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**Overcoming People-Related Challenges in Scale-Ups:
The Role of Human Resource Management Practices
With a Focus on Talent Acquisition**

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Abstract

As a subset of high-growth firms, scale-ups operate amid ongoing change, time, and resource constraints. These conditions create challenges that predominantly arise on the people side. Existing research has focused on the process of scaling, rather than on how challenges are mitigated through HRM practices. Based on 24 interviews, this research illustrates that these challenges mainly emerge in three dimensions: Leadership, Talent Acquisition, and Employee Retention. In this paper, the focus is on Talent Acquisition. This thesis is the first qualitative study to link challenges to HRM practice bundles. It develops a framework offering an integrated perspective on how scale-ups address people-related challenges, contributing to theory and practice.

Keywords

Scale-Ups; Scaling Process; High-Growth Firms; Characteristics of High Growth; People-Related Challenges; Human Resource Management; Human Resource Management Practices; Leadership; Talent Acquisition; Employee Retention

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Table of Contents

List of Abbreviations	3
List of Figures	3
1 Introduction	4
2 Literature Review	7
2.1 Scale-Up	8
2.1.1 Definition and Distinction.....	8
2.1.2 Scaling Process	10
2.2 Drivers of Challenges during Scaling	12
2.3 Key People-Related Challenges	13
2.3.1 Leadership – Individual Part by Lara Danielle Scheu [not included in this version]	14
2.3.2 Talent Acquisition.....	14
2.3.3 Employee Retention - Individual Part by Lukas Demant [not included in this version]	19
2.4 HRM in the Context of Scaling	19
2.4.1 Conceptualising HRM and HRM Practices	19
2.4.2 HRM Practices in High-Growth and Scaling Contexts	20
3 Conceptual Framework	22
4 Methodology	24
4.1 Research Design	24
4.2 Data Collection	26
4.3 Data Analysis	29
5 Results & Discussion	30
5.1 Characteristics of High Growth	31
5.2 Leadership - Individual Part by Lara Danielle Scheu [not included in this version]	33
5.3 Talent Acquisition	33
5.3.1 Key Challenges and HRM Practices.....	33
5.3.2 Discussion of Findings.....	37
5.4 Employee Retention - Individual Part by Lukas Demant [not included in this version]	42
6 Joint Discussion	42
6.1 Theoretical Contributions	42
6.2 Managerial Implications	46
6.3 Limitations and Future Research Directions	47
7 Conclusion	49
References	I
Appendix	XVIII
Appendix 1 - Overview of Reviewed Publications Addressing People-Related Challenges During Scaling	XVIII
Appendix 2 - Overview of Definitional Characteristics of ‘Scale-Ups’	XXIV
Appendix 3 - Distinction between Start-Ups, Scale-Ups, and Established Companies	XXVI
Appendix 4 - Interview Guide (Scale-Ups)	XXVIII

Appendix 5 – Interview Guide (Scale-Up Support)	XXX
Appendix 6 - Overview of the Interview Sample	XXXII
Appendix 7 - Qualitative Structuring Content Analysis	XXXIV
Appendix 8 – Coding System	XXXIV
Appendix 9 – Coding Guideline	XXXV

List of Abbreviations

CEO – Chief Executive Officer

CTO – Chief Technology Officer

HGF – High-Growth Firm

HR – Human Resources

HRM – Human Resource Management

RBV – Resource-Based View

SME – Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise

List of Figures

Figure 1 - The Lifecycle of an Entrepreneurial Firm	11
Figure 2 - Conceptual Framework Developed for This Thesis	24
Figure 3 - Refined Framework of People-Related Challenges and HRM Practice Bundles in Scale-Ups	45

1 Introduction

“... among the many resources shaping a company’s growth potential, the quality, talent and mindset of its people are the most important” (Pisano 2024, 9).

Building on this people-centred view of firm growth, scholars have increasingly explored the concept of scaling (DeSantola and Gulati 2017). Scaling can thus be defined as the transformational process through which firms achieve and maintain high growth (Coviello et al. 2024; Jansen et al. 2023). Accordingly, high growth is not only seen as a result but also as a key attribute of the scaling process itself (Coviello et al. 2024). In line with this, scholars have begun to examine more closely the typical characteristics associated with high growth. These characteristics include time and resource constraints as well as continuous change in organisations (Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024). Such characteristics illustrate that scaling is not guaranteed to be successful. Successful scaling requires firms to actively overcome several challenges (Genedy et al. 2024; Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024). In addition, the inability to scale is often equated with the inability to survive (Sanasi, Ghezzi, and Cavallo 2023). This makes it crucial to understand how these challenges can be addressed effectively. While such challenges may emerge in different areas of a company, recent studies have indicated that they are most evident in relation to Human Resources (HR) (Flamholtz and Randle 2012; Genedy et al. 2024; Major and Urbano 2025; Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024; Van Lancker et al. 2023). In this context, scholars have proposed the term people-related challenges to describe the tensions that firms encounter in leading, recruiting, and retaining employees during high growth (Van Lancker et al. 2025). In this regard, it is surprising that Human Resource Management (HRM) has received little attention in extant literature on scaling. Previous studies have already indicated that HRM practices are positively related to company growth (Demir, Wennberg, and McKelvie 2017; Lopez-Garcia and Puente 2012). However, there is a lack of knowledge about the concrete HRM practices that organisations

implement to address people-related challenges. For instance, this gap is reflected in the recent call for papers examining the role of HRM during scaling issued by the Human Resource Management Journal (Raby et al. 2024).

At the same time, the concept of scaling has been applied to a variety of organisational types, often collectively referred to as high-growth firms (HGFs) (OECD and Statistical Office of the European Communities 2007; OECD 2021). In this diverse group of organisations, scale-ups represent a specific subset of HGFs (Fotopoulos 2025; Monteiro 2019). To date, scale-ups have received comparatively little attention, as many publications still focus on start-ups, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), or established companies (Baron and Hannan 2002; Spacenco and Mandari 2020). This neglected focus is noteworthy given that scale-ups, as young, entrepreneurial firms, are increasingly recognised as being key drivers of employment (Garcia-Tapial and Cardenete 2023; Isenberg and Onyemah 2017; Sage 2025). Simultaneously, practical reports identify HR as the main barrier to their growth. For instance, the European Scale-up Report surveyed over 80,000 scale-ups and found that most of these entities identified the management of their workforce as one of the most significant challenges limiting growth (Collewaert, Manigart, and Standaert 2020). To address such challenges, however, research implies that scale-ups cannot simply adopt the same HRM practices as those evident in established companies. Scholars emphasise the different conditions under which such young, entrepreneurial firms operate. Scale-ups tend to encounter limited legitimacy and resources. They typically operate under high levels of uncertainty, which ultimately affects the adoption of HRM practices (Leung et al. 2006; Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024; Van Lancker et al. 2022).

Synthesising these perspectives reveals a clear opportunity for further research: while people-related challenges are recognised as a key obstacle in scaling, little is known about the role of HRM in addressing these challenges, particularly in terms of how scale-ups employ HRM

practices. Subsequently, the objective of this thesis is to identify which HRM practices are applied in scale-ups to address people-related challenges. Therefore, the main research question of this study is: **“How do HRM practices in scale-ups address key people-related challenges during the scaling process?”** This question is further broken down into two sub-research questions: **“What are the key people-related challenges faced by scale-ups?”** and **“Which HRM practices are applied to address these challenges?”** These questions facilitate a systematic approach to mapping the encountered challenges with specific HRM practices.

To provide an answer to this research question, this thesis first focuses on the theoretical foundations as described in the literature (Chapter 2). Scale-ups are introduced as an organisational type, and the scaling process is outlined. Subsequently, the characteristics of high growth and the people-related challenges identified in prior HGF research are mentioned. These primarily manifest in three dimensions: Leadership, Talent Acquisition, and Employee Retention. As a response to these challenges, HRM and HRM practices are conceptualised. The findings are then integrated into a conceptual framework, providing the basis for the following empirical research (Chapter 3). Chapter 4 describes the chosen method of expert interviews, outlining how the data was collected and analysed. Next, the findings are presented and discussed along four categories derived from the interview data and interpreted in light of the literature review (Chapter 5). Chapter 6 synthesises the results from all categories to answer the main research question, thereby refining the previously introduced framework and providing managerial implications. Finally, this thesis concludes with an outlook on future research opportunities and a closing statement.

Due to the limited scope of this thesis, it does not offer a systematic comparison of HRM practices between established companies and scale-ups. Instead, the focus is on scale-ups, the challenges they face, and how they address these. References to established companies are made only to contextualise the findings, rather than to offer a full comparative study.

2 Literature Review

The ensuing chapter provides a review of the extant literature on people-related challenges, as well as the corresponding role of HRM practices in scale-ups. This establishes a theoretical foundation, while illustrating the research gap and demonstrating the relevance of the present study. The sourcing followed a systematic protocol, according to Siddaway, Wood, and Hedges (2019), to ensure the highest possible quality of information and to minimise selection bias. A comprehensive search was conducted across research databases and repositories, including Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCO, and Google Scholar, focusing on key terms in the titles, abstracts, and text. In addition to scale-up, related terms such as high-growth firms, scaling firms, entrepreneurial ventures, and rapid growth were included, as few studies explicitly consider scale-ups. The scaling-related terms were then combined with keywords referring to people-related challenges (e.g., barriers to scaling, growing pains) to ensure comprehensive coverage of the topic. Additionally, the following exclusion criteria were applied to exclude studies that lacked a clear connection to high-growth contexts, were not within the field of business, or focused exclusively on established companies. The search strategy yielded sources primarily from leading journals in management and entrepreneurship research. The examination of the academic journals revealed that they also referenced literature that was highly relevant to the topic. Thus, a backward search was conducted to capture additional literature. Moreover, the review was not limited to empirical studies, but also included practical reports, given the operational nature of HRM practices. Finally, adopting this methodological approach led to a clear record-keeping system. For instance, all relevant publications addressing people-related challenges during scaling were documented in a table. Based on this documentation, the challenges were categorised within three dimensions: Leadership, Talent Acquisition, and Employee Retention. This process resulted in the identification of different core publications, forming the basis for the subsequent literature review (Appendix 1).

2.1 Scale-Up

This section defines and conceptually classifies scale-ups and the corresponding scaling process. Prevailing definitions are presented and contrasted with related organisational types, such as start-ups, SMEs, HGFs, and established companies. This step is essential to establish clarity while illustrating the central characteristics and dynamics of organisational growth.

2.1.1 Definition and Distinction

The term scale-up is increasingly used yet debated in recent research, particularly when defining a specific type of firm (Denney, Southin, and Wolfe 2023; Strengers et al. 2022; Quas et al. 2022). However, it remains characterised by overlapping and sometimes ambiguous terminology. Within this discourse, concepts such as SMEs, start-ups, and HGFs are frequently employed, often interchangeably, yet without a universally accepted distinction (Coad et al. 2024). SMEs are generally regarded as stable and risk-averse firms that operate in established market niches and prioritise continuity rather than disruption (Autio 2016; Mercandetti et al. 2017). In contrast, start-ups, as young firms in the early stages of development, are typically characterised by innovation and experimentation. This often serves as a conceptual starting point for understanding the transition to scale-ups (Bertucci Ramos and Pedroso 2025; Zajko 2017). Unlike start-ups, still trying to determine their product-market fit, scale-ups have already validated their offerings and transitioned into a growth-oriented phase (Kohler 2018). Accordingly, scale-ups are often defined in a broad manner as successful start-ups (Durufle, Hellmann, and Wilson 2016; Pardo-del-Val et al. 2024).

To further differentiate scale-ups from start-ups, the literature frequently utilises the definition of HGFs according to OECD and Eurostat criteria: firms that achieve an average annual growth rate of at least 20 percent in either the number of employees or [revenue] over three consecutive years, starting from a baseline of ten employees (OECD and Statistical Office of the European Communities 2007; OECD 2021). While this benchmark offers comparability, it reduces the

complex phenomenon of growth to purely quantitative measures. In addition, Monteiro (2019, 102) challenges this assertion as “any scale-up is an HGF, but not every HGF is a scale-up.” While the HGF definition is useful for describing the growth aspect of scale-ups, it is argued that it is not sufficient on its own. If not supplemented by other criteria, it encompasses all growing companies, including established companies. Therefore, scale-ups are commonly regarded as a specific subset of HGFs (Fotopoulos 2025; Monteiro 2019). At the same time, scholars have proposed alternative approaches that involve a mix of quantitative and qualitative criteria (Appendix 2). Coad et al. (2024) posit that, as a subset of HGFs, different guiding elements should be considered. These include, for instance, their characterisation as young but not nascent firms. In line with this, the Kauffman Foundation (2017) explicitly positions scale-ups within the category of young ventures, specifying an age range of up to ten years.

For the purposes of this thesis, the guiding definition therefore integrates complementary elements, thereby addressing critiques of relying on one singular or purely one-dimensional definition inherent in the literature. Concretely, it combines a) the OECD criteria classifying scale-ups as a subgroup of HGFs, b) the age range set by the Kauffman Foundation, and c) qualitative criteria to ensure the definition does not solely rely on quantitative measures. Drawing on these elements, this thesis defines **scale-ups as a subset of HGFs, not older than ten years, that have transitioned beyond the start-up phase and are in the process of developing organisational features required to sustain high growth** (Coad et al. 2024; Fotopoulos 2025; Kauffman Foundation 2017; Monteiro 2019; OECD 2021; OECD and Statistical Office of the European Communities 2007). This approach acknowledges the diversity of theoretical perspectives but focuses on criteria that are feasible to apply in empirical research. At the same time, the definition remains sufficiently broad, ensuring that relevant cases are not excluded. To obtain a more comprehensive overview, refer to Appendix 3, which provides a concise distinction between start-ups, scale-ups, and established companies. The

table consolidates prior research, positioning scale-ups as a type of firm between start-ups and established companies (Piaskowska, Tippmann, and Monaghan 2021).

2.1.2 Scaling Process

In the literature, the term scale-up is closely linked to the concept of scaling. As previously defined in Section 2.1.1, scale-up refers to a particular organisational type. According to Jansen et al. (2023), the term scaling captures the process by which such firms achieve and sustain high growth. Scaling has been defined in multiple ways, reflecting its increased usage across different stakeholder groups (Bohan et al. 2024), contexts (Collewaert and Jansen 2025), and its application not only being limited to young, entrepreneurial firms (Coviello et al. 2024). Moreover, there are several types of scaling, including financial, organisational, market, and volume (Palmié et al. 2023). As this research focuses on people-related challenges, the emphasis is on organisational scaling, as this reflects changes in resources, capabilities, and processes most directly.

