

# BELONGING BEYOND THE NORM: GIFTED INDIVIDUALS IN THE WORKPLACE

Master thesis Strategic Human Resources Leadership

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# 1. Introduction

There is an increasing interest in managing diversity in organizations. Companies try to optimize the strategic benefits and competitive advantages created by diversity and to cope with the current dynamic and interconnected business environment (Cletus et al., 2018). Diversity can improve critical thinking through personal views, experiences, and approaches, improving personal growth (Cletus et al., 2018). In addition to the advantages and benefits diversity brings, it is necessary because of growing labor shortages, since diversity promotes corporate attractiveness and provides greater access to talent pools (Cletus et. Al, 2018). However, it also brings challenges, such as complexities regarding managing differences in employee characteristics, such as race, gender, and cognitive abilities.

Until recently, an important aspect of diversity has often been overlooked, namely neurodiversity. Neurodiversity is defined as “the diversity of human brains and minds- the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species” (Walker, 2014, p. 1) and includes conditions such as dyspraxia, autism spectrum disorder, dyscalculia, dyslexia, and giftedness (Walker, 2014). There has been a growing recognition of the value of neurodiversity in the workplace. Historically, neurodiversity is viewed as a deficit; however, nowadays it is increasingly being embraced as a source of strength and innovation within organizations because of the unique characteristics and capabilities neurodiverse people have. Armstrong (2015) points out in his research that these strengths and weaknesses cause ambiguity regarding what is considered a ‘normal’ working brain and what is not, as neurological differences have implications for information processing and functioning in neurodiverse employees. As such, it results in a brain that works differently than ‘the norm’.

The focus of this research is a specific type of neurodiversity: giftedness. There is no one, universally agreed-upon definition for giftedness (Rommelse & Slaats-Willemse, 2020). Gifted people often score more than 130 points on valid IQ tests, but there are different views on whether such tests are sufficient to assess whether someone is gifted or not, as highly intelligent people are not automatically perceived as gifted by most psychologists (Rommelse & Slaats-Willemse, 2020). For example, being autonomous and being a fast, creative, and intense thinker are also factors perceived as ideal-typical characteristics for gifted individuals (Nauta & Ronner, 2008). This ambiguity makes it difficult to identify and study gifted individuals and can lead to inconsistency in research findings.

Giftedness has mostly been researched in children and students but can also cause problems in later stages of life. In society, gifted employees are often seen as successful and satisfied employees who are strong contributors to progress (Reijseger et. al 2013). The same holds for existing research, where gifted employees are pictured as smart, driven, creative, and unique workers who can make valuable contributions to the organization. Unfortunately, this ideal image does not apply in many cases;

giftedness is no guarantee for success and wellbeing at work. Sometimes the opposite is true, since gifted employees often face challenges that can affect both their well-being and their performance.

A study by Reijseger et al. (2013) shows examples of these challenges. The study found that 37% of gifted employees were bored with their current jobs, often due to a lack of challenge. Gifted employees tend to have high standards and may experience overdrive, intellectual disconnect, and exhaustion. Additionally, the underutilization of their skills can lead to boredom. Bullying behavior can arise when they do not conform to average employee views (Reijseger et al., 2013).

To create diversity in an organization, fostering inclusion is essential. Sabharwal (2014) states that simply managing diversity is insufficient without also promoting an inclusive environment. Inclusion involves more than hiring diverse individuals; it also sheds light on the importance of integrating these individuals into the workplace, valuing their contributions, and making sure they feel part of the organizational culture (Sabharwal, 2014). Existing research has focused on neurotypical employees feeling included, as well as on inclusion of neurodiverse employees. However, amidst the focus on the talents, challenges, and uniqueness of gifted employees, the aspect of inclusion, specifically in terms of belongingness, is overlooked.

Belongingness refers to the feeling of being accepted, and valued within a particular group or community, and feeling connected (Jena & Pradhan, 2018). It is an important aspect of inclusion and a fundamental need for employees because it directly influences an individual's engagement, motivation and overall well-being in the workplace (Jena & Pradhan, 2018). According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Model (Maslow, 1954), once physiological and safety needs are satisfied, individuals seek social connections and a sense of belonging, which are crucial for mental health and personal fulfilment. This manifests in the need for pleasant working relationships with co-workers, peers and others in the hierarchy (Benson & Dundis, 2003). However, employees are often not able to fulfil this need, or have to adapt themselves in trying to achieve these relationships (Benson & Dundis, 2003).

So far, research on the topic of belongingness in the workplace has predominantly focussed on neurotypical employees and neurodiverse employees with autism, ADHD or dyslexia (Cockshaw et al., 2012; Jena & Pradhan, 2018; Mohamed et al., 2013; Taric, 2024). There appears to be a significant gap in literature when it comes to understanding belongingness among gifted employees. Existing literature on giftedness acknowledges the challenges gifted individuals may face, but there remains a lack of understanding and knowledge regarding their experiences and needs within organizational contexts. Gifted individuals may face barriers when it comes to belongingness due to factors such as stereotypes, biases, and misconceptions about their abilities (Pérez et al., 2020). This gap represents a limitation, which hinders efforts to create inclusive work environments.

As organizations continue to emphasize diversity and inclusion, understanding the diverse needs of all employee groups, including those who are gifted, is important. Therefore, this research seeks to address these limitations by exploring the experiences of gifted employees regarding belongingness in the workplace, to contribute to a more inclusive workplace. The following research question has been formulated: ‘How do gifted employees experience belongingness within organizational settings, and what factors influence their sense of belongingness?’ By delving into the nuanced dynamics of belongingness, this study aims to shed light on the experiences gifted employees have with feeling like they belong, in order to foster their sense of belonging and their well-being within organizations. It also invites a detailed exploration of the various factors possibly contributing or hindering their sense of belongingness.

Understanding the experiences of gifted employees in relation to belongingness contributes to literature and discussions of inclusivity by highlighting the need to recognize and address the unique challenges and needs faced by this population within organizational contexts. By examining how gifted employees experience belongingness in organizational environments, this research contributes to theoretical frameworks on social inclusion and belongingness. In addition, giftedness is often overlooked as a relevant dimension of diversity. The increased representation and visibility created by this research can help raise awareness of the unique challenges gifted individuals face and highlights the importance of inclusive practices that accommodate their diverse talents and perspectives. This can lead to an increased understanding of (neuro)diversity. Finally, as this research highlights a relatively underexplored area, it encourages future academic inquiry into the topic of experiences of belongingness into the topic of gifted employees.

Investigating belongingness among gifted employees is also of practical importance, since belongingness is linked to overall well-being and mental health (Somoray et al., 2017). Research has shown that individuals who experience a sense of belonging in their workplace also experience less stress and lower levels of anxiety and depression (Cockshaw & Shochet, 2012). Moreover, belongingness is positively associated with job satisfaction and engagement (Borrott et al., 2016). Employees who feel valued, respected, and included are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs and engage actively in their work. In addition, when employees feel disconnected from their workplace, they are more likely to seek opportunities elsewhere (Borrott et al., 2016). Cultivating a culture of belongingness and inclusivity can therefore increase employee loyalty and reduce turnover.

Finally, in order for gifted employees to excel, it is important for them to feel valued and belonged. When employees feel like they belong, they are more likely to contribute their unique perspectives and talents to team projects (Moneta et al., 2010)

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1 Explaining giftedness

In practice, there is no clear definition for giftedness (Rommelse & Slaats-Willemse, 2020); there is no list of criteria that need to be met in order to call someone gifted. Giftedness is often described as an above-average level of intellectual or creative ability that exceeds what is typically observed in individuals. An important question in research about giftedness is whether the diagnosis can be based solely on a high score on an IQ test, or also has to include high prestation. Some definitions focus more on intelligence than giftedness. The numerous number of definitions possibly has to do with the elusiveness of giftedness as a concept, and with the fact that definitions arise from different systems of thought and ways of seeing things (Rommelse & Slaats-Willemse, 2020).

Existing definitions of giftedness are based on an evolution of ideas (Al-Hroub & Khoury, 2018). Each definition has been built upon a previous definition, making it a continuous process of integrating existing iterations and adding components (Al-Hroub & Khoury, 2018). There are various types of conceptual definitions, which can be summarized in six categories: psychometric definitions, neurobiological or cognitive definitions, creative-productive definitions, psychosocial definitions, composite definitions, and the advanced academic approach (Eckert & Robins, 2017). The table below shows an overview of definitions for giftedness.

*Table 1: Overview of definitions for giftedness.*

Category	Source	Key characteristics
Psychometric definitions	Sarouphim (2009)	Focuses on IQ scores to determine giftedness. Only testing specific abilities, like linguistic and mathematical skills, while ignoring others.
Neurobiological/cognitive definitions	Gardner (1999)	Suggests that intelligence includes various abilities (linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, et cetera). Challenges the notion of a single intelligence measure.
Creative-productive definitions	Renzulli (2005)	Introduces the three-ring model of giftedness, which includes three interacting clusters: above-average ability, high levels of creativity, and high levels of motivation (task commitment).
Psychosocial definitions	Gagné (1999)	Defines giftedness as possessing high potential in specific domains, along with the motivation and commitment to develop this potential to a high level of performance.
Composite definitions	Kooijman - van Thiel et al. (2008)	Integrates cognitive, psychosocial, and emotional dimensions, emphasizing the complex interaction between individuals and their environment.
Advanced academic approach	Peters et al. (2021)	Identifies gifted individuals based on exceptional performance in academic subjects, underscoring a traditional academic lens.

Together, these definitions highlight that gifted individuals possess not only exceptional cognitive abilities, but also unique emotional and creative dimensions, which interact with the environment. However, the lack of a commonly agreed on definition for giftedness is problematic for research, as a unified definition is crucial for consistency across research and practice. According to Carman (2013),

disparity in operational definitions used for identifying gifted individuals for research results in lower generalizability of research findings and makes it difficult to compare results across studies.

