



The Role of Ambidextrous Leadership and Internal and External Enablers of
Ambidextrous Innovation

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Abstract

In rapidly changing industries, organisations must utilise existing capabilities while pursuing new opportunities to stay competitive. This study examines how and why ambidextrous leadership and internal and external organisational factors play a role in ambidextrous innovation. The setting is a large African multinational telecommunications organisation. A qualitative case study approach was employed, using semi-structured interviews with 18 senior leaders across various divisions to examine how leadership practices, organisational support systems, and external influences affect the adoption and ongoing success of ambidextrous innovation strategies. The findings indicate that visionary leadership, psychological safety, behaviours that encourage risk-taking, and prevailing market conditions are essential for fostering both exploitative and exploratory innovation. Misaligned performance management systems with a general bias towards short-term objectives and incentives, hierarchical decision-making, and the external regulatory environment were identified as barriers. Effective innovation ambidexterity within an organisation relies on ambidextrous leadership capabilities at every level, supported by flexible structures, empowered teams, and clear strategic alignment to effectively manage the tension between radical and incremental innovation in rapidly changing environments.

Keywords

Key words: Ambidexterity, Innovation Ambidexterity, Ambidextrous Leadership, Exploitation and Exploration

Declaration

I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy (International Business) at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorisation and consent to carry out this research.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

“To remain competitive, an organisation must ensure that its internal rate of change is faster than its competitive environment” (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

This research study explores how and why ambidextrous leadership, together with internal and external organisational factors, plays a role in ambidextrous innovation within a large multinational telecommunications organisation. The interplay between these concepts in an organisation is crucial, as rapid digitalisation has significantly enhanced networking through connected platforms and the Internet of Things (IoT), leading to the development of intelligent systems, machine learning, and artificial intelligence that are disrupting the technology industry (Niewöhner et al., 2021). The enormous amounts of data are already creating significant challenges for managing innovation in many organisations, as their traditional processes are too slow to keep pace with the rapid evolution of digital market ideas. The surge in data, hyper-speed connectivity and computing is boosting knowledge-driven value, accelerating product deployment, and reducing the cycles of innovation and product development (Niewöhner et al., 2021). This swift progress has spurred innovation and transformed customer demands, with networks supporting new revenue models centred on continuous customer engagement interaction. This has caused a shift in the market, compelling companies to quickly adapt or face disruption through innovation, which includes modifying internal organisational structures, external units, and engaging in open innovation by collaborating with outside partners to satisfy increasing market demands (Niewöhner et al., 2021).

Early studies by Burns and Stalker (1961) and Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) demonstrated that organisations in stable environments tend to develop mechanistic management systems. In contrast, those in dynamic environments developed more organic systems (He & Wong, 2004; Saleh et al., 2023). March (1991) built on this foundational work by introducing the ideas of exploitation, which include efficiency, control, and certainty, and exploration, which involves search, discovery, and innovation as key adaptive challenges for organisations (Swart et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2019). Hence, innovation ambidexterity has gained increased importance in

organisations for encouraging both exploitation and exploration, resulting in incremental and radical innovations (Saleh et al., 2023).

Additionally, traditional business models have become a significant concern for many organisations as they seek to capitalise on technological opportunities and avoid disruption. Over the last two decades, research has focused on how organisations persistently seek new strategies for growth by developing the capability to enhance existing technologies and markets, while also exploring new ones. Several scholars have explored this dual approach, which involves generating new sources of revenue while disrupting existing ones by balancing efficiency and control with flexibility and autonomy, as outlined in the literature (Dominguez et al., 2019; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013; Saleh et al., 2023).

Recent literature further indicates that adopting an organisational ambidextrous approach enhances organisational adaptability and innovation outcomes by balancing these two complementary processes. Such an approach has been shown to improve financial performance, innovation capacity, and long-term sustainability, particularly in dynamic digital environments (Saleh et al., 2023; Elashry & Elbanna, 2024).

This is especially important to telecommunications organisations, as they have been significantly impacted by the rise of technology companies specialising in the Internet of Things, data analytics, artificial intelligence, communications, and cloud platforms (Paiola et al., 2024), enabled by connected networks. These technology companies offer alternative methods for developing, operating, and managing products and services within their markets, including the ability to operate globally from any location through innovative business models (Paiola et al., 2024). The telecommunications sector, in contrast, presents a paradoxical landscape; on the one hand, it is regarded as a well-established industry characterised by intense competition among key players, with a focus on cost and efficiency (Koryak et al., 2018). On the other hand, it is also viewed as a rapidly evolving field where innovative technologies and business strategies continually develop to succeed in a changing environment (Koryak et al., 2018). There is, therefore, a growing need to integrate innovation ambidexterity within telecommunications organisations to enable responses to rapid technological change, digital disruption, and evolving customer demands. To remain competitive, telecommunications organisations must adapt faster than their competitors.

Integrating innovation ambidexterity through strong ambidextrous leadership will then be seen as a strategic asset. The following section details the changes and disruptions currently facing the telecommunications industry, supporting the need for an innovation ambidexterity strategic approach and the role that leadership and the internal and external influencing factors can play.

1.2 The need for the research

‘Get it right and healthy margins, enhanced valuations and new growth opportunities should follow. However, that will likely require a massive and radical transformation of the way most traditional telcos currently operate. We expect it will take nothing short of a revolution in skills, culture, business models, risk taking, customer awareness, partnering and operations — among other areas.’ Diogo Sousa, Partner and Head of Telecommunications Centre of Excellence, KPMG in Portugal (KPMG, 2023, Pg 1)

Modern industrial transformation would be impossible without communication technologies; for example, Industry 4.0 relies heavily on wireless networks to enable advanced industrial use cases (Kumar et al., 2020). The development of the telecommunications industry has led to several technological improvements, with emerging 6th-generation advancements driving expansion across sectors such as e-commerce, payment services, enterprise services, and online advertising. (OECD, 2024). Recent studies have confirmed that telecommunications networks form the fundamental backbone of the digital economy, supporting connectivity, data analysis, and platform ecosystems that foster innovation and create value across various sectors (OECD, 2024a; Feizi et al., 2023). As such, the ICT sector continues to transform business models, value chains, and competitive structures, reshaping industry concentration and digital value networks.

Teece (2017) argues that without a strong business model to capture and deliver value, even the most advanced technological innovations are likely to fail. Similarly, Christensen et al. (2018) emphasise that disruptive innovation succeeds only when organisations can align their business models with emerging digital ecosystems. In the telecommunications sector, where rapid, disruptive change is intensifying, the strategic capacity to evolve and adapt business models has become essential to sustaining innovation and competitiveness (Feizi et al., 2023). Their challenge is to

leverage their current infrastructure while also developing new technologies and products beyond mobile operations (Moqaddamerad & Tapino, 2022). The disruptive potential of these trends could lead to changes in industry concentration, value networks, and supply chains. Therefore, it becomes a strategic priority for telecommunications organisations to evaluate the potential impact of disruptive trends, such as cloud computing, artificial intelligence, fintech, and satellite technologies, and to build strategic capability to respond to these disruptions. Figure 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the value creation and capture potential that harnessing the power of 6th Generation (6G) technology can have on the telecommunications sector (Yrjölä et al., 2022), promoting sustained growth and expansion in both their mobile and beyond-mobile businesses. This requires a shift in the business model towards an innovation ambidexterity strategy in response to the changing environment they operate within.



Figure 1. Proposed Area of value creation and capture in 6G technologies, Source: Yrjölä et al., 2022, pg.8.

Mbilima and Phiri's (2025) recent study on Zambia's telecommunications industry, which cites Airtel Zambia as a case study, is a good demonstration highlighting the significant impact that digital transformation initiatives have had on growth in this sector. Their quantitative analysis of 97 employees focused on the relationship between digital literacy, organisational capability, and the impact of investments on financial performance. The results showed a positive relationship between digital literacy and digital investments, which enhance financial performance; however, digital

capability had a weaker and statistically insignificant influence (Mbilima & Phiri, 2025). Overall, the authors noted that these factors account for 25.3% of the variation in financial performance when emphasis is placed on employee digital literacy and alignment with the organisation's digital capabilities within its strategic objectives (Mbilima & Phiri, 2025). The study concluded that in the Zambian telecom sector, investing in appropriate digital technologies and skills gives rise to increased innovation capacity, such as mobile money and digital platforms, which help respond quickly to market shifts, diversify revenue and enhance efficiency, which are key to maintaining growth, competitiveness, and profitability (Mbilima & Phiri, 2025).

This research study explores the interplay between ambidextrous leadership and internal and external influencing factors within a multinational telecommunications organisation in Africa, examining how and why these elements shape innovation ambidexterity.

1.3 Research objectives

Robert Duncan (1976) first used the term ambidextrous to describe organisations that adjust their structures to promote and implement innovation. Organisational ambidexterity was then defined as an organisation's ability to simultaneously pursue innovation through exploration while enhancing efficiency by refining existing capabilities (Junni et al., 2013; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013).

Saleh et al. (2023, p. 3) explain that organisational ambidexterity in organisations arises from the need to 'balance two distinct tasks concurrently': exploration, which involves radical innovation, and exploitation, which encompasses incremental innovation. This dual ability enables organisations to adapt to changing environments, recognise and capitalise on opportunities, allocate resources efficiently, and stay competitive (Ye et al., 2018). Developing ambidextrous capabilities has been empirically linked to improved organisational performance, including higher sales, better ratings, increased innovation, market value, and survival (Dominguez et al., 2019). Further support for this connection is provided by the meta-analysis by Junni et al. (2013), which reviews 52 studies and finds a positive, statistically significant relationship between organisational ambidexterity and firm performance. This dual approach requires organisations to develop strong innovation capabilities, as they

must manage the tensions between exploration and exploitation, which often compete for the same resources and may require different organisational structures and processes. Organisations need to build on this understanding of organisational ambidexterity within their context to adapt and evolve their strategy towards innovation ambidexterity, which will enable them to operationalise this balance.

Organisations that simultaneously pursue efforts to promote both radical innovation aimed at entering new markets or disrupting current ones, and incremental innovation focused on enhancing existing market positions, can be seen as successfully integrating innovation ambidexterity. (Saleh et al., 2023). To effectively address the paradox of ambidexterity, organisations must invest in the development of innovation capabilities, to resolve the conflict that exists within the business between ‘exploration and exploitation innovations’ that essentially compete for the same resources, may have conflicting output demands and are facilitated through disparate organisational design (Saleh, et al., 2023, page 4).

While the literature has examined innovation ambidexterity and its association with improving organisational performance (Hughes et al., 2020), there is limited understanding of the roles that ambidextrous leadership and internal and external organisational factors play in driving its successful implementation and sustainability in a specific context which this research project aims to undertake through the individual experience of senior leadership in a large multinational telecommunications organisation.

1.4 Research Contributions: Theory and Practice

Saleh et al. (2023) identify seven key determinants for managing ambidexterity that drive organisational innovation. After reviewing 121 articles over 18 years, they identified leadership style as one of the seven factors in managing ambidexterity within an organisation. Based on the insights from their study on these seven determinants, they propose a set of management priorities that include leadership actions and behaviours that foster ambidextrous innovation. They highlight this as one of the ‘future areas of management research’ aimed at enhancing insights on innovation ambidexterity (Saleh et al., 2023, p. 35).

Additionally, Swart et al. (2019), in their study of 212 staff members in a UK-based services company, aimed to identify which individuals within the organisation at

particular levels of management facilitated these dual strategies. Swart et al. (2019) demonstrate that the limited knowledge regarding the impact of senior leaders has significant consequences, particularly for human resource management, as it directly affects organisational design, resourcing, development, and job rewards. Their study found that the roles and tones of senior management employees in an organisation are essential for driving innovation ambidexterity. However, because their study was conducted in only one organisation, it has several limitations. They suggest that future studies should provide further insights to build on the nature of this relationship (Swart et al., 2019). As a key contributor to the successful integration of an ambidextrous innovation strategy, an ambidextrous leader is recognised as a leader who must embody this duality, rather than relying on separate leaders for different functions to drive ambidextrous innovation within an organisation. This ability to integrate the contradictory behaviours is what makes an ambidextrous leader a powerful driver of both team and organisational innovation.

The literature recognises that innovation and leadership must work together and are dependent on supportive organisational systems (Saleh et al., 2023). These are internal and external factors that enable and support the successful integration of organisational innovation ambidexterity. Understanding these factors can support ongoing research by providing further insights and considerations when facing the dilemma of competing resource allocations, targeting learning capabilities, setting key objectives, and adapting organisational designs to foster innovation ambidexterity. (Saleh et al., 2023; Kortmann, 2014). The African telecommunications context, with its unique regulatory and market conditions, further broadens the predominantly developed market-focused innovation ambidexterity research, and providing more context-specific insights can contribute to growing research.

This research aims to understand the interplay between ambidextrous leadership and the internal and external factors within a telecommunications organisation in shaping innovation ambidexterity. A review of the existing literature, combined with insights from senior leadership, aims to provide a deep understanding of the theory in comparison to the practical applications of managing dual business models. It seeks to support and contribute to the expanding body of literature on innovation ambidexterity, particularly within the telecommunications sector.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Digitalisation accompanying Industry 4.0 has driven rapid economic change and innovation. It leads to shorter innovation cycles, greater volatility, and higher costs, requiring organisations to engage in continuous innovation to stay competitive (Niewöhnera et al., 2021). It is therefore essential to continually improve existing products and pursue new technologies, which involves managing the conflicting demands of both radical and incremental innovations, a concept called ambidexterity. Although incremental innovation has been common in organisations, achieving radical innovations simultaneously remains a significant challenge (Niewöhnera et al., 2021). For many organisations, the ability to maintain a competitive advantage in these dynamic environments increasingly depends on effectively managing paradoxical demands (Schrage et al., 2025; Smith & Lewis, 2011).

In response to these challenges, the concept of organisational ambidexterity has gained substantial interest as organisations seek to balance radical and incremental innovation (Dominguez et al., 2019) to meet dual requirements for sustained growth. While this dual approach has proven important for long-term success, it also generates notable challenges that require leadership capability and internal and external enablers to successfully integrate into an organisation (Sahel et al., 2023). This research study explores the interplay between ambidextrous leadership and internal and external influencing factors, examining how and why these elements influence innovation ambidexterity, contributing to current research

Chapter 1 of this research report provided a view of the evolving business landscape, driven by rapid digitisation, requiring organisations to swiftly respond and adapt to avoid disruption. It is therefore prudent for organisations to integrate effective strategies and enablers that drive growth and business sustainability. The telecommunications industry is no exception, as it has been susceptible to significant technological change and disruption. In this light, telecommunications organisations need to respond by building an innovation pipeline through ambidextrous innovation to remain relevant and sustainable in the future. Leveraging leadership capabilities and understanding the internal and external factors that enable the successful integration of an innovation ambidexterity strategy into the organisational vision is

therefore essential. This literature review will examine 'how and why' ambidextrous leadership, along with the internal and external factors, supports ambidextrous innovation.

2.2 Ambidexterity: Foundation for Ambidextrous Innovation

2.3.1 Organisational Ambidexterity: The dual and conflicting demands

Early perspectives viewed exploration and exploitation as mutually exclusive trade-offs, supporting sequential strategies within organisations. Smith et al. (2022) expand paradox theory to show that these demands represent enduring dualities that must be managed simultaneously rather than resolved through choice. Recent studies reinforce this view, illustrating that an organisation's capability to navigate these paradoxical tensions achieve higher adaptive performance (Papachroni & Heracleous, 2020; van Neerijnen et al., 2021). This perspective is particularly important for understanding organisational ambidexterity, as it shifts the focus from structural separation to dynamic integration (Peng et al., 2022). The paradox theory literature clearly indicates that tensions between exploration and exploitation in organisations are persistent and need to be actively managed over time by leveraging cognitive and behavioural responses (van Neerijnen et al., 2021; Papachroni & Heracleous, 2020). The authors emphasise that top leadership teams capable of paradoxical thinking are better positioned to foster organisational ambidexterity (van Neerijnen et al., 2021). This development highlights the importance of leadership capability in managing these paradoxes within organisational ambidexterity.

2.3.2 Organisation Ambidexterity Designs

The literature identifies three organisational ambidexterity designs: contextual, sequential, and structural. Understanding each of these designs is essential because each approach offers mechanisms for balancing exploitation and exploration within organisations. This directly impacts how innovation is managed and sustained, so recognising which design is the best fit for an organisation's environment, leadership style, and strategic goals enables them to be better equipped to effectively integrate innovation into their daily practices and respond to market changes, ultimately enhancing performance and sustainability (Ossenbrink et al., 2019).

2.3.2.1 Structural versus Contextual Ambidexterity

The debate over the best design for ambidexterity centres on two main models. The first is structural ambidexterity, which involves establishing separate, distinct units for exploration, such as research and development labs and new ventures, while maintaining core business units through incremental change (Saleh et al., 2023). This method helps in reducing conflicts by keeping these demands apart. It entails establishing distinct organisational units, cultures, and reward systems for each activity, protecting radical, often initially unprofitable, exploration efforts from the efficiency pressures of the core business (Birkinshaw et al., 2023). However, recent studies highlight that the primary challenge lies in integration, where insufficient coordination between units can lead to fragmentation and reduced agility. Modern approaches suggest employing hybrid or dynamic integration mechanisms to mitigate these issues (Ossenbrink et al., 2019).

The second model is contextual ambidexterity, which integrates exploration and exploitation within the same organisational unit or even within the same individual (Katou *et al.*, 2021; van Neerijnen et al., 2021). Contextual ambidexterity, as originally conceptualised by Gibson and Birkinshaw (2004), who explained that exploration and exploitation can be managed within a single organisational unit and even by the same individuals. Recent research expands on this idea, demonstrating that such duality depends on a supportive organisational environment characterised by shared values, a compelling vision, and robust HR and performance systems that empower leaders and employees to balance competing demands (Birkinshaw et al., 2023). While this approach provides greater flexibility and quicker integration, it also causes fatigue and possible role conflict for employees balancing both innovation and efficiency (van Neerijnen et al., 2021).

Although structural ambidexterity was once common in many organisations, there is now a noticeable shift towards contextual ambidexterity, especially in rapidly changing environments where quick switching is essential (Bozic & Dimovski, 2019). Research also shows that these approaches are not mutually exclusive and that a hybrid ambidexterity strategy may be the most effective (Ossenbrink et al., 2019). Ossenbrink et al. (2019) introduced the concept of hybrid ambidexterity, suggesting that the environment influences the use of both structural and contextual approaches. In this design, organisations may employ structural separation for highly disruptive, distant

exploration activities whilst leveraging contextual ambidexterity to sustain incremental innovation within their core operations (Ossenbrink et al., 2019). Recent studies in emerging markets, such as Malaysia, reveal that contextual ambidexterity often exerts a more substantial influence on firm performance than structural ambidexterity due to the heightened need for adaptability in rapidly evolving environments (Katou et al., 2022). This divergence highlights the importance of context-specific research, such as the proposed study in the African telecommunications sector, to identify the optimal configuration. Ultimately, whether to adopt structural or contextual strategies depends on environmental factors, including culture, systems, and, especially, leadership, that guide employees in making daily decisions about how to allocate their time between these activities and the organisation's size (Bozic & Dimovski, 2019).

2.3.3 Organisational ambidexterity and performance

Ambidexterity pertains to the capacity to simultaneously engage in exploration and exploitation (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013; Hughes et al., 2020). Recent research confirms that firms able to sustain this duality consistently outperform those that focus on a single mode of innovation (Saleh et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2019). Empirical evidence shows that balancing both types of innovation encourages greater adaptability, market leadership, and sustained growth, particularly in turbulent digital environments (Bozic & Dimovski, 2019; Hughes, 2018). As a result, organisational ambidexterity is not a choice but a strategic necessity for competitive survival, particularly in sectors such as telecommunications, where rapid technological change requires both operational efficiency and the exploration of emerging opportunities (Saleh et al., 2023).

Alongside financial benefits, the research by Hughes et al. (2020) showed that organisational ambidexterity also boosts innovative capacity and strategic agility. For instance, Hughes et al. (2020) found that dynamic sequential ambidexterity, which involves shifting focus over time, generally results in better firm performance than a balanced or simultaneous approach. This emphasises that ambidexterity is more than a strategic decision; it is a capability embedded within the organisation's core resources, systems, and needs.

In the design of contextual ambidexterity, simultaneous exploration and exploitation processes become part of an organisation's routine operations. Here, a portion of

employees' time is dedicated to radical innovation alongside their regular work (Mattes & Ohr, 2019). Well-known examples include Google, Volkswagen, and 3M, which practice contextual ambidexterity. At Google, engineers spend 20% of their time on innovative projects, while Volkswagen's concept teams allocate 50% of their time to breakthrough ideas, and 3M follows a 15% rule (Mattes & Ohr, 2019).

Other organisations adopt a structural ambidexterity design, separating units or teams such that one focuses on exploration while the other manages exploitation (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013; Birkinshaw et al., 2023). These teams operate under distinct organisational logics, structures, and reward systems, enabling simultaneous pursuit of innovation and efficiency (Mattes & Ohr, 2019). Schindler's Research and Advanced Development unit and Siemens' Corporate Technology division exemplify such structural configurations.

Beyond these two designs, organisations may realign their structures over time in response to environmental shifts, a process known as sequential ambidexterity (Liu & Wang, 2024). IBM remains a classic case, having cyclically shifted between exploration and exploitation phases to navigate technological disruption and sustain growth (Bozic & Dimovski, 2019).

2.4 Ambidextrous Innovation

2.4.1 Defining Ambidextrous Innovation

Understanding innovation ambidexterity is essential in this study because it provides a clear conceptual foundation, ensuring that the idea of this dual capability is well understood and serving as a basis for subsequent analysis within this shared framework. Researchers have conceptualised this dual capability in various ways, and many of the papers reviewed in this study suggest that balancing the exploitation of current strengths through incremental advancements with the exploration of new opportunities is critical for long-term performance. Zhang *et al.* (2019) define ambidextrous innovation as the simultaneous pursuit of both exploitative and exploratory technological innovations, which enables organisations to balance these two types of innovation and improve their growth and adaptability. This simultaneous pursuit of an organisation to engage in both radical and incremental innovations leads to significant changes, creating breakthroughs that reshape or establish entirely new markets. In contrast, incremental innovations generate gradual improvements to

current offerings and processes, thereby maintaining the organisation's competitive edge (Kortmann, 2015; Zhang et al., 2019).

Almost 30 years ago, March (1991) proposed that excessive exploration leads to a “failure trap” of endless experimentation, whereas excessive exploitation results in a “success trap” of rigidity. Therefore, organisations need to find a balance between the two. Ambidexterity provides a way for firms to sidestep innovation traps and capitalise on the advantages of both exploration and exploitation (Birkinshaw et al., 2023)

Marín Idárraga et al. (2025) recently conducted an extensive meta-analysis to investigate the relationship between organisational ambidexterity and performance across various industries. The authors aimed to synthesise findings from a large sample of empirical studies, specifically 330 studies published between 2007 and 2021, to provide more clarity on whether exploration and exploitation activities have a direct impact on organisational performance or if their impact is mediated through innovation. To achieve this, they employed a meta-analytic structural equation model to test the hypotheses and provide evidence on the causal mechanisms linking ambidexterity, innovation, and performance, addressing existing theoretical debates (Marín Idárraga et al, 2025).