Given the variety of definitions, research conceptualises scaling as either a process, a stage of development, or a capability. According to Coviello (2019, 11), scaling is “a stage of growth where the firm: 1) leverages economies of scale; and 2) is [characterised] by transformation in its processes, people, and places.” Similarly, DeSantola and Gulati (2017, 641) refer to scaling as the “challenge of how to [synchronise] internal organising and growth.” Still, across the outlined perspectives, a consensus emerges: scaling entails more than mere growth in size; it demands transformational efforts across the firm. Nevertheless, much of the literature still uses growth as the main attribute to define scaling (Coviello et al. 2024), often labelling it as rapid (Belingheri and Lechner 2025a; Kuratko, Holt, and Neubert 2020), exponential (Jansen et al. 2023), or even declared as hyper growth (Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024). Beyond this, the differentiation between distinct growth patterns demonstrates a lack of homogeneity. Given its complexity, growth is measured in a variety of ways, for instance, through inputs such as the

number of employees (Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024). Similarly, the challenge of determining growth is not limited to outcomes alone. It has also been described as a black box process, with research increasingly examining what happens inside firms while they grow (Mula, Zybura, and Hipp 2024). While certain scholars use scaling and growth as synonyms (DeSantola and Gulati 2017), others argue that they should be distinguished. They claim that scaling represents a unique form of growth (Coad et al. 2024; Coviello 2019). The link between growth and scaling is further explored in the literature through lifecycle models showcasing the phases a company goes through to become an established organisation. According to Greiner's (1972) growth model, crises occur at the end of each phase in areas such as leadership, autonomy, and control. These crises must be overcome to continue growing. Similarly, Picken (2017) captures scaling as the third phase in the life cycle of an entrepreneurial firm, following the start-up and transition phase. In essence, scaling entails the transition from a less structured venture to a more formalised organisation by adding resources (Figure 1).

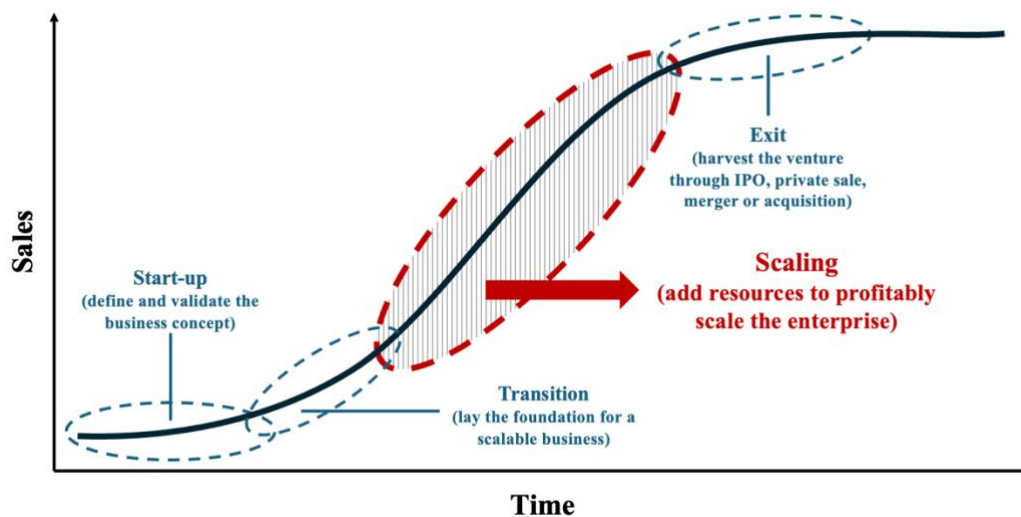


Figure 1 - The Lifecycle of an Entrepreneurial Firm | Source: Own creation based on Picken 2017

Although these models provide insights into the challenges faced by the enterprise at each stage, they are criticised for their assumption of sequentiality. It is noted that firms might follow a different sequence, phases might overlap, and persistent scaling may be constrained by the

occurrence of setbacks (Coad et al. 2024; Levie and Lichtenstein 2010; Tippmann et al. 2023a). Still, frameworks widely acknowledge that scaling necessitates a shift in the organisation itself, compared to earlier phases (Picken 2017). This supports the understanding of scaling as an organisational process to sustain growth rather than a stable stage.

Based on the reviewed literature, this thesis defines scaling as an organisational process with growth as its central attribute. Although the literature frequently employs various labels to describe growth in the context of scaling, this research adopts a broader notion of high growth to capture both the speed and sustainability of expansion. Accordingly, it defines **scaling as the process through which scale-ups achieve and maintain high growth by transforming the internal organisation, acquiring and deploying resources, and aligning organisational capabilities**. This definition builds upon the process perspective established by Coviello et al. (2024) but extends beyond a focus on digital resources by adopting a broader resource-based view (RBV) (Penrose 1995). This is consistent with recent research emphasising HR as a crucial determinant (Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024).

2.2 Drivers of Challenges during Scaling

Given the key role of high growth in the scaling process, the literature has increasingly focused on the characteristics of high growth as the origin of emerging challenges. Three characteristics have been identified in particular: time constraints, continuous change, and resource scarcity (Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024). These characteristics collectively influence the overarching context within which firms operate, allocate resources, and manage their human resources. In the literature, they are therefore commonly cited as the main cause of the various challenges that are also referred to as growing pains during scaling (Flamholtz and Randle 2012; Genedy et al. 2024; Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024). As Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova (2024) state, growing pains are internal challenges that emerge due to inadequate organisational development, for instance, in processes, structures, culture, or resources. While each growing

pain is considered a challenge in its own right, challenges are also said to be interconnected. The resolution of one pain point often gives rise to the emergence of another, thereby resulting in constant internal tensions, instabilities, or trade-offs (DeSantola and Gulati 2017; Gulati and DeSantola 2016; Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024).

Even though the phenomenon of growing pains can manifest across a variety of dimensions within an organisation, recent research highlights that many of the occurring challenges are strongly related to HR (Collewaert and Jansen 2025; Major and Urbano 2025; Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024; Sluss 2025; Van Lancker et al. 2025). Practitioner-oriented studies further reinforce these findings. In 2011, across all regions (including the Americas, EMEA, and Asia-Pacific), challenges related to HR were the most frequently cited growth constraint, with similar findings persisting in 2016 (World Economic Forum 2011, 2016). It is emphasised that a company's ability to scale successfully amid characteristics of high growth mainly depends on its ability to attract, manage, encourage, and retain employees (Raby et al. 2024). This perspective reflects a shift in focus from the organisation itself to the employees, as the actual actors responsible for carrying out the scaling process (Genedy et al. 2024). Similarly, Flamholtz and Randle (2016) acknowledge that people drive internal change, which is crucial during growth. Hence, given the centrality of people as both a driver and constraint on high growth, the following section explores in greater depth the key people-related challenges that emerge during scaling.

2.3 Key People-Related Challenges

This thesis builds on the understanding of **people-related challenges as the internal organisational tensions that arise when the demands of high growth exceed the capacity of a firm to adapt and transform the organisation in a way that enables both incumbent and new talent to contribute effectively to the scaling process** (Coviello et al. 2024; DeSantola and Gulati 2017; Greiner 1972, 1997; Jansen et al. 2023; Palmié et al. 2023; Van

Lancker et al. 2022).

According to Palmié et al. (2023), the human aspect of scaling is embedded within the organisational dimension, which encompasses activities, processes, and resources. From this perspective, growth is understood to be constrained mainly by three HR-related factors: capabilities, knowledge, and headcount. Similarly, people-related challenges that recur in a high-growth context range from clarifying roles and decision-making rights to building middle management. Other challenges include hiring quickly amid skill shortages, onboarding at scale, burnout, and retention risks (DeSantola and Gulati 2017; Genedy et al. 2024; Greiner 1972, 1997; Jansen et al. 2023; Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024). Despite the heterogeneity of terminology observed across studies to describe challenges, a pattern of recurring pain points related to the human side emerges (Appendix 1).

Accordingly, the people-related pain points identified in the literature cluster predominantly within the following three dimensions: Leadership, Talent Acquisition, and Employee Retention. These categories are consistent with core HRM functions (i.e., leading, hiring, and retention) and are frequently cited as constraints in HGFs. Thus, the following subsections explore each dimension in detail.

2.3.1 Leadership – Individual Part by Lara Danielle Scheu [not included in this version]

2.3.2 Talent Acquisition

In the context of HGFs, Talent Acquisition broadly refers to the attraction, recruitment, and onboarding of a large workforce to meet the demands of high growth despite limited resources, time constraints, and ongoing transformation (Kotter and Sathe 1978; Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024). Although it is often reduced to recruiting, the term encompasses more than filling vacant positions. As Cappelli and Keller (2014, 306) argue, it represents a strategic effort within talent management focused on “getting the right person in the right job at the right time” (Alashmawy and Yazdanifard 2019; Opada et al. 2024). Accordingly, it covers the initial steps

of the employee lifecycle to ensure a pool of skilled individuals is available and effectively integrated into the organisation to perform (Gladka, Fedorova, and Dohadailo 2022; Koivunen et al. 2023).

Alongside leadership, access to talent and its integration are widely considered to be further key enablers for scaling (Lee 2014; Major, DaSilva, and Urbano 2025; Van Lancker et al. 2023; 2025). As emphasised in the OECD's adopted typology of HGFs (Section 2.1.1), growth in the number of employees is not solely a result, but rather a requirement for organisational growth (OECD 2021). When organisations cannot access the necessary talent, scholars increasingly highlight the risk of placing strain on both the organisation itself and other employees. This has been repeatedly linked to performance risks and the overall threat to the firm's survival (Clough et al. 2018; Gulati and Sawhney 2019; Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024; Van Lancker et al. 2023). Without an inflow of qualified professionals, organisations lack the capabilities required to meet evolving business needs. This results in skill gaps, slower processes, and a mismatch in accountability (Fombrun and Wally 1989; Picken 2017). Consequently, Talent Acquisition represents a central mechanism enabling organisations to add the necessary capacity in terms of people. If it is insufficient, it not only becomes a bottleneck for scaling, but also causes organisational dysfunction. Nevertheless, given the characteristics of high growth, the process introduces its own set of challenges, being most prominently: **1) attracting the required specialised talent, 2) recruiting at speed and scale, and 3) integrating new hires effectively** (Coad et al. 2014; DeSantola, Gulati, and Zhelyazkov 2023; Kotter and Sathe 1978; Lee 2014; Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024; Piaskowska, Tippmann, and Monaghan 2021).

1) As firms scale, the challenge of **attracting the required specialised talent** becomes increasingly apparent. Considering the transformative nature of scaling, the skills needed across the organisation shift. Although start-ups tend to employ generalists, scaling involves greater complexity and requires more specialists due to the emergence of new, specific roles (Greiner

1997; Hoffman 2018; Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024; Piaskowska, Tippmann, and Monaghan 2021; Picken 2017). As HGFs frequently operate in new markets, they often require unique combinations of talents with specific capabilities (Coad et al. 2014; Kotter and Sathe 1978; Piaskowska, Tippmann, and Monaghan 2021). Nevertheless, the attraction of such specialised talent is becoming increasingly challenging. While founders often rely on their social networks in the start-up phase, this approach reaches its limits in terms of capacity and capabilities once firms scale (Leung 2003; Picken 2017). Externally, young entrepreneurial firms operate in competitive labour markets that are strained by talent shortages (Baron, Hannan, and Burton 2001). Moreover, they may encounter shortcomings in attracting talent when compared to well-established companies. Specifically, young and small organisations tend to have weaker legitimacy and fewer resources (Brush, Ceru, and Blackburn 2009; Leung et al. 2006). They are also observed to offer lower wages and fewer benefits than larger firms (Oi and Idson 1999). These disadvantages in attracting talent are often described as the liability of newness and smallness (for details, Leung et al. 2006). Although some employees accept lower salaries in exchange for autonomy and an innovative environment, these conditions tend to fade as organisations scale and move towards more structure and processes (Greiner 1997; Penrose 1995; Picken 2017; Roach and Sauermann 2015; Sauermann 2018). Internally, initial employees may become unsuitable to keep up with the evolving requirements encompassing scaling. The introduction of specialised roles can present challenges for early employees, who may be unable to perform to the required standard. This can result in reassignment or even departure from the company, potentially leaving critical positions temporarily unfilled (DeSantola and Gulati 2017; Galbraith 1982; Gulati and DeSantola 2016; Kotter and Sathe 1978). In turn, this increases the firm's need to attract specialised talent. Still, scaling firms increasingly struggle to do so. This is particularly evident in technical disciplines, as recently evidenced in a study on scale-ups in Germany. If not addressed, the skill gaps reduce a firm's

innovative capacity and weaken its competitive position (Hirschfeld et al. 2024).

2) To prevent people from becoming a bottleneck, scaling necessitates **the rapid recruitment of substantial numbers of new employees** to fill vacant positions. Due to the time pressure associated with high growth, recruitment is often referred to as massive hiring over a short period of time (Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024). These recruitment efforts are described as challenging by scholars for a variety of reasons. As Kotter and Sathe (1978) indicate, HGFs do not have the option of passively awaiting the ideal candidate. This is because such firms face a hiring demand that is five to ten times greater than that of slow-growth companies of equivalent size. Hence, HGFs are forced to adopt a proactive, non-selective approach in their hiring endeavours. With a tendency to hire marginal employees, such as young people or immigrants, who may not be the optimal fit, but satisfy short-term capacity needs (Coad et al. 2014; Lee 2014). Moreover, time constraints on managers hinder thorough candidate assessments and further challenge recruitment (Barringer and Jones 2004; Flamholtz and Randle 2016). However, even with more thorough hiring processes, founders report a 50/50 success rate for senior positions, according to an article by McKinsey & Company (Beerthuis et al. 2024). Collectively, recruitment during scaling can be described as a speed-quality-trade-off, involving the aim of employing rapidly to maintain expansion, but with the risk of poor hiring choices. As challenging as it is, “it is not merely about hiring quickly; it is also about hiring right” (Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024, 11). Consequently, given the potential for suboptimal hiring decisions, firms may encounter team instabilities or misalignments between new employees and organisational needs (Flamholtz and Randle 2016; Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024; Picken 2017). Furthermore, a general mismatch between organisational need and insufficient recruitment can not only limit growth (Rich 1999) but also increase dissatisfaction among existing employees. This is due to increased stress resulting from capacity gaps or the need to compensate for a lack of new employees (Flamholtz and Randle

2016; Kotter and Sathe 1978).

3) Finally, high growth not only challenges recruitment but also the subsequent **onboarding of new joiners** (Gjerløv-Juel and Guenther 2019; Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024). Onboarding refers to the integration of new employees, familiarising them with their role, existing processes, and routines (Kotter and Sathe 1978). Constraints on time and resources, paired with constant change, make it difficult to incorporate new employees into evolving structures, leading to poor onboarding processes (Brush, Ceru, and Blackburn 2009; Kotter and Sathe 1978). Unlike established companies, where new employees tend to be integrated into established teams, HGFs often form entirely new teams with employees who have worked at the company for no more than a year (Greiner 1997; Kotter and Sathe 1978; Picken 2017). An example is provided by the company N26: at times of high growth, new employees were onboarded by colleagues who also recently joined. This illustrates how rapid team expansion can outpace the development of established onboarding procedures (Tayenthal 2021). Moreover, the onboarding of new hires places additional strain on managerial capacity, a primary constraint identified in Penrose's (1995) theory of firm growth. The time and effort spent on integrating new employees distracts managers from other activities, such as developing firm-specific knowledge. This knowledge is said to be crucial for a company's long-term survival (Gjerløv-Juel and Guenther 2019; Hannan and Freeman 1984; Penrose 1995). Consequently, the integration of new hires entails substantial costs (Lockett et al. 2011). If integration does not keep pace with scaling, the continuous inflow of new employees who are unfamiliar with the firm and each other often leads to unclear role divisions. This leads to siloed working practices (Flamholtz and Randle 2016). In organisations where up to half of the workforce consists of recent hires, delayed assimilation can have significant impacts on overall performance, making it a pressing issue (Kotter and Sathe 1978; Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024).

