

**UNIVERSITY  
OF TWENTE.**

Master Thesis

Climate Conscience at Work:  
A Process Model of Value-Driven Employee Turnover in the  
Context of Ecological Sustainability

**Author: Celina Borko**

M. Sc. in Business Administration – Entrepreneurship, Innovation and Strategy

Faculty of Behavioral, Management and Social Sciences

University of Twente

24<sup>th</sup> of November 2024

1<sup>st</sup> Supervisor: Dr. Barbara Kump

2<sup>nd</sup> Supervisor: Dr. Svenja Damberg

## Abstract

As climate change awareness is increasing globally, ecological sustainability is also gaining more relevance in the labor market. This has given rise to a phenomenon called “Climate Quitting”, which describes voluntary employee turnover out of reasons related to ecological sustainability. While this is already being frequently discussed in the media, no academic literature exists on the matter yet. Current research discusses typical turnover processes, but misses out on important variables that contribute to climate quitting in particular, specifically regarding the role of values. Considering that knowledge gap, this study aims to answer the research question “*How does the process of climate quitting unfold?*” To that end, a qualitative inductive research design was adopted. Data was collected by interviewing 17 people who have quit a job out of ecological sustainability-related reasons. These interviews were analyzed based on the Gioia method, and synthesized into a process model, named the “4-E Model” which divides the process into the four phases: 1. *Entry*: Entering the job with varying levels of sustainability expectations; 2. *Evaluation*: Assessing value alignment and experiencing cognitive dissonance; 3. *Exploration*: Attempting dissonance reduction and deliberating turnover, and 4. *Exit*: Preparing for and executing the turnover decision. These findings provide important insights for both theory and practice, by proposing a turnover model that includes values related to broad societal issues, which were not accounted for in previous turnover literature, and by being the first to connect turnover theory with cognitive dissonance theory, which in the research appeared as central to climate quitting. For practice, the findings emphasize the need for adjusted employee retention strategies, such as improved means for employee sustainability-engagement, and highlight the general necessity of serious corporate sustainability efforts.

**Keywords:** *Climate Quitting, Turnover, Gioia Method, Qualitative Research, Organizational Commitment Theory, Moral Identification Theory, Cognitive Dissonance Theory*

## Table of Contents

<b>1</b>	<b><i>Introduction</i></b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>2</b>	<b><i>Theory</i></b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>2.1</b>	<b>Traditional Turnover Models</b> .....	<b>9</b>
2.1.1	Intermediate Linkages Model.....	9
2.1.2	Unfolding model.....	10
<b>2.2</b>	<b>Additional Factors</b> .....	<b>10</b>
2.2.1	Organizational Commitment .....	11
2.2.2	Moral Identification.....	12
2.2.3	Cognitive Dissonance.....	13
<b>2.3</b>	<b>Literature Gap</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>3</b>	<b><i>Methods</i></b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>3.1</b>	<b>Methodology</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>3.2</b>	<b>Data Collection</b> .....	<b>15</b>
3.2.1	Sample .....	15
3.2.2	Interview Guideline .....	16
<b>3.3</b>	<b>Data Analysis</b> .....	<b>18</b>
3.3.1	Gioia Method.....	18
3.3.2	Process Model .....	22
<b>4</b>	<b><i>Findings</i></b> .....	<b>22</b>
<b>4.1</b>	<b>Expectations Phase</b> .....	<b>25</b>
4.1.1	Sustainability expectations .....	25
4.1.2	No sustainability expectations.....	25
4.1.3	Trigger for value shift.....	26
<b>4.2</b>	<b>Evaluation Phase</b> .....	<b>27</b>
4.2.1	Trigger for company evaluation .....	28
4.2.2	Evaluation of corporate sustainability .....	29
4.2.3	Moral identification.....	30
4.2.4	Cognitive dissonance.....	31
<b>4.3</b>	<b>Exploration Phase</b> .....	<b>32</b>
4.3.1	Insider activism .....	32
4.3.2	Internal switch .....	33
4.3.3	No internal change attempt.....	33
4.3.4	Organizational commitment.....	35

4.3.5	Personality factors .....	38
4.3.6	Contextual factors.....	39
<b>4.4</b>	<b>Exit Phase .....</b>	<b>39</b>
4.4.1	Decision to leave .....	39
4.4.2	Preparation.....	40
4.4.3	Trigger for leaving.....	42
<b>5</b>	<b>Discussion.....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>5.1</b>	<b>Theoretical Contribution.....</b>	<b>43</b>
5.1.1	The 4-E Model.....	43
5.1.2	Contribution to traditional turnover theories.....	48
<b>5.2</b>	<b>Practical Contribution.....</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>5.3</b>	<b>Limitations.....</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>5.4</b>	<b>Future Research Recommendations.....</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>53</b>
	<b>References.....</b>	<b>55</b>
	<b>Appendix A - Interview Guide.....</b>	<b>62</b>
	<b>Appendix B - Integrity Statement .....</b>	<b>66</b>

# 1 Introduction

Climate change is widely recognized as one of the most imminent threats to our planet and our society, affecting not only our natural systems but also public health, economic stability, and social equity (Calvin et al., 2023). As a result of growing awareness about climate change as a global issue, climate change is increasingly influencing various aspects of society, including the job market, up to employee behavior (Stevenson et al., 2014). Climate change is a major part of the overarching concept of ecological sustainability, which is defined in this paper as “the preservation of the natural environment. Its ultimate goal is to prevent the deterioration generated through the depletion of natural resources, the disruption of habitats, and pollution” (Mandelli, 2022, p. 336). In the remainder of this paper, “sustainability” will be used to refer to ecological sustainability, unless stated differently.

Research has shown that the relevance of climate change for career decisions has increased significantly in past decades (Brannstrom et al., 2022), and is likely to increase even further, given the heightened awareness of the younger generations towards climate change (Stevenson et al., 2014). On that note, Paul Polman conducted a study in 2023, investigating the relevance of climate change for Millennials and Gen Z in the context of employment. In the study, 77% of millennials and Gen Z indicated that they are taking a firm’s commitment to ecological sustainability into account when searching for a new job (Polman, Paul, 2023). This suggests that (ecological) sustainability can be considered a value that individuals possess to different degrees, representing a “guiding principle in people’s lives” (Schwartz, 1992).

However, not only attracting, but also retaining talent is a crucial element of the human resource management of a business, due to the time and resources that recruiting and training new employees requires (Florek-Paszowska & Hoyos-Vallejo, 2023; Narayanan et al., 2019). Many quantitative studies exist that provide support for a positive correlation between environmental responsibility of an organization and employee retention (e.g. Choi & Yu, 2014; Kim et al., 2024). In that context, a new(ly recognized) trend known as 'climate quitting' is gaining increasing media attention (Nicholls-Lee, 2023). Climate quitting generally refers to the phenomenon of individuals leaving their jobs due to concerns about ecological sustainability (Polman, 2023). This trend suggests that climate considerations are not only relevant to job seekers but may also significantly impact turnover decisions of currently employed individuals. Nonetheless, to the authors’ best knowledge after conducting literature

research on Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, the phenomenon of climate quitting has so far not received explicit scholarly treatment.

Generally, the landscape of widely accepted process theories on turnover is relatively scarce. Starting in 1958, the first influential turnover model was published by March & Simon (1958), which merely described turnover as a function of “desirability of movement” and “easy of movement”, without addressing the exact process of turnover. In the “intermediate linkages model” by Mobley (1977), this view was significantly expanded. In it, the turnover process is described as a sequence going from the “evaluation of existing job” in eight steps over “search for alternatives” to “quit/stay”. Shortly after, Mobley addressed shortcomings of their first model by adding multiple new other dimensions, such as individual and organizational values, or the expected utility of the present and alternative job (Mobley, 1979). The factor “individual values” may help explain climate quitting; however, it is mentioned but not further elaborated in the model. Indeed, it is likely that the individual values refer to much more self-related aspects, such as work-life balance, or autonomy, instead of broader societal issues such as climate change. Moreover, Mobley's model does not specify how exactly individual values influence other turnover variables. Thus, Mobley's theory cannot adequately explain climate quitting as a special form of turnover.

In 1994, Lee and Mitchell developed the “unfolding model” as a response to Mobley's intermediate linkages model (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). Lee and Mitchell expanded Mobley's model by adding several process steps that precede the timeline addressed in the intermediate linkages model. Precisely, Lee and Mitchell (1994) argued, that turnover processes are initiated by shocks that lead the employee to evaluate their employment, a factor that has not been addressed in Mobley's model. While the unfolding model marked a significant advantage in turnover literature, it still does not fully explain the process of climate quitting, due to it lacking further insight on the role of (sustainability) values in the context of turnover.

Some variables have been discussed in turnover literature, which may provide important insights to fill the mentioned gap in the current process models. One of the most frequently cited predictors of turnover is “organizational commitment” (A. Florek-Paszowska & Hoyos-Vallejo, 2023; Meyer & Allen, 1991). Organizational commitment generally refers to the degree and the way that an employee is attached to the organization, and has been shown to also be influenced by corporate social responsibility, which entails environmental responsibility (Mory et al., 2016). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that organizational commitment may be relevant in explaining climate quitting. According to Meyer and Allen

(1991), one of the three dimensions of organizational commitment is affective commitment. This may play a significant role in climate quitting as a form of value-based quitting, as it incorporates the factor of the employee aligning with company values (Porter et al., 1974). However, this moral aspect has not been conceptualized more deeply within organizational commitment theory. Thus, variables are needed that help to gain a deeper understanding of the role of value alignment in employee retention and turnover. In that regard, “moral identification” (May et al., 2015) will be taken into account. According to May et al. (2015), individuals who possess moral identification, identify with their organization's ethical traits and are more likely to remain employed at that organization, in order to retain moral self-consistency. In turn, this suggests that a lack of moral identification may be a decisive factor in climate quitter's decision to leave. However, staying in, and leaving a company are not mere opposites when it comes to their antecedents, and should not be treated as such (Hom et al., 2017). Thus, variables posited by “cognitive dissonance theory” (Festinger, 1957) will be consulted to round up the picture, by providing an established view on the behavior of individuals who experience cognitive discrepancies. The theory argues that individuals who hold conflicting cognitions (which also includes knowledge of one's own behavior, such as working at a company that does not match one's moral standards) are put into a state of discomfort, named cognitive dissonance, which may be an important factor in the context of climate quitting. This state of cognitive dissonance motivates individuals to engage in discrepancy reduction, by changing either their attitudes or their behavior, with the latter being possibly applicable to climate quitting. Thus, the factors “cognitive discrepancy”, “cognitive dissonance”, and “discrepancy reduction” may prove relevant in this research.

Taken together, these theories and variables provide valuable insights on which factors may influence the process of climate quitting and lead to the employee's turnover. However, they fail to explain climate quitting as an unexplored phenomenon in its entirety, specifically on a process level. Understanding the development of climate quitting is crucial, as it reveals how the individual steps lead to each other, and which factors are especially critical in the process. Overall, it appears that current turnover theories provide a baseline for understanding the turnover process on a fundamental level, but they miss elements that are crucial in the special context of climate quitting. Integrating organizational commitment, moral-identification, and the factors related to cognitive dissonance theory into a new turnover process model may fill this gap and help to unravel climate quitting.

Thus, this study aims to address the following research question:

*"How does the process of climate quitting unfold?"*

By answering this research question, this paper aims to advance the understanding of climate quitting as a form of (the similarly understudied) value-based quitting. Through an examination of the factors that shape the climate quitting process at each stage, this research provides a detailed view on how sustainability values can influence employees' decisions to leave their organizations, and how other factors affect the process. In that, the research fills the gap of understanding the effect of sustainability values in the context of turnover, a factor that has hardly received proper attention in extant turnover literature. By conducting interviews with people who have climate-quit, and creating a process model through rigorous application of techniques based on Gioia et al. (2013) and Langley (1999), the research presents a picture of climate quitting that is empirically grounded in current data instead of decade-old theories. In that sense, it accounts for societal developments of recent times, which is especially valuable given that the most influential turnover theories were developed when the attention of the society towards climate change was still limited.

On the practical side, this research provides valuable insights for organizations seeking to retain environmentally conscious employees. By understanding the factors and processes that characterize climate quitting, organizations can develop more effective sustainability strategies that align with employees' values and expectations, potentially reducing turnover related to ecological sustainability concerns. Specifically, the findings can be considered in the strategy creation as well as human resource management of a firm. Considering the increasing awareness of the issue climate change (Meier, 2024), a shift towards more climate-conscious business practices will keep growing in importance, and benefit not only the employee, but also the organization, and society as a whole. This research will shed light on the relevance of fostering a culture that prioritizes environmental responsibility and supports employees' sustainability-related values and initiatives, which will give organizations significant advantages when it comes to human capital.

The remaining paper will be structured as follows: The current state of the literature will be laid out in the following section, looking at extant turnover models as well as research on organizational commitment, moral identification and cognitive dissonance theory. Subsequently, the methods applied in this research will be described, i.e. the data collection, and qualitative data analysis. Then, the findings of the research will be presented, together with



the model that was developed through the process. Lastly, the findings will be discussed, and limitations of the study as well as future research recommendations will be presented. The paper closes with a brief conclusion.

## 2 Theory

In order to answer the research question and develop a new understanding of the turnover process in the special context of climate quitting, it is essential to first lay the basis by examining the current state of turnover literature. Then, this chapter will take a closer look at factors that may help to explain the value dimension of turnover, which is not covered by extant turnover process models.

### 2.1 Traditional Turnover Models

#### 2.1.1 Intermediate Linkages Model

The earliest turnover process model that remains widely accepted and cited in management research is Mobley's (1977) 'intermediate linkages model'. In that, Mobley (1977) describes a process going from 'job evaluation' over 'thinking of quitting' to 'search for alternatives', lastly leading to the decision on whether to stay or quit. The model proposes that job dissatisfaction initiates a sequence of cognitive stages that may ultimately lead to turnover, with each stage representing a potential point where the process could stop (with the employee deciding to stay with the organization). Later, Mobley refined this model to account for dimensions and interrelations that had not been included in the original model (Mobley et al., 1979). This new version acknowledged that the initial, linear model could not adequately account for the complexity of the turnover process. Thus, it was extended by several factors and dimensions. For instance, organizational and individual factors as well as individual values were added, with the latter being postulated to influence satisfaction and attraction-expected utility of the present and alternative job(s). However, Mobley et al. (1979) did not specify in their paper what exactly the individual values dimension includes, making it difficult to apply to climate quitting, assuming that individual values play a critical role in climate quitting. Furthermore, neither the original nor the extended model account for the factors that lead the employee to evaluate their job in the first place.

### 2.1.2 Unfolding model

Lee and Mitchell's (1994) unfolding model marked a notable change in the conception about turnover at that time. While Mobley's (1977) model had argued for job dissatisfaction as the beginning of the process, Lee and Mitchell (1994) proposed that the starting point of turnover most often is not merely gradually increasing dissatisfaction, but the process is usually triggered by a "shock". In the unfolding model, a shock describes an event, or a change in the system, which leads the employee to reevaluate their job. The model describes four different decision paths how these shocks ultimately lead to turnover, going i.a. through image violation (the disconnect between the employee's values, goals, and expectations, and the reality of the workplace), memory probing (connecting the shock with experiences or observations), job dissatisfaction, and searching for alternatives. These main factors appear in different combinations among the different pathways. In context with job dissatisfaction, the model also includes the intermediate linkages model by Mobley (1977) as one part of the process (Decision Path #4). In that sense, the unfolded model is an extension of the intermediate linkages model, explaining how the process described in Mobley (1977) is set in motion, and proposing different pathways that deviate from Mobley's model but also lead to turnover.