The lack of consistency in definitions used for giftedness also holds for measuring giftedness, since there is no clear method to do so. According to Carman (2013) there is a wide variability in the types of methods used. The most commonly used method has been school identification, based on IQ scores, an intelligence measures remain the dominant method to identify giftedness. Other identification methods include achievement tests, academic achievements, teacher and parent recommendations, and extracurricular activities (outstanding academic achievements). Recommendations tend to be based on intellectual ability, specific academic aptitude, and achievements. As the identification methods are inconsistent, there is a risk of using non-equivalent samples, which can affect research outcomes.

## *2.2 Gifted employees in the workplace*

According to Van Casteren et al. (2021), gifted employees have unique capabilities and resources, which impact work-related outcomes differently compared to typical employees. These unique capabilities and resources can result in significant contributions to innovation in organizations (van Casteren et al. 2021). However, in order for gifted employees to excel, organizations are required to recognize, acknowledge, and value these employees' talents. The different way in which gifted individuals think and act makes that factors influencing their well-being and inclusion may differ for gifted versus non-gifted employees (Van Casteren et al., 2021).

Vreys et al. (2016) state in their research that gifted employees highly value the opportunity to utilize their knowledge and skills, especially in addressing complex issues and applying analytical thinking. They thrive when immersed in challenging tasks that allow them to connect various elements and make meaningful contributions. When this need for challenge is not satisfied, they can suffer burn-out, causing dissatisfaction and disengagement from their work (Vreys et al., 2016).

Furthermore, gifted employees consider themselves demanding; they set high standards for both themselves and their work environment, which can cause anxiety and stress (Vreys et al., 2016). This internal pressure to perform can worsen the pitfall of being prone to conflicts due to their critical nature and openness about organizational processes (van der Waal, Nauta & Lindhout, 2013). In addition, their emotional sensitivity can sometimes result in emotional exhaustion, especially when conflicts are not managed constructively (De Dreu, Dierendock, & Dijkstra, 2004).

Gifted employees have a strong drive to learn and to experience new things (Vreys et al., 2016). This means they actively seek opportunities to expand their skills and knowledge, often pursuing additional academic degrees or courses outside of work. Their inability to satisfy their need for learning and growth at work can cause frustration and boredom (Vreys et al., 2016). Furthermore, gifted

individuals have more creative potential than the average employee (Vreys et al., 2016). With little effort, they can identify relationships between goals, missions, and assignments. Thinking out of the box is very common among gifted individuals. In addition, switching between disciplines is often no problem for them (Vreys et al., 2016). To make use of this potential, it is important to realize collaboration between the work environment and the gifted employee.

Gifted employees also value meaningful interactions with colleagues, particularly those that involve in-depth discussions and the exchange of work-related ideas. They may struggle with small talk and prefer engaging with coworkers on substantive issues, rather than engaging in trivial conversations (Van Casteren et al., 2021). They appreciate the opportunity to set their own goals and determine how to proceed toward achieving them, and they prefer a management style that allows for autonomy and minimal interference with their work process. Managers who adopt a facilitative leadership style are preferred, as facilitative leaders provide guidance and support and create conditions for employees to thrive independently, rather than directing them. (Van Casteren et al., 2021).

Gifted employees highly value contributing to something valuable and meaningful, such as environmental progress or the well-being of others (Van Casteren et al., 2021). They are guided by strong ethical and moral convictions and are unwilling to compromise their principles. This means they seek authenticity in their work environment and prefer organizations that align with their values and allow them to make a meaningful impact. Gifted employees may anticipate negative social consequences if they disclose their intelligence or giftedness in the workplace; some may go to great lengths to conceal their abilities in order to avoid stigma or judgment from others (Van Casteren et al., 2021).

The insights gained from examining the characteristics and experiences of gifted employees, highlight the need for workplace inclusion efforts tailored to their unique needs. There is no one size fits all approach, the same holds for gifted individuals. Research has been done on inclusion of neurodiverse employees (Volpone et al., 2022). However, inclusion of gifted employees and experiences with belongingness have not been studied yet.

### *2.3 Workplace inclusion*

According to Shore et al. (2011), workplace inclusion is "the degree to which an employee perceives that he or she is an esteemed member of the work group through experiencing treatment that satisfies his or her needs for belongingness and uniqueness" (p. 1265). Shore has based this definition on optimal distinctiveness theory (ODT), which suggests that individuals feel the need to balance their desire for inclusion (belongingness) with their desire for distinctiveness or uniqueness within social groups (Shore et al., 2011).

According to Hagerty et al. (1992), belongingness is "the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment" (p. 173). They differentiate between two dimensions of sense of belonging: valued involvement, which refers to the feeling of being appreciated, required, and accepted within a group or organization; and fit, which is the individual's belief that their traits and qualities align with or enhance the system or environment they are part of. Uniqueness refers to the desire to stand out and be seen as distinct from others. Individuality, and having qualities or experience that others don't have, affirm a sense of personal identity.

Shore et al. (2011) advanced the idea of workplace inclusion by suggesting that uniqueness is the aspect that enhances group dynamics. This only occurs when an individual is embraced and valued by the group because of their unique capabilities, rather than *despite* their unique capabilities. Chung et al. (2020) tested the model designed by Shore et al. (2011) by using workgroups as unit of study and concluded that belongingness and uniqueness do influence the perception of work group inclusion. For example, according to Friedman, Kane, and Cornfield (1998), members of minority groups who stand out due to their uniqueness and who have established networks that provide them with a sense of belonging tend to experience a high degree of career optimism. This means that in order to experience the workplace as inclusive, it is required that individuals feel simultaneously unique and like they belong.

Shore et al. (2011) have pointed out the importance of inclusivity for all members of the organization, as inclusivity directly impacts the satisfaction of employees regarding belongingness and uniqueness. According to Bell (2021), enhancing inclusivity is essential for ensuring full and meaningful participation in the workplace. This means that true inclusion cannot exist without first recognizing disparities and addressing inequities.

In addition to the positive outcomes of experiencing belongingness, it is also important to highlight the negative outcomes of not experiencing this. This is the case when other employees or groups are seen as insiders and the individual is seen as an outsider. Kwan et al. (2021) highlight that employees who do not feel like they belong are more likely to experience workplace exclusion, causing organizational deviance, workplace stress, burnout, and higher turnover intentions (Yagil & Medler-liraz, 2017; Coissard et al., 2017; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Therefore, creating an inclusive environment where gifted employees feel both belonged and unique is essential for organizational harmony and employee well-being.

Existing research has showed several factors that influence workplace belongingness for neurotypical employees (Raza et al., 2020). Affective commitment, or emotional attachment to the organization, plays a crucial role. When employees believe in their company's values and feel connected to its goals, they are more likely to feel they belong (Raza et al., 2020). Inclusive leadership is another

significant factor. Leaders who support and value their employees' input foster a sense of being part of the team. This approach enhances employees' feelings of recognition and inclusion (Katsaros, 2022). The organizational culture also has a profound impact. Cultures that prioritize respect, acceptance, and harmony help employees feel valued and integrated into the workplace community (Mohamed et al., 2013). Personality traits such as emotional stability, extraversion, and agreeableness influence how individuals perceive their belongingness. These traits affect their interactions and integration within teams (Somoray et al., 2017). Positive team dynamics and supportive interpersonal relationships further enhance belongingness. When employees have strong, positive connections with their colleagues, they feel more included and valued (Cockshaw & Shochet, 2010). Finally, psychological safety is vital. An environment where employees feel safe to express themselves without fear of negative repercussions fosters open communication and mutual respect, essential for a sense of belonging (Edmonson, 1999).

In addition, Jena and Pradhan (2018) have identified twelve components of workplace belongingness in their research:

*Table 2: Twelve components of workplace belongingness*

<b>Twelve components of workplace belongingness:</b>
working without sacrificing principles;
referring to the organization with 'we/us' rather than 'they/them';
a feeling of assemblance between the values of the organization and the own values and beliefs;
carrying positive emotions during the job, doing more than expected;
common themes with co-workers;
fairness in the execution of rules and policies;
feeling that personal needs are met by the organization;
help in case of issues, both personal and professional;
career goals being considered by the organization;
trying to make the job both exiting and promising;
rewards for accomplishments.

In summary, the theoretical framework discussed different definitions of giftedness and how gifted employees' unique traits, such as high intellectual and creative abilities, a preference for deep interactions and a drive for autonomy, affect their workplace experiences. It highlights that factors enhancing belongingness among neurotypical employees, like inclusive leadership, positive team dynamics and a supportive organizational culture, are crucial but possibly need to be tailored to accommodate the distinct needs of gifted individuals. Given these insights, this research focusses on understanding how gifted employees experience belongingness in the workplace and what factors contribute or hinder these feelings. Through the use of interviews, this research tries to gain insights directly from these individuals, to foster an understanding of these experiences.

### 3. Methodology

The present study examines the experiences of gifted employees, with the objective of developing an understanding of how they perceive their feeling of belongingness in the organizational context they work in.

Studies that focus on interpretations and experiences tend to favour qualitative research. By delving into phenomena that extend beyond individuals' lives, stories, and behaviors, as Cypress (2015) suggests, this research gains a deeper understanding of the nature of a person's experiences, particularly in relation to the feeling of belongingness experienced by gifted employees within their workplace contexts. Qualitative research does not have a standard design (Flick, 2007); therefore, in this research a qualitative survey design was chosen, focusing on exploring the experiences of belongingness among gifted employees within workplace environments.