The study's findings demonstrate that neither exploration nor exploitation, nor ambidexterity as a whole, has a consistent, direct positive effect on performance. However, the authors demonstrated the significant mediating role of innovation. In other words, the positive effect of ambidexterity on performance primarily results from its ability to convert balanced exploration and exploitation into innovative outcomes, such as the launch of new products or technological advances (Marín Idárraga et al., 2025).

Notably, Saleh et al. (2023) identify key drivers at an organisational level that influence ambidextrous innovation, and they also highlight both the enabling management priorities and future research prospects. Among these, leadership styles are regarded as a major determinant, with management emphasising leadership control and effectiveness.

2.4.2 Innovation Ambidexterity and the Telecommunications Sector

As the review above shows, innovation and organisational ambidexterity have been widely examined as drivers of enhanced organisational performance. Recent research has examined how ambidexterity specifically affects telecommunications organisations (Lungu, 2022; Moqaddamerad & Tapinos, 2022). This is significant to this study because the research project is centred on the analysis of the individual experiences of leaders in a telecommunications organisation, where technological disruption and intense competition in the sector demand both incremental upgrades and breakthrough innovations for business sustainability.

Lungu (2022) emphasises that adopting innovation ambidexterity is crucial for the telecommunications industry's long-term competitiveness. It promotes continuous innovation, helps predict disruptions, and enables strategic adjustments. Moqaddamerad & Tapinos (2022) emphasise that the uncertainties introduced by 5G technologies force telecom companies to innovate and adapt their business models to create, deliver, and capture value in a rapidly changing environment. Their research suggests that organisations must manage these technological disruptions and seize new opportunities to remain competitive, which can be effectively achieved by establishing an innovative ambidextrous approach as a key strategic element.

Njiru and Mutua (2024) further demonstrate how organisational ambidexterity, especially balancing exploratory activities like innovation and adaptation, with exploitative ones such as refinement and efficiency, influences business performance in the Kenyan telecommunications sector, currently dominated by a major provider holding about 66% of the market share. (Njiru & Mutua, 2024). The authors conducted a structured review of existing literature, analysing data from 31 studies focused on the Kenyan telecommunications industry. These studies assessed performance using financial metrics and market share. The findings revealed that organisations that effectively balance exploration and exploitation outperformed those that concentrate on only one. This suggests that organisational ambidexterity has a positive impact on both revenue and market share, confirming its role in sustaining competitiveness (Njiru & Mutua, 2024). Safaricom's achievement in the Kenyan market through continuous service innovation, such as mobile money and enterprise solutions, has contrasted with the decline of its less adaptable competitors, and is cited as an example of successful ambidexterity (Njiru & Mutua, 2024)

The authors argue that implementing strategic decision-making that integrates innovation with operational enhancements is crucial for long-term success in the telecommunication industry within changing markets (Njiru & Mutua, 2024). They demonstrate that ambidexterity is more than a theoretical concept; it is a practical requirement for telecommunications companies navigating turbulent conditions. This supports the idea that balancing exploration and exploitation is vital for maintaining a competitive edge.

In summary, innovation ambidexterity is not only a theoretical ideal but also a proven strategic approach that organisations can effectively utilise to achieve superior performance in innovation results, growth, and adaptability within the changing business environment (Saleh, 2023; Niewohner et al., 2021). As a result, achieving innovation ambidexterity becomes a crucial focus for leadership in organisations aiming for sustained success in dynamic industries. Therefore, the researcher centred this study on understanding ambidextrous leadership, and the internal and external enablers that influence innovation ambidexterity towards long-term business sustainability.

2.5 Ambidextrous Leadership Capability

2.5.1 Defining ambidextrous leadership

Ambidextrous leadership is defined as a leader's ability to promote both exploratory and exploitative behaviours in followers by flexibly switching between two distinct sets of behaviours (Xi et al., 2025). The first set is known as opening leadership behaviours, which involve encouraging exploration, creativity, experimentation, autonomy, and risk-taking. They aim to stimulate new ideas and challenge the status quo (Rosing et al., 2011; Xi et al., 2025). The second set is referred to as closing leadership behaviours, which focus on promoting exploitation, efficiency, control, monitoring, and adherence to rules and standards. These are designed to ensure the effective execution of existing processes and ideas that lead to incremental organisational changes (Xi et al., 2025). The main contribution of the ambidextrous leader model is recognising that a single leader must embody this duality, rather than relying on separate leaders for different functions to drive ambidextrous innovation within an organisation. This ability to integrate seemingly contradictory behaviours is what makes a leader a powerful driver of both team and organisational innovation.

2.5.2 Leadership Impact on Innovation Ambidexterity

Organisations are therefore shifting from relying solely on structural solutions towards more contextual approaches or a blend of both, which is essential for shaping behaviours and culture to encourage ambidexterity innovation. This has, in turn, been demonstrated to be essential for gaining a competitive advantage; yet its antecedents, especially those related to leadership, have not been thoroughly examined (Li et al., 2020).

Koryak et al. (2018) investigate the contradictory relationship between 'exploration and exploitation' in organisations, focusing on managerial attention, cohesion of top management teams, vision, research and development intensity, and continuous improvement as antecedents of ambidexterity. Their study of 422 SMEs in the UK found that diverse top management teams foster exploration, while a written and communicated vision has a positive influence on ambidextrous innovation. This is supported by Bell and Hofmeyr (2021), who examine how leadership influences organisational ambidexterity. Their research highlights the need for leadership skills to balance innovation with core business functions, stakeholder engagement, empowerment, strategic consistency, and adaptability.

Zhang et al. (2019) further argue that leaders play an important role in fostering these ties, as their cross-functional reach enables them to leverage the onboarding of a diverse range of resources, easing any internal resource scarcity and facilitating a balance between exploiting and exploring resource skill. Swart et al. (2018) further substantiate this by citing that top management teams play a role in balancing decisions related to skills, resource allocation, and organisational design, which drives performance. Additionally, they serve as role models for values and behaviours associated with contradictory orientations, thereby effectively navigating these contradictions and ensuring the organisation remains adaptable and competitive in a dynamic environment.

In their 2018 study, Ye et al. (p. 1958) similarly explain that organisations achieve ambidexterity by cultivating and applying 'leadership human dynamics' and 'dynamic capabilities' indicating that leaders must continually refresh, restructure, and broaden their leadership behaviours by 'sensing and seizing' opportunities and switching between exploitative and exploratory behaviours as needed (Ye et al., 2018, p.1958).

Dynamic capabilities enable organisations to align their resources and capabilities with the requirements of the business environment, facilitating both types of innovation. Their study emphasises the importance of a leader's flexibility and adaptation in achieving ambidextrous innovation (Ye et al, 2018). Furthermore, diversity within top management teams, encompassing cognitive diversity and team heterogeneity, has a positive impact on the integration of an ambidextrous innovation culture (Saleh et al., 2023; Swart et al., 2018).

A study in China investigated this using data from 511 Chinese employees, focusing on the relationship between ambidextrous leadership behaviours and innovation. The findings indicated that leadership styles characterised by high empowerment and low direction promote radical innovation, particularly when combined with firm support. This suggests that leaders should shift away from traditional, directive strategies and move towards empowerment (Li et al., 2020).

In another recent article, Slatten et al. (2023) empirically examined the mediating role of ambidextrous leadership styles in fostering organisational ambidexterity as well as individual-level job performance and creativity in healthcare. In their cross-sectional study of 258 in-home care workers in Norway, the authors found that ambidextrous leadership has a direct, positive influence on employee ambidexterity and the quality of care provided. However, they found less significance regarding the direct impact of ambidextrous leadership on employee creativity (Slatten et al., 2023). This further supports the growing body of evidence linking the importance of developing ambidextrous leaders to promoting both high-quality service and innovation within staff, highlighting the multiple direct and indirect pathways through which leadership shapes organisational outcomes (Slatten et al., 2023).

The effectiveness of this duality from a leadership capabilities perspective also depends on various organisational and environmental factors, as identified in the research, which indicates that leaders' behaviours require a supportive environment that reduces exploration-related risks (Li et al., 2020). Therefore, building on our earlier examples, the effectiveness of senior leadership teams in implementing this duality greatly influences the success of ambidextrous innovation efforts across the organisation, and thus integrating this into top management capability is essential for organisational ambidexterity (Zhang et al., 2018; van Neerijnen et al., 2021). An

additional enabler is the organisational vision and strategy, which shape decision-making to align with innovative ambidexterity, ensuring that the leadership mindset remains consistent with the overall strategic direction (Kortman, 2015).

The next consideration is that consistent management at the middle-tier level is essential for fostering a firm's ambidextrous innovation performance. This emphasises that successful ambidextrous innovation relies on senior leaders gaining the support of culturally aware managers across the organisation (Berraires, 2019). Lastly, ambidextrous innovation can also be linked to organisational adaptability and dynamic capabilities (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). By effectively managing the exploration-exploitation trade-off, leaders can strengthen their dynamic capabilities, enabling their organisations to respond quickly and efficiently to changes in their environment (Asif, 2020; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

2.6 Internal Enablers for Ambidextrous Innovation

2.6.1 The Role of Human Resource Management Systems

The literature acknowledges that leadership cannot operate in isolation; it requires support from aligned organisational systems. Effective Human Resource Management practices that simultaneously support the stability necessary for exploitation and the flexibility needed for exploration are essential for an organisation (Ahammad et al., 2020). Human resource systems serve as formal mechanisms that translate strategic intent into employee behaviours and outputs. This includes dual performance management systems, reward structures that balance short-term efficiency with long-term innovation, and development programmes that foster ambidextrous skills (Swart et al., 2019). For ambidexterity and innovation, these Human Resource management systems must also be ambidextrous (Ahammad et al., 2020), meaning that they are designed to simultaneously support the conflicting demands of exploration and exploitation (Ahammad et al., 2020).

This would involve, for example, recruiting new employees with a diverse range of skills, including an entrepreneurial, creative, and radically disruptive mindset, alongside specialists with in-depth expertise. The performance management system, which evaluates employees, would, in addition to short-term efficiency targets, also incorporate long-term innovation criteria to foster an ambidextrous culture and encourage an ambidextrous mindset within the organisation. Furthermore, the

organisation should improve its reward systems to balance incentives for successful exploitation, such as efficiency bonuses, with support for exploration initiatives, even if they are radical, such as rewarding efforts that may not be fully realised or prototypes that have failed. This is important because an organisational culture focused solely on exploitation can undermine ambidextrous innovation, especially if formal HR systems do not recognise exploration activities (Swart et al., 2019).

A recent study investigating how internal organisational systems support ambidexterity was conducted in Egypt's public telecommunications sector, recognised for its ongoing modernisation and environmental turbulence, which emphasises its significance (Elashry et al., 2024). The authors concentrated on the impact of high-performance work systems and HR practices on ambidexterity. These systems and practices are centred around enhancing the skills, motivation, and opportunity of employees, thus fostering ambidexterity. High-performance work systems are strategic, coherent bundles of human resource management practices designed to unlock the potential of employees and, consequently, enhance organisational performance. These systems move beyond the conventional top-down hierarchies and control mechanisms, advocating for a people-oriented approach (Elashry et al., 2024). The study demonstrated that focusing on employee involvement, skill development, and motivation in high-performance work systems aims to cultivate a culture of engagement, autonomy, and ongoing improvement (Elashry et al., 2024). Key components typically include selective hiring, extensive training and development, performance-based rewards, team-based structures, open communication, and employee involvement in decision-making (Elashry et al., 2024). It also highlights that investing strategically in Human Resource infrastructure empowers employees and supports both exploitative and exploratory innovation simultaneously, thereby improving the organisation's ability to adapt (Elashry et al., 2024).

These insights are particularly relevant for telecommunications leaders seeking to foster and champion a pro-innovation culture and utilise internal systems to maintain performance in rapidly changing environments (Ahammad et al., 2020; Elashry et al., 2024).

2.6.2 Knowledge Management

Knowledge management acts as a catalyst for both creating new knowledge and utilising existing knowledge, serving as a driving force behind ambidexterity. Leaders play an essential role in fostering a culture of ambidexterity by promoting the sharing of current knowledge and the pursuit of new insights (Jia et al., 2022). The author demonstrated through a quantitative study of over 200 cases in China that the relationship partly mediates the link between exploitation and exploration in knowledge search between ambidextrous leadership and organisational innovation. Leaders who directly support learning by encouraging the exploration of new knowledge and ensuring the effective use of existing knowledge (Jia et al., 2022; Asif, 2020) aid in enhancing intellectual capital and organisational performance (Asif, 2020).

Further to the above, the effective knowledge management processes, including the management of knowledge redundancy, are essential for promoting innovation ambidexterity (Elashry et al., 2024). For instance, intra-organisational knowledge sharing has been shown to boost both ambidexterity and overall organisational performance (Dzenopoljac et al., 2024), as this illustrates the dual capability to engage in knowledge exploration through seeking new knowledge and external scanning, and knowledge exploitation by utilising existing knowledge and facilitating internal sharing.

Importantly, in the context of this research, it was noted that less than 10% of the reviewed literature addresses innovation ambidexterity in the African context (Saleh et al., 2023). This is further complicated by the fact that telecommunications organisations in Africa face additional challenges due to rapid technological advancements, infrastructure constraints, complex regulations, and unique cultural and market conditions. Therefore, it is essential to examine innovation ambidexterity within this specific context.

2.7 Ambidexterity in the context of the African Telecommunications Sector

The African telecommunications sector offers a unique and essential context for exploring ambidexterity characterised by leapfrogging technology adoption, rapid growth rates, and distinctive socio-economic challenges. Organisations in this sector face substantial pressure to innovate (Machemba & Shukla, 2024), and current research in the African context mainly focuses on broad innovation management,

digital transformation, and the impact of leadership on innovation outcomes in countries such as South Africa, Egypt, Kenya, and Zambia (Mbilima & Phiri, 2025).

Notably, Hanson et al. (2020) examined Africa's digital economy, highlighting the complex interaction between digital disruption, innovation, and leadership within the telecommunications sector. They point out that digital disruption functions both as an enabler and a destabiliser for traditional markets, with telecom infrastructure serving as a vital catalyst for entrepreneurship, regional integration, and economic growth (Hanson et al., 2020). The study emphasises that while telecom infrastructure can promote digitalisation and innovation, it may also increase inequalities if not managed inclusively. The literature emphasises that regulatory harmonisation, collaborative partnerships among governments, telecoms, and startups, and robust digital governance are crucial for sustainable transformation. It further suggests that effective leadership is therefore crucial, not only to maximise the benefits of digital transformation but also to ensure ethical and inclusive progress in Africa's rapidly evolving telecommunications landscape.

A further qualitative study by Abagen and Ochi (2024) supports Hanson et al (2020), highlighting that partnerships among Africans living abroad collaborate to advance technological progress in Africa's finance and telecommunications sectors through digital transformation. The authors note that their initiatives have introduced new technologies and innovations, fostering growth and development by enhancing the economy and promoting financial inclusion. They also suggest that these diaspora-led initiatives further encourage the convergence of fintech and telecom sectors, which in turn drives employment, entrepreneurship, and overall socio-economic progress.

The past five years have seen Africa's telecommunications regulators increasingly shift from their traditional oversight roles to more proactive players seeking to enable digital transformation in their countries. This has become a top policy priority across Africa, and regulators are recognised as pivotal to this agenda. When reviewing key markets in Africa, such as Kenya, Egypt, and South Africa, common reform approaches can be observed from a regulatory perspective, influencing innovation, investment, and digitalisation in the sector. There have been six particular areas of enablement, which include, firstly, the regulators' adoption of a comprehensive "fifth generation" (G5) approach to regulation, where their strategy goes beyond traditional

telecom to support a fully digital economy. This emphasis opens cross-sector collaboration and active stakeholder participation to foster an environment conducive to investment, competition, and innovation, all while safeguarding consumers, which has been demonstrated in 2023 by the Egyptian regulator, which earned the International Telecommunication Union's highest G5 Benchmark of "Advanced" status, showing successful collaborative practices that promote an integrated digital economy (Elashry et al., 2024).

Secondly, regulators have moved to update and modernise their spectrum policy and infrastructure sharing to extend connectivity. Spectrum auctions are now often designed not only for revenue but also to mandate coverage in underserved areas, helping to bridge the digital divide. This can be seen in the active network-sharing agreements between various operators across the continent, and in open access wholesale fibre models that are reducing duplication and costs. Thirdly, recognising that heavy fees and taxes can deter network investment, several governments enacted tax reforms in the telecom sector. This is evident in shifts like South Africa's 2025 budget, which removed taxes on affordable smartphones to encourage device uptake, and Kenya's reversal of a planned tax hike on mobile services to keep costs low for consumers.

Another key area focuses on data protection and customer trust across borders. Data privacy laws have been introduced across Africa, transforming the regulatory landscape for digital services, with more than half of African nations now having data protection laws. Kenya, for example, passed a Data Protection Act in 2019, and South Africa's POPIA came into effect in 2021. These frameworks impose stricter regulations on telecom operators concerning customer consent, data sharing, and breach notifications. The emphasis on privacy and cybersecurity aims to enhance user trust in digital services, which is vital for the adoption of mobile banking, e-commerce, and other innovations.

Lately, increased collaboration between telecom regulators and central banks on mobile money and fintech regulation has been demonstrated. Sub-Saharan Africa leads the world in mobile financial services, such as M-Pesa, prompting closer oversight of issues while maintaining proper safeguards (Njiru & Mutua, 2024). There is also a clear trend towards establishing formal mechanisms for regulatory

collaboration. Multi-agency forums and memoranda of understanding are being utilised to address overlapping mandates among telecoms, competition authorities, and financial regulators. In South Africa, this is evident through initiatives like One-Stop or Digital Regulators Forums, which are being piloted to coordinate actions on converged issues.

Despite these positive trends, challenges persist in this area, where policies and frameworks are often well-designed but not fully implemented or enforced. Legacy issues such as fragmented institutional roles and capacity constraints can impede progress, as seen in Kenya's stakeholders, who note that engagement processes, although mandated, sometimes lack clarity or are conducted in an ad-hoc manner. Additionally, infrastructure gaps outside the telecom sector also obstruct digital ambitions, such as South Africa's power outages, which directly affect telecom service quality. Each country displays unique strengths and weaknesses in its regulatory environment, which must be regarded as external factors influencing both leadership capacity and innovative development within organisations.

2.8 Research Opportunity

From the arguments in the literature review, the researcher can conclude the relevance of the study as follows:

Through a review of recent academic and industrial literature, the researcher aimed to examine organisational and innovation ambidexterity, its association with improving organisational performance, and the role of ambidextrous leaders in building ambidextrous innovation. This research aims to support and contribute to the growing body of literature on the important role of ambidextrous leadership and the internal and external enablers in integrating ambidextrous innovation within an organisation. This will be achieved by exploring the individual experiences of senior leadership in a multinational telecommunications organisation in African.

The research will consider the specific environment, challenges, and characteristics of a particular setting, in this case, an African telecommunications company, as studies on ambidexterity, innovation, and leadership have been more common in developed markets. This is demonstrated in the comprehensive systematic review of 121 academic papers on innovation ambidexterity, where currently less than 10% of the articles reviewed were focused on an African context (Saleh et al, 2023). African

telecommunications organisations operate in unique environments with rapid technological change, infrastructure challenges, regulatory complexities, and have distinct cultural and market dynamics. A general view of an ambidextrous leadership model may not fully align with, or require adaptation in, the African context. A further benefit of the research is that it targeted senior leadership specifically and their capability to embed innovation ambidexterity, whereas previously the focus has been on a middle-management view.

Further to the above, while many telecom studies have reviewed business model innovation and digital transformation (Kaulio, et al., 2017; Moqaddamerad & Tapinos, 2022), the direct causal mechanism of ambidextrous leadership in driving both the exploitation of current digital assets and the exploration of new digital business models, for example, 6G, cloud computing, and artificial intelligence, is still under research (Saleh et al., 2023). The current references primarily relate to organisational ambidexterity, rather than specifically to leadership.

2.9 Conclusion

This literature review indicates that the individual experiences of senior leadership in an African context can support, expand, or identify nuances in understanding how and why leadership ambidexterity, as well as the internal and external influence, plays an essential role in innovation ambidexterity strategy. This is inherently necessary within a telecom organisation, as they must respond to and navigate technological disruptions and market shifts effectively. Understanding these factors can contribute to ongoing research and assist senior leaders in gaining insights and considerations when dealing with resource allocation dilemmas, focusing on learning capabilities, setting key objectives, and designing organisational structures to embed and promote innovation ambidexterity.

The analysis of existing knowledge confirms that the proposed research is not a duplication but a support or extension within the field, and by focusing on senior leadership in the African Telecommunications Industry, the current study directly addresses significant contextual gap identified in the literature (Bell & Hofmeyr, (2021); Koryak, et al., (2018); Slatten, at al., (2023)). The findings aim to provide deep insights into ambidextrous innovation practices, leadership styles, and internal and external

factors in an emerging market context, thereby contributing to both theory and practice.

Chapter 3: Research Questions

This study aimed to investigate the role of senior leadership in shaping and driving ambidextrous innovation within an organisation. It explored this link through a literature review and semi-structured interviews across different divisions of a South African multinational telecommunications company. The questions were designed to delve into the research problem and to allow the researcher to gather insights from senior executives on the role of leadership in embedding ambidextrous innovation in the organisation.

The first research question aimed to understand how senior leaders perceived the concept and practice of ambidexterity within their organisation. More deeply, the study sought to understand the importance that leaders attributed to innovation ambidexterity in ensuring their organisation's survival in the current market environment.

1. How do senior leaders in a multinational telecommunications organisation perceive and define the significance of innovation ambidexterity

- What are the most important ways in which the organisation practices ambidextrous innovation?
- Is it important for the survival of the company?

The second research question investigates the internal factors, behaviours, and mindsets that either facilitate or impede the senior leadership's ability to create an environment that allows the simultaneous pursuit of exploitative and explorative innovations (Saleh, et al., 2023) within their team. On a more detailed level, it sought to understand through the individual experiences of the senior leadership experience which leadership styles were most effective for managing innovation ambidexterity strategies, how organisational culture enables innovation related decision making and what tensions arise when integrating this into the organisation.

2. What internal leadership behaviours, mindsets, and organisational factors promote or impede the development and sustainability of ambidextrous innovation?

- What leadership behaviours or mindsets are needed when managing ambidextrous strategies?

- How does the culture of this organisation influence and support your decision-making in innovation-related matters?
- What tensions are experienced in trying to integrate ambidextrous innovation?

The third question aims to understand which internal support mechanisms are used to implement and integrate ambidextrous innovation strategies, the types of impediments encountered, and the impact of external drivers on leadership's ability to foster ambidextrous innovation.

3. How are senior leaders supported in implementing the duality of radical and incremental innovation strategies, and what impediments do they encounter?

- What support mechanisms are used to enable innovation strategies?
- What resistance or challenges are encountered when integrating an ambidextrous innovation strategy?
- How do external drivers impact the leader's ability to be ambidextrous?

These questions aim to provide deep insights into ambidextrous innovation practices, ambidextrous leadership styles, and influencing internal and external factors in an emerging market telecommunications organisation.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This research methodology and design section outlines the key decisions made to undertake a successful and impactful study through a qualitative approach that combines primary data collected from semi-structured interviews with secondary data from existing academic and industry research. It discusses key aspects, including the research philosophy, approach adopted, methodological decisions, research strategies, timeline considerations, and methods for data collection and analysis. This chapter aimed to present a clear and coherent research structure that addressed the identified research topic and associated questions, to make a meaningful contribution to the literature on innovation ambidexterity in organisations.