## 2.2 Additional Factors

As established, current turnover models fall short on precisely explaining the role that values play in the formation of turnover intention, and subsequent turnover. In fact, values are hardly mentioned in traditional turnover models, and, while being in the center of the model by Mobley et al. (1979), not further elaborated on. Research that addresses the connection between values and turnover is frequently quantitative (see e.g. Consoli et al., 2016; Florek-Paszowska & Hoyos-Vallejo, 2023), and does not provide deeper insights into the mechanisms that shape that relationship. Further, current studies linking corporate sustainability and turnover primarily focus on sustainability initiatives that directly benefit the employee (Karatepe et al., 2022), or the effect of management practices on employees' sustainability behavior (Arshad et al., 2022; Carmeli et al., 2017). However, this narrow focus overlooks the potential impact of broader ecological sustainability efforts on employee attitudes and behaviors, specifically in connection with individual's own sustainability values.

Thus, different variables are needed to help explain the value dimension, which is the core of what makes climate quitting distinct from other forms of turnover. Generally, values have been conceptualized in many ways. The definition that seems most appropriate for this research

and will thus be employed, describes values as “broad, trans-situational, desirable goals that serve as guiding principles in people’s lives” (Schwartz, 1992). That is, because this conceptualization captures the motivational aspect of values, which appears to be relevant for climate quitters, who acted upon their values by leaving their jobs. In the following, established variables will be introduced, which may play a decisive role in the process of climate quitting.

### 2.2.1 Organizational Commitment

Organizational commitment, as conceptualized in Meyer and Allen's (1991) three-component model, might be a relevant factor for understanding how employees' perceptions of their organization's ecological sustainability influence their intention to stay or leave. Generally, organizational commitment is a psychological state that “characterizes the employee’s relationship with the organization (Meyer & Allen, 1990, p. 539) and influences their decision to stay in or leave an organization (Meyer & Allen, 1990). High organizational commitment is positively related to an employee’s desire to continue their membership with an organization (Salleh et al., 2012). However, while the concepts of staying and leaving are technically mere opposites, the lack of organizational commitment does not necessarily lead to the turnover of an employee or even a turnover intention (Hom et al., 2017). Nonetheless, organizational commitment has been frequently used in turnover literature as a reverse measure to approximate turnover (A. Florek-Paszowska & Hoyos-Vallejo, 2023; Salleh et al., 2012). In this qualitative research, the relevance of organizational commitment lies in understanding whether low levels of commitment are decreasing employee’s motivation to stay with the firm, or whether employees are pursuing climate quitting despite experiencing high levels of commitment. In the following, the three dimensions of organizational commitment proposed by Meyer and Allen (1991) will be elaborated on.

*Affective commitment* refers to an employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization (Meyer & Allen, 1991). This dimension of commitment may be relevant in the context of climate quitting, as it is related to the match of the employee’s self-image and the organizational reality, as embodied in organizational culture, values, and practices (Swales, 2002). Previous research has shown that corporate social responsibility initiatives, which often include environmental sustainability efforts, can enhance employees' affective commitment (Turker, 2009). In turn, the commitment on this dimension may be weakened if employees disagree with the perceived ecological responsibility of their organization, lowering their attachment to the organization (A. Florek-Paszowska & Hoyos-Vallejo, 2023). While this alone may not necessarily lead to an increased turnover intention, it

reduces the reasons for employees to remain part of the organization, in case of deliberation. Overall, affective commitment could determine the climate quitting process both in favor and against quitting, as it encompasses not only values, but also aspects like interpersonal relationships or organizational support (Meyer & Allen, 1991).

*Continuance commitment* refers to an employee's perception of the costs associated with leaving the organization (Meyer & Allen, 1991), a factor that is frequently overlooked in existing research (Ashar et al., 2013; Tilleman, 2012). Individuals with a high continuance commitment perceive the costs of leaving as high, compared to the costs of staying. For employees valuing sustainability highly, the perceived ecological performance of the organization forms part of the cost and benefit assessment. Specifically given the novelty of heightened climate awareness among the general population (Meier, 2024), and the tendency of organizations to engage in greenwashing rather than implementing effective sustainability measures (Mu & Lee, 2023), the availability of truly "climate-friendly" jobs can be (or appear) relatively scarce to the employee (Benkarim & Imbeau, 2021). Because of that, employees might consider the costs of leaving as high, due to the risk of not finding a job at a company with a better perceived ecological sustainability. Thus, the consideration whether fitting alternatives are available may be highly relevant for potential climate quitters.

Lastly, *normative commitment* generally refers to an employee's feeling of obligation to continue employment with the organization (Meyer & Allen, 1990). González & Guillén (2008) suggest that employees may feel a diminished normative commitment if the company fails to uphold their moral standards, which could apply if they perceive a lack of genuine climate efforts from their company. This also reveals that the constructs of normative and affective commitment are highly related in terms of their antecedents, considering that moral alignment also influences affective commitment.

### 2.2.2 Moral Identification

While organizational commitment is said to include value alignment between individuals and their organizations, it does not fully explain *why* individuals seek value alignment at work. Moral identification theory by May et al. (2015) helps to fill this gap, and understand climate quitting on a more psychological level, by giving rise to the concept of moral identification. This concept builds on social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), which posits in the context of employment that individuals exhibit social identification with their organization if the organization shares characteristics the employees define themselves with and consider

relevant. May et al. (2015) took this a step further, and applied it to morals, suggesting that these characteristics could also be of moral and ethical nature. Based on that, they developed the concept of “moral identification” which they defined as “perception of oneness or belongingness associated with an organization that exhibits ethical traits, which also involves a deliberate concern of the membership with an ethical organization” (May et al., 2015). Drawing on the notion that individuals generally strive for self-consistency (Aquino & Reed, 2002), May et al. (2015) further suggested that individuals who perceive such moral identification with their organization would wish to remain employed by the organization, and also, that those who do not experience moral identification would be more likely to quit. In that sense, moral identification provides reasoning as to why value-alignment is an important factor for continued employment. In the climate quitting context, it can be argued that the subjective dimension “ethical traits”, as used in the definition of moral identification by May et al. (2015), would be strongly connected to ecological sustainability for those individuals who end up climate quitting.

### 2.2.3 Cognitive Dissonance

As explained, moral identification is the value alignment that employees perceive between them and their company, and is said to decrease turnover intention (May et al., 2015). However, what exactly happens once individuals perceive *misalignment* remains unclear. To fill this gap, cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) poses a valuable concept for understanding employees' responses to value misalignment with their organization. Originally developed as a psychological model, cognitive dissonance theory has been widely accepted and employed in management literature to understand i.a. employee and manager behavior (Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2007). Despite being developed almost 70 years ago, it remains highly influential and frequently cited (Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2007). The cognitive dissonance theory posits multiple variables, that may provide a useful lens in this context.

The state when individuals hold two or more conflicting cognitions at the same time is called “cognitive discrepancy.” Those cognitions, according to Festinger (1957), include attitudes, beliefs, or knowledge of one’s own behavior. As Hinojosa et al. (2017) note, this factor is also applicable to value incongruence between employees and organizations, which underpins its relevance in the context of climate quitting. In turn, the feeling of discomfort that results from the cognitive discrepancy is dubbed “cognitive dissonance” (Festinger, 1957). Usually, individuals who find themselves in a state of discomfort will aim to resolve this feeling,

highlighting the motivational aspect of cognitive dissonance and potentially making it a central concept in climate quitting in explaining climate quitting, as the aim is to understand the driving forces of sustainability-related turnover. In that regard, the feeling of cognitive dissonance motivates the individuals to pursue “discrepancy reduction”, which is the attempt to reduce the discrepancy, and by that, the dissonance (Festinger, 1957; Hinojosa et al., 2017). This can be done in several ways, with the main approaches being an attitude change (reframing view to make situation more favorable) or a behavior change (changing behavior to match cognitions) (Hinojosa et al., 2017). Arguably, a behavior change may describe what is happening in the case of climate quitting. Thus, the cognitive dissonance theory gives rise to three potentially relevant factors, namely cognitive discrepancy, cognitive dissonance, and discrepancy reduction, which have been overlooked by previous turnover literature.

### 2.3 Literature Gap

Overall, it appears that turnover has been studied in literature from a perspective that only focuses on the most common antecedents of turnover, dismissing turnover forms that are less typical, such as climate quitting. While current models explain the general steps that lead to quitting, such as evaluation of the company or search for alternatives, they do not address the role that ethical considerations may play in the process. Precisely, most turnover models seem to emphasize how individuals perceive the act of working itself, whereas in climate quitting, turnover is much more related to the content of the work and the impact that they are having through their work. However, in light of the growing awareness about ecological issues, climate quitting will increase in relevance, possibly even becoming a typical form of turnover at some point. Several factors have been found in literature, that may considerably influence the climate quitting process, namely organizational commitment, moral identification, and cognitive dissonance with its related factors cognitive discrepancy and discrepancy reduction. These factors have hardly been connected with turnover process literature yet, even though they might provide significant advantages to the understanding of value-based quitting. Furthermore, given the lack of research on the topic, it is possible that even more factors may play a role in the climate quitting process, that have not been considered at all yet.

To bridge this gap in the literature, this research tries to answer the research question “How does the process of climate quitting unfold?” by using a qualitative approach, as described in the following chapter.

## 3 Methods

### 3.1 Methodology

Given the limited knowledge about climate quitting, and about value-based quitting in general, an inductive approach using qualitative research methods is required to further explore the role of the identified variables, and to understand how, if at all, they fit into the climate quitting process. Inductive research allows for discovering new aspects, that have not been considered priorly (Orton, 1997). For that reason, in-depth interviews were conducted and analyzed using grounded theory methods. The flexible nature of this interview method allowed participants to freely discuss their experiences and elaborate on key topics, allowing for unexpected topics to emerge and for them to emphasize aspects that are more relevant than others (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The Gioia method by Gioia et al. (2013) was employed, as it provides a structure for rigorous qualitative research, coupled with the visual mapping strategy (Langley 1999). By connecting both methods, a process model could be created that is grounded in the statements of the interviewees.

### 3.2 Data Collection

To gain to gain a deep understanding of the climate quitting process from the perspective of climate quitters, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with people who reported to have quit a job out of reasons related to ecological sustainability. This study was done with prior ethical approval from the University of Twente's ethics committee.

#### 3.2.1 Sample

The sample consisted of 17 participants who were found via two main channels: one being blog articles on climate quitting that included the full names of climate quitters, who were then approached via LinkedIn; the other one being an online portal where people who are working in the climate field, or want to do so, connect with each other. People who had posted in the channel that they transitioned to a sustainability career were approach via direct message, focusing mostly on the ones that had posted most recently, to ensure that they still have a detailed memory of the process that led them to climate quit.

As recommended by DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree (2006), the aim was also to achieve a relatively heterogenous sample, with regards to the characteristics of the people that are *not* directly related to the research question. In the end, the demographic variables of the sample

were divided as follows: ten females, six males, one non-binary person. Two were aged 20-30, eight aged 30-40, two aged 40-50 and three aged 50-60, resulting in a mean age of 35 at the time of the interviews, which were conducted on average three years after the respective times of turnover. Eight were based in North America, six in Europe, two in Asia, one in Australia. The industries people worked in before climate quitting were: legal services, information technology consulting, marketing and advertising, oil and gas, data science, financial services, food, automotive, travel, agriculture/environmental technology, artificial intelligence, ESG consulting, software development, management consulting, and sustainability consulting. As can be seen, the industries comprise of those, that are generally known to be harmful to the environment (e.g. oil and gas, automotive, travel, AI), as well as those that do not usually have such connotation (e.g. legal services, ESG consulting, software development). This heterogeneity further helped getting a clearer idea about the multifaceted nature of climate quitting. Individuals worked in the following positions: consultant, lawyer, client engagement director, marketing manager, software engineer, solutions manager, development specialist, sales manager, head of creative, operations manager, software engineer, analyst, senior consultant, sustainability consultant, and product manager. Regarding tenure, two individuals were employed at the organization for around one year before climate quitting, eight people for 2 to 4 years, and seven for 7 to 10 years, with an average of 5 years. Two individuals pursued climate quitting twice, with the second time being after one year at the company in both cases.

The interviews were conducted online between March and May 2024, and recorded as well as transcribed using MS Teams with the consent of each participant, which resulted in around 170,000 words of transcript. The auto-transcription was revised manually for all interviews. The interviews took between 50 and 90 minutes, with most interviews lasting about 60 minutes.

### 3.2.2 Interview Guideline

Key to rigorous qualitative research, and a main advantage of it, is the iterative process that is used to conduct the research (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This iterative approach was already employed in the interview guideline creation. As Kallio et al. (2016) suggest, the interviews were initially created using some insights from previous literature, about which factors generally play a role in the quitting process, and which factors might especially influence the climate quitting process. Additionally, questions were added that intuitively seemed to have potential relevance for the research question.



In the next step, the interviews were refined and restructured, following the advice from methodological literature (Kallio et al., 2016; Rowley, 2012). For instance, it was ensured that only open-ended, non-suggestive questions were used. As the goal is generating a process model, questions were put into a chronological order (as much as possible, without knowing about the exact chronology of climate quitting), to help interviewees recreate the development accurately and chronologically in their minds.

The initial interview guide was then pre-tested with a friend (who did not climate-quit, but has quit a job before) as suggested by Adams (2015), to ensure that questions were understandable, and to see how long the interview approximately takes. The questions seemed logical, so no adaptations to the interview guideline were made. The pilot interview took about 40 minutes, leading to the assumption that the “actual” interviews might take about an hour, as the interview participants who had climate-quit would have more to say to many of the climate-specific questions. This turned out to be an accurate estimation. Due to the iterative nature of the method, each interview was assessed in the end to see whether topics came up that could be included in the following interviews, which is also referred to as “emergent design” (Creswell, 2007). In fact, since only little is known about the topic, the first interviews already yielded important and interesting insights that had not been considered before, which helped to further refine, as well as expand the question pool. The semi-structured nature of the interviews generally proved beneficial, as many follow-up questions were asked during interviews that did not appear in the interview guide initially.

The interview guide that was used in the end (see Appendix A) started with a brief introduction of the researcher and the remark that the interviewees data will be handled anonymously. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions about the interview. Informed consent to the recording of the interview had already been given together with the scheduling of the online interview. As the logical chronology of the process suggests, the content related questions began with the time of “Starting the job”. The questions entailed, for instance, what expectations interviewees had when starting the job, and their initial job satisfaction. Then, questions were asked about the organizational commitment to the firm, the moral identification, and the role of sustainability for the interviewees. Next, the questions concerned the phase of actively thinking about turnover, emphasizing the reasons to stay versus the reasons to leave. This was to shed light on *because* of which negative factors interviewees leave, but also *despite* which positive factors they leave. Lastly, questions about the final

turnover decision were asked, precisely, whether this decision was triggered by a specific event, and whether the individuals changed their behavior within the firm before leaving.

