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Organizational Structure Elements as Building Blocks for Trust: A study on the effects of organizational structure elements on employees' organizational trust.

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ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE ELEMENTS AS BUILDING BLOCKS FOR TRUST

*A study on the effects of organizational structure elements
on employees' organizational trust.*



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Abstract

Fostering trust in organizations is challenging and a central concern for modern-day leaders and academics alike. Trust comes on foot and goes away on horseback, as illustrated by many organizations that struggle to build trust relationships with employees and external stakeholders. A growing body of management research emphasizes the pivotal role of trust in employee retention, productivity, learning, and more. Often, the focus lies with leadership and culture in relation to trust. This article contributes to this debate by investigating the research gap of what organizational structure elements influence employees' organizational trust in the Dutch context through a survey conducted among 110 Dutch employees of public and private organizations. The findings revealed that structural design significantly impacts trust dynamics. Specialization and span of control emerged as positive predictors of trust, while centralization and hierarchy negatively influenced trust. Notably, formalization and standardization showed no significant effects, as did the hypothesized sectoral differences, indicating that structural predictors of trust have similar effects across the public and private sectors in the Dutch context. By demonstrating the significance of structural design, this study also emphasizes the need for further investigation on why and how organizational structure elements influence employees' organizational trust in a general context, in supplement to leadership and culture. In addition, the findings offer several actionable insights for organizational leaders.

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Introduction

Trust is often described as the ‘glue’ of organizational relationships, fostering cooperation, innovation, and resilience in organizations (Zak, 2018). In the context of organizational research, trust is a multidimensional and multifaceted concept that has been widely studied. Multiple scientific disciplines focus on different aspects of trust, with management literature focusing on trust in organizations (Kramer & Tyler, 1996; Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998). Integrating the multitude of definitions and operationalizations, trust is an expectation, willingness, and act to build relationships between people, groups, and organizations (Schoorman et al., 2007). In rapidly changing contexts for organizations, trust is a critical determinant of success, serving as the foundation for effective relationships between employers, employees, and external stakeholders (Searle et al., 2011; Six & Sorge, 2008). Trust fundamentally changes organizations by increasing productivity, employee satisfaction, organizational retention, and learning (Paliszkiwicz, 2013; Shockley-Zalabak et al., 2000; Six & Sorge, 2008; Vanhala et al., 2016; Zaheer et al., 1998). As organizations face rapid changes and increasing challenges in employee management, trust has become indispensable for resilience and success (Six & Sorge, 2008).

While leadership and culture have been widely studied as antecedents of organizational trust, the role of organizational structure remains underexplored (De Jong et al., 2017; McEvily et al., 2003; Verburg et al., 2018). Structural elements like formalization and hierarchy influence trust through systems of authority and coordination, offering a depersonalized yet critical foundation for trust formation in organizations (Li et al., 2012; Verburg et al., 2018). While leadership and culture provide a relational foundation, organizational structure governs the systems and processes that enable or hinder trust and, therefore, needs to be studied (Creed & Miles, 1996; De Jong et al., 2017; Gilbert & Tang, 1998; Möllering et al., 2004; Verburg et al., 2018).

This research focuses on the trust relationship between employees and the organizations in which they work. Employees evaluate whether their organization is capable of fulfilling its responsibilities, whether it operates with integrity, and whether it prioritizes their well-being (Searle et al., 2011). These evaluations are often influenced by the leadership, culture, and structure of organizations (Creed & Miles, 1996; Galbraith, 1995). Many of these variables are rooted in structural features such as decision-making processes, the clarity of roles, degree of autonomy, and communication channels. Understanding the structural

antecedents of trust is, therefore, essential to provide a holistic view of the formation of employees' organizational trust (Li et al., 2012; Verburg et al., 2018). By focusing on trust at the macro level, this study recognizes that an employee's perception of trust is shaped by the organizational systems in which they operate (Creed & Miles, 1996). By examining how these structural elements impact organizational trust, this research aims to bridge the gap between individual trust experiences and the systemic frameworks that underpin them.

Although acknowledged, the role of organizational structure in trust remains fragmented and secondary to leadership or culture in research, contributing to ambiguities in predicting its influence (De Jong et al., 2017; Schoorman et al., 2007). This underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding and clearer conceptualization and analysis of structural elements. Moreover, the role of sectoral differences in moderating these relationships remains contested (Perry & Rainey, 1988; H. G. Rainey & Bozeman, 2000). Public organizations often face demands and values concerning reliability, consistency, and fairness, which generally results in more formalized and hierarchical organizations. In contrast, private organizations prioritize flexibility and performance outcomes. These distinctions in priorities, demands, and values may influence the functioning of structural elements across sectors. However, growing convergence in governance models complicates this dichotomy. The Dutch organizational landscape, with many 'flat' organizational structures and emphasis on decentralization, provides a compelling context for addressing these questions.

This study seeks to investigate the influence of six organizational structure elements – centralization, formalization, specialization, standardization, hierarchy, and span of control – on employees' organizational trust. Additionally, it explores whether these effects differ between public and private sector organizations. The research aims to address this central question: *To what extent do elements of organizational structure influence employees' organizational trust in Dutch private and public sector organizations?* This study addresses this gap by statistically testing hypotheses and offering practical insights for leaders and practitioners.

Specialization and span of control emerged as significant predictors of trust, with specialization enhancing trust through role clarity and competence, while broader spans of control foster autonomy and empowerment (Creed & Miles, 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Conversely, centralization and hierarchy were detrimental, diminishing participation and

transparency (Moorman et al., 1993; Verburg et al., 2018). The non-significance of formalization and standardization raises questions about their role in trust-building, highlighting the need for further exploration into these factors. Finally, the minimal sectoral differences observed suggest universal application of these structural elements across public and private organizations, with only the combined effect of formalization and sector approaching significance (Buelens & Van Den Broeck, 2007). Overall, the findings advance the understanding of structural elements of employees' organizational trust across different sectors in the Netherlands.

In addition, this research makes several important contributions to the field of organizational literature. First, it advances the theoretical understanding of organizational trust by highlighting the role of structural antecedents. While leadership and culture remain dominant themes in trust research, this study demonstrates that structural design is equally important in shaping trust dynamics, thereby offering a more comprehensive view of trust-building (De Jong et al., 2017; Verburg et al., 2018). Second, the study addresses the ongoing debate about sectoral differences in organizational studies. The minimal moderation effects observed suggest that structural dimensions may operate similarly across sectors, challenging traditional dichotomies between public and private organizations (Buelens & Van Den Broeck, 2007). Finally, the study provides practical recommendations for organizational leaders by identifying the structural elements that enhance or undermine trust. These insights are particularly valuable in an era where employee engagement and well-being are critical to organizational resilience and success.

Theoretical framework

Trust

The concept of trust has been widely researched. Despite these high levels of interest in trust within management and organization literature, the definitions and conceptualizations of the concept are fragmented (McEvily et al., 2003). Broadly defined, trust refers to the expectation, willingness, and act of building relationships between individuals, groups, or organizations (Schoorman et al., 2007).

Firstly, trust manifests in three distinct forms. The first is trust as a “subjective, aggregated, and confident set of beliefs about the other party and one’s relationship with her/him” (Dietz & Den Hartog, 2006, p.558). This form is echoed by the definitions of trust in

Zand (1972), Cook & Wall (1980), Boon & Holmes (1991), Creed & Miles (1996), Lewicki et al. (2006), and Whitener (1997). The second form conceptualizes trust as a decision, reflecting an intention to act based on confidence in the other party, based on Mayer et al. (1995) and Rousseau et al. (1998). Whereas the second form, trust as a decision, implies only an intention to act, the third form defines trust as this very decision to act (McAllister, 1995). Dietz & Den Hartog (2006) integrate these three forms and conceptualize trust as “an expectation, a willingness to be vulnerable and a risk-taking act” (p.560).

Secondly, trust is formed through multifaceted processes and consists of three core elements: competence, benevolence, and integrity (Creed & Miles, 1996; Gambetta, 1988; Kramer, 1999; Mcknight & Chervany, 1998). These elements appear frequently in trust literature and form the foundation of many theoretical and empirical studies on trust. Each provides a distinct perspective on assessing a trustee, offering a robust foundation for analysis (Mayer et al., 1995; Shockley-Zalabak et al., 2000). Competence refers to the skills, abilities, and characteristics that enable a trustee to exert influence within a specific domain (Zand, 1972). Trust is domain-specific, meaning a trustee may be trusted in areas where they are competent but not in others where they lack experience or aptitude. Benevolence captures the extent to which a trustee is perceived to desire to do good to the trustor, independent of self-interest (Mayer et al., 1995). Lastly, integrity involves the trustor's perception that the trustee adheres to principles that the trustor finds acceptable (Mayer et al., 1995). Together, these elements highlight trust's nuanced and evaluative nature, emphasizing its complexity in organizational contexts.