#### *3.1 Research design*

This study assumes a relativist ontological position, recognizing the existence of multiple subjective realities (Levers, 2013). These realities are shaped by the experiences and perceptions of individuals. This stance is particularly relevant for exploring the nuanced experiences of gifted employees in organizational contexts, where belongingness is influenced by a variety of individual and environmental factors. Epistemologically, the study is grounded in constructivism, which states that knowledge is constructed through social interactions and shaped by cultural and historical contexts (Cobern, 1993). Constructivism can provide a nuanced understanding of the extent to which gifted employees experience a feeling of belongingness within their work environments. It emphasizes the subjective nature of knowledge and understanding, shaped by individual experiences and social interactions, and can contribute to the generation of actionable insights for organizations to support gifted employees.

Given the focus on understanding the personal experiences and perceptions of gifted employees within organizations, a phenomenological research approach is used. This approach focuses on the exploration and understanding of the 'lived experiences' of individuals (Keen, 1975) and is suitable when the goal is to examine the subjective realities of gifted workers regarding their sense of belonging within the workplace. It helps gain in-depth insights into the ways gifted employees experience interactions, policies, and the culture within organizations and how these experiences affect their sense of belonging (Keen, 1975).

#### *3.2 Data collection*

The starting point for this research is data collection. Semi-structured interviews with gifted employees have been used to collect data. This interview format is distinguished by a list of topics, which serves as a basis for the discussion to ensure key topics are covered, but also permits some leeway. This allows interviewers to delve more into particular subjects in response to the participants'

answers (Magaldi & Berler, 2020). It also offers flexibility for the interviewer to probe deeper into areas of interest or relevance that emerge during the conversation. This approach helps to fully understand what people go through and pays attention to the unique details of everyone's story.

The method used in this study to select participants was purposive sampling. This is a non-random method, where participants are chosen based on their knowledge, experience, or competence regarding the topic area (Jawale & Baba, 2012). More specifically, three psychologists from Expertisecentrum Neurodiversiteit used their professional and private networks to find gifted people who would be interested and considered a good fit to take part in the study. They specifically approached people who met these criteria. They also spread a call via email. In addition, an invitation was shared on LinkedIn. Because a commonly agreed-on definition and measuring method of giftedness does not exist, it was sufficient when individuals perceived themselves as gifted, regardless of the definition or measuring method used. By using this approach, the study guaranteed to include participants who can offer comprehensive and pertinent insights into their experiences of belongingness.

Constructivism supports the use of semi-structured interviews to gather rich, subjective insights into gifted employees' experiences with belongingness. A total of 13 interviews were held with various gifted employees. Two interviews were held in-person; the remaining 11 took place online through Microsoft Teams.

The interviews contained 5 predetermined questions and lasted an average of 50 minutes, providing enough time to delve deeply into the topics discussed. The interviewees were provided with the opportunity to share their experiences, perceptions, challenges, and successes in the workplace, related to belongingness. They discussed how gifted employees interpret their unique needs and challenges within the work environment and how giftedness impacted work relationships, interpersonal relationships, or job performance. Moreover, the discussion covered how organizational policies, practices, and facilities, as well as the absence thereof, can influence gifted employees' sense of belonging. The interview also explored the impact of interpersonal relationships and the culture within teams and organizations on these employees' feelings of belongingness. In addition, moments were discussed when the interviewees felt particularly included or excluded, as well as what contributed to those feelings.

The interviews were recorded using Microsoft Teams and stored on a Radboud OneDrive account. The in-person interviews were recorded by phone and transferred to a Radboud OneDrive account. The transcripts were made with GoodTape. GoodTape is a secure transcription service that is also available in Dutch. The transcriptions are secured using end-to-end encryption, ensuring data privacy and integrity. GoodTape's operations adhere strictly to General Data Protection regulations, guaranteeing that files remain within EU boundaries.

The objective of the study was to gather a diverse range of insights and experiences related to the feeling of belongingness. As such, the study intentionally did not limit participants based on age, the sector they work in, the measuring method and definition used for their diagnosis, or any other demographic characteristics. This approach was chosen to ensure a broad and varied perspective on the topic, encompassing individuals from different backgrounds and life stages.

### *3.3 Data analysis*

The present research is exploratory in nature and therefore, inductive reasoning is used. Inductive reasoning is a process in which general conclusions are drawn from observations or examples. It involves looking at detailed data and identifying patterns or themes that lead to broader, probabilistic theories (Hayes et al., 2010). As this research deals with a poorly understood area, inductive reasoning provides the flexibility to follow where the data leads, rather than being constrained by existing theories (Hayes et al., 2010)., Interviewing is in line with inductive reasoning. The method used to analyze the outcomes of the interviews is the Gioia method. This method has been proven effective for conducting and disseminating in-depth examinations (Gioia et al., 2012). The design enabled the researcher to investigate unique characteristics that broader studies might overlook. By utilizing the Gioia method, researchers are able to collect rich, detailed data, specific to the context, which can help providing better insight into the nuanced experiences of gifted employees in the workplace; it can help shed light on the difficulties of navigating the workplace as a gifted employee, as it allows researchers to study how individuals perceive and make sense of their experiences (Gioia et al., 2012).

The contextual background is important in this study, as this shapes the interactions, behaviors, and outcomes experienced by gifted employees. An advantage of this method is its potential for theoretical contributions, since it provides grounds for theoretical innovation due to its systematic and detailed approach (Gioia et al., 2012). However, remaining flexible is also an important key strength of the method, which enables the researcher to adapt to the unique aspects of the research context whilst maintaining a structured approach.

To analyze the outcomes of the interviews, a three-order process of analyzing is used, based on the steps provided by Gioia et al. (2012). The first-order analysis is based on the creation of informant-based terms. In this step, significant phrases or concepts mentioned by the participants are labelled with codes that closely reflect the interviewee's own language. Based on these codes, a list is formed, representing the different aspects of the participant's experiences as they described them.

During the second-order analysis, researcher-centric themes are formed. The first-order codes are grouped into categories based on similarity or relatedness. This clustering is influenced by the researchers' insights and understanding of the data. For each cluster, a label is developed that captures the essence of the grouped codes, also called second-order themes.

In the third step, the second-order themes are aggregated into aggregation dimensions. This means the researcher looks for higher-level patterns among the second-order themes. These patterns form the basis of broader dimensions or constructs, which reflect the overarching aspects of the data. These aggregated dimensions form the basis for theoretical constructs. The thematic and aggregate findings are supported with direct quotes from the interviews to ground the theoretical constructs in the empirical data. Appendix 1 shows an example of the coding steps.

### *3.4 Ensuring qualitative rigor and transparency in data analysis*

It is important to meet the high standards of qualitative rigor demanded by the academic community. Through the systematic analysis of data, a disciplined yet flexible approach to data interpretation is used. This structure allows for a transparent and traceable path from raw data to theoretical constructs. The creation of a data structure that visually represents the road from raw data to aggregate dimensions helps demonstrate how conclusions are grounded in data. This visualisation serves as evidence of the analytical rigor and ensures transparency.

By retaining informant voices and integrating researcher interpretations in the form of second-order themes, the methodology ensures a balance between the empirical data and the theoretical interpretation, enhancing the study's credibility. Detailed notes are kept on why and how coding decisions are made, the development of themes, and the formation of aggregates, which improves transparency. Furthermore, it is important to ensure trustworthiness by checking the consistency of codes across data.

### *3.5 Research ethics*

Various ethical considerations are taken into account when conducting this research. It is of great importance that participants understand the nature, purpose, and potential risks of the research before agreeing to participate. This also involves communicating the participant's right to withdraw from the study at any time. In addition, participants' identities and personal information is protected in order to maintain trust and ensure safety and privacy. This involves careful handling of data and thoughtful consideration of how findings are reported to prevent unintentional disclosure of identities. As this research involves sensitive topics, the potential for harm must be taken into account in order to minimize risks and protect participants from stress. The right to withdrawal without giving a reason, as well as the confidentiality of this research, contribute to this. Finally, contact information is shared in case there are questions or concerns.

### *3.6 Reflection on personal position*

Reflecting on my personal position as a researcher, particularly in the context of qualitative research, I find that my values of attentiveness, empathy, carefulness, sensitivity, respect, reflection, conscientiousness, engagement, awareness, and openness have shaped aspects of the research process. Attentiveness is about being fully present during interactions with participants and listening intently;

not just to the spoken words, but also to the nuances and subtleties of their experiences. By showing empathy and stepping into the shoes of the participants, I tried to approach the research subjects with sensitivity and respect. In some cases, respondents showed many emotions, so I did my best to give them time to articulate their emotions and emphasized that they did not have to share anything they were uncomfortable discussing.

By using a precise and discrete approach to coding, categorizing, and theorizing, I ensured care in handling the data and committed to the integrity of the research. It is important to be aware of the emotional and ethical dimensions of the research and to stay aware of its potential impact on participants, as giftedness can be a sensitive topic. Therefore, it is essential to show respect by valuing their time, their stories, and their willingness to contribute to this research; and by ensuring confidentiality and obtaining informed consent.

In addition, I constantly reflected on the process by questioning my assumptions, biases, and interpretations. I considered how my background and perspectives influenced the research process, and I tried to remain responsible and diligent in all aspects of the research, staying aware of the broader context in which the research took place. These values are a constant reminder of the responsibility I bear as a researcher. Therefore, the knowledge obtained is not only rigorous and insightful, but also respectful, ethical, and compassionate.

## 4. Results

In this section, the results of the interviews are presented and discussed. Relevant overarching themes and second-order codes are used to structure the chapter. The themes explored include characteristics and needs, making connections, work content and structure, management and organization and awareness and support. These themes shed light on how gifted employees navigate their sense of belonging, highlighting the factors that affect this variable. The findings are supported by quotes from the interviews. To ensure anonymity, names of participants, colleagues, companies, and functions are labelled A through M, for example 'Respondent M' or 'Company B'. Additional quotes can be found in Appendix 2.