In the end, the interviewees were asked whether they would do anything differently now than they did it during the time in question, and if they wanted to add anything that had not been covered yet. This provided more space for the interviewees to make points that may be surprising, and cover aspects that were not considered during the interview guideline creation, which is in line with the idea of inductive research to create new knowledge from the data, rather than imposing existent theory onto the data (Orton, 1997).

### 3.3 Data Analysis

To answer research question “How does climate quitting unfold?”, the aim of the data analysis is to create a process model that is grounded in the collected data. Thus, a grounded theory approach is necessary to ensure rigor in the analysis, an aspect that is seen as especially important in qualitative research, given the influence of the researcher on the interpretation of the findings (Gioia et al., 2013). On that note, this study employs the widely recognized Gioia method, which proposes a way on how to build theory from qualitative research in a systematic way (Gioia et al., 2013). Additionally, the visual mapping theory (Langley, 1999) is used to create the final process model. Thus, the data analysis step bridges the data, as collected in the previous step, and the theory that results from it (Orton, 1997).

#### 3.3.1 Gioia Method

The Gioia Method represents a grounded theory by providing a structured approach to making sense of qualitative data (Gioia et al., 2013). A core component of the Gioia Method is the creation of a data structure, consisting of first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions. In the first step, 1st-order codes are created directly from the data that retain the participants’ words as much as possible, to ensure their perspective is accurately captured. Once the 1st-order codes have been identified, the researcher connects them with knowledge from theory and literature to condense them into 2nd-order themes that use terms and are connected to conceptualizations from previous research. Lastly, the 2nd-order themes are further synthesized into aggregate dimensions that represented higher-order classifications which, in the case of this research, are the overarching phases of the process (Gioia et al., 2013).

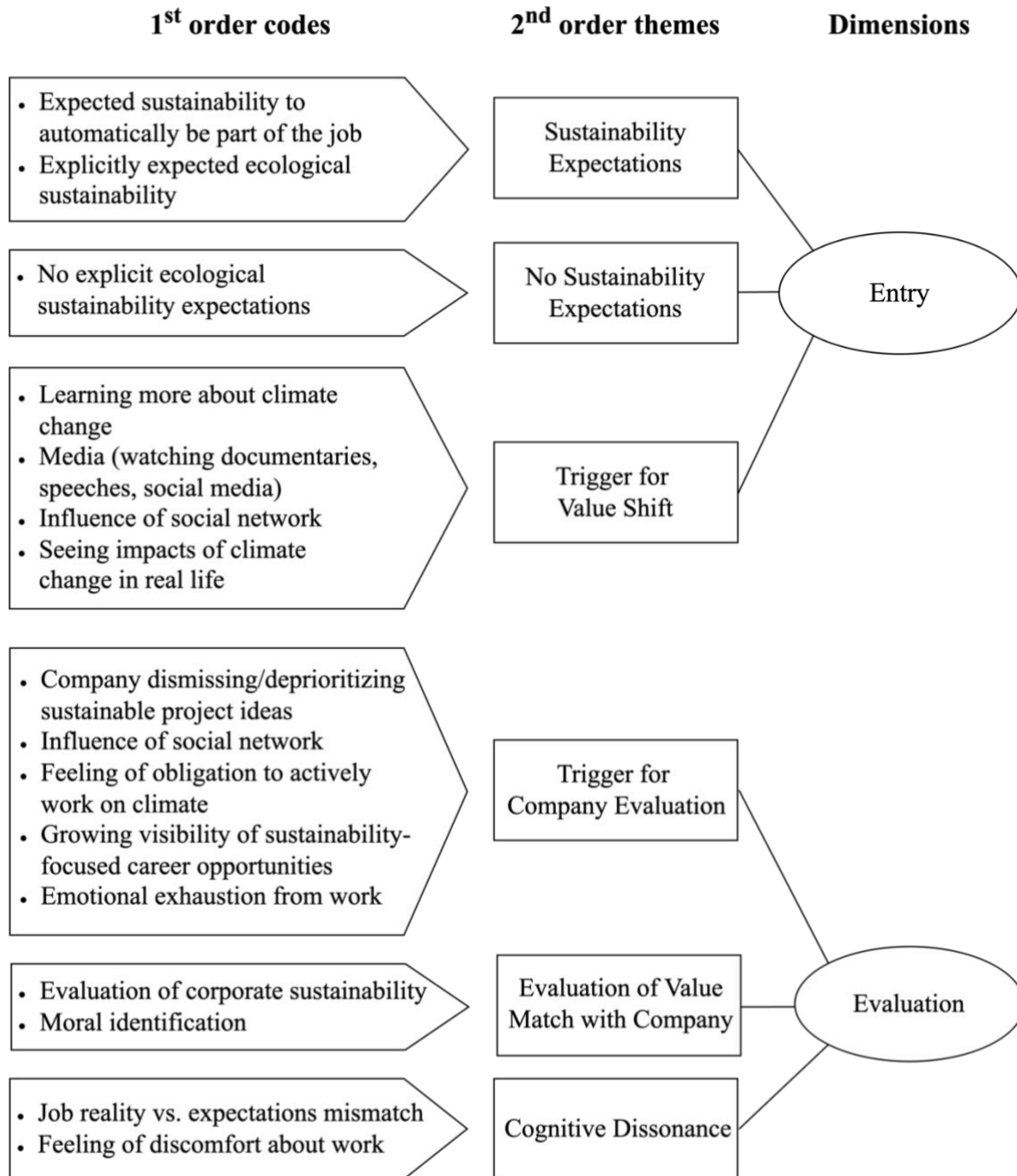
In that sense, the Gioia method does not seek to completely cancel out the influence of the researcher in the theory creation process, but rather highlights the importance of seeing both

the researcher as well as the interview participants as “knowledgeable agents” whose perspectives should both be valued (Magnani & Gioia, 2023, p. 2). If a theme occurs in the research that has been conceptualized before, using the established concepts can help to contextualize the added knowledge within what is already known. The data structure is created as a visual representation of the results from the coding of the interviews, which helps to understand how the themes and dimensions were developed and what concepts they entail. Further rigor is ensured through the constant iterative process, by continuously comparing findings with the data and switching back and forth between the interview transcripts and the emergent data structure (Magnani & Gioia, 2023).

### **Coding of data**

The software ATLAS.ti was utilized to carry out the data analysis. In the first round of coding, the interviews were screened meticulously and quotes that appeared relevant to the research question were assigned codes. In order not to lose relevant information, most quotes were given distinct codes in the beginning, which resulted in an initial number of 1125 codes. Only those quotations that were evidently related to the same core information were assigned with the same code; for instance, the code “Financial security through family” was given to multiple quotes from the beginning. Subsequently, codes were merged and deleted in several rounds, going back and forth between the codes and the data to ensure that deleted codes contained no information that is relevant to the research question, and that only those codes were merged that really matched each other. For instance, the codes “considered coworkers friends”, “liked the team”, and “family feeling with coworkers” were merged to “good relationship with coworkers” (which in the end was further merged with other codes to “high emotional attachment”). In the next steps, codes were merged and removed further, and the scope of the analysis was redefined in light of the research question. Precisely, only the time between the beginning of the employment and the final turnover was considered, as the time outside this scope did not appear relevant enough for the research question. The remaining codes were compared continuously with the data, and at this point, 2<sup>nd</sup>-order themes began to emerge, as codes began to resemble concepts from literature closely enough to be linked with those concepts. As an example, codes such as “proud of working at the company” and “feeling of obligation towards company” were considered to be highly related to the established concept of normative commitment by Meyer and Allen (1991). By comparing codes with the theoretic background, but also with each other, codes were assembled into categories. Following the method of Axial Coding, as suggested by Strauss & Corbin (1998), the

categories were further merged, and restructured, ultimately resulting in a number of 15 categories, which were divided into four dimensions that represent phases of the process. The data structure is presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Data Structure**

Source: Created by the Author

*Cotinued on the next page*

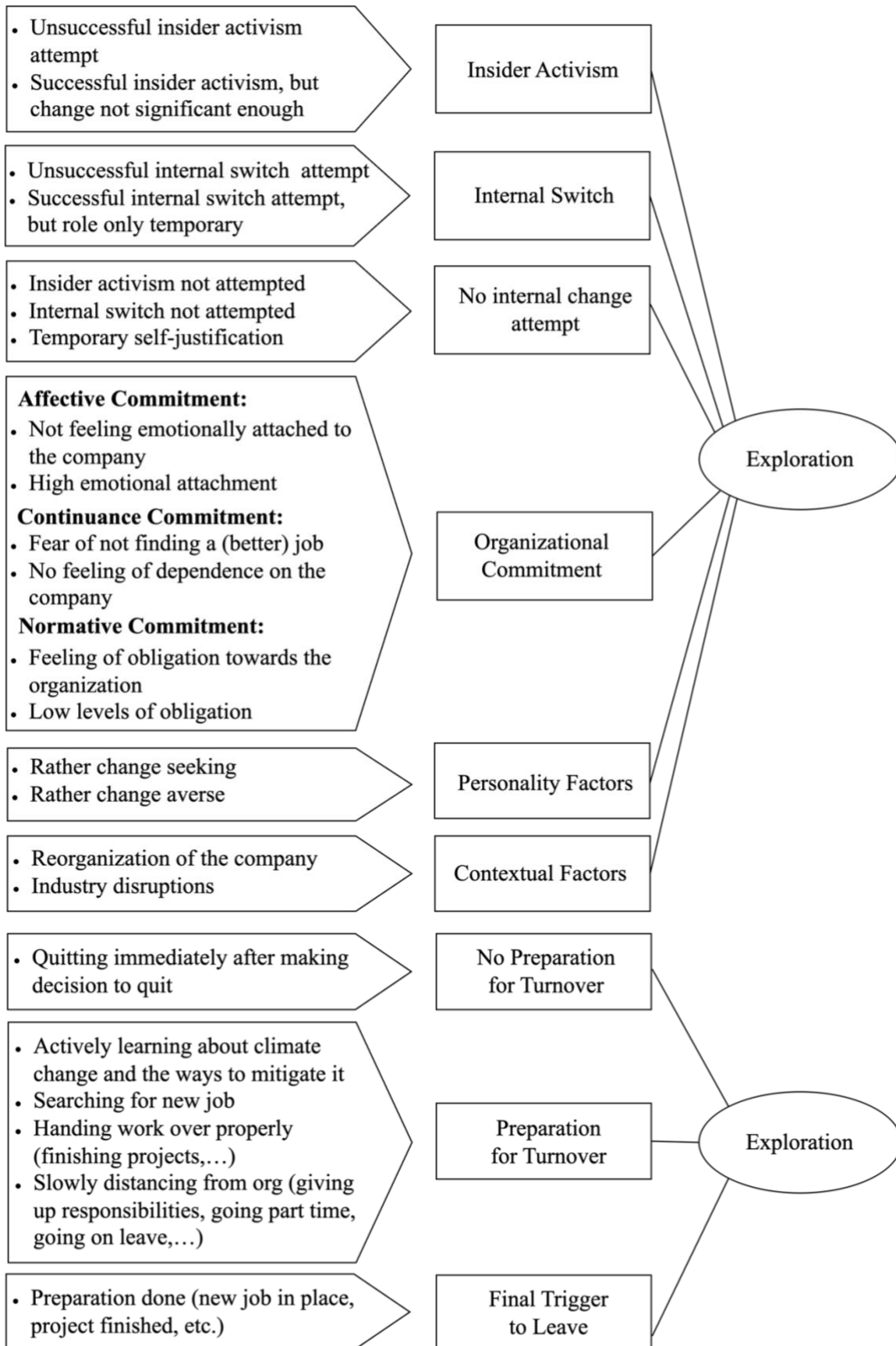


Figure 1: Data Structure

Source: Created by the Author

### 3.3.2 Process Model

Although informative, this data structure is only a static picture of a dynamic process. To address this, a dynamic depiction is needed. While the Gioia method involves the development of such a dynamic model, this is usually a variable-based boxes-and-arrows model (Gioia et al., 2013). Given process-related research question “How does climate quitting unfold?”, that approach is not entirely suitable for this research, as it focusses rather on the interpretation of the relationship of different variables, rather than factors leading from one step to another in a process. Thus, to account for the temporal dimension, the individual themes and dimensions presented in this data structure were transformed into a dynamic process model as described by Langley (1999), showing the interconnections of the themes and dimensions, and presenting them in chronological order, accounting for the temporal dimension. Importantly, in process theory, this entails describing the circumstances that are required (or at least typically present) to transition from one stage to the other (Cloutier & Langley, 2020). When answering a process related research question such as the one in this study, it is helpful to follow a visual mapping strategy, specifically as this allows the “simultaneous representation of a large number of dimensions” and can “easily be used to show precedence, parallel processes, and the passage of time.” (Langley, 1999, p. 700).

Given the iterative approach of the research, the process model was not created after the data structure was finalized, but much rather in tandem with it. Precisely, early versions of the model were created during the coding process, and constantly compared with the data, as well as the codes, categories, and dimensions. The aim was to create a model, that is simple enough to comprehend, general enough to be applicable for most climate quitters, and yet accurate enough to feel fitting to the collected data. Overall, the final model consists of the dimensions and the categories that are presented in the data structure, with only few slight alterations. For instance, “Starting the Job” and “Turnover” do not appear as distinct categories in the data structure, as they merely represent the temporal boundaries of the model. The dimensions represent the overarching phases of the process.

## 4 Findings

The previously described data analysis resulted in the following model (Figure 2), which will be thoroughly described in this chapter. In the model, boxes represent events and actions, whereas ellipses represent factors and states of mind. It presents a timeline going from left to

right, with “starting the job” and “turnover” marking the beginning and the end of the depicted process.

As can be seen in Figure 2, the model shows a partially parallel process consisting of three rows, with the two bottom rows depicting the process steps, and the top row showing factors and variables that influence certain process steps. The process is illustrated in two rows, as it is characterized by ‘bifurcations’, which represent junctures in a process (Cloutier & Langley, 2020). The steps on the middle row are those that every individual in this sample went through during the climate quitting process. The shortest route from ‘Starting the Job’ to ‘Turnover’, which only entails these “minimum” steps, is represented by solid arrows. However, in many cases, individuals use alternative paths, which are shown in the bottom row and represented by dashed arrows. While the steps on the alternative routes are very frequently found in climate quitting, they are not necessary for the process to continue, and thus do not characterize *all* climate quitting processes, like the steps on the minimal route do. Notably, each individual might be on the “main route” for one part of the process, but take the alternative route at another bifurcation.

Triangles were used to represent the defined scope of the analyzed process, boxes represent events and actions, and ellipses represent factors and states of mind. In that sense, the model incorporates both the variance dimension that is the focus of the grounded theory approach, as well as the temporal dimension which was highlighted through the visual mapping strategy. The following description of the findings will follow the chronology of the process as depicted in the model, with quotes of the participants underpinning the findings. Some quotes have been slightly altered for better readability, or to ensure the anonymity of the participants.

