AWAKE AND RECOMBINE:
How Municipalities Engage in Inter-Organizational Digital Transformation

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How Municipalities Engage in Inter-Organizational Digital Transformation

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Cover illustration: AI-generated image of the LeoPhant walking in the Matrix
Created by the author, using DALL·E (OpenAI, 2025)

"You're afraid of change. I don't know the future. I didn't come here to tell you how this is going to end. I came here to tell you how it's going to begin."

– Neo, in the film *The Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999)

ABSTRACT

As municipalities awaken to the demands of digital change, inter-organizational digital transformation is emerging as a means to recombine capacities and act collectively. Drawing on institutional theory, the dissertation conceptualizes such transformation not as technical modernization but as institutional reconfiguration, where norms are reinterpreted, agency redistributed, and legitimacy claims renegotiatied amid growing digital divides. Where prior research emphasized strategy, governance, or technological innovation, this work highlights the institutional, relational, and collective dimensions of transformation. It presents collective institutional entrepreneurship as the process through which public actors mobilize complementary capabilities across organizational boundaries, craft shared governance, and gradually "rewrite the institutional code" that shapes transformation.

The argument is underpinned by a longitudinal case study of collaboration between Sweden's Ånge and Sundsvall municipalities, complemented by a nationwide survey. The dissertation unpacks how inter-organizational digital transformation evolves in phases; how legitimacy, trust, and equity are constructed; and how tensions (especially between autonomy and interdependence) generate transformation in resource-asymmetric settings.

Empirically, it shows how institutional entrepreneurs navigate capability gaps, governance ambiguity, and entrenched norms through shared narratives and strategic framing while managing power asymmetries and infrastructural mismatches.

Theoretically, the dissertation advances a processual, collectivity-centered understanding of institutional change. It demonstrates how complementarity, equity, and legitimacy are actively constructed. Methodologically, it illustrates how phenomenon-driven, abductive inquiry grounded in interviews, documents, and reflexive fieldwork illuminates the recursive interplay between structure and agency in digital transformation.

Overall, the research frames municipal digital transformation as a contested institutional journey shaped by collaboration, collective agency, and pursuit of equitable digital welfare. It offers insights for theorizing on digital transformation and informs practical awareness of how public organizations can recombine institutional capacities to build more resilient and equitable digital futures.

SAMMANFATTNING (ABSTRACT IN SWEDISH)

När kommuner vaknar inför den digitala omställningens krav framträder interorganisatorisk digital transformation som ett sätt att rekombinera kapaciteter och agera kollektivt. Med utgångspunkt i institutionell teori konceptualiserar denna avhandling sådan transformation inte som teknisk modernisering, utan som en institutionell omkonfiguration, där normer omtolkas, handlingsutrymme omfördelas och legitimitet omförhandlas i skuggan av växande digitala klyftor. Där tidigare forskning främst betonat strategi, styrning eller teknologisk innovation, belyser detta arbete transformationens institutionella, relationella och kollektiva dimensioner. Avhandlingen introducerar begreppet kollektivt institutionellt entreprenörskap som den process genom vilken offentliga aktörer mobiliserar kompletterande förmågor över organisatoriska gränser, utvecklar gemensamma former för styrning och gradvis ”skriver om den institutionella koden” som formar digital transformation. Analysen baseras på en djupgående longitudinell fallstudie av Ånge och Sundsvalls kommuner, kompletterad med en nationell kartläggning. Studien visar hur denna interorganisatoriska digitala transformation utvecklas i faser, hur legitimitet, tillit och rättvisa konstrueras, samt hur spänningar, särskilt mellan autonomi och ömsesidigt beroende, genererar förändring i resursasymmetriska sammanhang.

Empiriskt visar avhandlingen hur institutionella entreprenörer navigerar kapacitetsluckor, styrningsmässig otydlighet och djupt rotade normer genom gemensamma narrativ och strategisk inramning, samtidigt som de hanterar maktasymmetrier och infrastrukturella misspassningar.

Teoretiskt bidrar avhandlingen till en processuell och kollektivt orienterad förståelse av institutionell förändring. Den visar hur komplementaritet, rättvisa och legitimitet inte enbart är givna tillstånd, utan aktivt konstrueras i interorganisatoriska praktiker. Metodologiskt illustrerar studien hur fenomenbaserad, abduktiv forskning, förankrad i intervjuer, dokument och reflexivt fältarbete, kan belysa det rekursiva samspelet mellan struktur och aktörskap i digital transformation.

Sammantaget framställer avhandlingen den kommunala digitala transformationen som en omstridd institutionell resa, formad av samarbete, kollektivt aktörskap och strävan efter mer resilienta och rättvisa digitala framtider. Den bidrar med teoretiska insikter för att utveckla förståelsen av digital transformation och erbjuder praktisk vägledning i hur offentliga organisationer kan rekombinera institutionella förmågor för att främja en mer rättvis digital välfärd.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is, i hope, an example of collaboration that is both deeply collective and, at the same time, hopelessly individual. It is about inter-organizational digital transformation, yet most of it was written in solitude, surrounded by coffee cups, a humming dryer, and a washing machine (yes, my home office is also a laundry room), sometimes in the quiet company of Beatrice, the family cat, and the faint glow of a computer screen. This thesis calls for action, but will probably leave you with more questions than answers about what "collective institutional entrepreneurship" actually means. In studying how municipalities transform together, I found myself part of a parallel transformation, becoming a creature of the night sustained by caffeine, questions, and a curiosity that refused to rest.

It is also, admittedly, longer than any reasonable person should ever be expected to read. It's full of terms that even I sometimes need to look up in my own notes. It stretches across several disciplines, meaning that every expert will probably find something to disagree with. It argues for collaboration, yet large parts were written in splendid isolation. It praises efficiency, but was written through a process that was anything but efficient. Still, I hope it stands as a small contribution or at least a curious footnote in understanding how municipalities can act together to make digital transformation a little more equitable.

There are many people to thank for helping me through this process, and for keeping me (mostly) functional along the way. First of all, Professor Johan Magnusson, you are the reason I was given, and dared to take, the opportunity to pursue a PhD. You believed in me. You have been a relentless force of curiosity and momentum, turning every obstacle into an idea and every half-formed thought into a challenge worth chasing. You pushed me when I needed it most. Without you, this pursuit of equal welfare would have been a void.

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My co-supervisor, Dr. Charlotta Kronblad, you helped me untangle complex thoughts and express what I could not yet articulate. Your sharp intellect and creative perspective often prompting me to ask "what if we think the opposite?" consistently challenged and inspired me.

My co-authors: Fredrik Carlsson, Johan Magnusson, Nataliya, Charlotta Kronblad, Pamela Ndanu Kisembo and Daiva Brazauskaite, I thank for adding sharpness, humor, and depth to this work. Our discussions, sometimes chaotic but always meaningful, taught me what true academic collaboration feels like: ideas that grow between people, not within one.

Heartfelt thanks to Mattias Robertsson Bly. Without you, Ångsvall would never have become a reality. You are living proof that with trust, courage, and determination, the impossible can become achievable.

If this is a thesis about collaboration, then it was only natural that the PhD journey itself became one. To borrow some epic wording addressed to Per Persson: "I will not do this without you." And to Fredrik Carlsson: thank you for putting words to the things I do in my job, connecting practice to research. I will never forget how we could spend Friday nights discussing the meaning of a single word, to the chagrin of our families. Our collaboration and friendship have been absolutely essential in getting me through this tough challenge.

Thanks go to all my municipal colleagues who generously shared your time, frustrations, and stories. Your openness turned abstract theory into lived experience. This work is, in every sense, as much yours as it is mine.

Sincere thanks to my colleagues in the Graduate School of Digital Management 2022. Your insights, encouragement, and camaraderie made this journey not only bearable, but also intellectually rewarding and personally meaningful.

To all of Sweden's institutional entrepreneurs, like Felicia Hallström, who are committed to making welfare more equitable and to transforming collaboration into a truly collective endeavor.

I thank Anna Shefl, of ASDF, for a sharp eye, linguistic precision, and patience. You helped me say what I meant but more clearly, and you made the text more coherent, readable, and (I hope) even enjoyable as it neared its final form. Any errors remaining from further iterations are a reminder that nothing is ever complete.

To my family. Thank you for never giving up on me, even when I got lost into thoughts about the thesis during dinners. You may not have always known what I was doing, but you always believed it mattered. Thank you for reminding me that life is more than the next chapter draft, and for believing, even when I didn't, that this day would come.

To Bishop Teresia Boström, your kind blessing on my writing helped more than you can imagine, in the moments when doubt was loudest.

Finally, a note on the cover of this thesis. The LeoPhant walk comfortably i the Matrix is meant to represent inter-organizational digital transformation and explicitly the Ångsvall experience, but like most collaborations, it's both structured and messy, coherent and chaotic, transparent and opaque. It captures, perhaps unintentionally, the essence of this work: that transformation is never tidy, and that progress in municipalities or in PhD writing is something we construct together, one imperfect step at a time.

If this thesis helps even a few people see collaboration in a new light, I will consider it a success. If not, then at least it stands as proof that persistent dialogue, much like digital transformation, is possible, even between sleep deprivation and bureaucracy.

PREFACE

Right in the middle, at the exact geographic center, of Sweden there is a river that winds quietly through a small community. You can imagine its banks lined with houses and gardens, with children playing near the water's edge while parents chat across low fences. The world feels still, calm, and ordinary. As the day progresses, you catch the scents from a barbecue and somebody starts playing music on the patio while having a sip of rosé wine. This is the image of absolute perfection.

But now imagine that this river, by chance or perhaps by the design of some long-forgotten bureaucrat, marks the border between two municipalities. The people on one side live in Municipality X, and those on the other bank live in Municipality Y. Would that matter?

It very much does. In one of the municipalities, the average life expectancy is five years longer than that of the people across the water. The probability of a child dropping out of school is four times higher, the waiting time for health-care access three times longer, the average annual take-home pay 30% lower. The risk of being subject to domestic abuse is twice as high. The risk of accidents from falling while in institutional care for the elderly is five times as great. Unfortunately, I could continue the list nearly forever.

This river has become a constant and growing source of unease for me. I stand on the bank and look across. On one side, families thrive; on the other, they struggle. I cannot shake the feeling that this is not acceptable. And, worse, that it is just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. How can we accept that there are inequalities depending on such details of where you live? How long can this rift be allowed to continue to grow?

As if these differences were not stark enough on their own, a newer, quieter current has begun to flow beneath the surface: digital inequality. The digital welfare systems that now underpin almost every aspect of public life do not reach both sides of the river equally. On one bank, residents navigate sleek online portals with ease, booking appointments, accessing school results, applying for support in mere minutes. Across the river, families grapple with outdated platforms, complex login procedures, and incompatible systems. Parents miss messages from schools. Elderly citizens

cannot access health portals. Applications for social support stall because systems fail to exchange data.

What should have been tools for empowerment are instead barriers, new gatekeepers deciding who receives help and who is left waiting. The promise of digitalization, meant to reduce inequality, here silently reproduces it.

As I stand by the river, watching the water flow between unequal worlds, I am overtaken by a mix of anger, frustration, infinite sadness, and a burning desire to act. While my descriptions above are illustrative, the division they represent is very real. The river I speak of is not a metaphor. It exists, with the name Ljungan. On one bank lies Hjältan, an area that itself is divided: the municipal border between Ånge and Sundsvall cuts through it, separating neighbors who share the same street, the same water, the same air. What should be one village is split in two by a line that nobody can see but everyone feels.

While standing here, I began to realize how such invisible lines shape not only places but also possibilities, how institutions too can divide or connect the worlds we inhabit. This dissertation is a call to awaken to those divisions and to act toward their transformation.

An AI-generated image of such a river divide, at left, and a corresponding map from the online database of Sweden's Lantmäteriet as of 2025, at right

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Part 1

AWAKE AND RECOMBINE

How Municipalities Engage in Inter-Organizational Digital Transformation

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

A complex web of challenges influenced by societal forces and organizational structures shapes digital transformation in the public sector. This is the context in which the institutional constraints and capability gaps motivating the research reported upon here reside. I begin by introducing the phenomenon in terms of its motivation, its context, and the analytical focus of the dissertation. These informed the empirical setting and formulation of the central research question guiding the project, which are reported upon next. The chapter continues with an explanation of the phenomenon-driven abductive approach that gave structure to the work and the dissertation itself, before introducing the five papers that represent its empirical and conceptual foundation. Finally, I clarify the contributions and significance of this work and provide an overview of the presentation's structure.

1.1 BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION

In the public sector, the process known as digital transformation is bringing about profound organizational change, triggered and shaped by the integration and widespread diffusion of digital technologies (Hanelt et al., 2021). This process faces a well-documented array of barriers: fragmented accountability, organizational inertia, legacy infrastructure, conflicting institutional logics, and many others (Cordella & Tempini, 2015; Dunleavy & Margetts, 2006; Fountain, 2001; Mergel et al., 2019). Notwithstanding widespread investment and policy ambitions, many initiatives deliver only partial gains, improvements to discrete services or processes rather than the systemic reconfiguration often envisioned (Lindgren et al., 2019; Wessel et al., 2021). These recurrent patterns point to a deeper institutional issue: that transformation in the public sector is not so much a technological or managerial challenge as a question of how institutions see, interpret, and reorganize themselves.

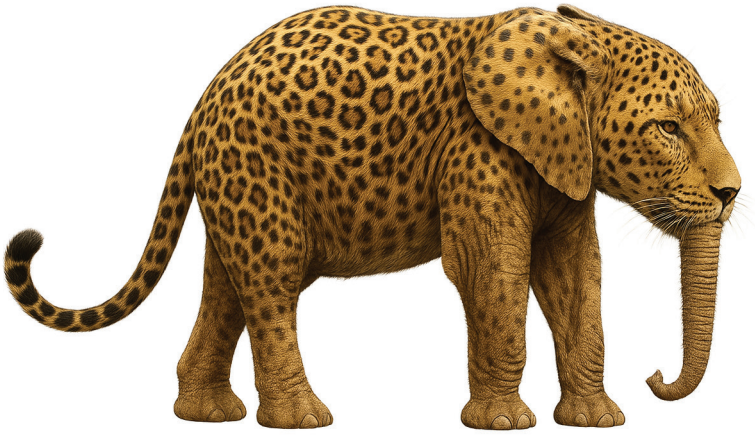
The significance of digital transformation in the public sector has intensified over time. Governments are increasingly expected to deliver both efficient and equitable services, yet resource disparities, administrative silos, and uneven capabilities make this increasingly difficult (Bailey & Nyabola, 2021; Fersch et al., 2025). In a Nordic context, where public services are funded by taxes collected from local inhabitants, larger municipalities naturally command greater financial resources while smaller ones have considerably less to work with. Yet the initial outlay for the necessary IT infrastructure is nearly identical, and while larger municipalities can readily sustain advanced digital infrastructure, smaller or more rural ones' struggles to achieve economies of scale amplify digital inequality (Carlsson et al., 2023a; Kusanke et al., 2023). Sweden exemplifies this duality: a high-capacity welfare state with strong institutional traditions, it is also a place where the uneven distribution of digital capability ushers in risks of reproducing inequality in access to public services (Carlsson et al., 2023b; Magnusson et al., 2025; Norling, 2024).

Under such conditions, transformation requires more than technology; it demands a new way of perceiving and mutually aligning/constructing institutions. That tension can be understood through two metaphors (presented in figures 1 and 2) that guide the presentation in this thesis.

Figure 1. An AI-generated image of Neo confronting the Matrix. Created by the author, using DALL·E (OpenAI, 2025)

This first metaphor, drawn from the idea behind the film The Matrix (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999), captures the moment of institutional awakening: recognizing that the rules and routines shaping public administration are not natural laws but human constructions that can be reimagined and rewritten. The protagonist's realization that his perceived reality is a coded simulation offers an analogue to public actors learning to "see the code" of institutional life, the taken-for-granted logics, structures, and beliefs that constrain change. Only by becoming aware of these institutional architectures can they begin to act beyond them.

Figure 2. An AI-generated image of the LeoPhant, created by the author with DALL·E (OpenAI, 2025)



The second metaphor is that of the LeoPhant. This imaginary being combining the leopard's agility with the elephant's resilience and robustness symbolizes what comes after awakening, the creative recombination of institutional capacities. The metaphor captures the idea that digital transformation in the public sector depends on forming hybrids that balance adaptability and resilience, innovation and legitimacy. Here, the LeoPhant stands for institutional complementarity by design: how municipalities can combine their distinct strengths to create something more capable and equitable than any of them could achieve alone. In this sense, transformation is not about escaping institutions but about reconfiguring them collectively into new, hybrid forms (see Carlsson et al., 2023b).

One promising pathway for such institutional recomposition is inter-organizational digital transformation. By pooling resources, aligning governance, and sharing capabilities, municipalities can design digital infrastructures that serve citizens more equitably while also appropriately distributing the risks and responsibilities (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015; Juell-Skielse et al., 2017; Mergel et al., 2019). Collaboration is rarely straightforward, though; it requires trust-building, legitimacy, and careful balancing of autonomy against dependence (Berends & Sydow, 2019; Ring & Van de Ven, 1994). When successful, collaboration

becomes more than an administrative arrangement. It evolves into a new institutional layer (or even a mature institution) that reshapes how public organizations define their roles, relationships, and values.

Against this backdrop, I embarked on a study of how municipalities engage in inter-organizational digital transformation, with particular attention to the institutional mechanisms, collective forms of agency, and governance conditions that render such collaboration possible and, furthermore, sustainable. On this basis, the dissertation explores how actors able to recognize that the institutional code can be rewritten (dubbed institutional entrepreneurs here) mobilize collective efforts to overcome structural inertia, redistribute agency, and create new configurations of equity and efficiency. The research project's outputs converged in strong awareness that transformation emerges not from isolated reforms but from the collective rewriting of institutional code across organizational boundaries.

By drawing together the metaphors of the Matrix and the LeoPhant, this thesis frames digital transformation as both institutional awakening and institutional recombination: the ability to see the constraints of the system plus the creativity to recompose its parts. Through this dual lens, digital transformation in the public sector is revealed to be a anything but a linear project of modernization. This is a deeply institution-rooted collective and reflexive process, one in which municipalities learn not only to navigate the Matrix but to create the LeoPhant.

1.2 THE SWEDISH PUBLIC SECTOR

This thesis is nested in the empirical context of the Swedish public sector. Sweden is a parliamentary democracy and constitutional monarchy whose administrative model features agency-style autonomy and strong local self-government. The public sector has three tiers: the state level (comprising government offices and independent administrative agencies), an intermediate level with 21 regional "local" administrations (handling primarily health care and public transport), and 290 municipalities (responsible for schools, social services, elder care, spatial planning, water/sewerage, and local infrastructure). Government at the last two of these levels is conducted by elected councils and executive boards alongside pro-

fessional administrators. Steering typically combines attention to objectives and results, mechanisms for internal control, and standard public procurement, together with application of national digital-government frameworks and information-security requirements (Clarke, 2020; Janowski, 2015; Magnusson et al., 2025; Norling, 2024).

Financing relies primarily on municipal/regional income tax, with registered residents' income, up to a certain level, getting channeled directly toward municipal and regional funding. This is complemented by state grants and accompanying "equalization" (i.e., means for redistributing funding to favor disadvantaged municipalities). The corresponding operation environment is shaped also by demographic profiles/shifts, which impose greater demands through aging of the population and dwindling of human resources (as birth rates fall and immigration exerts its own effects) and through specific skills or shortages thereof, with particular shortfalls in digital-domain and analysis competencies intensifying the capability gaps (Edelmann et al., 2023; Hanelt et al., 2021). At the same time, the diverse organizations hosted by the various municipalities wrestle with fragmented, antiquated information-technology (IT) landscapes in a time of heightened demands for interoperability, information security, and regulatory compliance (Eriksson & Öhlund, 2024; Haug et al., 2023; Irani et al., 2022).

Capacity constraints stand out especially in cases of small municipalities, which typically struggle to realize economies of scale. Larger municipalities meanwhile face issues of coordination and complexity wrought by varied terrain with numerous services. These two sets of dynamics, among others, contribute to uneven digital-age readiness and risks of digital inequality (Carlsson et al., 2025; Norling et al., 2022). Budget pressures and electoral-cycle pressures induce short-termism also; in contrast, cybersecurity, civil preparedness, and climate-related transitions require long-term investment (Currie et al., 2024; Dunleavy & Margetts, 2023; Marienfeldt et al., 2024).

In response, inter-organizational digital transformation with its purposeful combination of complementary capabilities has gained prominence as a means to enhance quality, robustness, resilience, and equity in welfare services. Evidence from digital-government and information-systems (IS) research shows that coordinated programs, shared services, and co-produc-

tion arrangements can pool resources, mitigate risk, and align local initiatives with national strategies when supported by appropriate governance (Lappi et al., 2019; Scupola & Mergel, 2022; Tana et al., 2023).

1.3 AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTION

While inter-organizational collaboration has long been among the elements at the heart of information-systems research (Hafseld et al., 2022; Mian et al., 2024), little is known about how collaborative endeavors enact inter-organizational digital transformation in the public sector (see Berente & Seidel, 2022; Haug & Mergel, 2023; Mergel et al., 2019; Scupola & Mergel, 2022). Accordingly, the following research question guided the doctoral project:

How do municipalities engage in inter-organizational digital transformation?

In tackling that question, I proceeded from the well-justified assumption that public-sector digital transformation is a process of institutional change. This entails a reconfiguration of logics, governance, and professional practice under conditions of legal constraint, multi-stakeholder accountability, and deeply rooted norms (see Scott, 2010). While there has been substantial research on both inter-organizational collaboration and digital transformation, our understanding remains limited with regard to how these processes unfold jointly: how collaboration shapes institutional contexts and, in turn, is shaped by them. As H. Schmidt, E. M. Wild, and C. D. Jacobs (2025) have argued, there remains a need for research into the dynamic processes of strategizing and coordinating across organizations' boundaries during digital-transformation efforts, particularly within complex public ecosystems.

Notwithstanding the growing interest in public-sector digital transformation, scholarship shows significantly limited understanding of how inter-organizational digital transformation emerges and how collective institutional dynamics shape its development. Thus far, research has focused largely on either the digital strategies of individual organizations (Hanelt et al., 2021; Vial, 2019) or governance and policy-level perspectives (Mergel et al., 2019), whereas the relational and institutional-level dynamics between organizations whereby transformation occurs have received considerably less attention (Väyrynen & Lanamäki, 2025). Sev-

eral scholars have therefore called for work that captures digital transformation as a collective and institutional process (Carlsson et al., 2023b; Lindgren et al., 2019; Wihlborg et al., 2016). For example, the Schmidt et al. publication mentioned above highlights a need for process-oriented studies that explore how digital strategies are coordinated and negotiated across organizational boundaries within collaborative networks and partnerships. Similarly, when pointing to institutional tensions and dependencies as important barriers to collective digital transformation, Kristian Norling et al. (2022) and Johan Magnusson et al. (2025) have underscored the need for theoretical frameworks that address how hybrid arrangements evolve over time.

The project came to terms with this gap in the literature by directly examining the enactment of institutional entrepreneurship in inter-organizational digital transformation in the public sector. Embracing and exploiting digital transformation is increasingly recognized as a process that extends far beyond technologies' adoption. It involves profound shifts in institutional logics, governance arrangements, and professional practices. Different in several vital respects from private organizations, public institutions are embedded in highly regulated environments, accountable to multiple stakeholders, and bound by deeply rooted norms and traditions (again, see Scott, 2010). These conditions render efforts at digital transformation uniquely complex. It frequently entails collaborative arrangements unfolding across boundaries that have traditionally separated agencies, municipalities, and other actors. In this context, a pivotal role is played by actors I refer to as institutional entrepreneurs (Battilana et al., 2006; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). They initiate and continue driving change by mobilizing resources, forging coalitions, and creating legitimacy for relevant digitally aligned practices. In the public sector, the "entrepreneurs" are rarely individuals; that is, the endeavor often takes shape as collaboration involving leadership teams, groups of professionals, and networks linking multiple organizations (Wijen & Ansari, 2007). To understand how inter-organizational digital transformation unfolds, then, one must examine not only the enabling strategies and tactics that institutional entrepreneurs deploy but also the barriers and tensions that shape the collaborative processes and how mitigation or navigation of these tensions may sustain collaboration over time (Heitala & Päivärinta, 2025; Mergel et al., 2019).

1.4 A PHENOMENON-DRIVEN APPROACH

Over the past decade, scholars have called for renewed emphasis on phenomenon-driven research in management and organization studies, not just in the IS field. Bringing in this perspective challenges the dominance of theory-driven approaches, which risk locking the inquiry into what G. M. Schwarz and I. Stensaker have described as a "theoretical straitjacket" (2014, p. 478). Rather than begin by seeking to fill gaps incrementally with reference to established theory, phenomenon-driven research starts with pressing empirical puzzles and lets the phenomenon itself guide subsequent theorizing (Fisher et al., 2021). My research drew especially on the perspective of Jörgen Sandberg and Mats Alvesson (2024a), conceiving of theory not as a fixed destination but as an evolving interpretive framework shaped through iterative engagement with the phenomenon. In this view, phenomena are not simply illustrations of theory. They get treated as primary sources of insight that stimulate novel conceptualizations.

Recent work also stresses that phenomena are rarely "given." They often have to be actively constructed, refined, and sometimes even redefined as the research progresses. Alvesson and Sandberg (2024a) have stressed that good research involves not merely documenting what appears obvious. Instead, one must engage in creative construction of phenomena through which researchers grow able to see the world in a new light. This requires a balance between art and science. R.W. Gregory and O. Henfridsson (2021) have described phenomenon-driven theorizing as an iterative craft in which intuition, discovery, and storytelling mesh with logical rigor and systematic analysis. This resonates with what Karl Weick (1989) famously termed "disciplined imagination," denoting the creative yet systematic process through which theoretical insight emerges from deep engagement with empirical conundrums. Theorizing in this framing represents not a detached act of abstraction, but, as A.L. Wright et al., (2023) have suggested, a mode of engagement that unfolds through researchers' immersion in complex settings. Offering practical guidance for selecting and framing phenomena accordingly, Fabrice Lumineau et al. (2025) recommended that they be evaluated for their pertinence, reach, insightfulness, magnification, and expediency. At the same time, the authors recognized that researchers inevitably "muddle through" as they traverse landscapes of

constraints and opportunities that shape how a phenomenon comes to be defined.

My dissertation exemplifies this process of gradually constructing a phenomenon through deepening inquiry. The research began not with a well-bounded theoretical object but with the intuitive sense that something novel was afoot in Swedish municipalities' attempts at digital transformation. That intuition was informed not only by scholarly curiosity but also by professional experience. In my role as Chief Information Officer and Chief Digital Officer of the institutional setting that I would end up studying, I wore two hats, as simultaneously practitioner and researcher. This position granted privileged access to the everyday practices, challenges, and negotiations that feed into digital transformation, yet it also required careful reflexivity. Throughout the research process, I sought to make my professional perspective explicit, acknowledging both the insights and the potential biases that accompany proximity to the field. By continuously interrogating my assumptions and situating my interpretations within empirical and theoretical frames, I aimed to make sure that the dual perspectives became a source of depth in addressing the phenomenon rather than of distortion. This reflexive stance also shaped the methodological trajectory of the dissertation.

After preparation of the project's first paper, a contrast in strategic positions became clear among large vs. small municipalities: larger ones were emphasizing efficiency while smaller ones stressed innovation. Such evident distinctions reflect not only differences in capacity and scale but also corresponding institutional logic and adaptive strategy. This early finding highlighted the vast potential for complementarities across municipal borders and pointed to the possibility that combining the sets of capabilities could prove central for future digital transformation efforts.

The work behind Paper 2 honed the phenomenon further by examining deviant workplace behavior, which revealed the importance of institutional entrepreneurship as a driver of what I conceptualized under the term "polyphonic strategy." With this deepening, the role of individual actors emerged as a key mechanism in digital transformation. Once the work had highlighted that strategy is not purely set at organization level but also enacted through institutional entrepreneurship from within, the view gained another layer. Drawing attention to the phenomenon of col-

lective digital transformation, the in-depth case study informing Paper 3 clarified that new forms of inter-municipality collaboration are possible and that such collaboration is a valuable mechanism for advancing digital transformation in the public sector. This suggested a phenomenon involving not only individuals' entrepreneurship but also new forms of collective action.

Developing this line of reasoning further, I then examined how institutional entrepreneurship fosters equitable collaboration between municipalities of unequal capacity. Reporting on this through the "Ångsvall" case (in Paper 4) shows how deliberate design can transform dependence into interdependence and redress structural imbalance via mechanisms of institutional work. This illustrates how equity and legitimacy can be woven into the very architecture of collaboration.

A fifth and final step extended the resulting perspective by exploring institutional entrepreneurship at inter-organizational level. Accordingly, Paper 5 identifies this as a more generalizable mechanism by which collaborative arrangements evolve and stabilize across diverse public-sector contexts. The paper peels back the layers to ways in which the dynamics observed in municipal cooperation can inform a broader understanding of how institutions collectively create the conditions for digital transformation beyond local borders.

Taken together, these five steps represent a form of iterative, abductive theorizing in line with G. Fisher et al.'s view of phenomenon-driven scholarship (2021): each constituent study (and paper) shifted and refined the understanding of the phenomenon, leading from initial intuition to recognition of complementary capabilities, then to that of individuals' role, of collective digital transformation, and finally of the broader dynamics of inter-organizational entrepreneurship. This trajectory reflects precisely the process of phenomenon construction that Alvesson and Sandberg called for, wherein the phenomenon is gradually shaped and clarified through the research process itself (2024b). It also reflects how Gregory and Henfridsson recommend dealing with the art–science dichotomy (2021): imaginative leaps and empirical engagement interact productively with systematic theorizing.

In its words and example, the dissertation responds directly to calls for more phenomenon-driven research. I achieved this not by predefining

the phenomenon at the outset but by engaging with empirical anomalies and puzzles, constructing the phenomenon step by step, and refining it in dialogue with established theoretical traditions. The result is a conceptualization of collective institutional entrepreneurship in public-sector digital transformation that is both empirically grounded and theoretically relevant (Chapter 2 presents the latter positioning, which is followed by Chapter 3's detailing of data sources, coding procedures, and criteria consistent with this abductive, phenomenon-driven approach).

The work constituting the foundation for the dissertation is detailed in the following five papers:

1. Carlsson, F., Matteby, M., & Magnusson, J. (2023). Digital transformation drift: A population study of Swedish municipalities. In *dg.o '23: Proceedings of the 24th Annual International Conference on Digital Government Research* (pp. 318–326). https://doi.org/10.1145/3598469.3598504
2. Magnusson, J., Carlsson, F., Matteby, M., Kisembo, P. N., & Brazauskaite, D. (2025). The polyphony of deviance: The impact of deviant workplace behavior on digital transformation. *Transforming Government: People, Process and Policy, 19*(1), 37–52. https://doi.org/10.1108/tg-09-2023-0144
3. Carlsson, F., Matteby, M., Magnusson, J., & Lindström, N. B. (2023). Collective digital transformation: Institutional work in municipal collaboration. In *dg.o '23: Proceedings of the 24th Annual International Conference on Digital Government Research* (pp. 583–592). https://doi.org/10.1145/3598469.3598536
4. Matteby, M., Berbyuk Lindström, N., & Kronblad, C. (2025). Making the little brother matter as much as the big one: Ensuring equitable partnership in inter-municipal collaboration for digital transformation. In *AMCIS 2025 Proceedings* (Paper 39). https://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis2025/intelfuture/intelfuture/39
5. Matteby, M. (2025). From silos to synergy: Institutional entrepreneurship in collective digital transformation within the public sector. Accepted for publication in *CEUR Workshop Proceedings, Electronic Government EGOV 2025*. https://ceur-ws.org/Vol-4127/paper15.pdf

1.5 CONTRIBUTIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE

Drawing on institutional theory (e.g., Ahrens et al., 2018; Battilana et al., 2009; DiMaggio, 1988; Hardy & Maguire, 2017; Maguire et al., 2004) and literature on inter-organizational collaboration (e.g., Kinsbergen et al., 2025; Wong-Pérez et al., 2024), the dissertation advances institutional theory especially by illuminating the role of collective institutional entrepreneurship in inter-organizational digital transformation. As noted above, traditional accounts of institutional entrepreneurship often emphasize individual-level agency (Battilana et al., 2009; DiMaggio, 1988; Hardy & Maguire, 2008). In contrast, my undertaking conceptualized institutional change as a collective and distributed process, one in which leadership, legitimacy, and mobilization get constructed by multiple actors: municipal management and other personnel, politicians, and others. The approach also answered calls for more nuanced understandings of institutional drift, thereby revealing how institutions experience incremental reshaping through collaborative, cross-organizational digital initiatives and the dynamics of power within institutions (Bentzen & Torfing, 2023; Lægreid & Rykkja, 2022). The findings demonstrate strikingly that digital transformation in the public sector is not solely or even mainly a product of technology implementation. It is deeply enmeshed in institutions' negotiations, identity work, and legitimacy struggles among the collaborating entities.

Introducing and developing the concept of collective institutional entrepreneurship constitutes an important reframing of public-sector digital transformation as a socially constructed, multi-actor endeavor. By analyzing the strategies and tensions that shaped municipalities' collaborative efforts, this thesis highlights collaboration's dual function as both a mechanism for achieving technical innovation and a driver of institutional change, thus spotlighting the dialectical relationship between structure and agency in public-sector innovation.

In the course of striving to describe and explain the phenomenon of collective institutional entrepreneurship, I adopted a normative, prescriptive perspective in aims of providing actionable guidance for public-sector entities in navigating digital transformation. In line with M. Hanisch's (2024) call for prescriptive theorizing as a means of addressing complex

grand challenges, this work contributes with insight and practical guidelines for individual practitioners and their organizations navigating digital transformation. The Ångsvall case illustrates how coordinated municipal collaboration can reshape local digital landscapes while advancing equity and responsiveness. The role of trust, a shared vision, and cross-boundary leadership emerged as paramount for cultivating sustainable digital transformation efforts. By articulating the dynamics, conditions, and strategies together with the tensions faced by institutional entrepreneurs (such as navigating bureaucratic inertia, balancing local against shared goals, and mobilizing institutional resources) this dissertation supplies a practical framework for public organizations seeking to foster collaborative digital transformation. The methods it presents for fostering institutional alignment and cross-sector innovation can be readily adapted across diverse public-sector settings.

Ultimately, my argument is that the success of digital transformation in the public sector hinges on our capacity to cultivate and support collective institutional entrepreneurship. As public institutions face mounting pressure to innovate while preserving democratic accountability and social equity, understanding how collaborative expression of agency reshapes institutional fields becomes both a scholarly imperative and a policy necessity.

1.6 THE STRUCTURE OF THIS WORK

The dissertation takes the form of guided exploration led by a reflective narrator who moves between observation, interpretation, and theorization. Each chapter builds upon the previous one to tease apart how municipalities engage in transformation through inter-organizational digital transformation. Along the way, the text is organized to mirror both the phenomenon-driven orientation of the study and abductive motion (travel across the domains of theory, empirical inquiry, and conceptual development), culminating in the development of collective institutional entrepreneurship as a lens for understanding how institutional change is enacted across organizational boundaries. The narrator's voice remains consistent throughout, interpreting transformation not as a technological rollout but as an institutional awakening, the moment when the Matrix

becomes visible and the coding of public administration is recognized as mutable.

With the introduction, I have situated the reader via a map of this institutional terrain. Although the motivation, the aim and question developed on the basis of it, and the empirical and theoretical context of Swedish municipal digital transformation will grow clearer as the journey progresses, this chapter has already explained why a phenomenon-driven, abductive approach dovetails particularly well with understanding collaborative transformation processes that blend structure and agency, reflection and action, and it has indicated how this research contributes to both institutional theory and practice while inviting the reader to view digital transformation as a process of awakening to new institutional possibilities and of recombining resilience and agility, the two defining attributes of the LeoPhant.

The next chapter provides context that grounds the project in theory, connecting the institutional, organizational, and individual levels of analysis. Contextualizing material describes the structural conditions that shape municipal digital transformation, most pronouncedly capability disparities, institutional inertia, and emerging cross-boundary collaboration. The section devoted to theoretical underpinnings establishes a coherent conceptual basis for examining collaboration as both mechanism and outcome of transformation. Via an integrative survey of literature in the areas of digital transformation, institutional theory, and institutional entrepreneurship, the narrator ties institutional drift and collective agency together, to frame digital transformation as a process through which municipalities learn to see the Matrix and begin to reconfigure its code by means of collective effort.

Chapter 3 details the methodology. Recapitulating the interpretive stance and the epistemological approach to the project, it outlines the ontological assumptions and abductive logic guiding my inquiry and concretely describes a qualitative research design in which iterative analysis, reflexivity, and theory development operate inseparably. The data-collection strategy, combining population-level analysis of municipal steering documents with a longitudinal case study of the Ångsvall collaboration, embodies relationality in travel (iterative movement) between empirical detail and theoretical abstraction. The narrator's position maintains trans-

parency of positionality and interpretation, making certain that the voice of the researcher remains present yet non-intrusive.

Chapter 4 presents and connects the five papers that form the empirical and analytical "meat" of the project's output. Each paper explores a particular dimension of inter-organizational digital transformation (complementarity, leadership, asymmetry, and institutional design), and each incorporates reflexive commentary manifesting how insight from the study shaped both practice and conceptual development. The synthesis at the end of the chapter weaves together these threads, linking both individuals' and organizations' experiences to institutional change. At key points, the discussion revisits the guiding question of how municipalities engage in digital transformation through collaboration.

Taking the core findings further, Chapter 5 presents a processual and relational account of collective digital transformation. This encompasses a phase-based model of how collaboration evolves over time, analysis of the tensions and strategies that sustain it, and articulation of collective institutional entrepreneurship as the central mechanism of change. Through these findings, the narration highlights how municipalities reimagine and reconstruct the institutions that frame their work, showing how digital transformation arises from the dynamic interplay of structure and agency, the balance embodied by the resilient, agile LeoPhant.

With Chapter 6, the path takes us into interpretation and implication. Discussing collective institutional entrepreneurship's operation through trust, a shared vision, and distributed leadership, it articulates five principles that define the phenomenon. The chapter connects these to broader debates in institutional theory and digital-transformation scholarship. In so doing, it demonstrates collaboration's simultaneous functioning as mechanism and institutional outcome. The Matrix and LeoPhant metaphors are on display here as interpretive tools, serving to illustrate the motion between institutional awakening and recombination. Maintaining a steady narrative rhythm gives beats to combining analytical precision with interpretive reflection in a manner that retains terminological consistency across terrain of institutional work, collaboration, transformation, and other concepts.

The dissertation concludes by drawing the levels of analysis together. Reviewing the contributions, acknowledging the limitations, and propos-

ing future research directions on their basis, it reflects on the wider implications of collective digital transformation for public governance. As the loop closes between theory and practice, the narrator's voice elucidates a parallel between the awakening of institutional awareness and the recombination of institutional strength and agility. We end where we began, with the recognition that municipalities engage in digital transformation by rewriting the institutional code through which they collaborate, trust, and act together. But the journey takes us to a point at which we are also equipped with a thorough picture of how and why.