2.3.3 Employee Retention - Individual Part by Lukas Demant [not included in this version]

2.4 HRM in the Context of Scaling

Overall, the comprehensive review of research on Leadership, Talent Acquisition, and Employee Retention reveals that people-related challenges within each dimension represent critical internal tensions. The illustrated impact of these challenges indicates a clear necessity for an effective approach to their management. Accordingly, the subsequent section examines HRM in the context of scaling, thus offering a framework for understanding how such challenges may be addressed. Consequently, Section 2.4.1 examines how this thesis conceptualizes HRM and HRM practices. Subsequently, Section 2.4.2 transfers this general understanding to the specific context of high-growth and scaling firms, thereby finalising the foundation for the subsequent analyses.

2.4.1 Conceptualising HRM and HRM Practices

To comprehend HRM, it is crucial to establish a shared understanding of the term HR, which is commonly used as a synonym for people (Major, DaSilva, and Urbano 2025; Kotter and Sathé 1978). Therefore, HRM can be conceptualised as a coordinated approach to policies, practices, and processes through which organisations acquire, develop, motivate, and retain people to meet the firm's strategic objectives (Armstrong 2006; Boxall and Purcell 2004; Storey 1996). Moreover, HRM is seen as a distinctive way of managing employment that seeks to foster a committed and capable workforce through an integrated set of practices that cover the employee lifecycle, from recruitment to offboarding (Armstrong and Taylor 2014; 2020; Boxall and Purcell 2004; Storey 1996). In this thesis, the definition proposed by Noe et al. (2021, 2) is adopted: **“HRM comprises the policies, practices, and systems that influence employees’ behaviour, attitudes, and performance”**, while treating HRM as a **strategic, integrated approach to employing, developing, and supporting people** (Armstrong and Taylor 2014;

2020). This definition emphasises that HRM is not merely administrative, but a comprehensive management system with different interrelated elements. This corresponds to developments in HRM theory, whereby the role of HRM is increasingly strategic (Van Buren, Greenwood, and Sheehan 2011).

While HRM refers to the overarching strategic system, HRM practices encompass the concrete actions taken by an organisation. In prevailing literature, HRM practices are commonly described as “a set of distinct yet interrelated activities, ... that are directed at attracting, developing and maintaining ... a firm’s human resources” (Lado and Wilson 1994, 701). Therefore, HRM practices are characterized by their operational nature (Gerhart, Wright, and McMahan 2000). Moreover, the literature broadens the understanding of HRM practices by utilising different levels, distinguishing between specific practices forming the lowest level and policies at a higher level that guide and enable their choice, design and implementation (Allen, Bryant, and Vardaman 2010; Collewaert and Jansen 2025; Hausknecht, Rodda, and Howard 2009; Lepak et al. 2006; Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024). **Accordingly, this study employs the term HRM practices to refer to the concrete, people-oriented activities through which organisations operationalise their HRM approach.**

2.4.2 HRM Practices in High-Growth and Scaling Contexts

The literature has discussed HRM practices for decades from different angles, with some scholars examining individual activities while others focus on sets of multiple practices. Due to the variety in content and measurement, there is no universally accepted or consistent list of HRM practices (Boselie, Dietz, and Boon 2005; Paauwe 2009; Wright and Boswell 2002). Attempts are further complicated by the utilisation of disparate labels, including high-performance work practices, best practices (Pfeffer 1998), or formal, sophisticated, and professional sets (Kok 2003). Nevertheless, various approaches exist in the literature for categorising HRM practices. Two prominent logics are the AMO perspective, which groups

practices according to activities that enhance ability, motivation, and opportunity (Jiang et al. 2012), and functional bundles (e.g., recruitment, performance review, training and development, compensation) (for details, Alam et al. 2024). This diversity reflects that the adoption of HRM practices depends strongly on the organisational context.

In the context of HGFs, HRM practices are perceived as key mechanisms to achieve and sustain high growth. Demir, Wennberg, and McKelvie (2017) stress that effective HRM practices moderate the relationship between human capital and firm growth, while Major, DaSilva, and Urbano (2025) further elaborate on HRM practices as a facilitator of scaling, by aligning organisational objectives with the capabilities and motivations of employees. In accordance with this perspective, a body of research recognises the importance of effective HRM practices, positively impacting a company's performance and survival (Genedy et al. 2024; Hambrick and Crozier 1985; Kotter and Sathe 1978; Lopez-Garcia and Puente 2012; Messersmith, Patel, and Crawford 2018). Kotter and Sathe (1978) refer to HRM practices as a way of overcoming people-related challenges. They posit that successful HGFs tend to have a dedicated HRM function that collaborates with other departments to recruit, train, and support their employees, thereby ensuring tailored activities are in place. Extending this reasoning, scholars increasingly argue that HRM practices become crucial at both individual and organisational levels to cope with the challenges encompassing growth (Genedy et al. 2024; Van Lancker et al. 2023; Demir, Wennberg, and McKelvie 2017; Piaskowska, Tippmann, and Monaghan 2021).

However, as previously outlined, the classification of HGFs encompasses a heterogeneous set of organisations (OECD definition in Section 2.1.1), comprising both established companies and scale-ups that experience phases of high growth. Hence, generalised insights on HRM practices derived from HGF research do not account for the distinct conditions inherent in these different types of firms. Accordingly, Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova (2024) and Hornsby and Kuratko (2003) argue that practices evident in established organisations are unlikely to be

transferable to young, entrepreneurial firms in the same manner. Consequently, in contrast to established firms, such organisations are perceived to adopt less formalised and structured HRM practices. This is characterised by the initiation of fewer activities and the subsequent expansion of activities through experimentation, when necessary, as opposed to long-term planning (Genedy et al. 2024; Hamilton and Ng 2025; Hornsby and Kuratko 2003; Koryak and Nicolaou 2016; Leung 2003). Therefore, according to Van Lancker et al. (2022) the adoption of HRM practices in young, entrepreneurial firms depends on mainly three determinants: a) contextual factors (e.g., industry and economic circumstances), b) organisational factors (e.g., size/growth trajectory and availability of resources), and c) individual factors (e.g., the founder's character traits). Consequently, there is a discrepancy in HRM practices across the various types of HGFs, including scale-ups as a subset (Demir, Wennberg, and McKelvie 2017). Despite the existence of general insights on HRM practices in HGFs, extant literature neglects to specify which concrete HRM practices scale-ups apply in practice to address the people-related challenges. This fragmentation constitutes a clear research gap, thereby justifying the subsequent empirical analyses that form the core of this thesis.

3 Conceptual Framework

In the subsequent chapter, the conceptual framework of this thesis is introduced. This framework synthesises the existing knowledge on the research topic, as previously outlined in the literature review (Chapter 2). In line with how the purpose of a conceptual framework is evaluated by scholars, it is defined by Maxwell (1996) as a collection of concepts and ideas that inform one's research. Despite the incorporation of several components derived from extant research, the framework itself has been constructed by the researcher (Maxwell 2012). Thus, it compels selectivity, identifying which components should be integrated as being most meaningful for the following investigation. Furthermore, it is asserted that such frameworks are most effective when presented graphically, rather than textually, to facilitate focus and the

illustration of interconnections (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2014). Accordingly, the ensuing framework description is concise, merely summarising the essential connections.

Synthesising the findings of the literature review, the developed conceptual framework (Figure 2) is built upon the understanding of scale-ups as a specific subset of HGFs (Coad et al. 2014; Fotopoulos 2025; Kauffman Foundation 2017; Monteiro 2019; OECD 2021). For scale-ups, the process of scaling is instrumental in achieving and sustaining high growth, which transforms the internal organisation (Coviello 2019; DeSantola and Gulati 2017; Jansen et al. 2023; Picken 2017). High growth is thus treated as the central outcome and defining attribute of scaling (Coviello et al. 2024; Jansen et al. 2023; Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024; Picken 2017). The conceptual framework further highlights that high growth is characterised by time and resource constraints, as well as continuous change. The literature links these factors to growing pains, particularly people-related challenges (Flamholtz and Randle 2016; Genedy et al. 2024; Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024). Moreover, people-related challenges are conceptualised in three interrelated dimensions that mirror key HRM functions: Leadership, Talent Acquisition, and Employee Retention (Coad et al. 2024; Collewaert and Jansen 2025; DeSantola and Gulati 2017; Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024; Van Lancker et al. 2022). The framework ultimately positions HRM practices as the organisational response: comprising operational activities at the practice level, within these three dimensions. These practices are initiated in response to people-related challenges, thereby facilitating and maintaining high growth (Armstrong and Taylor 2014; Demir, Wennberg, and McKelvie 2017; Major, DaSilva, and Urbano 2025; Noe et al. 2021). By establishing this foundation, the proposed framework provides a basis for subsequent, targeted research and analysis (Imenda 2014; Maxwell 1996; Ravitch and Riggan 2016).

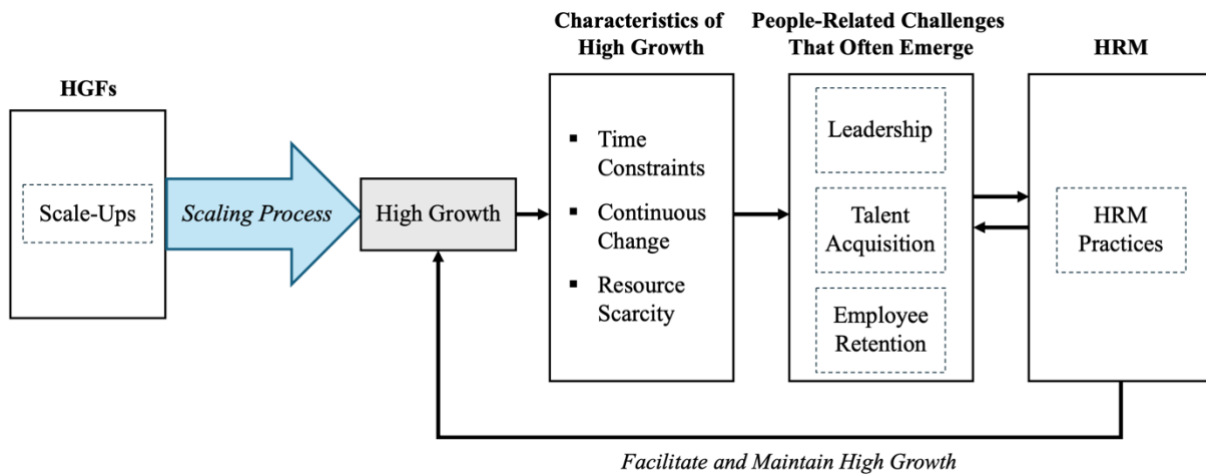


Figure 2 - Conceptual Framework Developed for This Thesis | Source: Own creation

4 Methodology

The methodology outlines the systematic logic that connects the research questions with the method chosen to investigate it, thereby making the research process transparent and reproducible. Because the phenomenon of how scale-ups handle people-related challenges through HRM practices is still under-researched and not easily captured through numerical indicators, this thesis follows a qualitative, largely inductive approach. This approach focuses on meanings, experiences, and interpretations rather than statistical relationships (Corbin and Strauss 2015; Mayring 2001; Taylor and Bogdan 1998). The subsequent section explains the qualitative, exploratory research design, the utilisation of systematic expert interviews as the primary instrument, and the procedure for data collection and analysis.

4.1 Research Design

The aim of this study is to understand how scale-ups address people-related challenges through HRM practices. As the literature review has shown, HRM in high-growth contexts, particularly in scale-ups, is still under-explored. It is characterised by fragmented findings and the absence of a consolidated set of practices. Against this backdrop, the study employs a qualitative, exploratory research design (Flick, von Kardorff, and Steinke 2004) rather than testing pre-defined hypotheses. The research design centres on reconstructing how organisational actors in

scale-ups perceive and tackle people-related challenges through HRM practices.

Qualitative research encompasses a range of procedures, with the aim of understanding complex social processes in their everyday context (Flick, von Kardorff, and Steinke 2004; Kallio et al. 2016). The emphasis is on how actors themselves experience and interpret their situation, rather than on forcing data into rigid, pre-formulated categories (Patton 2010). Such an approach is particularly suitable in business and organisational research, where behaviour and decision-making are strongly shaped by subjective interpretations and contextual dependency (Flick, von Kardorff, and Steinke 2004). As Wilson (1970) notes, qualitative research methods are characterised by their openness and engagement, making them well-suited for a dynamic and evolving context, such as surrounding scale-ups. Another strength lies in their emergent design, which enables researchers to respond flexibly to new themes and insights that emerge during the research process (Flick, von Kardorff, and Steinke 2004). This thesis employs a qualitative, inductive approach, thereby enabling an examination of both HRM practices and the underlying organisational logics, informal routines, and interpretations. By analysing how founders and HR professionals describe and justify their approaches, the study develops a context-sensitive account of how scale-ups deal with people-related challenges.

Expert interviews are a commonly applied method of data collection in qualitative research (Bogner, Littig, and Menz 2009). As a field-specific form of qualitative research, they are particularly suited to generating and analysing information that is not publicly available and often resides internally within an organisation (Kruse 2015). Such domain-specific organisational knowledge is typically proprietary and requires direct access to experts who possess it (Bogner, Littig, and Menz 2009; Kaiser 2021). Therefore, expert interviews were selected as the most suitable research instrument for this study, as they enable the elicitation of in-depth insights from professionals. This method provides access to context-specific knowledge that cannot be obtained through quantitative approaches. In this study, the term

expert is defined as an individual who possesses role-specific knowledge relevant to the research interest and demonstrates substantial competence within that domain. They hold positions that grant access to processes and decision structures, enabling them to autonomously apply their knowledge, thereby shaping organisational practice (Bogner, Littig, and Menz 2002; Helfferich 2022; Kaiser 2014; Kruse 2015; Libakova and Sertakova 2015). Building on this rationale, experts provide a credible source of empirical insight, as their professional competence enhances the reliability of the data collected (Dorussen, Lenz, and Blavoukos 2005). Extending this reasoning, Pfadenhauer (2009) notes that expert interviews constitute a targeted and insightful method for generating high-quality, contextually rich empirical data. To further specify this study's methodological approach, the following section outlines the specific form and level of structuring applied in the interviews.

Following the typology proposed by Bogner, Littig, and Menz (2002), this study employs the systematising form of expert interviews, which is designed to collect structured, practice-based knowledge from professionals on well-defined aspects of the research topic. While the degree of structuring and openness may vary depending on the research objective and the studied phenomenon (Bogner, Littig, and Menz 2009), this study applies a semi-structured approach. The use of an interview guide (Appendices 4 and 5) ensures comparability across interviews, while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on context-specific experiences (Helfferich 2022).

