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# Managers' Work, Working Conditions and Wellbeing in Small Companies with Profitable Growth

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*To my beloved son Leo,  
my well read and justice-seeking teenager*



# Abstract

**Background** Managers' work, working conditions and wellbeing are important determinants of occupational health in organizations. Nevertheless, little research has investigated these factors in the context of small growing businesses, which are known to contribute to employment, economic growth and social stability. The aim of this thesis was to explore managers' work, working conditions and wellbeing in the context of small businesses with profitable growth.

**Methods** Study I used a cross-sectional design to assess patterns in managerial work activities and leadership behaviours. Studies II–IV used qualitative interviews with managers (II–IV) and employees (II) to explore the effects of managers' wellbeing on their leadership (II), their working conditions (III), and changes in their working conditions and wellbeing in the context of growing small businesses (IV).

**Results** Managers worked long hours, posing risks for occupational health, but also adopted work practices that bolster occupational health. Firm size mattered for managerial work. Managers' wellbeing reflected in their mood and energy levels and influenced their leadership behaviours and performance, and the company's work environment. Managers were more constructive when they felt well, and more passively destructive when they felt unwell. Certain factors mitigated the consequences of their negative behaviours in the organization. Five types of managers' demands and resources (daily managerial work; achievement of results; and social; organizational; and individual factors) were identified, where the specificity of the small business context revealed unique characteristics. Company growth changed managers' experiences of working conditions and wellbeing.

**Conclusions** The specific context of small growing businesses shaped managers' work, working conditions and wellbeing and the interplay between them. Dynamism in the organizational context due to growth had implications for managers' work, working conditions and wellbeing.

**Key words:** small businesses, business growth, managers, wellbeing, psycho-social working conditions, managerial work activities, leadership behaviours, job demands, job resources, occupational health

# Sammanfattning

**Bakgrund** Chefers arbete, arbetsvillkor och välbefinnande är viktiga faktorer som påverkar arbetshälsan inom organisationer. Dock finns det lite forskning om dessa faktorer när det gäller små växande företag. Denna kontext är viktig eftersom små företag bidrar till sysselsättning, ekonomisk tillväxt och social stabilitet. Syftet med denna avhandling var att utforska chefers arbete, arbetsvillkor och välbefinnande i kontexten av små företag med lönsam tillväxt.

**Metod** Studie I var en tvärsnittundersökning för att utforska mönster i chefsarbete och ledarbeteende. Studie II–IV hade en kvalitativ design och baserades på semistrukturerade intervjuer med chefer (II–IV) och anställda (II) för att undersöka konsekvenserna av chefers välbefinnande för ledarskap (II), chefernas arbetsvillkor (III) och förändringar i chefers arbetsvillkor och välbefinnande i växande små företag (IV).

**Resultat** Chefer arbetade långa timmar, vilket innebär risker för arbetshälsa, men de använde också arbetsmetoder som främjar arbetshälsa. Företagsstorlek spelade roll för chefsarbetet. Chefers välbefinnande återspeglades i deras humör och energinivåer och påverkade deras ledarbeteende, prestation och företagets sociala klimat. Chefer var mer konstruktiva när de mådde bra och mer passivt destruktiva när de mådde sämre. Vissa faktorer kunde mildra konsekvenserna av negativa beteenden inom organisationen. Fem grupper av krav och resurser för chefer (dagligt chefsarbete, måluppfyllelse, sociala, organisatoriska och individuella faktorer) identifierades, där småföretagskontexten visade unika drag. Chefer upplevde förändringar i sina arbetsvillkor och välbefinnande över tid på grund av företagstillväxt.

**Slutsats** Den specifika kontexten av små växande företag formade chefernas arbete, arbetsvillkor och välbefinnande samt också samspelet mellan dessa. Dynamiken i organisationskontexten på grund av företagstillväxt hade konsekvenser för chefernas arbete, arbetsvillkor och välbefinnande.

**Nyckelord:** små företag, företagstillväxt, chefer, välbefinnande, psykosociala arbetsvillkor, chefsarbetsaktiviteter, ledarbeteende, arbetskrav, arbetsresurser, arbetsmiljö

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# List of Papers

This thesis is based on the following papers, which are referred to in the text by Roman numerals.

## Paper I

Ahmadi, E., Macassa, G., & Larsson, J. (2021). Managers' work and behaviour patterns in profitable growth SMEs. *Small Bus Econ*, 57(2), 849–863. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11187-020-00386-0>

## Paper II

Ahmadi, E., Lundqvist, D., Bergström, G., & Macassa, G. (2022). Managers' and employees' experiences of how managers' wellbeing impacts their leadership behaviours in Swedish small businesses. *Work*. <https://doi.org/10.3233/WOR-220159>

## Paper III

Ahmadi, E., Lundqvist, D., Bergström, G., & Macassa, G. (2023 published online). A qualitative study of factors that managers in small companies consider important for their wellbeing. *Int J Qual Stud Health Well-being*. DOI: 10.1080/17482631.2023.2286669

## Paper IV

Ahmadi, E., Lundqvist, D., Bergström, G., & Macassa, G. (*Submitted*). Managers in the context of small business growth: a qualitative study of working conditions and wellbeing.

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## Abbreviations

CEO	chief executive officer
CoDa	compositional data analysis
COR	Conservation of Resources theory
CPE	Change, Production and Employees leadership model
EC	European Commission
HEL	Healthy and Effective Leadership model
JD–R	Job Demands–Resources model
SCiG	Successful Companies in Gästrikland
SME	small and medium-sized enterprise
UoG	University of Gävle



# Table of Contents

1.	Introduction .....	1
2.	Background .....	3
2.1.	Conceptual framework .....	3
2.2.	The context and management of small businesses .....	3
a.	Small businesses .....	3
b.	General features of management in small businesses .....	5
c.	Managerial work during small businesses' growth .....	6
2.3.	Managers' work .....	7
a.	Managerial work activities .....	8
b.	Leadership behaviours .....	10
2.4.	Managers' psychosocial working conditions and wellbeing .....	11
a.	Psychosocial working conditions .....	11
b.	Wellbeing .....	13
c.	Earlier research on small business managers' psychosocial working conditions and wellbeing .....	14
2.5.	Consequences of managers' wellbeing for leadership .....	15
2.6.	Rationale for the thesis .....	18
3.	Overall and specific aims .....	19
3.1.	Main objective .....	19
3.2.	Specific objectives .....	19
4.	Materials and Methods .....	20
4.1.	Study design .....	20
4.2.	Setting of the study .....	21
4.3.	Samples and procedures .....	23
	Study I .....	23
	Studies II–IV .....	23
4.4.	Data collection .....	24
	Study I .....	24
	Studies II–IV .....	25
4.5.	Data analysis .....	26
	Study I .....	26
	Studies II–IV .....	27
4.6.	Ethical considerations .....	29
5.	Results .....	30
	Study I. Managers' Work and Behaviour Patterns in Profitable Growth SMEs .....	30

Study II. Consequences of managers' wellbeing for their leadership behaviours.....	31
Consequences of managers' wellbeing .....	31
Factors protecting against negative leadership behaviours related to managers' poor wellbeing.....	32
Study III. Factors that managers in small companies consider important for their wellbeing.....	33
Daily managerial work and achieving results .....	33
Social, organizational and individual factors .....	34
Study IV. Managers' working conditions and wellbeing in the context of small business growth.....	35
Variations in managers' experiences of their wellbeing and working conditions over time.....	35
Managers' trajectories in terms of wellbeing and working conditions .....	37
6. Discussion.....	39
6.1. Managers' work, working conditions and wellbeing in the context of small growing companies.....	40
a. Managers' work in relation to occupational health.....	40
b. Managers' working conditions in relation to their wellbeing ...	41
c. Consequences of personal wellbeing for managers' leadership behaviour .....	42
d. Changing context, working conditions and wellbeing.....	43
6.2. Interplay between managers' work, working conditions and wellbeing and the context of small growing businesses.....	44
Theme 1: Stability and change in managers' work, working conditions and wellbeing .....	44
Theme 2: Interrelatedness of managers' work, working conditions and wellbeing.....	47
6.3. Methodological considerations .....	50
Designs .....	50
Samples.....	51
Measurements .....	53
Qualitative method and data analysis.....	53
Other considerations .....	54
6.4. Contributions .....	54
6.5. Future research.....	55
6.6. Practical implications.....	56
6.7. Conclusions .....	58
References.....	59

# 1. Introduction

This thesis explores occupational health in small growing businesses. More specifically, it focuses on managers' work, working conditions, and wellbeing.

It is well known that managers' work and leadership in organizations constitute a central aspect of employees' occupational health (Kuoppala et al., 2008; Skakon et al., 2010; Montano et al., 2017; Kaluza et al., 2020). An array of studies have examined the importance of managers' work and leadership for employees; far fewer studies, however, have examined managers' own working conditions and their importance for the managers' wellbeing. Also, the research has focused mainly on leadership in large organizations. Even though small businesses make up a large part of the Swedish labour market, there is currently limited knowledge about managers' work, working conditions and wellbeing in the context of small businesses (O'Gorman et al., 2005; Lechat & Torrès, 2017). Small growing businesses have unique conditions which affect these factors. Managers of small enterprises differ from other managers because of their focal role in the enterprise's operations (O'Gorman et al., 2005), and because of the distinct character of small businesses (Torrès & Julien, 2005), as well as the diverse roles of manager-owners, ranging from entrepreneur to operational manager and even professional worker. The context of small businesses becomes even more complex and varied when taking into consideration the dynamics of growth.

Previous research has shown associations between managers' and subordinates' wellbeing (Skakon et al., 2010) as well as between managers' wellbeing and their leadership behaviours (Harms et al., 2017; Joseph et al., 2015; Kaluza et al., 2020), with a manager's wellbeing constituting an important factor for occupational health (Kaluza et al., 2020; Lundqvist et al., 2012). Managers' wellbeing holds particular significance in small enterprises (Lechat & Torrès, 2017), and has implications for their own performance and decision-making processes, and for overall company functioning, business efficacy, survival and longevity (Cocker et al., 2013; Dijkhuizen et al., 2018; Fernet et al., 2016; Gorgievski et al., 2010; Hessels et al., 2018; Torrès & Thurik, 2019; Stephan et al., 2023). Therefore, it is crucial to get a better understanding of managers' wellbeing and working conditions in the context of growing small businesses. Such understanding will contribute to the promotion of healthy and sustainable businesses. Managers' wellbeing may also be an important prerequisite for their practised leadership; therefore, it is necessary to deepen our knowledge of the ways in which managers' wellbeing influences their leadership and their workplace.

It is also known that wellbeing is affected by working conditions (Ariëns et al., 2001; Bongers et al., 2002; Stansfeld & Candy, 2006; Van der Doef & Maes, 1999; Häusser et al., 2010; Niedhammer et al., 2021; Nixon et al., 2011). Consequently, grasping the elements and contextual nuances of the working

conditions of managers in small enterprises emerges as important as these conditions have the potential to impact managers' wellbeing. Nevertheless, research has not yet adequately delved into the occupational factors that shape the wellbeing of managers in small enterprises (Lechat & Torrès, 2017).

The importance of the topic of this thesis becomes more apparent when taking into consideration that small enterprises stand for a large share of employment worldwide (Nowrouzi et al., 2016; Legg et al., 2014) and that growth in small firms is essential for business survival, success, longevity and financial performance (Pasanen, 2007). None the less, the existing knowledge on creating and maintaining healthy small businesses is limited (Legg et al., 2014). Furthermore, the phenomenon of growth in small businesses has not been explored from an occupational health perspective and more knowledge is needed on implications of growth for managers' work, working conditions and wellbeing.

The aim of this thesis has been to empirically contribute to enhanced knowledge about managers' work, working conditions and wellbeing in the specific context of small growing businesses.



## 2. Background

### 2.1. Conceptual framework

The key elements of this thesis are the work, working conditions, and wellbeing of managers in small growing companies (Figure 1). These elements are decisive for occupational health in small companies and are related to each other and their specific context. Managers' work (comprising managerial work activities and leadership behaviours) has an impact on managers' working conditions. Managers' working conditions are important for managers' wellbeing, which in turn affects their work. All these factors are context-sensitive, and more knowledge is needed to elucidate how managers' work, working conditions and wellbeing, as well as the mutual relationship between these, are actualized in the specific organizational context of small growing companies.



Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the thesis.

The following sections outline the organizational context of small growing businesses (Section 2.2), the theoretical concepts and previous research on managers' work (Section 2.3), working conditions and wellbeing (Section 2.4) and, lastly, the relationship between wellbeing and leadership behaviours (Section 2.5).

### 2.2. The context and management of small businesses

#### a. *Small businesses*

Small businesses normally are independently owned and operated ventures that are not dominant actors in their field (Carland et al., 1984). They are usually

defined by either their total number of employees or their annual turnover (European Commission, 2023a). In this thesis, the small businesses are defined by number of employees. According to the definitions provided by the EC (European Commission, 2023a), small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) employ fewer than 250 persons, and small companies have up to 49 employees.

During the past 50 years and especially during the 1970s–1980s, there has been a shift in emphasis of economic activity from large to small companies. Today, small companies represent a large segment of many economies globally (Thurik & Wennekers, 2004). Small companies therefore play an important role in national economies and employment (Barbosa et al., 2019; Gupta, 2015; Owalla et al., 2022; Visentin et al., 2020). In Sweden, SMEs represent 99.9% of all enterprises and employ around 65% of employees in the private sector (Tillväxtverket, 2023). Four out of five new jobs in Sweden are created in SMEs. Small businesses account for approximately 40% of national turnover and added value, as well as approximately 45% of the total number of employees in businesses in the country (Tillväxtverket, 2023). Because of the small businesses' high contribution to employment they also impact social and political stability (Thurik & Wennekers, 2004).

Moreover, these small businesses are considered promoters of economic growth, innovation and competitiveness, creating employment opportunities (Fuller, 2003; Dobbs & Hamilton, 2007), and therefore as the backbone of national economies (European Commission, 2023b). Furthermore, their growth has been an area of interest and potential concern for policy makers, researchers and practitioners (Dobbs & Hamilton, 2007; Gupta, 2015; Leitch et al., 2010) because of its contribution to economic success, growth and job creation (Bureau et al., 2012; Buttner, 1992; Pasanen, 2007). Growth has been suggested to be essential for an SME's prosperity, sustained existence, and financial outcomes (Pasanen, 2007) and better chances of survival (Dobbs & Hamilton, 2007). That said, it is not an exaggeration to maintain that good and effective leadership in small businesses is a guarantor of both profitability and success (Valdiserri & Wilson, 2010) and plays an important role for the whole economy. Creating a healthy work environment in small businesses is of great significance as it affects a large proportion of employees (Legg et al., 2014).

Small businesses are underresearched as a group in general, and in relation to managers' work, wellbeing and working conditions in particular. Nevertheless, the existing research on managers and entrepreneurs can provide valuable insights into the distinct characteristics of managers in small growing businesses. This is because small business managers share common features with the general population of managers and entrepreneurs.

Small businesses are often not specifically focused on in empirical research; rather, they are treated as part of the larger group of SMEs. While SMEs are often referred to as a homogeneous population sharing similar characteristics (Torrès & Julien, 2005), these enterprises are characterized by high heterogeneity and diversity (Blackburn & Curran, 2000; Torrès & Julien, 2005). For instance, the diversity may be in relation to size, sector, type of product, or managers' and employees' characteristics (Blackburn & Curran, 2000). Therefore, research paying attention to the context of small businesses is needed.

Similarly, the existing research on entrepreneurship that examines the working conditions and wellbeing of entrepreneurs (e.g. Hessels et al., 2018; Mäkinen et al., 2021; Stephan, 2018) holds relevance for managers of small enterprises. This field of study has faced criticism for treating a diverse spectrum of entrepreneurs as a homogeneous entity (Barbosa et al., 2019; Owalla et al., 2022), neglecting to adequately consider the distinctive organizational contexts in which entrepreneurs act (Hessels et al., 2018). The landscape of entrepreneurs encompasses various categories, including self-employed entrepreneurs with or without employees, as well as owner-managers of small or medium-sized companies (Hessels et al., 2018; Mäkinen et al., 2021). Variations in firm size, business tenure and other traits can lead to differences in organizational structure, financial resources, human capital, and technological capability (Barbosa et al., 2019). Since these variations can themselves influence entrepreneurs' work, working conditions and wellbeing, there is a need to include them in research investigations (Hessels et al., 2018; Mäkinen et al., 2021) and apply a more context-sensitive perspective (Stephan et al., 2023).

