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Autonomy with Clear Boundaries Stimulates Innovation Energy of Employees

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ABSTRACT

In the current era of rapid global tensions and transformations, organisations increasingly recognise that bottom-up innovation is essential for sustaining effective innovation processes. While research on Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB) has grown, limited attention has been paid to the necessary delimitation of autonomy to stimulate IWB in conjunction with the strategic direction of an organisation. This study addresses this gap by examining how personal and contextual factors shape IWB within organisational settings. Employees who engage in IWB function as key agents of change, aligning innovative efforts with organisational strategy through problem recognition, idea generation, idea promotion, and idea realisation. Their contributions are influenced by individual attributes—such as creativity, psychological empowerment, and optimism—together with enabling factors including perceived autonomy, external collaboration, innovative teamwork, and supportive leadership. Yet organisations face continuous risks of obsolescence, driven by expanding knowledge and volatile market demands that require new products and services. Within this context, innovative and conservative employee groups coexist; when conservative orientations prevail, stagnation and decline become more likely. To explore these dynamics, we conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty-seven managers and seventy employees, complemented by five focus groups with seventeen employees across diverse departments in three profit and nonprofit organisations. Findings highlight perceived autonomy as a central facilitator of IWB but also emphasise the necessity of clearly defined boundaries. Without constraints—such as deadlines, regulatory frameworks, organisational procedures, or system requirements—innovation risks becoming unfocused, ambiguous, or misaligned with strategic priorities. This study contributes by demonstrating that innovation outcomes are most successful when top and middle management ensure close alignment between organisational strategy and innovation objectives. Such strategic coherence reduces the risk of employee disillusionment, ensuring that innovative initiatives are not developed in isolation but embedded within the organisation.

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1. Introduction

Organisations today are actively seeking strategies to thrive amidst rapid and profound global changes. In recent years, they have faced mounting customer demands, intensified price competition, and rising expectations for faster delivery (Crossan & Apaydin, 2010). Moreover, unprecedented challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, environmental crises, and geopolitical tensions have further underscored the imperative for innovation. Beyond these global developments, every organisation is inherently at risk of obsolescence due to ongoing knowledge expansion and dynamic market shifts, which continuously generate the need for new products and services. Gerards (1980), in his dissertation—written prior to many of the current global disruptions—already identified the significance of fostering and retaining innovative employees within organisations. He warned that when conservative factions dominate, organisations risk ageing into irrelevance and eventual termination. Many organisations remain hesitant to embrace innovation or diversify due to a culture of risk aversion. In such environments, management and employees often rely on the assumption that existing organisational structures and products will continue to suffice.

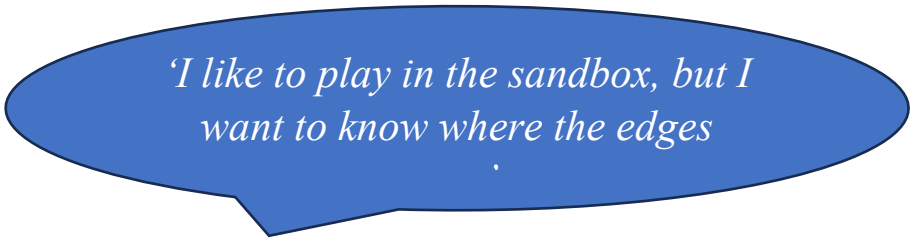
This mindset reflects a lack of adaptive attitude. When signs of decline emerge, a shift in leadership may be required to reverse the trend. Gerards (1980) described this cycle in terms of distinct organisational phases: unstable balance (rationalisation phase), rigidity (conservation phase), crisis (chaotic phase), and renewal through new leadership (revival phase).In the contemporary context, organisations are increasingly turning to both employees and customers as sources of innovative ideas (Guterres, 2020; Wijffels in Schröder, 2020). Although management can support innovation, research indicates that its origins often reside in the expertise, creativity, and proactivity of skilled employees (Mumford, 2000). Employees with diverse professional and personal backgrounds are recognised as key drivers of innovation (Van de Ven, 1986). The concept of Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB) has received considerable scholarly attention since Scott and Bruce (1994) first highlighted its role in fostering innovation. Numerous theoretical frameworks have since identified factors influencing IWB (Bass et al., 1999; Bos-Nehles et al., 2017; De Jong & Den Hartog, 2010; De Spiegelaere, 2014; Van den Brand et al., 2021).Findings from our three case studies suggest that, alongside other contextual and environmental factors that stimulate employees' innovation efforts, perceived autonomy is a pivotal contributor.