### 4.1 Characteristics and needs

This section discusses the unique characteristics and needs of gifted employees, and what the implications of these unique characteristics and needs are for feeling belonged.

#### 4.1.1 The ability to quickly grasp things

The respondents had in common that they were able to quickly grasp concepts and information. For gifted employees, this ability can play an important role in their experiences with belongingness within a team or organization. They quickly understand complex situations and recognize patterns. This ability is expressed in different ways. For example, seeing the actual underlying reason for someone's actions, but also realizing in an early stage that person's management choices are incorrect.

*Yes, I think I understand. I often feel misunderstood by others because I tend to think several steps ahead. Specifically, thinking five steps ahead is something I struggle with. I can often see early on that certain decisions, especially management decisions, are not the right ones. That's something I have a lot of trouble with. (Respondent H)*

However, this ability can lead to problems with their sense of belongingness. Gifted employees may feel isolated when their observations and insights are not shared or understood by their colleagues. Their ability to see issues early on can create friction if their concerns are misunderstood or even dismissed by management, making them feel undervalued and disconnected from their team.

#### 4.1.2 Inability to articulate complex thought processes

In addition to the ability to quickly grasp things, articulating the complex thoughts of gifted employees appeared to cause problems. Several respondents indicated that they often think in complex, multi-step processes that are difficult to articulate in simple terms. They may use a nonlinear path from problem to solution, which can result in unique insights and ideas. This complexity can hinder effective communication with others, who may not follow their line of reasoning. The interviewees repeatedly emphasized that their complex thought processes are difficult to convey to

others, resulting in feelings of isolation and misunderstandings. Some respondents realized these differences in thinking and perceived themselves as different from the average due to their cognitive differences.

*From a young age, I realized that people couldn't follow me, because I always skipped a few steps that I had already taken in my mind. (Respondent M)*

Explaining their thought processes is partially so difficult because the intermediate steps in their thought processes are self-evident to the respondents. One respondent highlighted this by stating the following:

*Sometimes I don't see those intermediate steps myself because they are so logical to me, so I can't explain them because it already makes sense to me. (Respondent H)*

As a result, respondents have the feeling that they cannot say what they think, because others do not understand and they want to prevent confrontations.

This lack of mutual understanding can cause communication breakdowns. When gifted individuals and others do not share the same way of thinking, it can become challenging to achieve a mutual understanding. Effective collaboration can be hindered by this divergent way of thinking:

*If I have to deal with six other people at the same level who all think like A then B, it will never be a match. (Respondent H)*

Over time, some respondents managed to learn to navigate their unique cognitive processes and accept that not everyone thinks several steps ahead.

#### *4.1.3 Experiencing things more intensely*

Another characteristic often associated with giftedness that appeared in the interviews is experiencing things more intensely. In the quote, the respondent describes her sensitivity to sensory stimuli. This sensitivity to subtle signals from others, such as moods and emotions, can distract gifted employees from their work.

*Yes, the senses, like hearing or whatever, but also drafts or the proximity of people. But I'm also sensitive to atmosphere. (...) I can sense how someone is feeling. I can tell if someone is angry or uncomfortable and then I think: 'Oh no, what have I done?' You know, that kind of thing, so it's very distracting. Meanwhile, my colleagues were mostly busy consulting with each other, and I was thinking: 'Geez, just do your work'. (Respondent E)*

In addition, emotions are experienced more intensely. For example, when gifted employees feel misunderstood or unheard, this intensity can magnify their feelings of isolation or detachment. The following quote refers to a colleague who shares the same experience but reacts differently. The respondent perceives the situation as problematic sooner than his colleague:

*Intensity, so yes, you are out of it earlier, but also more vehemently out of it and the moment you feel you are not being heard, then you also feel that more intensely than some other colleagues. (Respondent L)*

This could indicate that neurotypical employees experience the same problems, but gifted employees perceive the problem as problematic earlier and therefore, they are more susceptible to negative influences in terms of feeling belonged.

#### *4.1.4 Feeling responsible for the company*

Another trait that emerged from the interviews is a great sense of responsibility. The quotes demonstrate how this sense of responsibility for organizational practices can cause feelings of engagement, frustration, and irritation. The first quote describes how the respondent feels deeply engaged with the organization and is concerned about potential improvements. The second quote describes how gaining insight into the way things go can result in frustration and disillusionment. The confrontation with the reality of existing problems and inefficiencies, and the fact that the respondent cannot do anything about it, leads to distancing.

*And so yes, I feel very involved, also because I'm like: 'Hey it... It could be so much better, and it could be so much, uh, for everybody'. (Respondent I)*

*Yes and that actually the more I have to do in that works council and – and the more I get to see from management, the problem only gets bigger, because... (...) Yes, whereas I would prefer to resign myself to it. Yeah, it's not going to work anyway. It's not going to happen, so that's – that's difficult and that causes in my case that I therefore distance myself rather than feel extra involved. (Respondent L)*

The frustrations and disillusionment that come with this heightened feeling of responsibility can lead to a feeling of powerlessness or inability to effect change. This can result in feelings of disengagement and detachment from the organization, negatively influencing feelings of belongingness.

#### *4.1.5 The need for appreciation*

The interviews illustrated the need for appreciation among gifted employees in the workplace. Feelings of not being valued can lead to disconnection and disengagement. They seek recognition not just for their intelligence or skills, but for their unique contributions and perspectives. However, they feel often overlooked, misunderstood or even marginalized, negatively contributing to their feelings of belongingness.

## *4.2 Making connections*

This section discusses workplace interactions and the challenges that appear during these interactions, including superficial interactions, differing interests and the struggle of being perceived as aloof.

#### 4.2.1 Communicating with colleagues

The interviews revealed a clear pattern of challenges in communication with colleagues. The outcomes showed that there is often a dissonance between the need for deep, meaningful interactions and the often-superficial nature of everyday conversations in the workplace. Several respondents emphasized the importance of informal conversations that align with their intellectual level. One respondent described how crucial the level of the ‘chitchat’ and ‘water cooler talk’ are for feeling comfortable in conversations. This sense of belonging is enhanced when jokes and thoughts are understood by others who have a similar intellectual level.

*So that at least you can join in the chitchat, right? The water cooler talk. Yes, the small talk.*

*(Respondent L)*

*Yes, that it is at a level where I don't feel uncomfortable and that I can make my own jokes and, well, my brain farts, so to speak, and that they are at least understood. (Respondent L)*

Another recurring theme is the lack of depth in conversations. One respondent described how, during a project, she was repeatedly confronted with conversations that remained superficial and touched on topics in which she was not interested. This superficiality causes a lack of connection, both in personal projects and in work situations. This lack of connection negatively affects feelings of belongingness.

#### 4.2.2 Different interests

Differences in interests, values, and priorities can hinder respondents’ abilities to create meaningful connections with colleagues. The respondents often expressed feelings of disconnection and alienation in relation to their colleagues, characterized by a lack of shared interests and values. One respondent highlighted his struggle to relate to coworkers at company N and in the sector he worked in. He attributed this disconnect to differences in educational backgrounds and interests.

*Yes, getting worked up about societal matters, huh? I mean, just open the newspaper and...*

*Yeah, it makes me really sad. And others. Yeah, then it's more like, 'Have I been on vacation yet? All that tax I have to pay' and... Well. (Respondent F)*

Moreover, the discussion of mundane concerns by colleagues leaves respondents feeling disconnected, as they experience a misalignment of priorities and values. Conversations revolving around trivial matters, for example sports and television, further increase their sense of isolation, as they prefer more meaningful interactions and discussions. The lack of shared interests contributes to a perception of superficiality and a lack of meaningful connections, negatively influencing their feeling of belongingness.

#### 4.2.3 Presence of like-minded individuals

The desire for connection and understanding is a recurring theme throughout the previous sections. However, this desire is often not met, because of all differences. Therefore, gifted employees seek

opportunities to engage with like-minded individuals who can relate to their unique perspectives and cognitive abilities. This is also stated by respondent A:

*I would appreciate it if I could speak with others who are also gifted about how they experience it and how they deal with it, and what it means to them. (Respondent A)*

They have a preference for working with like-minded colleagues. Interactions with such individuals often result in smoother communication, enhanced productivity, and a deeper sense of mutual understanding:

*Yes, in hindsight. Yeah, I thought, oh, so he's also gifted. Then I understand why we connect so quickly. We enjoy working together, he always wants to work with me too. I also like him. You know? He gives me enough freedom, trusts me, and together we progress quickly. (...) Not pushing or pulling, but it goes very smoothly. (Respondent E)*

This search for connection extends beyond the immediate work environment, as participants are involved in high-IQ societies, specialized events, and online communities.

The outcomes highlight the importance of finding a supportive network within the workplace. Some respondents expressed their appreciation for colleagues who are willing to share their expertise, provide guidance, and engage in meaningful discussions. Others described feelings of isolation and loneliness due to the absence of like-minded individuals, particularly when they lack opportunities to connect with peers who understand their experiences. They mentioned the potential for communication barriers and the need for patience and adaptability when working with non-gifted colleagues. This consumes energy and causes a feeling of loneliness, negatively affecting their feelings of belongingness.

#### *4.2.4 Being perceived as aloof*

The respondents often find themselves being perceived as aloof or intimidating, which further complicates their sense of belonging and increases their feelings of unavoidable adaptation. This arises from their natural behaviors, such as thinking quickly, having strong opinions, and having high standards, which can be misinterpreted by colleagues and managers. Their advanced problem-solving skills and ability to quickly grasp complex concepts can intimidate others, especially in group settings, where their intellect may overshadow their colleagues' contributions.