Thirdly, Dietz & Den Hartog (2006) delineate three strands of trust in management literature: trust within organizations, between organizations, and trust between organizations and their external environment. This research will focus on the first of these strands: trust within organizations. More specifically, the trust of employees in their organizations. Understanding this specific form of trust necessitates accounting for various factors, such as the organization's culture, structure, and leadership. However, this research focuses on the influence of organizational structure elements on the organizational trust of employees.

Within organizations, trust can involve different dyads, including individuals, groups, or the organization as a whole (Mayer et al., 1995; Schoorman et al., 2007). This research focuses on employees' trust in the organization, which is referred to as organizational trust (Möllering et al., 2004). Maguire & Phillips (2008) defined organizational trust as “an

individual's expectation that some organized system will act with predictability and goodwill" (p.372). Henceforth, when analyzing the concept of organizational trust, the dyads are the individuals within the organization, the employees, and the collective, the organization. Like with interpersonal trust, individuals assess whether the other party, in this case, the organization, is reliable and competent to meet goals and responsibilities (organizational ability), shows interest and involvement regarding personal wellbeing (organizational benevolence), and acts according to 'commonly accepted moral principles' (organizational integrity) (Gustafsson et al., 2021; Searle et al., 2011; Verburg et al., 2018).

Organizational structure

Organizational structure is defined by many different authors. These different definitions, however, reflect a consensus that organizational structure involves the formal division and coordination of tasks and responsibilities within an organization, impacting interactions and work performance (Daft, 2010; Galbraith, 1995; Mintzberg, 1979). So, the organizational structure is determined by (1) *work division* and (2) *coordination mechanisms* (Meijaard et al., 2005).

While significant attention has been given to contextual antecedents of organizational trust, research has primarily focused on interpersonal and relational trust at the micro level or institutional trust at the macro level (De Jong et al., 2017; Kramer, 1999; Rousseau et al., 1998). However, this specific focus neglects how trust is formed across levels within organizations (Li, 2008). Applying institutional sources of trust, organizational settings involve three critical antecedents: leadership, culture, and structure (Li et al., 2012). Leadership and culture, which embody institutional roles and norms, have been extensively researched, whereas the role of structure as the embodiment of institutional rules remains poorly defined in relation to trust (Li et al., 2012).

Organizational structure determines systems of authority, roles, and procedures, fundamentally influencing employees' trust perceptions through depersonalized mechanisms (Creed & Miles, 1996; Verburg et al., 2018). This contrasts leadership and culture, which rely on interpersonal and subjective interactions. Structure's depersonalized foundation for trust formation enables applicability across sectors (Burke et al., 2007). Given the persistent ambiguities in the conceptualization of organizational structure concerning trust and the overlaps in boundaries between structure, culture, and leadership, focusing on structural elements provides a distinct contribution to understanding organizational trust (Li et al., 2012;

Verburg et al., 2018). Several authors investigated this relationship, but ambiguities remain. Creed & Miles (1996) explore how organizational trust is formed and mention structure as part of managerial philosophies and control. They argue that organizational structure can influence the level of trust by affecting managerial practices and control mechanisms within the organization. Verburg et al. (2018) investigate how organizational control, which is part of the organizational structure, influences organizational trust. Li et al. (2012) look at contextual antecedents of trust, including structural elements. However, apart from these notable exceptions, the effects of structural elements on trust remain understudied.

Concerning this, the conceptual challenges are further compounded by fragmented operationalizations of organizational structure. The most widely used distinction to describe differences in organizational structures is that of the mechanistic and organic structures (Ambrose & Schminke, 2003). These two archetypes are located on a continuum and are rarely found in practice in their pure form. Mechanistic structures are characterized by centralized authority, strict hierarchical communication, standardized managerial styles, and decision-making driven by formal rules. In contrast, organic organizations exhibit flexibility, decentralized power, open communication, and adaptability, prioritizing employees' ability to achieve goals over rigid regulations (Ambrose & Schminke, 2003). Another way of operationalizing organizational structure is provided by Geeraerts (1984) and Li et al. (2012), who distinguish formalization and centralization. Additionally, Geeraerts (1984) distinguishes specialization and differentiation. Daft (2010) delineates organizational structure into two main dimensions: structural and contextual. Structural dimensions encompass internal characteristics: formalization, complexity, centralization, specialization, standardization, hierarchy of authority, professionalism, and personnel ratios. Contextual dimensions include goals, strategies, environment, culture, size, and technology, describing the organizational settings that influence structural dimensions. Daft (2010) subsequently links these to the two archetypes that Ambrose & Schminke (2003) employed in their research. Another key operationalization of organizational structure is provided by Mintzberg (1979), who describes seven organizational designs based on how organizational components are structured and coordinated. Coordination is categorized into three types: direct control, mutual adjustment, and standardization (Mintzberg, 1979). Combining the works of Mintzberg (1979), Geeraerts (1984), and Li et al. (2012), the structure consists of formalization, centralization, specialization, differentiation, and coordination. Pugh et al. (1968) broadly use the same five elements, apart from substituting coordination for configuration. In another key work on

organizational structure, Robbins (1990) distinguishes six elements: specialization, departmentalization, hierarchy, span of control, centralization, and formalization. Considering the overlap in conceptualizations, this research will try to integrate these into a clear set of dimensions. Formalization, centralization, specialization, and standardization appear most frequently and are deemed the essential elements of organizational structure. In addition to this, coordination, defined as the processes that ensure individual and unit activities are integrated and aligned to collective objectives, includes hierarchy and span of control (Mintzberg, 1979). Moreover, Pugh et al. (1968) measure configuration with elements of the span of control and hierarchy, resulting in an alignment with the elements Robbins (1990) presents and mostly with the definition of coordination from Mintzberg (1979). All in all, integrating the conceptualizations from the literature, this research conceptualizes organizational structure with the following dimensions: formalization, centralization, specialization, standardization, span of control, and hierarchy. Specialization, span of control, and centralization encompass task and authority distribution within organizations, constituting the *work division*, whereas formalization, standardization, and coordination concern control and integration of organizational procedures, amounting to the *coordination mechanisms* (Meijaard et al., 2005).

Organizational trust dynamics in the public and private contexts

Research indicates that organizational structures can significantly impact trust, typically with varying effects across the public and private sectors (Jung et al., 2006; Whitener, 1997). In the public sector, values like accountability, transparency, and stability often lead to more centralized and formal structures (Buelens & Van Den Broeck, 2007; H. Rainey, 2021). In contrast, the private sector prioritizes flexibility, responsiveness, and innovation, requiring more decentralized structures. This difference may moderate the effects of the structural elements on organizational trust, creating sector-specific mechanisms of impact.

A deeper analysis of the literature reveals various dimensions that distinguish public from private entities, including aspects such as regulation, funding, and ownership (Andersen et al., 2024; Boyne, 2002; Murray, 1975; H. G. Rainey et al., 1976; H. G. Rainey & Bozeman, 2000). In addition to this, Perry & Rainey (1988) emphasize differences in structures, environment, and interaction with the environment between the private and the public sectors. Furthermore, public organizations tend to be more bureaucratic since these organizations are

bound by more complex standards, values, and rules (Boyne, 2002; Mintzberg, 1979; H. Rainey, 2021). Organizations in both sectors face unique demands, leading to differing perceived responsibilities and motivations (Buelens & Van Den Broeck, 2007). According to Meyer (1979), public bureaucracies are evaluated by their conformity with public values and higher authorities, whereas private bureaucracies are evaluated on economic performance. These differences influence employees' attitudes and feelings toward the organization (Perry & Wise, 1990). In a public sector organization, employees might develop higher levels of trust through organizational structure elements featuring bureaucratic characteristics because of non-profit rules, which provide employees with the sense that they are not being used for profit, as opposed to the private sector (Perry & Wise, 1990). The pursuit of profit and shareholder interests may lead to perceptions of opportunism, which can undermine trust if employees feel their contributions are primarily exploited for financial gain (Perry & Wise, 1990). Additionally, these structures enable public sector employees to adhere to public values, which can be seen as a form of empowerment, leading to trust in the organization (Vineburgh, 2010). However, where many authors observe differences between the public and private sectors, it must be mentioned that this view is more nuanced and that these sectors do not diverge in all areas (Rainey et al., 1976; Rainey & Bozeman, 2000). These nuanced differences in demands and expectations for each sector highlight the need to examine how these moderate the relationship between organizational structure and trust.