However, respondents exhibiting IWB consistently emphasised that autonomy in the innovation process must be accompanied by clearly defined boundaries. Such boundaries help prevent disruptions due to uncertainties around time constraints, development regulations, organisational policies, or system requirements (Van Essen, 2024). Previous studies have shown that innovation processes are more likely to succeed when senior management ensures alignment between the organisation’s strategic objectives and innovation activities. Such alignment helps mitigate frustration among employees engaging in IWB, particularly when excessive autonomy results in initiatives that the organisation is unwilling or unable to implement (Lee, 2013).Scholars have long examined the complex relationship between organisational structure, autonomy, and the degree of flexibility required to enable innovation. As early as 1965, Thompson analysed the tension between bureaucratic structures and innovation, recognising the importance of providing creative space to encourage IWB.

His review revealed a dynamic interplay between routine operations and formalised structures, suggesting that even within systems characterised by formal procedures and established incentives or sanctions, employees retain the discretion to conform to or deviate from established rules. In routine organisational tasks, formalisation can help manage complexity and maintain control effectively. However, separate phases of innovation—such as

development—demand varying levels of flexibility. While development stages often require high formalisation, particularly for purposes of quality assurance or market readiness, they also benefit from degrees of adaptability, especially during prototyping, to accommodate unforeseen challenges.

Mattes (2013) contributed important insights through his exploration of multilevel ambidexterity, a concept central to balancing formalisation and flexibility. He defined formalisation as the institutionalisation of codified rules that govern organisational procedures. In contrast, flexibilisation represents a shift away from rigid structures towards autonomy and self-regulation, especially by highly capable individuals or teams. This balance is fundamental to achieving ambidexterity within innovation processes, as demonstrated in contemporary co-creation strategies such as Agile and Lean methods. Despite its importance, the need for clear boundaries within autonomous innovation work remains underexplored in the IWB literature. Our research contributes to this discussion by highlighting the need for these boundaries from the perspective of the innovators themselves. As one respondent put it:



Using data from three case studies, we authored this article on the necessity of autonomy boundaries in stimulating innovation energy, which is crucial for demonstrating IWB.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this theoretical framework, we summarise the theories used in our research on IWB, with a focus on innovation energy and the IWB-stimulating factor of autonomy, in relation to the necessity of setting boundaries on this autonomy.

2.1. What is Innovative Work Behaviour and Innovation Energy?

De Spiegelaere et al. (2014, pp. 144–145) argued that, following an extensive review of various definitions of innovation and IWB in the literature, a fully comprehensive definition of IWB had yet to be established. Consequently, they proposed the following definition, which we adopt in our research:

> *'IWB is all employee behaviour aimed at the generation, introduction and/or application (within a role, group or organisation) of ideas, processes, products or procedures, new and intended to benefit the relevant unit of adoption.'*

We employed two primary dimensions—each comprising two stages of IWB, inspired by the framework developed by Dorenbosch et al. (2005), to assess whether voluntary participants in our study could be classified as innovative. These dimensions are: (1) development-oriented IWB, encompassing problem recognition and idea generation; and (2) implementation-oriented IWB, comprising idea promotion and idea realisation.

We argue that creativity, a foundational component of innovation (Amabile, 1988, 1998), alongside psychological empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995, 2008), significantly influences

employees' innovation energy and engagement in IWB. Optimism has also emerged as a critical personal trait associated with IWB (Hsu et al., 2011; Li & Wu, 2011; Van Essen, 2024).

Furthermore, we identify transformational leadership (Bass et al., 1999) as a key contextual factor that fosters innovation energy and encourages IWB. Other salient environmental enablers include perceived autonomy (e.g., Bos-Nehles et al., 2017), innovative teamwork (Van Essen, 2024) and external networking (e.g., De Jong & Den Hartog, 2005), both of which contribute to a climate conducive to innovation.