Research philosophy is defined by Saunders and Lewis (2012) as a system of beliefs and assumptions about how knowledge develops and its nature. This research was grounded in interpretivism, which focuses on understanding how individuals think and behave within a social context and how they interpret their actions within their social environment. As this study focused on the individual experiences of senior leadership capabilities towards fostering ambidextrous leadership in their organisation, it centred on gathering insights into their experiences, stories, and emotions.

Published research articles were examined to explore the concepts of innovation ambidexterity, leadership capability, its advantages and challenges for organisations, and any links of influence between senior leaders and institutionalising a culture that supports ambidextrous innovation. The methodology aimed to provide insights into the mechanisms and impact of top leadership by understanding their experiences, perceptions, narratives, limitations, and challenges related to cultivating a culture of innovation and ambidexterity. Consequently, this interpretative qualitative approach aimed to explore the individual experiences, actions, behaviours, beliefs, challenges, and contextual factors influencing individual senior leaders. These elements cannot be easily quantified (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022).

Using the Yin case study research design and methodology provides a way to explore "how" and "why" questions related to current events within their real-world context (Yazan, 2015). Unlike thematic analysis, which mainly identifies patterns or themes in

data, Yin's case study approach considers research as an "intensive study of a single unit," also known as 'the case,' aiming to provide a deep, contextual understanding of complex issues, which in this study included examining aspects of leadership, the organisation, ambidexterity, and innovation. This approach helped link the evidence gathered through the semi-structured interviews to theory and secondary literature data, enabling an analytical generalisation of findings (Yazan, 2015), which led to practical and theoretical insights specific to strengthening the institutionalisation of ambidextrous innovation within the organisation through its leadership.

This framework served as a guide connecting the three research questions by integrating various sources, including semi-structured interviews and existing academic and industry literature documents. It enabled exploration from multiple perspectives within the organisation, ensuring credibility and providing a structured research plan that covered the planning, design, data collection, and analysis stages to examine the gathered data (Yin, 2016). The approach aimed to produce a comprehensive case study report that investigated how senior leadership capability influenced the embedding of a culture of ambidextrous innovation within a multinational telecommunications organisation, leading to sustained growth.

This research used theoretical frameworks, such as ambidextrous innovation, culture, and leadership theory, to support the data gathered and subsequent analysis. The case study was limited to specific boundaries that defined its research scope. It also maintained research quality through cross-checking the data, ensured detailed record-keeping, considered alternative explanations, and followed the methods specified in the procedures (Yin, 2016). The researcher ensured that the principles of the methodology were followed to illustrate how senior leaders viewed leadership capability and its link to ambidextrous innovation, using contextual analysis supported by consistent evidence and connected to larger theoretical frameworks. The researcher ensured that each step of the process was carefully followed to maintain the integrity of the process and data.

The study gathered insights from senior telecommunications leaders through semi-structured interviews, highlighting their individual experiences through observation and probing (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022; Zikmund et al., 2013). It used a "snapshot time horizon" to clearly understand current conditions and relationships (Saunders et al.,

2023, p. 212). This method was primarily selected due to the research's time constraints, which made it the most practical option.

4.2. Research Philosophy

Saunders et al. (2023) describe how a qualitative exploratory approach facilitates the investigation of less familiar topics, identifies key meanings, and generates ideas for future research. This research design aligned with these principles, remaining interpretive and exploratory, and aimed to understand each individual's unique interpretation of their role as leaders in promoting a culture of ambidextrous innovation, based on their subjective experience (Reeves & Hedberg, 2003). Furthermore, Creswell and Poth (2018) illustrate that a qualitative approach is an appropriate choice, given the need to capture the subjective experiences and contextual factors of senior leadership in embedding an organisation towards a culture of innovative ambidexterity. This approach enables the researcher to explore and gain insights into how senior leaders interpret and perceive their social realities and worldviews within the organisational culture, through methods such as semi-structured interviews, observations, and associated case studies (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022).

This research project, therefore, does not aim to produce generalised findings across all senior leaders or to test whether an existing theory universally applies. Instead, it sought to capture the individual experiences of senior leadership to provide depth and context to the narrative. This approach was intended to deepen understanding of the pivotal role leadership capability plays in the strategic implementation and integration of culture and processes, while contributing to theory development within the context of ambidextrous innovation.

4.3 Plan and Design

The planning and design phase primarily ensured that the researcher had a good match between the four research questions and the chosen case study method (Yazan, 2015). The research questions focused on the individual experiences of senior leaders in cultivating a culture of ambidextrous innovation, based on current events within a real organisation. The design element of the case study then created a blueprint that defined the single-case design. In this study, a multinational telecommunications company is specifically examined, focusing on senior leadership to test theoretical propositions related to ambidexterity and innovation (Yazan, 2015).

4.4 Population Group

In research terms, a population refers to the entire group that can potentially be included in a study. At the same time, a sample is a smaller subset of this population that is chosen for practical reasons. (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 32). For this study specifically, the population consisted of a subset of senior leaders in a large multinational telecommunications organisation established in South Africa, who were assumed to have been involved in strategic decisions for initiatives focused on both exploratory and exploitative innovation based on their seniority levels in the organisation. This approach ensured that the findings could be generalised to the larger population while keeping the study manageable and practical.

Focusing on a single large multinational telecommunication organisation allowed for a targeted research approach aimed at conducting an in-depth investigation into how senior leadership capability facilitates navigating and embedding a culture that supports the demands of innovation ambidexterity within their organisation in a rapidly changing market. By employing a single case study design, this research aimed to capture the unique characteristics and context that influence their decisions. This specific multinational telecommunications organisation was suitable for this study due to its extensive geographic presence across Africa, its susceptibility to rapid technological changes, and the high demand for operational efficiencies and continuous innovation. The single-case study method enabled an in-depth examination of a multinational company's leadership and innovation strategies and methods across its various divisions and operations, providing comprehensive and detailed insights. Thus, including multiple divisions, operations, and geographies, where heterogeneous insights could be generated. The case was deemed significant due to the extent of technological change the organisation and its leadership have experienced and will continue to experience.

4.5 Unit of Analysis

This study defined the unit of analysis as the primary entity being examined in the research framework. According to Islam and Aldaihani (2022), the unit of analysis can range from individuals, groups, organisations, or societies, depending on the research objectives and questions. For this research, the unit of analysis is the perceptions and individual experiences of senior leadership and executives within a multinational

telecommunications organisation. This choice was based on the aim to examine the mediating role of senior leadership in driving an impactful culture of ambidextrous innovation within an organisation. By focusing on senior leadership and an executive perspective, the study could identify the collective behaviours, decision-making processes, and strategic actions that influenced the ambidextrous innovation outcomes. This approach aligns with Saunders and Lewis's (2012) recommendations, which emphasise the importance of selecting a unit of analysis that directly addresses the research questions and objectives.

Marshall (2014) further emphasised the importance of the unit of analysis in qualitative research, highlighting its impact on data collection and analysis. In this study, the selected unit was supported by gathering data through interviews, observations, and document reviews to ensure the data was relevant and thorough. Purposive sampling was employed to select senior leaders and executives with relevant knowledge and experience associated with ambidextrous innovation, thereby enhancing the study's data. Zikmund et al. (2013) also highlight the importance of clearly defining the unit of analysis to ensure consistency. By focusing on senior leadership and executive roles, the study aimed to systematically investigate their experiences, behaviours, tools, and strategies used to promote a culture that supports both exploratory and exploitative innovation. This method successfully examined leadership styles, decision-making, and personal influences within ambidextrous innovation strategies, contrasting with previous research that emphasised the relationship between organisational ambidexterity and company performance (Jacobs, M., & Maritz, R., 2020; Saunders et al., 2023).

4.6 Sampling Method and Size

A targeted sampling approach was used to select participants who met specific criteria relevant to the study. This included holding a senior leadership role (e.g., CIO, CTO, CHRO, CSO, and senior executives) with direct strategic oversight of innovation projects, initiatives, or business transformation efforts, and having at least five years' employment within the organisation. Additionally, they were drawn from different functions working across different geographies to represent the multinational diversity within the organisation.

This targeted sampling approach aimed to gather data from participants best suited to provide insights into developing and sustaining an organisation's ambidextrous and innovative practices and culture. The interviews were conducted with willing and available individuals who agreed to participate. Since this was a qualitative study that did not aim for statistical generalisation but sought saturation (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022), the sample size was focused on 18 participants from a single telecommunication multinational organisation operating across Africa. The names of the individuals and organisation is kept confidential, and the interviews were structured to ensure a manageable duration, provoke engaging conversations, and probing questions to gain a clear understanding and insights into the factors driving a culture of innovative ambidexterity.

4.7 Data Collection

The next stage involved moving into the execution phase by collecting evidence for the case study. Here, data were gathered from multiple sources, as outlined in the planning and design. The data collection was systematic and followed the principles of using multiple sources, which include gathering evidence, consistently keeping a record of that evidence, and building a database for the case study (Yazan, 2015). For this study, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, gathering the perspectives of senior leadership within a multinational organisation, which served as the primary source of insights. Senior leaders and executives involved in operations across Africa were invited via direct email. The email correspondence detailed the duration, purpose, and scope of the one-on-one interviews, which lasted approximately 60 minutes, and requested that they complete a consent form. The researcher used audio recordings and a transcriber, accessed through Microsoft Teams (with permission), to capture discussions verbatim. Each interview was noted for key points through handwritten notes by the researcher, and the transcripts were stored in the case study database.

Interviews were guided by a prepared briefing email but remained conversational, allowing interviewees to share their stories and reflections. Importantly, the interview guide is applied consistently across all interviews, maintaining a formal tone while also assessing the participants' suitability for the study. The researcher provided context for each question and explained any unfamiliar terms before proceeding with the

conversation. As Yin (2016) notes, interviews in case studies are more like “guided conversations” than structured surveys; therefore, the researcher encouraged leaders to share specific events, projects, or recalled examples that illustrate the ambidextrous innovation experiences they had encountered. These specific examples were compared to other interview responses and organisation initiatives and events within the company to mitigate any bias that may arise during the interview process. Furthermore, interviewing multiple leaders across different levels and areas of the business aimed to draw out diverse perspectives across the three leadership tiers within the organisation.

4.8 Interview guideline

An online semi-structured interview was held, guided by a predetermined set of questions. This approach provided a balanced mix of flexibility and structure, enabling probing and clarification, which was essential for examining leadership styles and strategic aspects related to innovation ambidexterity.

Table 1 below details the interview questions used to guide the interview process.

Table 1: Interview Questionnaire

Research Questions
Research Question 1: <i>How do senior leaders in a multinational telecommunications organisation perceive and define the significance of innovation ambidexterity</i> • What are the most important ways in which the organisation practices ambidextrous innovation? • Is it important for the survival of the company?
Research Question 2: <i>What internal leadership behaviours, mindsets, and organisational factors promote or impede the development and sustainability of ambidextrous innovation?</i> • What leadership behaviours or mindsets are needed when managing ambidextrous strategies? • How does the culture of this organisation influence and support your decision-making in innovation-related matters?

- What tensions are experienced in trying to integrate ambidextrous innovation?

Research Question 3:

3. How are senior leaders supported in implementing the duality of radical and incremental innovation strategies, and what impediments do they encounter?

- What support mechanisms are used to enable innovation strategies?
- What resistance or challenges are encountered when integrating an ambidextrous innovation strategy?
- How do external drivers impact the leader's ability to be ambidextrous?

4.9 Data Analysis

The analysis stage involved interpreting the data and aimed to address the research questions that were posed. Yin (2016) emphasises this as the most demanding and challenging part of case study research, requiring both a systematic approach and a level of creativity. The researcher approached this analysis in an organised, step-by-step manner, incorporating some coding through thematic analysis within the broader Yin case study design and methodology.

Compiling and familiarisation with the data involved gathering all transcribed interviews, documents, and notes into a single case study database. The researcher then thoroughly reviewed the transcript data and notes to become immersed in them. During this process, initial impressions and reflections are recorded post the interview discussion, similar to Braun and Clarke's (2006) "familiarisation" phase. The researcher identified themes by grouping related codes into broad categories based on some key ideas from each leader. These patterns of shared meaning centred around key concepts and were directly linked to addressing the research questions. To deepen understanding of the themes, the researcher utilised the Excel software tool to record data and the Microsoft Copilot research agent to assist in extracting granular codes from each of the 18 participants' transcripts individually. This provided a detailed and effective method for retrieving evidence related to each code, which was compared to the initial reflection recorded for the analysis. The codes and code groupings were then reviewed for accuracy, coherence, and relevance, leading to

refinement, splitting, or discarding to ensure they are analytically sound and well-supported.

Once this process was completed, the researcher refined and named the six identified themes, explained their significance to ambidextrous leadership and innovation ambidexterity, and proceeded to incorporate the findings into a coherent narrative with descriptions and quotes in the final report (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022). The analysis was further examined by reviewing existing literature on innovation ambidexterity and leadership related to the identified themes.

4.10 Data Quality and Reliability

Qualitative research is inherently subject to a variety of biases (Zikmund et al., 2013). These biases may originate from the interviewer, interpretation, and responses during the interview process, as well as data analysis. To mitigate these biases and ensure the validity and reliability of the data, a semi-structured interview guide was used, allowing respondents sufficient freedom to explore concepts as they arose during the discussion. Furthermore, strict adherence to the specified criteria was maintained in the selection of participants for the sample, with a representative sample across various disciplines and leadership tiers.

4.11 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS) prior to commencing data collection (addendum 1). This involved securing permission and consent from the organisation to participate in the research (addendum 2). All participants were required to sign a consent form prior to participating in the interview, and the confidentiality and anonymity of all participants will be maintained.

The process followed key principles to ensure data accuracy and validation, and all efforts were made to maintain an unbiased analysis. All interviews were accurately recorded and transcribed, with participants confirming the correctness of the data interpretation through the interview conversations. Questions were asked consistently, and the researcher remained impartial when interpreting responses (Saunders et al, 2023, pp. 236-237).

4.12 Research Limitations

The study recognises that using a case study methodology may have limitations. These include the scope being restricted to a single organisation, which could potentially skew the results. The timeframe for data collection, including interviews, might be restrictive, impacting the comprehensiveness of the findings. Although efforts were made to gather a representative cross-section of participants from various divisions and regions, the results could still be influenced by the number and distribution of respondents, introducing participant bias. Lastly, this study was conducted with caution to ensure an environment is created where top leadership could freely share their insights. Further efforts were made to minimise the risk of participants withholding information or providing responses they believe are expected rather than truthful, thereby guarding against potential limitations related to social desirability bias, as opposed to honesty.

4.13 Conclusion

In conclusion, this research paper aimed to examine the mediating role of senior leadership in cultivating a culture that fosters ambidextrous innovation within organisations for sustained growth. This entailed an analysis of existing literature and interviews aimed at understanding the individual experiences of senior leadership in implementing both exploitative and exploratory innovation strategies. As organisations continue to navigate rapidly changing environments, the insights offered in this paper may emphasise the importance of strategic leadership capability in fostering a culture of ambidextrous innovation that ensures organisations remain relevant, maintain a competitive advantage, and promote growth.

Chapter 5: Findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the study's findings from qualitative data collected in the field to contribute to the ongoing academic discussion on senior leaders' roles in fostering ambidextrous innovation within organisations, as outlined in the research questions in Chapter 3. These questions were explored through open-ended, semi-structured interviews conducted online via Microsoft Teams. The sample of 18 participants was asked a standardised set of questions to maintain consistency between the literature focus, research questions, data collection, and analysis methods. Each participant was given an interview brief explaining the study's aims, and all interviews were recorded; their transcripts were then thoroughly analysed.

The qualitative data were systematically analysed using an open coding method, as detailed in Chapter 4, which served as a foundational approach for organising and interpreting the interview transcripts. This method enabled the identification of recurring themes directly from the participants' words and experiences. The resulting open codes were then organised into broader categories, each mapped to the core research questions arising from the research topic. These code groupings provide a structured framework for presenting major themes that emerged, offering insight into senior leadership's experiences of fostering and implementing ambidextrous innovations within the organisation. By linking each code group to the relevant research questions, the analysis provides clear evidence of the research findings that address the study's objectives.

The interview guideline questions were drafted based on the three research questions outlined in Chapter 3, which provided the framework for data collection aligned with the literature review analysis, which revealed a gap concerning leadership capability in fostering innovation ambidexterity. Each subsequent section is organised around these four interview questions to ensure a logical flow and a clear structure for the data.

The remaining section of the findings chapter focuses on exploring the individual experiences of senior executives in understanding how ambidextrous innovation is perceived and embedded within the organisation. To accomplish this, the chapter is

structured to show how leaders have interpreted and tried to foster a mindset of innovation ambidexterity within their roles by reflecting on the enablement of the current organisational structure, innovation culture, mechanisms in place. It further explores the tensions and challenges faced when balancing short-term deliverables against long-term visions or disruptive and radical initiatives, and internal and external drivers that influence ambidextrous leadership capabilities.

Understanding the organisational context and its importance, along with assessing internal and external enablers and threats, offers essential insights for leaders. It helps them balance conflicting strategic interests between incremental innovation, refining current and past business models, and radical innovation, which involves pursuing new strategic avenues and sometimes entirely new models. Additionally, this analysis helps identify the critical levers to activate for successful implementation through effective leadership strategies.

This section is divided into six subsections. It begins by discussing the strategic understanding and significance of innovation ambidexterity within the organisation, along with personal experiences related to its implementation. The following subsection explains the prevalent practices of ambidextrous innovation in the organisation, followed by the mindsets and behaviours that drive intentional ambidextrous innovation. The next section examines the prevailing leadership culture and support that enable ambidexterity, as well as the tensions and challenges experienced by leaders. The last section of the findings chapter describes the external drivers that support and threaten leadership capability, enabling the effective implementation of a consistent ambidextrous innovation leadership culture across the organisation.

5.2 Description of Selected Sample

Table 3 below lists the interview participants, including their roles and within the multinational organisation, their levels of seniority, and the rationale for their inclusion in the sample study. The 18 participants were selected using judgmental and quota sampling methods, ensuring they possessed specific expertise and characteristics relevant to the study, while also achieving balanced representation across key area groups.

Since this study examined how senior leadership fosters ambidextrous innovation within the organisation, the insights required were both theoretical (understanding these constructs) and practical (drawing on experience and perception). Behaviours and mindsets related to ambidextrous innovation involve both personal and organisational actions. Therefore, expert knowledge and experience were vital criteria in selecting participants. To evaluate expertise and knowledge, key considerations include the participant's current role, level of seniority and influence, industry experience, particularly in telecommunications, and their perceived range and depth of knowledge related to innovation enablement.

The sample included 6 females and 12 males, all of whom were currently employed as permanent staff within the multinational telecommunication organisation at the top three leadership levels. The group comprised 4 members of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) who serve on the group executive committee reporting to the Group CEO, 6 Managing Executives (ME) reporting to the SLT, and 8 Executive Heads reporting to the Managing Executive. Table 2 outlines the reasons for selecting these participating groups.

Table 2 : Functional Roles in Senior Leadership

Functional Role	Level	Sample Size	Selection Criteria
Senior Leadership Team	Tier 1	4	These roles, from the perspective of industry experts, demonstrate how organisational transformation and change are interpreted, implemented, and communicated. Leaders' perspectives reveal how change initiatives align with overall strategy, particularly regarding ambidextrous innovation and leadership influence. Recognising strategic intent and executing targeted initiatives for exploitation and exploration highlight leaders' ability to foster ambidextrous innovation.
Managing Executive	Tier 2	6	Dual role: they develop strategy and often lead its execution. Unlike the Chief roles, they usually serve as key sponsors for strategic initiatives, shaping change by handling funding, resources, and tools. As a result, they are accountable for operational agility, overseeing the assessment, adjustment, and realignment of organisational processes, systems, and structures.
Executive Head of Department	Tier 3	8	Serves as a liaison between strategy makers, such as executive management, and staff at all levels. They relay strategic decisions to operational teams and handle operational challenges. Typically, they also supervise specific functional areas and manage activities within those domains.

Table 3: Respondent Profiles

	Leadership Tier	Division
Respondent 1 (R1 Customer Ops)	Managing Executive	Customer Operations
Respondent 2 (R2 Comms)	Senior Leadership Team	Corporate Communications
Respondent 3 (R3 Strategy)	Executive Head of Division	Strategy

Respondent 4 (R4 IT)	Managing Executive	Information Technology
Respondent 5 (R5 IoT)	Executive Head of Division	IoT Enterprise Business
Respondent 6 (R6 Tech)	Managing Executive	Network Technology
Respondent 7 (R7 IT)	Executive Head of Division	Information Technology
Respondent 8 (R8 Tech)	Executive Head of Division	Technology
Respondent 9 (R9 Finance)	Managing Executive	Office of the CEO Finance
Respondent 10 (R10 HR)	Managing Executive	Human Resources
Respondent 11 (R11 HR)	Senior Leadership Team	Human Resources
Respondent 12 (R12 Legal)	Executive Head of Division	Legal
Respondent 13 (R13 Tech)	Managing Executive	Technology Architecture
Respondent 14 (R14 Strategy)	Senior Leadership Team	Strategy
Respondent 15 (R15 Property)	Executive Head of Division	Property and Facilities
Respondent 16 (R16 Comms)	Executive Head of Division	Corporate Communication
Respondent 17 (R17 IT)	Senior Leadership Team	Information Technology
Respondent 18 (R18 Strategy)	Executive Head of Division	Strategy

5.3. Presentation and Analysis of Results

Results are presented and analysed based on the Research Questions from Chapter 3. The tree diagram below details the main themes and code groupings as extracted from the interview transcripts.

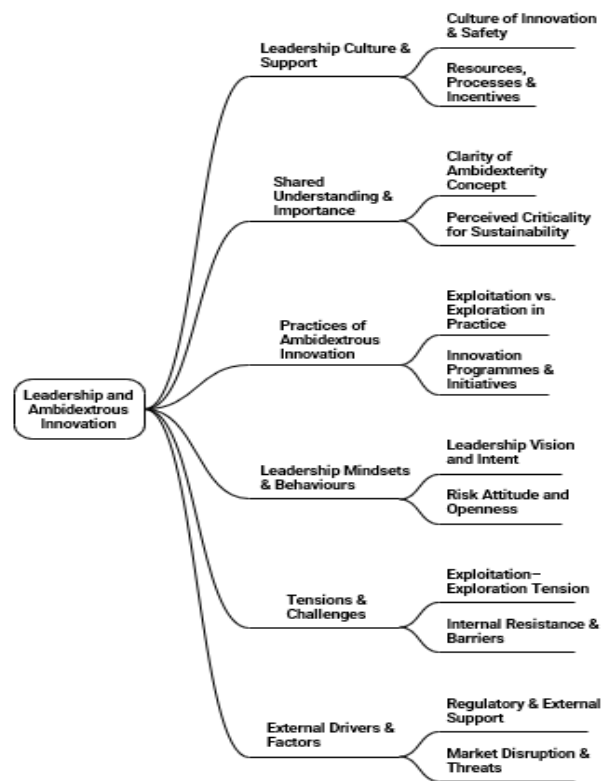


Diagram 1: Coding Tree for Ambidextrous Leadership Capability, and Ambidextrous Innovation

5.4 Shared Understanding and Strategic Importance

5.4.1 Clarity of Concept

Among the eighteen participants, most demonstrated a clear and comprehensive understanding of the concept and could cite practices and examples, while a few indicated they needed to do some research beforehand to better grasp the concept in order to meet the interview goals, then proceeded to clarify the concept to ensure alignment with the interviewer. Many interviewees noted that not everyone shares the same understanding or perspective on ambidexterity. Although all leaders aim to innovate, they often have varying ideas on how to balance leveraging core assets versus exploring new opportunities, suggesting varying levels of understanding. All of the senior leaders, especially from the senior leadership group deeply grasp ambidextrous innovation, whereas the executive heads were less familiar or slower to embrace the concept.