In this regard, it should be noted that the concepts of small business and entrepreneurship are closely related and overlap; however, they are not identical (Carland et al., 1984; Gupta, 2015; Sadler-Smith et al., 2003; Thurik & Wennekers, 2004). Entrepreneurship emphasizes identifying and exploiting opportunities (Korsgaard, 2013), and this kind of behaviour may occur in firms of different sizes (Carland et al., 1984; Thurik & Wennekers, 2004). However, small businesses often serve as a vehicle for entrepreneurship (Gupta, 2015; Thurik & Wennekers, 2004). Furthermore, entrepreneurial behaviour is marked by high growth orientation, innovation, risk taking, high autonomy, the need to control (Carland et al., 1984; Gupta, 2015; Sadler-Smith et al., 2003; Thurik & Wennekers, 2004) and a strong need for achievement (Wu et al., 2007). The largest overlap between the discourses on entrepreneurship and those on small businesses is in relation to new small and fast-growing businesses (Thurik & Wennekers, 2004).

### ***b. General features of management in small businesses***

In terms of features shared by small companies, it is commonly acknowledged that they have limited financial, human and technological resources compared with larger businesses (Barbosa et al., 2019; Carland et al., 1984). Also, they often face economic and organizational challenges and are characterized by high failure rate during their first years of operation (Dobbs & Hamilton, 2007; Gupta, 2015). It is often emphasized that in small businesses, managers have a central role in creating prerequisites for occupational health, company effectiveness and survival (Barbosa et al., 2019; Fuller-Love, 2006; Legg et al., 2014). Furthermore, leaders of small businesses shoulder the intertwined responsibilities of entrepreneurs, managers, and operational staff, and this potentially affects their work and overall wellbeing.

Small and medium-sized enterprises and their management modes are specific and differ from large companies (Torrès & Julien, 2005). Management of an SME is characterized by centralization, a low level of specialization,

simple and informal information channels, and short-term, informal and intuitive strategies. Torrès (2004) describes the characteristics of management of SMEs in terms of hierarchical, intra-functional, temporal and spatial proximity. According to this perspective, SME managers are prone to what is geographically, psychologically or temporarily closest to them, here and now. For instance, the manager is highly involved in the organization and its many activities, has intensive relationships with internal and external stakeholders and places strong emphasis on short-term and operational issues (Torrès, 2004). Owing to high centralization and the manager's high involvement in the operative and short-term operative activities there are many daily disturbances and issues in the manager's work that place demands on this individual's attention and working time (Torrès, 2004). Also, the centrality of the owner-manager for the management system is accentuated in SMEs, leading to highly personalized modes of management and doing business (Fuller, 2003; Torrès, 2004). Small size creates conditions for stronger interpersonal relations and managers tend to have personal and frequent contacts with clients, suppliers, bankers and employees (Torrès, 2004). Therefore, the proximity in relationships internally and externally and the personalization of business (where the owners' personal values and commitment largely affect businesses) are viewed as central in small firms (Fuller, 2003; Torrès, 2004).

Nevertheless, Torrès and Julien (2005) suggest that not all small firms necessarily reflect these features and that there is the possibility that they denature (meaning that they lose their specificity and become more like large companies in relation to their basic characteristics and management practices). In the process of denaturing, the attributes of small business management based on proximity are reduced. In particular, denaturing firms decentralize management to a larger degree, increase labour specialization, expand markets, and attain more formal strategies and information systems (Torrès & Julien, 2005). Small firms that denature, thus, move from more simple, intuitive, informal management modes based on proximity in relations, towards more complex, structured, long-term, formalized and depersonalized modes (Torrès & Julien, 2005).

### ***c. Managerial work during small businesses' growth***

An important feature of the small business context is its variability and dynamic nature due to the process of growth. The phenomenon of business growth is complex and manifold (Achtenhagen et al., 2010). Despite a substantial body of research, there is still inadequate theoretical knowledge and a limited grasp of the phenomenon (Dobbs & Hamilton, 2007; Leitch et al., 2010). In business studies, one approach to delineating business growth can be found in a diverse array of life-cycle models that depict firms' growth trajectories as traversing distinct stages (Lester et al., 2003; Phelps et al., 2007). While the life-cycle perspective has encountered criticism for its deterministic and linear outlook (Phelps et al., 2007), researchers tend to agree that common characteristics exist within the growth process. For instance, there are periods of stability intertwined with moments of crisis or critical junctures, alongside transformations in the fundamental structures, activities, and key challenges faced by

companies over time. In essence, there are specific transformations that extend beyond mere alterations in size and age as companies undergo growth.

According to a model proposed by Churchill and Lewis (1983) specifically tailored for small and growing companies, businesses pass through five distinct growth stages: existence; survival; take-off; success; and resource maturity. These stages are accompanied by a progression in the diversity and complexity of five key management factors. These factors encompass managerial style and decision making (referring to the extent of delegated decision-making authority by the owner); organizational structure (involving the layers of management within the firm); operational systems (comprising the intricacy of the firm's financial, marketing, and production systems); strategic planning (including the development of both short and long-term goals, along with major strategic initiatives); and owner involvement (indicating the level of the owner's engagement in ongoing business activities and decision-making processes). Therefore, when a company grows the owner's decision-making style moves from a controlling stance to a more delegating approach, the owner's direct involvement in daily operations decreases, and new managerial layers are introduced. Simultaneously, the organizational structure, operational systems, and strategic planning undergo a gradual increase in complexity. As a result, the firm's growth leads to changes in the firm's structural and contextual dimensions (Phelps et al., 2007). This transformation subsequently influences the essence of managerial roles (Shim et al., 2000) and likely will impact managers' working conditions, resources and demands. However, the issue of business growth from an occupational health perspective has received limited attention.

### **2.3. Managers' work**

Managers' work and leadership are considered interrelated activities which, as shown in the conceptual model, have consequences for the company and ultimately for the managers' own work conditions. However, there has been a recurring discussion about whether management and leadership should be viewed as separate concepts, and whether or not managers and leaders are different (Ellström & Kock, 2009). For instance, it has been argued that managers are devoted to administrative and bureaucratic tasks such as planning, budgeting and control while leaders influence people's thoughts and emotions, for instance through inspiration, vision and symbols (Alvesson & Spicer, 2014). Such a strict distinction between leaders and managers has been criticized for overemphasizing the role of leader (Alvesson & Spicer, 2014). It has also been argued that, in practice, management and leadership are often intertwined (Alvesson & Spicer, 2014), especially when formal managers are in focus. According to Mintzberg (1973; 2009), leadership is one of the nine roles that managers perform in their work, however, permeating the other roles and being always present in managers' work. This thesis focuses solely on formal managers; therefore, the term "manager" will be used throughout the text. Furthermore, in accordance with Mintzberg (1973), leadership will be considered an integral part of managerial work. Bearing the main responsibility for

an organization or unit (Mintzberg 1973; 2009) and their daily functioning (Kotter, 2001) is central to being a manager. Therefore in this thesis, management and leadership will be considered as complementary activities of a manager, in line with discussions by Ellström & Kock (2009). Managers' work will be studied from the management and work behaviour approach (Tengblad, 2012). This perspective emphasizes the importance of managers' daily behaviours, which allows to explore their relevance for occupational health.

Leadership is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. There are many definitions available, highlighting different aspects of leadership. This thesis will use the definition proposed by Yukl (2013, p. 23), which views leadership as "a process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives". This definition emphasizes the goal-oriented influence processes in leadership (Ellström & Kock, 2009).

Apparently, there are several approaches to the study of leadership. For instance, leadership research has historically focused on leaders' personal traits, skills and competences, leadership behaviour and styles, and leader-member exchange (Yukl, 2013). This thesis, however, focuses on leadership behaviours as this perspective looks more closely at what managers do in their daily work.

Furthermore, managers' work and leadership behaviours are studied from a contextual perspective. Both leadership and managerial work interact with the context and are constrained and shaped by various situational variables (Fiedler, 1978; Yukl, 2013; Ellström & Kock, 2009; Northouse, 2013; Oc, 2018). They also may affect the context by reproducing or modifying it (Ellström & Kock, 2009). Therefore, there is a need to know more about the ways in which managerial work and leadership behaviours interact with situational characteristics (Yukl, 2013). Attributes of leaders, employees and the context have an impact on how leadership is practised in different settings and what effect it may have on the employees, their wellbeing and performance (Myndigheten för arbetsmiljökunskap. 2022). To get a nuanced understanding of leadership and managers' work, there is a need to consider their immediate context and pay attention to the complex interaction between managers, employees and the context (Alvesson & Spicer, 2014).

### ***a. Managerial work activities***

In the management and work behaviour approach, researchers have focused on managerial practices, with the aim to understand what managers do (Hales, 1986; Noordegraaf & Stewart, 2000; Tengblad, 2012). To this purpose, managerial practices have been dissected from various angles, including managers' roles, activities, the composition and nature of their work, communication modes and facets of informal work (Hales, 2001). Here, particular attention is paid to managers' allocation of time to managerial work activities. This helps to better understand what managers do in their daily work and how it potentially affects occupational health.

A major work in this field is Mintzberg's study from 1973. It looked at the different work activities managers do and grouped them into categories such as desk work, phone calls, scheduled and unscheduled meetings, and touring

the company. Mintzberg illuminated commonalities in managerial practices, leading to assertions on the generic nature of managers' work (Mintzberg, 1973). Other scholars have highlighted both what is common and what can vary in managerial work (Hales, 1999; Tengblad, 2012). The variations, according to Stewart (1976), may stem from variations in the demands and constraints in managers' work, as well as managers' individual choices.

While studies on managerial work offer a comprehensive understanding of what managers do, it remains unclear why managers do what they do and whether their way of working has significance for employees and organizations (Hales 1986; 1999; 2001; Martinko & Gardner, 1985; O'Gorman et al., 2005). Notably, this underscores the insufficient investigation into two key areas: (1) the factors, encompassing organizational, individual, and contextual elements, that account for the commonalities and variations in managerial activities; and (2) the impact of managerial work and behaviours on organizational performance and employees.

While research indicates that company size has an impact on managerial work and behaviours, still too little research has addressed managerial work in small businesses (O'Gorman et al., 2005). The few available studies examining the allocation of time to managerial work activities in small companies show that managers allocate less time to scheduled meetings, and dedicate more time to informal communication and touring the company (defined here as the practice of managers moving around the workplace and engaging with employees in spontaneous interactions), in contrast to their counterparts in larger companies (Choran, 1969; Florén & Tell, 2004; 2012). Even in the context of growing small businesses, O'Gorman et al. (2005) observed a similar pattern. The investigation conducted by Florén and Tell (2012) comparing managerial work in fast-growing and slow-growing small businesses revealed no significant differences in time allocation, level of formalization or communication patterns that could account for the differing growth dynamics of these firms.

In this thesis, two aspects of managers' time allocation to work activities, namely managers' total working hours and proportion of time spend on touring the company, are considered to be of particular importance for occupational health. When touring managers are present and accessible for contacts and spontaneous informal interactions with their staff. Previous studies underscore the importance of managers adopting a hands-on and accessible approach for interacting with employees, which has been shown to positively impact employee wellbeing (Lundqvist et al., 2012; Skarholt et al., 2016; Poulsen & Ipsen, 2017). Touring also presents increased opportunities for managers to exhibit relations-oriented leadership behaviour, a factor that research has linked to employee wellbeing (Skakon et al., 2010).

Furthermore, in relation to working hours, research suggests that managers who are burdened with excessive workloads may struggle to effectively handle their own work situation in the long term (Carlsson, 1951; Tengblad, 2006). Research has also shown that working long hours are related to various negative outcomes including depression, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and coronary heart disease (Bannai & Tamakoshi, 2014), representing a significant risk to occupational health. It is important to note that classic studies of managers'

work (e.g. Mintzberg, 1973) included both touring and total working hours; however, these aspects can be separated. Touring the company is a managerial work activity, something that managers do. Number of working hours reflects total time allocated to managerial work activities. It is also considered a measure of quantitative demand in the field of occupational health and therefore represents an aspect of managers' working conditions.

### ***b. Leadership behaviours***

A large body of leadership research focuses on leadership styles with the intention to describe and explain effective leadership. Several leadership behaviour theories have received considerable attention, among others the Full Range Leadership model, and Servant, Spiritual and Authentic Leadership theories (Yukl, 2013). This thesis explores leadership behaviours by employing the three-dimensional leadership model (Yukl et al., 2002) also referred to as the Change, Production and Employees (CPE) leadership model (Ekvall & Arvonen, 1991). This model classifies leadership behaviours into three broad categories: task-oriented; relations-oriented; and change-oriented behaviours.

In the model, task-oriented behaviours (such as organizing and planning work activities, setting goals and standards, monitoring operations and performance) are envisaged to ensure effective production and task fulfilment. Relations-oriented behaviours (such as providing support and encouragement, recognizing contributions and achievements, socializing, fostering relations) emphasize building cooperation and trust. Lastly, change-oriented behaviours (encouraging employees to see problems and opportunities in a new way, developing innovative new strategies, initiating, and facilitating innovation in the organization) aim to bring about change, growth, and adaptation to the external environment (Yukl et al., 2002). Change-oriented behaviours may be viewed as entrepreneurial, since their characteristics including innovativeness, risk taking, creativity, and striving for change and growth have also been regarded as characteristics of entrepreneurial behaviours (Sadler-Smith et al., 2003), as discussed previously.

The strength of the three-dimensional model is that it offers a general typology of leadership behaviours and thus covers all possible behaviours relevant for all types of leaders. Since the model is simple and easy to comprehend it may be used for categorizing different behaviours. The behaviours in the three-dimensional model have been found to be associated with health, job satisfaction, performance, quality and effectivity (see Arvonen, 2002; Kuoppala et al., 2008; Larsson, 2010; Nyberg et al., 2005, Nyberg, 2008; Skakon et al., 2010). However, research shows greater support for the association between the relations dimension and health, while the results regarding the task- and change-oriented behaviours demonstrate mixed results (Larsson, 2010). Systematic reviews of research on the association between leadership and employees' health have found managers' support and consideration to be linked to the subordinates' wellbeing and stress levels (Skakon et al., 2010).

According to Ekvall and Arvonen (1994), effective managers use all three dimensions to a high degree. The specific behaviours within the dimensions



are relevant for effective leadership, but can be more, or less, important in specific situations and contexts (Yukl et al., 2002). Yukl and colleagues (2002) have called for research to investigate the specific behaviours that successful managers use within the dimensions, and to explore leadership behaviours in various contexts and in relation to performance measures to deepen the understanding of leadership (Yukl et al., 2002).

When assessing the consequences of leadership behaviours for employees, the organization and occupational health, it is common to distinguish constructive and destructive behaviours. Several reviews (Derue et al., 2011; Inceoglu et al., 2018; Kaluza et al., 2020) have used the categories of task-, relations- and change-oriented behaviours to describe constructive leadership.

“Destructive leadership” serves as an umbrella term encompassing a wide spectrum of leadership behaviours and styles that have the potential to cause harm to the organization and its members, either intentionally or unintentionally (Einarsen et al., 2007; Krasikova et al., 2013; Mackey et al., 2021). This category encompasses behaviours that employees perceive as hostile, aggressive and abusive (Tepper, 2017). Furthermore, when leaders exhibit absence, inactivity, and avoidance during times when active participation is needed (referred to as “laissez-faire leadership”) (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Fosse et al., 2019), this is commonly recognized as a passive form of destructive leadership (Fosse et al., 2019; Skogstad et al., 2017). Research has demonstrated that both active and passive forms of destructive leadership have adverse consequences for both organizational effectiveness and the wellbeing of employees (Buch et al., 2015; Derue et al., 2011; Einarsen et al., 2007; Klasmeier et al., 2021; Mackey et al., 2021; Schyns & Schilling, 2013; Skogstad et al., 2007; 2017).

## **2.4. Managers’ psychosocial working conditions and wellbeing**

### ***a. Psychosocial working conditions***

The concept of “psychosocial working conditions” remains challenging, despite extensive research and a range of definitions employed within various strands of research on this topic (Corin, 2016; Lundqvist, 2013). Psychosocial working conditions can be viewed as the interplay between an individual and their work environment, where psychosocial factors represent social (environmental) conditions that affect individual psychological aspects, and vice versa (Theorell, 2007). Also, according to a report from the Swedish Agency for Work Environment Expertise (2020a), factors in a psychosocial work environment are those that can psychologically or socially influence an individual in a work-related context, i.e. where individuals are expected to carry out their work responsibilities.