Data analysis from our three case studies—conducted as part of a doctoral dissertation—suggests that innovation energy serves as the converting mechanism by which individual innovation properties are translated into IWB. This converting is shaped collectively by five operational mechanisms:

> *'(1) the individual mechanism where the person finds the energy in themselves leading towards IWB with or without the other working mechanisms, (2) the work design autonomy mechanism where the individual energy shapes and is shaped by the tasks with various levels of perceived autonomy, (3) the team mechanism where the person's energy influences the collective team behaviours and vice versa, (4) the leadership mechanism where the innovation energy affects and is affected by leadership and (5) the external mechanism where the person's energy influences the external stakeholders and vice versa' (Van Essen, 2024, p. 17).*

Innovation energy is conceptualised as follows*:*

> *'Innovation energy is a stimulus converting personal innovation properties into IWB in a mutual dependency with the work context and the innovation properties.* The converting stimulus is conceptualised as: '*The energetic power which gives result drive, flow, and stamina in the total IWB process' (van Essen, 2024, p. 17).*

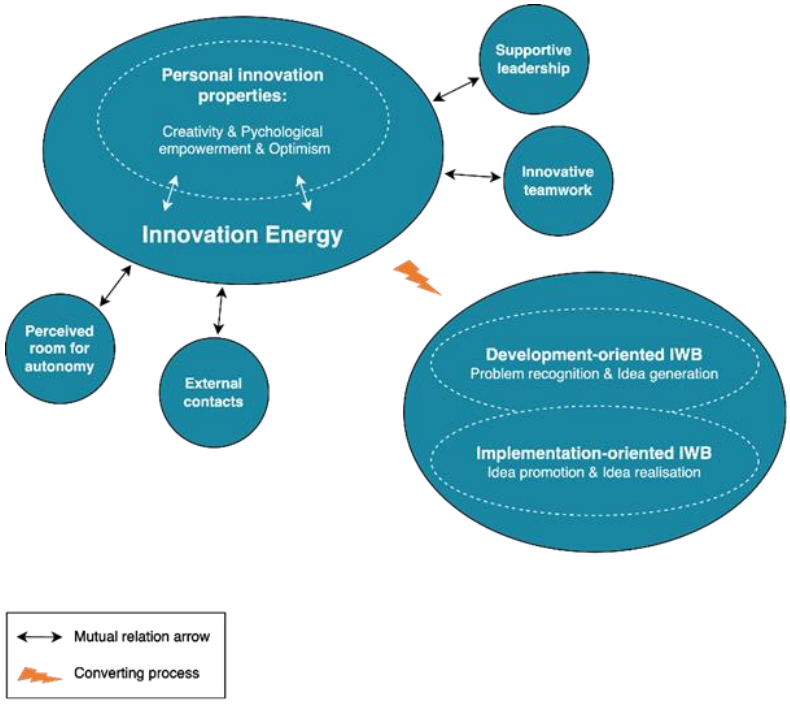


Figure 1. The 'Innovation Energy and IWB model'

Source: van Essen (2024, p.18)

In the dissertation the IWB process and the converting role of innovation energy is visualised in the following Figure 1.

2.2. Autonomy and the Need for Strategic Alignment in its Stimulating Influence on Innovation Energy and IWB

Autonomy in the workplace encompasses both the organisational support that enables employees to influence work goals and the individual's capacity for self-regulation. It involves self-awareness, confidence, and empowerment, alongside the freedom afforded by the work environment. Organisational autonomy provides space for critical reflection on work methods, objectives, and principles (Kessels, 2004).