“Ability of the business to balance between efficiency and productivity in the present and innovating and adapting for the future.” (R2 Corp Comms)

Other participants similarly admitted

“Do we have on the one side a culture of innovation that looks towards iterative change... and then on the opposite side of it, it’s looking at leapfrogging... moon shots or the blue sky thinking...” (R10 HR)

“We have as a core, but we also look at ideas to leapfrog. So, while ... the right hand is ensuring that the ship sails with incremental progression, there is other things we look for ... to diversify ourselves and keep ourselves competitive as we go forward.” (R9 Finance)

“On one end, incremental innovation... in the middle, adjacent... on the far end, disruptive innovation.” (R5 IoT)

Contrastingly, other participants viewed this as a balance between short-term goals and long-term vision, rather than incremental and radical change, or expressed concern that not everyone in the organisation grasps it in the same way.

“Exploratory (future) is broad and ambiguous, whereas exploitative (day-to-day) is smaller scale, but you get impact quicker.” (R4 IT)

“I’ve heard ... talk about ambidextrous organisation a few times... at least I’m on the same playing field, but I don’t know if everybody quite understands ... the notion of that.” (R9 Finance)

5.4.2 Critical for survival?

There was broad agreement on the importance of innovation ambidexterity as being essential for long-term, ongoing success and survival. All leaders across the various divisions recognised that depending heavily on the core telecoms services in saturated markets is not sustainable. They agreed that pursuing both incremental improvements and radical innovation is essential for future viability, given the maturity of the core markets contributing heavily to the bottom line, considering the rate of competitive and technological changes and the commoditisation of traditional telecom services. Several participants mentioned the classic “Innovator’s Dilemma” (ref), noting that even highly successful companies can fail if they focus only on current customer needs

and ignore disruptive innovations. The implication is that if the organisation does not want to become obsolete, it indicates that continuous innovation is not optional but imperative:

*“It’s **critical**. There’s **just no option** about it. Companies that don’t do this... keep on holding on to a smaller and shrinking market.” (R2 Corp Comms)*

Similarly, other leaders echoed the sentiment, saying that,

“We considered incoming disruptions (who’s coming to kill us) and outgoing (how can we disrupt other industries).” (R5 IoT)

“For this business to remain relevant, we do need to think about different ways.” (R10 HR)

“DSTV... now that’s being replaced with streaming” because they didn’t switch quickly enough.” (R2 Corp Comms)

“If you don’t do new stuff, you’re not going to be relevant. We generally lead, but we have to keep it up.” (R6 Tech)

Many leaders agree that external pressures, such as competition from tech giants, fintechs, and alternative technologies and services, heighten the urgency. In short, the consensus is that ambidexterity is essential for survival within organisations.

5.5 Practices of ambidextrous innovation

5.5.1 Exploit vs Explore

When evaluating whether the organisation regularly practices ambidextrous innovation- exploiting its core business while structurally experimenting with radical or disruptive new approaches many interviewees consistently noted that the company excels at leveraging existing assets, improving efficiency, and making incremental gains in its network, products, and processes. However, they recognise it is less developed in exploring radically new offerings. While leadership understands the importance of ambidextrous innovation, their focus remains primarily on the core business, with performance metrics and funding dedicated to sustaining core innovation.

“We do both, but... on the exploiting side, sweating our assets, I think we’re pretty good at that... On the exploratory side, I think we’re probably average.”
(R1 Customer Ops)

“So, I don’t think there’s a balance between exploration and exploitation...”
(R7 IT)

“80- 90% of the ideas are still within our core... improvements of our products and processes. We haven’t yet said, ‘here’s a completely new business we’ll fund and build.’ (R1 Strategy)

“I don’t think [innovation] comes natural for many people” and that only a few leaders actively think about “leapfrogging” into new areas, while others remain focused on existing business.” (R10 HR)

However, not everyone was clear that it was part of an embedded practice, questioning whether its enablement is widespread or, in one case, whether that practice even exists.

‘Sweating the assets we have (exploitation)... and then exploring new frontiers... Do we practice an ambidextrous way of working to continuously grow?’(R3 Strategy)

“No, it doesn’t exist here... only in pockets.” (R12 Legal)

“On paper, innovation is at the core of our strategy... but are we really that good on the exploratory side? We have it in our objectives, we talk about it, yet we haven’t made a massive shift – it’s mostly been within what we do.” (R1 Customer Ops)

There is a general consensus in acknowledging that exploration is crucial for future growth, alongside incremental and sustained development, as both exploitation and exploration innovations are necessary to navigate industry disruption.

5.5.2 Innovations Programs and Initiatives

Most respondents were familiar with a variety of formal innovation programmes, describing how the organisation conducts hackathons, hosts an innovation hub platform, has conversations with leadership, runs design thinking initiatives across teams, agile squad formations for project execution, and the 10X programme to foster

new ideas from employees that support the current and future vision. These programmes provide a platform to step outside daily duties and think creatively, allowing teams to prototype new solutions quickly, especially adjacent or even disruptive concepts, such as new fintech features, AI-driven call centres, digital self-service enhancements, and drone-enabled site monitoring, without immediately overhauling core and short-term business objectives.

“How are we enabling the young generation... give them safety [and] confidence... We have the innovation hackathon... which is a great impetus. The power of the hackathon is putting people together to innovate... that shared excitement.” (R14 Strategy)

“We have the innovation programme, the hackathons... structured programs where ideas can be core... or a bit more left field.” (R3 Strategy)

“Hackathons... create a platform for technology people to come up with ideas... fast track the ideas.” (R4 IT)

Participants noted that previously, the organisation had initially created dedicated units for innovation outside its main activities. For example, a senior executive mentioned forming an innovation team named “Technology for Development (T4D),” which focused on social impact solutions that eventually turned into commercial products. Another example shared by a participant was a Digital Acceleration Unit, which essentially served as an internal incubator when these teams existed, they focused on exploring new business models like mobile agriculture services, telemedicine pilots, and drone flight path mapping, which were somewhat separate from the organisation’s primary key performance goals. However, discussions revealed that such units were not sustained,

“I used to have an innovation team called T4D... technology for development, which started out as a project to help women... snowballed into something huge.” “Solutions were not for purposes of making money... moved off external affairs to one of the P&L.” (R2 Corp Comms)

“We had something called the acceleration unit... but it lost its momentum. – probably because it wasn’t core to the business.” (R7 IT)

“We have subsidiaries, as innovation hubs... They have a very important place, but we haven’t been as successful with them as we wanted. Some have done well and some not so well. I don’t think they’ve reached their full potential.” (R9 Finance)

The majority of leaders interviewed stated that to support exploration, they would occasionally need to temporarily reassign talented staff or allocate resources to innovation squads. This demonstrates a willingness to redirect resources from the core to nurture promising new ventures, which has led to a focus beyond the telecommunications business into Fintech, IoT and Enterprise Solutions. Additionally, some leaders mentioned the facilitation of internal “sandboxes,” which are secure spaces to pilot new concepts on a small scale without interference from rigid processes.

“Are you passionate about this idea? Okay, focus on this exclusively.” (R13 Tech)

“It’s a leadership perspective to say: look at your talent pool, who are the innovators, and enable those people... let them do their thing. They need to work on more than just incremental innovations, possibly the disruptive ones.” (R8 Tech)

In summary, the organisation's approach to ambidexterity is mainly focused on systematic exploitation, ensuring the core business remains strong, while exploratory innovation occurs in bursts through hackathons, special projects, or acquisitions rather than as an ingrained, continuous process. The balance is not yet even; it leans towards exploitation. Nonetheless, the organisation aims to foster a practice of ambidextrous innovation by creating opportunities to think beyond the immediate tasks.

5.6 Leadership behaviours and mindsets

5.6.1 Leadership Vision and Intent

This set of results analyses how the leaders within the organisation explicitly communicate a vision for balancing core tasks with new initiatives (ambidexterity) and strategically prioritise innovation by advocating for a “dual focus” in strategy, highlighting the significance of both immediate results and long-term innovation. A recurring idea is that leadership’s strategic intent has a significant influence on

innovation outcomes. Interviewees observed that the most effective leaders actively promote a vision for innovation that focuses on the company's future shifts rather than merely managing day-to-day operations in current delivery. This perspective was supported by participants who emphasised the need for visionary, forward-looking leadership that champions ambidexterity and sets a clear innovation direction or tone to inspire management to follow.

“In 2020, we developed Vision 2025 – a five-year strategy. It spoke about the core business being mobile and beyond mobile, and in that bucket of beyond mobile are elements like financial services, fixed line, IoT, digital, content services...” (R9 Finance). He goes further to emphasise, “At the end of March 2025... 21.4% of our service revenue now comes from beyond mobile. Now, going forward with Vision 2030, the ambition is that by the end of 2030, we want to get to 30% beyond mobile.”(R9 Finance)

“...our strategy for 2030 grows beyond mobile. We could have stayed with just mobile communications... look where we’d be today if we’d done that – nowhere.” (R11 HR)

The senior leadership team clearly articulates the importance of innovation in their vision statements. For example, the Vision 2030 of the organisational strategy includes ‘Innovate for Growth’ and mechanisms like the CEO Innovation Award and ‘Spirit’ days, which promote ‘out of the box’ thinking to drive innovation. Many senior leaders indicated that they not only sponsor but also actively participate in hackathons or innovation forums. Further evidence of management commitment to driving both incremental and radical innovation was provided by examples like the Chief Communication Officers, who indicated running the T4D innovation team. This team, which started as a corporate social initiative through a dedicated group, led to incubated products that later became commercially significant, showing direct personal involvement in exploratory ventures. Importantly, at the executive level, participation is linked with sponsorship, where the CEO and EXCO members are seen not just as overseers but as active champions attending and judging hackathon presentations, allocating resources to promising ideas, and, in some cases, guiding specific innovations.

“...one thing that drives innovation... is your messaging – you hear it in the town halls... We all (focus on) innovation. Our guys carry an innovation KPI, we have a pillar for innovation...” (R17 IT)

“Judging hackathons gives leaders a different level of thinking... more learning than anything else.” (R4 IT)

“If an organisation leads with an intention to innovate, it succeeds better than one executing on a previous strategy with only marginal changes,” one executive argued, “because apart from good execution... a leader’s job is to see what’s needed next and anticipate the market” (R2 Corp Strategy)

One participant boldly indicated that,

“that’s what leaders should be paid for” (R17 IT)

Supported by further examples, the Group CEO is frequently cited by most participants as a leader who promotes and supports ambidextrous innovation. Several interviewees emphasised that without consistent senior leadership drive to challenge the status quo, the company should *“be prepared to fail in the long term”*. They all emphasised that an ambidextrous innovation strategy necessitates leaders with a change agent mindset, those willing to adapt their strategy, invest in new ideas, and articulate a compelling vision that balances the present and the future.

“The leadership... sees it. You have to give credit to the CEO – he’s been very deliberate that we must deliver sustained growth. From a strategic direction point of view, it’s very clear.” (R11 HR). “Seven years ago, we’d say we believed in innovation, but we weren’t visibly doing it. Now leadership stands up and says, ‘this is what we stand for.’ That has helped enormously to embed it in our culture.” (R11 HR)

“Judging hackathons... more learning than anything else [for leaders].” (R4 IT)

“Good leadership requires ‘a bit of both’ – executing well and asking, ‘what’s next?’”(R2 Corp Comms),

This leadership intent, however, is not uniformly visionary; it often requires individual champions at the top to promote ambidextrous thinking throughout the organisation,

and it often falls short of the organisational strategic intent to embed across all levels of leadership.

The CEO, “drives it and understands why it’s important”, whereas “the rest of the leadership team [were not] looking at it at the same pace”. “The bigger challenge is getting buy-in... getting everyone to believe it’s the right course and removing obstacles for the ‘explore’ side of the business. People might say ‘we’re still high margin, why worry?’ but we need those new growth levers.’ (R11 HR)

“At the chief level, I think there’s a very, very good understanding... people fully buy in to it (the need to diversify beyond core).” (R9 Finance)

“If the CEO doesn’t push it personally and tie it into evals (evaluations), it won’t scale.” (R5 IoT)

These behaviours help foster ambidextrous innovation, as employees see their leaders personally trying to balance efficiency today with innovation for tomorrow

5.6.2 Risk appetite and openness

The data also reveal a spectrum of leadership attitudes toward risk and experimentation. While senior leaders conceptually acknowledge a *“fail fast, learn fast”* ethos, the actual culture among leadership is often risk-averse. Interviewees mentioned that missteps tend to be remembered and can stigmatise people’s reputations which naturally deters risk-taking. This indicates that not all leaders are equally committed to the strategic intent of ambidextrous innovation, as leaders continue to exhibit an execution bias and prioritise operational excellence and short-to medium-term results.

There is a clear tendency towards a “pragmatic, short-term performance focus,” as one participant described it, meaning that achieving the quarterly performance targets often takes precedence over experimenting with untested ideas. Leaders worry that heavy investment in exploratory projects that might impact short-term profits could lead to shareholder pushback. There is a view among most tier-two and tier-three leaders that depicts a cautious tone from those in the senior leadership team, which can limit bold innovation, as the perception downstream suggests that support for unpredictable outcomes is lacking. They point out that while leaders say failure is

acceptable, in practice, people still fear being blamed if an innovation project fails, because not delivering core KPIs remains unforgiving.

“We make our shareholders really happy and we're not going to change that formula... To deviate from that... I don't think our biggest shareholder would be too happy,” (R1 Customer Ops)

“We are a tough environment – people are scared to make mistakes because they fear consequences”,(R 12 Legal), implying a lack of proper psychological safety.

The prevailing mindset among leaders is cautious and execution-focused, but there is recognition that the desired mindset for ambidexterity is more entrepreneurial – characterised by an openness to new ideas, a willingness to take calculated risks, and creating a safe space for innovation. Building this mindset uniformly across all leaders (not just a few innovation enthusiasts) is considered crucial for successfully managing ambidextrous strategies that drive innovation.

One participant explained that conceptually everyone sees the benefit of experimentation but *“... the maturity level is not [yet] there” (R1 Customer Ops)* and in practice,

“Some leaders are more open than others,” (R13 Tech)

“Everyone has the intention and the desire... but people see it differently” (R2 Strategy)

This creates an atmosphere of fear and caution. This “fear of failure” culture means leaders may hesitate to propose bold ideas or pilot new approaches.

“People fear consequences... they will be remembered for that mistake years after.” (R10 HR)

“There is a large culture of blame... They were allowed to fail. They used to call it school fees. (R12 Legal)

“We have a serious problem with psychological safety... that thing becomes a major problem and then that is what you're labelled as.” (R13 Technology)

Based on the interviews, leaders must actively and consistently promote ambidextrous innovation by striking a balance between pursuing significant efficiencies and exploring new opportunities. Simply mentioning these objectives in speeches or strategy slides isn't enough; leaders should align their reward structures, create a safe environment, and allocate time for themselves and their teams to reflect on future improvements and disruptions, rather than focusing solely on operational reviews.

In essence, the prevailing leadership behaviour has been disparate between the senior leadership and that of the two layers below. While the senior leadership shows a clear intention and mindset, the two leadership levels below have been cautious and execution-focused. There is a growing awareness and some action towards becoming more ambidextrous in innovation efforts, with conversations, resources, and programmes to encourage a positive mindset. However, they often default to short-termism and centralised control, which is viewed as a limiting factor. Moving forward, the respondents suggest that leaders who succeed in ambidexterity will be those who

'Consistently prioritise it (ambidextrous innovation) alongside financial targets, empower distributed innovation ownership, and remain adaptable themselves.'
(R14 Strategy)

One interviewee cited global technology companies as inspiration, mentioning companies like Apple or NVIDIA, as they,

"Apple... NVIDIA... pressure on themselves to come up with a new product..."
(R2 Strategy)

indicating an intention from leadership that anticipates constant innovation and growth. Adopting a leadership mindset that prioritises exploration as an integrated responsibility, rather than an optional activity, is currently considered essential for organisational growth.

5.7 Leadership culture and support

5.7.1 Culture of innovation

Organisational culture influences how leaders make decisions regarding innovation and its implementation, according to the feedback from all participants. Several key cultural factors were identified in the interviews that either support or hinder innovation-related choices, affecting the leaders' ability to foster a behaviour of ambidexterity.

Within this organisation, there is a strong culture of delivery with a specific focus on shorter-term operational excellence. The organisation has long prided itself on reliable execution and hitting targets. This results in a culture where leaders and employees feel their primary duty is to maintain smooth operations and meet their key performance targets. On the positive side, this culture fosters accountability, which means that any incremental innovation aligned with operational efficiency and effectiveness is likely to be well-executed by the team.

“Constant improvement... of our products [and] the way we are... taking our assets into the future... to improve efficiency, relevance, [and] profitability through incremental new initiatives.” (R14 Strategy)

“everything you’re doing... we always have room to imagine it better or co-create with colleagues” (R16 Corp Comms)

“That fibre deal is a case study in resilience... so many times it was nearly dead in the water, and they kept pushing it until it got done.” (R3 Strategy)

On the negative side, it can make teams reluctant to pursue ideas that don’t immediately contribute to their short-term performance targets, as one leader illustrated.

“Our culture is execute and do your job... People ask, why are we spending resources on this [innovation] when it doesn’t have guaranteed ROI?”(R13 Tech)

“We sleep, we think... everyone obsesses about achieving their own KPIs.”(R10 HR)

“Middle management is where innovation goes to die – too KPI-focused and cautious.” (R5 IoT)

“We have 60–70 KPIs... spend enormous time building PowerPoints to justify ourselves.” (R8 Tech)

Therefore, cultural emphasis on short-term results can cause decision-makers to be conservative, often choosing incremental changes that match existing performance measures rather than riskier and more radical innovations unless they are supported by senior leadership.

“Our KPIs are around outputs... we strive to do more, but the message isn’t consistent across teams.” (R4 IT)

“the bulk of the money... focused on short term things... What product are we going to release? What bundles... it's for the now... like a summer campaign... for the summer.”(R17 IT)

Further to the focus on operational excellence, the sample set of leaders participating in the study exhibited strong pride in the company and shared values of customer service and network quality. This unified, loyal culture means that when a clear innovation aligns with customer value, teams rally behind it. For example, when both leadership and staff deeply believe in the purpose of improving livelihoods through products and services such as connectivity and financial inclusion across Africa, they go above and beyond to ensure its success in the market. This is clearly evident in the investment of resources in Fintech Platforms and the subsequent growth arising from this ecosystem, which has largely fueled the beyond-mobile business.

“Examples of that: our fintech platform ... we’re the first company that ever launched a super app in the continent... being Africa’s largest fintech shows how we’ve gone beyond the core.” (R11 HR)

‘great companies fail when they only listen to current customers and do not anticipate future needs.’ (R5, IoT)

However, the same pride can make teams emotionally invested in the status quo offerings. A response from one of the participants indicated that there might be a sentiment of

“our existing products are market-leading, why change what works?” (R 12 Legal)

unless a compelling case is made, and this is supported by another participant recalling a conversation where a leader indicated,

“we know our market best.” (R7 IT)

Culturally, the organisation’s identity as a leading telecommunications company in Africa has biased decisions to focus on protecting and optimising its core, which has established them as proud market leaders, rather than exploring unknown territories

that might lead to failure. Overcoming this requires deliberately fostering a level of risk-taking around ambidextrous innovation within the organisation. This is evident in a participant's response.

"being a bit uncomfortable is okay," (R2 Corp Comms) and that innovation can be part of the company's proud legacy too, rather than a threat to it.

5.7.2 Empowerment versus fear

In addition to the culture drivers, the organisation has historically been somewhat hierarchical, where decisions flow through formal committees and senior leadership. This suggests a centralised leadership culture where the Group CEO's vision and decisions hold significant influence, and successes in both incremental and radical innovation in both the mobile and beyond-mobile businesses, such as Fintech and IoT, are seen when championed by him or influential senior leadership members. A positive aspect is that when these innovations are sponsored, they receive protection and resources. On the negative side, lower-tier leaders might be hesitant to take initiative or lack ownership unless supported by senior leadership, which can bottleneck and slow innovation decisions. If every new idea requires a CEO sign-off, both speed and motivation suffer,

"Leadership has to demand it... and hold people accountable," said one of the participants. *(R3 Strategy)*

One participant described that even when hackathon ideas are generated,

"if the relevant business owner isn't involved or convinced, the idea will get lukewarm support and fall by the wayside."(R4 IT)

In other words, unless the official decision-maker, often an EXCO member, engages with viable ideas, they are not realised.

"It can't just be grassroots – if the CEO doesn't push it personally and tie it into evals (evaluation), it won't scale." (R5 IoT)

"The organisation is very driven by our chairman... It's always, 'The CEO said... I don't think he's empowered his leadership team enough to push major innovations on their own.'"(R1 Customer Ops)

“(CEO) loved our digital identity idea; he assigned it to chiefs but nothing happened ... If CEO doesn’t drive it, it stalls.” (R5 IoT)

In addition to the lack of empowerment, many participants indicated that, although the company culture promotes an inclusive and safe space for innovation on paper, in practice, this has not yet been fully realised. They noted that while senior leadership discusses values like “curiosity” and “fail fast,” employees feel that *“people still ask ‘what if it fails?’ and worry about being reprimanded.” (R17 IT)*

“Is there enough risk-taking appetite? ... or psychological safety—if you do wrong, you're not going to be smashed? Those are fair challenges.” (R14 Strategy)

“People are scared to try again after failure... tolerance for outages has become less.” .. “People can challenge in a safe space without fear of being victimised.” (R4 IT)

“You don’t even feel safe sharing an idea.” (R7 IT). “People hold back; they fear.” (R7 IT)

“.....He started creating threats that he’ll get his own team... not good for psychological safety.” .. “SLT is afraid of failing targets... that fear trickles down.”.” (R13 Tech)

This is further worsened by differences in leadership behaviour, as teams under more progressive leaders feel freer to experiment, whereas teams led by very conservative managers remain silent or cautious. One interviewee pointed out that

“everyone understands [innovation] is important, but... can people challenge in a safe space without fear of being victimised.” (R4 IT)

Some leaders genuinely foster open dialogue and learning from failure,

“You can’t be authoritarian. You must allow freedom to challenge without fear of consequences. I don’t want yes-men – if I’m wrong, challenge me on it.” (R14 Strategy)

but others maintain a punitive tone with a “no mistakes” approach. The leadership culture, therefore, is somewhat inconsistent, with pockets of innovation-friendly

culture, especially in areas where senior sponsors intervene. However, there is also a lingering “fear-based” culture in parts of the organisation.