CHAPTER 2

CONTEXT AND THEORY

To situate the research in relation to the relevant scholarly domains, I begin by outlining the broader landscape of public-sector digital transformation and inter-organizational collaboration, with particular attention to the structural tensions, institutional pressures, and capability asymmetries that delineate empirical cases for examination. Then, a review of the literature on institutional theory and institutional entrepreneurship details how rules, norms, and cultural-cognitive frames shape the possibilities for collaboration and for change. With this groundwork from the contextual background and theoretical foundations laid, the chapter identifies crucial gaps in prior research and articulates the theoretical assumptions that guide the analysis. Together, these elements establish the conceptual scaffolding for the empirical work presented in later chapters.

2.1 THE CONTEXT

2.1.1 DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Over the past decade, digital transformation has emerged as one of the most influential concepts in the IS discipline and organizational research both (Hanelt et al., 2021). The notion refers not to adoption of new technologies on its own but to fundamental changes in organizational properties, structures, and logics in consequence of using digital information, computing, communication, and connectivity technologies in combination. In descriptions of digital transformation as a process of seeking to improve an entity by triggering significant changes in its properties through digital technologies, G. Vial (2019) has emphasized that this is less a discrete event than a continuous process of becoming. Subsequent studies have expanded on this definition, exploring how digital transformation affects strategic renewal, organizations' identity, and institutional arrangements (Baiyere et al., 2023; Markus & Rowe, 2021, 2023; Wessel et al., 2021). From perusing reports on those studies, I find digital transformation to be not simply a technological shift. Through this institutional process, organizations continually rework how they create value, coordinate with others, and exercise governance.

Early conceptualizations in the information-systems literature treated digital transformation as a natural extension of digital innovation and IT-enabled change (Hinings et al., 2018; Kohli & Melville, 2019). Yet, as scholars began to detect a pervasive influence of digital technologies on organizations' fields and associated forms, the research focus broadened toward the institutional and processual mechanisms through which such transformations unfold (Berente & Seidel, 2022; Bodrožić & Adler, 2022). Digital transformation is therefore best understood as an ongoing reconfiguration of socio-technical systems that involves interactions among technologies, actors, and institutional contexts (Baygi et al., 2021; Oberländer et al., 2021). Considering the evolution of its study, A. Hanelt and colleagues (2021) described witnessing the field's growth into a multidimensional domain involving strategy, structure, culture, and capabilities. Klaus Warner and Markus Wäger (2019) offered an example by demonstrating dynamic capabilities' pivotal role in sustaining transformation

over time. Such scholars' perspectives collectively stress that digital transformation is an organizational learning journey rather than a technical shift, often unfolding through iterative cycles of experimentation, institutionalization, and renewal.

Recent discussions have focused on clarifying the boundaries and theoretical scope of digital transformation research. For instance, M. L. Markus and F. Rowe (2023) have expressed concern that the notion bears a risk of conceptual ambiguity in the absence of researchers specifying what is transforming, how, and to what end. In reasoning along similar lines, Lauri Wessel et al. (2025) concluded that digital-transformation research has reached a theoretical crossroads, where closer integration with established organizational theories has become crucial. A. Baiyere et al. (2025), in turn, addressed this issue by examining the relationship between digital transformation and traditional IT management. They argued that digital transformation involves new organizing logics that differ from earlier paradigms for IT-enabled change. Growing consensus around the need for concepts' precision has galvanized efforts to probe digital transformation via broader theoretical lenses from institutional theory, sociomateriality, practice theory, etc. (Hinings et al., 2018; Orlikowski & Scott, 2023).

Research taking an organizational perspective has examined how firms activate capabilities and governance structures to manage digital transformation. The dynamic-capabilities approach of A. Yeow et al. (2018) stresses that organizations must constantly align their strategy, technology, and structure to sustain transformation. Similarly, Wessel et al.'s work focused on the distinction between digital transformation and IT-enabled transformation (2021) shows that, while both involve technology, the former implies fundamental reconfiguration of organizational identity and value logic. Adding a macro-level view, Z. Bodrožić and P. S. Adler (2022) framed digital transformation as a Schumpeterian process of creative destruction that reshapes the economic and institutional order. In the same vein, digital-transformation guru Evgeny Kaganer et al. (2023) described this transformation as able to disturb organizational inertia and lay bare key tensions between established routines and emergent digital practices. These contributions together attest that digital-transformation research has matured beyond isolated case studies to encompass theories of institutional change, strategy, and collective adaptation.

While most early work in this arena concentrated on private-sector organizations, digital transformation has increasingly become a critical theme in recent public-administration and digital-government research. Historically, this body of work evolved from study of e-government toward a broader understanding of digital government and digital-era governance (Dunleavy & Margetts, 2023; Janowski, 2015). Tracing its trajectory through successive phases, Tomasz Janowski (2015) characterized it as beginning with digitalization for internal efficiency, followed by services' transformation for external stakeholders, and culminating in digital government as a platform for societal value creation. This parallels the pattern wherein the IS field has shifted focus from technology adoption to institutional change.

Public organizations themselves increasingly view digital transformation as a route to resolving complex challenges such as demographic change, fiscal constraints, and citizens' demands for transparency and responsiveness (Carter et al., 2024; Clarke, 2020). However, their views are by no means uniform. I. Mergel et al. (2019) have zeroed in on the danger of equating digital transformation in the public sector to digitalization. The former is a multifaceted journey that involves fundamentally reworking institutional logics, governance arrangements, and accountability mechanisms.

In addition, their analysis produced evidence that governments face distinctive challenges when compared to private firms: public-sector digital transformation is constrained by legality, equity, and political-oversight factors, which render the ensuing change more incremental and prone to contestation. Later studies confirmed this institution-oriented view and elaborated on it. Scupola in work with Mergel (2022) examined co-production in digital transformation, fleshing out the picture of how collaboration among government agencies, citizens, and private partners creates value for the public via new governance arrangements. Regarding the pandemic years specifically, S. J. Eom and J. Lee (2022) argued that turbulence in such settings can reveal both resilience and fragility in digital government systems, accelerating innovation while exposing strong institutional inertia. A comparable observation by G. Agostino et al. (2021) points to the power of crisis contexts (e.g., COVID-19) to catalyze digital transformation in delivery of public services. These studies probing the

unique nature of digital transformation in the public sector collectively establish that it is not only about efficiency but also about legitimacy, trust, and inclusiveness.

2.1.2 DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND INSTITUTIONS

Institutional theory stresses that our reactions and responses to a newly apparent phenomenon often get decided by surrounding institutions, each with its own logics, beliefs, and norms (Scott, 2014; Thornton et al., 2012). Together these constitute coherent systems that guide our behavior, both as individuals and within organizations. When something new makes an impact on the institutional system, complexity might well sprout, since that new arrival may or may not mesh with the prescribed patterns of behavior (Greenwood et al., 2011; Kraatz & Block, 2008). Accordingly, digitalization can appear as an external force that challenges prior logics and compounds complexity. Clearly, public entities' institutional embedding molds the paths by which digital transformation occurs, in an organic manner. B. Hinings et al. (2018) provided a starting point by describing digital transformation as an institutional process in which new digital logics emerge, challenge, and eventually reconfigure the established institutional arrangements.

Extending the implied argument, N. Berente and S. Seidel (2022) integrated institutional theory with digital-transformation scholarship to shed light on digital technologies as both affording and restricting institutional change. This contribution holds particular relevance for the public sector, where organizations' institutional embeddedness shapes the pathways by which digital transformation unfolds. That is, institutional change specific to the public sector often undergoes mediation by regulatory frameworks, professional norms, and public-accountability dynamics (Norling, 2024; Weerakkody et al., 2016), expressions reflecting what Richard Scott (1995) described in the general case as the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive dimensions of each institution shaping how organizational change and stability (i.e., equilibrium) may be maintained. Here, interplay between innovation and regulation creates what Y. Kim and J. Zhang (2016) cast as "wicked problems" of digital governance. Solutions in this realm must balance efficiency, privacy, and equity. The complexity is com-

pounded by organizational inertia, problematic legacy systems, and diffuse responsibilities (Eriksson & Öhlund, 2024; Irani et al., 2022).

Alongside its complexity, scholars have drawn attention to the socio-technical dimensions of public-sector digital transformation. A. Clarke (2020) and L. Carter et al. (2024) have depicted the creation of digital government units and strategic information-system design as attempts to institutionalize digital transformation within bureaucratic structures. That goal on its own does not suffice, though. Studies by J. M. Goh and A. E. Arenas (2020) and by S. Hong et al. (2022) supply ample evidence that technology alone cannot resolve the inherent tradeoffs in public organizations. Creating value depends instead on the development of capabilities through which organizations can reconcile competing demands. In a systematic review of the relevant literature, N. Haug et al. (2023) identified both top-down mandates and bottom-up innovation as forces of digitally induced change in the public sector, where institutional complexity limits both. The result is what E. Gritt et al. (2024, p. 2) have called "liminal digital transformation," a process characterized by ambiguity, negotiation, and incomplete implementation.

More recent studies have begun to articulate a sense of digital transformation in the public sector as a collective and distributed process. For example, S. Tana et al.'s conceptualization of digital transformation as collective social action (2023) features an argument that it arises from mutual alignment of multiple actors with a shared vision of public purpose. Their perspective resonates with Fredrik Carlsson, Nataliya Lindström, and Johan Sandberg's evidence of how resource disparities can be turned into tools through inter-municipality partnerships (2025). These studies revealed that collaboration and coordination are anything but peripheral to public-sector transformation, they are mechanisms at the core of its success. The shift in awareness toward collective approaches constitutes a promising start; it reflects broader recognition that public value creation depends on shared governance and on relationships anchored in trust (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Scupola & Mergel, 2022).

At the same time, empirical research has highlighted the persistence of structural and cultural barriers alike. In work specific to Sweden, Norling et al. (2022) examined "digital decoupling," a phenomenon wherein real-world capacities place municipalities' strategy-based ambitions for

digital transformation out of reach. Magnusson et al. (2025) expanded on the relevant impediments by showing how governance ambiguity can deter transformation efforts, while J. Crusoe et al. (2024) demonstrated how willful ignorance can lead to token efforts rather than substantive change. Other revelatory work in this area, by Malin Tinjan (2024, 2025), addresses transformation narratives' ability to create managerial inertia as public managers reproduce the existing practices under the guise of digital reform. All these scholars' findings indicate that, while digital transformation has become a dominant policy narrative, its enactment remains uneven and institutionally constrained.

The overall trajectory of research into public-sector digital transformation shows a clear progression from efficiency- and modernization-focused initial studies that treated digital transformation as a technological/managerial issue toward increased attention to institutional, relational, societal, and collective dimensions (Tana et al., 2023). Today, digital transformation in the public sector appears as ongoing negotiation among actors, technologies, and institutional contexts rather than a linear change process. There is much further to go, though. The greatest challenge, as portrayed by E. Vigoda-Gadot and S. Mizrahi (2024), lies in developing integrative theories that account for the interplay of human agency, digital technologies, and organizational systems. Following this direction aligns with Wanda Orlikowski and Susan Scott's (2023) sociomaterial conceptualization, which portrays digital transformation as continuous reweaving of social and material arrangements that redefines institutional fields.

While the literature recognizes digital transformation in the public sector as involving reconfiguration of rules, roles, and routines that underpin public value creation through a multifaceted process of technological, organizational, and institutional change, significant knowledge gaps remain. Growing recognition of this phenomenon's importance notwithstanding, research has yet to fully explain how collaborative arrangements sustain transformation across organizations' boundaries, how institutional entrepreneurs muster collective action under conditions of asymmetry, and how the process maintains legitimacy and equity throughout. Addressing these gulfs in understanding requires longitudinal, process-oriented studies that capture the temporal and relational dynamics of transformation. Turning to the notion of collective digital transformation and of collec-

tive institutional entrepreneurship provides one route to advances in this regard. Both theory and practice stand to benefit from greater understanding of how public entities transform together rather than alone.

2.1.3 PUBLIC SECTOR INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL COLLABORATION

In inter-organizational collaboration in the public sector, autonomous organizations coordinate in various ways to pursue goals that no single actor alone could reach (Huxham, 1993; Vangen et al., 2015). The range of actors in contemporary administrations includes municipalities, regional local administrations, government agencies, and an expanding circle of private and civic partners. As for scholarship that considers them all, study of inter-organizational collaboration has evolved since the days of early network-based advocacy that urged scholars and practitioners to take interdependence seriously (O'Toole, 1997; Provan & Milward, 1995). Today's frameworks for collaborative governance are intricately articulated process models that highlight the importance of starting conditions, facilitative leadership, institutional design, and iterative engagement aimed at building a shared purpose (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Bryson et al., 2006, 2015; Emerson et al., 2012). In parallel with the evolution of the study of inter-organizational collaboration, advances in e-government and digital-government research have yielded awareness that collaboration is inseparable from integration of information, data, and infrastructures across boundaries (Dawes, 1996; Gil-Garcia & Pardo, 2005; Pardo & Tayi, 2007; Yang & Maxwell, 2011). More recently still, ecosystem and platform studies have recast inter-organizational collaboration as multi-level coordination in environments of socio-technical service systems that extend beyond any single hierarchy (Adner, 2017; Hietala & Päivärinta, 2025; Jacobides et al., 2018). Finding value in that angle, Ann Majchrzak et al. (2015) drew attention to inter-organizational collaboration as a dynamic process in which coordination, trust, and knowledge-sharing arise through ongoing interaction. This insight holds special relevance for digital transformation in the public sector.

Where K. Emerson et al. (2012) would approach inter-organizational collaboration in government as cross-boundary decision-making and man-

agement aimed at some public purpose, an IS lens sharpens one's focus on how artifacts, data models, platforms, interfaces, and standards all actively shape boundaries and authority. Rather than being mere carriers of collaboration, information systems enact it. As A. Pelizza (2021) showed, designing classification and integration systems inherently redraws perimeters of inclusion and exclusion, reconfiguring who is visible, what counts as relevant knowledge, and which organizational units gain or lose control. In other word, inter-organizational collaboration is simultaneously institutional and sociomaterial: it comprises joint problem-framing, resource-pooling, interdependence of roles, shared infrastructure, and routines for conflict resolution that gel with conditions set by the law alongside other standards and requirements related to public scrutiny.

The organizational architecture of collaboration varies greatly. Often, participant-governed constellations function well in small-scale, high-trust settings where the parties' goals are mutually aligned and the need for network-level competencies is modest. Where asymmetries in capacities or mandates exist, arrangements in which one organization takes the lead can add direction. Another option, particularly suitable for cases with numerous participants and high heterogeneity, is network-based administration, whereby organizations scale their coordination by creating a dedicated entity to perform network-level tasks (Provan & Kenis, 2008). The choice of arrangements is vital; recent empirical research confirms that such design decisions are crucial for innovation-oriented collaboration. Work by Koen Verhoest et al. (2024) offers a case in point, showing that the structural *cum* relational design of cross-sector partnerships significantly shapes technological innovation outcomes. Public collaboration often implements a mix of these forms as pressures related to legal mandates, funding streams, and political oversight pull governance in hybrid directions. What matters most is the fit between form and contingencies: complexity, trust, goal consensus, resources' balance, and infrastructure maturity (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012). Alongside structural suitability, legitimacy shapes how collaboration gets sustained. Citing factors that determine whether participants view a network as trustworthy and authoritative, Sangheon Lee and Marc Esteve (2023) have offered evidence that perceived legitimacy in collaborative governance is strongly influenced by procedural fairness, inclusiveness, and transparency.

A context of digital transformation places the integration problem at center stage. Shared data and interoperability enable joint services but bring to the surface political and organizational barriers, areas of ambiguous authority, mismatched incentives, and where the risks and privacy safeguards reside. There is a long tradition of research into inter-organizational integration of information attesting that success hinges as much on governance and stewardship as on technology (Dawes, 1996; Pardo & Tayi, 2007; Yang & Maxwell, 2011). Leadership models are adapting accordingly. In the wake of the SARS-CoV-2 crisis sweeping China, Zijun Mao, Jingui Wu, and Mixia Liu (2023) documented a leadership ecosystem that, with chief information officers (CIOs) as its hub, coordinated vertical and horizontal data-sharing through role rotation, mixed centralization and decentralization, and boundary-spanning procedures. At the same time, collaboration capacity depends on factors beyond internal maturity, as Kristina Weißmüller, Adrian Ritz, and Sruthi Yerramsetti (2023) pointed out when showing how extra-organizational impetus for change when coupled with stakeholder demand catalyzes co-creation, pushing municipalities toward partnership across sector lines. These dynamics echo a broader shift toward ecosystem governance in which exploration and exploitation must be balanced collectively rather than within any single organization. Heidi Hietala and Tero Päivärinta (2025) have conceptualized this as multi-level "collective ambidexterity" in governance (see Inoue, 2021), with work at ecosystem, group, and organization levels being complemented by empirical attention to modes of collaboration in inter-organizational e-government initiatives (Juell-Skielse et al., 2017).

The roles and leadership evident in public inter-organizational collaboration blend facilitation and authority. Facilitative leadership compiles, mediates, and brokers shared understanding while formal authority supplies mandates, standards, attainment of power, and compliance mechanisms. Multi-level governance links ecosystem-level ambitions, principles, and visions to domain-level orchestration and to organization-level routines for discovery, delivery, etc. In practice, this entails CIOs and chief data officers (CDOs) often acting as institutional entrepreneurs who align incentives, standards, and safeguards across agencies, frequently through program offices that resemble network-oriented organizations and via instruments of foundational law that set long-term "rules of the game" for

decisions about platforms and data rights (Mergel et al., 2018; Tumbas et al., 2018).

Attention to these strands in the weave reminds us that the success of collaboration should be assessed beyond project outputs. In the thinking of Keith Provan and H. Brinton Milward (1995), effectiveness in collaboration expresses system, organization, and client/citizen dimensions. The value of many services must be judged both in terms of reliability of operation and in terms of alignment with values such as equality, accountability, transparency, and due process (Bozeman, 2007). Integrated handling of life-event services, such as smooth handling of a birth, a death, or forming a small business, requires even more: it depends on many agencies, vendors, and civic actors coordinating around shared infrastructure and governance routines in a sustained manner. Capability development and policy learning are additional outcomes, as networks institutionalize shared infrastructure and practices that outlast individual leaders' tenure.

Prior research highlights, in addition, the tensions that keep raising their head in public-sector inter-organizational collaboration. Accountability/auditability worries can stifle adaptability and experimentation when mandates are fragmented and risk is locally acute (Lægreid & Rykkja, 2022). Other tensions stem from trust/power asymmetries, which shape voice, benefits' distri¬bution, and the pattern of winners vs. losers; design choices (related to platforms, standards, etc.) can entrench those asymmetries by privileging some data or actors over others (Pelizza, 2021). Moreover, incentives rarely align; i.e., benefits tend to cohere at system level and in the long term while costs are local and immediate, so explicit risk- and reward-sharing mechanisms prove essential. Capacity and maturity gaps further complicate municipal, agency, and other synchronization, while ages-old installed bases pile on governance debt in the form of standards and stewardship that lag behind use-case innovation (Pardo & Tayi, 2007).

Comparisons with studies of collaboration in the private sector helps clarify what distinguishes the public sector. Private-sector alliances, ecosystems, etc. are organized around appropriability and competitive advantage, with governance tuned to safeguarding relational rents, managing interdependence, and positioning elements within modular architectures (Adner, 2017; Dyer & Singh, 1998; Gulati, 1998; Jacobides et al., 2018).

The public counterpart, in contrast, is oriented toward public value and operates under statutory obligations, transparency requirements, and political oversight (Bozeman, 2007; Rainey & Bozeman, 2000). Cycling is often slower, stakeholder inclusion wider, and accountability more formal. These differences do not negate ecosystem concepts' utility in the public sphere; rather, they place legitimacy, rights, and equity alongside efficiency and innovation as major design criteria.

The aforementioned dynamics crystallize even more concretely in studies of specific empirical domains. Work on health-information exchange and emergency management speaks to the decisiveness of interoperability, data governance, and trust for network effectiveness (Pardo & Tayi, 2007; Yang & Maxwell, 2011). Municipal co-creation initiatives show how stake¬holder demand and external impulses can pull public organizations into productive partner¬ships (Weißmüller et al., 2023). Studies of data-sharing programs that require vertical and horizontal coordination, such as those mobilized in conditions of crisis, reveal the importance of CIO-centered and other leadership-based architectures (Mao et al., 2023), while life-event services illustrate the need to orchestrate exploration and exploitation across levels so that novel service concepts mature into reliable common infrastructure (Hietala & Päivärinta, 2025).

Aiding in reflection on how municipalities tackle digital transformation via inter-organizational collaboration, prior research provides a foundation for deriving a set of design heuristics for institutional practice. That work offers only guiding orientations for cultivating collaboration as an institutional capacity, but so do heuristics, they do not dictate ostensibly universal solutions. Among the main points are that governance should take a form that matches the conditions: participant-governed networks are most effective in closer partnership endeavors, whereas the value of lead-organization or network-administrative organization arrangements rises with scale and heterogeneity (Provan & Kenis, 2008). These forms of coordination express the balance between autonomy and alignment that every collaborative initiative must negotiate.

Collective ambidexterity should be intentionally structured through explicit rhythms and connective mechanisms that link ecosystem-level strategy to domain-level orchestration and to organizational routines (Hietala & Päivärinta, 2025; Juell-Skielse et al., 2017). In this respect, municipali-

ties participate themselves but also act as orchestrators of shared transformation processes. To enhance the corresponding perspective, Meng Zhang and Guy Gable (2017) proposed a systematic framework for multi-level theorizing in IS research. Emphasizing the value of constructs' and mechanisms' coherence across analysis levels, their framework aids in clarifying how ecosystem, domain, and organization dynamics can be linked conceptually for purposes of examining collaborative digital transformation. Data rights, interoperability standards, and stewardship arrangements must be treated as matters of constitutional design, bound up with decisions that allocate power, authority, and responsibility across the entire institutional field (Dawes, 1996; Pardo & Tayi, 2007). These foundations determine the distribution of trust, accountability, etc. in collaborative systems. Furthermore, boundary-spanning capacity, the connective tissue of collaboration, must be deliberately furnished with suitable resources. Structures and roles that translate civic impulses or market signals into institutional action sustain responsiveness and keep transformation anchored in public value (Mao et al., 2023; Weißmüller et al., 2023). Finally, performance assessment should prioritize system-level outcomes and network health over local throughput. Effective collaboration manifests itself not only in individual organizations' gains but also in the capacity of the collective to create enduring public value and institutional resilience (Bozeman, 2007; Provan & Milward, 1995).

Together, these heuristics such as those outlined above possess the power to translate the conceptual insights of this thesis into design-oriented guidance. They thus pave the way for institutional entrepreneurs' efforts to cultivate the balance of resilience and agility symbolized by the LeoPhant (designing for trust, coordination, and collective renewal) within the broader awakening to the Matrix. In and as the kernel of findings from research such as reaffirm that digital transformation in the pub not achieved not through technology alone but through the continuous reworking of the institutional code that makes collaboration possible.

Before I could articulate full-fledged heuristics, I had to address the important research gaps remaining to be filled, micro-to-macro mechanisms deserve closer attention: how local design choices pertaining to platforms, contracts, and classifications cumulatively inform field-level boundary shifts and distributions of value. Equity-by-design requires methods

for encoding representation, fairness, and accountability into collaborative architectures and mechanisms for data governance. Scaling and sustaining present another difficult problem: collaboration must evolve from piloting into institutionalized shared infrastructure without sacrificing adaptability. And even the fundamental matter of orchestration (of distributed institutional entrepreneurship among CIOs, CDOs, and boundary-spanners across levels) is still underspecified both theoretically and empirically.

What unites all these gaps is a need to address inter-organizational digital transformation in the public sector as a multi-level socio-technical practice-borne process. Effective collaboration aligns the governance form with relevant contingencies, merges facilitative leadership with suitable formal authority, treats data and standards as of fundamental import, and deliberately balances innovation with reliability of operations. Above all, public values form its core while it applies digital infrastructure such that collaboration itself becomes an enduring institutional outcome.

2.1.4 PUBLIC-SECTOR INSTITUTIONAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Institutional entrepreneurship in the public sector coheres around purposive actors, both individuals and collectives, in their initiation, propelling, and embedding of changes to the rules, norms, roles, and infrastructure that organize public service delivery (Battilana et al., 2009). The field is grounded in the "paradox of embedded agency": the ability for actors socialized by existing institutions to reshape them (Garud et al., 2007). Synthesis work characterizes the integrative process through which such actors diagnose field-level tensions, align diverse interests, and activate coalitions that stabilize new institutional arrangements. That work involves weaving together multiple logics, resources, and forms of authority while building cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative legitimacy (Battilana et al., 2009). This brings to the fore the interplay of position, resources, and "social skill", i.e., the ability to interpret conflicts, frame the case for change in ways that resonate with heterogeneous interests, and orchestrate coordinated action spanning organizational boundaries (Fligstein, 1997, 2001).

By introducing the notion of institutional entrepreneurs, Paul DiMaggio (1988) cast into relief the agency and interests in processes of institutional change. Studies since then have shown how such entrepreneurs envision solutions, craft compelling interpretations, and anchor them in everyday routines, thereby rendering any ensuing change difficult to reverse even in mature fields where transformation flows more typically from powerful cores (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Maguire et al., 2004). Under conditions of digital transformation, this skill acquires a socio-technical dimension: Entrepreneurs mediate in arenas of technological affordances, organizational logics, and administrative law. Simultaneously, ostensibly minor information-system design choices may ripple into macro level effects on accountability, access, and democratic oversight (Pelizza, 2021).

Public-sector institutional entrepreneurs rarely act alone. Instead, they orchestrate ecosystems of agencies, vendors, and civil society. Recent case research considers CDOs as institutional entrepreneurs who establish new governance logics for digital innovation, logics increasingly translated to the public sector, where "digital leaders" dictate the roles, norms, and abilities for data and platform governance (Tumbas et al., 2018). Similarly, CIOs often concretize the data-sharing agendas. For instance, applying a CIO-centric leadership ecology in Chinese municipalities solidified data-sharing as a field-level commitment through multi-actor coordination, policy coupling, and technical enablers (Mao et al., 2023). Practice-oriented scholarship conceptualizes this as institutional work: everyday practice that, as it creates, maintains, and disrupts institutions via standardization, categorization, storytelling, prototyping, and piloting, fastens new orders into durable arrangements (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

As evidence amasses from multiple sectors, the contrast between private and public institutional entrepreneurship sharpens. In market contexts, where new arrangements become secured in place through performance and profitability gains, institutional entrepreneurship often centers on market positioning and competitive advantage. Change agents act as strategic innovators who turn institutional ambiguity to their advantage to advance their organization or industry's gains (Battilana et al., 2009; Garud et al., 2007). In the public sector, on the other hand, institutional entrepreneurship unfolds in conditions of democratic accountability, legal constraints, and public scrutiny. The source of legitimacy here is not market validation but alignment with public-interest values such as equity,

transparency, and procedural justice (Bozeman, 2007; Rainey & Bozeman, 2000). While private-sector entrepreneurs capitalize on structures that reward seizing opportunities, public ones often labor to reconcile conflicting mandates, balance innovation with accountability, and translate digital affordances into institutional forms that retain legitimacy and are otherwise sustainable.

Research connected with wind energy in Finland and India revealed entrepreneurs translating across technological systems, markets, multiple local communities, and fields of regulation; legitimacy must be secured in multiple domains, the logics of which have to be interwoven (Jolly et al., 2016). In the public sector, this challenge is amplified by the presence of many principals, legal/procedural requirements, and equality norms, all of which render legitimacy work a more detail-oriented and extensive undertaking than in private fields (Tassabehji et al., 2016). The United Kingdom's Government Digital Service unit illustrates institutional entrepreneurship in digital government altering services but also, at the same time, rules, norms, and capacities for developing, running, and funding digital products (Rollason et al., 2018).

In public digital ecosystems, tentative research findings point to how collective ambidexterity may be arrived at through regulated collaboration; joint goals; and multi-level mechanisms for prioritization, financing, and measurement (Hietala & Päivärinta, 2025). This does entail particular liability of institutional entrepreneurs, however; they end up responsible for balancing experimentation with scaling and for tempering competing logics of agencies, vendors, and other actors (Tassabehji et al., 2016). In patterns across cases, three capacities recur: social skill, discourse and interpretation skills, and infrastructural agency (Battilana et al., 2009; Fligstein, 1997, 2001; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). In digital government, CIOs/CDOs instantiate these capacities by establishing shared data architectures and governance models that normalize multi-agency work (Mao et al., 2023; Tumbas et al., 2018).

At base, the process logics of the public sector diverge from those in the private sphere. What counts as success is not market share and returns but public benefit, legality, and trust (Tassabehji et al., 2016). In this sense, institutional work in digital government becomes less about individual disruption and more about collective renewal, an ongoing effort to rewrite institutional code through collaboration, legitimacy, and shared purpose.

Institutional work thus becomes a democratic craft reshaping rules and beliefs while making sure that change remains legitimate, equitable, and accountable (Garud et al., 2007; Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Maguire et al., 2004).

2.1.5 RESEARCH GAPS

Though research into digital transformation, inter-organizational collaboration, and institutional entrepreneurship has advanced considerably, clearly several important gaps have persisted. The first is related to the temporal dimension of entrepreneurship. Few studies systematically trace how institutional entrepreneurship activities unfold over time in inter-organizational contexts, particularly under digital transformation initiatives. By focusing on outcomes rather than processes, the literature has left the temporal, iterative, and recursive nature of institutional work underexplored (see Battilana et al., 2009; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Longitudinal and process-tracing studies can rectify this shortcoming by uncovering how collaboration evolves (from initiation to consolidation) and how coalitions can sustain momentum throughout.

Scholarship has paid little heed also to micro-level dynamics. Issues such as trust formation, negotiation of responsibilities, and management of power asymmetries among actors have gone insufficiently addressed by the theory. However, these relational processes are central to long-term collaboration, especially in contexts of pronounced resource or capacity disparities (Bryson et al., 2015; Edelenbos & Klijn, 2007; Pardo & Tayi, 2007; Pelizza, 2021).

Leadership represents another gap. While much institutional-entrepreneurship literature has focused on the "top management," considerably less has looked at mid-level ones, let alone at distributed actors in collective entrepreneurship. These players' actions are critical for the innovation/accountability balance and for mediating tensions between organizations (Carlsson et al., 2025; Firk et al., 2021; Marienfeldt et al, 2024; Nielsen & Noesgaard, 2023).

Fifth, the literature tends to portray institutional change as intentional and linear, overlooking institutional drift and emergent dynamics. Digital transformation in particular is iterative and generative, shaped by evolv-

ing technologies, user feedback, and governance adjustments. Research is needed to explore how unanticipated deviations and liminal phases can be leveraged for institutional innovation (Henfridsson & Yoo, 2014; Voronov et al., 2021).

Equity and inclusion present a sixth research gap. Collaborative arrangements in public sector digital transformation often involve partners with unequal resources, capacities, and influence. Without deliberate strategies to ensure fairness, smaller or less-resourced actors risk marginalization (Hietala et al., 2023; Wouters et al., 2023). Understanding how institutional entrepreneurs enable equitable access, participation, and benefit-sharing is essential to linking institutional entrepreneurship with public value creation.

Finally, the role of digital platforms in collective institutional entrepreneurship merits further examination. As platforms grow ever more central to governance, knowledge-sharing, and resource mobilization, their institutional implications in settings of collaborative public-sector initiatives are only starting to receive focus. Lessons can be taken from recent research conceptualizing platforms as socio-institutional (rather than purely technical) arrangements that structure participation, authority, and innovation (Jacobides et al., 2018; Rudmark et al., 2024). In the public sector, platformization is bound up with questions of public value, co-production, and legitimacy as governments and agencies turn to shared digital infrastructure to coordinate transformation across boundaries (Panagiotopoulos et al., 2019; Scupola & Mergel, 2022). Digital platforms' place in collective entrepreneurship remains a frontier: we are just beginning to understand how actors co-create rules, data standards, and value architectures that sustain collaboration in digital ecosystems (Hietala & Päivärinta, 2025; Tana et al., 2023).

I have positioned my work to bridge the gaps identified above, thereby equipped me for solid exploration of how municipalities engage in inter-organizational digital transformation. Although I could not completely fill all of these gaps, my project has fleshed out the picture of how institutional entrepreneurship operates in collectively reconfiguring institutional arrangements, roles, and practices through digital means. By adopting a longitudinal and process-oriented approach, I proved able to trace how collaborative initiatives evolve over several phases, thus high-

lighting both intentional strategies and emergent dynamics. The work gave particular attention to the role of distributed and mid-level actors; the interplay between formal governance structures and informal practices; and mechanisms of negotiating trust, accountability, and equity among diverse partners. Through these contributions, the dissertation offers theory that crosses the divide between institutional and IS perspectives alongside practice-informing insight that could assist in the design of more inclusive, equitable, and effective collaboration in public-sector digital transformation.

2.2 THEORY

The central underpinnings for the reasoning in this dissertation come from institutional theory, a body of work that provides a powerful lens for understanding how organizations operate within broader systems of rules, norms, and shared meanings (see DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Scott, 2014). It centers on explaining organizational behavior as not mere pursuit of efficiency but a quest for legitimacy within an institutional environment (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Organizations conform to socially accepted practices because such conformity, by signaling appropriate action and stability, functions to safeguard their survival in complex environments (Meyer & Scott, 1983; Suchman, 1995).

From its inception, institutional theory represented a direct challenge to the functionalist assumptions dominating mid-twentieth-century organizational research. As characterized by Pamela Tolbert et al. (2011), the prevailing view at the time, rooted in functionalism and rational-systems theory, espoused the notion that formal organizational structures exist primarily to enhance coordination, efficiency, and control. These structures were presumed to be technical instruments serving organizations' effectiveness. Institutional theory, from the seminal works of John Meyer and Brian Rowan (1977) and Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) onward, cast this assumption into doubt via evidence that the forms and practices get adopted not for their technical utility alone; they have become socially accepted symbols of rationality and competence. In other words, structures often persist not because they are efficient but because they are legitimate.

With institutional theory, then, the focus of analysis moved from technical efficiency to social legitimacy. Scholarship began emphasizing that organizations operate in environments replete with cultural expectations, normative standards, and regulatory constraints. In such contexts, decision-makers adopt particular policies, practices, or forms of organization not so much for any objective improvement to performance but since these represent "the proper way to do things" (Tolbert et al., 2011). This symbolic adoption, sometimes described as "myth and ceremony" (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), lets the organization maintain legitimacy externally and coherence internally, even when the structures chosen yield fairly little benefit for its operations.

Proceeding from that awareness, Garry Bruton et al. (2010) conceptualized institutions as rule systems and mutual understandings that define what actions are legitimate or even conceivable. Accordingly, the term "institution" here encompasses formal regulatory frameworks (inscribed by laws, courts, and official agencies), social conventions plus professional norms, and deeply embedded cultural-cognitive assumptions shaping how actors interpret their environment (see Jepperson, 1991; North, 1990; Scott, 2014). From this angle, institutions simultaneously enable and constrain: they provide order and predictability yet also restrict the space demarcating acceptable organizational behavior. As DiMaggio and Walter Powell (1983) famously argued, this dynamic leads to institutional isomorphism: organizations in a given field grow to resemble each other as they face similar pressures to meet societal expectations.

Scott's (2014) well-known model synthesizes these dynamics into three institutional pillars that collectively structure organizational behavior: the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive. The first of these components stresses formal rules, laws, and enforcement mechanisms that guide action via sanctions and enforced compliance (North, 1990). The normative pillar reflects the influence of society's and professions' values prescribing what gets deemed appropriate or morally acceptable conduct (March & Olsen, 1989). Finally, the cultural-cognitive pillar represents the taken-for-granted assumptions and interpretation schemata that cast some actions as natural and others as unthinkable (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Zucker, 1977).

The pillars form the skeleton of the enabling and constraining institutional architecture. Institutions give order, stability, and meaning to organizations' life by specifying what actors will perceive as rational, appropriate, and legitimate. At the same time, they restrict the range of conceivable alternatives by anchoring behavior in presupposed logics and expectations (Scott, 2014; Zucker, 1977). In this sense, institutions constitute the social scaffolding that gives shape to how organizations interpret problems, devise solutions, and enact change within larger societal systems. The corresponding structural understanding of institutions laid the groundwork for later developments that fleshed out institutional models by adding agency and change to the scholarly landscape.

Even in its earliest form, this structural framing, by illuminating institutions' function of both stabilizing and constraining organizational life, set the stage for questions about how change can occur within deeply embedded structures. Over time, institutional theory expanded beyond its sociological origins to become an integrative framework spanning multiple disciplines: most prominently, sociology, political science, and economics (Bruton et al., 2010). While early studies focused on organizations' conformity and stability, later developments introduced an agentic dimension to the analysis, exploring how actors can strategically shape or otherwise alter institutions (DiMaggio, 1988; Greenwood & Hinings, 1996; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). This shift gave rise to the concept of institutional entrepreneurship, which recognizes that actors may engage in purposeful institutional work to redefine their field's norms, rules, and meanings (Battilana et al., 2009; Garud et al., 2007).

More recent scholarship has extended the agentic perspective into the realm of digital transformation, with Berente and Seidel (2022) arguing that institutional theory furnishes a critical foundation for understanding how digital technologies mold the very structures and logics behind organizational life. After all, digital infrastructure, algorithms, etc. increasingly operate as institutional actors in their own right, exerting pressures that both bound and facilitate change (Eriksson & Öhlund, 2024; Kronblad et al., 2024). In thinking along similar lines, Orlikowski and Scott (2023) pointed to digital systems' production of several forms of institutional displacement. As they subtly reconfigure the given practices and norms within organizations, they bring something additional to human agency

into institutional entrepreneurship in the digital age: sociomaterial configurations of technologies, norms, and meanings (see Tumbas et al., 2018).

However scholarship evolves, the enduring contribution of institutional theory lies in understanding organizations as embedded in social systems; that is, these entities' behavior cannot be explained purely through instrumental rationality or market logic. This stance supports nuanced views. In the context of public administration, institutional perspectives have proven particularly influential for grappling with how digital reforms emerge as incremental, negotiated processes rather than radical shifts (Colovic et al., 2025; Luna-Reyes & Gil-Garcia, 2014). Public-sector digital transformation illustrates how institutional layering, rather than replacement, characterizes the evolution of governance structures (Gong & Yang, 2025). Bearing this out, studies of public-service reform attest that institutional change gets sustained via collective framing and institutional work rather than isolated inventions (Bertz et al., 2024).

Acting as "social rule systems" that set the boundaries of rationality itself (Jepperson, 1991), institutions establish a shared basis for judging credible evidence, acceptable conduct, and legitimate purpose. As Bruton et al. have noted, the corresponding perspective directs attention to the "rules, norms, and beliefs that influence organizations and their members" (2010, p. 426), thus offering richer understanding of how organizations reach legitimacy across diverse contexts.