One respondent discussed the challenges of her enthusiasm being misinterpreted:

*Not always, everyone is waiting for me to be kind of, well, a know-it-all... I've learned in practice that I shouldn't show that. (Respondent E)*

This need to suppress natural enthusiasm and insights in order to avoid being seen as a know-it-all shows the struggle of gifted employees to fit in without compromising their identity. Recognizing the

need to tread carefully, some employees have adopted strategies to mitigate negative perceptions by suppressing their natural drive to freely share ideas or insights, fearing that others may feel inferior. The respondent quoted above became mindful of how her contributions could be perceived by others and adopted a habit of seeking permission before sharing thoughts or ideas.

Managing with how they are perceived, often results in feelings of alienation and undervaluation. Despite their potential and drive, the respondents mentioned struggling to connect authentically with their colleagues and managers, hindering their overall sense of belonging and satisfaction at work.

### *4.3 Work content and structure*

This section discusses how work content and structure influence feelings of belongingness. It includes the need for autonomy and flexibility among gifted individuals, their struggles with boredom, the desire for meaningful work and the impact of misaligned expectations and underutilization of talents and the impact on their sense of belonging.

#### *4.3.1 Freedom in work*

The participants often express a need for autonomy and flexibility in their work environment, seeking the freedom to dictate not only what tasks they undertake, but also how and when they complete these tasks. Some participants mentioned valuing the autonomy to choose the content and direction of their work. They thrive when they can choose projects that align with their interests, strengths, and personal goals. Moreover, they benefit from flexible work arrangements that accommodate their preferred working hours, locations, and styles. It is important for them to have the freedom to structure their workday according to their energy levels and productivity peaks, allowing them to maximize their contributions without feeling constrained by schedules or office norms.

*But having the opportunity to work in your own way. And for one person, that might be a bit of hyperfocus and then completely crashing; for another, it might just be going home; and for another, it might be three days of messing around and letting your mind go in all directions, and then suddenly, bam. (Respondent L)*

The freedom to determine their work content and structure positively impacts the participants' sense of belongingness within organizations. When provided with flexibility, they feel valued, respected, and empowered to contribute their unique talents and perspectives. As one respondent stated:

*I really enjoyed myself there. Just looking back, purely because I really got the space to do my thing. (Respondent L)*

Conversely, a lack of such autonomy leads to feelings of constraint, frustration and a sense of disconnection, as they feel their unique needs and capabilities are not recognized or appreciated.

#### 4.3.2 Boredom at work

An important factor regarding experiences of belongingness is boredom. Participants expressed frustration with the repetitive nature of tasks, often feeling as though they are stuck in a cycle of monotony. They noted a pattern of quickly losing interest in their jobs, often within a few months of starting a new position. This boredom hinders their ability to find long-term satisfaction in their work and contributes to a sense of disconnection from their work.

*Almost everything works out within a few months, so your job becomes boring again within 3 to 6 months. (...) So I want something else. So it's also very difficult, I think, to find a job where you really feel engaged in the long term. (Respondent L)*

Participants described feelings of embarrassment and shame when discussing their work with others, highlighting the disconnect between their perceived capabilities and their actual experiences of boredom and dissatisfaction. This disconnection leads to feelings of undervaluation, as gifted individuals struggle when their potential is not fully utilized, negatively contributing to their feelings of belongingness.

#### 4.3.3 Feeling that work is meaningful

Participants expressed a desire for meaningful engagement in their work. For participants to feel like their work is meaningful, it is important for them to work towards a goal. Participants questioned the purpose of their work and struggle to find fulfilment in tasks that seem disconnected from meaningful outcomes. They emphasized the importance of aligning their work with a broader sense of purpose and societal impact. They draw inspiration from the idea of working towards a common goal that fits individual interests, finding meaning in their roles as contributors to the greater good. This fosters a sense of belongingness that is rooted in a shared mission, and the feeling of belonging to a larger purpose and collective responsibility.

#### 4.3.4 Level of work

Participants expressed a great sense of responsibility towards their work, often setting high standards for themselves and others. This led to feelings of frustration when they perceived a misalignment between their expectations and the capabilities or priorities of their colleagues. They acknowledged their tendency to overwork themselves and occasionally overburden others with tasks.

*That was, well, a good example is meetings where I used to get very irritated. Like guys, do we really need to discuss this again? Isn't it clear how this works and come on, let's get to work. (...) Yeah, but others aren't ready for it yet, and then you have to wait, it could be in 3 months that someone else says, 'oh, but let's do it like this or that'. (Respondent J)*

Some participants shared experiences of disillusionment and disappointment within their work environments, particularly when their expectations of their colleagues' competence or intelligence were not met:

*And I always feel that. That involvement is always tested and somewhat undermined by non-functioning colleagues, because then I simply lose trust, you know. (Respondent H)*

This mismatch between their ideals and reality in the workplace result in feelings of frustration and disillusionment, undermining their sense of belongingness within the organization. Ultimately, this mismatch undermines the sense of belongingness gifted employees experience within the organization, as they struggle to match their career goals with the current situation.

#### *4.3.5 Utilizing talents and potential*

Participants struggle with the balance between harnessing their capabilities to the fullest and navigating the constraints imposed by structures and perceptions. They expressed frustration with bureaucratic or inefficient organizational processes, which hinder their ability to work effectively. They feel constrained by procedures or slowed down by unnecessary meetings and administrative tasks.

A recurring theme is their desire to unleash their full potential. One respondent compared her experiences to those of a restrained horse yearning to gallop freely when the reins are finally loosened. However, this sense of liberation is often short-lived, as participants encounter barriers that impede their progress and limit their creativity. They expressed frustration at being held back and restricted, missing opportunities to fully engage with their work.

#### *4.4 Management and organization*

This section explores participant's experiences with management, focusing on the impact of managerial competence, communication and openness to input and criticism on employees' sense of belonging.

##### *4.4.1 Experiences with management*

Several participants described situations in which they felt their managers were not adequately fulfilling their roles, either due to a lack of competence or due to disinterest in employees' well-being and professional development. This resulted in a loss of trust and respect for management.

Visibility and accessibility also play an important role. Participants felt disconnected and unsupported when their managers were physically distant or inaccessible, with infrequent or minimal interaction outside of formal performance reviews. One participant noted:

*But especially when some managers are just completely uninterested. (Respondent I)*

This caused feelings of disconnect and a sense of unfulfilled expectations, particularly concerning communication and support from leadership. Inconsistent support and engagement from management clearly negatively impacted employees' feelings of being understood and connected with the organization.

Conversely, participants valued managers they had who were visible and approachable and who fostered a sense of support and guidance. One participant acknowledged instances in which his managers provided him with the time and space to figure out what works for him as a gifted employee. However, this manager did not provide him with tools or guidance.

*And so it wasn't a new or shocking term or anything for him, but he was... He was relaxed about it, was like: Well, you know, just take the next period of time to figure out for yourself what that means for you and how you can possibly interpret that within your work. So that's it, he didn't give you any tools or anything like that. (Respondent H)*

A few participants highlighted their positive experiences with managers who maintained open lines of communication and regularly sought input from their team members, significantly enhancing their sense of belonging.

#### *4.4.2 Room for input, criticism, and suggestions*

Many participants highlighted the importance of being able to express their thoughts and concerns openly, without fear of repercussions. When they felt their voices were heard and their contributions valued, they reported stronger connections to their work and colleagues, directly impacting belongingness. One participant expressed gratitude for the opportunity to discuss personal development and organizational matters weekly.

*We had weekly discussions where we talked about personal development and organizational matters. That was very comforting for me. (Respondent K)*

Participants noted that the degree of acceptance of their input significantly influenced their engagement and commitment. They appreciated managers who welcomed their suggestions and valued their perspectives, and faced challenges when their suggestions were met with resistance or disregarded by their manager or colleagues. In some cases, participants felt like their input was avoided, which resulted in difficulties with staying engaged:

*It's difficult to remain as engaged when I feel like my opinions are being disregarded. (Respondent C)*

Furthermore, participants expressed that feeling validated and valued in the workplace extended beyond just being heard; it also involved seeing their criticisms and suggestions translated into action. They appreciated managers who not only listened to their input, but also demonstrated a willingness

to implement changes based on their feedback. However, some participants expressed frustration when their criticisms and suggestions were not acted upon.

*I've raised concerns multiple times, but they still proceed with their plans despite the warnings. (Respondent F)*

When they saw their feedback resulting in positive changes, they felt a stronger connection to their work and colleagues. Conversely, a lack of action in response to their input undermined their confidence in the organization's commitment to their well-being and development.

Some participants expressed frustration with micromanagement, where managers closely monitored and directed their tasks. One participant stated:

*Only my manager, instead of supporting me, began micromanaging me, scrutinizing every move. (Respondent B)*

This approach reduced the respondent's autonomy and led to feelings of constraint and disconnection, influencing their feeling of belonging.

#### *4.5 Awareness and support*

This section examines the varying levels of understanding and support for giftedness in the workplace, highlighting the impact of managerial awareness on employee experiences. It discusses the mixed support for specific needs, the strategies employees use to compensate outside of work and the importance of open communication about giftedness. Additionally, it addresses the challenges of constant adaption and the resulting feelings of isolation and frustration among the individuals.

##### *4.5.1 Attention to and understanding of giftedness*

The understanding of neurodiversity among managers and HR departments appears to vary across organizations. While some respondents said their managers exhibited familiarity with the concept, others demonstrated limited knowledge or misunderstanding. Participants highlighted instances where managers lacked clarity on how to support neurodiverse employees effectively, suggesting a need for further education and training in this area:

*It's also, in my opinion, our HR department doesn't pay any attention to neurodiversity among employees at all. (Respondent G)*

The level of attention to and understanding of giftedness among managers and HR departments directly influenced the support gifted individuals experienced in the workplace. When there is awareness, employees feel recognized and accommodated, fostering a stronger sense of belonging. Conversely, when there is limited understanding or misunderstanding, employees may feel overlooked or misunderstood, leading to feelings of exclusion and reduced belongingness.