Overcoming this involves fostering a culture of humble learning, which some leaders promote by showcasing external case studies and even inviting teams to experiment with each other’s solutions, thereby influencing whether scalable innovation occurs. decisions and developed solutions from elsewhere are made swiftly or delayed.

In summary, the organisation's culture both supports and constrains innovation decisions. It strongly supports disciplined execution and customer focus, which helps refine chosen innovations and ensure they deliver value. It also offers structured programs, annual hackathons that have evolved into a global initiative, the internal Innovation Academy, the Innovation Hub, and immersion sessions, all of which reflect a culture of embracing ambidextrous innovation. However, ingrained habits of playing it safe, deferring to hierarchy, and avoiding failure can hinder truly radical and bold decision-making. The interviews suggest that as the culture shifts to be more open, younger employees navigating the organisation with a more digital mindset post-COVID are gradually making decision-making more innovation friendly.

One notable cultural shift that leaders observed was that younger staff members question more and want to understand the “why” behind decisions, prompting older leaders to justify their actions and often leading to the adoption of new approaches. This cultural evolution, although sometimes uncomfortable, ultimately supports more effective ambidextrous decision-making by preventing complacency.

“How are we enabling the young generation... give them safety [and] confidence... We have the innovation hackathon... which is great impetus. The power of the hackathon is putting people together to innovate... that shared excitement” (R14 Strategy)

5.7.3 Resources, Processes and Incentives

As an established multinational telecommunications company, the organisation has implemented various support mechanisms, including dedicated personnel, allocated resources, defined processes, and rewards, to promote a balance between exploitation and exploration. These mechanisms demonstrate that the organisation is not leaving ambidexterity to chance but attempting to institutionalise it through

programmes and processes. Interviewees discussed these concrete support mechanisms, or for many, the lack thereof, for embedding ambidextrous innovation.

On the positive side, they described certain organisational structures established to realise their innovation strategy vision. These include a small innovation team under the strategy division, innovation hubs, the innovation academy, annual hackathons now held globally, spirit days, leadership conversations aimed at fostering an innovation culture, some budget allocation for new projects, and recognition programmes like the CEO Innovation Awards. These initiatives aim to enable ambidexterity by providing people, processes, and tools for employees to pursue new ideas, both to improve efficiency and effectiveness within the core business incrementally, and to foster radical innovation, such as beyond-mobile ventures with fintech and IoT as key contributors.

“We have the innovation programme, the hackathons... structured programs where ideas can be core... or a bit more left field.” (R3 Strategy)

“The hackathons changed things... they created a platform showing people that we want new ideas. That was the biggest barrier – to signal that innovation is welcome. We’ve cracked that now with hackathons bringing brilliant ideas.” (R11 HR)

“...a framework called DORA... it gives you measures to measure productivity and your time to value – change failure rates... mean time between failures... defect density... code quality... we apply the framework... to get that time to value (down).” (R17 IT)

However, the consensus from the majority of participants was that these mechanisms are not yet sufficient or fully effective. Resource allocation emerged as a pain point – pursuing new ideas often requires cross-functional collaboration and dedicated time/funding, which are hard to come by. One participant noted that experimental projects require borrowing IT and network resources,

“and if there’s no clear understanding [from management] why this is being done... people think we’re wasting money, and then it will not happen” (R4 IT)

Several interviewees described the organisation's budgeting and KPI system as rigid, with leaders assigned targets for core business without a formal mandate or dedicated time in their schedules for innovation. As one participant illustrated,

"I don't think we [provide support] to the degree required... budget will never be enough, but people could repurpose and reprioritise – yet they can't. They can't shift [resources], and that holds us back" (R10 HR)

This indicates a gap in the organisation and the need for greater management flexibility, allowing teams to allocate a portion of their time or budget to research and development pilot programs for innovation-related ideation. In terms of processes, some felt the company lacks an efficient pipeline to take ideas forward as some mechanisms that have been put in place still struggle to realise their intended purpose and outputs. Many interviewees highlighted that hackathon outputs, for example, often fail to reach the product roadmap.

"Winning ideas from hackathons are rarely implemented." (R13 Tech), this was followed by

"Hackathon turned into a celebration... no one has implemented anything..." "most of these fail .. no sponsor .. no capex.. no will power" (R13 Tech)..

"We nurture ideas via hackathons, but they never get funded. R&D spend is seen as [a] cost to cut." (R5 IoT)

"...those days of getting... money of 1 billion is gone... now you got to fund your own transformations, and you have to be really creative." (R17 IT)

"It's fine – you've given me the message, and I understand the task – but where are the tools that are gonna help me get there? Where is the support... the funding? We say we have this ambition and objective, but we need the mechanisms to actually do it." (R15 Property)

In summary, despite these challenges where impact is constrained by strict short-term goals, isolated budgets, and weak integration with the performance system, the general view is that the organisation supports mechanisms that greatly enhance its ability to manage new opportunities alongside core operations. They are actively

learning and improving these mechanisms as illustrated by changes to hackathon incentives, tools provided and greater leadership engagement.

5.8 Leadership tensions and challenges

5.8.1 Explore-Exploit Tensions

Implementing a culture that simultaneously emphasises operational excellence and radical innovation inevitably creates tensions. The participants highlighted several tensions experienced within the organisation, indicating that, in the end, everyone defaults back to their KPIs. This tension tends to be structural, as performance assessments are linked to core KPIs rather than innovation metrics with participants illustrating that brilliant ideas from a hackathon or sandbox can be sidelined if a network upgrade or end-of-quarter sales target takes priority.

“The majority of the people are very much focused on their day job (in the mobile core) ... It’s not a lack of desire... Everyone defaults to keeping the core business going and meeting immediate KPIs.”(R9 Finance)

“No one’s going to say, I did this cool innovation but underperformed on all my KPIs. That wouldn’t be acceptable.”(R4 IT)

“If I personally want to innovate, I have to do it after hours and on the weekend... that boundary (during work) is set and I cannot move out of that because we’ve got KPIs.” (R8 Tech)

Secondly, the division between generations or mindsets was seen as a source of additional tension. The seasoned “old guard”, those responsible for the company’s core success, sometimes stick to past successful approaches and are sceptical of new trends. Conversely, the “new blood,” which includes younger employees or hires from different industries, often wants to adopt the latest technologies or business models.

One interviewee noted, “Older people don’t see it as innovation... younger people want to see change in a different way.” (R4 IT)

“Youngest guys come up with the coolest ideas... less pragmatic, more creative.”(R17 IT)

“From a baby boomer leadership perspective... you won’t see much innovation. They grew up in a factory/sequence era – things had to happen 1-2-3-4... If you deviate, it’s a problem.”(R6 Tech)

For example, a young engineer might suggest open-source software or agile methods, while a veteran might prefer traditional vendor solutions and waterfall planning, as they trust these approaches because they have never failed them. There's also the opinion from the older leaders that

“Our generation had to do more with less – create things from nothing. The younger generation finds a lot ready-made... They have advanced tools we didn’t, which can help them explore more, but they might not have the same drive to innovate from scratch.”.followed by, .“We have to encourage young employees not to be lazy and let technology do everything. The danger now with AI is they let the machines think for them.” (RF 11 Human Resource).

These contrasting views can cause internal friction. However, many acknowledged that both viewpoints are valuable, emphasising the importance of bridging the gap between them. Some participants mentioned resolving this by pairing experienced staff with junior team members on innovation projects to combine institutional knowledge with new ideas. Managing this dynamic requires careful attention; if overlooked, it can hinder innovation, as experienced staff in the organisation tend to be risk-averse, and younger staff may advocate for change without fully understanding legacy systems. As one of the senior leader participants indicated, leaders must mediate this process,

“It comes down to bringing them along – communicating why it’s different this time,” meaning they need to explain new approaches within context rather than impose them outright.”(R1 Customer Ops)

5.8.2 Centralised versus Decentralised Control

The organisation's operating model presents a further tension owing to the central control versus decentralised experimentation. Traditionally, decision-making was centralised to ensure control, scalability and consistency. However, individual teams or departments seek the freedom to experiment and tailor their initiatives to their specific contexts, while the Group team or central functions remain cautious about

deviations and potential risks. For example, Kenya had the autonomy to develop their Fintech platform in an unbanked market, which was a highly successful exploratory innovation at the time. However, when attempting to replicate this product in South Africa, a more centralised, risk-averse approach was adopted, which ultimately stifled agility and led to the failure of implementation, incurring significant costs to the company. The lesson internalised was that excessive central constraints can destroy a good idea when preventing adaptation to the local context.

One executive admitted, “Maybe the go-to market... for South Africa should have been different.”(R5 IoT), supported by the expectation that.

“Innovation must come from one location... that’s where we’re falling short.”(R12 Legal)

The interviewers have observed increasing tension between allowing operating countries to innovate independently and driving all innovation from a Group perspective. Interviewees from the South African operation felt that the centralised control from the Group team can be slower or overly regulated, while Group employees believed that the operating countries sometimes oversell their concepts and lack follow-through on their innovations. This tension influences how quickly an innovation in one part of the organisation is adopted elsewhere and how resources are allocated. Notably, many participants have also noted that various operating countries have differing appetites for innovation.

“Egypt is ahead of the pack in terms of innovation. They have a culture of innovation – it seems like their people in authority hold more sway... they’re very agile: they take the baton and run.” (R8 Tech)

Lastly, people have self-identified as innovators or operators, and a potential misunderstanding between the two has given rise to increased tensions.

“Corporate innovation is pretty much an oxymoron... [it’s] asking people not inclined to think innovatively to do so.” (RF5 IoT).

“Innovation will definitely come more from commercial or technology... Would it come from legal? I don’t know... You can’t ask the whole organisation to have the same mindset.”(R17 IT)

This underscores a tension that some employees in many of the support services, such as finance, legal, or even certain technical roles are very detail-oriented, risk-averse and excellent for incremental operational improvements, but they clash with the freewheeling style of creative innovators within the digital product development space. One interviewee described this as needing different “types” of personas for different stages, those that are idea generators versus those that are implementers. When not managed well, participants often feel stifled by the process, and operators frequently perceive innovators as impractical. Within this organisation, this tension is evident when, for example, the Network operations team hesitates at a new service launch because it might impact stability, or when an innovation team becomes frustrated that legal or compliance blocks a pilot due to regulations. Navigating this involves forming interdisciplinary teams with a common purpose and goals.

5.8.3 Internal resistance and barriers

Promoting an ambidextrous innovation agenda in parallel with running a large, mature, legacy business has naturally encountered resistance and challenges within the organisation. The interviews highlighted several recurring obstacles where leaders and employees often hesitate to support innovation initiatives.

Firstly, both leaders and employees are primarily assessed based on their operational performance, which is linked to specific targets. General resistance for leadership often stems from concerns about diverting resources or attention away from their core duties, especially since taking risks on new projects may not offer immediate benefits or impact. As a result, persuading these leaders to focus on innovation is difficult, as integrating new ideas and implementations while meeting targets without causing disruptions remains a challenge. Many participants stated that innovation tasks are an added burden rather than part of their usual responsibilities. This can lead to passive resistance, as employees may delay or procrastinate on new tasks because they are not as urgent as operational duties and is noted with the overwhelming reflections of the various leaders,

“We want to move ahead, but we keep falling back to BAU incremental change... purely around cost.”(R4 IT)

‘We tend to solve for now and shelve longer-term [ideas]’ (R6 Tech)

“I have two people dedicated to R&D across all markets.” (R13 Tech)

“A lot of people are focused on their day jobs... they can’t even see past their nose because that’s what they’re so consumed in (their KPIs).” (R8 Tech)

“Because you’re so consumed in the exploitative part... you don’t really make the time [for exploratory innovation]. A lot of people are doing two roles... when you run two roles, you’re just focusing on keeping the lights on.” (R1 Customer Ops)

“There’s always a conflict between the KPIs versus doing these extra things... and down the line, there’s a big impact if you ignore KPIs. So, the more you’re measured on short-term goals, the more it kills the motivation to try something new.” (R7 IT)

Secondly, the organisation's core operations rely on complex, highly dependable systems such as billing platforms, network infrastructure and evolving communications technologies within a finite budget allocations and robust systems and processes have been implemented within the organisation to ensure this remains a priority. Proposing changes or testing new ideas on these systems often encounters resistance from technical teams due to the potential impact on millions of customers. As a participant in the technology teams explained,

“Not everything needs a hammer... policies should be reviewed and not applied uniformly,” (R4 IT), referring to strict governance procedures. And this sentiment is extended to budget allocations,

“From a resourcing point of view, it benefits certain areas of the business. In other areas, it’s twice as hard to extract that resource. We always end up on the short end of the stick when competing for funding... It’s not apples with apples.”(13 Property)

While the risk and compliance culture is essential for business stability and longevity, it can sometimes become overly cautious. For example, internal IT may resist adopting cloud solutions for new services if they do not meet traditional security standards, which can delay the launch of new products. Overcoming such hurdles involves negotiating exceptions, updating policies, or implementing alternative solutions, which can be challenging and time-consuming.

Finally, resource competition and fatigue among skilled employees often cause leaders and employees to feel overstretched. Innovation projects frequently compete with immediate ongoing deliverables, which can lead to silent resistance. Employees may agree to new initiatives but often lack focus or delay efforts due to being overwhelmed by their core responsibilities. Furthermore, after many recent periods of cost-cutting or restructuring across the entire African operation, employees experiencing change fatigue tend to resist new initiatives, opting instead to take breaks and stick to familiar routines.

“If you ask me now, what’s the next thing... I would tell you nothing.” (RF12 Legal)

“When there’s talk of retrenchment, everyone just focuses on looking good on paper – no one wants to take a risk and possibly fail, because they’re afraid for their job.” (R8 Tech)

One leader points out, *“One main reason [we struggle] is resource allocation, especially time.” (R9 Finance)*

“One main reason is resource allocation, especially time. People have finite hours in a day... at crunch time, everyone will default back to their KPIs.” (R4 IT)

5.9 External drivers and factors

The final theme captures external factors outside the organisation that either support or threaten the company’s and its leaders’ ability to innovate while leveraging internal strengths. These include regulatory conditions, emerging technologies, market disruptions, and broader industry trends.

5.9.1 Regulatory and external support

Regulatory impact

The Regulatory environment acts as both a constraint and an enabler: In the telecom industry, which is highly regulated, government and regulatory agencies heavily impact the ability to innovate. In some cases, national policies or agendas promote innovation. Market growth has benefited from infrastructure expansion policies that facilitate the deployment of new services. Similarly, South African regulators have sometimes established regulatory sandboxes, such as the Financial Sector Conduct Authority’s

fintech sandbox, which telecom companies can utilise to test innovations like insurance or lending products in a controlled environment. An interviewee cited an example of a financial regulator in one country that set up a regulatory sandbox:

“They said, ‘show us what you’re trying to do, let’s do it together”, (R3 Strategy) by the time the product was ready for market, they approved it because they were part of the process.”

When regulators adopt a proactive approach such as releasing 5G spectrum or encouraging infrastructure expansion

‘On the other hand, the convergence of regulations (e.g., in fintech) could make things easier if managed well. We look for a ‘healthy market’ (moderate regulation, growing economy), and our purpose-driven initiatives help governments see us as a partner, which can open doors.”(R9 Finance)

Early engagement with regulators, involving them in the innovation process, was highlighted as a best practice to facilitate new offerings (such as mobile financial services) within legal boundaries. Besides telecom regulators, national policies and economic conditions also influence the process. In some cases, government digitalisation agendas and partnerships give favourable momentum in innovation.

Many leaders highlighted that strict regulations could impede or delay innovation, such as when new services need regulatory approval or when cautious regulators limit testing with customers. Often, regulators in organisations operating in different countries exercise caution when telecom companies explore new areas, like requiring banking licences for financial services or restricting data monetisation due to privacy laws. Leaders have encountered regulatory challenges, such as delayed spectrum auctions, which hinder network innovation, and strict mobile money regulations that have slowed the growth of Fintech platforms. These external obstacles can frustrate internal innovation, and a potentially viable service might be ready to launch but remain stalled for two years because of regulatory approval processes, draining momentum and resources. As a result, vague or restrictive regulations imposed externally can block internal initiatives.

“If you’re in a heavily regulated environment, it’s not easy to do things that haven’t been approved. You have to do a lot in-house first” (R12 Legal)

"Why develop it if approval is uncertain?" (R17 IT)

Overall, the external regulatory environment serves as a double-edged sword: it imposes constraints requiring patience and compliance from leaders; however, when handled skilfully- through collaboration and advocacy- it can also provide frameworks that legitimise and speed up innovation, as demonstrated by sandbox approvals.

Technological Advancements

The rapid development of technology (e.g., AI, cloud computing, 5G) is an essential external enabler, offering the organisation new tools and opportunities to innovate. For example, the widespread use of smartphones and affordable data in Africa enables Organisation to explore digital services (financial apps, video, IoT) that utilise its network. This technological trend motivates Organisation to innovate and provides them with capabilities (like advanced analytics) to do so efficiently. Adopting new technologies early (e.g., being an early 5G adopter, experimenting with satellite connectivity) can boost internal innovation capacity because it helps the organisation learn and adapt ahead of competitors.

"As ChatGPT came out, it opened a whole new world of possibilities... if you don't adapt, you'll be left behind."(R17 IT)

Market Needs and Customer Expectations

External demand acts as a powerful catalyst for innovation. In many African markets, consumers often skip traditional outlets to adopt mobile solutions, creating favourable conditions for innovations like Fintech, Cloud, Satellite solutions. In South Africa, changes in customer behaviour, such as increased self-service and digital engagement, externally pressure organisations to digitise and enhance the customer experience. These external expectations strengthen internal innovation by providing significant incentives, such as the growing fintech ecosystem, guiding organisations to expand in that area. Beyond mobile business while leveraging its telecom assets to meet the rising demand.

"The customer always drives this change... they need things differently"(R1 Customer Ops)

Partnerships

Collaborations with external firms, such as content providers, fintech startups, or Big Tech companies specialising in cloud or IoT, bring fresh ideas and expertise. For example, partnering with AWS or Google on cloud solutions can enhance the organisation's IT agility while leveraging its existing infrastructure. This external ecosystem thus promotes internal innovation through collaboration and knowledge sharing.

5.9.2 Market Disruption and Threats

New Competitors and Disruptive Players

The primary external threat to the organisation's internal innovation stems from non-traditional competitors. These include banks offering telecom services, OTT (over-the-top) platforms like WhatsApp that cut SMS and voice revenues, and MVNOs that use the telecom's network without significant investment. While these threats motivate the organisation to pursue both incremental and disruptive innovation, a slow response could become overwhelming. Additionally, large technology firms such as Google and SpaceX/Starlink—equipped with substantial innovation resources and capital—pose a formidable challenge that could surpass the organisation if internal assets are not utilised effectively. This environment heightens the need and urgency for internal innovation, acting as both a catalyst and a risk that could erode internal confidence if neglected.

“You have mobile virtual operators... making a profit with zero investment, while we carry the network costs. And banks... they're encroaching on our pie.” (R13 Property)

Adding, *“We need to move into those spaces ourselves” (R13 Property)*

Economic and Social Conditions

South Africa's challenging economic environment, characterised by sluggish growth, high unemployment, and energy shortages, creates external barriers to the organisation's innovation efforts. Additionally, the geopolitical situation and the depreciation of currencies across African markets are believed to hinder innovation efforts down. Consumers facing financial difficulties are less inclined to spend on new services, making it harder to turn innovations into profit. Furthermore, during economic downturns, cost-cutting measures can limit innovation budgets. Socioeconomic issues

such as unequal digital literacy also mean that some innovations, like advanced apps, may not be adopted equally by all customer groups, thereby lessening their overall impact. While necessity often drives innovation, ongoing economic challenges can reduce funding and hinder the successful launch of new offerings,

“The market has almost plateaued... growth is very small, 2–3% a year. It’s hardly sustainable and definitely not in the double digits.”(R9 Finance)

5.9.3 Market Saturation and Competition Maturity

The main mobile market in South Africa is nearly fully saturated, with close to 100% penetration. To grow, the company must either increase its market share, which could trigger price wars, or introduce new services. This saturation creates financial pressure that might limit innovation, as the company may prioritise marketing and retention over R&D to retain subscribers. While this situation can motivate the pursuit of new revenue streams, it also presents a risk, since the main source of income isn’t growing enough to support significant innovation. Additionally, mature markets like South Africa tend to become “steady Eddy,” whereas in-growing markets like Tanzania show more eagerness for trying new approaches. Such external market conditions influence internal leadership mindsets, and complacency becomes a risk in saturated environments.

“Everything’s changing so fast... everybody keeps eating each other’s lunch... the slice gets thinner and thinner.” (RF 3 Strategy)

“We sit with an organisation that’s a mature industry... basically governed around price and performance. We’ve built this large animal... and you find the majority of the budget... on one side (incremental), happening at a slow pace, while disruptors, lighter and agile, compete neck and neck with us.” (R8 Tech)

“We’re seeing declining revenues on the network side... the comms market is converging and saturating.” (R8 Tech)

5.10 Conclusion: Summary of findings

Table 4: Summary of findings

Theme	Summary of Key Insights
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1. Shared Understanding & Strategic Importance	Senior leadership generally demonstrates a clear grasp of ambidextrous innovation. While this understanding varies across organisational levels, there is broad agreement that both incremental and radical innovation are essential for long-term viability. In the context of saturated markets and rapid technological change, all participants noted that reliance on core telecom services is increasingly unsustainable and embedding, and that embedding innovation ambidexterity is innovation ambidexterity was viewed as critical to survival.
2. Practices of Ambidextrous Innovation	The organisation demonstrated strong capabilities towards exploitation. There was evidence of consistent refinement of the core business offerings through incremental improvements. However, exploration of breakthrough innovation was limited and occurred in pockets with occasional radical projects in fintech and IoT. Although initiatives such as the hackathons, innovation hubs, and innovation squads support ambidexterity, exploratory innovation tends to occur in sporadic bursts rather than as a consistent activity. Previous attempts to establish dedicated innovation teams failed to sustain, primarily because they became disconnected from the core business and faced a gap in the transition from ideation to implementation. Overall, leaders expressed that innovation primarily focuses on exploitation, with exploratory efforts lacking proper integration and ongoing commitment.
3. Leadership Mindset, behaviours and risk attitude	An ambidextrous Leadership mindset and capability were shown to be crucial in driving innovation success. When CEO's and senior teams embed a vision that balances short-term achievements with long-term innovation goals, they influence behaviours. Even though strategic plans and visible backing for innovation helped set shared priorities, a disconnect is evident between words and practice regarding risk taking associated with ambidextrous innovation. Despite promoting a 'fail fast, learn fast' attitude in the organisation, the culture remains risk-averse, with middle and lower managers focusing more on operational short-term objectives out of fear of failure and stigma. This results in a mixed level of ambidexterity seen. Many top leaders support and fostered ambidextrous innovation, but most employees were seen to prefer more traditional methods biased towards incremental change. Fostering psychological safety and encouraging entrepreneurial qualities, such as curiosity, boldness, and adaptability, were noted as essential for embedding ambidexterity and evolving leadership capability.
4. Organisational Culture and Support Mechanisms	The organisation has a strong focus on operational excellence and short-term performance objectives, which fosters accountability but tends to hamper exploratory innovation. Hierarchical leadership and systemic constraints, such as misaligned budgets and inflexible processes, were seen to diminish the effectiveness of innovation support structures. Recognition from leaders was clear that achieving sustained innovation ambidexterity requires behavioural changes, stronger ambidextrous leadership capability, empowerment, and better alignment of processes and systems.
5. Internal Tensions and Challenges	Internal tensions were evident when balancing short-term responsibilities with radical innovation. Generational gaps and the tension between centralised control and decentralised agility were seen to hinder an organisation's ability to practice innovation ambidexterity. Factors such as strict compliance requirements, scarce resources, and change fatigue add to leadership challenges. Psychological safety and the freedom to create without the stigma attached to failure were also noted as challenges that created tension. Overcoming these tensions to achieve ambidextrous innovation will involve incorporating innovation into performance assessments, allocating dedicated resources, promoting collaboration, changing incentives and decentralising decision-making.