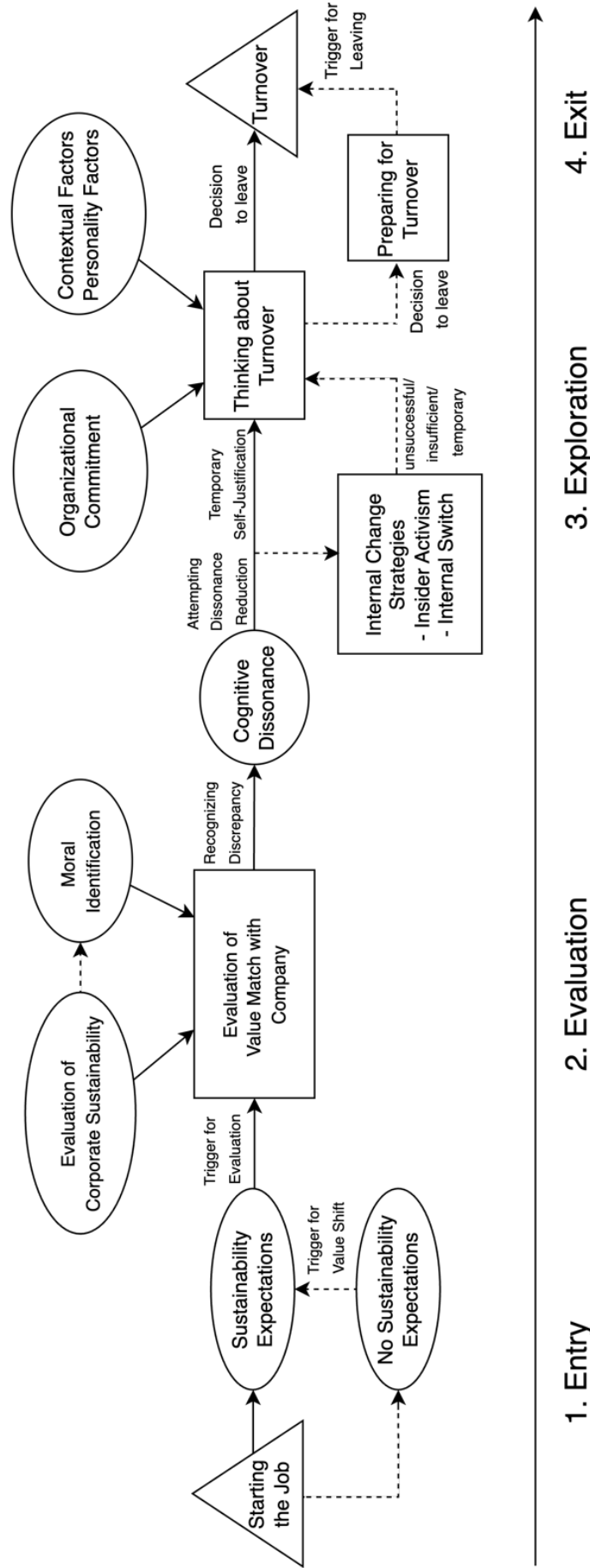


Figure 1: The 4-E Model of Climate Quitting

Source: Created by the Author



## 4.1 Entry Phase

Representing the defined scope of the analysis, the process model starts with the employee entering the company, in the model indicated as “starting the job”. When starting a new job, individuals hold varying levels of sustainability expectations, shaping the way in which their personal climate quitting journey begins. Thus, at this point, the path already diverges into two types of paths: coming into the job already with some sustainability related expectations, and starting without such expectations.

### 4.1.1 Sustainability expectations

Among those who already exhibited sustainability expectations, some participants **expected sustainability to automatically be part of the job**. IP7 (Interview Participant 7) recounted their expectations when searching for their first job after graduating from their studies, saying: *“I think at the time I thought sustainability was much more embedded in functions, so I was not looking for sustainability manager roles.”* It appears that IP7 had a certain conception about the job world before entering it, which entailed the notion that work inherently included ecological sustainability. Thus, some individuals who end up climate quitting do not actively look out for climate related roles but believe that they can positively contribute to climate change in (almost) all roles.

Other interviewees **explicitly expected ecological sustainability** in their jobs, looking out for roles or being attracted by roles because they seem to align with their individual sustainability values. In this sample, that was especially those two people, who had already climate quit once, and had then explicitly searched for a new, climate friendly job. This was for instance IP11, who had left a job at a bank to start a job which was advertised for as “ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) consultant.” At the time of starting the job, they thought *“and now finally, I am on a climate role,”* indicating that the apparent environmental focus of the job was a main motivator for IP11 to take it.

Consequently, both groups of people joined their company thinking that the work would match their values in terms of sustainability, either indirectly, as the first group, or directly like the second group.

### 4.1.2 No sustainability expectations

Conversely, other individuals entered their roles with **no explicit ecological sustainability expectations**. The interviewees in this group had, e.g., not been aware of the severity of the

problem climate change yet, had not expected that they could contribute to the solution with their specific skill set, or had different priorities in their job search, such as IP2: *"I think at that point I was more concerned with starting a career and making money."* Some of them were in fact prioritizing sustainability in their job search but did not look for ecological sustainability in particular. IP5, for instance, considered value alignment in their decision to start the job, mentioning *"I also had expectations around that it would be a good business, what I would consider like an ethical and respectful of like human and individuality kind of business."* However, this value alignment was at that time not specifically connected to ecological sustainability.

#### 4.1.3 Trigger for value shift

Despite the difference between these two groups with regards to their sustainability expectations, all individuals in the sample ended up climate quitting. Thus, those who did not have initial expectations regarding corporate ecological sustainability when starting the job, underwent a value shift during their time of working at the company, which ultimately led them to develop an expectation towards their work to be ecologically sustainable. This value shift was triggered by many different factors amongst the interviewed climate quitters, with many of them also mentioning several factors that pushed them into being more climate aware.

For some people, it was **learning more about climate change** that made them change their view on the issue. IP3 described their feelings when learning more about climate change as follows: *"Oh my God, like, I thought I knew something about, you know, the environment. But this is really, really, really bad. And now I'm like, oh, you know, and I know who's causing it. Like this CO2 emissions stuff going on."* The quote clearly shows how the interviewee experienced intense feelings when learning about the severity of climate change, and also connected the issue to their company, which was referred to in the clause *"and I know who's causing it."*

Similarly to learning about climate change, many participants were influenced by the **media** towards being more conscious of ecological sustainability. That included for instance social media, speeches, and documentaries, such as for IP4 who said, *"I started thinking about it sometime probably in 2018-2019 when I think it began when I watched "the inconvenient truth."* Due to the informative nature of many media channels, this factor is strongly related to the previous 'Learning about climate change'. However, media may also have an influence on

people's opinions and values that goes beyond mere objective information, but incorporate social norm aspects as well, which is why it is treated as an individual aspect.

This factor may also play a crucial role in the third factor that was found, namely the **influence of the social network**. People reported that observing colleagues and friends doing climate work, or talking to them about the issue in general, also made them shift their attention more towards climate change in their work, like described IP12:

*“I had a number of conversations, one of the cofounders of that startup went into climate and is now a CEO of a climate company. And so I saw kind of the movement of people around me doing that. An old friend of mine that had also sold multiple companies and was now going into climate. And I said, OK, like, let me talk to these people about where they're at. And it just became like, yeah, I need to do this also.”*

The last trigger for the value shift that was mentioned in the interviews is **seeing impacts of climate change in real life**. Making the abstract concept of climate change more tangible by seeing its effects, led people to recognize the importance of their work to help tackling the problem. When thinking about their reason to start considering ecological sustainability an important aspect of their job, IP6 concluded *“I think probably just a, you know, increasingly seeing some of the effects like weather events and, you know, temperature changes and things like that.”*

Overall, whether it was through learning more about climate change, the media, the influence of the social network, or seeing impacts of climate change in real life: All participants developed an expectation towards their organization to be ecologically responsible, as judged in their own subjective terms.

## 4.2 Evaluation Phase

At the end of the first phase (Entry), the climate quitters are all at the same point, at which they have recognized climate responsibility as a personal value, and in turn expect their job to be ecologically sustainable. This marks the transition to the second phase, the Evaluation phase. While the first trigger brought about ecological sustainability as a strong value of the participants, not everyone necessarily immediately recognizes whether this value matches with the reality within their current work or not. In fact, many people mentioned an additional trigger that made them go from “only” valuing ecological sustainability to realizing a potential conflict between this value and their company's actions.

#### 4.2.1 Trigger for company evaluation

One trigger that made some participants aware about the potential mismatch between their company and their values, is the **company dismissing/deprioritizing sustainable project ideas**. IP2 talked about their experience with the company blocking off their sustainability project ideas, which left them demotivated and disappointed, and made them question their job.

*“It's frustrating and then to continually bring my ideas and the things that I'm passionate about and interested in to the table to see if maybe we could explore that, (...) and continually be met with like, well, no, that's not realistic because XYZ, it's like, OK well, fine. If you don't want my ideas. If you don't want my, you know my passion, then that's on you. That's not on me. And this isn't the right spot.”*

Other participants shared similar stories, of bringing in sustainable project ideas and not being taken seriously, or sustainability aspects of projects being deprioritized.

Like for the value shift in the expectations phase, the **influence of social network** played a role in making the participants take a closer look into their match with the company they work for. Specifically, becoming politically active and engaging with like-minded people was mentioned several times as a trigger for evaluating one's occupation in terms of sustainability, such as for IP14: *“I kind of got more involved in the political scene on the left and just felt this disconnect between what I was doing for work and then what I like, believed in and valued as a person.”*

Another factor that was mentioned multiple times was the **feeling of obligation to actively work on climate** that was pulling climate quitters out of their old jobs, specifically as a direct consequence for those who had just attained sustainability expectations in the first phase. On top of merely having the desire to not harm the environment through one's work, participants reported the felt obligation to work on climate directly and have a positive impact. One participant perceived this call to action right after experiencing the trigger ‘learning something about climate change’ in the first phase:

*“For me, I guess so it was kind of my sliding door moment where I decided that I have the facts in front of me and I can't really ignore them, so I'm going to make the conscious decision to integrate those facts, and once you do that, you kind of have to do something significant about it” (IP8).*

For several others, the feeling of obligation was also connected to being or becoming a parent. IP9 even compared climate inaction to a crime when saying *“I became a parent and was starting to think more consciously about the next generation and about being complicit in kind of withdrawing from this future generation in this overdraft.”*

Simultaneously, the **growing visibility of sustainability-focused career opportunities** triggered those participants, who had not seen career opportunities for themselves in the climate realm yet, to evaluate their current employer. One interviewee noted this expanding job market by saying *“I guess I just started to see more, more of that opportunity, like I, there were more companies that had a sustainability focus that were hiring for marketing positions.”* (IP2)

As another participant described, the misalignment in values went so far that it manifested in **emotional exhaustion from work**, as described by IP14: *“That I just felt so drained at the end of every day and the people that I was working with on the client side were very, like demanding and I don't know, I just kept finding myself in positions that I like did not want to be in or culture wise.”*

Overall, whether it was internal factors (feeling of obligation to actively work on climate, emotional exhaustion) or external factors (company dismissing/deprioritizing sustainable project ideas, influence of social network, growing visibility of sustainability-focused career opportunities), individuals had reached a point at which they compared the values and goals that they had for their work with the reality in the organization.

#### 4.2.2 Evaluation of corporate sustainability

After recognizing their desire for the work to match their sustainability values, climate quitters have to estimate this match in some way. The employee’s evaluation in terms of ecological sustainability is based on two main dimensions: Their employers climate efforts, and their climate impacts. Thus, they are evaluating the match between their desired sustainability, and what they perceive in the organizational reality based on these two dimensions, with both factors having varying significance among climate quitters. This means that for instance, the company could exert high efforts to mitigate its negative climate impacts, but still have a negative contribution overall, leading the employee to be unsatisfied and eventually climate quit.

Regarding the effort, many participants **perceived a lack of (genuine) commitment to sustainability**, which in many cases was even recognized as greenwashing. As IP7 observed, *“the intention is there to a certain extent, but that's not really what's driving the company. It's*

*in the end just profits.*" This perceived lack of sustainability effort was particularly frustrating when participants recognized their organizations' unused potential for serious climate action.

*"They had all the things that you need to go for that transition... So they had capital, they had plenty of capital. They had the right skills... And they had people... So they had all the component parts to have jumped on board, become a pioneer in renewable energy and chose not to. That was an active choice" (IP3).*

Many climate quitters even perceived the sustainability efforts of their company becoming worse, and thus perceived no outlook on improvements. When IP3 heard about upcoming projects of the company at the time of working for them, they thought *"This is so bad. Like, this is not transition. This is completely expanding, like making the situation worse, more CO2, more pollution,"* highlighting their abolished hopes of the organization transitioning to more sustainable operations.

Yet, even in companies making genuine sustainability efforts, some participants **perceived the climate impact as insufficient or even negative**, with the first often caused by a sustainability strategy of the organization that did not match with the employee's ideas: *"I don't know if the way we approach sustainability was the best way to do that. So it's not that like the company doesn't care about it, but I didn't see that that was where I could make the biggest impact." (IP16).* In the case of negative impact, IP17 mentioned how the company's business model connected with its vision to constantly expand the business as automatically leading to increasingly negative impact of the company, saying *"that way (by working at the company) I actively contributed to it getting worse, because they're aiming to sell more and more vehicles every year, how is that supposed to work?" (translated).*

#### 4.2.3 Moral identification

Moving away from the mere comparison of personal goals and corporate realities to the cognitive effects, a decisive factor when it comes to the value-based evaluation of the workplace is moral identification. This, for climate quitters, can be strongly impacted by the perceived impact and effort of the company, as indicated by the dashed arrow in the model. This relationship is exemplified by IP14: *"as you start to get more exposed to the larger portions of this organization and their desires to maybe put profit before impact, that's where I start to feel like, disconnected."* This also highlights that for many climate quitters who feel a lack of moral identification, the identification lowers over time, instead of being low from the beginning. Overall, many participants reported that their **values were misaligned with the**

**company**, pointing out the misalignment with the management, or the company's partners: "*(I was) looking around at my client list and seeing some of the world's biggest polluters and really not liking the side of the story that I was on*" (IP2). Similarly, IP15 voiced their disheartenment about feeling the lack of identification with their coworkers, saying "*The bit that I found harder was misaligning with the values of the people who are in my company.*" The feeling of moral misalignment can be so intense that individuals even experience a feeling of shame about doing work that they perceive as not purposeful enough. In that regard, IP5 reported: "*I felt shame about the work that I did before. And, like that I wasn't... that it's not good work.*"

However, not all interviewees perceived a general moral disidentification with the organization itself; in fact, many interviewees found that their **values were generally aligned with the company**. IP5, for instance, perceived the aspects of the company's actions as a mere result of the capitalist economic system that the company operates in: "*(...) when it didn't adhere to like my morals, I felt that it was more of an expression of, like, the infrastructure that we're working in, like capitalism, et cetera.*"

It is important to note though, that most often no clear distinction between those who perceived a high degree of moral identification with the company, and those who did not can be made. In fact, most participants expressed lack of alignment with a specific part of the organization, but not with other parts, showing a **mixed value alignment**. Among others, his was the case for IP3, who distinguished between coworkers and top-level management, saying that they "*did not blame the workers at all. Probably not even middle management. But the senior management, the executives, the directors.*"

#### 4.2.4 Cognitive dissonance

The result of the evaluation of the value match with the company was consistently for all participants the recognition of a discrepancy. The interviewees felt that working at their employer at that time did not align with their goal of contributing positively, or at least not negatively to climate change mitigation. In that regard, most participants perceived a **job reality vs. expectations mismatch**, as illustrated for instance by IP7 who said: "*(the product we were selling) was much more commercial than I expected it to be.*", or by the following statement of IP15: "*I think the seed of like oh, this isn't quite what I hoped it would be, was planted very early.*" Clearly, participants recognized a discrepancy between what they *wanted* to do for work and what they *were* doing for work.