#### 4.5.2 Support for specific needs

Participants reported mixed experiences regarding the support they received for their specific needs as neurodiverse individuals. Some felt that their managers and HR departments were receptive to their needs and provided adequate support; for instance, one participant mentioned that colleagues were willing to adjust environmental factors, for example reducing noise levels, to accommodate their sensory sensitivities. This level of support fosters a sense of belongingness and inclusivity within the workplace environment. However, others encountered challenges in having their needs addressed adequately, which contributed to feelings of isolation and exclusion. In some cases, this had to do with a lack of knowledge of the facilities and support available:

*I really need to delve into that, and I've discussed it with my team leader, for example, and he didn't have a clear idea like, 'Oh, then you should go there and there now', you know, so they also don't know. So, they are aware that it exists, but they don't necessarily have a clear understanding of it. (Respondent H)*

Many participants discussed compensating for their giftedness-related challenges outside of work, indicating a gap in support within the workplace. Strategies such as seeking alternative outlets for stimulation, pursuing hobbies, or engaging in extracurricular activities were commonly mentioned:

*So, then, you start seeking stimulation in your personal life, because you're actually under-stimulated. (Respondent D)*

While these strategies may provide temporary relief or fulfilment, participants expressed a desire for greater recognition and support in professional settings to address their neurodiversity-related needs more effectively.

#### 4.5.3 Being open about giftedness and problems

Acceptance and understanding among peers appear to be important for experiences of belongingness, particularly understanding among peers and navigating personal characteristics. Participants emphasized the value of having friends who appreciate and acknowledge their unique qualities. Examples were mentioned of colleagues creating spaces for open dialogue and sharing personal insights, to improve interpersonal dynamics and promote mutual understanding. Acceptance, understanding, and open communication are crucial for creating supportive social and professional environments, where gifted individuals feel understood and feel like they belong.

*And what we do then is simply sit together in a room, and we have a format for that in which we essentially present ourselves to each other. Like, 'hey, this is how I am.' Well, and that openness shared among all of us beforehand, that really helps in how we interact with each other (...). (Respondent A)*

However, respondents also indicated that they did not feel safe to be open about their giftedness. Their fear of being misunderstood or judged for their abilities makes that they keep their giftedness for themselves:

*I also don't dare to tell anyone because it's really like that. You feel superior to the rest or something. (...) Well, sometimes I feel a bit misunderstood because of that, and being misunderstood is... It's a bit difficult in that sense because it also makes you feel a bit lonely within your work. (Respondent C)*

In addition, the challenges they face are often unique to them, which makes them cautious about expressing themselves in order to avoid being misunderstood or seen as overly sensitive. This threshold for sharing can contribute to feelings of isolation.

#### *4.5.4 Adaption to the environment*

Due to a lack of knowledge and awareness about how to support and communicate with gifted employees, the respondents often find themselves continuously adjusting their behavior and communication styles to align with their work environment. Such an ongoing process of filtering and self-monitoring drains their energy, hinders interactions, and contributes to feelings of isolation. Several respondents expressed difficulties maintaining their authenticity in environments where they feel their true selves are not accepted. The need to balance authenticity with the fear of negative repercussions often results in frustration and a sense of being misunderstood.

*I have always learned that the moment I am myself, people will attack me because I am super sensitive and vulnerable. So, I don't have much... I'm not a streetwise person, so to speak. (Respondent E)*

This quote underscores the fear respondents have of being true to oneself due to past experiences of bullying and rejection. This respondent feels that showing their true personality could cause them to be targeted, thus leading to self-censorship.

*Always thinking: oh dear, I might do something strange. I better not say too much, because then I might say something stupid. They think I'm stupid. I have different humour, they talk about music, and I think, well, I listen to classical music, you know. But I don't say that. (Respondent E)*

The necessity to hide aspects of one's identity, such as interests or humour, in order to avoid standing out or being judged, is a significant burden. This burden can result in feelings of isolation and disconnection from the workplace culture.

## 5. Conclusion and Discussion

This study aimed to shed light on the experiences gifted employees have with feeling like they belong, in order to foster their sense of belonging and their well-being within organizations. By interviewing gifted employees and asking them about their experiences, this study has fostered insight into these experiences and what contributes to them. The present research provides a first exploration of how gifted employees experience belongingness, by developing concepts that enable researchers to create a better understanding of how gifted employees experience belongingness on the work floor, as well as what factors contribute to these experiences.

The results of this study reveal that the experience of belongingness among gifted employees in organizational settings is multifaceted and influenced by several factors. This discussion section integrates the findings from the conducted interviews with existing literature on giftedness and belongingness, providing an understanding of how gifted employees experience belongingness within organizational settings, and what factors influence their sense of belongingness.

### *5.1 Theoretical contribution*

The starting point of this study was the absence of theoretical insights into experiences of belongingness among gifted employees, and what factors contribute to these experiences. This study significantly extends the existing literature on both gifted employees and workplace belongingness by providing new insights into the unique intersection of these two domains.

Previous research has primarily focused on the distinctive capabilities and needs of gifted employees, which set them apart from neurotypical workers, for example heightened cognitive abilities, intense sensitivities and a strong drive for intellectual challenge (Shore et al., 2011). In addition, research by Jena and Pradhan (2018) focused primarily on belongingness and showed twelve components that influence inclusion and specifically workplace belongingness among neurotypical workers. However, this research has not adequately explored how these factors apply to gifted individuals. In addition, Van Casteren et al. (2021) and Vreys et al. (2016) studied the significant contributions that gifted employees can make. In order to make these contributions, they state that the specific characteristics and needs of gifted employees have to be met. However, they did not include experiences of belongingness in their research.

The findings underscore that meaningful interactions and shared intellectual interests are crucial for fostering belongingness among gifted employees. Participants often struggled to connect when their personal interests diverged from colleagues', resulting in superficial interactions that left them feeling alienated. Additionally, autonomy and flexibility were pivotal factors influencing belongingness; participants valued the freedom to shape their work according to their strengths, which enhanced their sense of being valued. Conversely, rigid structures and micromanagement constrained autonomy and led to feelings of undervaluation. Furthermore, environments that welcomed open input and

constructive criticism were essential for enhancing belongingness. While gifted employees appreciated opportunities to contribute meaningfully, concerns about how their ideas would be perceived sometimes deterred them from sharing openly.

The outcomes offer a nuanced view of the specific needs and characteristics of gifted employees. Van Casteren et al. (2021) and Vreys et al. (2016) indicated that these aspects are important for gifted employees' performance. However, this research highlights how factors like specific needs, characteristics and external influences specifically influence their sense of belonging within the organizational settings and shows that taking into account and accommodating these needs is crucial for their feelings of inclusion. This shifts the narrative from merely recognizing gifted employees' needs and characteristics to understanding how these needs and characteristics interact with their feelings of belongingness.

Furthermore, this study provides a nuanced view of how organizational practices, leadership styles and workplace cultures can either support or hinder gifted employees' sense of belonging. By exploring the interplay between these factors and gifted employees' unique traits, the study enriches both belongingness theory and giftedness theory. It advances our understanding by demonstrating that a comprehensive approach to inclusion must be the adaption of organizational environments to meet their specific needs for intellectual stimulation, autonomy and meaningful engagement.

#### *In summary*

The study highlights the complex interplay of factors that influence the sense of belonging of gifted employees in organizational settings. While their unique cognitive abilities and sensitivities offer significant potential contributions, these same traits can also cause feelings of isolation, misunderstandings, and frustration. This study suggests that current approaches to workplace inclusion and belongingness need to be expanded to better accommodate the experiences of gifted individuals. Without acknowledgement and understanding of their unique traits and needs, gifted individuals may struggle to have their concerns addressed effectively and their needs fulfilled. Effective communication, supportive management, alignment of interests, and an inclusive organizational culture are critical for enhancing the sense of belonging of gifted employees. Organizations that recognize and address the unique needs of gifted individuals can foster a more inclusive and productive work environment, ultimately benefiting both these employees and the organization as a whole.

#### *5.2 Limitations*

In this paragraph, the limitations of this research are discussed. Based on these limitations, suggestions for further research are provided.

The selection technique used in this study, which relied on participant's self-identification as gifted, presents a notable limitation. This approach introduces a degree of subjectivity and potential inconsistency, as the criteria for self-identifying as gifted can vary widely among individuals. Moreover, this method of selection may have predominantly attracted participants who are experiencing challenges or difficulties related to their giftedness and are therefore more motivated to share their experiences. This could potentially skew the sample towards those with negative experiences.

In addition, conducting the majority of the interviews via Microsoft Teams might have introduced certain constraints. The online format could have affected the depth and spontaneity of responses (James & Busher, 2013), as some participants might feel less engaged or find it harder to express themselves in a virtual setting. Conversely, one respondent mentioned feeling more anonymous and thus more comfortable openly sharing their experiences.

Furthermore, a notable limitation of this study is the retrospective perspective of some respondents, who only recently discovered their giftedness. These individuals reflected on their past experiences without the knowledge of their gifted status at the time those experiences occurred. This retrospective understanding could have influenced their interpretations, potentially causing a reinterpretation of past events through the lens of their newly identified giftedness. As a result, their experiences might be subject to hindsight bias, meaning their current knowledge and insights have influenced their perception of past experiences because of social desirability or potential failures of memory (Bell & Bell, 2017).

