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**HR MANAGEMENT IMPLEMENTATION IN SCALED STARTUP COMPANIES
THROUGH AN ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING LENS**

**IMPLEMENTAÇÃO DA GESTÃO DE RH EM EMPRESAS STARTUP ESCALADAS
POR MEIO DA LENTE DA APRENDIZAGEM ORGANIZACIONAL**

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Orientador: Prof. Dr. Wilson Aparecido Costa de Amorim.

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Este trabalho é dedicado a todos que tiveram seus sonhos interrompidos.

[This work dedicates to all who had their dreams cut short.]

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instead of starting ghosting. The science builds on collaboration and cooperation, so this study was only possible with your help. Last but not least, thank you, the reader, for spending some time reading these pages. Hopefully, you will find what you want here.

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EPIGRAPH

Being in the middle of time and space
It sort of makes your eyes water
We'd never find this moment again
In a million years
This is our world
Let's not blow it

(Matt Groening, Life in Hell. Sep. 20, 2001)

RESUMO

MIYAZAKI, F. R. (2023). *Implementação da gestão de RH em empresas startup escaladas por meio da lente da aprendizagem organizacional* (Tese de Doutorado). Faculdade de Economia, Administração, Contabilidade e Atuária. Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo.

As organizações buscam, por meio de suas áreas, políticas e práticas de Recursos Humanos (RH), reunir e mobilizar suas pessoas para criar uma fonte de vantagem competitiva. Porém, uma mudança pretendida pode não produzir o resultado esperado se não houver engajamento da administração e dos colaboradores em geral. As startups adicionam complexidade a isso ao atuar em ambientes de extrema incerteza com recursos limitados enquanto tentam encontrar um modelo de negócios adequado e uma solução que permita à empresa obter ganhos de escala. Esta tese estudou cinco casos (startups com pelo menos 100 funcionários, mais um caso complementar de atores relacionados ao investimento em startups) em 18 participantes entrevistados (12 participantes do sexo feminino) de várias funções. A análise de conteúdo indicou oito principais achados: 1) Essas empresas iniciaram suas áreas de RH em seus primeiros 100 funcionários (geralmente entre 50 e 60). 2) A implementação considera a demanda e o orçamento disponível. 3) Estruturar um RH auxilia a organização em vários outros aspectos, desde a redução da carga de trabalho do fundador anteriormente responsável pelo RH até ajudar a estruturar outras áreas e processos. 4) O RH pode atuar para aprimorar, reforçar e compartilhar a cultura organizacional, aspecto fundamental para as startups. 5) HRTechs (startups com soluções relacionadas a RH) têm uma pequena vantagem em RH, pois é possível encontrar um corpo de conhecimento significativo dentro dessas empresas, que também podem usar o RH para ajudar a melhorar seu produto principal, baseado em RH. 6) As empresas estudadas aprenderam a aprimorar e adaptar seus processos de recrutamento de acordo com suas necessidades e especificidades do cargo a preencher, como desenvolvedores em geral, geralmente com processo simplificado devido à escassez de profissionais e à intensa concorrência por eles. 7) Não foi possível encontrar diferenças significativas entre startups de diferentes setores (exceto para HRTechs, já que RH faz parte de seu core business). Porém, uma startup maior pode tender a ter uma área de RH mais estruturada, ainda que não esteja claro se isso acontece por um único motivo. 8) A pandemia de Covid-19 foi um desafio significativo que desencadeou mudanças profundas e imediatas em todas as empresas participantes. No entanto, algumas tiveram a sorte de se beneficiar desse cenário, escalando apesar (ou mesmo por causa) das dificuldades. A cultura tem desempenhado um papel essencial no engajamento das pessoas para encontrar e implementar soluções que permitam às suas organizações adaptar-se e sobreviver às crises, cada uma com a sua estratégia e meios.

Palavras-chave: Implementação de RH. Empresas startup. Qualitativo. Estudo de casos múltiplos. Aprendizagem organizacional.

ABSTRACT

MIYAZAKI, F. R. (2023). *HR Management implementation in scaled startup companies through an organizational learning lens* (Doctoral Thesis). Faculdade de Economia, Administração, Contabilidade e Atuária. Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo.

Organizations seek, through their Human Resources (HR) areas, policies, and practices, to gather and mobilize their people to create a source of competitive advantage. Although, an intended change may not produce the expected result if there is no engagement from management and employees in general. Startup companies add complexity to that by acting in environments of extreme uncertainty with limited resources while trying to find a suitable business model and a solution that allows the company to achieve scale gains. This thesis studied five cases (startups with at least 100 employees, plus a complimentary case from actors related to investment in startups) in 18 interviewed participants (12 female participants) from various roles. Content analysis indicated eight main findings: 1) These companies started their HR areas in their first 100 employees (usually between 50 and 60). 2) The implementation considers demand and the available budget. 3) Structuring an HR helps the organization in several other aspects, from reducing the workload of the founder previously in charge of HR to helping to structure other areas and processes. 4) HR may act to enhance, reinforce, and share the organizational culture, a fundamental aspect for startups. 5) HRTechs (startups with HR-related solutions) have a slight advantage in HR since it is possible to find a significant body of knowledge inside those companies, which can also use HR to help improve their main product based on HR. 6) The studied companies have learned how to improve and adapt their recruitment processes according to their needs and the specificities of the position to fulfill, such as tech talent, usually with a simplified process due to the scarcity of professionals and the intense competition for them. 7) It was not possible to find significant differences between startups from different industries (except for HRTechs, since HR is part of their core business). However, a more extensive startup may tend to have a more structured HR area, but it is unclear if that happens for a single reason. 8) The Covid-19 pandemic was a significant challenge that triggered profound and immediate changes in all participating companies. However, some were fortunate enough to benefit from that scenario, scaling despite (or even because of) the difficulties. Culture has played an essential role in engaging people to find and implement solutions that allowed their organizations to adapt and survive the crises, each with its strategy and means.

Keywords: HR implementation. Startup companies. Qualitative. Multiple-case study. Organizational learning.

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ACRONYM LIST

AMO	Ability, motivation, opportunity
Bacen	Brazilian Central Bank [Banco Central do Brasil]
CEO	Chief executive officer
CFO	Chief financial officer
CLT	Consolidation of (Brazilian) Labor Laws [Consolidação das Leis do Trabalho]
COO	Chief operating officer
CPO	Two possible meanings: “Chief people officer” or “chief product officer”
CRM	Customer relationship management
CTO	Chief technical officer
CS	Two possible meanings: “Customer satisfaction” or “customer success”
CX	Consumer experience
eNPS	Employee net promoter score
ERP	Enterprise resource planning
ESG	Environmental, social, and corporate governance
EVP	Employee value proposition ¹
HPWS	High-performance work systems
HR	Human resource
HRM	Human resource management
IDP	Individual development plan
IPO	Initial public offering
KM	Knowledge management
LO	Learning organization
MVP	Minimum viable product
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NPS	Net promoter score
OECD	The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OKR	Objectives and key results
OL	Organizational learning
Sebrae	Brazilian Micro and Small Business Support Service ² [Serviço Brasileiro

¹ Another possible meaning for the acronym is “Executive Vice President”, but this usage did not happen a single time in this study.

de Apoio às Micro e Pequenas Empresas]

SaaS	Software as a Service ³
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SLA	Service-level agreement
SHRM	Strategic human resource management
TAP	Topic, applicability, and perspective
UN	United Nations
VC	Venture capital
WEF	World Economic Forum
WPL	Workplace learning

² This is apparently the official translation for the Sebrae acronym meaning. Retrieved from: < https://www.sebrae.com.br/sites/PortalSebrae/canais_adicionais/sebrae_english >. Retrieve on May 22, 2021.

³ Also known as “freemium model”, an inbetween the totally free product and the premium, one-time payment product.

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1. INTRODUCTION

These are times of uncertainty. As communication, economic, social, and technological changes occur, competition increases to ever-higher levels. Meanwhile, companies try to achieve sustainable advantages, so chances increase to anticipate opportunities and develop solutions to problems that do not exist yet.

Organizations, in general, faced several environmental challenges during the last years, such as technological disruptions, shifting economics, political uncertainties, and even a global healthcare crisis, so there are constant changes and threats, but also opportunities to look for sources of competitive advantage.

Whether in a fresh and young startup or an established company, management must learn how to gather and employ resources to detect and seize new opportunities while building the means to exploit them (Teece, 2016). In the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, companies had to learn on their own how to detect and manage threats, especially smaller companies such as startups, including to avoid closure due to the lack of resources (the leading and most immediate worry for such endeavors), supply chain disruptions, the lack of specific policies and measure to those companies, and to keep growing despite the unfavorable scenario (Kuckertz et al., 2020; Sreenivasan & Suresh, 2022).

Regarding human resources, it may mean developing people, their skills, and their capacities, but also the need to reevaluate older and already established sets of policies and practices to assess if they are still effective since the context, need, or friction that led to tailoring it is no longer the same, or even relevant as companies expand (Chen, Chen, & Wang, 2011).

Learning is related to behavior patterns (action) or knowledge (cognition) that needs to be acquired and developed and, in an organizational context, while initially based on individual rather than collective learning theories, can be connected to an increased chance of firm survival (Casey, 2005). In that sense, the learning capacity in an organization links HRM practices and firm performance (Chahal, Jyoti, & Rani, 2016; Jerez-Gómez, Céspedes-Lorente, & Pérez-Valls, 2019). Organizational learning may also help deal with innovation and technology adoption by increasing knowledge and means to apply these new resources to develop products and solutions and increasing resource efficiency to improve results or reduce impacts from its usage (Belinski, Peixe, Frederico, & Garza-Reyes, 2020).

While possible to state that human resources are one of the most valuable assets for companies, these statements may be void if they do not specify how HR interweave with

other strategic assets to generate competitive advantage (Mueller, 1996) or how to integrate and develop them (Snell, Youndt, & Wright, 1999). To keep up with changes in markets and organizational context, companies began to seek through their HR areas new ways to manage, stimulate, demand, and reward their workers, so their contributions could help companies better achieve their goals and results.

Scaling up and its effects on the adoption of different human resource management (HRM) policies and practices could be understood, for example, as an effect of the four contextual factors behind organizational learning (OL): Strategy towards flexibility, an organizational structure that allows innovation, a corporate culture that fosters learning, and the environment that needs further interpretation and adapting (Fiol & Lyles, 1985). In this case, as companies change, they need to adopt different sets of HRM measures to adapt to their environments while looking for sources of competitive advantage.

When considering startup companies, at least in comparison to their “grown-up” and more established counterparts, different contexts and demands may require specific human resources configurations in instances such as employee profiles and roles, possibly with staff that is more of a generalist type, or at least not HR-exclusive (Brock, 2006; Obedgiu, 2017; Lee, Drummond, & Hempel, 2021).

Also, in startups, the founders have a significant role in gathering and mobilizing resources to establish a firm and increase its survival odds by applying their skills and industry knowledge (Colombo & Grilli, 2010; Muñoz-Bullon, Sanchez-Bueno, & Vos-Saz, 2015; Riani, 2022), and existing HRM policies and practices are usually more direct and less intricate, possibly less formal (De Winne & Sels, 2010; Schmelter, Mauer, Börsch, & Brettel, 2010).

Starting from the 1980s, but more present in everyday organizational life since the following decade, globalization helped to overcome geographical barriers and distances while increasing competition in markets and the search for excelling in performed activities and ways to enable sustainable competitive advantages that could help some edge to organizations (Legge, 1995). It also had some potentially positive effects, such as triggering market expansions or cultural diversity, which may allow finding different approaches and solutions (Stone & Deadrick, 2015).

According to The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), three main challenges need addressing in these times of fast and profound changes: 1) Economic, due to innovation and its disruptive waves, with new value chains, datasets, and security threats; 2) Environmental, where the impact of human actions to natural resources

require new solutions; and 3) Social, because the growth of population, urbanization, and social inequalities can lead to conflicts and political decisions that aim only short-term issues (OECD, 2018).

Until the beginning of the 1990s, Brazilian organizations conceived their human resources as abundant and inexpensive, with little emphasis on training or development, and management policies mainly reactive to external stimuli, with slow response to changes in markets and society (Fleury, 1990).

The time has come, and the shortage of qualified workers has become an issue for Brazilian companies and workers since the early 2000s (Lucas, Parente, Amorim, & Fischer, 2013a). On one side, several workers need skills and experience to find new formal jobs, so they may end up relegated to exclusion and poverty (Lucas et al., 2013a).

Economic growth and demographic changes make it difficult for companies (especially industrial or larger companies) to fulfill their job vacancies because they need more skilled workers (Lucas, Parente, Amorim, & Fischer, 2013b). The competition for specialized tech talent has been increasing since the last decade, which will represent a deficit of several million people and a few trillion dollars in lost revenue, with Brazil pointed out by an International Monetary Fund report as a particularly vulnerable country amid this global shortage (Costa, 2019).

On the other hand, due to technological shifts, future demand prospects, and job automation, current students and even employed workers may not be suitable for future jobs with their current capacities and skillsets (Albuquerque, Saavedra, Morais, Alves, & Yaohao, 2019). These workers, though, can employ a lifelong learning mindset to continually acquire knowledge and capacities and increase their long-term employability (Eppler-Hattab, 2022).

Leaders have an important role in HRM and in how it influences the learning that happens inside organizations by supporting and directing capacity building through specific programs and differences related to the region, firm size, maturity level, internal structuring, and focus on control and formal development programs have led to different results (Bitencourt, 2004).

Other human capital and workforce governance themes may help address how people contribute to generating value for organizations, such as the industrial relations definition of labor as contained in people and not a commodity (Kaufman, 2010). To highlight labor and its contribution, organizations should provide strategies and practices to ensure that people can learn, develop, and use their capacities and skills to perform their work correctly, benefitting organizations and their careers (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014).

World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Human Capital Report indicates that human capital development may indicate long-term success. It is described as more complex than formal education and can develop continually by learning and usage, possibly enabling opportunities and benefits when (and if) properly nurtured (WEF, 2017).

Brazil stands below average in the Global Human Capital Report, ranked 77 out of 130 countries. There are indicators where it stands out, but negatively, and all of them related to education or work: "Unemployment rate" (15-24 age group) (ranked 100th), "Availability of skilled employees" (103rd), "Quality of primary schools" (117th), and "Quality of education system" (119th) (WEF, 2017a).

Complementarily, in the Social Mobility Index (WEF, 2020), lifelong learning, one of the most significant challenges to countries, reflects that companies fail to train their employees formally. Though, unemployed workers may struggle to qualify themselves elsewhere. In the educational aspect, Brazil significantly underperforms: Out of 82 countries, both education access (57th) and quality & equity (65th) are low, and the national lifelong learning sits on the Index's antepenultimate position (80th) (WEF, 2020a).

The lack of qualification of Brazilian workers mentioned above is a social issue that may prevent workers from achieving career inclusion or progression opportunities, segregating those with fewer educational opportunities from others. However, it also brings similar difficulties for companies to seize opportunities. To cover at least partially the educational gaps in their personnel, companies need to assess their skills and learn how to develop workers in-house (Souza et al., 2014), so these workers may turn from a competitive liability that hinders learning efforts to a source of advantage (Nunes & Santos, 2007).

This research uses the organization as its unit of analysis. It focuses on startups that successfully scaled their operations to the point that there is a need to have an HR management with a set of adequate and performance-enhancing policies and practices. As these companies develop and grow, they become more sophisticated in their activities, responsibilities, and structures, thus requiring a workforce that is, at the same time, more diverse and specialized in their skill sets.

Despite operating in particular contexts, startups must make decisions and structure their HR as these grow and require contributions from these workers to care about other staff and help develop them while spreading values from the founders (Tomczyk, Lee, & Winslow, 2013). There must be some interesting points or events behind decision-making processes to unveil that relate to how these small but promising companies learn to make changes, assess

their efficacy, and revisit to improve, modify, or even revoke previous decisions as time passes, turning individual learning into organizational learning.

Organizations need to manage and plan activities, attributions, processes, systems, and structures to keep up with changes (Sackmann, Eggenhofer-Rehart, & Friesl, 2009; Amorim & Fischer, 2013; Cragg, Caldeira, & Ward, 2011; Kowalkowski, Windahl, Kindström, & Gebauer, 2015). Also, these companies continuously seek ways to improve learning to perform their duties better, reaping firm outputs as collaboration or innovation (Han & Stieha, 2020).

Adding to those concepts, Nielsen (2013) argues that workers are not passive recipients of predefined changes and interventions with perceptions to measure and compare; their agency and participation are crafters to fulfill their needs, particularly regarding implementing proposed policies and practices by line managers. These factors highlight the importance of continuously developing HRM to suit better organizations, their needs, and work and personal relations dynamics.

The central research question must be adequate to identify the evidence necessary to answer it and what evidence to look for in the different data sources while maintaining the research focus and avoiding unnecessary efforts (Santos, Pimenta, & Nobre, 2007). In this case, the central question is describable as follows:

How do startups implement human resources management policies and practices?

Based on this research question, the general objective to be pursued in this thesis is: *Analyze how scaled-up startup companies implement their human resources management areas.*

In addition to the general objective, there are four specific research objectives for this study:

1. Describe how startups decide to implement HRM policies and practices;
2. Identify whether a Venture Capital investor joining these companies had any influence on the decision to implement HRM policies;
3. Verify if and how startups adapt their strategies to handle contextual factors toward implementing HR policies and practices;
4. According to managers in startup companies, verify the perceived importance of the HR management area and its implementation.

HR management's choice as a central point to this thesis may be explained by how changes to society, its markets, and companies added functions and responsibilities to the HR area, increasing its strategic role. These changes also relate to some of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) from the United Nations (UN). These are associated with challenges entrepreneurial and innovative companies face, their values, and how they develop, potentially generating decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), fostering innovation (SDG 9), reducing inequalities (SDG 10), ensuring quality education and lifelong learning opportunities (SDG 4), or even by promoting health and wellbeing for people (SDG 3), for example (United Nations, 2020).

By adequately implementing HR practices, organizations can consistently link strategy to practice (reducing the gap between intended and perceived practices), improving organizational performance (Ogliara, 2020). Adapting capacity to organizations is vital, but not a novelty, and is verifiable, for example, on the link between HRM, organizational resilience, and adapting to thrive despite uncertain and unfavorable conditions (Lengnick-Hall, Beck, & Lengnick-Hall, 2011). This importance is also underlined in a small excerpt from Amorim and Fischer (2013, p. 330), as it follows:

The struggle of organizations for leadership, or simply for survival, in a fast-moving market is indissolubly linked to their capacity to adapt and innovate. The correct interpretation of market signals or, more ambitiously, the creation of innovative references for the market are activities that depend on the organization's and its members' capacity to understand and elaborate. [“A luta das organizações pela liderança, ou simplesmente pela sobrevivência, em um mercado que se move com rapidez, liga-se indissolúvelmente à sua capacidade de adaptação e inovação. A interpretação correta dos sinais do mercado ou, de maneira mais ambiciosa, a criação de referências inovadoras para o mercado são atividades dependentes da capacidade de compreensão e elaboração da organização e seus integrantes.”]

The size and type of the company also matter. As up-and-coming and fast-growth companies, startups are usually associated with a less formal and structured HR function, even singlehandedly by an owner/founder, mainly focusing on recruitment and allocation processes to support these companies' operational activities (Buller & Napier, 1993).

Brazilian entrepreneurs have faced a complex scenario in the last few years, including an economic, political, and social crisis since 2014 (Silveira, Santos, & Leão, 2022). Despite that, there are almost ten thousand operational startups in Brazil nowadays, with São Paulo as the most prominent state, acting in several industries (StartupBase, 2023a, 2023b) and with more than 80% of the total venture capital (VC) investment in Brazil (Movile & Distrito, 2022).

Most of these startups have a yearly income of R\$ 500 K or lower, but some of these companies managed to develop and achieve multimillionaire yearly incomes (Abstartups & BR Angels, 2022). This study focuses on a few more structured and valuable companies since these startups could thrive and structure despite every hardship.

While being a part of the organizational development process, the structuring process of the HR area, its policies, and practices still need more coverage, despite its importance to organizations as a whole. The concept of bundling helps to explain how companies may implement several HR practices in a complementary way to achieve optimal fit (internal and external) and coherence to their strategies, arguing that it should concern organizations holistically (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014).

Literature usually associates HR management with established (and frequently larger) companies. Still, smaller businesses can also contribute to the literature in their way: With more linear, simple, and transparent structures, the distance between practice and results is smaller (De Winne & Sels, 2010), and the solutions may be different compared to their established counterparts, being high-performance work systems (HPWS) and implementation two potential points to approach regarding HR management (Bendickson, Muldoon, Liguori, & Midgett, 2017).

An expected contribution is obtaining more information on how implementation happens in startup companies as they structure their HR areas (formal or not), providing behaviors, capacities, and even new professionals to support organizations as they endure new challenges. On the practical side, smaller and less established organizations can benefit from the concepts explored in this thesis by continuously adapting and improving to fit their unique realities, guaranteeing greater control and predictability over HR processes and knowledge flows needed for these organizations.

Startups are small yet promising companies in technological environments, often with disruptive innovations. They usually need to reach maturity in their structures, models, and practices, appropriating resources to continuously develop and lay systems that allow gaining traction and scaling their operations. The literature review has shown an increasing interest and involvement in scalability themes among startup articles, despite most texts including only startups but not scaling.

As these companies grow aware of the specificities of their internal and external contexts, it is possible to consider them before adjusting sets of policies and practices for optimal implementation, an ever-changing sweet spot as markets, technologies, society, and companies themselves change over time.

The organizational learning lens may help understand HRM implementation in these companies, from relevant actors and elements for decision processes to the learning dynamics from a startup point of view, while institutionalizing changes that allow these companies and their funders to have greater control over the company's trajectory.

OL helps to understand inputs and actions related to decision-making, and its communication and participation processes may relate to good governance (Belle, 2016). This way, it may be more likely for business models to structure, products or services to develop, and investments to achieve a return.

As further discussed in section 2 (Literature review), this thesis focuses on three main themes: HR management and its implementation, startup companies (and their scaling-up), and organizational learning (employed as an analytical lens). More specifically, the study focuses on how scaled-up startup companies implemented their HR management areas while employing organizational learning to help in the analysis.

This thesis presents seven sections to achieve the proposed objectives and expected contributions to the field of study, including this introductory section.

Section 1 (Introduction) overviewed the context of this research to present objectives, justifications, and the study's relevance, with expected contributions to the field, giving the reader a preliminary basis for the following sections.

Section 2 (Literature review) describes general concepts and some of the latest research on the three main themes of this study: HR management (HRM), organizational learning, and startup companies. It also presents the literature review for themes relevant to this research before heading to methods, studied cases, data collection, and obtained results.

Section 3 (Methods) contains the methodological choices of the thesis, with definitions of used concepts and explanations about how these methods are related and appropriate to the current research.

Section 4 (Description of the cases) describes each participating case from the study. A single company comprises each case, except for the complimentary case, which contains people from different roles and companies related to the startup ecosystem.

Results and discussion in this thesis divide into two sections to avoid an overly extensive section of over a hundred pages for the sake of readability: Sections 5 and 6.

Section 5 (HR and implementation in startups) aims to gather, describe, analyze, and compare perceptions and insights regarding policies and practices, triggers and learning cues, and contributions from investment-related actors.

Section 6 (Main findings and insights) summarizes the main findings of this research around the studied cases and questions that may surround the HR practitioner, from “when to start HR” to questions related to size and industry or opportunities ahead of these companies.

Section 7 (Conclusion and final remarks) comments on the study’s findings compared to general and specific objectives, the contributions to theory and practice, describes limitations found, and mentions possibilities for future studies to help the field keep its evolution.

After listing the references used in this study, there are the Appendices: The interview scripts in both English (the language used for writing this thesis) and Brazilian Portuguese (the language employed during the interviews, since every participating person was fluent or native in the language) appear in Appendix A (for startup members) and Appendix B (for investment and startup ecosystem actors). Appendix C contains the range values for qualitized terms across this thesis (e.g., a “medium” startup has a headcount between 101 and 250).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section presents classical and recent theoretical references regarding the main themes of this study (HR management, startup companies, scaling up the startups, and organizational learning) to present theoretical evolution and research trends and build a basis on how this study may answer to its research question, address the proposed objectives, and contribute to the field in theory building and guiding practice as well.

2.1. HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Human resource management can be related to how firms staff their activities, especially the productive ones, hiring and firing people while doing the bureaucracy between these stages. Still, it can have a far deeper involvement than that, spanning from mobilizing the sole individuals and line managers to including members of the board and agents of strategy definition, potentially generating competitive advantage and playing an active role in a company's long-term viability and success.

HRM, trying to keep up with the increasing complexity of society, tries to achieve the objectives of organizations by ensuring a regular supply of qualified people, in the needed quantity and level of capacities, which must take place in a productive, healthy, and safe environment for greater efficiency and effectiveness (Ferris, Barnum, Rosen, Holleran, & Dulebohn, 1995).

The article by Lengnick-Hall, Beck, and Lengnick-Hall (2011) considers that an HR system is composed of three layers, as listed below from the farthest to the closest:

- High-range: Broad elements that provide general guidelines, directing other aspects of the system. Ex.: Architecture, philosophy, principles;
- Mid-range: Intends to align strategy and practical aspects by proposing approaches. Ex.: Policies and programs;
- Low-range: Reflects implemented HR and its specific activities. Ex.: Practices and processes.

Two of these aspects, in particular, indicate how a general guideline can be processed until put into practice: Policies (mid-range layer) and practices (low-range layer). A policy is describable as a general guideline for action based on organizational needs and strategies

(Schuler, 1992) that aims to maximize outputs related to one of four main areas: Employee influence, human resource flow, reward systems, and work systems (Guest, 1987).

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) points out that HR policies may increase consistency across an organization by including principles, responsibilities, and rights, yet requiring proper implementation to ensure its efficacy (CIPD, 2021). Policy implementation also plays a more significant role in impacting change-related outcomes than knowledge of policies regarding awareness and clarity of these policies (Bish, Newton, & Johnston, 2015).

Implementing HR policies has a shared responsibility to succeed, where each actor has its duties and responsibilities. While HR staff interpret, communicate, guide, and support those policies, they also have to convince line managers of the importance and necessity of those policies (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014). Meanwhile, line managers properly implement the policies and make necessary decisions that may be needed to achieve efficacy and consistency (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014).

That link between strategy and practice is necessary to guide action as planned. As Armstrong & Taylor (2014, p. 29) state, “Strategies cannot be left as generalized aspirations or abstractions.” It happens in two steps: implementing HR policies that provide general guidelines; and HR practices that put strategies into operation, as planning does not translate automatically into effective practice (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014).

Trullen, Bos-Nehles, and Valverde (2020, p. 155) clarify the meaning of implementation in the HRM context by addressing literature from three areas outside HR (change management, innovation, and strategy) before proposing their own contextualized definition for HRM implementation, as follows:

A dynamic process that starts with the decision to introduce a new (or significantly change an existing) HRM policy or practice (also known as adoption), during which relevant HRM actors (such as line managers, HR specialists, user employees) engage with it, interacting among themselves and attempting to shape it to fit their requirements and needs, until the policy or practice becomes routinized.

Among some methodological frameworks and themes for future research in HRM implementation, Trullen et al. (2020) included two that may particularly interesting for this thesis: Practice-based and contextual approaches.

- Contextual approach: Focuses on different possible contextual factors, levels of analysis, and practices to understand the implementation decisions and processes.

Potential research lines: Organizational enablers, processes to each type of practice, and the effect of macro-contextual elements over HRM implementation;

- Practice-based approach: Focuses on what happens (and how it happens) during implementation processes, which resources are employed, and why. Potential research lines: The roles of line managers in adapting and appropriating (from different contexts) during HRM implementation and how organizational resources as documents or managerial tools may impact HRM implementation.

Recent research in a British health and social care organization raised questions about how different professionals may respond differently to job redesign implementation according to their professional qualifications and responsibilities (Chen, Currie, & McGivern, 2022). In comparison, an HR practice offers a guideline for specific actions according to the individual role (leadership, managerial, or operational), reinforcing performance by guiding behaviors for specific organizational and role needs (Schuler, 1992).

Advancing on the HR system, an integrated bundle of HR practices that are consistent internally (between its practices) and externally (with strategy), is a high-performance work system (HPWS), affecting internal structures to improve performance outputs (Evans & Davis, 2005). These HPWSs are usable to plan models that employ OL to develop human, organizational, and social capital to levels where an organization may handle uncertainty, instrumental in knowledge-intensive environments (Lengnick-Hall, Lengnick-Hall, Andrade, & Drake, 2009).

Despite considering that an exact configuration depends on each organization's context and oddities, Evans and Davis (2005) have grouped the practices in an HPWS into seven main categories: Communication, compensation, decentralized decision-making, flexible work assignments, self-managed teams, staffing, and training.

There is a need to use specific policies and practices for organizing workforce development activities and adapting to organizational needs⁴, a responsibility that is not restricted to HR professionals but shared at some level by all members of the organization, highlighting roles played by leaders, such as line management (Boxall & Purcell, 2011).

In a complementary way, HRM policies and practices may improve elements related to resilience (such as adaptability, agility, and flexibility), allowing the development of these competencies in core employees (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011). These competencies for

⁴ Boxall and Purcell (2011) describe three main variables with influence on professional development: Ability, motivation and opportunity, widely known in HR literature by their acronym (AMO).

resilience, absorbed from the individual level, may enhance an organization's capacity to address uncertainties and threats.

Proposing a strategic and integrated HRM system, Dutra (2013), a professor with decades of experience in research and practice in Brazilian companies, divided the HRM practices into three groups:

- **Movement:** Supports processes related to moving people in a company (regardless of their contract status), such as hiring, internalizing, promoting, reassigning, or transferring;
- **Development:** Contains processes that allow personnel to develop in the organization. Examples: Career, performance, and training;
- **Acknowledgment:** Addresses processes that acknowledge and distinguish personnel and their contributions to a company. Examples: Facilities and services, incentives, and payments.

A thematic analysis featuring startups made found standard HRM practices relevant to those companies, some of which relatable to the groups of HRM practices above: movement (recruitment and selection), development (training), and acknowledgment (compensation, payments, and performance appraisal) (Boudlaie, Mahdiraji, Jirandeh, & Jafari-Sadeghi, 2022).

Another recent article relating startups and HRM practices argue that recruitment impacts talent retention and firm performance, considering it crucial for startups (Mukul & Saini, 2021). Some of the constraints endured by these startups are available talent quality, waging restrictions, low reputation, and even location disadvantages, which startups must overcome by carefully choosing their recruitment prospects based on networks and recommendations (Mukul & Saini, 2021).

Recruitment and selection may employ specialized platforms to increase agility and overcome physical barriers (as happened during the worst days of the Covid-19 pandemic) in those processes (Ferreira, Silva, Oliveira, & Carmo, 2022). Social media is another possibility for recruitment, with a high cost-benefit ratio and the possibility of targeting a specific target audience, as happens with LinkedIn, the tool of the trade for recruitment professionals for more than a decade (Madia, 2011; Koch, Gerber, & De Klerk, 2018).

It is necessary to posit that social media recruitment also has limitations, such as the different candidate profiles when compared to professional resumes (Zide, Elman, & Shahani-

Denning, 2014) or the need for a dedicated approach since the volume of candidates may overwhelm a recruiter if not given appropriate handling (Koch et al., 2018). Platform-based recruitment may experience minor difficulties, such as connection issues, downtime in the platform, and insufficient information to conclude the hiring, which may require additional contacts and recruitment stages (Ferreira et al., 2022).

Despite the different contexts and company types, it is possible to identify similarities between recent research (Mukul & Saini, 2021; Boudlaie et al., 2022) with Dutra's (2013) strategic and integrated model for HRM practices, especially on the movement group of practices. Selecting the "right candidate" is essential for companies but not enough to ensure the success of both parties since companies need to provide a working environment suitable for professional development, productivity, and performance gains and acknowledge reasonable efforts (Abbasi, Tahir, Abbas, & Shabbir, 2022).

To keep up the pace against competition, companies need to respond quickly to changes in technology, markets, and customer demands. Companies have shifted focus to agile-like approaches to deal with uncertainty and valuing aspects such as adaptation, customization, execution, and implementation, particularly on the gaps between research and practice (McMackin & Heffernan, 2021).

Boxall (2021) recommends starting analysis from problems that need assessment instead of HR practices to understand better how HRM models impact employees in general, allowing to divide of these problems into two categories: Misalignments, which happen when a stakeholder perceives a transaction or relationship as unfair or unsustainable (e.g., generating labor or legal liability), and perverse alignment, which damages the society in a broader sense (e.g., damages to vulnerable customers or an industry).

It is possible to explain the development of HRM models, policies, and practices from a market perspective. As a company grows in complexity, its success depends more and more on behavior patterns consistent with established companies (Fischer, 2002), building ways to explore detected opportunities (Teece, 2016).

HRM studies are dividable into two main approaches, one focusing on the usage of best practices for delivering excellence, but also for integrating solutions and helping to create value for companies and their surroundings (Ulrich, 2020), and the other that aims for the best fit by adjusting HR practices internally to achieve synergy and make sense inside the organization (internal fit) and between the organization and its context (external fit), where human and social capital reinforce each other to generate value (Purcell, 1999; Boxall & Purcell, 2011).

While these approaches may seem contrasting, at the end of the day, both of them, best practice or best fit, seek to link HR management to firm performance (Stavrou, Brewster, & Charalambous, 2010). Also, neither of them thoroughly explains that link alone, requiring further help from cultural and institutional aspects to consider how an organization achieves legitimacy and adapts to places and contexts to undertake their activities (Stavrou et al., 2010).

There are two main approaches to HR management throughout the literature; one focuses on people management in organizations generally, while the second aims explicitly to manage people in organizations to ensure both employee performance and organizational goals (Gooderham, Mayrhofer, & Brewster, 2019).

It is possible to relate both perspectives mentioned above (Boxall & Purcell, 2011; Gooderham et al., 2019) by aligning the general HR approach to the “best practices” approach, while the latter that focuses on both employee performance and organizational goals could be relatable to the “best fit” approach.

Also, the alignment of individual outputs and organizational goals (Gooderham et al., 2019) underpins the strategic aspects of HRM. It is also similar to the definition of strategic HR management (SHRM) as an arrangement of planned behaviors to help an organization achieve performance and objectives simultaneously (Wright & McMahan, 1992).

HR management research has been increasing considerably over the last few decades. The interest in its strategic counterpart grew after the early 1990s and established itself as a relevant trend in HRM. A search in the Web of Science indexer, restricting category (business or management) and document type (article) but considering singular and plural forms of *human resource* (including the acronym *HRM*) indicates that strategy played a minor role before the 1990s: Only 10.46% of the articles contained *strategic* or the acronym *SHRM* at any point (words in italic are search terms).

The mentioning of strategic aspects in HRM research increased in the early 1990s (1991 to 1995: 30.09% of strategic mentions in HRM articles) and stabilized since then at around 30%, as shown by results in Table 1. It is worth noting that despite the growth in strategic terms in those articles, the growth in the number of articles was even higher. Still, 2021 and 2022 alone had almost the same number of published HRM articles as the 2011 to 2015 period (3,868 vs. 3,972) and in the amount of strategic HRM articles (1,128 vs. 1,242).

Years	HRM	SHRM	Ratio (SHRM / HRM)
1990 or older	621	65	10.46%
1991 to 1995	525	158	30.09%
1996 to 2000	852	287	33.68%
2001 to 2005	1,223	426	34.83%
2006 to 2010	2,327	773	33.21%
2011 to 2015	3,972	1242	31.26%
2016 to 2020	7,330	2272	30.99%
2021 and 2022	3,868	1128	29.16%
Total	20,718	6,351	30.65%

Table 1: Published articles featuring HRM and SHRM. Source: Web of Science. Date retrieved: Jan. 18, 2023.

Research on HR management in Brazil dates from the late 1970s and early 1980s; labor issues have begun gaining importance, emphasizing two critical factors for companies back then: cost-cutting and unionization (Amorim, Comini, & Fischer, 2019). In Brazilian literature, the habilitation thesis from Albuquerque (1987) can be seen as the starting point of SHRM research, as pointed out by a literature review from Fischer (2015).

It is worth noting that until the 1980s, Brazilian literature on HR Management was scarce and mostly imported from other countries with their contexts, which did not necessarily match Brazilian reality at that time (Tonelli, Caldas, Lacombe, & Tinoco, 2003).

The 1990s decade brought a whole different context to Brazilian companies, with economic deregulation, opening to imports, reforms, and efforts to realign companies to worldwide competition, which required updates on infrastructure, knowledge, and technology (Wood & de Paula, 2008). During that decade, globalization also played a role in expanding communications, expanding media outlets on HRM literature, either academic (Tonelli et al., 2003) or professional, directed to a broader audience (Wood & de Paula, 2008).

The mere presence of HRM practices cannot assure its efficacy since it depends on more elements to be successful, such as means to measure the generation of desirable behaviors by the organizations, the application and control by the leaders, and the perception of these systems by the individuals as a whole (Plothow, 2018).

It is worth noting that there is a need for further research on implementing HR models and policies since HRM literature focused on elaborating practices but relegated the HR worker primarily to a consultive role (Bianchi, Quishida, & Feroni, 2017).

Incentives and status reduction are two potential examples of changes from planning to implementing, both of them relating to aspects that are, in one way or another, cultural, so different configurations and approaches may be necessary (Bendickson, Muldoon, Liguori, & Midgett, 2017).

Even acclaimed practices may experience differences when implemented in contexts other than the original one. A potential example of this is implementing a policy or practice in startup companies instead of established firms due to the specificities of startups, as described in the appropriate subsection (2.3, “Startup companies”).

2.2. ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

Organizations are not living beings and, therefore, could not learn equally to those. However, as social constructions with intangible and tangible aspects, they can do so through their individuals, who act as learning agents. This learning (formal or informal) can be related to different forms of knowledge (theoretical or practical) or changes in behaviors and patterns.

For companies, OL is an intangible resource essential to react to changes in the environment, acquiring external knowledge, improving current internal capacities, optimizing the usage of organizational resources, and capturing the value available from the market opportunities (Liu, 2018). The individuals from organizations are the learning agents in OL. Argyris and Schon (1978, p. 18) define these individuals as “(...) agents of changes in organizational theory-in-use which run counter to organizational entropy.”

The contextual and environmental factors comprise what Argyris (1977) defines as an organizational learning system, which may promote or hinder learning and processes related to correcting and improving the learning system. However, the author also states that correcting factors that may question the learning system is challenging (Argyris, 1977).

In their seminal work, *Organizational Learning*, Fiol and Lyles (1985) stress that organizations must align with their environment and be innovative to remain competitive, meaning that organizations must adapt based on past behaviors, effectively adding, changing, or removing knowledge that guides actions to perform (Fiol & Lyles, 1985). Innovativeness also benefits organizations with a more extensive learning capacity, highlighting the importance of adapting to situations while identifying and acquiring knowledge flows and sources (Argote & Hora, 2016).

Learning relates to knowledge acquisition, but mainly to acquiring the know-how associated with the practical usage of this knowledge, effectively enabling or hindering the results of this usage as needed by the organization (Cook & Yanow, 1993).

On the other hand, organizational learning allows organizations to acquire individual knowledge and transform it into organizational knowledge, which helps to operate in uncertainty, dealing with unprecedented events better than their competitors due to the complexity and constant changes of businesses (Basten & Haamann, 2018).

Crossan, White, and Lane (1999) proposed the organizational learning framework conceiving OL as a dynamic process that spans multiple organizational levels and timeframes, contrasting knowledge acquisition and usage. It is also known as the “4I framework”, based on four subprocesses (intuiting, interpreting, integrating, and institutionalizing) and three learning levels (individual, group, and organizational).

According to the author Mary Crossan in a conversation with Mishra and Reddy (2021), the 4I framework is not size-dependent, so it applies from startups to large companies, differing only in the institutionalizing subprocess (Mishra & Reddy, 2021). Figure 1 illustrates the 4I framework, its cycles, and its components.

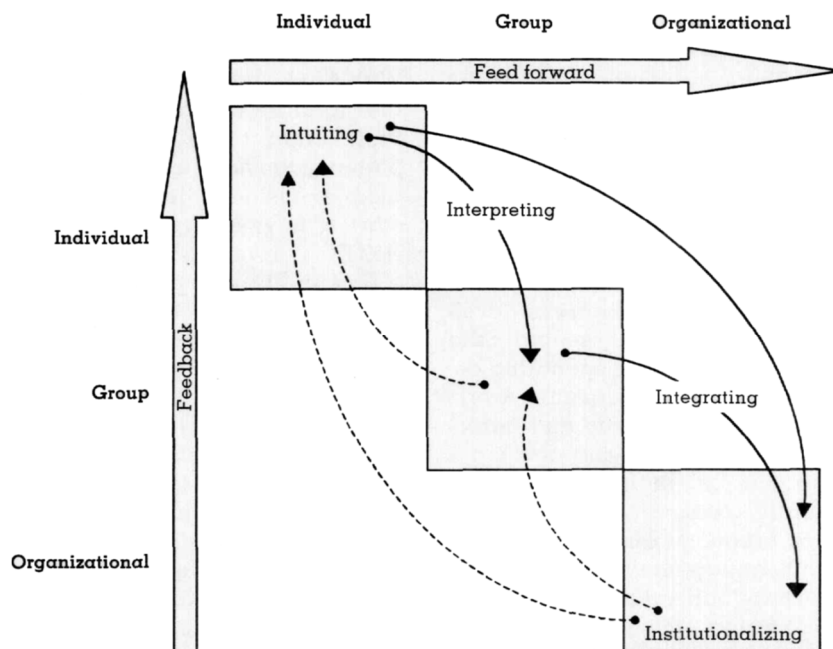


Figure 1: The 4I framework. Source: Crossan et al. (1999).

Individual learning relates to group learning, but the relation between group learning and organizational learning is more substantial, where team behavior (both internal and

external) is quite relevant to that relation, effectively being a gateway between the group and organizational learning (Bido, Godoy, Araujo, & Louback, 2010).

The variety of actors involved in learning also matters. Establishing cooperation from different elements is valuable for organizational learning. While it is challenging to affect the whole organization with OL, it allows each person to deliver a unique contribution, thus considering a more comprehensive range of perspectives when a solution is found (Rupčić, 2018).

There are two approaches where OL is likely to occur: One is learning from experiences acquired from trial and error situations, and the other involves the development of procedures and routines from the knowledge previously stored in organizational memory (Tortorella, Vergara, Garza-Reyes, & Sawhney, 2020).

Casey (2005) relates learning to the continuous response and adapting processes that are necessary for an organization to survive and thrive in its environment and proposes a sociological model to enhance learning, with a diagnosis method that includes four *how-to* questions to develop a learning plan: 1) How to obtain information?; 2) How to define goals?; 3) How to integrate internally and externally?; 4) How to share its meaning?.

As an example of how organizational learning helps companies respond to demands and changes coming from contextual elements, stakeholder pressures are more prone to trigger organizational changes via exploration than regulatory issues by exploiting how to improve performance in the current ruleset (Zhang & Zhu, 2019).

Antonello (2005) defines organizational learning as a dynamic process that appropriates and generates knowledge to develop resources by involving interactions, changes, and reflections to answer organizational problems. Lyman and Parchment (2020) regard OL as a comprehensive, continuous, and systematic process that aims to improve concepts, knowledge, and actions, enhancing the capacity to face uncertainties by leading to extensive changes, empowering its members, and sustaining excellence needed practices for organizational performance.

There is an attractive and processual working definition for organizational learning that this study will use as default (except when mentioned otherwise), as it follows:

We define organizational learning as a process in which an organization's members actively use data to guide behavior in such a way as to promote the ongoing adaptation of the organization. To use data is to seek and attend to task-relevant information, in particular for assessing collective performance and progress against goals. Guiding behavior involves choosing actions based on data-driven observations, including actions designed to test inferences. Adaptation is change by

an organization in response to external changes – both problems and opportunities. Ongoing adaptation suggests sustained attention to relevant data, especially regarding results of new actions. (Edmondson & Moingeon, 1998, p. 12)

Organizational learning is a process that starts and is centered on but is not limited to the individual, who acts as a learning agent to the organization while empowering itself and furthering its organizational space (Friedman, 2002). Due to not being living creatures, organizations cannot learn the same way people do, but there can be some learning.

Organizational learning may be too broad when considering mystification issues, possibly incurring reification or anthropomorphism (Friedman, Lipshitz, & Popper, 2005). At this point, caution is necessary: Not every learning works the same, and not all is organizational learning.

It is worth noting that the anthropomorphism issue on organizational memory was a theme previously addressed and considered as analogies and metaphors to clarify and illustrate similarities instead of inducing the reader to error (Walsh & Ungson, 1991). Still, these analogies need help to solve validity issues such as consequentiality, measurement, or construct validity (Walsh & Ungson, 1991).

Organizational learning relates in its possible approaches to three main categories: People (Chief knowledge officer, dyadic relationships, events for informal interactions, job rotations, knowledge broker, knowledge manager, and skills management), processes (action learning, communities of practice, cross-functional teams, experience factory, leaving expert debriefing, postmortem evaluations, project briefings, research and development, and training), and technologies (knowledge repositories and virtual worlds) (Basten & Haamann, 2018).

It is essential to know what organizational learning is and what it can do, but it also is to understand what OL is not. There are commonalities between organizational learning and knowledge management (KM), such as the knowledge in most OL studies (Castaneda, Manrique, & Cuellar, 2018).

Still, two points may differ OL from KM in recent research: 1) Technologies employed, since OL approached tools like data mining or information systems, while KM favored interaction platforms, and 2) research focus, because OL focuses on competitiveness, innovation, knowledge absorption, and strategy, while KM focused on knowledge flows, technology transfer, and value creation (Castaneda et al., 2018).

In other words, OL allows organizations to appropriate and transform individual knowledge into organizational knowledge by choosing from different approaches that group

primarily in people, processes, and technologies, assessing and integrating results and benefits (Basten & Haamann, 2018). OL also relates to decision-making actors and processes such as reflection points, the events that provide inputs into a system, and the communicating and participating processes that provide legitimacy (Belle, 2016).

There are different levels of learning, and each of these levels can impact the organization and its strategies differently: Lower-level learning is short-termed, made from restrictive environments and primary associations, with limited impact; higher-level learning aims the long-term, changes previous rules, and influence the organization as a whole by using cognition and insights (Fiol & Lyles, 1985).