This thesis primarily explores psychosocial working conditions in terms of how individuals perceive their work characteristics to be relevant for their wellbeing; therefore, it adopts the definition of psychosocial working conditions of Theorell (2007) and the Swedish Agency for Work Environment Ex-

pertise (2020a), focusing on the interplay between environmental and individual factors that impact managers psychologically and/or socially in their specific work contexts.

To explore the wellbeing and working conditions of small business managers this thesis utilizes the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; 2017; Demerouti et al., 2001). Alongside the demand–control–support model (Karasek, 1979; Johnson & Hall, 1988) and the effort–reward imbalance model (Siegrist, 1996; 2002), this model is one of the most influential models linking working conditions and wellbeing.

In the JD–R model, the concept of occupational wellbeing is explained through the lens of job demands and job resources (Demerouti et al., 2001). Job demands are attributes and circumstances of a job that necessitate physical and psychological efforts, resulting in physiological and psychological costs (Demerouti et al., 2001). On the other hand, resources facilitate the accomplishment of work objectives, foster personal growth and development, and counterbalance job demands and their associated physiological and psychological costs (Bakker et al., 2004). This framework suggests that work environments characterized by high demands and low resources tend to intensify strain and reduce work engagement (Bakker et al., 2004), whereas situations featuring both high job demands and high resources represent active and stimulating jobs (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Research has indicated that wellbeing is, in general, positively influenced by abundant job resources and negatively impacted by escalating job demands (Crawford et al., 2010; Demerouti & Sanz Vergel, 2014; Häusser et al., 2010). Resources may exist at an organizational, interpersonal and/or individual level (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

The strength of the JD–R model is that it is flexible and allows to include working conditions and factors relevant for specific occupational settings (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). The model has been empirically supported in a variety of contexts (Kattenbach & Fietze, 2018; Bakker et al., 2003; Hakanen et al., 2006; Llorens et al., 2006). Nevertheless, given that specific job demands and resources vary based on the context, more research is needed to target specific occupational settings (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

The JD–R model is consistent with Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989). According to this theory, job demands deplete people's limited pool of resources, leading to stress and burnout when resources are low or threatened (Hobfoll, 1989; 2001). To prevent resource loss or recover from losses, resource investment is necessary (Hobfoll, 1989; 2001). Therefore, in chronically stressful managerial jobs, resource gain is an important shield against resource loss and contributes to maintain strong resource reservoirs.

It is worth mentioning that resources are interlinked and aggregate in resource caravans and ecologies (Hobfoll, 2011). In studies of work settings, increased attention is being paid to organizational ecologies of resources that are accumulated and made available for individuals and groups within organizations (Hobfoll, 2011). Therefore, it is important to concurrently study organizational resources in their immediate contexts.

Initial lack of resources and surplus of resources tend respectively to escalate towards downward loss and upward gain spirals (Hobfoll, 2001; Hobfoll

et al., 2015). When continued or not successfully addressed, loss has an increasingly negative impact and leads to escalating series of resource losses where available resources are used to prevent or compensate for resource loss (Hobfoll, 2001). Conversely, a strong pool of resources allows to compensate for acute stressors, offset resources for proactive coping to prevent future resource loss, and ensure future resource gain (Hobfoll, 2011). Therefore, work settings that manage to build stronger resource reservoirs are better equipped to adapt to current stress, prevent future loss of resources and ensure future gains.

## **b. Wellbeing**

A considerable amount of research exists on the topic of wellbeing, encompassing various approaches to understanding and defining it (Schulte & Vainio, 2010; De Simone, 2014). Historically, wellbeing was primarily associated with the absence of illness, focusing largely on physical health (Page & Vella-Brodrick, 2009; Tengel, 2006). Over time, the concept evolved to now encompass a wider scope of dimensions, including physical, emotional, mental and social (Grant et al., 2007; De Simone, 2014).

Stephan et al. (2023) highlight such dimensions as cognitive wellbeing (e.g. life and work satisfaction), affective wellbeing (related to feelings and moods, e.g. happiness or anxiety and depression) as well as hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing. Hedonic wellbeing is oriented towards happiness and satisfaction (corresponding to high levels of positive cognitive and affective wellbeing) (Stephan et al., 2023), and eudaimonic wellbeing relates to individuals' psychological functioning, including experiences of growth, fulfilment, and meaningfulness (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Similarly, Page and Vella-Brodrick (2009) suggest that wellbeing is composed of such dimensions as subjective wellbeing (which reflects the hedonic approach to wellbeing and includes life satisfaction and dispositional affect); workplace wellbeing (which encompasses job satisfaction and work-related affect); and psychological wellbeing (which corresponds to the eudaimonic approach and involves factors such as self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, environmental mastery, autonomy, a sense of purpose in life, and personal growth).

In this thesis wellbeing is treated as a broad concept to fully capture different dimensions that reflect individuals' judgements of their lives and feeling well beyond physical and psychological health (Danna & Griffin, 1999; Sonnentag, 2015). Therefore, the thesis applies a broad conceptualization of wellbeing: individuals' subjective assessment of how they feel and function (Warr, 2013).

Furthermore, in line with the framework used by Kaluza et al. (2020) this thesis makes a distinction between some aspects of wellbeing such as valence and temporal stability. Valence distinguishes between positive (e.g. work satisfaction, flourishing and work engagement) and negative (e.g. burnout, job strain) dimensions of wellbeing (Kaluza et al., 2020; Stephan et al., 2023). Temporal stability differentiates short-term wellbeing (emphasizing momentary states) from long-term wellbeing (accentuating more stable and lasting states) (Kaluza et al., 2020; Warr, 2013). Positive and negative dimensions of

wellbeing reflect two distinct processes where resources activate motivational processes and boost wellbeing while demands trigger health impairment (Stephan et al., 2023; Lesener et al., 2018).

### ***c. Earlier research on small business managers' psychosocial working conditions and wellbeing***

Two streams could be discerned in the previous research regarding small business managers: one concentrating on the general population of managers and the other centred around entrepreneurs. However, among these two, there is a noticeable scarcity of studies that delve into managers' wellbeing and work environments, especially in the context of small, growing companies. Notably, a significant portion of studies exploring the factors contributing to managers' wellbeing have been mostly conducted in the setting of public organizations (see, e.g., Asplund et al., 2022; Björklund et al., 2013; Lindholm, 2006; Skagert et al., 2012) or large companies (Lundqvist et al., 2012; Nyberg et al., 2015). The context of small companies has been left largely overlooked. The existing research on entrepreneurs' working conditions and wellbeing has inadequately differentiated between various types of entrepreneurs, such as those with and those without employees (Hessels et al., 2018; Stephan, 2018), thus failing to specifically spotlight managers in small companies.

Previous empirical studies show that managers have stressful work; they face fragmentation, complexity, continuous change, and uncertainty (Ganster, 2005; Mintzberg, 1973; Quick et al., 2000). Also, they commonly grapple with long work hours and large workloads to be completed at a swift pace (Carlson, 1951; Ganster, 2005; Mintzberg, 1973; Quick et al., 2000; Tengblad, 2006). However, notwithstanding high demands, managers also enjoy higher levels of control, decision authority, and autonomy as valuable job resources (Bernin & Theorell, 2001; Li et al., 2018; Nyberg et al., 2015).

The work of entrepreneurs, in this thesis also referred to as “manager–owners”, is associated with high demands and stress (Mäkinen et al., 2021; Omrane et al., 2018; Sardeshmukh et al., 2021; Stephan, 2018). The very nature of their work, encompassing responsibilities, tasks and challenges tied to business ownership and operation, can inherently result in substantial strain and burnout (Fernet et al., 2016; Hessels et al., 2018; Lerman et al., 2021) as well as the potential for additional stressors such as work–life conflict, role ambiguity and financial pressures (Cocker et al., 2013). Attributes of entrepreneurs' work include long working hours, juggling multiple roles, navigating uncertainty in an unpredictable environment, making significant time and energy investments, and experiencing loneliness and lack of support (Cocker et al., 2013; Fernet et al., 2016; Mäkinen et al., 2021; Omrane et al., 2018; Sardeshmukh et al., 2021; Visentin et al., 2020). Entrepreneurs also handle higher levels of workload and uncertainty compared with non-entrepreneurs (Lerman et al., 2021). However, they enjoy high resources, for instance a higher degree of autonomy and independence, compared with salaried workers (Shir & Ryff, 2022).

Reviews (Mäkinen et al., 2021; Stephan, 2018) of existing research categorize the predictors of entrepreneurs' wellbeing into levels related to their job

(e.g. high workload, role ambiguity, autonomy, flexibility, significance), social dynamics (support from family and peers, feedback from clients, work–family conflict, conflicts with customers and employees), characteristics of the business (income, subjective financial success, firm size, financial challenges, job insecurity, and uncertainty), personal attributes (personality traits, human capital, values, and motivation) and societal factors. Lechat and Torrès (2017) report that the most common stressor for owner–managers of SMEs is excessive workload, followed by competitive pressures and client attrition. They identified client satisfaction, strategy success, and a positive social atmosphere as among the most favourable contributors to wellbeing.

In sum, research underscores that both managers and entrepreneurs confront highly demanding work environments, but also benefit from substantial resources.

Previous research has shown that despite the high demands, managers and entrepreneurs enjoy good wellbeing to a greater extent than do the employees (Hessels et al., 2018; Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Marmot & Shipley, 1996; Stephan, 2018). However, there are studies indicating potential risks of reduced wellbeing linked to managerial positions (Boyce & Oswald, 2012; Ikesu et al., 2021; Johnston & Lee, 2013; Nyberg et al., 2017). Entrepreneurs, too, face risks of burnout (Torrès & Thurik, 2019) and poor health in the long term owing to sustained exposure to high stress levels (Stephan, 2018). Few studies have highlighted low wellbeing among entrepreneurs (Boyd & Gumpert, 1983; Jamal, 1997). Additionally, research underscores variances in managers' wellbeing based on their position in the hierarchy: top-level managers often have better wellbeing, while first-line managers face poorer wellbeing and working conditions (Björklund et al., 2013; Lundqvist, 2013).

Moreover, it should be noted that previous studies have predominantly presented a static view of wellbeing and work in small businesses, often overlooking the variability and dynamism inherent in this context (Stephan, 2018). A dimension of this dynamic context is related to business growth and the consequential transformations it triggers within these companies. Hessels et al. (2018) suggest that an increase in firm age and size could potentially influence managers' working conditions and wellbeing. Further research is warranted to explore how the growth of a business can potentially shape managers' working conditions and wellbeing, given its consequences for employee wellbeing and overall company performance.

Altogether, too few studies have addressed managers' wellbeing and psychosocial working conditions in the specific context of small growing companies. Also, variability due to the growth dynamic has been overlooked in previous research.

## **2.5. Consequences of managers' wellbeing for leadership**

As mentioned in the Introduction, previous research has shown that the wellbeing of managers and their leadership are related and that this relationship is two-directional. Managers' wellbeing influences how they practise leadership,

on the one hand; on the other, managers' leadership behaviours affect their own wellbeing (Kaluza et al., 2020).

This thesis explores the consequences of the wellbeing of managers for their leadership behaviour, employing a conceptual framework developed by Kaluza et al. (2020). In this framework, wellbeing is considered in terms of valence (positive and negative) and temporal (short-term and long-term) stability. Leadership behaviours are classified as destructive (passive and active) and constructive (task-, relations-, and change-oriented). There is an association between managers' positive wellbeing and constructive behaviours, as well as between their negative wellbeing and destructive behaviours, as established in systematic research reviews by Joseph et al. (2015) and Kaluza et al. (2020).

In addition, this framework draws upon an array of resource theories (Fredrickson, 2004; Hagger et al., 2010; Hobfoll, 1989; Kaluza et al., 2020) to illuminate the potential pathways that connect the wellbeing of managers with their leadership behaviours. Conservation of Resources theory suggests that wellbeing can function as a personal resource, enabling managers' optimal operation and active engagement in leadership behaviours (Hobfoll, 1989). The broaden-and-build theory, on the other hand, proposes that managers with a sense of wellbeing may possess heightened intellectual, physical and social resources, leading to a broader range of attention, cognition and actions (Fredrickson, 2004). Ego depletion theory adds another layer by suggesting that managers may have reduced energy and resources for constructive behaviours when they are depleted, potentially facing challenges in suppressing negative impulses when fatigued or irritable (Hagger et al., 2010).

There is currently a lack of substantial empirical research delving into the connection between the wellbeing of managers and their exhibited leadership behaviours. The existing research has predominantly utilized quantitative approaches to assess generic leadership constructs such as transformational leadership, leader-member exchange, and destructive leadership (e.g. Bernerth & Hirschfeld, 2016; Lin et al., 2016; Zwingmann et al., 2016). This methodological approach presents challenges in pinpointing specific leadership behaviours that are impacted by the wellbeing of managers. However, a few qualitative investigations have explored the ways managers' wellbeing impacts specific leadership behaviours in workplace settings. For instance, a study focusing on the experiences of managers in a large industrial Swedish company revealed that when managers were feeling well they tended to be more supportive, inspirational, communicative and accessible (Lundqvist et al., 2012).

Another noteworthy aspect in existing research is the lack of attention given to the temporal aspect of the association between managers' wellbeing and their leadership behaviours, as well as how this relationship varies over time. This concern has previously been raised in the context of leadership behaviours (see, e.g., Barnes et al., 2015) and the interplay between leadership behaviours and employee wellbeing (e.g. Inceoglu et al., 2018).

Given the limited research available, there is a need for a more in-depth understanding, gained especially through qualitative studies, of how managers' wellbeing impacts their leadership behaviours and styles generally and, in the unique context of small businesses, which specific behaviours are affected, and

how this unfolds over time. It is likely that the effect of managers' wellbeing on their behaviours and on employees may be more evident in smaller organizations because of the closer relationship between managers and employees and the managers' high involvement in all areas of business operations.

## **2.6. Rationale for the thesis**

Existing research indicates that managers' work, working conditions and wellbeing are important determinants of occupational health in organizations. Nevertheless, there is a dearth of studies that explore these factors in the setting of small growing businesses. The context of small growing businesses is important because of the substantial contribution of these businesses to employment, social stability, economic growth, and innovation. They also represent a specific occupational setting. This implies that an exploration of managers' work, leadership, wellbeing and psychosocial working conditions must adopt a context-sensitive approach. By exploring the actual knowledge gaps related to the specific and important context of small businesses, this thesis will contribute to an in-depth understanding of healthy and sustainable businesses.

Previous research indicates that the working environment matters for managers' wellbeing. Nevertheless, there is a lack of knowledge about what this relationship looks like in small businesses and what specific factors are important for managers' wellbeing in the context of small growing companies.

Regarding the importance of wellbeing for managers' leadership practice, although there are a limited number of studies, there is not enough knowledge about how this relationship unfolds in the context of small businesses and which leadership behaviours are affected. In addition, although it is known that the work and leadership of managers has consequences for employees' and the managers' own wellbeing, most studies thus far have been conducted in larger companies and there is very little knowledge about managers' work and leadership in the context of small growing businesses.

Finally, previous research has provided a static picture of managers' working conditions and wellbeing. While it is known that small growing businesses are dynamic and changeable, growth has not been looked at from an occupational health perspective.

Therefore, this thesis aims to fill these knowledge gaps.



### **3. Overall and specific aims**

#### **3.1. Main objective**

To explore managers' work, working conditions and wellbeing in the context of small businesses with profitable growth.

#### **3.2. Specific objectives**

- a. To assess managers' work and behaviour patterns in profitable growth SMEs. Additionally, to investigate whether leadership behaviours and manager and organization characteristics could explain the extent and nature of managers' work (Study I).
- b. To explore managers' and employees' experiences and perceptions regarding the consequences of managers' wellbeing for their leadership behaviours in small businesses (Study II).
- c. To explore which factors within the small business context were perceived by managers to hinder or enable their wellbeing (Study III).
- d. To explore how managers in small companies perceive their working conditions and wellbeing in the context of business growth (Study IV).

## 4. Materials and Methods

### 4.1. Study design

In this thesis, the work, working conditions, and wellbeing of managers in small companies with profitable growth were examined in four studies. The first study (Paper I) employed a quantitative approach and was based on cross-sectional survey data. It examined patterns in managers' work activities as well as the association between the leadership behaviours of managers and their total working hours and the proportion of time they spent on touring the company. Studies II–IV (Papers II–IV) employed a qualitative approach and were based on semi-structured interviews. Study II explored managers' and employees' experiences of how managers' wellbeing impacts their leadership behaviours. Study III investigated the factors that small business managers perceive as important for their own wellbeing. Finally, Study IV focused on managers' perception of their working conditions and wellbeing in the context of small business growth. An overview of the studies is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of the studies included in this thesis (CoDA = compositional data analysis; SCiG = Successful Companies in Gästrikland).