4.2 Data Collection

In the context of semi-structured interviews, an interview guide (Appendices 4 and 5) is a systematic, pre-arranged structure outlining the flow of the conversation (Helfferich 2022). The primary function of the guide is to provide orientation for the interviewer while simultaneously avoiding any restriction of the natural flow of dialogue. Consequently, interviewers are encouraged to deviate from the guide, when necessary, to explore relevant topics in greater

depth (Niebert and Gropengießer 2014). According to Helfferich (2022), the formulation of an interview guide is contingent upon three requirements: clarity, openness, and alignment with the narrative flow. In this thesis, clarity was achieved through concise and unambiguous questions as well as a limited number of items per thematic block. Openness was ensured by beginning with broad, non-leading questions about people-related challenges and HRM practices before introducing the research themes derived from the literature (Helfferich 2022). Alignment with the narrative flow was maintained by progressing from general background questions to the three core dimensions of Leadership, Talent Acquisition, and Employee Retention, with smooth transitions ensuring coherence and conversational flexibility (Helfferich 2022, Niebert and Gropengießer 2014). To support the conceptual development and practical implementation of these requirements, the SPSS model proposed by Helfferich (2022) was applied. SPSS is an acronym for the process of collecting, checking, sorting, and subsuming questions. This model served as a step-by-step guide for constructing coherent interview guides, which were designed differently for professionals working in scale-ups and for external mentors, as shown in Appendices 4 and 5.

The study relies on purposeful sampling to identify cases that fall within the guiding definition of scale-ups (Appendix 6), developed in Section 2.1.1 (Creswell and Plano Clark 2018; Patton 2010). Purposeful sampling is most appropriate when the intention is to extract as much insight as possible from a limited number of cases. However, it may increase the risk of bias and therefore requires careful reflection (Stratton 2024). At the organisational level, firms were selected if they met the scale-up criteria, given the definition in terms of growth, size, and age. These criteria capture firms that have achieved high growth, but they do not imply that existing organisational features are already sufficient to sustain this growth. At the individual level, the sample included actors directly involved in shaping HRM practices within scale-ups: founders, CEOs, and internal HR professionals, as well as external mentors. To capture a wide range of

perspectives, the sample was intentionally heterogeneous (Appendix 6) (Merkens 2003).

Participants for the interviews were recruited via LinkedIn, e-mail, and personal contacts, based on the inclusion criteria outlined above. In several instances, initial interviews recommended further suitable experts, thereby supporting access to additional scale-ups through elements of snowball sampling (Ting et al. 2025). As a result, a total of 24 experts, including 19 representatives from scale-ups and 5 mentors, were interviewed (Appendix 6). Once an expert agreed to participate, they received a calendar Microsoft Teams invitation containing a brief description of the study. At the start of each interview, the researcher introduced themselves and outlined the aim of the study and the structure of the conversation. They also clarified any key terms that needed further explanation. The semi-structured interview guide provided the central structure for the discussion, while the sequencing of questions was adjusted in line with the flow of the conversation. The interviews were scheduled for a maximum of 45 minutes and were conducted in English. Each participant was informed about confidentiality, voluntary participation, and their right to discontinue at any time. Explicit consent was obtained for video and audio recording, as well as for the use of anonymised quotations in the thesis.

All interviews were transcribed shortly after the conversation, using the transcription function in MAXQDA, and then carefully checked and corrected manually. The transcripts follow a content-oriented, near-verbatim style. Wording is retained as precisely as possible, while filler sounds, long pauses, and obvious speech errors are omitted, in line with common recommendations for qualitative interview transcription (Dresing and Pehl 2018; Gläser and Laudel 2010). To protect the privacy of the participants, all personal names and company identifiers were replaced with pseudonyms during the transcription process. For reasons of readability and scope, the complete transcripts have been omitted from the thesis and can be made available upon request.

4.3 Data Analysis

The empirical material was examined using the structuring qualitative content analysis proposed by Kuckartz (2018) (Appendix 7). This method provides a systematic approach for interpreting qualitative textual data and for developing categories that allow the data to be meaningfully organised and evaluated. It integrates both deductive and inductive logics of category formation, which enables the analysis to incorporate theoretical expectations, as well as novel insights emerging from the material itself (Kuckartz 2018; Kiefer 2024). Among the types of content analysis distinguished by Kuckartz (2018), namely typifying, evaluative, and structuring, the structuring approach was chosen. This approach aims to comprehensively represent the entire dataset and to provide a transparent and replicable procedure for identifying central themes and patterns. Hence, the chosen analytical procedure is particularly appropriate for the objective of this study, which requires a systematic yet flexible method to interpret expert interview data and relate the findings coherently to the research questions.

The coding process followed the seven phases of the structured qualitative content analysis described by Kuckartz (2018). In the first phase, the text was explored to identify central themes relevant to the research questions. Key passages were marked, and initial reflections and interpretations were documented in analytic memos to guide subsequent steps (Kiefer 2024). In the second phase, thematic main categories were developed to structure the material into coherent and interpretable segments. This process combined deductive and inductive reasoning to ensure that relevant and distinctive aspects of the data were captured. Each category was defined and described in a coding guideline (Appendix 9) that established clear boundaries for the coding process (Kuckartz 2018; Kiefer 2024). The third phase initiated the first coding cycle, during which the data were assigned to the established main categories. In line with methodological recommendations for context-sensitive interpretation, cross-cutting themes were coded within the domain in which they appeared, thereby avoiding decontextualisation of

meaning (Schreier 2012; Schreier 2014; Stamann 2025). Text segments can belong to more than one category when conceptually appropriate (Kuckartz 2018). Therefore, subsequently, all text segments within the same category were compiled and refined, allowing for a more differentiated understanding of the material. The fifth phase focused on the inductive formation of subcategories that specified and extended the main categories. Building on these results, the sixth phase comprised a second coding cycle, in which the entire material was reviewed once more to ensure internal consistency and analytical precision (Kiefer 2024). Finally, the coded material was systematically analysed and summarised to answer the research questions. Given the scope of this study, the data were evaluated exclusively on a categorical basis (Kuckartz 2018).

5 Results & Discussion

The present chapter outlines the results of the data analysis, given the adopted coding system (Appendix 8) and developed coding guideline (Appendix 9). The coding system is divided into four main categories: Characteristics of High-Growth, Leadership, Talent Acquisition, and Employee Retention. These categories were informed by relevant literature (Chapter 2) and further refined through the coding of the interview data. Ultimately, this resulted in a total of eight subcategories. Thus, this chapter is organised into two parts. The first section of this chapter presents findings related to the characteristics of high growth overall. It describes the contextual conditions in which people-related challenges and HRM practices emerge in scale-ups. As these characteristics provide the contextual foundation for all subsequent analyses, this section remains primarily descriptive. Consequently, the implications of these findings are addressed separately in the joint discussion (Chapter 6).

The following sections focus specifically on the other three main categories of Leadership, Talent Acquisition, and Employee Retention. The most prevalent people-related challenges and corresponding practices for each category are outlined. Subsequently, the findings are discussed

and linked back to existing research. In line with this approach, each category provides detailed answers to the sub-research questions outlined in Section 1: “What are the key people-related challenges faced by scale-ups?” and “Which HRM practices are applied to address these challenges?” Collectively, these findings inform the synthesis of all categories presented in the joint discussion of this thesis.

5.1 Characteristics of High Growth

Throughout the interviews, the experts highlight a few recurring factors that characterise the context in which scale-ups operate. Most interviewees note that their situation is influenced by limited resources, speed, volatility, time pressure, and ongoing change (E1, E3, E4, E5, E10, E15, E16, E17, E21, E22). Several interviewees further describe their situation during scaling as “chaos” (E1, E2, E17). In addition, E2 defines this state as constant “firefighting”. Requirements shift continuously, which leads to persistent adjustments (E12, E8). In addition, E15 notes that structured planning is difficult because “speed is more important.” Moreover, E3 states: “People always say they do not have time. They are, of course, stressed”. One expert emphasises that processes, culture, and leadership structures do not scale at the same pace as the organisation, making parallel activities unavoidable (E17). Experts reference “limited budget” (E5), “resource scarcity” (E4), “you obviously can’t throw money around” (E16), and “we are not liquid” (E21). Finally, E10 provides a concise characterisation of the organisational context, referring to a “strong impact of limited resources, pressure due to time constraints, and regular changes.”

Hence, several experts explicitly link characteristics of high growth to general people-related challenges. Specifically, they describe them as contextual factors under which such challenges arise. For instance, interviewees report that limited resources and constant time pressure create strain on employees. Many tasks must be handled simultaneously and under high urgency (E3, E4, E5, E11, E16, E20). At the same time, several experts report that high speed and volatility

amplify errors, misunderstandings, and instability because processes are incomplete and frequently changing (E1, E8, E12, E17). Building on this, friction within teams arises when priorities shift rapidly, and expectations remain unclear (E3, E4, E17, E23). In this context, experts claim that “leadership faces heightened pressure” (E14), as leaders must make “rapid decisions” while “simultaneously maintaining cohesion within teams” (E23). Moreover, they imply that time pressure and resource scarcity also affect recruiting. Requirements evolve quickly while budgets and tools remain limited, which restricts the ability to reach or assess candidates effectively (E8, E16, E21, E22).

Beyond these general links to people-related challenges, interviewees also associate the outlined characteristics with difficulties in the implementation of HRM practices. In this context, experts describe HRM practices as intuitive, reactive, and driven by immediate needs rather than long-term strategy (E2, E4, E5, E14). E14 points out that HRM practices are implemented “just to keep things running, since we are in that firefighting mode.” Experts further describe their practices as “trial and error” (E8, E14, E17). Similarly, E9 describes HRM practices as activities “you can build as you go.” Moreover, experts mention that resource constraints require prioritisation of practices (E10, E11, E12, E22). This is illustrated by statements such as: “I do not have ten thousand euros to spend on LinkedIn ads like larger companies do” (E12) or “... given our resources, we need to start somewhere, we cannot expect to adopt a full set of new, somehow required practices at the same time” (E1). They also note that HRM practices tend to be deprioritised, which restricts the ability to build foundational structures (E1, E4, E20). One expert adds that practices are only implemented once problems become visible, for example, “when employees start leaving,” at which point “it is often already too late” (E20). Against this backdrop, the following sections outline people-related challenges and corresponding HRM practices in the main categories of Leadership, Talent Acquisition, and Employee Retention.

5.2 Leadership - Individual Part by Lara Danielle Scheu [not included in this version]

5.3 Talent Acquisition

Another relevant main category in the coding system is Talent Acquisition. A total of 314 interview segments were assigned to this category. These segments are divided between the following three defined subcategories: Talent Attraction (85 segments), Recruitment (146 segments), and Onboarding & New Hire Integration (83 segments).

5.3.1 Key Challenges and HRM Practices

Talent Attraction: Talent Attraction in scale-ups refers to generating interest among talent, establishing visibility, and encouraging individuals to apply. Interviewees mention that conditions such as limited visibility (E20, E2, E22) and comparably lower compensation levels (E2, E21), alongside a tight and competitive labour market (E21, E19, E8), make it challenging to attract suitable candidates. E2, E19, and E22 note that, due to limited resources, scale-ups cannot provide the same compensation packages as those offered by established companies and therefore “usually can’t compete regarding wages” (E2). Experts describe the labour market as tight and highly competitive (E2, E19, E21, E8), with some pointing to difficulties in attracting specific profiles, particularly in sales and technical roles (E12, E13, E21). One interviewee highlights that requirement profiles and candidates on the market “often no longer really match” (E12). Another expert observes a shift “from a candidate-driven market to an employer-driven one”, while at the same time noting increasing difficulties in attracting qualified inbound applications (E9). Moreover, E21 states they “never rely on inbound applications”. With E2 referring to the fact that the market is “so tight”, “traditional job postings simply don’t deliver” (E2). Across the interviews, experts refer to multiple HRM practices that they utilise to mitigate these constraints and attract talent. According to E2, they “rely heavily on active sourcing”, while other interviewees similarly highlight such efforts, including direct outreach via LinkedIn and cold calling (E21, E8, E16, E6, E1). These activities are supported by tools such as a

multiposting function on targeted job sites (E16, E20, E12) as well as "performance and social recruiting" on platforms such as TikTok. Thereby, E18 stresses the value of ads directing candidates to simplified application funnels, consisting of only a short form. Other scale-ups try to fill these gaps by sourcing talent in other countries (E19, E20), with one expert noting that they aim to tap into "the largest possible talent pool", including people abroad (E9). Additionally, interviewees mention practices that built on networks, including referrals (E21, E23, E16, E12), as well as building partnerships with universities or local job agencies to reach candidates (E4, E10, E21, E24). Finally, several interviewees cite their working conditions as part of their approach to Talent Attraction (E9, E16, E4, E11). For instance, experts refer to flexibility in terms of location (E9, E4) and working hours (E11), with E16 mentioning remote work as "key benefit many candidates value." E2 notes they "focus on benefits, convincing ... to join even if they earn 100€ less", while others emphasise a work environment characterised by trust and opportunities for learning and development (E11, E8, E4), alongside equity options (E9, E4).

Recruitment: Recruitment encompasses the subsequent steps to decide whom to hire from the pool of candidates who have applied. Experts refer to challenges given increasing hiring volumes with limited internal capacity (E9, E7), while accompanying the need to proceed quickly (E24, E15). In addition, different interviewees refer to difficulties in ensuring the quality and right fit of hiring decisions during scaling (E17, E15, E7, E2). As increasing hiring volumes and limited internal resources create bottlenecks (E9, E7), experts stress a process and capacity overload (E18, E9, E2, E14, E3). The restricted availability of hiring managers is referred to by E18, who must conduct interviews alongside their other tasks. E2 reports overloaded recruiters, describing team members as "extremely busy". Increasing hiring volumes also adds complexity, as E14 emphasises, the "level of complexity that comes with hiring so many people in relation to the number you already have". To address these tensions,

scale-ups report the following practices: shortening recruitment cycles (E11, E24, E12), prospective planning when specific roles need to be filled (E20), and distributing the workload by involving relevant departments to avoid overloading individual managers (E20). To compensate for an insufficient internal capacity, E10 reports incorporating external partners (e.g., external recruitment agencies) to take over. Other practices include the use of HR software, such as Personio (E16), automation and AI-based assistance (E8, E14, E7), and interview training across the whole organisation to expand capacity (E9). Moreover, according to E3, the introduction of gradations helps to distribute workloads. Within the recruitment process, interviewees describe ensuring the quality and fit of hiring decisions as challenging due to unclear role requirements (E17) and an initially unstructured process (E1, E17, E2). E17 claims that there was “no defined set of criteria, no comparability, no quality assurance”, which led to hiring mistakes. E1 further illustrates an unstructured procedure, with each manager “had their own way of doing things.” With E7 stressing the need to “not just fill a role, but fill it with the right person”, while E2 notes that quick hiring decisions lead to mismatches identified only after probation. Across most interviews, experts refer to the introduction of a standardised, multi-stage recruitment process during scaling. Interviewees describe initial screening steps that include CV and motivation checks (E24, E8), and cultural-fit and online assessments testing different capabilities, with the help of external platforms (E9). To achieve more consistent evaluations, E20 emphasises the importance of “sharpening role profiles”, while E17 and E15 mention the use of defined selection criteria that focus on “hard facts I can check” (E17). According to E14, the screening of applicants is further supported by AI-based tools. The subsequent steps consist of several interview rounds combining cultural, technical, and case-based assessments (E24, E22, E16, E9), with cultural fit often being assessed first (E24, E22, E16, E9). Role-specific adaptations are pointed out by E11, including different sequences for technical or non-technical positions. Across the interviews, candidates are assessed by multiple

people (E24, E21, E16, E8, E7, E5, E3). Reference checks form another part of the process (E16, E7). Following the interviews, E9 mentions debriefing routines to collect feedback from everyone involved to make a backed-up hiring decision.