Finally, it is important to mention that some respondents were diagnosed as highly sensitive persons, which could have influenced their experiences of belongingness. Mentioned in the results section, giftedness and high sensitivity sometimes occur together. However, there is no empirical evidence for the link (De Gucht et al., 2023). The overlap between giftedness and high sensitivity can complicate the interpretation of research findings. It becomes challenging to attribute certain experiences or characteristics to either giftedness or high sensitivity. For example, intense feeling could also be caused by high sensitivity.

### *5.3 Recommendations for further research*

Future studies should aim to use a standardized definition of giftedness to address the subjectivity and inconsistencies related to self-identification. Developing or adopting widely accepted criteria will enhance the consistency and comparability of findings across different studies. Unfortunately, this will take time.

In addition, by incorporating observational methods, researchers can gain deeper insights into the interactions, behaviors, and contextual factors that influence gifted employees' sense of belonging and

help validate self-reported data from interviews. Future research could also benefit from including longitudinal studies or participants who are aware of their gifted status throughout their careers, allowing for a more consistent and contemporaneous examination of their experiences with belongingness.

Lastly, it could be relevant to consider cross-cultural comparisons in order to understand how cultural differences impact the experiences of gifted employees. Investigating how organizational practices and cultural norms in different regions influence sense of belonging could provide valuable insights for multinational organizations seeking to support gifted employees globally.

#### *5.4 Practical implications*

The findings of this research have several practical implications for improving the sense of belongingness among gifted employees. These implications focus on addressing the challenges faced by gifted employees.

First, fostering understanding and awareness is crucial. By encouraging open discussions about giftedness, and creating forums or discussion groups where gifted employees can share their experiences and insights, mutual understanding can be reinforced. In a culture of psychological safety, gifted employees feel more comfortable expressing their ideas and concerns without fear of judgment. Additionally, developing and implementing training programs for management and employees can increase awareness of the characteristics and needs of gifted and other neurodiverse employees.

Next, enhancing communication and facilitating deep conversations can make a significant difference. Initiatives such as book clubs, special interest groups, or lunchtime learning sessions allow employees to engage in meaningful, thought-provoking conversations. To bridge communication gaps, workshops could be beneficial that focus on effective communication skills and articulating complex ideas.

For management, fostering inclusive leadership is essential. Recognizing and valuing the unique contributions of gifted employees will create a more inclusive environment. Flexible work arrangements, such as flexible hours, remote work options, and accommodating different work styles, can help gifted employees work in ways that suit their strengths and preferences.

Moreover, clearly communicating the organization's vision and values ensures that employees understand how their work contributes to the organization's overarching goals, making them feel more connected. Finally, personal recognition, recognizing efforts and achievements, and providing regular and constructive feedback can help gifted employees feel valued and understood.

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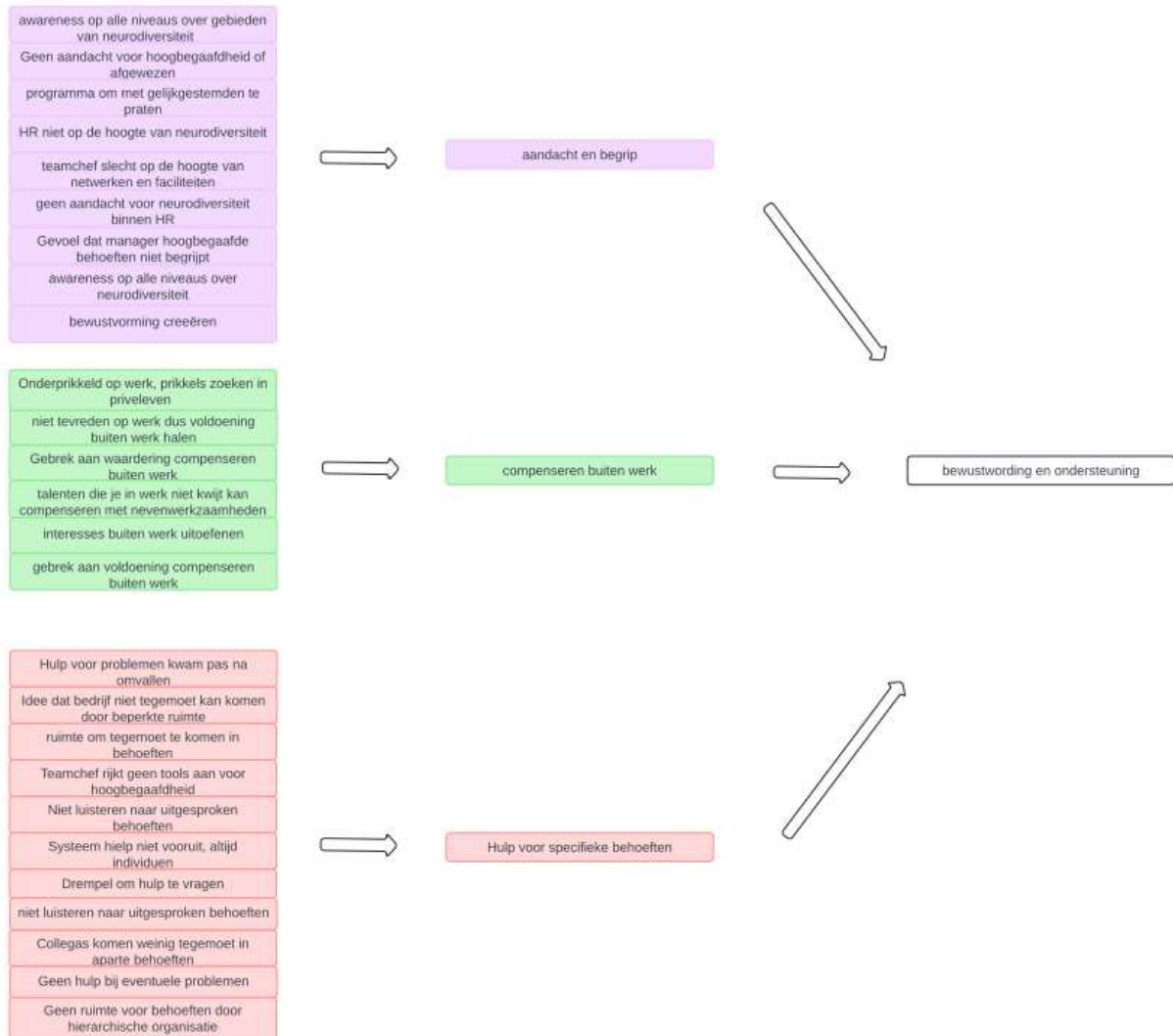
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## 7. Appendix

### Appendix 1:



### Appendix 2:

Second order codes	Quotes
The ability to quickly grasp things	"Yeah, well, you see through everything earlier, right? Meetings always take too long because, well, you already know where it's heading."
Experiencing more intensely	"But those people just went to work and got things done, while my own colleagues were mostly spending a lot of time discussing things with each other. I really felt like, come on, just do your job."
Need for appreciation	"So, that's why, you see, at all those employers, I've actually missed that feeling of, you know, doing all these clever things, right? I solve it all in one go and it just works, but everyone finds it very normal and

	<i>because I do it so quickly, relatively, it's not considered remarkable."</i>
<b>Feeling responsible for the company</b>	<i>"Then actually I start feeling too involved and worrying about things I otherwise wouldn't worry about. Yes, I find that a shame and then it feels like my own company in the sense that, yes, I find it a shame that they don't ask others for their opinion. Yes, that they don't ask others like, what do you think about it?"</i>
<b>Communication with colleagues</b>	<i>"Never really that depth, that, yes, I can't take that. And that is often the case at work as well." (respondent D)</i>
<b>Inability to articulate thought processes because way of thinking</b>	<i>"If you don't understand where the person is coming from, you won't have any understanding, because you can't place it." (Respondent H)</i>  <i>"Yeah, that I always felt like I wasn't understood. That I could explain technical things and even provide beautiful illustrations, all sorts of diagrams, constructions, formulas, you name it, simulations, everything necessary to show someone else how something could work or why it could or couldn't work. And yeah, if you're facing someone who isn't gifted or managers who have no background in technology, then it just stops there."</i>
<b>Being open about giftedness and problems</b>	<i>"Actually, you just need to explain how you operate instead of, well, labelling it. And that's not always understood, but yeah, that's difficult."  "What I see is, so I also think I experience that less now. Although I can sometimes feel very lonely because, yeah, you can't always share your story in a work situation with your team."</i>
<b>Different interests</b>	<i>"I didn't find the topics people talked about interesting. I didn't find the things they were occupied with interesting. I, I, I, I just really don't get happy from that."</i>
<b>Presence of like-minded individuals</b>	<i>"I think that, in any case, the need to work with people with a high IQ, to put it very simply."  "So, and the funny thing is, with gifted people, you can also have a conversation more easily and then never see that person again. And yet you had a very deep, enjoyable conversation. Yes, in no time, yes. Yes, yes, so then, yes, you don't need to know each other at all. Yes. No. Yes, I I" "I really enjoy that too, but if you don't have that at work, then it is really exhausting."</i>
<b>Being part of the group/organisation</b>	<i>"I get along very well with many people in the workplace, in the family, within friend groups, or whatever, but I always have the feeling that I just don't quite fit in, you know. Everywhere, it's like that."</i>