Research consistently identifies autonomy as a critical driver of IWB (Bos-Nehles et al., 2017). Employees' perceptions of autonomy—particularly their freedom to perform tasks in their own way—are strongly linked to self-determination, a vital component of psychological empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995, 2008). Both personal and organisational autonomy are essential for fostering IWB. In this article, organisational autonomy is regarded as a key work-context factor, while personal autonomy is considered an intrinsic element of the innovation-related empowerment experienced by employees exhibiting IWB. De Spiegelaere (2014) identified autonomy as a mechanism that enhances intrinsic motivation, fosters experimentation, and increases job responsibility. Several dimensions of autonomy influence IWB, including work method autonomy (discretion over tasks and procedures), scheduling autonomy (control over the timing of tasks), time autonomy (flexibility in working hours), and locational autonomy (choice of workplace). Among these, work method and locational autonomy exert the strongest impact on IWB, while time autonomy enhances IWB primarily when it contributes to work method autonomy.

Nonaka (2004) argued that autonomy facilitates access to 'tacit knowledge,' enabling implicit ideas to be transformed into explicit knowledge, which is crucial for the creation of latest ideas. However, Senge (2014) cautioned that autonomy alone is insufficient for driving innovation, as entrenched mental models can hinder learning. As such, organisations must balance autonomy with clear strategic goals to ensure that innovation aligns with broader organisational objectives.

Lee (2013) highlighted the importance of small, autonomous teams in transdisciplinary research, advocating for a balance between individual freedom and organisational direction. Without strategic alignment, employees may become frustrated if their innovations are not implemented. Even within an environment of autonomy, strategic coherence is necessary to prevent disengagement from research and development efforts.

Aligned with the purpose of our article Swaroop and Dixit (2018) argued that higher perceived work autonomy is associated with increased IWB among employees whereby Jang and Kim (2025) stated that organisations should promote greater job autonomy for employees while thoughtfully regulating performance pressure within teams. To maximise organisational effectiveness, a balance should be struck between autonomous decision-making and performance expectations, supporting both short-term outcomes, such as work engagement, and long-term capabilities, including innovative behaviour, in today's increasingly competitive business landscape.

Hackman and Oldham (1975, p. 162) defined autonomy as:

> '*The degree to which the job provides substantial freedom, independence, and discretion to the employee in scheduling the work and determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out.'*

We follow this historical but still actual definition in our research and incorporate the concept of perceived autonomy (Lumpkin et al., 2009), which reflects employees' subjective experience of independence in their roles. In our framework, perceived autonomy is a key contextual factor influencing IWB. We define it as the extent of organisational freedom granted to employees, ensuring that while they have the space to innovate, their efforts remain strategically aligned.

3. Method

Our research was conducted using the abductive systematic combining approach (Dubois & Gadde, 2002, 2014), see Figure 2. This iterative process led to the development of the 'Innovation Energy and IWB Model,' as depicted in Figure 1, which integrates both established theoretical variables and newly identified factors through inductive coding.

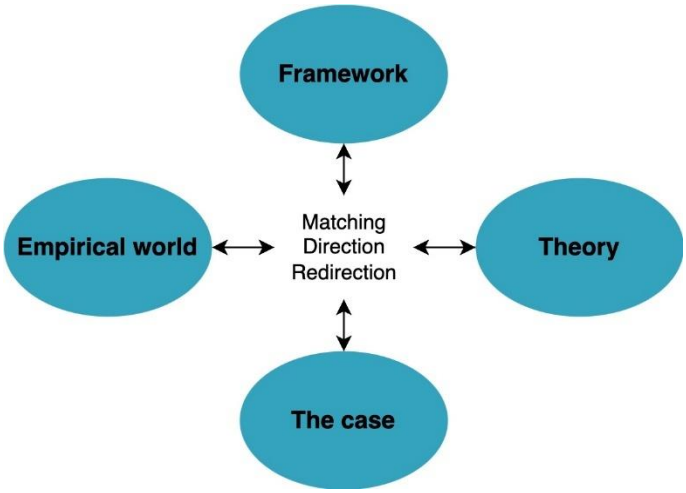


Figure 2. Systematic Combining Model
Source: Dubois and Gadde (2002, p. 555)

At this stage, quantitative research remains unfeasible, as further investigation is needed to establish a comprehensive theory of innovation energy (Boeije, 2014).