Overall aim: The overall aim of this thesis was to explore managers' work, working conditions and wellbeing in the context of small businesses with profitable growth.				
	Study I	Study II	Study III	Study IV
Title	Managers' work and behaviour patterns in profitable growth SMEs	Managers' and employees' experiences of how managers' wellbeing impacts their leadership behaviours in Swedish small businesses	A qualitative study of factors that managers in small companies consider important for their wellbeing	Managers in the context of small business growth: a qualitative study of working conditions and wellbeing
Aim	To assess managers' work and behaviour patterns in profitable growth SMEs. Additionally, to investigate whether leadership behaviours, and manager and organization characteristics explain the extent and nature of managers' work	To explore managers' and employees' experiences and perceptions regarding the consequences of managers' wellbeing for their leadership behaviours in small businesses	To explore which factors in the small business context were perceived by managers to hinder or enable their wellbeing	To explore how managers in small companies perceive their working conditions and wellbeing in the context of business growth
Research questions	1. What is the scope and content of managerial work	1. How does managers' wellbeing impact	Which factors do small business managers	How do managers in small

	in profitable growth SMEs? 2. Do differences in (a) leadership behaviour orientation; (b) organizational context; and (c) manager characteristics influence the scope and content of managerial work in profitable growth SMEs?	their practised leadership behaviours, as perceived by the managers and the employees? 2. How does this affect the employees and organizations?	perceive as hindering or enabling their well-being?	businesses perceive their working conditions and well-being in the context of business growth?
Sample	<u>Selection of companies:</u> – the SCiG project’s inclusion criteria (i.e. registered in Gästrikland, ≥5 years in operation, ≥4 employees, and ≥4 million Swedish krona in net sales per annum.) – nominated for the SCiG award during 2015–2018 (among the 120 highest rated companies for financial performance) – size (≤250 employees) <u>Participants:</u> Managers of the companies included in the study, n=133	<u>Selection of companies:</u> <u>Group 1:</u> Small companies with sustainable profitable growth in a longer time perspective, n=9 <u>Group 2:</u> Small companies with short-term profitable growth, n=3 <u>Participants (n=39):</u> 20 managers (formal managerial position and personnel responsibility) and 19 employees	<u>Selection of companies:</u> As in Study II  <u>Participants (n=20):</u> Same managers as in Study II	<u>Selection of companies:</u> As in Study II  <u>Participants (n=20):</u> As in Study III
Data collection	Quantitative – questionnaire	Qualitative – semi-structured interviews	Qualitative – semi-structured interviews	Qualitative – semi-structured interviews
Data analysis	Descriptive statistics, correlation, linear regression and CoDa	Inductive content analysis	Inductive content analysis	Inductive content analysis and thematic analysis

## 4.2. Setting of the study

The data for this thesis were gathered via the Successful Companies in Gästrikland (SCiG) project. This project annually honours the 50 most successful companies in Gästrikland, a province in central Sweden. The project is carried out in cooperation between the University of Gävle (UoG), and business organizations and municipalities in Gästrikland.

The sampling process for Studies I–IV was carried out in two steps: the first used the SCiG sampling procedure; the second used a specific sampling process tailored for the studies (illustrated in Figure 2). The SCiG project’s inclusion criteria are: companies registered in Gästrikland, operational for a minimum of 5 years, employing at least four staff members, and a turnover in net sales of  $\geq 4$  million Swedish krona per year. Companies meeting these criteria are ranked by the SCiG project based on economic indicators, including net sales, number of employees, equity ratio, income, pre-tax profit margin, return on assets and return on equity. An autonomous auditing firm is entrusted with the selection and evaluation process, employing data derived from the companies’ five most recent annual financial statements (with greater weight accorded to the most recent report). These data are compiled by a European company specializing in quality-assured business and financial information. In essence, the ranking system is designed to identify companies that have exhibited profitable growth with retained profitability over the last 5 years.

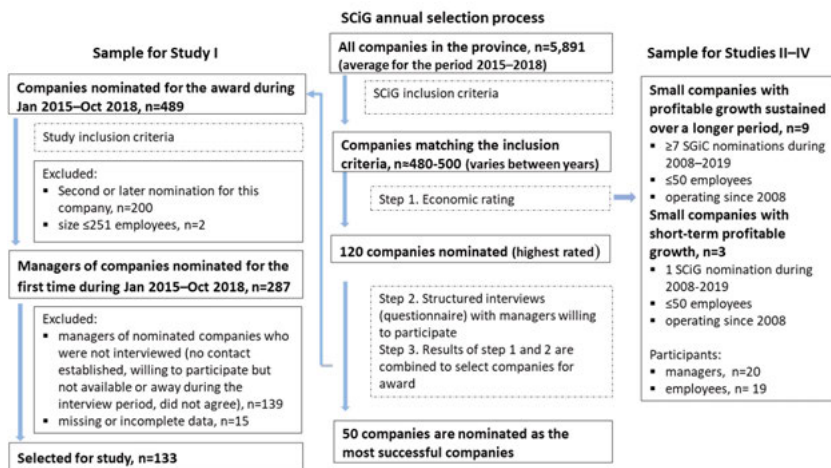


Figure 2. Selection process for the Successful Companies in Gästrikland (SCiG) project, and the studies included in this thesis.

Of all the companies in the region ( $n=5,891$ ) only approximately 500 companies matched the SCiG criteria. Subsequently, the uppermost 120 enterprises featured in the ranking are designated as nominees for the award. A standardized questionnaire (covering diverse dimensions of organization, leadership, and managerial work) was used to interview the managers of the nominated companies. The interviews are conducted by students enrolled at the UoG, as a component of their educational curriculum focused on leadership and organization. The responses gathered from the questionnaires serve a dual purpose: aiding in the identification of companies eligible for the award, and providing data for research purposes.

The specific sampling for the studies in the thesis included companies that were nominated for the award through financial ranking (and demonstrated higher profitable growth compared with most of the similar size companies in

the region). The sample thus allows to study growing companies. Nevertheless, it should be noted that focus on successful, long-standing companies can potentially bias the results towards increased resilience and sustainable work environments, overlooking the experiences of struggling of less established businesses. This may limit the applicability of the findings to a narrower range of small businesses, primarily those that have experienced prolonged success. However, this specific sampling does give valuable insights into the process of growth of small businesses.

### **4.3. Samples and procedures**

#### ***Study I***

The sample for Study I consisted of top managers of the SMEs that were nominated for the SCiG award during the period 2015–2018 and took part in the structured interviews within the framework of the SCiG project. The term “top manager” encompassed owner–managers, executive directors, and managers holding similar leadership roles; “SMEs” denotes companies with a workforce of up to 250 individuals. The dataset of the study was composed of questionnaire responses, with participation limited to one manager per company. In cases where companies received multiple nominations for the award, only the data from their initial inclusion in the ranking list were considered.

This way, responses from a total of 133 managers were included in the study’s analysis. The managers on average were 48 years old; 88% were male, and 31% had higher education. On average, the managers’ tenure in the present company was 15 years (range 1–42 years) and their managerial experience was almost similar. The companies, on average, employed 21 individuals (range four to 150 employees).

#### ***Studies II–IV***

Studies II–IV employed one and the same main sample, with some modifications in Study II.

For Studies II–IV, companies were selected that had secured a place on the SCiG nomination list at least once between 2008 and 2019, indicating substantiated profitable growth. These companies had a staff size of  $\leq 50$  employees to align with the definition of “small-scale enterprise”. Additionally, they had been in continuous operation since 2008. A total of twelve companies were included in the studies. Among these, nine were positioned at the top of the nomination list over the period 2008–2019, while three were at the lower end of the list. The nine companies topping the list had received nominations for the award on more than seven occasions from 2008 to 2019, signifying a sustainable and profitable growth trajectory over an extended period. These firms had shown an increase in net sales and/or employee number during this period. Conversely, the three companies at the lower end of the list had exhibited shorter periods of profitable growth during the same period and had been nominated for the award only once. They had not exhibited noteworthy advancements in net sales and/or employee numbers throughout the period studied.

This selection methodology was adopted to introduce diversity in the dataset with regard to the degree of sustainable growth.

Initial contact was established with the chief executive officers (CEOs) of the selected companies via email, inviting them to participate in the study and outlining the study's objectives, data collection procedure, and treatment of the gathered data. This was followed by follow-up telephone discussions to confirm their engagement in the study and address practical aspects of data collection.

Subsequently, the CEOs disseminated information about the study to their subordinate managers, seeking their willingness to participate in the interview process. The companies involved had workforces ranging from four to 46 individuals, and their operational histories ranged from 12 to 51 years. They were engaged in diverse sectors including sales (n=5), manufacturing (n=4), technical consultancy (n=2) and transportation (n=1).

The sample in Studies II–IV consisted of managers in the selected companies. The sample for Study II was enlarged to include employees in addition to managers, meaning that, in addition to the 20 managers interviewed for Studies II–IV, some 19 employees were also interviewed for Study II.

Across all three studies, the managerial participants were twelve CEOs, nine of them also being owner–managers, and eight managers at lower hierarchical levels, altogether 18 men and two women. Their ages ranged from 29 to 66 years, and their managerial experience from 2.5 to 29 years. Employees included in Study II comprised 15 men and four women.

#### **4.4. Data collection**

##### ***Study I***

In Study I a questionnaire was used to collect data. The dependent variables included the scope and content of managerial work activities; independent variables consisted of leadership behaviour orientation, managers' background characteristics, and organizational context. Maes et al. (2005) posit that factors operating at managerial level, including any managerial practices, and at the level of companies serve as fundamental determinants of company performance.

The variable regarding the scope and content of managerial work activities consisted of the managers' working hours and the allocation of time to managerial work activities, with particular focus on touring the company. The categorization of *activities* was aligned with classifications from previous studies (Florén & Tell, 2004; 2012; Kurke & Aldrich, 1983; Mintzberg, 1973; O'Gorman et al., 2005; Tengblad, 2006). Participants were requested to specify the proportion of their working time (in a typical work week) spent on activities such as desk work (e.g. emails, general administrative tasks), telephone calls, scheduled meetings, unscheduled meetings (e.g. ad-hoc interactions in hallways leading to spontaneous meetings), and touring the company (interactions while walking around and conversing with subordinates). An assessment of the total number of *working hours* was conducted by posing the question: "How many hours per week do you typically work?"

To quantify *leadership behaviour*, four one-item questions were asked to assess managers' general inclination towards relationships, task execution, and change in line with the taxonomy of the three-dimensional model (Ekvall & Arvonen, 1991; Yukl et al., 2002) and the behaviours outlined in the Healthy and Effective Leadership (HEL) model (Larsson & Vinberg, 2010). Respondents were prompted to review descriptions of key behaviours within each dimension and rate the degree to which they implemented these behaviours in their daily work, on a scale of 0 = "I never engage in this behaviour", to 100 = "I consistently exhibit this behaviour and could serve as an exemplary model for other managers". For instance, the description pertaining to relations-oriented behaviours was as follows: "As a manager, I offer support and encouragement to employees, express confidence in an employee's ability to tackle challenging tasks, acknowledge accomplishments, provide guidance as necessary, engage in discussions, offer advice, consult with employees, keep them updated in decision-making processes, and handle conflicts constructively."

To portray the characteristics of the managers, variables such as *age*, *gender*, *education*, *managerial experience*, and *tenure* were used. Age, education, and managerial experience are prevalent attributes often considered in research examining small business performance (Maes et al., 2005). *Age* was assessed on a continuous scale. *Gender* was categorized as 0 = male, or 1 = female, while *education* was categorized as 0 = no higher education, or 1 = higher education. *Managerial experience* was quantified as the cumulative number of years the respondent had spent in managerial roles in their current and previous affiliations. Organizational *tenure*, indicating the number of years the respondent had been employed in the current organization, was utilized to assess their familiarity with the company-specific context and their experience in its operational landscape.

The last two variables encompassed facets of the organizational context in which managers operated, potentially influencing their roles. *Control span* quantified the number of subordinates directly under a manager's supervision, while *number of employees* indicated the overall workforce size of the organization, serving as an indicator of company size.

## **Studies II–IV**

In Studies II–IV, qualitative interviews were used to collect data. The same methodology and data collection method was used for all three studies; however, with different sets of questions relating to the specific objectives of each study.

Data collection took place through individual interviews conducted in 2020. A semi-structured qualitative interview guide (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) was used, including a predefined list of themes and supplemented with open-ended questions. The participants were not presented with any specific definition of "wellbeing" in any of the studies.

The main focus in Study II was on the consequences of managers' wellbeing for their leadership behaviour and for their employees. Questions to the employees included "Would you notice if your manager did not feel well? – If so, how does this manifest?", and questions to the managers, "Do you think

that your health and wellbeing is important for your leadership? – If so, in what way does it affect your leadership?” and “Can you give an example?”

Study III focused on managers’ working conditions and factors influencing their wellbeing. Examples of questions asked are: “Is there something in your everyday work that makes you feel good?”, “What is the most important factor for you to feel good at work?” and “What in your work makes you not feel good?” Subsequent questions challenged the participants to elaborate on and exemplify their answers.

Specific questions included in Study IV focused on managers’ perceptions and experiences of their own wellbeing and working conditions. Examples of questions in this study were: “How do you perceive your own health and wellbeing?”, “Did your wellbeing change during your work as manager? – If so, in what way, and what did this depend on?”, “How do you perceive your work-life balance?” and “How do you perceive your work situation?” The open-ended questions were followed by probing follow-up questions to get clarification and examples.

The interviews were conducted through two modes: face-to-face sessions held on-site at the companies’ premises (n=18), and remote interviews conducted via the Zoom video conferencing platform (n=2). The interview duration ranged from 60 to 90 minutes. With the participants’ consent, all interviews were audio-recorded. The transcription was undertaken by a professional transcriber (n=29) as well as the first author (E.A.) (n=10), ensuring a verbatim representation of the interviews.

## **4.5. Data analysis**

### ***Study I***

The statistical data analysis conducted in Study I comprised two distinct stages. The initial phase included a descriptive analysis of total working hours and the distribution of time across managerial work activity categories (including desk work, telephone calls, etc as listed above). This was done employing measures of central tendency and spread: n, mean, median, range, and standard deviation. In addition, arithmetic means and standard deviations were computed for the proportions of time allocated to managerial work activities and total working hours, corresponding to varying levels of leadership behaviour orientation, situational characteristics, age, gender and education. For this analysis, all the independent variables and covariates were transformed into dichotomous variables using the median as a threshold (below median = 0, above median = 1). The Mann-Whitney U-test was used to assess potential differences. Furthermore, a correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between all dependent and independent variables.

The subsequent phase encompassed both univariate and multiple linear regression analyses aimed to investigate the potential relationship between total working hours and the following factors: leadership behaviour orientation, organizational context, and managers’ background characteristics. Initially, univariate linear regression was conducted to evaluate the links between total



working hours and each predictor variable. Subsequently, a multivariate regression analysis was conducted to explore the relationship between working hours, leadership behaviour, and the predictors that exhibited significant associations with the outcome in the preceding univariate analysis.

Given that the cumulative percentage of time devoted to managerial work activity categories constituted a complete working day, the variables were intrinsically co-dependent. Conventional statistical methods may be unsuitable for analysis of finite and collinear data, where segments make up the entirety, and their fluctuations are dependent on each other, being restricted by a consistent total (Pawlowsky-Glahn & Egozcue, 2006). Therefore, compositional data analysis (CoDA) was employed to investigate the potential relationship between the proportion of time allocated to walking about and leadership behaviour orientation, organizational context, and managers' background characteristics. To perform this analysis, the dependent variable (touring the company) was initially transformed into a proportion, bounding values between 0 and 1. This transformation accounted for the non-linear effects of explanatory variables and the reduction in variance that occurs as the mean approaches the boundaries of 0 or 1. To quantify the influence of exposure variables on the dependent variable, marginal effects were computed using a fractional logit model. Additionally, p-values and a 95% confidence interval were provided for the results obtained.