Definitions and Hypotheses

Given the lack of a comprehensive framework in current theory regarding the various structural elements and their mechanisms of influence on trust, particularly concerning sectoral differences, the following section provides clear definitions of these core dimensions and formulates hypotheses grounded in these theoretical insights.

Firstly, formalization codifies norms into rules, regulations, and procedures that direct employee behavior and decision-making (Mintzberg, 1979; Thompson, 1967).

The effects of *formalization*, the degree to which rules, regulations, and policies govern behavior, are likely to be binary, shaped by the expectations of the organizational sector and employee interpretations of formalization. According to social exchange theory, which posits that perceived organizational trust leads to reciprocity (Shore et al., 2009), high levels of formalization can signal organizational distrust. This reduces employees' autonomy and signals strict control, which may be viewed as undesirable by employees (Whitener,

1997). According to reciprocity theory, employees may respond in kind with reduced trust if they feel that the organization distrusts them (Creed & Miles, 1996). In the private sector, this reaction may be more significant since excessive bureaucratic rigidity can hinder flexibility and innovation, eroding trust (Rainey & Bozeman, 2000; Weisbrod, 2009). This flexibility can enhance trust by empowering employees and fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment in organizational outcomes (Buelens & Van Den Broeck, 2007; Vineburgh, 2010). Conversely, in the public sector, the effects might be reduced as formalization can foster trust by clarifying expectations and ensuring adherence to public values such as transparency, predictability, and accountability through formal rules and policies (Pertusa-Ortega et al., 2010).

H1: Formalization negatively influences employees' organizational trust, with a stronger negative effect in the private sector than in the public sector.

Secondly, centralization refers to “the locus of authority to make decisions affecting the organization (Pugh et al., 1968, p.76).

Centralization, as the concentration of decision-making authority, typically limits employee autonomy, which can be viewed by employees as undesirable (Creed & Miles, 1996; Whitener, 1997). Moreover, employees might interpret high levels of centralization as indicators of the organization's low trust in them, leading to a reciprocation of low trust in the organization (Moorman et al., 1993; Whitener, 1997). This relationship is expected to hold consistently across sectors, as heavily centralized structures undermine employee autonomy, a known antecedent of organizational trust (Kramer, 1999).

H2: Centralization negatively influences employees' organizational trust, with effects being consistent across the public and private sectors.

Next, specialization encompasses the “division of labor within the organization, the distribution of official duties among several positions (Pugh et al., 1968, p.72).

Specialization involves the assignment of specific roles and tasks to employees, which increases job clarity. This, in turn, fosters trust by reducing ambiguity and enhancing employees' sense of purpose (Mishra, 2014). Additionally, Creed & Miles (1996) state that clear roles and expectations assigned by the organization increase employees' trust in the organization. Furthermore, specialization leads to increased competence of employees within

their area of expertise and interdependency, fostering a cohesive and trusting environment within teams (O'Brien, 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998). This could boost employees' trust in the rest of the organization (Mishra, 2014; O'Brien, 1995). As role clarity and learning are valued across sectors, specialization is expected to have a consistent, positive effect on organizational trust.

H3: Specialization positively influences organizational trust by increasing employee competence and fostering role clarity, with these effects being consistent across the public and private sectors.

Then, standardization in organizational structure refers to the routines and procedures that ensure task execution is done consistently and predictably (Mintzberg, 1979; Weber, 1947).

Standardization, as the uniformity of processes, is hypothesized to affect organizational trust differently across sectors. In the public sector, standardization aligns with the value of accountability, which may enhance trust by promoting fairness and stability (Creed & Miles, 1996; Pertusa-Ortega et al., 2010). Employees in this sector might perceive standardization as organizational benevolence and capability aimed at ensuring equal treatment and quality of public services (Mishra, 2014). In the private sector, however, this effect might be contradictory since standardization limits employees' autonomy and learning, which signals organizational distrust through a lack of perceived benevolence (Zak, 2018). Also, standardization can inhibit innovation and adaptability, which undermines trust in flexible, innovation-oriented environments (Walker & Bozeman, 2011).

H4.1: Standardization positively influences organizational trust in public sector organizations.

H4.2: Standardization negatively influences organizational trust in private sector organizations.

Furthermore, hierarchy is defined as the degree to which authority is distributed in distinct levels of control, with clear levels of responsibility and command (Mintzberg, 1979; Weber, 1947).

Regarding *hierarchy*, Creed & Miles (1996) emphasize the importance of clear organizational roles and the possibility for employees to identify key persons and decision-

makers for organizational stability and reliability. Given the correlating values of the public sector, hierarchy is expected to have a positive effect on organizational trust in public organizations (Verburg et al., 2018). On the contrary, in private organizations with higher levels of change and innovation, employees might perceive hierarchy as a form of distrust of the organization through control demands and lower levels of autonomy (Verburg et al., 2018). According to reciprocation theory, this distrust could be matched with organizational distrust from the employees (Moorman et al., 1993). Furthermore, flat structures often correlate with higher trust in innovative settings. Hence, higher levels of hierarchy are expected to reduce trust in change-oriented environments (Kramer, 1999).

H5.1: Hierarchy positively affects organizational trust in public sector organizations due to perceived stability and clarity.

H5.2: Hierarchy negatively influences organizational trust in private sector organizations due to perceived control and reduced autonomy.

To conclude, the span of control is specified as the number of subordinates and the areas of activities for which an individual in a leadership position within an organization is responsible (Robbins, 1990).

The organizational span of control influences organizational trust in several ways (Jacobsen et al., 2023). A moderate span of control allows leaders to engage more effectively with their teams, which can build trust, as employees feel their leaders are accessible and attentive to their needs and concerns. Both too-narrow and too-broad spans of control can undermine trust. A narrow span might suggest micromanagement, leading to employee resentment, while a broad span can result in neglect and lack of support, both detrimental to organizational trust (Jacobsen et al., 2023; Yukl, 2012). The sector is not expected to produce contrasting effects.

H6: The span of control has a parabolic relationship with organizational trust, where a moderate span enhances trust, while both narrow and broad spans diminish organizational trust.