6. External Drivers and Influences	Many external factors, such as regulations, technological advancements, changing customer needs, and market competition, have influenced the organisational innovations ambidexterity. Supportive regulations and new technologies foster innovation, whereas strict regulations and cost limitations can obstruct it. Competition from fintech, OTT platforms, and large tech firms requires both incremental and radical innovations for the organisation to stay relevant. Leaders need to use both enabling and impeding factors to help manage challenges effectively, to balance core activities with exploratory initiatives.
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Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on developing themes between the findings that emerged from the data collected during the interviews, then comparing these with the theoretical framework established in the literature review (Chapter 2). It aims to systematically address each of the research questions by comparing the themes that emerged from the interviews with the main theoretical constructs on ambidextrous innovation and ambidextrous leadership capability. The objective of this chapter is to build an argument on how well the existing theory explains the observations noted in the field and where the theory may need to be expanded upon.

A thematic analysis was carried out as the main method to identify and extract themes from the interview transcripts, where open coding was performed to identify points of similarity and differentiation through the individual experiences of the senior leadership of this organisation. Once the open codes were completed, they were then grouped into code clusters, and common concepts were developed, establishing links between these concepts. The table below links the research questions posed at the start of the study with the ideas and patterns that emerged from the interview data analysis, illustrating how various constructs are interconnected. The main categories or insights identified through thematic analysis help organise and interpret the data, demonstrating how these themes relate to the existing theories discussed in the literature review. Conclusions are drawn for each area, indicating whether these findings support, extend, or challenge prior studies.

Table 5: Research questions, concepts, and themes

Table 5 links each research question to the theoretical constructs from the literature and the corresponding themes derived from the data.

Research Question	Relationship of these concepts	Themes

Research Question 1: How do senior leaders perceive and define innovation ambidexterity, and what is its perceived impact on business sustainability?	Was there alignment with senior leaders on the concept of organisational Ambidexterity Does the senior leadership believe that organisational survival and Innovation Ambidexterity are linked?	Theme 1a: Understanding ambidexterity Different definitions among leaders focus on balancing short-term efficiency with long-term innovation. Bias towards exploitation with structured yet limited exploration initiatives. Theme 1b: Strategic Significance There is a strong consensus that ambidexterity is essential for survival and long-term competitiveness in a turbulent telecom market.
RQ2: What internal leadership behaviours, mindsets, and organisational factors promote or impede the development and sustainability of ambidextrous innovation?	Understanding the Ambidextrous leadership behaviours and mindsets	Theme 2a: Leadership vision & support Senior leadership (Top Tier) drive innovation ambidexterity through clear vision and ambidextrous leadership styles. This same capability is not prevalent in the tier-three and middle management layers, where focus remains on operational targets and shorter-term deliverables. A tension exists between leaders who take risks and those who operate within a risk-averse culture. High consensus on the impact of failure and fears of non-performance. Short-term performance pressures hinder the freedom to open innovation.
	What organisational practices of ambidextrous leadership are prevalent towards implementation	Theme 2b: Empowerment and autonomy Structured programs like the hackathons, specialised teams and agile project teams but this is not the norm. There continues to be a bias towards traditional, hierarchical decision-making that creates rigidity, control and hampers innovation.
	Ambidextrous leadership capability through culture and organisational support	Theme 2c: Organisational Culture and Systems A strong execution culture promotes efficiency through exploitation, but this often suppresses experimentation. A misalignment between performance goals and objectives and incentives further hinders the achievement of ambidexterity.
RQ3: How are senior leaders supported in implementing the duality of radical and incremental innovation strategies, and what impediments do they encounter?	Enablement through support mechanisms such as HR systems and knowledge management	Theme 3a: Mechanisms for Supporting Ambidextrous Innovation: Culture and Systems Introduction of innovation programs such as hackathons, innovation hubs, beyond mobile business units, and dedicated exploration teams. These initiatives generate ideas, but their integration and impact in the business are limited. Time constraints and funding prioritisation for exploratory projects as well as the lack of formal processes to convert experimental ideas into business outputs towards value creation and value add.

	What leadership and organisational tensions affect innovation, ambidexterity, and ambidextrous leadership?	Theme 3b: Internal tensions and challenges Conflicts in balancing core targets and new initiatives, including resource competition, the “explore-exploit” paradox, generational differences in mindset, and siloed innovation efforts. Resistance to change and innovation fatigue among staff managing their core duties; structural bottlenecks and complex approval processes that impede radical initiatives.
	What external dynamic capabilities and drivers, such as market disruption, competition, and regulation, influence implementation and integration?	Theme 3c: External Drivers and Constraints Competitive pressure from Tech disruptors and rapid technological changes has prompted leaders to pursue ambidextrous innovation with some urgency. Regulatory requirements and market conditions sometimes delay or restrict ambidextrous innovation but can also be the impetus to influence policies, drive collaborative experimentation and ideation.

The following sections summarise each research question in turn. Each question and its related themes will be discussed, beginning with a summary of the relevant findings from Chapter 5, followed by a comparison with the existing research literature from Chapter 2. Each main section concludes with a brief overview of the study's findings that either support, extend, or challenge the literature.

6.2 Analysis of Findings for Research Question 1

How do senior leaders perceive and define innovation ambidexterity, and what is its perceived impact on business sustainability?

Theme 1: Perceptions of ambidexterity and its role in business sustainability

This section explores how senior leaders understand and value ambidextrous innovation within their organisation. The findings highlight two main points: the first showing that although there was a common understanding of the concept of innovation ambidexterity, they held differing views on its interpretation; second, there was almost universal agreement that achieving this balance is crucial for the company's survival and long-term success. We discuss these findings in relation to the literature on ambidexterity and organisational performance.

6.2.1 Leaders' Understanding of Innovation Ambidexterity

In the interviews, leaders consistently described ambidexterity as the simultaneous exploitation of current capabilities and exploration of new opportunities. However, not all leaders used the term in the same way. Some framed it as balancing short-term operational goals with long-term innovation, while others saw it as balancing “incremental” with “leapfrog” changes, and a few participants needed to clarify the concept during the interview. This variation suggests that, in practice, the senior leaders understood the dual nature of the concept, but many emphasised different aspects based on their perspective. In general, most leaders viewpoints aligned with March's (1991) traditional definitions of the simultaneous pursuit of exploitation, emphasising efficiency and productivity, and that of exploration, which involves seeking new and experimental ideas for future value creation. Additionally, all participants recognised that both elements are necessary to some degree.

The consensus view from the interviewed leaders aligns well with the theoretical definitions cited in Chapter 2, which define organisational ambidexterity as an organisation's ability to balance radical and incremental innovation (Dominguez et al., 2019). This is evident with leaders explaining the concept as “keeping the ship sailing efficiently while looking for leapfrog ideas”. The literature also highlights that exploitation generally results in incremental innovations and stable improvements, whereas exploration leads to radical innovations and novel breakthroughs. Leaders provided several examples, similarly referring to network and service optimisation in the current mobile environment and the incubation of new digital services and products in the fintech and IoT spaces.

Interestingly, the findings also revealed that some executives questioned whether everyone in the organisation truly shared the same understanding of innovation ambidexterity. One executive explained that “*not everyone sees it the same way*” and that many leads tend to focus on either core execution or new ideas, but very few have done both effectively. This is consistent with the literature, where van Neerijnen et al. (2021) demonstrate that organisations have difficulty internalising this behaviour across all levels. The mixed understanding among leaders in this study suggests that this context is still developing; with many leaders know the concept of innovation ambidexterity, but interpretations and practices vary. This finding aligns with the literature, which emphasises that, while the principle of balancing exploit and explore

is well-established in theory, organisations often struggle to communicate and embed a uniform understanding of how to achieve it in their daily work (Papachroni et al., 2015). The study highlights this gap and the need for clearer internal communication and training in ambidextrous thinking at all organisational levels.

6.2.2 Ambidexterity as a strategic imperative for survival

A significant finding in Chapter 5 was the consensus among all leaders interviewed that pursuing both incremental and radical innovation simultaneously is vital to the company's long-term growth. Many of the interviewees specifically stated that the organisation "*has no choice*" but to innovate in new areas while maintaining the strength of its core, or risk decline. One participant bluntly noted that companies that fail to embrace ambidexterity will be stuck with "*a smaller and shrinking market*", citing how a once-dominant pay-TV firm lost ground to streaming services by not adapting quickly. This sense of urgency and importance aligns with numerous studies that have found that innovation ambidexterity correlates with higher performance and better survival rates in dynamic industries. In the study by Bozic & Dimovski (2019), they report that ambidextrous firms attained market leadership, organisational success, and sustained growth. The participants believed that "we won't remain relevant without continuous innovation," which aligns with the literature stating that ambidexterity is essential rather than optional for maintaining a competitive advantage.

In the telecommunications industry, there appears to be a heightened need, as evidenced by the study's findings and the literature. Leaders frequently mentioned disruptions such as fintechs, big tech entrants, virtual operators and new technologies like AI, satellites, and cloud computing that can rapidly erode a telecom's traditional business. This aligns with the literature on telecommunications sector dynamics as detailed in Lungu's (2022) study. This study indicated that innovation ambidexterity is crucial for the long-term competitiveness of telecoms organisations, helping them adapt to disruptions and maintain continuous innovation initiatives. Similarly, Njiru & Mutua's (2024) research on African telecom markets revealed that companies that effectively balance exploitation and exploration performed better. They highlighted Safaricom's M-Pesa fintech platform as a prime example of exploratory innovation that outpaced competitors. The participants' viewpoints align with these cases as they frequently referenced the need to go "beyond-mobile" into new digital services to avoid obsolescence, which is precisely the strategic shift many incumbent

telecommunication organisations are adopting in response to market saturation and over-the-top (OTT) competition.

A key point of agreement is the reference to Christensen's (2016) disruptive innovation theory by leaders. The idea that focusing solely on current customers and products through incremental change leaves the organisation susceptible to disruptors. One participant even cited that a very successful mobile core, which services voice and messaging(SMS) revenues, can quickly decline if new technologies like Voice over IP and messaging apps are not addressed. This aligns directly with Christensen (2016), who warned that great firms can fail by ignoring disruptive innovations or innovations that do not deliver value. Some leaders commented that *"if we don't do new stuff, we won't be relevant,"* which supports this sentiment from a practical perspective. Therefore, the findings strongly support the existing theory on the strategic importance of ambidexterity within the organisation, aligning with its connection to long-term performance. It is worth noting that even though the importance of ambidexterity was undeniable, some participants did express concern about the rate at which change occurs within the organisation, stating, *"we talk about it, but have we made a massive shift? Shifts are mostly within what we do."* This suggests that while leaders conceptually accept the importance of innovation ambidexterity, their actions may be lagging.

Importantly, research question 1 reveals that a key finding of this study is the practical confirmation of academic claims that innovation ambidexterity is considered essential for business survival, especially in a rapidly evolving industry. This provides a foundation for understanding how leaders, equipped with this awareness and capabilities, strive to promote innovation ambidexterity through their actions.

6.3 Analysis of Findings for Research Question 2

What internal leadership behaviours, mindsets, and organisational factors promote or impede the development and sustainability of a culture of ambidextrous innovation?

Theme 2: Leadership behaviours and organisational factors influencing ambidextrous innovation.

This section addresses the internal dynamics of leadership behaviors, mindsets, and organisational context that either enable or impede the development of an

ambidextrous innovation culture. In Chapter 5, several key themes were identified, including the leadership vision, the organisational risk appetite, empowerment and decision-making, and supportive organisational factors supporting the integration of ambidextrous innovation. The report undertakes to examine each of these concepts and connect them to the concepts of ambidextrous leadership and organisational culture from the literature.

Overall, the findings depict an organisation led by executives who believe in innovation and strive to promote it. The wider organisational culture, however, primarily favours exploitation or incremental innovations which give rise to tensions. This is sometimes described in research as the challenge of shifting from a traditional, efficiency focused organisations to an ambidextrous one. This transition involves not only new structures but also new leadership behaviours and cultural values (Xi et al., 2025). The following sub-sections explore these factors in detail.

6.3.1 Theme 2a: Leadership vision and support

A positive finding within the organisation was that the senior leadership team (SLT) provides strong visionary support for ambidexterity. The CEO and top executives have specifically incorporated innovation into the corporate strategy, ensuring that the vision statements for 2025 and 2030 include ambitions to grow “beyond mobile” services and to include the principle of “Innovate for Growth” (*R9 Finance*) as part of the core strategic pillars. According to the participants, many SLT members not only sponsor innovation initiatives, like hackathons or new venture teams, but also participate in them. An example of judging hackathon pitches or championing specific exploratory projects was referenced through interview conversations. This shows a clear signal from the top that ambidextrous innovation is valued. Leaders also cited the CEO’s communication as consistently encouraging employees to spend effort on both improving core operations and developing new ideas. Such leadership messaging and engagement align with what the literature describes as a setting for vision and a context for innovation ambidexterity. Koryak et al. (2018) found that a well-communicated strategic vision positively influences ambidextrous innovation in firms. This emphasises the importance of senior managers articulating a clear and shared vision, creating a context in which individuals feel motivated to pursue both exploitative and exploratory work. The top leaders in this study have illustrated that the organisation has begun integrating innovation ambidexterity into its strategic vision,

and that enablers such as hackathon competitions with substantial rewards, performance indicators for innovation, and recognition through prestigious innovation awards have been implemented.

Several interviewees pointed out that when senior leaders themselves engage in innovative thinking or novel projects, it encourages leaders and individuals down the line to do the same. One leader described the Group CEO as personally involved in pushing innovation ambidexterity, saying *“he’s been very deliberate that we must deliver sustained growth beyond our core... leadership stands up and says this is what we stand for, which has helped embed it into our culture”*. These role modelling behaviours align with the concept of ambidextrous leadership proposed by Xi et al. (2025), who emphasise that leaders must demonstrate both ‘opening’ behaviours to foster creativity and ‘closing’ behaviours to ensure execution. Through the active promotion of innovation, while still driving performance, top leaders in the organisation aim to embody this duality. The literature also notes that senior leaders who set the tone for innovation ambidexterity by visibly prioritising both exploration and exploitation; influenced the dilution into the management levels (Zhang et al., 2018). These findings support this idea, especially at the highest levels of leadership, where a strong tone resonates. One executive noted that the challenge, however, is *“getting everyone to believe it is the right course and removing obstacles”*, implying that although the senior leadership team sets *the* tone, it is not always uniformly internalised at lower levels.

The interviews also revealed that mid-level management and some tier-two and tier-three leadership were not always as enthusiastic or clear about how to pursue innovation ambidexterity. Several participants noted that, historically, some department heads were *“still focused on their own KPIs”* and not as willing to divert resources towards exploratory initiatives. This highlights a common issue discussed in the literature on leadership alignment. Bell and Hofmeyr (2021) noted that to enable organisational ambidexterity, leaders at all levels should develop certain skills, including adaptability. If top leaders advocate and role-model innovation but middle managers remain focused solely on efficiency, the organisation experiences a disconnect that creates a bottleneck to innovation, as suggested by Swart et al. (2019). In this study, the need for mid-level management and all tiers of leadership to support

this integration is noted, highlighting that building ambidextrous leadership capability to integrate this duality remains a work in progress.

6.3.2 Theme 2b: The leadership mindsets and risk dynamics

A significant obstacle identified was the cautious attitude many leaders held, indicating a limited risk appetite. Although the organisation's and senior leadership team's notion of "fail fast, learn fast," in the culture code, encouraged the idea, the leadership felt that mistakes were not easily forgiven or forgotten. The participants specifically cited that employees felt a fear of being labelled and judged because of errors or failures, resulting in them preferring to stay safe and focus on incremental ideas. Many of the participants themselves acknowledged that, *"We have a serious problem with psychological safety... people hold back; they fear consequences."* This type of environment conflicts with the practice of exploration, which inherently involves uncertainty and potential failure.

The literature directly pertaining to ambidextrous leadership behaviours, specifically the balance and duality of innovation, is demonstrated in Rosing et al.'s (2011) study, which distinguishes between "opening behaviours" and "closing behaviours." They explain that opening leadership behaviours include encouraging experimentation, autonomy, and risk-taking, whereas closing behaviours enforce discipline, adherence to plans, and risk mitigation. In an ideal ambidextrous leadership approach, a leader dynamically alternates between these behaviours. They provide an environment that creates freedom for innovation, while at other times they tighten the execution towards key outputs (Xi et al., 2025). The study's findings suggest that many leaders within the organisation, especially at the middle management and technical supervisory levels, rely heavily on closing behaviours, emphasising control, predictability, and a zero-error execution culture. There were fewer mentions of leaders displaying open behaviours such as giving their teams time for creative projects or specifically rewarding innovation or left-field thinking. This demonstrates that the leadership style mix is more biased towards exploitation. Xi et al.'s (2020) study has empirically demonstrated that emphasising directive or closed leadership at the expense of empowering or open leadership can negatively affect radical innovation. Li et al. (2020), cited in the literature review, found that shifting from traditional directive styles to a more empowering approach significantly enhances innovation outcomes. This study

resonates with this notion and suggests a need for a mindset shift among leaders to foster greater openness.

The presence of fear and blame was very widespread in the organisation. An ambidextrous organisation must be a learning organisation where small failures are regarded as learning opportunities. The fact that people feel mistakes are punished or fear recourse indicates a learning culture problem within the organisation. This contradicts the idea proposed by Uhl-Bien & Arena (2018) that adaptability and the related innovations flourish in an ambidextrous culture when leaders foster an environment safe for innovation. This study's findings support that theory by showing the opposite, which means that when psychological safety is low, exploratory innovation is limited (Lee et al., 2020).

One nuance observed in the interviews was the existence of pockets of progressive mindsets. Some leaders were highlighted as exceptions and described as those who "allow freedom to challenge without fear". This shows that within the same organisation, leadership mindsets can vary considerably. It also suggests that when leaders and managers adopt an ambidextrous mindset, their teams are more likely to generate exploratory ideas. These findings are supported by Ye et al. (2018), who state that developing ambidexterity requires leaders to continuously identify and capitalise on opportunities and adjust behaviours as needed, which they note only some individuals might do without a structured program.

In summary, this study's findings on risk aversion in comparison to a risk taking mindset illustrate a barrier to innovations ambidexterity that is well-documented. The literature suggests a flexible, paradox-embracing leadership approach, but in this case, the reality still aligns more with a traditional leadership style.

It further suggests that leadership development interventions are needed to help integrate the practice of ambidextrous leadership and innovation. This affirms studies like Li et al. (2020), which stressed that a supportive environment from leaders is necessary for innovation. The contribution of our findings highlights that, despite senior leadership commitment and strategic vision, middle-level leadership culture may require significant shifts to truly empower exploratory innovation, which is a challenge that is frequently mentioned by the interviewees.

6.3.3 Theme 2c: Organisational culture as an enabler

The organisational culture has traditionally had a strong discipline of execution, which participants acknowledge with pride. This culture, focused on execution, includes a relentless drive to meet quarterly targets, ensure network reliability, and deliver well-defined key performance indicators, making it an excellent culture for exploitation that drives efficiency and operational excellence. This can also result in unintended restraint on exploration if the leadership are not aware of this. The study's findings demonstrate that employees and leaders frequently experience immense pressure to achieve short-term results, leaving limited mental capacity or time for innovative thinking. Participants expressed this, indicating that “*everyone obsesses about their KPIs*” or “*middle management is where innovation goes to die, they are too KPI-focused and cautious*”. This highlights a strong cultural bias towards stability and control.

In theoretical terms, this scenario reflects the tension Birkinshaw et al. (2023) describe between an organisation's exploitative culture and the need to cultivate an exploratory culture simultaneously. March's (1991) classic concept remains relevant here, as this may lead to success traps and failure traps. This means that the organisation's focus on exploitation might lead to them falling into a “success trap,” focusing so much on current performance metrics that it under-invests in exploration. The findings suggest that the organisation's leaders are aware of this danger and have attempted to pivot, but decades of success in the core mobile business have embedded a performance-first mindset. This culture does not discourage innovation, as employees participate enthusiastically in hackathons and innovation hubs and acknowledge the importance of new ideas, but participants emphasise that the order of priority is clear and always puts core performance drivers first.

Many participants indicated that the culture scores highly on discipline and stretch, driving high performance standards against shorter term goals, but perhaps lower on support and trust for exploratory risk-taking. Several participants noted a lack of psychological safety in some units, indicating fear of blame if an idea fails or hesitation to challenge due to organisational hierarchy and tenure. This suggests that ambidextrous innovation generally suffers when people fear punishment for mistakes or failures (Jin & Peng, 2024)

The findings in this respect show a partial misalignment with an ideal innovation ambidextrous culture. Several leaders admitted that “*speaking up with radical ideas*” or spending work time on unproven projects is not entirely the norm, and people often have to do that “*after hours*.” This highlights a gap in leadership behaviours where truly ambidextrous organisations integrate cultures or structures that protect or encourage exploration alongside daily activities (Xi et al., 2025). On the positive side, the various participants noted that the organisational culture has strong shared values regarding customer-centricity and improving lives through technology. When exploratory innovations are clearly linked to those core values, such as mobile money services that enhance financial inclusion, teams rally behind them. This aligns with the idea that culture can be a bridge between exploitation and exploration when managed well. Research by O’Reilly and Tushman (2013) suggests that a common vision and value system can integrate disparate efforts, which is evident in the organisation’s vision of being a “*leading digital company empowering society*”.

In summary, the organisational culture has a mixed influence as it strongly supports exploitation and provides a disciplined environment for execution, but it does not sufficiently promote exploration due to risk aversion and a focus on short-term results, which does not fully foster innovation ambidexterity. The data does not contradict the theory cited earlier in Chapter 2; rather, it illustrates the cultural paradox that exists and reinforces the need for an adaptive, ambidextrous leadership style to nurture a more innovation-friendly climate (Schrage et al., 2025; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

6.3.4 Theme 2d: Internal structures and systems

Another internal factor affecting innovation ambidexterity relates to the structures and systems that shape organisational design and processes. These can both support and hinder the dual pursuit of innovation. The findings in Chapter 5 highlight some relevant elements, which are discussed below.

There is evidence from the interview of a degree of centralisation in the decision-making structure, with major innovation decisions or approvals often having to wait for senior executives or committees to move forward. This means exploratory initiatives can stall if not prioritised at the top two tiers of leadership. The participants spoke about the need for relevant business owners or executive committee members to sponsor

ideas or innovation initiatives to gain traction, implying that this bottom-up innovation approach can create structural bottlenecks.