Additionally, the patterns of time allocation to managerial work activities identified in Study I (managers in profitable growth SMEs) were qualitatively compared with previous studies of managers in various-sized companies that used the same measurement categories: three studies of small companies (Chorran, 1969; Florén & Tell, 2012; O'Gorman et al., 2005), one of intermediate companies (Kurke & Aldrich, 1983), two of large organizations (Mintzberg, 1973; Tengblad, 2006), and additionally two focusing on small growing businesses (O'Gorman et al., 2005; Florén & Tell, 2012).

The CoDA analysis was conducted using Stata 15.0 (StataCorp, College Station, TX, USA). The remaining analyses were conducted using SPSS (IBM Corp, Armonk, NY, USA).

### ***Studies II–IV***

In Studies II and III the analysis was conducted using qualitative content analysis. In Study IV, in addition to qualitative content analysis, thematic analysis was conducted.

#### ***Content analysis (Studies II–IV)***

Qualitative content analysis was used as the primary data analysis method in Studies II–IV to describe the studied phenomena by capturing the core meanings of the data. An inductive methodology was employed in the analysis. This method was chosen because of little prior research on this specific group, and was aimed to prevent limiting the analysis to pre-established categories derived from existing quantitative studies.

The analysis followed a series of distinct phases, beginning with preparation (involving the selection of the unit of analysis and making sense of the

data). This was followed by organization (including open coding, grouping, categorization, and abstraction) and, finally, reporting (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The entire interview transcripts were designated as unit of analysis, in accordance with the guidance of Graneheim and Lundman (2004), with particular emphasis on the manifest content. Multiple readings of the transcribed material were undertaken to facilitate immersion.

Subsequently, the text was imported into version 9 of ATLAS.ti for Windows (Microsoft, Seattle, WA, USA). The transcribed texts were divided into meaning units aligned with the aim of the study, varying in length from a few words to several sentences. Each meaning unit was then assigned a label describing its content and essence, effectively creating initial codes.

The initial codes were subsequently organized by comparing similarities and differences, which subsequently facilitated their abstraction into broader categories that unveiled recurring patterns in the material. The coding framework underwent several revisions and refinements throughout this process, involving the comparison of meaning units, codes, categories and sub-categories. The categories that emerged were constructed to address the “what” (Morse, 2008) of the study’s objectives and accurately describe the groupings of codes that they consisted of (Lindgren et al., 2020).

The analysis followed an iterative process of revisiting and refining the focus of each research question in Studies II–IV. An initial screening of data, coding and sorting was done considering these research questions. After setting the focus for each study, the material was again reviewed for more detailed grouping and sorting. This approach was applied separately to Studies II, III, and IV.

### *Thematic analysis (Study IV)*

Following the qualitative content analysis, a thematic analysis was additionally conducted to examine the participants’ perceptions of their wellbeing, demands and resources over time. This was informed by both participants’ current and previous depictions of working circumstances and experiences in managerial roles. After rereading all the transcripts, individual trajectories, including all the shifts in the factors identified during the initial analysis – namely, wellbeing, demands and resources – were charted for each case. These individual trajectories were subsequently grouped into clusters that highlighted shared trends and divergent experiences among the participants, illuminating how their perceptions of wellbeing, demands and resources had evolved from previous periods to the time of data collection. The analysis yielded themes that illuminated recurrent patterns in the respondents’ individual perceptions of wellbeing, demands and resources over time.

The primary analysis was executed by the first author (E.A.), who then engaged in discussion with the second author (D.L.) concerning the process of sorting and abstraction. Subsequently, all authors (E.A., D.L., G.B., G.M.) collaborated to review and refine the identified categories and themes.

#### **4.6. Ethical considerations**

The studies included in this thesis have adhered to Swedish legislation on research involving human subjects, and the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki, and have been approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Uppsala (Reg. No. 2016/208 for Study I, and Reg. No. 2019-00314 for Studies II–IV). All participants were informed about the study’s objective, the voluntariness of participation, and anonymity and confidentiality principles as well as their right to decline an interview or withdraw from the study at any time without having to give a reason. This information was provided both orally and in writing. Before each interview, informed consent was obtained from each participant.

The collected data were processed only by the authorized researchers and data analysts involved in this research project and are stored where no unauthorized persons can access them.

## 5. Results

### **Study I. Managers' Work and Behaviour Patterns in Profitable Growth SMEs**

The managers averaged 52.4 work hours per week, 34.4% of which time was spent on desk work, 17.4% on telephone calls, 16.2% in scheduled meetings, 12.4% in unscheduled meetings, and 19.6% touring the organization and engaging in spontaneous interactions with employees. Their leadership style predominantly focused on relationships (80%), change (80%), tasks (65%) and HEL behaviours (80%). In addition, they dedicated a fairly large proportion of their work time, nearly 20%, to touring the company. By contrast, other studies of managers in small companies indicated 6–12% time spent on tours) (Chorran, 1969; Florén & Tell, 2012; O’Gorman et al., 2005). For larger companies, this percentage ranged from 1% to 3% (Kurke & Aldrich, 1983; Mintzberg, 1973; Tengblad, 2006). Comparing patterns of managers’ time allocation between larger and smaller companies suggests that managers in smaller companies allocate more of their time to touring the company and administrative tasks and less to scheduled meetings than those in larger firms.

Managers in the study worked an average of 52.4 hours per week, which is more than managers in slow-growing (45.5 hours/week) and fast-growing (44.5 hours/week) small businesses, as indicated by Florén and Tell (2004). Compared with managers in large companies, the findings are mixed. While the managers in the current study dedicated longer hours to work than managers reported by Mintzberg (1973) as working 45 hours per week and by Kurke and Aldrich (1983) as working 44 hours per week, they lagged behind the hefty 72.2 hours per week reported by Tengblad (2006) for large-company managers.

When the patterns of managerial work activities and total working hours were stratified by the predictor variables (which were dichotomized around the median), some variations emerged depending on the levels of predictor factors. Managers leaning more towards relations orientation ( $\geq 81\%$ ) dedicated less time to desk work. Those with a more pronounced task orientation ( $\geq 66\%$ ) had fewer unscheduled meetings. Managers in larger SMEs in the sample (with 13 or more employees) allocated more time to administrative tasks and scheduled meetings. Managers overseeing a broader span of control (with 13 or more subordinates) worked an additional 5 hours compared with their counterparts with fewer subordinates. Female managers reported spending more time on desk work, but these data warrant careful interpretation as only 12% of respondents were women. Highly educated managers were more engaged in scheduled meetings and worked 6 hours less than those without higher education. Time spent touring remained consistent, with no significant variations observed when stratifying by predictors.

These patterns were also reflected in the correlation analysis. Managers with a larger span of control spent more time on telephone calls, had fewer unscheduled meetings and spent less time during unscheduled meetings, and tended to work longer hours. A negative correlation was observed between time spent on desk work and a manager's orientation towards relations. Additionally, organizations with a higher number of employees had managers spending a larger proportion of their time in scheduled meetings. However, the main outcomes (time spent on touring the company and total working hours) were not correlated with the predictors of interest (perceived leadership behaviour orientation). Touring the company showed no significant correlation with leadership behaviour orientation, company context, or the background characteristics of the manager.

Similarly, the regression analysis showed no association between managers' total working hours and their leadership behaviour orientation. From the univariate analysis, associations emerged between working hours and factors such as age, education, and managerial experience. However, when age, education, and managerial experience were accounted for in the multivariate analysis, only education remained significant in its association with the outcome, albeit with a wider confidence interval.

The compositional analysis did not yield any statistically significant association between time spent touring the company and leadership behaviour orientation. Time spent touring was negatively associated with both company size and managers' education. The association between number of employees and time spent touring was further supported in the multivariate analysis.

## **Study II. Consequences of managers' wellbeing for their leadership behaviours**

The analysis of interviews in Study II resulted in two categories. The first pertains to the perceived impact of managers' wellbeing on their behaviours and the organization, as experienced by both the managers and their employees. The second highlights the protective factors that shield employees and organizations from the adverse effects of leadership behaviours stemming from managers' low wellbeing. Both categories were further divided into subcategories.

### ***Consequences of managers' wellbeing***

The analysis revealed that fluctuations in managers' wellbeing were evident within the organizations. They were noticed as they affected the managers' mood and energy levels and influenced managers' performance and leadership behaviours, and the overall workplace atmosphere.

Managers responded that their employees would probably be quick to sense if they were not feeling well. This was corroborated by the employees, who felt that they could pick up on their manager's sense of wellbeing because of their close relationship and regular interactions, and knew each other well.

Both managers and employees concurred that managers' wellbeing directly influenced their interactions and approach to leadership. When managers felt well, they were more present and available, engaging in conversations with

employees on the floor. They were also more open to contacts, easier to collaborate with, and more supportive and appreciative of employees' accomplishments. In addition, they were more oriented towards finding solutions, and were inspirational and visionary.

Conversely, when managers were not feeling well, they became mentally and physically unavailable. They distanced themselves from employee interactions, and were less empathetic and less understanding of challenges employees were facing. They were more prone to finding problems than to finding solutions, being more critical, and directing and controlling.

Both managers and employees responded that managers' wellbeing influenced the workplace atmosphere. When feeling well, managers radiated positive energy, invigorated the workplace, and made the environment more enjoyable and pleasant. By contrast, when they were not feeling well, managers projected negativity, dampened others' moods, and adversely impacted the workplace environment. The employees emphasized that managers' moods were contagious and directly affected the overall atmosphere at the workplace.

Additionally, the managers acknowledged that when they were not feeling well, their productivity suffered, they became less focused, made more errors, and misprioritized tasks. They also typically tackled mainly the urgent tasks, but avoided the more intricate and challenging ones. By contrast, when they were feeling well they approached their work more methodically, made decisions swiftly, and operated under the belief that no challenge was insurmountable. While the managers believed that their wellbeing influenced their own work performance, the employees did not raise this issue in the discussions.

### ***Factors protecting against negative leadership behaviours related to managers' poor wellbeing***

Overall, the findings indicate that employees did not feel significantly impacted by deviations in leadership behaviour when their manager was not feeling well. They seemed to attribute this to various strategies employed by both managers and employees. The employees reported that, when a manager was not feeling well on a given day, it did not significantly affect the work, although the usual positive influence of the manager's mood on the workplace climate and behaviours was temporarily absent. Also, both managers and employees maintained that in general there was consistency in the manager's wellbeing and that bouts of stress or unwellness were infrequent and brief.

When not feeling well, managers prioritized professionalism; they fulfilled their responsibilities and tried to keep a positive demeanour in front of the employees to prevent spreading negativity. They emphasized the need to stay calm, especially during challenges involving employees. However, many managers admitted that they chose to distance themselves during such times, working either from their office or from home to shield employees from potential negativity. Also, over time and with experience, the managers learned to manage stress by accepting work situations, viewing problems as routine challenges, and not allowing stress to overwhelm them.

Employees offered support to the managers when they appeared unwell, demonstrating concern and understanding, and providing an opportunity for

the managers to share their feelings about the issue. This was recognized and valued by the managers as well. Both managers and employees agreed that mutual trust and close contact between them was crucial to enable employees to offer support when managers were unwell. Employees were empathetic when their manager faced a stressful situation or did not feel well. In their perspective, being part of a small organization meant closer working relations and a short distance between staff and management. Employees often viewed managers as peers or close colleagues rather than as distant superiors.

Sometimes employees refrained from reaching out to managers when they appeared to be unwell. Recognizing that the manager would soon be better, employees would either defer their interactions or seek assistance from someone else in the organization.

### **Study III. Factors that managers in small companies consider important for their wellbeing**

This study's findings highlight factors that managers identified as crucial to their wellbeing. These were grouped into five primary categories: daily managerial work; achieving results; social; organizational; and individual factors. Each category contained factors that hindered or bolstered managers' wellbeing.

#### ***Daily managerial work and achieving results***

Among factors that respondents emphasized as positive for their wellbeing were: having a *manageable workload*, a sense of *control at work*, and the *autonomy to determine working time*. The managers appreciated *smooth operations* where things progressed as planned without significant hitches. However, they also conveyed that facing challenges was *stimulating* and enhanced their job satisfaction. Having *variation in one's work*, ensuring that the daily routine was dynamic and not monotonous, was seen as a substantial contributor to job contentment.

Managers also derived satisfaction and wellbeing from both *personal and company development*. It was invigorating to *play a key role in the company*, *contribute to the development of products and employees*, and witness one's *own development and growth*. Lastly, the inherent significance and meaningfulness of their work was perceived as important. The managers appreciated what they were doing, believing that they were making meaningful contributions – whether to society or the environment.

Managers listed several hindering factors that affected their wellbeing. A predominant concern was the *high workload and time pressure*. Many reported working between 40 and 60 hours per week, deeming their workload substantial yet manageable. They felt stressed when faced with the challenge of accomplishing multiple tasks within a limited time frame.

Also, *unforeseen incidents and difficulties* meant a deviation from plans, and therefore complications. Equipment malfunctions, sudden employee sick absences, subcontractors missing deadlines, and urgent orders piling up were

all stress triggers. *Disturbances and interruptions* further worsened the situation. Managers expressed frustration when their work became fragmented, which prevented them from completing tasks as planned, especially when under significant workload pressure.

The overall *responsibility for both the business' trajectory and the welfare of staff* also affected owner-managers. Constantly aware of the company's current standing and prospects, being perpetually alert, addressing financial challenges, and adjusting to external changes proved demanding. Moreover, bearing responsibility for securing their employees' income and employment stability added another layer of pressure.

*Role conflict and an unclear management structure* posed another set of potential challenges. These included ambiguity in roles and responsibilities, especially when several owner-managers were simultaneously involved in the company's operations, were part of the management group and sometimes were even board members.

In relation to *achieving results*, the managers maintained that their wellbeing was negatively affected when the company could not meet deadlines or provide a high service level and good quality, or when it failed to satisfy customers, or when they themselves could not meet their own work goals. Conversely, managers' contentment with personal performance and the appreciation they were shown contributed to their wellbeing and satisfaction. Here, the company's strong performance, the success of employees in delivering quality products and services, robust sales figures, and customer satisfaction with the company were equally important.

### **Social, organizational and individual factors**

*Social factors*, which included personnel-related issues, such as conflicts, dissatisfaction, negative attitudes, and employees not feeling well, were particularly challenging for managers. They not only drained their energy and dampened their motivation but also affected productivity and the ability to meet deadlines. Beyond that, the managers felt a deep concern for their employees' wellbeing. In fact, the wellbeing and satisfaction of employees were important for the wellbeing of managers. A positive workplace atmosphere, characterized by mutual support, a helping culture, and positively charged relationships and interactions with employees enriched the managers' work experience and contributed to their wellbeing.

Additionally, support emerged as a pivotal factor among social factors. External assistance, coming from board members outside the company or mentors from larger corporations, and internal backing from employees, management teams and co-owners were crucial. Furthermore, the support that the managers received from their families was essential for their work.

The findings regarding the category of *organizational resources* varied between the smallest companies in the sample, those with between four and six employees and a shorter growth period, and the larger ones, which had ten to 46 employees and a longer growth trajectory. The managers of the smallest firms described business vulnerability due to financial and personnel constraints as a hindering factor. Even slight fluctuations in the workforce could



lead to delayed deliveries, jeopardizing cash flow. The managers in these companies faced the challenge of achieving results without overburdening their limited staff. Moreover, the challenges they faced related to managerial work (high workload, fast pace, and incidents at the workplace) were intensified because they had to juggle both managerial and operational duties, and could not hire subordinate managers and delegate work because of the small workforce.

The largest of the small companies faced fewer challenges. Their robust financial and human resources gave them a stable foundation, acting as a buffer during challenging times. This stability brought a sense of psychological security for both the managers and the employees and guaranteed a more balanced workload for all. These companies had a multi-level leadership structure, including subordinate managers and supervisors, which allowed for efficient operational management and problem solving, with issues being resolved without always escalating to the CEO. Furthermore, having specialized staff for finance and administration relieved managers of many of these tasks. A well-organized structure, with clear roles, planning and routines, made the managerial task of problem solving smoother. Digital systems further enhanced managerial efficacy, providing oversight of company processes, reducing inefficiencies, and mitigating errors.

*Individual factors* also played a role in shaping managers' experience at work. High workload and time pressures negatively impacted managers' work-life balance and enhanced stressful situations, which was further aggravated when combined with personal problems. However, some managers found ways to cope with stress through better planning, prioritization, and taking tasks step by step. This, combined with a shift in their attitude towards problem solving, and a conscious effort to reduce self-imposed pressures, fostered their wellbeing. With age and accumulated managerial experience, many experienced improved ability to handle stress. Moreover, managers' personality traits and optimistic outlook, such as viewing problems as challenges intrinsic to their roles, further bolstered their resilience and wellbeing.