This recognition resulted in a **feeling of discomfort about work**, which IP4 mentioned in the following statement: *“The main thing in my mind was just that I want to get out of this very uncomfortable state of knowing that I'm working on something that's bullshit in the grand scheme of things.”* This concept of feeling discomfort due to two discrepancies between several cognitions (in this case: the urge to do climate-friendly work and the knowledge that the current work is not climate-friendly enough) is well known in extant literature as “Cognitive Dissonance”, which is why this category was named after the established concept.

### 4.3 Exploration Phase

After recognizing the cognitive dissonance climate quitters had about their work and/or their employer, participants pursued different strategies to resolve this internal conflict.

#### 4.3.1 Insider activism

Some people attempt to diminish their cognitive dissonance by trying to improve the sustainability performance of their workplace from within. This is generally referred to as **insider activism**, and in the given sample it included: suggesting sustainable projects (*“when I did have the opportunity to pitch a sustainability focused project that I had come up with, it initially was met with a lot of really positive feedback” IP2*), setting up conversations on climate (*“I organized for climate activists to come into our office and have lunch talks every now and then” IP15*) or engaging in already existing sustainability groups within the company (*“I also did try to get involved with the sustainability initiatives in my department.” IP7*). However, for most people who attempted insider activism, the approach led to either **unsuccessful or unsatisfying outcomes**, leaving the concerned individuals frustrated. The interviewees reported making attempts to pitch ideas for sustainability improvements within the organization, but in most of the cases, they did not yield any results. That was either due to their ideas being blocked/not taken seriously by the management (*“I was advocating for that, for other ways to do (business). (...) But it is very impossible to challenge.” IP13*) or being deprioritized (*“once it actually became real, that's when it started to become deprioritized to my colleagues, they had other stuff going on.” in IP2*). For those individuals who successfully managed to pursue insider activism, they remained unsatisfied as they **perceived the internal change as not significant enough** (*“I did take action internally before moving on, but it just didn't feel like it was ever going to be enough.” IP8*). Thus, the changes that they could bring about within the organization did not suffice for them to perceive a match between their



personal sustainability vision, and the organizational reality, which was the aim of the strategy.

#### 4.3.2 Internal switch

Next to the insider activism approach, some interviewees approached dissonance reduction by attempting to switch internally to a more sustainability related role. Some of them had already tried pursuing insider activism before. Similarly to insider activism, none of the participants ended up being able to resolve the dissonance that way. In most cases, it turned out to be an **unsuccessful internal switch attempt**, as *“there were just no teams to join” (IP12)*, or the interviewees were not able to switch to the sustainability teams: *“I did try to look internally to see if I could switch to more like a position for sustainability and I almost managed, but not quite.” (IP7)*

Nonetheless, also for those who did manage to switch, the internal transition could not permanently dissuade them from considering turnover. That is because the sustainability role was not a long-term full-time position, such as for IP12 who reported: *“there was an option maybe to stay with the current (sustainability) project part time. And I was like, this is not what I need. I need to go take all of this passion that I have and go full on somewhere.”* In the interviews it appeared to be quite common that sustainability projects in the organizations are only temporary, and there was no permanent employment option.

#### 4.3.3 No internal change attempt

Contrarily to the previously described two groups, there is also a significant number of people who did not attempt an active dissonance reduction strategy, such as insider activism or an internal switch. Refraining from trying to change the situation from within was most often a conscious choice, reasoned by different caveats that the interviewees had perceived in these approaches. In the cases when **insider activism was not attempted**, some perceived the chances of success as too low, meaning that they suspected that no change could be triggered by them at all (*“at some point I also just saw the systems are so in place, like especially at the level I'm currently at. That's not gonna work” IP7*), or the change would not be significant enough, as IP4 noted:

*“Yeah, I considered that (insider activism) and I rejected that possibility because it's clear that it's never going to be their main thing (...) And if it's the secondary or tertiary*

*thing for a company, it's not going to make a big dent in climate. And I wanted to make a big dent in climate."*

Other participants did not attempt insider activism out of fear of repercussions, suspecting that voicing dissatisfaction about the company's sustainability practices would lead to personal disadvantages within the firm, such as IP14: *"If I showed anything other than like feigned interest in what we were doing, I thought that would maybe hurt my chances at promotions and you know, opportunities within the company."* While none of the interviewees mentioned experiencing repercussions as a consequence of attempting insider activism, the interviews revealed it as a factor that is keeping people from advocating for internal improvement.

The reasons for **not attempting an internal switch** are different than those just mentioned in the context of insider activism. In this sample, the interviewees who did not try to switch to a more sustainability related position also stated a variety of reasons. One is, that they did not think any role in the company would match their values better than the one they already had, like IP14 described: *"I felt like the lane that I was in (...) was pretty much the only lane available for me within that organization that I felt okay about."* IP17 argued that for them, making an internal switch would not resolve the cognitive dissonance, as they felt a deep conflict with the company's values or goals that would not be solved by switching to a different position: *"Well, then I wouldn't change anything about the root (of the problem). I want to leave because I don't want to support the company anymore"* (translated). Another reason to refrain from trying to switch internally is the desire to work on climate more intensely than what the climate quitters' current employer could offer, like IP5 mentioned *"I actually just wanna do that full time. I don't wanna do the other pieces anymore."*

Lastly, those climate quitters who did not take an active approach via insider activism or internal switching, dealt with the internal conflict by **justifying the work to oneself**, trying to make the value mismatch seem smaller to them than they genuinely perceived it. IP3 for instance acknowledged this cognitive process, saying *"As my knowledge and awareness of the environmental threats increased, so did my sense of conflict with what I was doing, but I would justify it. You know, I could still justify, rationalize it to myself. Like hey, you know, I'm doing important work."* Thus, this approach takes the form of focusing on the positive aspects of the job instead of the negative parts, but did not serve as a long-term solution, as the cognitive dissonance grew stronger over time.

Overall, the main strategies that climate quitters pursue to resolve the cognitive dissonance they perceive about their work or organization, can be broadly categorized into insider activism, internal switching, or self-justification of the situation. These strategies are not mutually exclusive, for instance, a climate quitter may switch to a different position internally, and also pursue insider activism at the same time. Likely they may have also justified the work to themselves before taking action. Regardless of the strategy, what all climate quitters have in common, is their dissatisfaction by the result of each strategy, leading them to consider turnover as an alternative option.

#### 4.3.4 Organizational commitment

In the process of thinking about turnover, organizational commitment appears to play a critical role, and the participants made a lot of statements that fit well into the three dimensions by Meyer and Allen (1991). The interviews revealed that all of its dimensions, namely affective, continuance, and normative commitment are relevant in the context of climate quitting and contribute both positively and negatively to the climate quitter's turnover intention.

##### *Affective Commitment*

Given that the conceptualization of affective commitment overlaps with moral identification (see chapter 2 'Theory'), it can be expected that individuals who experience low levels of moral identification with their organization (as many climate quitters do), will also have low affective commitment to that organization. The interviews supported this idea. Many climate quitters reported **not feeling emotionally attached to the company**, and not feeling any pride in working there, such as IP14: *"I would talk very poorly about my job. Like I wasn't very excited about it, wasn't excited about the end goal, all that sort of stuff."* IP17 also mentioned *"I think with the company, with the brand, I identified just the slightest, maybe 5-10% of identification"* (translated).

However, many interviewees also reported a high affective commitment to the organization, showing that the cognitive dissonance they felt about their work does not necessarily lead to a lack of affection towards the organization. That was characterized for instance by **high emotional attachment**, as demonstrated in the passionate statement by IP8:

*"Oh, it was amazing. I loved it. Loved everything about it, the actual role, but also working with the people. My manager was great. And it was kind of everything that I*

*could have expected and more. (The company) has this really amazing and unique culture. And usually takes really good care of their people. (...) So yeah, everything was really amazing for nearly the three years that I worked there.”*

### ***Continuance Commitment***

A significant argument for climate quitters against turnover is the security of having as stable job, as mentioned by IP5: *“I had doubts because of like fear that I would not find another job. And that I would be out of a job for a while”*. This **fear of unemployment** was especially nuanced for some interviewees, who were afraid that they could not find a “better” job on the market. Since better is not an objective term, it must be clarified in this specific context. Several individuals reported that they had the assumption that the reason why they are quitting would not be solved by working in a different company, or as IP13 put it: *“most of the companies I would have a chance to work for would basically be the same as that company I was disagreeing with.”* They perceived a lack of available sustainability jobs on the job market, meaning that if they were to quit, they would have a difficult time finding a job that better aligned with their sustainability values. Considering that for many employees, climate impact is the main (if not only) reason to quit, working in a similarly “unsustainable” job would not resolve their cognitive dissonance. For some, this fear is also connected to their belief that they did not have the required knowledge and skills to work in the climate field. That is, because many climate quitters develop their sustainability values while being in the job, and thus did not have the awareness before that would have led them to pursue environmental sustainability education. Similarly, they usually do not have job experience in the field. For instance, IP16 stated:

*“I think (when applying for jobs) I was thinking more on like terms of general social impact, but never specific climate or ecological sustainability, because that's not something I've ever learned about really like, that was a really big gap in my knowledge and I didn't feel like I could get a job or that I would be... could provide any value in that kind of space.”*

On the counter side, some interviewees recognized their ability to transition into a new career, due to them having financial stability, for instance through savings or a multiple-income household. This led them to have a **low dependence on the company** which is associated with low continuance commitment. This was the case e.g. for IP6, who explained *“I'm married, and my husband works full time, and I had a lot of savings (...) so, yeah, I did definitely have a*

safety net that allowed me to have some more flexibility.” Given that many interviewees plan on shifting to an entirely new field, financial concerns are specifically a consideration, since they would likely earn less in a field in which they do not have as much experience as in their current one. Financial security can also enable one to quit a job without having a new one in place, and taking time to search for alternatives, or potentially even learning new skills. In fact, the privilege of financial security is one that characterized most interviewees, indicating that the factor of continuance commitment (or lack thereof) may play a significant role in the climate quitting process.

### ***Normative Commitment***

The third component of organizational commitment is normative commitment, the **feeling of obligation towards the organization**, which also some climate quitters perceived. IP5 mentioned this, saying *“I did feel lucky to have the job. I think even at times I felt like I owed something to the company.”* This statement indicates that the feeling of obligation might be connected to a lack of job alternatives, making the individual thankful for having the opportunity to work at the company they were working for at that time. Another interviewee expressed a strong sense of loyalty, saying *“I am very loyal to them when I'm talking about them externally, but the loyalty is with good cause”* (IP9). IP14 explicitly acknowledged the feeling of loyalty as a factor that was keeping them in the organization: *“so it's yeah, a little bit of like a loyalty spin to it is why I think I stuck around for longer than I intended.”* This highlights normative commitment, as a form of organizational commitment as an influential retention factor.

However, not all interviewees experienced high normative commitment. In fact, some reported quite **low levels of obligation** to their organizations. This was evident in statements like, *“I was just getting really fed up. So no, I was not coming with no loyalty. I just wanted to get out”* (IP11). This quote illustrates how frustration with the job or company can diminish an employee's sense of obligation towards that organization, potentially increasing the chances of the employee considering turnover.

Overall, looking at the three dimensions of organizational commitment, it became evident that climate quitters partially experience low levels of commitment, further intensifying their desire to leave. However, on all dimensions, many interviewees also reported high levels of commitment, which shows that it is not merely a lack of organizational commitment that is

pushing climate quitters out of their organization, but rather other factors that are significant enough for the climate quitters to leave, despite perceiving high commitment levels.

#### 4.3.5 Personality factors

After looking at the organizational commitment, which is strongly tied to the specific organization, it is interesting to also consider personal characteristics of climate quitters that are unrelated to the specific organization, as this may also play a role in their likeliness to quit. In this research, especially the participants' change tolerance was examined, to determine whether it is people who are generally change seeking who end up climate quitting, or also those that are change-averse.

In fact, most of the interviewees reported that they frequently seek out for new opportunities, or at least generally try to improve situations that do not suit their visions, as indicated by statements such as this one from IP12: *“I think I'm not a comfort zone person. I get bored easily. I wanna be excited and like and I wanna learn and I wanna challenge myself all the time.”*. Thus, most climate quitters appear to be **rather** on the **change seeking** side of the spectrum

However, not all climate quitters are generally characterized by an affinity for change. The interviews showed that also people who are **rather change averse** can end up climate quitting, such as IP11 who pointed out that they only look for change when they perceive a severe problem with their current situation: *“I think I get pushed to make a change if something really breaks down or something really doesn't like align with my beliefs or values, or I mean it has to be something drastic that makes me want to make that step towards the change.”* This highlights the intensity with which climate quitters can be appalled by their organization's sustainability practices, leading them to quit a job even though they prefer stability, which is further exemplified by IP9: *“Before I was a parent, I had a much bigger appetite for change. But now? I'm more cautious, more risk averse.”*

Overall, personal characteristics such as change aversity influence the thought process on turnover, either towards staying, as for change averse people, or towards leaving, as for change seeking people. Given that in the sample of 17 climate quitters, 15 appeared to be rather change seeking, and only 2 were found to be generally change averse, this indicates that resistance to change might be a factor that is strongly influencing the climate quitting process. However, further research would be needed to confirm this, by not exclusively looking at climate quitters, but also those who ended up not quitting.

### 4.3.6 Contextual factors

As a last factor influencing the consideration whether to quit or not, the interviews revealed that contextual factors can play a role. Precisely, company changes, such as the **reorganization of the company** seemed to have influenced the consideration to quit for some interviewees. For instance, IP6 reported those changes facilitating their turnover, saying *“Somebody else had taken over my team. And then after that, the team actually got split up and there were a lot of organizational changes, so that wasn't as difficult of a transition.”*

Similarly, IP9 saw the covid lockdowns and the resulting **industry disruptions** as a fitting opportunity to leave the company, saying (as a quote of what they were thinking to themselves): *“You want to work on solving this problem, and the world is shut down. The universe is saying to you you cannot work in the travel industry. You cannot work for this company anymore.”* These points also highlight that the timing of their turnover also mattered to many climate quitters, looking out for a moment in which the company was in undergoing changes already.

Given that the sample only consisted of those individuals who ended up climate quitting, the result of the thinking process on whether to quit or not resulted in a decision to leave for all interviewed individuals. This turnover decision leads them to the final stage, called Exit stage.