Our primary objective was to contribute to the literature on IWB by conceptualising innovation energy and clarifying its role within the IWB process. We adopted the methodological framework proposed by Sætre and Van de Ven (2021), who characterised abductive theorising as a systematic approach for identifying and validating anomalies, rather than a singular moment of inspiration. Sonali et al. (2006) state that qualitative approaches address a major limitation of many quantitative studies: their limited capacity for theory development. They recommend that qualitative research should be followed by quantitative research to test and refine the developed theory. Our study contributes to the crucial qualitative component of this process.

The research involved three case studies conducted in profit and non-profit organisations, with interviews conducted among twenty-seven managers and seventy employees. The cases were selected based on the following rationale: the two profit-oriented organisations were highly innovative, ensuring access to respondents with IWB. In contrast, the non-profit organisation had not traditionally focused on innovation but had recently initiated a highly innovative process. This context provided an opportunity to identify respondents with IWB in an environment where innovation was not yet a daily practice. Participants varied in terms of gender, career experience, and age.

Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and one hour, with data collection continuing until saturation was reached. The interview transcripts were analysed using Atlas.ti, employing both axial and open coding, while selective coding facilitated the identification of key findings.

For this article, we used Atlas.ti once again and selected quotations from the doctoral dissertation, with a particular focus on the role of autonomy in IWB and the stimulation of innovation energy, while emphasising the necessity of boundaries. In the analysis process, we adhered to the abductive systematic combining approach (Dubois & Gadde, 2002, 2014), as illustrated in Figure 2. This approach involved a continuous, iterative process of matching, directing, and redirecting, in which data from our chosen empirical context were confronted with existing theories, case-specific circumstances, and our research framework.

A comprehensive data management plan was developed. Ethical approval was obtained from the privacy officers of the respective organisations and from the University of Twente prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and all interviewees provided signed informed consent.

4. Results

In this chapter, we present the results supporting the conclusion that autonomy is a critical factor influencing IWB, energising innovation. We then outline findings indicating the necessity of clear boundaries for autonomy to maximise its stimulating role.

4.1. Autonomy as a Stimulating Factor for IWB and Innovation Energy

Our case study revealed that employees demonstrating IWB actively seek autonomy, drawing on their psychological empowerment. Dedicated and transformational leadership is essential in fostering a powerful sense of autonomy within departments and driving IWB outcomes. This leadership helps translate innovations into tangible products for organisational use and market introduction.

Employees described their experiences with autonomy in the following ways:

> '*Actually, I have always had the space to do things I had to do, particularly the technical aspects. How to solve a problem? You receive some guidance, but how you solve it is entirely up to you as a technician at my company because they assume you are the expert.'*
>
> *'Our manager allows a lot of freedom, but ultimately, the priorities at the strategic level guide what you contribute. Nevertheless, it is a team in which you exercise considerable freedom, initiative, and insight.'*
>
> '*With innovation, you need autonomy. Without it, you cannot innovate; I cannot put my ideas into a format.'*

These experiences highlight that perceived autonomy directly contributes to employees' innovation energy:

> *'Responsibility, being allowed to act. You are empowered to make decisions because people trust your expertise. If you believe something is good, then do it. That gives me energy.'*

'What gives me energy is having some control over my day.'

Moreover, innovation energy reinforces the perception of autonomy, creating a positive feedback loop:

'You can achieve a lot because you have freedom if you take initiative. People are incredibly open to this. It motivates me to keep enjoying work. If I want to try a different approach, there are possibilities.'

'Seeing colleagues given space to explore energises me. Not everyone can do that. I ask highly creative colleagues how this contributes to our product development.'

While autonomy clearly energises innovation, our findings also reveal that employees experience greater creativity and sustained innovation energy when it is exercised within clearly defined boundaries. The next section details how such boundaries support productive IWB.

4.2. The Need for Boundaries on Autonomy to Stimulate IWB and Innovation Energy

While employees value autonomy, they also emphasised the importance of clear guidelines and structure to channel innovation effectively. Structured project plans, innovation frameworks, clarity on budgets and timelines, and alignment with organisational strategy were repeatedly mentioned as crucial for turning ideas into actionable innovations.

A respondent metaphorically summarised this need:

'I like to play in the sandbox, but I want to know where the edges are.'