#### **Study IV. Managers' working conditions and wellbeing in the context of small business growth**

The overall findings in Study IV reveal, by highlighting managers' current and previous resources and demands, that (1) managers experience a change in their wellbeing and working conditions over time. Tracking each manager's trajectory further showed that (2) the changes occur in different ways depending on organizational and individual factors.

##### ***Variations in managers' experiences of their wellbeing and working conditions over time***

Most managers at the time of the interviews had a sense of wellbeing, and considered stress periods as short and rare. They experienced job satisfaction and a good balance between work and private life. However, many managers admitted that they often neglected their physical health in favour of spending

time with their families and fulfilling their managerial duties, and wished they could exercise more.

Several managers maintained that they had experienced stress and felt unwell previously because of long working hours and poor work–life balance. Despite these challenges, they had still felt satisfied with their job because of their engagement, ambition and the possibility to do what they want to do.

In relation to demands, most managers reported having a high, yet manageable workload, typically clocking in between 40 and 60 work hours a week. While this may seem substantial, most of them did not find the hours problematic. They recognized the cyclical nature of their jobs, with intense periods of work followed by quieter times of recuperation. Notably, their current work hours were significantly reduced compared with the past, when they had worked 50–100 hours a week, work even extending into evenings and holidays.

The growth of the company introduced a new set of challenges for managers, such as the constant need to recalibrate the organizational structures to adjust for the increasing size and complexity of the company's operations. Other challenges were ambiguous roles and a lack of well-defined policies and routines. Additionally, periods marked by internal conflicts, staff turnover, and the challenge of preserving a family-like workplace atmosphere and close-knit relationships with colleagues added to the complexities they navigated.

In relation to resources, managers frequently drew comparisons between their current and past work environments, particularly noting the changes in *organizational resources* as their company grew. In the earlier stages, managers had worn many hats, handling everything from hands-on operations to administrative and managerial duties. However, company growth had led to increased financial and personnel resources, alleviating the managers' workload. Managers especially valued the addition of personnel resources. Having lower-level managers take on some of the daily operational leadership and staff responsibilities, alongside administrative staff handling financial and administrative tasks, allowed the senior managers to focus more on strategic leadership and business expansion. Overall, company growth typically led to a more specialized organizational structure, with distinct departments or teams formed, and more clearly defined roles. As mentioned previously, the three companies at the lower end of the study sample, those without consistent growth, highlighted the inherent vulnerability of being a small business, which was predominantly due to limited financial and personnel resources.

The managers also highlighted changes in their *personal resources* over the course of time. Factors such as health issues, family circumstances, and managerial experience were underscored as leading to increased awareness of the importance of wellbeing and work–life balance. This realization, in turn, prompted the managers to reassess and adjust unfavourable working situations. With a growing understanding that relentless work pressure was not sustainable in the long term, the managers were now actively prioritizing their own health and seeking a healthier work–life balance by deliberately modifying their work situation and reducing their work hours.

Experience and increasing age also influenced a shift in managers' perspectives. With age came the desire to avoid excessive working hours. Furthermore, as they grew more confident in their roles and gained a better grasp of the work content and the cyclical nature of work through the year, they felt better equipped to navigate their roles. They also improved their strategies for managing their responsibilities through planning, setting priorities, adopting a more organized approach, breaking tasks into manageable chunks, refraining from overcommitting, and acknowledging that high-stress periods and substantial workloads are inherent aspects of a manager's role.

### ***Managers' trajectories in terms of wellbeing and working conditions***

The trajectory analysis revealed varied patterns in how managers' perceived wellbeing and working conditions evolved over time. Although there was significant diversity in individual experiences and both personal and firm-specific attributes and circumstances, five groups with different trajectories of wellbeing and working conditions were identified, as discussed below.

#### ***Changes in wellbeing due to organizational and individual resources***

This group comprised owner-managers of growing companies who reported improved wellbeing over time. This was attributed to both organizational and personal factors. While their wellbeing had declined during the early phases of their companies (characterized by excessive workloads, high pace of work, and extended working hours), the increased organizational and personal resources had gradually led to improvement of their working conditions and wellbeing.

#### ***Unchanged wellbeing***

Managers in this group maintained stable wellbeing, unaffected by the demands of high workloads. This stability was attributed to their resilience, optimistic disposition, and active coping strategies.

#### ***Aware of the importance of sustainable working life from the beginning***

Managers in this group initially had a keen awareness of the importance of a sustainable work-life balance. They intentionally aimed to maintain moderate working hours, established clear distinctions between work and leisure, and refrained from working overtime. Their health consistently remained good, and they experienced no notable change in their wellbeing.

#### ***Small companies with low organizational resources***

Generally, managers in this group had limited organizational resources but still reported feeling well. While the size of their companies presented certain limitations to their working situation, this did not equate to diminished wellbeing. It is plausible that individual resources, combined with minor organizational adjustments, played a role.

### *New in the manager role*

This group consisted of managers who had recently stepped into their managerial role, whether as owner-managers or as lower-level managers. Many grappled with demanding workloads, particularly during the initial phases of their tenure. However, as they recognized the importance of wellbeing, they actively sought to establish and maintain a better work-life balance. They achieved this through measures such as delegating tasks, establishing efficient routines, prioritizing actions, and making swift decisions.

Some of those who had newly transitioned into lower managerial roles reported enhanced wellbeing. They attributed this to the advantages that came with their new position, including increased responsibility, influence in the company's direction, more control over their work schedule, and more varied and stimulating work.

# 6. Discussion

The overall aim of this thesis was to explore managers’ work, working conditions and wellbeing in the context of small businesses with profitable growth. The purpose of the first study was to explore managers’ work and behaviour patterns in Swedish SMEs with profitable growth. The second study focused on managers’ and employees’ experiences and perceptions regarding consequences of managers’ wellbeing for their leadership behaviours in small businesses. The third study examined which factors in the small business context were perceived by managers to hinder or enable their wellbeing. Finally, Study IV explored the context of growing small businesses and their managers’ perception of changes in their working conditions and wellbeing Figure 3 shows the focus of the studies included in the thesis and how the studies are related to each other.

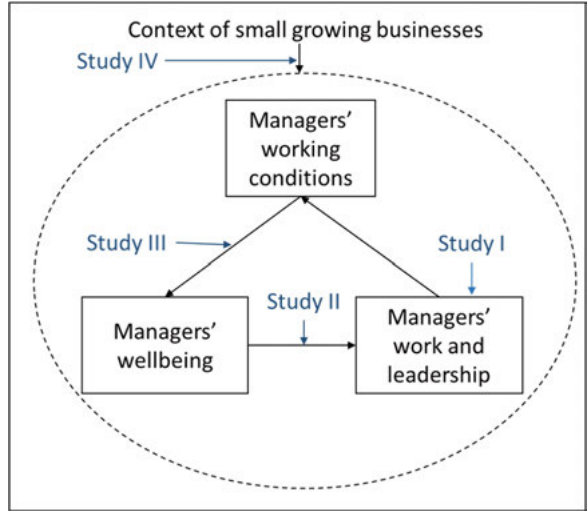


Figure 3. Focus of the studies included in the thesis.

The Discussion is presented in two parts. The first part focuses on how managers’ work, working conditions, and wellbeing unfold in the context of small growing businesses (Section 6.1). The second part delves into the interrelations between these factors and this specific context (Section 6.2).

## **6.1. Managers' work, working conditions and wellbeing in the context of small growing companies**

### ***a. Managers' work in relation to occupational health***

The findings of Study I reveal certain aspects of managers' work that contribute to occupational health and could pose risks for managers' wellbeing. The results also highlight the specificity of managerial work in the small business context.

Some findings established that managers in SMEs with profitable growth are engaged in practices that, according to previous research, are beneficial for occupational health.

Firstly, the managers exhibited strong engagement in task-oriented, relations-oriented, and change-oriented behaviours (as outlined in the three-dimensional model). The three dimensions of leadership behaviour mentioned above are associated with health, effectiveness, job satisfaction, and performance (Arvonen, 2002; Larsson, 2010; Nyberg, 2008; Nyberg et al., 2005; Skakon et al., 2010). These findings also align with the conclusions of Ekvall and Arvonen (1994), who posited that successful managers actively apply all three dimensions. Interestingly, scores for the task-oriented dimension were somewhat lower in this study, suggesting that managers favoured entrepreneurial, supportive, and dialogue-oriented leadership behaviours over structuring and planning behaviours.

Secondly, the fact that managers dedicated a significant portion of their work time to touring the company may have enhanced occupational health and company effectiveness, as underscored by existing research (Larsson & Vinberg, 2010; Peter & Waterman, 1982). A greater emphasis on touring is an indication of relations-oriented leadership behaviours and managers' active presence for and availability to their team. This is a factor that has previously been linked to enhanced employee wellbeing (Lundqvist et al., 2012; Skarholt et al., 2016; Poulsen & Ipsen, 2017; Skakon et al., 2010).

The patterns of managers' behaviours identified in the findings can be assessed as constructive behaviours contributing to employees' wellbeing and company effectiveness. Active leadership behaviours manifested in, e.g., high involvement in all three dimensions of leadership behaviours in general, and touring in particular, have been found to be positive for occupational health. It must be noted, however, that the active practice of leadership may also be resource-consuming, according to COR theory, and can lead to depletion of managers' wellbeing. This suggests the importance of a strong pool of resources supporting managers in maintaining sustainable work and wellbeing.

The fact that managers worked long hours indicates a potential health risk for managers, and by extension, may put the overall health of the organization at risk.

Furthermore, the findings reveal distinct disparities between small and large companies concerning managers' time allocation to managerial work activities, emphasizing the influence of organizational size on managers' work. Contrary to Mintzberg's (1973) assertions on the nature of managerial work – more

specifically, assertions that managers allocate little time on touring the company and are predominantly occupied with planned meetings – the results of Study I indicate differently. Managers of smaller businesses also tend to have a low level of formalization in their operation. This supports the notion that managerial work in SMEs is specific to the size of the enterprise, and that managerial work patterns differ between large and small enterprises. Also, our findings show an association between the size of the organization and the time allocated to touring. This in turn highlights that variations in managerial work may exist even within the group of SMEs, contingent on the company's size.

### ***b. Managers' working conditions in relation to their wellbeing***

Study III identified five categories of factors within the context of small businesses that managers perceived as impacting their wellbeing. These factors are seen as resources and demands through the perspective of JD–R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; 2017): while managers face high demands and have to constantly tackle challenges (which can potentially deplete their energy and negatively affect their wellbeing), certain work aspects can be beneficial resources, enhancing motivation and wellbeing, and aiding in managing job demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). This mirrors other reports where managers encountered both high demands and resources (Li et al., 2018). These factors are largely consistent with previous studies on larger organizations (e.g. Lundqvist et al., 2012) and entrepreneurs (Mäkineniemi et al., 2021; Stephan, 2018). Notwithstanding, the findings of this thesis reveal that the small business context adds unique aspects to these factors.

While identifying known demands in managers' daily work, such as high workload, time pressure and interruptions, the study also emphasized the unique demands faced by owner–managers regarding their responsibility for employee job security and overall company development. In addition to such resources as autonomy, task variation, and the possibility to impact organizations' activities, the study also reported the managers' perception of the meaningfulness and importance of their role.

This study showed that achievement of results is a precursor to wellbeing, adding to previous research that treats it as an outcome. Managers' perception of personal and collective achievement plays a crucial role in their wellbeing. In relation to managers' social environment, the study identified factors highlighted in previous research, such as conflicts and personnel problems, the role of social support, and work–family conflict (Stephan, 2018; Mäkineniemi et al., 2021), but also new dimensions such as a positive social climate, and interpersonal relationships with employees and customers as well as the importance of employees' wellbeing.

Study III points to the company's overall resources as a factor either hindering or enabling managers' wellbeing. This adds to previous studies which highlighted managers' personal earnings as enabling their wellbeing. Smaller companies in the sample were more vulnerable owing to limited financial, personnel and organizational resources, making the managerial role more challenging, while larger small businesses were less vulnerable. The individual factors identified in this study were consistent with previous research (Stephan,

2018; Mäkinen et al., 2021), emphasizing coping mechanisms, age, leadership experience, and work–life balance as significant influences on managers' wellbeing.

### ***c. Consequences of personal wellbeing for managers' leadership behaviour***

Study II reports that managers' wellbeing is reflected in their mood and energy levels, and impacts their leadership styles, workplace climate, and performance. The study found that specific protective factors can mitigate the adverse effects of negative leadership behaviours due to poor wellbeing on employees and the organization.

Thus, the findings demonstrate that managers' leadership behaviours move across a spectrum from destructive to constructive based on their wellbeing. When well, the managers exhibited more active, supportive, dialogue-driven, and motivational leadership. By contrast, when unwell, they tended to be passive, avoidant, and more directive. Managers' wellbeing particularly affected their engagement in relations-oriented behaviours and, to a lesser degree, change-oriented behaviours. Since past studies have linked these two types of leadership to employee wellbeing (Harms et al., 2017; Inceoglu et al., 2018; Montano et al., 2017; Skakon et al., 2010; Swedish Agency for Work Environment Expertise, 2020b), it is evident that a manager's compromised wellbeing can influence leadership styles that foster employee wellbeing. Given that relations- and change-oriented behaviours are more energy-intensive than task-oriented ones, they are likely to be impacted when managers' resources are depleted. In our study, this was evident from the managers being more active and engaging when feeling good and more passive and avoidant when they did not feel well.

The managers' wellbeing also influenced their performance, focus, decision making, and willingness to tackle demanding tasks. This aligns with past studies linking wellbeing to productivity (DiMaria et al., 2020; Ford et al., 2011; Gutiérrez et al., 2000; Montano et al., 2017), especially for managers (Dijkhuizen et al., 2018; Hosie et al., 2019; Lundqvist et al., 2012). While the results of this study in general align with Lundqvist et al.'s (2012) findings on the impact of managers' wellbeing on leadership and performance, those in Study II go further to suggest effects on workplace social climate.

Nevertheless, neither employees nor managers included in Study II believed that managers' poor wellbeing had a considerable impact on the employees or the organization. This contrasts with previous research (Harms et al., 2017; Kaluza et al., 2020; Kuoppala et al., 2008; Montano et al., 2017; Skakon et al., 2010) and the potential reasons for this discrepancy are outlined below.

Firstly, managers in the study generally had stable wellbeing, with brief periods of stress only causing temporary fluctuations. Secondly, leadership can vary over time; therefore both momentary and sustained behaviours matter (Barnes et al., 2015). Study II suggests that short-term fluctuations in leadership behaviour due to temporary fluctuations in managers' wellbeing coexisted with leadership that remained largely constructive over the long term.



Building on these observations, the initial theoretical framework based on Kaluza et al. (2020) was expanded to more comprehensively capture the relationship between managers' wellbeing and their leadership behaviours and also include temporal aspects of leadership. In the refined model (as presented in Study II), leadership and wellbeing are portrayed in terms of both short-term and long-term perspectives, on a spectrum of negative to positive. The refined model emphasizes the range of leadership behaviours, from highly constructive to destructive, reflecting the varying levels of active or passive engagement. Study II shows that the day-to-day leadership behaviour of managers can fluctuate within this spectrum based on their immediate wellbeing.

As a third reason, it can be assumed that the effects of temporary negative leadership behaviours can be moderated by certain protective factors at the managerial, employee, and organizational level (see the refined theoretical model in Paper II).

#### ***d. Changing context, working conditions and wellbeing***

While Studies I and III, like most of previous research, present a static view of managers' work and working conditions, Study IV revealed that some conditions change during company growth. As companies grow, managers often experience decreased workloads, and improved wellbeing and work–life balance. This is likely due to increased organizational and individual resources.

The JD–R model posits that job demands and resources are influenced by specific occupational settings and the organizational context (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). Study IV not only supports this assumption but also demonstrates that the unique context of small businesses transforms as they grow. The study points to the dynamic interplay of job demands, resources and wellbeing in the process of business growth.

Consistent with prior research (e.g. Marmot & Shipley, 1996; Stephan, 2018; Mäkinen et al., 2021), this study found that managers typically experience wellbeing, job satisfaction, and a balanced work–life, even amidst high demands. However, findings from Study IV further reveal that many owner–managers risked impaired wellbeing during earlier stages when their companies were smaller and more vulnerable. Specifically, owner–managers of particularly small businesses often grapple with high workloads, extended hours, and work–life conflicts, especially when navigating company growth largely on their own, with resource constraints. Additionally, newer managers, at both lower and higher levels, face increased job demands in the initial years of their role. This provides a more nuanced picture of small business managers' wellbeing.