Organizational learning differs from individual learning because it is related to further organizational change and because the culture embedded in organizations allows them to, as a group of individuals, collectively acquire the knowledge and experience required to perform certain activities (Cook & Yanow, 1993; Abbad & Borges-Andrade, 2014). Also, the nature of organizational learning is different from the individual one, being based “(...) explicitly or implicitly, on an understanding of what it means for an individual to learn” (Cook & Yanow, 1993, p. 374).

Argyris and Schon (1978) divided the learning that may happen in organizations into two types: *single-loop*, which maintains the central norms and features related while aiming for effectiveness, and *double-loop*, which also restructures these organizational norms, impacting assumptions and strategies to improve performance. Also, practitioners should seek to overcome organizational contradictions and vicious circles to migrate from a single-loop towards a double-loop learning organization (Argyris & Schon, 1978).

There were tries to expand Argyris and Schon's (1978) approach to single and double-loop learning by proposing triple and even quadruple-learning theories. However, there has yet to be a definitive consensus. Triple-loop learning could be at a deeper/higher level with an extra complexity layer and more meaningful insights. However, the theoretical rooting is sparse and scarce, “sometimes driven by normative considerations, and lack support from empirical research” (Tosey, Visser, & Saunders, 2011, p. 391).

Simonin (2017) further digresses these additional layers of learning and questions their viability, generically reducing different approaches, models, and levels of OL into a series of archetypes: From the extinct dodo for zero-loop learning (no changes despite the efforts) to the mythical sphinx (never seen, so its existence is unlikely) associated with triple-loop learning, which would require fundamental changes in a whole company, let alone quadruple-

loop approaches, which would require changes in the entire society and may happen only in philosophy, the reason why they do not even have an associated archetype (Simonin, 2017)⁵.

To avoid misconceptions, organizational learning and learning organization are closer terms but not synonyms. While organizational learning is a set of actions and processes relatable to learning in an organization, the learning organization is an organization where learning happens after efforts to allow it (Örtenblad, 2001).

Seven properties can represent learning organizations: 1) Exchange from communities of practice, 2) networked knowledge and experience, 3) continual improvement, 4) learning leadership, 5) open dialogue, 6) continual transformation, and 7) psychological contracts (Snell, 2001).

Organizational learning is associated with collective learning and an improvement process, differentiating it from the inspiring guidance that empowers people to improve organizational adaptability, a concept related to the learning organization (Sun, 2003).

Also, “learning organization” differs from “a learning organization” as the latter fits in one of these types of concepts: 1) “Alive” and working for continuous learning (the present participle), 2) emphasizing its learning-related context (gerund), or 3) both the present participle and gerund types (integrated) (Sun, 2003).

Organizational learning and the learning organization are conceivable as different but complementary concepts in organizational theory. The nomological network by Ang and Joseph (1996), as shown below in Figure 2, aligns both OL and LO as core learning concepts while suggesting that the learning outcomes may lead to gains of competitiveness and, ultimately, organizational survival.

There is also a margin for potential adverse effects in a learning discourse that legitimizes an ethos in which learning is always and essentially positive, leading to potentially forgetting that learning also means disruption and reduction of variety (Contu, Grey, & Örtenblad, 2003), or ignoring that it is also possible to learn bad habits or patterns from experience, as seen in Boxall’s (2021) perverse HR alignment that harms individuals or the whole society.

⁵ It’s not impossible that a triple-loop learning (learning to learn how to learn) or even quadruple-loop learning (learning to learn to learn how to learn) may exist outside of philosophy or tongue twister levels, but adequately capturing the essence of these phenomena and proving them empirically seems impractical at least.

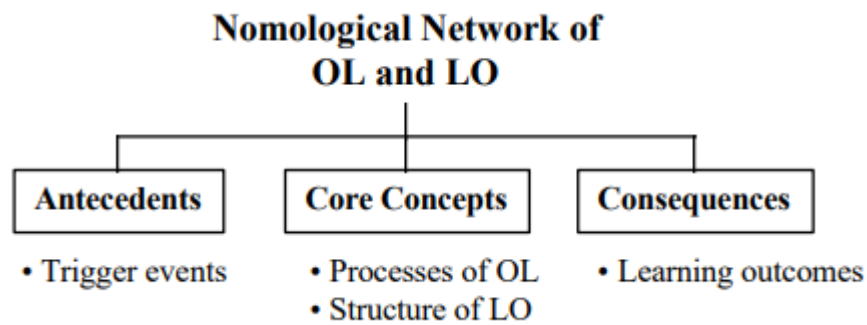


Figure 2: Nomological network of OL and LO. *Source:* Ang & Joseph (1996).

Organizational learning and learning organization are complementary and connectable concepts, even if it requires a (newly found) bridge. Being relatable to both the descriptive OL and the normative LO, the character-based judgment, related to leader characters (despite their hierarchical levels) and based on strengths and weaknesses from ten different dimensions, helping to explain the (dys)functional aspects of learning that emerge in an organization: Accountability, collaboration, courage, drive, humanity, humility, integrity, justice, temperance, and transcendence (Mishra & Reddy, 2021).

One way or another (being a “learning organization” or “a learning organization”), LO was always less favored in academic articles than OL and even regarded as a potential fad or hype in learning research (Contu, Grey, & Örtenblad, 2003).

When comparing LO and OL, the learning organization concept was proportionally less frequent than during the late 1980s or early 1990s, possibly because only a few organizations achieved a learning organization status (Antonello, 2005).

Whatever the reason is, articles employ organizational learning as a research topic consistently a few times more than learning organization. When searching in an indexing platform, such as Web of Science, employing the same limiters for category and document type, allowing both spellings (UK and US) for the word “organization,” the number of LO articles is no more than 25% of the articles regarding OL, despite the increase of publishings in both OL and LO since the 2016-2020 period.

The amount of organizational learning and learning organization articles increased consistently since the 1996-2000 period, with two noticeable surges: 1996-2000 against 1991-1995 (increases of 2.91x in OL and 4.13x in LO) and 2016-2020 against the 2011-2015 period (increases of 1.63x in OL and 4.75x in LO), as indicated by results in Table 2, showing the consistent prominence of OL over LO as a research theme over the years, even though in the last decade LO is gaining some ground comparing to OL.

Years	OL	LO	Ratio (LO / OL)
1990 or older	14	1	7.14%
1991 to 1995	84	15	17.85%
1996 to 2000	245	62	25.30%
2001 to 2005	316	48	15.18%
2006 to 2010	437	33	7.55%
2011 to 2015	563	41	7.28%
2016 to 2020	921	195	21.17%
2021 and 2022	467	101	21.62%
Total	3,047	496	16.27%

Table 2: Published articles featuring OL and LO. Source: Web of Science. Date retrieved: Jan. 18, 2023.

Organizational learning favors being a social-practice-based process rather than individual capacity acquisition or a structural learning system, differing from workplace learning (WPL) because WPL has a deeper focus on educational activities (Elkjaer & Wahlgren, 2005). In addition, other aspects converge on learning subjects but diverge in intensity, such as organizing the learning environment, which may influence learning outcomes (Elkjaer & Wahlgren, 2005).

There is a potential issue regarding the usage of organizational learning: cognitive processes happen continuously yet are only perceived when changes are noticed and contextualized, being practical when conceived as a social construction that turns raw cognition into knowledge that, while abstract, can be manipulated, shared and actively employed (Nicolini & Meznar, 1995).

Learning can be an organizational performance outcome when occurring from experiences and observations, therefore a potential case of organizational learning, since there is an input, a reflection process, and a change of attitudes and behaviors, that instead of happening unconditionally, these interactions can shape how, when and why this learning happen (Schwab & Miner, 2008).

Organizational learning studies in startup companies must be aware that despite similarities with OL in established companies, varying essentially in institutionalizing (Mishra & Reddy, 2021), context and alignment may affect these companies differently than their established and more mature counterparts. There needs to be more literature on how learning happens in smaller organizations and how their size-related oddities may affect

operationalizing definitions or constructs related to small businesses (Coetzer, Kock, & Wallo, 2017).

Organizational learning plays a role in organizations but is also helpful to individuals. In a turbulent environment, the organizational learning capacity, moderated by employee flexibility, can impact organizational performance, so HRM has a gap to explore and implement practices to foster these factors and subside a constant increase in firm performance (Camps, Oltra, Aldás-Manzano, Buenaventura-Vera, & Torres-Carballo, 2016).

In addition, HRM should implement consistent and customized practices that address employees' needs, assuring these individuals' challenges and psychological security and increasing engagement and job performance (Jose, Nimmi, & Mampilly, 2021).

Considering the potential contributions of OL and how to trigger this learning, it is crucial to notice the importance of handling people in organizations and aligning policies and practices with strategies while stimulating people to acquire, develop, spread, and employ new capacities to improve personal and firm performance. Moreover, Human Resource management comprises how an organization mobilizes people to reach its goals.

2.3. STARTUP COMPANIES

Although it is possible to define a startup company by broad classifications as “any new and small company,” this thesis works with more restrictive definitions to reflect the base of technological solutions and the operating environment, interconnected and continually renewing itself.

The development of a company has five stages by the life-cycle model, as proposed by Baird and Meshoulam (1988): Initiation, functional growth, controlled growth, functional integration, and strategic integration. These stages can be aligned with those from the product life-cycle model, defining four main life-cycle stages: startup, growth, maturity, and decline (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014).

A startup has informal aspects as an initial developmental stage, focusing on a limited number of themes. Its viability is the main challenge; therefore, awareness and assessment of contextual issues are restricted and not actively done (Baird & Meshoulam, 1988).

Entrepreneur Eric Ries (2011, p. 8) defines a startup as “(...) a human institution designed to create new products and services under conditions of extreme uncertainty”. The Brazilian Micro and Small Business Support Service (Sebrae) employs a similar approach to Ries' (2011) yet focuses on business models and scalability (Sebrae, 2014).

Based on Churchill and Lewis' (1983) five stages of small business growth (existence, survival, success, take-off, and resource maturity), Paschen (2017) consider three main life-cycle stages for startup companies:

- Pre-startup stage: Starting from an idea to identifying the venture potential and a suitable business model;
- Startup stage: Refining a viable product and adjusting the fit between the product and the market;
- Growth stage: More established and profitable, looks for scaling operations to increase revenue at a substantial rate continually.

Molnár and Jaki (2020), considering financing criteria, also employed three main life-cycle stages for startups that may sound a little different but are complementary to those from Paschen (2017):

- Pre-seed: Focuses more on the management team and less on financials than later stages;
- Seed: Increased focus on product, market, and financial viability;
- Expansion: Still considering financial indicators, market, product, and management team, the business plan becomes more important to assess (with financials as the main driver) the potential to develop and scale the business.

While entrepreneurs are everywhere and a startup approach may apply even to larger companies (Ries, 2011), startup companies are born with a problem-solving purpose while being connected enough to societal problems to quickly address issues and propose innovative solutions (Cruz, Quitério, & Scretas, 2019).

Regarding their viability, startups must quickly adapt while looking for a suitable and viable business model (Blank, 2013), which may be a tricky point: Only a few startups successfully show constant profits, given the consistently high rates of failure (over 90%) and decline from these endeavors (Cusumano, 2013). Is there any measure to increase the survival odds of these new ventures?

Apparently, there is. Success is more likely in startups backed by investors with structured processes for adding value, operating their investments as parts of a more extensive

portfolio while evaluating investors' range of resources - not only the financial ones (Teten, AbdelFattah, Bremer, & Buslig, 2013). Resources have a vital role in a startup's viability. Still, resources themselves (whether financial or not) may not be enough to ensure this viability for a startup.

On the one hand, while there is a relationship between founders' prior wealth and startup size, the relationship between that wealth and profitability depends on how wealthy these founders were: This relationship is positive on the lower 75% of founders' wealth, but strongly negative on the top 25%, indicating that excessive resources may lead to poor performance due to less careful resources management (Hvide & Møen, 2010).

On the other hand, cooperation with incumbent firms can benefit both parties, as they help each company differently. Startups usually lack a solid market network, knowledge, and financial resources to access and cooperate with incumbent and established firms to access their market networks and partners (Garidis & Rossmann, 2019).

A survey with founders, CEOs, and executives from German startups on startup cooperation behavior indicated that the intention to cooperate is more significant to the cooperation intensity than the cooperation quality (Garidis & Rossman, 2019). Also, this survey showed that the cooperation intensity was more relevant to performance than the relationship between cooperation quality and performance, but the latter is still relevant.

These results indicate that actively and willingly partnering with other companies may help startups succeed by providing access to contacts and resources that businesses need to gain legitimacy and thrive (Garidis & Rossmann, 2019). Also, the dimensions and outputs related to cooperation behaviors, such as knowledge exchange, can be used by startups to systematically assess knowledge gains and usage, identifying behaviors and patterns to improve (Garidis & Rossmann, 2019).

Another factor that may improve or hinder a startup company's survival odds is the composition and adequacy of its team, which is noticeable directly as they operate and try to establish its operations or indirectly as it happens during funding or accelerating rounds, also considering that most startups have more than one founder (Lazar, Miron-Spektor, Agarwal, Erez, Goldfarb, & Chen, 2020).

The founders of a startup have a vital role: Making decisions to ensure that the business survives to its first months while achieving a viable business model that allows them first to reach a breakeven point at least and secondly to increase sales and income constantly to achieve a scalable gain.

In that order, young entrepreneurs may resource to heuristics for embasing their decisions to organize things, express their identity in the venture, and experiment and acquire information about its market, quickly changing if needed to keep adapting (Gilbert-Saad, Siedlok, & McNaughton, 2023).

The founding team is not necessarily the team that idealized the startup or the one that will take the startup forward: In fact, it is possible to divide that input-process-output model into three different stages or timestamps: Formation (incipient or pre-startup), founding (startup), and evolving (post-startup, scaling) (Lazar et al., 2020).

Exemplifying how important these teams can be for Brazilian startups, the vast majority (93.5%) of applicants to acceleration programs, which recruit startups with growth and scalability potential, are rejected because their teams are not adequate for developing their businesses (Abreu & Campos, 2016). That kind of consequence shows how critical recruitment and other HRM elements can be for a startup that might not have another chance to succeed or remain operational.

Since there is a range of possible authors and classifications on a startup company's life cycle and development, Figure 3 comprises these possible stages to highlight (in bold, possibly between two stages) those related to scaling and developing that are more closely related to this thesis.

Authors	Development stages				
Churchill & Lewis (1983)	Existence	Survival	Success	Take-off	Resource maturity
Baird & Meshoulam (1988)	Initiation	Functional growth	Controlled growth	Functional integration	Strategic integration
Armstrong & Taylor (2014)	Startup	Growth	Maturity	Decline	
Paschen (2017)	Pre-startup	Startup	Growth		
Lazar et al. (2020)	Formation (pre-startup)	Founding (startup)		Evolving (scaling)	
Molnár & Jaki (2020)	Pre-seed	Seed	Expansion		

Figure 3: Authors and developmental stages. Source: Made by the author.

An analysis by Inácio, Autio, Morini, Gimenez, and Dionisio (2016) about the Brazilian entrepreneurial ecosystem shows entrepreneurs' attitudes as its main positive point. Still, some issues could hinder its companies at that point, notably the lack of consistency in available human capital, high-impact enterprises, few international companies, and an unfavorable social context (Inácio et al., 2016).

The large population and high cell phone and internet usage rates help technology-based companies thrive in Brazil (Distrito, 2022). However, on the other hand, the fact that

the country is still under development (which may present its related challenges and business opportunities) and the regional competition from emerging markets in Latin America, such as Colombia and Mexico, may make it difficult for Brazilian startups to attract large funding rounds and spread (Distrito, 2022).

Regarding Brazilian startups, StartupBase, a platform that monitors data about the Brazilian startup system, found 22,417 startups in its records, most of them (51.8%) from two regions: Southeast (34% of the startups, 43% of the cities with at least one startup), and South (13 of the startups, 27% of the cities with at least one startup) (StartupBase, 2023a). The five Brazilian states with the most startups are: São Paulo (21.76%), Minas Gerais (6.56%), Rio Grande do Sul (5.08%), Rio de Janeiro (4.64%), and Santa Catarina (4.22%) (StartupBase, 2023b).

These startups act in several different industries, such as education (9.10%), finance (6.16%), health and wellbeing (5.01%), advertising (4.76%), and e-commerce/marketplace (4.66%) (StartupBase, 2023b). Regarding the business model, software as a service (SaaS) is currently the favorite model (16.93%), followed by the marketplace (7.18%) and direct sales (4.34%) (StartupBase, 2023b).

Still considering StartupBase's (2023b) database, while there is a high number of startups labeled as nonoperational (9.25%), there is a fair number of endeavors that are getting on track: From the 9,427 startups classified in any active stage (there are 11,042 startups with no classification available, 48.9% of the total), 17.08% are in the ideation stage, 1.30% in validation, 38.8% in operation, 31.90% on traction, and 10.89% achieved scale.

Startups have increasing importance for the Brazilian entrepreneurial ecosystem and economy, which allows for fostering innovation, new job opportunities, and increased competitiveness (Santos, Holanda, Santos, Felizola, & Florencio, 2020; Santos & Theóphilo, 2022). Startups also boost tech transfers and market university-related patents to reach larger, established companies and foster creating public policies to help develop innovative and technology-based companies (Meyer, 2006; Silveira et al., 2022).

Brazilian startups have high expectations of advancing their businesses in a short period and with limited resources: In a survey with more than 250 Brazilian startups and data collected from more than 2,500 startups, most of these companies (58.0%) expected to triple the revenue, and the majority of the startups (54.8%) had resources to operate for 12 months or less without running out of money (Abstartups & BR Angels, 2022).

Despite a large number of startups with little to no income (74.7% with a yearly income of R\$ 500 K or less), some high-successful companies managed to achieve an eight-

figure yearly income (2.6% above R\$ 10 M) (Abstartups & BR Angels, 2022). However, at this point, these multimillionaire endeavors are still more of an exception than the rule.

As pointed out in a report by CB Insights, a market intelligence company with a business analytics platform, despite the unfavorable economic and political context, some factors enabled recent positive results for Latin American startups: Increases in internet and mobile phones availability and usage, aligned with the regulation in some novelty markets as, for example, open banking (CB Insights, 2020).

The pandemic years were tough for people and businesses, but still, some startups achieved unicorn status during that time. In early 2023, CB Insights' (2023) database currently shows eleven companies that reached unicorn status since 2020: three from 2020 (but one of these in January, before the official arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil), six in 2021, and two in 2022.

As of early 2023, there are sixteen Brazilian startups with a valuation of over US\$ 1 billion under CB Insights' (2023) database. However, only two of them are over US\$ 5 billion: C6 Bank (fintech, US\$ 5.05 B) and QuintoAndar (e-commerce & direct-to-consumer, US\$ 5.1 B) (CB Insights, 2023). Nubank no longer featured in that list after delisting from the Brazilian Stock Exchange (Carmen, 2022).

Gulati and DeSantola (2016), while highlighting the importance of understanding how startups achieve this scale gain, still mention four critical activities for this:

- 1) Hiring functional experts and defining specialized roles;
- 2) Creation of management structures suited to the organization's new level;
- 3) Building capacities for forecasting and planning future scenarios;
- 4) Articulating and supporting cultural and institutional values.

All these aspects must be aligned so that the startup's development is possible and sustainable in the long term. For example, when training its staff, the company must meet demands for more specialized workers (which require specific development efforts) and teams with a greater diversity of profiles and capabilities (which may require particular recruitment and management), demanding activities that regard HRM and OL.

The lean startup model, for example, is one research theme related to startup companies, learning, and implementation for scaling up. Primarily based on shorter development cycles to assess the viability of a business model, the lean startup is relatable to Blank's (2007) work and its four-stepped process to locate, develop, and grow its markets:

- Customer discovery: Understand and list the customers' needs, suggest a product, and check for potential customers' reactions;
- Customer validation: Check the business's potential viability by analyzing the sales processes, sustainability, and scalability;
- Customer creation: Determines processes to assess the company's initial objectives, positioning, launch, and demand creation (whether by acquiring installed user bases or developing an own user base from scratch);
- Company building: Development of the company in its structural, cultural, and management aspects, expansion of its customer base, and creation of departments that can learn and improve continually, ensuring its long-term viability and success.

It is possible to group these steps into two stages: The first stage, search, comprises customer discovery and customer validation (and the loop from customer validation back to customer discovery, named pivot), while the second one, execution, contains the last two steps, customer creation and company building (Blank, 2007). If considered the cognitions behind these two proposed stages, there are differences in the developmental stage and other aspects (Yang, Sun, & Zhao, 2019):

- Search: Akin to early development stage companies, it relates to an exploratory approach, uses experimentation and risk-taking activities, with an uncertain business model while aiming to survive. Managed by the founders. Fail often, but fast;
- Execution: Suitable to late development stage companies, uses an exploitative approach and activities related to implementation, production, and growth. It usually has a known business model, aims for profitability, and dedicated executives are responsible for its management. Avoid failure.

In the Brazilian context, São Paulo is the country's most populated (12.33 M in 2020⁶) and wealthiest (GDP R\$ 714.68 B in 2018, R\$ 58,691.90 per capita⁷) city, and the most promising one for an entrepreneur. According to Oberlo's (2021) database of 200 of the

⁶ Retrieved from: < https://ftp.ibge.gov.br/Estimativas_de_Populacao/Estimativas_2020/POP2020_20210331.pdf >. Date retrieved: Jul. 23, 2021.

⁷ Retrieved from: < <https://cidades.ibge.gov.br/brasil/sp/sao-paulo/pesquisa/38/46996> >. Date retrieved: Jul. 22, 2021.

world's biggest capitals and business centers for entrepreneurial success, São Paulo stands in the 69th position in a ranking that analyzed factors from human tech capital to Covid support.

Scoring 53.4 from a maximum of 100 points (London, the best-placed city, was set as a parameter), São Paulo is the only Brazilian city in the top-75 rankings and the second from Latin America, behind Santiago (61st) and in front of Lima (73rd) (Oberlo, 2021).

Regarding growth and scaling, like most companies (if not every company), startups intend to establish themselves in their respective markets, developing their products and structures while looking for a suitable business model that allows a continuous increase in operations, so revenue grows faster than expenses. However, companies perform differently and may not take the same route to grow.

Since startups exist “first and foremost to survive and ultimately achieve market success” (Jabłoński, 2017, p. 55), there are three primary outcomes for a startup: Failure (ceasing operations), achieving success (which may depend on each company and individual expectations), and the whole in-between. At this point, it is relevant to give an insight into the possible outcomes while pointing out which are of interest to this research.

The basic concept of the failed company, formerly a startup or not, is an understandable and self-descriptive concept, considering that most startups will fail and cease operations in a short period (Arnaud, 2019; Cusumano, 2013). However, the possibilities are broader in startups to questions like when a startup fails. For example, a startup may fail because it ran out of resources before implementing a scalable business model, thus returning no money to its investors (Arnaud, 2019; Wise, 2018).

Another failure for a startup happens when it constantly cannot implement a viable business model that results in meaningful growth, remains stagnant, and will be in trouble with its investors sooner or later. That company might generate some revenue at this point but only around the breakeven, thus failing to present a value proposition that scales over time (Wise, 2018). Despite investing rounds, it remains stagnant, with no clear direction or perspective to return investments (Arnaud, 2019; Wise, 2018), which is a relative failure.

On the other hand, a successful startup may have started small and become robust through actions such as: Leading a value creation framework that aims at societal impact instead of financial results only (Taneja & Chenault, 2019), understanding customers' demands and what is valuable to them (Chang, 2017), and knowing how and why to pivot significant elements of their business models to avoid failure or to seize better innovation opportunities (Chaparro & Gomes, 2021; García-Gutiérrez & Martínez-Borreguero, 2016).

Since success is subjective according to each one's expectations, there are three primary outcomes for startups that remain operational: Exit (of private control), stagnation (failing to get traction and a relative failure, a.k.a. zombie), and growth.

Exiting is a possibility and may even be a strategy for startup founders (Parker, 2013), usually happening at any time between starting operations and the end of the scaling-up process, possibly representing either the founders leaving the company or being merged, acquired, or going public by an initial public offering (IPO) (Pisoni & Onetti, 2018), as shown in Figure 4.

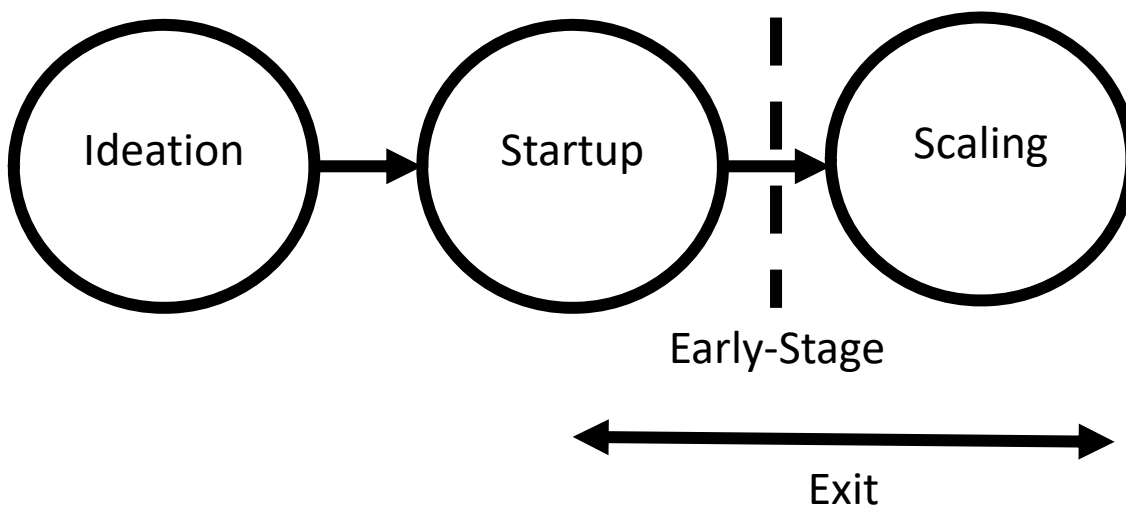


Figure 4: Startup development and exit of the founders. *Source:* Adapted from Pisoni & Onetti (2018).

As the startup proceeds to establish itself and gain traction, three strategic scaling-up possibilities may affect financial stability and company ownership: Stay private, which may be costly; go public by selling shares for extra resources but losing some decision power due to the entrance of new share and stakeholders; or even get acquired, which may entirely reshape the organization and its structures (Duruflé, Hellmann, & Wilson, 2017).

A wealthy founder may provide a larger size to their startup without experiencing several resource constraints (Hvide & Møen, 2010). Part of this may happen because this wealthy founder can afford to stay private, therefore not giving up on ownership (by going public or being bought out of the business) to pursue its planning.

The financial needs of startups can influence strategies and goals, impacting every other aspect of these organizations. According to a startup's developmental stage, there are different financial needs and barriers to accessing these resources (Arena, Bengo, Calderini, & Chiodo, 2018).

While a seed (preoperational) organization needs low financing, costs rise sharply until maturity, especially in the startup and early growth phases, and different financial barriers, according to the development stage: There is an unfavorable risk-return ratio in preoperational companies, performance issues in the startup phase, lack of financial skills in early growth, and even the size may be an issue to keep financing those startups (Arena et al., 2018).

The type and the moment of funding may be relevant, as well as the funded startup size. In the case of angel investors, they are usually individuals with a certain wealth and willing to invest some value (less than US\$ 1 M) from their resources in new ventures (Becker-Blease & Sohl, 2015). In early-stage investments, angel investors positively impact resources from follow-on rounds (Croce, Guerini, & Ughetto, 2018). In late-stage rounds, the angel investment increases a startup's chances of succeeding in public listing or acquisition (Croce et al., 2018).

Going public and getting acquired are both exit procedures. Still, while the exit per se is an objective factor as well as failing or staying private, to the point where it is possible to predict these outcomes with a certain precision (e.g., Ross, Das, Sciro, & Raza, 2021), the reasons and implications behind the exit are subjective and contextual (Parker, 2013).

Crossing the adoption gap between early adopters and the mainstream public (thus avoiding restricting sales to only a niche group) implies considering a more comprehensive array of customers as the user base moves and adopting repeatable processes to allow scaling operations (Rasmussen & Tanev, 2020).

The startup growth remembers the concept of rapid scaling (Huang, Henfridsson, Liu, & Newell, 2017), which is related to a significant increase of the (potentially continuous or self-reinforcing) user base of a venture by digital innovation, which needs nurturing to be sustainable as time goes on.

Picken (2017) considers that the beginning of a transition process from startup to scaling is the company gaining traction in its marketplace while setting foundations for an operation with scalable growth, from a little structured and often informal company to a structured and disciplined one, requiring new capacities to develop.

This thesis focuses on startups that are operational and have scaled to achieve a certain structural complexity, avoiding failed, preoperational, and even early-stage startups for the following reasons:

- Failed: No longer viable prospects for scaling in size and complexity. Often ceased operations.
- Preoperational: Without starting operations and generating some revenue, it is unlikely that should justify any HR management staff or structure;
- Early-stage: These companies are experimenting with their products to achieve a better fit with potential markets and customers. At that point, a dedicated, HR-exclusive structure would be too expensive.

Startups that scaled operations until demanding some HR structure are the chosen company focus for this study. These companies usually depend on achieving quick (Picken, 2017), repeatable, scalable, and sustained growth (Chaparro & Gomes, 2021; García-Gutiérrez & Martínez-Borreguero, 2016; Sebrae, 2014). HR may help these companies by providing human capital in the amount, pace, and quality needed and helping people develop once inside a company.

The startups' growth cycle is relatable to their business models, which must be scalable, replicating their activities continuously, making revenue grow faster than the costs, and allowing these organizations to increase the scale of their activities (Monteiro, 2019). Going past their exploratory phase by finding a viable product, establishing a market segment, and beginning a phase of traction and growth with significant gains in their market penetration, it is possible to label these startups as scaleups (Duruflé et al., 2017).

While research on startups started expanding in the 2000s, possibly due to technological advancements and broader commercial usage of the internet, scalability and scaleups remained a specialized or niche segment, failing to experience that much attention compared to its primary research field (startups).

Data from the Web of Science platform (with the same restrictions on category and document type from previous mentionings from Table 1), displayed next in Table 3, indicates that mentions of scalability in articles about startups started in the 1990s. However, after the first impact (1991 to 1995: 7.31%), the proportion of articles mentioning scalability or scaleups remained between 5% and 7%.

One way or another, it is possible to notice an increase in articles about startups between 2016 and 2020 compared to the previous five-year period (2011 to 2015): 2.88x. In that regard, the number of articles on scalability or scaleups in startups rose at a higher pace: 3.47x.

Years	Startups	Scaleups	Ratio (Scaleups / Startups)
1990 or older	31	0	0.00%
1991 to 1995	82	6	7.31%
1996 to 2000	158	12	7.59%
2001 to 2005	221	14	6.33%
2006 to 2010	392	24	6.12%
2011 to 2015	635	34	5.35%
2016 to 2020	1,830	118	6.44%
2021 and 2022	1,177	60	5.09%
Total	4,526	268	5.92%

Table 3: Published articles featuring startups and scaleups. Source: Web of Science. Date retrieved: Jan. 18, 2023.

As seen above, research on scalable startups or scaleups is a relatively new and underexplored research field (compared to other business or management topics, at least). Some of this research covers funding themes. However, how funding and ownership influence organizational strategies in startup companies, especially regarding HR models, policies, practices, and learning towards continuous HR development as the startup gains traction and scalability, still needs further exploring.

2.4. INTEGRATING THE THEMES

The three main themes of this study (HR management, startup companies, and organizational learning) have some points of convergence, at least conceptually. For example, custom-tailored OL practices to impact organizational outputs (such as firm performance) (Camps et al., 2016; Jose et al., 2021) are a theme of interest to OL and HRM. Still, does any recent research field or trend actively integrate all of these themes?

Long story short, the answer would be NO. Further exploring, though, reveals some common themes that are more relevant when analyzing these research themes on dyads (OL x HRM, OL x startups, HRM x startups). So while no article recently addressed organizational learning, HR management, and startups, it is possible to understand how contemporary research integrates these themes.

A search using the Web of Science indexer, which filtered journal articles published between 2016 and 2020 (excluding later research to avoid any temporary shift or bias from

the pandemic), employing the same document type (article) and categories (business or management) from previous searches listed in this thesis, could not retrieve any article that featured HR management, organizational learning, and startups simultaneously.

Out of more than 11 thousand articles featuring at least one of these themes between 2016 and 2020 (HRM: 8,669, OL: 1,042, startups: 2,056), it was possible to retrieve 67 published articles containing (at least minimally) two of these themes (about 0.5% of total), as Table 4 displays.

Year	Published articles		
	HRM x startups	HRM x OL	Startups x OL
2016	11	2	1
2017	6	2	1
2018	8	1	1
2019	8	3	4
2020	12	5	2
Total	45	13	9

Table 4: Published articles featuring two out of three themes. *Source:* Made by the author. *Date retrieved:* Aug. 13, 2021.

Inside each theme, it was possible to notice that some subthemes or approaches were more prevalent in one crossing to one research theme than in another. When considering OL, Table 5 shows that organizational learning capability, the overall winner (20.6%) subtheme, was much more present in articles also featuring HRM (24.4%) than in articles with startups (7.6%). At the same time, learning processes, the overall runner-up (17.2%), was a much more transversal theme, entirely integrated with both HRM (13.3%) and startups (30.7%).

OL subthemes or approaches (featured more than once)	Integration with other themes		
	Any	HRM	Startups
Organizational learning capability	20.6%	24.4%	7.6%
Learning processes	17.2%	13.3%	30.7%
Learning as an output enhancer	12.0%	13.3%	7.6%
Ambidextrous learning	8.6%	11.1%	-
Learning organization	8.6%	11.1%	-
Learning modifiers	6.8%	6.6%	7.6%
Learning as a mediator	3.4%	4.4%	-
Learning as a moderator	3.4%	4.4%	-
Learning orientation	3.4%	2.2%	7.6%
Learning outcomes	3.4%	4.4%	-

Table 5: Published articles featuring OL and another theme. *Source:* Made by the author.

In HRM, only two of its subthemes or approaches appeared in conjunction with OL and startups articles: Implementing, the winner in every possible category, and HRM policies. HRM practices, for example, were featured only in articles with OL but not in articles about startups. Table 6 shows every subtheme or approach featured more than once with other main research themes (OL or startups).

HRM subthemes or approaches (featured more than once)	Integration with other themes		
	Any	OL	Startups
Implementing of HR systems and practices	18.5%	17.7%	22.2%
Dynamic capabilities	11.1%	13.3%	-
HRM policies	9.2%	8.8%	11.1%
High-performance work system (HPWS)	7.4%	8.0%	-
HRM practices	5.5%	6.6%	-
Authentic leadership	3.7%	4.4%	-

Table 6: Published articles featuring HRM and another theme. *Source:* Made by the author.

Previous literature on startup companies only adhered a little to the other main themes of this research article, HRM and OL, so only three subthemes or approaches, as shown in

Table 7, appeared more than once in published articles regarding those other themes. The lean startup was the most prevalent but only appeared in articles featuring OL. No subtheme or approach was transversal by appearing in HRM and OL.

Startups subthemes or approaches (featured more than once)	Integration with other themes		
	Any	HRM	OL
Lean startup	13.6%	-	23.0%
Entrepreneurial orientation	9.0%	22.2%	-
Multinational expansion	9.0%	-	15.3%

Table 7: Published articles featuring startups and another theme. *Source:* Made by the author.

The integration of HRM, OL, and startups in recent articles by their combinations allowed identifying similarities and singularities in their subthemes or approaches. Thematic cluster analysis from the literature review by Castaneda et al. (2018) shows that the conceptual relationship between HRM and OL in articles is consistent and dates from the 1970s, featuring themes such as dynamic capabilities, knowledge management systems, leadership, firm performance, strategic planning, social and workplace learning.

There are few transversal points in these themes, which appeared to other research themes, being learning processes (OL) and implementing HR systems and practices (HRM) the most relevant ones.

On the singularities side, though, certain aspects are much more relevant to one theme than another (e.g., organizational learning capability, which is far more frequent to HRM than recent startup research). It is valid to point, though, that specific differences, or even absences, such as HPWS in articles with startups, may be related to the characteristics of a theme.

Startup companies may need more complexity in their demands and structures to benefit from a full-fledged HPWS. It would make little difference proportionally to the time, resources, and personnel needed. Nevertheless, at some point, they still need to develop progressively and structure their HR departments, models, policies, and practices. When and how that happens is a question that needs further addressing.

2.5. CONCEPTUAL SYNTHESIS

This subsection summarizes some of the main theoretical definitions, assumptions, and conceptual choices for this study. Table 8 contains these aspects, while the concepts appear in the following subsection.

Concept	Assumption/choice	Reason
Learning organization	Both “learning organization” or “a learning organization” are described in the text as “learning organization”.	These concepts cover different aspects from the same theme (an organization where learning happens).
Organization type	Startup companies.	Scarce literature that covers startups to both HRM and organizational learning.
OL and/or LO	Both are similar, but not synonyms (Örtenblad, 2001). Nevertheless, this thesis focuses more on OL than LO, except when mentioned in the text.	OL refers to actions and processes, LO refers to the organization where learning happens.
Startup type	Companies that are operational, have achieved some scale gain, and started their HRM areas.	Failed startups have no growth perspectives, preoperational startups may not generate revenue, and very early-stage startups usually have no interest or resources to afford having HR-exclusive staff.

Table 8: Theoretical assumptions and choices. *Source:* Made by the author.

About the assumptions and choices covered by Table 8, it is valid to explain further the focus on startup companies and OL rather than on LO. Firstly, as shown under subsection 3.2 (Case selection criteria), the choice of startups as the organization type and the eligibility criteria, such as being currently active (in the operational stage), that already achieved a particular growth in the headcount (the minimum required was having at least a hundred people, regardless of contract type), with at least an HR-exclusive employee aims to gather companies in a minimally similar development stage.

Nevertheless, these companies must be advanced enough to have some degree of HR management handled internally by HR-dedicated staff to ascertain human resources management, its implementation, and learning aspects. That is also the reason for requiring a relatively high headcount number that could rule out most early-stage startups, shifting the focus to startups that, one way or another, had achieved some scaling since it would be too expensive for preoperational companies to achieve this size and complexity, for example.

Regarding organizational learning and learning organizations, the focus is on finding OL-related aspects in how the participating companies structured themselves HR-wise, such

as learning moments, triggering events, decision-making processes and patterns, and learning outcomes that could change these companies, whether of a single-loop kind that only aims for immediate gains and efficacy improvement, or a double-loop learning that triggers more significant changes in these companies, requiring structural changes as a result of this learning process, with long-lasting effects. Also, every learning organization has some organizational learning inside of it, but the opposite is not necessarily true.

Meanwhile, it is valid to point out that this study addresses methods-related aspects under section 3, so methodological assumptions or choices are not covered by Table 8. Furthermore, to highlight some of the essential concepts used in this research, Table 9 synthesizes these concepts alongside a working definition and the primary authors that sustain these definitions.

Concept	Working definition	Reference(s)
High performance work system (HPWS)	An integrated bundle of HR practices, consistent internal and externally, that affect internal structures to handle uncertainty and improve performance outputs.	Davis & Evans (2005); Lengnick-Hall et al. (2009).
HR management (HRM)	Continuous efforts to ensure a regular supply of qualified people in an organization, according to organizational necessities.	Boxall & Purcell (2011); Ferris et al. (1995).
Individual learning	The learning done by a single individual, which acts as an agent of changes and can be related to group learning.	Argyris & Schon (1978); Bido et al. (2010); Friedman (2002).
Learning organization (LO)	An organization where active efforts allows learning, whether continuous, contextual, or both, to happen.	Örtenblad (2001); Sun (2003).
Organizational learning (OL)	A dynamic process involving different organizational levels, contrasting knowledge appropriation, generation, and usage to develop resources by interactions and reflections.	Antonello (2005); Crossan et al. (1999).
Policy	A general guideline for action that is based on organizational needs, aims to maximize outputs related to human capital and labor systems and bases on shared values.	Guest (1987); Schuler (1992).
Practice	Guides specific actions according to individual role in an organization, aims to reinforce performance by cuing behaviors for specific needs.	Schuler (1992).
Scalable gain	A fast increase in the income and continuous user base from a replicable product or service, which needs nurturing to be sustainable in the long run, so revenue grows faster than costs.	Huang et al. (2017); Monteiro (2019).
Scaleup company	A high-growth entrepreneurial firm that defined a product to explore and established itself in a market segment, experiencing a consistent growth in activities and revenue that allow increasing the scale of its activities.	Durufié et al. (2017); Monteiro (2019).
Startup company	A company in an initial development stage, with informal aspects and uncertain context, trying to achieve a viable, repeatable and scalable business model.	Baird & Meshoulam (1988); Sebrae (2014).
Strategic HR management (SHRM)	An arrangement of planned behaviors aiming to align organizational objectives and individual performance.	Wright & McMahan (1992).

Table 9: Conceptual synthesis from the literature review. Source: Made by the author.

This conceptual synthesis table differs from the methodological association matrix because the conceptual synthesis gathers theoretical concepts and uses definitions in the text's scope. In contrast, the latter (available in section 3.4, "Methodological synthesis") interrelates the theoretical foundations, methodological choices, and expected hypotheses, questions, analysis techniques, and results.

The thesis presents this and other method-related aspects, such as data selection, criteria for case acceptance, data treatment, and methodological synthesis, in the following section.

3. METHODS

The design and procedures described in this thesis aim to align the various methodological aspects of scientific research, such as the research question, objectives, literature employed, approach and protocols, data analysis, and integration, leading to the results. These choices should also ensure that every aspect is internally accurate and consistent while appropriate and relatable to the research.

Science cannot exist without scientific methods, but these methods are broader than science and valuable to other study areas (Marconi & Lakatos, 2003). Still, a method is a set of systematic activities that allows safely reaching knowledge with validity while tracing a path to be followed, detecting errors, and assisting decisions (Marconi & Lakatos, 2003).

The central research question of this study, “*How do startups implement human resources management policies and practices?*,” may be appropriate to explore with a qualitative design, which was the choice made in this thesis.

Qualitative research may be suitable when a problem needs further exploration to add more complexity and details that are only obtainable by contacting people in their working environments, understanding the context, and listening to their stories (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research is beneficial when the factors behind a topic, possibly a novelty one, need to be clarified or discovered (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

That effort to become familiar with certain phenomena is part of the foundation of qualitative inquiry, meaning that it is essential to become intimate with the subject of the research, narrowing the focus and respecting people and their experiences to interpret obtained data and look for meanings (Charmaz, 2004). The search for familiarity with a theme also relates to an exploratory approach (Marconi & Lakatos, 2003), with two other main aspects: clarifying or modifying concepts and developing hypotheses for further investigation.

An exploratory approach may employ different data-collecting procedures and sources, such as content analysis, interviews, or observation, to understand the studied phenomena (Marconi & Lakatos, 2003). It adheres to the definition by Willis, Jost, and Nilakanta (2007, p. 181) of qualitative research, “(...) an approach to understanding human and social behavior that emphasizes the collection of ‘thick’ data.”

This study is describable as exploratory and qualitative to acknowledge the mechanisms behind phenomena, namely how startup companies develop and structure their HRM departments, models, policies, and practices as they grow larger, more complex, and engage a scalable business model, with triggering factors and learning points.

The in-depth analysis of a social phenomenon is also relatable to using a case study approach, as pointed out by authors such as Creswell and Creswell (2018) or Yin (2015). HRM implementation is familiar to qualitative design and case study approach, being a common choice for both, allowing further exploring and multiple perspectives related to the theme (Ogliara & Fischer, 2019).

Regarding temporality, this thesis planned interviews under a semistructured script to help describe the cases and the findings in a processual way, in addition to retrieved data from websites, news, media sources, and an HR-oriented social network, which allowed gathering HR-related information in an environment relevant for HR practitioners where several of them and their companies are active. Data centers on events, activities, and choices, describing how events unfolded over time and the sequence of patterns told in stories to understand better how processes deal with context and evolve with their events (Langley, 1999).

Considering the importance of context to processual research, shifting contexts means that social processes are discontinuous and open-ended, highlighting the challenge of recognizing patterns in the unpredictability of these shifting contexts related to processual research (Pettigrew, 1992). In practical terms, a methodological choice for this study was looking for events, processes, and outcomes represented by identifiable choices and decision patterns.

Strategy process research is suitable for qualitative methods, so formulating and implementing change processes on events are points of interest to address the temporal evolution and, utmostly, the practice of strategy in organizations (Whittington, 2007). Also, attributing causalities (instead of inferring them) and meanings from past events helps to project future events from a temporality perspective (Hernes, Simpson, & Söderlund, 2013).

Bringing theory to a practice-oriented approach, the suggestion of topics for further research by Trullen et al. (2020) comprises in a framework of contextual approaches two possibilities that may be suitable for this study: 1) Organizational enabling factors of HR implementation, such as climate, culture, and leadership, and 2) implementation processes according to practice types, such as performance assessment or waging.

Despite being initially established in healthcare and law environments⁸, case studies have a long tradition in business or management contexts (e.g., Maxfield, 1930). Yin (2015)

⁸ The usage of case studies as a teaching method in legal education dates from the late 19th century, invented by Christopher Columbus Langdell, Harvard Law School. Retrieved from: < <https://casestudies.law.harvard.edu/the-case-study-teaching-method> >. Date retrieved: Aug. 22, 2021.

conceives the case study as empirical research on a phenomenon in its natural environment and considers previous theories and multiple data sources to support analysis. Its usage is favorable when it is impossible to separate the phenomena from its context (Yin, 2015).

Continuing on other premises and theoretical assumptions that subsided the development of a research and lead to its analysis (Marconi & Lakatos, 2003), the central unit of analysis is the organizational level. As such, insights on strategies or policies regarding how the HR sectors and their professionals are structured, developed, and demanded to enhance the human capital centers on organizations as a whole, allowing perceptions and contributions from several actors and functions on each researched organization.

The primary data collecting techniques proposed in this research are interviews, mainly to collect perspectives and perceptions, approaching individuals from different hierarchical levels and attributions in the studied organizations. These interviews happen as a dialogue toward a direction, managed by the researcher and based on its script to find meaningful insight after collaboration from the parties involved (Creswell, 2014). To help build the cases and as a complementary source, data collection also gathered information from other media, such as professional-oriented social networks, websites, and news outlets in general.