## 4.4 Exit Phase

The Exit stage in the model incorporates all the steps that happen between an employees' final decision to leave until the actual turnover. The interviews showed that this stage also follows two alternative paths. Some individuals, depicted on the top arrow going from thinking about turnover to turnover, actualize their quitting intention as a mere consequence of the preceding thought process that resulted in the desire to leave, without taking further action. Often, this happens when there are strong negative feelings involved surrounding the current work, making the employee perceived the negative outcomes associated with quitting the current job as less significant than the negative feelings associated with staying in the job for longer.

### 4.4.1 Decision to leave

As mentioned, the shortest route from thinking about turnover to turnover is in that employees may execute their decision to quit without taking further preparation measures. For instance, many climate quitters reported quitting without knowing what job do after, as IP4

recounted: *“Yeah, there was no plan. The plan was just to focus full time on figuring that out.”* A statement by IP13 sheds more light on the reasons, why some individuals take this approach, explaining: *“I was completely burned out. I didn't want to work at all. I spent, how much, maybe seven months without working.”* Another perspective is given by IP9, who highlighted their emotional attachment towards the company that made them resist to actively search for a new job: *“I remember in my mind at the time.... Like not wanting to search, I had this feeling of I love where [I work]. I'm never gonna leave my job.”* This also highlights the struggle that climate quitters can have with leaving a company they generally like, apart from the sustainability aspect. Similar to some other individuals, IP9 was not looking for a new role, but happened to find another job suddenly and coincidentally: *“But I wasn't actively searching, it, just felt serendipitous.”* Contrarily to IP9, many of the interviewees who shared this experience of suddenly finding a job, would have been willing to quit their current job without having a new role in place, such as IP14, who decided *“I'm just gonna put in my notice (...) And I'm just gonna finish this out. I'm gonna take a little breather, and then I'm gonna just start applying for jobs.”*

#### 4.4.2 Preparation

However, unlike illustrated in the previous paragraph, most climate quitters take measures to prepare for their turnover after having made the decision to quit. One common preparation is the **search for a new job**. Given that not all individuals are equipped with financial resources that allow them to be without a job for a while, many climate quitters start searching for alternative employment after making the decision to leave but before quitting their job. The statement by IP11 shows this relationship of the search for a job being a consequence of the turnover decision, saying *“And then I said (...) it's time to leave now, I need to start looking outside. And that's when I started searching and then I found this climate role with the consultancy.”*

However, some of these individuals perceive a lack of skills and knowledge required to work in the climate field, especially since they often desire to switch to entirely new industries. Thus, they frequently prepare by **actively learning more about climate change and the ways to mitigate it**. This knowledge acquisition lowers their continuance commitment, meaning that turnover is facilitated as their ease of movement to a different job, potentially even job field, is enhanced. When describing their final weeks in the organization, IP16 recounted that they *“started to just learn more, very surface level, again, just like podcasts, videos, books, lots of readings.”* This research further reinforced their belief that *“working in my field was not the*



*best way to take action"*, ultimately leading them to leave the organization. Similarly, IP6 reported that they were *"pretty certain I wanted to leave, but I yeah, I wanted to have more domain knowledge."*

For many climate quitters, another important part of the preparation of their turnover is **handing the work over properly**. This most commonly includes finishing the current project, as illustrated by the statement of IP3: *"I was in my mind trying to think, OK, like which projects do I need to close out? Like what do I need to get in order so that I'm ready to leave?"*, underlining the importance that a proper closing-off has for the individuals. IP7 explicitly emphasized the feeling of obligation towards the organization that is inherent in this part of the preparation: *"I did feel like, (...) it would kind of be quite rude to one month before (the end of the project) just be like, OK, well, I'm leaving."*

This aspect of loyalty also comes into play when it is not about finishing a project but giving the organization time to prepare for their turnover, like IP10 said: *"So I definitely felt the loyalty towards [the manager] to kind of give him the opportunity to think about how he wants to do this and replace my role."* This highlights that this form of preparation is less preparation for the climate quitter than rather "or the company, which is also supported by the following statement of IP13, who stated: *"I wanted to leave but in in some kind of smooth way to not leave [the organization] in trouble."*

Lastly, some climate quitters prepare by **slowly distancing from the organization**. That is, both formally as well as psychologically. Formally, interviewees distanced themselves for instance in that they *"gave up quite a bit of my responsibility"* (IP10), or in the case of IP13, going *"back to a freelancer status partial time"*. Overall, many interviewees reported going on leaves or reducing their work hours prior to their actual turnover. Furthermore, some individuals started to only doing the minimum required work, and emotionally distancing themselves from the organization and their job responsibilities during the end of working at the company. For instance, IP2 mentioned: *"I unfortunately allowed it to affect my energy and motivation in my role and just wouldn't put my best foot forward for clients that I felt were actively destroying the planet."* Similarly, IP14 explained: *"my attitude towards work was like very standoffish, I guess. Like I'm like a cog in a machine and like, I'm just gonna do my part and like, nothing more, nothing less."* This shows that this psychological distancing, despite not being an active preparation strategy, appears to be a common form for climate quitters of letting go of one's involvement with the company before actually quitting. The formal distancing may also be a tool for lowering the normative commitment (i.e. the obligation)

towards the company, potentially making the turnover easier for both the employee as well as the employer.

#### 4.4.3 Trigger for leaving

Lastly, those individuals who did not immediately quit as a consequence of the thought process in the Exploration phase, needed a last trigger for leaving the organization. Since this group entails those individuals who prepared for their turnover, it only makes sense that the trigger for leaving would be that this **preparation is done**, which is what the interviews showed.

For instance, some individuals had reported that they wanted to finish a project before leaving (see theme “preparation” – code “handing work over properly”). As an example, IP14 replied to the question “*you made the decision to quit after the project. The project lasted longer than expected. Did you end up quitting after the project was done then?*” with “*Yeah, I gave my notice like, with like a two week buffer of like if the project runs over a little bit, I’ll be around for those two weeks, but that’s it.*” indicating that the finalization of the project was a direct prerequisite for the turnover of IP14.

Similarly, such as the majority of interviewed climate quitters, IP6 reported that they “*found the job that I’m in now and then ultimately left the last job because I found that new job.*” The interviews revealed that finding a new job appears to be the most important requirement for quitting. However, as stated under “4.4.1 Preparation”, there are also individuals who quit without having a new job in place. Arguably, although none of the interviewees mentioned it, one could assume that some individuals also quit before finishing their current project or finding a job, even though they planned to prepare for their turnover. That could be e.g. if circumstances within the organization change (such as sustainability becoming worse, change of management, etc.), pushing the climate quitters from the preparation step prematurely.

## 5 Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the process of climate quitting as it unfolds from the perspective of individuals who have done it. In this chapter, the findings will be discussed, highlighting their theoretical and practical implications, and pointing out the limitations of the study. Lastly, suggestion for future research will be derived from the discussion.

## 5.1 Theoretical Contribution

### 5.1.1 The 4-E Model

The findings revealed that climate quitting follows a process that has been synthesized into the “**4-E model**” consisting of Entry, Evaluation, Exploration, and Exit. This model significantly extends current literature by providing the first comprehensive process framework specifically for climate-related turnover. The model identifies the individual steps, and at points of evaluation, the important factors that influence such. It acknowledges and shows bifurcations of the process, and the factors that trigger the transitions between the steps. Overall, the 4-E model provides a sound foundation for understanding the under-researched topic of climate quitting, and potentially for drawing inferences to value-based quitting as a whole. In that, it addresses the gap in the extant literature of connecting turnover process theory with variables that explain value-driven behavior, precisely organizational commitment, moral identification, and cognitive dissonance.

While the structure of the model helps to understand the steps that the climate quitting process entails, it is important to acknowledge the complexity that it entails. Given that decision processes rarely follow an entirely linear process, the phases in this model are strongly intertwined and the distinctions between categories are blurred. For instance, a perceived lack of organizational effort towards the environment will for climate quitters often be related to a perceived lack of moral identification with the management. Likewise, a perceived lack of value alignment with the coworkers has implications on both moral identification as well as affective organizational commitment. Further, as Langley (1999) noted about the visual mapping strategy: “emotions and cognitions are less easy [than events] to express in this way, being more difficult to temporally pin down.” (Langley, 1999, p. 702). This supports that a process structure with entirely distinct categories and an unambiguous temporal ordering of factors is not something that a process model such as the 4-E model can achieve.

However, this does not necessarily mark a weakness of the study, but rather underpins that these concepts are indeed deeply connected to each other and cannot be entirely separated. Despite that, they all have nuances that make them especially relevant in the respective stage in which they appear in the model. For instance, while organizational commitment is a cognition that develops throughout the entire time of working at a company, it especially plays a role during the time of thinking about turnover, which is why it appears in that context in the model. The following section will discuss the findings throughout the process in more detail,

while focusing on those findings that are surprising, especially relevant for the research question, or provide new insights, as recommended by Gioia et al. (2013).

Starting with the **Entry** phase, the findings revealed that climate quitting is most often done by people who did not start the job with specific climate-related expectations, but usually ones who develop these values during employment. This suggests that climate quitting is not just a recruitment or initial fit issue but has continuing relevance throughout the entire employment. In fact, most of the interviewed employees had worked at their organizations for several years before climate quitting, which further supports this insight. The findings indicated that a case in which employees come into the job with strong sustainability expectations and end up climate quitting would be, if important characteristics of the company change, for instance through a change of management through a merger or acquisition. It may also be that an employee perceives their companies' actions as greenwashing and realizes only after starting the job that the organization's image regarding sustainability does not fit the organizational reality. These findings demonstrate that both, individuals who come into the company with sustainability expectations and those who do not, can end up climate quitting. However, the initial triggers for them to evaluate their employer are different. While the "sustainability expectations" group needs changes in organizational circumstances or the realization that the company does not hold up to their image, to consider evaluating them more deeply, the other group is often triggered by the realization of the urgency to combat climate change. In other words, the reasons for the first group often stem from within the organization itself, whereas for the second group, the initial trigger is usually external (such as media or social network).

In that sense, the triggers that lead employees to evaluate their organizations in the **Evaluation** phase can well be categorized into "push- and pull-factors", a distinction that is frequently applied in social science literature (Kirkwood, 2009; Zmud, 1984). Push-factors represent those that, in this context, are "pushing" the employee out of the organization, and include the company dismissing/deprioritizing sustainable project ideas and emotional exhaustion in the "Trigger for Evaluation" category of the 4-E Model. In contrast, pull-factors are external and "pull" the employee out of the organization. In this case, those factors are the growing visibility of sustainability-focused career opportunities or the feeling of obligation to actively work on climate and the influence of the social network.

The push-pull distinction can also be applied in the context of Evaluation of Corporate Sustainability. The interviews revealed that climate quitting encompasses both, individuals who perceive their current climate impact as neutral or limited and seek to have a positive or

even higher impact with their work (pull), as well as those who want to leave an organization whose impact they perceive as harmful to the environment (push).

In that regard, the distinction between effort and impact in the evaluation of corporate sustainability plays an interesting role in the evaluation of the match with the company. While arguably most companies who pursue little climate efforts will also have negative, or at least not positive climate impact, the same does not necessarily apply the other way around. In other words, companies might exude high efforts for ecological sustainability but still have a neutral or even negative impact. This reasons why a connection was drawn to moral identification, this finding is insightful, as it reveals that the evaluation of corporate sustainability does not necessarily always lead to moral disidentification but plays an independent role in the process. That is, because the climate effort of a company is an intentional act that relates to values and goals, which employees can in turn identify with, whereas the actual impact does not necessarily translate into values directly. At the same time, the connection between the sustainability effort of a company and moral identification is complex, as moral identification can pertain to management as well as to coworkers, and each can be high or low independently of the other.

The interviews revealed that the evaluation of the value match with the company leads to a discrepancy recognition for all climate quitters. The resulting state of psychological discomfort that many participants described, aligns with what Festinger (1957) called 'cognitive dissonance', the uncomfortable feeling that arises when individuals hold two or more conflicting cognitions simultaneously. In the context of climate quitting, this dissonance manifests as a conflict between participants' environmental values and their employment that does not align with their visions regarding climate change mitigation. For instance, participants experienced dissonance between their desire to contribute positively to climate change mitigation and their work, which they considered as either insufficient or even harmful to environmental sustainability. This points at a significant strength of the study, in being the first to explicitly connect turnover with cognitive dissonance theory in a turnover model. In fact, the findings highlight cognitive dissonance as a key mechanism in understanding sustainability-related turnover, by unveiling a strong connection between the turnover process that resulted from the data analysis and the cognitive dissonance theory as postulated by Festinger (1957), despite not including cognitive dissonance theory in the creation of the interview guide.

First, the theory proposes that a discrepancy arises when individuals hold conflicting cognitions at the same time, with that including i.a. “counter-attitudinal behavior”, defined as “acting in a way that is counter to an attitude or belief [the individuals] hold” (Hinojosa et al., 2017, p. 174). This transfers well to climate quitters, with the behavior being ‘working at an organization that does not have a sufficiently positive climate impact’, and the belief being that they want to have a positive climate impact with their work to a certain degree. Second, in cognitive dissonance theory, the cognitive dissonance is said to be the negative affective state that results from the discrepancy recognition, which was found in the interviews in the form of “feeling of discomfort”. Third, the cognitive dissonance is posited to evoke motivation for dissonance reduction, which matches the interviews but was not included in the data structure and final model. Finally, discrepancy reduction, and with that, dissonance reduction is performed by altering one (or more) of their cognitions in favor of the other. Indeed, the findings showed that employees attempt to resolve cognitive dissonance through various strategies. Specifically, these were aimed at changing the cognition related to one’s own behavior, precisely through insider activism and internal switching attempts, and lastly also turnover. However, attitude changes were also found in self-justification of the work. The fact that the majority of interviewees reported behavior, rather than attitude changes, might also be due to the sample consisting only of individuals who ended up climate quitting. This points at the necessity of interviewing not only climate quitters but also people who consider climate quitting, as this may yield different and more nuanced results. The finding that most climate quitters only actively considered quitting after pursuing unsuccessful insider activism or internal switch attempts demonstrates how unresolved cognitive dissonance can lead to turnover despite the presence other positive job factors, such as a high salary or good relationships with coworkers. The fact that these attempts generally proved unsuccessful or unsatisfying highlights the challenge for employees of resolving sustainability-related cognitive dissonance within existing organizational structures.