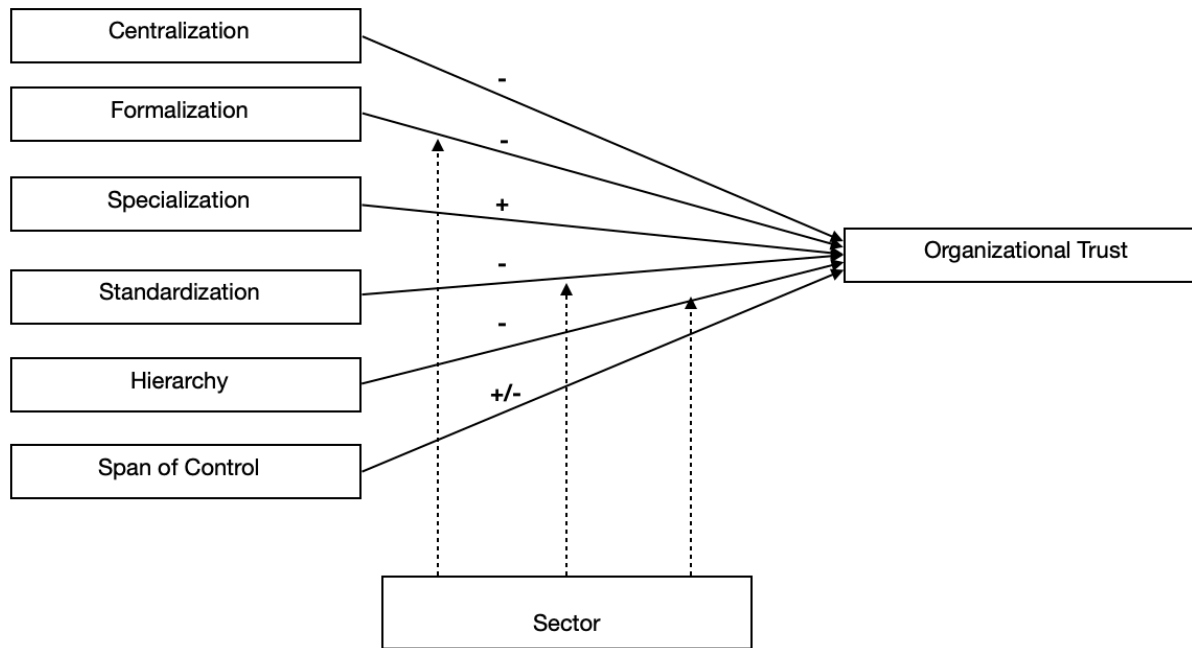


Figure 1: Conceptual model

Methods

Design

This study employed a quantitative research approach to examine the influence of organizational structure elements on employees' organizational trust, with a focus on how this relationship is moderated by the organizational sector. Hypotheses were tested using data from a cross-sectional survey design, capturing data from employees at a single point in time. Data collection was conducted using an online survey. Reliability and validity in the measurement of the constructs are ensured as a structured survey instrument, incorporating (parts of) validated scales, was used (Cresswell, 2014). The analysis followed a correlational design aimed at identifying statistical relationships between the central variables. Before the analysis, assumptions for regression analysis, including multicollinearity, normality, and homoscedasticity, were tested. To account for potential confounding factors, key control variables were included in the analysis, as recommended by Arkes (2022). The statistical analysis tested the direct effects of organizational structure elements on trust and explored the moderation effects of the sector using regression modeling. Through these designs, the study aimed to provide insights into how organizational structure elements influence organizational trust in diverse organizational contexts.

This research was conducted in the Dutch organizational landscape, which provides a unique context for studying the effects of organizational structure on trust. Over the past decades, rooted in the principles of New Public Management, the Dutch public sector has prioritized efficiency, accountability, and market orientation. These reforms were widely adopted in the 1990s and largely dismantled traditional bureaucracies into specialized entities in more competitive environments (Kickert, 2003; Lynn, 2006). More recently, New Public Governance has shifted the focus towards collaboration, engagement of stakeholders, and decentralization. These changes reflect a broader trend in the Netherlands towards more participatory and networked governance structures, which distinguishes this context from other countries where bureaucratic rigidity often remains prevalent (Jilke et al., 2013; Osborne et al., 2021). The Dutch private sector is known for flat hierarchies and flexible work environments, with further accentuation by the adoption of hybrid and remote working policies (CBS, 2024). This flexibility, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, reflects a preference for egalitarianism and employee autonomy, which could positively influence trust dynamics (Osborne et al., 2021). With these organizational context characteristics of the Netherlands in mind, insights gained might be dependent on country-specific elements and represent more flat organizational structures. While the Dutch context provides valuable insights into trust and structure dynamics, the results may not generalize to other countries with more hierarchical structures or different cultural norms.

Sample

This research's sample was drawn from the targeted population of adult employees of public and private sector organizations in the Netherlands. The sample size was determined based on statistical considerations for the regression analysis. Following the rule of thumb $N > 50 + 8m$, where m is the number of predictors (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2018), a minimum of 98 participants was required. To increase the statistical power to detect significant effects, this study targeted a total sample size of 110-125 respondents, aiming at an even distribution between public and private sector employees to ensure balanced representation. Larger sample sizes improve the reliability and validity of the statistical results as they estimate effects more accurately and enhance generalizability to the population level (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2018). Participants for this study were recruited using a combination of mailings, professional networks, and social media. Random sampling was employed by distributing survey invitations broadly across sectors and job roles to ensure proportional representation of

respondents from both the public and private sectors and to minimize selection bias (Cochran, 1977).

The survey included measures of formalization, centralization, specialization, differentiation, hierarchy, span of control, as well as organizational trust. These constructs are based on validated scales from prior research as far as possible, ensuring the survey's relevance and robustness. The questions assessing specialization were based on research from Pugh et al. (1968), for the questions concerning standardization, the works of Mintzberg (1979) and Marsden et al. (1994) were taken as a blueprint. Further, for the questions concerning hierarchy, the work of Miller & Droge (1986) served as inspiration. Additionally, Li et al. (2012) and Ouchi & Dowling (1974) inspired the questions measuring the span of control. For centralization, Hage & Aiken (1967) and Aiken & Hage (1968) provided the constituent elements for the survey questions. Lastly, the questions indicating formalization originate from Aiken & Hage (1968), Marsden et al. (1994), and Pugh et al. (1968). Regarding the questions on these organizational structure elements, no verified surveys were found. However, insights from the mentioned works, combined with an extensive online search, constitute a strong basis for these questions. Additionally, the survey was piloted in two rounds with participants from both the public and the private sector to ensure content validity. In contrast to the other questions, the items measuring organizational trust were drawn from an existing scale from Searle et al. (2011), verified by Verburg et al. (2018). The final survey contained six constructs. Explanatory Factor Analysis was conducted post-data collection to verify construct validity, complemented with reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha.

The survey employed a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), allowing for nuanced responses while maintaining simplicity in analysis (Likert, 1932). Additionally, especially in social sciences and situations in which respondents share personal information, central tendency bias might occur (Davies, 2020). In response to this, this research employs a smaller Likert scale of 5 elements, as recommended by Davies (2020). Participants responded to questions on their organization and experiences within, enabling the assessment of structural elements and organizational trust levels within their organizations. To adhere to ethical standards, participants provided informed consent electronically, with the assurances that all data is anonymous and confidential.

Data Preparation

Before the analyses, several steps were undertaken to prepare the dataset. Construct means were calculated and transformed into new variables for the dependent and independent variables based on matrix questions. The birth year variable was transformed into an age variable. Missing values were minimal, with one missing value replaced for gender using the median. Two test respondents with incomplete and non-representative responses were excluded. These preparations ensured that the dataset was complete, consistent, and ready for analysis.

Analysis

For the analysis, this study employed a correlational research design to explore the effects of organizational structure elements on organizational trust moderated by the organizational sector. This design is considered suitable for the investigation of relationships between variables without manipulating the study environment (Cresswell, 2014). Data management was performed through Qualtrics, with the analysis driven through IBM SPSS Statistics 30. The use of this software is well-regarded in social sciences as it enables researchers to handle complex datasets and perform statistical analyses (Meyers et al., 2013). Descriptive statistics offered a foundational overview of the sample characteristics, ensuring that the conditions for later analyses were met. To further validate the constructs, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted. The results informed subsequent regression models, providing a robust basis for interpreting the findings. Thereafter, hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to explore the relationships between organizational structure elements and organizational trust. First, the control variables were entered to isolate their effects. Secondly, the core predictors – organizational structure elements – were added. Interaction terms were included in subsequent models to assess the moderation effects of the sector. In addition to the primary variables, several control variables were included to account for factors that might influence employees' organizational trust independently of organizational structure. By including these controls, the effects of structure elements are more isolated, which enhances the quality of the results (Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016). Prior research recommends including basic demographic factors such as gender and age, with the first measured as a binary variable and the latter as a continuous variable. Next, employee education and roles influence workplace expectations, performance, and cognitive styles, potentially impacting organizational trust (van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017). Lastly, organizational size was added as employees' organizational trust is influenced by individual

attention, familiarity, and experienced benevolence, which are all affected by organizational size (Li et al., 2012).

Throughout the study, methodological decisions were guided by established academic standards (Cochran, 1977; Cresswell, 2014; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2018). This approach ensured the study's rigor and credibility in examining the influence of organizational structure on trust.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

After preparation, the dataset comprised 110 respondents, distributed across the public (55.5%) and private (35.5%) sectors. The mean age of participants was 37.23 years (SD=14.20), with a moderately even distribution between male (56.4%) and female (42.7%) respondents. The most frequently represented organizational size categories were 0-50 employees (27.3%) and 1001+ employees (30.9%), with the rest evenly distributed across the categories in between. The most common role within the organization was worker/operative (65.5%), followed by manager/supervisor (10.0%) and executive (15.5%), indicating a representative sample distribution of the population. In contrast, the education level is not fully representative of the population, with most respondents holding a higher education level. Most respondents held a WO/University education (55.5%), followed by HBO/Higher professional education (32.7%). This suggests a highly educated sample, with the majority holding university-level qualifications. The descriptive analysis of the control variables reveals that the sample consists of a representative group of respondents, apart from the higher education level. The dependent variable, organizational trust, had a mean of 3.88 (SD = 0.64) and exhibited slight negative skewness (Skewness = -0.915), indicating that most respondents reported higher-than-average trust levels. The key predictors showed no extreme outliers. An overview of the descriptive statistics was added in the appendix.