All of these qualitative interviews happened in an online environment, employing Zoom as a conferencing and recording tool; each interview got scheduled and recorded individually, with only the interviewer (the researcher) and the interviewee (the participant) in the conference room. Launched in 2012, Zoom is a relatively recent videoconferencing tool that became popular as a work and educational conferencing solution during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, its potential for academic purposes usage in qualitative interviews came before that time (Archibald, Ambagtsheer, Casey, & Lawless, 2019).

There was a handful of pretesting conversations with scholars, HR practitioners, a tech recruiter, and even a former HR executive. A test-run interview happened in early 2022 with the HR manager from a smaller startup located in the Greater São Paulo (SP) area to ensure that the interview questions were appropriate for the proposed objectives, clarifying script points and validating conceptual insights and that the approach points were meaningful for HR staff and developing startups as well.

Since converting the live conference recording into a workable video file was a resource-intensive process that would take about ten minutes per conversation hour with the available hardware and software (both acquired with the researcher's resources), the advisable was scheduling interviews with at least one-hour interval between sessions. Still, there was a

case of back-to-back interviews (ST01 and ST02), which went fine in conducting conversations, managing time, and converting files between the interviews, with only a fifteen-minute break between interviews.

The construction of cases happened by gathering the recorded interviews from each case and adding them with documents or reports related to those companies, allowing multiple perceptions and points of view to build meaningful cases that allow the reader to understand the participating companies and the context behind them. When relevant, these data sources are mentioned during case descriptions, yet in a general way to avoid identifying the participating companies from this thesis (e.g., “according to a startup-oriented news website”). Aligning these multiple references and insights help to understand how these startups built, implemented, and even corrected or improved their HRM models, policies, and practices over time.

3.1. DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENT

As previously stated, this thesis employed a case study approach to understanding better how HRM continuously develops in startup companies. Considering that the unit of analysis of this study is an organization, a single (startup) company comprised each case. Both interviews from participating professionals and data from other sources relatable to a specific company are part of a single case.

There is yet to be a definitive final word on how many cases should be in a study that employs the case study approach. Still, there are some valuable guidelines in the existing literature. Eisenhardt (1989), for example, suggests that some number between four and ten cases should be adequate overall, regarding that the empirical grounding for a complex study with less than four cases may be insufficient.

Still, even these numbers are not definitive measures, and it is possible to consider some flexibility in both lower and upper limits regarding the number of cases since the appropriate number of studied cases depends on the obtained complexity (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The bare minimum of cases seems to be two to four cases (Perry, 1998), while the upper limit stands between 12 to 15 cases (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Perry, 1998) since more than that would be awkward to present or result in fewer data per studied case (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The total required number of interviews also varies and is even more context-dependent than the number of cases to study. Three interviews from different hierarchical

levels for each studied case should be fine, but it may not be possible in some contexts, such as in smaller companies (Perry, 1998). Coincidentally, all five cases from this study gathered three interviews each, all with people that, one way or another, have a relation with human resource management. The complementary case, from actors related to finance and investment in the startup ecosystem, also has three interviewed participants, each from a single company that is not contained in the thesis otherwise.

Interviews and questionnaires, if adequately designed (the TAP procedure reminds three potential question design issues: Topic, Applicability, and Perspective), may be used as part of a research design to combine data and strengthen insights (Tharenou, Donohue, & Cooper, 2007). The interviews in this thesis addressed participants from different hierarchical levels, from co-founders and area leaders to practitioners in general, from the studied cases.

These interviews aimed to extract data from conversations to help understand phenomena and clarify meanings that would not be obtainable by questionnaires or research on public documents (Marconi & Lakatos, 2003). In this study, as contained in sections 5 (HR and implementation in startups) and 6 (Main findings and insights), the interviews captured perceptions from several perspectives to give insights into implementing HR models, policies, and practices, including triggering events or learning processes on how and why to implement and develop them.

After recording individual interviews, there was the transcription of these interviews for applying the content analysis technique to group data and allowing to generate representations (Bardin, 1977) for further classification analysis of information grouped in this way. Further description and discussion about data treatment occur under subsection 3.3 (Data treatment and analysis protocols).

3.2. CASE SELECTION CRITERIA

As pointed out before, this study uses organizations as its unit of analysis, focusing on startup companies from different industries, particularly those that scaled up in size and complexity. This growth means changes in the set of implemented models, policies, and practices related to HR management, which needs to learn how to deal with a workforce that is both more diverse and more specialized in their skills and capacities.

Initially, establishing criteria for choosing the participants in a study is one of the requirements for an investigation to maintain scientific rigor (Marconi & Lakatos, 2003),

along with other items such as assessing the interviews' objectivity or looking for validity issues of forms and interviews, including their scripts.

Regarding the minimum headcount for participating in the study, the chosen criterion is only to allow companies that had a minimum of a hundred people at the time of data collection, regardless of the contract type (part-time, full-time, zero-hour contract, or even no contract for founders and shareholders in general). Literature on HR management shows that this minimal number of a hundred people relates to more maturity in the company and its processes, allowing a more strategic role in its HRM rather than only enduring administrative/bureaucratic tasks (Huselid, 1995; Collins & Smith, 2006). In contrast, the literature on small businesses usually includes fewer than a hundred people in the company to qualify (Reid, Morrow, Kelly, Adams, & McCartan, 2000; Rowden, 2002).

While it may be harsh to define headcount as an excluding criterion, it is undeniable that, at some point, size matters for organizations and that larger companies tend to have more developed HR areas and practices, at least when compared to smaller ones (Youndt, Snell, Dean, & Lepak, 1996). Other studies previously employed this minimum headcount of a hundred people in a company to allow participation in HRM studies, particularly when a strategic role was involved (e.g., Huselid, 1993, 1995; Chang & Huang, 2005; Gooderham, Parry, & Ringdal, 2008; Mitchell, Obeidat, & Bray, 2013; McClean & Collins, 2019).

The selection criteria for participating organizations, each of these comprising one of the cases from the study, are the following:

- Unit of analysis: Organizations (each case is a single organization);
- Type of organization: Startup companies;
- Type of startup: Scaled-up startups (i.e., a minimum headcount of 100 people);
- Activity stage: Operational and in a growth phase, even if not an exponential growth (so no failed, preoperational, or some early-stage startups could participate);
- HR management: There must be at least an HR area or department with at least a full-time, HR-exclusive professional (meaning that HR attributions must be complex enough not to be taken by a founder solely or incorporated as part of another area or department or even assigned for a third-party company).

It is worth explaining at this point of the text that ownership status was not a selection criterion, meaning that private-owned, public, or acquired startups were all applicable for

participating in the study since the focus is on the HRM areas, policies, and practices, and the structuring and learning processes behind it.

Conducting the study on startups that have grown more extensive and complex may result in a sample composed of organizations developing and applying their models and practices for HR management further (whether deliberately or not). That occurs because their operations require greater complexity on configurations related to how they recruit, develop, mobilize, retain, and even release personnel in a way that could not be feasible anymore to be handled solely by a founder or owner while dealing with other aspects of these businesses.

This study employed five contact methods: Contact form (from the company's website), e-mail, Instagram (a social network focused on sharing user-generated photos and videos), LinkedIn (a business social network popular with HR professionals), and WhatsApp (an instant messaging app that was top-rated in Brazil then, functionally similar to Line, which was more prevalent in Asia at the time of this study).

Since most of these prospective companies did not have all five contact methods (contact form, e-mail, Instagram, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp) available to the public, sometimes it was possible to contact a company in a couple of ways or even by a single contact method, for example.

From an initial base of 97 potential participating companies approached since early 2022, five refused participation immediately (four by e-mail contacts and another through WhatsApp), and most companies never returned any response. Sixteen agreed to participate after initial contacts and at least a video conference to explain and answer questions about the study. Still, only five of those 16 startups made it to the interview rounds.

Regarding those other companies that initially agreed but were not among the final participants: One lacked adherence to the selection criteria, another got acquired by a larger company, a third one, listed as a potential unicorn company a few months before, ran out of resources and had to dismiss most of its personnel (it still operates, but in a much smaller scale that would not fit this study's criteria), and eight other startups stopped answering contacts at some point (some of these right away, others after some failed tries to schedule the interviews).

3.3. DATA TREATMENT AND ANALYSIS PROTOCOLS

This study recorded almost every interview similarly: Individual qualitative interviews with a semistructured script, usually held online with the Zoom app and recorded by the app

as interviews happen. However, one interview used Google Meet as a meeting and recording platform, as required by the participant, which hosted, recorded, and shared the interview video with the author the following day. Appendix A contains the interview script for participants from the studied cases. At the same time, Appendix B describes the interview script for the complementary case from actors related to investments in the startup ecosystem.

As further detailed in sections 5 (HR and implementation in startups) and 6 (Main findings and insights), this study comprises 18 interviews (with a total recording time of slightly over 18 hours), 15 of them with people from the five studied companies. These interviews address the HR structure of each participating company, its HR policies and practices, and the structuring process of the HR area. The other three interviews have a complementary aspect, addressing different aspects between startups and investments to understand better how and why these actors would benefit from an investment deal.

After collection, comprised mainly of recording and transcribing the interviews (with minor edits for clarity or removing information that is confidential or could reveal the identity of an individual or a company), data needed processing before facing analysis procedures for highlighting aspects and meaningful insights considering the context, methods, and intended research goals to deliver appropriate contributions. These treatment processes must also follow preconceived and embased procedures to enhance further analysis. Research must follow specific and methodological rules to structure its analysis and increase the results' validity and presentation (Mozzato & Grzybovski, 2011).

To understand a complex phenomenon such as qualitative design, data, methods, and analysis, the researcher needs to understand its context, natural environment, participants, and how they build and handle their meanings and unique realities (Suter, 2012). Data analysis needs to consider its collection method and, whether qualitative or quantitative, there are some structuring stages before analysis, as follows (Silva, Rocha, Costa, & Pereira, 2008):

1. Search for recurring themes or results, which could unveil topics of interest for developing data categories;
2. Interrelate themes while trying to offer a general structure;
3. Link obtained and analyzed results with existing literature.

Qualitative data are initially unstructured and may need some treatment before extracting into excerpts, groups, and themes in general. This study structured the procedures involved in this treatment in data analysis protocols. One possibility is to use linguistic

analysis to define an effective quickstart protocol, counting words and grouping them around keywords, allowing further case-by-case content analysis (Freitas, Muniz, & Moscarola, 2005).

This protocol would allow the creation and refining of categories after throughout reading (Freitas et al., 2005). For this research, the reading process involved all transcriptions while watching and listening again to the interviews to try to capture cues and nuances from the tone and body language employed by participants during the interviews.

Considering insights from the literature (Yin, 2015) and the research objectives and needs, Table 10, displayed next page, contains the data analysis protocol employed in this study, with steps to proceed and a brief description. Steps 0 and 1 comprise the pre-analysis stage, steps 2 to 5 belong to the exploring phase, while steps 6 to 10 relate to the treatment and interpretation phase (Bardin, 1977).

0:	Data collection	From the participating companies' websites, reports, and media outlets, among other available data.
1:	Transcription	Needs translating from Brazilian Portuguese to English.
2:	Reviewing	Rewatching the interviews with the transcription, trying to find cues and nuances from verbal and non-verbal means to avoid possible data loss in speech transcription.
3:	Filtering	Identifying potential contributions for the research and separating them from questions, idea transitions, and nonrelated (off-topic) information. Depending on circumstances, personal or sensible information may need treatment or removal.
4:	Theme assignment	Identify in a data source or speech all possible themes that may be relatable, and assign them. An answer to a question may contribute to multiple categories, and the answer to a question may appear beforehand or belatedly as the interviews flows.
5:	Content grouping	Gather information from all data sources (including interviews) and group this information around themes and cases.
6:	Theme building	Consider data origin and context, cues, triggers, and learning points to build every analysis theme (contained primarily under subsections 5.1 and 5.2).
7:	Case building	Also considering data origin and context, cues, triggers, and learning points to build analysis, results, and insights within cases (including the complimentary case from actors related to funding and investment in startups).
8:	Results building	Similar to step 7, but considering similarities and singularities between cases to build a general overview of each theme, issue, and contributions or solutions found in the study.
9:	Process building	To complement and reinforce steps 6 to 8, consider the context of each company to understand better what could have led to a decision and the implications of that.
10:	Literature checking	Comparing analysis and results to the existing literature to verify its consistency and if there were any unexpected or counterintuitive insights.

Table 10: Data analysis protocol. Source: Made by the author, parting from Bardin (1977) and Yin (2015).

This study employed content analysis after retrieving data from qualitative sources and methods (Bardin, 1977; Franco, 2018), using the message as a starting point, whether documental, figurative, gestural, spoken, or written, necessarily expressing context, meaning, and direction (Franco, 2018). These messages helped to build a deeper understanding of the studied cases, their context, and the perceptions and surroundings of the interviewed participants.

It is possible to complement the content analysis with thematic analysis since the latter focuses on patterns in categories to create a network of relevant themes and relations between them (Suter, 2012). After completing steps 0 (data collection), 1 (transcription), and 2 (reviewing) from the data analysis protocol, it is possible to provide the following themes for analysis, as Table 11 shows next page, already mentioning the subsection of the thesis where the theme has a thorough discussion.

As part of a deductive category-forming process, Table 11 also shows relevant references to understand better how each category got structured from theory while maintaining adherence from obtained data to established categories (Gondim & Bendassoli, 2014).

It is possible to see the set of questions employed to gather data from the interviews in Appendix A (for the participating startups) and Appendix B (for the complimentary interviews from actors related to investment in startups). There is a further explanation of how each category works under section 5 (HR and implementation in startups) since that section explores those categories later in the text.

Categories	Themes
HR Policies and practices (5.1) (Guest, 1987; Buller & Napier, 1993; Dutra, 2013; Boudlaie et al., 2022)	Recruitment and selection (5.1.1)
	Training and careers (5.1.2)
	Communication strategy (5.1.3)
	Engaging policies (5.1.4)
Implemented HR and learning cues (5.2) (Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Crossan et al., 1999; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007; Armstrong & Taylor, 2014)	Implementing events and triggers (5.2.1)
	Decision patterns and implications (5.2.2)
	Investors and independence (5.2.3)
	Implementing efficacy and evaluation (5.2.4)
	Participative policies and practices (5.2.5)
	Strategic value and alignment (5.2.6)
Insights from investors (5.3) (Crossan et al., 1999; Anderson & Cappelli, 2021; Singer, 2021; DesJardine et al., 2023)	Profile and reasons for investing (5.3.1)
	Investment expectations (5.3.2)
	Adapting to hardship and pivoting to success (5.3.3)

Table 11: Categories and themes. Source: Made by the author, parting from Bardin (1977) and Suter (2012).

Quantitative data used in this thesis, such as financial information from available reports, are structured from the beginning and require some treatment before integrating with other data sources. Still, a margin exists for designing and applying a data treatment and analysis criterion to work these data along with others from qualitative sources.

Despite their different natures and characteristics, it is possible to integrate qualitative and quantitative data, when relevant, with handle and care. By qualitzing quantitative data in

this study, it is possible to transform quantitative into qualitative data by creating profiles or verbal classifications (Sandelowski, 2000).

Quantitative data obtained, such as headcount changes over time (mostly but not only positive changes) or values from investments, for example, were an essential part of enriching the description of each case present in this study. It was possible due to qualitzing obtained numbers into verbal terms that highlight the relative importance of the original data, already contextualized. These integration procedures must respect the obtained data, its characteristics, and context to avoid implying bias and reducing contributions.

Integration differs from triangulation in two stages: processes and outcomes, relating triangulation primarily to bringing together data from different methods (Moran-Ellis et al., 2006). This data source triangulation should get a more comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon, as a collection method may only obtain some specific data or perceptions (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014). An author of a received and helpful report may not be available for interviews, whether this person is not interested, has departed from the company, or is somehow unavailable.

As for the analysis protocol, Farmer, Robinson, Elliott, and Eyles (2006) present a data triangulation protocol comprised of six main steps:

1. Sorting (preparation): Sort the obtained findings from each data into categories (key themes) to compare, determining convergence (overlap) or divergence;
2. Convergence coding: Compare sets of results from each theme and data source, so the meanings, frequencies, relevance, and examples/quotes of those findings may determine the convergence in one out of four convergence types (agreement, partial agreement, silence, and dissonance);
3. Convergence assessment: Review previous comparisons to obtain a global convergence level. In addition, the researcher should look for differences that may be relatable to data sets of different focus, natures, or scopes;
4. Completeness assessment: Compare the data sets to highlight both similar and unique contributions, creating a summary that contains the unified findings while broadening findings to ensure completeness and identifying eventual differences in coverage or scope;
5. Researcher comparison: Compare the convergence, divergence, and completeness reports of a data set with conclusions from other researchers, to clarify understandings and check for intersections between researchers' insights;

6. Feedback: Retrieve the findings to members of the research team and other key stakeholder groups for further comments. It is recommendable to include a summary of the triangulated vital findings.

It is worth noting that some of these steps for data triangulation (Farmer et al., 2006) have convergence with this study's data analysis protocol, except for the researcher comparison (that relates to the pretesting conversations before field research) and maybe feedback (because of the nature of this thesis): Sorting may apply at some measure to steps 1 to 4 from the data analysis protocol; there is some convergence coding from steps 3 to 6; convergence assessment from steps 6 to 9; and completeness assessment from steps 8 to 10.

Combining Farmer et al.'s (2006) data triangulation protocol, given the exceptions mentioned above, with the data analysis protocol seems feasible for this thesis. Hence, the data analysis followed its steps and guidelines to help categorize, analyze, and integrate data from different perspectives and sources.

These are proposed methods and procedures for data treatment and analysis and a concept of an application protocol. The following subsection synthesizes the methodological assumptions and choices, presenting them in an association matrix.

3.4. METHODOLOGICAL SYNTHESIS

This study summarized the main methodological choices and theoretical foundations in a matrix to compare and integrate these aspects and enhance their coherence and contributions. A methodological association matrix (e.g., Mazzon, 2018; Preusler, Costa, Crespi, & Porto, 2020; Munaier & Costa, 2021), as used in this synthesis, aims “(...) to allow the researcher to critically evaluate if all the points in the research project are adequately coordinated, articulated, and linked” (Mazzon, 2018, p. 752).

As displayed in Figure 5 the methodological association matrix employed in this study grouped the research objectives (general and specific), research techniques, data sources, and main categories. It happens because, as conversations flow during interviews, sometimes an answer to a question may contain bits of information or insights about other questions or categories from the study.

Also, a specific topic from an interview may relate to information from other data types or sources, for example, debating on a specific employee layoff movement and trying to

address reasons or impacts behind that event (already considering aspects such as when it happened or how much people got dismissed from the company).

Objectives	Research technique	Data source	Main categories
Gen.) Analyze how scaled-up startup companies implement their human resources management areas.	Documental research	Companies' websites Media outlets	HR policies and practices
	Qualitative interviews Content analysis	Transcribed interviews	Implemented HR and learning cues
			Insights from investors
1) Describe how startups decide to implement HRM policies and practices.	Documental research	Companies' websites	HR policies and practices
	Qualitative interviews Content analysis	Transcribed interviews	Implemented HR and learning cues
2) Identify whether a Venture Capital investor joining these companies had any influence on the decision to implement HRM policies.	Documental research	Companies' websites Financial and funding reports	Insights from investors
		Media outlets	Implemented HR and learning cues
	Qualitative interviews Content analysis	Transcribed interviews	HR and learning cues
3) Verify if and how startups adapt their strategies to handle contextual factors toward implementing HR policies and practices.	Qualitative interviews Content analysis	Transcribed interviews	HR policies and practices
			Implemented HR and learning cues
4) According to managers in startup companies, verify the perceived importance of the HR management area and its implementation.	Qualitative interviews Content analysis	Transcribed interviews	Implemented HR and learning cues
	Documental research	Media outlets	Insights from investors

Figure 5: Methodological association matrix. Source: Made by the author.

These aspects allowed the coordination of the different research efforts while maintaining methodological and theoretical consistency with the proposed research objectives and methods. To highlight the context of each participating company in this study, the

description of the cases (each case comprises a single participating company and its related personnel) appears in section 4 (Description of the cases). At the same time, the results and analyses from interviews and integration with other data sources compose sections 5 (HR and implementation in startups) and 6 (Main findings and insights).

4. DESCRIPTION OF THE CASES

This section further describes the multiple cases in this study, each comprised of a single company, its context, and personnel related to HR management. Given the ever-changing nature of startup companies, it may be reasonable to state that the information in each case's description reflected the company's reality at the time of the interviews (mid-to-late 2022).

Each participating company received a fictional, assumed name to hide its identity. For similar reasons, the text groups the exact location of each company into regions (e.g., "Greater São Paulo [SP] area"). Likewise, financial and funding information from news, reports, statements in general, and operational data retrieved from third-party sources such as professional social networks or news outlets, already combined and processed, appear only in qualitized forms as words or verbs, allowing the reader to understand the general context of each company while hiding its identity. Appendix C contains the full ranges for each qualitized term employed in this thesis (headcount, increase/decrease rates, age groups, and other numbers in general).

Numbers (raw or qualitized) about age and time in the company or industry related to when data collection happened. The measures for the time in the company are in months since Brazilian startups are usually recent, and the tenures may last only a short time (so an individual with "many" months in the current term had joined the company between 26 and 100 months before data collection).

4.1. DEMANDINSPECT

DemandInspect is classifiable as a PropTech (Property Technology): A company that may employ technology to ease and quicken real estate transactions. DemandInspect offers an in-house platform that connects workers and clients, usually companies related to construction or real estate, to specific tasks (according to the company website).

This company recruits and trains freelance workers on its platform to deliver property-related tasks required by the clients, such as data gathering, property inspection, or photographic essays, rewarding the workers for their engaged time (according to the company website). DemandInspect is expanding to new regions, offering its services in more than fifty Brazilian cities while searching for new workers and clients in cities to further its reach (according to multiple news outlets).

Training for new platform workers happens through an online course that teaches people how to assert details and procedures, allowing them to understand demands from every side involved in real estate deals (ST02; ST03). Also, this course shows how to input obtained information into the DemandInspect platform.

Along with their platform workers that have flexible schedules and work directly on locations required by clients (such as a construction site or another property to make inspections, photographs, or record videos), DemandInspect also hires internal staff in areas such as HR. These staff members are usually exclusive to the company, working under full-time contracts (ST02).

Regarding its headcount, the company currently has some personnel (a medium-sized startup), slightly increasing during last year but with an expressive growth if comparing the actual size to two years before (according to a professional social media platform). DemandInspect's dedicated HR staff had a moderate increase (between 26% and 100%) in the previous year, also hiring a few C-level executives since 2021 (according to a professional social media platform), and one of these recent high-level hires (ST02) got interviewed for composing this case.

Name: DemandInspect

Industry: PropTech

Founded: 2018

Region: Greater Florianópolis (SC) area.

Headcount: Medium (between 101 and 250) (according to a professional social media platform, multiple news outlets).

Funding: Seed round (2022), a few million R\$ (according to multiple news outlets).

Operational stage: The company is active in many Brazilian cities from a few states, with several B2B companies (construction or real estate) as clients.

The three interviewed participants from DemandInspect were:

- ST01: Male. Co-founder and executive. Adult (age between 31 and 40 years). Many months (between 26 and 100) in the company and some years (between 11 and 25) in the industry (real estate). Master's degree (Sustainability);

- ST02: Female. Executive. Adult (age between 31 and 40 years). Many months (between 26 and 100) in the company (multiple tenures) and a few years (less than 10) of experience (HR management). Undergraduate course (Psychology);
- ST03: Female. Coordinator. Adult (age between 31 and 40 years). A few months (less than 10) in the company and some years (between 11 and 25) in the industry (real estate). Postgraduate course (HR management).

4.2. CORPOHEALTH

CorpoHealth is a HealthTech company that offers a corporate health plan as an alternative to the Brazilian government-funded health system and other private-owned health plans, whether these are individual or corporate ones (according to the company website). While HealthTech companies generally employ technological means to improve healthcare user experience or consumption, CorpoHealth's efforts aim to make healthcare more accessible, connecting patients to healthcare professionals and venues such as hospitals and laboratories (according to the company website).

CorpoHealth operates as a digital healthcare plan, reducing bureaucratic procedures and pricing to grant healthcare access to its clients faster than traditional healthcare operators (according to the company website and a news outlet). Also, its personnel needs to integrate different data sources and cooperate with other professionals to avoid knowledge gaps, focusing on analysis and insights to prevent health issues rather than only starting to worry about them when these issues are such a thing for the patient (according to multiple company-controlled websites).

The company believes in translating its values into workplace competencies while focusing its strategy on people and engagement (Jose et al., 2021; and according to the company blog). Communication is also essential for CorpoHealth, constantly aligning expectations with evaluation and feedback cycles in an assertive, constructive, and respectful tone (ST04). Mental health and workforce diversity are important issues, and a person specializing in diversity and inclusion aims to spread and maintain these values across the organization (ST08; company blog).

As a company that entered the operational stage in 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic was spread and gaining numbers across the world, with no vaccines available at that point in Brazil, CorpoHealth considers itself a remote-first company, which allowed hiring people from all over the country to endure work tasks online (according to a professional social

media platform). As a result, many employees are from Northeastern Brazil, even though the company base is in the São Paulo state, from the Southeastern region and well over a thousand kilometers apart (ST04; ST08).

CorpoHealth has a few hundred employees, and despite having fired a few dozen people in mid-2022 as part of a series of massive layoffs that tech companies in Brazil and abroad have done, the current headcount is still slightly higher than six months before (according to a professional social media platform). Also, the actual numbers are a moderate growth (between 26% and 100%) compared to one year before and an expressive increase compared to two years earlier. Its HR team increased expressively (between 101% and 1,000%) during the last year, and the company hired a few C-level executives related to technical areas since mid-2021 (according to a professional social media platform).

The mass layoff may be related to the exponential growth in hirings during early 2022, gaining a few hundred new people in months (according to a professional social media platform), or the company's structuring to reduce its expenses and launch a Series B funding round shortly (according to a professional social media platform and the company blog). One way or another, it was a measure to adapt CorpoHealth to a new scenario, with more risks and fewer available resources, aiming for at least a breakeven situation in its budget (according to a professional social media platform and a news outlet).

Name: CorpoHealth

Industry: HealthTech

Founded: 2018

Region: Greater São Paulo (SP) area.

Headcount: Large (between 251 and 1,000) (according to a professional social media platform, multiple news outlets).

Funding: Seed round (2019), a few million R\$. Series A round (2021), several hundred million R\$ (according to the company website, a professional social media platform, and multiple news outlets).

Operational stage: The company is active in the Greater São Paulo (SP) area, covering lots of companies (usually individual or small companies, with less than ten people) as their clients, with a few thousand lives covered.

The three interviewed participants from CorpoHealth were:

- ST04: Male. Executive. Adult (age between 31 and 40 years). Many months (between 26 and 100) in the company and a few years (less than 10) of experience (startups). Undergraduate course (two courses: Administration and Engineering);
- ST05: Female. HR manager. Adult (age between 31 and 40 years). Many months (between 26 and 100) in the company and a few years (less than 10) of experience (startups). Postgraduate course (HR management);
- ST08: Female. Area leader. Middle-aged (age between 41 and 50 years). Some months (between 11 and 25) in the company and some years (between 11 and 25) of experience (communication). Postgraduate course (two courses: Marketing and Inclusive management).

4.3. HASHCARD

HashCard is a Fintech that offers a range of financial products with its credit card, such as cashback (refunding a small percentage of purchases), cash withdrawal, loans, and even small insurance services (according to the company website). As a fintech, the company aims to make customer relationships with money and financial products more straightforward. In HashCard's case, it mainly uses its credit card to deliver products and services to clients.

HashCard has a learning culture, always looking to ease and improve the user experience by digitally offering different financial, marketing, and technological solutions (according to the company website and a professional social media platform). Its culture also values cooperation and sharing to gain insights from available data in an approach described internally as "laid cards" (a term derived from card games where players expose their cards, meaning that they are honest to others in their assignments).

About their staff, HashCard reinforces the organization's values by turning them into direct and understandable hashtags for its personnel, such as #Boldness, #DataRules, #HandsOn, or #LaidCards. These hashtags define how the company works and why people should behave accordingly.

Despite the backing of the venture capital company that acquired the operation in 2020 (according to multiple news outlets), HashCard HR focuses on a lean team, only implementing benefits and other initiatives to engage and reward people when possible without risking the company's financial viability. It may have happened because the company has reached financial breakeven only recently after years of investment and structuring.

Hirings also happen at a less intensive rate, so in the last two years, the headcount increased moderately – a safe and sustained growth instead of an exponential (and risky) one. Its administrative team, which comprises HR and other bureaucratic tasks, has only a few people and was reduced by one person last year.

Name: HashCard

Industry: Fintech

Founded: 2015

Region: Greater São Paulo (SP) area.

Headcount: Medium (between 101 and 250) (according to multiple professional social media platforms).

Funding: The company ran bootstrapped until acquired in 2020 by a venture capital company for a few hundred million R\$ (according to a professional social media platform and multiple news outlets).

Operational stage: Active nationwide, has issued a few million credit cards (physical or virtual).

The three interviewed participants from HashCard were:

- ST06: Female. Line manager. Adult (age between 31 and 40 years). Many months (between 26 and 100) in the company. Undergraduate course (Pharmacy);
- ST07: Female. Culture practitioner. Middle-aged (age between 41 and 50 years). Many months (between 26 and 100) in the company and some years (between 11 and 25) of experience (marketing). Undergraduate course (two courses: International relations and Social science);
- ST11: Female. HR practitioner. Adult (age between 31 and 40 years). Many months (between 26 and 100) in the company and some years (between 11 and 25) of experience (HR management). Undergraduate course (Psychology).

4.4. COGNISOFT

Cognisoft can be described as an HRTech since its product relates to a solution for the HR area. Given that, the company offers a data-driven suite that employs a predictive algorithm to search for patterns to retrieve data from raw material, offering insights to HR

practitioners that may be useful and that probably would not be obtainable otherwise (according to the company website and a professional social media platform).

The company intends to be a one-stop shop for HR solutions, employing its algorithm in various situations to transform pieces of information into data. It operates under a software as a service (SaaS) business model, hosting the platform in a server and offering access to its suite and updates through subscription, receiving recurring payments from clients as an income source (according to the company website).

Some of Cognisoft's central values are applicability, entrepreneurship, evolution, sharing, and transparency (according to the company website). Based on these values, the company may develop actions for engaging people, offering customizable projects to help companies to structure their HR areas. As would be expectable, part of this expertise resulted in improving the own company's HR, as evidenced by their business model, where the recurring subscribing and revenue allow improvements on the product for customers (and HR is part of the internal structure as well as the product for sale) (according to the company website).

The Covid-19 pandemic offered new challenges for companies worldwide. While some struggled, others thrived: Possibly in part, but not only due to the need to adapt operations and HR to a remote-based world (or at least not only because of pandemics), Cognisoft scaled its revenue exponentially (more than 1,000%) in three years (2019 to 2022) (according to multiple news outlets).

The company started to expand early and entered its fourth year with a few hundred client companies (according to the company website). In 2022 there was the official launch of the Cognisoft platform, so any company could hire its services if desired (ST09; and according to a nonprofessional social media platform).

During the last year, the number of employees slightly increased, and there are hints that Cognisoft is structuring to start scalable growth: Recently, the company presented pitches to potential investors from Latin America and got selected for a small governmental endowment for accelerating (according to a government agency website and a professional social media platform).

Name: Cognisoft

Industry: HRTech

Founded: 2015

Region: Greater São Paulo (SP) area.

Headcount: Medium (between 101 and 250) (ST09; a professional social media platform).

Funding: Corporate round (2019), undisclosed value (according to the investor website, a professional social media platform, multiple news outlets, and a business information platform).

Operational stage: Active nationwide, yet with online clients, has several companies from different industries in a few Latin American countries as clients, with a yearly gross income of some million R\$ (according to the company website, a professional social media platform, and multiple news outlets).

The three interviewed participants from Cognisoft were:

- ST09: Female. HR business partner. Young adult (age between 18 and 30 years). Many months (between 26 and 100) in the company. Undergraduate course (Psychology);
- ST10: Male. Analyst. Young adult (age between 18 and 30 years). Many months (between 26 and 100) in the company and a few years (less than 10) of experience (startups). Undergraduate course (Engineering);
- ST12: Female. Area leader. Young adult (age between 18 and 30 years). Many months (between 26 and 100) in the company. Postgraduate course (Law).

4.5. PLYTECH

Plytech is another HRTech and operates an analytics-powered suite focused on providing insights for engaging people and subsidizing their management. The main difference between Plytech and Cognisoft is that while the latter employs an algorithm to transform raw data into manageable insights, Plytech offers a platform to monitor continuously cultural and engagement aspects from the workers, offering insights to help HR management (according to the company website).

Plytech offers a customizable platform for their customers to monitor continuous feedback from their customers' clients, offering data science and people analytics to provide insights for management in accessible reports (according to the company website and a news outlet). Their customers are other companies, usually larger ones, potentially with several thousands of people, and operate under the SaaS subscription model (according to multiple

news outlets). This model receives recurring income while providing a platform for continuous monitoring and support.

The company focuses on organizational culture, empowering people by giving agency through their perception assessments while easing management's everyday work with its automated, user-centered, analytics-based insights and reports so that HR may handle more strategic tasks (ST14; company website). Their founding team has an expressive and diverse academic background with corporate experience, providing solutions based on science and empiricism for their customers (according to a news outlet).

Plytech went well through the Covid-19 pandemic, offering an online solution and growing as clients had to adapt and rely more on remote work⁹. Their income was some million R\$, and the company expected to significantly exceed these values in 2022, expressively increasing the number of clients and registered users (according to multiple news outlets).

The company expanded well during the Covid years, with an expressive increase in employees in the last two years. They captured funding via a seed round in 2021 (a few million R\$), with performance clauses that may potentially increase the investment a few times more (according to multiple news outlets). There was recent executive-level hiring, which may hint that Plytech is structuring to reach even higher standards (according to a professional social media platform).

Recent events such as the Great Resignation, a large-scale reconsidering and rearranging movement between jobs and careers as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic that increased turnover rates (Krugman, 2022; Serenko, in press), also helped increase people analytics' relevance, as companies could use insights from past events to develop better strategies and approaches for the future. In that matter, Plytech benefits by giving valuable insights to managers in client companies and growing its internal HR with growth and maturing its internal methods (ST13; ST14).

The Plytech platform is available in Brazilian Portuguese and a few more languages. While most customers are from Brazil, a few are from other countries, including overseas (according to a news outlet). Therefore, the company is considering future efforts to expand

⁹ "Teleworking" could be another way of calling the work made by an employee away from the office and is overall the most common expression in the English language, as cited by Hartmann's (2022) literature revision about telework and remote work. The main difference is where the primary duty station is: For teleworkers, it is the office, while remote workers use a remote location (which may or not be their homes) as the workplace (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2021). Every studied case of this study had to employ remote work at least in the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic due to social distancing measures, so the thesis named it always as remote work, regardless of a return to the office at a later point.

its customer base for deeper penetration in international markets, as there is a large margin for growth.

Name: Plytech

Industry: HRTech

Founded: 2016

Region: Santa Catarina (SC) State, outside the Greater Florianópolis area.

Headcount: Medium (between 101 and 250) (according to a professional social media platform).

Funding: Seed round (2021), a few million R\$ (according to a professional social media platform and multiple news outlets).

Operational stage: Active nationwide, yet with online clients, has several companies from different industries and at least one multinational company as clients, helping to manage a total of several thousand people, with a yearly gross income of some million R\$ (according to the company website and multiple news outlets).

The three interviewed participants from Plytech were:

- ST13: Female. Coordinator. Adult (age between 31 and 40 years). Some months (between 11 and 25) in the company and some years (between 11 and 25) of experience (HR management). Postgraduate course (Administration);
- ST14: Female. Analyst. Young adult (age between 18 and 30 years). Some months (between 11 and 25) in the company and a few years (less than 10) of experience (HR management). Postgraduate course (HR management);
- ST15: Female. Co-founder and area leader. Adult (age between 31 and 40 years). Many months (between 26 and 100) in the company and some years (between 11 and 25) of experience (Psychology). Master's degree (Psychology).

4.6. INVESTMENT AND STARTUP ECOSYSTEM ACTORS

To complement insights and perceptions from the studied cases and interviewed participants, this study interviewed a few people related to investment and the startup ecosystem to compare and deepen perceptions about the themes associated with this thesis.

Three professionals from different companies and backgrounds participated in the interviews:

- INVA: Male. Acts as an angel investor focused on early-stage startups and as a board member of an association of angel investors. Co-founder of a recruitment and selection company focused on providing talent for startups. Adult (age between 31 and 40 years). A few years (less than 10) of experience (angel investment). Master's degree (Entrepreneurship);
- INVB: Male. President of a Brazilian startup association. Co-founder of an Edtech. Director of a think tank that proposes public policies for enhancing entrepreneurship in Brazil. Adult (age between 31 and 40 years). Some years (between 11 and 25) of experience (startups). Master's degree (Entrepreneurship);
- INVC: Male. Head of finance in an early-stage startup focusing on connecting companies and tech talent under hourly agreements. Young adult (age between 18 and 30 years). Some months (between 11 and 25) in the company and a few years (less than 10) of experience (finance). Master's degree (Administration).

No company related to these participants (INVA, INVB, and INVC) participated in the study. As far as the researcher knows, none of these participants had any share, stake, or direct contact with any studied cases, so there is no immediate conflict of interest.

Participant INVA's startup foundation happened in 2018, but his involvement with startups came from earlier, having a few years of professional experience with startups.

The association that the participant INVB acts as a president of was eight years old (founded in 2014) at the time of data collection. Still, his involvement with startup companies and entrepreneurship, in general, is by far the oldest among any interviewed participants, being an entrepreneur since his teenage years, more than a decade ago. INVB's startup was two years old (founded in 2020), and the think tank foundation date was 2015.

The startup where participant INVC acts as head of finance was two years old when the interview happened (founded in 2020). His involvement with startups came from joining this company, but his experience with finances, in general, was older, spanning nearly a decade.

4.7. INTERVIEWED PARTICIPANTS

Each studied case contained three interviews, including the complementary study case of actors from the investment and startup ecosystem. Every interview happened individually, online, and in a single session, using a Zoom paid account (by the researcher) as a tool to hold those meetings, with a single exception: The interview with participant INVB happened via Google Meet, hosted and recorded by that participant. Every participant agreed verbally in their interviews to participate in the recorded session.

Figure 6, displayed next page, contains information about the participating companies and participants, with personal data shown under ranges of values to protect their identities while giving the reader a general idea of the interview context (Who was the participant?; How experienced was it?).

Participant	Age group	Gender	Company/case	Job/role	Time in the company (months)	Duration (hh:mm:ss)
ST01	Adult (31 to 40)	M	DemandInspect	Co-founder	Many (26 to 100)	00:54:54
ST02	Adult (31 to 40)	F	DemandInspect	Executive	Many (26 to 100)	01:06:07
ST03	Adult (31 to 40)	F	DemandInspect	Coordinator	A few (less than 10)	01:00:48
ST04	Adult (31 to 40)	M	CorpoHealth	Executive	Many (26 to 100)	01:02:55
ST05	Adult (31 to 40)	F	CorpoHealth	HR manager	Many (26 to 100)	01:00:09
ST06	Adult (31 to 40)	F	HashCard	Line manager	Many (26 to 100)	01:08:43
ST07	Middle-aged (41 to 50)	F	HashCard	Culture practitioner	Many (26 to 100)	01:41:54
ST08	Middle-aged (41 to 50)	F	CorpoHealth	Area leader	Some (11 to 25)	01:02:04
ST09	Young adult (18 to 30)	F	Cognisoft	HR business partner	Many (26 to 100)	01:05:37
ST10	Young adult (18 to 30)	M	Cognisoft	Analyst	Many (26 to 100)	01:04:34
ST11	Adult (31 to 40)	F	HashCard	HR practitioner	Many (26 to 100)	01:25:40
ST12	Young adult (18 to 30)	F	Cognisoft	Area leader	Many (26 to 100)	01:03:11
ST13	Adult (31 to 40)	F	Plytech	Coordinator	Some (11 to 25)	01:02:50
ST14	Young adult (18 to 30)	F	Plytech	Analyst	Some (11 to 25)	01:05:44
ST15	Adult (31 to 40)	F	Plytech	Co-founder	Many (26 to 100)	00:37:30
INVA	Adult (31 to 40)	M	Investment	Board member	Many (26 to 100)	00:25:20
INVB	Adult (31 to 40)	M	Investment	Association president	Many (26 to 100)	00:29:58
INVC	Young adult (18 to 30)	M	Investment	Head of finance	Some (11 to 25)	00:55:36

Figure 6: Interviewed participants. Source: Made by the author.

In total, there were six male and 12 female participants. The most prevalent age group was between adults (31 to 40 years), with 11 participants, followed by young adults (18 to 30 years, 5 participants) and two middle-aged participants (41 to 50 years). No participant was mature, old, or under Brazilian legal age (18).

While it was not a requirement, every participant had at least an undergraduate course as an academic background. No participant had their current startup job as their only occupation (but every professional experience from participant INV B had a relation with startups or entrepreneurship).

Regarding occupations, the most common main roles (a person could perform in two or more roles, but counting only their principal role for this calculation) were: Co-founders, executives (including C-level staff), area leaders, managers, coordinators, HR-related practitioners, and analysts, each of these with two participants.

The total time of the 18 recorded interviews was 18:13:34, with an average length of 1:00:45. There was one interview above an hour and a half (ST07, 1:41:54), and only two interviews from the complementary case went under a half hour each (INVA, 25:20; INV B, 29:58).

After describing each main studied case (sections 4.1 to 4.5) and the additional case (section 4.6), the thesis advances to the results and analysis sections of the study. The following part (section 5) presents the main themes and results from the studied cases and investment-related actors, while a compilation of the main insights lies in section 6.

5. HR AND IMPLEMENTATION IN STARTUPS

This section describes, analyzes, and compares data and insights from the participating companies and interviews with their staff. The presentation of results and resulting discussions divides into three parts:

The first one (5.1, “HR policies and practices”) contains the different perspectives about the companies, their policies, and practices relatable to HR, such as bonuses, promotion, recruiting, or training. The second part (5.2, “Implemented HR and learning cues”) delves into HR implementation, trying to get clues about the “hows,” “whys,” and learning opportunities to innovate or improve Human Resources in each company while comparing approaches from each company to similar challenges.

Also, there is the third part (5.3, “Insights from investors”) of this section, which compares insights from people related to investments in startups to each studied case, ascertaining if expectations and practices from both sides (startups and investors) meet each other or if there is a relevant gap or misunderstanding.

As previously stated in the methods section, the descriptions and analyses from the cases regarding a specific point or theme starts from within the cases and then compare between cases. The analyses between cases compared positions with more internal consistency by starting from a within-cases analysis.

Considering the thesis, objectives, and data-collecting methods, subsection 5.1 contains information and insights related to HR policies and practices (Appendix A), which helps achieve specific objective 1 (describe how startups decide to implement HRM policies and practices).

In contrast, subsections 5.2.3 and 5.3 primarily consider the perspectives of the participating actors related to startups and investment (Appendix B), relating to specific objective 2 (identify whether a Venture Capital investor joining these companies had any influence on the decision to implement HRM policies).

Adapting HRM to context and changes via HR policies and practices links to the specific objective 3 (verify if and how startups adapt their strategies to handle contextual factors toward implementing HR policies and practices" and scatters around mainly around subsections 5.2.2 (Decision patterns and implications) and 5.2.4 (Implementing efficacy and evaluation). Considering the interview script in Appendix A, questions 1, 2, and 4 played a significant role, and information from other sources helped compose case descriptions (as seen in section 4).

The last specific objective (According to managers in startup companies, verify the perceived importance of the HR management area and its implementation) is perceivable around the whole in this section, with particular emphasis on subsections 5.2.5 (Participative policies and practices) and 5.2.6 (Strategic value and alignment), also referring to questions 5 and 6 from Appendix A.

Since this is by far the most extended section of the thesis, with more than eighty pages, gathering events and insights seemed appropriate to ease navigating through the different themes, companies, and events related to HR implementation in these startups.

This way, information is gathered around each analysis theme and, inside that theme, dividing analysis in each participating company to avoid comparing these companies directly without considering their particular contexts and conditions, from size and industry to general policies that affect how HR structures in a company, such as Cognisoft's "no policies" policy (which indicates an attempt to make management as simple as possible to keep structures slim and agile toward changes).

5.1. HR POLICIES AND PRACTICES

First, it is valid to state that each case studied in this thesis comprises a startup company located in Brazil, operational at the moment of data collection, with at least a hundred people back then (independently of the contract type). The HRM implementation topics this subsection describes are all related to the context of Brazilian startups, specifically those that scaled their size and complexity.

With that point in mind, it is reasonable to point out that recruitment is an HR practice that plays a vital role in startup companies, particularly those experiencing an accelerated growth rhythm or structuring to achieve scalable growth (Mukul & Saini, 2021). Still, each company may have different requisites and approaches to recruit and retain people more adherent to its reality and needs (Buller & Napier, 1993; Leung, 2004; Grillitsch & Schubert, 2021; Mukul & Saini, 2021).

Alongside recruitment and selection (subsection 5.1.1), which comprises the primary HR process for an up-and-coming startup company, there are three other groups of HR-related practices that this study describes: Training and careers (5.1.2), communication strategies (5.1.3), and engaging policies (5.1.4).

5.1.1. RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION

As a movement-related practice (moving people from outside to inside the organization, whether previously employed or not), recruitment and selection are crucial for any startup company, not only due to the context of the limited resources that urge these companies to hire and develop people with little to no room for errors (Men, Ji, & Chen, 2017; Nakaya & Ishida, 2022).

Effectively recruiting skilled people to a company also allows it to acquire capacities and knowledge, which helps to develop innovative companies and a viable business model (Loon, Otaye-Ebede, & Stewart, 2020). Nowadays, recruitment may even resource artificial intelligence and algorithms to boost its results and help develop business models, with potential roles such as data analysis provider, development facilitator, or even as a decision-making tool (Weber, Beutter, Weking, Böhm, & Krcmar, 2022).

Considering specific objective 1 (how startups decide to implement HRM policies and practices), implementing recruitment-related procedures intends to solve a given problem, such as scaling the business. That may explain why an earlier-stage startup (such as DemandInspect) has recruitment practices centered around the leaders and their shortlists. On the other hand, a more developed company such as CorpoHealth can first define recruitment criteria and even a baseline structure before resourcing fast and precise recruitment processes to attract new people and avoid creating candidate pools that may never be of use.