Equally complex as moral identification is the role of organizational commitment in the **Elaboration** phase for the understanding of climate quitting. While organizational commitment research could lead to the assumption that climate quitters exhibit low levels of commitment, specifically given that commitment is frequently used as a proxy for employee retention (A. K. Florek-Paszkowska & Hoyos-Vallejo, 2023; Salleh et al., 2012), that is not what this research found. In fact, many individuals in the sample demonstrated high levels of organizational commitment, specifically on the affective commitment dimension, which is said

to be related to values and identification. This might also be due to a lack of conceptual clarity of the concepts, and the assigning of codes to either moral identification *or* organizational commitment through the researcher. Nonetheless, many climate quitters undeniably held high levels of affective commitment, reporting a strong emotional attachment to the company. The same is true for the normative commitment, where in fact many climate quitters also reported a feeling of obligation towards the organization. This stands in contrast to the suggestion by González & Guillén (2008) who proposed an ethical conceptualization of normative commitment, which would suggest a stronger connection of normative commitment to the moral misalignment with the company. Regarding continuance commitment, it is noteworthy that most interviewed participants reported having financial security, which enabled them to pursue the steps that are mentioned in “4.4.1 Exit - Preparation”. This suggests a certain privilege that supports individuals in being able to pick a suitable and value-aligned job, and in turn the barriers that might impede the process. A sample that also includes people who are thinking about climate quitting but have not executed it could shed more light on this suggestion. Overall, the findings show that organizational commitment is complex in climate quitting scenarios, with all dimensions potentially acting as both retention and turnover factors. Specifically, it appears that high organizational commitment does not necessarily prevent turnover when sustainability values are misaligned, challenging traditional turnover theory assumptions that low organizational commitment drives turnover decisions (Kim et al., 2017; Porter et al., 1974). While organizational commitment is often used to predict turnover in “traditional” turnover setting, it does not suffice to predict climate quitting. However, quantitative research is needed to further support or reject this statement.

With regards to the **Exit** phase, the study found that many climate quitters went through specific preparation steps, such as learning more about climate change or distancing themselves from the organization. First, this structured approach to exit suggests that climate quitting is often a deliberate, considerate process rather than an impulsive decision. Second, it appears that these steps may all be interpreted as organizational commitment reduction. Finishing projects and handing over work properly might lower the individual’s normative commitment, as they may feel a diminished sense of obligation towards the organization if they sort out the duties that they still had at the time of deciding to quit. The continuance commitment is lowered through searching for jobs and learning more about climate change mitigation, as continuance commitment represents the dependence individuals exhibit towards their organization. Undeniably, this dependence is lowered once individuals perceive better chances of finding a

fitting job through pursuing further education, and latest once they actually get a suitable job offer. Lastly, affective commitment may be lowered through emotional distancing from the organization, as affective commitment is specifically associated with emotional attachment to the company. However, in the sample, the majority of the individuals who emotionally distanced themselves from the company were in fact those, who did not experience high affective commitment in the first place. Thus, the initial suggestion of the preparation as a form of organizational commitment reduction does not necessarily apply in the case of the affective dimension of organizational commitment. Nonetheless, this finding overall suggests that organizational commitment does not only play a role in the deliberation about turnover but exerts continued importance until the very end of the employment.

Taken together, the findings indicate there is not any specific factor that is pushing employees either out of the firm or keeping them inside, but rather a complex interplay of forces, with cognitive dissonance at the core. For instance, not all employees perceived a general lack of moral identification or a lack of organizational commitment, but these factors rather acted as both turnover and retention factors. One individual could perceive high continuance commitment, increasing their desire to retain part of the company, but low affective commitment, decreasing such desire. Similarities that have been found between all individuals include the misalignment between desired versus perceived sustainability effort or impact of the company, and the cognitive dissonance with subsequent dissonance reduction approaches. Additionally, almost all interviewees were characterized by a desire for change, and by a financial security net through savings or friends and family, implying that characteristics of the individuals play a decisive role in the climate quitting process, and that these two mentioned factors might likely be highly correlated with climate-related turnover.

### 5.1.2 Contribution to traditional turnover theories

The contribution of this research to traditional turnover theories especially lies in its focus on values related to broader societal issues rather than just individual or organizational issues. This provides a significant advantage to the current understanding of turnover, which is mainly based on aspects that are related to employee directly, such as job satisfaction or expected utility of the job. In climate quitting, the reasons in favor of quitting are outside the realm of impacts that are personally related to the employee, which is a side that has not been adequately addressed in turnover literature before. The model by Mobley et al. (1979) portrays individual values as antecedents for job dissatisfaction or expected utility of the present and alternative job. However, the values in this model relate to the employees themselves and are not



transferable to values such as ecological sustainability. Those values may not necessarily influence job satisfaction and may also not influence the utility of the present or alternative job in their current conceptualization, but influence the turnover process in much different ways, as elaborated in this research. In that sense, the findings of this study might be transferable to value-based quitting in general, given that in the model, only the step “Evaluation of Corporate Sustainability” specifically relates to climate change but could most likely also be applied to different forms of sustainability, specifically social issues. More research is needed to substantiate this hypothesis.

Further, most current turnover process models assume low job satisfaction and low organizational commitment as the beginning of the turnover process (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2005). This research challenges this notion and argues that turnover requires neither low job satisfaction nor low organizational commitment, as suggested by the interview data. Additionally, the 4-E Model extends previous turnover by including stages that come before the perception of discomfort with one’s job but that are relevant for the process. That is, for instance, the sustainability expectations or the triggers to evaluate the company.

Regarding the latter, it could be argued that these trigger had already been incorporated by Lee and Mitchell (1994) in the unfolding model. Indeed, the “shocks to the system”, that are a core concept of the model, share similarities with the triggers for evaluation in the 4-E Model by being events that lead the employees to evaluate their job. However, the “script” that is proposed to follow these shocks is hardly applicable to climate quitting, as it assumes familiarity with similar situations, which may not apply to novel contexts like climate quitting. Furthermore, the concept of “image violations” in the unfolding model focuses, such as the individual values in the extended intermediate linkages model by Mobley et al. (1979), rather on personal career goals and values than on broader societal issues like climate change, as is the case in climate quitting.

The 4-E Model also shares significant similarities with the unfolding model, first of all, by being both parallel process models of turnover. Both acknowledge that the company evaluation is usually initiated by a trigger (or “shock to the system”). The unfolding model, the intermediate linkages model and the 4-E model all have in common that they include preparation for turnover through job search, and the availability of alternatives, which in the 4-E model was part of continuance commitment. However, the 4-E model fills substantial gaps in knowledge about sustainability value-based turnover that the previous models did not address. That is partially because some of these aspects are highly specific to climate quitting

(e.g. dissonance reduction through insider activism), although they will likely transfer well to general value-based turnover.

## 5.2 Practical Contribution

Next to the theoretical contributions, this research also has numerous practical implications. To begin with, the finding that most climate quitters developed their high sustainability values during the time of employment suggests that climate quitting is not an employee attraction or initial fit issue, but an ongoing retention factor to consider. Further, the findings of this research clearly show that employees look out for both climate effort and impact of their company. As found in the interview data, many businesses attempt to balance out their negative climate impact by employing climate-positive initiatives that are separated from the parts of the organization that produce negative outcomes to the environment. While these initiatives were highlighted positively by many employees, they were still seen as inadequate for serious climate change mitigation, indicating that this separation does not sustainably satisfy climate-conscious employees. This indicates that pursuing eco-initiatives next to the main business of the organization alone does not suffice, but climate change mitigation must be integrated into the business model and strategy.

The findings further show that that traditional retention measures may not be sufficient when sustainability values are misaligned. This emphasizes the need for new retention strategies that address sustainability values. The finding that a large part of the employees attempted unsuccessful insider activism or an internal switch, and the rest refrained from these strategies out of low expectations of success, or even fear of repercussions, signals the importance of providing channels for employees to pursue sustainability initiatives internally. That should include enabling employees on all levels to propose sustainable improvements to the ways business is currently being done and establish a culture of progressive and participatory change.

Looking at a different perspective than managerial implications, the findings also suggest the necessity of further options for employees to find sustainable jobs. While developments are already happening in that regard, and “green” job boards and portals are appearing increasingly (see e.g. [workonclimate.org](http://workonclimate.org)), providing additional resources for employees to connect with each other, and specifically to find value-aligned employers is crucial. That is, to enable employees to climate-quit, if they feel like they cannot pursue their climate visions at their current company, ultimately shifting the workforce to jobs that support the environment, rather than destroy it.

### 5.3 Limitations

Like any other research, this study is subject to several limitations, the most significant of which are presented here. Starting with the data collection, one limitation is the “sampling on the dependent variable” (Bolt et al., 2022, p. 565). This means that the sample only contained individuals who had pursued climate quitting, and excluded for instance those who are thinking about it but had not executed it. By interviewing also non-climate quitters, this research could have potentially gotten a clearer picture about the factors that are salient in keeping individuals from climate related turnover.

Another limitation is the potential confirmation bias that almost inevitably results from the nature of qualitative research. Usually, the grounded theory approach emphasizes not looking into data in too much detail beforehand, to avoid confirmation bias (Gioia et al., 2013). This is virtually impossible as, one, academics who research a topic in a certain field tend to be already fairly familiar with the literature in such field. Second, the development of the topic and research question requires a familiarization with the literature, in order to develop scientifically relevant research. Thus, biases in the data collection and data analysis are difficult, if not impossible to omit. In the context of this study, this played out in the creation of the interview scheme, which incorporated insight from previous literature. For instance, the interview guide entailed questions that were aimed at organizational commitment, which almost predetermined that organizational commitment would later be part of the model, even if it would not have appeared salient if it had not been part of the interview questions. However, several measures were taken to counteract this bias. That was firstly, formulation of broad and open-ended questions, secondly, the usage of a semi-structured interview format which allowed the researcher to delve deeper into participants’ statements that were new and surprising, and thirdly, the revision and - as needed - adaption of the interview guide after each interview.

Lastly, potential biases of the research also include recall biases (Orton, 1997). This aspect is related to the time-component of the research in relation to the investigated timespan, namely the entire employment phase of the individuals. It generally means that individuals cannot recall events entirely correctly as they happened, which is even more true for research that includes several years of events, such as this one. The recall bias entails, for instance, that individuals memorize specific events better than gradual processes, which might result in the study portraying these events as more relevant than they were in reality (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2005). This is especially relevant for research that involves emotions and cognitive

processes, which are difficult to “temporally pin down”, and also for most individuals to remember accurately (Langley, 1999, p. 702). In theory, this issue could be minimized by employing a longitudinal approach throughout individuals’ entire time of working at a company. However, interviewing individuals over a timespan of several years would require substantial resources, and be inefficient in a context like climate quitting, given that a large number of people would need to constitute the sample, to make sure that it includes individuals who actually end up climate quitting.

## 5.4 Future Research Recommendations

Given the exploratory nature of the research question, it only makes sense that this research opens up just as many questions than it could answer. Through suggesting a cohesive process model of climate quitting from starting the job to turnover, the study provides many future research avenues, some of which have been suggested in the previous sections already. Firstly, referring back to a point made in the limitations section, research should be conducted that looks at both stayers and quitters, to pinpoint those factors that really distinguish climate quitters from those who do not quit but also perceive value-misalignment. This would allow to gain a different perspective by identifying potential barriers to the process, that were not addressed in this sample. Secondly, each of the four phases presented in the 4-E Model should be explored more thoroughly, as many points could only be touched upon. For instance, the factors that influence individuals’ sustainability expectations when entering a job could be identified. As a development of this study, it is also crucial to investigate what individuals exactly require in terms of sustainability effort and impact, so that they perceive alignment with their values. In that regard, research could also look into the individuals’ attribution of the perceived lack of sustainability effort or impact, for instance whether they see the issue in the management, in the coworkers, their role, the business model or in capitalism as a whole.

Then, research could shed light on the implications that the type of sustainability mismatch (whether individuals are more unsatisfied about the effort or the impact) and the attribution of the issue have on the remaining process. As an example, one may assume that individuals who see the responsibility for the negative climate impact with the business model, would likely be less prone to attempt an internal switch, than individuals who see the problem in their specific role. Potentially, a typology model (Cornelissen, 2017) could reveal relationships like this, but also other connections between the different parts of the model. Thirdly, more research is needed on the contextual and personality factors that influence the “thinking about turnover”

step. While this research only yielded limited results, focusing for instance only on the change attitudes of climate quitters, it is likely that there are more factors that are relevant in these two categories, which have remained unexplored in this study. Research could investigate other forms of disengagement than turnover, such as absenteeism or silent quitting, both for people who end up climate quitting, and those who do not. This again points at the need for research on individuals who consider climate quitting but have not pursued it yet. Fourthly, this paper suggested that the findings are likely inferable to other forms of value-based quitting, indicating the need to conduct studies on turnover for social sustainability reasons, and compare the results to this research. Lastly, quantitative research is needed to shed light on the relationships that the model suggests, specifically considering the factors presented in the top row. For instance, given the ambiguity of the findings regarding the role of organizational commitment, statistics of a large sample could help to get a clearer idea on which dimension of organizational commitment influences the turnover decision of climate quitters in which way.

## 6 Conclusion

By means of qualitative analysis, this study answers the research question “How does climate quitting unfold?” To that end, interviews were conducted and analyzed rigorously based on Gioia et al. (2013). Coupling the Gioia Method with the Visual Mapping Strategy (Langley, 1999), a process model was created that was thoroughly described in the Findings section. In that model, named the “4-E model”, climate-related turnover is portrayed as a development in four phases: 1. Entry: Entering the job with varying levels of sustainability expectations; 2. Evaluation: Assessing value alignment and experiencing cognitive dissonance; 3. Exploration: Attempting dissonance reduction and deliberating turnover, and 4. Exit: Preparing for and executing the turnover decision.

These findings extend previous literature by connecting elements of the intermediate linkages model (Mobley, 1977), and the unfolding model (Lee & Mitchell, 1994) with organizational commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991), moral identification (May et al., 2015), and cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), and enriching them with novel, context-specific insights. Specifically, this study found that cognitive dissonance plays a core role in the climate quitting process, and turnover represents a form of dissonance reduction, after alternative approaches (insider activism, internal switch, self-justification) fail, or are rejected. The incorporation of, specifically, insider activism and internal switch as dissonance reduction

strategies is another advantage of the model, as they represent important steps of the climate quitting process, which distinguishes climate quitting from “typical” turnover, and poses a potential leverage point for organizations to prevent turnover. The study further found that organizational commitment plays a complex and ambiguous role in the context of climate quitting, and that climate-related turnover is not necessarily associated with low levels of organizational commitment, which challenges the current state of the literature, that sees organizational commitment as a main retention factor. The findings inform businesses that seek to retain employees on the relevance of considering ecological sustainability in their practices and fostering a culture that value-driven employees can agree with. Hopefully, they add another evidence for showing that committing to ecological sustainability as an organization is crucial for a sustainable transformation of our society.