Onboarding & New Hire Integration: Once a candidate has been hired, onboarding refers to integrating them into the scale-up so that they can become effective in their role. Experts report challenges given the emergence of completely new roles without internal expertise to rely on (E4, E14, E8), or stemming from missing onboarding processes (E2, E1, E10). E14 illustrates a case in which the newly created role of a CTO, whose position had not previously existed, offered no internal reference points, describing: “He basically had to onboard himself.” Similarly, E4 acknowledges the difficulty of setting up an onboarding for a role that the founders themselves do not fully understand. E8 adds that, as teams expand, scale-ups often lack individuals who have been around long enough to train new employees. Other interviewees refer to onboarding practices that consist only of “observe, help out a bit, and that’s it” (E2), or highlight the initial absence of a consistent general processes that lead to delays or mistakes (E1). Considering these tensions, specialists mention several HRM practices being introduced to facilitate onboarding. E4 specifies the involvement of external or temporary managers (e.g., participating in Entrepreneur in Residence programs), who “temporarily join the company, explain processes, and help carry out the onboarding”. Others point to standardised onboarding plans to ensure basic steps are covered (E23, E16, E14, E5), checklists (E2), or internal knowledge repositories that offer guidance for new employees (E10). Additional support activities for new employees include buddy or mentor formats (E24, E21, E16, E14, E5), and HR-led or department-specific onboarding sessions (E16). Within the interviews, different training sequences are reported, including role-specific (E21, E16) and culturally focused sessions (E22, E9). E3 relies on fixed start dates for new employees per month, as well as according to E9 and E24 preboarding elements, such as early, informal meetings or events.

Further practices include automated onboarding messages, guiding new employees through the process (E1), and goal sheets defining objectives for the first months (E16). Finally, several interviewees mention feedback procedures throughout onboarding, including check-ins (E20, E22), surveys (E11), and self-reflections (E9). Thereby, according to E9, including perspectives from both new employees and other colleagues, offering a “360° perspective”.

5.3.2 Discussion of Findings

Talent Attraction: The interviews reveal that scale-ups not only struggle to attract talent due to external labour market conditions but also because of limited visibility in the talent market and less competitive employment offers. Experts repeatedly compare their firms to established companies that can offer higher compensation or a more comprehensive set of benefits, which makes it harder to attract strong candidates. Overall, the challenge appears to relate less to the number of applications than to the fit and quality of talent who consider joining a scale-up. These findings are in line with prior research on HGFs as discussed in Section 2.3.2, which primarily emphasises the difficulty of attracting specialised talent as role complexity increases during scaling (Coad et al., 2014; Kotter & Sathe, 1978; Piaskowska et al., 2021). Moreover, they refine this perspective by suggesting that the challenge lies not in skill scarcity alone, but in scale-ups’ relative shortcomings compared to established companies, especially regarding their attractiveness. This pattern can be interpreted as a manifestation of the liability of newness and smallness, whereby uncertainty, resource scarcity, and a limited organisational legitimacy constrain the ability of young firms to attract talent, ultimately affecting their HRM practices (Leung et al. 2006).

Consequently, the interviewed scale-ups rely on specific HRM practices that can be grouped into three clusters. **1)** First, scale-ups rely on **proactive multi-channel sourcing**, thereby translating the need for proactivity in high-growth contexts into HRM practices (Kotter and Sathe 1976). Rather than depending on inbound applications, they adopt outbound efforts

across different channels that aim to generate an inflow of suitable candidates. In several cases, this also involves extending their search logic to include international talent pools. This resonates with a recent survey on scale-ups in Germany, whereby almost 50% of employees across entities are foreigners (Hirschfeld et al. 2024). **2) Second, network- and referral-based talent access** illustrates that scale-ups both mobilise social ties (e.g., employee referrals) and institutional relationships (e.g., university partnerships) to reach specific talent pools. This approach aligns with former research illustrating that HRM practices often remain network-based but shift from mainly personal to an increasing focus on business networks as firms move beyond the start-up into the growth phase (Picken 2017, Leung 2003; Leung et al. 2006). **3) Finally, HRM practices cluster around benefits beyond salary.** As scale-ups often cannot offer the salaries of established firms, they try to increase their attractiveness through other aspects. They foster flexible working arrangements, learning and development opportunities, and, in some cases, equity options that do not put immediate strain on cash flow. This is consistent with evidence that employees who decide to work in entrepreneurial firms place less emphasis on salary and more on independence and responsibility than those in established companies (Sauermann 2018). However, other practices required during scaling, such as adding management layers or clarifying roles (see Section 5.2 on Leadership; Picken 2017), tend to reduce such autonomy and flexibility, indicating trade-offs between practices across dimensions.

Recruitment: As a result of the interviews, two main challenges were identified in terms of recruitment. Firstly, the increasing number of vacancies, coupled with limited internal resources, is leading to capacity issues. The experts indicate that recruiters are experiencing high workloads while facing demands to fill positions in a timely manner. The present sample thus validates the necessity outlined in the literature to manage phases of massive hiring to maintain high growth (Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024), in which HGFs must cope with

higher recruitment needs than slow-growing companies (Kotter and Sathe 1978). Secondly, the findings show that another key challenge in recruitment is ensuring the quality and fit of hires. The experts mention that difficulties in ensuring quality are related to time pressure. However, in the sample, these difficulties are more linked to internal deficits: role requirements are vague, evaluation criteria are not specified, and the process is handled inconsistently. While prior research mainly links poor hiring decisions during high growth to time pressure (Barringer and Jones 2004; Flamholtz and Randle 2016; Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024), the interviews instead highlight internal conditions in scale-ups as a challenge to overcome.

In response, the data illustrate two main bundles of HRM practices in recruitment. **1)** To address capacity bottlenecks, scale-ups rely on practices that **enhance their recruitment capacity**. This involves streamlining existing recruitment processes, planning essential hires in advance, and involving departments more closely in selection and interview tasks, thereby distributing the workload. Moreover, the implementation of basic digital systems, incorporating initial automation and AI solutions, serves to reduce screening and coordination efforts. It is remarkable that only one expert referenced the involvement of external partners to expand capacities. These observed practices can therefore be seen as consistent with the assumption of Van Lancker et al. (2022) (Section 2.4.2), according to which the implementation of HRM practices in young, entrepreneurial firms is influenced by the availability of resources. Scale-ups tend to rely on comparatively less resource-intensive adjustments and solutions in recruitment, rather than costly practices such as expanding HR teams. **2)** Next, the interviews show that scale-ups increasingly focus on the **standardisation and professionalisation** of the overall process to ensure the quality of hiring decisions. Scale-ups are gradually professionalising previously informal and manager-specific activities during recruitment. Specifically, this includes refining role profiles, defining selection criteria, and introducing standardised, multi-stage selection processes. The collected data reveal that the core of the

processes consists of several rounds of interviews, which typically examine professional and personal elements. It is evident that the initial interviews are often focused on assessing cultural fit. This is achieved by presenting the company and other elements, such as its values, and by asking questions to assess whether the candidate would fit into the environment. Such practices mitigate the tendency, described in broader HGF research, to recruit less selectively under time pressure, and consequently hire marginal employees (Coad et al. 2014; Lee 2014). At the same time, the observed standardisation can be interpreted as an expression of professionalisation, which is often associated with scaling (Greiner 1997; Picken 2017). However, in this context, this professionalisation manifests specifically in different HRM practices that structure the overall recruitment process.

Onboarding & New Hire Integration: The interviews demonstrate that onboarding and the integration of new employees in scale-ups are a considerable challenge, mainly for two reasons. First, as already described in broader HGF research, it is apparent that new employees are often integrated into structures that are still being developed (Brush, Ceru, and Blackburn 2009; Kotter and Sathe 1978). This means that processes, roles, and responsibilities have not yet been fully defined or assigned. It is shown by our data that the main challenge lies in the fact that new roles are being created faster than knowledge about how to onboard them properly can be built up internally. Secondly, our findings confirm that onboarding is often made more difficult by a low base of experienced employees (Kotter and Sathe 1978; Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024), who can take over onboarding. Ultimately, the interviews indicate that onboarding often remains informal, highly dependent on individuals, and inconsistent in its process.

To address these challenges, the experts mention that scale-ups implement a range of HRM practices that can be grouped into three clusters. **1)** In line with recruitment, the results show that scale-ups rely on gradual **standardisation and professionalisation** of the onboarding process. Specifically, they imply simple, repeatable structures. For instance, these include basic

onboarding plans, checklists, bundled start dates, and central knowledge bases for accessing relevant information. Although roles and processes are still being established and are likely to change over time, as evidenced during high growth (Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024), these practices aim to establish a minimum level of consistency in the integration of new employees.

2) Next, the data provides practices that indicate **external support** and **feedback-driven improvement of onboarding**. On the one hand, scale-ups have external, experienced managers temporarily take over onboarding on a voluntary basis. Such practices address both the shortage of experienced employees and the burden on internal managers, which Penrose (1995) highlights as the main obstacle to further growth. On the other hand, experts emphasise practices such as regular check-ins and feedback loops involving opinions from new and existing employees. Thus, in line with the process-oriented perspective on scaling (Coviello 2024), onboarding is treated as a process that is refined throughout as the scale-up grows. 3) Additionally, the data illustrates that scale-ups not only strengthen role-related onboarding but also focus on **social and cultural integration**. For instance, scale-ups assign a designated contact person to new employees and supplement formal information with team-specific introductions. These practices can be interpreted as an attempt to provide guidance to new employees even in an environment where roles are still subject to change. Therefore, it is evident that onboarding in scale-ups involves more than simply passing on information. It also encompasses different practices that address the risk of cultural fragmentation, as mentioned in the literature during high growth (Bohan and Levie 2025).

Overall, the results show that Talent Acquisition in scale-ups is shaped by people-related challenges throughout the entire process, from the attraction to the integration of new employees. These challenges mainly emerge as scale-ups must expand their workforce faster than their capacities, structures, and processes can adapt. This is especially visible in overloaded, initially unstructured recruitment and onboarding approaches. In response, scale-

ups rely on different HRM practices that broaden access to suitable talent, professionalise steps in the recruitment and onboarding process, and often make use of external and digital support to cope with increasing complexity. Taken together, Talent Acquisition in scale-ups can be described as a balancing act: firms must attract, recruit, and integrate talent fast enough to sustain high growth, despite limited resources. At the same time, processes are being professionalised while retaining the flexibility required to respond to ongoing changes.

5.4 Employee Retention - Individual Part by Lukas Demant [not included in this version]

6 Joint Discussion

Building on the individual findings presented in Chapter 5, this chapter collectively discusses the results. The theoretical contributions of this research are therefore discussed in relation to three key insights identified in the observed cases. Furthermore, the initial conceptual framework presented in Chapter 3 is refined by integrating these insights with the more detailed findings from each dimension. Based on this, managerial implications are derived. Finally, the limitations encountered and opportunities for future research are outlined.

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

Key Insight 1 – Contextual factors in scale-ups have a dual effect: they give rise to people-related challenges and influence how HRM practices are implemented.

Across the interviews, the contextual factors experienced in scale-ups, such as constraints on resources, time pressure, and continuous change, indicate a dual effect. On the one hand, these factors lead to the emergence of people-related challenges. For instance, work overload, coordination issues, or unstructured onboarding approaches. This is in line with research pointing to conditions labelled as characteristics of high growth as drivers of challenges in scale-ups (Genedy et al. 2024; Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024). On the other hand, our data indicate that the same conditions influence the design and implementation of HRM

practices. The outlined conditions not only reveal the need for specific HRM practices. At the same time, they also influence their adoption. For instance, given budget constraints and limited time, scale-ups can only implement certain practices. Specifically, experts repeatedly refer to prioritising those that address the most pressing challenges or address several tensions at once. This can make the adoption and further development of HRM practices particularly challenging. These findings nuance existing research. Taken together, these insights complement our previously developed conceptual framework (Chapter 3) by suggesting that contextual factors not only lead to the emergence of people-related challenges but also shape and challenge the implementation of corresponding HRM practices.

Key Insight 2 – The dimensions of Leadership, Talent Acquisition, and Employee Retention are interconnected, can be mutually reinforcing, or involve trade-offs.

The interviews suggest that people-related challenges in scale-ups are interconnected rather than being isolated tensions of Leadership, Talent Acquisition, and Employee Retention. On the one hand, unaddressed challenges in one dimension quickly spill over into the others. Unclear structures and stressed leaders, for instance, slow down the recruitment process and delay onboarding. Bottlenecks in recruitment capacity and processes put pressure on existing teams and make it harder to maintain a stable organisational culture. Ineffective onboarding increases turnover, which puts further strain on Leadership and Talent Acquisition. Taken together, the data illustrate how these interdependencies can create a vicious cycle for scale-ups: poor staffing, high job demands, stress, and overload mutually reinforce each other. These findings align with prior research on the cumulative growing pains in systems, processes, and structures (DeSantola and Gulati 2017; Flamholtz and Randle 2012; Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024). As Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova (2024) highlight, the interconnectedness of such challenges makes them especially difficult to address in isolation, thereby complicating the implementation of effective HRM practices. This interconnectedness also manifests as

trade-offs between HRM practices. For instance, when added leadership layers improve coordination, but simultaneously reduce flexibility. At the same time, interviewees describe how these interdependencies can function as a virtuous cycle when effective HRM practices are in place. For example, well-designed and structured onboarding practices support faster integration of new employees and, over time, contribute to lower turnover and a stable culture. Overall, the findings stress that people-related challenges and HRM practices in Leadership, Talent Acquisition, and Employee Retention in scale-ups are closely interconnected, highlighting the need for integrated rather than isolated HRM practices.

Key Insight 3 – HRM practices in scale-ups are informal and need-based at first and are gradually professionalised, trying to balance agility and structure.

Across the three dimensions, the interviews show similar patterns in how HRM practices are set up and developed over time. HRM practices are often more informal and experimental, emerging in response to immediate needs, and are shaped by a trade-off between agility and structure. In terms of their initial setup, many scale-ups start with informal practices, such as founder networks, personal check-ins, and team rituals. Formal practices, such as leadership principles, job levels, structured recruiting steps, and review cycles, are further added step by step through trial and error and refinement. Moving from an informal to a fully professionalised approach is not something that happens overnight. While almost all interviewed scale-ups already have a dedicated HRM function in place, the adoption and development of HRM practices is an ongoing process that depends on priorities and the availability of resources. In addition, the data reveal that HRM practices are often built as you go. This means that HRM practices are often introduced reactively and in response to observed problems. For instance, additional layers and clearer roles are introduced once overload becomes visible. Recruitment processes become more standardised following unsuccessful hires. Onboarding tools are developed in response to integration issues or early turnover. Retention measures, such as pulse

checks or exit interviews, are typically introduced reactively following visible strain. Over time, this results in more professional structures. However, interviewees emphasise that there is always a question of how much structure is useful. Insufficient structure can result in firefighting, capacity constraints in recruitment or onboarding, and consequently higher rates of mis-hires, staff turnover, and cultural clashes. Having too much structure can result in a loss of speed and flexibility, both of which are said to be crucial for scaling (Tippmann, Monaghan, and Reuber 2023b). The findings indicate that scale-ups adopt context-specific HRM practices, rather than relying on a predefined set of HRM practices. Overall, this supports the idea that HRM practices are best suited to individual circumstances rather than being implemented based on best practice (Boselie, Dietz, and Boon 2005; Paauwe, 2009). Building on the three key insights and the individual analyses (Sections 5.2 to 5.4), Figure 3 presents the refined framework.