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted for each construct separately using Principal Axis Factoring (PAF) with Promax rotation to confirm that the items designed for each construct loaded onto a single factor as expected. All constructs demonstrated acceptable factor loadings, validating their role as distinct dimensions of organizational structure or trust.

Specialization had a KMO score of 0.673, indicating strong sampling adequacy. One factor was extracted, explaining 37.795% of the variance. All five items loaded onto this factor, with loadings ranging from 0.316 to 0.702. *Standardization* achieved a KMO score of 0.811, representing strong sampling adequacy. A single factor explained 56.305% of the variance, with item loadings ranging from 0.551 to 0.832. *Hierarchy* had a KMO score of 0.726 and accounted for 53.164% of the variance. All five items loaded onto one factor, with loadings between 0.512 and 0.714. *Span of Control* had a KMO score of 0.697, with a single factor explaining 49.372% of the variance. Four items loaded onto this factor, with loadings from 0.414 to 0.738. *Centralization* demonstrated a KMO score of 0.667, explaining 56.318% of the variance. All four items loaded strongly onto a single factor, with loadings ranging from 0.514 to 0.940. *Formalization* had a KMO score of 0.790, explaining 70.349% of the variance. All four items loaded onto one factor, with loadings between 0.739 and 0.814. The dependent variable, *Organizational Trust*, achieved a KMO score of 0.888. One factor was extracted, explaining 53.409% of the variance, with item loadings ranging from 0.562 to 0.837. The EFA results validate the six constructs—specialization, standardization, hierarchy, span of control, centralization, and formalization—as distinct and internally consistent. The factors explained between 37.795% and 70.349% of the variance for individual constructs, collectively supporting the robustness of the theoretical framework. Percentages within this range are commonly deemed acceptable for factor analysis in organizational studies (Howard, 2023; Watkins, 2018). An overview of the EFA results is provided in Appendix B.

Reliability Testing

Reliability analysis was conducted using Cronbach's alpha to assess internal consistency. Organizational trust demonstrated high reliability ($\alpha=0.900$), while other concepts produced acceptable reliability with scores between $\alpha=0.858$ and $\alpha=0.728$. The Cronbach's alpha value for span of control was just below 0.7 but deemed acceptable, also because the concept only comprised four questions. Specialization ($\alpha=0.577$) was retained despite its lower reliability score due to theoretical importance and adequate factor loadings. The construct measures specific aspects of organizational structure that are critical to understanding trust.

Regression Analysis

Before conducting regression analysis, key assumptions were tested. Scatterplots for each predictor against organizational trust confirmed linear relationships, including for the

span of control, which showed no evidence of parabolic effects. This was confirmed with supplementary tests. Multicollinearity diagnostics revealed acceptable values, with all tolerance levels above 0.1 and VIF values below 10 in the first two models, indicating no multicollinearity concerns. However, in the third model, multicollinearity occurred between the moderation variables and the singular respective variables. In response, the variables were centered and singly run in a separate model, as recommended by Tabachnick & Fidell (2018). This solved the multicollinearity issue but did not provide different effects than represented in the third model.

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted in three steps to examine the predictors of organizational trust, starting with only the control variables. In the first step, age, gender, education level, organizational size, and role were added to the regression model. This produced no significant effects and only explained minimal variance ($R^2 = 0.058$, $p = 0.388$). Among these variables, role within the organization was the only variable approaching significance ($B = -0.155$, $p = 0.062$), suggesting a possible negative influence of higher leadership roles on trust. The second step encompassed adding the predictors: specialization, standardization, hierarchy, span of control, centralization, and formalization. This significantly improved the model fit ($R^2 = 0.457$, $P < .001$) and led to significant results. Specialization ($B = 0.367$, $p < .001$) and span of control ($B = 0.223$, $p = 0.012$) positively influenced trust, indicating that greater task specificity and greater control spans enhance trust. In contrast, centralization ($B = -0.318$, $p < .001$) and hierarchy ($B = -0.204$, $p = 0.028$) negatively influenced trust, reflecting the adverse effects of centralized power and hierarchical structures on organizational trust. Lastly, the interaction terms were included to examine sectoral differences ($R^2 = 0.487$, $p < 0.001$). The interaction term between formalization and sector approached significance ($B = 0.171$, $p = 0.079$), suggesting that formalization may have varying effects across public and private sectors. Interaction terms for hierarchy and sector ($B = -0.149$, $p = 0.236$) and standardization combined with sector ($B = -0.191$, $p = 0.145$) were not significant, producing no strong evidence of different sectoral effects for these predictors. The below-provided overview exhibits the main effects of the predictors. The original regression tables per hierarchical step were added in Appendix A.

Table 1: Regression analysis overview

Predictor	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
(Constant)	4.146 *** (.487)	3.086 *** (.627)	2.102 ** (1.037)
Age	-.001 (.004)	-.001 (.004)	-.001 (.004)
Gender	-.124 (.130)	-.127 (.104)	-.111 (.103)
Sector	.004 (.102)	.000 (.082)	.701 (.585)
Education level	.078 (.071)	.094 (.059)	.102 * (.059)
Organizational size	-.022 (.041)	-.022 (.037)	-.040 (.038)
Role in organization	-.155 * (.082)	-.164 ** (.067)	-.165 ** (.067)
Specialization		.367 *** (.092)	.326 *** (.094)
Standardization		.135 (.092)	.423 * (.218)
Hierarchy		-.204 ** (.092)	.093 (.256)
Span of Control		.223 ** (.087)	.208 ** (.087)
Centralization		-.318 *** (.070)	-.318 *** (.071)
Formalization		.089 (.067)	-.209 (.174)
Formalization x Sector			.171 * (.096)
Hierarchy x Sector			-.149 (.125)
Standardization x Sector			-.191 (.130)
R ²	.058	.457	.487
Adjusted R ²	.004	.390	.405
p-value	.388	< .001	< .001

Standard errors are reported in parentheses.

*, **, *** indicates significance at the 90%, 95%, and 99% level, respectively

In summary, the regression highlights specialization and span of control as positive predictors of organizational trust, while centralization and hierarchy exert negative effects. Sectoral interactions suggest possible variations per sector in the role of formalization, though this evidence was not significant. H1 was partially supported by the data. Formalization showed no significant main effects or interactions with the sector. The interaction term between formalization and sector approached significance ($B = 0.171$, $p = 0.079$), suggesting possible but inconclusive sectoral differences. In contrast, H2 was strongly supported by the findings. Centralization had a significant negative impact on organizational trust ($B = -0.318$, $p < .001$). No significant interaction with the sector was observed, indicating consistent effects across sectors. Next, H3 on specialization's effects on trust was supported. Specialization was a significant positive predictor of organizational trust ($B = 0.326$, $p < .001$). No interaction terms indicated sectoral differences, confirming consistent effects. Further, H4.1 and H4.2 were not supported. Standardization showed no significant effects, either as a main effect or as an interaction with the sector. The main effect approached significance, but the interaction was not significant and showed contrasting effects. Additionally, H5.1 was not supported, while H5.2 was partially supported. Hierarchy had a significant negative influence on organizational trust ($B = -0.204$, $p = 0.028$), contradicting the hypothesis for the public sector but confirming the hypothesis for private sector organizations. No significant sectoral interaction was found. Lastly, H6 was not supported. The span of control positively influenced organizational trust ($B = 0.208$, $p = 0.019$), but no evidence of a parabolic relationship was observed.

The findings support hypotheses H2 and H3, providing clear evidence for the consistent negative effect of centralization and the positive effect of specialization on organizational trust. Hypotheses H1, H5.2, and H6 are partially supported, while H4.1, H4.2, and H5.1 are not supported.

Table 2: Overview of the hypotheses

Hypothesis	Predictor	Effect	Support
H1	Formalization	Negative (sector interaction)	Partially
H2	Centralization	Negative	Supported
H3	Specialization	Positive	Supported
H4.1 (Public Sector)	Standardization	Positive	Not supported
H4.2 (Private Sector)	Standardization	Negative	Not supported
H5.1 (Public Sector)	Hierarchy	Positive	Not supported
H5.2 (Private Sector)	Hierarchy	Negative	Partially (general effect significant)
H6	Span of Control	Parabolic	Partially (positive linear effect)

Discussion

This study investigated the role of organizational structure in shaping employees' organizational trust, focusing on six structural dimensions – formalization, centralization, specialization, standardization, hierarchy, and span of control – and testing for sectoral differences between the public and private sectors. The analysis confirmed that specialization and span of control positively influence trust, while centralization and hierarchy exert negative effects. Contrary to the hypotheses, formalization and standardization did not significantly predict trust and moderation effects of the sector were minimal, suggesting a universal application of the findings across organizational contexts.