DemandInspect: The company assesses the need to open a new job if another person is necessary. From then on, recruitment depends on whether the job is for an in-company office position (internal workers) or if the opening is for an external role (external workers), usually in contact with clients.

1. Internal workers: A coordinator or manager asks the new hire using an internal form, describing the needed profile, behavior, skills, model (presential, remote, or hybrid), and available wage. These hires work on a full-time contract (ST02). This worker's profile demands action for problem-solving, but in an office environment (ST01).
2. External workers: It is possible to assess the need for a new hire by comparing the current work demand and the number of current active workers. These workers operate on zero-hour agreements (ST02). There are no specific technical requirements for a person to apply as an external worker except for being able to work with a

cellphone and its apps (ST03), plus having an entrepreneurial approach and street mentality (ST01).

Besides the different work demands and required profiles (Gulati & DeSantola, 2016), participant ST01 pointed out a relevant factor for hiring external workers in zero-hour agreements: Financial viability, especially for companies in an early stage. “I cannot start a business in this format by hiring (exclusively) everyone; I would just be transferring the problem I want to solve into my business.” [“Eu não tenho como iniciar um negócio nesse formato contratando (com exclusividade) todo mundo, eu só estaria transferindo o problema que eu quero solucionar para dentro do meu negócio.”] (ST01).

The learning method for implementing zero-hour agreements to external workers with flexible schedules and on-demand payments was, according to ST01, benchmarking Uber and other platform capitalism or sharing economy companies for insights on how to solve problems related to scaling operations in an efficient way for improving results (financial costs, in this case) (Belinski et al., 2020).

This kind of solution would be more complex, if not impossible, to overcome with conventional hiring methods. On the other hand, it does not advance much on institutionalizing new processes, knowledge, or behavior patterns across the organization, focusing more on acquiring external knowledge to improve internal affairs, but with no significant feed-forward cycle (Crossan et al., 1999).

There is no active search for potential employees in positions that still need to be opened, even for developers, which is unique for the studied cases in this thesis since every other company implemented specific recruitment practices for these high-demand professionals. Instead, every manager and every leader in DemandInspect maintains shortlists of potential employees they would like to bring for work into the company at some point (ST02). Keeping shortlists and employing them to hire new employees resembles that startups must choose their prospective employees carefully, sometimes resourcing to personal networks or recommendations (Mukul & Saini, 2021).

CorpoHealth: The company’s recruitment has two main fronts: passive recruitment, where the company publishes a job advert to recruit from a candidate pool, and active recruitment, where the company hires some headhunting companies to help find candidates that suit a specific profile (ST04). In that matter, CorpoHealth also employs referrals in recruiting, acknowledging people responsible for indicating prospects that turn into company

employees (ST04). Unlike DemandInspect, which customizes recruitment only according to the role of the new hire, CorpoHealth customizes it according to the role of the opening and to the expected employee profile.

Regardless of how the recruitment process started, assessing the candidates happens according to a series of criteria previously defined by HR and the manager responsible for the hiring, considering the expected motivation and values compatible with the company (ST04) or, simply saying, the choosing of the most appropriate candidate for that job opening (Dutra, 2013). As candidates advance in the recruitment process, the company communicates the progress (or failure) to align expectations and provide necessary feedback assertively (ST04).

That emphasis on assertive feedback is a kind of consideration for the candidate's time and efforts, pointing out how or where it could develop further and increasing the overall experience of applying for a job opening in CorpoHealth, helping a candidate to develop even if at that time, it could not fill a vacancy (ST04).

Indicating efforts and progress before even hiring candidates for the company while potentially pointing out development points may sound counterintuitive if some fail to make it in the recruitment process. However, it fills every group of HRM practices: Movement (recruitment), development (points for training), and acknowledgment (recognizing efforts and progress) (Dutra, 2013; Boudlaie et al., 2022).

CorpoHealth only adverts a job opening to avoid creating a sizeable backup candidate pool just in case things do not work out, with no objective hiring perspective (ST04). However, some openings may require time to find the right person and fill the vacancy (ST04).

The recruitment process can hire multiple people simultaneously and has hired as many as twenty new employees on a particular occasion (ST05). Recruiting would vary on certain aspects according to the desired profile or role, from where to advert a job opening to which competencies to require, but not on its base structure, consisting of four steps (ST05):

1. Interview with an HR recruiter (for cultural fit with the company values);
2. Interview with the leader directly responsible for the position (for asserting technical skills);
3. Interview with the area leader (for behavioral competencies related to the area);
4. A final cultural check considering the whole company and its context, the "bar raiser," made by a person that has no relation with the recruiting process or the area related to the position (for fair and unbiased recruitment).

It is valid to point out that according to the position to fulfill and its context, the recruitment process is modifiable, which is an improvement that came from experience to help capture value (Liu, 2018): Technology-related prospects (e.g., developers) may be subject to a “live coding” stage as part of the recruitment process, or it is possible to merge steps, reducing the process to three steps or even two, the first with the HR recruiter for culture (steps 1 and 4) and the second with the individual directly responsible and the area leader interviewing together the candidate (steps 2 and 3) (ST05).

The company has reinforced its culture since the recruitment process, presenting values as diversity and inclusion since the early stages as a job description in an advert, from explicitly pointing out how important the matter is for CorpoHealth, to sending slides presenting the company’s culture (ST08; Gulati & DeSantola, 2016). Reinforcing and spreading organizational culture and values shows that CorpoHealth institutionalizes it across the organization, acquiring, improving, and integrating diversity-related knowledge from organizational to individual levels (Crossan et al., 1999).

The HR team currently coordinates recruitment and selection efforts. However, before establishing this team, which started with the arrival of participant ST05 as a coordinator, a third-party accounting company took charge of some administrative duties from CorpoHealth, including HR aspects as the paperwork related to hiring a new worker (ST05).

On contract types, almost everyone from CorpoHealth works under a regular, full-time contract with an indefinite period, with directors and medical staff as the sole exceptions, working under self-employment contracts (ST05).

HashCard: Hiring in HashCard considers the need to work under a budget that does not allow many failed bets and that employees need a receptive environment that engages people to work and deliver the so-needed results under a high degree of uncertainty (ST07).

At the time of her arrival, before the acquisition by a venture capital company, participant ST11 relates that HashCard had less than fifty people under its umbrella. Since back then, the focus of HR activity was recruitment to provide areas with the required people and skills (ST11).

The company, currently with more than one hundred employees, works on recruitment and selection with two groups of people, each of them with a specific profile and documented requisites, according to participant ST06:

- Entry-level (attendants): Focus on people with analytical, communication, and problem-solving skills to avoid conflicts (essential when dealing with clients that may report to the Brazilian Central Bank [Bacen] in case any severe wrongdoing happens);
- Advanced (coordinators and specialists): Look for candidates with management and negotiating skills and a higher seniority level, answering directly for results while distributing tasks and making demands. Coordinators also have to deal with external tools (software) suppliers.

While the team managed by participant ST06, the company's largest, had reduced to a third of its original size, what mostly happened was the reassignment of some workers to new activities. There were a few dismissals and other transfers of employees to external tools suppliers, happening as part of the company's strategy to lay some duties to third-party companies (ST06).

The hiring process is customizable, and according to the area, type, and profile of the job, a hiring process may differ in things such as procedures, requirements, contract types, and even the pacing of the recruitment (ST11). Customized recruitment for technology and development openings may require a faster process, with more objective interview questions and coding tests when relevant and available (ST11; Gulati & DeSantola, 2016). Customizing the recruitment process according to the complexity level, in addition to the role to fulfill, is something unseen in other companies from this study, at least when considering the description of entirely different sets of capacities and skills required.

When hiring, HashCard considers its internal context as a startup that is under development in a high uncertainty and the profile of job applicants so that the recruitment process will bring people with an appropriate technical and behavioral profile (ST07):

“That is why the profile for hiring in a startup is so peculiar, because when you arrive at a structure that has a business unit that is being developed, you are already within the entire framework of a developed, consolidated, and sometimes stuck structure in which you need to try to innovate. In a startup this is the opposite, I have nothing given, everything is uncertain, and that is fine. So the profile of the person is very different. An innovative person can even innovate within a more consolidated structure, but within a startup, you really need to undertake because that will not always work and you are not protected by anything.”

[“Por isso que o perfil pra contratação em uma startup é tão peculiar, porque quando você chega numa estrutura que tem unidade de negócios que está sendo desenvolvida, você já está dentro de todo um arcabouço de uma estrutura organizacional desenvolvida, consolidada, e às vezes engessada, em que você precisa tentar inovar. Numa startup isso é ao contrário, não tenho nada dado, tudo é incerto, e está tudo bem. Então o perfil da pessoa é muito diferente. Uma pessoa inovadora, ela pode até inovar dentro de uma estrutura mais consolidada, mas dentro

de uma startup você precisa empreender de fato, porque nem sempre aquilo vai dar certo e você não está protegido por nada.”] (ST07).

When there is a need for a new job opening, the person in charge of that position describes their demands and requisites to the recruitment staff (ST06). While HR proceeds with the first recruitment steps, the leadership responsible also joins the final interview, from preselecting some profiles for advance to the interviews to participating in the interview with HR and bringing another leadership to compare visions on the prospective candidates (ST06).

The average contract type for new hiring is an office-based (so people may or may not be allowed to work remotely since hybrid work is more a privilege than an acquired right) full-time contract under an indefinite period. While there are older self-employment contracts, new hires are usually under a regular full-time contract (ST11).

Cognisoft: Before heading to the current business model that offers an HR suite with an algorithm for providing insights to HR practitioners, the company offered a product related to recruitment and selection processes, so this practice was present and structured one way or another in Cognisoft since the beginning (ST10).

While there was a structured recruitment and selection process before pivoting to the current business model, the problem is that there needed to be more standardization, so each area and each leader would handle recruitment and selection as it pleased (ST09). After the arrival of participant ST09 to the HR area, coming from another area in the company, Cognisoft started centralizing recruitment around the HR for structuring, aiming to increase reliability (ST09; Abbasi et al., 2022).

Cognisoft's recruitment process considers the role to fulfill for customizing. However, there is another aspect relevant in the company to the recruitment process that is trying to relate it to the experience that approved candidates would face in the company: “(...) something close to reality, with everyday life, with experience within the scope of the position, of the function it will perform.” [“(...) algo que seja aproximado com a realidade, com o dia a dia, com a experiência mesmo dentro do cargo, da função que vai exercer.”] (ST10).

The current recruitment and selection process in Cognisoft divides people into operation and development workers, with different recruiting processes (ST09; Gulati & DeSantola, 2016). The recruitment and selection process for operation workers usually goes following these steps (ST09; ST12):

1. Filtering: Psychometric tests based on standards of what is acceptable for the company;
2. Interview with HR area: For assessing behavioral and cultural aspects;
3. Interview with the area leader: To assess the candidate-job fit and competencies required for the function and the area;
4. Applied case: To assess in practice if the candidate can work with their base of knowledge to produce and deliver results;
5. Validating with company partners: It is a “double-check” stage to ensure that the hire is necessary and makes sense for the company’s current stage.

Every one of these steps may eliminate a candidate for an open position: From the filtering step, where candidates under a specific standard are not allowed to progress, until the very last stage, where a partner can veto hiring if, by any reason, it concludes that it is not necessary, so there are not redundant steps for the applicant for an operational role (ST12).

On the other hand, recruitment and selection processes for development workers may differ compared to operation workers: There is less emphasis on behavior and cultural aspects, for example, because what matters most is the logic employed to solve problems, and technical assessment is far more rigorous (ST09; Gulati & DeSantola, 2016).

Currently, the recruitment process for development workers consists of three steps: Headhunting and an initial contact, logical and problem-solving tests, and a technical interview with a live coding test with the company’s chief technical officer (CTO), and there is no recruitment staff dedicated exclusively for development workers because the HR area is not large enough to allow this (ST09).

That more agile hiring process for development workers is explainable in the current context of tech staff: Tech talent is an overheated hiring market where companies compete with others from potentially anywhere in the world to hire a developer (ST12). As an example of how hard it is to attract developers for a company, the initial contact after the headhunting involves a speech of at most fifteen minutes to convince that talent that Cognisoft is an excellent place to work and that it should move forward in the hiring process (ST12).

A few exceptions follows neither of the two previously described scripts, especially for positions with particular requirements, such as tech leaders requiring senior expertise. In this case, the company’s CEO will handle the recruitment process directly, conduct the necessary interviews and finish the recruiting (ST09).

Plytech: Recruitment and selection, the first HR practice implemented in the company (ST15), happens according to previous planning and the assigned budget for each area, but if there is an urgent need to hire, it is possible to negotiate and reassign resources from any other assigned area (ST13). There was customization on those processes to allow working with the role and capacities related to each area, but the main focus on recruitment and selection was on cultural fit (ST14; Mukul & Saini, 2021).

Every recruiting process, regardless of area, has to follow a particular workflow according to the following base script (ST14):

- Job opening: The area leader determines if there is a need for a new hire, considering the existing budget;
- Internal aligning: The manager responsible for the job opening and the HR staff make a meeting to verify the parameters for the job advert:
 - Job level (junior, middle/full, senior);
 - Desirable (but optional) capacities are desirable;
 - Required (mandatory) capacities;
 - Classifying (from most to least significant): Behavioral and technical capacities).
- Area alignment: How important is that job opening? What is the profile of the assigned area?
- Filtering: Analysis of prospective candidates before inviting them for interviews;
- HR interview: The first interview is with HR staff to ascertain cultural fit, behavioral, and even some technical skills;
- Area interview: This interview addresses technical skills (more deeply than the previous round) and task deliveries.

The script above describes the reality of a more mature and scaled startup, but things were different before. When the HR area was only beginning and participants ST13 and ST14 were newcomers to Plytech, recruitment and selection was a far less complex process, starting and ending with an interview with the area leader (ST14). The company started structuring and detailing its processes as it grew more complex and diverse.

When participant ST14 joined Plytech, there were less than a handful of HR employees, so they had to perform as generalists, each one performing “a little bit of

everything.” Still, from that time until transferring to another role that also contains cultural demands, rather than HR only, this participant was present in every recruitment and selection process.

Recruiting development professionals is a pain, as it is for every company mentioned in this study (ST14; ST15), regardless of the platform employed since there is usually no appliance on their part, which triggers more active recruiting for this kind of professionals (ST14):

“If I open a vacancy, and we open a vacancy for an HR assistant, it rains applications. My God, we broke candidacy records. Hence, why do I say that one process differs from the other? Devs do not rain. I have to go after them, period. Whether through a tech recruitment platform or LinkedIn. If I look at my applications from another recruitment company, which we use for our careers page, within a dev vacancy, I cry and get into the fetal position there. If I do not actively search, I do not find the person. So the big difference starts there!” [“Se eu abro uma vaga, e a gente abriu uma vaga de assistente de RH, choveu candidaturas. Meu Deus, a gente bateu recordes de candidaturas. Daí, porque que eu falo que é diferente um processo diferente do outro? Os *devs* não chovem. Eu tenho que ir atrás deles e ponto final. Seja através de uma plataforma de recrutamento tech, seja através do LinkedIn. Se eu olhar minhas candidaturas ali de outra empresa de recrutamento, que a gente utiliza para nossa página de carreiras, dentro de uma vaga de *dev*, eu choro e fico em posição fetal ali. Se eu não fizer a busca ativa, eu não acho a pessoa. Então já começa aí a grande diferença!”] (ST14).

Despite the humorous remark from participant ST14, Plytech needed to do something to hire tech talent. They developed an extremely agile, no-nonsense process: The developer is usually interested in something other than corporate culture or people, so the talks during the recruitment process focus on the challenge to solve, available technologies, or the tech stack (ST14).

The international competition for Brazilian tech talents and the “exchange rate factor,” since these companies pay in dollars or euros, makes it harder to hire developers, adding complexity to startups: Different skills, driving factors, and demand may justify hiring a specialized recruiter (ST14).

Regarding the hiring pace and scalability, although it is possible to hire a significant amount of people quickly, there were negotiations to give more time between hires to allow HR to work better on these processes (ST13). Instead of overloading the person in charge of recruitment and selection with twenty processes simultaneously, assigning five or six processes per recruiter would be more beneficial (ST13).

Suppose there is a need for an emergency, temporary, and urgent hire, especially for those high-demanded developers. In that case, the company may use services from a third-

party company that specializes in recruiting tech talent or even lending a recruiter for intensive processes in short periods, so there are emergency routes for recruitment and selection (ST13).

Aside from providing alternatives for emergency hiring scenarios, there is also work for improving regular recruitment and selection processes. Although this is a practice in an advanced stage nowadays, there is always room for improvement: People at Plytech are developing a recruitment dashboard to provide presentation-friendly insights for meetings or for answering questions from the board, for example (ST13). Gathering hiring info in a single panel may help view and analyze information relevant to the process in an accessible way.

5.1.2. TRAINING AND CAREERS

Training helps startup companies to manage better and develop their human capital. From courses and other training resources for new employees to continuing education measures (Santos, Brambilla, & Almeida, 2022), training in a startup (or from a startup, in the case of HRechs for their clients) must provide development paths, places or instances for development to happen, and foster individual development plans (IDPs) (Chagas, Costa, & Paradela, 2022).

Appropriate career development practices may ensure that the professional will have the chance to perform more complex roles inside the company rather than preparing young professionals for larger companies to poach once the opportunity arrives. On the one hand, offering meaningful roles with a large agency and decision power may bring an experienced professional from a large company to a startup (Aguinis, Gottfredson, & Joo, 2012).

On the other hand, both large and small, even startup companies compete for talented professionals (Aguinis et al., 2012). Still, there are two other sources of difficulty for startups to hire or retain large amounts of senior staff: Financial constraints and the nature of these companies, which are usually less structured and more fluid (Buller & Napier, 1993; Besker, Martini, Lokuge, Blincoe, & Bosch, 2018).

DemandInspect: Training depends mainly on leadership since each area, director, and manager can determine its development activities. According to ST02, the executive assigned to HR duties, in general, each sector's leader identifies its needs, then acts directly to address these gaps or asks for HR's help in any measure (Boudlaie et al., 2022). This help may come

as the HR suggests a training or focus to action, for example, or even therapy (there are psychologists among the HR practitioners).

On the other hand, individual internal workers cannot ask for suggestions in the same terms since HR is still analyzing their activities before suggesting effective measures or training programs (ST02). External workers are subject to constant assessments to solve questions and verify the quality of their tasks, using the feedback to provide an evaluation, reflection, and improvement point (ST01; ST03).

If the quality deems as insufficient, these workers may be sent to a “recycling course” to retrain and improve their technical skills before new assignments (ST01; ST02). This kind of initiative may sound trivial at first sight. However, it shows that startup growth involves giving people inside an organization appropriate means and opportunities to develop since training is expensive and its efficacy is not guaranteed (Abbasi et al., 2020).

DemandInspect constantly reevaluates the contents and methods of training, “even too much,” as participant ST02 would say in a humorous comment during her interview. Regarding external workers, for example, the content of the so-called recycling course suffered more than a change per month since the arrival of ST02 in the company. Participant ST03 also revealed that they collected insights from feedback during training since onboarding for constant improvement (Evans & Davis, 2005), asking questions like this:

“Is there anything in the training you think could be modified that would make your learning much easier?” [“Tem alguma coisa no treinamento que tu achas que poderia ser modificado, que facilitaria muito o seu aprendizado?”] (ST03). This kind of feedback question highlights the role of HR as a learning agent in the organization (Argyris & Schon, 1978).

According to ST02, DemandInspect uses career promotions as part of measures to raise wellness and mental health. It happens by valuing personal growth and career development and engaging people, which is explainable by the company’s constant employee count growth, a little over 100% growth in two years. Some hirings were recent to the point that these employees were not available to take their first vacations, for example.

Career tracks still need to be fully structured in DemandInspect, especially in their long-term perspectives, since most hirings are relatively recent. However, external workers are also part of the company planning, possibly ascending to seniorized or supervising external roles. Another possibility for these external workers is migrating careers towards internal roles as part of the quality team, measuring and helping external workers’ teams perform their tasks, or even to fulfill other internal openings (ST02).

The company shows these different career possibilities for new workers from the earliest days as part of the onboarding process, offering the possibility of progression in roles and wages to motivate and engage people (ST03).

CorpoHealth: Training constantly updates and evolves, varying according to areas or roles and the available budget (ST04). The company also made institutional development practices available for every employee, such as providing English courses with a significant discount for every employee or even free of charge for certain people (ST04), which may be into the training category of an HPWS (Evans & Davis, 2005).

It is possible to understand the subsidized English courses because of the potential positive impact on individual performance and the company in general (Boudlaie et al., 2022), despite the possibility that in the future, these employees get recruited by other companies because of higher qualification (Mukul & Saini, 2021). However, the general criteria for a manager or leadership to consider the adoption of training initiatives or programs are assessing demand, necessity, and remaining budget (ST04).

When this study proceeded with the interviews, there was an ongoing detailing of jobs, roles, and complexity levels (e.g., junior, middle, and senior-level) and what is expectable from them, allowing more accurate feedback, expected performance levels and indications for promotion, retention, or firing (ST04, ST05).

“The role of the HR team is to make all the teams put on paper, in an Excel, what is expected from each of these positions, frame and give this feedback to people.” [“O papel do time de RH está sendo fazer todos os times colocarem no papel, num Excel, o que é esperado de cada uma dessas posições, enquadrar e dar esse feedback para as pessoas.”] (ST04).

Participant ST05 says that this career structuring task would take a year quarter and considers that designing descriptions, roles, and expectations allows people to design their IDPs (another development-related initiative in addition to the constant feedback that employees receive since the application process for a job position):

“It's a very menial task, it's sitting down and really designing the technical and behavioral skills needed for each of the positions. Our objective, and here we are going a little further towards letting people take the lead in their careers, is to describe all the positions in the company, make this visible to everyone, so that each one can look there on their own what is the job description it wants to achieve to design their own IDP.” [“É uma tarefa bem braçal, é sentar e desenhar mesmo aptidões técnicas comportamentais que cada um dos cargos quer ter. O nosso objetivo, e aqui a gente vai pra um caminho um pouco mais de deixar as pessoas assumirem o protagonismo na carreira delas, é descrever todos os cargos da companhia, deixar isto visível pra todo mundo, para que cada um por conta própria

olhe lá qual é o a descrição do cargo que ela quer atingir para desenhar o seu próprio PDI.”]

Regarding careers, there are area committees where leaders take brief reports about every employee from that area to discuss merit acknowledgment and promotions (ST05). That happens in a meeting with other leaders, stakeholders, and people from other areas whose work relates to evaluated people to bring their inputs and support decisions made (ST05).

Structuring careers and performance assessment committees were things that did not happen forcibly but according to the natural growth of CorpoHealth: “I think this was in line with the company’s natural growth in terms of prioritization, but I think we had perhaps more urgent issues before that were not a pain, but when we reached almost a few hundred people we understood that we needed to have a little more rules, right?” [“Eu acho que isso foi conforme o crescimento natural da companhia em termos de priorização, mas acho que a gente tinha temas talvez mais urgentes antes que não eram uma dor, só que quando a gente chegou em quase algumas centenas de pessoas a gente entendeu que a gente precisava ter um pouco mais de regra, né?”] (ST05).

The structuring of those committees respected singularities, so while each area committee considered its context and needs, there was some constant assessment process for everyone in the company, regardless of area or job (ST05), at least yearly (ST04). This structuring gave more clarity inside CorpoHealth, asking questions such as the whos, whats, and whys regarding job mobility (ST05), which resembles Dutra’s (2013) movement group of HRM practices.

In the earliest days of CorpoHealth, job mobility was less clear for employees, with promotions or firings based on fragile reasonings as supposed arrogance or mistreatment, or even by (the lack of) affinity reasons, so CorpoHealth efforted to create mechanisms that inhibit mobility based on personal relations (ST04).

HashCard: As a relatively early-stage startup, HashCard can not afford those extensive and highly specialized teams with niche jobs, so the company expects that its people show multitasking abilities (ST07) to perform in a high job rotation scheme according to the work demands (ST11), mobilizing and reassigning people to perform specific tasks.

The HR team welcomes new employees regardless of area, and the onboarding process starts with a welcome kit consisting of small gifts to proceed with a briefing on how the area responsible for that hiring works (ST06). The briefing shows the structure of the area

and the people, training on the area's work indicators, tools, systems, and structures so that a new hire could have an idea of the references to start their journey (ST06).

As a consequence of being a results-oriented company, training in HashCard focuses on learning to explore resources and possibilities, which identifies with the company's culture of dare risking and a hands-on approach, brokering knowledge from different sources while internalizing experiences (Basten & Haamann, 2018). Participant ST07, for example, mentioned that being comfortable with trial and error also relates to learning to work and collaborate, to engage people as they progress in their careers, gaining complexity and responsibilities.

A potential downfall of combining high job mobility, learning by doing (different from DemandInspect, which centers training on their leaders, or Cognisoft, which combines area and leader to define their initiatives), and a collaborative and process-light approach is that temporary shifts may lead to workplace distortions, where people from different areas and job titles do the same but earn differently (ST11). This misalignment between the intended and practical consequences of mobilizing people was not deliberate but may have brought some degree of unfairness or unsustainability to how this mobility happens (Boxall, 2021).

People joining an area without formal procedures for obtaining data to acknowledge and solve problems (ST06) shows that a company may free people to create innovative solutions (Anderson & Cappelli, 2021). However, if little constraint also means a scarcity of rules, people may feel inhibited due to the little support for their development and duties. Also, HashCard still has to thoroughly structure its career tracks, as happened with DemandInspect, the two earlier-stage startups from this study.

Given that information on training and careers, when a theme of general interest or a wide gap appears, HashCard HR may structure or provide training to people to address it, signaling that its HR may act as a support unit for other areas when needed or required as a way to help developing people inside the organization. An example cited for every participant from the company was a workshop about handling layoffs in a more humane matter (ST06; ST07; ST11).

Literature on layoffs during the pandemic (Barrero, Bloom, & Davis, 2020; Adikaram, Priyankara, & Naotunna, 2021; Chebolu, 2021; Croteau, Grant, Rojas, & Abdelhamid, 2021) emphasized the reasons and potential impacts on jobs, but far less – if ever – on how to proceed with those terminations in such a difficult time in people's lives. The aforementioned humane layoff created a communication script to give everyone a fair experience regardless of

former position or factors that triggered the dismissal, giving security to those in charge of the communication efforts (ST07).

Cognisoft: While the training relates to each area and manager, to address any competency or skill gap or even to further the development of an employee, HR influences training by helping to provide valuable capacities, guidance, and insight for managers, acting as a development partner (Dutra, 2013).

The performance assessment system provides a general overview of each employee, with development and improvement points. That may be sufficient for less complex companies, until slightly more than a hundred people, to maintain the assessment quality (ST10).

The Cognisoft suite also plays a role in helping to develop the company's staff by providing critical insight for managers, such as team engagement and performance, and by highlighting overperforming and underperforming people, which can help a manager to make better decisions (ST12).

There is some implemented training for managers on how to make decisions or subside the decision-making process, which is possible using some of the insights provided by the Cognisoft platform (ST12). Hence, HR acts to show the best possible path and the success odds by analyzing existing indicators and insights, yet the final decision is on the respective leadership (ST12).

Career-wise, there is mobility for people among the different areas and roles available at Cognisoft: The management tries to understand the strengths of each employee, so when there is a job opening, whether it is a hierarchical promotion or not, moving people between positions is an accessible and informal process (ST10). That way, Cognisoft's HR guides development initiatives using data-driven insights and employee strengths to learn where and how to direct development.

Behind job mobility decisions, monthly meetings for each theme or area, such as operation, strategy, or results, discuss tasks and projects, assessing if there is a need to reallocate any people to improve results or if hiring extra people is a better solution (ST09), relating to reassigning as part of the movement group of HRM practices (Dutra, 2013).

These monthly meetings may help decision-making by discussing employees' capabilities, predicted potential, career possibilities, and the success odds for each choice (ST09). A dismissal only happens when the company tries every other option and fails, and there has been no massive layoff movement in recent years (ST09).

Plytech has structured career paths, and prospective candidates may look into their options through a well-known third-party recruitment platform. While most openings will receive several applications, developers still need an active search for these professionals, so scarce that the company considers opening specific opportunities for tech recruiters instead of looking only into full-fledged HR professionals (ST14).

That difficulty in hiring developers happens because, as an HRTech, Plytech's core business attracts people for careers related to the HR context, naturally obtaining candidates for the company in these jobs that Plytech excels at (ST14). However, people from other contexts may need to see a specific reason for applying for a job in Plytech, as happens with tech professionals (ST14).

When a new employee arrives at Plytech, basic training during the onboarding process, along with cultural fitting, lasts a week (ST15). The development processes, however, are still a work in progress since the company designed them over time (ST14). While development practices and work rites are present, the development paths as a structured, documented item are under development, "about to release" at the time of recording the interviews for this study (ST14).

As people handle their tasks and develop their capacities in Plytech, they can develop their careers inside the company nonlinearly, supporting projects and duties from other teams or areas to benefit the whole company (ST14). The person is in a specific job, assigned under a team or area, but may offer help and collaborate in a project, returning to the original area assigned as the task force is over (ST14). This degree of mobility for collaborating with other areas for different experiences and supporting projects from other areas slightly resembles what HashCard does, with the difference that Plytech has structured its career tracks and has some well-developed HR guidelines.

Working in different activities, even under exceptional, temporary assignments, may help employees have different experiences and reach a sense of purpose in the company, giving people agency over their careers and expanding their experiences and skills. Besides acknowledging employees' efforts, which is a work rite as well as a development initiative that is already institutionalized across the company after people learn how to make it properly to value efforts and guide improvements, Plytech also organizes quarterly workshops for talks about career development, questioning people where they want to come or how the company can help them (ST14).

There is a monthly work rite where people may award others using an appropriate part of the company system (ST13). It may happen because of any relevant accomplishment or how someone helped an area to develop, for example, increasing the purpose of acknowledging people's development in their careers (ST13).

5.1.3. COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

Organizations may employ various tools and strategies to communicate and receive employee feedback. The communication channel itself has its importance, but a successful communication strategy needs to have a two-way conversation, which happens by receiving answers, feedback, and other communication efforts that allows people to create engagement and help managers to direct actions toward their goals by providing insights and a base for action (Rudeloff, Pakura, Eggers, & Niemand, 2022).

A practical example of how important communication may be for startups happened at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic when companies had to make significant changes in their work assignments and structures almost overnight due to a radical and mostly unpredictable contextual change, such as shifting to fully online learning and remote work (Mikołajczyk, 2022), learning to adapt and align with the environment for increased viability (Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Argote & Hora, 2016) at least while there were social distancing public policies that implied in restrictions to gathering several people in environments such as workplaces.

DemandInspect: After the worst period of the Covid-19 pandemic that forced people and companies to adopt social distancing measures, including remote work, DemandInspect now gathers most of its internal people in a hybrid model. Presential work happens at least partially in most cases, but for new openings, the manager may choose if the job offering is presential, remote, or hybrid work (ST02).

As the company could adopt less strict social distancing measures, HR had to negotiate with managers and workers to reach agreements, so transitioning to a more office-intensive schedule would be less stressful, even for workers unwilling to adopt hybrid work. Besides guiding and supporting implementation, it is also part of an HR's duty to communicate changes and to convince people of the importance and necessity of such changes, thus engaging other people alongside them (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014).

In DemandInspect, part of this communication effort happened by convincing people to progressively return to the office, with arguments such as “once a week, to see how it goes” and, as people got more used to and felt safer, gradually increasing their presential part of the work (ST02).

Their everyday communication strategy employs internal support, tools such as a customer relationship management (CRM) solution, or instant messaging solutions such as WhatsApp. There is also an internal app for external workers that allows sending engaging messages or any other kind of content that the company wants to send formally (ST03).

Internal people work using a third-party, HR-oriented app that allows centering work-related info such as company documents, days to work remotely, vacations, onboarding, and assessments in general, such as climate, performance, or even post-dismissing (ST02). Managers can also use this same HR-oriented app to track previous assessments or control absenteeism in their teams, for example (ST02).

Communication appears in several roles in DemandInspect, from giving feedback to informing development measures such as their “recycling courses,” which hints at communication as part of an HPWS (Evans & Davis, 2005). Also, the company values its “hearing” process to search for improvement points actively. It keeps people engaged while encouraging them to improve processes (ST01).

Participant ST01 points out that this opening to hear and engage their employees is part of and reinforces the company’s cultural values, coming from the founding team across the company: “The culture of a company, it does not borrow from anything. That root part of the culture comes from the founders.” [“A cultura de uma empresa, ela não pega emprestado de alguma coisa. Essa parte raiz da cultura, ela vem dos fundadores.”] (ST01).

CorpoHealth: Internally, the company centers its communication and corporate real-time messaging on a third-party platform that could integrate with other programs (ST04; ST05). Externally, it uses social media platforms to engage customers and the public, and there are no specific platforms for certain areas or applications (ST05).

Regarding diversity and inclusion, CorpoHealth sends to approved candidates, alongside the job offer, a presentation showing the company’s goals and cultural values and a manifesto of diversity and inclusion (ST08). During the onboarding process, the company communicates its culture with topics such as its values, allowed and forbidden things, and the importance of valuing diversity and inclusion with zero tolerance for bigotry and discrimination behaviors (ST08).

Internally and externally, CorpoHealth applies universal design to aim at diversity and inclusion when communicating with people: From bringing a visually impaired person for help validating a solution to identifying improvement points, such as how their healthcare workers should deal with people with disabilities (ST08).

CorpoHealth is developing an internal anti-discrimination policy, regarded by participant ST08 as the most relevant policy regarding diversity and inclusion, based on data, facts, and science to prevent the occurrence of discriminatory acts inside the company (ST08). It may be a company-building process (Blank, 2007) while institutionalizing its culture and values (Gulati & DeSantola, 2016).

In support of that anti-discrimination policy, there is a policy for people to watch their own words to avoid using content in meetings and speeches that may be offensive to certain races or groups of people (e.g., disabled persons) because “if you speak, you do not just speak, you think and you feel.” [“se você fala, você não simplesmente fala, você pensa e você sente.”] (ST08).

It is valid to point out that monitoring words and actions refer to an individual monitoring their behavior rather than someone else's to avoid prejudice or things could get out of control: “You do not need to correct your colleague; correct yourself. Huh? Because it started to become a patrol.” [“Você não precisa corrigir a colega, corrige a si mesmo. Né? Porque começou a virar uma patrulha.”] (ST08).

HashCard: As mentioned in the case description (section 4.3), HashCard turned its values into hashtags, using these hashtags to quickly communicate clearly and directly the company’s philosophy and behavior standards, yet in an informal tone. In that sense, HashCard’s HR acts as a cultural guidance actor, supporting the company’s cultural values and people inside the company to act according to these values (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014).

The company has no formal established communication policy, but there are regulations related to HashCard’s industry – a fintech – that disallows behaviors such as leaking data from clients (ST06). When any interaction deals with potentially sensitive information, the employee has to make a critical assessment to decide what it can or cannot mention or share with others, so there is a high degree of subjectivity (ST06).

This lack of formal policies or procedures may sound chaotic, but it is a deliberate choice and part of HashCard’s culture. Also, it is not unusual for smaller companies, such as startups, to have less complex and possibly more informal HRM policies and practices (De Winne & Sels, 2010; Schmelter, Mauer, Börsch, & Brettel, 2010).

According to participant ST07, cooperation between people and the independence of each people coexist. The aimed communication tone is informal, young, tech-savvy, and based on pop culture, explaining what happens and why things go one way and not another (ST07).

“Being uncomplicated, cheap and in the sense of people initiatives and using little technology that ironically despite HashCard being a fintech, having a very strong layer of technology behind them, the people area, it is still very manual. We don't have any ERP (enterprise resource planning) running, no otherworldly people analytics, nothing like that. There are two people even talking to people, creating narratives, communications, very hands-on initiatives.” [“Ser descomplicado, barato e e no sentido das iniciativas de pessoas e usando pouca tecnologia que ironicamente apesar da HashCard ser uma *fintech*, de ter uma camada de tecnologia muito forte por trás delas, a área de pessoas, ela é muito manualizada ainda. A gente não tem nenhum ERP rodando, nenhum *people analytics* das galáxias, não tem nada disso. São duas pessoas mesmo conversando com as pessoas, criando narrativas, comunicações, iniciativas muito ainda mão na massa.”] (ST07).

HashCard regards transparency as a work practice in every stage, communicating directly to people what happens and what the company expects from the recruitment process, including challenges and potential hardships in work, even if one or another candidate bails off the appliance process. However, by doing this, the company avoids someone joining and only then acknowledges its actual situation (ST11).

Except for a remote meeting tool, there was no mention of communication-specific software by the interviewed participants, but that may be explainable due to the work arrangement, now once again presential, office-based after the worst stage of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ease of social distancing measures. Without those restrictions, asking a colleague directly at their desk for help or gathering people in a meeting room becomes easier to discuss a specific topic.

The “laid cards” policy is also visible in HashCard’s everyday affairs as part of its communication, maintaining a direct and transparent yet pertinent and respectful tone to base and report decisions:

“Laid cards is a point that even came out positively in a benchmark survey. We are very transparent with everything. We try, of course, not to put it in a way that causes chaos, but I think that transparency in communication, in this hiring, onboarding, and even offboarding, (...) making it clear to the person (who is going to leave), ‘look, you are leaving because we tried so far, there were N conversations, N points, that and that done, and so... It did not happen, right?’.” [“Cartas deitadas é um ponto que até saiu positivamente em uma pesquisa de *benchmark*. A gente é muito transparente com tudo. A gente tenta, claro, não colocar de uma forma para causar o caos, mas acho que a transparência na comunicação, nessa vinda, no *onboarding* e até no *offboarding*, (...) deixar claro para a pessoa (que vai sair), ‘olha, você está

saindo porque a gente tentou até aqui, foram N conversas, N pontos, isso e isso feito, e assim... Não rolou, né?'] (ST11).

Cognisoft tries to give people the autonomy to access, update, and work with data from its platform as part of their daily routine (ST09). This effort aims to make people more comfortable with its primary work tool and able to extract data and insights for decision-making processes, also helping to increase performance and reliability in an environment where technology becomes obsolete very quickly (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014; Argote & Hora, 2016).

Every product and every process handled in Cognisoft focuses on generating information that the cognitive algorithm may gather and turn into workable data “(...) because to do people analytics, you need a volume of data, and our products are geared much toward managing that specific process.” [“(…) porque para fazer *people analytics* você precisa de volume de dados, e os nossos produtos são voltados muito para o gerenciamento daquele processo específico.”] (ST12).

By managing received data to guide their decision-making processes as part of their culture, people at Cognisoft end up acting as agents of learning and changes that put into practice the received knowledge (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Cook & Yanow, 1993).

Despite measuring goals, people at Cognisoft do not employ its platform internally to decide on bonuses because the company aims to grow consistently (ST10). Instead, they discuss the merits of people during their area and theme meetings, discussing achievements and deciding bonuses locally and on a case-per-case basis during these events without interference from the internal platform (ST10).

On diversity, inclusion, and well-being, Cognisoft cares about how it handles work to build a healthy and autonomous work environment in the long run since people are there to work for “a marathon, not a sprint,” [“para uma maratona, não para um sprint”] (ST10). To achieve that, employees should avoid approaches and behaviors that may upset or harm others (ST10; Boxall, 2021).

When there is a mental health issue, for example, the company handles each case individually by first understanding the case before acting: In some cases, the company’s staff may offer some help; in others, the employee may receive a sick leave for recovering, and in others, the affected person may consult with a specialist, all of that communicated with no hurdles, respecting each one as an individual (ST10).

The Covid-19 pandemic changed how Cognisoft approached work, from moving from the office to remote work and from how people work to how to discuss and make decisions

(ST09), learning how to deal with changes and integrating them into the organization to improve work (Crossan et al., 1999). Communication-wise, people started realizing that the pandemic would not go anywhere soon and that meeting protocols and practices made for an office-based world were not appropriate for remote work, leading to improvements in the workflow and compiling a manual for remote work (ST09).

“When companies started to come back, we even had no office. And we said ‘man, let us build an office and it will take this long’. And even before that there was the whole question of anxiety, ‘do I move or not move to São Paulo?’, and then we defined the hybrid system. But in our hybrid system, it was the following: Each manager defines the dynamics of his team. That was the rule. So, technology managers, nobody wants to work in the office. Everyone wants to go to the office once a month. In our case, for example, my team's internal operation goes every Monday. So we did not create the rules, we created premises, and based on these premises we makes decisions on a daily basis.” [“Quando as empresas começaram a voltar, a gente inclusive estava sem escritório. E a gente falou ‘cara, vamos construir um escritório e isso vai demorar esse tempo’. E antes mesmo tinha toda a questão da ansiedade, ‘mudo ou não mudo para São Paulo?’, e aí a gente definiu o sistema híbrido. Só que no sistema híbrido nosso foi o seguinte: Cada gestor define a dinâmica do seu time. Essa foi a regra. Então o dos gestores de tecnologia, ninguém quer pro escritório. Todo mundo quer para o escritório uma vez por mês. No nosso caso, por exemplo, a operação interna do meu time vai toda segunda-feira. Então a gente não criou o regramento, a gente criou premissas, e com base nessas premissas a gente vai tomando decisão no dia a dia.”] (ST12).

Before defining any “back to office” policy, Cognisoft created a survey to assess people’s reaction to the possibility of returning, partially or entirely, to the office, which led to the HR area starting to structure the office (ST09). The response was generally positive, with around 70% agreeing to a hybrid model (ST09), and a possibility for that was people feeling a lack of social contact, interaction, and collaboration (ST10).

The office remains little used, as it stays more as a support function than the primary work resource. Hence, meetings with leaders or those that address results usually happen in the office and have good attendance, but otherwise, people work primarily from home on their daily affairs (ST09).

Plytech: Internal communication vastly uses the startup’s platform, centering many interactions between employees and the company, from establishing communication rules to providing ways to give inputs on capacities or results, and even offering suggestions directly to the company (ST13). Since the company internally uses every system it offers for its customers, plus some modules that were not publicly released yet, this is more the rule than an exception inside Plytech (ST15).

From development and performance to acknowledgment and engagement, there are tools and ways inside the Plytech platform to help leaders by supporting their work and providing data and insights to subsidize decision-making processes (ST13).

There are also indicators and tools for assessing perceptions about various aspects relevant to HR management, such as onboard assessments, for example (ST15), allowing managers to insert specific questions about a topic or even send individual, confidential, and even anonymous assessments asking for additional information for improving work and management for people in the company (ST13).

It is essential to mention that having a communication platform will not improve the company and its HR instantly in an effortless way. To achieve an optimal model for internal HR, Plytech had constant talks between its HR and people science employees, which are responsible for developing the methods and rules behind the system (ST14; Armstrong & Taylor, 2014).

Those talks also required a good dose of work to develop an enjoyable communication system involving all the employee experience, managing contact points between the company and the employee, assessing the efficacy of methods, and looking for any potential gap or demand (ST14).

As an example of how important communication is for successfully implementing an HR system or platform, there are times when even salespeople from the company ask for an HR representative to talk with a customer for help in a particular aspect of the platform, which may result in insights for improvement (ST14; Han & Stieha, 2020):

“This is really cool because sometimes the sales area itself tells us, ‘we need you to exchange an idea with such and such a company, because they are having difficulties with HR. Can you do a mentorship there, signaling what you need? Can you show how Plytech can help with this issue they are having difficulty with?’. So we even exchange (information) with companies, showing how we do it internally and how it can be done within their reality, giving tips because we have already been here in a certain way, right? We have already implemented it here. This happens quite a lot.” [“Isso é muito bacana porque às vezes a própria área de vendas fala pra gente, ‘a gente precisa que vocês troquem uma ideia com a empresa tal, porque eles estão com uma dificuldade no RH. Vocês conseguem fazer uma mentoria lá, sinalizando o que precisa? Vocês conseguem mostrar como a Plytech pode ajudar nesse quesito que eles estão com dificuldade?’. Então a gente faz inclusive trocas (de informações) com as empresas, mostrando como a gente faz internamente e como se pode fazer dentro da sua realidade, dando dicas porque a gente já passou por aqui de uma certa maneira, né? A gente já implantou aqui. Isso acontece bastante.”] (ST13).

Similarly, there is an encouragement for employees to interact and contribute to the company by using a “suggestion box” in the Plytech platform, even if anonymously, which

the system allows (ST14). This idea may be the next game-changing feature for internal processes, relationships, or the communication process itself (ST14).

5.1.4. ENGAGING POLICIES

Employee engagement is significant for startup companies, and it was possible to notice this as a recurring aspect during interviews. From differences between working in established and startup companies to the importance of achieving a cultural fit between the company and its employees, engagement is present or at least mentioned in many situations.

Overall, startups need to state and communicate their values to their employees to align expectations and allow people to perform and develop inside the company (Kulkarni, Mutkekar, & Ingalagi, 2020), which may help in employee retention if there is an empowering, flexible, innovative, productive, risk-willing yet growth-minded environment (Buller & Napier, 1993; Mukul & Saini, 2021).

In **DemandInspect**, HR is an acting team that motivates and engages its coworkers while contributing to strategies, to the point that it is one of the business' pillars (ST01) and a central figure for mobilizing staff during implementation processes (Trullen et al., 2020). After the initial structuring of the area, which mainly happened under the command of ST01, it was possible to allow entry and maintenance processes in HR, such as interviews, feedback, or weekly follow-up.

This initial structuring also allowed assessing if there was any relevant gap in HR management, if employee retention was working or if people were leaving the company in waves, work-related complaints, or any situation requiring intervention and improvement (ST01; Mukul & Saini, 2021). After an investment round that required updating HR systems and structures, changes aimed to make HR robust and able to support an extensive, scalable, and sustainable growth process (ST01).

Participant ST01 also warned that if people are not adequately engaged to remain and participate, the company will lose some of its talents and the opportunity to mature its processes, constantly replacing those it could not maintain.

As part of this care with employee engagement, DemandInspect constantly monitored the environment to find if something was "off," a potential difficulty, or a source of unhappiness at work (Jose et al., 2021). For internal workers, increasing the value of

corporate food vouchers happened to cover the recent effects of inflation, resulting from a constant look at workers' needs (ST02).

Another example of this monitoring happened during the first semester of 2022: After some sharp increases in gas prices as a result of a series of external factors, the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine the main of them, the company started paying a transport bonus to external workers, thus remaining viable for those workers (ST02).

Still, regarding external workers, DemandInspect manages the number of active workers and current work demand to ensure enough work for everyone. In the case of a period of absence or vacation, the employee informs the company, and the company sends a replacement temporarily, so people taking vacations may still have a base of work and income (ST02; ST03).