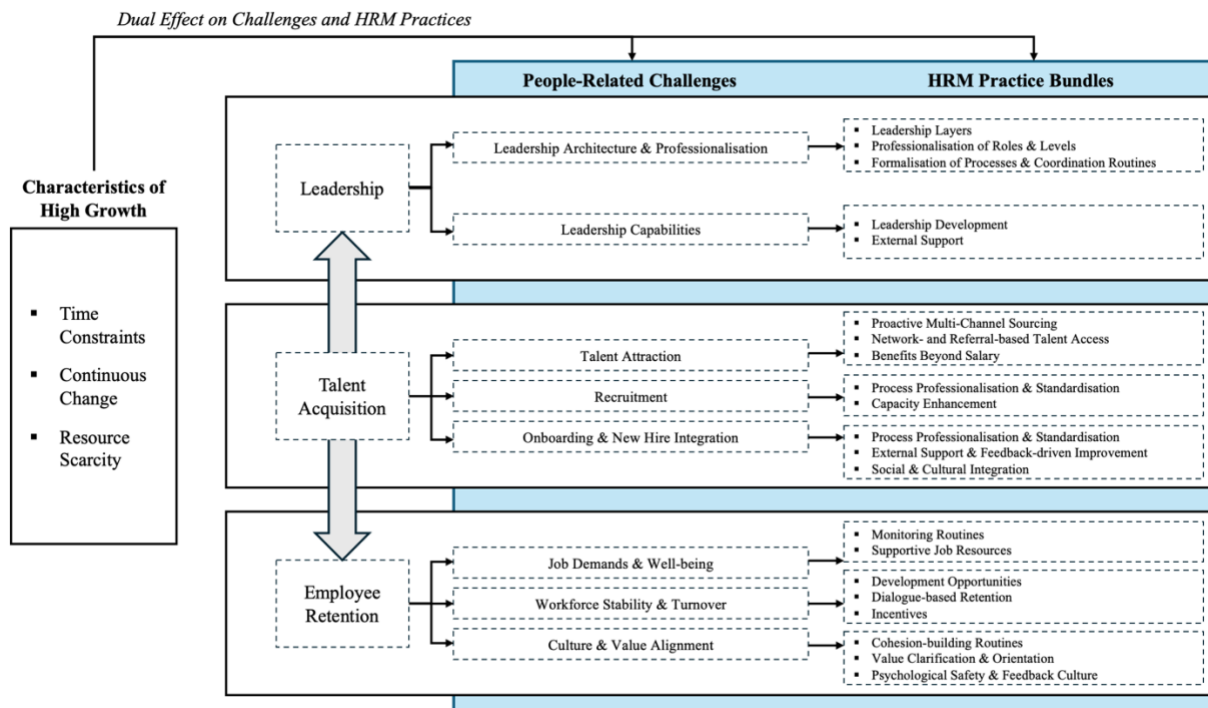


Figure 3 - Refined Framework of People-Related Challenges and HRM Practice Bundles in Scale-Ups | Source: Own creation

This framework combines the identified patterns in people-related challenges and bundles of corresponding HRM practices in Leadership, Talent Acquisition, and Employee Retention. As

the literature does not clearly indicate a preferred way to categorise HRM practices (Boselie, Dietz, and Boon 2005; Paauwe 2009), the framework adopts these dimensions to outline the employed HRM practices, thereby ensuring practical relevance. The bundles are not intended as exhaustive lists of concrete activities, but as analytically grounded groupings that highlight evident response patterns. For examples of concrete practices within each bundle, we refer to the individual analyses in Sections 5.2 to 5.4.

6.2 Managerial Implications

As characteristics of high growth shape the context in which scale-ups operate, managers must design and implement HRM practices in line with these conditions. Depending on the maturity of the HR function, this responsibility may lie with founders, general managers, or dedicated HR professionals. Even if they are still in the early stages of scaling or often referred to as firefighting mode, decision-makers should allocate at least some attention and resources to people topics. Rather than focusing on numerous initiatives, it is more beneficial to prioritise a handful of practices that address multiple bottlenecks at once. Given that Leadership, Talent Acquisition, and Employee Retention reinforce each other, core HRM practices should be aligned across these dimensions rather than tackling issues in isolation. Consequently, for every new practice, managers should consider its implications across all dimensions to support positive reinforcement. Furthermore, repeated mis-hires, early exits, or leadership overload should be recognised as warning signs. They indicate that the overall set of HRM practices needs to be reviewed and streamlined, rather than just single processes. The findings show that HRM practices in scale-ups are often initially informal and reactive, only becoming professionalised over time. Managers should use this initial phase to actively test which practices are effective and which do not fulfil their purpose. This evaluation should be done regularly. Once proven effective, practices can be documented and transformed into standards, such as checklists or templates. Finally, as scale-ups are constantly balancing agility and

structure, there is no single set of HRM practices that can be transferred to all scale-ups. Therefore, rather than adopting a generic best practice bundle, managers should aim to implement a minimum set of viable HRM practices. The framework developed (Figure 3) can serve as a starting point by grouping typical people-related challenges and indicating how they can be addressed through related practice bundles. These bundles are intended to provide guidance on potential approaches to practices, rather than serving as fixed templates. In practice, specific HRM practices need to be tailored to the circumstances and needs of each scale-up, considering contextual, organisational, and individual factors (for details, Van Lancker et al. 2022). The overarching goal for founders, managers, and HR professionals in scale-ups should be to establish a coherent and stable set of HRM practices. This foundation should allow practices to be added, adjusted, or reduced as the organisation evolves. This will allow scale-ups to preserve the speed and flexibility that support scaling.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research Directions

Within the scope of this thesis, different limitations must be acknowledged. These relate to the generalisability of the results, the single-method qualitative design, the potential influence of respondent and researcher biases, and the absence of a systematic comparison with established companies. First, the findings of this thesis cannot be generalised beyond the specific cases examined. Although the combined definition of scale-ups provides conceptual clarity, the empirical sample represents a diverse set of firms that differ in age, speed of scaling, and degree of organisational formalisation. This heterogeneity limits the transferability of insights. The results should therefore be interpreted as an empirically grounded contribution that illustrates how HRM practices appear in the studied cases rather than as a universal model applicable to all scale-ups. Whether the identified patterns hold across the broader population of scale-ups remains an open question. This requires further investigation and lies beyond the scope of this study, which aims to provide initial empirical insights into HRM in scaling contexts (Raby et

al. 2024). Second, the study relies on a single-method, interview-based design. Because no triangulation was possible, the analysis does not incorporate complementary sources such as organisational documents, observations, or quantitative indicators of HRM outcomes. As a result, it is not possible to systematically assess the effectiveness of the reported HRM practices in addressing the identified people-related challenges. The absence of independent or quantitative data prevents any form of statistical validation, which would have strengthened the robustness of the findings, but was not feasible within the scope of this research (Patton 2015). Third, the study is inherently exposed to several forms of bias arising from its qualitative design. Expert interviews are naturally susceptible to social desirability bias. As a result, interviewees may have portrayed their organisations or decisions more favourably than they occur in practice. This may have been done either to meet what they perceived as the researchers' expectations or to reinforce the legitimacy of their own actions. In addition, the coding and interpretation of the data rely on the researchers' judgment, which may have influenced how themes were grouped or which nuances were emphasised. These potential biases are typical for qualitative research and should be considered when interpreting the findings (Choy 2014). Finally, the study does not include a systematic comparison with established companies. While references to HRM practices in established companies are used for contextualisation, the research design does not empirically examine how HRM in scale-ups differs from that in mature organisations. Such a comparative analysis would require a broader empirical scope and remains a task for future research. Taken together, these limitations do not diminish the contribution of this thesis but clarify the boundaries within which its findings should be understood.

From the previously mentioned limitations, several valuable future research directions can be derived, and further lines of inquiry emerge beyond those explicitly outlined above. First, future studies could draw on more homogeneous samples of scale-ups to capture differences across

specific growth phases more systematically. Analysing firms at comparable developmental stages would allow a clearer identification of how HRM practices emerge and how they vary across early, mid, and mature scaling trajectories. Second, subsequent research could examine the effectiveness of HRM practices through multi-method and outcome-oriented designs. Integrating longitudinal elements with quantitative indicators and validated measurement scales would allow researchers to determine whether these practices have a statistically significant effect in mitigating people-related challenges. This should, for example, involve introducing specific HRM interventions and assessing pre- and post-changes in employee well-being, using instruments such as the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach, Jackson, and Leiter 1997) or established motivation and engagement scales (Van der Kaap-Deeder et al. 2020). Including employee-level data is essential, as employees directly experience the practices whose effects are being evaluated. Finally, research could further investigate and refine the theoretical framework proposed in this thesis, as its underlying assumptions may differ from those that apply to established companies (Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024). Such refinement could facilitate the development of more context-specific HRM theories and support the creation of practice-oriented roadmaps that help scale-ups navigate people-related challenges.

7 Conclusion

Scale-ups encounter people-related challenges during scaling, as high growth entails time and resource constraints as well as continuous change. Addressing these challenges, the aim of this thesis was to identify which HRM practices scale-ups employ to respond to those challenges, thereby contributing to the underexplored intersection between HRM and scaling in research.

Based on 24 expert interviews with founders, HR professionals, and mentors of scale-ups, the findings indicate that people-related challenges mainly unfold across three dimensions: Leadership, Talent Acquisition, and Employee Retention.

While people-related challenges emerge given characteristics of high growth, these conditions

also shape and constrain the implementation of corresponding HRM practices in scale-ups. Moreover, HRM practices do not appear as isolated activities. Rather, HRM practices across Leadership, Talent Acquisition, and Employee Retention are interconnected, mutually reinforcing, or involve trade-offs. Even a few well-aligned practices can reduce negative dynamics and create the internal organisational capacity needed to achieve and maintain high growth as well as further expand HRM practices over time.

As a result, this thesis proposes a framework that links key people-related challenges in scale-ups to corresponding HRM practice bundles, along the three interconnected dimensions. Instead of prescribing a universal best practice, the framework outlines context-specific best fit configurations of HRM practices that evolve as scale-ups professionalise their operations, in a structured yet flexible way. This thesis thereby advances academic understanding by consolidating insights from different scale-ups into an integrative framework that deepens knowledge of how HRM practices are configured in scale-ups. Hence, this study makes a distinct empirical contribution by acknowledging scale-ups as a specific subset of HGFs rather than treating them as a smaller, younger version of established companies. This research moves beyond broader, generic insights on HGFs and provides a foundation for future systematic studies comparing HRM practices across scale-ups and established companies. At the same time, the framework offers practical implications for those responsible for people topics in scale-ups, whether at the beginning of the scaling process or at a more advanced stage. It helps them anticipate which challenges are likely to emerge and consider potential courses of action to mitigate these challenges in a proactive way, including how multiple HRM practices can be combined and sequenced in practice.

Ultimately, this thesis answers the main research question, **“How do HRM practices in scale-ups address key people-related challenges during the scaling process?”**, as follows: scale-ups develop context-specific, best-fit sets of practices that help them manage and overcome

Group Part

people-related challenges during high growth. Specifically, scale-ups rely on HRM practices that fit their specific context and enhance their capacity to adapt the organisation so that both incumbent and new talent can contribute effectively to the scaling process.

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Appendix

Appendix 1 - Overview of Reviewed Publications Addressing People-Related Challenges During Scaling | Source: Own creation

	Author	Titel	Source	Context	Relevant Focus Area(s)	Research Design
1	Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024	Growing pains during scale-up hypergrowth: Integration and future research agenda	Technological Forecasting and Social Change	Technological scale-ups	Expanding job demands; Massive hiring; Changing leadership requirements; Evolving organisational culture; Turnover	Theoretical
2	Genedy et al. 2024	Growing pains in scale-ups: How scaling affects new venture employee burnout and job satisfaction	Journal of Business Venturing	Scale-ups; New ventures	Employee burnout; Employee job satisfaction; Employee well-being	Empirical
3	Greiner 1972	Evolution and Revolution as Organisations Grow	Harvard Business Review	High-growth firms	Managerial problems; Leadership crisis; Autonomy crisis (delegation); Control crises; Red-tape crises; Employee retention	Theoretical
4	Picken 2017	From startup to scalable enterprise: Laying the foundation	Business Horizons	Scalable business; Entrepreneurial venture	Entrepreneurial risk-taking; Decision processes and infrastructures; Utilisation of resources; Organisational culture; Changing skill requirements, organisation and management team	Theoretical
5	Hamilton and Ng 2025	What we know about high-growth firms, and what we do not: A systematic review	International Small Business Journal	High-growth firms	Lack of management skills; High growth needs; High growth pressures; Employee well-being; Burnout	Theoretical

6	Lee 2014	What holds back high-growth firms? Evidence from UK SMEs	Small Business Economics	High-growth firms; Potential high-growth firms	Recruitment; Skill shortages; Management skills	Empirical
7	Mula, Zybura, and Hipp 2024	From digitalized start-up to scale-up: Opening the black box of scaling in digitalized firms towards a scaling process framework	Technological Forecasting & Social Change	Digitalized scale-ups	Build capacity; Synchronistic technology and organisational process innovation; Founder learning; Structure vs. culture; Resource allocation; Decision-making; Delegation	Empirical
8	Flamholtz and Randle 2016	Growing Pains: Building Sustainably Successful Organizations	John Wiley & Sons (Book)	Growing organisations	Leadership overload; Lack of structure; Poor delegation; Coordination problems; Cultural tensions; Inefficient processes; Hiring constraints; Misfit hires; Management succession gaps	Theoretical (with empirical illustrations)
9	Brown and Rees-Jones 2025	Learning to ride the high growth “Rollercoaster”: the role of publicly funded business accelerator programmes	Small Business Economics	High-growth firms	Mental health; Mental well-being; Psychological resilience; Instability; Stresses and strains; Detrimental effects	Empirical
10	Piaskowska, Tippmann, and Monaghan 2021	Scale-up modes: Profiling activity configurations in scaling strategies	Long Range Planning	High-growth firms; Scale-ups	Integration of hires; Managerial constraints; Formalisation; Bundling of resources	Empirical