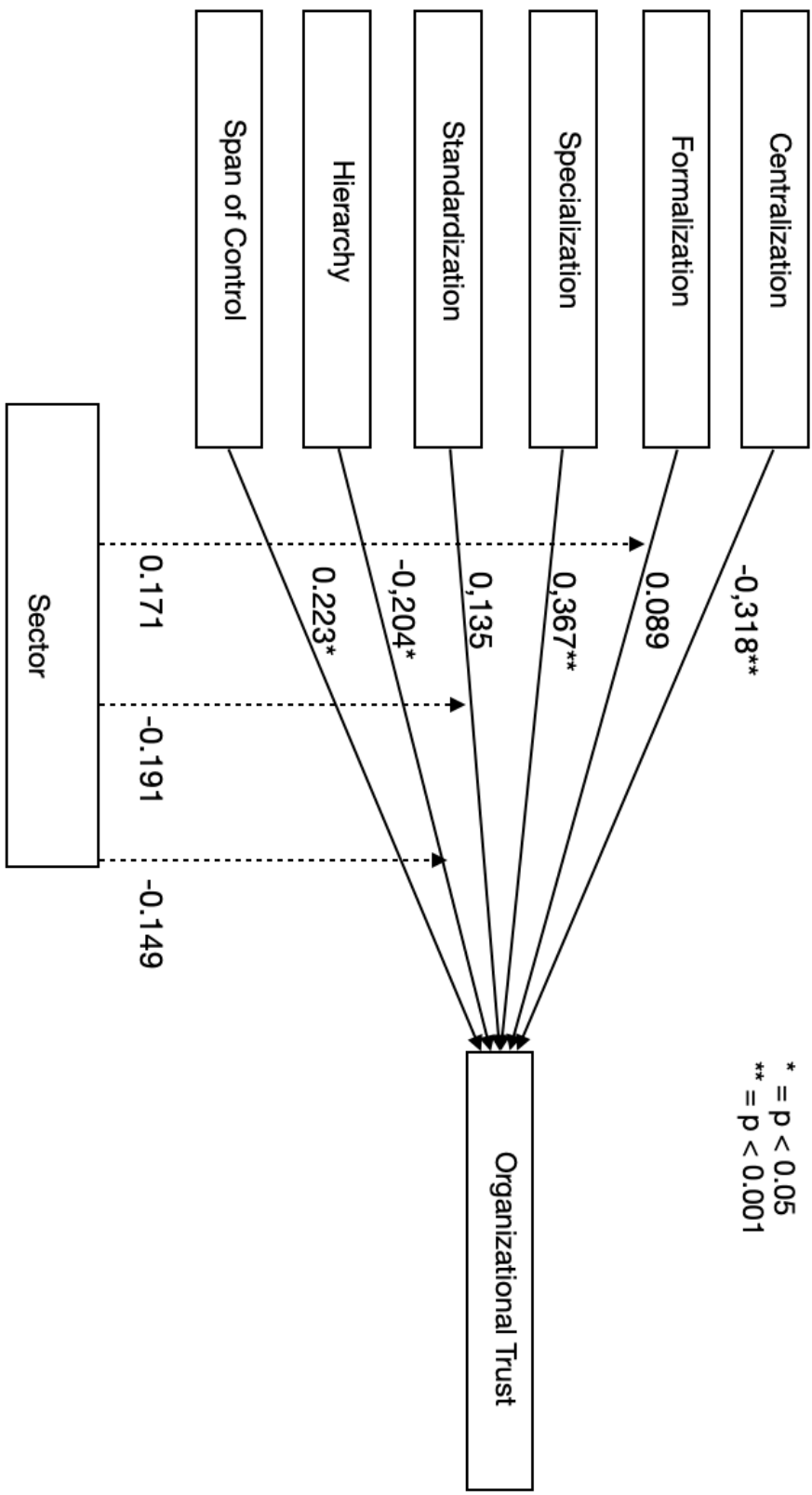


Figure 2: Summary of key results

Interpretation

The study found robust evidence supporting the positive effects of the span of control and specialization on organizational trust. Firstly, the span of control, although hypothesized to have a parabolic effect, has a consistent positive effect on organizational trust. A review of the literature indicated that overly broad or narrow spans of control diminish trust. Based on the results, this appears to only be true for the latter. This outcome challenges traditional assumptions and suggests that broader spans promote employee autonomy. This aligns with the Self-Determination Theory, which highlights the importance of autonomy in fostering motivation and trust (Creed & Miles, 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Employees in environments with broader spans likely perceive greater independence, which enhances their feeling of being trusted, leading to a reciprocal reaction (Jacobsen et al., 2023). Secondly, specialization, as hypothesized, positively influenced organizational trust by fostering role clarity and enhancing employees' competence. The results corroborate the insights from the theoretical framework that clearly defined roles reduce ambiguity and increase employees' confidence in their ability to fulfill personal and organizational objectives (Schoorman et al., 2007; Shockley-Zalabak et al., 2000). Although the effects of specialization were significant, reliability testing and EFA revealed some challenges in conceptualizing and measuring the construct. While the concept remains a valid predictor, these issues highlight the need for refinement in its operationalization and further research to solidify its theoretical basis.

In addition to the positive effects, this study also found that centralization and hierarchy negatively impacted organizational trust, reinforcing prior theories on the detrimental impact of overly rigid organizational structures (Moorman et al., 1993; Verburg et al., 2018). In line with the hypotheses, centralization undermines trust by concentrating decision-making power at the top and limiting employees' participation. Employees in centralized organizations often feel disconnected from decision-making processes, leading to a perception and reciprocal reaction of reduced trust. Hierarchy also negatively influenced trust, contrary to the hypothesis that it might exert contrasting effects per sector. This lack of sector-specific differences indicates that hierarchical structures universally erode trust, irrespective of context. The results suggest that hierarchies, by adding layers of control and bureaucracy, hinder transparency and autonomy, which are two critical drivers of trust (Verburg et al., 2018). These findings challenge traditional notions that hierarchy may provide stability and predictability in public organizations, suggesting instead that it stimulates perceptions of control and alienation in both sectors.

The predictors of centralization and hierarchy appear to be complementary and particularly damaging when combined. Together, these elements may create rigid, top-heavy systems where employees feel micromanaged and disconnected, further eroding trust. These effects seem to be reinforced by the Dutch context, which fosters a strong preference for more hierarchically flat structures (Jilke et al., 2013). These complementary negative effects highlight the importance of balance in organizational design: while some structure is necessary for coordination, excessive control and stratification are detrimental to trust (Verburg et al., 2018; Weibel et al., 2016).

In contrast to the strong effects on trust by the previously mentioned predictors, formalization and standardization failed to produce significant effects. Formalization was hypothesized to positively influence trust in public organizations by providing clarity and consistency but negatively impact private organizations due to perceived rigidity. However, its non-significance suggests that employees may interpret formalization differently depending on its implementation. For instance, formalization perceived as fair and supportive may enhance trust, whereas overly rigid or punitive rules may diminish it (Rainey & Bozeman, 2000; Shore et al., 2009; Whitener, 1997). This finding underscores the need for future research to examine the nuanced role of context and perception in shaping the effects of formalization. Similarly, standardization did not significantly predict trust, which may reflect its ambiguous role in organizational dynamics. While standardization ensures predictability, clarity in expectations, and fairness, it could also constrain creativity and adaptability, leading to mixed employee perceptions (Creed & Miles, 1996; Pertusa-Ortega et al., 2010). This duality may have neutralized its overall impact in the present analysis.

The hypothesized sectoral differences were largely unsupported, with only one interaction term, formalization, and sector, approaching significance. These findings fuel ongoing debates in the literature regarding whether public and private organizations differ fundamentally in their structural dynamics. Scholars such as Rainey & Bozeman (2000) argue that sectoral differences are often overstated, and this study lends credence to the notion that employees' perceptions of trust may be shaped more by universal structural principles than by sector-specific factors. The almost significant interaction term of formalization and sector suggests that formalization may play a slightly larger role in fostering trust within public organizations, where rules and procedures are often central to governance (Pertusa-Ortega et al., 2010). However, this effect requires further investigation.