According to the results of this thesis, organizational growth leads to shifts in owner–managers' roles, management styles, and interactions, as well as organizational structures and resource availability, which can have implications for managers' working conditions and wellbeing. Although changes mostly result in improved wellbeing for managers, particularly those at higher levels in growing small businesses, growth can also be a stressor, necessitating continuous organizational adjustments, and can, if mismanaged, cause tensions.

## **6.2. Interplay between managers' work, working conditions and wellbeing and the context of small growing businesses**

This section discusses how managers' work, working conditions and wellbeing interrelate with each other and with the context of small growing businesses. In this regard, two recurring themes were observed in the studies included in this thesis, when synthesized.

### ***Theme 1: Stability and change in managers' work, working conditions and wellbeing***

This thesis indicates that there are stable features of managers' work, working conditions and wellbeing in the context of small businesses; however, there is some variation. Stability, according to our findings, may be the result of stable features of managers' work, working conditions and wellbeing (shared by managers in general) and common characteristics of small businesses. Variation occurs when there are differences between companies; it occurs over time and because of interaction between organizational and individual factors.

Previous research points to stable features of managers' work across different contexts (Mintzberg, 1973; Tengblad, 2006), as mentioned in the Introduction. There are also stable features in relation to managers' wellbeing and working conditions shared by managers in general. For instance, managers' work represents active job: managers commonly experience high demands and high resources (Bernin & Theorell, 2001; Li et al., 2018; Nyberg et al., 2015). Therefore, despite the stress, managers generally enjoy good health (Hessels et al., 2018; Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Marmot & Shipley, 1996; Stephan, 2018). And finally, previous research has shown that managers' wellbeing and leadership behaviours are associated (Harms et al., 2017; Joseph et al., 2015; Kaluza et al., 2020). Findings from Studies I–IV generally support the above picture. However, the findings of this thesis also show that the context of small businesses provides some specific features for managers' work, working conditions and wellbeing that may be characteristic of this unique context while also pointing to variability and dynamism typically found in the context of small businesses.

### ***Stable features of the small business context in relation to managers' work, working conditions and wellbeing***

The patterns of managers' leadership behaviours elucidated in Study I reflect the characteristic features of small businesses. For instance, using less structured and more intuitive, informal procedures compared with larger businesses (Torres & Julien, 2005) may explain the somewhat lower degree of managers' involvement in task-oriented leadership behaviours. The observed high change orientation may reflect the entrepreneurial dimension in owner-managers' work that is related to risk taking, innovation and creativity. High relationship orientation and a high percentage of time spent touring the company are linked to the proximity in relationships due to the small size of the business. Beyond

this, a high involvement of managers in operational activities and highly personalized modes of management in small companies explain these managers' high engagement in touring as well as in active leadership behaviours.

The findings of Study I point to specific patterns of managerial work activities in small firms, compared with large companies, relating to such characteristics of small businesses as a tendency towards informal and intuitive strategies and modes of work, high proximity in relations and a high degree of owners' personalization of business activities.

Further, the finding that these managers work long hours can be referred to such features of small business context as centralized management, owner-managers' active involvement in companies' operational activities, leading to more disruptions in the manager's work day and issues that demand the manager's attention. Resource constraints (Barbosa et al., 2019; Carland et al., 1984) mean that managers cannot delegate tasks to other employees and need to work longer hours instead. This was confirmed in Studies III and IV, whose findings show that owner-managers in smaller firms worked long hours in the beginning of their carriers; this situation changed when the company expanded and resources increased.

While most antecedents of managers' wellbeing identified in Study III align with those identified in previous research, several new findings reflect the specificity of the small business context. Managers' concerns for business survival, employee income stability, and achieving results can be attributed to owner-managers' associating with their company as a personal investment, need for achievement and identifying business failure as their own personal failure. In addition, the distinct nature of small businesses emphasizes the importance of interpersonal relations. Factors such as close ties with employees and customers, a positive social atmosphere, and employee wellbeing can be characteristic of small businesses and are due to the proximity between managers and staff, frequent interactions, and the owner-manager's high involvement in operational activities. In an environment characterized by closeness between employees and managers, fluctuations in wellbeing can be more noticeable, which was shown in Study II. Thus, small business managers may depend more on their employees' wellbeing than do managers in larger corporations. Our findings suggest that, in small businesses, managers' roles blend the demands of traditional management with the challenges of entrepreneurship.

Study II emphasizes the unique context of small companies, which shapes the effects of managers' wellbeing on leadership behaviours and their subsequent influence on employees. Thus, the adverse effects from any temporary negative leadership behaviours (due to a manager's low wellbeing) were mitigated by factors at the employee and organization levels. For instance, employees showed understanding of the personal and professional challenges faced by managers, and supported them. This was anchored in close manager-employee relationships, mutual understanding, frequent interactions, and trust – attributes often inherent to small companies (Knani et al., 2021).

### *Variations in the context of small growing companies*

Study I's findings show that company size was related to percentage of time that managers allocated to touring the company. This indicates that SMEs should not be regarded as a homogeneous group and that there are differences in relation to managerial work, even within this group, depending on company size.

In this connection, Study III points to differences between small firms of different size in relation to availability of financial, personnel, and organizational resources, which had implications for managers' working conditions and wellbeing.

As mentioned previously, Studies II–IV highlight the temporal aspect in managers' wellbeing, work and working conditions, reflected in short-term and long-term variations. In Study II, temporary variations in managers' wellbeing led to short-term fluctuations in leadership behaviours on the constructive–destructive continuum. However, these temporary changes coexisted with more constructive leadership behaviours that were sustained over the longer term.

Likewise, Study III's findings suggest that small business managers often face varying intensity in demands such as workload and work pace, leading to periodic changes in daily, weekly, or seasonal pressures. Such fluctuations may also be expected in other, unpredictable demands, such as incidents and problems in production and with staff or customers. Addressing these periodically intense demands can be energy-consuming, depleting managers' resources and leading to short-term fluctuations in their wellbeing. This observation aligns with existing research which underscores that there are daily variations in job demands and resources (Bakker, 2014) as well as managers' wellbeing (Barnes et al., 2015).

An original and interesting finding in Study IV is that the stable features of small businesses are subject to change when businesses grow, confirming that changeability and dynamism are characteristics of this context. Study IV demonstrates long-term variations in managers' wellbeing, work and working conditions, induced by change in the business context due to growth. This shift can be attributed to an increase in the extent to which owners delegate responsibilities, as well as a growing complexity of organizational structures and operational systems. Concurrently, there is an apparent reduction in the owner's engagement in day-to-day business activities and decisions. This shift is accompanied by increased labour specialization, formalization, and standardization, planning and control measures, as well as a diminished closeness in relationships with employees.

These changes generally align with the transformations outlined in Churchill and Lewis' model from 1983. Findings of Study IV suggest that companies experiencing growth undergo a process of “denaturing”, to use Torrès and Julien's (2005) terminology, shedding their distinct characteristics as small businesses. As a company expands, the roles and tasks of owner–managers undergo a transformation, resembling those of managers in larger enterprises. Thus in Study IV, transformations in the company context due to growth led to changes

in the managers' work, and, subsequently, in their working conditions and wellbeing.

### ***Role of personal factors***

The studies in the thesis repeatedly emphasize the importance of personal factors in shaping working conditions and wellbeing. As an example, Study II demonstrates that the managers' use of coping strategies (purposeful modifications in their behaviour and way of working) led to reduced manifestation of negative leadership behaviours, which, in turn, mitigated the exposure for employees and the company. Studies III and IV suggest that managers' capacity to handle high job demands was enhanced through gaining managerial experience and understanding the specifics of the work and the unique situation of the company, as well as having a seasoned attitude to problems and challenges.

Further, findings from Study IV indicate that personal resources affect managers' working conditions, with consequences for their wellbeing. Specifically, the study highlights managers' recognition of the importance of wellbeing for sustainability of both their personal and their companies' working life. With this enhanced awareness, managers modified their working behaviours and reduced their work hours, which impacted their wellbeing. Managers who initially had substantial individual resources avoided overworking, preserving their wellbeing. This indicates that such resources can be protective.

The thesis also points to the interaction between individual and organizational resources. Study IV revealed that the long-term changes in managers' working conditions and wellbeing did not occur in the same way for all managers and that the interplay between available organizational and individual resources could explain the varying trajectories of working conditions and wellbeing over time for the managers.

The studies also indicated that the abovementioned personal resources increase over time. These changes obviously are not due to growth or contextual changes but are a result of personal growth.

### ***Theme 2: Interrelatedness of managers' work, working conditions and wellbeing***

In sum, the findings of the thesis suggest that managers' work, working conditions and wellbeing are closely interrelated, both with each other and with the context. The model in Figure 3 summarizes the studied factors, their interrelations and contextual embeddedness. For instance, managers in small businesses with profitable growth are engaged in active leadership behaviours and touring, which, according to previous research (see, e.g., Larsson, 2010; Skakon et al., 2010; Skarholt et al., 2016; Poulsen & Ipsen, 2017), both contribute to employee health and organizational effectiveness (Study I). However, some aspects of their work, such as working long hours, pose risks for their wellbeing. The findings point to specificity of managerial work in small businesses (Study I). Managers' wellbeing affected their leadership behaviours, their own performance and decision making and the workplace social atmosphere (Study II). Managers' low wellbeing impacted those leadership behaviours that, ac-

cording to previous research (Harms et al., 2017; Inceoglu et al., 2018; Montano et al., 2017; Skakon et al., 2010; Swedish Agency for Work Environment Expertise, 2020b), influence employee wellbeing. However, some factors in company context could mitigate the effect of negative leadership behaviours on employees and the organization (Study II).

The managers perceived that their working conditions were important for their own wellbeing and Study III discusses concrete factors that were considered essential in the context of small businesses. Finally, Study IV shows that managers' wellbeing and working conditions change as a result of the changed company context. Likewise, managers' work changes because of business growth. All four studies demonstrate that the specific context of small businesses shapes a manager's work, working conditions and wellbeing, as discussed under Theme 1.

Altogether, this also demonstrates the interconnectedness between different aspects of the company context, managers' work, and managers' working conditions and wellbeing. These appear also to be closely related to the employees' wellbeing, performance on individual and company levels, and other outcomes. For instance, important elements of the manager's psychosocial working conditions are the wellbeing of the employees and relationships with the employees, as well as achievement of results by the manager, the employees, and the company. Study III also shows that the managers' psychosocial working conditions were closely related to their work. In addition, organizational resources were important for managers' wellbeing and reflected the small company context. For instance, the managers were constrained by resource availability. Managers in small companies could also influence their working conditions to some extent, as individual factors show (Studies II–IV).

Moreover, the factors identified in managers' working conditions and perceived as important for the managers' wellbeing (Study III) appeared to be interrelated. For instance, the small businesses' vulnerability and poor resources seemed to intensify the demands that the managers encountered in their daily work. Furthermore, for small business managers, succeeding or failing to respond to the challenges in daily managerial work and having employees who do not feel good may affect their sense of achievement. A favourable social climate and close relationships are positive for employees' wellbeing, which in turn impacts managers' wellbeing. Antecedents of managers' wellbeing such as interpersonal relations with employees and customers, a good social climate, and employees' wellbeing may also be affected by leadership behaviours and also by the way things are organized. Study II found that managers' wellbeing can affect the working climate, work relations, and interaction with employees as well as managers' own performance and, consequently, achievement of results. This means that these factors may be both consequences and antecedents of managers' wellbeing and can be affected both by managers' leadership behaviours and by the organizational context of the companies.

Therefore, the factors included in this thesis – managers' work, working conditions and wellbeing and the specific context of the small businesses – are dynamically interdependent and, consequently, change in one factor may lead

to change in the other factors. At a more overall level, this interaction can be theorized in terms of gain and loss spirals.

This is in line with Lundqvist (2013) describing a close relationship between managers' psychosocial working conditions, health, and leadership in terms of reciprocal spirals. Lundqvist theorizes that working conditions can enhance gain spirals, strengthening health and leadership, which in turn improves working conditions. While organizational or external stressors can increase demands on managers, available resources can counteract these, and health can be an important resource also. However, escalating stressors with diminishing resources can trigger a loss spiral, negatively impacting health and leadership. This perspective underscores the dynamic interplay of these factors, challenging traditional research approaches with distinct dependent and independent variables for being too static and overlooking reciprocity (Lundquist, 2013).

The process of company growth described in Study IV can illustrate the development of gain spirals in small businesses over the long term. Studies III and IV report that the smallest companies faced vulnerability because of limited economic and personnel resources. By contrast, larger small businesses did not face this vulnerability. However, Study IV reveals that as companies grow, they can increase their personnel and economic and organizational resources, which helps them mitigate the vulnerabilities associated with being a small enterprise. In line with COR theory (Hobfoll, 2001; 2011), companies with an initially more abundant resource pool are better positioned to defend themselves against both current and future resource losses, and to achieve further resource gains. This suggests that the growing companies in Study IV had acquired a strong reserve of resources, enhancing their resilience. This enabled them to withstand both acute and chronic stressors, safeguard against resource depletion, and ensure future resource accumulation (Hobfoll, 2001; 2011; Hobfoll et al., 2015). Companies in the study that sustained growth appeared to benefit from a resource surplus, generating a positive growth spiral. Possessing a resource surplus or a substantial resource reserve can serve as a protective factor, particularly in relation to the wellbeing of managers, as seen with the managers of the growing companies in Study IV.

Interestingly, the results revealed that managers in the smallest companies without growth maintained good wellbeing despite facing high demands. There may be two possible reasons for this. Firstly, personal resources could be a buffering factor. Secondly, it seems that these companies had reached an operational size and mode that provided a manageable working situation for their managers. Despite their vulnerability due to constrained resources, these firms remained stable. They were able to respond to daily stressors, such as sickness absences or equipment malfunctions, maintaining their balance without currently investing in growth, largely due to the lack of the resources for expansion or hiring extra staff. While such resource constraints do not necessarily result in a negative spiral, they still render a company vulnerable. Significant shifts in external conditions, such as an economic downturn, could pose risks of intensified resource drain, resulting in a loss spiral.

Similarly, Study II shows that employees did not view temporary negative shifts in leadership (caused by managers' low wellbeing) as substantially affecting their work. Nevertheless, such variations may become more significant when external or internal demands, such as economic downturns, pandemics, or personal crises, disrupt the balance of demands and resources for managers and employees. This imbalance could trigger negative health spirals down the line. This may result in more sustained destructive leadership behaviours, caused by managers' depleted health resources or employees' adverse responses to such leadership. It is obvious that this subtle balance may be disturbed if available organizational or individual resources diminish or demands intensify. It is, therefore, important to realize the fragility of this balance and the importance of building resource-rich ecologies in small businesses.

Therefore, the findings suggest that growth, when successfully adapted and managed, gives opportunities for small companies to build stronger resource ecologies enabling them to withstand stressful events and generate gain spirals, support managers in their work and allow them to sustain their health and productivity, engage in health-promoting and effective leadership and promote the company's performance. Such ecologies need to be sustained and promoted to foster engagement and resilience (Hobfoll, 2011) and contribute to healthy organizations in terms of increased company effectiveness and employee health. The thesis shows that creating and sustaining resource ecologies is a continuous unfolding process – it is not static, but dynamic.

### **6.3. Methodological considerations**

#### ***Designs***

The conventional approach to examining managerial work often relies on structured observation, as pioneered by Mintzberg (1973). Studies in this area are mostly qualitative and often rely on small datasets. Study I, a survey study, adopted an alternative method that allowed to survey a larger group of managers and incorporate a more extensive set of variables (on leadership behaviours and background attributes of both managers and companies). This made it possible to delve into the variability of managerial work practices in the studied context and examine potential links with leadership behaviours.

Like all data collection techniques, survey techniques have strengths and limitations. While cross-sectional studies are effective in providing a “snapshot” of a population, this design has its limitations, especially concerning causality and temporal relationships. Therefore, the cross-sectional design employed in Study I precluded any definitive conclusions about causality in the observed relationships and did not reveal how the variables and relationships evolve over time.

By contrast, the research addressing managers' working conditions and wellbeing is dominated by quantitative studies. Therefore, the qualitative approach employed in Studies II–IV was chosen to gain a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in the poorly researched context of small businesses. Any qualitative study inherently faces limitations regarding the generalizability of results; however, using qualitative methodology in Studies



II–IV enabled a deeper exploration of the phenomenon beyond predefined categories.