## References

- Adams, W. C. (2015). Conducting Semi-Structured Interviews. In K. E. Newcomer, H. P. Hatry, & J. S. Wholey (Eds.), *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation* (1st ed., pp. 492–505). Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119171386.ch19>
- Aquino, K., & Reed, A. (2002). The self-importance of moral identity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83(6), 1423–1440. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.83.6.1423>
- Ashar, M., Ghafoor, M., Munir, E., & Hafeez, S. (2013). The Impact of Perceptions of Training on Employee Commitment and Turnover Intention: Evidence from Pakistan. *International Journal of Human Resource Studies*, 3(1), 74. <https://doi.org/10.5296/ijhrs.v3i1.2924>
- Ashforth, B. E., & Mael, F. (1989). Social Identity Theory and the Organization. *The Academy of Management Review*, 14(1), 20. <https://doi.org/10.2307/258189>
- Benkarim, A., & Imbeau, D. (2021). Organizational Commitment and Lean Sustainability: Literature Review and Directions for Future Research. *Sustainability*, 13(6), 3357. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13063357>
- Bolt, E. E. T., Winterton, J., & Cafferkey, K. (2022). A century of labour turnover research: A systematic literature review. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 24(4), 555–576. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12294>
- Brannstrom, C., Ewers, M., & Schwarz, P. (2022). Will peak talent arrive before peak oil or peak demand?: Exploring whether career choices of highly skilled workers will accelerate the transition to renewable energy. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 93, 102834. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2022.102834>
- Calvin, K., Dasgupta, D., Krinner, G., Mukherji, A., Thorne, P. W., Trisos, C., Romero, J., Aldunce, P., Barrett, K., Blanco, G., Cheung, W. W. L., Connors, S., Denton, F.,

- Diongue-Niang, A., Dodman, D., Garschagen, M., Geden, O., Hayward, B., Jones, C., ... Péan, C. (2023). *IPCC, 2023: Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [Core Writing Team, H. Lee and J. Romero (eds.)]. IPCC, Geneva, Switzerland. (First). Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).* <https://doi.org/10.59327/IPCC/AR6-9789291691647>
- Cloutier, C., & Langley, A. (2020). What Makes a Process Theoretical Contribution? *Organization Theory*, 1(1), 263178772090247. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2631787720902473>
- Consoli, D., Marin, G., Marzucchi, A., & Vona, F. (2016). Do green jobs differ from non-green jobs in terms of skills and human capital? *Research Policy*, 45(5), 1046–1060. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2016.02.007>
- Cornelissen, J. (2017). Developing Propositions, a Process Model, or a Typology? Addressing the Challenges of Writing Theory Without a Boilerplate. *Academy of Management Review*, 42(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2016.0196>
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed). Sage Publications.
- DiCicco-Bloom, B., & Crabtree, B. F. (2006). The qualitative research interview. *Medical Education*, 40(4), 314–321. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2929.2006.02418.x>
- Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance* (Reissued by Stanford Univ. Press in 1962, renewed 1985 by author, [Nachdr.]). Stanford Univ. Press.
- Florek-Paszkowska, A., & Hoyos-Vallejo, C. A. (2023). Going green to keep talent: Exploring the relationship between sustainable business practices and turnover intentio. *Journal of Entrepreneurship, Management and Innovation*, 19(3), 87–128. <https://doi.org/10.7341/20231933>



- Florek-Paszkowska, A. K., & Hoyos-Vallejo, C. A. (2023). A comprehensive bibliometric analysis and future research directions in the nexus of sustainable business practices and turnover intention. *Cleaner and Responsible Consumption, 11*, 100146. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.clrc.2023.100146>
- Gioia, D. A., Corley, K. G., & Hamilton, A. L. (2013). Seeking Qualitative Rigor in Inductive Research: Notes on the Gioia Methodology. *Organizational Research Methods, 16*(1), 15–31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428112452151>
- González, T. F., & Guillén, M. (2008). Organizational Commitment: A Proposal for a Wider Ethical Conceptualization of ‘Normative Commitment.’ *Journal of Business Ethics, 78*(3), 401–414. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-006-9333-9>
- Harmon-Jones, E., & Harmon-Jones, C. (2007). Cognitive Dissonance Theory After 50 Years of Development. *Zeitschrift Für Sozialpsychologie, 38*(1), 7–16. <https://doi.org/10.1024/0044-3514.38.1.7>
- Hinojosa, A. S., Gardner, W. L., Walker, H. J., Coglisier, C., & Gullifor, D. (2017). A Review of Cognitive Dissonance Theory in Management Research: Opportunities for Further Development. *Journal of Management, 43*(1), 170–199. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206316668236>
- Hom, P. W., Lee, T. W., Shaw, J. D., & Hausknecht, J. P. (2017). One hundred years of employee turnover theory and research. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 102*(3), 530–545. <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000103>
- Kallio, H., Pietilä, A., Johnson, M., & Kangasniemi, M. (2016). Systematic methodological review: Developing a framework for a qualitative semi-structured interview guide. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 72*(12), 2954–2965. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.13031>

- Kammeyer-Mueller, J. D., Wanberg, C. R., Glomb, T. M., & Ahlburg, D. (2005). The Role of Temporal Shifts in Turnover Processes: It's About Time. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 90*(4), 644–658. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.90.4.644>
- Kim, S., Tam, L., Kim, J.-N., & Rhee, Y. (2017). Determinants of employee turnover intention: Understanding the roles of organizational justice, supervisory justice, authoritarian organizational culture and organization-employee relationship quality. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal, 22*(3), 308–328. <https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-11-2016-0074>
- Kirkwood, J. (2009). Motivational factors in a push-pull theory of entrepreneurship. *Gender in Management: An International Journal, 24*(5), 346–364. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17542410910968805>
- Langley, A. (1999). Strategies for theorizing from process data. *The Academy of Management Review, 24*(4).
- Lee, T. W., & Mitchell, T. R. (1994). An Alternative Approach: The Unfolding Model of Voluntary Employee Turnover. *The Academy of Management Review, 19*(1), 51–89.
- Magnani, G., & Gioia, D. (2023). Using the Gioia Methodology in international business and entrepreneurship research. *International Business Review, 32*(2), 102097. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ibusrev.2022.102097>
- Mandelli, M. (2022). Understanding eco-social policies: A proposed definition and typology. *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research, 28*(3), 333–348. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10242589221125083>
- May, D. R., Chang, Y. K., & Shao, R. (2015). Does ethical membership matter? Moral identification and its organizational implications. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 100*(3), 681–694. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0038344>

- Meier, F. (2024). Using Wikipedia Pageview Data to Investigate Public Interest in Climate Change at a Global Scale. *ACM Web Science Conference*, 365–375. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3614419.3644007>
- Meyer, J. P., & Allen, N. J. (1990). The measurement and antecedents of affective, continuance and normative commitment to the organization. *Journal of Occupational Psychology*, 63(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8325.1990.tb00506.x>
- Meyer, J. P., & Allen, N. J. (1991). A Three-Component Conceptualization of Organizational Commitment. *Human Resource Management Review*, 1(1), 61–89.
- Mobley, W. H. (1977). Intermediate linkages in the relationship between job satisfaction and employee turnover. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 62(2), 237–240. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.62.2.237>
- Mobley, W. H., Griffeth, R. W., Hand, H. H., & Meglino, B. M. (1979). Review and conceptual analysis of the employee turnover process. *Psychological Bulletin*, 86(3), 493–522. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.86.3.493>
- Mory, L., Wirtz, B. W., & Göttel, V. (2016). Corporate social responsibility strategies and their impact on employees' commitment. *Journal of Strategy and Management*, 9(2), 172–201. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JSMA-12-2014-0097>
- Mu, H., & Lee, Y. (2023). Greenwashing in Corporate Social Responsibility: A Dual-Faceted Analysis of Its Impact on Employee Trust and Identification. *Sustainability*, 15(22), 15693. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su152215693>
- Narayanan, A., Rajithakumar, S., & Menon, M. (2019). Talent Management and Employee Retention: An Integrative Research Framework. *Human Resource Development Review*, 18(2), 228–247. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1534484318812159>

- Nicholls-Lee, D. (2023, October 23). *The 'climate quitters' ditching corporate roles*. BBC.  
<https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20231016-the-climate-quitters-ditching-corporate-roles>
- Orton, J. D. (1997). From inductive to iterative grounded theory: Zipping the gap between process theory and process data. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 13(4), 419–438. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0956-5221\(97\)00027-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0956-5221(97)00027-4)
- Polman, Paul. (2023). *Net Positive Employee Barometer*. Republic.
- Porter, L. W., Steers, R. M., Mowday, R. T., & Boulian, P. V. (1974). Organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and turnover among psychiatric technicians. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 59(5), 603–609. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0037335>
- Rowley, J. (2012). Conducting research interviews. *Management Research Review*, 35(3/4), 260–271. <https://doi.org/10.1108/01409171211210154>
- Salleh, R., Nair, M. S., & Harun, H. (2012). Job Satisfaction, Organizational Commitment, and Turnover Intention: A Case Study on Employees of a Retail Company in Malaysia. *International Journal of Economics and Management Engineering*, 6(12).
- Schwartz, S. H. (1992). Universals in the Content and Structure of Values: Theoretical Advances and Empirical Tests in 20 Countries. In *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (Vol. 25, pp. 1–65). Elsevier. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(08\)60281-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60281-6)
- Stevenson, K. T., Peterson, M. N., Bondell, H. D., Moore, S. E., & Carrier, S. J. (2014). Overcoming skepticism with education: Interacting influences of worldview and climate change knowledge on perceived climate change risk among adolescents. *Climatic Change*, 126(3–4), 293–304. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-014-1228-7>
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

- Swailles, S. (2002). Organizational commitment: A critique of the construct and measures. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 4(2), 155–178.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2370.00082>
- Tilleman, S. (2012). Is Employee Organizational Commitment Related to Firm Environmental Sustainability? *Journal of Small Business & Entrepreneurship*, 25(4), 417–431.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08276331.2012.10593582>
- Zmud, R. W. (1984). An Examination of “Push-Pull” Theory Applied to Process Innovation in Knowledge Work. *Management Science*, 30(6), 727–738.  
<https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.30.6.727>

## Appendix A - Interview Guide

### Introduction

My name is Celina, and I am currently finishing my double degree in Innovation Management & Sustainability, as well as Business Administration. This Interview is part of my Master Thesis project on “Climate Quitting”, and I am conducting this interview to learn about people’s experiences who already did, or want to quit out of climate concerns. That is why I invited you today. Thank you very much for taking your time to tell me about your personal experiences.

Further, I know that turnover can be a sensitive topic. I want to emphasize that no personal or company names will appear in the work, or any other information that can evidently be connected to you as a person. Do you have any questions regarding the confidentiality of this interview?

Yes: (...)

No: Okay, then I will turn on the recording now and we can start.

*Turn on recording*

We just agreed to this interview being recorded, correct?

Starting the job and working there:

- First, can you tell me something about your educational and professional background, including the job we will talk about today?
  - Prompt:
    - What did you study, what jobs did you do before working in the company we are going to talk about today?
    - What kind of job did you do at the company that you ended up quitting?
- Looking back, what were your expectations when starting to work for the current company?
  - Prompt:
    - What factors are generally relevant for you when it comes to a job that you enjoy?
- How satisfied were you initially with your job overall? (...) Did this change over time?
  - Prompts:
    - Tasks? Salary? Coworkers? Supervisors?

Organizational Commitment

- How strongly did you feel committed to the company?
  - What gains of staying and potential losses of leaving did you perceive?

Prompts:

Affective commitment:

- How emotionally attached did you feel to the organization?

Prompts:

- How did you feel about talking to others about your job at the organization?
- Did you feel like people around you, whose opinion you value, respected the organization?
- Did you experience a sense of belonging? Did you feel like “part of the family?”

Normative commitment:

- Did you experience any feelings of obligation to the company?

Prompts:

- Do you experience a feeling of loyalty to the organization?
- Did these feelings change over time?

Continuance commitment

- Did you feel like you were dependent on working for the company?

Prompts:

- When working for the company, and before you actively considered to quit, did you generally feel like you could generally “afford” leaving the organization, and possibly even being without a job for some time?
- Were you confident that you could always easily find a job you enjoyed?
- Did you feel like you would lose substantial personal sacrifices if you left the company?
- Did these feelings change over time?

Personal/Value related:

- Now, we are here to talk about Climate Quitting, so the overarching topic is Sustainability. What is sustainability to you, and what role does it play in your life?

Prompts:

- Perhaps repeat words that were used and require elaboration.
- Would you say people around you see you as a person who cares a lot about sustainability?

Moral Identification

- How much did you feel like your personal values were aligned with those of the company?

Prompts:

- Did you experience any specific instances that made you question the morality of the company? -> If yes, ask to elaborate
- Did you feel like you had to compromise your own ethical beliefs while working at the company?
- What importance do morality and ethics generally have in your professional life?

- Have these factors played a role in your professional career before you left this company we are currently talking about?
- Did you feel like if you talked to co-workers or supervisors about any concerns you might have, they would understand you and take you seriously?
- Did you generally identify with the company?
- Did you feel like there is meaning to your work?

## Thinking about Quitting

- Let's go a bit further in time. What made you first consider quitting? → Elaborate!!
  - Prompt: Did any specific event occur that triggered the thought of quitting?
  - Can you tell me more about things that happened that reinforced the intention?
- Did you then quit right away?

*Yes:* → go to Step 4: Quitting

*No:* → go to Step 3: Staying

## Staying

- What factors were most salient in keeping you from leaving the company right away?
  - Prompts:
    - Did the company have any measures in place that enabled you to voice your concerns for sustainability?
      - Yes:* Did you make use of them? If yes, how so? (...) Did you feel like this changed anything?
      - No:* →
  - Prompt: Did you try to find (any other) alternative solutions to your situation before quitting?
    - Prompt: Did you try to improve the sustainability of your organization?
      - Yes:* How so?
      - No:* →
    - Did you look for alternative employment before quitting? (/Have you looked at alternative employment already?)
      - *Yes:* Did you find one or more jobs that you could work for if you quit? (Did you already have any offers to work at other companies?)
      - *No:* →

## Leaving

- Let's get to the point in time when you executed your decision to leave. Did anything happen that triggered this final decision?
  - If yes, ask to elaborate.



- If no: What made you decide to quit, then?
- Prompt: What would it have needed for you to stay?
- When quitting the job, did you let your company know that you left due to sustainability reasons?
  - Prompt: Did you receive any feedback to that? (Do you think that changed anything in the company?)
- Did you change your behavior within the company when you already knew you would quit?

## Closing Questions

- If you could go back in time, would you do anything differently now than how you did it before?
- Family opinion?
- Lastly, do you feel there is anything you consider important for the topic, but that has not been covered in the questions?

*Yes:* (...) Okay, thank you for that additional input. Answers to this question are very helpful as they enable me to consider aspects that I have not thought of before. →

*No* →

## Goodbye

- Okay, then that's it. Again, thank you very much for taking the time for this interview. Your answers were very helpful for my research. Would you like to leave me your email address so I can get back to you if anything is unclear in the recording, or if questions appeared in later interviews that I would like to ask you as well?
- Are you interested in the results of the study?

*Yes:* Okay, then I will send you an email once the interviews have been analyzed. Thank you again for your contribution to my research, and I wish you a pleasant day.

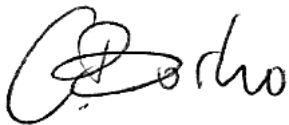
*No:* Okay, then we're done. Thank you again for your contribution to my research, and I wish you a pleasant day.

## Appendix B - Integrity Statement

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own original work and has been written by me entirely. I have faithfully and appropriately cited all sources used in this work. This thesis has not been submitted, for a course or degree, at this or any other university. All research conducted for this thesis was carried out in strict accordance with the research ethics guidelines of the University of Twente. I confirm that the interviews conducted for this research were carried out with informed consent from all participants, and that data has been anonymized and handled with care. I also declare that the software, programs, and tools used in this research have been appropriately licensed or were freely available for academic use.

I am aware that making a false statement will have legal consequences.

Berlin, 24.11.2024

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Celina Borko', with a stylized, cursive script.

Celina Borko