Implications

The conclusions drawn in this research provide actionable insights for organizational practitioners aiming to foster trust within their teams and organizations. Trust is increasingly recognized as one of the key ingredients for employee engagement, organizational performance, and overall well-being (Shockley-Zalabak et al., 2000; Six & Sorge, 2008; Zak, 2018). While leadership and culture often take the stage in trust-building literature and efforts, this study underscores the critical role of structural design. First, organizations must leverage specialization to improve role clarity and competence. Clear, well-defined roles reduce ambiguity and empower employees to excel in their areas of expertise (Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998). However, care must be taken to avoid silos that may restrict collaboration and to narrow tasks that reduce creativity and discretion. A broader span of control can also enhance trust by promoting employee autonomy. Wider spans of control reduce micromanagement and allow for greater empowerment at lower levels (Jacobsen et al., 2023; Yukl, 2012). Yet, organizations should balance this approach, avoiding spans so broad that they compromise oversight and support. Encouraging independence while maintaining connectedness fosters both trust and productivity (Shockley-Zalabak et al., 2000). Reducing centralization is another critical strategy. Decentralized decision-making empowers employees, making them feel valued and trusted (Creed & Miles, 1996). This perceived trust is reciprocated by employees, increasing organizational trust (Moorman et al., 1993). Addressing overly hierarchical structures is equally vital. Flattening hierarchies improves transparency and accessibility, fostering collaboration and communication across levels (Verburg et al., 2018). Functional teams that bridge hierarchies can also enhance trust by emphasizing connectedness and discretion over rigid authority. In contrast, formalization requires a nuanced approach. A certain degree of formalization can enhance trust, but excessive rigidity and administrative burden may stifle creativity and the perceived level of trust for employees (Buelens & Van Den Broeck, 2007; Creed & Miles, 1996). Practitioners should involve employees in the design and evaluation of these formalized processes to ensure efficacy, efficiency, and trust. Though less significant in the study, standardization still holds value in fostering consistency and fairness. The involvement of employees in designing these standards can avoid rigidity or inconsistency (Walker & Bozeman, 2011). Finally, sectoral nuances, though minimal, suggest the value of tailoring trust-building strategies to specific contexts. By adopting a holistic approach, including structure, culture, and leadership, organizations can create a strong foundation for employees' organizational trust, driving engagement, performance, and innovation (Galbraith, 1995).

Limitations

First of all, this research employs a simple quantitative design but recognizes options for more thorough data collection and more complex research designs. Secondly, this study employed a relatively small and specific sample. Though sufficient for statistical analysis, it may not capture the full diversity of organizational contexts, which limits the generalizability of the findings to the population level (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2018). Having used a convenience sampling strategy, the sample might not represent the whole width of the population geographically and demographically, as well as the different types and sizes of organizations. Furthermore, since the interaction terms were not supported, statistical power issues might have occurred. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data could introduce response biases, such as the social desirability bias, where participants might respond in a way they believe is expected rather than reflecting their true experiences (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Also, since respondents do not like being portrayed or to portray their organization negatively, prestige bias may occur. Because surveys are based on self-reported measures, respondents might not answer accurately or have positively inflated perceptions (Davies, 2020). To mitigate these biases, efforts were made to ensure anonymity and confidentiality throughout the study, encouraging candid responses. Furthermore, current-mood bias might occur, which is hard to address with a simple survey design. Future studies could benefit from a more comprehensive approach, including a mixed-methods design, to mitigate these potential biases (Cresswell, 2014). Specifically on trust, respondents might experience prestige bias, leading to hesitancy to provide critical responses, especially when employees identify strongly with their organization (Davies, 2020). Despite the guaranteed anonymity for respondents, this might still play a role in self-report surveys. Also, survey data may be affected by the current moods of respondents and recent experiences since it only records one moment in time (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Therefore, the results might not be fully representative. Future research could incorporate a longitudinal element to mitigate these biases. Lastly, the concept of specialization was identified as a significant predictor of organizational trust, yet its conceptualization and operationalization presented some challenges. Although the results seem robust, the construct requires refinement and validation in future research to ensure reliability and applicability.

Recommendations

Based on the insights from the analysis, this study incorporates several recommendations to enhance the robustness and generalizability of these findings. Future

research could replicate this study with a larger and more diverse sample, elevating the sample to an international level for international generalizability. Additionally, an international, stratified sample would allow researchers to verify if the observed effects of organizational structure on trust apply universally or if these vary across countries (Buelens & Van Den Broeck, 2007). Furthermore, qualitative research methods could be employed to add depth to the quantitative findings and gain insights into the mechanisms through which organizational structure elements influence organizational trust. Next, given that trust in organizations has many interconnected antecedents, future research would benefit from examining additional mediating and moderating variables based on the insights from this study and other works (Li et al., 2012). The integration of different topics that influence organizational trust could include leadership style, tenure, and culture, for example. Analyzing these variables, in addition to structural elements, could lead to more comprehensive models for organizational trust. A more complete and nuanced classification could help researchers delineate which structural elements are most predictive of organizational trust. By demonstrating the critical role of structure in trust-building, this research advances the understanding of organizational dynamics and provides practical guidance for designing trust-enhancing workplaces. Future studies should continue to explore these relationships, shedding further light on the interplay between structure, leadership, and culture in fostering organizational trust. From a more specific point of view, future research should aim to refine the definition of specialization as a construct, given the conceptual and measurement issues that occurred in this research. To ensure theoretical alignment, mixed-method approaches, including qualitative validation, are recommended. Furthermore, future research should explore the relationship between the span of control and organizational trust. The hypothesized parabolic relationship was not confirmed in this study, which was contradictory to the theoretical expectation. Confirmation of this effect could determine whether existing literature should be revised (Jacobsen et al., 2023). Lastly, the near-significant interaction between formalization and sector suggests a potential avenue for more in-depth analysis. Future studies could explore this relationship using larger samples or sector-specific qualitative methods to better understand the role of formalization.

Conclusion

This study investigated to what extent elements of organizational structure influence employees' organizational trust in Dutch private and public sector organizations. The findings revealed that structural design significantly impacts trust dynamics. Specifically,

specialization and span of control emerged as positive predictors of trust, fostering autonomy and role clarity. Conversely, centralization and hierarchy negatively influenced trust by reducing employee empowerment and transparency. Interestingly, formalization and standardization showed no significant effects, suggesting their influence is context-dependent or minimal. Notably, the analysis found no significant evidence for sectoral differences, indicating that structural predictors of trust have similar effects across the public and private sectors in the Dutch context.

The research process, while solid, highlighted some conceptual and methodological challenges, which underscore the need for further refinement of some of the concepts and the need for testing across diverse contexts. However, the study provides a strong empirical foundation, using validated and reliable statistical techniques to address key gaps in the literature on organizational trust. The findings offer several actionable insights for organizational leaders. By demonstrating the significance of structural design, this study suggests that organizations seeking to foster trust have the possibility to do so by not only strengthening their leadership and culture but also building structures that facilitate trust. Complementing evidence from the literature that is skewed away from organizational structures, the results imply that practitioners should opt for structures that balance coordination with employee empowerment. This study makes several important contributions to the field of organizational research. Demonstrating the significant effects of structural elements on trust, it highlights the importance of organizational design alongside leadership and culture as key components of trust-building. While leadership and culture remain critical, this study underscores that structural factors also play a vital role in shaping trust dynamics. Organizations seeking to foster trust should, therefore, consider not only their leadership practices and cultural initiatives but also the design of their structural frameworks. Additionally, the findings challenge traditional assumptions about the distinctiveness of public and private organizations, suggesting that universal principles may govern trust-building across sectors.

In conclusion, this study confirms that organizational structure significantly influences trust, with specialization and span of control enhancing trust and centralization and hierarchy diminishing it. The non-significance of formalization and standardization highlights the importance of contextual and perceptual factors, while the minimal sectoral differences challenge assumptions about the distinctiveness of public and private organizations. By shedding light on structural predictors of organizational trust, this research complements

existing studies on leadership and organizational culture as key components in fostering trust, advancing the understanding of how structural design contributes to building trusting workplace environments.