Participants further highlighted the role of clear assignments, rules, and boundaries:

'*It is very unclear what my exact assignment is; that costs me energy.'*

'Freedom to challenge rules is important, but having rules also fosters creativity. You must stay within frameworks. For example, a painter can be free, but certain constraints help achieve something beautiful.'

'You cannot just innovate independently. It helps to discuss with someone whether something is necessary. My manager plays a key role here.'

'The most important thing is balance, so you are not responsible for things beyond your control.'

'Leadership frameworks for innovation are useful. They allow you to consult someone if things do not work out.'

Autonomy can also be self-limited to meet client demands:

'Sometimes innovation is curtailed because production must continue, and clients impose deadlines or functionality requirements.'

Finally, respondents stressed the importance of aligning individual innovation efforts with the broader organisational direction:

> *'When I see opportunities or threats, I wonder how we will achieve market goals in five to ten years. I can follow my own course or collaboratively determine a vision.'*

> *'People are free to generate ideas, which is creatively stimulating. However, without a defined scope, innovation may be misdirected. Innovation is enjoyable, but the purpose must be clear.'*

> *'There is a tension: organisational space allows independence, but coarse-grained guidelines help ensure clarity. This applies to myself and my colleagues, guiding efforts in a clear direction.'*

These findings illustrate that autonomy is a powerful driver of IWB, but clear boundaries are necessary to ensure innovation energy is productive and aligned with organisational goals.

5. Conclusion

The quotations highlight that granting autonomy in isolation is insufficient to stimulate IWB and innovation energy. Innovative employees consistently express the need for creative freedom, but they also seek clear boundaries and alignment with the organisation's strategic objectives. The interviews revealed a dynamic relationship where autonomy stimulates innovation energy, while, conversely, innovation energy drives employees to seek greater autonomy. This mutual relationship between the two variables was found to be mutually reinforcing.

A supportive leader plays a critical role in striking the right balance between providing sufficient freedom for innovation and ensuring that a clear strategic direction and structured procedures are maintained within the organisational context. In the following discussion, we contextualise these findings within the three organisations studied, aligning them with existing theories on autonomy and IWB. A cross-case analysis of our data (Van Essen, 2024) showed that:

In Case 1, a profit-driven organisation, clear innovation boundaries were set by adhering to a strict protocol for approval, which was focused on time and financial resources allocated to innovations that aligned with the organisation's strategic objectives. At the same time, employees were provided with some open innovation time. However, if an employee wished to advance an innovation to the development phase, they were required to follow the established protocol, with the development process being managed through an agile system. This organisation showed that despite this strict innovation rules, they can bring radical new invented products to the medical market.

In Case 2, another profit-oriented organisation, employees enjoyed considerable freedom. An agile innovation method was implemented, but teams had the discretion to choose whether to adopt this innovation approach. The employees were primarily focused on addressing customer demands and, therefore, were more engaged in improving existing products and services than in pursuing radical innovation. Some respondents mentioned that they felt the organisation lacked alignment with its strategic direction, which they believed hindered more ambitious innovation efforts.

In the third case study, a nonprofit organisation, innovators (and their teammates) expressed frustration due to the absence of a clear project structure and defined boundaries for time and

financial resources allocated to the innovation process. While team leaders demonstrated the right supportive attitude, they were burdened with numerous other responsibilities, limiting the amount of real support provided to innovators. Consequently, team culture influenced innovation goals, leading to varying innovation outcomes across different sub-departments within the same organisational department. As noted in a separate article (Van Essen, 2023), innovation requires not only a content focus but also attention to Human Resource Management (HRM), strategic alignment, and a well-defined overall project structure.

6. Discussion

In case study one worked out in the cross-case analysis, the organisation underwent a significant strategic shift, concentrating its innovation efforts on a specific segment of its product portfolio while divesting from other organisational components. Although this transition led to notable innovation successes, employees reported a decline in their perceived autonomy. Previously, they had enjoyed greater creative freedom, but the novel approach introduced increased formalisation, bureaucracy, and stricter procedures, thereby constraining their ability to explore novel ideas. Despite concerns regarding organisational rigidity, employees expressed pride in their contributions to radical innovations.