In summary, institutional theory reveals that organizations survive and thrive not simply because they are efficient. Pivotally, they get perceived as legitimate participants within a socially constructed environment. As they exert regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pressure, institutions shape what is possible, permissible, and meaningful in organizations' life. By recognizing the power of these institutional forces, scholars and practitioners alike can better understand why organizations often resist change, similar forms' emergence across diverse fields, and how legitimacy operates as the fundamental currency of organizations' survival.

This institutional embeddedness may be illuminated via my metaphor from *The Matrix*, whose characters unknowingly operate while encapsulated in a simulated reality, a system so pervasive and coherent that human beings cannot distinguish it from the reality hosting it. This controlled environment models the institutional landscape in which organizations

operate: a network of structures, routines, and shared assumptions that collectively define what gets deemed real, possible, and legitimate (Scott, 2014; Zilber, 2011). As those living within the movie's Matrix do, organizational actors rarely question the system's existence, for it provides order, predictability, and a sense of normality. Conforming to institutionalized expectations offers familiarity and legitimacy, an institution-supplied pill that allows actors to function in comfort without confronting uncertainty.

In parallel with this "blue pill," the film's plot illustrates agency, through the alternative of taking a red pill. This symbolizes willingness to face a less certain reality, to look beyond the comfort of institutionalized norms, and to imagine other possibilities. In our metaphor, institutional entrepreneurs are those actors choosing to recognize that the environment they inhabit is socially constructed and therefore subject to change. Rather than merely adapt to institutional pressures, they seek to reconfigure the very logics, practices, and relationships that sustain the existing order (Battilana et al., 2009; Garud et al., 2007).

From an institutional perspective, the Matrix represents a reality that, supported by Scott's three pillars, is taken for granted as the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive components together sustain organizational life. The regulative pillar provides the "rules of the game" through laws, positive and negative sanctions, and formal structures (North, 1990); the normative one defines moral obligations and values that specify appropriate behavior (March & Olsen, 1989); and the cultural-cognitive pillar represents the interpretive frames and scripts that make certain actions appear natural vs. unthinkable (Scott, 2014; Weick, 1995). These functions provide the code that sustains the institutional Matrix.

The code is not immutable, however. Institutional life is not static. As Royston Greenwood and Christopher Hinings (1996) and likewise T. B. Lawrence and R. Suddaby (2006) have pointed out, institutional environments supply both constraints and possibilities of agency. While most organizations reproduce established logics through habitual conformity, a few actors, those dubbed institutional entrepreneurs here, act on an awareness that the institutional world is socially constructed and therefore alterable (Battilana et al., 2009; DiMaggio, 1988). As these sensitized actors "take the red pill," they symbolically step outside the zone of comfort of institutionalized certainty to envision new configurations of rules, roles,

and practices. They engage in what Steve Maguire et al. (2004) termed institutional work, purposive actions aimed at creating, maintaining, or disrupting institutions.

This metaphor captures the tension between embeddedness and agency, long recognized in institutional theory as the paradox of embedded agency (e.g., Holm, 1995; Seo & Creed, 2002). Institutional entrepreneurs are capable of changing the constraining institutions while these simultaneously shape their cognition and legitimacy. In a red-pill moment of reflexivity, these actors recognize that institutional arrangements are human constructs, not hard-and-fast facts (Weick, 1995; Zilber, 2011). They begin to reinterpret institutional logics, what Patricia Thornton et al. (2012) characterized as "the socially constructed patterns of material practices, assumptions, and values that provide meaning to social reality," and to experiment with alternative ones.

The Matrix metaphor thus underscores a duality inherent to institutions. They are both the invisible architecture that sustains organizational life and a potential source of its transformation. Institutional entrepreneurs, like the movie's protagonist Neo, do not simply escape the Matrix; they learn to see and rewrite its code, creating new opportunities for collective change.

For the public sector, the Matrix metaphor resonates particularly strongly. Municipalities operate within highly codified systems of governance characterized by legal mandates, procedural norms, and deeply ingrained beliefs about fairness and accountability (Christensen et al., 2019; Meyer & Hammerschmid, 2006). These systems provide the comfort of predictability and legitimacy but can also perpetuate rigidity and institutional inertia (Selznick, 1996). For many public managers, the institutional blue pill provides stability through compliance with established procedures. In this setting, the institutional entrepreneurs challenging accepted boundaries of public administration can reframe what concepts/constructs such as digital transformation mean. Rather than adopt technology as an external tool, they adapt it as a catalyst for institutional reconfiguration, seeing it as a tool for rethinking how organizations collaborate, share responsibility, and deliver equitable digital services (Battilana et al., 2009; Mergel et al., 2019). As public-sector institutional entrepreneurs awaken to the fact that rules, norms, and cultural beliefs are not

immutable constraints but modifiable codes of conduct and meaning, we find echoes of the point in *The Matrix* where Neo realizes that the reality around him is constructed and therefore may be rewritten. Applying this metaphor can assist institutional-theory scholars in visualizing a continuum between comfort and consciousness: most organizational actors reside in the institutional Matrix, reproducing established logics to sustain legitimacy, while a few perceive its constructed nature and engage in transformation work, often in the face of resistance from those who remain embedded in the familiar (Garud et al., 2007). This concretizing metaphor helps clarify why institutional change is rare and difficult: leaving the comfort of the Matrix and persuading others that a new reality is possible requires courage-imbued legitimacy-building (Hardy & Maguire, 2017; Suchman, 1995).

One can take the Matrix metaphor further. It refers to imbalance, representing metaphorical source code of the institutional system that by nature is written unevenly; some parts are hard-coded (the regulative in some respects) while others are more malleable (the normative and cultural-cognitive). Actors within this system may know that transformation is necessary yet find themselves constrained by the rigidity of the legal–administrative framework. For institutional entrepreneurs, this imbalance is both an impediment and an opportunity. It requires a collective response: no single organization can rewrite the code alone, but by acting in collaboration they can compensate for each other's institutional limitations.

This situation points to a growing need for inter-organizational collaboration as a balancing mechanism (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003; Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). With more asymmetrically developed institutional pillars, there is more evident potential for collaboration to pool organizations' complementary capacities, thereby jointly restoring a semblance of equilibrium. For instance, a smaller municipality such as Ånge may possess greater normative flexibility, closer community ties, informal-level trust, and fewer internal silos while a larger one like Sundsvall holds stronger regulative and technical capacity, with very firmly established governance systems and resources.

Through collaboration, these municipalities can form what Frank Schweitzer and Melanie Handrich (2021) have described as complementary institutional arrangements: joint structures that offset weaknesses and

enhance collective legitimacy. The smaller partner contributes agility and localized knowledge that ameliorate the rigidity of the regulative system; the larger partner contributes procedural robustness that stabilizes innovation within acceptable legal parameters. This form of institutional complementarity (see Hall & Soskice, 2001) translates asymmetry into synergy, enabling progress without undermining legitimacy.

In theoretical terms, such collaboration constitutes a form of collective institutional entrepreneurship (Garud et al., 2007; Wijen & Ansari, 2007). Instead of individual actors attempting to change rigid structures on their own, we find multiple organizations coordinating to redistribute institutional strength across the field. Each partner contributes elements of flexibility or control to contribute to a new equilibrium, balance over the pillars. As work by Julia Battilana and colleagues (2009) spotlights, institutional entrepreneurship is not only a matter of creating new practices; it is also about reconfiguring existing institutional relationships to enable change.

Thus, inter-organizational collaboration becomes both an adaptive response to institutional imbalance and a proactive mechanism for transformation. By deliberately combining complementary strengths, regulative capacity, normative alignment, and cultural-cognitive innovation, collaborating municipalities can collectively "rewrite" portions of the institutional code, reducing rigidity without destabilizing legitimacy. Applying this collaboration-rooted logic also helps articulate what Christine Oliver (1991) termed the strategic response to institutional pressures: organizations can resist or adapt to institutional constraints via coalition-building. In the public sector, this adaptation arises not through contesting authority directly but in layering new cooperative practices atop preexisting institutions (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Streeck & Thelen, 2005). Over time, these layered arrangements can incrementally bring institutional change, cumulatively reshaping how municipalities understand and enact digital transformation.

In summary, the doctoral project responded to the fact that restoring balance under conditions of imbalance, e.g., institutional environments where the regulative pillar dominates tend to privilege control and compliance over adaptability and learning necessitates forms of collective agency that transcend organizations' boundaries. Collective institutional entrepreneurship emerges accordingly as a means by which actors can jointly

negotiate legitimacy and enable innovation without compromising institutional stability. In this respect, inter-organizational collaboration functions as a compensatory institution-level mechanism, one that redistributes agency across organizations, reconciles competing logics, and creates socially legitimate pathways for change, in highly regulated or otherwise asymmetry-manifesting settings.

2.2.1 THEORETICAL STARTING POINTS

Institutional theory is not a box of analysis tools so much as a way of seeing organizational life. It approaches organizations as enmeshed in broader social structures dictating what seems rational, appropriate, and legitimate. Hence, institutional theory influences how its adherents perceive change: not as a singular product of isolated decision-making but as an outcome wrought by evolving institutional logics, legitimacy negotiations, and collective sensemaking. Responding to research gaps identified by Bruton et al. (2010), my study proceeded from the conclusion that institutional theory in the form traditionally applied in organizational and entrepreneurship research does not fully capture the specific dynamics of public-sector institutions. After all, institutional configurations in the public sector differ from those in private markets, partly for reason of the regulatory dimension's typical dominance, normative obligations, and limited cultural-cognitive flexibility. These properties significantly mark how institutional entrepreneurship and collaboration unfold in public organizations.

Recent research reinforces this point. Topi Tuominen (2025) demonstrated that institutional reflexivity, i.e., institutions' capacity to perceive and question their own structures, emerges in public organizations through cross-boundary collaboration. Similarly, by showing that algorithmic decision-making challenges traditional perceptions of legitimacy, work by Jarkko Hillo et al. (2025) revealed how new digital logics reshape institutional trust. John Boswell and colleagues (2025) have taken the argument further, proposing that public institutions embody institutional pathos and emphasizing the emotional and value-laden dimensions of legitimacy that shape administrative change. Taken together, these studies support viewing institutional theory as an organic framework that captures

both the structural and affective conditions under which digital transformation occurs.

The following presentation of assumptions summarizes the theoretical stance that guided the doctoral project's attention to those conditions and perspectives I carried forward from institutional theory into the study of public-sector digital transformation.

Asymmetrical Institutional Pillars

In the public sector, the pillars posited by institutional theory as shaping organizations through regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements are asymmetrically developed. As noted above, the first of these, comprising laws, formal rules, and accountability mechanisms, tends to dominate while normative and cultural-cognitive dimensions often remain secondary (see Lægreid & Rykkja, 2022). This asymmetry constrains innovation by emphasizing compliance and procedural legitimacy to the detriment of experimentation or learning. Compensating for the structural inflexibility thereby characterizing public-sector institutional environments so as to restore institutional balance demands collective mechanisms such as inter-organizational digital transformation.

Legitimacy Superseding Efficiency

While institutional theory traditionally explains organizational behavior as legitimacy-seeking (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), for public institutions legitimacy is not a means but an end. Public organizations get judged more by conformance to normative/regulatory expectations than by market performance (see March & Olsen, 1989; Selznick, 1996). This creates a paradox for innovation: even beneficial changes may be resisted if they seem to place established legitimacy sources (such as signs of fairness, equity, or accountability) at risk. Accordingly, public-sector institutional entrepreneurship must balance innovation with legitimacy's preservation. Transformation must not threaten the structures that assure of trust.

Institutional Entrepreneurship As Collective, Not Individual-Level

Institutional theory often conceptualizes change in terms of strategic actions by individual entrepreneurs or organizations (see Battilana et al., 2009; DiMaggio, 1988). In the public sector, however, the locus of agency is distributed. Change happens through collective institutional entrepreneurship, when multiple organizations jointly mobilizing resources, legitimacy, and authority to reform shared systems (Garud et al., 2007; Wijen & Ansari, 2007). This collective modes of change is essential because no public organization on its own meets all the prerequisites for digital transformation that expresses the required institutional balance and ambidexterity. Inter-organizational digital transformation therefore represents both a practical necessity and a strongly theory-supported mechanism for institutional change in the public sphere.

Layered and Interdependent Institutional Logics

Institutional logics in the public sector are often layered (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Thornton et al., 2012), with bureaucratic, professional, and democratic values coexisting and sometimes conflicting within the relevant institutional field. For example, an administratively focused logic might emphasize compliance while profession-based logics stress competence and democracy-aligned ones appeal to equity and transparency. Institutional change therefore involves negotiating among coexisting schemata rather than replacing one with another. The associated layered configuration produces both tensions and opportunities for institutional entrepreneurs wishing to dovetail digital transformation with multiple, sometimes contradictory legitimacy demands.

Institutional Imbalance Creating a Need for Complementarity

Given the prevailing imbalance, no single public organization can balance all three institutional pillars effectively. Since smaller entities often exhibit flexibility and close stakeholder relationships but lack procedural capacity while larger, more sprawling ones typically possess robust governance systems but show limited adaptability, inter-organizational digital transformation based on meshing of the various strengths provides an avenue for rebalancing, evening out the institutional asymmetries (see Schweitzer et

al., 2021). For actors such as municipalities, collaboration functions thus, as a corrective mechanism that enables the entities' collective digital transformation without eroding any of the entities' institutional legitimacy.

Institutional Reflexivity As Learned Rather Than Innate

Institutional theory assumes that actors' awareness of institutional structures, which Weick (1995) and later Tammar Zilber (2011) cast as sensemaking, is distributed unevenly. This assumption holds in the public sector, where routines, proceduralism, and attention to regulations often dominate such that room for institutional reflexivity often emerges only through boundary-spanning collaboration. Actors exposed to multiple institutional contexts, such as inter-municipality partnerships, develop greater capacity to perceive the constructed nature of institutions and to act entrepreneurially. This collaboration is not just a means of institutional change; it also stimulates institutional awareness.

Institutional Change in the Public Sector: Evolutionary, Not Revolution

Unlike market contexts where disruptive change may be feasible, public-sector institutions evolve incrementally through layering and recombination (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Streeck & Thelen, 2005). That is, as indicated above, institutional entrepreneurs seldom dismantle existing systems; instead, they add further practices, and the addition gradually reconfigures institutional fields. Municipalities' digital transformation, then, is better understood as a process of institutional adaptation (integrating new digital logics into set governance frameworks) than as radical institutional disruption. Empirical studies of digital transformation attest to this incremental-development pattern. For instance, Maria Annosi et al. (2022) found that shifts in institutional logics occur through gradual reinterpretation rather than rupture, as organizations experiment with new practices within old structures. Likewise, Luis Luna-Reyes et al. (2020) observed that digital-government capabilities evolve through continuous learning that reconfigures the institutional arrangements rather than via wholesale replacement.

Context is Key

Finally, institutional theory's application to public-sector settings must recognize contextual asymmetries in authority, accountability, and public value creation (see Christensen et al., 2019; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). Applying institutional theory without adapting it to a public-governance logic risks overstating the role of market-force-like pressures and underestimating the enduring influence of the state, government structures, and public legitimacy. Therefore, my project adopted the working assumption that institutional theory in public administration requires calibration to the context. The framework has to maintain sensitivity to the state's unique institutional configurations and to collective forms of agency. This context-based calibration is especially critical in the digital era. As Berente and Seidel have argued (2022), digital transformation introduces strikingly new institutional logics that interweave technology-, bureaucracy-, and democracy-based principles. In parallel reflections, Orlikowski and Scott (2023) noted that, since sociomaterial dynamics now underpin institutional change, scholars need to examine how technologies and human actors produce legitimacy together. Powell and DiMaggio (2023) contend that institutional theory itself must evolve to address digital forces while retaining its focus on embeddedness and legitimacy. Showing the way in this regard, Ana Colovic et al. (2025) have demonstrated how digital-innovation intermediaries help institutionalize digital transition by linking technical infrastructure with policy frameworks.

The Wider Backdrop of Theory

Together, the assumptions presented above offer me a framing of institutional theory for public-sector inquiry. In summary, while institutional theory provides valuable conceptual tools, its classical equilibrium model (with the load evenly balanced across the pillars and focus on individuals' entrepreneurship) does not apply as-is to bureaucratic systems. The public sector's asymmetric institutional architecture, rigid regulatory controls, layered logics, and collective forms of agency demand an expanded perspective on institutions. From the standpoint required, inter-organizational digital transformation is not a peripheral governance mechanism

but a core institutional process that maintains stability and transformation simultaneously.

These conclusions are consistent with recent contributions reaffirming the necessity of institutional theory for understanding such collaborative transformation endeavors in the digital age. Integrating sociomaterial and institutional perspectives (see Berente & Seidel, 2022; Orlikowski & Scott, 2023) enables a more nuanced explanation of how public organizations balance stability with innovation. In pursuit of precisely such understanding, I have conceptualized inter-organizational digital transformation as a form of collective institutional entrepreneurship that reconciles technological change with persistent demands for public legitimacy.

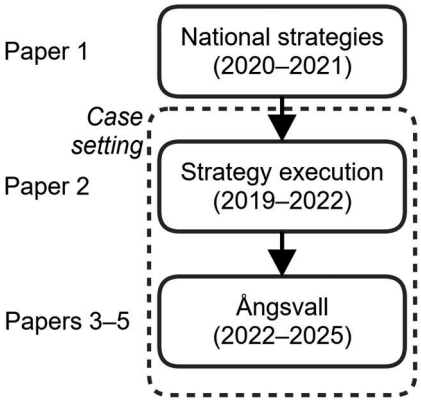
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

This chapter presents the methodological approach behind the dissertation and explains how the research design supports investigation of the central research question. It begins with an outline of the ontological and epistemological stance underpinning the work, followed by a detailed description of the empirical settings, data-collection procedures, and analysis techniques used for each of the five studies conducted. Particular attention is given to the abductive and phenomenon-driven logic of inquiry, in which iterative engagement with empirical puzzles progressively shaped construction of the phenomenon examined. The final portion of the chapter addresses trustworthiness, ethics considerations, and methodological limitations; this material testifies to the rigor and transparency of the research process.

Figure 3, below, presents an overview of the studies conducted for the thesis, arranged as a timeline of the research.

Figure 3. An overview and simple timeline of the papers and studies



Paper 1 lays the conceptual foundation for the subsequent studies by identifying complementarity as a crucial dimension of municipal digital transformation. It highlights how large and small differ and introduces the opportunity to leverage their different strengths, such as efficiency and innovation, to pursue shared digital goals. Paper 2 builds on this insight by emphasizing the role of the individual in institutions and on the role, of unintended consequences in the shaping of social reality. It explores how actors who deviate from established norms can act as catalysts for organizational change, introducing the notion of polyphonic strategy, where multiple voices and perspectives collectively drive transformation.

The core focus of this thesis, however, is a qualitative longitudinal case study of the entity "Ångsvall," a partnership between two Swedish municipalities: Ånge and Sundsvall. This case is analyzed in papers 3–5, which elaborate on inter-municipality collaboration (Paper 3), the strategies used for ensuring equitable collaboration (Paper 4), and the enactment of institutional entrepreneurship in inter-municipality collaboration for digital transformation (Paper 5).

Together, these five papers form a cumulative understanding of how actors awaken to digital inequalities, recombine institutional capacities, and engage in collective institutional entrepreneurship to build more equitable and resilient forms of digital governance.

3.1 RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY: ONTOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL ANGLES

This dissertation is solidly grounded in a phenomenon-driven approach that entails specific ontological and epistemological commitments. At the ontological level, the research was informed by a stance of critical realism, whereby the phenomenon of collective institutional entrepreneurship in public-sector digital transformation was approached as both real and socially constructed. On one hand, municipalities encounter material constraints, institutional logics, and digital infrastructure that exist in causal relations with the possibilities for transformation. On the other hand, these realities are continuously shaped and reinterpreted through the actions, sensemaking, and strategies of organizational actors. Critical realism provides middle ground between positivist realism and strong social constructivism by recognizing the layered nature of reality: generative mechanisms exist but are only partially accessible through experience (Bhaskar, 2013; Wynn & Williams, 2012). This perspective permits analysis to acknowledge both structures (institutions, governance logics, digital infrastructure, etc.) and agency (entrepreneurship, deviant workplace behavior, collaboration, etc.).

In its epistemology, the research employed a phenomenon-driven and abductive orientation. Accordingly, the knowledge presented in this thesis did not grow out of proceeding from any fixed theoretical gap; neither did I seek to apply and test an existing theory in a new setting. Instead, the research was guided by empirical anomalies and puzzles that grew visible from engagement with municipalities and their digital transformation efforts. The project's iterative process of moving between data and theory reflects my abductive approach to reasoning (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Peirce, 1934), in which surprising empirical insight can stimulate reconsideration of existing concepts and the gradual construction of new ones. Abduction is particularly well suited to phenomenon-driven research because it allows for flexibility and emergence while still producing theory-anchored meaningful insight (Fisher et al., 2021; Van de Ven, 2007).

The positioning of this dissertation responds to the broader paradigmatic debates in organization and IS research. My interpretive approach resonates also with the Matrix metaphor of awakening: the task of the

researcher is to learn to see the institutional code that structures action without assuming a position outside it.

G. Burrell and G. Morgan (1979) famously identified four paradigms of social-science research, contrasting among functionalist, interpretive, radical humanist, and radical structuralist positions. This dissertation does not fit neatly into any of these categories; rather, it reflects the hybrid stance enabled by critical realism, which bridges structural explanations with interpretive sensitivity (see Mingers, 2004). In the IS field, critical realism has proven particularly influential in guiding research designed to uncover generative mechanisms in socio-technical change while avoiding both technological determinism and pure social constructivism (Smith, 2006; Wynn & Williams, 2012).

This abductive orientation is visible in the progression across the five papers. Initial intuition coalescing around differences between large and small municipalities led to uncovering complementary strategic positions in the areas of efficiency and innovation. Inspired to consider whether combining such capabilities could be critical for future digital transformation, I embarked on the study reported upon in the second paper, which highlighted the role of deviant workplace behavior in producing polyphonic strategy. Whereas that paper gives attention to institutional entrepreneurship's importance at the level of individuals, the third one deals with the phenomenon of collective digital transformation. Considering this second angle expanded the view toward inter-municipality collaboration, leading to research that clarified the role of institutional entrepreneurship in such collective efforts. Paper 4 reports on this, and Paper 5 extends the understanding to inter-organizational digital transformation more broadly.

The epistemological commitment of this thesis is therefore neither to theory-testing nor to atheoretical description but to an engaged form of theorizing that treats the phenomenon as the central source of knowledge. This aligns with calls for phenomenon-driven research that balances rigor with relevance (see Gregory & Henfridsson, 2021); that embraces a constructive role for the researcher in shaping the phenomenon (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2024a); and that employs abductive cycles of discovery, connection, and theorizing (Fisher et al., 2021).

Together, taking an ontological stance sensitive to digital transformation in municipalities as both materially real and socially constructed and

adopting an epistemological one that emphasizes a knowledge-creation path of abductive, phenomenon-driven theorizing situated my commitments for a research design that is highly context-aware, open to emergence, and capable of generating theory-linked insight that remains closely connected to practice.

3.1.1 THE APPROACH SITUATED IN RELATION TO INTERPRETIVE IS RESEARCH

The work's positioning in relation to the IS field's interpretive tradition is best approached by considering my critical-realist, abductive approach in terms of the principles developed by K. H. Klein and M. D. Myers (1999, 2001) for evaluating the quality of interpretive field studies. This adds another dimension to the foundations for the research design described below. Interpretive research has long held centrality in the information-systems field's activities. With its tools for studying meaning-making, social construction, and the relations between technology and context, this well-established tradition builds on hermeneutics and phenomenology by means of iterative interpretation, contextualization, and co-construction of meaning with participants. Widely applied in IS research ever since their introduction, the seven principles of Klein and Myers provide a touchstone for judging how well this path leads to knowledge in particular cases.

While aligned with the interpretive tradition, my project followed its own path in several significant ways. Firstly, the study adhered to reflexive and engaged epistemology shaped by my role of both researcher and practitioner. Rather than apply interpretive principles only, I approached reflexivity as an ontological condition of the research itself; knowledge emerged through my embeddedness in the municipalities of Sundsvall and Ånge. Managing this insider role necessitated mechanisms for systematic reflexive practice. Keeping a detail-level field diary in particular aided in iteratively tracing how my interpretations evolved and how theoretical abstractions became tied back to practice (Alvesson et al., 2008; Finlay, 2002b).

Table 1 sets the descriptions supplied by Klein and Myers' for an interpretive approach alongside the epistemological and ontological stance underpinning this thesis.

Table 1. Comparison of approaches

Dimension	**The interpretive approach of Klein and Myers**	**My epistemological and ontological approach**
Philosophical grounding	Rooted in hermeneutics and phenomenology, drawing on work by Gadamer and Ricoeur (see Klein & Myers, 1999)	Grounded in social constructivism and institutional theory, with emphasis on reflexivity and practice (per Alvesson et al., 2008; Van de Ven, 2007)
Ontological stance	Assumes that reality is socially constructed and accessible through participants' meanings (see Klein & Myers, 2001)	Views digital transformation as a dynamic, institutionally contested process enacted through practice and collaboration.
Epistemological stance	Takes knowledge as arising from construction of meaning between researcher and participants, as evaluated via seven interpretively aligned principles (see Klein & Myers, 1999)	Regards knowledge as co-produced through dialogue, reflexive engagement, and the researcher's hybrid role of practitioner and scholar (see Finlay, 2002b; Van de Ven, 2007)
Researcher's role	Applies an interaction principle acknowledging that the researcher shapes and is shaped by the field (see Klein & Myers, 1999)	Regards the researcher as both insider and scholar; with reflexivity as methodological but ontological too; a field diary serves to document and analyze positionality
Methodological orientation	Offers seven guiding principles: the hermeneutic circle, contextualization, interaction, abstraction, dialogue-based reasoning, multiplicity of interpretations, and suspicion (see Klein & Myers, 1999)	Employs reflexive practice, engaged scholarship, and institutional analysis to trace collective digital transformation across municipalities
Focus of analysis	Concentrates on understanding of meaning, on sensemaking, and on socially constructed contexts (see Klein & Myers, 2001)	Focuses on understanding institutional change, power, and equity-linked tensions as inscribed in public-sector digital transformation (see Guillemin & Gillam, 2004)
Contribution to knowledge	Sets criteria for quality in interpretive research and supplies a framework for methodological rigor in IS (see Klein & Myers, 1999)	Advances theorization on collective institutional entrepreneurship and demonstrates reflexivity as a bridge between scholarship and practice

This comparison illustrates my study's vantage point: anchored in interpretive traditions yet extending beyond them. While I share interpretivists' concern with meaning and context, I found value in explicitly foregrounding reflexivity, institutional dynamics, and the hybrid researcher-and-practitioner role as core epistemological and ontological commitments. This nuanced real-world perspective contributes to the ongoing evolution of interpretive research into information systems by showing how engaged scholarship imbued with strong reflexive practice can enrich institutional analysis of such phenomena as digital transformation.

3.1.2 DOVETAILING RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Throughout my work, I have not merely managed but actively utilized my duality as a resource for knowledge creation. Rather than view professional engagement as a source of bias to be neutralized, my research treated it as an epistemological bridge. The aim was a marriage of research and practice, a mode of inquiry wherein theory-building and practical engagement co-evolve (Cunliffe, 2016; Tsoukas, 2009; Van de Ven, 2007).

Reflexivity has become a defining feature of contemporary organization and management research, fields in which knowledge is increasingly understood as situated, relational, and constructed through engagement (Alvesson et al., 2008; Finlay, 2002b). Rather than chase detached objectivity in vain, reflexive practice recognizes that the researcher's institutional positioning, professional values, and everyday acts actively shape both the research process and its outcomes.

My own reflexive practice was shaped by the overlapping identities of a researcher within the Digital Government Research Consortium at the University of Gothenburg's Swedish Center for Digital Innovation and an officer of the municipalities of Ånge and Sundsvall. This intersection shaped how I formulated questions, accessed sites, interpreted events, and theorized about digital transformation. Following L. Finlay's (2002a) metaphor of the reflexive swamp, I navigated terrain of introspective reflection, intersubjective dialogue, and collaborative engagement, complementary windows to how public-sector digital transformation unfolds in practice.

For me, then, reflexivity was not an abstract methodological stance but lived practice embedded in the rhythms of both scholarship and admin-

istration. Through field notes, debriefing with peers, and collaborative workshops, I traced how interpretations emerged, evolved, and at times displayed conflict. The notes especially functioned as a methodological and ethics device. Hence, the field diary served as both a site for systematically recording impressions, tensions, and dilemmas and a space to revisit how my insider perspective shaped meaning-making.

This research/practice integration expresses the tradition of engaged scholarship (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014; Van de Ven, 2007), which emphasizes joint production of knowledge by academics and practitioners. Rather than treat these as separate worlds, I chose to situate these two arenas productively as mutually constitutive, each informing and challenging the other.

The study resonated in particular with the approach described by Haridimos Tsoukas (2009), who defined engaged scholarship as a dialogue-based emergent affair relying on continuous negotiation of perspectives: my empirical material was constructed with municipal actors whose contributions were treated as inputs to theory-building dialogue rather than as data to be extracted. Positioning myself within both the academic and the practitioner sphere let me recognize and instrumentalize the tensions between analyst's distance and pragmatist's action.

This dovetailing served three intertwined purposes. Methodologically, it enhanced the study's credibility, reliability, and confirmability through transparent documentation, systematic reflexive auditing, and overall attunement to assuring of traceable and accountable interpretations and analysis decisions (see Darawsheh, 2014; Wynn & Williams, 2012). Ethically, it maintained integrity by fostering attentiveness to what M. Guillemin and L. Gillam (2004) termed "ethically important moments," those instances by which the researcher's positioning, decisions, or interpretations actualize implications for participants and organizational relationships. Finally, in a scholarly–practical sense, the approach generated actionable findings that advanced both theory and the practical craft of municipal digital transformation, illustrating how engaged scholarship can bridge analytical depth with relevance to practice (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2024a; Van de Ven, 2007).

Far from undermining attention to rigor, reflexivity strengthened methodological robustness in this implementation. By tracing interpreta-

tions paths, management of subjective judgments, etc., applying it created an audit trail linking theory to lived practice. Triangulation, member checking, and co-coding procedures helped balance insider proximity with outsider distance. These practices and my overall approach to reflexivity enabled identifying "double exposures": (sites of juncture between academic abstraction and organizational realities), where institutional work became visible and theorizing possible.

Thus, the dissertation contributes to a wider methodological movement that views reflexivity as a form of epistemic responsibility (Cunliffe, 2016; Hibbert et al., 2019). Openly acknowledging positionality, power, and voice supports aims of generating knowledge that is simultaneously rigorous, context-grounded, and socially useful. In sum, in keeping with Alvesson and Sandberg's (2024a) notion of reflexive theorizing, I treated subjectivity as an engine of insight rather than a source of contamination. Reflexivity enabled the identification of the aforementioned double exposures abstraction and organizational realities where institutional work became visible and theorizing possible.

Through these practices, the dissertation contributes to a broader methodological movement that views reflexivity as a form of epistemic responsibility (Cunliffe, 2016; Hibbert et al., 2019). By openly acknowledging positionality, power, and voice, the study aims to produce knowledge that is simultaneously rigorous, context-grounded, and socially useful.

Practitioner-Researcher Motives and Stepping In

To explicate how this productive positioning came about, I turn first to how the endeavor began, with my entry into the research. Bearing the two-pronged institutional identity referred to above, with the Sundsvall and Ånge municipalities and as a university researcher, I occupied decision arenas, steering fora, and arenas of everyday practices that are typically inaccessible to external scholars. In parallel, I engaged at national level through inter-municipality networks, guidance committees, and working groups, thereby collaborating with numerous public organizations, of various sorts. Supplementing depth from the focal cases with breadth from this multi-level involvement extended my empirical access in a manner that afforded comparative understanding of patterns, governance tensions, and boundary conditions across contexts.

Such proximity afforded a rare vantage point for studying inter-organizational digital transformation as lived practice, yet it also entailed an ethical and epistemological imperative to lay bare and constantly consider how my position influenced what I could observe and how I interpreted it (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014; Cunliffe, 2016; Finlay, 2002b). Again, I accepted this positioning not as a methodological liability but as an epistemic resource that enabled a richer, situated form of theorizing via what A. H. Van de Ven (2007) called engaged scholarship. Researcher and practitioner jointly construct meaning and actionable insight.

The research motive emerged from challenges surfacing repeatedly in settings of municipal digital transformation. Among their sources were fragmented IT landscapes, legacy dependencies, procurement logics that curtail innovation, and size-related asymmetry between municipalities, with short-termism driven by budget cycles and electoral politics only compounding the frustrations. Yet, as I amassed professional experience, I repeatedly witnessed something else too: complementarity in action. Smaller municipalities' agility and experimental drive could pair fruitfully with the capacity and procedural robustness of larger ones. Witnessing these patterns informed the research aim: to theorize on how municipalities engage in inter-organizational digital transformation and on how such collaboration can become a mechanism of institutional change that offsets asymmetry problems, fosters equity, and sustains digital transformation over time.

Maintaining balance in the duality of practitioner and researcher identities required continuous reflexive calibration (see Cunliffe, 2016; Hibbert et al., 2014). To manage the potential for role conflict and interpretive bias, I adhered to the aforementioned systematic methods for handling reflexivity throughout the study (see Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017; Darawsheh, 2014): maintaining a contemporaneous reflexive diary documented the analysis decisions, emergence of interpretations, and responses to ethics dilemmas; regular briefings and debriefings with peers, colleagues in the municipal setting and academic supervisors both, held up a critical mirror that spotlighted assumptions and maintained interpretive distance (Coghian, 2001); and co-coding of key empirical materials, by testing alternative readings/interpretations, enhanced the credibility and dependability of the analysis (Wynn & Williams, 2012).

All participants gave informed consent, with secondary consent obtained for quoting of comments. To minimize undue influence, I avoided interviewing direct subordinates and remained open about my dual role throughout the research process (see Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Whenever participants or peers questioned interpretations, I revisited them and documented any revisions in the diary, for full traceability and accountability. These methodological safeguards complemented the trustworthiness framework, described below, and the ethics protocols outlined further along, in Section 3.4.

Ultimately, practitioner–scholar duality, coupling insider access with methodological self-critique, grew central to the research design. Real-world practice supplied lived institutional realities to ground the theorizing, while academic discipline rendered those realities analytically visible and conceptually transferable. The result is a form of situated theorizing (Tsoukas, 2017) that fuses practical insight with theoretical abstraction. This reflexive integration, embodying the principle of dovetailing research and practice, advances the ideal of engaged scholarship by showing how public-sector insiders can simultaneously inform institutional theory and inform the design of equitable governance for digital transformation.

3.2 THE RESEARCH SETTINGS AND DATA COLLECTION

Next, I describe the settings, data sources, and methods via a chronological presentation of the contexts, from the broader national landscape of Sweden (addressed in the initial survey) through the four sub-studies involving the two municipalities.

3.2.1 NATIONAL STRATEGIES (PAPER 1)

For the initial survey, I and my research team collected data from municipalities' top-level steering documents, commonly titled "Budget," "Business Plan," or "Goal and Resource Plan." Swedish law requires municipalities to produce such documents annually to outline their objectives and allocate resources for the coming year. These documents were collected in two rounds of data-gathering, probing all 290 of Sweden's municipalities.

From the round in May 2021 and in May 2022, we were unable to obtain documents from seven and 14 municipalities, respectively. This represents non-response rates of 3% and 6%. To enrich the document-based dataset, we also included demographic data for all municipalities supplying data. That material, from publicly available databases maintained by the Swedish Association for Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR), covered such variables as political majority, municipality size, geographic location, and financial status. Paper 1 gives additional details.

3.2.2 STRATEGY EXECUTION (PAPER 2)

To obtain insight with regard to the role of individuals in strategy execution in digital transformation, we conducted a case study of "deviant workplace behavior." The setting was Sundsvall Municipality. To sensitize ourselves to the case, we referred to secondary data from a broader clinical research initiative aimed at supporting Sundsvall's digital transformation, mainly transcripts of 65 interviews with stakeholders across the municipal landscape: politicians, administrative personnel, and staff members from municipally owned companies. Our analysis did not cover this material, which served to inform our background understanding of the organizational context. Primary data collection, carried out in spring 2021, took the form of 15 semi-structured interviews. Our sampling strategy for these applied three criteria identified in literature on deviant workplace behavior: balance of positions in the hierarchy (Moon, 2021), proximity to digital-transformation processes (Christ-Brendemühl & Schaarschmidt, 2019), and tenure (Appelbaum et al., 2019). Hence, we interviewed three senior managers, four mid-level managers, three team leaders, and five frontline civil servants. For additional details, see Paper 2.

3.2.3 ÅNGSVALL (PAPERS 3–5)

The rest of the research was set in both municipalities, Sundsvall and Ånge, between 2021 and 2025. Both are in northern Sweden. Sundsvall, which has nearly 100,000 residents and 8,600 public-sector employees, is recognized as one of Sweden's trailblazers in digital transformation within the municipal domain. Its neighbor Ånge, with corresponding figures of

roughly 9,200 and 1,050, is among the country's smallest municipalities. While Sweden is widely regarded as a welfare state, smaller municipalities such as Ånge struggle with access to resources and competencies needed for secure digital infrastructure, programs, and applications. In response to this inequality, the national government supported an initiative for collaboration between the two municipalities. Its seeds were planted in 2021 when Ånge's chief executive officer approached Sundsvall's CEO and CIO to discuss the potential for shared IT infrastructure and services. The partnership between Ånge and Sundsvall, dubbed Ångsvall, allowed Ånge to accelerate its digital transformation by utilizing Sundsvall's resources while Sundsvall benefited from the more efficient digital innovation enabled by Ånge's agility as an innovation hub (Teljebäck et al., 2023). By early 2022, Ånge's CEO and Sundsvall's CIO had formalized the partnership via a memorandum of intent, thereby establishing shared IT operations and further cooperation. A formal agreement regulated terms and allowed for amicable withdrawal, though neither party has invoked the exit clause. In mid-2022, the initiative gained recognition from Sweden's Experimental Activities Committee as an excellent example of innovative collaboration. The project officially concluded in December 2024 but continues to evolve.

Informing papers 3–5, semi-structured interviews conducted in four rounds, between 2021 and 2024 (see Table 2), covered the initiative's progression from its initial phase to final phase as defined by the representatives of the participating municipalities. The research team interviewed 53 individuals in all: the institutional entrepreneurs involved and other key actors in the initiative, such as managers responsible for strategy and governance, IT managers, human-resources specialists and chief human-relations officers, CIOs and CDOs, chief financial officers, CEOs, communication officers, vice presidents for selected aspects of operations, and politicians. Designing the sampling to capture both the institutional entrepreneurs' perspectives on the process and the views of other stakeholders established comprehensive understanding of the initiative. Spreading out the interviews over time enabled tracking the evolution of the digital-transformation dynamics and examining the institutional entrepreneurs' activities at multiple points in this process.