According to participant ST02, it happens to keep those workers engaged and reward the investment of their time and efforts in the company. The perspective of promotions to internal roles may also help engage the external workers, many of them in their first job related to real estate markets (ST03), acknowledging their efforts and allowing movement to the internal staff structure, two of the three groups of HRM practices described by Dutra (2013).

The following statement from participant ST03 may help understand how DemandInspect acknowledges and values their external workers to keep them engaged: “Because here we know them by name, it is not a number. We know those who are really committed people, so we always say that.” [“Porque aqui a gente os conhece pelo nome, não é um número. A gente conhece aqueles que realmente são pessoas comprometidas, então a gente sempre fala isso.”] (ST03).

Leaders can award people according to the company’s business plan and define access criteria or measurements to check who may be eligible. Hence, bonuses happen according to the sector and the available budget for each area (ST02). As circumstances change often, practices and processes are constantly revised as part of a startup mentality (in comparison with a traditional company, at least) (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007), which helps to generate and renew workers’ engagement (ST02).

That kind of “embrace the change,” “learning by doing” (instead of “learning by thinking”) agrees with the boundary condition that suggests teams with no formal business education are more likely to actively propose and test solutions until they find convergence (Rupčić, 2018; Leatherbee & Katila, 2020). While participant ST01, which started structuring

the HR area, has an advanced degree not directly related to business, participant ST02 and some other HR practitioners in DemandInspect are psychologists.

CorpoHealth values engaging people in their work environment, so they consider results from their engagement survey since the beginning of their operational stage (2020) to assess progress and the need for change in several areas (ST05). It is worth noting that the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil with the beginning of their commercial operation led the company to adopt remote work, which later became a remote-first approach, as the employee distribution has spread across the whole country and even abroad (ST04; ST05).

Their engagement survey allows CorpoHealth to extract inputs, divided by area or theme, to base action on areas' business partners and action planning in general (ST05). Also, an engagement survey allows putting issues in context because if a single person lists a problem, it may be a personal negative (ST05). However, if twenty-five relates to the same issue, it is a real and significant problem (ST05).

During the high uncertainty from the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil, CorpoHealth's HR acted to keep people together and engaged, providing a common ground and a socialization ritual: Every working day at 9 AM, people would meet remotely to check if everyone were doing fine (ST05). After a while, because there was no significant news, new uncertainties, or risks to justify a meeting every day, and given the fast growth pace during the pandemic, those meetings gradually descaled, first to three times per week, then once a week (ST05; Tian & Xu, 2015).

Establishing a diversity and inclusion area allowed the company to treat these themes in everyday affairs, dissociating from a single "diversity officer" to focus on valuing people and their contributions (ST08; Boudlaie et al., 2022). Their teams have many diversity-related people in leadership roles, such as people from disability, gender, or racial minorities, engaging people and valuing diversity (ST08), effectively empowering historically underrepresented workers as some may reach leadership roles in CorpoHealth.

Not every worker will necessarily fit into a company as diversity-oriented as CorpoHealth. A few cases happened where culture pushed people with little alignment out of the company. In one of these, a former employee approached the diversity leadership to understand why there was not such a thing as "reverse racism," i.e., the belief of a supposed anti-white racial bias, even though this was not a marginalized group (ST08; Bax, 2018; Woo, 2018; Hawkins & Saleem, 2022).

According to participant ST08, that one case was odd because the person was not even white, and the approach seemed more like a dispute or challenge over the role of diversity and the fight against racism in the company, reputing as only whining instead of legitimate demands that affect people's lives: "Deep down he was all the time wanting to prove to me that maybe I was not so sure of what I was talking about." ["No fundo ele estava o tempo todo querendo me provar que eu talvez não tivesse tão certa do que eu estava falando."] (ST08).

Not three months after joining CorpoHealth, this individual, not complying with the company values and potentially disruptive to the work environment, got so disengaged that it has resigned after finding another company to work (ST08), which may have been a lost opportunity to inadvertently learn and bring potentially harmful behaviors to the company (Boxall, 2021).

HashCard: Keeping people engaged is central to the company's strategy, so the company employed hashtags to express its values and policies to make communication more direct and transparent, giving people a purpose and maintaining them on the same page by aligning expectations (ST11).

Leaders play an essential role in engaging their teams by promoting a work environment that is healthy and inclusive for people (Plothow, 2018). If that fails, employees may feel disheartened and disengaged, and since a bad manager can make people sick, increasing absenteeism and turnover (ST06).

Participant ST07 recalled during her interview that no matter the company (startup or not) or the size, it will always need people in some measure, people with engagement who need to learn and cooperate, daring to take risks (Yang et al., 2019). It relates to the company mentality, regarded as inclusive but noisy, nonconformist, engaged, and questioning (ST07).

There are surveys to assess and manage engagement and organizational climate, addressing elements such as benefits, bonuses, and other initiatives, including an ombudsperson service (ST07). The provided benefits resulted in financial pressure since the financial margin did not support implementing such measures without a degree of risk, a risk that the company agreed to take the risk to engage people for better results (ST07).

The HR efforts to align culture, expectations, and demands to give purpose to all employees, making it natural for them to remain in the company and engaged in delivering results (ST07; ST11; Jose et al., 2021). Working on cultural aspects such as hashtags (that contain organizational values) and a sense of purpose also acts as a retention effort, keeping

engagement and the people around HashCard (Mukul & Saini, 2021), especially for critical positions, such as technology roles, when the retention efforts happen more actively (ST11).

“And the shine in the eyes, which is something we work on a lot, and it is curious because the owner has other (companies) invested in and says ‘man, what does HashCard have?’. Because the turnover is low. The operation is big, if we look at the revenue last year... It is an operation that has a very relevant revenue and that has people, sometimes the result is not good but the people are there, they are engaged, they are motivated. Sales are not the best but ‘man, let's not give up, let's go’. And we attribute this to the shine in the eyes, which is one of the values that we are looking for.” [“E o brilho nos olhos, que é uma coisa que a gente trabalha bastante, e é curioso porque o proprietário tem outras (empresas) investidas e fala ‘cara, o que a HashCard tem?’. Porque assim, o turnover é baixo. A operação é grande, se a gente for ver no ano passado o faturamento... É uma operação que tem um faturamento bem relevante e que tem as pessoas, que apanham tantas vezes na reunião lá com o investidor até com os gerentes, às vezes o resultado não está bom mas a galera está ali, está engajada, está motivada. As vendas não estão as melhores mas ‘cara, não vamos desistir, vamos lá’. E a gente atribui isso ao brilho nos olhos que é um dos valores que a gente busca muito.”] (ST11).

Cognisoft: There is an emphasis on HR policies and practices that aim to empower and engage its staff toward a more productive work environment without taking a toll on people’s physical or mental health (Ferris et al., 1995). Part of these comes from interactions between people to build an inclusive environment, but even its working platform helps to engage people.

Transforming untreated information into relevant data to help improve people from the company also led to another objective of using its platform, which is building an engagement process: “For example, I have a process within the HR area, which is the engagement process. At the end of this process, I use my software to manage this process, and at the end, I have data that I centralize.” [“Por exemplo, eu tenho um processo dentro da área de RH, que é o processo de engajamento. No final deste processo eu uso o meu software para gerenciar esse processo e ao final eu tenho dados que eu faço a centralização.”] (ST12).

Assessing engagement happens through climate surveys, where variations in the results or any perceptible hint may indicate a change in staff’s mood (ST10). Monitoring the company’s engagement allows HR to show the managers issues in their teams, so Cognisoft tracks teams with low engagement scores to assess if this may have any cause, such as wages, culture, leaders, or the company itself (ST12).

The company structured some of its practices to increase engagement and belonging feeling in its employees, as seen since onboarding, which works four main aspects: Product, culture, team structure, and the company (ST09). The meetings and contents offered help the newcomer to interact and understand how the company works and what is expectable. The

new hire can also provide feedback to help improve the onboarding process and the employee experience (ST09).

As currently structured, the onboarding intends to clarify for a new hire the whats, hows, and whys of the company, its purpose, and activities (ST09). Besides technical guidance, the company also offers a kind of mentor to answer general questions (not area or work-specific) and a so-called “buddy,” which will follow and supervise the work of the new employee in operation during its first days (ST09).

These measures may be helpful for a new employee to acknowledge the company’s workflow and make oneself feel comfortable and engaged with work and the company. It should also help avoid a possible deception for expectations failing to meet reality:

“It’s no use for the person to know everything in theory and in practice it doesn’t work. We have a much more tendency to leave the person alone, in the sense of providing context and tools, but not leading the horse to water. (...) Normally, people in onboarding sell a dream and leave the person very ‘spare thumb’, then they go to real life and then there is a reality shock. So we prefer to treat everyone the same from the first week onwards.” [“Não adianta a pessoa saber de tudo na teoria e na prática não funcionar. A gente tem uma pegada muito mais de deixar a pessoa avulsa, no sentido de dar contexto e ferramenta, mas não dar o caminho das pedras. (...) Que normalmente a galera no *onboarding* vende um sonho e deixa a pessoa muito ‘café com leite’, depois ela vai pra vida real e aí dá um choque de realidade. Então a gente prefere já tratar igual todo mundo desde a primeira semana.”] (ST09).

Along with engagement, the Cognisoft platform also covers other aspects that may be relevant to engaging, such as commitment, communication, and bonuses (ST09). The fact that internal staff uses the same platform that the company offers to its clients (not necessarily the same version or with the same active functionalities) is faced naturally by HR since, in some cases, the related products were available before the need to implement inside the company (ST09).

Plytech considers itself an innovative company with its ways of doing things. This company does not like strict rules but can abide by them if there is any legal boundary, such as labor laws for HR procedures (ST13; Buller & Napier, 1993). Culture and engagement play a significant role in the company as part of its way of doing things and are present in how people work and interact with each other and the work tools.

The cultural shock from transitioning to a startup from traditional companies may require a mindset change, especially on how to do things and the fast-paced vision (ST13; Ries, 2011). Hence, the company tries to make things more flexible and accessible to engage

its staff, such as using “guidances” instead of “policies” to show a language that is more agile and flexible than traditional businesses (ST13). Similarly, participant ST14 explained that she did not like the word “retention” in its HR context because it seems restrictive such as a straightjacket.

Instead of retaining employees in a restrictive manner, which may be ineffective for tech talent due to market conditions, people at Plytech work continuously on culture to involve emotionally people, especially developers, giving them a purpose to work and a reason to stay (ST14; Cruz et al., 2019; Mukul & Saini, 2021).

The existing indicators in the Plytech system allow a manager to monitor how these indicators evolve and guide actions to solve the problem or to check which dimensions compose a specific engagement predictor trying to look for potential issues or something that may be wrong in the company (ST13).

On the other hand, a manager can also combine results with assessed capacities and development to determine if one is able and deserving to receive a quarterly bonus, obtaining data-based insights from the internal platform to make accurate decisions (ST13; Edmondson & Moingeon, 1998; Boudlaie et al., 2022).

For example, measuring indicators and perceptions from employees provided guidance on which benefits were to implement and how, and communication between leaders and other employees using the platform to identify potential issues and improvement points, such as mental health measures (ST13). Leaders were used to only looking for data insights simply, not generating specific guidance to action (ST13):

“The leaders looked at it in a superficial way, let us put it that way, right? For the indicators there. Now, as we use the platform, we went in and started looking at the data, having someone specific looking at the data, today we are able to do many more actions. I have, for example, someone here within the company focused on the employee’s experience, so I have a checkpoint where we measure exactly what is the greatest impact here within the company, and we always evaluate for the employee how that experience is here inside.” [“Os líderes olhavam de uma forma superficial, vamos dizer assim, né? Para os indicadores ali. Agora, como a gente usa a plataforma, a gente entrou e começou a olhar para os dados, ter alguém específico olhando para os dados, hoje a gente consegue fazer muito mais ações. Eu tenho, por exemplo, alguém aqui dentro da empresa focado na experiência do colaborador, então eu tenho um *check point* onde a gente mede exatamente qual o maior impacto aqui dentro da empresa, e a gente faz sempre avaliação pro colaborador como está aquela experiência aqui dentro.”] (ST13).

There is a focus in Plytech on guaranteeing an excellent experience for employees in every action, from before hiring to retention until dismissing, to improve employee retention (ST13). Combining this employee experience focus with the platform usage resulted in

increased usage of data for decision-making and engagement, and insights from the internal platform may result in improvements for the commercial suite that Plytech offers as a signature for its customers (ST13).

Improving and validating products with internal usage before offering them to external customers may be an advantage for HRTechs, highlighting how important it is for these companies to have a structured and well-coordinated HR area (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007; Tian & Xu, 2015). Their solutions help run smoothly and improve internal HR, assessing the quality of their products beforehand. At the same time, customers' usage and feedback provide recurrent income and improvement opportunities from feedback.

5.2. IMPLEMENTED HR AND LEARNING CUES

From perceptions and insights in the interviews, it was possible to find a few cues for participating companies to learn about HR implementation, reinforcing the fit between organizational needs and the means required for meeting those needs (Schuler, 1992). The look for learning cues may be complex in contexts with significant amounts of available data to analyze and validate (Calvard, 2016), as it happens most in this study.

Also, these organizations must face unexpected events, revisit practices and past events to ascertain their efficacy, and redesign what is not working appropriately (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007), finding ways to deal with uncertainty and reduce exposure to risks (Tian & Xu, 2015; Gilbert-Saad et al., 2023).

5.2.1. IMPLEMENTING EVENTS AND TRIGGERS

Implementing an HR policy or practice relates to some desired and planned change that will take practice in a company, adding the necessary decisions and actions to make it work into daily operation (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014). Both human resources management and organizational learning literature may help to understand why organizations change.

On the OL side, it happens because of three groups of factors: Triggering events of learning, learning processes (as well as organizational structures that allows learning to happen), and outcomes as a consequence of learning (Ang & Joseph, 1996; Basten & Haamann, 2018). On the HRM side, there are three contributing factors that may affect the effectiveness of HR implementation: Content, context, and processes (Mirfakhar, Trullen, & Valverde, 2018).

When combining both, it is possible to relate OL outcomes to the HR implementation efficacy, meaning that the company has learned how to implement a policy or practice correctly, the processes from both HR and OL, and finally, HR implementation context and content as the OL's triggering events.

Participant ST01 posits that in **DemandInspect**, as well as several other startup companies, an HR area or sector usually is not something that these endeavors are born with (Buller & Napier, 1993), but instead is something that each company builds around its culture, starting from the founding team:

The first HR are the founders of the company, that's a fact. And so things get bigger and the founders can no longer do this work and the team grows, and then you notice that you are running a deficit in that area. And then you start bringing in people to start structuring this sector. So it never gets ahead, it's always a consequence of the size, as the business grows. [“O primeiro RH são os fundadores da empresa, isso é um fato. E assim que as coisas vão tomando proporção maior e os fundadores não conseguem mais fazer esse trabalho e a equipe vai aumentando, e aí você vai notando que você vai sendo deficitário naquela área. E aí você começa a trazer pessoas para começar a estruturar esse setor. Então ele nunca chega na frente, é sempre uma consequência do tamanho, à medida que o negócio vai aumentando.”]

He remembers that DemandInspect hired its first HR-exclusive employee when it had only some internal people (ST01). Because of the business model, this HR person also helped prospect external workers for a while, lasting until the internal people doubled compared to hiring that first HR employee. The internal people headcount was moderately larger than the first moment when internal and external workers started having more specific treatment. In contrast, the external headcount totaled some dozens of people at that time (ST01).

Another relevant point regarding HR implementation relates to measures taken during the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to the business nature, operating as some marketplace of real estate services, the company was able to experience growth during those difficult times by adapting to offer solutions that meet consumer demands (ST01; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011; Amorim & Fischer, 2013).

Those solutions involved changes in how the company's employees could work, such as offering property inspections via online conferences for clients that could not or would like to not be in person during the inspection (ST01). DemandInspect incorporated learned lessons and optimal practices to improve their processes and generate more value, remaining open to new experiences, testing, and pivoting their business model to adapt to contextual changes to improve the fit between products and clients (ST01; Rupčić, 2018).

After the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, it has become gradually less risky for people to gather, in a way that some companies started returning gradually to their offices, if not full-scale, at least partially (hybrid work, mixing characteristics from presential and remote work). In that context, DemandInspect tried to assess the demands of people and the company itself, adapting contracts to allow hybrid or even fully presential work while scaling the return to office according to the work demands, the dynamics of each area, and the possibilities of each individual (ST02; Zhang & Zhu, 2019). Generally, it is possible to group the primary learning triggers from DemandInspect into demands from work (solving problems) or efficacy (to increase the service level).

It is valid to point out that while some workers were highly favorable to return working in the office, others were uncertain or even unwilling to make the same move. All that happened when the company moved to a larger office that could receive all internal staff, which expanded during the pandemic, to work at the same place (ST02).

At the time of data collection, most of the DemandInspect workers acted in a hybrid work schedule to benefit from both presential and remote work, even though the new office size not being a constraint, allowing them to receive all of the internal staff at the same time (ST02).

Although the company was able to make changes to adapt to contextual changes as a healthcare emergency (the Covid-19 pandemic) and even gradually revert some of these if and when these were not necessary anymore, there were long-term changes in work:

From wearing masks or adopting other measures in certain inspections to avoid making other people uncomfortable (ST03) to allowing online property inspections for their clients (ST01) or flexible work schedules in a hybrid format for their workers (ST01; ST02), DemandInspect monitored and identified points in need of change but also learned when to keep or not these changes (Argote & Hora, 2016).

In general, the need for usage or demands from work triggered changes, but the perceived efficacy and internalizing determined whether those new practices could benefit or not the business (ST01). The HR area helped the company's employees to understand demands and assess viable solutions, guiding the development of people to increase value for the company (ST02).

CorpoHealth: Considering the HR area, when asked about what HR structure CorpoHealth had before her arrival, participant ST05 was straight to the point: "Did not exist." As previously described (under section 5.1.1), before implementing an HR area,

CorpoHealth relied on a third-party accounting company to fulfill bureaucracy duties related to hiring new workers (ST05). It means that the first HR employee – ST05 – had to implement the area from ground zero:

“Yeah, I think the purpose was for me to structure HR from scratch. That's what I had to (do), to begin with. (...) And all the subsystems that touch HR there, right? I think that was the briefing I had when I arrived. And then, the path I followed to be able to prioritize, understand where I needed to focus first, was to talk to everyone at the time. We were less than twenty-five people, so I talked to everyone to align expectations, what they expected from an HR, and even where the company was heading in their view, the difficulties they had, in any topic, touching HR or not. So I think my briefing was: Build HR from scratch, the second step was to interview and talk to people, to understand what the focus would be, and then I designed the action plan.” [“É, eu acho que o propósito era que eu estruturasse um RH do zero. Era isso que eu tinha de (fazer), pra começar. (...) E todos os subsistemas que tangenciam o RH ali, né? Acho que esse foi o *briefing* que eu tive quando eu cheguei. E aí, o caminho que eu segui para conseguir priorizar, entender onde precisaria focar primeiro, foi conversar com todo mundo, na época. Éramos em menos de vinte e cinco pessoas, então conversei com todo mundo para um alinhamento de expectativas, o que eles esperavam de um RH, e até para onde que a empresa estava caminhando na visão deles, as dificuldades que eles tinham, em qualquer tema, tangenciando RH ou não. Então acho que o meu *briefing* foi: Construa um RH do zero, o segundo passo foi entrevistar e conversar com as pessoas, para entender qual seria o foco, e aí desenhei o plano de ação.”] (ST05).

There was a pivoting process since ST05's arrival at CorpoHealth, shifting the company focus from managing emergency wards to a corporate health plan. From that time, she had to hire a handful of healthcare people. However, after the pivoting, it was necessary to let those professionals go, as the company would no longer have healthcare workers under direct contract (ST05; Blank, 2007; Chaparro & Gomes, 2021).

As the company grew more extensive and complex, there was the need to establish and expand areas such as marketing or sales, with singularities in places to advertise job openings, how to find these professionals, and how to behave during an interview (ST05). Every time it implements something, HR included, CorpoHealth launches a reaction survey by NPS (Net Promoter Score, which measures a feeling about something, in this case, the implementation) to base changes and improvements (ST04).

There was a time when even recruiting was specialized in CorpoHealth, with each HR professional focusing on recruiting a specific job, such as operation area professionals, usually dealing with the recruitment on a large scale, or healthcare professionals, now under self-employment contracts (ST05). After the layoffs in early 2022, it was impossible to maintain the recruitment team since the company temporarily halted new signings (ST04; ST05).

The trigger for laying off *en masse* was analyzing the payroll value versus the cash burn rate, which led to a need to reduce the personnel budget, the main expenditure, among other budget cuts, lowering the company's financial risk and relying more on its operating income (ST04; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007; Tian & Xu, 2015).

Covid-19 was another example of an event that triggered changes in CorpoHealth. After starting 2020 as a pre-operational and presential company, things changed quickly. Then CorpoHealth's work model was not viable anymore, with the need to hire in scale to expand operations, but unable to gather workers around the office:

“From day to night, we found ourselves working from home and needing to hire a lot of people, so we started to discuss, we started to understand that we were a company that should be what we call remote-first, so we were a truly remote company. And what are the pros and cons of being a remote company? So we had this whole discussion.” [“Do dia para a noite a gente se viu todo mundo de home office e precisando contratar muitas pessoas, então a gente começou a discutir, começou a entender que a gente era uma empresa que deveria ser o que a gente chama de *remote-first*, então a gente era uma empresa de fato remota. E quais são os pros e contras de ser uma empresa remota? Então a gente fez toda essa discussão.”] (ST04).

After working for some time, people in CorpoHealth realized that remote work would not go anywhere despite how the pandemic would fare. Remote working meant employees from around the country and even abroad could apply; the founders had left São Paulo, and returning to an office-based model was not feasible anymore, so they accepted the company as remote-first for the time being (ST05; Liu, 2018).

At the time of writing this thesis, remote work is an established work model for several workers, companies, and industries to the point that many people may feel difficult to imagine a return to the office. Through assessing the eNPS (employee net promoter score) survey and its results, CorpoHealth identified demand for a solution that the company tried to implement without success.

According to participant ST04, it was noticeable that many people like and even need to work outside their homes, so partnerships with coworking spaces could be helpful, even though it did not work previously. The possibility of bringing back coworking spaces is under consideration, but with no definitive answer yet (ST04). This process of revisiting and reevaluating to determine which changes may help to keep the organization competitive resembles Fiol and Lyles (1985) mention of aligning the organization to its environment. Revising processes is one of the patterns for learning in CorpoHealth, composing with NPS

surveys the set of insights that will turn into data for HR people to learn how to proceed and what to change.

During CorpoHealth's growth and funding process, there was a curious trigger for implementation: The English language is essential for their employees, not only for terminologies that are common in a startup context but also because speeches and interactions in general with investors need to be in English (ST08; Evans & Davis, 2005). However, some employees did not have minimum proficiency in the language (ST08).

The solution was to provide an English course for every employee in the company and scrap the English language as a requirement for joining the company (ST08). The hiring part happened to make applying for a job position in CorpoHealth more accessible since most people in Brazil never had an opportunity to learn a second language, discarding beforehand candidates that could contribute to the company if given enough time (ST08).

Allowing overcoming this educational hurdle relates directly to the UN's SDG number 4 (ensuring quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all) (United Nations, 2020). Also, it points to establishing and reinforcing its organizational culture as one of the triggers for learning before a change, with the other being to fulfill organizational goals.

If a candidate without enough proficiency in the English language joins the company, they will have the opportunity to learn alongside other development duties and to be demanded accordingly (ST08). That subsidized language training opportunity may be an example of how organizations may provide outstanding opportunities for people who deserve it, as Abbasi et al. (2020) mentioned.

HashCard: The first person hired as an HR-exclusive staff was ST11, joining the company in early 2020. Before that, the consultant ST07 gave some inputs related to HR, but her focus stayed more on cultural aspects. The trigger for hiring an HR employee was the need to structure the area and the founding team selling the company to a new owner since there were some HR aspects that the founders were unwilling to implement formally (ST11; Parker, 2013; Pisoni & Onetti, 2018).

In general, implementing HR policies and practices happens according to HashCard's current situation and the progress of the financial indicators so that the financial viability is not at risk (ST07; Tian & Xu, 2015). For example, there was a recent slight layoff movement in early 2022, affecting a handful of people, aiming to reduce the payroll and triggering a couple of HR practices related to this event (ST06):

- Humanized layoff: Managers got instructed about how not to involve themselves emotionally, about understanding the situation and feelings of the other person, and how to handle the situation (ST06);
- Outplacement: The company helps its dismissed employees transition to new jobs with instructions such as building a LinkedIn profile and behaving in an interview. “Well, there are a lot of these guidelines there on the internet.” [“Bom, essas orientações aí que têm de monte na internet.”] (ST06).

This dismissal movement and its implications do not mean that HashCard’s HR or staffing has reached its final form, but the opposite. There is an acknowledgment of the need to develop further the HR area in elements such as jobs and waging structuring (ST11). As the company grew, this “growing pain” rose from its collaborative and fluid work model as people acted in duties other than those related to their official jobs, possibly for extended periods (ST11).

The pandemic of Covid-19 also affected HashCard, requiring some changes on the go. Contracts received a minor temporary adjustment to allow remote working, freeing people from the necessity of going to the office to work, temporarily ceasing transport vouchers but instating a temporary home office assistance payment (ST11). Also hired in 2020, participant ST06 was the first management-level employee to join the company after a fully-remote hiring process, as she recalled during her interview.

Some work processes also changed during the pandemic. For example, internal research adopted a model of quick surveys, measuring results with NPS scores and inputs from the answers (ST06; Zhang & Zhu, 2019). NPS surveys and their scores are part of the patterns for learning in HashCard, also considering ideas and collaborations from people and learned lessons from past events. There was also much writing on new practices to handle the pandemic, and another batch of new policies and practices from the acquisition process, to the point that it was impossible to credit some changes solely to Covid-19 or the acquisition (ST11).

“So we cannot separate and say ‘look, it was the acquisition’ or ‘look, it was the pandemic’. I think that if it were not for the pandemic (the changes) would happen, but in a more gradual way. We would focus on a few things at a time. But as the pandemic came, then it had to happen very quickly. I think that was it, we worked a lot with this bureaucratic part aligned with the legal, because there was not much to escape, and making people aware.” [“Então não dá pra gente separar e falar 'olha, foi a aquisição' ou 'olha, foi a pandemia'. Eu acho que assim, se não fosse a pandemia (as mudanças) iriam acontecer, mas de uma forma mais gradativa. A gente iria focar

algumas coisas por vez. Mas como veio a pandemia, aí precisou acontecer muito rápido. Acho que que foi isso, a gente trabalhou muito com essa parte burocrática alinhada com o jurídico, porque não tinha muito como fugir, e conscientizando a galera.”] (ST11).

During the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic and as things unveiled, with new events and responses from legal parties, such as the enactment of specific laws or provisional measures, HashCard joined a benchmarking group with other companies to discuss these changes and propose optimal practices (ST07).

As the pandemic started to refrain, organizations and society started to scale back social distancing policies. In HashCard, initially, there were a few guidelines such as distancing policies, criteria for having to work in the office, testing, and avoiding to go if there was any influenza-like symptom, among others (ST06).

Meanwhile, there were surveys about three or four times per year to assess people’s reactions to the pandemic and their willingness to return to the office as the scenario improved (ST11). Initially, the overall reaction was rejecting remote work, then massively rejecting the return to the office until people started discussing a return to the office in a hybrid format, advancing discussions to the scheduling between presential and remote work (ST11; Rupčić, 2018). Being a company with a slim structure and an agile-oriented approach, HashCard relies on giving leaders a significant degree of autonomy to learn, command, and spread how to proceed to move the company forward, valuing collaborations from everyone and the insights from those leaders.

Cognisoft: The company started to gain traction only a few years after its founding, still before the arrival of the three participants in this study from the company (ST09, ST10, and ST12). Initially, Cognisoft had only one administrative person in its ranks, and this person had an operational, jack-of-all-trades role, doing bureaucracy and routines related to finance or HR (ST12).

There was a definition of cultural values when the company had only a few people because of the need to hire more staff, which led people at Cognisoft to define and transmit those values to the new employees, besides starting to hire based on the organizational values (ST10). However, the biggest trigger was the need to scale hiring to supply the company with the needed volume and quality (ST10).

“The moment came when there was already an OK volume, that it was worth having someone centralizing to give it a flow, increase the level of hiring and ensure that hiring was

being done in the best possible way.” [“Chegou o momento que já tinha um volume OK, que valia a pena ter alguém centralizando pra dar vazão, aumentar o nível de contratação e garantir que as contratações estavam sendo feitas da melhor forma possível.”] (ST10).

After quickly scaling in six months, more than doubling its headcount, the company assigned participant ST12, who had a legal background, to structure a back-office, people-related area due to the growth pace and the increasing HR complexity. She had more basic HR knowledge then, but since Cognisoft deals with an HR-oriented product, plenty of guidance was available when needed (ST12), which helps organizational learning to happen due to the amount of available knowledge in organizational memory (Tortorella et al., 2020).

There was a trigger for implementing, and there was a trigger for delaying it. As pointed out by participant ST10, since the company’s product had a relation with human resources, many people could provide help and insights on administrative topics, regardless of the cost of hiring an extra person. Specifically for Cognisoft, structuring its culture happened before hiring an HR-specific employee (ST10).

Later, a trigger for improving recruitment and hiring by implementing an assertive and scalable process for development workers was the need to bring a lot of new tech talent to the company in a short period (ST09). After allocating a person for headhunting while others would filter the remaining prospects to only recommend the most promising for interviewing, the recruitment process takes about ten weekly hours from HR (ST09). Still, this is a continuous process because the conversion rate is low and because sometimes the tech team is expanding, but at other times someone has departed from Cognisoft (ST09; Mukul & Saini, 2021).

Regardless of the area, people at Cognisoft started naming “owners” to projects after an event where ownership was unclear, and no one was taking it forward; that project was not with anyone because it was with everyone (ST09). That is an example of how learning outcomes may impact the organization, providing more accuracy in HR affairs (such as determining a responsible for a project for giving accountability to it) or by supporting decision-making through insights and adapting to situations to make the company more competitive.

Covid was a game-changer in the company. Considering its unprecedented status (at least for anyone born after the 1929’s Spanish Flu), people had first to understand what was going on before making assumptions and decisions. After losing a few clients and dismissing a few people to adjust the cash flow, people at Cognisoft started moving their routines from presential to remote work (ST10).

After a while, people realized that remote work differed from an office-based model, so there was a need to adapt and deal with the fact that it was not possible to replicate some things fully (ST10; Sun, 2003; Casey, 2005): “People clearly began to miss social interaction, closeness, and we literally took the presential model and put it in remote work. We did not think much about how we would adapt it, what was the best way, and so on.” [“As pessoas nitidamente começaram a sentir falta de interação social, de proximidade, e a gente literalmente pegou o modelo presencial e colocou no *home office*. A gente não chegou pensar muito em como a gente adaptaria, qual que era o melhor jeito e etcétera.”] (ST10).

It is possible to attribute a part of this to how people at Cognisoft thought the pandemic would happen and start to fade in Brazil in a matter of a week or two (ST09). It took some time for people to realize that Covid-19 would be a long-lasting issue, acknowledging the need to improve meetings and their flow since (ST09). Currently, the company works in a hybrid model, but people spend most of their time working from home.

The event that led to the opening of the HR area in **Plytech** was the hiring of participant ST13, coming from a training and development role in another company. Before that, there was no structured HR management, and, as there was already an accelerated growth pace, she arrived with a first mission: Recruit more employees and help structure an HR area.

“Those who participated in a recruitment here at Plytech were the leaders themselves. There was a committee where they spoke, an HR committee that was a few people who knew more about HR and approved some policies, things like it worked, but there was no specific department.” [“Quem tocava a parte de recrutamento aqui na Plytech eram os próprios líderes. Tinha um comitê onde eles falavam, um comitê de RH que era algumas pessoas que conheciam mais de RH e que faziam algumas aprovações de políticas, coisas como funcionava, mas não tinha um departamento específico.”] (ST13).

Before hiring the first HR-exclusive person, when the company’s headcount was a few dozen people, Plytech assigned bureaucratic tasks related to personnel to its financial area (ST13; ST15). At that time, the CEO also acted as the HR leader before assigning the participant ST15, a co-founder herself and more experienced in HR, as the area leader (ST13; Buller & Napier, 1993; Lazar et al., 2020).

Under ST15’s umbrella, the HR area was able to structure training and development under her responsibility (ST13; ST15). At the same time, the company started its accelerated growth process (ST15), assigning administrative, bureaucratic, and recruitment duties in

charge of participant ST13 (ST13). The HR's current size is a few people, but an expressive amount, even for an HRTech, given Plytech's total size. Triggering learning moments from leaders and their insights or HR-related demands highlights the HR role in Plytech. This area is active and acts strategically to improve human capital while giving agency for other area leaders to perform.

By formalizing every process from zero, the HR area could structure and define policies, such as rules for commission-based roles or vacations (Dutra, 2013; Boudlaie et al., 2022), giving a base for scalable and sustainable growth, and embasing people's actions (ST14). As mentioned by participant ST14, "Everything when you say 'wow, it is going to be tied up,' is something that we always have horrors, goosebumps, it even makes our hair stand on end because we really do not like to have many rules, we like to break them! If we can break it, we will like it a lot!" ["Tudo quando que você fala 'puxa, vai ficar amarrado', é algo que a gente tem sempre horrores, arrepios, chega até arrepiar os pelos, porque a gente realmente não gosta de ter muitas regras, a gente gosta mesmo é de quebrar elas! Se a gente pode quebrar, a gente gosta muito!"] (ST14).

The Covid-19 pandemic triggered an emergency shift to remote work in a company that until then operated with 100% of presential work, but it also opened a path to expand the focus for new hires (ST15). Instead of only hiring people from the same region for office work (and it is worth mentioning that Plytech is the only company in the study outside of a state capital or its metropolitan area), the company could now hire people from everywhere (ST13). The shift from a presential-only work model to one entirely remote was a deliberate decision from the company, enabling changes to improve work performance (ST15).

Remote work also triggered some changes to provide work conditions and benefits for employees while complying with legal requirements since their employees work under full-time contracts under Brazilian CLT (Consolidation of Labor Laws [Consolidação das Leis do Trabalho]) (ST13), relating triggering events (antecedents), learning processes, and outcomes (consequences) (Ang & Joseph, 1996; Basten & Haamann, 2018).

Some examples of this are flexible methods to record attendance in a remote environment, compensatory time, or corporate healthcare plans to avoid generating labor liabilities (ST13). To help HR know how far they can go in defining or structuring, Plytech also counts on help from a third-party legal consultant, thus avoiding generating any labor liability (ST13; Tian & Xu, 2015).

5.2.2. DECISION PATTERNS AND IMPLICATIONS

Decisions may have different sets of patterns or heuristics behind them, with different implications. When considering the organizational learning aspect, tracking the changes in patterns behind how it learns to act in a certain way allows understanding of the interaction flows (which can be asymmetric as learning networks structure around a few central actors) and which people need special attention, such as highly demanded people that may leave the company (Škerlavaj, Dimovski, & Desouza, 2010).

On the HRM side, it is valid to point out the involvement of front-line managers, which is fundamental for HR implementation, as role models for other employees who will try to identify and learn behavior patterns from their actions, effectively guiding them into action, even if the action is not doing anything because there is no engagement from the leaders to undertake implementation (Nishii & Paluch, 2018).

On the learning types, most studied companies adopted patterns that relate to double-loop learning, changing organizational structures, beliefs, and strategies to improve performance as learning happens, with two exceptions in DemandInspect and HashCard (Argyris & Schon, 1978). In the first case, that happened because learning was directed mainly to improve service levels, with no structural changes. In the second case, it is possible to attribute single-loop learning to HashCard because learning has led to acting quickly and improving operational efficacy, but with little to no long-lasting changes.

DemandInspect divides their decision roles according to the company sectors and respective managers, so each leader has a certain degree of freedom to take measures and guide their sector (ST01). Despite this, the different areas and sectors communicate with each other, tracking goals and collaborating for everyone to achieve their individual and collective goals (ST01).

Participant ST02 recalls that the decision to implement a dedicated HR area in the company happened under the decision of the then-responsible for people and operations, ST01, because of work demands and to achieve efficacy (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014):

“And then, with the demand and work, it was no longer working (to solve), he was seeing that the processes were also, in a way, accumulating and he needed someone to look at it.” [“E aí, com a demanda e trabalho não estava mais dando (conta de resolver), ele estava vendo que os processos também, de certa forma, estavam se acumulando e precisava de alguém para olhar para isso.”] (ST02).

Participant ST02 was the first employee recruited to the newly-founded HR area, bringing her experience in recruitment and selection to expand the company's internal staff. Before her, recruitment focused mainly on increasing the number of external workers (ST02). After its implementation, the HR area was able to assign people to specific tasks (Gulati & DeSantola, 2016): One employee only for internal people processes (hiring, onboarding, assessments, and individual conversations, for example), while another person would remain assigned to external people processes, from initial contacts to selection and hiring (ST02).

The decision to open a quality sector to centralize processes related to external workers happened as an opportunity (hiring a highly-skilled and experienced worker) to solve a demand: Enable conditions for external workers to develop their skills, establishing the company as a reference in its services (ST02; ST03), which seems as an organizational structure to enable cooperation and raise the company and its service level to a new level of complexity and quality (Gulati & DeSantola, 2016; Garidis & Rossman, 2019). In general, learning in DemandInspect follows two patterns: It is leader-centered and may also trigger the need for action due to some opportunity for the company to seize.

It was noticeable that quality was an issue because some inspections lacked quality due to the absence of proper training and revision or caring about the quality of inspections instead of just its plain deliverance (ST03). Moreover, if a lack of training has led to perceived poor work quality, the company needs to create conditions for its people to learn, train, and improve appropriately the required sets of knowledge required to perform (Cook & Yanow, 1993).

In both cases, HR and quality, it can be argued that the demand or problem came first. It led related individuals with decision power to take action and implement a new part of the company to solve a problem or reduce a gap that otherwise the company's then-current structure could not adequately address.

The structuring process in the quality sector implied hiring staff and reorganizing regions to create a basis for measuring numbers of work, training, and people development to ensure that current actions could generate a working environment where people could learn, develop, and progress (ST03). This type of proceeding relates more to single-loop than double-loop learning, focusing only on effectiveness rather than changing strategies and structures (Argyris & Schon, 1978). However, it is still an effort to ensure learning in the organization.

CorpoHealth: Decisions regarding HR in CorpoHealth may happen following context changes, whether internal, such as company growth or budget changes, or external, with examples such as Covid or uncertainties from the economic and political situation (Trullen et al., 2020). NPS surveys also may base the company's decisions, particularly eNPS in HR-related issues, on measuring perceptions from its workers and the eNPS scores to identify demands and opportunities (ST05).

The company's growth led to the need to expand areas such as HR since the necessary recruitment to support exponential growth in operations found the number of recruiters as a bottleneck – at times, the then-coordinator ST05 was the only recruitment staff while facing constant increases in headcount (ST05; Gulati & DeSantola, 2016; Mukul & Saini, 2021). An implication of the search for bottlenecks that could hinder the company was that the main criteria for increasing the number of recruiters were how many job openings each recruiter was in charge of (ST05).

As an example of a demand that arises over time, implementing more diversity and inclusion as part of the natural growth of CorpoHealth came as a way to align individual and organizational expectations to the company's mission of taking care of people (ST08). This area is still under a structuring process, but the pattern to adopt or change a policy or practice to increase diversity is to be coherent with developing CorpoHealth (ST08).

Feeling the need for improvements led the HR team to increase and change its development focus (Edmondson & Moingeon, 1998). From an initial focus on recruiting and selection to caring about people and their development, and finally, to a business partner model, these changes came from an understanding of CorpoHealth's situation, demands, and next steps to continue pushing itself forward by the contributions of its people (ST04).

A relevant insight into the constant need for changes comes from the company's rites, as each area delivers its practices and needs to be able to change them since a rite that works at a given moment may not work later (ST05). “It was easy when we understood that it (the company) is a living organism and that the rituals will have to change because the company will change, new people will arrive, and we have to be open to change.” [“Ficou fácil quando a gente entendeu que (a empresa) é um organismo vivo e que os rituais vão ter que mudar porque a empresa vai mudar, vão chegar novas pessoas e a gente tem que estar aberto a mudar.”] (ST05; Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Bido et al., 2010).

A direct implication of adopting a remote-first approach since the early days was that while the company base is in São Paulo state, many workers are from Northeastern Brazil, and even people living outside Brazil work in CorpoHealth (ST04). It led to some minor

issues to solve, such as how to sign a healthcare plan for these workers outside the São Paulo state since CorpoHealth operates only in the Greater São Paulo (SP) area (ST04).

Another point relatable to this approach is that remote work makes it harder to monitor what employees are effectively doing all the time. In CorpoHealth, there was uncertainty if people would be productive and deliver their tasks while working from home or if they would watch a movie during work time (ST04). However, this new work arrangement allowed the company to scale its operations quickly under a freedom and trust culture (ST04), one of the learning outcomes or implications in the company, also considering operational improvement as another possible outcome.

Working all the time remotely also meant that the company had to accept technology as an ally to stop worrying about aspects related to presential work, such as offices (hiring or renting, location, maintenance costs) or the number of workstations available (ST04; ST05). Besides making flexible work assignments (Evans & Davis, 2005), adapting to a remote-first approach also allowed focus on a scalable HR model for enhancing people development and work quality (ST05).

HashCard: The final deciding instance is composed of the company CEO and a CFO, but consultant ST07 answers for people and culture (with a focus on the latter), and the HR specialist ST11 is responsible for the HR area (ST06). As previously described, participant ST11 was the company's first employee dedicated only to HR, since while participant ST07 joined HashCard earlier, her attributions were not exclusive to human resources.

Participant ST07 considers that HR management has much autonomy in HashCard (which fits into the “self-managed teams” category of an HPWS [Evans & Davis, 2005]) and attributes some factors to this, which are possible to divide into two groups, the reasons and the actions:

- Reasons: Ideas brought by people, decisions made by an HR committee, insights (both qualitative and quantitative) from surveys, benchmarking;
 - Benchmarking: Pertinence (context and fit analysis), financial viability, implementation feasibility;
- Actions: Align understandings and expectations, agile implementing.

It is worth pointing out that aligning understandings and expectations, as well as agile implementation, are also outcomes of the learning inside HashCard, due to its agile and fluid

nature of approaching processes to solve problems with few resources and despite operating in a highly regulated industry as it happens with Brazilian Fintechs, that must obey national and international regulations. As a highlight of the #DataRules hashtag, there is an encouragement for people to bring data, trends, and assessments for discussion and approval during committee meetings (ST07). If a decision implicates an expressive cost or financial impact, there is also a discussion with investors to communicate and cooperatively find an agreement (ST07).

The criteria for hiring new people, at least on the teams led by participant ST06, is somewhat subjective, with no specific criteria rather than perception from leaders to hire more people to increase those teams. In this case, there are no clear metrics as those provided by a service-level agreement (SLA), as it happens between HashCard and some suppliers related to customer service, to specify the amount of work assigned to a person and a growth curve to manage its progress (ST06).

A possible reason for not adopting objective criteria other than payroll cost and the financial viability to determine the need for new hiring is that some critical services, such as dealing with demands from Brazilian Central Bank, require more time to solve (ST06). When there is a need for a new hire, dimension, or restructuring of the team size, a manager will discuss the matter with the CEO and the CFO to determine if the movement is possible and affordable (ST06).

When a change in HR is needed, there is an alignment between the tactical and operational side (under the responsibility of the HR specialist ST11) to strategic and cultural aspects (assigned to participant ST07), resulting in an implementation compatible with the company (Trullen et al., 2020), guided solely by the area's people except when there is a financial implication.

It is possible to notice two patterns in **Cognisoft**: Who makes decisions and how to subsidize decisions. The first pattern relates to the structure of areas and meetings, while the second refers to working data and bringing insights to highlight the available options and their success prospects. Employing data-driven insights to learn possibilities, their viability, and supporting decision-making processes is a vital learning pattern, also considering the leader's role in collecting valuable inputs from other team members before deciding.

The directors could make decisions on their own. However, even for the CEO, that is different from the rule: In general, it is necessary to listen to what the teams have to say about the theme have to say, so assessing perceptions has a more strategic process in decision-

making (ST09). The team participates in all discussions, and the final word belongs to the team (ST09).

Participant ST12 further explained that there are several decision-making processes in Cognisoft, such as area or theme meetings, so “decision-making, rather than being necessarily based on something like hierarchy or structure, is more based on, for example, processes and moments.” [“a tomada de decisão, em vez de ela ser baseada necessariamente em alguma coisa como hierarquia ou estrutura, ela é mais baseada em, por exemplo, processos e momentos.”] (ST12; Evans & Davis, 2005). Assessing processes and moments is a learning trigger employed in Cognisoft, while perceiving any noticeable knowledge gap is another, leading to learning moments, adapting, and action-taking.

To add another example of who decides, hiring decision happens on daily operation when a manager shows a business plan to work with an existing budget and the intended expenditures, whether these expenditures are in people, services, or software, for discussion and approval in a budget meeting, when a committee deliberate and decide (ST12).

On subsiding decisions as an implementing pattern: When the company identifies a gap or lack to fulfill, it also assesses performance changes (ST10; Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Cook & Yanow, 1993). If it concluded that Cognisoft needs a hire with more knowledge, for example, there is a mapping to understand functions, related people, and how these perform (good, average, or poor) (ST10). This mapping usually triggers when there is a feeling that something is starting to go south (ST10), and the insights about related people may hint to the manager on the issue and the options to solve it.

There is a clear pattern in the candidate profile for a job position in Cognisoft: Instead of seniorized, established professionals, the company aims at recently graduated, high-potential professionals, not only because a startup could not afford to hire highly experienced professionals but also because “these people working out they work out very well” [“essas pessoas dando certo elas dão muito certo”] (ST10).

Since the available human capital may be scarce or at least inconsistent (Inácio et al., 2016), aiming at prospective employees still in college may be an approach to get past that potential shortcoming. In order to achieve that hiring of outstanding candidates, the company wants to know during its HR area interview for cultural fit assessment not only about the candidate’s personality and preferences but also about achievements and experiences during college, looking for any significant milestones and also to know more about the prospective candidate (ST10).