This tension—between the autonomy necessary for creativity and the requirement to align with corporate strategy and timelines—reflects a broader challenge in managing innovation. Lee (2013) emphasised the importance of small, autonomous teams with elevated levels of independence in transdisciplinary research. He argued that fostering individually driven, small-scale projects is essential, as they often evolve into larger research programmes. However, large R&D organisations can become overly rigid, adhering strictly to predefined research areas and methods, which impedes their capacity to adapt to rapid environmental changes and achieve breakthrough innovations.

Similarly, Van Den Brand et al. (2021) highlighted the crucial role of transformational leadership in bridging organisational strategy with both individual and team-level innovation. Successful innovative teamwork requires a delicate balance between autonomy and alignment with the organisation’s strategic objectives. A supportive leader is pivotal in ensuring that employees experience a sense of autonomy while simultaneously integrating their contributions into the broader innovation strategy. Leadership, therefore, functions as a key mechanism in connecting employees' creative efforts with the organisation's long-term vision, providing appropriate levels of autonomy to stimulate creativity while maintaining strategic coherence.

While this organisation demonstrated a strong alignment between strategic goals and individual innovation, this was not the case in the other two organisations studied. In case study two, employees enjoyed substantial freedom to innovate; however, some expressed the need for a clearer understanding of the company’s strategic direction. They sought a well-defined innovation trajectory that would allow them to progress beyond incremental innovations and focus on more radical developments.

In the third case study, a top-down decision to reform the work system introduced structural challenges. The absence of a clear project framework led to resistance among colleagues, forcing innovators to invest a massive portion of their innovation energy in the "idea promotion" stage of the IWB process (Dorenbosch et al., 2005), striving to build organisational cohesion and a shared vision to support their innovations.

Joly (2021) advocated for purpose-driven leadership, emphasising that alignment between management objectives, employees' personal goals, and the company’s overarching mission is

critical. Managers must understand their employees' perspectives and actively bridge the gap between individual and organisational values. By fostering authenticity and reinforcing shared values, leaders can cultivate an environment conducive to innovation.

Schippers and Hogenes (2011), paraphrasing Cross, Baker, and Parker (2003), further emphasised the relationship between energy and organisational objectives, noting that energy alone is insufficient unless it is directed towards specific tasks aligned with strategic goals.

A recurrent challenge in innovation management is the tendency of leadership to prioritise the content of innovation over the process (Ulrich, 1998). This issue was particularly evident in the third case study, where the innovation process lacked clear project structures, autonomy boundaries, and purpose-driven management. Rather than being guided by HRM or change specialists, project leaders relied on educational professionals, thereby increasing the likelihood of failure in complex, radical innovation projects (van Essen, 2023).

De Man and Tours (2016) highlighted that failed innovation initiatives underscore the necessity of systematic and effective management to ensure success.

Lee (2013) further noted that R&D teams face an increased risk of failure when employees perceive a misalignment between their work and the organisation's strategic direction. Achieving such alignment requires a leadership approach that integrates technical expertise with strong HRM capabilities.

De Leede (1997) argued that complete autonomy is unattainable, as organisations operate within broader influencing environments. He proposed the concept of 'responsible autonomy,' where employees have the freedom to make decisions and execute tasks but are simultaneously expected to take responsibility and demonstrate commitment. High-discretion organisations foster trust and open communication, enhancing employee engagement. Conversely, organisations with lower discretionary levels can compensate for this by ensuring two-way communication and strong managerial support.

A notable paradox regarding autonomy emerged in case study two. Although employees were granted significant freedom, the organisation's strong customer focus paradoxically led to a reduction in perceived autonomy. The continuous pressure to meet client demands resulted in time constraints, introducing an additional complexity to autonomy management.

Kessels (2004) conceptualised autonomy as both the opportunities provided by the organisation to shape work goals and structures and the individual's capacity for self-directedness. In this case, employees' intrinsic motivation for their tasks contributed to a perceived reduction in autonomy due to heightened external pressures.