### **Samples**

The sample in Study I may not be fully representative of all growing SMEs in Sweden. While the overarching situation, such as legislation and organizational culture, is consistent throughout the country, local and regional variations might challenge the generalizability of the results. Furthermore, while recognizing that SMEs are a diverse group, a unified approach was adopted for simplicity's sake. The companies in the present sample displayed variations in number of employees (ranging from four to 150), company age, and industry type, all of which can influence managerial work and behaviours.

Upon completing Study I, we decided to shift the focus in subsequent studies from SMEs to small companies specifically. This decision was influenced by observed differences in managerial work that depend on company size, even within the SME category. Furthermore, this shift took into account criticisms of previous research that treated SMEs as a homogeneous group without adequately differentiating between companies of varying size (Schulte & Vainio, 2010). The advantage of this refined approach is that Studies II–IV could focus on a narrower group of small companies. This provided an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of managers' working conditions, wellbeing, and work in this specific context.

The sampling approach of the SCiG project, which prioritizes companies with profitable growth, may have introduced a positive bias to the results in Studies II–IV. This bias could manifest as, for instance in Study II, stronger protective factors that offset the negative impacts of fluctuations in managerial behaviours. These factors may include high levels of wellbeing among managers and employees and a positive social climate. While Studies II–IV incorporated companies with varying degrees of profitable growth to address this potential bias, it is important to note that all the sampled companies had been in operation for several years, consistently showing profitable growth. Essentially, these companies are mature businesses that have navigated challenges over time and have adapted effectively. Therefore, the selected manager population may inherently have leaned towards a more favourable evaluation of their resources while potential stress factors (for instance in Study III) were underestimated. Hence, the findings of this thesis cannot be generalized to the whole population of small businesses but are relevant to this specific subset of organizations.

Similarly, the various trajectories outlined in Study IV suggest that these pathways lead to increased resilience and a more sustainable work environment for managers owing to a decrease in demands and an increase in resources. However, potential bias could have emerged due to the specific sample (i.e. the focus on successful, growing companies that have thrived for several consecutive years). This sampling omits companies that may have failed, where managers' wellbeing could have been a factor leading to the owner–manager selling or shutting down the firm.

The specific nature of the sample, consisting of award-winning companies in Mid-Sweden, and the limited sample size precluded the possibility to explore variations in company or managerial attributes, such as gender. A significant majority of managers in these companies were male, mirroring the sociodemographic trends of the region, which traditionally has male-dominated businesses. It is possible that, with a more gender-balanced sample, the results of Study IV might have been different, especially concerning work–life balance. For instance, women, because of the prevailing gender roles, may not have the same possibilities to work the extremely long hours that many of the men in this study reported.

With regard to the sample for Studies II–IV, 15 companies with steady profitable growth (nominated for the award more than seven times during 2008–2019) were contacted. Nine of them participated. As to companies with low rates of growth (nominated once for the award during the period), 20 companies were invited to take part in the study and three of them participated. In general, it is known that small businesses are difficult to recruit for participation in research studies because of their resource constraints and difficulty to invest managers' and employees' time in research activities. However, it is notable that in this sample, companies with steady growth and multiple nominations were much more prone to participate than were companies with low levels of growth and a single nomination. It can be assumed that one of the reasons is that the first group know the SCiG project well, had been nominated several times, had contact with the university researchers (on dissemination activities) and the students (through interviews) and therefore were more willing to contribute to the research activities. It is also possible that companies in group 1 were more successful and had more resources, and their managers were satisfied with their work and therefore were more willing to share their success stories. They could also potentially have had more time available, which made them more predisposed to participate in the study. Conversely, managers struggling to stay afloat may have been more stressed and prone to opt out of participation.

Another constraint to consider is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which limited the outreach to potential participants and may have affected the managers' inclination to participate. It is possible that companies with a larger resource buffer can cope better with the difficulties caused by the pandemic.

The diverse selection of companies, which varied in size, age, growth stage, and industry, alongside managers of different genders, ages, tenures, management levels, and departments, likely enriched the data and bolstered the credibility of the findings (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Patton, 2014) in Studies II–IV.

Furthermore, Study II stands out methodologically by including perspectives of both managers and employees, since no prior studies had taken this approach. This not only enhances the reliability of the results but also provides a more comprehensive understanding of the subject.

## **Measurements**

The questionnaire method used in Study I aligns with mainstream studies based on Mintzberg's (1973) classification of work activities. This enables comparison with existing data. Nonetheless, this study may have overlooked other pertinent categories not contained in these predetermined classifications, such as managers' operational tasks. Additionally, relying on self-reported data may have affected the accuracy and internal validity of the results. In particular, the responses could lean more towards managers' perceptions of their tasks rather than describing the actual activities. Furthermore, it may have been challenging for respondents to accurately recall a typical workday. Yet, as noted by some researchers, perceived workload may be a more effective indicator of psychological health than actual workload (Hobson & Beach, 2000).

Measurement of leadership behaviour orientation in Study I was done with one single-item scale per leadership behaviour, and this may diminish the validity of the findings. The study employed the questionnaire used by the SCiG project, which was restricted in volume and therefore could not include a standard CPE instrument to measure task-, relations- and change-oriented behaviours (Ekval & Arvonen, 1991).

## **Qualitative method and data analysis**

A potential limitation of Study IV is the variability in how individual managers might have interpreted the terms "currently" and "previously". For some, "currently" may have referred to today while for others to the past few years; likewise, "previously" could have meant the previous year in some cases – and a decade ago in some others. Such variations may stem from the fact that the companies were at different stages of growth, and the managers had diverse durations of managerial experience.

An additional possible limitation in Studies III and IV is the absence of a predefined definition of "wellbeing" provided to the respondents before the interviews. Consequently, the respondents may have alluded to different aspects of wellbeing, referring to factors they themselves perceived to be important for their own wellbeing.

It must be acknowledged that the relatively small sample size and the use of qualitative methods do not permit to make strong conclusions about changes in managers' wellbeing in the context of business growth and assert any causality in Study IV. Further research, employing diverse methods, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of this issue.

Additionally, the trajectory analysis in Study IV was not intended to assert patterns in the evolution of managers' wellbeing, demands, and resources in the context of small business growth. Its aim was solely to illustrate that these changes can manifest in different ways, depending on the interaction between organizational and individual resources.

The research presented in Studies II–IV focused on managers' subjective experiences and perceptions of their work situation and wellbeing, treating these perceptions as indicative of their actual circumstances. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that alternative perspectives might also interpret managers'

accounts as socially constructed narratives. For example, the data in Study IV underscored the significance of individual managerial resources. This perspective can be examined against scholarly discourses that challenge the overemphasis on managers' roles in a company's successes or failures, as articulated by, e.g., Alvesson and Spicer (2014). The narratives of the managers, in terms of what they convey and how they do so, might be interpreted as the managers showcasing a socially constructed identity of a proactive, action-driven entrepreneur whose actions are critical for business success. As a result, they might place excessive emphasis on their individual contributions. Exploring this phenomenon through other methods, such as observations or discourse analysis, might illuminate these patterns more clearly.

### ***Other considerations***

The initial focus of the PhD project was the working conditions, wellbeing and leadership of both managers and employees in profitable SMEs. However, this preliminary theme was later refined to concentrate exclusively on managers' working conditions, wellbeing, and work in small growing businesses, with the aim to gain a more profound understanding of the phenomena. In addition to adopting a more focused objective and population, the attention veered away from profitability and company success. The initial interest was piqued by distinguishing features between more and less successful companies, exploring whether profitability and success correlate with healthier outcomes for both managers and employees. This interest was connected to the SCiG project, whose nominees made up the study's population, and which provided the research context.

Nevertheless, the primary interest shifted to the managers' working conditions, wellbeing and work in small businesses, where growth and profitability are contextual elements. The main emphasis was placed on growth as a dynamic component of the context, while the endeavour to assess profitability, or link the studied phenomena to profitability, remained outside the scope of this thesis. It was decided primarily to refine and narrow the focus of the thesis. Additionally, the decision was influenced by the complexity of evaluating success and profitable growth, as well as the need for modifications in methods and for selection of companies to include both profitable and unprofitable ones.

Thus, Study I primarily focused on examining the work and behaviour patterns of managers in SMEs with profitable growth, without attempting to draw direct correlations with the companies' financial performance. In this study context, company effectiveness, gauged through profitable growth, was an established parameter. Studies II–IV focus mostly on the context of small companies (Studies II and III) and business growth (Study IV).

## **6.4. Contributions**

This thesis provides empirical contributions to the domains of occupational health, leadership, and small business development.

The overall contribution of the thesis lies in contextualizing the research on managers' work, working conditions and wellbeing and demonstrating the importance of the specific context of small growing companies in shaping these factors and their interrelationships.

Study I adds to the existing literature on managerial work by providing empirical evidence regarding managers' work and behaviour patterns in profitably growing SMEs. Additionally, by delving into the discussion of the health implications of managerial behaviours and work patterns, this thesis supplements the field of occupational health in the SME context. Also, the study contributes to knowledge in the field by employing an interdisciplinary approach, bridging the research areas of managerial work, leadership behaviour and occupational health in the context of growing SMEs.

The findings of Study II offer a deeper and more dynamic insight into the interplay between managers' wellbeing and their leadership behaviours within the unique setting of small businesses. The findings of Study II reinforce the sparse existing research on the impact of managers' wellbeing on leadership and the specific behaviours influenced. Additionally, this research further enriches the field by highlighting (1) the temporal dimension of leadership behaviours and how the perceived relationship between managers' wellbeing and leadership behaviours varies over time; and (2) the influence of contextual nuances on this relationship, emphasizing the protective resources within small companies that shield against destructive behaviours.

Study III's findings provide a better understanding of the factors that managers identify as essential to their wellbeing in the small business context. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of the company's context in shaping a manager's working conditions and, subsequently, their wellbeing.

The primary contribution of Study IV is its emphasis on the dynamic, evolving and context-specific nature of managerial work, working conditions and wellbeing in small growing firms. This makes a clear contribution to previous research in the field, which mostly provided a static picture of managers' wellbeing. Moreover, Study IV utilized an interdisciplinary approach, merging theoretical viewpoints and empirical research from occupational health, management studies, business growth and entrepreneurship. This blend of perspectives enriches the understanding of managers' wellbeing in the context of growing small businesses.

## **6.5. Future research**

- This thesis enhances knowledge about managers' work, working condition and wellbeing in small growing businesses. There is, however, also a need to study these issues from employee perspectives and gain a more comprehensive understanding of employees' wellbeing and their working conditions in growing small firms.
- Study I highlights the active engagement in leadership behaviours (assessed through three general dimensions of leadership behaviour oriented towards production, employees, and change). Further exploring which concrete behaviours within these dimensions are used by managers in

small companies, and whether this changes with growth, would both deepen the understanding of leadership in small companies and provide tools for practitioners. It would also be of interest to study the perceived consequences of such behaviours on employees and organization. Similarly, Study I suggested that managers in small companies are actively engaged in touring the company and allocate a high proportion of time to this activity. Further qualitative research is needed to delve deeper into the significance and nuances of touring in small firms, from the perspectives of both managers and employees.

- The finding of differences in organizational resources that support small business managers (Study III), depending on company size, warrants deeper exploration through both qualitative and quantitative studies. More research with this focus will enable a clearer understanding of the distinctions between the smallest and the largest small firms. Moreover, further-examining changes in managers' work and wellbeing which are due to the dynamic nature of small businesses is a potential avenue for future studies. For instance, future research may need to address the working conditions and wellbeing of managers in companies at various growth phases, encompassing start-ups, businesses in active growth, and established enterprises.
- One lingering question is whether growth requires an initial surge in resource allocation from managers in order to sustain that growth. In situations where managers are resource-constrained – a common scenario in small businesses – they may be compelled to work extra hours to save costs, increase earnings, or generate the necessary surplus for growth and to be able to hire more staff. Also, leading a growing and profitable business may require increased effort and time commitment from managers. This topic presents an opportunity for further research.

## 6.6. Practical implications

The findings in this thesis can be used to support managers of small, growing businesses in their quest to preserve and enhance their wellbeing while running a company and pursuing economic efficiency. By supporting managers, this thesis argues, a more sustainable working life, for both managers and their employees, could be achieved. Specifically, the findings have the following practical implications:

*Within the area of information and education of managers:*

- Managerial work in small businesses has its own specific features, which implies that generic recommendations based on the studies of large companies cannot always be transferred to small companies. This knowledge and insight should underlie educational activities directed at small business managers.

*Within the area of occupational health:*

- Exercising active leadership behaviours with task, relations, and change orientation may contribute to healthy and effective organizations. Investing manager's working time in touring, walking about in the company and socializing with employees, as well as being present and available for contacts may be beneficial to employee wellbeing and company effectiveness. Managers should be equipped with knowledge about these behaviours through training and information initiatives.
- Capitalizing on the intimate nature of small businesses, e.g. prioritizing and maintaining close and frequent contacts with employees, and fostering a culture of open dialogue, especially during challenging times or when managers themselves do not feel well, can lead to transparency that can help employees to better understand managers' situation. Managers should be informed and instructed about the importance of openness. Moreover, cultivating a positive workplace climate, maintaining regular interactions with employees, and promoting employee wellbeing may also contribute to a manager's personal wellbeing.

*Within the area of managers' wellbeing:*

- Small business managers, especially at the onset of their careers, would benefit from understanding the importance of own wellbeing for their leadership behaviours and performance, and the wellbeing of their employees, and consequently for the overall health and longevity of the business. Managers should therefore be helped to obtain the insight that cultivating a work environment that mitigates stress and fosters the wellbeing of both owner-managers and lower-tier managers is a necessary component for healthy organizations. Furthermore, managers should be helped to gain the insight that long working hours can pose a risk to their own health, and in the long run may negatively impact the organization.
- Managers should be aware of the array of resources that they have at their disposal to enhance their own wellbeing, and identify demands that may be particularly energy-draining. This awareness can lead them to critically assess their own working conditions, enabling them to proactively work with strengthening job resources while reducing detrimental demands. The compilation of demands and resources presented in Study III offers managers a ground for reflection about their individual situation and inventories of their job demands and resources.

*Within a broader social context:*

- The thesis gives insights to politicians and decision makers for need to develop practical strategies or frameworks (such as educational and mentorship programmes, or collective resource pools for accounting, human resources, etc provided to multiple businesses) to diminish the vulnerabilities inherent to start-ups and small businesses, bolster managerial and

company resources, and enhance the working conditions and wellbeing of managers.

## **6.7. Conclusions**

This thesis found that the specific context of small growing businesses shapes the work and leadership, working conditions and wellbeing of the managers of these businesses. Also, the context impacts how these factors interrelate with each other and with occupational health in small businesses. In addition, the thesis indicates that there is a dynamism in the context itself, which is related to the process of growth and which has implications for managers' work, working conditions and wellbeing.

The research findings also point out that managers in profitable small growing businesses often work long hours, posing health risks to themselves and potentially to their companies. However, the managers studied here adopted work practices and leadership behaviours that could bolster occupational health in their companies. Additionally, the findings show that managers' time allocation varies between small and large enterprises, underlining that the firm's size is an essential factor in managerial work.

Furthermore, managers' own wellbeing impacted their leadership behaviours, with changes in their mood and energy levels influencing their leadership behaviours and performance, and the company's work environment. Managers tended to exhibit more constructive behaviours when they felt well, while leaning towards passive, even destructive behaviours when they felt unwell. However, because of certain protective factors related to the small business context these negative behaviours did not always have significant consequences.

This thesis also identified five important factors that small business managers perceived as either boosting or hindering their personal wellbeing. These included resources in the daily managerial work; achievements and successes; and social; organizational; and individual factors. While these categories align broadly with previous research, this study's specific setting of managerial work in small firms introduces distinct and unique features. Specifically, the availability and vulnerability of a company's resources, intricately linked to its size; and managers' enhanced responsibility for their business' prosperity, staff remuneration, and overall performance; alongside the managers' closer relationships with employees, appeared to shape the managers' workplace environment and wellbeing.

Additionally, the thesis revealed a dynamism in the working conditions and wellbeing of small business managers, in the sense that they, over time, experienced changes in their perception of their wellbeing, demands placed upon them, and available resources, all of which happened in tandem with the company's growth. The perceived changes may be attributed both to increases in organizational factors due to growth, and to the managers' enhanced awareness regarding the importance of a sustainable work situation.



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**Papers**

Associated papers have been removed in the electronic version of this thesis.

For more details about the papers see:

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