Feedback about daily issues in Cognisoft used to involve several parties, some possibly unrelated to the matter but still giving their opinions just for the sake of doing it. It led to some changes to give agility to work, with less bureaucracy:

“When I walked in, everyone was into everything. Man, everything I was going to do, the whole company sat down to discuss. It just does not work now, does it? It turns into a lot of discussion and little action. So we understood that it does not work to involve people in the discussion. It works more to be direct, have a goal, and put only those who matter in that meeting there at that point rather than involve everyone all the time.” [“Quando eu entrei, todo mundo estava em tudo. Gente, tudo que ia fazer sentava a empresa inteira pra discutir. Só que agora não funciona, né? Vira muita discussão e pouca ação. Então, a gente entendeu que não funciona envolver as pessoas na discussão. Funciona mais ser direto e ter um objetivo, e colocar só quem importa naquela reunião ali pra aquele ponto do que envolver todo mundo sempre.”] (ST09).

As seen in other cases, in **Plytech** the main driving factor for implementation is the existing budget in an area, defined at the beginning of each year and allowing for adjusting values and priorities inside that budget (ST13). If there is any urgent need, it is possible to negotiate between areas or, in the last case, let the CEO decide (ST13).

That degree of autonomy of areas and especially on their leaders can be noticed in a remark from participant ST14 about the leaders' agency: “We are not a leader's babysitter, quite the contrary. Our leaders have full autonomy for all decision-making processes. The HR area here is like a support.” [“A gente não é babá de líder, bem pelo contrário. Os nossos líderes eles tem autonomia plena pra todos os processos decisórios. A área de RH aqui, ela está como um apoio.”] (ST14). The mentioned autonomy for teams and their leaders may relate to the self-managing teams described by Evans and Davis (2005) as part of a high-performance work system.

The leaders of each area are the primary guardians of the company's culture, while the general guideline for HR is to act as a support team that helps to develop and maintain things (ST14). However, the focal point remains in the area leaders (ST14; ST15). As it happens with Cognisoft, the other HRTech from this study, in Plytech there is a leader-centered learning pattern. Although, Plytech also relies on testing and validation to learn and make decisions.

An implication of being an HRTech that offers a product for HR areas is that it is possible to test and validate things internally, which allows continual company structuring and development (ST15; Blank, 2007; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). An area may lend an employee for the development area to test a particular platform aspect, caring about the user experience while looking for improvements (ST13). It is up to managers and other leaders

from each area to make decisions inside their areas if there is a budget to support that decision (ST13).

As HR-related demands started to scale in Plytech, the company also started growing the HR area with more people and complexity (ST15). People at Plytech address priorities among their demands, thinking on scalability, so some things may only be worth doing after others or at a particular time, usually starting to sort priorities with criteria such as financial impact, legal compliance, or time constraints (ST13). Also, searching for suppliers and partners for the company's actions helps give scalability (ST13), as there is a split in efforts and resources spent (Garidis & Rossmann, 2019).

Planning future actions before heading into practice can also help to split efforts into a broader timeframe, avoiding bottlenecks or resource usage overload, such as splitting efforts for recruiting people to reach a required amount across a whole quarter instead of opening several of these at once (ST13). Optimizing the usage of resources is the result of learning how a process works, which events may trigger it, and how to make it more efficient with fewer resources. It is a good learning outcome and may even allow scaling operations by controlling resources and outputs in a given context.

Regarding recruitment and selection, for example, there was a strategic focus on the growth and scalability of Plytech even before starting their HR area (ST13). Hence, people arriving at the company needed to have a similar mentality, and recruitment of new employees had to consider that need to give the needed growth to allow the company to continue its development (ST13).

5.2.3. INVESTORS AND INDEPENDENCE

The arrival of an investor to a startup company may grant the so-needed resources for its viability while structuring a business model that may scale to provide solutions to an indefinite base of users. However, that influx of additional resources may have its cost in a potential loss of independence, especially if investors and the startup are not on the same page (Croce et al., 2018).

That independence to implement, change, and dare to take extra risks and pivot everything while trying to establish a viable business model is one of the advantages of a startup, especially considering that the founding team will usually also provide its first CEO, but receiving funds, knowledge, and other types of support can make the difference between

surviving until fitting a viable business model that reaches customers is also a powerful asset for smaller endeavors (Broekhuizen, Bakker, & Postma, 2018; Rasmussen & Tanev, 2020).

DemandInspect: As noticeable in the speech of interviewed participants (ST01 to ST03), the investment did not change that much in the company's daily affairs and complemented the necessary resources to structure itself for more extensive, scalable growth.

This “next step” may or not require a further investment round as Series A (Croce et al., 2018). However, at least in the stage met during data collection and analysis, the investment did not intervene in the company management so HR could act according to its budget, policies, and practices but not have to report constantly to an external actor, for example.

Participant ST01 recalls that creating the HR area happened a moment before the company started receiving investments and running on its funds. The company received a Seed round investment in early 2022 to test and improve the product and the business model (ST01; Paschen, 2017; Rasmussen & Tanev, 2020).

Participant ST02 said that the business plan in the investment prospect mentioned an HR area so the apparent contradiction may refer to different phases of HR: A barebones structure that primarily recruits and endures bureaucratic tasks (ST01) or a people assessment and development area that has a strategic value (ST02).

ST01 also pointed out that the company always aimed not to lose its essence, guaranteeing that the entrepreneurs behind the business would not lose the independence to decide, and it was possible because of the investment choices made (Teten et al., 2013):

“It goes a long way from the beginning of a negotiation where you don't open up this possibility of, let's say, being commanded, but aggregated. So from the choice of fund, in the way you deal with them, listen to them, see what makes sense. (...) Today, investors have also matured and there is the fact that it is a common speech of them to let the entrepreneur run its business and then add what is possible, but not de-characterize the business. So it would be very wrong on our part to allow that and on their part to want to force something in that aspect.” [“Vai muito desde o início de uma negociação onde tu não abres essa possibilidade de, vamos dizer, ser comandado, e sim agregado. Então da escolha do fundo, no trato que tu fazes com eles, escuta eles, vê o que faz sentido. (...) Hoje os investidores também amadureceram e há o fato de que é um discurso comum deles de deixar o empreendedor tocar o negócio dele e aí agregar no que for possível, mas não descaracterizar o negócio. Então seria algo muito errado da nossa parte em permitir isso e da parte deles de querer forçar algo nesse aspecto.”] (ST01).

On the other hand, the quality sector happened after the investment round to avoid losing clients due to client unhappiness about the service quality and preparing the company

for a business model that could offer the same quality level even after scaling its operation (ST01; Gulati & DeSantola, 2016; Garidis & Rossman, 2019). During her interview, participant ST03 did not know if the quality sector was a demand of any kind from the investors or if it was a part of the company's natural growth (as it seemingly was).

The internal HR system allowed easy consulting for documents relevant to the investment round by digitalizing them and allowing digital signatures to verify their authenticity (ST02). Regarding daily HR management operations, ST02 mentioned that the investors did not interfere and that no investor even contacted her except in the due diligence stage to ensure that there were no pending debts regarding people.

CorpoHealth: Here, the investors have a counseling and consulting role, yet their influence is perceivable in other ways (Duruflé et al., 2017). For example, some current investors only invest in companies with diversity and inclusion initiatives (ST05; ST08).

Despite the need for diversity and inclusion, these investors do not impose or condition their funding with specific measures: “This theme of diversity and inclusion for them (investors) is very important, but so far we have no demands like ‘I will only invest in you if you have X percent of black people’, we still have not had any type of demand in that regard.” [“Esse tema diversidade e inclusão pra eles (investidores) é muito importante, mas até o momento a gente não teve nenhuma demanda do tipo ‘eu só vou investir em vocês se vocês tiverem X por cento de pessoas negras’, a gente ainda não teve nenhum tipo de demanda nesse sentido.”] (ST08).

Even outside of diversity and inclusion themes, the relationship between CorpoHealth and its investors is a counseling and consulting, bringing insights from markets and their movements (ST05; Jabłoński, 2017; Teten et al., 2013). ESG (environmental, social, and corporate governance) is an example of a theme where investors may ask about the company's vision, but again, with no demands whatsoever (ST05).

“It's a really nice exchange. I even feel that they learn from us, and we learn from their experience. So, our relationship with investors is super good. They connect people, who are also going through similar difficulties, so they are much more a partner than bringing a voice of command and control.” [“É uma troca muito legal. Sinto inclusive que eles aprendem com a gente, e a gente aprende com a experiência deles. Então, nossa relação com os investidores é super boa. Conectam pessoas, que também passam por dificuldades similares, então eles são muito mais um parceiro do que trazer alguma voz de comando e controle.”] (ST04).

CorpoHealth's recent layoffs and budget cuts have prepared the ground for a future Series B funding round since those measures have given the company a leaner, more efficient cost structure (ST04), sounding like a pivot to protect the company against a potential threat (Chaparro & Gomes, 2021). Since recent valuation rounds around have not been good worldwide, reducing costs allowed CorpoHealth to prepare for an eventual Series B without a rush or the fear of running out of cash before reaching a favorable agreement (ST04; ST05).

Regarding investments and operational independence, participant ST05 pointed out that despite the funding made, there was no "top-down" instruction from investors on implementing any HR policy or practice, neither hiring nor firing personnel. Recent layoffs happened after discussions between directors and the HR leadership on questions like "is it necessary?", "which size?," or "how to run it?" (ST05).

In **HashCard**, while there is not much interference from the company's new owners, there are constant talks with investors, who act primarily as advisors (Teten et al., 2013). The company acquisition from the founding team may have changed things a little, starting from the founders exiting the company (Parker, 2013; Pisoni & Onetti, 2018), but the everyday relationship has little interference from the new owners.

During the acquisition process, the founders left HashCard, and a new board took over, appointing an executive as the company CEO. Other than that, no other visible influences, policies, or structures came by the direct request of the new owner (ST11).

Areas have a budget to implement actions to solve problems and deliver results for the company. The leaders have a high degree of autonomy to make decisions and act within that budget (Evans & Davis, 2005). If there is a need for any exceptional expenditure, it can be dealt with and negotiated with investors (ST07):

"We always have an instance of approval there. If it is going to have a high financial impact, we have here a weekly cadence of information with the investor. So we are always aligned. And when it has high financial impacts, (we can) take the subject as a relevant initiative and have the endorsement, have the investor's approval. So in this process we are very free to apply what we believe, what we want. And like every company, when we reach the end of a path, it has a financial impact and that was not within the original budget, we highlight that for extraordinary approval." ["A gente sempre tem uma instância aí de aprovação. Se vai ter um alto impacto financeiro, a gente tem aqui uma cadência semanal de informações com o investidor. Então a gente está sempre alinhado. E quando tem altos impactos financeiros, (podemos) levar o assunto como uma iniciativa relevante e ter o endosso, ter a aprovação do investidor. Então assim, nesse processo a gente é muito solto para aplicar o que a gente acredita, o que a gente quer. E como toda empresa, quando a gente chega no fim de uma trilha, tem um impacto financeiro e isso não estava

dentro do orçamento original, a gente destaca aquilo para uma aprovação extraordinária.”] (ST07).

Sometimes, the constraint may come from inside the company. A little while after arriving, participant ST06 made a small structural change in her team without asking for permission from anyone because the budget allowed that move. When asked by the CEO if there was any authorization for doing that, she replied, “yes, it has a budget” [“sim, tem orçamento”] (ST06).

Due to the lack of response from the CEO, she learned on the go that structural changes such as hiring, moving, or raising payments would require internal approval (ST06; Argyris & Schon, 1978; Cook & Yanow, 1993; Crossan et al., 1999). The participant also mentioned that while there is no system of pressure from the outside, internal controls may require further debating a question before implementation, depending on its impact, especially if that impact is financial or structural (ST06).

On the budget side, the owner defines a general budget for the HashCard to operate, so the CEO and the CFO allocate this budget between areas and teams as necessary, with no external interference (ST11). Definitions of the size of each team happen in meetings between managers, the CEO, and the CFO, with the HR providing additional info, such as: How it works in other companies, how many people, the average wage, where it usually places under a corporate hierarchy... (ST11).

Cognisoft: In the past and present, the investors only had a small role in the company. In the past, there was no financial support for the company to scale its operation or to grow exponentially (ST09), to the point that its growth has similarities with a bootstrap model (ST09; ST12), running with little resource constraints (Hvide & Møen, 2010), but it may also relate with a previous size that demanded fewer resources to keep growing (Arena et al., 2018).

At the same time, at present, their role usually restricts to the investors’ meeting, where Cognisoft shares some relevant information to keep investors up to date on the company’s status (ST09). During the investors’ meeting, held every few months, there are reports and discussions on strategic choices (ST09; Teten et al., 2013).

Even after these discussions, the decision usually comes from inside the company rather than outside; despite any potential disagreement while trying to find common ground, decisions must have approval from Cognisoft representatives, particularly from the CEO, the

majority shareholder, and the person who gives the final word on company's destinies (ST09).

Some employees also are minor shareholders, and the company chooses a few employees each year to join the shareholders' list, empowering and giving more responsibilities to those selected (ST12). These employees-shareholders have a specific meeting to make decisions, so while investors have only a small role and almost no deciding power, Cognisoft centers agency around its ranks (ST12; Nielsen, 2013).

There are no announced plans to attract more funds to the company via investment, so Cognisoft will not look for a Series A investment round or other similar funding options in the immediate future.

In **Plytech**, as with other studied companies, there is much autonomy in each area, with budget as the main restriction. Investors have an organizational instance to receive reports about the company's actions and to provide feedback or insights, which is the company board (ST13; ST15). However, usually, there is no deciding power from those investors alone (ST13).

That happens because the board comprises the investors and other stakeholders, so in Plytech the board helps to elaborate decisions, always having talks with every party involved (ST13; ST14), which helps to keep an alignment between the different actors (Duruflé et al., 2017; Boxall, 2021). The board is quite a requirement after the investments received from the company, and it helps to monitor any need for change, but otherwise, there is plenty of autonomy in each area (ST14; ST15).

Inputs and suggestions from investors during board meetings allowed Plytech to further structure and improve its areas, adding benchmarks to acknowledge and react to changes in the markets and inside the company (ST15).

Not only can the board provide insights and suggestions, but the CEO may also give their opinion or suggestions from their network, but in the end, decision-making happens internally (ST13), whether by network experiences, continual transformation, or open dialogue, for example (Snell, 2001). As stated by participant ST13, "the board's role is more one of monitoring and suggestion and not exactly imposing." ["o conselho ele tem um papel mais de monitoramento e sugestão e não propriamente impositivo."].

Similarly, the HR area may bring improvements or insights from their own or their contact network, and since it is an HR company, there are several contacts to collaborate possibly (ST13). Regardless of the area, their teams and leaders have the autonomy to act and

decide. Investors have a voice inside the company through the board, where they can require information, collaborate, and suggest actions or changes. However, the final word on decisions will happen inside the company.

5.2.4. IMPLEMENTING EFFICACY AND EVALUATION

Effectively implementing an HR policy or practice could mean that that policy or practice happened as planned, that the implementation process happened as planned, or even that the company delivered the expected results. This array of possibilities indicates that efficacy is subjective and that last possibility significantly reinforces it: Who was expecting the organizational results, and how to determine if the implemented topic helped the company in any measure?

For that reason, assessing the efficacy through perceptions of people related to the implemented HR seems feasible, but the search for consensus in what matters for implementation, why it is efficient, and how to find agreement between the different actors may be a tricky point for companies (Guest & Conway, 2011).

This point also includes performance assessment, whether as part of an established system or to evaluate and determine if a new hire made some impact on the company. Despite objective metrics or indicators that a manager may employ, performance assessment may also contain a fair portion of subjectivity and even imprecision during the evaluation of an employee (Kunz, 2015).

DemandInspect: The interviews showed from different perspectives that the company relies on constant evaluation to determine, for example, how things are going, if the employees are engaged and with a productive organizational climate, and if there is any need for improvement on a newly implemented policy or practice to impact on work performance (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014).

The business model, operating like a platform capitalism company, relies heavily on assessment and feedback to succeed (ST01). The CFO and co-founder ST01 regards the company's HR as a very active sector for its roles with internal staff and for deciding on strategies that keep employees engaged and motivated.

Implementing is measurable by progression in objectives and key results (OKRs), defined according to strategic guidelines that consider the company in a long-run perspective (ST02). For example, after returning to offices in a hybrid work model, HR started a climate

survey to assess how employees perceived their satisfaction with physical space or if there was any demand or lacking resources (ST02; Chen et al., 2022).

By using OKRs, HR could revamp their onboarding system, constantly evaluating the employees' perception and using it to identify improvement points, asking questions to measure the implemented HR as “So, did you like it?” [“E aí, gostou?”] or “What is in need?” [“O que está precisando?”] (ST02; Fiol & Lyles, 1985).

Regarding performance evaluation, regularly collecting production and results from the workers allows for measuring how they progress (ST02; ST03), and, in the case of external workers, if the quality measured from inspections and their technical details is insufficient (Trullen et al., 2020), it is possible to send them to a “recycling course” (ST03).

In **CorpoHealth**, there is no such thing as a universal assessment method for the whole company at once since each area has a certain freedom to develop, implement, and evaluate (ST05). However, HR-wise, regular eNPS surveys provide insights into how things are going (ST05).

As an example of how the company measures efficacy, If the training or any other people development initiative happens, there is always a follow-up eNPS survey; however, these surveys usually focus more on the training content rather than the HR role through the process (ST05; Kunz, 2015). Despite this, CorpoHealth employs both feedback and insights from the survey to identify points to change or improve:

“Every time we implement an activity, and I see this a lot in HR, in the people area, we do a reaction survey, an assessment, an NPS of that. And there they bring the points and the team picks it up, incorporates it and improves. Based on that, we make a lot of format changes.” [“Toda vez que a gente implementa alguma atividade, e eu vejo muito isso no RH, na área de pessoas, a gente faz uma pesquisa de reação, uma avaliação, um NPS daquilo. E ali eles trazem os pontos e o time pega, incorpora e melhora. Baseado nisso a gente faz bastante mudança de formatos.”] (ST04).

Diversity and inclusion policies and practices, primarily a work in progress, plans to follow a short script to measure and assess implementing efficacy (ST08):

- Mapping to look for cognitive biases and paths to correct them (unbiasing);
- Writing a policy to determine necessary practices;
- Periodically run a new mapping (the timeframe is yet to define);
- Measure and assess for efficacy;

- If it concluded that implementation is not bringing results...
 - Rewrite things for restart, from planning to designing policy and practices for diversity and inclusion.

This script allows revisiting policies and practices (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014; Kunz, 2015), but it does not necessarily happen spontaneously: For participant ST08, for example, there are some implemented HR practices, and it is possible to revisit them periodically, but it only seems to happen when the demand arises, or it becomes some bottleneck.

CorpoHealth's remote work (usually called in Brazil as "home office" despite the different meaning) policy, to exemplify, brought some operational issues related to unmatched expectations from employees, but revisiting the policy only happened after it became an issue at work (ST08; Chen et al., 2022).

Performance assessment divides into two groups, one for operational teams that measure and quantify indicators, allowing ranking, dividing into quarters, and identifying gaps to overcome (ST04; ST05). In contrast, the other group consists of higher-rank employees, where it is necessary to compare performance to what to expect from that job or role, a reason why there was a need to structure job descriptions and expectations (ST04; ST05).

Every area may use its frameworks and tools for performance assessment, but there is an alignment to guarantee that the differences regard only the format, not the content to evaluate (ST05). Hence, behaviors, competencies, performance, and improvement points are subject to a fair assessment regardless of area or job (ST05).

HashCard: Assessing efficacy and results may differ according to the case or area involved. It is possible to evaluate new hiring according to performance assessment, where the area and activity dictate how to evaluate this person (ST06):

- Operational employees, or those related to customer service, have quantifiable demands to fulfill and goals to beat. Since these goals impact individual bonuses, the assessment is also individual, and people have access to their results;
- Other employees may have demands or goals that do not necessarily have a direct relationship with results, so the focus shifts to deliverable tasks, such as finishing a procedure or developing a system.

HashCard relies greatly on data, but possibly due to having only a few official, mandatory tools for its HR team (ST07), subjectivity is also very present in how HR manages and perceives people. One way or another, and according to the #LaidCards hashtag, HashCard collects data or insights from every implemented measure, from the ombudsman, or even from monitoring recently hired or dismissed persons to search for cues on how HR and the whole company are doing (ST07; Guest & Conway, 2011).

As an example of subjectivity, employees are subject to a behavioral assessment with no clearly defined criteria previously defined, happening regardless of the area or role associated with a person (ST06). The 360-degree feedback surveys for reviewing behaviors and competencies also employ a reasonable degree of subjective and qualitative insights, allowing assessment of implemented elements and highlighting improvement points (ST07; Fiol & Lyles, 1985).

Subjectivity may lead to misunderstandings when communication fails for any reason. There was a case of a person who was dismissed after a round of results and feedback, yet to its very surprise (ST06; Kunz, 2015). Despite the surprise reaction, it highlighted that HashCard's feedback system had some communication flaws that needed addressing. "Wow, what do you mean the person got fired and it is telling me it does not know it is going to be dismissed?" ["Nossa, como assim a pessoa está sendo desligada e está me falando que não sabe que vai ser desligada?"] (ST06).

Feedback used to happen as work got carried on, so in theory, a person would know simultaneously to work how things are going until there was a perception that people were not receiving adequate feedback (ST06). Hence, HR implemented a feedback work rite, even if informal: When providing feedback, people need to inform it clearly and from the beginning of the conversation to the receiving part, progressing naturally as before on the rest of the feedback session (ST06).

Other than that need to inform it is a feedback session, it remained the same since there was no perception or complaints about the need to implement other changes (ST06). Even how often the feedback happens (such as weekly or monthly) is not a previously defined issue, so every manager chooses when and how to provide feedback, remaining this way unless instructed otherwise (ST06).

How assessment happens regarding hiring or implementation hints that HR has an informal and fluid form in HashCard, possibly because the company is still relatively small but developing at a sustainable pace, not looking for a "growth at all costs" formula.

An informal and user-dependent HR area that constantly collects insights from available data to fine-tune its procedures according to demands, with no formal systems or metrics, may agree with policies such as the “laid cards” (ST11), but even this may be circumstantial. As pointed out in an interview, “laid cards can happen even because there are still few people.” [“Cartas deitadas conseguem acontecer até porque é pouca gente ainda.”] (ST11).

Cognisoft: There is no great emphasis on actions only for assessing implemented policies or practices since the focus stays more on testing its products internally, which will indirectly and, in practice, show the effectiveness of different company aspects (ST09).

Some indicators, such as NPS assessments or progression in OKRs, may help acknowledge how HR is going (ST10). However, there is no specifically-tailored research in HR about implemented practices or processes because the company would need to be larger for that (ST09). For that reason, insights from NPS surveys are not exactly a learning pattern in Cognisoft, since they were not HR-specific, but a company-wide supporting tool that may be helpful (or not) to HR management.

There are some so-called “mission cards” that every employee receives quarterly, containing goals to achieve and metrics and indicators to assess progress and completion, delivered results, and variables that impact this, with special care on the behavior that led to the delivered result (ST09). With these mission cards, it is possible to further develop the feedback processes by highlighting flaws and improvement points for every person and structuring assessment and feedback (ST09).

Regarding performance assessment, the company holds an HR meeting twice per year, discussing merits, feedback, guidelines, and indications for bonuses or promotions in roles or wages (ST10). All relevant decisions on people and careers happen during this event based on discussions involving the CEO, representatives from HR and financial areas, and the area leader regarding the employee to discuss, verifying expected and effective development, among other details that may be of help (ST09; ST10; ST12).

The HR meeting is the moment where the company discusses potential promotions, so it is expectable that the leaders bring their options to the table and defend these possible choices (ST12):

“If I want to promote someone on my team, this is the moment. For my manager, for example, which is who I answer directly, I have to justify the impact and responsibility of this person and why I believe they will handle the new challenge.

So for this decision-making process, we already do that.” [“Se eu quiser promover alguém da minha equipe, é o momento. Para o meu gestor, por exemplo, que é o que eu respondo pra ele direto, eu tenho que justificar o impacto e a responsabilidade dessa pessoa e porque que eu acredito que ela vai dar conta do novo desafio. Então para esse processo de tomada de decisão, a gente já faz isso.”] (ST12)

Considering data from mission cards such as goals, results, variables, and behavior implies that the performance assessment has a certain degree of subjectivity. However, the multiple participants of this meeting, including an HR representative, indicate that there are discussions between participants before any final decision that may impact career development.

Plytech: It is possible to hint from the interviewed participants that this company relies significantly on constantly monitoring its indicators for corrections and improvements (ST13; ST14; ST15; Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Armstrong & Taylor, 2014). A specific area of management dedicates to obtaining and sorting those indicators (ST14).

Inside HR, those indicators allow for assessing everything that happens inside the area (ST14; ST15). The management area behind analyzing those data is growing to provide more insights, which is one of the reasons behind Plytech’s growth (ST14).

Through those indicators, it is possible to have clear and accessible data to support analysis and decision-making, as stated by participant ST13:

“We can already measure the efficiency of implementing a benefit and its usability there. Let's put it this way, we have data in hand, right? So we can actually measure this efficiency. And we are structuring with this process exactly that, you know? We are improving our processes to measure more and more.” [“A gente já consegue medir ali a eficiência de uma implantação de um benefício, a usabilidade dele. Vamos dizer assim, a gente tem dados na mão, né? Então a gente consegue sim medir essa eficiência. E a gente está estruturando com esse processo justamente isso, sabe? Está melhorando nossos processos pra medir cada vez mais.”] (ST13).

Insights from customer experience and satisfaction, whether from usage statistics or through direct contact via support forms, for example, return to HR after the previous gathering and analysis via customer satisfaction (CS) area (ST14). Participant ST14 mentioned that as a company with a SaaS product, it could not be different from this constantly assessing usage feedback to provide continuous improvements.

The already planned but yet-to-implement HR-specific dashboard is an example of the constant improvement of systems and practices for providing necessary information to the board and gathering all relevant management information in the same space (ST13).

Regarding people and their performance, the assessment of performance and perceptions is one of the company's premises, that constant monitoring (ST14). A platform app for employee experience intends to measure and assess how people's experiences happen at work (ST14). Constantly measuring employee experience allows perceiving if something went well, if there is a need for any fix or improvement, or if someone is not performing as required.

As a basic example, the old recruiting process for tech talent required a long testing phase, making the selection take longer than expected and causing the company to lose these employees because someone else was faster and hired that same person without any skill test (ST14). That perception that the company was losing people due to its overcomplicated hiring process for a short-supplied position has led Plytech to revisit the process and make it quicker for future recruiting.

5.2.5. PARTICIPATIVE POLICIES AND PRACTICES

As entrepreneurial companies with innovative products or solutions, startups need their people to engage in helping the business to thrive. One possible way to engage people with the business is by increasing their instances and opportunities to willingly participate, provide feedback, and suggest ideas or changes, which help build involvement with the company and improve team morale or potentially reduce social acceptance if the participation opportunities increase competition inside a team (Cañibano, 2013).

In the human resource management context, participative policies and practices may fit inside an HPWS, and the perception of influence over the decision-making process can help employees to boost performance while lowering turnover intention (Sikora, Ferris, & Van Iddekinge, 2015).

Giving employees some voice to express themselves can provide a competitive advantage for companies and express concerns, ideas, and interests (Mowbray, Wilkinson, & Tse, 2022). If the voice channel is perceived as only beneficial for the company, complaints, demands, and grievances tend to shift toward informal channels instead of those institutional communication ways (Mowbray et al., 2022).

DemandInspect: The recorded interviews suggest that the company allows employees to constantly give and receive feedback on several aspects of their jobs, using this feedback alongside metrics to propose improvements and even new features. An example of this

happened when the company started a quality sector to standardize and improve deliverances from external workers to avoid nurturing a gap that could quickly become a weakness in the business model (Cañibano, 2013; Mowbray et al., 2022).

Allowing employees to participate and give their opinions in shaping company policies and practices is relatable to if and how the company effectively listens to its workers. In that sense, participant ST01 points out that the entrepreneur needs to be able to listen and filter what makes sense from what does not.

While not every feedback makes sense to the company in its current stage, many of its actions result from feedback (ST01). However, at least the workers' voice is considered, and their perceptions reach the decision-makers, bringing the workers to be a part of company development (ST01). It happens because of a lack of emphasis in the hierarchy, allowing everyone to express their opinions to improve the company (ST02). In the worst case, it results in not implementing a suggestion but never a punishment for being participative (ST02).

An example of a potential implementation discussed from employee feedback was the possibility of incorporating a flexible gym membership, which would fit with the company's current running team project (ST02). However, at first glance, it was rejected because it felt like it only reached some employees (ST02).

A successful application was the recent creation of a commission for teambuilding events, such as the end-of-year party, previously held by the HR staff (ST02). However, creating a commission allowed people from different areas to collaborate and contribute towards these events (ST02).

Another suggestion turned into reality is implementing transport bonuses after increases in gas prices that could make new inspections unviable, as an employee reported: "I am going to look for something else because it is difficult (to make ends meet)." ["Vou procurar outra coisa porque está difícil (de pagar as contas)."] (ST02).

External workers and quality team members can propose changes in procedures according to their experiences, perceptions, or received feedback, as well as bring ideas or innovations to their leaders, which a leader may accept and implement if appropriate and necessary, acknowledging who made the suggestion (ST03).

Possibly because of the nature of the work, the recorded interviews did not allow identifying any suggestion from these operational workers that changed HR management across the company, spreading to other areas, resulting only in local changes. However,

everyone is encouraged to participate in corrections and improvements, from the executive level to operational workers.

CorpoHealth: It is noticeable that the company has a culture that values interactions and feedback between employees to acknowledge efficacy and identify workable points to achieve better results in the future. It happens by prompting people to tell others their feedback, positive or not, focusing on the content (e.g., a process, project, structure) instead of criticizing the person (ST04).

Encouraging people to look for colleagues to talk more assertively and more often is a deliberate action to increase transparency at work, despite any possible resistance to being criticized by some people:

“We have been working hard to make the feedback a practical gift, for people to bring up their annoyances and the points they liked about each other, and for them to speak openly.” [“A gente vem trabalhando muito para que o feedback seja um presente efetivamente, que as pessoas tragam os incômodos e os pontos que gostaram umas para as outras, que falem abertamente.”] (ST04).

Everyone should feel invited to give feedback and thoughts on the company's affairs. However, there are some decisions that CorpoHealth takes using upper management: Decisions that are necessary to keep the business healthy happen considering mainly HR and some specific areas such as finance, as it happened when moving the deadline to take days off from overtime before paying the corresponding value to an employee, from a quarter to a whole semester, since a quarter was not time enough (ST05).

After considering those inputs and other stakeholders, such as the unions, HR made the final decision single-handily, as it was necessary to avoid generating labor liabilities, and later informed other areas on how to proceed relating to overtime, hour bank, and days off (ST05).

When asked if people had a voice to express their perceptions to propose and help build some practice or process, participant ST05 mentioned that it is necessary since the company needs engagement (Sikora et al., 2015). However, HR people will analyze carefully before deciding, trying to dissociate in a complaint, what is a personal negative experience and what is a real issue, trying to measure before making a final decision (ST05).

Reaching people to give feedback and make suggestions is relatively accessible at CorpoHealth due to its informal work environment, so people feel comfortable reaching upper management to make a suggestion or to criticize something (ST08). There is a work rite that

happens once each three months where every employee gathers in a remote conference (even in the current size of a few hundred people) to discuss previously suggested themes, such as culture or HR benefits (ST08).

In that rite, the “sticky day,” people make suggestions using virtual sticky notes to help debate and plan themes relevant to the company or the employees, as described below:

“So we put the columns (of themes) that were most suggested and open the sticky notes for people to put what they want. Whatever they want. The criticism they can. We do this once a quarter, which is called a ‘sticky day’ and we collect, read each one of those suggestions, separate them into blocks and plan. Of course, there are unfeasible things, (...) but there are insights that seem very interesting. This has shaped and has even made part of our OKRs, our quarterly goals. When we look at people, many insights, many suggestions and many projects come out of there.” [“Então a gente coloca as colunas (de temas) que foram mais sugeridas e abre as notas adesivas para que as pessoas coloquem o que elas desejarem. O que elas quiserem. As críticas que elas puderem. A gente faz isso uma vez a cada trimestre, que se chama ‘sticky day’ e a gente coleta, lê cada uma aquelas sugestões, separa em blocos e planeja. Claro que tem coisas inviáveis, (...) mas tem insights que parecem muito interessantes. Isso que tem moldado e tem feito até parte ali dos nossos OKRs, nossas metas trimestrais. Quando a gente olha para as pessoas muitos insights, muitas sugestões e muitos projetos saem dali.”] (ST08).

HashCard constantly relies on participation from its staff in internal form-based surveys. From organizing hybrid work (despite the base contract remaining office-based, so the company may call people back if necessary since hybrid work is more a privilege than an acquired right) to work practices, people at HashCard regularly run surveys on diverse subjects to know perceptions, get suggestions, and align possibilities (ST11; Armstrong & Taylor, 2014).

There is a perception that using these surveys is helpful for the company, despite only some suggestions being pertinent or feasible to turn into action (ST11). However, people have a voice to raise questions or demands to their managers or the HR area without fearing retaliation or punishment by using their regular communication channels or by offering inputs in the form-based surveys due to the anonymity of these (ST11).

Engaging is fundamental for HashCard HR, as it constantly tries to improve its people to achieve better results working to create value together since there are challenging goals and limited team size (ST07):

“If I am not aligned, if we are not playing together, collaborating, there are few people, many challenges, many externalities that are a concern at all times, affect our possibility of being creative if we only worry about the environment.” [“Se eu não estiver alinhado, se a gente não estiver jogando junto, colaborando, são poucas pessoas, muitos

desafios, muitas externalidades que a todo tempo preocupam, afetam a nossa possibilidade de ser criativo se a gente só ficar se preocupando com o ambiente.”] (ST07).

Engagement works from assessing what people expect from a feedback round to ensuring that it makes sense for people to be at the company despite underachieving results from a complex scenario. Obtained results did not allow employees to achieve bonuses for their payments in 2022, and that was told in advance because the lack of results was not a fault of theirs (ST07).

It happened in a context where HashCard focused on a niche of clients (lower middle class) that faced expressive losses in the last years, considering the Brazilian context since the pandemic arrived (ST07). Hence, people had to accept that disappointing operational result and start working towards a better next year by developing new products, solutions, and strategies, betting on a fresh start as the socioeconomic and health crises faded (ST07).

Developing new possibilities together is something encouraged at HashCard, from approaching other people to give perceptions and insights to showing demands or themes that need addressing and change (ST06). Some of these ideas turn into a change at the end of the process:

“It is not uncommon and it is also not forbidden for me to look up any area and say, ‘look, I think this here deserves to be different’ or ‘when you are going to do an onboarding, I think it is interesting for you to start with this here, I think it is cool for you to present this from here’. These ideas are generally very well accepted and sometimes implemented, sometimes not, that is okay too, but there is a process for this to happen.” [“Não é incomum e também não é vedado que eu procure qualquer área e fale assim, ‘olha eu acho que isso aqui merece ser diferente’ ou ‘quando você for fazer um *onboarding* eu acho interessante você começar por isso daqui, eu acho legal você apresentar isso daqui’. Geralmente essas ideias elas são muito bem aceitas e em algumas vezes implementadas, outras não, também tudo bem, mas existe um processo pra que isso aconteça.”] (ST06).

The fluid communication in HashCard allows people to take their ideas for others, and it is possible to accept and implement some of these. Hence, people are free and have a voice to present their ideas to others, as well as others may present their ideas to these people (ST06). When someone presents an idea to the HR and culture people, this idea may be accepted and implemented in a single team, area, or for the whole company (ST06).

Cognisoft: The freedom for employees to propose changes in structures is more limited than the counterparts found in this study. Employees are free to elaborate and discuss their IDPs under guidance from their managers, so the plan will not become unrealistic (ST09).

These employees are also accessible to other collaborative tasks, such as giving feedback or indicating process improvement points (ST09). Usually, they only discuss those matters moderately to avoid a pointless effort. Due to the company's current size, everyone discussing everything all the time would spend much time in those discussions (ST09).

Participant ST09 related this waning openness to inputs to the company's development: "As you grow up, you can't be as democratic as that, there comes a time when you need to be a little more directive." ["À medida que vai crescendo não dá pra ser tão democrático assim, chega uma hora que você precisa ser um pouco mais diretivo."] (ST09).

Developers in Cognisoft have more freedom to act and suggest improvements or fixes in their tech routines because the area runs very fluidly, with minimal bureaucracy and a direct mentality, partly because of the CTO's view against bureaucracy (ST09). However, they do not participate a lot in other areas and are happy this way:

The last eNPS assessment from tech talent resulted in a perfect score of 100, showing that developers are currently happy, but that is only possible because the dev team is relatively small (under 25 people), so their openness and satisfaction at work in a larger team could not be the same (ST09).

Learned lessons play a role in improving existing practices and guiding the development of new ones (Edmodson & Moingeon, 1998; Rupčić, 2018). When questioned about how practices implementing and perception assessing went from bringing the work from the office to people's homes due to the pandemic, participant ST10 made some remarks:

"We obviously did climate assessments to understand how the team's atmosphere and vibe was, but maybe today, if the pandemic happened again, right? [Knocks on wood three times] God forbid, but if it was like, 'It is going to happen next month,' what would you do? We would probably change the routines we were having a little bit to try to make them a little more adapted for the home office, ok? Already fast, we were taking time to do this adaptation process." ["A gente obviamente foi fazendo pesquisas de clima para entender como estava o clima e a *vibe* do time, mas talvez hoje, se a pandemia acontecesse de novo, né? [Bate na madeira três vezes] Deus me livre mas, se fosse tipo 'vai acontecer no mês que vem', o que se faria? Provavelmente a gente mudaria um pouco as rotinas que a gente estava tendo para tentar deixá-las um pouco mais adaptadas para o home office, tá? Já rápido, a gente foi demorando para fazer esse processo de adaptação mesmo."]

Through those assessments and other feedback instances, such as one-on-one conversations, people at Cognisoft can perceive climate and general perception, allowing the creation of based actions to intervene more precisely on problems (ST10). The company puts transparency in high regard, so through received feedback and inputs, the company has

challenges in converging opinions to a common direction and making relevant people participate in a discussion, filtering out-of-context contributions (ST12).

In **Plytech**, there has been a focus on cocreating experiences with employees since day one. Participant ST14, responsible for onboarding processes, pointed out that the main mindset change from working in a traditional company and working for a startup such as Plytech lies in that openness to new ideas.

While in other companies, criticism or suggestion could have a hostile reception and make people wary, Plytech has made available on its platform an anonymous suggestion box for people to collaborate and express themselves (ST13; ST14). There is an encouragement for people to use that suggestion box and give their thoughts about diverse affairs such as HR benefits (ST13; ST14), as exemplified by participant ST13:

“They inform or even make suggestions because they have already researched loopholes in the CLT that the company could introduce. So they really suggest it and that is really cool for us, because we grow with them. And there is this constant exchange. ‘Ah guys, this benefit is not nice. Could you change? Could you guys see the alternative?’” [“Eles informam ou eles dão até sugestões porque eles já pesquisaram na CLT brechas que poderiam introduzir na empresa. Então eles sugerem mesmo e isso é bem bacana pra gente, porque a gente cresce com eles. E há essa troca constante. ‘Ah gente, não está legal esse benefício. Vocês poderiam modificar? Vocês poderiam ver a alternativa?’.”] (ST13).

By giving voice to employees about the company and listening to those opinions, suggestions, and even demands or complaints, Plytech seeks to value and respect every opinion, even implementing some suggestions after analyzing and considering those pertinent and viable (ST13). That “feedback culture” (ST14) allows people to suggest improvements directly to the company, possibly avoiding any tension with a manager or other people that could not like that suggestion (ST14).

Another suggestion that made it an implemented practice regarded meal tickets (ST13). The company restructured the benefit internally and offered it to employees, so those unwilling to change could not sign in for a change, keeping things as before but still able to provide insights into other ways to make it more flexible (ST13).

A collaborative effort that Plytech intends to make become a reality is organizing an open list of employees willing to receive other coworkers at their houses, so those visiting workers may travel and work while being hosted by another person from the company (ST13).

To summarize, people at Plytech can express themselves in several aspects of daily organizational life without fearing retaliation, much the opposite of that. The feedback culture mentioned by participant ST14 guarantees that everyone is welcome to give their thoughts on how to improve the company so everyone may benefit from it.

It is not possible or reasonable to constantly implement suggested changes. However, at least there is an opening for doing that, and one that the company has a genuine interest in acknowledging perceptions and discussing them internally.

5.2.6. STRATEGIC VALUE AND ALIGNMENT

Human resource management is something that most startups begin without, at least in a structured way, with HR-exclusive staff. However, a strategic aim is something that these companies need to be born with since they need to develop, structure, and grow in a context with limited resources and elevated uncertainty.

A startup can consider its HR management as a bureaucratic or processual part of the company that exists only to deal with legal demands and cost-control issues, or they may have a strategic value and help to create value, greatly benefitting from an HPWS to recruit, develop, and retain the existing human capital (Buller & Napier, 1993; Bendickson et al., 2017; Mukul & Saini, 2021). An HR that is capable and structured while aligned with the organization and its strategy to act precisely on its needs is a must for them to express values, impose its culture, and make goals and how to achieve them clearer (Cabrera & Bonache, 1999).

DemandInspect: From what the participants (ST01, ST02, and ST03) have said, it is safe to point out that while still under a more profound structuring process, HR plays a strategic role in DemandInspect, not only for having its executive but also by recruiting and developing people to bring solutions and value.

Actively hearing its employees and keeping a communication channel open between regular workers and upper management towards engaging people is a core HR management practice (ST01). It comes from the culture and the founders to the daily operation, reinforcing the company values (ST01).

Participant ST02 considers the HR area a “well-being catalyst” to align culture and to reward those who invested their time and efforts in growing DemandInspect. Reinforcing the organizational culture by considering it to plan and apply HR practices such as recruitment

and selection, which seemingly considers the fit to the job and the company, at least for internal workers (ST02), is part of an HR alignment that considers both culture and strategy (Cabrera & Bonache, 1999).

This HR alignment constantly changes practices and returns them to the system to reinforce consistency and synergy, evolutionarily (Snell & Morris, 2021), something present in DemandInspect and its approach to HR management to internal and external workers, as hinted by participating members.

In that sense of a constant evolution of practices, participant ST03 mentioned the openness to new ideas to improve work production and quality, leading to changes, revisions, and reevaluations of what and how it happens or if people have an appropriate preparation to supply clients' demands.

CorpoHealth: HR acts in the company primarily by its culture, yet there is a noticeable degree of structuring in the HR as an area and how it changed to meet company needs and expectations, forth and also back, when it was necessary to cut part of the budget to assure financial viability for a longer time.

Remote-first is the company's core HR policy in any hierarchical degree, so it is only possible to revert to an office-based model with major disruptions (ST05). CorpoHealth did not plan to work this way but adapted to circumstances to optimize results (Liu, 2018), mainly because of starting their operational stage near the coming of the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil (ST04).

There are three primary HR practices, according to the interviewed participants: eNPS surveys (to measure engagement and perceptions), IDP (to point out specific development demands in each person), and structured feedback (through one-on-one conversations and a 360 degrees approach) (ST04; ST05).

Still, there is also an identifiable policy to encourage people to provide feedback to others, building trust and work relationships (ST04; ST05). Encouraging feedback is related to CorpoHealth's culture and is not necessarily related to negative interactions. As pointed out by participant ST05, "the feedback is a gift" ["o feedback é um presente"], so people should give and receive it with arms wide open.

The HR area aims to take care of people in the company, a fact that all three participants from CorpoHealth (ST04, ST05, ST08) mentioned during their interviews. From giving meaningful feedback to job candidates not selected (ST04) to valuing insights from engagement surveys (ST05), and even by not demanding previous skills in the English

language not to exclude people beforehand (ST08), the company respects the human aspect of human resources.

Diversity and inclusion, viewed as a part of the HR structure, reinforce the strategic approach of valuing people inside CorpoHealth. Providing a company that is more accessible to different forms of existence helps avoid always having the same employee profile (ST04; ST08). Nevertheless, it could delve more deeply in the future into different forms of cognition and thinking, such as neurodiversity (ST04).

HashCard: Generally, the HR in this company is relatively informal and still under a structuring process. Nevertheless, the company focuses on maintaining a consistent culture and developing its people. Its HR needs to give sense and value to achieve common goals in a way that engages and benefits all parties (Cruz et al., 2019): The company, its investors, and the people that work in HashCard, who needs to develop as professionals and as persons during their tenure at the company (ST07).

In other words, HR acts strategically in HashCard by mobilizing people with the company culture, so they autonomously find creative solutions for their needs. Inclusion, for example, involves caring about people and letting them be themselves while creating a healthy work environment (ST06). Although an inclusive and welcoming workplace must be productive to make ends meet, there is a need to deliver results to sustain the company structure.

While participant ST07 points out that the company culture must be inclusive but not a utopia, so work practices must happen while the company must be profitable, participant ST06 said that this inclusive culture might sometimes be excessive, maybe to the point of lenience.

“Sometimes I think this crosses the line of what is acceptable and then I fail to recognize a non-delivery because I am highly inclusive and I am highly conniving with what you are. And I think that in the corporate environment this is very cool, it is very nice, it is comfortable, but we are here for the purpose of delivering (results for) a company and having this comfortable environment, I see in some people, it causes a certain mix and confusion and that everything is really right.” [“Às vezes eu acho que isso ultrapassa o limite do aceitável e aí eu deixo de reconhecer uma não entrega porque eu sou altamente inclusivo e eu sou altamente conivente com o que você é. E eu acho que no ambiente corporativo isso é muito bacana, é muito legal, é confortável, mas a gente está aqui por um objetivo de entrega de (resultados para) uma empresa e ter esse ambiente confortável, eu vejo em algumas figuras, causa uma certa mistura e uma certa confusão e de que realmente tá tudo certo.”] (ST06).

HashCard empowers its staff to act autonomously by maintaining some of the company values, such as an ethic, respect, and tolerance to diversity in its several aspects (ex.: identity, gender, politics, religion), while people try their best to achieve quantifiable objectives, such as operational goals (ST07).

A practice that HashCard regards as positive and strategic is its retention plans, focusing on crucial positions such as technology or management (ST11). Another strategic practice is reinforcing the company's values through hashtags, giving a sense of purpose, and mobilizing people with this approach, always relating it to indicators or achievable goals (ST11).