There was also evidence from the interview that detailed the creation of specialised cross-functional teams from the hackathons, the “Digital Acceleration” unit, or ad-hoc agile squads for new product ideas, showing efforts to establish dedicated innovation platforms or separate structures to drive innovation ambidexterity in the organisation. Conversely, the dissolving of some of these teams, such as the Tech for Development (T4D) innovation group, has led to a loss of momentum when their activities were merged into core operations. Similar instances, such as dissolving the acceleration unit, indicate that the organisation struggles to balance structural ambidexterity and reintegration, often failing to fully achieve either.

Participants emphasised a key aspect of the performance management system and how it relates to the current assessment methods for individuals rewarded. They indicated that the key performance objectives for most leaders overwhelmingly focus on core business metrics, including financial targets and network performance. Innovation performance indicators are either newly added or relatively minor. Additionally, it was noted that no formal reward system exists for taking prudent risks or sharing novel ideas in the current system. In fact, time spent on innovation often competed with operational tasks, which in most cases took priority. This becomes a real challenge for an organisation if exploration is not measured or incentivised, as it tends to get squeezed out.

Examining these three aspects against the literature reveals that firstly, the organisational design for ambidexterity can take several forms, namely, structural, contextual, or hybrid (Ossenbrink et al., 2019). In this case, the organisational approach appears to be mostly contextual, with leaders trying to encourage innovation within existing units through structured programs and behaviours. This, however, is countered by structural separation measures, including the creation of separate innovative teams and the acquisition of subsidiary companies. The limited success of these structural attempts, such as innovation units that fail to deliver major breakthroughs and are shut down, resonates with known challenges. One interviewee described an innovation hub’s results as not achieving their “full potential” because operational teams may not have adopted and executed their outputs. This suggests

that structural ambidexterity is not achieved; it will consistently fail if integration mechanisms are weak. Contextual ambidexterity, on the other hand, has also been hampered by the cultural issues as indicated above. This scenario might point to the need for a hybrid ambidexterity strategy, as suggested by Ossenbrink et al. (2019), in which some radical projects are structurally separated while the core business undergoes incremental shifts that are more contextually flexible. Notably, the literature review also demonstrates that the optimal configuration of innovation ambidexterity may be context specific and will often depend on leadership capability to make it work as they play a significant role in guiding employees in making daily decisions about how to allocate their time between these activities (Bozic & Dimovski, 2019).

Secondly, regarding empowerment and autonomy, the data show that lower-level teams are rarely given the freedom to pursue strategic innovation. This implies a lack of empowerment at the lower organisational levels, which is a barrier to building an ambidextrous innovation foundation. Saleh et al. (2023) highlighted the need for employees to have a level of comfort and autonomy to pursue exploratory activities within guardrails. Some more empowered examples were given, for example, a leader pulling a talented person out of their day job to focus on a new idea, which is effectively a leadership workaround to the existing rigid structures. That kind of action aligns more with the concept of ad-hoc ambidexterity, which depends more on an individual leader's initiative than on an institutionalised process.(Teece, 2016).

The third aspect concerns the company's Human Resource (HR) practices and incentives, an area where the company's practices still lag behind theoretical expectations. The results of this study indicate that, historically, performance metrics have not adequately included these dual criteria that enable ambidextrous innovation. When an employee's entire appraisal is based on core business deliverables, they will naturally defer exploration work. The absence of formal rewards and incentives based system for innovation, aside from recognition events, is a hindrance. The findings are supported by the literature review that highlights incentive systems focused heavily on exploitation undermine exploration innovation (Ahammad et al., 2020). Swart et al. (2019) also argued that if formal systems do not recognise exploration, employees will stick to exploitative tasks, as evidenced by the findings.

Another specific challenge mentioned was that, on most occasions, resources for innovation must be cut from core budgets and existing headcount, which has been challenging for the leadership to navigate. Many progressive tech-originated companies often have research and development budgets, but traditionally in companies where research and development is not as intensive, the budget might not be well separated from operational spending. The literature on innovation ambidexterity often stresses the need for resource flexibility or separation to ensure exploration is prioritised (Saleh, 2023). Overall, the organisation's internal structures and systems partly impede ambidexterity, which aligns with the theory's predictions given its size and legacy (Bozic & Dimovski, 2019).

In conclusion, regarding research question 2, the study finds that leadership mindset and organisational factors both drive and hinder innovation ambidexterity in expected ways. Strong top-tier leadership support acts as a driver, while cultural and mindset issues, along with misaligned systems, act as hindrances. The findings emphasise the importance of several organisational factors identified in the literature, such as leadership style, culture, and HR systems, as key influences on the effective integration of innovation ambidexterity (Saleh et al., 2023). This strengthens the argument that achieving innovation ambidexterity is not only about strategy, but about fundamentally altering leadership style and organisational practices. Next, we examine how these internal dynamics interact with the organisation's ambidextrous innovation strategy integration and what external factors influence them.

6.4 Analysis of Findings for Research Question 3

Questions 3

How are senior leaders supported in implementing the duality of radical and incremental innovation strategies, and what impediments do they encounter?

Theme 3: Support mechanisms for ambidextrous leadership, and managing challenges to facilitate ambidextrous innovation integration.

This section examines question 3, which explores how senior leaders implement ambidextrous innovation strategies within their organisation and the external challenges they encounter. These include internal processes and tools, as well as external environmental factors. The findings reveal that leadership has implemented support mechanisms but struggles to fully realise them. Further to this, the external

pressures faced by the organisation have both motivated and constrained the leader's ability to integrate innovation and ambidexterity. These aspects are linked to literature with respect to ambidexterity, dynamic capabilities, and industry factors as influencing factors.

6.4.1 Theme 3a: Mechanisms for Supporting Ambidextrous Innovation

To operationalise innovation ambidexterity, leaders have implemented various programs and structural interventions. These include Innovation Programs and Campaigns, for example, the annual Hackathons, the CEO Innovation Award, “Spirit Days” for ideation, and an internal Innovation Hub and Academy where employees can learn and pitch ideas. These initiatives are meant to stimulate bottom-up exploration and signal that innovation is everyone’s responsibility.

In addition to the programs, dedicated innovation teams have been established at various times in response to organisational needs (I4D, Acceleration Unit) to focus on more radical or adjacent innovations outside daily operations. Some of these were effectively internal startups or incubator environments, deliberately kept separate from core operations to give them freedom. The organisational expansion into fintech services, mobile money, and the Internet of Things (IoT), often through subsidiaries or partnerships, indicates deliberate structural moves to pursue new business ventures and shift their business from core mobile to beyond mobile opportunities. It was evident from the interviews that senior leadership sponsorship for these beyond-mobile ventures was evident for the successful execution and integration. Lastly, leaders have indicated that cross-functional squads and smaller-scale sandbox teams have enabled cross-departmental collaboration on specific innovation projects, providing a safe space to test solutions without the burden of hierarchical processes.

These mechanisms align with many best practices cited in ambidextrous innovation literature. An example of this is the hackathons and ideation campaigns through the Innovation Hub, which are common tools for fostering a culture of innovation and surfacing grassroots ideas. Setting up separate innovation units is also a good example of structural ambidexterity that helps shield exploratory efforts from the pressing deliverables of the core business. The fintech ventures undertaken correspond to what Mattes and Ohr (2019) would call a structural ambidextrous design, aiming to facilitate distinct units that focus on exploration.

The findings show that these mechanisms have generated a pipeline of ideas and prototypes where leaders mentioned a drone-based network inspection solution from a hackathon, or an agriculture mobile service incubated through an established cross-functional team, and even some successful new services, specifically relating to the fintech platform and its associated financial services, which are now a significant revenue generator for the business. This partially validates the literature's recommendation that companies use such mechanisms to achieve ambidexterity by creating separate units for new ventures or running internal innovation contests, which yield new growth streams (Ossenbrink et al., 2019).

However, importantly, the findings have revealed a bottleneck between ideation and implementation within the organisation. Many interviewees complained that the hackathon-winning ideas rarely made it to full implementation, or that innovations from dedicated innovation teams were not scaled across the company. Essentially, demonstrating that the conversion rate of exploratory ideas into value creating business outcomes was considered low compared to daily incremental business improvements. This reflects what researchers (Saleh et al.) identify as the execution challenge of innovation, where the generation of ideas is easier than integrating and monetising them. Thus, while the presence of mechanisms aligns with theory, the effectiveness has been mixed, which the literature would attribute to inadequate internal processes for execution. Studies on innovation ambidexterity stress the importance of alignment between these exploratory and exploitative units, for instance, by having ambidextrous leaders who translate between the two or by using transitional processes to ensure flow through. The results of this study suggest that the organisation could strengthen its alignment processes to yield sustained value from the various innovations.

Respondents noted that funding for these exploratory projects was also limited, and leaders were often expected to re-prioritise their operational budgets to cover these costs. The literature in this area often recommends having a separate innovation budget to prevent resource competition (Saleh et al., 2023). This organisation's practice did not feature separate budgets, which deviates from what might be considered ideal practice. This results in promising initiatives being shelved, especially when core budgets are regularly cut, a common occurrence during tougher economic times across all their operations. The participants also observed that recent cost-

cutting and restructuring efforts have diminished people's willingness to experiment. This illustrates how innovation ambidexterity becomes vulnerable when resources are scarce and tightly controlled. Consequently, external economic pressures have begun to influence internal resource allocation decisions, which often negatively impact ambidextrous innovation.

In summary, the interviewed leaders have implemented various support mechanisms aligned with the principles of innovation ambidexterity theory, fostering both structural and contextual encouragement for innovation. The partial success and failure of these efforts align with the literature, which observes that implementing ambidexterity is challenging and often iterative. It could be argued that the findings broaden the literature by offering a case study of the trial-and-error process involved in implementing ambidexterity, which starts with separate units, then moves towards integration, and then proceeds to relying on targeted campaigns, among other strategies. This demonstrates that finding the right balance and process is an ongoing and iterative journey. On the positive side, it validates that experimentation and exploration alongside exploitation through structured mechanisms are necessary, as doing nothing would be worse.

6.4.2 Theme 3b: Internal challenges experienced in execution

This chapter highlights many internal challenges to adopting ambidextrous innovation strategies, such as culture, performance indicators, and resource conflicts. It is also important to recognise the additional difficulties leaders encounter in execution and change management beyond these issues.

The findings described instances of resistance from the middle management layer, which did not prioritise new initiatives, and many employees experienced change fatigue. One direct challenge was the extent of the workload, as one participant noted, many people “*are doing two roles... just keeping the lights on,*” and driving innovation beyond their workload has led to overload or limited involvement in innovation. The data corroborate this, showing that to execute innovation, ambidexterity requires leaders to be mindful of resource capacities and possibly dedicate time, as in the case of Google’s 20% rule or 3M’s 15% rule (Mattes % Ohr, 2019). This argues that when organisations have not sought to institutionalise time allocation for creativity, employees may find it difficult to engage deeply in ambidextrous innovation efforts.

Another challenge noted was the lack of productive coordination across departments. Interviewees noted that ambidextrous innovation efforts often cut across traditional silos, and without strong cross-functional coordination, projects can be delayed waiting for one department's input or when teams face conflicting priorities. The literature on organisational processes indicates that mechanisms such as cross-unit teams, integrator roles, ambidextrous leadership, or shared objectives are necessary to prevent innovation from becoming someone else's problem (Saleh et al., 2023). The findings implied some silo issues, such as Legal or Compliance teams, that may block or slow a pilot project due to procedural or regulatory matters, or where IT might be reluctant to deviate from its roadmap, tend to hinder an ambidextrous innovative strategy. These challenges further emphasise the need to build greater ambidextrous leadership capabilities within the organisation, as they are limited among leaders, with pockets in the senior leadership team or the CEO.

These internal execution challenges emphasise that innovation ambidexterity is not just structural, but it is profoundly human and organisational. People need to be convinced, motivated, and, at times, relieved of other duties to make space for innovation (Saleh et al., 2023). The findings in this domain do not contradict theory but rather illustrate why innovation ambidexterity is challenging to execute and expand the evidence for the idea that successful innovation ambidexterity often requires changes in processes such as resource allocation, innovation targets, and the building of ambidextrous leadership capability.

6.4.3 Theme 3c: External environmental factors

The external environment in which this telecommunication organisation operates significantly impacts its innovation ambidexterity journey. As the findings show, two main types of external factors are highlighted below.

External drivers such as fierce competition from new entrants, including fintech startups and over-the-top services (such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram), rapid technological advancements (including 5G, AI, IoT), and changing customer behaviours act as key drivers of ambidextrous innovation. Many of the interviewees have identified these factors as reasons why ambidexterity and innovation have become essential for growth. The literature indicates that dynamic and challenging external environments force organisations to integrate ambidextrous innovation

strategies. (Saleh et al., 2023). This is evident in the Kaulio et al. (2017) study, which found that in organisations undergoing high levels of disruptive change, innovation ambidexterity is not optional. These external pressures drive leadership to justify and drive innovation from within instead of relying on traditional business models. The majority of the participants clearly recognise this disruption and cite examples such as the need to anticipate threats, with phrases like being aware of “*who’s coming to kill us*”. Essentially, these external drivers have strengthened the organisation’s commitment to drive innovation ambidexterity, confirming a positive link between perceived environmental uncertainty and innovation efforts.

On the contrary, external challenges were also perceived as constraining innovation, especially in the telecommunications sector. The most prevalent concerns were regulatory and policy factors. The telecommunications and financial services sectors are heavily regulated, and data revealed that regulatory approvals for new services, such as financial licenses, spectrum, and privacy laws, can slow things down. This can slow the momentum of innovation projects, even when they are supported internally. Many of the participants indicated that supplementary service-related mobile money might be ready technically, but awaits central bank approval. The literature on innovation in emerging markets often notes that regulatory frameworks are a double-edged sword, sometimes protecting incumbents and at other times being restrictive. The literature review detailed the progressive nature of African regulators: some enabled sandbox teams where, in partnership with the regulator, innovative technologies can be tested, while others imposed extensive taxes. Notably, these external factors are somewhat beyond the scope of the traditional innovation ambidexterity theory, which usually assumes a stable and set environment. It, however, highlights the importance of organisation to align its ambidexterity strategy with what the external environment allows.

Several leaders cited that partnerships and early engagement with regulators have helped reduce this hurdle, reflecting a stakeholder management strategy to navigate these external barriers. Conversely, onerous regulation could stifle the exploratory process, which suggests that organisations must not only reconfigure internally but also influence and adapt within these environments (Teece, 2018).

Another external constraint worth noting was the impact of the macroeconomic climate, specifically economic stagnation and issues such as South Africa's power crisis. Economic hardship affects consumers with less spending power for new services, which can, in turn, lower the returns from exploring premium options or services. The organisation's partial retreat on innovation budgets during tough times aligns with this pattern. The literature, however, indicates that a truly ambidextrous organisation must maintain innovation investment even during downturns to emerge stronger in the long term (Saleh, 2023). This is evident in the findings, with continued growth and investment in the group-wide hackathons and investment in innovative solutions within their East and North African operations.

Finally, having a dominant competitor in specific markets was observed to either discourage or motivate innovation. In Kenya, for example, the organisation responded by leapfrogging with its own innovations, while in another market, such as South Africa, being a leader led to complacency unless an external disruptor threatened. In this case, both scenarios require innovation ambidexterity, but in different ways, confirming that no competitive position is secure without it (Njiru & Mutua, 2024). In conclusion, the external factors in the study mainly validate the need for innovation ambidexterity, and the threats and opportunities demonstrate that an ambidextrous leadership approach is needed to navigate within this environment.

The overall conclusion for research question 3 of the study finds that leaders have implemented many structural and process mechanisms recommended by innovation ambidexterity theory, but the challenge lies in the practical execution and integration. The external environment strongly supports the need for these efforts, given the turbulence and disruption the telecommunications sector faces. Lastly, external barriers, particularly regulation, pose additional hurdles, emphasising the need for ambidextrous leadership to actively engage with external stakeholders when implementing innovation ambidexterity.

6.5 Overall conclusion

The findings of this research project illustrate three specific aspects of how they relate to the literature cited in the literature review. It demonstrates alignment with and extension of the theory by offering practical, in-depth insights into the complexity and

interactions within a corporate environment. Finally, it highlights any nuances the organisation encounters compared to the theory.

In many ways, the findings from the organisational experiences support the fundamental principle of innovation ambidexterity theory. The leaders recognise the paradox of balancing exploitation and exploration in innovation initiatives and its importance for business growth, which aligns with the literature that suggests innovation ambidexterity drives performance, growth, and survival. The research highlights enabling factors such as visionary leadership, a supportive organisational culture, and dedicated resources, which align with those discussed in the literature review. It further highlights barriers like an emphasis on short-term goals, fear of failure, and structural obstacles are recognised as common inhibitors of innovation within the organisation. This reinforces the cautions in the literature that creating an innovation ambidextrous organisation requires overcoming significant organisational challenges (Niewöhner et al., 2021).

The research findings further expand the theory by offering in-depth insights into the magnitude, complexity, and interplay of these factors within a corporate setting. This is clear in an example showing that, while the theory often treats structural and contextual ambidexterity separately, the organisational journey demonstrates how they may oscillate or blend, thereby enabling learning and adaptation through experience and practice. This supports newer models like hybrid innovation ambidexterity and suggests that a phased or hybrid approach can be more pragmatic (Ossenbrink et al., 2019).

Additionally, the detailed qualitative data on leadership behaviours show that some participants exhibit clear ambidextrous leadership behaviours, while others do not, indicating that not all leaders naturally adopt this approach. In these cases, leadership development and formalised, structured processes may be necessary to encourage the shift. The African telecommunications context, with its unique regulatory and market conditions, broadens the predominantly developed market-focused innovation ambidexterity research, providing more context-specific insights (Saleh et al., 2023). The study showed, for instance, that in emerging markets, regulatory engagement becomes a key leadership task in enabling innovation. This nuance could expand

innovation ambidexterity frameworks to include external stakeholder management as part of organisational capabilities.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter summarises the key findings of this research and discusses their significance, based on the theory and qualitative data analysis in Chapter 6. The study aimed to investigate the role of ambidextrous leadership and internal and external enablers in promoting ambidextrous innovation within a large African telecommunications organisation. It provides an in-depth qualitative analysis of senior leaders' perspectives in Chapter 5, aligned with the conceptual framework from the literature in Chapter 2.

It aimed to do this by focusing on three key areas, namely the leaders' perceptions of innovation ambidexterity and its importance for organisational survival; secondly, internal leadership behaviours, mindsets, and organisational factors that promote or hinder the balance between exploratory and exploitative innovation; and lastly, the ways in which senior leaders are supported in fostering both radical and incremental innovations, including any external challenges they may face. By examining these aspects, the research project aimed to provide a comprehensive view of leadership's role in enabling simultaneous exploitation and exploration, a capability widely regarded as essential for long-term competitiveness in rapidly changing environments (Xi et al., 2024). The research sought to highlight the interplay between leadership actions, internal and external organisational context, and ambidextrous innovation, linking back to the three research questions and the relevant theoretical frameworks.

7.2 Key Theoretical Findings

Overall, the findings of this study align with and support the existing theory on ambidexterity while also providing some practical insights and context-specific nuances that expand the literature. It demonstrates consistency with earlier research, as senior leaders recognised and understood the concept of ambidexterity and its significance for organisational survival in the volatile telecommunications market. There was complete agreement among all leaders that, without ongoing innovation alongside efficient core operations, the organisation's long-term viability would be at risk (Xi et al., 2025; Saleh et al., 2023). At the same time, the study offers new insights by demonstrating how innovation ambidexterity is practised within a real organisational

setting context. It highlights, for example, the tension between top leadership's vision that promotes innovation and ambidexterity, and middle-management routines that favour operational stability and short-term goals. This misalignment has not been extensively documented in prior ambidexterity studies.

The study also highlighted the influence of company specific factors, such as a legacy culture with low tolerance for failure, and external forces like regulatory constraints, in shaping innovation ambidexterity success. These findings could support and deepen academic understanding of innovation ambidexterity by illustrating how established principles play out in an emerging market telecommunications context, thereby expanding theory to incorporate factors such as heavy regulation and deep-rooted mindsets that can influence the success of innovation and ambidextrous strategies.

In summary, the evidence reinforces core concepts from literature that embedded innovation ambidexterity requires supportive leadership and flexible structures (Saleh et al., 2023; Hughes et al., 2020), while offering a few new perspectives on the barriers and enablers of ambidexterity in practice, particularly from a leadership perspective. (Bell & Hofmeyr, 2021; Swart et al., 2019). These findings offer valuable guidance for leaders in large organisations on fostering environments that support innovation and ambidexterity. The findings also highlighted the pivotal role of senior leadership in setting the tone and behaviours by communicating and role-modelling a clear vision that radical innovation and efficiency are dual priorities. At the same time, the data shows that organisations need to foster the right conditions, such as visible decision-making, resource commitments, appropriate performance indicators and incentives, as well as a climate of psychological safety, so that mid-level managers and employees can engage in exploratory initiatives without fear.

Additionally, some common shortcomings were identified, such as an innovation agenda hindered by short-term pressures or rigid performance indicators that solely reward exploitative performance frameworks (Teece, 2018; Saleh et al., 2023). These gaps are not only a theoretical concern but also highlight leadership challenges that must be addressed.

Furthermore, understanding external impediments, such as regulatory hurdles in the telecommunications sector, can help develop strategies to proactively engage external stakeholders. The research links theory and practice by explaining why cultivating

innovation ambidexterity is crucial and how it can be fostered or hindered within an organisation. It offers guidance on how to navigate and balance the explore-exploit paradox through ambidextrous leadership capabilities. This chapter is structured to present the supporting findings and theoretical position in response to the three research questions. It then discusses the implications of these findings for management practice, outlining key recommendations for integrating innovation ambidexterity robustly. Finally, it suggests directions for future research by building on the insights and gaps identified.

7.2.1 Key Findings for Research Question 1

How do senior leaders perceive and define innovation ambidexterity, and what is its perceived impact on business sustainability?

All the senior leaders viewed innovation ambidexterity as needing to exploit current capabilities and explore new opportunities simultaneously, despite differences in terminology. All the leaders described it as balancing efficiency and innovation, with some variations, framing it as short-term compared to long-term goals or as incremental versus radical innovation. They all recognise the duality of exploit and explore, in line with the literature (Zhang et al., 2019). This demonstrates leadership's clear understanding, consistent with research showing that top leaders acknowledge the importance of balancing these objectives (Papachroni & Heracleous, 2020).

Some leaders needed to clarify the concept, and, notably, participants indicated that not all managers see innovation ambidexterity the same way. This was especially evident with examples that indicated an operationally focused leader might stress exploitation, while a strategy leader emphasises exploration. Although senior leaders show a common understanding of innovation ambidexterity, there is a lack of consistent interpretation across management levels, as individuals tend to favour either exploration or exploitation based on their roles and comfort, which aligns with the paradox theory (Smith & Lewis, 2011). In practice, this highlights the need for clearer communication and education to ensure a common language across leadership and, in turn, the business as a whole. Even when leaders agree conceptually on the innovation ambidexterity concept, differences can lead to inconsistent priorities (van Neerijnen et al., 2021).