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Appendix A: Data Analysis

A.1: Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive Statistics							
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic
Organizational Trust	110	1.20	5.00	3.8800	.64264	-.915	1.839
Formalization	110	1.00	5.00	3.3182	.87584	-.267	-.396
Centralization	110	1.50	5.00	3.5136	.74258	-.103	-.175
SpanofControl	110	2.00	5.00	3.4364	.66311	-.198	-.088
Hierarchy	110	1.80	5.00	3.6400	.73387	-.572	.102
Standardization	110	1.80	4.80	3.5982	.66277	-.323	.028
Specialization	110	1.40	5.00	3.6436	.58569	-.556	1.670
Age	110	17.00	67.00	37.2273	14.19953	.375	-1.359
Role in organization	110	1	4	2.24	.753	.889	.782
Organizational size	110	1	5	3.03	1.605	.009	-1.556
Sector	110	1	3	1.54	.659	.843	-.376
Education level	110	2	5	4.35	.894	-1.471	1.481
Gender	110	1	2	1.43	.497	.298	-1.947
Valid N (listwise)	110						

A.2: Regression Table Step I

Coefficients ^a						
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardize d Coefficients	t-value	Sig.	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
(Constant)	4.146	.487		8.520	<.001	
Age	-.001	.004	-.011	-.115	.908	
Gender	-.124	.130	-.096	-.949	.345	
Sector	.004	.102	.004	.043	.966	
Education level	.078	.071	.108	1.092	.277	
Organizational size	-.022	.041	-.056	-.544	.588	
Role in organization	-.155	.082	-.182	-1.887	.062	

a. Dependent Variable: OrganizationalTrust_Mean

A.3: Regression Table Step II

Coefficients ^a						
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardize d Coefficients	t-value	Sig.	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
(Constant)	3.086	.627		4.920	<.001	
Age	-.001	.004	-.016	-.201	.841	
Gender	-.127	.104	-.098	-1.224	.224	
Sector	.000	.082	.000	.003	.998	
Education level	.094	.059	.130	1.588	.116	
Organizational size	-.022	.037	-.056	-.609	.544	
Role in organization	-.164	.067	-.192	-2.454	.016	
Specialization	.367	.092	.335	3.995	<.001	
Standardization	.135	.092	.139	1.470	.145	
Hierarchy	-.204	.092	-.233	-2.224	.028	

SpanofControl	.223	.087	.230	2.555	.012
Centralization	-.318	.070	-.368	-4.526	<.001
Formalization	.089	.067	.122	1.340	.183
a. Dependent Variable: Organizational Trust					

A.4: Regression Table Step III

Coefficients ^a					
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T-value	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	2.102	1.037		2.026	.046
Age	-.001	.004	-.025	-.309	.758
Gender	-.111	.103	-.086	-1.070	.287
Sector	.701	.585	.719	1.200	.233
Education level	.102	.059	.143	1.736	.086
Organizational size	-.040	.038	-.099	-1.048	.297
Role in organization	-.165	.067	-.193	-2.474	.015
Specialization	.326	.094	.297	3.469	<.001
Standardization	.423	.218	.436	1.941	.055
Hierarchy	.093	.256	.106	.364	.717
SpanofControl	.208	.087	.214	2.396	.019
Centralization	-.318	.071	-.367	-4.453	<.001
Formalization	-.209	.174	-.284	-1.197	.234
Formalization x sector	.171	.096	.655	1.778	.079
Hierarchy x sector	-.149	.125	-.586	-1.192	.236
Standardization x sector	-.191	.130	-.776	-1.471	.145
a. Dependent Variable: Organizational Trust					

Appendix B: EFA-Results

Exploratory Factor Analysis Results

Factor	Item	Loading
Span of Control	Supervisors manage a considerable number of team members	.652
	Managers are responsible for overseeing extensive team operations	.738
	The organizational structure allows for broad managerial oversight	.476
	Leaders are tasked with guiding a diverse group of employees	.414
Hierarchy	Multiple layers of management exist within the organization	.697
	Responsibilities are distributed across different managerial levels	.512
	Authority is clearly delineated across various ranks	.682
	Communication flows vertically through established channels	.610
	The organization maintains a structured chain of command	.714
Standardization	The organization is structured into distinct functional areas	.666
	Each unit within the organization has clear duties and goals	.832
	Collaboration between different sections is structured and formalized	.551
	There is a strategic division of labor among various teams	.593
	Departments operate with specific and defined objectives	.720
Specialization	Team members are assigned specific tasks tailored to their skills	.702
	Job roles are defined with clarity and precision	.412
	Tasks are divided to enhance efficiency and productivity	.574
	Employees focus on a narrow range of activities to ensure expertise	.334
	My work assignments require specialized knowledge and abilities	.316
Organizational Trust	This organization is capable of meeting its responsibilities	.595
	This organization is known to be successful at what it tries to do	.585
	This organization does things competently	.562
	This organization is concerned about the welfare of its employees	.829
	Employees' needs and desires are important to this organization	.837
	This organization will go out of its way to help employees	.821
	This organization would never deliberately take advantage of employees	.766
	This organization is guided by sound moral principles and codes of conduct	.649
	Power is not abused in this organization	.656
This organization does not exploit external stakeholders	.596	

Formalization	Procedures and guidelines are extensively documented	.765
	Operations follow well-established protocols	.793
	Work activities are governed by formal policies	.739
	Employees adhere to predefined operational standards	.814
Centralization	Key decisions are made by a select group of leaders	.561
	The decision-making process is concentrated at higher levels	.940
	Lower-level employees have minimal influence over strategic choices	.514
	Employees have little autonomy in operational decisions	.579

Note: Extraction method used was Principal Axis Factoring.

Appendix C: Questionnaire

Questionnaire

Effects of Organizational Structure Elements on Organizational Trust Questionnaire

Dear Participants,

Welcome to this Questionnaire for my Master's Thesis at Leiden University. Over the coming 10-15 minutes, you will encounter several questions about yourself and your organization. I am broadly interested in how organizational structure elements influence organizational trust. Please answer all questions if possible and read the supplementary information carefully before providing the answers. There are no right or wrong answers in this survey. Only your personal experience and estimations regarding the statements/questions matter, so I would like to encourage you to answer spontaneously and openly. For those who fill out this survey on their phones: turning your phone horizontally provides you with a better view of the questions. Your responses are anonymous. Thank you very much for your participation. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to send me an E-Mail: d.s.ruiter@umail.leidenuniv.nl. Kind regards, David Ruiter

Q47 I agree that my answers will be used for data analysis privately and erased after the conclusion of this research.

Yes (1)

Matrix 1 Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about your organization.

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
Team members are assigned specific tasks tailored to their skills. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Job roles are defined with clarity and precision. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Tasks are divided to enhance efficiency and productivity. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Employees focus on a narrow range of activities to ensure expertise. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My work assignments require specialized knowledge and abilities. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Matrix 2 Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about your organization

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
The organization is structured into distinct functional areas (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Each unit within the organization has clear duties and goals. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Collaboration between different sections is structured and formalized. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
There is a strategic division of labor among various teams. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Departments operate with specific and defined objectives. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Matrix 3 Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about your organization

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
Multiple layers of management exist within the organization (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Responsibilities are distributed across different managerial levels. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Authority is clearly delineated across various ranks. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Communication flows vertically through established channels. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The organization maintains a structured chain of command. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Matrix 4 Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about your organization.

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
Supervisors manage a considerable number of team members. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Managers are responsible for overseeing extensive team operations. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The organizational structure allows for broad managerial oversight (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Leaders are tasked with guiding a diverse group of employees. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Matrix 5 Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about your organization.

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
Key decisions are made by a select group of leaders. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The decision-making process is concentrated at higher levels. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lower-level employees have minimal influence over strategic choices. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Employees have little autonomy in operational decisions. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Matrix 6 Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about your organization.

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
Procedures and guidelines are extensively documented. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Operations follow well-established protocols. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Work activities are governed by formal policies. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Employees adhere to predefined operational standards. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Matrix 7: Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about your organization.

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
This organization is capable of meeting its responsibilities. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This organization is known to be successful at what it tries to do. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This organization does things competently. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This organization is concerned about the welfare of its employees. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Employees' needs and desires are important to this organization. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This organization will go out of its way to help employees. (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This organization would never deliberately take advantage of employees. (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This organization is guided by sound moral principles and codes of conduct. (8)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Power is not abused in this organization. (9)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This organization does not exploit external stakeholders. (10)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

1 Gender

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Non-binary/third gender (3)

2 In what year were you born?

3 What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?

- Primary School (1)
- Secondary School (2)
- MBO/Secondary vocational education (3)
- HBO/Higher professional education (4)
- WO/University education (5)

4 In what sector are you employed?

- Public Sector (1)
- Private Sector (2)
- Other (3)

5 How many people are employed in your organization?

- 0-50 (1)
- 51-100 (2)
- 101-500 (3)
- 501-1000 (4)
- 1001+ (5)

6 What is your role within your organization?

- Manager/Supervisor (1)
- Worker/Operative (2)
- Executive (3)
- Other (4)