The longitudinal approach provided a richer sense of how the activities, challenges, and strategic actions shifted over time. Meanwhile, incorporating perspectives from different stakeholders broadened the picture on other dimensions. This, in combination with attentiveness to power dynamics during the interviews, helped to minimize potential biases. Also, regularly engaging in reflexive discussions internal to the research team aided in critically examining the emerging interpretations and guaranteed balanced representation of views.

Table 2, below, presents an overview of the data collected for the doctoral project: from semi-structured interviews, steering documents, and the researcher diary/logbook. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and subsequently translated into English. For further information on the implementation, please consult papers 3–5. The individual papers provide additional details on the coding and analysis in each constituent study.

Table 2. The data collected

Study topic	**Type of data**	**Quantity**
National strategies (Paper 1)	High-level steering documents	559 documents
Strategy execution (Paper 2)	Secondary: semi-structured interviews	65 documents
	Primary: semi-structured interviews	15 documents
Ångsvall (Papers 3–5)	Semi-structured interviews (Ånge) and steering documents	Round 1: 3, round 2: 4, round 3: 5, round 4: 6 36 steering documents (joint)
	Semi-structured interviews (Sundsvall) and steering documents	Round 1: 8, round 2: 12, round 3: 5, round 4: 10 36 steering documents (joint)
	Totals:	*133 semi-structured interviews* *595 documents* *47 logbook (field-diary) entries*

3.3 TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE RESEARCH

Employing the framework established by Y. S. Lincoln and E. G. Guba (1985) as synthesized in N. A. Stahl and J. R. King's work (2020), I assess the trustworthiness of this dissertation below across four dimensions: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Each is addressed in relation to the design and execution of the five papers produced.

3.3.1 CREDIBILITY

Defined as the congruence between findings and reality, credibility gains support through multiple forms of triangulation, member checking, peers' input/feedback, and reflexivity. My research's methodological triangulation entailed a combination of qualitative case studies, interviews, document analysis, and consideration of secondary data across all five studies.

Theoretical triangulation, in turn, manifests itself in the application of multiple conceptual lenses: institutional entrepreneurship, digital transformation, and collective-action theories each informed particular stages of analysis. This reflects phenomenon-driven research's way of adapting and expanding the theory in response to the findings as they develop (see Alvesson & Sandberg, 2024a; Fisher et al., 2021). Finally, I achieved environmental triangulation by investigating municipalities with different sizes, demographics, and organizational culture.

Regular consulting with peers brought supervisors and colleagues into the picture as noted above. Alongside this mutual process of briefing and debriefing, credibility received further support from institutional checks via ethics-approval procedures and member checking wherein interpretations of municipal practices were discussed with practitioners in workshop and feedback-check sessions. Extended engagement assured familiarity with the evolving digital-transformation agendas through several years of fieldwork, constituting prolonged engagement and persistent observation. Reflexive self-analysis, visible in the iterative redefinition of the phenomenon in the course of the research, added a further pillar of credibility, and prioritizing thick description (Geertz, 2017) in each paper aided in conveying contextual depth.

3.3.2 TRANSFERABILITY

The notion of transferability addresses the extent to which the findings may be valid in other contexts. Thick description of the municipal settings, including discussion of organizational structures, digital initiatives, and institutional environments, supports this aim. Each paper provides sufficient contextual detail to let readers judge whether the insight offered is likely to hold in other municipalities, regions, or public-sector organizations, in Sweden or abroad. This equips the reader to take responsibility for naturalistic generalization amid the inherent difficulties of transferability in public-sector studies as identified by F. Bannister (2007). In any case, the inclusion of diverse municipalities enhances the likelihood of finding useful parallels to one's own contexts.

Rather than present the findings as universally generalizable, my research output positions them as "lessons from elsewhere" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For instance, I do not assign law-like status to the finding that large municipalities emphasize efficiency while small ones emphasize innovation; rather, this represents empirical insight that can inspire comparative inquiry in other public-sector contexts. Similarly, the phenomenon of polyphonic strategy, presented in Paper 2, holds potential as a lens for understanding the complex decision-making in digital transformation but a lens that must be adjusted to the context.

3.3.3 DEPENDABILITY

A notion paralleling that of reliability, dependability refers to consistency and transparency. Several mechanisms have enhanced this aspect of my work. Consistent scrutiny by peers was one of them: supervisors and co-authors reviewed data interpretations, and all papers underwent peer review connected with academic journals and conferences. Augmenting this, reflexive analysis and bracketing functioned to distinguish between empirical observations and the researcher's interpretations. For example, field notes and coding memos explicitly recorded emerging concepts, thus elucidating the separation between data and theory-building.

Reflexive auditing constituted another vital feature. Accordingly, the dissertation is able to trace the researcher's evolving role and understand-

ing across the five papers with full openness. Revealing the "muddling through" trajectory, with each study progressively honing the phenomenon, reflects transparent documentation of decision-making. Furthermore, anticipation of peer review made sure that the findings were presented clearly and consistently enough to behoove research scrutinized by academic and practitioner audiences alike.

The approach chosen honors well-regarded recommendations for critical-realist case-study research, which prioritize transparency in documenting the steps of analysis, maintaining clear links between data and claims, and identifying the causal mechanisms (Wynn & Williams, 2012).

3.3.4 CONFIRMABILITY

Finally, the findings should be grounded in data rather than researcher feelings. Confirmability was supported by systematic coding systems, proper documentation of the data collection, and appropriate analysis protocols and storage of transcripts. Audit trails cover all these elements. I pursued precision and accuracy in the reporting, largely through clear distinctions between empirical evidence and interpretive claims. When the research was collaborative, co-authors provided a further layer of verification as the interpretations were cross-checked and debated.

Although the research involved active involvement in the case environments, care was taken to avoid over-identification with participants. I sought to guarantee findings that grew out of critical analysis of observed practices rather than descriptions constructed to mesh with political agendas. The iterative, abductive approach itself enhanced confirmability, in that surprising findings served as opportunities for theory development rather than as anomalies to be explained away. Again, this reflects the critical-realist principle of methodological transparency and rigor in pursuing objectivity via qualitative inquiry (Wynn & Williams, 2012).

3.4 ETHICS CONSIDERATIONS

Deciding to pursue a PhD while serving as both CIO and CDO of two public organizations immediately presented persistent ethics considerations. The demands of fulfilling professional obligations while striving

for academic rigor made the choice neither obvious nor easy. While the only straightforward way to reconcile the workload was through meaningful overlap between my research and my livelihood, this convergence between professional responsibility and scholarly inquiry brought with it a host of critical ethics dilemmas, linked to objectivity, neutrality, influence, and potential conflicts of interest. Against the backdrop of current ethics guidelines and related scholarship (e.g., Hård af Segerstad, 2021; Markham et al., 2018; Zimmer, 2018), this section of the chapter examines the ethics dimensions of conducting such research as both participant and investigator. Addressing central issues such as informed consent, confidentiality, privacy, risk of harm, and positionality, it grapples with their presence in the research process and outlines how I mitigated the associated risks in a manner that upholds solid ethics, supporting both scientific integrity and credibility.

3.4.1 THE RESEARCH CONTEXT AND ITS ETHICS LANDSCAPE

The research setting itself already perturbed traditional institutional boundaries and practices. Namely, digital fusion of two municipalities with vastly different size (in roughly 1:10 scale by population) heralded disruption not only to the IT systems in place but also to the core business processes of both municipalities. Activity in the initiative under study was experimental in nature yet supported at national level. My own activities in its design and execution added ethical complexity to the picture: I would be studying this transformation from within while helping lead it. One aspect of the challenge involved ascertaining whether my pursuit of research-stimulated insight was shaping any of my business decisions (or vice versa); after all, as DiMaggio (1988) noted, institutional entrepreneurship is rooted in actors' pursuit of valued interests. In response, I readjusted my analysis lens to examine institutional entrepreneurship rather than institutional work in general. This choice, which involved explicitly acknowledging my active and interested positioning, necessitated heightened ethical scrutiny and ongoing reflection on how methodological, personal, and professional interests intertwine. The stakes are higher when the researcher seeks not to describe alone but to intervene, contribute, and effect societal change in a clinical tradition (Schein, 1989).

3.4.2 INFORMED CONSENT

Clear information in written form that specified each constituent study's aims, the procedures, and participants' rights was supplied to everyone potentially taking part, in a manner consistent with M. P. Zimmer's recommendations (2018). Informed consent was obtained before participation, with emphasis on anonymity, voluntary involvement, and the right to withdraw at any point. At this juncture, I could delineate an ethics complication arising from being a research subject myself. While my consent is implicit, situations arose wherein my contributions even via informal conversations entered the dataset, so I had to evaluate periodically whether, in the interest of conscious, explicit consent, spontaneous interactions should be excluded for the sake of ethical clarity. This situation is analogous to that I faced when informants requested confidentiality mid-interview in connection with sensitive matters. I had to be ready for immediate adaptation to guarantee participant comfort and support from the whole research team.

Maintaining confidentiality is central to ethical research. Given the small number of participants and the context's specificity, there is a significant risk of informants' identification, even through anonymized data. Sensitive quotes are often essential to deep analysis but pose risks when tied to known individuals or political relationships. To minimize this constellation of concerns, all quotes used in publications were cleared through a secondary consent process, for guaranteed continued trust, and all transcripts were coded and stored securely within EU-based infrastructure in accordance with University of Gothenburg protocols. Only members of the relevant research team have access to the archived material, and all identifiers have been removed from it. Video recordings were deleted in line with relevant data-retention policies.

Finally, I recognize that the duality of my role increases the risk of breaching confidentiality. As a senior organizational figure, I might recognize information about colleagues or even inadvertently reveal it, thus potentially compromising their privacy. For example, when analyzing anonymized transcripts, one can often infer the identity of one's close colleagues even when names are omitted. While there may be little risk to them, the ethics dimension still must be acknowledged.

3.4.3 RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY AND CONFLICTING INTERESTS

From a complex position of institutional actor and researcher, I took part in shaping strategy, managing change, influencing staff behavior, and analytically interpreting the associated dynamics I may have influenced. Obviously, risks of bias and conflict of interest follow. As Y. Hård af Segerstad (2021) emphasized, such configurations demand greater ethical awareness and transparency. In my case, there were two main risks to contend with: of angling interpretations of the data to align with preexisting beliefs or desired outcomes and of letting academic curiosity rather than organizational necessity affect my professional decisions, as pointed out above. This ethically weighty cultural-cognitive tension was amplified by my commitment to the transformation project: its success represented both an empirical focus and a personal objective.

Acutely aware that the same insider status that may grant deeper access and context (Blythe et al., 2013) may compromise critical distance, I knew that I had to remain vigilant about distinguishing between empirical insight and self-justifying narratives. Frequent collaboration with peers helped counterbalance the potential for bias. In addition, the research team discussing the insider/outsider dynamic frankly and at length created a route for further input and support.

3.4.4 EQUITABLE TREATMENT AND RISK OF HARM

Although my research carried no physical or medical risks, it did imply a risk of social, psychological, or professional harm, through fears of reprisal for candid comments, misunderstanding how the data might be used, etc. Some informants explicitly voiced concerns about quotes being traced back to them by coworkers or managers. To mitigate harm, interviews were paused or even terminated if discomfort arose. Data that could expose participants, especially from the smaller municipality, were handled with particular care. Additionally, the research design was developed to avoid comparing municipalities in a prejudicial manner. For instance, we eschewed judging institutional work in terms of aggregate word counts, which might prove disfavorable to smaller or less outspoken actors, and

opted instead for interpretive, intention-based analysis that better respects context and equity. This decision ties in with marginalization concerns raised in the early stages (addressed in papers 3–5): because most informants were from Sundsvall, underrepresenting the significantly smaller Ånge entailed potential for sidelining its perspective unless the work featured conscious inclusion efforts. Whereas institutional theory often treats actors as interchangeable, this research had to acknowledge local power dynamics and population disparities.

To preclude inequity, the team adapted the data-collection and analysis methods both. Questions were rephrased, interview guides diversified, and coding systems adjusted to prevent dominance by one set of voices. Hence, the research embraced pluralism, recognizing the need to balance utilitarian efficiency with ideals of equity. This balancing act echoes the ethos of collective digital transformation itself: seeking outcomes that are not just effective but also fair and inclusive.

3.4.5 INTERPRETATION OF THE DATA

Interpreting data as both an insider and a researcher always ushers in risks of unintentional manipulation or interpretive bias. Again, while my experience brought contextual richness and meaning-making capacity, it could have blurred the line between evidence and belief. To mitigate this issue, I engaged in collaborative coding with a research colleague who does not share my institutional ties. Aware of a lingering temptation to select data items that support favorable narratives, we actively reflected on such tendencies and developed second- and third-order coding strategies to increase objective distance. This constitutes one more example of approaching ethical integrity as not completing a static checklist but engaging in an ongoing, constantly evolving journey of reflection, dialogue, and adjustment.

3.4.6 POSITIONALITY, CONFLICTS OF INTEREST, AND REFLEXIVITY

Given the practitioner facet to my role, this research incorporated autoethnographic elements that spotlight both advantages brought by privileged access and concomitant risks of bias. Maintaining a reflexive logbook

throughout the project supported awareness of issues bubbling under the surface, as noted above. In addition, an independent researcher reviewed a subset of transcripts, to enable discussing and resolving any discrepancies evident. With an eye to mitigating potential conflicts of interest, I separated research activities from managerial duties wherever doing so was feasible. These procedures made my positionality explicit while restricting its influence on the data collection, analysis, and writing.

3.4.7 USE OF GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Throughout the development of this dissertation, I have employed generative artificial intelligence as a reflection-supporting collaborator in the process of scholarly inquiry. Rather than engage in it as a substitute for academic work, the AI system functioned as a conversation partner providing a springboard for idea exploration, offering alternative formulations, and assisting in refining my writing as a non-native user of English. I approached this interaction much as I would an engaged colleague: by testing out arguments, probing concepts' connections, and iteratively improving the clarity and structure of my text. Therefore, all analysis decisions, interpretations, and theoretical contributions presented in this dissertation are my own.

This reflective, transparent approach to the use of generative AI in scholarly writing aligns well with the stance of emerging guidance, which places stress on integrity, authorship accountability, and disclosure (Hsu et al., 2025; Peters, 2025; Sodangi & Isma'il, 2025). My experience resonates with evidence from recent studies that AI systems can act as dialogue partners extending concepts' exploration and enhancing linguistic precision, provided that their use is openly acknowledged and responsibly governed (Bittle & El-Gayar, 2025; Dahal, 2024; Linder & Nepogodiev, 2025). By viewing AI not as a substitute for critical thought but as a reflective companion in academic reasoning, I take a position consistent with evolving scholarly norms (see Costa et al., 2024; Ganguly et al., 2025). This position finds further grounding in the framework of Ram Gopal et al. (2025), who contend that generative AI is transforming the landscape of IS research by enabling new forms of human–machine co-invention. At what they term the "Level II" or "supercollaborator" stage, AI enhances

ideation, sensemaking, and refinement while preserving essential human judgment and scholarly authorship. This level and their call for proactive, transparent, community-guided engagement with AI in research both mirror the principles underlying my own practice.

Having outlined issues that run the gamut from the cutting-edge AI domain to the age-old dilemma of objectivity/involvement, I hope I have clarified the core principles for tackling the dilemmas encountered throughout this research, with special attention to consent, privacy risks, interpretation of the data, and positionality overall. The intersection of the analyst's role with my position as an actor creates unique challenges but also provides for profound insight into institutional entrepreneurship in collective digital transformation. By foregrounding the associated issues and means of handling them, I aim to enhance the transparency, credibility, and societal relevance of the research, mindful that ethics is not only a framework for responsible conduct but also a method for rigorous inquiry.

CHAPTER 4

THE ASSOCIATED SCHOLARLY PUBLICATIONS

With the groundwork properly laid, I can now present the key findings from the work conducted in response to the research question. The chapter begins with an overview and synopsis of the published papers that form the core of the doctoral project's output, outlining the individual sub-studies' objectives, methods, and outcomes. This is followed by a description of each paper and its contributions, alongside reflection on that paper. Finally, I recapitulate discussion of my role in the respective studies and publications.

4.1 THE JOURNEY OF THE PUBLICATIONS

In the research journey across these five papers, a phenomenon-driven progression wherein each study emerged organically from insight gained in the earlier work, the stepwise evolution began with the initial survey behind Paper 1, in which investigation of nationwide patterns revealed fundamental differences between large and small municipalities in approaches to digital transformation. Discovering that size promotes distinct strategic orientations with complementary strengths prompted questions about mechanisms. These led directly to Paper 2, which zooms in on

local dynamics through the lens of institutional change and deviant behavior. In the study presented there, I discovered how individual actors and small groups significantly influence the implementation of digital strategies, often creating pluralism in strategies' execution. This insight into the human dimension of transformation highlighted unknowns in collective action in digital contexts.

Building on this understanding, I tackled these questions by conceptualizing collective digital transformation as a frame suited to making use of complementary capabilities across organizational boundaries. The research presented in Paper 3 revealed how inter-organizational collaboration could potentially harness the diverse strengths identified in Paper 1 while addressing the pluralism observed in Paper 2. This conceptual advance, in turn, pointed me to practical questions about how such collaboration might be structured and sustained.

The next sub-study therefore emerged as a natural extension, analyzing the dynamics of collective institutional entrepreneurship in the specific context of Ångsvall. By reporting on these, Paper 4 illuminates how new institutional frameworks may be created that support collaborative digital transformation. The work highlighted the critical role of equitable governance in fostering successful partnerships among diverse stakeholders.

The final sub-study brought the research full circle by examining how size differences, first spotlighted in Paper 1, become a keystone generative element in implementation of digital transformation through inter-organizational digital transformation. This paper, directly addressing the equity challenges in collaborative arrangements, emphasizes how collective institutional entrepreneurship must explicitly account for power imbalances, to safeguard equitability of outcomes.

Along the journey, each paper represents a waypoint: a study that can stand on its own but that also responds to questions raised by previous findings. Together, the five form an integrated body of knowledge about digital transformation in public administration. As practitioner and researcher both, I have been able to observe phenomena, derive insight, and immediately apply and test said insight in real-world contexts, thereby establishing a virtuous circle of discovery and application. Thereby, the phenomenon-driven approach represented here has yielded contributions to both theory and practice, offering guidance to municipalities and researchers navigating the complex landscape of digital transformation. Table 3 provides an overview of each paper's specific contributions to this evolving understanding.

Table 3. The papers in a nutshell

PAPER / STUDY / VENUE	RESEARCH QUESTION	CORE THEORIES	CONTENT	THEORY CONTRIBUTIONS	PRACTICE CONTRIBUTIONS
No. 1 / NATIONAL STRATEGIES / "dg.o"	How can theories of drift inform our understanding of shifts in direction of digital transformation strategies in the public sector?	Institutional drift	Mapping Swedens's national landscape of municipal digital transformation initiatives illustrates strategies' orientations and directions, alongside the related potential for the country's collective digital-transformation efforts	Identifies strategic, institutional, and technological drift thus showing how the digital transformation often evolves away from controlled intentions	Support for data-driven policymaking with potential to increase the efficacy of new policies primarily for digital transformation
No. 2 / STRATEGY EXECUTION "TGPPP"	What is the impact of deviant workplace behavior on digital transformation?	Institutional drift	Identifying three types of institutional drift (decelerating digital transformation, maintain infrastructural stability and accelerating digital transformation) and theorizing on the role of deviant workplace behavior as a driver of strategies for digital transformation	Demonstrates constructive and destructive deviance creating "strategic polyphony", through which the tensions get redirected along multiple (sometimes conflicting) trajectories	Identifies deviant workplace behavior as an accelerator for actualizing intent and a means by which managers can improve meeting of prerequisites for strategy-linked choices by design
No. 3 / ÅNGSVALL / "dg.o"	How is collective digital transformation enacted in a collaborative arrangement between two municipalities?	Institutional work	Demonstrating that complementarity fosters sustainable collective digital transformation and mitigates inequalities; elucidating also how safeguarding of uniqueness can function as a rational strategy for enabling rather than resisting institutional change	Via an empirical example of collective digital transformation, shows how institutional work that preserves the complementarity and uniqueness of the parties involved aligns with research into collective ambidexterity	Insight that can assist public organizations in considering non-market-oriented approaches to collaboration along with advocacy for complementarity rather than homogeneity
No. 4 / ÅNGSVALL "AMCIS"	How can institutional entrepreneurs ensure an equitable partnership in inter-municipal collaboration for digital transformation?	Collective institutional entrepreneurship interorganizational collaboration	Identifying strategies and tensions that come into play in the efforts to guarantee equitable collaboration	Conceptualizes institutional entrepreneurship as a trust-based, multi-actor process that mutually aligns the institutional logics and mobilizes dispersed resources for shared digital-welfare goals; identifies strategies and tensions in its driving of equitable collaboration	Awareness that mutual benefits can give impetus to collaborative efforts and of both the power-distribution dynamic and the role of institutional entrepreneurs
No. 5 / ÅNGSVALL "EGOV"	How is institutional entrepreneurship enacted in inter-municipal collaboration for digital transformation?	Institutional entrepreneurship	Identifying three distinct phases of institutional entrepreneurship's enactment: (divergence, convergence, and confluence) that characterize the process of collective digital transformation	Identifies trust-building as institutional work and specifies governance mechanisms that prevent dominance by larger partners	Valuable guidance for municipal managers who might lead similar initiatives; insight that can help institutional entrepreneurs prepare for and navigate the dynamics of institutional change amid transition

4.2 PAPER 1: EXPLORING THE MERITS OF COMPLEMENTARITY

The paper "Digital Transformation Drift: A Population Study of Swedish Municipalities" investigates how digital transformation strategies evolve across municipalities and how this evolution can be understood as a process of drift. The study took a population-level perspective, analyzing the steering documents of all 290 Swedish municipalities over two years (2021–2022). By examining how municipalities allocate resources and set goals related to digital transformation, the paper identifies a gradual shift in strategic direction from efficiency and internal value creation toward innovation and external value. This large-scale empirical analysis yielded a unique overview of how local governments in Sweden collectively navigate digital transformation and how their strategies evolve over time. The approach chosen identifies systematic differences in strategy by context, most centrally by size (small/rural vs. large/urban) and economic policy orientation (deficit vs. surplus).

The study proceeded from the premise that digital transformation entails fundamental organizational change driven by means of digital technologies (Hanelt et al., 2021; Vial, 2019). In the public sector, framings of digitally driven transformation often spotlight transparency, openness, and citizen-centeredness (Janowski, 2015; Kankanhalli et al., 2017), yet prior research offers evidence that municipalities frequently focus their digitalization efforts on internal efficiency rather than on bringing value for citizens (Norling et al., 2022). With this awareness, we set out to understand how municipal strategies are changing and how theories of drift might shed light on the changes. Drift, in this context, refers to unintended or emergent shifts in strategy, the institutional order, or meaning that occur as the transformation unfolds (Baptista et al., 2021; Ciborra et al., 2000; Nielsen et al., 2022; Voronov et al., 2021).

To operationalize the direction of municipal digital-transformation strategies, the study design defined strategy as an intersection of two dimensions: activity and direct value. The activity dimension captures whether strategic initiatives are oriented toward efficiency (exploitation) or instead innovation (exploration), following J. G. March's (1991) organizational-ambidexterity concept and refinements made to it by Mary Ben-

ner and M. Tushman (2003). The notion of the direct-value dimension, inspired by M. Menz et al.'s (2021) and Y. Yoo et al.'s (2010) discussion of the boundary-blurring effects of digitalization, distinguishes between benefiting internal stakeholders (such as municipal employees, their managers, and politicians) and benefiting external ones (such as citizens or other organizations). Together, these dimensions make it possible to assess not only what municipalities do in their digital-transformation efforts but also for whom those activities are designed to create value.

To situate the efforts on these dimensions, the study applied content analysis (per Krippendorff, 2019) of the municipalities' highest-level steering documents. Every mention of "digital*" was extracted and coded in accordance with whether it reflects 1) efficiency or innovation and 2) internal or external value. Considering the results for two consecutive years allowed the analysis to detect shifts in strategy direction that could be interpreted as drift. Finally, integrating demographic data (the municipalities' size, financial status, and political majority) facilitated exploring patterns of variation across the municipal population.

Analysis revealed a clear trend: Sweden's municipalities are collectively drifting toward greater emphasis on innovation and on externally facing value. On average, they moved 2.8 percentage points in both of these directions over the two-year span. The drift was most pronounced among small and rural municipalities, which exhibited a 9.5-point shift toward innovation and a 4.3-point shift toward external value. In contrast, large cities more often displayed minor movements or, in some cases, even a backswing toward efficiency. Moreover, municipalities with a budget deficit showed the strongest drift, suggesting that economic pressure may act as a catalyst for reorientation of strategy. Political orientation had a smaller effect, although left-wing and coalition governments did display a larger shift than right-wing ones. When translated into monetary terms, the aggregate drift corresponds to hypothetical reallocation of approximately €2.2 million to innovation and external value each, on the assumption that digital transformation accounts for one per mille of total municipal costs.

These empirical results were interpreted in light of three complementary theories of drift. The first, institutional drift (Voronov et al., 2021), describes small deviations in everyday practices gradually altering the institutional order from the perspective of growing orientation toward inno-

vation and external value reflecting how individual actors normalize new digital practices within municipal organizations. This interpretation, in which the actors challenge established bureaucratic norms that privilege stability and internal efficiency, is supported by evidence that deviant or experimental practices can drive institutional change in the public sector (Magnusson et al., 2020). Secondly, the theory of strategic drift (Baptista et al., 2021) highlights the material characteristics of technology itself as introducing new action repertoires that shift strategic intent. Accordingly, introducing automation, AI, and similar technologies may reconfigure organizational priorities, thereby steering strategy toward new forms of innovation irrespective of initial plans. Finally, the concept of translational drift (Nielsen et al., 2022) encompasses how ideas such as digital transformation travel across organizational fields, changing meaning as their adoption propagates. In Sweden, national initiatives promoting digital maturity and self-assessment tools have spread interpretations of digital transformation that cohere around innovation and external value; this contributes to a pattern of field-level shifts among municipalities.

The paper cites these results as evidence that digital-transformation strategies in the public sector are not static or centrally controlled; they evolve through a combination of institutional, strategic, and translational dynamics. It presents the argument that drift is not necessarily a symptom of failure; it might be a natural feature of digital transformation as an ongoing, emergent process. Municipalities adjust their strategic direction in response to technological possibilities, institutional pressures, and policy discourses. Over time, these adjustments produce collective patterns of change across the entire population of local governments. The landscape of digital government in Sweden gets shaped accordingly.

The study advanced understanding in several respects. Empirically, it represents one of the first population-level analyses of digital-transformation strategies, with concrete evidence of how municipal priorities change over time. Methodologically, it introduced a systematic way to operationalize the strategies' directionality by subjecting policy documents to content analysis. On the theory front, it clarified how the concept of drift can enrich understanding of digital transformation as a dynamic and multi-level process. Rather than focus solely on planned strategies, the study shed light on unintended shifts that emerge from the interplay of individuals' agency, technological affordances, and institutional translation.

Reflections on the Findings from Paper 1

Paper 1 concretizes important aspects of what I experienced through the study. I knew that large and small municipalities do not proceed from the same place or lead digital transformation under identical logic. They differ, and their differences represent potential for exhibiting complementary strengths. What surprised me was the consistency of the pattern to the differences, nationwide. The homogeneity evident from the results points to systemic drift rather than a handful of local exceptions. Reading the work of Gustaf Juell-Skielse and colleagues (2017) helped me recognize that the associated traits are not purely natural results of the settings' variety. They do not just develop internally either; hence, they can be designed partly through choosing particular collaboration modes.

I arrived at the findings against the backdrop of intimate knowledge of my home organization's unbalanced strategy: a tendency to privilege efficiency over innovation and prioritize internal improvements over external, citizen-facing value in service development. Over the years, I had often asked why administration-linked needs should outrank citizens' needs on our digital agenda. When I tried to make my case at the organization's executive meetings, the ball routinely rolled back to me: "You need to refine the presentation, investigate more, count better." That alibi narrative from members of the top management reinforced inertia (see Tinjan, 2025). I left more than a few of those meetings with a heavy head, then returned to the drawing board to produce an even better brief, only to hear the same response again. The circle repeated time and time again, bringing countless moments at which I felt tempted to give up.

The work behind Paper 1 led me to wonder whether I had been looking at matters in the wrong way. Therefore, I turned the question around: instead of trying to make a large municipality behave with agility as a small one does, could I design for complementarity? Perhaps smaller municipalities' proximity to frontline problems can drive citizen-centered innovation while larger municipalities contribute the installed base, governance, and integration capacity that render the ensuing solutions robust and scalable. The thinking of Yoshiyuki Inoue strengthened my sense that the answer might indeed lie in collective ambidexterity (see Hietala & Päivärinta, 2025). In light of awareness that principled balancing of exploration and exploitation could get enacted not solely in the focal organization but for

the entire ecosystem, across its building blocks, the nation-level patterned homogeneity proved not discouraging but instructive. It pointed to shared structures that one can work with, and, in line with the Juell-Skielse team's thinking, to practical forms of collaboration able to convert size variations from a source of friction into a systems-level benefit.

While I was ruminating on these issues, the chief executive of a small municipality called me with the simple question of whether Sundsvall could take over the much smaller Ånge's IT operations. When writing the corresponding logbook entry, I noted that he "had a choice to outsource or collaborate. Past, similar experiences of IT collaboration indicate that his knowledge of ITSM [IT service management] is significant." Reading his invitation not as a plan for centralization but as a concrete way to operationalize complementarity, I reframed the joint activities requested as something that could benefit both organizations. In hindsight, that phone call stands out as the practical bridge carrying reflection into action. It provided a live setting to test the collaboration modes I had just encountered, most prominently from a new vantage point now that I had shifted my stance. The key was to stop trying to make a big municipality wear the shoes of a small one.

Presenting the results in Paper 1 prompted a follow-up question related to real-world practice: can macro- and micro-level evidence be drawn together in a way that truly explains what happens in day-to-day work? Preparing the paper clarified large vs. small municipalities' distinct sets of conditions and types of logic coupled with digital transformation. However, the concrete conditions wherein decisions must be translated into action remained elusive. Therefore, my colleagues and I commenced investigation of the individual's role in the setting of the organization I knew best, my own. Examining how strategy is understood in practice, how it gets acted upon (and perhaps modified along the way), and which challenges arise in such situated work, we were guided by the hypothesis that the very idea of "strategy execution," implicit in our work, might be misspecified.

4.3 PAPER 2: EXAMINING THE ROLE OF THE INDIVIDUAL

The paper "The Polyphony of Deviance: The Impact of Deviant Workplace Behavior on Digital Transformation" examines how atypical workplace behavior shapes the direction and pace of digital transformation within a public-sector organization. The point of departure is the recognition that public organizations rarely transform in linear, planned ways. Instead, transformation emerges through everyday practices, workarounds, and acts of resistance that often diverge from formal governance structures. The paper's argument builds on a qualitative case study of Sundsvall as an organization with more than 8,000 employees and an ambitious digital-transformation program launched in response to projected financial stress. In its approach to analyzing how individuals' actions and micro-level deviations aggregate into organization-level shifts, the study considered deviant workplace behavior as a generative mechanism in the evolution of municipal digital transformation.

The paper's theoretical foundation lies in institutional theory, particularly the aforementioned notion of institutional drift, which characterizes gradual, often unnoticed deviations from established norms as reshaping institutional orders over time. The paper connects this with the literature on deviant workplace behavior (Appelbaum et al., 2007; Robinson & Bennett, 1995), reframing deviance as both destructive and constructive in its effects on organizational change. Within the context of digital transformation, this implies that acts such as bypassing formal routines, ignoring decision gates, or using unauthorized digital tools can sometimes accelerate transformation while at other times they preserve stability or slow the progress. Through its reasoning, this work bridges insight from digital-transformation research (Chanias et al., 2019; Hanelt et al., 2021; Vial, 2019) and public-sector-change studies (Kuipers et al., 2014; Weerakkody et al., 2016), showing that institutional drift holds value as a lens for understanding the emergent, polyphonic nature of digital government.

Empirically, the study drew on 15 semi-structured interviews with employees and managers, at different levels of the Sundsvall organization's hierarchy, complemented by secondary data from a broader program of clinical research engagement. The analysis identified multiple forms

of deviant workplace behavior, on a spectrum from constructive workarounds and shadow innovation (Magnusson et al., 2020) to more obstructive behaviors such as continued reliance on legacy systems, deliberate non-participation, and projects' circumvention. These behaviors were found to interact with four sets of mediating factors: organizational ones (structure issues, lack of resources, roles' ambiguity, etc.), individual-linked ones (personality traits, skills, and tenure), technological factors (the pace of change, limitations posed by the installed base, etc.), and social ones (cultural norms, peer pressure, etc.). Together these mediators explain why deviant workplace behavior arises and how it influences transformation trajectories.

The main finding presented is that deviant workplace behavior leads to three distinct types of institutional drift. Firstly, digital transformation decelerates when deviance reinforces bureaucratic norms of stability and control, thereby maintaining the pre-digital institutional order. Secondly, maintaining infrastructural stability reflects a form of protective deviance within IT departments where employees prioritize continuity, security, and service quality over innovation. Finally, accelerating digital transformation ensues as employees, often when perceiving an existential threat to the municipality's long-term viability, act courageously and circumvent formalities so as to pursue innovation and change. These three forms may well coexist, producing what we dubbed strategic polyphony, wherein multiple, partly conflicting transformation logics operate simultaneously within a given organization. The paper suggests that, rather than being a single, unified strategy, digital transformation unfolds as a negotiated process shaped by diverse forms of deviation and drift.

While digital transformation has become a centerpiece of strategic development for many organizations, Paper 2 highlights that its implementation often ends up more complex than the leaders and strategists initially expect. To a significant extent, blame for these difficulties can be laid with the prevailing notion of strategic execution. Traditional approaches may be inadequate. Closer examination of the phenomenon behind the buzzword uncovered pluralism within strategy execution that significantly affects how digital transformation gets implemented in practice.

Organizations face a wide array of challenges when it comes to adapting to the demands of digital transformation. One of the main hindrances

consists of conflicting views of what digital transformation entails and how it should be implemented. Administrative norms and cultural barriers can create an environment wherein changes, digital transformation or any others, become difficult to realize. Paper 2 posits that this is not just a matter of technology. There is a deeper issue of strategic leadership and how strategies are understood/interpreted within the organization.

Much of the insight coheres around the concept of pluralism in the execution. Instead of viewing strategic execution as a linear, uniform process, one should open one's eyes to the diversity of perspectives coexisting within an organization. These perspectives are often rooted in individuals' or small groups' values and their beliefs about what is best for the organization. Stances on priorities, resource allocation, and even fundamental values connected with innovation and risk may vary greatly. Resistance and reactive strategies stand out, then, as a natural consequence of this pluralism whereby individuals and groups go further than responding to changes, they actively shape the responses in light of their understanding of the organization's goals. These dynamics are crucial for understanding why some transformation initiatives progress slowly or fail entirely.

The impact of individuals' and groups' affiliations on strategy execution constitutes another important part of the picture, drawing attention to how those with a shared worldview may unite and collaboratively oppose or support specific strategic initiatives. Here, a form of micro-culture may develop within the organization as some groups advocate innovation and change while others remain more conservative and resistant. The associated internal tensions contribute to overall fragmentation of execution and to complicating the implementation of a cohesive, effective strategy for digital transformation. The paper highlights the importance of recognizing the differences in perspective and working with them rather than attempting to suppress them. Managers who navigate the opposition in awareness of these tensions are better equipped to lead digital-transformation processes and maximize the chance of success.

For research into digital transformation in government, the study represents an example highlighting the micro-level behaviors that produce emergent strategic directions. From a theoretical perspective, by integrating conceptualization of institutional drift and deviant workplace behavior, the paper showcases how informal and noncompliant actions can act

as generative forces in pursuit of organizational change (Dillard-Wright, 2022). This challenges the commonplace view of digital transformation as a top-down or policy-driven process. The contribution to theory is aligned instead with studies emphasizing its emergent, improvisational nature (Chanias et al., 2019; Orlikowski & Scott, 2023). Moreover, the paper positions deviant workplace behavior not as mere resistance but as a mechanism that both contests and sustains institutional change. For digital-transformation research (especially that focusing on municipalities), this yielded a nuanced view of agency within bureaucratic settings via a conceptual window to how everyday practices either reinforce existing governance structures or catalyze new digital logics.

In conclusion, casting the pluralism in strategy execution into high relief promotes more profound understanding that the difficulties of digital transformation encompass far more than technological or other resources. Complex social and cultural dynamics interact within the organizations. Awareness of the various values and perceptions that coexist is pivotal. Leaders and strategists need to address them actively. The benefit of doing so is not merely pitfall-avoiding navigation of digital transformation; by harnessing the power of these diverse perspectives, organizations can create a more inclusive, dynamic work environment where innovation and strategy-level thinking thrive. The paper presents a new way forward in understanding strategic execution, rooted in considering the prevailing pluralism and in recognizing the significance of individuals' and groups' roles in creating a shared vision for the future of digital transformation within organizations.

Reflections on the Findings from Paper 2

The research that informed Paper 2 crystallized awareness of why the execution of my home organization's digital-transformation strategy had stalled. Since my training in hierarchical control had sensitized me to patterns of inertia, doubts surfaced: despite that training, I was witnessing the same inertia in my department as in meetings with top managers, even as I was granted more formal authority within the municipality's delegation system and via its regulations. We were still failing to meet the expectations we had set for ourselves, so what was I doing wrong?

The findings presented in Paper 2 forced me to question the comforting assumption that digital transformation is mainly a matter of executing strategy. Looking deeply into this organization had illuminated how strategy's interpretation diverges in multiple strands of practice. People do not simply implement; they translate, adjust, resist, and sometimes accelerate, as individuals but also often in small coalitions cohering around shared conceptions of what is best for the organization (in a fundamentally constructive enterprise). Within what I had considered noise from a central-strategy-unit perspective lay pluralism wherein some patterns slow the transformation, others add stability, and a few propel it forward at greater speed than planned. Although scholars working with other contexts have documented precisely this dynamic, micro-level responses to tensions that recompose strategy over time (Kersten et al., 2023; Voronov et al., 2021), I had not detected its threads before.

That reframing granted me a far more profound understanding of everyday deviations and, perhaps of greater importance, awareness that such deviations might be natural and, furthermore, potentially constructive. Workarounds, shadow IT, and boundary-crossing favors rarely unfold at random; they attest to efforts to solve real problems under imperfect conditions, amid constraints. Associated behaviors clustered where our governance was too tight, too loose, or simply counterproductive. Treating deviations as data to learn from rather than defiance to suppress dovetails with research into public-sphere digitalization that utilizes portfolio and process designs channeling plurality instead of attempting to quash it (Lappi et al., 2019). It also resonates with scholarship that advocates gradually building the capabilities for transition-oriented long-term transformation as opposed to "command and control" enforcing change up front (Warner & Wäger, 2019; Yeow et al., 2018).