	<p><i>Always just a bit on my own little island or something within those."</i></p> <p><i>"But I don't feel like a part of the organization. It's a kind of feeling I've always had everywhere. My whole life, I've always felt like an outsider in organizations, even though I can be a part of them."</i></p>
<b>Relationship with management</b>	<p><i>"And people also see you as a threat, because there are many managers who actually see that you are just as good or maybe even better. Yes, and then you are a threat. And then, yes, it is quite difficult to deal with."</i></p> <p><i>"Yes, exactly, that you can just say everything. Well, a bit of appreciation that you get in return, like 'Hey, it's great that you're doing this,' or 'You pick things up quickly.'"</i></p>
<b>Adaption to the environment</b>	<p><i>"And gradually, I also realized that this was actually true and that I was always adapting myself to the level of my surroundings."</i></p> <p><i>"Yes, yes, in contact with non-gifted people, you are constantly aware of how you have to say things, what you say, and the speed; you always have to slow it down. And with gifted people, you can, so to speak, jump from one topic to another, and they follow you."</i></p>
<b>Being perceived as aloof</b>	<p><i>"I often ask for permission, guys, I see what may I share it with you instead of just opening my mouth." (Respondent J)</i></p> <p><i>"And, I often disagree with how he does things, so he already thinks I'm a know-it-all."</i></p>
<b>Freedom in where, when and how to work</b>	<p><i>"And if you don't get that space, then yes, you also start to feel less involved because more and more often you think, well, fine, if you want it exactly like that, not the right way. But if you insist on it, well then I'll do it your way. But then I'll say at 5 minutes to 5, guys, it's been nice."</i></p>
<b>Boredom at work</b>	<p><i>"Yeah, I don't tell people with pride at a birthday party what kind of work I do. I do it with three fingers in my nose, and everyone thinks it's fantastic. (Respondent A)</i></p> <p><i>Dit ding dus doe het nog maar een keer, dus ja, ik was gewoon te snel en Ik heb Ik heb mij dood verveeld op mijn werk. Ja, Ik was eigenlijk altijd eerder klaar dan dan nodig.</i></p>
<b>Feeling that work is meaningful</b>	<p><i>"Where do I stand in the chain? How many beads are still to come after me before finding out whether I'm doing my job well or not? To what extent does that actually influence the final result? And if the conclusion is that it doesn't really make much difference."</i></p>

<b>Level of work</b>	<p><i>"And yes, well, that's sometimes really the feeling I have at work. As if I'm surrounded by a bunch of people with limited intelligence. Yes, while, well, when you think about it, you know they're all smart people.</i></p> <p><i>But I often didn't understand. I thought, yes, it's so logical that this can all be better and done differently. We should do this. And then I would get irritated that others didn't see it that way, right? Then I often thought, well, they don't want to see it or they don't make an effort. And only much later did I realize that they just didn't see it, that they couldn't think that far ahead or."</i></p>
<b>Utilizing talents and potential</b>	<p><i>"And I think that I would have been more effectively utilized for the organization if they had given me tasks that fit within my talent spectrum, rather than just fitting the profile of a junior policy advisor."</i></p> <p><i>'And if we didn't have that layer of management in between that slows everything down. So if I could once get off the handbrake and, and. Again like."</i></p>
<b>Experiences with management</b>	<p><i>"But at the same time, I've had a lot of managers whom I think, you just don't function well as a manager." (Respondent 1)</i></p> <p><i>"I find such things unacceptable, and I'm inclined to think that what I believe should be the way it is. I think that if I had been the manager, I would have done it differently. It even got to a point after a year where, along with a colleague, I directly told that manager, 'Hey, this is your responsibility.'"</i></p>
<b>Experiences with management styles</b>	<p><i>"The person who eventually became my manager, yes, they went to sit in a little office on the other side of the building, so they were just completely invisible to actually indicate the difference."</i></p>
<b>Room for input, criticism and suggestions</b>	<p><i>"Yes, and then, yes, and then, and with that. So, indeed, I had already pointed out six months before, 'Hey, you need to watch out. This is going to happen with all the blah blah.' You know? That was then not listened to."</i></p> <p><i>'I think, yes, I have had, occasionally, managers who I felt really saw me but also let me be as I am and who I felt at least listened to me, yes. And whether they agreed or not, and whether it ultimately led to anything or not, it at least gave me the feeling that I could give my opinion and that it was listened to."</i></p>
<b>Attention to and understanding of giftedness</b>	<p><i>"And at some point, it was also said, yes, I actually want to continue with career coaching focused on giftedness. And she also said to me, yes, but giftedness</i></p>

	<p><i>has nothing to do with your work. That is completely separate from each other."</i></p> <p><i>"Yes, I think that management often just doesn't really know what to do with me."</i></p>
<b>Support for specific needs</b>	<p><i>"Addressing the issue. Yes, absolutely. It's really just treating the symptoms. No, and that's because a company, as I see it, is always organized around the average, just like the education system, and really the whole world. And in the end, we're talking about a very small group. So how can you specialize in something that so little is known about?"</i></p>
<b>Compensating outside of work</b>	<p><i>"Over the past 6 years, I've been the chairman of the national choir organization, which during Corona took up 60 hours per week, so it became a bit of an out-of-hand hobby. But that's where I could channel some of my talents that I couldn't utilize in my job. I had to make that choice consciously, and actually, since I've been doing that, my work has been going well."</i></p>

### Appendix 3:

#### **Opening:**

#### **Dank voor medewerking**

Allereerst, hartelijk dank voor uw tijd en interesse in het afnemen van dit interview.

#### **Uitleg interview**

Voor mijn master thesis van de master Strategic Human Resources Leadership ben ik onderzoek aan het doen naar de ervaringen met "belongingness" onder hoogbegaafde medewerkers. Het gesprek zal ongeveer een uur duren. Ik zal me eerst even voorstellen. Dan zal ik het een en ander uitleggen over het onderzoek, en daarna gaan we het over jou hebben.

#### **Toelichting toepassing resultaten**

Dit interview zal vertrouwelijk en anoniem behandeld worden. Het interview zal worden getranscribeerd na afloop en daarmee geanonimiseerd. De opnames worden na het afronden van de thesis verwijderd. Alle bestanden worden bewaard op de Radboud Drive. Uw naam zal nooit vermeld worden in de transcripten of het verslag. Ik zou graag dit interview op willen nemen: dit is voor mijzelf om ons gesprek terug te kunnen luisteren. Als dit oke is, dan zet ik nu de opname aan. Tijdens ons gesprek zal ik af en toe aantekeningen maken.

U kunt zich te allen tijde zonder opgaaf van reden terugtrekken uit het onderzoek.

**Even voor de formaliteit: zou je willen bevestigen dat je toestemming hebt gegeven voor de opname? Je kan je op ieder gewenst moment terugtrekken. Is dat akkoord?**

Er zijn geen goede of foute antwoorden. Het gaat puur over uw ervaringen. Heeft u vooraf nog vragen? (...) Dan kunnen we beginnen.

1. Demografische en Achtergrondinformatie:

Kunt u wat over uzelf vertellen?

Wat is uw leeftijd

Kunt u alstublieft een kort overzicht geven van uw carrièreachtergrond en uw huidige rol?

Hoe definieert u uw eigen begaafdheid? Bent u formeel als begaafd geïdentificeerd, of identificeert u zichzelf als zodanig op basis van uw kenmerken en ervaringen?

2. Ervaringen met hoogbegaafdheid op de werkplek:

Kunt u iets vertellen over uw ervaringen met hoogbegaafdheid op de werkplek?

- Wat vond u daarvan?
- Hoe hebt u dit ervaren?
- Wat betekent dit voor u?
- Hoe voelde u zich toen?

Kunt u een situatie beschrijven waarin u het gevoel had dat uw begaafde kenmerken bijzonder invloedrijk waren in uw werkomgeving?

Zijn er middelen of aanpassingen die u denkt dat de inclusie van begaafde werknemers op de werkplek zouden verbeteren?

Kunt u wat vertellen over de organisatiecultuur (en –beleid?) Is er een netwerk, zijn er faciliteiten waar je gebruik van kunt maken?

### 3. Percepties en Ervaringen van Verbondenheid en uitsluiting:

Hoe betrokken voelt u zich bij de organisatie?

Kunt u een ervaring delen waarin u een sterk gevoel van verbondenheid (betrokken, erbij horen) op het werk voelde?

Kunt u een ervaring delen waarin u een sterk gevoel van uitsluiting op het werk voelde?

- Welke factoren droegen bij aan deze gevoelens? Wat vond u daarvan?
- Hoe hebt u dit ervaren?
- Wat betekent dit voor u?
- Hoe voelde u zich toen?

Welke soorten ondersteuning vindt u het meest behulpzaam om een gevoel van verbondenheid in uw werkomgeving te bevorderen?

### 4. Interpersoonlijke Relaties en Sociale Dynamiek:

Kunt u wat vertellen over uw ervaringen met de omgang met collega's

Kunt u wat vertellen over uw ervaringen met de omgang met leidinggevendenden?

Zijn er specifieke uitdagingen die u tegenkomt bij (het vormen of onderhouden van relaties op het werk vanwege uw hoogbegaafdheid? Geen reactie dan algemeen, bijv wat een bedrijf kan doen)!!

- Wat vond u daarvan?

- Hoe hebt u dit ervaren?
- Wat betekent dit voor u?
- Hoe voelde u zich toen?

#### 5. Aanbevelingen en Afsluiting:

Op basis van uw ervaringen, welke aanbevelingen zou u doen aan organisaties om de verbondenheid van begaafde werknemers beter te ondersteunen?

Is er nog iets anders dat u zou willen delen over uw ervaringen met betrekking tot begaafdheid en verbondenheid op de werkplek dat we nog niet hebben besproken?

#### **Conclusie:**

Bedank de deelnemer voor zijn of haar tijd en waardevolle inzichten.

Wil je nog iets toevoegen?

Zijn er dingen niet besproken? Heeft u nog vragen?

Zo niet, dan ga ik nu de opname stoppen.

Debrief: wat ga ik doen en wat is het doel? Eventueel meer info over het onderzoek

Herhaal de vertrouwelijkheid en informeer over de volgende stappen en hoe zij de bevindingen van het onderzoek kunnen verkrijgen.

Geef contactinformatie voor eventuele vervolgvragen of extra input die zij na het interview willen aanbieden.