This paradox underscores the necessity of not only granting autonomy but also ensuring that organisational structures and leadership support its effective utilisation. Organisations must strike a balance between granting employees independence and ensuring that their efforts align with strategic objectives. A leadership approach that fosters transparency, trust, and alignment between individual creativity and corporate goals is essential for sustaining innovation in dynamic environments.

7. Practical Implication of the Research

The findings of this study underline the importance of autonomy as a key driver of IWB and innovation energy, while also emphasising the necessity of clear boundaries. Based on these insights, several implications can be drawn for organisational practice.

First, organisations should **enhance employee autonomy by simplifying formal procedures and reducing unnecessary bureaucratic barriers**. Managers can support this by granting employees greater decision-making freedom in their professional domains, particularly regarding how problems are approached and solved. In practice, this means allowing employees to select their own methods and tools for tackling innovation-related challenges, while trusting their expertise. HRM policies can reinforce this by embedding autonomy-supportive practices in job design, performance appraisals, and leadership development programmes.

Second, autonomy should not be unlimited. **Clear boundaries are essential to ensure autonomy remains constructive and strategically aligned**. Organisations can operationalise this by implementing structured project frameworks that provide clarity on scope, timelines, budget, and expected outcomes. Practical measures include setting up *innovation charters* for projects, designating specific "innovation time," and offering access to resources such as cross-functional teams or innovation coaches. These measures ensure that employees' innovation energy is channelled productively, reducing the risk of misalignment or wasted effort.

Third, **alignment with organisational strategy is critical**. Employees should be encouraged to innovate, but within a shared strategic direction that ensures innovations contribute to long-term organisational goals. Managers play a crucial role in facilitating regular dialogues between employees and leadership to connect bottom-up ideas with top-down strategy. HRM can institutionalise this alignment by creating structured feedback loops, for example through periodic "innovation review boards" or by integrating innovation objectives into personal development plans.

Taken together, these implications highlight that the most effective innovation climate is one that balances autonomy with clear frameworks. By granting employees meaningful freedom within defined boundaries and aligning their efforts with strategic goals, organisations can foster a sustainable environment in which IWB is both energising for employees and valuable for long-term organisational success. These implications summarized in managerial take aways:

- **Enhance autonomy:** Simplify formal procedures and empower employees to make decisions within their areas of expertise, particularly in innovation-related tasks.
- **Set clear boundaries:** Provide structured frameworks for projects, including defined scope, timelines, budgets, and expected outcomes, to channel innovation energy constructively.
- **Allocate dedicated innovation time:** Allow employees specific periods for creative work to foster sustained innovation without compromising operational duties.
- **Align with strategy:** Ensure employee-driven innovation is connected to the organisation's strategic objectives through regular dialogue and feedback loops.
- **Supportive leadership:** Develop managers to function as facilitators who balance autonomy and guidance, providing both trust and oversight to reinforce psychological empowerment.

8. Limitation

One aspect not explicitly investigated in our research was the role of organisational and team culture in the process of IWB. However, observations made during the study suggest that culture may significantly influence both IWB and innovation energy. The types of innovators identified across the three case studies varied considerably. For example, we suspect that an individual exhibiting strong innovation energy in one of the participating organisations might

not demonstrate the same behaviour or energy in another, owing to marked differences in organisational culture.

We also anticipate that cultural context may determine the degree to which boundaries on autonomy are necessary to stimulate IWB and innovation energy. A start-up, for instance, typically operates within a cultural framework distinct from that of a large, established enterprise; likewise, the autonomy and innovation dynamics in a non-profit organisation may differ from those in a profit-driven company. Although such differences between profit and non-profit organisations were observed in our study, they were not systematically explored.

Future research focusing on the influence of organisational and team culture could add a valuable dimension to our findings. A more thorough understanding of how cultural factors shape the relationship between autonomy, IWB, and innovation energy may offer deeper theoretical and practical insights, particularly in tailoring innovation strategies to diverse organisational contexts.

Finally following the in the method mentioned recommendation of Sonali et al. (2006) that qualitative research should be followed by quantitative research to test and refine the developed theory we invite other researchers to give this quatitative follow up on our qualitative research.

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