The findings from considering my own organization's real-world patterns convinced me that I needed to pursue arrangements whereby the central unit for strategy-based control would be integrated with the IT function and share its location, thus reducing the gulf between strategy and practice (Luna-Reyes et al., 2020). This change in structure, which I performed immediately, created a setup attuned to how the life cycle of digital solutions should be managed (per Carroll et al., 2023; Øvrelid & Bygstad, 2019): linking development and IT operations such that "build"

and "run" inform each other. Once solid internal governance of pluralism is in place, the next question is what a design for complementarity across organizations might look like. That question triggered the next stage in my research.

4.4 PAPER 3: THE PARTICULARITIES OF COMPLEMENTARITY

"Collective Digital Transformation: Institutional Work in Municipal Collaboration" explores a manner in which digital transformation can be enacted collectively across municipal boundaries rather than purely within the confines of a single organization. It introduces and conceptualizes collective digital transformation as a form of inter-organizational collaboration guided not by financial motives such as pursuing efficiency or cost reduction but by morally and ideologically aligned goals, among them equality, solidarity, and safeguarding of public value. Examining the case of the self-described Ångsvall "digital merger" in depth, the paper presents the joint initiative whereby the two municipalities together sought to provide their citizens with equal access to digital public services, thus challenging long-held institutional views of municipal autonomy in Sweden.

The paper's starting point is the recognition that digital transformation in the public sector has been unevenly distributed, with significant differences emerging among the municipalities in digital-domain capabilities and the intensity of transformation efforts (McAfee & Brynjolfsson, 2008; Mergel et al., 2019). These disparities cast doubt on the fundamental presumption of equality in access to welfare services. In response to this concern, raised also in previous studies of digital divides (Asgarkhani, 2005; Lidén, 2016), we presented the argument that as municipalities grow increasingly digitized, the transformation of those with stronger capabilities will accelerate while others lag behind. A disturbing ramification of the resulting "performance spread" (see Magnusson et al., 2020) is that citizens' experiences and rights to digital public services may ultimately hinge on where they live, notwithstanding legal frameworks emphasizing equality and non-discrimination (Bannister & Connolly, 2014).

As the chasm of inequality widens, scholars such as Carlsson et al. (2023b) have recommended that municipalities engage in collective digital transformation, a process wherein multiple local governments collaborate around shared goals and infrastructure. The study reported on in the paper approached such collaboration as a form of collective action (Ostrom, 2010), grounded in common values and norms rather than competition. Drawing on institutional-work theory (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2013), we conceptualized collective digital transformation as a process through which new institutions emerge from active efforts to create, maintain, disrupt, and preserve institutional arrangements. The model of institutional work helped us trace how civil servants and leaders act to reshape governance structures, norms, and practices in response to the challenges of digitalization.

The case study of Ångsvall's formation dealt with conditions wherein a large, digitally mature municipality supplies the digital infrastructure and competence while a smaller, more agile partner contributes with exploration and rapid innovation. The paper details the project, motivated by a shared moral rationale among both entities' political and administrative leaders (to assure equal digital welfare services regardless of municipal borders); presents an anchoring in extensive empirical material, including 55 formal documents and 11 semi-structured interviews with upper-echelon managers such as CEOs, CDOs, and IT directors; and details analysis in which a coding system derived from institutional-work theory (Hirsch & Bermiss, 2009) pinpointed sharp distinctions between organizational and individual-led forms of institutional work in four classes: creating, maintaining, disrupting, and preserving.

It also delves into the empirical findings. The study revealed that most institutional work in the Ångsvall collaboration (62% of all instances) had creation at its center: the actors focused on establishing new institutions for collective governance, shared infrastructure, and joint decision-making. Organization-level work's strong dominance (at 89% of all observations) reflects the top-down and structural nature of the early stages of institutional formation. However, the study simultaneously uncovered individual-level actions playing a critical role in legitimizing and sustaining the collaboration. Prominent among these were "ambassadorial work" by leaders such as CEOs and CDOs that framed the initiative as a moral

obligation to citizens rather than an administrative merger. Such efforts by individuals conferred internal and external legitimacy both. This finding supports prior work stressing the importance of agency and relational work in institutional change (Cloutier et al., 2015; Pemer & Skjølsvik, 2017).

In all, the study identified 23 themes in the institutional work, of which People, Managing, Ambidexterity, and Organizing manifested themselves most often in the data. More general analysis showed that collective digital transformation requires both technical integration and cultural adaptation. For example, the institutional work at organization level involved creating new venues for dialogue, developing shared service catalogues, and establishing governance structures for the joint IT function. Individual-level work included managing employee resistance, fostering trust, and mitigating anxieties about job loss that surfaced as Ånge's IT department was slated for absorption by Sundsvall's. Overall, people-related factors, such as trust and sense of urgency, appeared most central to the collaboration's success.

Considering the conclusions in Paper 3, which build on the insight expressed in Paper 1 with regard to the complementary dynamics through which the agility and citizen-focused strategies of smaller municipalities can be blended with the extensive resources and scale of larger ones, draws attention to the significance of complementary capabilities in driving effective collaboration among municipalities. The case study highlighted the pivotal role of a structured approach that, more than capitalizing on these complementary strengths, nurtures robust inter-organizational yet fundamentally human relationships.

Its findings suggest that municipalities' principled design of frameworks for collaboration can exploit each partner's unique strengths to address common challenges more effectively. By creating collaborative networks that allow room for resource-sharing and knowledge exchange, municipalities can develop solutions that are not only effective but also resonant with the local communities' needs.

The study also identified a noteworthy role for institutional preservation in maintaining the municipalities' complementarity. Instead of striving for homogeneity, the partners in this case deliberately aimed to preserve differences: Sundsvall's scale and stability were paired with Ånge's agility

and adaptability. The paper examines this dynamic in terms of collective ambidexterity (as discussed by Inoue, 2021) wherein system-level balance between exploitation and exploration is achieved across multiple organizations. By assigning exploration to Ånge and exploitation to Sundsvall overall, the municipalities together came to embody an ambidextrous collective capable of both stability and innovation.

The paper points to the great importance of inter-organizational collaboration for actualizing the potential of the complementary capabilities. This form of joint undertaking entails transcending traditional boundaries and working together across them to craft shared goals and frameworks. Such collaboration facilitates pooling of resources, expertise, and best practice such that the municipalities become equipped to tackle complex issues that no single entity could manage alone. Joint initiatives in such arenas as digital services, public health, and environmental sustainability stand to benefit greatly from the diverse perspectives and tools that different municipalities bring to the table.

Retaining a strong focus on individuals reinforces the contention that collaboration is not just a technical or administrative exercise; it is fundamentally a social endeavor. The paper stresses that cultivating trust, mutual understanding, and shared vision among stakeholders is crucial for overcoming barriers and aligning efforts to reach common objectives.

The main conclusion is that collective digital transformation represents a new institutional form of organizing digital government. It fundamentally redraws the boundaries of municipal autonomy by introducing a form of digital interdependence that stretches past traditional governance structures. Digital transformation, in this sense, functions as a legitimate mechanism for institutional change, one that allows municipalities to renegotiate the balance between equality and independence. The Ångsvall case demonstrates how digital transformation can become both a moral and a structural driver of institutional disruption, bringing new configurations of governance and service provision into being.

Reflections on the Findings from Paper 3

Translating the insight behind Paper 1 into strong motion, the work that produced Paper 3 targeted this practical question: if large and small municipalities are fundamentally different and complementary, how

might one design collaboration fueled by the differences? The underlying study convinced me that doing so is entirely possible but only through treating collaboration as inter-organizational social action. In the case I worked with, the arrangements that created genuine movement paired small-actor (Ånge) exploration and discovery close to the citizens and frontline problems with large-actor (Sundsvall) scale, platforms, security, and digital-infrastructure integration. I approached this explicitly via the lenses of governance and value for the public (Janowski, 2015; Panagiotopoulos et al., 2019) and with regard to collective social action rather than single-organization execution (Tana et al., 2023). That emphasis on individuals echoes the lessons explicated in Paper 2, primarily that the same human agency that pluralizes strategy within a given organization is precisely what causes complementarity to work across organizations.

This portion of the doctoral project also clarified how my work ties in with the national government's studies of the Ånge–Sundsvall project (Teljebäck et al., 2023), which highlight the contrasts in structures and institutions between large and small municipalities. With Paper 3 I added attention to a micro layer, at which people in boundary and translation roles actually knit capabilities together across organization boundaries (see Juell-Skielse et al., 2017). Together, these two perspectives gave me a fuller picture of why complementarity exists and how it enters play in day-to-day collaboration. Instead of trying to resolve divergence by making everyone the same, I had grown able to interpret the clear differences among the actors as an asset.

The digital merger of Ånge and Sundsvall nonetheless raised substantial tensions. Reading my corresponding logbook entries vividly recalls some truly difficult moments. In the beginning, I was often my municipality's lone "true believer," constantly defending the vision against both direct opponents and its lukewarm defenders (see Machiavelli, 1532/1998). Especially memorable is a meeting at which the city's head of procurement and the chief financial officer questioned the very legality of what we were doing. I recounted when writing my notes on August 26, 2022, that

> [o]ne of the suppliers who had lost the deal to supply laptops to Ånge questioned the collaboration and whether Sundsvall's supply to Ånge was in accordance with the Procurement Act. Despite the fact

> that Sundsvall's lawyer, financial manager, and purchasing manager attended the meeting, I was the one who had to answer all the questions. My patience ran out, and I questioned the purchasing manager's competence, and existence.

Immersing myself in scholarship that echoed what I was living through in those months had both therapeutic and guidance effects. In particular, reading about studies of liminal leadership and institutional entrepreneurship in in-between spaces (Henfridsson & Yoo, 2014; Putra et al., 2023) and gaining deep familiarity with institutional theory's perspectives on how embedded actors still move institutions through situated work (Hinings et al., 2018; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) equipped me better to understand and work with betweenness as I straddled the old and the emerging institution.

This entailed a shift in my work's practical arrangements. I began to employ complementarity as a design principle to overcome inaction (Wijen & Ansari, 2007) and thereby outflank the inherent conservatism of the top managers (Arvidsson et al., 2025). As I strove to channel pluralism rather than suppress it (see Kaganer et al., 2023), a new challenge became apparent: colleagues in Ånge increasingly felt that Sundsvall's interests had gained pride of place. That is, they experienced a direct identity risk to the smaller (and hence more vulnerable) partner. The constellation of questions revealed here set the agenda for the next part of the project, tracing the micro-level mechanisms of orchestration in so-called Ångsvall. Delving into how institutional entrepreneurs mobilized resources, crafted a shared frame, and deployed joint procedures and infrastructure moved the project's focus to how equity may be produced, in conjunction with a gradual move from assertive leadership to shared stewardship. The metaphorical little brother has to matter as much as the elder one (see Nielsen et al., 2022; Panagiotopoulos et al., 2019).

4.5 PAPER 4: PROBING THE ISSUE OF ASYMMETRIES

The paper "Making the Little Brother Matter As Much As the Big One: Ensuring Equitable Partnership in Inter-Municipal Collaboration for Digital Transformation" explores how institutional entrepreneurs enable equitable collaboration between municipalities of different sizes, capacities, etc. in the context of digital transformation. Building on theory of institutional entrepreneurship and inter-organizational collaboration, the study focused on the Ångsvall initiative as a novel form of collaboration designed to guarantee equal access to public-sector digital welfare services despite significant differences in municipal resources, digital maturity, and capacity. The study contributed to knowledge of governments' digital transformation by demonstrating that they can nurture equality more through careful leadership, shared framing, and complementary strengths than through mechanisms of competition or formal hierarchies.

The study proceeded from the observation that the increasing use of digital technologies in the public sector has amplified the inequalities between municipalities (Bailey & Nyabola, 2021; Carlsson et al., 2023a). Large, resource-rich municipalities being able to afford secure platforms, specialist personnel, and advanced e-services while their smaller and rural counterparts struggle with limited budgets, insufficient digital infrastructure, and lack of competence (see Aksztejn, 2020) is creating knock-on effects whereby uneven capacity poses a risk of producing a deep digital divide in the welfare state. To some extent, access to services already depends on where citizens live. Inter-municipality collaboration has become a viable strategy for pooling resources and competencies to counteract this trend (Wiberg & Limani, 2015). However, such collaboration is not without its travails. Differences in size and power often lead to unbalanced implementation wherein the larger municipality dominates decision-making, thereby undermining the smaller partner's influence (Fourie, 2018; Todeva & Knoke, 2005). To articulate a possible solution, the third study asked how institutional entrepreneurs can foster equitable partnerships in digital-transformation initiatives that manifest such asymmetries.

Accordingly, Paper 4 focuses on both the critical role of size differences among municipalities and the importance of collective institutional

entrepreneurship for successful implementation of digital transformation through inter-organizational collaboration. The report underscores how these dynamics influence the effectiveness of collaborative efforts and shape the outcomes of digital initiatives. Indeed, size variations were found to exert significant effects on municipalities' approaches to digital transformation and to collaboration: while smaller municipalities may face resource and capability limitations that render their digital-transformation efforts more challenging, larger ones' typical access to more resources, technical expertise, and infrastructural capacity enables implementing comprehensive digital solutions. However, the study found also that this disparity can create opportunities for collaboration, where smaller municipalities can utilize the strengths of larger ones to co-develop solutions that meet their specific needs.

Understanding these size dynamics is essential for fostering effective inter-organizational collaboration by means of a complementary relationship. Large municipalities can provide essential technical support, advanced technology, and strategic insight while a little brother can contribute community engagement, local knowledge, and innovative grassroots initiatives. This creates a synergistic environment where both parties can benefit from the other's strengths, ultimately enhancing the transformation efforts' overall effectiveness.

Considering institutional entrepreneurship sensitized the study to the work and role of actors who initiate and actively participate in institutional change by developing visions, rallying support, and legitimizing new arrangements (Battilana et al., 2009; DiMaggio, 1988). Their work demonstrates particular relevance in collaborative contexts that imply challenges for existing institutions and when new governance structures must be built. As for their role in a context of digital transformation, they play two parts, in fact: institutional entrepreneurs act as visionaries who frame the purpose of collaboration and as facilitators who secure lasting inclusion, transparency, and balance (Hardy & Maguire, 2017). We combined this perspective with the other half of our theoretical foundation, from literature on equitable inter-organizational collaboration, which emphasizes shared decision-making, fairness in resource distribution, and joint accountability as essential for sustaining partnerships over time (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2011; Wong-Pérez et al., 2024).

This study, completed later in the project, benefited from a longitudinal perspective obtained from document analysis and interviews covering 2021–2024. That situated us well to trace how the actions of the institutional entrepreneurs evolved over four distinct phases: launching the collaboration, establishing infrastructure, identifying joint projects, and executing inter-municipality initiatives. The data demonstrated concretely how institutional entrepreneurs from municipalities of markedly different scales, a regional center and a small rural municipality, worked to balance intrinsically asymmetrical power relations.

Collective institutional entrepreneurship emerged as a vital component giving impetus to the inter-organizational collaboration. The study's findings therefore provided strong empirical support to prior research's suggestions that successful implementation hinges on the ability of local actors, from larger and smaller municipalities, to work together in taking the initiative for shaping of collaborative processes.

Handled well, collective institutional entrepreneurship enables municipalities to navigate the complexities of digital transformation by encouraging the pooling of resources, knowledge, and expertise. Applying this type of collective approach also fosters a shared sense of ownership and responsibility for the outcomes of a digital transformation initiative. One possible outcome is joint creation of innovative digital solutions tailored to the unique contexts of the municipalities involved. Additionally, municipalities that work together can more readily share best practices, address common challenges, and enhance their adaptive capacity in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

The paper examines these actions along the temporal dimension, in terms of the aforementioned phases. In the initial phase, the institutional entrepreneurs focused on building trust and articulating a shared vision centered on equality and mutual benefit. In Ånge, worries about dependence and loss of autonomy blossomed; financial managers in Sundsvall questioned the value of allocating resources to a smaller partner. To manage these concerns, the institutional entrepreneurs accentuated complementarity rather than hierarchical relations. They framed Ånge as an agile testing ground ideal for piloting of digital-transformation initiatives before scaling to Sundsvall, and Sundsvall's resources were portrayed as enablers rather than asserters of dominance. The associated discourse led by the

institutional entrepreneurs transformed asymmetry into synergy, reframing size differences as strategic advantages. This communicative work here echoes M. Perkmann and A. Spicer's characterization of interactional and cultural projects (2007), wherein institutional entrepreneurs align diverse stakeholders by means of framing and discourse.

In the next phase, with a focus on mobilizing resources and developing shared digital infrastructure, the institutional entrepreneurs worked to translate the general vision into specific goals such as establishing a unified identity-management system, aligning the individual entities' cybersecurity protocols, and creating a shared governance structure. By jointly defining standards and allocating resources transparently, they reduced tensions related to control, ownership, etc. Guaranteeing Ånge's staff the same technological tools and access enjoyed by Sundsvall's employees represented a symbolic yet also highly practical step toward equity. Such emphasis on technical infrastructure's power as a means of fostering institutional equity (rather than a mere technology) points to digital transformation in government as something deeply institutional and political (Mergel et al., 2019; Vial, 2021).

With the third phase, the collaboration matured into distributed joint projects across such distinct municipal-service domains as welfare and administrative services. The institutional entrepreneurs expanded participation by engaging employees from both municipalities in the project design and decision-making. They deliberately relinquished some control to foster local ownership and be sure that innovation emerged from both contexts. This shift toward shared responsibility signaled a move from directive to participatory leadership, consistent with B. C. Crosby and J. M. Bryson's (2018) notion of collaborative leadership in public management. By the end of this stage, the institutional entrepreneurs were acting less as central authorities and more as facilitators for a distributed network of actors. Their ability to balance control and autonomy allowed the collaboration to get more resilient and adaptive over time.

The final phase fastened these features in place as the municipalities formalized long-term arrangements for joint project funding and governance. The institutional entrepreneurs continued to stress fairness and shared decision-making, with assurances of transparent project prioritization and cost-sharing. The collaboration had now evolved from a bilateral

project into institutionalized partnership embedded in the municipalities' everyday operations. This institutionalization process was supported by persistent political and national recognition, which not only conferred legitimacy but also mitigated financial risk and sustained the local-level commitment. By framing the initiative as an effort to safeguard equal digital welfare, the institutional entrepreneurs further aligned the collaboration with national policy objectives, reinforcing its moral and institutional legitimacy (Lounsbury et al., 2003).

Alongside the potential path of these phases, paved by collective institutional entrepreneurship, the paper lays out various challenges that can arise when municipalities of differing sizes collaborate. Power imbalances, mismatching goals, and differences in organizational culture can all complicate matters. The work highlighted especially that larger municipalities inadvertently taking over the discussions and decision-making processes can place complementarity in danger by overshadowint the contributions and perspectives of smaller ones. Deliberate measures to mitigate these challenges are crucial. Equitable governance structures must be established, to promote inclusivity and give all stakeholders a voice in the collaboration process. Facilitating ongoing dialogue, creating shared objectives, and fostering mutual trust can help overcome barriers and encourage more fruitful collaboration. By prioritizing these aspects, municipalities can maximize the benefits of size diversity while minimizing potential conflicts.

The paper articulates several contributions to theory. Firstly, it challenges earlier research suggesting that the most intense collaboration occurs at the beginning. The Ångsvall case revealed that, in contrast, discourse and shared framing remain crucial throughout the collaboration. From this standpoint, we should paint institutional entrepreneurship as ongoing communicative practice rather than a one-off act of initiation (Battilana et al., 2009). Secondly, the study demonstrated that formal contracts do not suffice for equitable collaboration in digital transformation. It requires continuous negotiation of meaning, resources, and responsibilities. Finally, the report stresses the importance of political and institutional support for stabilizing collaboration between unequal partners, concluding that external legitimacy can act as an equalizing mechanism.

The insight offered in Paper 4 constitutes essential guidance for future digital transformation initiatives among municipalities. When stakehold-

ers recognize and embrace the differences in size and capacity, they can design collaboration frameworks for the transformation that make productive use of these disparities. Moreover, fostering a culture of collective institutional entrepreneurship can fuel local actors' proactive engagement in such initiatives. Through this, the solutions can end up more innovative and context-relevant.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that practitioners should actively seek partnerships that facilitate knowledge-sharing, capacity-building, and sound allocation of resources. Collaborating across size gulfs can enhance municipalities' digital infrastructure and service delivery as a whole; when handled well, this supports more equitable access to digital services for all residents.

Reflections on the Findings from Paper 4

Preparing Paper 4 crystallized the fact that collaborating in this way functions healthily only if institutionalized via equitable governance, furnished with shared digital infrastructure, and led by institutional entrepreneurs. Guided by the work of Janowski (2015), I recognized the effort as institution-building rather than project coordination. In practice, that requires holding together partners of unequal size by continuously articulating complementary strengths, framing the activities in terms of mutual benefits and equitable welfare, and instilling shared routines and joint digital infrastructure that render the collaboration "real" in day-to-day operations (Berente & Seidel, 2022; Hinings et al., 2018; Tassabehji et al., 2016). This portion of the research also put a name to a classic dynamic I lived through: the aforementioned big brother / small brother tension. I ceaselessly supported the smaller municipality's position, whether in small but meaningful ways, such as being sure to order the entities as "Ånge and Sundsvall," never the other way around, or in more obviously significant ones. With regard to the latter, a logbook entry for September 8, 2023, states, "A solutions architect mentioned that Ånge will access the digital workplace service through the newly implemented delivery approach, the same approach we had wanted for Sundsvall. Two other colleagues added that Ånge now benefits from several solutions newer than Sundsvall's."

Early on, assertive leadership often proves necessary for gaining momentum. Over time, that leadership focus must give way, however, to

collective ownership so that equity is enacted, not just declared. Evolution of this sort resonates well with prior scholarly findings related to narrative leadership and capability-building in efforts at digital transformation (Nielsen et al., 2023; Warner & Wäger, 2019).

Some decisions were more complex than others, but they all emerged as pivotal. In one case in point, appointing a single chief investment officer for Ångsvall, rather than maintaining two parallel positions, was necessary to reduce ambiguity, consolidate accountability clearly, and enable creating a new shared institution. The inflection point for adopting this joint approach, which was supported by evidence of investment/data-leadership alignment and central digital leadership in the public sector (Firk et al., 2021), is captured by a logbook entry from April 2023 stating, "No need for an IT manager in 2024. Conflicting wills led the IT manager to ask for a severance" and this follow-up note from May 22, 2023: "IT employees in Ånge are happier after the IT manager quit." Drawing a firm line with those openly critical of the collaboration itself was also necessary to protect the whole, avoiding what Jukka Rintamäki et al. (2025) have called institutional parasites and countering the inertia demonstrably plaguing public-sector digital transformation (Kaganer et al., 2023).

Political backing mattered throughout, and anchoring the work in shared digital infrastructure was catalytic: it turned talk into a tangible base for innovation and scalability. In this I was inspired by research into socio-technical infrastructure and portfolio governance (Lappi et al., 2019; Øvrelid & Bygstad, 2019) while remaining attentive also to participation and co-production dynamics that otherwise might derail scaling (Scupola & Mergel, 2022). Simultaneously, I had to factor in tensions emerging in the large municipality. As my notes from October 14, 2024, regarding the Sundsvall municipal council explain, "the leading politician becomes jealous of Ånge developing predictive school transport. When he asks why Sundsvall doesn't have it, another politician replies that it's because the chair of the school board doesn't want to create 'job shortages.'" Moments such as that one explain why equitable governance must be designed to distribute credit, capabilities, and benefits, lest politics overshadow and fracture the collaboration (Panagiotopoulos et al., 2019; Scupola & Mergel, 2022).

The work chronicled in Paper 4 therefore redirected my actions toward formalizing the shared new institution. We established a joint prioritization process explicitly exploiting what Hietala and Päivärinta have dubbed distributed ambidexterity: keeping discovery at the "edge" (i.e., near the citizens) while platformizing and scaling components at the center (2025). Inspired also by related work (Smith & Beretta, 2021; Warner & Wäger, 2019), we tuned the governance and capacity-building to glue exploration and exploitation together. At the same time, we developed population-count-based cost-sharing models for developing, implementing, and operating common IT/digital base services; the approach we chose enabled Ånge to receive a 90% discount, such that the smaller partner could present positive return-on-investment calculations without impairment of regional efficiency (Carter et al., 2024; Lappi et al., 2019). The underlying rationale was to lower the entry barriers for innovation emerging from smaller municipalities, facilitating their integration into the joint development pipeline, while also guaranteeing scalability through secured funding mechanisms and maintaining regulatory and procedural compliance once the initiative demonstrates validated value.

The articulation in Paper 4 points to the mechanisms and boundary conditions I still needed to understand. Could the Ångsvall model be followed with other groups of entities? That question gained urgency as municipalities began approaching me, some wanting to join Ångsvall, others wishing to port the governance pattern to their own constellation. I had to know what keeps equity durable after key entrepreneurs step back. With my next sub-study, then, I aimed to trace collective digital transformation through an institutional-entrepreneurship process perspective. Guided by recent scholarship on idea travel (Neilsen et al., 2022) and institutional change (Hinings et al., 2018), I set out to follow how a small core forms, expands and pluralizes, and finally consolidates into shared ownership and responsibility. An especially crucial aspect of this endeavor involved identifying which activities most effectively broaden participation and distribute the efforts' burdens over time.

4.6 PAPER 5: CREATION OF A NEW INSTITUTION

Exploring the specifics of how institutional entrepreneurship gets enacted in the context of municipal collaboration for digital transformation, the study presented in "From Silos to Synergy: Institutional Entrepreneurship in Collective Digital Transformation in the Public Sector" built on my project's earlier findings related to the emerging concept of collective digital transformation (Carlsson et al., 2023b). This work likewise focused on the Ångsvall collaborative digital merger. Following the collaboration longitudinally over several years, the study examined how institutional entrepreneurs act to create, maintain, and embed new institutional arrangements that enable municipalities' joint pursuit of digital-welfare-promoting transformation despite structural and resource differences.

The study's departure point was the recognition that digital transformation in the public sector requires not new technologies alone; it demands new forms of leadership capable of orchestrating change across organizational boundaries (Edelmann et al., 2023; Porfírio et al., 2021). Prior research has highlighted that, while digital transformation in government is often cast as a strategic necessity (Carter et al., 2024; Mergel et al., 2019), it frequently encounters institutional barriers rooted in the same government's bureaucratic traditions and siloed governance (Lægreid & Rykkja, 2022). Inter-municipality collaboration, as Juell-Skielse et al. (2017) have pointed out, offers a way to overcome these limitations by pooling resources, aligning infrastructure, and sharing digital capabilities. Yet, as Carlsson et al. (2023b) argue, such collaboration remains difficult to sustain, on account of the conflict in institutional logics of autonomy, accountability, and equality that characterizes municipal governance. It is against this backdrop that the paper positions institutional entrepreneurship as a critical mechanism for explaining how collective digital transformation becomes possible in practice.

For this study too, I adopted an interpretive approach to case-study research. This time, the work followed the Ångsvall initiative from the outsourcing discussion in 2022 all the way to 2025, with partnership inspired by a logic of collective digital transformation still flourishing through pairing of agility and local responsiveness with scale, infrastructure, and strong

competence. For suitable data sources, I complemented the four rounds of interviews (of all 53 informants) with examination of 36 steering documents, my field notes, and internal communications.

Applying the concept of institutional entrepreneurship highlighted the role of these individuals and groups (actors who initiate and actively participate in changes that diverge from preexisting institutional arrangements, per Battilana et al., 2009) within municipalities as change agents able to drive collaborative initiatives forward. Empowering local actors to take ownership of the collaborative process is crucial for the success of this new institutional framework since it encourages active participation and fosters commitment to shared goals. In public-sector settings, the institutional entrepreneurs typically operate within complex webs of interdependencies that require balancing innovation with legitimacy/accountability work (Garud et al., 2007; Tumbas et al., 2018), so the study examined specific means by which they orchestrate change. It pinpointed seven core activities: identifying opportunities, mobilizing resources, building alliances, advocating and framing, navigating constraints, establishing new norms and practices, and making use of social positions. This typology of activities attuned the study's analysis to precisely how institutional entrepreneurship unfolded over time in the Ångsvall collaboration. That analysis, combining inductive and theory-driven coding, identified three distinct phases through which institutional entrepreneurship was enacted: convergence, divergence, and confluence.

In the first phase, the two key institutional entrepreneurs, the CEO of Ånge and the CIO of Sundsvall, oriented their actions around a shared vision of equal digital welfare. This phase was characterized by joint sensemaking, vision articulation, and alliance-building. The entrepreneurs crafted a narrative emphasizing equality and moral responsibility, which aided in gaining legitimacy both in political and in administrative quarters. The work involved framing the collaboration as not an efficiency-focused merger but a moral endeavor to make sure that all citizens, across geographic conditions, would have equal access to digital services. Thus, they set a shared institutional purpose that laid foundations for collective action.

The collaboration entered the divergence phase as it expanded to encompass additional stakeholders and operation layers. Growing par-

ticipation increased tensions related to institutional logics, expectations, etc., and the differences in size, resources, and structure between Ånge and Sundsvall became visible. One telling moment of friction and uncertainty arrived as Sundsvall developed complex digital governance systems with specialized roles while Ånge employed a much leaner structure. As institutional entrepreneurs, the two leaders had to navigate resistance, redundancies, and the emotional dimensions of change (not least the aforementioned dismissal of Ånge's IT manager and the subsequent redistribution of authority). During this phase, the entrepreneurs adopted more facilitative roles, focusing on creating spaces where differing institutional practices could "meet" and evolve together. Rather than assert directive leadership in efforts to resolve all tensions, they worked to sustain productive friction that enabled experimentation and adaptation. I found commonality with C. Hardy and Maguire's argument (2008) that institutional change in inter-organizational contexts often requires managing rather than eliminating contradictions.

The third phase ushered in confluence as the collaboration began to stabilize. New institutional routines and norms became woven in. Decision-making processes, shared governance, and joint prioritization mechanisms were gradually institutionalized, and responsibility for transformation became distributed throughout the organizations. The institutional entrepreneurs increasingly stepped back, allowing "proto-entrepreneurs" emerging within both municipalities to take ownership of the process. This phase marked the solidifying of collective digital transformation into an institutional reality, a shift from collaboration as project to collaboration as institution. The marriage of complementary strengths, Sundsvall's infrastructure and Ånge's agility, gained formality as an enduring digital ecosystem characterized by shared governance and mutual reinforcement. In sum, the process resembled what Inoue denoted as collective ambidexterity, with exploration and exploitation distributed across organizational boundaries rather than confined to a single entity.

The article extends Paper 4's argument that developing a new institutional framework able to support inter-organizational collaboration strongly is crucial. This framework should be designed to facilitate collective action while remaining adaptable to the contexts and capacities of different municipalities. The associated institutional entrepreneurship

involves deploying innovative practices, structures, and policies that promote collaborative governance. Actively reshaping the systems and fostering new cooperation mechanisms enables municipalities to enhance their ability to address complex social challenges together.

Central to this endeavor is the concept of equitable governance, which emerged as a vital factor in reaching the desired outcomes. Achieving equality in decision-making processes and access to resources is essential for fostering inclusivity and making sure that all municipalities can contribute to and benefit from collaborative efforts.

Equitable governance not only builds trust among the participating organizations but also helps mitigate power imbalances that may arise as collaboration unfolds. Guaranteeing that even the smallest or least resource-rich municipalities have a voice in decision-making processes is vital for creating a sense of ownership and investment in the collaborative initiative. Commitment to equitable practices fosters a more cohesive environment where all stakeholders feel empowered and invested in common goals.

Paper 5 delves into the prerequisites for this by framing the need for a new institutional framework suitable for fostering a collaborative environment within the context of institutional entrepreneurship. The study showed that the success of inter-organizational digital transformation hinges on foundational conditions that revolve around creating an environment that supports partnership, trust, and shared objectives among municipalities. By outlining clear expectations and fostering open communication, municipalities can strengthen their relationships and enhance the collaboration. I found that this proactive approach is vital for overcoming potential barriers and fostering a culture of cooperation that prioritizes mutual benefit.

In its discussion, the paper offers a mid-range process theory of institutional entrepreneurship in collective digital transformation, conceptualizing the process as one oscillating between closeness and distance. Early in the convergence phase, closeness enables joint sensemaking and legitimacy-building. Then, distance amid divergence allows for differentiation and learning across institutional boundaries. Finally, in confluence, a new balance is achieved through integration and the institutionalization of shared practices. This flow, which parallels a pattern of closeness and

distance identified by Magnusson et al. (2021) in connection with digital ambidexterity, illustrates how institutional entrepreneurs navigate and recalibrate proximity over time to sustain collaboration and propel change.

My final study represents an advance to IS theory, wrought by integrating institutional entrepreneurship with collective digital transformation. I extended the latter concept with a leadership dimension that complements the institutional-work perspective developed by Carlsson et al. (2023b). In addition to drawing together these two concepts, which helped illuminate how leadership, agency, and institutional change interact in the public sector, this study has enriched institutional theory directly, by illustrating how entrepreneurship unfolds not as a discrete act but as a longitudinal, relational process involving distributed agency and evolving roles. For practice, the paper offers insight for municipal leaders and policymakers hoping to manage inter-municipality digital initiatives. It suggests that leadership in such settings is less about command and control and more about maintaining balance: between stability and change, autonomy and collaboration, and local and collective interests.

Reflections on the Findings from Paper 5

Taking the research full circle, Paper 5 clarifies the prerequisites that I had initially sensed only intuitively in the course of practice. For collective digital transformation to emerge, the actors must construct suitable joint institutional arrangements, lead through the mechanism of institutional entrepreneurship, and take equitable governance as the organizing principle. From a process standpoint, the findings map a trajectory on which early convergence around equality of digital welfare and initial shared governance gives way to divergence (as participation widens and tensions surface) before ultimately confluence emerges as new shared routines, platforms, and decision rights anchor shared ownership and responsibility. The paper's phase-based model, building on notions identified from the literature (Panagiotopoulos et al., 2019; Scupola & Mergel, 2022), recasts my "how do we scale and keep it fair?" question as a design brief for a sequence of institutional-entrepreneurship activities that unfold as resource mobilization, alliance-building, framing, and norm-setting such that equity and scale grow together rather than clash.

Also, the final part of the research yielded a phase-specific playbook that now serves to guide Ångsvall's continued expansion as three further municipalities (northern Hälsningland's Nordanstig, Ljusdal, and Hudiksvall) step aboard. As these receive orientation and "get their bearings," integrating insight expressed in papers 4 and 5 aids in judging when the absence of certain conditions indicates that Ångsvall-style collaboration might not offer the right path. While several municipal executives, driven mainly by dissatisfaction with their local IT department, have expressed an interest in "joining Ångsvall" in hopes of a substitute for internal change and while Sundsvall displays political enthusiasm in this direction, Paper 5 emphasizes how sensitive and fragile the process is. It would not take much to jeopardize the collaboration with Ånge. Moreover, those who question the Ångsvall collaboration model are already in the ascendancy, with tensions coming to a head at the national level when the head of digitalization at SALAR publicly stated that Ångsvall is not an archetype: "You cannot say that all municipalities should do as Sundsvall and Ånge have. It is not possible."[1] This nest of problems demands awareness of how the pieces slot together: what can be generalized, what must be tailored case-specifically, and who is not yet ready. In any case, drawing on the insights of Tinjan (2025) and Kaganer's team (2023), I approach these moments too as signals of inertia to be managed through design, not ignored.

The main findings articulated in Paper 5 hold several implications for future decision-making. With regard to my own work, the first of them is that I must make sure the conditions are in place for future collaboration to move through all three phases and reach maturity as a genuine joint institutional articulation aligned with the digital-transformation agenda. This requires concretely according priority to the institutional core: a standing joint decision forum, openly published governance principles that support equity, and long-horizon agreements that formalize costs' and benefits' distribution and the way in which the shared digital infrastructure is to be used (see Janowski, 2015; Panagiotopoulos et al., 2019).

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[1] Asgård, S. (2022, November 9). SKR:s digitaliseringschef: "Jag har varit en nörd i andras ögon hela mitt liv." *Dagens Samhälle*. https://www.dagenssamhalle.se/samhalle-och-valfard/digitalisering/skrs-digitaliseringschef-jag-har-varit-en-nord-i-andras-ogon-hela-mitt-liv/

Secondly, I will serialize the institutional-entrepreneurship activities in a manner that renders their sequence explicit: resources' mobilization and framing in the convergence phase, alliance-building and translation in the divergence stage, and normalization and routinizing to accompany confluence. Managing this trajectory also entails monitoring how participation broadens over time, so that we can ascertain whether shared ownership (as considered by Nielsen et al., 2022; Warner & Wäger, 2019) is developing, as opposed to continued dependence on a few key individuals.

The final ramification ties in with this. So-called succession planning that cultivates additional institutional entrepreneurship across/between units and municipalities can furnish filling of relevant roles such that shared ownership persists once the early champions step back. My experience attests to the time-critical nature of this endeavor, through findings consistent with collaborative-governance and public-leadership research's emphasis on broader participation and joint decision capacity (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Crosby & Bryson, 2018; Emerson et al., 2011).

Lessons from the past can arm one with lessons for the future. In the latter case, a model that enshrines enrolling additional prospective institutional entrepreneurs and safeguards solid development of their relevant competencies possesses considerable power to mitigate dependence on any individuals, thus offsetting the risks bound up with individual champions and their inevitable exit (Lakshman & Akhter, 2015; Sun et al., 2020). My own work has inscribed these lessons in the system through operations checkpoints to revisit whenever key actors leave: verify the phase, activate the appropriate elements of the succession plan, redistribute the institutional entrepreneurship activities accordingly, and reaffirm the equity compact. Thus, momentum can be sustained and fairness survives personnel-related shocks. A framework that generalizes such lessons holds vast potential for the research landscape and, in the practical domain, sector-wide.

4.7 MY ROLES IN PREPARING THE PUBLICATIONS

Developing the five publications integral to the dissertation project involved several other researchers within the Digital Government Research Consortium. The overarching aim behind their engagement was my swift orientation as a newly involved PhD student and effective learning in terms of steadily becoming more adept in designing studies and writing papers. Table 4 summarizes my roles in the work informing each publication with reference to the Contributor Role Taxonomy (see https://credit.niso.org/).