11	DeSantola and Gulati 2017	Scaling: Organizing and Growth in Entrepreneurial Ventures	Academy of Management Annals	Entrepreneurial ventures	Hurdles to recruiting; Lack of resources; Turnover; Shifting role expectations; Alterations in team composition; Leadership handoffs	Theoretical
12	Ranta and Ylinen 2024	Employee benefits and company performance: Evidence from a high-dimensional machine learning model	Management Accounting Research	High-growth companies	Keep and attract high performers; Employee benefits and company performance; Employee satisfaction	Empirical
13	Hambrick and Crozier 1985	Stumblers and stars in the management of rapid growth	Journal of Business Venturing	Rapid-growth firms	Disaffection; Inadequate skills; Inadequate systems; Burnout; Massive hiring, Internal turmoil; Organisational strain; Resource needs	Empirical
14	Clough et al. 2019	Turning Lead into Gold: How do Entrepreneurs Mobilize Resources to Exploit Opportunities?	Academy of Management Annals	Young ventures	Resource mobilization; Resource dependence; Power dynamics	Theoretical
15	Strengers et al. 2022	The organizational culture of scale-ups and performance	Journal of Organizational Change Management	Scale-ups	Organisational culture; Difficult to maintain one main culture; Subcultures; Discrepancy between top managers and employees	Empirical
16	Brush, Ceru, and Blackburn 2009	Pathways to entrepreneurial growth: The influence of management,	Business Horizons	Fast-growing firms (new England-based)	Quality of human resources; Skill gaps; Inability to access talent; Integration efforts	Theoretical

		marketing, and money				
17	Van Lancker et al. 2023	Preparing for scaling: A study on founder role evolution	Journal of Business Venturing	Scaling ventures	Organisational development; Evolution of founder roles; Skills requirements	Empirical
18	Kotter and Sathé 1978	Problems of Human Resource Management in Rapidly Growing Companies	California Management Review	Rapid-growth firms	Expanding job demands; Recruiting and training demands; Strain on resources; Burnout	Empirical
19	Demir, Wennberg, and McKelvie 2017	The Strategic Management of High-Growth Firms: A Review and Theoretical Conceptualization	Long range planning	High-growth firms	Skills of key employees; Experience of founder-managers; Firm-specific skills; HRM practices	Theoretical
20	Gulati and DeSantola 2016	Start-Ups That Last	Harvard Business Review	Fast-growing firms; Scaling ventures	Specialised roles; Management structure; Organisational culture; Skill gaps	Theoretical
21	Collewaert and Jansen 2025	Scaling and high-growth firms: an introduction	Elgar (Book Chapter)	Scaling; High-growth firms	Recruit and retain high-quality employees; Skill requirements; Turnover; Burnout; Effective coordination	Theoretical

22	Coviello and Domurath 2025	Scaling versus high growth: processes, outcomes and other considerations	Elgar (Book Chapter)	High-growth firms; Scaling	Burnout; Employee dissatisfaction; Organisational arrangements	Theoretical
23	Achtenhagen, Hakola, and Naldi 2025	Beyond high growth: disentangling the complexities of business scaling	Elgar (Book Chapter)	High-growth firms; Scaling	Growth hindrances; Workload; Poor health; Pressure; Stress; Burnout; Well-being	Theoretical
24	Van Lancker et al. 2025	Talent management in scaling firms	Elgar (Book Chapter)	High-growth firms; Scaling	Attracting, recruiting, retaining employees; Skill gaps; New organisational requirements; Guide joiners	Theoretical
25	Bohan and Levie 2025	Fostering a culture for scaling	Elgar (Book Chapter)	High-growth firms; Scaling	Job dissatisfaction; Burnout; Job demands; Rapid recruitment; Culture problems; Limited resources; Role of founder; Subcultures; Culture wars	Theoretical
26	Belingeri and Lechner 2025b	Venture Builders and the Creation of Scaleups De-Risking Entrepreneurship to Drive High-Growth Companies	Palgrave Macmillan / Springer Nature (Book)	High-growth firms; Scale-ups	Massive hiring; Complementary skills; Skill gaps; Scarce resources; Onboarding of new hires; Employee retention	Theoretical (with empirical illustrations)
27	Jansen et al. 2023	Scaling-up: Building, Leading and Sustaining Rapid Growth Over Time	Journal of Management Studies	High-growth firms; Scale-ups; Scaling	Leadership capabilities	Theoretical

28	Coad et al. 2014	Whom do high-growth firms hire?	Industrial and Corporate Change	High-growth firms	Talent attraction; Talent acquisition; Access too talent; Hiring	Empirical
29	Beckman & Burton 2008	Founding the Future: Path Dependence in the Evolution of Top Management Teams from Founding to IPO	Organisation Science	Entrepreneurial firms; From founding to IPO	Team composition; Evolution of Top Management Team (TMT); Functional structures, Capability gaps	Empirical
30	Zajko 2017	Challenges of scaling-up process for start-ups	De Gruyter Open (Conference Paper)	High-growth companies; Scale-ups	Access too talent; Massive hiring; Employee retention; Company culture; Skill gaps	Empirical

Appendix 2 - Overview of Definitional Characteristics of ‘Scale-Ups’ | Source: Own creation

Author(s)	Definitions	Characteristics mentioned	
		Quantitative	Qualitative
OECD-Eurostat 2007; Coutu 2014; DeSantola and Gulati 2017; Durufle, Hellmann and Wilson 2016; Belitski et al. 2023; Denney, Southin, and Wolfe 2023	A company achieving an average annual growth rate in either employment or turnover of at least 20 percent over three consecutive years, starting from a baseline of ten employees.	X	
Autio 2016	A company that has raised 1M euros or more of venture capital funding (since foundation).	X	
Kauffman Foundation 2017	“Employer firms up to ten years old and younger that start with fewer than fifty employees and grow to employ at least fifty people by their tenth year of operation.”	X	
Hoffman 2018; Pfothenauer et al. 2022	The scholars argue that profitability should not be considered a necessary element in defining scale-ups, since firms such as Uber demonstrate that rapid scaling can occur even in the absence of positive financial returns.	X	
Jansen et al. 2023	“We define scale-ups as those HGFs up to 10 years old that have grown to at least 50 employees or more by the tenth year of existence or at the year of measurement, whichever is less.”	X	
Coad et al. 2024	“Scale-ups are a subset of high-growth firms that have a specific style of growth that requires ramping up production of a new product (or service). This product has finished the processes of refinement, the business model	X	X

	<p>need not pivot but has become clear, and no further iteration stages are required to find a good fit with the market. All that remains is scaling up. Crucial elements of this definition are that scaling-up is a stage in a stylized life-course model of firm evolution. Scaling-up changes the proportions of a firm (in terms of raising fixed costs, reducing marginal costs, having an above- average capital intensity in terms of tangible capital and intangible capital and also with regards to IT and perhaps also robots and automated systems). Scaling-up connects favourable supply-side conditions (initial product development costs are near their end; low marginal costs of production) to favourable demand conditions (marked perhaps by increasing returns due to network externalities). Scaling-up is often observed alongside a burst of marketing effort to accompany what is essentially a pent-up supply-side push towards a hungry market.”</p>		
Zhao et al. 2019	<p>“Market validated firm[s] with high growth ambitions and potential for scalable business.”</p>		X
Durufle, Hellmann and Wilson 2016	<p>Entrepreneurial firms that have moved beyond the exploratory stage, established an initial product or service offering and market segment, and entered a growth phase oriented toward substantial market penetration.</p>		X
Coviello 2019	<p>Scaling firms expand a proven concept to a wider audience, characterized by efficiency gains, organisational diversity, absorptive capacity, and particularly by moving into international markets.</p>		X

Appendix 3 - Distinction between Start-Ups, Scale-Ups, and Established Companies | Source: Own creation

Dimension	Start-Up	Scale-Up	Established Companies
Size & Age	Small, young firms at the beginning of their business activity; with planned employee/revenue growth; and strong innovation orientation (Astuti, Helmi, and Riyono 2023; Bundesverband Deutsche Startups e.V. 2023; Coviello et al. 2024; Zaech and Baldegger 2017)	Young, high-growth firms as an intermediate type of firm between start-ups and established companies; quantitatively, often treated as a subset of HGFs; qualitatively, defined by organisational features that enable sustained scaling (Coad et al. 2024; OECD and Statistical Office of the European Communities 2007; Piaskowska, Tippmann, and Monaghan 2021; Zhao et al. 2019)	Large, established, often multinational; operates at high scale and in concentrated markets (Mintzberg 1980; Kvilhaug 2017; Veldman and Willmott 2013)
Business Model	Primary focus on finding a scalable business model; high uncertainty; within the first phase of the lifecycle of an entrepreneurial firm (Astuti, Helmi, and Riyono 2023; Löher et al. 2017; Richter and Schildhauer 2016; Picken 2017)	Post-product-market fit; firms scaling a validated offering; leveraging economies of scale with transformations in processes, people, and places; scaling = synchronizing internal organising and growth (Coviello et al. 2024; DeSantola and Gulati 2017; Monteiro 2019)	Mature, stable business model, routine production and recognised products; focus on incremental adaptation and customer retention (Astuti, Helmi, and Riyono 2023; Barao 2025; Kvilhaug 2017)
Growth Orientation	Early focus on acquisition, market learning, and viability; growth constrained by capital; survival- and growth-oriented strategy emphasising growth and liquidity (Astuti, Helmi, and Riyono 2023; Greiner 1997; Hilse and Suemihl 2019)	High growth as central attribute; often rapid/exponential (Coad et al. 2024; Coviello et al. 2024; DeSantola and Gulati 2017; Jansen et al. 2023; Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024)	Prioritise predictable, stable, often incremental growth; defend/optimize core operations (Astuti, Helmi, and Riyono 2023; Barao 2025; Veldman and Willmott 2013)

Organisational Setup	Simple/flat structure with low formalisation; founder-centric; fast decision-making (aligns with Mintzberg’s simple structure and Greiner’s creativity phase) (Astuti, Helmi, and Riyono 2023; Greiner 1997; Hanks et al. 1994; Mintzberg 1980)	Transition from founder-centric, low formalisation to professionalisation (layers, systems, controls); progression through phases of Greiner's Growth Model; increasing standardisation/formalisation consistent with Mintzberg’s shift away from simple structures (not yet machine bureaucracy); scaling as organisational transformation to sustain growth (DeSantola and Gulati 2017; Greiner 1997; Mintzberg 1980; Picken 2017)	A formalised, hierarchical and divisionalised structure; separation of ownership/control; slower decision-making due to multi-layer approvals and formal planning (Bratton 1989; Greiner 1997; Mintzberg 1980; Sine, Mitsuhashi, and Kirsch 2006; Veldman and Willmott 2013)
Resources	Constrained capital and lean headcount (members have many responsibilities); reliant on external finance and networks; founder decisions dominate; sales/customer acquisition a core challenge (Astuti, Helmi, and Riyono 2023; Bundesverband Deutsche Startups e. V. 2023)	Scaling as dynamic capability (RBV): acquiring and deploying resources to sustain expansion; growth bounded by managerial/administrative capacity and operational bottlenecks; people/HRM central to continuity (Belingheri and Lechner 2025a; Gendy et al. 2024; Jansen et al. 2023; Kor et al. 2016; Moedt, Lechner, and Khapova 2024)	Strong administrative and managerial capacity; separate legal entity & limited liability enable access to capital and scale; financialized context (Yang and Aldrich 2017; Barao 2025; Bratton 1989; Ireland 2010; Stout 2013; Yang and Aldrich 2017)

Appendix 4 - Interview Guide (Scale-Ups) | Source: Own creation

I INTRODUCTION

- *Welcome and thanks:* Welcome the interviewee and thank them for their time and willingness to participate.
- *Interview structure:* Briefly explain the structure: The interview will start with a short introduction and a few initial questions, followed by three main sections (Leadership, Talent Acquisition, and Employee Retention), which reflect the central dimensions of this study. It will conclude with short closing questions.
- *Timing and general notes:* The interview will take approximately 30 minutes. Introductory questions will be brief, while the main questions can be answered in more detail. The interviewee is encouraged to share personal experiences and concrete examples. There are no right or wrong answers.
- *Topic:* The topic of this study is to explore the people-related challenges that scale-ups face and the HRM practices they use to address them.
- *Definitions:* Clarify what is meant by people-related challenges and HRM practices.
- *Consent and data protection:* Ask for consent to record, use, and cite the interview data in the thesis. Inform the participant that anonymity is ensured, meaning that their name and the company will be anonymized. (Encourage participants to provide concrete examples to capture the context and practical implications)

II BACKGROUND

1. What are your main responsibilities regarding people or HRM-related topics in your company?
2. How would you describe the current growth phase of your company? (For instance, in terms of employee growth, market position, organisational structure, or recent expansion dynamics)
3. How is HRM currently organised in your company? (For example, is there a dedicated HRM

function, or does the responsibility mainly lie with the management team)

III PEOPLE-RELATED CHALLENGES & HRM PRACTICES

4. What people-related challenges have emerged during your company's scaling process, and which are currently the most pressing?

5. Which HRM practices are applied in your company to address these pain points?

IV LEADERSHIP

6. How has the role of leadership evolved during your company's scaling process? (This may include shifting from founder-led to distributed leadership, defining roles and decision rights, or coordinating across teams)

7. What difficulties have you encountered, and which HRM practices have helped to address them effectively? (For example, challenges in delegation, coordination, or middle management development)

V TALENT ACQUISITION

8. How would you describe the process of recruiting, selecting, and onboarding new employees during the company's scaling process? (This may involve aspects such as sourcing strategies, employer branding, assessment methods, or onboarding design)

9. What issues have emerged, and which HRM practices have proven particularly effective in addressing them? (For example, challenges related to hiring speed, skill gaps, or the integration of new hires)

VI EMPLOYEE RETENTION

10. How would you describe your approach to employee retention, motivation, and well-being during the scaling process? (This could include initiatives to sustain engagement, manage workload, or preserve company culture and shared values)

11. What obstacles have arisen in ensuring employee retention, and which HRM practices have proven most effective? (For instance, issues related to turnover, burnout, or cultural

misalignment)

VII CLOSING

12. How do resource constraints, time pressure, and continuous change influence the way HRM practices are implemented and prioritised in your company?

13. Is there anything you would like to add or that we haven't discussed yet, but you consider important?

- *Closing note:* Thank the interviewee once again for their time and contribution. Offer them the opportunity to review their interview responses or receive a copy of the final thesis upon request.
- *Language note:* To ensure a natural flow of conversation, synonymous terms such as issues, obstacles, or difficulties may be used interchangeably with challenges throughout the interview. This linguistic variation serves stylistic clarity and does not imply any conceptual difference.

Appendix 5 – Interview Guide (Scale-Up Support) | Source: Own creation

I INTRODUCTION

(see Interview Guide for Scale-ups for Introduction)

II BACKGROUND

1. What is your role and main area of responsibility in supporting or working with scale-ups, particularly regarding people or HRM-related topics?

2. How would you describe your organisation's involvement with scale-ups? (For example, through acceleration programs, consulting projects, or strategic HR support)

3. How is HRM organised in most scale-ups? (For example, is there a dedicated HRM function, or does the responsibility mainly lie with the management team)

III PEOPLE-RELATED CHALLENGES & HRM PRACTICES

4. Based on your experience, what people-related challenges do scale-ups typically face during high-growth phases?

5. How do scale-ups usually respond to these pain points? Which HRM practices or approaches have you observed to be particularly effective in addressing them?

IV LEADERSHIP

6. From your perspective, how does leadership typically evolve as scale-ups grow and formalise their structures? (This may include transitions from founder-led to more distributed leadership or defining roles and decision rights)

7. What leadership-related difficulties do you commonly observe, and which HRM practices or support mechanisms help overcome them? (For example, leadership coaching, external hires, or developing middle management)

V TALENT ACQUISITION

8. How do the scale-ups you work with typically approach recruiting, selecting, and onboarding new employees during their scaling journey? (Consider aspects such as sourcing strategies, employer branding, or onboarding design)

9. What recurring challenges do you notice in this context, and which HRM practices or external supports have proven most effective? (For example, speed of hiring, skill gaps, or integration of new hires)

VI EMPLOYEE RETENTION

10. In your experience, what factors are most critical for scale-ups to retain, motivate, and support their employees' well-being during high growth? (This could include maintaining engagement, managing workload, or sustaining company culture)

11. What obstacles do you often see threatening employee retention, and what practices or interventions have helped mitigate them? (For instance, turnover, burnout, or cultural misalignment)

VII CLOSING

12. How do resource constraints, time pressure, and continuous change affect the way scale-ups prioritise and implement HRM practices?