As part of the company culture and its care for people, diversity and inclusion are essential for employees to be themselves at work. However, it seems to have a limit inside HashCard: There is no allowance for prejudices of any kind, but on the other hand, the board is solely composed of men, and there is no black manager (ST06).

It may be because the company is still developing and structuring as an ongoing process. It may also be because this is a matter of concern and addressing for the near future, making speech meets practice and the work environment being inclusive for people so that they can join, act, and progress inside the company in equal conditions (ST06). Currently, there are no specific recruitment practices or guidelines for recruiting people with disabilities, special needs, or inclusive quotas (ST06).

In **Cognisoft**, there is the need to consider that culture is a fundamental value for the company and that HR acts like the culture guardian, so there is much effort in coordinating and creating conditions for other areas of the company to act and prosper.

Participant ST12, as the HR area leader, links culture to the company strategy and compares culture to a playbook with guidelines for decision-making. She thinks that a mistake that a common mistake is starting to focus on building processes before culture since every process needs to fit and reflect the organizational culture accurately.

An informal policy in Cognisoft is that the company avoids as possible establishing policies to keep the structure light, allowing people to have more autonomy to decide and make decisions based on available data and insights, as pointed out by participant ST12:

“We avoid creating policies for things as much as possible because we strongly believe that when you create policies, you create rules. And people have the need to put the ruler under their arm, right? So, for example, the CEO always says something that is very good for me, that there are two ways of managing people in any company: Management by processes, which you create rules, policies and put in

everything. (...) Or you manage people by human technology, which is really empowering everyone to make the best decision, on a case-by-case basis. As we are still a small company, we always go for this second path. Because we always make decisions in together, and that's the best decision sort of on a case-by-case basis.” [“A gente evita ao máximo criar política para as coisas porque a gente acredita muito que quando você cria política, você cria regras. E as pessoas tem a necessidade de colocar a régua debaixo do braço, né? Então por exemplo, o CEO sempre fala uma coisa que para mim é muito bom, que existem duas formas de você fazer gestão de pessoas em qualquer empresa: Gestão por processos, que você cria regra, política e você coloca em tudo. (...) Ou você faz gestão de gente por tecnologia humana, que é você capacitar realmente todo mundo pra tomar a melhor decisão, no caso-a-caso. Como a gente ainda é uma empresa pequena, a gente sempre vai pra esse segundo caminho. Porque a gente sempre toma as decisões em conjunto, e essa é a melhor decisão meio que um pouco no caso-a-caso.”] (ST12).

It was possible to notice an impact of this “no policies” policy happening in operation, where processes are fluid, possibly because of the CTO’s position as someone against creating new layers of bureaucracy to run the development team in a slim and slick structure (ST09). This deregulated structure may allow people to work freely, but the downside is that there is little to no predictability in service since there are few rules or guidelines to work, if any.

Five practices have more strategic importance for Cognisoft: 1) Recruitment and selection, 2) tech talent recruitment, 3) leadership support, 4) performance assessment, and 5) organizational climate (ST10). Participant ST10 considers that organizational climate has less relation with strategic planning, but that pointing does not lessen the importance of having a productive climate for Cognisoft.

Recruitment and selection are the most critical practices for any HR area because bad recruiting may hinder other parts of a company, so there is a need to bring new people according to the requirements and standards (ST09). By doing this, a company can build its human capital to an excellence level, allowing further development and guidance (ST09).

It is worth noting that recruiting development professionals may work differently in some companies (and it certainly does in Cognisoft) from recruiting other professionals due to some area specificities and considering that these are highly-scarce professionals at the time of writing these pages.

Cognisoft discusses diversity and inclusion internally, even creating a meeting to discuss it better. However, at this moment, it does not address these questions directly with quotas or other inclusive actions because it felt that it needed to be more effective (ST10).

They support educational measures and NGOs (non-governmental organizations) to help underprivileged youngsters, avoiding heated discussions due to the sensitive nature of

diversity and inclusion (ST09). They care about building teams with diverse thoughts and incentives by advertising new job openings in the most ways and channels (ST10).

Plytech: Considering the participants from this case, HR has a strategic role in Plytech, organizing and spreading its cultural values across the organization to engage people in their purposes and guarantee a better employee experience in the company (ST13). Recruitment and selection, culture, and development are the most relevant HR aspects, and there is constant measuring and assessment via OKR and perception surveys (ST15). Even for candidates, there is an explanation of the company and its pillars to ascertain a cultural fit (ST13).

Participant ST14 considers that cultural reinforcement is an essential group of work rites in the company, such as one-on-one meetings with leaders to align duties, to ask if things are going well, or how a person's weekend was. According to the interviewed participant, these culture-maintenance work rites generate an expressive return to the startup (ST14).

Culture must be across the whole organization and in every implemented policy, considering the employee value proposition (EVP) (ST13). Hence, a policy needs to consider who comprises its target audience and consider the whole organization, so implemented policies should make an impact instead of only happening to fulfill an obligation (ST13).

When asked which would be the central differential for a future candidate considering applying for a job, participant ST13 mentioned that organizational climate would be her first choice: “What we say is what happens, you know? Because we not only sell an organizational climate platform, but we actually have a very good climate.” [“O que a gente fala é o que acontece, sabe? Porque a gente não só vende uma plataforma de clima organizacional mas a gente realmente tem um clima muito bom.”] (ST13).

Organizational culture and climate and how leaders position themselves may help make an employee want to stay in the company, not only salary-wise retention (ST13). Bringing the right people and making them stay for the right reasons, engaging and giving them a purpose to work and grow with the company, is Plytech’s approach to human resources (ST13).

The recorded interviews hints that culture is the leading HR aspect in Plytech, as mentioned by participant ST14:

“People’s HR processes have to start with culture. So if you have an evident culture, be it different from ours, it does not have to be the same as ours, but you need to have a strong culture. You have to know what your purpose is. ‘Why does your

system exist? Oh! That's what it exists for! My company exists to provide this, this and that'. So, it needs to be very clear in the minds of founders, of HR: Why does it exist; so that everyone really engages with it.” [“Os processos de RH, de gente, eles têm que começar com a cultura. Então se você tem uma cultura clara, seja ela diferente da nossa, não precisa ser igual a nossa, mas você precisa ter uma cultura forte. Você tem que saber qual que é o seu propósito. ‘Por que que seu sistema existe? Ah! Ele existe pra isso! A minha empresa existe pra proporcionar isso, isso e isso’. Então, precisa estar muito claro na cabeça dos founders, do RH: Porque que ele existe; para que, realmente, todos estejam engajados com aquilo.”] (ST14).

5.3. INSIGHTS FROM INVESTORS

Among other stakeholders that may associate with startups and their founding teams to remain operational and improve their survival odds are the investors, which supply the company with funds while expecting financial returns and establishing legitimacy to make claims according to the circumstances (Singer, 2021).

According to the investor’s purposes, there may be some influence on the company’s destiny. However, there must be some alignment between investors and the startup company: While a short-term investor will try to maximize the immediate financial gains from its portfolio, a long-term investor will try to establish some working relationship with the company and their leaders, cooperating and trying to strengthen its portfolio value (DesJardine, Zhang, & Shi, 2023).

The complementary case of this study was comprised of interviews with people related to investments in startup companies or the startup ecosystem, aiming to understand better why investors would align themselves with a startup company and what the expectations are to ensure the viability of the investment. In that matter, a short-term investor would mostly try to inject funds aiming at a profitable exit as soon as possible (DesJardine et al., 2023). A long-term investor would help structure the company and the investment portfolio before considering an exit procedure (DesJardine et al., 2023).

Also, this subsection addresses how these startups should adapt to better deal with changes (whether internal or external) to remain viable and competitive. Analysis divided into three groups, as described in the following paragraph:

Firstly, the profile and reasons for investors to associate with startups or for startups to look for and associate with an investor (5.3.1). Then, aligning expectations from investors before the investment happens and their role in assisting the startup when needed (5.3.2). Finally, insights from these actors on how to adapt to overcome difficulties while preparing the company for future success, even if there is a need to pivot the business (5.3.3).

5.3.1. PROFILE AND REASONS FOR INVESTING

One thing in common from the interviewed people in this subsection is that they had some relationship or acting with startups or investments during most of their professional lives. One of these participants has been in the startup ecosystem since his teenage years and has only worked with startups during his professional life.

“I guess life kind of just took me there almost automatically. I was very fond of technology, so maybe that was the motivator, and I started working with technology. I discovered entrepreneurship from technology, found myself an entrepreneur, and never left.” [“Eu acho que a vida meio que me levou quase que automaticamente. Eu gostava muito de tecnologia, então talvez foi esse o motivador, e comecei a trabalhar com tecnologia. Da tecnologia eu descobri o empreendedorismo e me descobri empreendedor, e nunca mais saí.”] (INVB).

The other interviewed participants related to investments also started involving with startups naturally. One of them, participant INVA, got closer to startups due to his investment options, but initially was not necessarily directing his professional choices towards this path.

INVC, the remaining participant, got hired by a startup company to act as its head of finance. One of his duties is guaranteeing incoming and financing sources to the company, whether this financing comes from banks, investors, or any other source, to make projects viable (INVC).

According to his own words, his main challenge as the head of finance in a startup is to “(...) bring predictability to an unpredictable organization.” [“(…) trazer previsibilidade para uma organização imprevisível.”] (INVC).

As this participant (INVC) pointed out, at the end of the day, it is on him to guarantee that there will be enough resources to pay employees and the company obligations, from financial planning to comptrolling. He started working in a startup due to an opportunity, but in his previous job, in a financial institution, culture was a source of dissatisfaction.

It is possible to make a connection to the culture of startups, a differential in every case of this study. An established and well-defined culture may help to hire and retain talent for a startup, spreading the company values and contributing to making people a source of competitive advantage (Stone & Deadrick, 2015; Mukul & Saini, 2021). At this point, startups need to hire people who align with the organization and its purposes while having the capacity to deliver results.

While a cultural disagreement may alienate an employee and even lead to a turnover, an inclusive and compelling culture can help to make a company more attractive to candidates in potential. The studied startups mostly showed a culture that favors agility, collaboration, and mobilizing people to achieve expressive results with few people.

If the question is “why would a professional want to work for a startup?” there were three main reasons for this association (INVA):

- Learning and doing several activities: In general, startups have fewer people and have less emphasis on the hierarchy than their traditional and more established counterparts, so their employees need to be able to perform in different contexts and tasks (Anderson & Cappelli, 2021);
- The pace of growth: There is an accelerated pace of activities and growth for professionals working in startup companies, possibly due to a less vertical structure;
- Financial leverage: Startups exist in a high-risk, high-stakes environment (Blank, 2013; Cusumano, 2013), and a thriving startup may represent a significant reward for its partners. Stock options and other bonuses may fulfill this reasoning.

As an investor, its main contributions by associating with a startup are, beyond the financial contribution and the expectance of a return in the future, new connections (with the market, with other companies, and with professionals that may be of use in an endeavor) and even helping these startups to recruit new professionals (INVA; INVB). Access to new contacts and resources is a benefit found in startup cooperation behavior (Garidis & Rossman, 2019).

As challenges in contributing to startups, an investor needs to deal with bureaucratic aspects such as assessing the startup, its market and growth potential (Paschen, 2017; Molnár & Jaki, 2020), and due diligence to ensure that there are no significant uncertainties or risks associated with that company. In the DemandInspect case, due diligence happened during the investment deal. The potential investors contacted the company asking for documents to assess that there were no debts or any pendency regarding current or past staff (ST02).

Another challenge for startup investors is possibly helping to structure jobs, roles, and wages, as well as helping to hire quickly to allow and boost the company’s growth at a fast and scalable pace, also allowing the company to direct its efforts more to develop products and sales (INVA).

Assuring the entrepreneur behind a startup is mentally healthy is another possible role of the investor since some of these entrepreneurs are possibly overwhelmed, impacting daily operations (INVA). Mental health was a theme that appeared sporadically and spontaneously during the interviews, usually related to diversity and inclusion or engagement and retention, so this approach of caring about the entrepreneur, especially considering its power to make or modify decisions, can be a different perspective (Mukul & Saini, 2021).

Also, it is valid to point out that these listed tasks for investors may relate to the fact that he is more used to angel investment, where the invested funds are from the own investor (Becker-Blease & Sohl, 2015). That personal, hands-on approach can be part of the necessary efforts to increase the chances of investment success (Croce et al., 2018).

5.3.2. INVESTMENT EXPECTATIONS

Investors associate with startup companies for different reasons and with different expectations. The investor needs to consider several aspects before considering a startup as a prospective investment, such as the development stage (INVB).

An apparent reason for investing in startup companies is the potential financial output if that bet in a specific company pays out (Becker-Blease & Sohl, 2015). “You contribute today thinking about seven, ten years from now having a multiplication of your equity.” [“Você aporta hoje pensando em daqui a sete, dez anos ter uma multiplicação do seu patrimônio.”] (INVA).

From the investor perspective, startups need to focus on three main aspects: 1) The team, its competencies, and skills; 2) the market size; and 3) traction in a measurable indicator (INVB; INVC; Abreu & Campos, 2016; Lazar et al., 2020). Operation numbers or even the solution offered may be secondary for those in earlier stages since there can be a pivot at some time (INVB; INVC).

The founding team is essential for the investment and success odds of a startup. The founders must have deep knowledge about the intended market as well as sales and the ability to attract talented professionals (“would I work for this person?”) (INVA; INVC).

Having previous experience in successful startups, such as having a previous exit, may help, as well as having such technical authority in the intended market (INVC; Garidis & Rossmann, 2019). Furthermore, the founders must have good connections with the ecosystem their company interacts (INVA).

About the market size, it needs to be “enormous” to make it attractive for the investor (INVC):

“Because if the most your company can be worth is one hundred million, man, for a guy who is going to make a mistake in twenty investments and succeed in one, and this one he needs to pay the other twenty that went bankrupt, for him it is no longer worth it. So you need to have a huge possible market size.” [“Porque se o máximo que sua empresa pode valer é cem milhões, cara, para um cara que vai errar em vinte investimentos e acertar em um, e esse um ele precisa que pague os outros vinte que quebraram, para ele já não vale a pena. Então você precisa ter um tamanho de mercado possível enorme.”] (INVC).

Still, on markets, there are other points to consider: An extremely expressive market size in terms of net worth (minimum of R\$ 10 B) helps to attract investors, as well as identifying who are the most prominent customers if they are relevant enough to attract other ones and, in a certain way, validate the product or service offered (INVA).

Beforehand, the remarks from participants INVA and INVC about the market size happen in the Brazilian context, a country with more than 210 hundred million people and a GDP of more than R\$ 1.6 T. By reaching those numbers, an investor would look for an expressive minimum market size: 45% of the country’s population and 0.5% of the GDP.

Regarding traction, some companies can raise funds “on PowerPoint,” only with a business plan but no traction; top-tier funds ask for traction (in operational stage startups) to assess that the business model is bringing customers in a high potential market (INVC).

Investing in pre-operational startups is an additional risk since the company has yet to start to sense in practice its market, not generating any revenue so far (Arena et al., 2018). For an investor even consider participating in that kind of endeavor, with a possible exception made for those already used to investing in this kind of company, the founders, their skills, and their portfolio of previous experiences and achievements are fundamental to making the company a viable option for investments:

“Yes, I would invest (in the pre-operational stage), depending on who the founder is. If you come to me and say that you have already founded a Gympass, you have already founded 99 App or someone who already has a success story and if it is from the same industry, for me it would not be a problem to invest, because I already know that that person has already had one evidence it delivers. If I have clear evidence, some connection that shows that this person has the skills to deliver what they need to deliver, I would consider it.” [“Eu investiria sim (em estágio pré-operacional), dependendo de quem for o fundador. Se chegar para mim e falar que já fundou um Gympass, já fundou a 99 App ou alguém que já tem algum caso de sucesso e se for do mesmo segmento, para mim não teria problema nenhum investir, porque eu já sei que aquela pessoa já teve uma evidência que ela entrega. Se eu tenho evidências claras, alguma conexão que evidencia que essa pessoa tem competências para entregar o que ela precisa entregar, eu consideraria.”] (INVA).

It is worth mentioning that both companies mentioned by participant INVA are Brazilian unicorn companies, Gympass (class of 2019) and 99 App (class of 2018). While a unicorn company may be a too harsh reference point as an acceptable success case, it still needs to be a clear case of success for investors considering risking capital in such an early stage.

Asked when a startup should start structuring its HR, there were different but complementary answers. The contextual answer considers that there is no definitive answer, so each company will find its sweet spot for implementing (INVB), but there are a couple of cues for when an HR should happen (INVA; INVC; Crossan et al., 1999; Casey, 2005): Areas structuring and headcount.

The starting point of this question is the positioning from participant INVB: “Each company will have a different strategy and it varies greatly depending on the type of business and how it works.” [“Cada empresa vai ter uma estratégia diferente e varia muito o do tipo de negócio e de como é que ele funciona.”] (INVB).

If the need is to hire people for supplying areas, a startup may start by filling critical positions in four areas: Management, operation, technology, and sales (INVB). Depending on the case, a single person may accumulate roles in two areas, for example, but filling critical positions allows one to start structuring these areas (INVB).

Considering the headcount as a measure, the first HR representative will likely be a founder (INVA; Buller & Napier, 1993). After a certain number of employees - the numbers may differ according to the case - the startup can start structuring its HR as managing its people gains complexity (INVA).

Even the HR structure may start with a lighter, less formal design when beginning an HR area, but it needs to provide the basics to keep the company running (INVA; Buller & Napier, 1993; Armstrong & Taylor, 2014). It is essential to posit that the headcount is a measure, but not the only indicator to assess the need for hiring an HR staff: Identifying certain market visibility, the potential to scale its operation exponentially at some point, clearly defined goals for each area, and even a strategy to attract and retain new professionals are also relevant before structuring the HR.

The kind of business (i.e., its industry, market, and business model) or the types of positions to fill may also trigger hiring a specific HR staff. A gig-economy company that operates a marketplace may have different necessities for building the teams than a fintech, for example (INVB). Suppose the founders have a skill gap in a specific aspect of the

business, such as tech talent for development tasks. In that case, it may haste the HR structuring, so there will be no bottlenecks to scaling the operation (INVC).

Additionally, a startup should start structuring an HR area immediately after obtaining a significant investment for two main reasons: Bringing someone with a more technical repertoire to structure the HR (INVA), and because that will require several new hires at once to scale the operation (INVC; Gulati & DeSantola, 2016; Huang et al., 2017).

As an example of how helpful a dedicated HR staff can be for a startup looking for investors, it may help provide necessary documents related to the people structure to show investors that the current HR structure is viable and makes sense to the market and size. It happened to DemandInspect, which was effectively the only time HR interacted directly with an investor (ST02). In Plytech, there is an ongoing project to implement an HR dashboard to gather and present relevant information for internal meetings and presentations with board members (ST13).

Oppositely, a startup can also delay structuring its HR area by outsourcing it partially or as a whole to third-party companies. Outsourcing HR may happen because the startup has no HR expertise or specific skills, so delegating it to others would make the company structure less complex.

In fact, before investing in its HR area, CorpoHealth employed some third-party services to handle simple HR and administrative tasks (ST05). That may be explainable because outsourcing HR allows leaders to care about their people but delegate bureaucracy to the third-party company (INVB).

HashCard also outsourced some functions and employees to some technological tool suppliers, a different movement since the transferred employees were relatable to different aspects of the operation, given that the company already had an HR when that outsourcing operation happened (ST06). Plytech counted on help from a third-party legal consultant, which may be explainable for being outside HR's scope despite using its services to benefit its HR area (ST13).

Outsourcing HR may be a viable solution for startups to delay implementing the area under their control. However, that is a short-term solution: As the startup reaches some complexity in its operations and an increased headcount, it will require some HR-dedicated staff to help handle everyday tasks, allowing further specialization in crucial practices such as, for example, hiring and recruiting (INVB).

5.3.3. ADAPTING TO HARDSHIP AND PIVOTING TO SUCCESS

As things change inside and outside a company, there is a need to adapt to optimize strengths and seize opportunities while facing, minimizing, or hindering gaps, vulnerabilities, weaknesses, and threats. While there are several possible difficulties that a startup may face during its journey, this subsection covers a few mentioned during the interviews, such as facing hardships, hiring the right people, empowering people for change, staff adjustments, or structure for growth.

Facing hardships: At the time of writing this study, there were many challenges and uncertainties, including supplier disruptions, political unrest, the Covid-19 pandemic (starting to fade but still present), and even an armed conflict in Eastern Europe. None of these has made life for companies easier in Brazil or elsewhere.

When asked how a startup could adapt its HR to deal with changes to remain competitive, participant INVB answered that the correct was not asking what they can do, but what they must do (Fiol & Lyles, 1985). Changes will happen so fast and often that it will almost seem chaotic, but those changes are intrinsic to the startup environment (INVB).

“For example: In my company, there are some goals that I must deliver to continue growing (the investment). If it does not deliver these metrics, I will not invest more until these goals are met, so that a new investment can be made.” [“Por exemplo: Na minha empresa tem algumas metas que eu devo entregar para continuar crescendo (o investimento). Se ela não entregar essas métricas, eu não vou investir mais até que essas metas sejam atingidas, para que aí um novo investimento seja feito.”] (INVA).

When there is a need to adapt, everyone must be on the same page and ready to apply changes, aligning leaders and founders to have real-time communication and guaranteeing that metrics and indicators are accurate, so there will be no surprises (INVA; Crossan et al., 1999). If the situation requires harsher staff adjustments, such as dismissing employees or even a full-fledged layoff movement, people must be aware and well-informed in a professional way (INVA).

“I will say: ‘Look, the company is like this; the scenario is not positive. We must seek such a result so that the company can establish growth.’ If this is not delivered, there is already a certain sign that the company is not doing well, and (so) people can prepare and prepare those who must stay, who are non-negotiable, who must be within the company to keep it operating and be able to get through moments of crisis.” [“Vou falar: ‘Olha, a empresa está assim, o cenário não é positivo. Devemos

buscar tal resultado, para que a empresa consiga estabelecer crescimento'. Caso isso não seja entregue já há uma certa sinalização de que a empresa não está indo bem, e (para) as pessoas poderem se preparar e preparar aquelas que devem ficar, que são inegociáveis, que devem estar dentro da empresa para manter ela operando e poder passar momentos de crise.”] (INVA).

If things are not going well, the entrepreneur needs to consider the diverse time lengths for decision-making, each of these with its characteristics (INVA; Tian & Xu, 2015):

- Short-term (one month): Measuring results and urging action from the team. “It did not deliver this month, but we are going to keep, not letting the ball drop.” [“Não entregou neste mês mas vamos manter, não vamos deixar a peteca cair.”] (INVA);
- Medium-term (three months): At this point, it is possible to check if it is still possible to react, if the reaction went well, or if there was no reaction. “Wow, it has been three months.” [“Poxa, foram três meses.”] (INVA);
- Long-term (six months): If things get out of control for a whole semester, it may be the time to make a clear and harsh decision, maybe overly late if the company lacks the resources to endure longer.

As pointed out, decision-making in the startup context needs to be quick, or the company may not survive the hardship (Casey, 2005). Regarding smaller startups or those with few resources available, three months is the maximum a company can wait before correcting a route facing some difficulty (INVA). However, those with a more extensive financial backup or structure to endure may wait to revisit things drastically for up to six months (INVA).

Hiring the right people: Participant INVC expected the cultural shock from transitioning to a startup company after working in a much larger, traditional company. However, it does not make things necessarily more effortless, and some people may face problems adapting to the culture and workflow of a startup company:

“I went from a very well-structured environment to a chaotic one. I already knew it was going to be like this, I already expected it to be like this, so for me there was no breach of expectation. But it is not so easy to adapt and I see that there are many people who do not fit this profile. Even here, people who left a big company are struggling there to navigate the environment, which is very unstructured. But for me, for me, in my specific case, it was reasonably smooth.” [“Eu saí de um ambiente muito bem estruturado para um ambiente caótico. Eu já sabia que ia ser assim, eu já esperava que fosse assim, então para mim não teve uma quebra de expectativa. Mas

não é tão fácil se adaptar e eu vejo que tem muita gente que não se adequa a esse perfil. Inclusive aqui dentro, gente que saiu de empresa grande e está apanhando ali para navegar o ambiente, que é bem desestruturado. Mas pra mim, para mim, no meu caso específico, foi razoavelmente tranquilo.”] (INVC).

An HR officer with experience in large companies will need to quickly learn how to align with the startup culture, or the constant changes and the fast pace of the business nature may frustrate this professional as there will be much rework related to the required changes or even business model pivoting (INVB; Abbad & Borges-Andrade, 2014). This professional needs to structure HR to give manageable processes that help people perform without compromising agility: A fully structured and bureaucratic HR is slow, and an utterly unstructured one only brings chaos to the workplace (INVB).

In another example of how the lack of cultural fit may impact one’s perception at work, an experienced person that joins a startup for a new environment but demands guarantees and safeguards from established companies, such as job stability, would fail (INVC). It cannot help if this person gets shocked by high cash burn and low runway rates (which are part of the startup world) or brings tension to strategic meetings due to cultural differences (INVC).

Culture matters, but it is not the only thing. Behavioral aspects and technical skills are essential for candidates as well. However, the interviews with participants from the startups’ ecosystem and investment did not discuss any of these in detail, maybe because behavior can mix into the cultural fit, and technical aspects and requirements are specific to each industry and company (Schwab & Miner, 2008).

In contrast, these participants discussed things in a more generic aspect without entering into a single company. As an exception, participant INVC mentioned that due to the lack of specific skills, sometimes startups outsource their HR to other companies, which usually only offer a short-term solution due to the lack of scalability.

On the other hand, interviews with employees from the participating cases focused on finding a compatible profile while assessing behavioral and technical skills during their recruitment and selection interviews, whether the job openings were for HR, upper management, or tech talent, for example (Gulati & DeSantola, 2016).

Empowering people for change: Hiring the right people, being able to sense changes, and empowering them to adapt may be essential for a budding startup. As a head of finance of a startup himself, participant INVC managed the cash burn rate and, after realizing that the

company would need to fund-raise or run dry soon, made an alert and asked to start an investment round.

There were discussions on the need to look for extra resources because the company went from an investment round a few months earlier. However, in the end, the decision-makers agreed to look for another funding round, recurring to a bank loan, to keep a safe level of finances and avoid dismissing people. While it is not a complete pivot (especially in its business model), it certainly shares the principle of taking action to prevent a potentially harmful event from happening (Chaparro & Gomes, 2021).

In this case, a clear trigger led to action: Comparing the cash burn rate versus how many months the company could continue with that level of resources and expenditures (i.e., the company's runway). Participant INVC mentioned this trigger, but it also appeared in CorpoHealth's case, as mentioned by participant ST04, where it led to reducing the payroll by cutting budgets and jobs for trying to reach a financial break-even point.

Cognisoft employed a different approach to empowering its personnel by conceding minor share participation to a few chosen ones as part of their rewards and bonuses practices, increasing the agency and responsibilities of its employees (ST12). Hashcard, on the other hand, empower people by encouraging them to act with greater autonomy while reinforcing cultural aspects and the company values to make people do their best at work (ST07; Liu, 2018).

CorpoHealth made a different approach by valuing diversity and inclusion to empower people from underrepresented or marginalized segments of society, valuing those workers and their contributions, some of them already in leadership positions (ST08). HashCard also values diversity and inclusion in its ranks but prefers to reinforce that through company values, such as respect or tolerance of difference (ST07). One way or another, valuing diversity and inclusion should allow people to be themselves and increase their confidence at work to make decisions.

Staff adjustments: Considering that INVC's company had just raised investments a few months earlier could have mined the initiative to look for additional funds. However, there were two options before running out of cash: Adjusting expenses (primarily by dismissing people) or raising additional investments.

That first option, adjusting expenses and dismissing people, happened to several startups and tech companies, including some companies described in this thesis: Cognisoft, during the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, for adjusting expenses against the loss of a

few clients, and CorpoHealth, after realizing that their cash burn rate would lead the company to run out of resources shortly, therefore adjusting for a new reality that was riskier and with fewer resources or rewards available than before.

As startups find an acceptable fit between products and markets and gain traction in their numbers, market size, and demands, there may be a need to verify if the company and its people are still adequate for each other. That happens because one may have outpaced the other during its growth, leading to turnover and needing to replace the vacancies.

A possibility for this is the need to seniorizing the team because the company grew faster than its people. When that happens, people have to develop very quickly to ascend professionally in the company, thus avoiding the company allocating a new, external hire as its new superior (INVB). The startup needs to support developing a professional, whether to ascend or to accept and work with a new professional over itself on the corporate structure (INVA):

“If the company has grown a lot, prepare people, right? So that eventually new leaders can come above them. The company grew a lot, and sometimes there were leaders who then had to join leaders above them, and people were prepared to receive that leadership.” [“Se a empresa estiver crescendo muito, preparar as pessoas, né? Para que eventualmente possam vir novos líderes acima delas. A empresa cresceu muito, e às vezes tinha líderes que depois tiveram que entrar líderes acima deles, e as pessoas estavam preparadas pra receber essa liderança.”] (INVA).

Another worry for employees as their companies grow is to avoid dismissal for not being able to deliver the results necessary to maintain their jobs (INVB; Edmondson & Moingeon, 1998). If they fail to keep up with the company’s pace, then there may be a need for a replacement to keep dealing with the company’s duties and projects (INVB; Picken, 2017).

If a startup assigns only a junior-level person to handle the HR area and then starts growing exponentially, after a while, that person may feel overwhelmed due to not being able to meet expectations (INVB). Given that, investing excessively or even only in junior-level professionals may be a mistake in the long run, but a mistake that happens often (INVB).

Structure for growth: The participants related to the startup ecosystem also answered about structuring measures that a startup company should present for preparing for growth, mainly on policies, practices, and systems (Huang et al., 2017).

A measure that may trigger many other changes is pivoting, trying to find a better fit between the business model and the customer. When there is a significant change, there is also a need to verify again if strategies and structure still make sense, a process that may happen several times before validating the business model with potential customers:

“It is very common for you to be working on a line, on a customer’s product, and need to change completely. Pivot the product around, change the strategy, and by doing that, maybe your people structure will no longer make sense. So the first point is that this structure needs to be agile and flexible, to be able to accommodate these changes well.” [“É muito comum você estar indo numa linha, num produto do cliente, e precisar mudar completamente. Virar o produto, trocar de estratégia e ao fazer isso, talvez a sua estrutura de pessoas não vai fazer mais sentido. Então o primeiro ponto é que essa estrutura precisa ser ágil e flexível, para conseguir acomodar bem essas mudanças.”] (INVB).

There were two expressive pivoting cases among the studied companies of this thesis: Cognisoft, changing from a recruitment and selection process product to an algorithm-powered HR management suite (ST10), and CorpoHealth, which changed from an emergency wards management solution to a digital corporate health plan (ST05; Chaparro & Gomes, 2021).

Policies connect to the organizational culture, values, and goals, so it is easier to transfer from one company to another by considering the general context. Also, structuring policies and practices allows a startup to give a base people’s actions and future scalable growth on solid ground (ST14).

In one way or another, every participating startup in this study deliberately adopted a fluid structure, avoiding bureaucracy as much as possible to adapt and quickly change when needed. However, Cognisoft adopted a “no policies” policy as they prefer adopting case-by-case solutions, partially because the company is still developing (ST09; Armstrong & Taylor, 2014; Picken, 2017).

Larger, more developed companies, such as CorpoHealth, included more structure in their HR areas to allow implementation of rules and controls, giving more predictability in how people should behave in the company. Still, there is a policy that seems feasible to most startups and possible to adopt, formally or otherwise.

An important policy mentioned during the interviews was acknowledging the professionals and their growth at least once a year, which can relate to quantifiable measurements for progress or to culture fit and performance assessment (INVA). A policy like this should increase employee engagement and give a basis for future career movements since people are already aware of their progression.

Every participating company from this study had at least some practices related to this acknowledgment process despite being more or less structured or formal. These startups operate in high-paced, high-risk environments, so changes happen often. Giving people assessment and feedback is as important as communicating it clearly, to avoid misunderstanding from failing to reach out to the employee (ST06).

The talk on practices in startups unavoidably has to begin with recruitment and selection since that mainly was the first and the most critical aspect for every participating company in this study. Recruitment can be simple and inexpensive initially, but it must provide the necessary human capital to keep an organization viable.

It can start in a fundamental, handcrafted way, such as releasing adverts or asking for recommendations for filling job vacancies in a professional social media network (LinkedIn was powerful for participating HR practitioners when data collection happened) (INVC). This approach may be all right while the startup has yet to start scaling its operation, relying more on social than on techniques or systems, and it is a must-be if the position to fill is more of a senior level (INVC).

Investors can also act as partners in startup growth, as it would benefit both parties (Teten et al., 2013). Some investors may also help in the recruitment for some positions, especially senior-level and beyond, by exploring the contacts network from investors and their partners or by some established internal network or program that finds and indicates people for filling specific job vacancies (INVC). Investors helping to recruit candidates for senior roles is a relatively common practice, with people scouting potential candidates in preliminary talks to verify if that is a compatible profile (INVC).

Other essential aspects related to recruitment and selection have importance for an HR area, from development and training to career structuring, job mobility, retention, and even dismissal practices, which must happen with caution (INVB). In the beginning, a single person can handle alone all of these practices, adding extra people as the company grows more extensive and complex (INVB; Buller & Napier, 1993).

Performance assessment was a mentioned practice beneficial and applicable for most startups (INVB; INVC; Gooderham et al., 2019). As happened in the CorpoHealth case, the structuring of this practice is not something that happened imposed but in a natural way following the company's growth (ST05).

Despite that, even smaller companies may benefit from some performance assessment system that is adequate for their size and needs, as in Cognisoft with a more straightforward system (ST10), held in a committee-style meeting (ST09; ST10; ST12).

In addition to the generalist HR practitioner, some startups have specialist workers relatable to the HR area, such as business partners, recruiters, or even tech recruiters, given that this is currently a scarce professional worldwide. The participants from this study addressed this aspect only partially in their interviews, usually aggregating the related tasks with another job or role.

However, an up-and-rising startup may consider adding those specialists if the tradeoff is beneficial against the costs or even adding generalist HR practitioners that can perform these duties at least partially (such as an HR analyst with previous skills and experience to recruit tech talent).

Regarding systems, while it is possible to communicate via freemium applications such as WhatsApp (its business version may include paid extra functionalities) or Slack (which has paid plans with more features), a specific system helps to communicate and manage work (INVA).

A knowledge management platform could be important for HR and the whole company (INVA). This type of system can also center information, knowledge, and past experiences, allowing to filter of existing information to retrieve insightful data or compilations such as sets of best practices for a specific situation.

Similarly, the system to store information can be the regular office spreadsheet desktop app, or something more specific, according to the company size, needs, and resources available (INVC). Again, this may be the case of comparing costs, needs, and benefits to verify whether investing in data storage and processing suites makes sense.

Companies that operate a system or platform to offer services to customers, as some HRTech would do, may have the advantage of already having functionalities to cover some HR and operation aspects, so there is no high extra adoption cost.

Even when there is a solid business model already, a structured HR aligned to bringing value to the company, and things are going well, there is a need to constantly revisit things and look for any need for changes. This constant reevaluation should happen monthly to compare where the startup aims to get and how much time, allowing comparisons and actions to make any needed change (INVA).

In this sense, every startup needs to sense its own “sweet spot” in balancing agility and structuring, HR-wise or not (INVB; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011; McMackin & Heffernan, 2021). However, many of these companies are a little behind their “sweet spots,” with fewer processes than needed because the growth rate is intense and the structuring pace as it grows can not keep up with its need (INVB).

It is not ideal to have the structure lagging behind growth demands. However, still better than having an overly structured HR that freezes people's agency and inhibits growth, usually by hiring someone more senior than the company's complexity requires or when a new investor brings more complexity and structures than needed (INVB).

Different work contracts may also help in the short term to bring more experienced workers without having to pay a full-time arrangement, but only the worked hours, for example (INVC). It is possible to increase control over expenses or make a certain amount of money last longer by hiring people for smaller, specific assignments (INVC).

DemandInspect employs those zero-hour contracts for their external workers, which are plenty and scattered across the country, with a difference from regular zero-hour workers: They are subject to instructions, monitoring, and feedback from internal workers, but they can also progress to internal roles if the opportunity arises and they are okay with the different career progression, allowing scalability to the operation.

Following the analysis of HR implementation both from the startups' view and from actors related to investment in startups, the following section summarizes each studied case (section 6.1) and the main findings from the study (section 6.2).

6. MAIN FINDINGS AND INSIGHTS

As the name suggests, this section lists the principal conclusions from the studied cases, ranging from similarities and singularities to an overview of how aspects of HR implementation happen in each participating company. This section complements the previous one (HR and implementation in startups) and separates from it to summarize findings and insights from the studied cases and themes.

This subsection splits into two parts: An overview of each company (6.1) and another of how the same aspects of HR implementation happen in these companies (6.2). After each of these parts, there is a figure that summarizes the main findings of that part for quick reference and readability since the analysis went across two sections and a hundred pages long.

6.1. STUDIED CASES

The participating cases, each comprised of a single startup company, nonrelated directly to any other participating case of this thesis, have shown companies with different contexts to learn, stories to tell, industries, places, and development stages.

Even companies from the same industry, as happened with Cognisoft and Plytech, both HRTechs, showed some differences between them, such as, for example, the decision-making process: While Cognisoft gives a significant influence to the team, that gives the final word in a structure that centers decisions around events and processes, in Plytech the areas have agency to decide what lies inside their budgets, with HR developing and empowering those leaders.

DemandInspect has different internal and external worker structures, contract types, and recruiting strategies. However, it links them by the quality area, where external workers may ascend from the external operation and shift to the company's internal structure. That said, shortlisting potential hires for when a job opening happens is its primary prospection method in most cases and works so far (Mukul & Saini, 2021), despite failing to allow an excellent scalability factor if the operation starts to grow exponentially at any point.

Inside the company, training and development initiatives depend on each area and its leadership, which may ask for HR help if needed. These initiatives qualify, update, and even correct technical flaws or skill gaps (especially for external workers), and their contents are

constantly revised (Abbasi et al., 2020; Boudlaie et al., 2022). DemandInspect also uses feedback and learned lessons to improve its knowledge base and pieces of training.

The company is yet to structure its career tracks thoroughly. However, there are already a few visible options, even for external workers, that may ascend to a supervising role or migrate to an internal role as part of the quality team. DemandInspect employs career progression to reward and engage people.

Its communication system employs technical solutions and allows sending feedback or engaging messages, managing workflow, and even centering company documents. Engaging is held in high regard and seen as fundamental for the company. There is a constant assessment of motivation and engagement as part of the company's revisiting of tasks done and learned lessons.

CorpoHealth shifted from presential work to a remote-first approach at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, which led the company to expand its hiring range to anywhere in Brazil and abroad. They usually employ passive recruitment, posting job adverts, but may also actively hunt a specific employee profile. One way or another, the company uses feedback assertively to inform candidates of their progress or dismissal in job appliance, from the earliest stages to interviews or live coding tests.

Training varies according to each area and the available budget. However, there are institutional incentives for every employee, such as English courses with discounts or even free of charge (Boudlaie et al., 2022). There is an ongoing career detailing to address and describe jobs, complexity levels, and expected capacities. All of that structuring aims to guide developmental initiatives.

An interesting feature from CorpoHealth, unique among the companies participating in this study, is creating a diversity and inclusion area to reinforce the company's values and views (Blank, 2007; Gulati & DeSantola, 2016) against discrimination while recognizing people for what they are and what they achieve regardless of their any other thing. In that regard, everyone must do their part and correct their behavior instead of pointing fingers at others to avoid being an ideological patrol.

There is an engagement survey divided by area regarding communication and engagement practices. It helps planning and allows sensing if there is any issue or concerning point. This kind of practice helps to make a feed-forward, bringing perspectives and insights from the individual level to the group level and finally to the organizational level, which helps

HR to be aware of implementation efficacy and learn the outcomes from their actions (Crossan et al., 1999; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007; Plothow, 2018).

There was a daily checkup with all employees to verify if everyone was doing fine. That went well at the beginning of the pandemic. However, as months went by and the company scaled, that work rite had to descale because there was no relevant news or risks to assess (Tian & Xu, 2015), and the headcount increased dramatically. While the company adapted to difficult times, it also reevaluated to determine if a measure from the past still made sense for the company (Edmondson & Moingeon, 1998).

HashCard relies on a learning and transparency culture under a small team to deliver the required results. Its recruiting splits into two groups of employees: Entry-level and advanced jobs, each with its requirements and capacities to fulfill. The hiring process is customizable according to the job opening, with a quicker and more objective process for tech talent.

Despite that, there is an understanding that recruitment needs to bring people appropriate to work in an intense and volatile environment since the company is still developing. Also, the company works under a hybrid work model, but new contracts are still an office-based model, with remote work allowable – or not – according to circumstances.

As there is high mobility inside the company, people need to be comfortable with trial and error, working under job rotation according to demands and learning by doing how to perform those different functions in an innovative fashion (Anderson & Cappelli, 2021). However, if there is an identification of a relevant gap or lack, HashCard develops and structures training for the employees, with workshops to address specific questions, for example. Employing feedback and perceptions to generate learning, align expectations, and quick changes across the organization shows that even if there is no structural change from this learning, at least this agile work dynamic is a reality inside HashCard (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Crossan et al., 1999; Ries, 2011).

HashCard expresses and reinforces its values through hashtags; otherwise, there are no formal communication policies (De Winne & Sels, 2010; Schmelter, Mauer, Börsch, & Brettel, 2010) except those regulated by its industry (a fintech). In practice, people collaborate with significant autonomy in an informal, tech-savvy, and objective tone (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014). Asking for help at the neighboring desk is possible to find solutions for a work demand.

The company also employs surveys to assess engagement and organizational climate. According to these, it would implement or change features to keep people motivated to work and deliver results, giving a sense of purpose. The engagement process includes the company hashtags and is seen internally as a way to improve retention (Jose et al., 2021), especially in critical positions such as developers, where there is fierce competition for these hard-to-find, harder-to-keep professionals.

Cognisoft standardized its hiring process for all areas after pivoting from a recruitment and selection process to an HR management and insight-providing platform, centralizing those processes around the HR area to increase consistency and bring these processes closer to everyday work reality (Abbasi et al., 2022). There is a separate hiring process for development workers (Gulati & DeSantola, 2016).

However, the recruitment and selection process for operation workers involves five steps: Filtering, interviewing with the HR area, interviewing with the area leader, solving an applied case, and validating with company partners. Recruitment for development workers involves a curious step that tries to convince the potential workers that Cognisoft is a place to work up to their expectations and demands. Recruitment for positions with senior expertise involves the CEO's participation.

HR acts in training as a development partner for employees by providing capacities, guidance, and insights for managers. When considering a specific individual, performance assessment shows its development and improvement points. In a team, the Cognisoft platform highlights people who overperform and underperform. Existing indicators help show the possible career advancement paths and success odds for each, but the leader decides.

Behind career decisions and job mobility, HR helps management to know the strengths and the different areas and positions available for people. Monthly meetings deliberate on results and strategy, which could indicate the need to reallocate internal people or even an external hire. A dismissal would happen only after extensive tries and fails.

Regarding communication, Cognisoft tries to make people comfortable with its platform. It is also the primary work tool to measure goals and extract insights from provided data for improving decision-making (Edmondson & Moingeon, 1998).

As people realized that the pandemic would be long-lasting, there was a need to change the workflow and create a manual for adapting to remote work, as the current practices had a design to work in an office. After the pandemic started to fade, people adopted hybrid work after a survey to assess employees' reactions, which shows that Cognisoft can

learn and turn knowledge into changes, institutionalizing it across the organization and even being able to unlearn when a previous change is not necessary anymore (Crossan et al., 1999).

Transforming unsorted and unstructured data into insights that help decision-making processes may help people improve, but it also helps build engagement through climate surveys. Variations in these results hint to managers that there may be an ongoing change so that HR may look for potential causes or explanations for those variations in numbers.

Meanwhile, the company structured practices to increase engagement and the sense of belonging, from onboard to feedback processes (Ferris et al., 1995). The fact that internal HR uses the same platform that Cognisoft offers to customers is natural for employees, and sometimes there are new features available first inside the company before public release.

Plytech hires people following previous planning and the available budget, focusing on cultural fit (Mukul & Saini, 2021). There is a baseline script for the recruitment process, regardless of area: Job opening, aligning (internal, for determining hiring parameters, and area, for assessing the importance and profile of the opening), filtering, and interviews (HR, then area). The company actively searches for applicants for tech talent and applies an agile and direct hiring process.

To allow scalability while optimizing resource expenditure, Plytech distributes the expected number of hires over time to avoid an overflow of simultaneous hiring processes. Generally, the maximum number of simultaneous processes per recruiter is around five. Although emergency hires are possible, the company may employ help from third-party recruitment services to fulfill an emergency opening in the least time possible.

Due to being an HRTech, Plytech is attractive for people related to HR management, but people from other areas, such as tech talent, may need more incentive on working to such type of company. Inside the company, career paths are under development, despite having structured developmental practices and related work rites.

People may belong to an area but contribute sporadically to other areas in specific projects. That benefits the company and allows employees different experiences during their tenure, also allowing knowledge to flow between individuals and groups, benefitting the organization as a whole (Crossan et al., 1999; Argote & Hora, 2016). An interesting point related to careers and engagement is a work rite where employees may acknowledge and award others for relevant accomplishments or collaborations.

Communication inside the company employs its owned platform, centralizing interactions and providing tools to assess perceptions, send questions or inquiries, possibly

anonymous for confidential matters, with constant interaction with people science to develop methods and rules to improve the system. Sometimes people from Plytech's HR interact with customers' HR areas to help with any system-based questions, which also helps to exchange information and improve Plytech's HR (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014; Han & Stieha, 2020).

Culture and engagement are crucial for Plytech to show people how the company works to give them a sense of purpose and inhibit turnover (Cruz et al., 2019). Monitoring the existing indicators allows managers to predict scenarios and develop actions to identify issues and propose solutions.

It is possible to assess the efficacy of implemented HR, such as benefits, and to work on improvements not only for the internal HR but also for the commercial suite, where the company's HR acts as quality testers before forthcoming release, providing feedback and improvements (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007; Tian & Xu, 2015).

Summarizing: As Figure 7 shows, it is possible to gather and name a few findings from each participating company from this study, plus insights from actors related to investment and the startup ecosystem (the complementary case), to show how each startup chose a different path to overcome their challenges, grow, and structure.