Table 4. My role in preparing the publications, per the CRediT taxonomy

	Publication				
Roles	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Conceptualization	X		X	X	X
Data curation			X	X	X
Formal analysis		X	X	X	X
Funding acquisition	X	X	X	X	X
Investigation	X	X	X	X	X
Methodology			X	X	X
Project administration			X	X	X
Resources	X	X	X	X	X
Validation		X	X	X	X
Visualization	X		X	X	X
Writing of initial draft		X	X	X	X
Review and editing	X	X	X	X	X

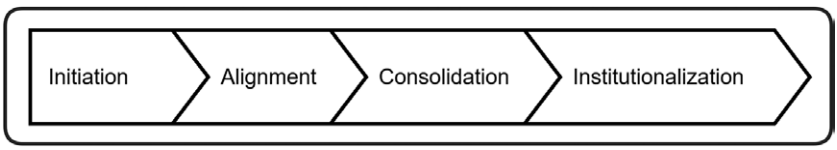
CHAPTER 5
THE CORE FINDINGS

Elaborating on the models, typologies, and awareness outlined in the previous chapter, the discussion now deepens the treatment of the core findings as an integrated response to the project's central question. The first aspect detailed is the phased model of collaboration that emerged from the longitudinal analysis of how collaboration evolves all the way from its initiation to the consolidation phase. Then, I examine the tensions, dilemmas, and strategic responses that characterize that process of collaborative digital transformation, drawing on evidence from both the population-level survey and the in-depth case study that followed. The final facet considered is collective institutional entrepreneurship as a generative mechanism whereby municipalities can jointly navigate institutional constraints and reconfigure their digital capacity. The knowledge cultivated forms a comprehensive answer to the question of how municipalities engage in inter-organizational digital transformation.

5.1 A PHASED MODEL OF INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

The model developed to capture inter-organizational digital transformation conceptualizes it as a process wherein several distinct components contribute to evolution that brings about both learning and institution formation. The model, outlined in Figure 4, is presented in detail below. As the text delves into each phase in turn, this subsection interweaves conceptual explanation and the powerful voice of empirical data. Integrating direct quotations from participants supplies windows to the lived process through which the phases unfolded. In line with interpretive and processual research traditions (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Langley, 1999), these empirical strands together demonstrate sprouting of theoretical understanding from situated practice rather than abstract deduction. Each phase is illustrated through moments that showcase its characteristic tensions, learning dynamics, and evolving sense of collective purpose (Appendix A provides a more detailed version, complete with milestones).

Figure 4. The stages in inter-organizational digital transformation



5.1.1 PHASE 1: AWAKENING COLLABORATION AND ESTABLISHING A FOUNDATION

Because the Ångsvall initiative was a pioneering form of inter-municipality digital transformation, the institutional entrepreneurs dedicated substantial time to disseminating explanations of its purpose and benefits throughout both organizations. The main purpose in this was for employees across the board to view the partnership as meaningful and mutually advantageous. In the first phase, they pursued five lines of action deliberately specified to address inequality concerns: a) communicate the vision and mission; b) highlight similarities between the municipalities; c) clarify the mutual but diverging benefits; d) guarantee inclusive, shared decision-making; and e) prevent the smaller municipality from experiencing identity loss in the collaboration.

Communication was pivotal. Early on, several employees in both municipalities worried that the initiative was being pushed through too quickly and resembled rushed or hackish efforts:

> There isn't any system, process, method, or anything like that. I don't know if I want to be quoted on this, but it's like "cowboy work." (Manager, Ånge)

To counter this concern, the institutional entrepreneurs from Ånge and Sundsvall gave joint presentations that emphasized unity and shared responsibility for devising a single, shared vision. As the metaphorical little brother, Ånge readily embraced arrangement conferring access to competencies and economies of scale that were otherwise out of reach. The big brother was less happy at this point: especially those parts of the organization working with finance questioned cost-sharing for its implications for Sundsvall's residents:

> There is this more altruistic perspective, like helping a smaller municipality that is weaker, and there is a point in advocating equal welfare. However, there is always the question regarding investments and money; what does it cost me? After all, I have my own citizens to take care of. (A manager for Sundsvall)

In response, the institutional entrepreneurs made complementarity tangible. They underlined Ånge's strengths: having fast decision tracks, small scale, and leadership by a group of top managers who met every week positioned Ånge as an innovation-ready testing ground where initiatives could be tried out on a smaller canvas before wider rollout in Sundsvall. Such articulation helped to restore a sense of focus after

> […] we perceive[d] that we can dress in pink veils and think that this is going to be fantastic [and] create an illusion that it will be better than it actually is before we start[ed] recognizing the problems we weren't aware of at the beginning. It becomes even more important to remember what it is [that we want to achieve in this collaboration]. Why do we do this? What was it that we originally wanted to do differently? (Manager, Sundsvall)

The responsive framing depicted and laid ground for collaboration that is mutually beneficial. On one hand, communication stressed that this would not be altruistic transfer. At the same time, ongoing emphasis on shared decision-making and safeguarding Ånge's identity stressed from the little brother's angle that the partnership would be equitable from the start.

5.1.2 PHASE 2: ACTIVATING ALIGNMENT WITH FOUNDATIONAL DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE

In the second phase, the institutional entrepreneurs shifted from broad framing to mobilization in action. This entailed doing three things in parallel. Firstly, they translated the shared vision into specific, measurable goals for each municipality. Spelling out near-term steps such as delivering a unified identity- and access-management structure alongside other shared data infrastructure facilitated solid support for exchange between Ånge and Sundsvall. This aided further in assuaging the aforementioned fears along the way:

> I see a challenge in that the model Sundsvall has is based on the idea that there should be more roles within the organization, roles that we don't have today. I believe there's a huge risk that Ånge will be overlooked. The Sundsvall model is what's being applied. It's a bit of a dilemma to come together in a shared system park and share IT. (Manager, Ånge)

The second locus of activity involved establishing shared technical foundations for reaching those goals, to render collaboration workable day to day. Standardizing cybersecurity protocols, IT models, and common definitions and methods was central to this work, which was intentionally developed jointly to preclude impressions of the smaller partner getting absorbed:

> There's a lot of tedious work [...]. We might not have the same models, the same definitions [...] and we also need to find a way to make it not feel like Ånge is giving up on what they think works. (Manager, Sundsvall)

Lastly, they assured of clarity and transparency in resource allocation so that the economic base for the collaboration would be seen as fair. To accompany crafting of shared standards, investments equipped Ånge employees to follow them well. These computers, related digital tools, etc. supported the Sundsvall-led initiative while also guaranteeing equitable access to the new shared infrastructure. Making the monetary flows and roles "legible," and specifying who contributes what to which deliverables, was treated as essential for acceptance and progress.

5.1.3 PHASE 3: CONSOLIDATION OF EFFORTS TO IDENTIFY INTERESTS FOR JOINT PROJECTS

With the foundational infrastructure in place, the focus moved from platform-building to implementing concrete digital-transformation initiatives throughout each of the two municipalities. Although acceptance of the collaboration had been secured, involving people from both organizations in joint projects was still in its infancy:

> So it is just about safeguarding what is so fundamental. We are doing this so that we can achieve equality. It must be complementary strengths. And, of course, it must be equal governance. And then? Then there is a chance that it will become sustainable. (Manager, Sundsvall)

The institutional entrepreneurs therefore concentrated on identifying shared interests so that new projects had anchoring in mutual goals and benefits, not in one-sided priorities. The action at this moment also eased recurring worries about planning, deliverables, and financing.

For tangible and fair joint work, the institutional entrepreneurs guaranteed both municipalities' representation in each initiative. A dedicated coordinator role was created to support project setup and keep participation balanced as initiatives progressed from idea to delivery:

> [A manager for Ånge] has worked in Ånge Municipality within our organization together with [Manager, Sundsvall], and we've also worked together in Sundsvall's organization, so at this point the trust base is broader than it was in the beginning. The seed, or the root, or

> the beginning, was really theirs; they found each other, had trust in each other, and were able to shape it into a good idea. It helps too that it has been applauded from various sides, and that the initiative itself has gained a lot of attention. It's nice to get a bit of praise and feel that the wind is at your back for a change.

This broadened engagement beyond the leaders' dyad, reduced dependency on a small core, and began to cultivate a shared-responsibility culture around the portfolio of projects. Along¬side representation, the institutional entrepreneurs created coordination and support so that efforts could evolve rather than lose steam. Also, delegating responsibilities to subject-matter experts in line units embedded collaboration in day-to-day operations instead of pursuing it as a top-down program. This widening of the actor base sustained momentum and encouraged innovation from within each municipality while still keeping projects tied to jointly recognized priorities:

> Different viewpoints arise along the way that suggest this may turn out well or that we could have done it differently. It has been very important to be steadfast. The expression is "to stand one's ground," meaning to stand by what has been decided, regardless of what you think we should pursue instead, since that is no longer relevant. (Manager, Ånge)

Finally, phase 3 required fostering trust and relinquishing the comforts of control. The institutional entrepreneurs gradually withdrew centralized control, simultaneously empowering variety-rich teams to take ownership of outcomes under the umbrella of equitably shared governance:

> I'd prefer to see it as us having established long-term collaboration on these issues. This is, in essence, our approach now. (Manager, Sundsvall)

As participants delivered results together, trust shifted from being leader-dependent to being grounded in repeated actions creating established practice. This reinforced the partnership's core design principle: complementary strengths under shared rules, the condition the partners themselves saw as pivotal to making the collaboration sustainable.

5.1.4 PHASE 4: INSTITUTIONALIZATION BORN OF COLLABORATION

As the process entered a new stage, the collaboration journey turned another corner, from building capacity to maintaining durability. The institutionalization stage began with entrepreneurs attending to creation of long-term financial agreements that established alignment in the municipalities' multi-year funding strategies such that costs and benefits would be distributed fairly even as time brought changes. The joint work had to outlast yearly budgets and withstand political reshuffles. One manager described the goal as to reach a point where "it shouldn't matter whether I live in Ånge or Sundsvall" because shared processes and financing would underpin digital service of the same quality in both places.

The leaders also guaranteed shared decision-making in project prioritization, strengthening the mechanisms for equal voice as the collaboration matured. Priorities were to be set jointly and projects run with representation from both municipalities. This moved ownership beyond the original institutional entrepreneurship dyad and inscribed equity in everyday portfolio choices:

> I know that we do things together. [For example, for] the care sector, I would say maybe look at applications at some level. At least, I understand it as if they [Ånge] are involved. (Manager, Sundsvall)

With the funding horizons and prioritization rules clarified, attention shifted to fostering collective ownership. Making the partnership feel like "ours" rather than "theirs" necessitated continuing to devolve responsibility to mixed teams, maintaining narratives of the results as co-owned outcomes, and keeping the benefits evident for each side so that shared responsibility for long-term digital transformation was not individual-dependent but institutionalized:

> We're going to talk about joint business processes in the next step. And that's where we are now, in a way, talking about how it shouldn't matter whether I live in Ånge Municipality or Sundsvall Municipality. (Manager, Ånge)

Taken together, these moves amount to leading equitable municipal collaboration for the long term, with underpinnings in formal agreements that stabilize financing, decision fora that protect equal voice, and routines that enshrine co-ownership. The collaboration matured, institutional entrepreneurs relinquished control, and shared responsibility began to bloom, in a leadership transition that made the partnership more resilient and lasting.

5.1.5 LESSONS FROM THE MODEL AND ITS PHASES

The lines of my model of inter-organizational digital transformation emerged not as a pre-ordained framework but in gradual crystallization of insight, shaped through abductive reasoning and sustained empirical engagement. That is, distinct phases of initiation, alignment, consolidation, and institutionalization became visible not from overlaying theory on my data but through the interpretive process of seeing the code of collaboration as it unfolded in real time. As time passed, early episodes of pragmatic coordination revealed a nascent structure: actors testing boundaries, probing complementarities, and attempting to translate localized innovation into shared language. This was the initiation, the moment of awakening within the Matrix. The transformation journey and my empirical journey progressed organically from there.

In retrospect, then, the phased model turned out to portray more than a temporal sequence. It represents an architecture of learning through which the entities gradually construct the institutional conditions for their collective transformation. By illustrating deepening travel relations' navigation of exploration and exploitation (Heitala & Päivärinta, 2025; March, 1991), articulating the four phases reveals how collaboration evolves from *ad hoc* coordination to ingrained capacity. Each phase is patterned by a specific mode of institutional work: theorizing and framing in initiation (Battilana et al., 2009), relational trust-building and boundary-spanning during alignment (Ring & Van de Ven, 1994), procedure codification and resource integration in consolidation (Provan & Kenis, 2008), and the final phase's embedding and legitimacy work in institutionalization (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Seen through this lens, collaboration is an instrument of institutional design, not merely a managerial tool.

The LeoPhant metaphor comes into full view here: a hybrid form that fuses resilience with agility. This is not a matter of mere theory. In the Ångsvall case, the hybridity permeated practice. Deliberate attention to governance, financing, and compliance enabled asymmetrical partners to generate equitable outcomes (as Paper 5 discusses in depth). What began as localized innovation grew into a collective infrastructure for transformation. The model captures real-world expression consistent with insight offered by Warner and Wäger (2019) and by Pernille Smith and Michela Beretta (2021) that distributed ambidexterity can be enacted when citizen-driven exploration is matched by platform-anchored exploitation. The model presents the backbone of how this can occur.

It functions as a tool at conceptual level also. The model offers a processual vocabulary for theorizing on collective institutional entrepreneurship (Carlsson et al., 2023b; DiMaggio, 1988; Hardy & Maguire, 2008). Transformation manifests itself here not as a punctuated shift but as iterative, cumulative practice. The recursive quality of this rebalancing of legitimacy, equity, and capacity under constraint highlights that success requires equity to be designed into collaborative architectures from the outset through fully justified proper funding, role symmetry, and mutual accountability (Carter et al., 2024; Lappi et al., 2019).

At a higher level of abstraction, the phased model constitutes more than a descriptive device. It frames a proposed theory of institutional equilibration under asymmetry. What emerges through Ångsvall is a logic of recursive embedding, institutional reciprocity, and collective sensemaking, culminating in and via a form of distributed institutional entrepreneurship in which unevenly situated actors construct shared legitimacy and durable capacity. This model transcends its empirical base to offer a meta-governance logic for public digital transformation, one in which equity (as design), adaptiveness (as capability), and institutionalization (as legitimacy) cohere into a self-reinforcing system. The little brother becomes not merely included but indispensable, a co-architect of the institutional future.

Reflecting as both observer and participant, I recognize the inescapable fact that the model's evolution mirrored my own epistemic trajectory. The iterative construction of Ångsvall and my embedded involvement therein illuminated the rhythmic nature of institutional entrepreneurship, a cycli-

cal dance of framing, translating, and embedding (Lawrence et al., 2011). The task of the narrator here is not to claim authorship of the model but to interpret its emergence as part of a broader institutional awakening: a moment when municipalities begin to see the Matrix and, in doing so, to reconfigure its code.

In this context, the LeoPhant does more than symbolize transformation. It embodies the infrastructural maturity of collaboration itself. And we can witness through the model how municipalities not only navigate but also collectively rewrite the code.

5.2 STRATEGIES AND TENSIONS IN INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

In a pattern analogous to honoring Newton's third law, where every action invokes a counter-action, institutional change bears inherent charges of tension. Examining the Ångsvall collaboration elucidated four constructive tensions with particular clarity: equality vs. inequality, standardization vs. local adaptation, trust vs. control, and innovation vs. efficiency. Rather than approach these as obstacles, the analysis focused on the strategic interplay through which they were operationalized as fuel for collaborative outcomes. The strategies employed to this end (especially those for shared IT operations, joint development initiatives, and the establishment of shared business processes) did not loosen or dissolve the tensions so much as convert friction into forward motion. Contradiction itself functioned as a generative force within the collaboration.

The timeline traced across the four phases of the collaboration endeavor (as synthesized in Section 5.1) attests to how the four persistent tensions listed were not treated as problems to solve or merely tackled but actively drawn out and reconfigured through situated strategies. These tensions became design conditions, structural features around which collaboration was purposefully composed such that it could yield tangible outcomes. My analysis made the causal logic of the process visible: how micro-level practices of negotiation and adaptation aggregate into meso-level results that create future-proof institutional transformation. This articulation provides the auditable construction project of a bridge between the empirical insight detailed in papers 4 and 5 and the guiding design principles, linking the practice of collaboration to its generative and institutional effects.

5.2.1 STRATEGY 1: COMPLEMENTARITY DESIGN

At the heart of the Ångsvall initiative's constructive equality–inequality tension are the scale, robust platforms, and greater resourcing brought by Sundsvall alongside Ånge's agility, shorter decision paths, and proximity to the citizens. For genuine compliance with the initiative's stated purpose of "equal digital welfare regardless of where you live," asymmetry had to be turned from a liability into an asset. Design for complementarity rendered the allocation explicit and fair. Responsibilities were distributed on the basis of strengths and the proportionality rules set up to preclude quiet reversion to the center as opposed to the periphery (with regard to money, risk, and capacity). Establishing a shared service catalogue indicating who decides and who delivers, sovereignty clauses to protect spheres of local discretion, and venues for the partners' equal footing served as mechanisms of insurance against identity loss etc. Importantly, they did so visibly. For instance, highlighting Ånge's contributions made participation feel more like contribution and less like absorption. To keep the equality ethos credible over time, the institutional entrepreneurs' design also guarded against resurgence of inequality, of governance habits that privilege scale over local relevance, and of doubts:

> Yes, like they don't really see you and your needs, and don't listen to you. That's one way to interpret it. If you think in terms of the higher purpose that we're supposed to reach these goals with the purpose of the collaboration itself, after all. What do you think are, like, the strengths in Ånge it's probably tied to Ånge's role and that answer was small. But I'm thinking like this: you do have strengths. Sundsvall describes it as, and [manager, Sundsvall], who is a municipal chief for that matter, also describes it as, there are strengths that are kind of important, that really can be a good contribution in this collaboration. It's not only Ånge that needs Sundsvall; you can see it the other way around too. (A municipal employee, with Ånge)

At the same time, the collaboration construct explicitly guarded against several ways in which inequality can reassert itself. To offset power dynamics that could have led the larger partner to set the agenda, capacity gaps

that might precipitate to uneven service access, and what one could term sizeist governance habits, mitigation techniques were built in to the architecture. Chief among these were transparent resource allocation, joint prioritization at every juncture, open communication and trust-building procedures, and systematic stakeholder involvement on both sides. The aim was to elevate equitable access, shared responsibility, and mutual benefit from aspirations to norms for the actual operations.

5.2.2 STRATEGY 2: SELECTIVE STANDARDIZATION

The standardization/customization tension manifests itself as either excessive uniformity suffocating local relevance or excessive variation thwarting interoperation. Since the target in the case examined was joint development with shared "order books" and code for inter-organizational digital services, standardization was applied where joint development hinged on it while adaptation was preserved where value depended on context. Standardization cannot mean "make Ånge look like Sundsvall," and local adaptation cannot mean "we all build our own." To seek middle ground, a standardized core encompassed what joint development must hold in common: application programming interfaces contracts and data models, identity and access management design patterns, cybersecurity controls, and release/change routines. The pieces must join such that a single, end-to-end process can run across municipal borders. Beyond that core, the partners could define "tolerances," the variance range allowed (producing local content, adjusting the language for appropriate local tone, implementing community-specific features, etc.) with clear guardrails:

> All of these and, well, is this technology and people in interplay? You know? We set rules that end up being hard, and yeah, then we get a certain outcome. But you can set hard and soft rules like maybe letting the optimization be a bit more flexible with this. (Municipal employee, Ånge)

Governance aligned with this tension is built for co-creation, with selective standardization permitting the joint development to work day to day. The instruments included a uniform definition of "done," a common artifact

repository, and coordinated software-release cadences. These had to factor in Ånge having faster release cycles than Sundsvall, which activated the fault lines of a policy-level tension. As one politician in Sundsvall put it:

> "It is not okay that Ånge always is ahead of Sundsvall."

The solution was to treat this as a productive tension rather than a failing: Early releases in Ånge were recast as sanctioned piloting that reduces risk in the course of development for subsequent upscaling in Sundsvall. The governance response brought in a reciprocity rule: what Ånge pilots Sundsvall industrializes. In effect, proof of possibility in Ånge creates informed demand in Sundsvall, aligning politics with product and turning cadence asymmetry into a shared advantage.

5.2.3 STRATEGY 3: UTILIZING AGILITY FOR INNOVATION

The tension between innovation and efficiency invited asking how to explore quickly without erosion of the discipline needed for constructing together. That tension, which peaked in phases 3 and 4 of the collaboration, shaped how joint development emerged. Framing during early consolidation positioned Ånge as a legitimate testbed where new digital initiatives could be piloted quickly. Reframing this agility as an asset reassured Sundsvall's politicians and managers that experimentation was not "cowboy work" but a structured way to invent:

> How can you drive innovation? How can you become more creative? Then it's about not being so prescriptive about what is to be done. Be very clear about where we're headed. As long as it leads to equitable welfare, it's okay. What did you steer? Okay, let me put it like this: what did you formalize, and what did you leave open? What [manager, Ånge] and I made very clear was that we corrected when things went in the wrong direction. If I notice, or hear, that someone is acting in that way, then I have to step in quickly and act and have a conversation with that person, or change something in the assignment description, or the like. So really, if you think about it in a positive way: how do you herd sheep? (Manager, Sundsvall).

As the consolidation phase brought mobilization, the tension sharpened. Ånge's higher release pace created political discomfort, as was crystallized in the comment quoted above that "it is not okay" for Ånge to be always more advanced than Sundsvall. Here, efficiency-based logics (from Sundsvall) clashed with innovation-based foci (from Ånge). However, expecting this in light of the groundwork behind Paper 1 furnished a possibility of preparing governance responses and adjusting the strategies such that the friction could emerge as a productive dynamic. The actors' distribution efforts in the consolidation-focused phase 3 incorporated agility and efficiency into the joint development pipeline institutionally. Pilot projects started in Ånge, with Sundsvall prepared to scale up the results. These paired actions created a distributed balance between exploration and exploitation (see Hietala & Päivärinta, 2025). Finally, agility and efficiency stabilized as complementary strengths as institutionalization (phase 4) created a single joint development process. The tension no longer sparked conflict; it was now a designed duality, with two sources sustaining each other in the delivery of equal digital services.

5.2.4 STRATEGY 4: TRUST-BUILDING OVER FORMALIZATION

The trust–control tension, foundational to the Ångsvall collaboration, coalesced around Sundsvall's scale and accountability pressures naturally favoring rules, process-oriented discipline, and systematic safeguards and, on the other hand, Ånge needing recognition and room to act in a subservience-free manner. In the first phase, the institutional entrepreneurs contained this tension via convergent framing. They coordinated joint communications and adopted a "single-sender" principle. By acting as the sole handlers of related messaging, they set the mission's agenda and protected its core. This prevented competing framings from jeopardizing the undertaking, by means of:

> A fairly big production of control. We wanted to control the message. And I did, like, hear some criticism along the way. But he's the one who has to say this. The whole organization doesn't yet know what it's about, but I know it was deliberate that [he would be the one to

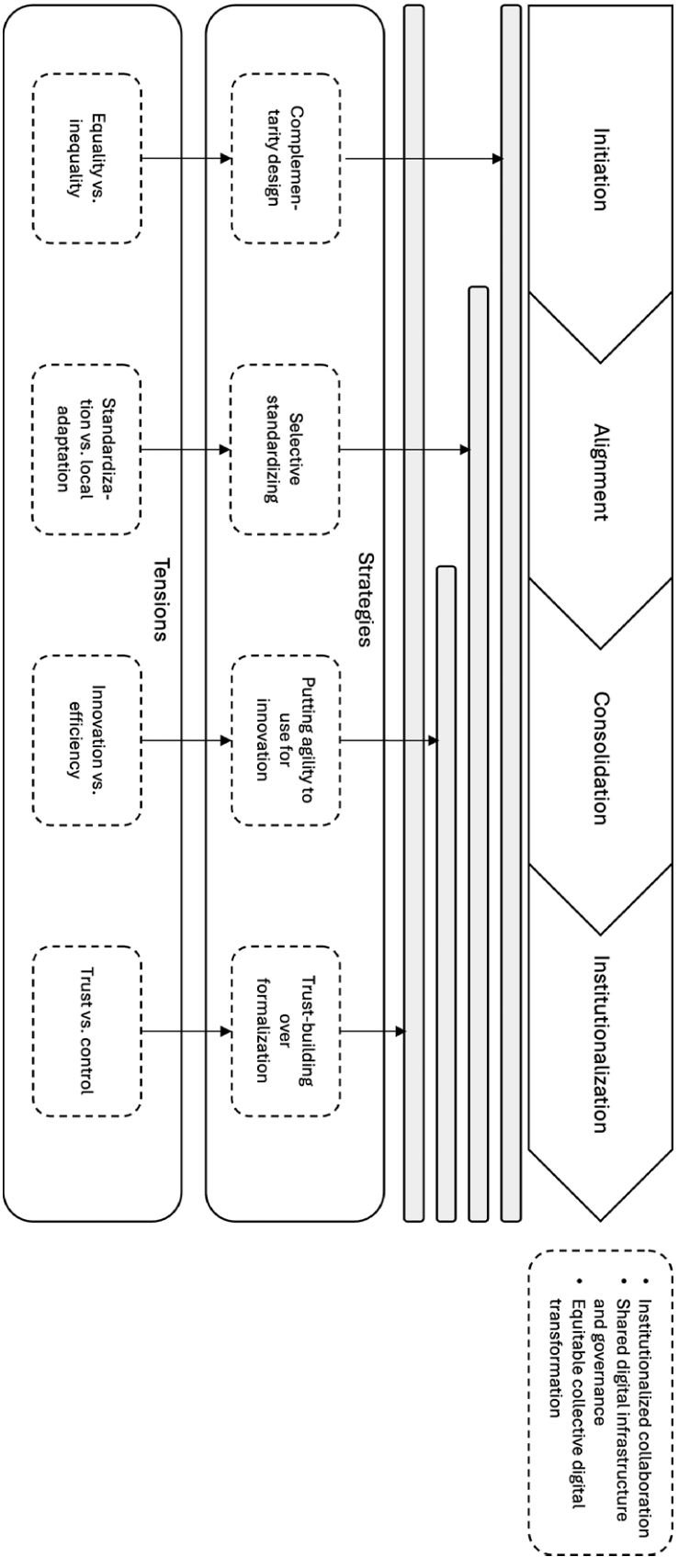
> say it]. If someone else had described it, it would have been described differently. So that was very important at the start, and that's also the challenge in large organizations, to manage that. (Manager, Sundsvall)

As the work entered the second phase, control requirements intensified, thus posing a risk of being read as impositions from the larger municipality. The governance response cohered around trust and equal responsibility. Crucially, the institutional entrepreneurs sanctioned exception paths, so speed was prioritized and some risks were accepted. Transparent resource allocation reduced the sense that control equated to reversion to centralization. Over time, personnel-dependence gave way to routinized practice, and teams rather than individual assumed ownership of shared steps in the process, scaffolded by the norm "joint by default":

> "We usually say it's a bit like a marriage, and I would still say that there's a lot of wisdom and practical perspectives in Ånge Municipality, where things have been done in a completely different way. For example, if we talk about our digital legacy, it looks entirely different in Ånge and is often easier there, since they didn't build themselves into complex systems to the same extent. So Sundsvall's role in this is to be, well, sort of the engine and driving force. But I would also say that we are doing this very much together, and there are applications… And now, when we go deeper into more detailed questions together with different parts of Ånge's organization, it becomes clear that there are all sorts of synergy effects here, on levels we hadn't considered at the beginning." (Manager, Sundsvall)

The analysis uncovered recurring tensions that required strategic responses in each distinct phase of the collaboration's evolution. These strategies did not exist in isolation but formed a cumulative rhythm progressively yielding stable inter-organizational digital transformation as time passed. Figure 5 outlines the dynamics of the relationship's tensions, strategies, and development.

Figure 5. Visualization of the interplay of tensions, strategies, and institutionalization



5.2.5 THE STRATEGIES OVERALL, COUPLED WITH REFLECTIONS

The strategy map developed by Ångsvall cohered not as a path of technical fixes but against living terrain marked by contradiction, negotiation, and deliberate design. What seemed at first to be blockages to operations were expressions of something more fundamental deep-seated structural, epistemic, and institutional tensions. The corresponding strategies emerged as situated practices rather than predefined solutions. Continuous reworking in response to changes in conditions accentuated that such collaboration entails not elimination but orchestration of the frictions, a symphonic movement of recomposition shaped by the capacity to act within paradox rather than outside it (Berente & Seidel, 2022; Orlikowski & Scott, 2023; Wimelius et al., 2021).

The four strategies' ebb and flow characterized this movement over time. Complementarity design, selective standardization, agility angled for innovation, and valuing trust-building over formalization each operated as both a response to tension and as reframing of the institutional terrain on which it played out. Designing for complementarity transformed asymmetry into capability by aligning the various actors' distinct strengths as constellations not through leveling but via nurturing of interdependence (Carlsson et al., 2025; Lappi et al., 2019; Nambisan et al., 2019). Selective standardizing balanced coherence with context-sensitive variation, to offer a shared language without imposing any single dialect. The results resonated with findings related to adaptive coordination in digital governance (Agostino et al., 2021; Nielsen et al., 2023). Empowering innovation with agility permitted experimentation safely tethered to institutional continuity; thus, sustaining novelty without dismantling what already worked meshes with the ambidexterity perspective (Baiyere et al., 2023; Smith & Beretta, 2021; Warner & Wäger, 2019). Finally, the emphasis on trust-building responded to the control problem by equipping the slow process to operate with confidence on a firm foundation from faster cycles; the informal served as a rock on which the formal could later stand (Clarke, 2020; Scupola & Mergel, 2022).

Again, these strategies did not resolve contradiction; they worked through it, shaping co-herence from building blocks of tension. Their

value lay not in technical content but in reflective density. Each of the four embodied a form of institutional work that expanded the boundaries of what collaboration might be. The design here, which took the form of situated practice, not central planning, dovetails with institutional perspectives on transformation in the digital age (Berente & Seidel, 2022; Bodrožić & Adler, 2022; Hinings et al., 2018). What Ångsvall developed over time was not a stable governance structure but an adaptive rhythm, collective muscle memory to exercise within lines of tension rather than to wipe away those lines (Carlsson et al., 2023b; Tana et al., 2023).

Set in relation to the dissertation's two anchoring metaphors, these strategies marked a shift in the collaborative imaginary. If earlier phases were about learning to see the Matrix, the hidden code of institutional constraint, the later work revolved around beginning to write within it, not in rebellion, but in revision to recode rather than eradicate it. Gradually, patterns of asymmetry, fragmentation, and control were rewritten as new protocols of inter-dependence, mutuality, and care (Eriksson & Öhlund, 2024; Rudmark et al., 2024). The architecture of the LeoPhant was taking shape, assembled as a composite body from fibers of trust, agility, and resilience. This creature, not yet a fully formed institutional entity, would not be designed once but grown organically through repetition and response (Baiyere et al., 2025; Tilson et al., 2010), as all life is.

Through its limbs, the strategy in Ångsvall became a medium of agency, though not of heroic collectives or individuals (Aldrich, 2011). Agency emerged in distributed form, from patterned interactions among human actors, elements of digital infrastructure, institutional constraints, and practical judgments. There was no blueprint, only practice. There was no architect, only composition (Carlsson et al., 2025; Magnusson et al., 2022; Yeow et al., 2018).

A deeper logic of public-sector digital transformation thus reveals itself. In the process I studied, change asserted itself not through decisive breaks but through cumulative acts of rebalancing (Mergel et al., 2019; Vial, 2019). The system learned to live with its tensions and, furthermore, derive benefit from treating them not as problems to solve but as conditions to

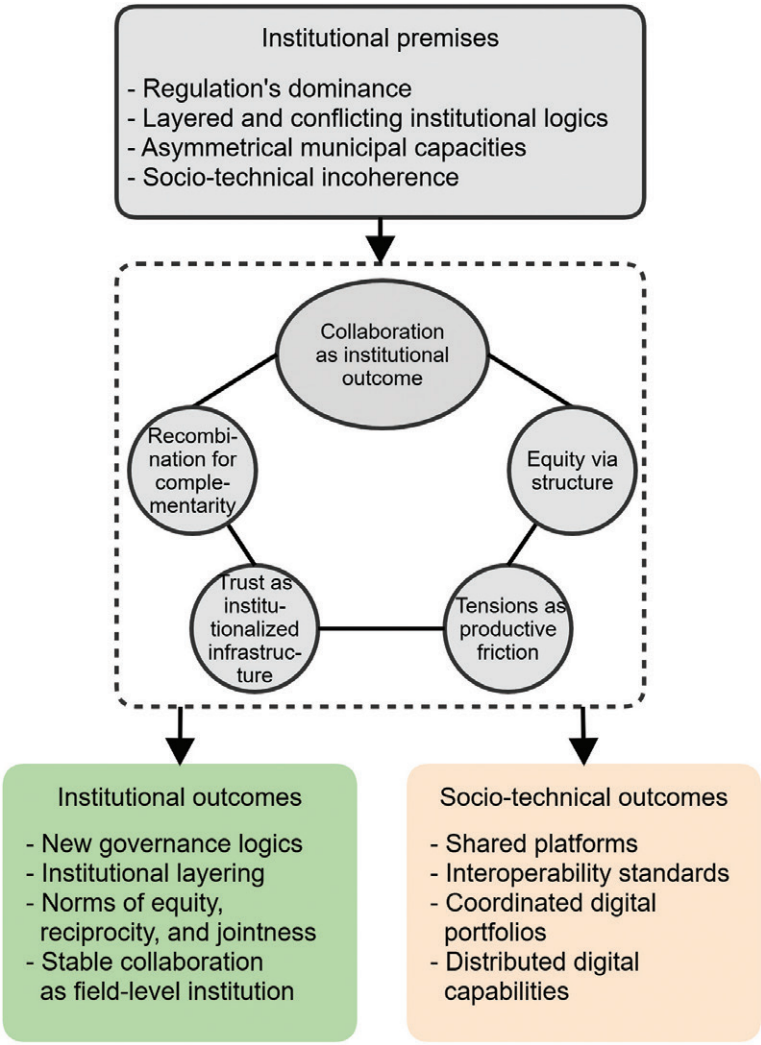
shape. What might have resembled *ad hoc* governance improvisation was actually careful institutional craftsmanship: slow, uncertainty-aware, and deliberate. It was slow in that transformation unfolded through the sedimented rhythms of coordination, negotiation, and trust-building rather than the breakneck speed of reform. Uncertainty required each step to navigate ambiguity and design while one was learning what the design should become, in a setting that reflects the emergent, indeterminate nature of digital transformation (Hinings et al., 2018; Orlikowski & Scott, 2023). Finally, it had to be deliberate since those acting amid the uncertainty chose to move with care, crafting each arrangement as both experiment and commitment in a pattern that reflects the notion of institutional work as intentional yet adaptive (Berente & Seidel, 2022; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). This is how the LeoPhant learns to walk: not by standing still to stop the effects of its body's contradictions but by finding balance. Each hesitant step is an act of composition that turns friction into movement and uncertainty into form.

5.3 COLLECTIVE INSTITUTIONAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP AS A MEANS OF TRANSFORMATION

Integrating the institutional preconditions, pathways, and outcomes that together explain how inter-organizational digital transformation evolved into insitutionalized capacity for collective digital transformation, the analysis produced a model of the underlying dynamic that permitted this evolution: collective institutional entrepreneurship. The project's third main finding brings in collective institutional entrepreneurship as far more than an enabling condition for digital transformation. This is a dynamic process through which inter-organizational actors colletively design, legitimize, and give stability to new institutional arrangements.

Figure 6 illustrates' as-is the model of collective institutional entrepreneurship derived from the Ångsvall case.

Figure 6. The model of collective institutional entrepreneurship



The model serves as a processual synthesis of the foregoing analyses, illustrating how the interplay of collaboration, equity, trust, and tension navigation operated as a generative dynamic behind institutional transformation.

While some prior work has referred to collective institutional entrepreneurship (Jolly & Raven, 2015; Wijen & Ansari, 2007), it is quite evident from my reading of the literature that a clear and consistent definition has yet to emerge. The notion generally gets applied for collaborative efforts by multiple actors to initiate and sustain institutional change, overcoming collective inaction through cooperation among dispersed stakeholders with divergent interests (Garud et al., 2007). By aligning their efforts toward shared goals, these actors can transform institutions or create new ones. The nascent understanding draws attention to cooperative strategies among government entities, civic groups, and other organizations, representing an approach necessary for addressing complex public problems that no single actor in isolation can resolve (Battilana et al., 2009; Maguire et al., 2004; Tana et al., 2023).

Some literature has begun highlighting actual practices central to collective institutional entrepreneurship, In this regard, E. Fohim and S. Jolly (2021) identified seven social skills: empathic, analytical, translational, framing, tactical, organizational, and timing, which matter differently across the phases of institutional change. Other illustrations exist: Jolly and R. P. J. M. Raven (2015) showed how coalitions in India's wind-energy sector combined lobbying, regulation design, and innovation infrastructure to enable meso-level transformation, while S. Loren (2025) further demonstrated how field-configuring events can prove informative, helping coalitions align by revealing compatibilities with existing logics. Most research, however, still frames collective institutional entrepreneurship as extending individuals' entrepreneurship into a networked setting, without fully specifying its defining features.

My conceptualization building on the Ångsvall case materials advances a more precise handling of this important phenomenon. In the collaboration I studied, institutional change did not spring from the actions of any single "hero" entrepreneur. On the contrary, in distributed and sustained collaboration across municipal boundaries, diverse actors mobilized resources, framed shared purposes, and designed governance structures to safeguard equity. From grounding in this empirical evidence, I define collective institutional entrepreneurship as *joint exercise of institutional agency wherein multiple actors, driven by a common purpose, initiate and implement changes that diverge from established institutional arrangements.* Through

mutual trust, collaborative leadership, legitimacy work, and purpose-ful exploiting of complementary strengths, these actors overcome organizational inertia and mobilize dispersed resources to create or transform institutions.

The formation of Ångsvall offers a vivid empirical illustration of this process. The metaphor of fusing the elephant's strength with the leopard's agility concretizes its hybrid nature, capturing how collaboration can marry the institutional solidity, procedural discipline, and technical capacity of a large municipality with the flexibility, trust-based culture, and adaptive responsiveness of a smaller one. Rather than reduce, ignore, or smooth over difference, Ångsvall's institutional entrepreneurs recombined these distinct capacities into a new configuration. That hybrid is both stable and adaptive. It is regulated yet explorative. The definition gains graphic form in the LeoPhant: in practice, collective institutional entrepreneurship achieves transformation through the deliberate recombination of complementary institutional strengths into a resilient and evolving whole. Behind this emblem stand several defining features underpinning the definition above, each of which was evident from patterns in the empirical material.

Firstly, a common purpose supplied the normative anchor for collaboration. In Ångsvall, this purpose was a shared commitment to equitable digital welfare, to making certain that smaller municipalities do not end up disadvantaged when compared to larger ones. As one municipal leader in Ånge put it, "Why should citizens in a small municipality have poorer conditions than those in a large one? If we are going to close that gap, then we must do it together across municipal Sweden."

Another pillar was created from trust-building and collaborative leadership as equally indispensable construction materials. Initially grounded in personal relationships, the trust here gradually evolved into institutionalized "trust by design," embedded in joint fora, transparent rules, and proportional cost- and risk-sharing. One participant, a manager for Ånge, explained, "I feel a great trust in both Manager 1 and Manager 2. I know I can always pick up the phone and call them when issues arise."

Further, complementarity rather than homogeneity emerged as the principle of collaboration. It was paramount that Sundsvall contribute scale and infrastructural robustness while Ånge contributed agility and innovative capacity. Rather than strive to eliminate differences, the munic-

ipalities deliberately preserved them, enabling a form of collective ambidexterity (see Hietala & Päivärinta, 2025).