13. Is there anything else you would like to add, for example, lessons learned, best practices, or common pitfalls you have observed in scale-ups?

(see Interview Guide for Scale-ups for Closing Notes)

Appendix 6 - Overview of the Interview Sample | Source: Own creation

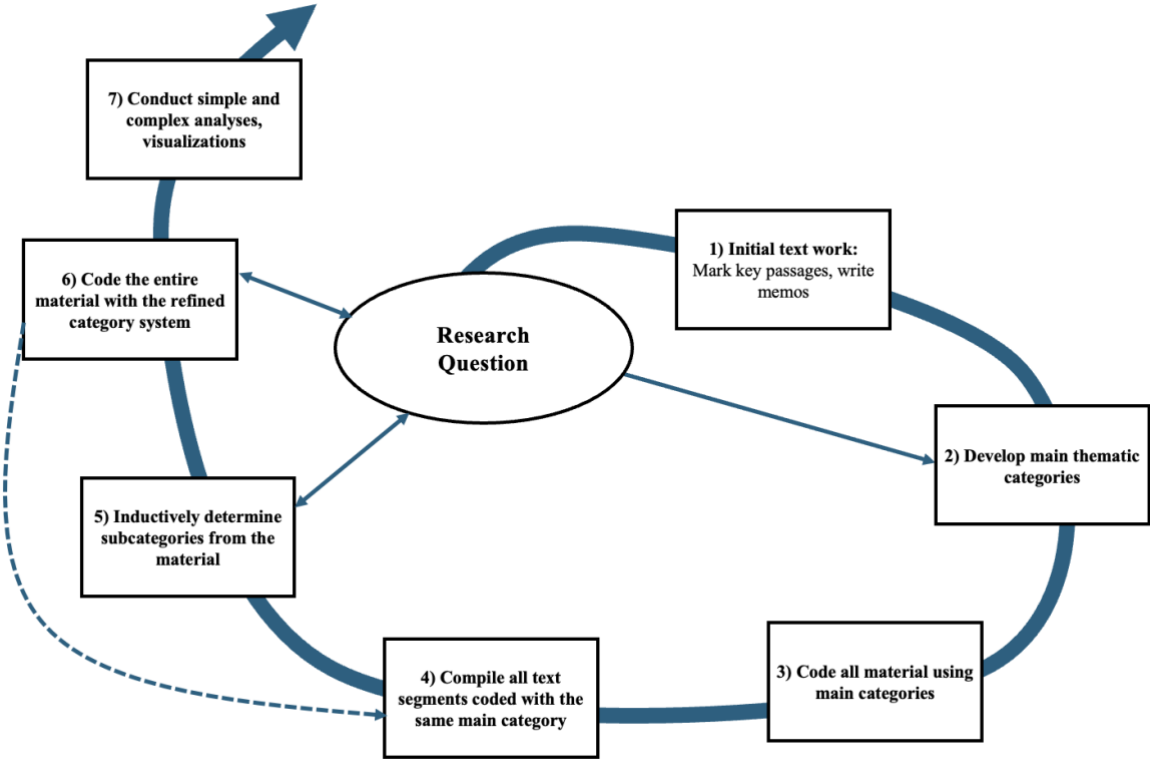
ID	Role/Position of the Expert	Organisational Context	Founding Year	Headcount	Dedicated HRM Function
E1	HR-Manager	Services for Renewable Energy	2017	> 5,000	Yes
E2	Head of HR	Health Care	2021	≈ 250	Yes
E3	HR Business Partner	Health Care	2020	> 1,900	Yes
E4	Mentor	Support for Scale-ups			
E5	Founder / Managing Director	Insurance	2016	> 200	Yes
E6	Founder	Health Care	2021	> 200	Yes
E7	Co-Founder	Smart Home	2016	> 200	Yes
E8	Talent Acquisition Partner	Software Development	2020	> 200	Yes
E9	HR-Manager	Consumer Services	2019	> 500	Yes
E10	Head of HR	Machinery Manufacturing	2020	> 70	Yes

E11	Talent Acquisition Manager	Technology, Information and Internet	2017	> 200	Yes
E12	Head of HR	Computer Hardware Manufacturing	2021	≈ 50	Yes
E13	CEO	Professional Training and Coaching	2020	≈ 50	Yes
E14	CEO	IT Services and IT Consulting	2020	≈ 50	No
E15	Talent Acquisition Manager	Software Development	2015	> 5,000	Yes
E16	HR Business Partner	Software Development	2021	> 200	Yes
E17	Mentor	Support for Scale-ups			
E18	Head of HR	Software Development	2019	> 200	Yes
E19	Mentor	Support for Scale-ups			
E20	Mentor	Support for Scale-ups			
E21	Talent Acquisition Manager	Software Development	2016	≈ 1000	Yes
E22	People and Culture Manager	IT Services and IT Consulting	2021	≈ 50	Yes
E23	Chief Human Resources Officer	Electromobility Technology	2019	> 5,000	Yes
E24	Mentor	Support for Scale-ups			

*All data retrieved as of December 2025

(Transcripts of the Interviews Available on Request)

Appendix 7 - Qualitative Structuring Content Analysis | Source: Own creation based on Kuckartz 2018



Appendix 8 – Coding System | Source: Own creation

Name of the Main Category	Name of the Subcategory
MC 1: Characteristics of High Growth	
MC 2: Leadership	SC 2.1: Leadership Architecture & Professionalisation SC 2.2: Leadership Capabilities
MC 3: Talent Acquisition	SC 3.1: Talent Attraction SC 3.2: Recruitment SC 3.3: Onboarding & New Hire Integration
MC 4: Employee Retention	SC 4.1: Job Demands & Well-being SC 4.2: Workforce Stability & Turnover SC 4.3: Culture & Value Alignment

MC = Main category; SC = Subcategory

Appendix 9 – Coding Guideline | Source: Own creation

Level	Code Name	Code Definition	Example(s)	Coding Rule*
MC 1	Characteristics of High Growth	Refers to the conditions inherent to rapid organisational expansion. These conditions, characterized by ongoing change, resource scarcity, and time pressure, shape the emergence of people-related challenges and influence how HRM practices are designed and implemented during high growth.	<p>1) “Resource scarcity definitely has a major impact on HRM practices. What tends to take priority are things like finding production capacity, not HRM practices. Everyone rushes toward the immediate business needs, often “blind” to the people side of the business.” (E4)</p> <p>2) “That’s why we’ve always focused on practices that address the big picture, things that are easy to manage and sustainable in the long term, rather than constantly changing details.” (E14)</p>	<p>Code when the passage describes how the conditions influence the emergence or intensification of people-related challenges or shape the prioritization, feasibility or implementation of HRM practices.</p> <p>Do not apply this code when the passage describes leadership practices, talent acquisition activities or retention mechanisms themselves. Such content should be coded within the respective functional categories unless the emphasise lies on the growth specific conditions and their effects on challenges or HRM practices.</p>

MC 2	Leadership	Refers to leadership within the organisation, encompassing both the structural conditions that shape leadership and the skills, behaviours, and mindsets of individual leaders.	See 2.1 to 2.2	See 2.1 to 2.2
SC 2.1	Leadership Architecture & Professionalisation	Refers to the formal design, and professionalisation of leadership within the organisation, including its structures, layers, roles, decision rights, processes, and organisational mechanisms that shape how authority, alignment, and execution are organised at scale.	<p>1) „I would say structure is a big one. As you mentioned, the more sub teams you have, the more managers you need. What happens a lot is that at some point, for example, the C level representative for People and Culture suddenly has a huge number of direct reports, and then you need to add another layer.“ (E15)</p> <p>2) “... once you start operating in a matrix organisation, where you need to encourage cross-functional collaboration. That’s why we started developing leadership principles.“ (E2)</p>	<p>Code when the interviewee refers to organisational-level leadership structures or formalised mechanisms (e.g. leadership layers, reporting lines, role definitions, authority, or decision-making rights).</p> <p>Do not apply this code when the content concerns individual leadership skills or behaviours.</p>
SC 2.2	Leadership Capabilities	Refers to the skills, competencies, behaviours, and mindsets of individual leaders, including founders’ formal role transition.	1) “Especially about three or four years ago, we had a lot of people stepping into their very first leadership roles, often right after their first full-time job, meaning they didn’t yet have much prior leadership experience.” (E9)	Code all segments that refer to the skills, competencies, attitudes, or behaviours of individual leaders, including the founder’s personal adjustment.

			2) “That’s why we’ve now launched an in-house leadership development program. It’s led by someone from my team, she’s a psychologist, and coach. Together, we designed a training program to systematically develop our team leads.” (E2)	Do not code when it refers to structural or organisational leadership design.
MC 3	Talent Acquisition	Refers to the organisational processes and conditions that shape how talent enters the firm, encompassing the attraction of potential candidates, the evaluation and selection of applicants, and the integration of new employees.	See 3.1 to 3.3	See 3.1 to 3.3
SC 3.1	Talent Attraction	Refers to how the organisation attracts potential candidates by generating interest, establishing visibility, and encouraging individuals to apply. The category captures the organisation’s capacity to position itself as an attractive employer for prospective applicants.	1) “We have been noticing a shift from a candidate-driven market to an employer-driven one. For certain roles and especially given the current economic situation where everything feels a bit “all over the place,” it’s become increasingly difficult to attract qualified inbound applications.” (E9) 2) “We also invest heavily in active sourcing. One of my colleagues spends at least 20 hours a week doing just that. But you have to find the right channels. In our case	Code when the interviewee refers to the pre-recruitment stage, including references to employer visibility, external positioning, or mechanisms through which potential candidates become aware of and interested in the organisation (all internal activities and tensions concerned with bringing talent in.)

			you also have to look on Facebook or in specialised groups and forums where employees exchange experiences.” (E2)	Do not code content that concerns the evaluation and selection of applicants or post-hire integration.
SC 3.2	Recruitment	Refers to the processes applied once potential candidates have entered the recruitment funnel, including the identification of suitable applicants, the assessment of their qualifications, and the decision regarding whom to hire.	<p>1) “Precisely through this whole trial-and-error process, what we have learned now is that, in times of desperation, we should not make a desperate move just to fill an immediate need that we might end up regretting in the future. ... However painful this might be, and it is a trade-off, sometimes you go a long time without the individual you need.” (E10)</p> <p>2) “We actually have a very standard and well-documented hiring process for candidates, but we adapt it slightly depending on the role type. For example, if we take non-technical roles, the process usually goes like this: recruiter screening, hiring manager interview, case study, technical group interview, and finally cultural fit interview.” (E11)</p>	<p>Code when the passage concerns the evaluative phase of hiring, that is, the systematic assessment and selection of candidates who have entered the recruitment funnel (e.g. screening of applications or the conduct of interviews; all internal activities and tensions concerned with choosing among talent who came in).</p> <p>Do not code when the content concerns how the organisation attracts candidates into the funnel (see Talent Attraction) or how new employees are integrated following the hiring decision (see Onboarding).</p>

SC 3.3	Onboarding & New Hire Integration	Refers to the integration of new employees into the organisation, helping them understand structures, workflows, expectations, and the resources they need to become effective in their role.	<p>1) „When you have a team of five and one new person joins, onboarding is manageable, you can easily show them the structures and how things work. But if that same team suddenly doubles in size, it’s a completely different challenge. You have to approach onboarding in a much more structured way.“ (E8)</p> <p>2) „They receive a goal sheet outlining objectives for the first week, first month, and first three months, including the resources they need and where to find them, and then it’s basically on them. We’ve also toyed with the idea of developing an AI-generated onboarding bot, but so far, it just hasn’t been a priority.“ (E16)</p>	<p>Code when the interviewee refers to the integration of new employees into the organisation, including experiences, requirements, obstacles, or support mechanisms related to this initial phase.</p> <p>Do not code when the content relates to pre-hire aspects (e.g., recruitment, selection, employer branding) or to topics that are not connected to the initial integration phase.</p>
MC 4	Employee Retention	Refers to the conditions and dynamics that influence employees’ attachment to the organisation, including their work experience, workforce stability, and the cultural and value-related factors that shape long-term involvement.	See 4.1 to 4.3	See 4.1 to 4.3
SC 4.1	Job Demands & Well-being	Refers to descriptions of employees’ job demands, workload, motivation, and overall well-being, including	1) “A growth phase can be incredibly stressful and demanding because, on top of day-to-day tasks,	Code when the interviewee refers to workload, job demands, stress, motivation, or

		<p>perceptions of how working conditions shape their daily work experience, energy levels, and ability to remain engaged.</p>	<p>so much is happening within the company itself.” (E8)</p> <p>2) “We then took the first step about one and a half to two years ago. We have two mental health items in our internal survey: 1) General awareness of mental health in the workplace, and 2) My supervisor is interested in my mental health and overall well-being.” (E18)</p>	<p>well-being as factors that shape employees’ experience of work or influence their capacity or willingness to remain in the organisation.</p> <p>Do not apply this code when workload or related conditions are mentioned only descriptively without any reference to their implications for employees.</p>
SC 4.2	Workforce Stability & Turnover	<p>Refers to descriptions of employee departures, retention patterns, and workforce stability, including how changes in headcount affect team continuity, and the organisation’s ability to maintain a stable workforce.</p>	<p>1) “That said, overall, our retention hasn’t been great. We’ve hired roughly twice as many people as we currently employ, meaning, we’ve effectively filled each role twice over time.” (E14)</p> <p>2) “... for example, exit interviews. Sometimes during scaling, everything seems to be going well, but suddenly someone decides to leave without any warning signs. That helps us to understand what went wrong and gives us room for improvement.” (E11)</p>	<p>Code when the passage refers to employees leaving the organisation, patterns of turnover, or the effects of employee departures and headcount changes on team or organisational stability and continuity.</p> <p>Do not apply this code when the passage does not concern exits, turnover, or stability-related implications of changing workforce composition.</p>

SC 4.3	Culture & Value Alignment	Refers to statements about the organisation’s culture, shared values, and sense of cohesion, including how these are maintained, communicated, or evolve as the organisation grows and more diverse employees join.	<p>1) “One of the main challenges during our scaling process has been the continuous development of our company culture, which changes significantly with each growth phase, from a family-like and exploratory culture toward a more performance-driven one.” (E13)</p> <p>2) “When it comes to retaining talent, both the reporting manager and the People & Culture team play a crucial role. First, the reporting manager needs to have regular one-on-one sessions to understand employees, whether they feel a strong sense of belonging, if they enjoy a good work-life balance, and how they feel about their work and the overall culture.” (E11)</p>	<p>Code when the passage refers to how culture, shared values, or cohesion are maintained, communicated, or experienced within the organisation.</p> <p>Do not code when the passage concerns topics unrelated to organisational culture or values, such as operational processes or individual behaviour.</p>
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*Only statements about people-related challenges in scale-ups or the HRM practices addressing them are coded. Therefore, if applicable, the examples provided include one anchor example for (1) challenges and (2) practices. Practices mentioned in the interviews were coded based on the underlying mechanism they relate to (e.g., well-being, culture alignment, onboarding).

MC = Main category; SC = Subcategory

(Coded Segments Available on Request)