From a relatively simple prospecting system based on referrals (DemandInspect) to having an insight-powered HR that subsidizes decision-makers with all sorts of data to present possibilities and their odds, employing data-driven learning to guide behavior changes and knowledge improvements (Edmondson & Moingeon, 1998), startups have different HR attributions and solutions to different contexts.

Studied case	Main findings
DemandInspect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Created an area (quality) that allows external workers to migrate to internal roles. • Relies primarily on shortlists from leaders to fill job openings. • Constant revisions of existing knowledge based on feedback and learned lessons.
CorpoHealth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopted a remote-first approach because of Covid-19 and remained with it because of the results (reverting it would be impractical at best). • Successfully pivoted the business model (from an emergency ward management to a digital healthcare plan). • It has created a diversity and inclusion area to spread and reinforce its values.
HashCard	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Its hiring process is customizable according to the job opening (tech talent hires are quicker and more objective). • The deliberately small team size requires mobility and job rotations to answer demands innovatively. • It has created an internal code (hashtags) to express and reinforce its values as its sole communication and engagement policy.
Cognisoft	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Started as a recruitment solution company to an insight-based HRM platform. • It avoids creating policies (a “no policies” policy) to favor creating case-by-case solutions. • The HR provides insights for decision-making and indicates the success odds of the available choices, but area leaders make the final decision.
Plytech	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It has developed a baseline recruitment script (but actively searches for tech talent due to scarcity) and distributes hiring over time to avoid overwhelming recruiters. • Centers communications around its platform, counting on help from HR staff to validate it and even exchange insights with clients. • Regards culture as crucial to engage and give a sense of purpose, monitoring indicators to identify and solve problems.
Complementary: Investment actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More than injecting funds, investors may need to help the startup to structure and hire to foster fast and scalable growth (as part of a portfolio). • There are three critical aspects for investing in a scaling startup: The founding team and their competencies, the potential market size, and achieving traction in a measurable indicator. • In times of crisis, aligning communications and tracking indicators are essential to ensure that the company needs to change and has the resources to do so (and if it does not, it will need to cut costs or raise funds to have a financial backup). • Assessing cash burn rates and the estimated runway may prevent the startup from running dry and having to make desperate moves or, even worse, cease operations.

Figure 7: Findings from the studied cases. Source: Made by the author.

Considering some of the main aspects related to HR and implementation, Figure 8, as displayed on the next page, summarizes and compares the situation of each studied case regarding four items:

- Customizable recruitment (for different needs that each company may have, temporary or not);
- Tech recruiting (since the low availability of tech talent was something noted by every studied company);
- Development initiatives (mainly regarding how these companies structured or not their career tracks, but also including critical points on training in general);
- Improvement cycles (where every company chose its way to internalize changes and improvements learned across their trajectories).

Company	Customizable recruitment	Tech recruiting	Development initiatives	Improvement cycles
DemandInspect	Per role	Regular	<u>Career tracks:</u> Unstructured <u>Training:</u> Per leader	Constant revising, maybe “even too much” (ST02)
CorpoHealth	Per role and profile	Simplified	<u>Career tracks:</u> structuring <u>Training:</u> Per areas or roles	Revising by feedback and IDPs
HashCard	Per role and complexity	Simplified	<u>Career tracks:</u> Unstructured <u>Training:</u> Learning by doing	Revising by HR to cover gaps
Cognisoft	Per role	Simplified	<u>Career tracks:</u> Structured <u>Training:</u> Per area and leader	Guided by HR insights and employee strengths
Plytech	Per role and need	Simplified	<u>Career tracks:</u> Structured <u>Training:</u> Learning by collaborating	Efforts recognizing (a regular work rite)

Figure 8: HR and implementation. Source: Made by the author.

Finally, when taking into account aspects of learning and HR in the studied cases, it is possible to compare these cases with other four items, all relatable to organizational learning or learning organizations, as shown in Figure 9:

- Learning triggers: Events and situations that led to a learning moment in the studied cases;
- Learning patterns: Processes and heuristics related to learning moments in these organizations;
- Learning outcomes: Implications, results, and consequences from the learning that happened in the organization;
- Learning type: Single-loop (impacting only an immediate result but with no long-lasting or structural effect) or double-loop (when the learning also leads to structural changes in an organization).

The first three items of that list (learning triggers, patterns, and outcomes) also relate to the nomological model of Ang and Joseph (1996), where the learning triggers can associate with the antecedents from the nomological model, the learning patterns relate with the core concepts (processes of OL and the structure of the LO), and the learning outcomes are part of

the consequences of learning according to that nomological model. The last item, learning type, refers to the single-loop and double-loop types of organizational learning, as described by Argyris and Schon (1978).

Company	Learning triggers	Learning patterns	Learning outcomes	Learning type
DemandInspect	Work and efficacy demands	Leader-centered Opportunity-seizing	Increased service level	Single-loop
CorpoHealth	Culture and goals Need for improvements	Insights: NPS surveys, revising processes	Improving and scaling operations	Double-loop
HashCard	Leaders' insights	Insights: NPS surveys, ideas, past events	Aligning expectations Quick changes	Single-loop
Cognisoft	Processes and moments Knowledge gaps	Leader-centered (with team inputs) HR insights	Accuracy and support in decision-making	Double-loop
Plytech	Leaders' insights HR-related demands	Leader-centered (with HR as a support) Testing and validation	Scaling operations Improving resources usage	Double-loop

Figure 9: HR and learning. Source: Made by the author.

6.2. INSIGHTS FROM HR IMPLEMENTATION ASPECTS

In this final subsection of results and analysis, the different aspects of the study that are relevant to startup companies, already integrating all studied companies and the complementary case, are grouped into topics for quick reference while trying to answer some questions that may arise from this thesis for both HRM researchers and practitioners.

It is possible to divide the insights from the studied cases and existing literature into eight main themes related to startups growth and structuring, some very particular to startups, some applicable to other companies, but described in the startups' context:

1) When to start the HR by hiring its first exclusive person, 2) When to implement HR policies and practices, 3) How HR can improve a company, 4) HR as a culture enhancer, 5) HR and HRM for HRTechs, 6) Learning how and why to hire and retain, 7) The effects of size and industry over HRM, and 8) Challenges to overcome and opportunities to seize.

When to start HR: One insight came from this question: “When should a startup company hire its first HR-exclusive person?”. As pointed out by participant ST01, before hiring the first HR-exclusive person, regardless of its function or experience level, the first HR is composed of a company founder (Buller & Napier, 1993; Youndt et al., 1996; Yang et al., 2019).

The exact moment to hire the first HR person will largely depend on the context (Bendickson et al., 2017), including elements such as industry, growth rate, resources and funding, and even some internal to each company as the amount of HR-related tasks to endure or the experience level in HR from the founder(s) assigned to this function (not necessarily exclusive to this).

Numbers-wise, opening an HR area in a startup is not precisely the company’s top priority, as it usually performs a support role, except in HRTechs, where HR is also part of the business as a product. The average number for hiring the first HR-exclusive person, thus opening an HR area in the company, seems to be between 50 and 60 people, but still accepting some variation: From lower extremes as 30 people to upper extremes closer to 80 people, the average startup will need at least one HR person among its first hundred employees (ST15; INVA; INVC).

In the startup context that this thesis employs, a possible minimum viable product (MVP) for an own HRM area (instead of employing only a founder or outsourcing it to a third-party company), and considering that an MVP is a product that allows collecting the maximum of helpful feedback with the minimum effort or resources to do it (Ries, 2011) would be a company that is: Operational, generating revenue, with a few dozen employees, and scaling in revenue and headcount to the point where it would be large enough to overwhelm a founder while being complex and specific enough to not outsource it to third-party.

When to implement in HR: The rule of thumb for implementing an HR policy or practice is assessing factors relevant to this and for the company, such as demand, necessity, and available budget (ST04), also considering the perceived efficacy and internalizing to

determine if the implementation benefits or not the company (ST01; Buller & Napier, 1993). However, each organization must address specific scenarios or contexts and learn how and when to act.

Overall, it seems that the studied cases learned to do an HR-related implementation considering some specific aspects as, for example:

- Urgent events with potentially serious consequences that demand immediate action (e.g., Covid-19 and remote work policies and practices);
- After a business model pivoting, when HR will lead changes to adapt and align to a new scenario (e.g., Cognisoft started centering HR duties around HR-specific staff after pivoting);
- When there is a perceived need (e.g., specific practices for attracting and retaining tech talent amid the scarcity of these professionals in tech-related companies);
- If the financial situation allows that implementation safely or there is an agreed risk-taking.

The Covid-19 pandemic was an example of a trigger that may lead to implementing urgent and sometimes game-defining changes. The change from a presential, office-based work model to a fully remote one happened as no other options were available. In the CorpoHealth case, for example, it changed how it approached work forever, adopting a remote-first approach and hiring several people from Northeastern Brazilian states. Even the company founders had left the Greater São Paulo region, so returning to office would be costly and impractical (ST05; Liu, 2018).

The learning point for Cognisoft to update its HR practices for remote work was realizing that the pandemic would be long-lasting, leading to workflow improvements and even creating a remote work manual for the company (ST09). Under hybrid work, each area in Cognisoft defined how often, when, and for what people would work in the office, as there are different demands and dynamics (ST12).

In DemandInspect and HashCard's cases, the learning point of when to return to the office was getting a positive reaction from internal assessments, starting from initial rejection to defining conditions and schedules (ST02; ST11; Rupčić, 2018).

Still, there are other cases of learning moments on when to implement a policy or practice. Every company in this study mentioned the difficulty of hiring development workers, as tech talent is scarce and their market is overheated, with global competition for

the same professionals. It also led to different approaches to hiring and keeping those workers in the company based on each startup's culture, values, and work practices.

The cash burn rate is an example of a potential trigger to action for adjusting expenditures to match revenue, which may include dismissing professionals (ST04; INVC). Pivoting the business model triggers the action, but reevaluating may also be necessary, as mentioned by participant INVB, because it is possible that not every practice makes sense or works under new conditions.

CorpoHealth's incentive to take English courses happened because it would benefit everybody to know terms in the English language that are widespread in the startup's context or even to make presentations for investors (ST08).

A learning point to hiring HR staff may relate to the company's growth: The need to scale hiring to provide adequate people in the needed quality and quantity, to center processes (ST10), or to reduce the number of simultaneous processes, which could reduce the quality of new hires (ST13).

There are size-related learning points for implementing or removing HR practices. Collaborative tasks such as indicating improvement points in a feature only happen until a certain point since the company has evolved large enough that it is not possible to have the involvement of everyone in everything all the time (ST09).

In Plytech, recruitment and selection were more straightforward before implementing an HR area (ST14). Moreover, Cognisoft's performance assessment system, which discusses each employee individually, with an overview and a list of improvements made, may not be possible to keep in a much larger company (ST10), at least not without scaling its HR.

How HR can improve a company: As expected, an HR area benefits a company in several ways, the very first of them being the ability to delegate duties to a specialist instead of assigning those duties to a company founder, spending its time and efforts (ST01; Buller & Napier, 1993).

Centralizing tasks around HR was a common mention during this research. Cognisoft has centered recruitment on increasing the reliability of the process (ST09) and the engagement process data to manage it (ST12). For Cognisoft, centering recruitment in HR allowed more hiring volume and optimized its efficacy (ST10). DemandInspect centralized work information and documents in a third-party, HR-operated app (ST02). Plytech centralized HR-relevant interactions between employees and the company under its platform (ST13).

An established HR helps to structure other HR-related processes in a startup (Dutra, 2013; Boudlaie et al., 2022), such as onboarding or performance assessment. For continuous improvement, there are in DemandInspect some key questions since the onboarding process to assess if there was anything that could change to make workplace learning easier (ST03). As part of the onboarding, showing new employees their possible career paths may be a good practice (ST03). A welcome kit with small gifts (ST06) and work explanations and instructions is another possible task for HR to centralize and handle (ST06; ST08).

Cognisoft's approach to onboarding, for example, focuses on four main points: The company's product, culture, team structure, and employee experience (ST09). This baseline should keep things real and avoid selling false expectations (ST09). Onboarding is an ongoing, ever-developing practice that a company may improve by using OKRs or any other way of collecting insights to work them in correcting gaps, lacks, or even improvement points (ST02).

A structured HR area also helps in handling performance assessment. HR may provide a general overview of the employees in a team, their development, and improvement points (ST02; ST03; ST10). It may also provide ground for organizing jobs, requirements, complexity levels, expected deliveries, and performance levels, which allows managers to provide a fair assessment, indicating if someone is ready for a promotion, needs further development, or to even considering dismissing an employee (ST04; ST05; ST10).

By acknowledging a team's most or least productive members, a structured performance assessment system may help develop teams (ST04; ST05; ST12) and provide data for management (ST13). If there is an identified skill gap, according to how related people perform, it may indicate a new, specialized hire (ST10). Through performance assessment, it is also possible to understand how employee experiences happen at work, complaints or demands to keep improving the organization and its structures (ST14)

HR may also act to help engage people around the work, providing a receptive environment (ST07), giving these people a sense of purpose (ST11; ST13; ST14; Cruz et al., 2019), or structuring career development as a way to acknowledge and reward people for their efforts (ST02; ST03; ST07). The incentive to continuously improve processes for the benefit of all reflects that culture comes from the founders but spreads to the whole organization (ST01).

HR as a culture enhancer: HR helped to shape, reinforce, and spread the culture of each company for employees and even for prospective candidates. While culture is an

essential theme for every startup under the sun, helping them to project an identity, innovate and navigate changes and uncertainties (Kaczam et al., 2022), only a single company (HashCard) had a culture-dedicated practitioner among its interviewed participants. On the other hand, CorpoHealth had an area leader related to diversity and inclusion, a part of the company's organizational culture (ST08).

During recruitment and selection processes, the search for cultural fit between companies and candidates often happens: Cognisoft (for assessing behavior and cultural fit), CorpoHealth (to reinforce values such as diversity and inclusion), and Plytech (cultural fit) are the described examples of this, which does not rule out that other participating companies may assess cultural fit as well in one way or another. HashCard looks for a candidate profile that suits behavior and technically the company's requirements for a job position, while in DemandInspect the potential workers have a previous shortlisting process.

HR for HRTechs: Regarding the HRTechs, both of them (Cognisoft and Plytech) that participated in this thesis benefitted their HR areas by offering an HR-related product to the market since human resources are both part of a company's structure and a part of its core business. In Cognisoft, for example, it was reported that acting in the HR market would ease attracting prospective workers from areas related to human resources (ST14).

These companies may benefit from improving and validating internally with their HR before the commercial release of products, incorporating insights from platform usage, or interacting with other areas during the product improvement (ST13). The usage experience also may provide insight and indicators to support management decisions (ST12) or measure goals and deliveries (ST10).

Being familiar with the HR system, which in this case is both a work tool and a sales product, is also helpful (ST09). It is possible to even interact with customers and their HR areas to exchange information about the system and their experiences, allowing them to compare practices and learned lessons to improve the platform and HRTech's internal HR area (S14; Armstrong & Taylor, 2014; Han & Stieha, 2020).

Learning how to hire and retain: Hiring is a practice in virtually any startup that grows until reaching the operational stage. Still, hiring happens differently and for different reasons in the studied companies. How and why someone joins a company may also affect their tenure.

As mentioned in the Cognisoft case but not necessarily restricted to that company, it is necessary to ensure that a specific hire makes sense for the company in its current stage (ST09; ST12). Financial viability may also be a factor for startups in earlier stages, so these companies also need to consider if it is possible to solve the problems that a startup proposes to address without transferring them inside the company, now with a challenging payroll burden to solve (ST01).

A shortlist or referral from a personal network may be a way to hire people with previous recommendations from a current employee (ST02; ST04; Mukul & Saini, 2021). Starting a recruitment process only for open job positions instead of just fulfilling a talent pool may help avoid undesirable surprises for the candidate (ST04). The ability to scale hiring processes to increase the headcount vastly in a short period is a desirable capacity for scaling startups (ST05; ST13). Distributing these processes helps to avoid lowering the hiring efficacy due to an overload of hires simultaneously (ST13).

The context behind the need to hire developers and the competition for these valued workers (Lucas et al., 2013b; Costa, 2019) led to the need to develop different recruitment approaches for these and possibly lay the ground for customizing recruitment and selection for different or specialist positions to fulfill.

It was possible to identify some measures inside hiring processes that are specific for tech talent, such as: “Live coding” tests (ST05; ST09; ST11), objective and technical interviews (ST09; ST11), shortened hiring processes (ST05; ST14), or even reducing the emphasis on cultural aspects that are secondary for these professionals (ST09; ST14).

Tech recruiters are possible, but this is only the case for a few startups because sometimes the company needs to be larger to afford that hire, so other options must be on the table (ST14). Trying to convince the tech talent that the company is good enough for them to work may help developers proceed with the recruitment process (ST12).

It may be challenging to attract development workers for a company, but making them stay is at least as crucial (Jose et al., 2021) since replacing a scarce professional can be costly, complicated, and time-demanding. Culture plays a significant role in maintaining talented people in a company, spreading values, maintaining engagement, and giving employees a sense of purpose and a reason to stay (ST11; ST13; ST14).

The onboarding process may help transmit these aspects to a new hire (ST09). However, each company needs to find its balance of reasons and approaches to convince people to remain loyal and engaged with the startup’s values and purposes.

Do size and industry matter?: There are a few things to consider in this aspect. Regarding size, for example, the larger company, CorpoHealth (the only participating company with hundreds of people), was also the one with the most structured and detailed HR policies and practices, including an area for diversity and inclusion relatable to the HR area.

This structure and complexity may relate to the amount of funding received. As a company that reached Series A investment round, CorpoHealth had many more resources to develop and structure than its counterparts from this study. HashCard went through a complete acquisition process at once, so despite the values involved (a few hundred million R\$), it remains operating under a relatively small team.

As previously pointed out (under section 5.2.3), there is little or no interference from investors in the studied cases for this thesis. In part, it may have happened due to the investment choices made by both companies and investors so that investors would be partners to help when possible, not bosses that make demands (ST08) or give orders to the invested company (ST01; Teten et al., 2013).

The relations between invested companies and investors showed no significant difference in the studied cases, being a mutually beneficial exchange of ideas and experiences (ST04). The HR structuring happened similarly, starting from nowhere or a pretty basic HR structure, from recruitment to providing scaling capacity of the headcount and some administrative tasks to reduce the amount of work from a founder and allow it to focus on other aspects of the business.

That may have happened because of the favorable context for startup investment in recent years. The so-called “easy money,” with high amounts and low requirements, is running dry at the time of this study (from late 2022 until the first days of 2023), so startups may need to pay more attention to aspects such as revenue and expenditures as other companies would need to (Browne, 2022).

In this new era of increasing risk, rising interest rates, and fewer available resources for investment, the attention progressively turns to sustainability and climate tech companies, which already amassed more than a quarter of investments in 2022, to help match goals for emission rates (Cox, Johnson, Jackson-Moore, & Moussa, 2022).

Plytech, the company with the more significant HR headcount among the other participating companies, also featured structuring and detailing its HR area, policies, and practices. As mentioned before, a possible explanation for the increased headcount is that this is an HRTech that involves its HR sporadically as part of the product development process, if needed, or to benefit the internal HR.

On the other hand, Cognisoft also featured an established and structured HR area, despite its relatively low headcount of HR-exclusive workers. Their highlight is recruitment and selection practices, which may be explainable since the company started as a hiring-related product before pivoting to a full commercial HR suit, giving a competitive advantage in that aspect.

The industry may also affect HR in other ways. HashCard, as a fintech, had to consider not only plain legal compliance before implementing an HR practice, for example, but regulations from Bacen to avoid creating some legal liability. Plytech also considered these potential legal consequences before implementing some HR benefits to avoid breaching any labor law.

DemandInspect has many external workers that may enter the internal structure through the quality department but, until that, remain external to work with client companies, working under flexible agreements. It may be relatable to the fact that a proptech works with many different tasks for external clients, usually real estate companies, agents, or even the final customers. It may also be a type of outsourcing practice similar to that mentioned by participant INVB as a short-term solution before achieving size and traction relevant enough to hire exclusive, diversified, and specialized workers.

Challenges and opportunities: The participating startups of this study had, despite some industry and location differences, some similarities that need mentioning. Most of them had a similar number of employees and a similar age; all were founded less than ten years ago.

Starting to scale or even starting the operational stage during the Covid-19 pandemic certainly brought challenges for these companies, such as an impromptu adapting to remote work and improving practices to extract the most results out of that situation, temporary or not. As Edmondson and Moingeon (1998) mentioned, adapting involves changes in the context of organizational learning and may help respond to both opportunities and threats.

Meanwhile, culture had a challenge and presented itself as an asset for the studied startups during the pandemic: Keeping workers safe and engaged, maintaining and reinforcing culture despite social distancing and restrictions to meeting and working together. These were examples of difficulties for organizational culture but challenges where culture was essential to keep these companies running.

As the pandemic is fading, there are points to address, such as a deeper look into work benefits, diversity, and inclusion (including other aspects such as diversity of beliefs,

sexuality, and even neurodiversity), mental health, or The Great Resignation. This recent phenomenon led to increased freelancing, knowledge loss, and difficulties in hiring and retaining people (Serenko, in press).

The Great Resignation led people to reconsider career choices, possibly choosing to privilege well-being in the work-life balance, opting for early retirement, or even leaving careers, which seems particularly relevant for healthcare workers, especially demanded and stressed during the pandemic (Sheather & Slattery, 2021; Formica & Sfodera, 2022).

People will quit their jobs for various reasons, even after the pandemic. Nevertheless, most are not quitting the labor market forever but rearranging themselves into new, better positions or careers (Krugman, 2022). In that matter, a company that succeeds in engaging its people to remain and succeed while attracting others may have a significant competitive advantage.

The economic recovery is underway, even if things are still away from before. There are fewer resources available and more uncertainties, from healthcare crises and supply chain disruptions to the threat of large-scale conflict. However, companies can make their mark with their HR areas by caring about their people and structuring their processes before storming markets with innovative products and solutions.

Summarizing: Figure 10 shows a collection of themes that may interest researchers or practitioners regarding HR and implementation in startup companies. HR areas overall played a support role in the participating cases, acting to improve and implement changes that may benefit an organization and its human capital.

Insights	Comments
When to start HR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The first HR-exclusive staff depends on the context, happening one way or another among the first hundred people, as the founders start only being able to handle HR and bureaucracy with help from a dedicated HR employee. • It usually happens between 50 and 60 people, but it may be with a slightly higher or lower headcount.
When to implement in HR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budget plays a significant role, but demand and necessity influence. • Adopting overnight remote work policies because of Covid-19 was a shared problem, but the solutions varied to fit their realities better. • Company growth is a meaningful trigger for implementation as the startup gain scale and becomes more complex.
How HR can improve a company	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HR can centralize tasks, structure processes, and integrate new people, for example. • HR may also help in performance assessment or by subsidizing decision-making processes.
HR as a culture enhancer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culture is crucial for startups, and HR may help to establish cultural aspects inside a company. • Cultural fit often appeared concerning recruitment and selection processes.
HR for HRTechs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They may benefit from improving and validating some HR solutions internally before releasing them to the market. • In those companies, HR is simultaneously an organizational structure and a core part of the business.
Learning how to hire and retain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hiring is the most relevant HR practice for developing startups, being crucial to provide talented people with the needed amount and pace to allow scaling operations. • As exemplified by the difficulties of hiring and retaining tech talent, the context behind different careers or roles may require different approaches, possibly involving a specifically-tailored process.
Do size and industry matter?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Larger companies may present more structured areas because of their financial capacity, providing more detailed policies and practices. • It may also relate to the amount of funding received, although every participating company related little to no interference from the investors. • Apart from some legal compliance for acting in a regulated area (as with HashCard, a Fintech), the industry little interfered with the participating companies' HR (but indirect interference is difficult to assess).
Challenges and opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adapting to remote work and keeping employees safe and engaged with the company was challenging. • It was possible to identify other points that may need attention in the future, such as diversity and inclusion, mental health, or staff rearrangements as the pandemic fades.

Figure 10: Insights from HR implementation. *Source:* Made by the author.

The triggers to starting an HR area and implementing some HR policy or practice helped to notice that startups may have some issues in common. However, their responses can differ since a problem may impact companies differently.

That ends the last section of the results and analysis from this thesis. The following section, which is the last, concludes the text while reflecting on the objectives, the studied cases, some limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

7. CONCLUSION AND FINAL REMARKS

This study aimed to increase knowledge of human resources management policies and practices, particularly in the context of up-and-coming, thriving startups that acquired some complexity and traction but are not just big, intricate tech companies that barely resemble their original selves. Implementing an HR area allows a startup company to provide an adequate structure to support its needs, whether recruiting, developing, engaging, or retaining people to perform at the required level, enhancing its human capital to bring a competitive advantage to that company (Buller & Napier, 1993; Mukul & Saini, 2021).

An original contribution from this thesis is to study, describe, and analyze HR implementation in Brazilian startups from the company background and potentially triggering events to learning patterns or heuristics as part of an organizational learning analysis lens. All of this happened during the Covid-19 pandemic, a worldwide, once-in-a-lifetime event that required quick, precise, and sometimes harsh decisions while offering little to no hints on how to proceed in a situation like this. Facing the unknown and making the most of it is part of a startup company's reality, so the participating companies were required to prove themselves, learning and adapting to survive and thrive in such an extreme situation.

Considering the central question of this study, “*How do startups implement human resources management policies and practices?*,” the studied cases show that startup companies implement their policies and practices based on their needs as they grow. Usually, the structuring of these policies and practices will start with hiring the first HR-specific employee, but that may vary depending on the skillsets of the founders, which are the first HR in most startups.

That leads to the general objective of the thesis, “*Analyze how scaled-up startup companies implement their human resources management areas.*” These companies start delegating HR duties to a founder or outsourcing to a third-party company. At some point, these tasks demand too much from a structure that is not HR-specific, whether a founder or an outsourced company doing administrative duty.

When this happens, the startup hires its first HR-specific employee, effectively starting its HR area in most cases. Insights from the studied cases show that the average startup will hire its first HR staff during its first hundred employees, usually between 40 and 60, but possibly as early as 30 or as late as 80, according to circumstances. The founding team's industry adequacy and HR management skills (or lack thereof) may influence hiring the first HR person later (or sooner).

Employing a multiple case study approach allowed this research to explore in-depth a few startups that agreed to participate and provided contacts with their employees to schedule and run individual interviews for discussing their perceptions about HR implementation under a semistructured script (the baseline script for startup members is in Appendix A and the script for actors from the investment and startup ecosystem is in Appendix B). The number of cases may seem low at first sight, but still above the minimum recommended numbers found in the literature (Eisenhardt, 1989; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Perry, 1998).

Data collection happened in startups from different industries and located in two Brazilian states: Santa Catarina (SC) and São Paulo (SP). Additionally, in the complementary case, from investment and startup ecosystem actors, one of the participants, the Edtech from participant INVb, was based in the Minas Gerais (MG) state. It may relate to the importance of these states (SC and SP) in the Brazilian startup ecosystem and their concentration over regions as service providers to customers (Li, Kenney, Patton, & Song, in press), but it is not possible to confirm this with only a few studied cases.

The first case, DemandInspect, is a PropTech that connects real estate owners to potential customers. It needs to divide efforts between internal workers performing office-related tasks and external workers related to specific tasks in property inspection, such as photography. Their people structure connects internal and external workers by the quality area and its HR, yet to thoroughly structure career paths, focuses on culture, engagement, and feedback to keep staff productive while reverting insights from feedback to improve knowledge and processes.

Case number two, CorpoHealth, is a HealthTech that has experienced expressive growth since the pandemic, changing quickly to a remote-first model but adapting equally quickly to context changes. An example happened in the massive layoff during early 2022 when resources available to startups started to become scarce, which led to the need for better operational results to remain competitive and financially stable. The company constantly assesses internal surveys to align feedback with development while betting on diversity and inclusion to empower people and evaluate them according only to behavior and performance.

HashCard, the third case, is a Fintech that bets on an informal structure to give people agency and mobility to bring the desired solutions to its challenges. It constantly reinforces the company values through hashtags to communicate directly with people, employing job rotation to explore possibilities, and aligning reasonings and expectations before implementing new practices in the workplace in a daring, hands-on approach, where HR acts

as the support and mobilizing factor. The company was acquired by a VC fund a few years ago, and since then, it has reached a financial breakeven and now grows steadily.

Cognisoft, case number four, is an HRTech that shifted from a recruitment product to a SaaS platform that employs an algorithm to extract data from raw information pieces, greatly benefiting from an increase in remote work since 2020. There is little structuring in several HR functions to give people the most agility and empowerment possible, to the point that it can be called a “no policies” policy. Despite that, they developed different general routines for hiring people according to intended jobs, focusing on cultural fit (except for development openings), double-checking, and practical tests/applied cases.

The fifth and last case, Plytech, the second HRTech from this study, offers a SaaS platform to monitor continuously organizational culture and engagement for mining insights that may be useful for managers. Its HR area began as the company started scaling its operation to help to structure hiring processes. However, now the area is large and experienced enough even to help validate new features in the platform before public release or to interact with customers to help them operate the platform while getting insights that may be of use internally.

The complementary case contains people related to the investment and startup ecosystem, having interviewed an angel investor, the president of an association of startups, and the head of finance from an early-stage startup. The first two have founded their own startup companies (a recruiter for startups and an Edtech, respectively). They exposed a few reasons for investing in a startup, from financial ones to help foster the entrepreneurial ecosystem to a few insights on adapting to hardships and structuring a startup for future, continual growth.

Considering the first specific objective, “*Describe how startups decide to implement HRM policies and practices,*” it was possible to notice that the triggering event usually was some difficulty that people in the company noticed and decided to take action to solve. In some interviews (e.g., ST05), this triggering event was called a pain or even a pain point. Regardless of the naming employed, the action to undertake would need to consider the problem to solve, the startup context, its culture, and its values before leading into action and taking implementation. Also, there may be situation-specific solutions that would not be as effective in other timeframes.

An implemented policy or practice at one point in time may not benefit the organization at another point or even be unavailable. Hence, companies need to reevaluate constantly to assess if something implemented before still makes sense or if the efficacy

remains. There were different solutions across the text, but one way or another, measuring results and perceptions from workers may provide information and insights, helping any decision-making process related to improving, updating, maintaining, or even reverting a change.

In the second specific objective, “*Identify whether a Venture Capital investor joining these companies had any influence on the decision to implement HRM policies,*” no participating company reported a direct influence from investors over their HRM-related decisions. Participants from the startups in this thesis mentioned that the investors usually interact collaboratively, learning from received insights and reports while exposing their experiences to help develop these businesses.

Even in the HashCard case, where a VC fund acquired the company, there was little interference in HR affairs, so that the company could act autonomously. That said, this positive working relationship could happen because the participating companies chose their investors at a favorable moment, preferring those aligned with the companies and their values to act as partners.

Things could work differently in a harsher investing environment with fewer investment options, higher risks, and lower values. It is also possible that a given innovation or solution is no more a novelty, reducing the perceived or potential value and making it harder for a business to keep extracting value over time. When does a disruptive solution stop disrupting, and how to keep selling that business idea to customers and investors?

The third specific objective, “*Verify if and how startups adapt their strategies to handle contextual factors toward implementing HR policies and practices,*” has shown that startups monitor what happens in the market to implement or improve a policy or practice. It relates partially to the first specific objective and the triggering events that may lead to HR implementation. However, the main point here is that, yes, startups can adapt strategies to gain competitive advantage, reduce losses, or avoid closing their operations, as things unveil.

The Covid-19 pandemic was an example of this, as an unprecedented and critical event that reached virtually every company and person, triggering implementations to adapt to a new context, initially with mandatory remote work, but afterward allowing some flexibilization and hybrid work, or even a total return to offices.

The need to hire system and software development professionals, despite the difficulty of hiring those professionals due to fierce competition, was another event that triggered adapting strategies and practices from startup companies to recruit and retain those professionals among the participating companies’ ranks. In general, hiring processes for these

tech talents became faster and more straightforward to match and beat the competition, with less emphasis on cultural aspects during recruitment talks since it had little effect on convincing them to join.

It is still being determined at this point if these workers' high demand and their shortage will continue for extended periods or if this is a temporary issue. However, companies have found a way to approach developers for job positions. Furthermore, if things change again, companies may adapt and make new strategies and decisions as part of continuous development.

The fourth and last specific objective was “*According to managers in startup companies, verify the perceived importance of the HR management area and its implementation.*” HR plays a strategic role in the studied companies in some duties that are fundamental for a startup company, especially one that is scaling its operation.

Recruitment and selection compose an essential yet complex practice that startups need to structure and handle to enable an accelerated growth phase. Some companies from this study have deliberately chosen to avoid sudden growth as part of their strategies. Intensive and exponential growth in a brief period is expensive, overloads hiring professionals (possibly requiring new hiring professionals or help from third-party professionals for the task), and may cost even more if the new hires fail to show results.

Acting as the culture guardian in their companies is another strategic role that every HR area from this thesis played. Founders may initially define the culture, but it is an HR area that will work on it, coordinating efforts and providing engagement and a sense of purpose while offering structuring guidance for other areas on values and procedures.

A contribution from this study is that, at the time of writing this thesis, there was no study of HR implementation in Brazilian startups, let alone considering the Covid-19 pandemic as a trigger for HR implementation or actively searching for learning points and event triggers as part of an OL analysis lens.

Researchers may analyze the choices, methods, and results obtained for improving their future endeavors, as discussed further at the end of this section. Similar efforts in a different context or timing may produce different and exciting results, and different approaches could result in more unique findings.

HR practitioners may read these pages to understand situations, contexts, triggers, and decisions made, possibly comparing with their contexts and experiences if there is a similar question (such as when to improve or modify a hiring routine) and collecting insights to adapt

and apply in their companies according to their criteria and reasonings (Gilbert-Saad et al., 2023).

At this point, it is valid to state that this study has some limitations the reader needs to observe before applying insights from here in other contexts. First, the research for this thesis happened in a very particular timeframe, under uncertainties of every kind. The facts here related happened during the Covid-19 pandemic, a massive public health crisis with no precedents from 1918-2020 (the Spanish Flu pandemic in the aftermath of World War I).

Covid-19 led to secondary events that may not happen again in the foreseeable future¹⁰, such as most companies shifting overnight from office-based work to fully remote schedules and implementing new policies and practices out of the blue amid uncertainty and financial turmoil.

During data collecting, an armed conflict between Ukraine and Russia started in early 2022 and continues as this study ends. The Brazilian general election in late 2022, with the closest presidential election result so far, was a highly polarized event that generated lots of tension. The list of relevant facts during the thesis writing is vast and shows the pressure from multiple types and sources over countries, companies, and individuals.

Regarding methods, the main limitation in employing both qualitative research and multiple case studies is that it is impossible to generalize insights and findings beyond the studied cases and their surrounding contexts. Similar decisions under different industries, sizes, locations, markets, or even times may result in different results. The reader is encouraged to read and reflect on the whole context and the available solutions before making their own decision for any individual case.

Still, in qualitative research, there is considerable subjectivity behind available information, categories employed, interpretation, and analysis in general. Even quantitative data needed interpreting before transforming into qualitative data or inserting into the analysis context. For example, how many years of experience are too many or too few in an industry? Startups are high-risk, ever-changing, and quick-paced environments, making it difficult to find long tenures in a single company or industry except in specific events, such as founding a startup.

Exploring beyond time-specific events such as the pandemic, the limited amounts of time, resources, and contacts may have limited the study to achieve many cases. However, there were signs of saturation when a second HRTech entered the pool of participants.

¹⁰ A massive and unexpected health crisis like this may happen again at some point, but as participant ST10 has done during his interview, let ourselves “knock on wood three times” about that.

Even though Santa Catarina and São Paulo are two relevant states for the startup ecosystem in Brazil, an additional limitation on the sampling may reside in the fact that only these states had participating companies in the study. On the other hand, since the study required a certain maturity level from the companies, including headcount and at least an HR-exclusive professional, several potential companies could not participate due to not having reached the required size at the time data collection happened.

The “resistance” from the research field is also a point that needs mentioning. From almost a hundred companies, there was the same number of companies that participated in the interviews and rejected immediately participating in any research. It may have happened for many reasons, from unfortunate timing to the fact that there was no study similar to this with Brazilian startups.

HR implementation is an exciting research theme, as well as organizational learning or startup companies. Considering the first two are context-dependent while the last one is ever-changing, some innovative research opportunities may be awaiting a researcher to unveil.

The studied cases were from different industries, but they all had reached a certain maturity point to be eligible for the study. Future research could compare the results from these companies to the realities and perceptions of startups in earlier stages, maybe even a preoperational one, to ascertain if companies in those earlier stages are able or willing to begin their HR areas at a similar size.

Alternatively, a future study could compare HR implementation between startups and traditional companies in a similar context and timeframe to ascertain how these companies fare and if there are hints of similar or unique behaviors, events, patterns, or even difficulties in HR implementation.

Also, there were different contract types, such as DemandInspect and the zero-hour workers on their quality team (mainly for economic reasons, but that may not be the whole story behind the phenomena). A potential working hypothesis for a future study could be if having different contract models can somehow impact HR tasks, attributions, and actions in such companies.

Another comparative possibility is including in future efforts startups from more Brazilian regions or even those from other Latin American countries. That will allow verifying if there is any significant regional difference that needs addressing before the analysis and implementation of a particular practice, for example.

Future research could do the exact opposite from what happened here and, instead of selecting multiple cases to find similarities and singularities, conduct a more profound

observation of a single, relevant startup trying to find answers to similar questions. How could an HR area develop in a well-succeeded startup, from the ground to unicorn?

Some of the study's related difficulties or limitations may indicate a way to conduct future endeavors. Regarding the time constraint previously mentioned, there is a possibility to find different insights and conclusions by applying a longitudinal design across several years and involving adding and removing participants over time, as these companies may come and go.

Suppose the problem to address is the qualitative nature of the research. In that case, a quantitative study could find if and how the presence or intensity of an HR practice impacted a measurable indicator, such as financial outputs, scores from eNPS surveys, or turnover rates. In that case, the sample size may be an issue, but one that is possible to address by, for example, changing the unit of analysis from companies to individuals.

There may be an incoming startup winter with a lower valuation, fewer opportunities to attract investment rounds (especially under similarly favorable conditions), and a fickle socioeconomic scenario that may last for a few months or even years. Although, it is necessary to navigate through grounds and possibilities to gather resources and survive those potentially hard times, with no success guaranteed.

The future researcher may find different companies and challenges for their studies. However, these come with different research opportunities, whether because of different contexts, industries, or sizes. Different times may require different measures to handle a triggering event in common or even a new, unprecedented one.

As pointed out in a famous letter by investment firm Y Combinator (2022), mentioned by participant INVC during its interview, under this uncertainty scenario, the safest bet was trying to survive the day since one can “pick up significant market share in an economic downturn by just staying alive.” Whatever the change, it must have a reason and purpose to make sense and impact the organization because, as the late chef, writer, and TV host Anthony Bourdain (1956-2018) could say, “luck is not a business model,” adding that “without new ideas, success can become stale.”¹¹

¹¹ Quotes extracted from Inc.com (2020). *17 Anthony Bourdain Quotes on Food, Business, and Life That Will Inspire You*. Retrieved from: < <https://web.archive.org/web/20200814145126/https://www.inc.com/peter-economy/17-anthony-bourdain-quotes-on-food-business-life.html> >. Date retrieved: Feb. 08, 2023.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A – SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCRIPT (STARTUPS)

All cases except the last, complementary one used the structure and questions from this appendix.

English translation

Profile questions:

- Age and gender;
- Role or position;
- Academical background;
- Time in the job;
- Time in the company.

HR policies and practices: (Dutra, 2013; Boudlaie et al., 2022)

- Recruitment and selection; (Boudlaie et al., 2022; Ferreira et al., 2022)
- Is there a communication system? (Belle, 2016; Rudeloff et al., 2022)
- Is there a bonus system? (Guest, 1987; Cabrera & Bonache, 1999)
- Are there practices to increase people's commitment to the company? (Cruz et al., 2019; Mukul & Saini, 2021)

HR implementation (mandatory questions):

1. What event led your company to implement a specific HR management policy or practice? Why? (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014; Basten & Haamann, 2018; McMackin & Heffernan, 2021; Ferreira et al., 2022)

2. Who decides and defines the implementation of HR management in the organization? (Cook & Yanow, 1993; Evans & Davis, 2005; Garidis & Rossmann, 2019; Mukul & Saini, 2021)
3. Did this decision to implement HR management happen due to any influence or suggestion from funders or investors? (Cook & Yanow, 1993; Crossan et al., 1999; Paschen, 2017; Croce et al., 2018)
4. Is there an evaluation of HR management when implemented? Is there a system of goals? (Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Chen et al., 2011; Guest & Conway, 2011; Kunz, 2015)
5. Are there participatory forms in the elaboration of HR management policies and practices? (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014; Sikora et al., 2015; Rupčić, 2018; Mowbray et al., 2022)
6. What are the most relevant HR Management policies and practices at this company? Are they strategically aligned with the company's goals? (Cabrera & Bonache, 1999; Bendickson et al., 2017; Liu, 2018; Cruz et al., 2019)

Portuguese (original) version

Questões de perfil:

- Idade e gênero;
- Cargo ou função;
- Trajetória acadêmica;
- Tempo no cargo;
- Tempo na organização.

Políticas e práticas de RH: (Dutra, 2013; Boudlaie et al., 2022)

- Recrutamento e seleção; (Boudlaie et al., 2022; Ferreira et al., 2022)
- Há um sistema de comunicação? (Belle, 2016; Rudeloff et al., 2022)
- Há um sistema de bonificação? (Guest, 1987; Cabrera & Bonache, 1999)
- Há práticas de aumento de comprometimento das pessoas com a empresa? (Cruz et al., 2019; Mukul & Saini, 2021)

Implementação de RH (questões obrigatórias):

1. Que evento levou sua empresa a implementar uma política ou prática específica de gestão de RH? Por quê? (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014; Basten & Haamann, 2018; McMackin & Hefferman, 2021; Ferreira et al., 2022)
2. Quem decide e define sobre a implementação da gestão de RH na organização? (Cook & Yanow, 1993; Evans & Davis, 2005; Garidis & Rossmann, 2019; Mukul & Saini, 2021)
3. Esta decisão sobre a implementação da gestão de RH ocorreu por alguma influência ou sugestão dos financiadores ou investidores? (Cook & Yanow, 1993; Crossan et al., 1999; Paschen, 2017; Croce et al., 2018)
4. Há avaliação da gestão de RH quando implementada? Existe um sistema de metas? (Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Chen et al., 2011; Guest & Conway, 2011; Kunz, 2015)
5. Há formas participativas na elaboração das políticas e práticas de gestão de RH? (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014; Sikora et al., 2015; Rupčić, 2018; Mowbray et al., 2022)
6. Quais são as políticas e práticas de gestão de RH mais relevantes desta empresa? Elas estão alinhadas estrategicamente aos objetivos da empresa? (Cabrera & Bonache, 1999; Bendickson et al., 2017; Liu, 2018; Cruz et al., 2019)

APPENDIX B – SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCRIPT (INVESTMENT AND STARTUP ECOSYSTEM ACTORS)

The structure and questions contained in this appendix were employed for the complementary case only.

English translation

Profile questions:

- Age and gender;
- Role or position;
- Operating time;
- Operating focus.

Motivation questions:

- What was the main motivation for working in this segment?
- What was the main contribution of your acting?
- What are the main challenges in your activity?

Investment and development (mandatory questions):

1. What must a startup present to be an investment with potential? (Baird & Meshoulam, 1988; Hvide & Møen, 2010; Armstrong & Taylor, 2014; Abreu & Campos, 2016)
2. When should a startup start structuring its HR while capitalizing and gaining traction? (Churchill & Lewis, 1983; Paschen, 2017; Lazar et al., 2020)
3. What is the minimum HR structure that a startup needs to be able to grow scalably? (Paschen, 2017; Lazar et al., 2020; Molnár & Jaki, 2020)
4. What policies, practices, and control systems should HR have in place to support continuous improvement in a startup? (Teten et al., 2013; Gilbert-Saad et al., 2023)

5. How can a startup adapt its HR policies and practices to manage changing scenarios and remain competitive and financially viable? (Blank, 2013; Cusumano, 2013; Cruz et al., 2019)

Portuguese (original) version

Questões sobre perfil:

- Idade e gênero;
- Cargo ou função;
- Tempo de atuação;
- Foco de atuação.

Questões sobre motivação:

- Qual foi o principal motivador para atuar neste segmento?
- Qual a principal contribuição de sua atuação?
- Quais os principais desafios em sua atividade?

Investimento e desenvolvimento (questões obrigatórias):

1. O que uma startup deve apresentar para ser um investimento com potencial? (Baird & Meshoulam, 1988; Hvide & Møen, 2010; Armstrong & Taylor, 2014; Abreu & Campos, 2016)
2. Quando uma startup deve começar a estruturar seu RH enquanto se capitaliza e ganha tração? (Churchill & Lewis, 1983; Paschen, 2017; Lazar et al., 2020)
3. Qual a estrutura mínima de RH que uma startup precisa para poder crescer de forma escalável? (Paschen, 2017; Lazar et al., 2020; Molnár & Jaki, 2020)
4. Quais políticas, práticas e sistemas de controle o RH deve apresentar para suportar a melhoria contínua em uma startup? (Teten et al., 2013; Gilbert-Saad et al., 2023)
5. Como uma startup pode adaptar suas políticas e práticas de RH para lidar com mudanças de cenário e se manter competitiva e financeiramente viável? (Blank, 2013; Cusumano, 2013; Cruz et al., 2019)

APPENDIX C – RANGES FOR QUALITIZED TERMS

Company size (headcount):

- Small: Lower than 100 people;
- Medium: Between 101 and 250 people;
- Large: Between 251 and 1,000 people;
- Very large: More than 1,000 people.

Increase/decrease rates:

- Minimum: Lower than 1%;
- Slight: Between 1% and 25%;
- Moderate: Between 26% and 100%;
- Expressive: Between 101% and 1,000%;
- Exponential: More than 1,000%.

Numbers:

- A few: Less than 10;
- Some: Between 11 and 25;
- Many: Between 26 and 100;
- Several: Between 101 and 1,000;
- Lots of: More than 1,000.

Age:

- Underage: Lower than 18;
- Young adult: Between 18 and 30;
- Adult: Between 31 and 40;
- Middle-aged: Between 41 and 50;
- Mature: Between 51 and 60;
- Old: More than 60.