Finally, mechanisms geared for equitable governance translated intentions of fairness into practice. Rules for joint decision-making, proportional cost-sharing, and explicit recognition of asymmetries prevented domination by one partner. Still, participants had to remain attentive to power tensions and balance needs, often referenced through the metaphor of siblings:

> We need to talk about this "little brother / big brother" thing and the balance of power. Otherwise, we risk slipping back into old hierarchies. (Manager, Ånge)

In contrast against individual-based institutional entrepreneurship, which keeps the agency concentrated in one actor (Battilana et al., 2009; DiMaggio, 1988), or routine inter-organizational collaboration, where the coordination may remain transactional (Hardy & Maguire, 2008), collective institutional entrepreneurship is characterized by relationality and normativity. On the relational dimension, agency is distributed across actors, fora, and artifacts, and on the normative axis it requires ongoing legitimacy work to balance asymmetries, manage tensions, and sustain a collective commitment to shared values (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Voronov & Weber, 2016).

5.3.1 COLLECTIVE INSTITUTIONAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP AS REFLEXIVE AGENCY

Considered as a whole, the Ångsvall case demonstrates most strongly that collective institutional entrepreneurship is not merely a trait of collaboration in given contexts but its generative engine (see Battilana et al., 2009; Berends & Sydow, 2019; Garud et al., 2007). It was through this distributed form of agency that the initiative's actors navigated asymmetry, constructed legitimacy, and gradually reconfigured the institutional terrain where they operated. This entrepreneurship was not a heroic endeavor of isolated individuals (Battilana et al., 2009; DiMaggio, 1988) but a shared and situated practice of designing within constraints. In its various phases

and strategies, the entrepreneurial collaboration unfolded as a process of reflexive composition wherein actors learned to influence the structures that influenced them while remaining embedded within these (Hardy & Maguire, 2008; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

This collective form of entrepreneurship displayed itself on three dimensions simultaneously. Firstly, it was relational, emerging through negotiated interdependence rather than central control. Agency became distributed across human and institutional actors, taking form in the spaces between organizations rather than within them (Garud et al., 2007; Wijen & Ansari, 2007). Secondly, it was processual, developing through iteration of exploration and stabilization that linked short-term experimentation with long-term institutionalization (Reay et al., 2019; Seo & Creed, 2002). Finally, it was reflexive, sustained by the actors' ability to question and recompose the very frameworks of governance they inhabited, and to keep doing so (Tuominen, 2025). Accordingly, collective institutional entrepreneurship served as the connective tissue of the Ångsvall collaboration, the medium through which exploration and exploitation were continually realigned (Hietala & Päivärinta, 2025).

Over time, this entrepreneurship became both a practice and a capacity: a way of seeing, organizing, and sustaining transformation. It animated the phases of development and the strategies behind the design, thus enabling the participants to transform paradox into movement and rewrite tension as institutional learning. A picture hence emerges of collective entrepreneurship as the invisible architecture behind the visible outcomes of coordination, standardization, and trust-building. In the case at the core of the dissertation, it was through this architecture that collaboration matured into an institutional capability, a capacity to act collectively upon its own conditions of possibility (Carlsson et al., 2023b; Crusoe et al., 2024).

Through the lens of Ångsvall, one can comprehend collective institutional entrepreneurship in all its richness as reflexive agency in motion, expressing shared ability to design within constraint, to make stability adaptive and change sustainable. Within the framing metaphors, it creates the moment when the actors within the Matrix begin to see the code together, their collaborative awakening that precedes the emergence of the LeoPhant: the reflexive form that fuses awareness with endurance, agility

with structure. Painted thus, collective entrepreneurship is neither a phase nor a strategy but the becoming.

It is also the energy that animates both. It is simultaneously the practice through which institutions become selfaware and, in their awareness, begin to evolve (Dorado, 2013; Hardy & Maguire, 2017). Marking the point at which the institutional system begins to imagine itself otherwise and act accordingly, it stands for a state and for motion too, a form of collective reflexivity. All this is what ultimately renders the LeoPhant possible, allowing transformation to unfold not as rupture but as the deliberate, evolving recomposition of the institutional order.

CHAPTER 6
DISCUSSION

This chapter builds a backbone of interpretation from the core findings presented in Chapter 5, to deepen theoretical and practical understanding alike with regard to how municipalities engage in inter-organizational digital transformation. The discussion begins by examining principles for collective institutional entrepreneurship that crystallized in light of the (phased and relational) dynamics of the Ångsvall collaboration, elaborating on corresponding mechanisms, and connecting the processual insight generated to broader scholarly debate in the arenas of institutional theory and digital-transformation research. Building on this foundation, I then sharpen attention to the theoretical contributions of the project's outputs: articulating how collaboration functions both as a driver and as an outcome of institutional change, in combination with how municipalities collectively rewrite the institutional code that governs their work. Together, these reflections position the findings on a wide expanse of academic terrain to clarify their significance for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to understand or cultivate collaborative digital transformation in the public sector.

When I initially set out to explore how municipalities engage in digital transformation through collaboration, I had to rely for direction on the research question of how municipalities engage in inter-organizational digital transformation. As patterns emerged in the institutional conditions, mechanisms, and collective forms of agency that condition this process, it grew very clear that this phenomenon involves far more than adopting digital solutions or restructuring administrative routines. What is at stake is not simply digitization or deeper transformation within individual municipalities but institutional reconfiguration aligned with the logics of digital transformation, a far-reaching process that unfolds across organizational boundaries and redefines the architecture of public governance itself (Scott, 2014; Berente & Seidel, 2022).

In thinking that builds on that of Berente and Seidel (2022) and of Haug et al. (2023), digital transformation in the public sector can be understood as a deeply institutionalized collective endeavor that unfolds within governance systems characterized by high regulation-density, layered logics, and asymmetries in resources and in capacities (see Currie et al., 2024; Scott, 2014). Rather than functioning purely as a governance mechanism, collaboration emerges as a field-level response to institutional imbalance, an attempt to restore equilibrium among the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars under conditions of asymmetry and constrained agency (see Carlsson et al., 2023b; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Tana et al., 2023; Wooten & Hoffman, 2008). As T. Reay and Hinings (2009) have observed, in such environments solid regulative structures can safeguard fairness but typically limit adaptive behaviors essential for innovation.

That helps explain why smaller municipalities, operating under constrained institutional conditions, often struggle to sustain digital transformation on their own. Inter-organizational digital transformation restores institutions' (joint and several) balance by recombining distributed strengths into a collective whole (Battilana et al., 2009; Magnusson et al., 2025; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). The Ångsvall collaboration exemplifies this dynamic: through complementarity-by-design, equity-by-structure, and trust-by-design mechanisms, municipalities co-created shared frameworks for digital transformation that bridge institutional divides.

The five papers together trace a phenomenon-driven trajectory from fragmented municipal realities toward a collective understanding of digital transformation as an institutional process. Each study adds a layer to this evolving conceptualization: the first identified complementarity as a productive difference between municipalities, demonstrating how diverse strategic logics combine through collaboration. The second introduced the individual-level dimension, illustrating how institutional entrepreneurs' deviant yet constructive actions challenge norms and open space for new digital practices. With the third and fourth, the focus shifted to collective agency, revealing how municipalities engage in joint institutional work and how reflexive governance can transform asymmetry into interdependence and embed fairness within collaboration. Finally, the fifth study synthesized the accumulated insight under the concept of collective institutional entrepreneurship as a process through which collaboration itself becomes institutionalized as a mechanism of digital transformation.

Viewed together, the five constituent studies illuminate digital transformation in the public sector as an iterative movement between awakening and recombination. Municipalities do not simply adopt technology; they awaken to the institutional coding that shapes their action space (its leeway and its limits) and recombine their distinct capacities into something new, ushering in hybrid forms of governance. In this sense, the integration of the papers marks a site of transition from seeing collaboration as an administrative arrangement to understanding it as the stuff of institutional innovation. This collective rewriting of institutional rules and relationships unlocks municipalities' route to transforming together rather than alone.

The same synthesis marks a transition in the phenomenon-driven journey of the dissertation's narrative, from empirical discovery to conceptual articulation. The patterns I described that emerged as the municipalities' collaboration unfolded (through distinct yet interdependent phases sustained by trust, complementarity, and governance design) echo patterns identified in digital-transformation research, exhibiting dynamics wherein institutional layering and adaptation intertwine rather than one supplanting the other (Carlsson et al., 2025; Hinings et al., 2018; Magnusson et al., 2025; Norling, 2024). To elaborate on precisely how such processes accumulate into institutional transformation, I turn from description (tracing what happened) to interpretation (examining how and why it happened)

by means of a guiding map that links the empirical patterns to conceptual developments (Vial, 2019). In other words, having followed the municipalities through their practical collaboration in the role of a researcher working alongside the field, rather than outside it, I am now positioned to draw from the underlying logics that guided their actions.

The discussion that follows lays out principles for collective institutional entrepreneurship and paints a picture of its constituent mechanisms. By offering guidance connected with the most central theory-informing insight that grew out of my theory-informed analysis, the narrative here fleshes out how collaboration operates as an engine of institutional transformation. Furthermore, it offers a map to concretely translating distributed agency into collective capacity. In following that map, collaboration, legitimacy, and agency can coalesce to sustain digital transformation as an ongoing institutional process.

Sections 6.1 and 6.2 distill the study's theoretical contribution into two interdependent layers. Section 6.1 introduces five principles for the orientations through which institutional awakening becomes possible: recognizing and navigating institutional constraints, forging a sense of shared purpose and legitimacy, designing for equity, cultivating complementarity, and building capacity for recombination. While these tie in with collaborative-governance principles (see Ansell & Gash, 2008; Provan & Kenis, 2008), they recognize the particularities of a digital, sociotechnical context. Section 6.2 then identifies the mechanisms through which adherence to the principles manifests itself in practice as trust-building, legitimacy mobilization, boundary work, capability redistribution, and governance-arrangement design (see Baygi et al., 2021; Lawrence et al., 2013). For the purposes of this thesis, mechanisms are understood as the relational processes by means of which institutional change becomes possible and lasting (Machamer et al., 2000). Introducing them serves a dual purpose here, shedding light on empirical patterns observed in the field and setting forth concept-rich explanations of how collective institutional entrepreneurship materializes through inter-organizational digital transformation.

Tying these layers together illuminates what happens when institutions truly wake up and recombine. They develop a collective capacity for reflexive transformation, a capacity that enables not merely adapting to

technological change but, as Janowski (2015) and P. Panagiotopoulos et al. (2019) have noted, to redefine the institutional frame for public value creation itself. Thereby, municipalities can seek digitalization beyond the tight confines of technical reform, engaging in an act of shared institutional imagination (Vigoda-Gadot & Mizrahi, 2024).

The concept of collective institutional entrepreneurship provides the bridge between these layers. Building on DiMaggio's (1988) insight that institutions change when actors recognize their constructed nature, then extending it through the reasoning of Battilana et al. (2009) and Tana et al. (2023), I interpret the municipalities not as single agents but as co-constructors of institutional renewal. This understanding positions digital transformation as a shared, situated accomplishment emergent in relationships rather than imposed from above.

The metaphors that frame my synthesis of insight grew out of developing that understanding, As I applied the Matrix and the LeoPhant as analytical lenses, awakening came into focus. I saw moments when the taken-for-granted became visible, akin to Orlikowski and Scott's (2023) "digital undertow." Secondly, recombination became evident, reflecting the creative synthesis that Berente and Seidel (2022) cast as institutional renewal: blending agility with legitimacy, innovation with stability.

The title "Awake and Recombine" captures the two processes' movement together. Here, to awaken is to recognize institutions as fluid systems of meaning, coordination, and power (see Bodrožić & Adler, 2022; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), and to recombine is to act upon that insight, to reconstruct those systems deliberately through collective experimentation and design (see Mergel et al., 2019; Scupola & Mergel, 2022). This combined process, as Carter et al. (2024) and V. Arvidsson et al. (2025) have hinted, is central to building digital governance that is both innovative and equitable. For me, the two sets of movement also capture the learning trajectory wherein municipalities came to act beyond inherited norms and began shaping new institutional possibilities (Carlsson et al., 2023b).

While the motion might appear sequential, I interpret it as temporally enacted and recursive. Each act of recombination brings equilibrium for the moment in new institutional arrangements. These, over time, once again invite awakening. In this rhythm I recognize Van de Ven's (1992) notion of processual temporality and R. Garud and J. Gehman's (2012)

view of path creation through reflexive reorientation. The cyclical dynamic aligns with an institutional-work perspective from which creation, maintenance, and disruption intertwine continuously (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) and with evidence of similar recursive movement traced via municipal-digital-transformation research by Hinings et al. (2018), Berente and Seidel (2022), and Carlsson et al. (2023b). Accordingly, I interpret awakening and re-combining not as a conclusion but as an ongoing cycle of institutional learning through which municipalities, those studying them, and others may continually revisit and revise the very code of digital governance itself. Combining principles and mechanisms of collective institutional entrepreneurship maps the unfolding of a recursive process through which municipalities wake up to their institutional constraints and recombine their capacities to generate new, shared institutional arrangements.

6.1 PRINCIPLES OF COLLECTIVE INSTITUTIONAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP: AWAKENING TO RECOMBINING

The five subsections below unpack how these orientations exhibit themselves in practice. Woven throughout my work are threads of what I have identified as five foundational principles of collective institutional entrepreneurship. The synthesis here crystallizes the most important insight afforded while also explaining the relations to the core literature.

6.1.1 CULTIVATING COMPLEMENTARITY

The Ångsvall case showcases how municipalities with distinct institutional advantages "team up" to ascertain what restoring equilibrium requires, then proceed on that basis. In this case, one partner contributed flexibility, local knowledge, and adaptation capacity enabled by strong normative and cultural-cognitive ties while the other brought to the table robust governance structures and technological infrastructure grounded in regulation-backed strength. Together, they exist in an institutional configuration more balanced than either could have established alone. As Hietala and Päivärinta (2025) emphasize in their work, such complementarity reshapes

not only technical capacity but also interpretive and legitimizing dimensions of transformation.

My narrative keeps returning to complementarity as a crucial fundament whereby collaboration becomes a means for institutional rebalancing, enabling agility and innovation to coexist with procedural legitimacy and compliance. However, that complementarity cannot be taken for granted. It does not arise spontaneously. Rather, it arrives via convergence through deliberate institutional work (Lawrence et al., 2011), work whereby the institutions frame collaboration as equitable, irrespective of asymmetries. Through such work, asymmetry becomes an advantage (a productive resource) rather than a disadvantage (a source of institutions' lopsidedness). Thus, cultivating complementarity becomes the first act of collective institutional entrepreneurship, the conscious orchestration of diversity into balance.

6.1.2 DESIGNING FOR EQUITY

By extending the reasoning of Battilana et al. (2009) and S. Dorado (2013), I am able to demonstrate that institutional entrepreneurship in the public sector is inherently collective. Change flows not from heroic individuals but from distributed actors occupying complementary institutional positions. Recent digital-government research by M. Afzal and Panagiotopoulos (2024) and by O. Eriksson and S. E. Öhlund (2024) backs up this understanding, as does work by Katri Väyrynen and Arto Lanamäki (2025), which explicates that transformation arises when multiple actors mobilize resources, legitimacy, and expertise across boundaries. In this connection, collectivity exists as a structural condition for entrepreneurship amid heavy regulation. It is through distributed institutional assets that municipalities can initiate and sustain transformation (see Crusoe et al., 2024; Garud et al., 2007).

From an empirical angle, the Ångsvall collaboration grew through identifiable stages: diagnosing tensions, mobilizing coalitions, building trust, stabilizing routines, and institutionalizing governance structures. Each stage required distinct varieties of institutional work, from framing and justification to structures' design and maintenance (see Lawrence et al., 2013). This pattern of development resonates with M. Seo and W. E.

D. Creed's (2002) notion of recursive institutional change, wherein actors continuously realign structures and norms. As Reay et al. have persuasively argued (2019), collective entrepreneurship is inherently processual, characterized by cycles of alignment, negotiation, and stabilization. Recent studies offer evidence of how public organizations design equity-oriented structures to guarantee trust and reciprocity in joint arrangements (Carlsson et al., 2025; Magnusson et al., 2025; Norling, 2024). In Ångsvall, these practices, which formalized decision structures, distributed voice, and codified accountability, constitute what I refer to as equity by design.

6.1.3 RECOGNIZING AND NAVIGATING INSTITUTINOAL CONSTRAINTS

Pursuing digital transformation interacts with persistent tensions between innovation and compliance, autonomy and coordination, efficiency and equity, etc. (see Greenwood et al., 2011; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). However, as recent writings on digital government imply, such contradictions can be made productive as opposed to purely obstructive (see also Kaganer et al., 2023; Magnusson et al., 2024; Tinjan, 2025). Confirmation from the Ångsvall case demonstrates institutional entrepreneurs treating tensions as resources for learning, pinpointing contradictions, framing them constructively, and channeling them into new forms of governance. Against the backdrop of Matthew Kraatz and Emily Block's work (2008), we can recognize in this an illustration of how collaboration lets actors navigate institutional complexity by accommodating rather than reconciling or compromising among multiple logics. Here, tensions serve as engines of reflexivity and adaptation. This notion is well in line with the ideas of Nicholas Luhmann (1995), who regarded paradoxes (i.e., tensions) as vehicles that force deparadoxization through reflection and acting to exit the paradox. Were there no paradoxes, Luhmann argued, there would be no action.

A core contribution of my research to the body of theory is the recognition that collaboration itself becomes institutionalized as, over time, arrangements initially formed for functional coordination amass stability, legitimacy, and normative weight (see Hardy & Phillips, 1998; Phillips et al., 2000). Other recent digital-government research does point to this

trajectory: collaborative structuring evolves into enduring forms of governance that reshape the field around them (Mergel et al., 2024; Rudmark et al., 2024; Scupola & Mergel, 2022). Drawing on work by Wolfgang Streeck and Kathleen Thelen (2005) along with more recent contributions by James Mahoney and Thelen (2010), one can understand this as a process of institutional layering and drift wherein new, collaborative norms augment preexisting administration frameworks such that expectations and practices gradually shift. In Ångsvall, collaboration became an institutional layer within local governance. An initiative no longer, it grew into a legitimate mode of arranging public digital transformation.

Crucially, that transformation is not purely organizational; it is also socio-technical in nature (see Hinings et al., 2018; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). Technologies shape governance by structuring interactions and redistributing authority. Shared platforms, data architecture, and interoperability standards can compel municipalities to harmonize their processes, negotiate power, and more (Tilson et al., 2010). Recent literature highlighting infrastructure's role as institutional scaffolding (Baiyere et al., 2025; Guenduez et al., 2025; Piccoli et al., 2024) is consistent with what the Ångsvall case revealed: by stabilizing coordination and legitimacy across municipal borders, elements of digital infrastructure turned technical integration into something more, a source for mutual institutional alignment. As Markus and Rowe (2023) noted, digital infrastructure can catalyze new institutional logics. My case showed precisely such dynamics.

6.1.4 FORGING A SENSE OF SHARED PURPOSE AND LEGITIMACY

Legitimacy acts as a motor of transformation. Municipalities seek legitimacy not only from citizens but also from other municipalities, regional agencies, and the state (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Suchman, 1995). With this engine, collaboration becomes a vehicle for collective legitimacy-construction, demonstrating alignment with shared values: transparency, fairness, solidarity, etc. (Carter et al., 2024; Panagiotopoulos et al., 2019; Vigoda-Gadot & Mizrahi, 2024). Ångsvall's framing of equal digital welfare exemplifies normative narratives solidifying partnerships in the face of political uncertainty. The legitimacy emerging here is what

David Deephouse and colleagues (2017) might regard as relational rather than organizational, born out of the shared commitments' credibility and the collaborative practices' coherence (with each other and with broader institutional values) (see Mergel et al., 2024).

In such collaboration, municipalities also cultivate institutional reflexivity, heightened awareness of the constructed nature of their institutional environment (Beck et al., 1994; Tinjan, 2024). Exposure to diverse administrative logics expands actors' repertoires of legitimate alternatives. As evidence from Weick (1995) and Maguire and Hardy (2009) suggests, this reflexivity enables reimagining governance and experimenting with new forms/expressions of institutions. In Ångsvall, collaboration furnished a space for institutional learning (see Hovorka & Mueller, 2025; Norling, 2024) that allowed the municipalities to transcend entrenched routines and to design adaptive forms of public digital governance.

6.1.5 BUILDING CAPACITY FOR RECOMBINATION

Through integrative synthesis of the findings outlined above, I have been able to demonstrate that municipalities can engage in fruitful digital transformation by employing collective institutional entrepreneurship that recombines complementary capacities, navigates tensions, builds legitimacy, and gradually institutionalizes collaboration itself. It bears repeating that the collaboration here represents no less than both the means and the outcome of transformation. As recent publications from Wessel et al. (2025) and Daniel Schlagwein and W. Currie (2025) note, digital transformation is rarely linear; it writes itself into the future as a contested, collective, and institution-embedded process.

Alongside rich discussion, from the Ångsvall case, of how such processes produce field-level reconfiguration grounded in relational work that is socio-technical and often normative in nature, my work advances theory in line with both classical institutional studies and contemporary digital-transformation research by peeling apart the functioning of collaboration as both means and outcome of institutional change. Specifically, I have been able to conceptualize collective institutional entrepreneurship as a field-level response to institutional imbalance in the digital-governance domain (see Afzal & Panagiotopoulos, 2024; Battilana et al., 2009; Eriks-

son & Öhlund, 2024); extend theories of institutional work, layering, and drift to clarify how collaboration itself may grow institutionalized (see Mergel et al., 2024; Phillips et al., 2000); introduce designed complementarity, consisting of intentional recombination of institutional strengths among the actors (Carlsson et al., 2025; Magnusson et al., 2025); enrich socio-technical theory by shedding light on how digital infrastructure can serve as institutional scaffolding (Baiyere et al., 2025; Piccoli et al., 2024; Tilson et al., 2010); and advance the concept of relational legitimacy, highlighting how inter-organizational digital transformation sustains public value and equity (Carter et al., 2024; Panagiotopoulos et al., 2019). The reconceptualization afforded by the case-study work gives institutional scholarship solid evidence that collaboration can evolve from a coordination-focused practicality into full-fledged institutional form.

6.2 MECHANISMS OF COLLECTIVE INSTITUTIONAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The findings presented in the dissertation reveal that inter-organizational digital transformation in the public sector is driven by a set of mechanisms that operate across the organizations' boundaries. These embedded mechanisms explain how municipalities mobilize, stabilize, and institutionalize collaborative arrangements under conditions of asymmetry, institutional rigidity, and competing logics (see Berente & Seidel, 2022; Bodrožić & Adler, 2022; Hinings et al., 2018). Whereas the empirically oriented portions of my presentation have delved into these mechanisms' practical operation, the following sub-sections elaborate on them as a conceptual tool and situate them more explicitly on the map of institutional theory and in the landscape of digital-government scholarship (Carlsson et al., 2025; Janowski, 2015; Mergel et al., 2019; Vial, 2019). This discussion provides an analysis-tuned vocabulary for understanding how collective institutional entrepreneurship emerges and why it can enable municipalities to pursue digital transformation more effectively together than any could alone (see Nambisan et al., 2019; Tana et al., 2023; Tassabehji et al., 2016).

None of the mechanisms described here function in isolation. They are interdependent, recursive, and mutually reinforcing. In this they are entirely consistent with institutional theory's conceptualization of organizational fields as systems of ongoing structuration (Berente & Seidel, 2022; Hinings et al., 2018). Each contributes to a broader-based institutional process through which collaboration evolves from an experimental arrangement into a durable institutional configuration reshaping how municipalities coordinate and how digital transformation unfolds (Arvidsson et al., 2025; Guenduez et al., 2025). Together, they constitute a foundation for theory that explains collective digital transformation as a multi-actor institutional phenomenon (Carlsson et al., 2025; Magnusson et al., 2025; Tana et al., 2023).

6.2.1 RECOMBINATION FOR COMPLEMENTARITY

The first mechanism involves purposeful recombination of complementary capacities across municipal borders. While resource constraints or efficiency goals often spark collaboration, my findings attest that institutional complementarity, not simple resource-pooling, is the pivotal factor. The discussion of them has stressed that smaller municipalities often exhibit high normative flexibility, relational embeddedness, and adaptive capacity while larger ones tend to display mature governance procedures, more formal decision-making structures, and stronger technological infrastructure; however, each municipality possesses distinct institutional strengths that reflect, beyond its size, also its history, norms, professional cultures, governance structures, and socio-technical configurations (see Ansell & Gash, 2008). The Ångsvall case illustrates one way of mobilizing, rather than minimizing, the associated asymmetries. By explicitly recognizing, articulating, and exploiting complementary assets, institutional entrepreneurs construct a shared understanding of how collaboration creates benefits and why both/all partners matter. Complementarity becomes not only a trait describing the conditions but an actionable principle (see Carlsson et al., 2025; Hinings et al., 2018). This tool can fruitfully shape how responsibilities are allocated, how decision-making is shared, and how the collaboration gets justified internally and externally.

This mechanism connects with institutional theory in two important ways. Firstly, it reframes the paradox of embedded agency (Seo & Creed, 2002) by explaining that no single actor possesses the full array of agency required to transform the institutional field in question. Agency arises from the complementary institutional positions in combination. When recombined, these enable new forms of action. Secondly, it demonstrates institutional capacities' distribution across organizations and spotlights that institutional entrepreneurship becomes possible upon configuration of these distributed capacities into a coherent collective constellation (Berente & Seidel, 2022; Bodrožić & Adler, 2022; Garud et al., 2007).

6.2.2 EQUITY VIA STRUCTURE

The second mechanism entails creating equity through structural design choices that intentionally counterbalance existing power asymmetries. Inter-organizational digital transformation initiatives frequently fail because larger or more resource-rich partners assert dominance in the decision-making, governance structures, and benefit distribution (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003; Torfing et al., 2012). Reflecting John Bryson, Barbara Crosby, and Melissa Stone's (2015) argument that effective collaboration depends on deliberate institutional design to ensure inclusivity and fairness, my findings attest to the value of engineering equitable collaboration through institutional structures that protect the identity, interests, and strategic relevance of all actors.

Equity by structure operates through formal governance arrangements, explicit attention to equality in the distribution of decision rights, and codification of principles that guarantee procedural fairness (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015; Sørensen & Torfing, 2021). It becomes visible in rules for representation, equal governance, transparency-related practices, and protection against unilateral control. These structures are created not only to promote fairness but also to foster legitimacy. When smaller actors perceive the collaboration as equitable, they are more willing to invest in it, share sensitive information, and accept compromises (Phillips et al., 2000). Such commitment enables the collaboration to remain resilient in the face of political shifts and leadership changes, personnel turnover, and resource fluctuations.

From an institutional-theory angle, attention to this mechanism highlights how legitimacy gets constructed relationally, as discussed by Mark Suchman (1995). Equity serves as a source of normative legitimacy, reassuring all partners that the collaboration fulfills public-sector values and democratic expectations. It also demonstrates the ways in which institutional entrepreneurs engage in design work that reconfigures power relations such that collective action ends up both possible and acceptable. As Hardy and Maguire (2017) and Lawrence et al., (2011) have emphasized, equity by structure implements an institutional safeguard that sustains enduring collaboration.

6.2.3 TRUST AS INSTITUTIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Developing trust as an element of institutional infrastructure that underpins all collaborative activities forms a third vital mechanism. While scholars often regard trust as a relational attribute (see Edelenbos & Klijn, 2007), my findings in the context of inter-organizational digital transformation attest that trust may function as an institutional resource that enables coordination, reduces perceived risk, and facilitates sharing of information and open discussion of negative as well as positive experiences (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). Trust accretes through repeated interaction, transparency, common narratives, and demonstrated reliability across the organizations' various boundaries (Mergel et al., 2019). Over time, trust comes to permeate the routines, expectations, and communication norms. It evolves from interpersonal trust between key actors into institutionalized trust maintained even when keystone individuals leave their roles in the institutions (Edelenbos & Klijn, 2007; Hardy & Phillips, 1998). This transition from relational to institutional trust proves fundamental to stabilizing collaborative arrangements in the public sector, where turnover, political cycles, and administrative restructuring are commonplace.

Trust as institutional infrastructure interacts with both complementarity recombination and equity by structure (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Complementarity offers a rationale for trust-building while equity-linked structures supply the safeguards needed for sustainable trust (Bryson et al., 2015). Deepening trust reduces the transaction costs associated with col-

laboration, and the municipalities grow able to engage confidently in more complex forms of joint decision-making and digital innovation. Institutional theory has long emphasized the importance of cultural-cognitive and normative alignment for enduring institutional arrangements (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014). My work went further by showing that trust gets woven into cultural-cognitive and normative infrastructure that anchors collaboration, thereby enabling institutional entrepreneurship to unfold collectively

6.2.4 TENSION NAVIGATION AS PRODUCTIVE FRICTION

The next mechanism involves navigating tensions that arise from differences in priorities, values, institutional logics, governance systems, and expectations. Work for digital transformation intrinsically crystallizes deep-seated tensions between innovation and compliance, centralization and local autonomy, short-term pressures and long-term ambition, and exploratory experimentation and operational reliability. Again, these tensions cannot be resolved completely, nor should they be. Tensions can function as tools, productive sources of reflexivity and adaptation. Institutional entrepreneurs engage in tension navigation by delving into disagreements (rather than ignoring them), framing conflicts as shared problems (rather than anyone's fault), and translating between divergent logics (rather than focusing on compromise). Instead of repressing tensions, they harness them to reveal institutional constraints, test assumptions, and negotiate new arrangements (Greenwood et al., 2011; Kraatz & Block, 2008). Tension navigation, then, becomes a mechanism through which institutional drift occurs (Voronov et al., 2021), as the repeated negotiation of conflicts gradually reframes norms, routines, and expectations.

This mechanism directly addresses the paradox of embedded agency (Garud et al., 2007; Seo & Creed, 2002). Tensions expose the limits of the institutional arrangements in place and create openings for reinterpretation and experimentation (Hardy & Maguire, 2008). Being able to navigate tensions collectively plays a central role in institutional entrepreneurship because it prevents collaboration from collapsing under the weight of conflict. It also accelerates institutional learning by making implicit assumptions visible and subject to renegotiation (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Voronov et al., 2021). Tension navigation thereby functions as a

catalyst for institutions' evolution. In this context, navigating the tensions also cultivates institutional reflexivity, aiding actors in collectively questioning often-invisible assumptions and recalibrating shared norms (see Tuominen, 2025; see also Kaganer et al., 2023).

6.2.5 COLLABORATION AS AN OUTCOME OF INSTITUTIONAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The final mechanism pinpointed pertains to institutionalizing collaboration. While scholarship and practice frequently fall into the tempting trap of conceptualizing collaboration as a temporary arrangement targeted at specific goals, my project found that it can solidify as a durable institutional structure at least in the context of municipalities' digital transformation. Through iterative processes of trust-building, governance design, and layering of routines, collaboration undergoes a shift from a project-based configuration (a means) to a stable form of organization that shapes future action (an end).

Collaboration as an institutional outcome (see Lawrence et al., 2011) becomes evident when shared governance structures persist beyond individual projects; when roles and processes involving collaboration become normalized; and when municipalities start treating it not as exceptional, situational, or temporary but as an expected mode/form of operation. At the maturation stage, collaboration becomes a part of the institutional landscape, terrain influencing how municipalities interpret their capabilities, obligations, and relations with other actors.

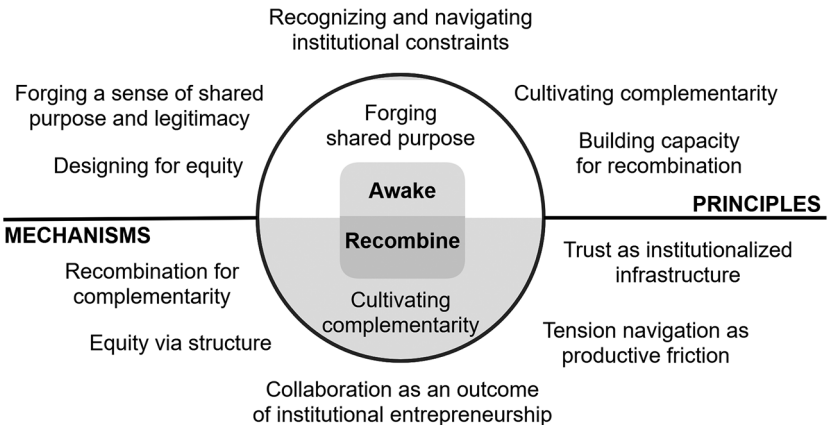
From an institutional-theory perspective, this mechanism depicts new institutions as arising not through sudden disruption but in gradual layering (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). Institutionalizing collaboration represents the cumulative effect of the other mechanisms identified. Complementarity creates motivation, equity assures of fairness, trust provides stability, and tension navigation creates adaptability (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Magnusson et al., 2025). Together, these mechanisms produce new institutional arrangements that, by reshaping the field, render collective digital transformation both possible and persistent (see Battilana et al., 2009; Hardy & Maguire, 2017).

6.2.6 THE PRINCIPLES ALONGSIDE THE MECHANISMS

So far, this chapter has reframed the collaborative processes observed in the municipalities in terms of a set of interdependent principles that characterize how actors may come to see institutions as changeable (in Section 6.1) and the mechanisms that concretize how that seeing coalesces in practice (in Section 6.2). To bring these layers together, Section 6.3 returns to the central movement that anchors this thesis: the rhythm of awakening and recombination. What I present, therefore, is not a set of conclusions from the analysis but a synthesis considering how the principles that orient institutional entrepreneurship and the mechanisms that enact it continuously shape one another in recursive cycles of collective transformation.

Figure 7 visualizes the principles and mechanisms through which collective institutional entrepreneurship is enacted. It synthesizes the strategic and structural dimensions, Awake and Recombine, that enable actors to navigate institutional constraints, forge shared purpose, and cultivate complementarity as foundations for sustainable collaboration.

Figure 7. Visualization of principles and mechanisms



As I look back over the journey of this inquiry, the mechanisms of complementarity, equity, trust, tension navigation, and institutionalization stand not as discrete variables but as relational forces that, together, explain how collective institutional entrepreneurship comes into being. They illustrate

the patterned interplay through which municipalities, operating under conditions of asymmetry and institutional rigidity, gradually learn to act as one. In their mutual interdependence, the mechanisms can be understood as enacting the five principles. Awakening, mobilization, alignment, composition, and institutionalization each represent a distinct posture of collective agency, and each mechanism reflects its practical articulation in the field.

Recognizing complementarity heralds awakening to shared potential. To step onstage in the multi-act drama of recognition, one must see in another municipality not a rival, but an extension of one's own capacity. Here, collaboration begins by discovering strength in difference (Bodrožić & Adler, 2022; Carlsson et al., 2023b). Pursuing equity, in turn, gives structure to this recognition. It transforms the moral impulse toward fairness into governance architecture, embedding legitimacy within the scaffolding of cooperation (Matteby et al., 2025). Long before digital transformation entered public discourse, scholars such as Sam Bucovetsky (1982) highlighted how inequalities in the local public sector may have an impact on fiscal capacity and decision-making autonomy. My research echoed the appearance of structural disparities in his work but not as fixed economic facts; here, they embodied institutional asymmetries that municipalities learned to renegotiate through collective, equitable design. With trust as the evolving organism's connective tissue, silent infrastructure establishes relations able to withstand uncertainty and distance (see Berends & Sydow, 2019; Ring & Van de Ven, 1994); however, finding that balance might require overbalance at times. That is, sustaining the collaboration requires what Michael Collins and Ion Juvina (2021) have called trust miscalibration, a deliberate overextension of trust whereby actors can safely act collectively despite incomplete information or uneven capacity. In this connection, trust functions less as a reflection of past reliability and more as a projection of shared intent. Without trust, complementarity collapses into dependency; with it, equity becomes lived rather than merely proclaimed.

The beat of tension navigation gets established in this setting. Collaboration moves to the rhythm of a dance of difference wherein tensions are not failures of design but essential conditions of transformation. Between autonomy and alignment, innovation and stability, etc. is the dance floor, the field where institutional work occurs (Lawrence & Sud-

daby, 2006). As Garud et al. (2010) have argued, transformation unfolds not only through the reproduction of established paths but through their deliberate reconfiguration, a process they gave the name "path creation." In inter-municipality collaboration, generative tension between continuity and renewal becomes a condition under which new institutional pathways can be collectively forged. Then, in this space, municipalities negotiate meaning, legitimacy, and pace, learning to treat friction not as resistance but as a generative source of renewal (see Tana et al., 2023). Finally, institutionalization closes the loop: it converts fragile practices into durable patterns, embedding collective routines and shared narratives that make collaboration not only possible but self-sustaining (Battilana et al., 2009; Hinings et al., 2018). Institutionalization is never final, though. It is the provisional stillness that lets the cycle begin anew, as the field reconfigures itself through continuous recombination of institutional elements.

All these mechanisms together weave the fabric of collective institutional entrepreneurship. In this action, shared IT operations do not provide the power behind inter-organizational digital transformation. Neither does it derive from pooling of resources more generally. Rather, its source lies in the institutional imagination that allows actors to recompose their relational world. In this light, digital transformation becomes a process of constructing new institutional capacities, capacities that emerge through the recombination of strengths, the design of equitable structures, the cultivation of trust, and the creative harnessing of tension (again, see Berente & Seidel, 2022; Carlsson et al., 2025). These are the forces that transform collaboration from a governance instrument into a generative institution.

From this perspective, the very collaboration furnishes the infrastructure of digital transformation: an institutional platform on which municipalities collectively navigate complexity, constraints, and opportunities. On its bedrock, the five mechanisms function as relational circuits. Complementarity mobilizes, equity legitimizes, trust stabilizes, tension navigation energizes, and institutionalization anchors. Cyclical movement among the mechanisms sustains transformation as a continuing institutional process transcending any finite reform.

This reflection points to still more profound theoretical implications. It has revealed that the agency exercised is not individual-level resistance but a relational practice of composition; institutional theory stands to benefit

greatly from awareness of how, from this standpoint, distributed actors transform structural asymmetries into collective capacity (see Battilana et al., 2009; Fligstein, 2001). A more mature concept of collective institutional entrepreneurship facilitates a nuanced framing wherein agency in the public sector represents an emergent property of interdependence, not pure autonomy. Finally, positioning collaboration as institutional architecture of transformation advances the field of digital-government research and practice by folding digital, organizational, and normative dimensions into a single coherent, equity-oriented form (Mergel et al., 2019; Scupola & Mergel, 2022; Vial, 2019).

Following these threads delivered a clear answer to the research question. Institutional entrepreneurs in the public sector enact inter-organizational digital transformation by engaging in collective institutional work, a distributed practice of institutional agency functioning across the organizations' boundaries (see Battilana et al., 2009; Lawrence et al., 2009). Through shared purpose, legitimacy work, and recombination of complementary strengths, the actors in the case study harmonized to convert dispersed capacities into a joint institutional rhythm. The desired transformation is not a singular product of a single decision by any actor; one must approach it as sustained choreography among many. It dances between structure and agency, awakening and recombination, with reflexivity and design (Seo & Creed, 2002). In this choreography, institutional work becomes the medium through which the system learns to adapt, linking varied individual initiatives to a collective process of transformation (see Hardy & Phillips, 1998; Phillips et al., 2000).

The narrative thus closes the circle. What began as an exploration of how municipalities collaborate to advance digital transformation has become an account of how institutions learn to transform themselves collectively. Digital transformation, seen through this lens, is neither technological revolution nor managerial reform but a form of institutional craftsmanship, a socio-technical reconfiguration sustained by moral, relational, and procedural pillars from principles for fruitful collaboration (see Scott, 2014). It is through the cycle of growth on their basis that municipalities, together, rewrite the institutional code of public governance.

6.3 CORE CONTRIBUTIONS

6.3.1 CONTRIBUTIONS TO RESEARCH

This project, by detailing how municipalities collectively engage in institutional change via inter-organizational digital transformation, advances both institutional theory and digital-transformation research. In this respect, it exemplifies what J. Reinecke et al. (2022) have characterized as a processual form of theoretical contribution, one that problematizes tak-en-for-granted assumptions and reconfigures them into new conceptual relations, thereby extending scholarship through reflexive theorizing. Where earlier institutional theory primarily emphasized stability, isomorphism, and compliance (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Zucker, 1977), my work illustrates how public organizations act as co-creators of institutional evolution through collective institutional entrepreneurship, transforming the structures that govern them (Battilana et al., 2009; Lawrence et al., 2011).

The central novelty here consists of reconceptualizing digital transformation as institutional reconfiguration across organizational boundaries rather than technological or intra-organizational change (Hinings et al., 2018; Vial, 2019). Within the highly regulated public sector, where the regulative pillar dominates and the normative and cultural-cognitive capacities develop asymmetrically (Lægreid & Rykkja, 2022; Scott, 2014), collaboration serves as a field-level mechanism of restoring institutional balance. Prior scholarly contemplation of collaborative governance (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003; Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015) facilitated my study revealing how shared governance, pooled legitimacy, and recombination of complementary capacities equip municipalities to construct institutional logics that reconcile efficiency with equity and local autonomy with interdependence (Greenwood et al., 2017).

The contributions to institutional theory offer synergy through their interrelation. The first reframes institutional entrepreneurship as a collective, processual phenomenon. Building on DiMaggio's (1988) early theorization on agency and on the model proposed by Battilana et al. (2009), the framework I developed for collective institutional entrepreneurship models agency as distributed across roles, artifacts, and collaborative are-

nas rather than concentrated in individual actors. This distributed agency unfolds collectively through phases of initiation, alignment, consolidation and institutionalization, linking micro-level practices with meso-level arrangements and ultimately with field-level transformation (see Hietala & Päivärinta, 2025; Lawrence et al., 2011).

Bringing in the five interrelated mechanisms by which institutional change gets enacted and stabilized amid asymmetry offers a unified view of how actors such as municipalities employ collaboration to rebalance institutional pillars and sustain transformation through coordinated institutional work. The joint conceptualization of complementarity recombination, equity by structure, trust as institutional infrastructure, tension navigation as productive friction, and collaboration as institutional outcome gives concrete form to insight expressed in writings by N. Phillips, Lawrence, and Hardy (2000) and by Hardy and Phillips (1998) on the institutionalization of inter-organizational digital transformation, while also supporting Seo and Creed's (2002) argument that institutional contradictions can serve as sources of great change.

In addition, the work carries institutional theory closer to a sophisticated view of generativity and balance. Representing this, the LeoPhant itself can be understood as the central institutional contribution of the doctoral research. Its fundamental message is that successful collaboration does not necessarily arise from replication. Generativity may grow from deliberate preservation and recombination of differences rather than sameness. Where institutional theory has often ploughed the furrows of processes of isomorphism and mimicry (how organizations align by imitating each other's structures and practices), this thesis paves an alternative path mirroring that of the institutions studied: coexisting stability and transformation can be wrought through cultivation of complementarity (Czarniawska & Sevon, 1996). The LeoPhant symbolizes how nourishing and instrumentalizing organizations' diversity, in place of efforts to dissolve it, can establish a foundation for sustainable inter-organizational digital transformation.

Shifting the gaze thus from conformity or isomorphism sheds light on institutional generativity, the capacity of public organizations to create new institutional logics via collaboration. With the accompanying stance, I have introduced institutional complementarity as a balancing function

through which deliberate design can rebuild from the material of asymmetrically developed pillars. This interpretation builds on and extends theoretical models of incremental institutional change developed both by Streeck and Thelen (2005) and by Mahoney and Thelen (2010), who described how layering and drift gradually reshape institutional orders over time. The contribution enriches broader institutional-studies discussion of how actors maintain both stability and transformation within established systems (Greenwood et al., 2017).

Bridging institutional theory with IS research represents a further contribution. Via boundary work that draws on socio-technical perspectives from digital-transformation studies, the dissertation demonstrates how digital infrastructure may act as institutional structure that shapes collaboration, legitimacy, and change (see Orlikowski & Scott, 2008; Tilson et al., 2010). This interdisciplinary synthesis contributes directly to information-systems research by clarifying the institutional foundations of digital transformation while extending institutional theory by recognizing the digital as an actively constitutive dimension of institutional work. Answering recent calls to examine how digital innovation and transformation reshape institutional fields (Hinings et al., 2018; Vial, 2019), my work through its fruit issues similar calls.

Epistemologically, the research contributes to abductive and processual theorizing by treating theory as an evolving conceptual process co-shaped by empirical engagement and reflection (Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021; Weick, 1995). Ontologically, it reframes agency as relational, distributed, and deeply incorporated into institutional structures. Conceptually, it introduces collective institutional entrepreneurship as a framework for grappling with how digital transformation unfolds in multi-actor governance systems. Normatively, it offers a model for equitable institutional design in which collaboration in public-sector innovation functions both as a normative value and as a practical mechanism that enables public organizations to navigate the institutional tension between innovation and legitimacy (see Ansell & Torfing, 2021; Suchman, 1995).

Finally, considering the collaboration itself as an institutional outcome affords examining a durable structure of coordination and shared legitimacy that extends beyond specific projects. Collaboration can develop into an institutionalized arrangement characterized by its own norms, routines,

and legitimacy claims. With revelations emerging from how the Ångsvall case's inter-organizational digital transformation became both the means and the result, the dissertation offers coherent field-level understanding of how public institutions collectively adapt to digital transformation amid constraints, asymmetry, and interdependence.

6.3.2 CONTRIBUTIONS TO PRACTICE

In its way of approaching digital transformation in the public sector as not primarily a technical problem but an institutional matter, the dissertation offers insight for policymakers, administrators, and practitioners who seek to design and sustain collaborative approaches to digitalization in complex, constrained settings featuring asymmetry. Its analysis of how municipalities engage in collective institutional entrepreneurship demonstrates in several ways the routes by which governance design, trust-building, and structural equity can enable more adaptive yet still legitimate forms of transformation (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003; Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015).

One key contribution to practice lies in pinpointing collaboration's function as an institutional design tool rather than merely an operational arrangement. Municipalities can deliberately construct collaboration structures that more than compensate for asymmetrically developed institutional capacities. It is abundantly clear that smaller municipalities often possess strong normative and cultural-cognitive resources, most prominently close community ties, local legitimacy, and flexible procedures, while larger ones tend to erect stronger regulative and technical infrastructure. Collaboration allows these capacities to be combined into a more balanced configuration. By acting on this insight, policymakers and public leaders can design complementarity into their inter-organizational arrangements rather than rely on *ad hoc* coordination or hierarchy-rooted mandates (see Kickert et al., 1997; Torfing et al., 2012).

Secondly, the discussion stresses the importance of equity by structure for establishing, strengthening, and maintaining collaboration under conditions of asymmetry. Power imbalances between municipalities can undercut trust and any sense of shared ownership if left unaddressed. The Ångsvall case demonstrates that equity must be structured into the archi-

tecture of collaboration through governance rules that distribute voice, resources, and decision-making authority fairly. Practitioners who apply this principle by developing transparent procedures, rotating-leadership models, and participatory decision structures that institutionalize fairness free themselves from the shackles of reliance on personal relationships or informal norms. Such arrangements foster long-term legitimacy and stability, guaranteeing the collaboration's ability to survive political upheaval and administrative turnover.

The concept of trust as institutional infrastructure represents a third practical contribution. Trust is not simply a relational asset. As a structured-in condition, it permits collaboration to function without continuous negotiation. By making trust intrinsic to their routines, joint data standards, and predictable processes, municipal partners can reduce uncertainty and promote continuity even amid shifting political priorities. One may conclude that digital infrastructure and governance protocols should be designed not only for efficiency but also for relational reliability, so that the collaborative work remains legitimate and resilient, far into the future (see Edelenbos & Klijn, 2007; Hietala & Päivärinta, 2025).

The findings attest in addition that institutions' tensions (for instance, between innovation and compliance) cannot be eliminated but can be transformed into productive forces through careful navigation. Practitioners can cultivate reflexivity spaces, such as cross-function workshops or joint innovation fora, where conflicting values and constraints get identified openly and reframed as opportunities for learning. The associated process converts friction into a driver of adaptive capacity as fuel for ongoing improvement. My conclusions in this regard are consistent with the literature on paradox navigation and collaborative reflexivity (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Ospina et al., 2020).

Finally, there is practical promise in the demonstration that collaboration itself can become an institutional outcome when designed and maintained deliberately. Even a relatively basic project-based partnership (e.g., an undertaking for shared IT operations) can evolve into a stable institutional arrangement with its own norms, routines, and governance structures. This implies that practitioners should treat embarking on collaboration as seeing to the success of seedlings for long-term governance innovation that reshapes how municipalities organize, share resources, and deliver

digital services. Recognizing an institutionalization process rather than a temporary instrument and investing correspondingly helps safe-guard collaboration keeps generating value far beyond the initial transformation effort (Hardy & Phillips, 1998; Phillips et al., 2000).

This research as a unified whole provides the public sector with a framework for institutional design and stewardship for the digital age. By approaching inter-organizational digital transformation as a mechanism of institutional balance and collective institutional entrepreneurship, practitioners can create governance systems that are not only more efficient but also more equitable, resilient, and legitimate. Ultimately, institutional change is both a technical and a moral endeavor: it requires building structures that support fairness and trust as much as performance and innovation. Accordingly, the thesis contributes a crucial angle on public-administration practice by translating institutional theory into actionable guidance for designing, maintaining, and legitimizing collaborative digital transformation (see also Bryson et al., 2014; Sørensen & Torfing, 2021).

6.3.3 CONTRIBUTIONS TO POLICY

Separately addressing the policy-relevant guidance offered by this dissertation seems prudent. It sheds light on ways to organize and govern digital transformation across municipal boundaries. The contribution here is a design-oriented one that translates empirical mechanisms into sound principles able to inform action. Firstly, complementarity by design calls for intentionally asymmetric, interdependent roles (such as the case endeavor's orchestrators, builders, and adopters), so that smaller municipalities' agility meshes well with larger municipalities' capacity. Secondly, implementing equity by structure requires that cross-municipality collaboration institutionalize voice, vote, transparency, and exit structures to guarantee legitimacy and durability. Thirdly, applying trust by design demands governance artifacts with shared release policies, federation, auditable approvals, and logging that provide for visible, manageable reliability checks.

At municipal and regional level, these principles imply a need to create joint governance (via a steering committee etc.) with explicit role allocation and clear exit rules; to devise a consolidated backlog-handling mechanism and a common release policy for shared platforms and services; and

to establish capability pools (for security, procurement, service design, etc.) on which both small and large municipalities can draw. On the national level, in turn, the core principles point to a need for incentive models that reward complementarity-embedded roles rather than isolated projects, for charter and agreement templates that normalize equitable governance (from their voting rules to the accountability mechanisms), and for supporting standardized interoperability and joint-procurement pathways.

The effects anticipated can be articulated as testable propositions. Asymmetric role arrangements should increase speed and robustness relative to those of uniform consortia, with the aid of formal rules for representation, withdrawal, etc. reducing inter-partner frictions and promoting durability. Combining a shared release policy with federated identity should reduce the risks to operations and shorten lead times linked to multi-municipality platforms, while constructively managed strategic polyphony would be expected to yield better decisions under uncertainty than unitary-voice control models.

While the ramifications are most clear with regard to Swedish municipal welfare services, applicability, albeit less direct, in other contexts with autonomous public-sector agents and governed procurement is likely. Naturally, generalization presumes such conditions as certain basic digital-domain capabilities among the participating organizations. Within the scope delimited, the principles and practices outlined here should provide a transferable foundation for designing inter-organizational digital transformation that enables institutional change.

6.3.4 BRIDGING THEORY, PRACTICE AND REFLECTION

The journey from seeing to making, from awakening within the Matrix to constructing the LeoPhant, captures how theory and practice entwine, shaping each other through processes of iterative inquiry. Hence, the contributions to research and practice too are profoundly intertwined, or what K. Barad (2007) would describe as entangled. To move forward in the research, I had to view theoretical insight and practical application as separate domains that subsequently inform each other; hence, they are portrayed here as co-constructive, emerging together through processes of inquiry and institutional transformation. Theoretical reflection shaped

the empirical exploration just as engagement with the Ångsvall case continually reconfigured my conceptual understanding of institutional entrepreneurship, collaboration, and digital transformation. This entanglement exemplifies knowledge production in public-sector research, which by nature is not a linear translation from theory to practice but a reciprocal process in which both evolve through mutual diffraction and rearticulation.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, the theoretical model of collective institutional entrepreneurship detailed in the dissertation does not stop at explaining how digital transformation unfolds. It also conveys how the transition can be governed in practical language. Likewise, the five mechanisms pinpointed are simultaneously theoretical constructs and design principles for collaborative governance. The reciprocal relationship of theory and practice captured here represents what Reinecke and colleagues (2022) described as processual theorizing: knowledge evolves through engagement with real-world challenges and feeds back to the reconfiguration of theory, and so on. By its nature, this thesis underscores the generative potential of public-sector practice as a living laboratory for institutional innovation.

Seen through a Baradian lens, the boundary between researcher and researched, or between theorizing and governing, becomes porous. From that perspective, each intra-process action in the research journey has a part in shaping the very institutional realities that the inquiry set out to understand. This draws a line under the point that public-sector transformation is as much an epistemic as it is an organizational endeavor.

CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION

The journey to understanding how institutional entrepreneurs in the public sector engage in inter-organizational digital transformation has vividly shown that transformation does not begin with technology or strategy. It inherently starts with awareness, with the kernel of a moment at which public actors learn to see what I have glossed as the Matrix: the shaping yet shaped invisible institutional structure that constrains and enables collective action. The metaphor points to the deeply embedded rules, routines, and hierarchies that compose the code on which public administration runs. To perceive the Matrix is to recognize that these institutional logics are not immutable laws but configurable: social, procedural, and technological patterns that can be reprogrammed through deliberate, collective effort. Situated in this analogy, digital transformation is an awakening to the possibility that those lines governing public administration are not fixed laws but code of human origin that can be rewritten through joint effort and mutual trust.

The five studies' findings and the empirical narrative of Ångsvall converge at a central conclusion related to this awakening: digital transforma-

tion in the public sector is a collective and relational process of institutional recombination. The institutional entrepreneurs engaged here do not act as isolated change agents; they compose the transformation together by coordinating across gulfs of asymmetry, converting tension into motion, and designing collaboration as an enduring institutional form. This process unfolds on three levels simultaneously. At institutional level, municipalities reshape the norms and logics that define legitimate action. At the organization level, they build governance mechanisms that balance autonomy with interdependence. On the level of individuals, these institutional entrepreneurs cultivate trust, reflexivity, and a shared sense of purpose that renders collective agency possible.

The findings reveal that meaningful transformation arises when distributed actors learn to act as one without becoming one. Through complementarity by design, equity by structure, and trust by design, they merge their difference as group strength. The LeoPhant, born in synthesis of the elephant's resilience and the leopard's agility, represents this capacity. The metaphor symbolizes how collaboration reconfigures institutional capacities, transforming friction into creative balance. Where the Matrix represents institutional awakening, the LeoPhant represents recomposition: the slow, deliberate reconstruction of institutions, crafted as shared, that can carry transformation forward.

I conclude that the doctoral project's greatest contribution to theory ties in with repositioning collaboration. An operational necessity can grow into an institutional mechanism of change. Methodologically, the thesis demonstrates how a relational and abductive approach can capture the movement between empirical practice and concepts' rich development. On the other hand, it offers concrete guidance for municipalities wishing to design collaboration that is equitable, durable, and generative of digital capability.

Ultimately, this dissertation attests to public-sector transformation's ability to succeed when the entities learn not only to navigate the Matrix but also to rewrite it together. The act of composing the LeoPhant, of blending resilience and agility through collective institutional entrepreneurship, is the answer to the question of how municipalities engage in inter-organizational digital transformation. Transformation, in this light, is not about replacing old systems but about collectively reimagining the institutions that make change possible.

7.1 LIMITATIONS

All research is shaped by boundaries of scope, method, and perspective, and mine is not exceptional in this respect. Its design as an abductive, interpretive, and processual endeavor privileged depth of understanding over breadth of coverage. The limitations entailed should, therefore, be read not as weaknesses but as reflections of the epistemic underpinnings of this work: institutional transformation is best understood through interpretive engagement, immersion in the context, and analytical iteration rather than through formal generalization (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Langley, 1999).

One limitation emerged with regard to the work's case-specific and context-embedded nature. The Ångsvall case provided a unique setting for studying collective institutional entrepreneurship under conditions of asymmetry and digital transformation. However, generalizability of the analysis (see Yin, 2018) is limited by the distinctiveness of the Swedish municipal context: e.g., its political culture, welfare model, and digital-policy framework. Hence, the findings are best understood as theoretical generalizations (Tsoukas, 2009) that illuminate mechanisms and logics rather than statistical regularities. This logic of transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) underscores the central aim behind interpretive institutional research, of providing plausible, contextually situated explanations that can inform understanding across settings (Suddaby, 2006). Research across different governance traditions and national contexts could test the transferability of these mechanisms under varying institutional arrangements.

Temporal scope represents a second limitation. While the study captured key phases in the formation and institutionalization of the Ångsvall collaboration, it did not follow the entire lifespan of the initiative thus far or its long-term outcomes. The institutionalization of collaboration and its effects on digital equity, legitimacy, and service delivery unfold over extended spans beyond the time horizon of my research. This limitation underscores the need for longitudinal designs that can trace institutional drift, maintenance, and renewal over time (Langley et al., 2013; Voronov, et al., 2021). Future studies employing historical or process-based methods (Abbott, 2001; Garud et al., 2007) could extend the temporal-domain conclusions, further examining how collaborative structures evolve, stabi-

lize, and adapt to shifting political and technological conditions as time passes.

Methodological reflexivity and positionality imposed additional restrictions. As an engaged researcher working closely with practitioners, I occupied a liminal position between participant and observer. One hallmark of engaged scholarship (Van de Ven, 2007) is insider/outsider tension (Bartunek & Louis, 1996; Coghian, 2001): while enriching the interpretive depth of the analysis, that position presented a risk of shaping interpretations through relational proximity and shared sensemaking. Efforts were made to mitigate the associated risks throughout the research process, by means of reflexive strategies involving iterative logbook anchoring, critical dialogue with fellow researchers, and member validation for interpretations (see Alvesson et al., 2008; Cunliffe, 2011). Nonetheless, the knowledge produced remains unavoidably situated (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017; Haraway, 1988), shaped by my embeddedness in the field and by the epistemological commitments of interpretive institutionalism (Jarzabkowski et al., 2017; Suddaby, 2010).

There is a fourth limitation, pertaining to dataset scope and selective representation. The research focused primarily on municipal actors and inter-organizational digital transformation within the public sector. Although the broader ecosystem included technology providers, consultants, and citizens, their perspectives were represented only indirectly. Future research could incorporate these stakeholder groups more directly into examination of how multi-actor ecosystems co-produce institutional change and digital governance (Ansell & Torfing, 2021; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). Expanding the analysis lens in this way would provide a more comprehensive picture of the socio-technical assemblages shaping public-sector transformation (Nicolini, 2009; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008).

Finally, the interpretive and qualitative orientation created their own limitations by prioritizing meaning-making and institutional dynamics over measurable performance outcomes. While this supports the study's theoretical aims of uncovering mechanisms and logics rather than causal effects, it inevitably restricts claims about efficiency, service impact, cost-effectiveness, etc. Further scholarly work could complement interpretive inquiry with mixed-methods or design-based approaches (Edmondson & McManus, 2007; Reason & Bradbury, 2008) to explore the relations

among institutional work, governance design, and measurable outcomes of digital transformation. Combining interpretive insight with evaluative rigor could yield richer understanding of how institutional and technological changes interact to produce sustainable digital governance outcomes.

Taken together, these limitations highlight that the project's value lies less in generalization by enumeration than in theoretical transferability and conceptually oriented advances (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tsoukas, 2009). By establishing a productive position within processual and interpretive traditions, my work contributes to greater understanding of how institutional change in the public sector can be examined as a lived, evolving, and entangled process. From this standpoint, acknowledging its limitations reaffirms its methodological integrity and clarifies the scope within which its insight holds explanatory and practical value.

7.2 FUTURE RESEARCH

This project proved groundbreaking in illuminating how municipalities engage in inter-organizational digital transformation. Yet its achievement of revealing collaboration as both a mechanism and an institutional outcome has brought with it new questions and uncovered several directions for further inquiry. Future research could fruitfully build on these foundations by examining how institutional dynamics, governance design, and digital infrastructure continue to co-evolve across scales and contexts.

Firstly, as I have noted above, scholars could take the exploration of collective institutional entrepreneurship's temporal dynamics further. The Ångsvall case revealed that collaboration evolves through exploration, consolidation, and institutionalization phases, but the temporal mechanisms through which new practices stabilize over time remain under-theorized, calling for further conceptual development. Longitudinal and comparative studies could examine how such collaborative arrangements mature, decay, and/or regenerate over time, along with how institutional entrepreneurs see the legitimacy and trust through as associated transitions proceed (see Battilana et al., 2009; Garud et al., 2007; Lawrence et al., 2011). Process-tracing and ethnographic approaches (per Langley et al., 2013) should suit capturing the subtle shifts in meaning, structure, and governance that accompany institutional drift and maintenance as the actors

simultaneously maintain and transform their institutions (Voronov et al., 2021).

This project pointed to immense potential in delving more deeply into institutional balancing and complementarity as design logics. The research showed that collaboration can compensate for asymmetrically developed institutional pillars, yet the principles by which such balance is achieved still have not come into complete focus. Future research could conceptualize and test institutional-design grammars, systematic patterns by which regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive capacities can be recombined across organizations (see Greenwood et al., 2017). Comparative research investigating multiple municipal partnerships, regions, or sectors could identify typologies of successful balancing strategies and their implications for digital equity and innovation (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Bryson et al., 2015).

Thirdly, greater attention should be paid to the role of digital infrastructure itself as an institutional actor. The findings demonstrate that technology plays a more decisive role than functioning as a supportive element in collaboration. Since it also shapes institutional relationships and governance forms, future projects could fruitfully employ socio-technical and actor–network perspectives (Henfridsson & Bygstad, 2013; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008; Tilson et al., 2010) to analyze how algorithmic systems, data architectures, and digital platforms converge as components embedded in institutional logics. Empirical studies could tend specifically to how shared digital infrastructure mediates trust, accountability, and equity across municipal borders or, on the other hand, produce new dependencies and asymmetries (Hietala & Päivärinta, 2025; Hinings et al., 2018).

There is room also to expand research into institutional equity and legitimacy in collaborative digital governance. The project found that power asymmetries possess production potential when managed through equity by structure, yet the normative and ethics dimensions of this principle warrant further exploration. Future studies could develop evaluative frameworks for assessing fairness, representation, and legitimacy in multi-actor collaboration (Bryson et al., 2014; Ospina et al., 2020). Comparative case studies with contexts of different welfare systems or governance traditions could help illuminate how institutional equity gets interpreted and enacted under particular democracy/administration logics (Torfing et al., 2012).

Cross-level and multi-sited analysis of institutional collaboration deserves attention too. The Ångsvall case revealed the basics of how local-level collaboration can initiate field-level institutional change, but we lack understanding of how such transformations travel how local innovations diffuse, scale, or become codified as policy (see DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Greenwood et al., 2017). Multi-site ethnography and field-level studies could trace how institutional templates of collaboration circulate among municipalities, government agencies, and technology providers, thereby shaping national approaches to digital transformation (Ansell & Torfing, 2021; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015).

Finally, there is a methodological opportunity to refine reflexive and entangled research designs further. Building on Barad's (2007) notion of working from within via "intra-action," future studies could experiment with participatory and design-based methods that engage with practitioners as co-theorizers (Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Van de Ven, 2007). Such approaches would not only align with the relational ontology articulated in this thesis but also advance a more generative, dialogue-oriented mode of public-administration research. This form of entangled inquiry, wherein jointly produced knowledge directly informs institutional practice, holds potential to function as both empirical exploration and intervention, turning the research itself into a site of institutional innovation.

Walking these avenues of future research could carry the contribution much further than Ångsvall, deepening several disciplines' and practitioner fields' understanding of how collective institutional entrepreneurship may foster digital transformation. Following them involves looking at multiple scales, several contexts, and convergence of theory and practice. These need not be separate pursuits. They invite engaging with entangled processes of institutional learning and renewal, on paths that cross-connect and loop back along the way.

7.3 CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

As the dissertation reaches its final pages, I wish to revisit the two metaphors that framed its beginning, this time highlighting them not as mere decorative imagery but as conceptual shorthand for the theoretical journey that I have undertaken. Both point toward the central insight of the work:

that digital transformation in the public sector is a process of institutional awakening and institutional recombination: of perceiving the constraints of inherited systems and then recomposing them collectively in light of learning experience.

As the film's protagonist awakened in *The Matrix*, municipal actors engaged in digital transformation must sensitize themselves to the invisible architecture that organizes their administrative world: the code of regulation, accountability, and legitimacy that structures the space of possibility. The act that I call seeing the code represents institutional reflexivity: conscious recognition that striving for stability, prioritizing the hierarchy, pursuing compliance, etc. are not immutable pillars of some law but historically produced arrangements. Such awareness does not dissolve institutions; rather, it renders them intelligible and, therefore, open to purposeful reconfiguration. Digital transformation begins at the moment of cultural-cognitive breakthrough when those directly serving the public and policy designers perceive that the systems they inhabit are contingent, negotiable, and ultimately rewritable.

Yet awakening alone is insufficient. After the moment of recognition, taking the pill of awareness, comes the work of recomposition, symbolized by the LeoPhant. A hybrid being that unites resilience with agility offers a shorthand for what the doctoral project showed empirically in the case of Ångsvall. Namely, transformation can evolve through deliberate recombination of complementary capacities across the organizations' boundaries. This institutional work stems from recognition by institutional entrepreneurs that they can build in novelty by rearranging the building blocks of institutions so as to utilize the best parts of each world. With a larger and smaller partner, this keeping and combining might benefit from the larger one being endowed with robust governance and technical infrastructure (conferring endurance and institutional memory) while the smaller one contributes nearness, adaptability, and normative cohesion to recombination. The LeoPhant they birth together is an institutional hybrid, not a merger that eradicates difference but a dynamic arrangement that channels diversity into balance.

In this sense, the LeoPhant embodies collective institutional entrepreneurship: the ability of multiple embedded actors to pool their distributed strengths in order to achieve what none could realize on its own. The col-

laboration that can evolve, as the empirical analysis revealed, may function simultaneously as a mechanism and an outcome, starting as the means through which institutional imbalance is addressed and then maturing as an enduring creature that becomes part of the institutional field itself.

The distributed strength described is still fragile. A keystone figure to the operations can disappear almost overnight. The following snapshot from my logbook captures the vulnerability in these evocative words, penned after I received news of Ånge's CEO's dismissal on a dark Friday in August 2025: "Well, I have just worked my last day in Ånge." The phone call had left me in utter shock. I asked myself, "What happens now? What phase is Ångsvall really in at this point? Is the joint arrangement ready to cope with this? Have we enrolled enough institutional entrepreneurs to carry confluence forward now that the former champion has been excised?" The incident made it crystal clear that, in institutional-entrepreneurship terms, sustaining transformation requires distributing agency beyond a few pivotal individual (see Ahrens et al., 2018; Battilana et al., 2009).

Only when the institutional work has grown genuinely collective, when the capacity to shoulder and renew the joint project is embedded across structural, relationship, and procedural lines can transformation weather fluctuations in the presence of individual champions. Over time, such arrangements solidify into new routines, norms, and governance forms, evidence that public-sector transformation proceeds not through radical displacement but through gradual layering, drift, and recombination.

Revisiting the metaphors together clarifies the two-pronged nature of this transformation. The Matrix reminds us that progress requires reflexive awareness, the courage to question institutional reality and to expose the assumptions that restrict one's action. The LeoPhant demonstrates that change grounded in wakefulness demands constructive synthesis: exercising the capacity to combine stability with agility, efficiency with exploration, and solid regulation with genuine equity. Transforming demands more than deconstruction; once awake, it necessitates an act of creation. By the same token, one must learn to read the code before one can rewrite the program.

These intertwined metaphors also illuminate a broader epistemic stance. In keeping with Barad's notion of entanglement, the boundaries between seeing and doing, or theory and practice, are porous. Institutional

awakening to the Matrix and the material recomposition of the LeoPhant are not sequential moments but intra-active ones within a single process. Awareness and creation co-produce each other: the more actors understand the institutional structures that shape them, the more capable they become of designing new ones. The cycle entailed captures the essence of digital transformation as observed in Ångsvall, a process where reflecting and acting, understanding and experimenting, etc. continually fold into one another.

Ultimately, the argument advanced in this thesis is a hopeful one. Even within the dense weave of public-governance structures, renewal can occur when institutions cultivate reflexivity and collaboration. The picture painted of awakening reveals that structure can be seen differently; the empirical formation of a metaphorical hybrid creature proves that difference can be organized productively. The two together show that transformation depends not on abandoning institutions but on rewriting them from within, recomposing their DNA such that resilience and adaptability coexist.

In the language of institutional theory, this means embracing the paradoxes of change rather than resolving them. In the vocabulary of this thesis, it means learning to navigate the Matrix and to build the LeoPhant. Through the motion of awareness and recombination occurring together, public organizations can evolve toward forms of governance that are at once resilient, equitable, and responsive. Through this lens, then, digital transformation is not a technological modernization project but an ongoing act of institutional imagination (see Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013). The actors continuously reinterpret and reconfigure the institutional arrangements that shape their reality, as they undertake a collective effort to re-script the rules of public life in ways that accommodate both equity and efficiency, resilience and agility.

The journey does not end there, however. Just as it starts with recognizing that creation begins within the code, the LeoPhant must continue the evolutionary movement informed by institutional consciousness. Just as the many currents of the river dividing Hjältan learn to flow as one body of water through all the different bends and over varied rocks, the possibility of equitable welfare thus becomes both imaginable and attainable.

CHAPTER 8

POSTSCRIPT

In the years following the initial phase of the digital-transformation initiative, the change has not only maintained its momentum but also evolved in both depth and scope. Transformation that began as a seed for localized efforts in Ånge and Sundsvall has matured into a robust inter-organizational endeavor that categorically transcends the sphere of administrative-efficiency undertakings. Today, the partners are well on their way to creating a genuinely proactive citizen-centered digital ecosystem with strong focus on predictive services.

The transformation efforts' first few steps continued as bold strides in the months and years that followed. What has taken place in that time is emblematic of a broader societal shift and the moving frontiers of technology: digital transformation is no longer regarded as merely digitizing of internal processes; it involves the intelligent orchestration of public services across institutional boundaries. With Ångsvall, the original aim was to enhance service delivery and reduce administrative friction. Over time, however, the partnership deepened into comprehensive integration of systems, data, and processes among varied public-sector actors. The

municipalities' venture has embraced an adaptive approach to digital strategy-making, wherein iterative learning and collaborative experimentation shape truly new modes of governance.

But not everything has been easy or gone as planned. Tensions, new and old, are ever present and constantly challenge our strategies. Not everyone wants to change, even if doing so creates a better life for all the residents. It requires present and courageous leadership to move forward.

A recently reached milestone in this ongoing evolution is the Ångsvall partnership's expansion to encompass three neighboring municipalities in northern Hälsingland: Nordanstig, Ljusdal, and Hudiksvall. This expansion marks a shift from single-organization focus toward a multifaceted perspective cultivated in pursuit of a regional digital-transformation alliance. The vision is for shared infrastructure and governance models to facilitate multi-municipality cooperation. With lessons from the existing collaboration framework, the setting enables resource-pooling, cross-boundary sharing of data, and standardization of digital services, all without loss of respect for local autonomy and in a manner responding to contextual needs.

Perhaps the most transformative development lies in the emergence of predictive digital solutions, systems capable of anticipating citizen needs in light of context- and behavior-related data. Solutions in this family are designed to eliminate bureaucratic processes entirely: where citizens once had to recognize their need for services and then apply for them, the system will proactively identify eligibility and deliver assistance automatically. This marks radical redefinition of the citizen-government relationship: from reactive service provision to proactive, intelligent welfare-service delivery.

This ongoing transformation demonstrates that digital transformation is not a one-time project but an evolving socio-technical process. The Ångsvall experience exemplifies digital transformation as simultaneously organization-level, inter-organizational, and societal. It reveals convergent motion toward a wholly new model of public administration, one that values anticipation over filling out forms, collaboration and interconnection (of individuals, services, etc.) in preference to isolation, and learning rather than rigid control.

At the time of writing, a new manifestation of this institutional innovation is emerging in southern Sweden, where the municipalities of Mörbylånga and Kalmar are jointly establishing a separate collaborative entity. Here, the Kalmarsund currently stands as the new "dividing river" to be bridged as inter-organizational digital-transformation efforts begin to reconfigure the institutional landscape in pursuit of equitable welfare services. As Felicia Hallström of Mörbylånga aptly stated,

> This is worth everything and surpasses any award or prize. Drawing on our complementary strengths, we are now shaping the future. With courage, relentless effort, and unwavering resolve, we push forward toward more equitable and more dignified day-to-day life for the many.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A. A DETAILED TIMELINE OF THE ÅNGSVALL INITIATIVE

Timing	**Details of the events and context**	**Vital decisions and turning points**	**Ånge CEO and Sundsvall CIO's actions**	**Deeper reflections and insight**
Summer 2021	A serious IT crisis in Ånge that disrupted public services	Recognition of deep-seated systemic vulnerabilities	Managed the crisis and reflected on the organizations' gaps	Crises catalyze foundational change
Early 2022	Ånge CEO proactively reaching out to Sundsvall's leaders	Initiation of inter-municipality collaboration	Directly contacted the Sundsvall CEO and CIO	Proactive leadership is crucial for initiating collaboration
Early 2022	A shift in focus, for leadership-approach changes in Sundsvall	A shift from "digital transformation" to traditional solutions	Devised a relevant strategy, with an approach stressing practical, traditional methods	Leadership changes significantly affect strategies' direction
Feb. 2022	Dialogue that revealed mutual frustrations	Identification of governance challenges	Led candid discussion and adapted the communication to the new focus for leadership	Early openness is essential for navigating shifts in priorities
March–April 2022	Compilation of material: governance-issue examples	Structured justification of the necessary changes	Documented examples clearly aligned with the new leadership focus	Progress requires alignment with the relevant leadership perspective
May 2022	An initial proposal presented to the municipal executives	Executive buy-in, secured by means of the adjustment in focus	Presented clear, traditional benefits aligned with the new leadership priorities	Early executive-level alignment is pivotal amid strategy shifts
June–July 2022	Informal internal interviews	Confirmation of a need for external perspectives	Conducted networking aligned with traditional problem-solving perspectives	Network alignment assists with understanding of shifting priorities

Timing	Details of the events and context	Vital decisions and turning points	Ånge CEO and Sundsvall CIO's actions	Deeper reflections and insight
Aug. 2022	Framework and strategy-roadmap development	A roadmap reflective of traditional solutions	Developed a framework emphasizing practical, manageable steps	Clarity in strategy is necessary amid any shift in direction
Sept. 2022	Official "kick-off" to the transformation	Mobilization cohering around traditional leadership values	Facilitated workshops putting a focus on pragmatic problem-solving	Buy-in requires a shared vision aligned with the leadership values
Oct.–Nov. 2022	A comprehensive set of interviews, organization-wide	Clarification of priority areas aligned with the new strategy's direction	Conducted interviews focused on traditional, practical solutions	Alignment guarantees such initiatives' relevance and acceptance
Dec. 2022	Strategic-level approval from the steering group	Authorization for the implementation phase	Presented arguments that resonate with customary methods	Legitimacy requires alignment with the prevailing leadership philosophy
Jan.–March 2023	Active monitoring of pilot initiatives	Validation through traditional solution-piloting efforts	Provided hands-on support and iterative reflection aligned for traditional methods	Pilot work is crucial for demonstrating the viability of adjusted solutions
April–June 2023	Adjustments based on pilot-phase feedback	Development of a clear internal communication strategy	Refined the approach and transparently propagated tradition-anchored solutions internally	Clear communication builds trust, particularly in a context of change
July–Aug. 2023	Scaling of resources and preparations for training	Confirmation of readiness for a broader traditional rollout	Developed comprehensive training that mirrors customary approaches	Preparedness makes sure of effective scaling under new strategic direction
Sept.–Nov. 2023	Initiation of organization-wide implementation	Support for the leaders with regard to traditional implementation	Closely mentored leaders and aided in alignment with traditions	Direct, visible leadership support is vital during transitions

Timing	Details of the events and context	Vital decisions and turning points	Ånge CEO and Sundsvall CIO's actions	Deeper reflections and insight
Dec. 2023–Feb. 2024	Structure changes and clarification of roles	Adjustment of the implementation pace to align with traditional methods	Guaranteed alignment and clarified roles in line with established practice	Continuous evaluation smoothes transition amid changes in direction
March–June 2024	Priority assigned to cultural integration	Integration of structure and behavior shifts to mesh with traditional change	Facilitated dialogue stressing pragmatic culture shifts	Behavior consistent with structure changes reinforces them
July–Sept. 2024	Fully established internal storytelling and reflection processes	Formal reflection aligned with traditional methods	Arranged storytelling sessions focused on pragmatic solutions	An approach that utilizes storytelling supports enduring traditional transformation
Oct.–Dec. 2024	Establishment of learning networks	Institutionalization of peer-based learning focused on traditional methods	Enabled multi-team mentoring with emphasis on practical problem-solving	Learning from peers fosters continuous improvement that meshes well with the strategy
Jan. 2025	A comprehensive picture of the insight, summarized and shared internally	Institutionalization of formal knowledge-sharing	Compiled insight, with focus given to pragmatic solutions and well-structured internal dissemination	Knowledge-sharing sustains transformation aligned with the new values for leadership