All senior leaders saw ambidexterity as vital for long-term success, emphasising its importance in the telecommunications sector, where changes such as digital services and new competitors are emerging rapidly. This aligns with literature linking the adoption and integration of innovation ambidexterity to business survival and improved performance (Saleh et al., 2023). Leaders stressed that continuous innovation is essential and not optional, thereby supporting the idea that exploitation only strategies lead to performance decline. One executive warned that organisations that ignore ambidexterity risk losing market share. This was illustrated by telecommunications organisations like Safaricom, which demonstrated how they thrived through innovation ambidexterity, while their less innovative rivals lost market share in Kenya.

Overall, research question 1 demonstrates that leadership views ambidextrous innovation as essential for long-term competitiveness and strategic success (Xi et al, 2025; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). However, while top leaders are committed, broader management and employee understanding are still evolving, requiring initiatives such as training and communication. This foundation informs the actions discussed in research questions 2 and 3.

7.2.2 Key Findings for Research Question 2

What internal leadership behaviours, mindsets, and organisational factors promote or impede the development and sustainability of a culture of ambidextrous innovation?

Despite senior leadership actively supporting innovation ambidexterity, persistent internal and external factors within the organisation make effective integration either easier or harder. Senior leadership was seen to actively champion ambidextrous innovation, with the CEO and top-tier leaders embedding it into strategy and providing personal support for initiatives such as hackathons and project sponsorship, clearly demonstrating that exploration within the organisation is valued. Many participants noted that the Group CEO and other top-tier leaders not only discussed the importance of ambidextrous innovation but also actively engaged in such activities. These leadership behaviours reflect the concept of ambidextrous leadership, where leaders manage the paradox of encouraging the new while ensuring efficiency in the core (Rosing et al., 2011).

The findings confirm that many top-tier leaders are modelling this dual approach, where vision and involvement are recognised as key enablers in the literature (Koryak

et al., 2018). The results from this study support this, as several leaders attribute the integration of innovation ambidexterity into the organisation's values and actively promote this agenda by exploring opportunities beyond the mobile business to stimulate growth and sustainability.

The study reveals barriers in organisational culture and systems that hinder leadership efforts. A deeply rooted, execution focused culture emphasises meeting short-term targets, which include network reliability, cost efficiency and zero error performance indicators. These traits are an indication of a high-performing exploitative culture, which creates a risk-averse mindset, deterring experimentation and limiting exploration. Literature notes that such a success trap can stifle exploration (Jin & Peng, 2024). Despite a company culture code of “fail fast, learn fast,” employees and leaders hesitate to suggest bold ideas or invest in unproven projects, as only core performance indicators are rewarded. This creates a highly disciplined but risk-averse culture, which is a significant internal barrier to ambidextrous innovation and requires a more supportive, learning-oriented environment (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

Another barrier is that management systems, including HR systems, organisational design, processes, and incentives, are misaligned with supporting innovation ambidexterity objectives. The study showed that formal performance metrics and rewards are primarily linked to exploitative outcomes, such as short-term financial and operational objectives, with little recognition for innovation or exploration beyond occasional awards. Managers who encourage experimentation often need to allocate time and resources from the existing core business, limiting their ability to do so. This systemic bias results in ensuring that even well-intentioned leaders focus on exploitation because what gets measured gets done and rewarded. This aligns with the theory, as observations show that organisations without intentional key performance measures and structured reward systems for innovation tend to under-invest in exploration (Kortmann, 2014; Ahammad et al., 2020). This research clearly demonstrates this point, with many mid-level managers remaining focused on traditional targets and hesitating resources to uncertain projects. Additionally, organisational structures add rigidity to decision-making, and many new ventures are centralised, requiring multiple approvals that can slow exploration efforts. This is a typical example of a classic structural innovation ambidexterity challenge, where separate innovation efforts struggle to integrate into the core business (Bozic &

Dimovski, 2019). Furthermore, the findings indicate that the organisation has attempted to establish innovation units and agile teams, but these efforts have often resulted in their discontinuation due to ineffective impact or failure to move from ideation to implementation. Overall, the current internal processes and systems favour exploitation, creating an imbalance that literature suggests needs addressing to achieve ambidexterity (Bozic & Dimovski, 2019)

The research also uncovers a leadership gap below the top tier. While the Executive Committee members exhibit ambidextrous leadership, many middle and lower-tier managers remain focused on operations and are hesitant to embrace exploratory initiatives. This gap in leadership support hinders the effective integration of ambidexterity, highlighting the need for alignment at all management levels. Bell and Hofmeyr (2021) argue that for organisational and innovation ambidexterity to succeed, leaders at all levels must balance innovation with core operations. Our findings align and demonstrate that without middle-level buy-in, top management's innovation efforts risk failure. As a result, ambidextrous leadership skills are uneven, indicating strength at the top but weakness in the middle layer, which highlights an area for development (Ye et al., 2018). 18).

7.2.3 Key Findings for Research Question 3

How are senior leaders supported in implementing both radical and incremental innovations, and what impediments do they encounter?

Research question 3 examines the mechanisms leaders use to implement an ambidextrous strategy and the challenges they encounter, particularly from organisational infrastructure and external environments. The study finds that senior leaders have introduced multiple support mechanisms for ambidextrous innovation that align well with ambidexterity theory, but they struggle to integrate them effectively and face several external constraints. It is clear from the data that the organisation has managed to implement several initiatives to enable innovation, yet realising the benefits thereof remains limited and challenging.

This includes formal initiatives such as hackathons, innovation competitions with CEO awards, and an “Innovation Hub” for idea incubation, encouraging exploratory ideas among staff. They have also experimented with dedicated units, such as an “Acceleration Unit” and a “Tech Innovation” team, to pursue ventures in fintech and

IoT, which are shielded from daily operations. These reflect a structural ambidexterity approach, freeing parts of the organisation to focus on radical innovation (Ossenbrink et al., 2019). Contextual ambidexterity is fostered by forming cross-functional squads and sandbox projects within core units, using agile sprints to generate new ideas. These align with best practices in innovation ambidexterity, such as idea competitions and exploratory departments, which effectively promote the balancing of exploit and explore activities (Mattes & Ohr, 2019). The initiatives have had modest yet impactful success, creating a pipeline of innovations and new businesses. Notably, the mobile financial services initiatives, created as an independent business line, now generate significant revenue, demonstrating the success of the structural separation strategy for impactful innovation. Overall, these mechanisms foster innovation ambidexterity, resulting in innovative products and services, and highlight that dedicated resources and processes are key drivers of innovation (Kaulio et al., 2017).

Despite these frameworks, leaders still encounter internal challenges in transforming exploratory initiatives into consistent outcomes. A significant obstacle is the difficulty of integrating and scaling innovation results. Many ideas generated from hackathons or pilots in the innovation hub never proceed to full deployment within the core business. Additionally, some innovation teams were disbanded or merged back without their projects being fully adopted. One executive expressed frustration over this and the low rate of being able to convert great ideas into real business value. This highlights a known implementation gap in innovation ambidexterity, demonstrating that idea generation is only part of the challenge and that, without effective integration, the implementation of exploratory projects often stalls (Xi et al., 2025). The research project clearly demonstrates that the organisation excels in generating ideas but struggles with execution.

Resource competition and conflicting priorities also hinder progress, as previously discussed. Although the organisation has the tools for innovation ambidexterity, it has yet to master the methods of integrating these tools into the standard operations for sustained impact. This illustrates the importance of enhancing coordination capabilities and ambidextrous leadership focus to connect exploratory and exploitative units, supporting the idea that successful innovation ambidexterity requires more than just structural separation (Ossenbrink et al., 2019). The primary learning indicated that

internal support mechanisms must be reinforced through improved processes and systems to guide their management strategy.

Importantly, research question 3 also emphasises the role of external environmental factors. The study shows that the external environment, especially in the African telecommunications industry, both encourages and complicates ambidextrous innovation. External drivers, such as market economics and technological shifts, motivate leaders to pursue innovation ambidexterity. Participants pointed to rapid technological disruptions, such as over-the-top services, fintech growth, and the evolution of 5G/6 G networks, as well as new competitors, as ongoing pressures that push firms to develop new business models while sustaining existing ones. This supports the theory that a more dynamic and challenging environment requires greater innovation ambidexterity for survival (Saleh et al., 2023). The data in this study confirm this, as leaders see innovation ambidexterity as vital given the fast-changing technological landscape.

Interestingly, external constraints, particularly strict regulation, significantly impede innovation in the telecommunications sector. Lengthy approval processes, licensing requirements, and compliance rules slow or restrict exploratory initiatives. Unlike digital-native organisations, telecommunications operators cannot simply move fast and fail fast due to external oversight. As a result, some radical ideas are delayed or blocked by external approval processes rather than internal resistance. Furthermore, macroeconomic factors and infrastructure issues, such as economic downturns or electricity supply problems, can indirectly reduce enthusiasm for innovation. These findings extend innovation ambidexterity theory, which traditionally focuses on internal alignment. This research project illustrates that external institutional factors, such as regulation, can significantly influence both organisational and leadership innovation ambidexterity. In this context, engaging with regulators and shaping policy became essential responsibilities for senior leaders to facilitate innovation, an area which has been less explored in the earlier innovation ambidexterity research. These insights broaden existing theory by showing that in emerging markets or highly regulated industries, ambidextrous leadership must also encompass managing external stakeholders (Teece, 2023). Leaders in this study have begun to recognise this, engaging more closely with regulators to foster innovation. This nuance indicates that innovation ambidexterity involves not only internal capabilities but also leveraging

external networks and navigating external constraints, aligning dynamic capability perspectives focused on sensing and shaping the environment (Teece, 2023).

In summary, the main findings of research question 3 demonstrated that, although the organisation has adopted many innovation ambidexterity tools such as targeted programs and incentives, separate innovation units, and ambidextrous leadership capabilities, internal issues and external factors can either enable or constrain efforts. Successful innovation ambidexterity thus requires both structural adjustments and robust ambidextrous leadership, along with external agility.

Overall, recognising innovation ambidexterity (research question 1) and developing structures and capabilities in research question 3 are essential, but not enough. The data suggest that it is essential to address these needs alongside cultural, systemic, and external challenges (research questions 2 and 3). These insights can then inform management recommendations to narrow the gap between the theoretical ideal and actual practice.

7.3 Recommendations of Leadership

Building on the findings, several clear recommendations emerge for senior leaders and managers in organisations aiming to cultivate ambidextrous innovation. The following recommendations aim to address the gaps and challenges identified in the study and align with established best practices for managing exploration and exploitation. Implementing these can help bridge the divide between knowing that ambidextrous innovation is important and building the structures and capabilities to make it work in practice. Below is a list of key recommendations for consideration to enable more effective integration of innovation ambidexterity.

- To cascade and build ambidextrous leadership practices and capability throughout the organisation by investing in leadership development and alignment programs to ensure that the mindset and behaviours supporting innovation ambidexterity are shared at all levels of management. It may also involve realigning managers' incentives by incorporating innovation metrics into their performance reviews, so they feel accountable for exploratory initiatives rather than just short-term results.
- To foster a culture of psychological safety and smarter risk-taking to help overcome the fear of failure, management should actively work to change the

cultural narrative around risk and failure through deliberate efforts. These could include establishing a “fail-fast, learn-fast” program that rewards teams for lessons learned from experimental projects, even if they do not succeed commercially.

- Efforts should be made to align structures and processes to better integrate innovation ambidexterity with the core operations. The organisation should refine its structure to better integrate exploratory initiatives into the core business. One suggestion could be to appoint certain units or individuals as “innovation champions” within main departments, serving as liaisons who gather ideas from the frontline and help advance them through the pipeline. This fosters internal support for new ideas rather than relying solely on an external push from an innovation lab.
- Investigate methods to reform and evolve the performance management system and associated reward systems to encourage exploration. This will ensure that managers and teams devote effort to innovation.
- Develop structured mechanisms for allocated time and funding towards ambidextrous innovation activities. This will reduce the strain on leaders and employees who are juggling dual roles.
- Improvements in external engagement and environmental scanning, considering the substantial impact of external factors mentioned in the study. Senior leaders should adopt a more systematic approach to engaging in the external ecosystem. On the regulatory front, it is recommended to strengthen partnerships with regulators and policymakers. Leads could form a dedicated regulatory innovation task force that works with regulators to pilot new technologies in controlled environments similar to the recommended regulatory sandboxes mentioned by one participant.
- Aim to embed innovation ambidexterity into the organisation's strategy and communication. This will ensure the sustainability and long-term impact of these efforts. This means that strategic planning processes each year should clearly balance investments in core improvements with investments in new growth initiatives, making innovation ambidexterity a strategic criteria. Leaders could develop a strategic scorecard that tracks both exploitative and exploratory

performance, illustrating the shift from abstract ideation to individual practices and impact.

By implementing these recommendations, leadership can build ambidextrous capability and better navigate the paradoxes inherent in ambidextrous innovation.

7.4 Research Limitations

While this research project offers valuable insights into ambidextrous leadership, ambidextrous innovation, and the related internal and external drivers within a telecommunications organisation, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. These limitations constrain the extent to which the findings can be applied and indicate that caution is needed when interpreting them, as explained below.

The study was carried out within a large multinational telecommunications company in Africa. Focusing on just one organisation may limit the ability to generalise the findings to other contexts. The telecom industry has unique characteristics, and the emerging market environment in Africa introduces its own nuances. As a result, some findings, such as the significant influence of regulators or the internal dynamics observed, may not directly apply to organisations in different industries or regions.

This research relied on qualitative data, primarily through semi-structured interviews with 18 senior leaders. While this approach offered in-depth insights, it also possesses certain limitations. The small sample size, despite including a significant proportion of top leadership within the organisation, means that the findings are not statistically generalisable. The interview sample also predominantly focused on senior executives, offering a narrow perspective and excluding views from middle management or other employees.

Like any interview-focused research on organisational practices, this method may be affected by social desirability and response bias. Senior leaders may have depicted their actions and organisational culture in an idealised way. Although the researcher assured confidentiality and encouraged open dialogue through the interview process, some interviewees might still have been guarded or inclined to present the organisation in a positive light. Further to this, there may also be bias in how data was interpreted, as the researcher, familiar with ambidexterity theory and the organisation, might have been more attuned to show what fits within the existing frameworks. Efforts

were made to mitigate this by systematic coding, but the risk cannot be eliminated entirely.

The research design was cross-sectional, capturing perceptions at a single point in time rather than tracking the organisation's ambidexterity journey over a period. It did not directly observe the implementation of changes or the development of any innovation initiatives.

Another limitation is that the data was mainly self-reported through interviews and internal documents. It did not include any additional observational data, such as meeting observations or quantitative organisational metrics, such as innovation output over the years, to further validate the findings.

Recognising these limitations, it is important to emphasise that they do not undermine the findings but rather define the boundaries within which the findings should be interpreted.

7.5 Recommendations for Future Research Opportunities

This study opens several avenues for further investigation. Building on the insights and addressing the limitations, future research can deepen and broaden our understanding of ambidextrous innovation and leadership in the following ways.

Firstly, to enhance generalisability, future research could explore multiple organisations for comparative case studies of innovation ambidexterity across firms of different sizes, industries, or locations to test the propositions derived from this single case against other environments, either strengthening their validity or refining them with new variables.

Another approach could be to take the identified themes and quantitatively examine their relationships by conducting a survey-based study that measures the extent of ambidextrous leadership behaviours across a larger population of managers and correlates them with ambidextrous innovation performance metrics.

The findings further highlighted external factors such as regulation, competition, and macroeconomics as essential yet understudied in innovation ambidexterity research. Future studies could examine this in relation to external ecosystem dynamics by

undertaking comparative studies of two countries with different regulatory regimes, and could investigate how firms adapt their innovation strategies.

In conclusion, there is scope to extend this research with promising outcomes. Pursuing these will not only address the limitations discussed but also deepen the academic and practical understanding of how organisations can successfully integrate ambidextrous innovation. This topic sits at the intersection of ambidextrous leadership, ambidextrous innovation management, and the internal and external factors influencing organisational change in a rapidly changing business environment, making ongoing research both relevant and essential.

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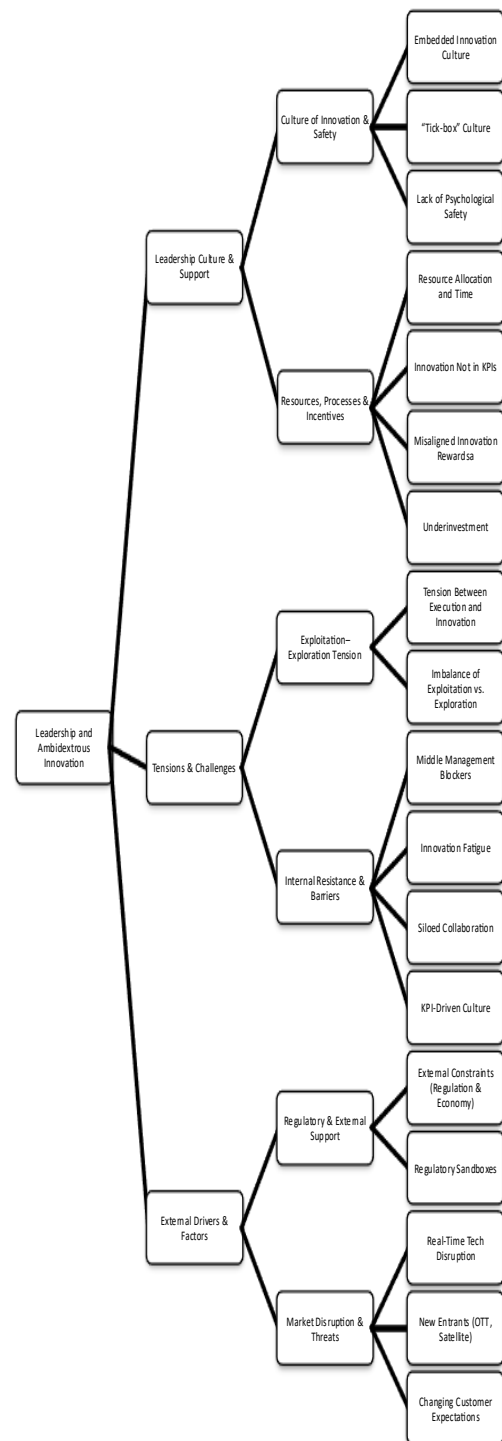
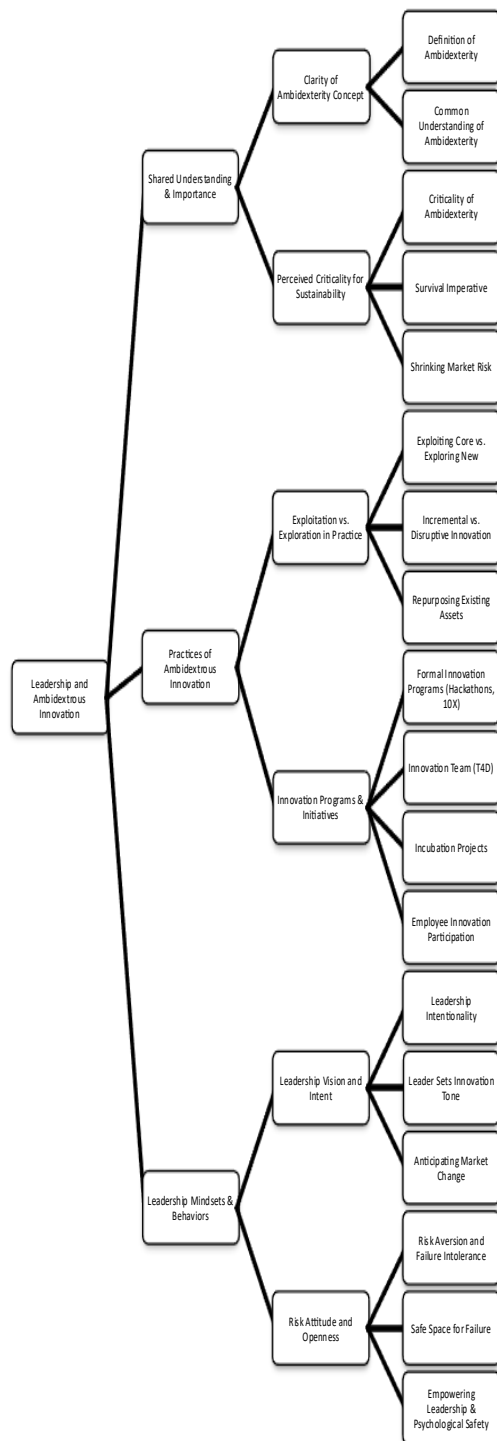
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Appendix 1: Coding Map in PowerPoint



C2 General

Appendix 2: Ethical Clearance Approval



Dear S [REDACTED]

Please be advised that your application for Ethical Clearance has been approved.

You are therefore allowed to continue collecting your data.

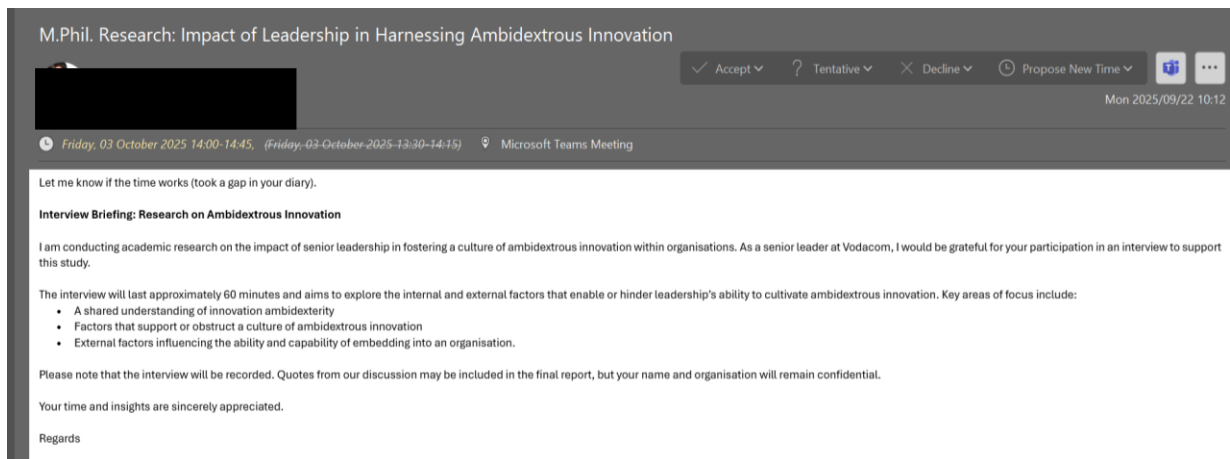
We wish you everything of the best for the rest of the project.

[Ethical Clearance Form](#)

Kind Regards

Appendix 3: Interview Invite and Guide

Interview Invite



Interview Guide: Questionnaire

Research Questions
Research Question 1: <i>How do senior leaders in a multinational telecommunications organisation perceive and define the significance of innovation ambidexterity</i> • What are the most important ways in which the organisation practices ambidextrous innovation? • Is it important for the survival of the company?
Research Question 2: <i>What internal leadership behaviours, mindsets, and organisational factors promote or impede the development and sustainability of ambidextrous innovation?</i> • What leadership behaviours or mindsets are needed when managing ambidextrous strategies? • How does the culture of this organisation influence and support your decision-making in innovation-related matters? • What tensions are experienced in trying to integrate ambidextrous innovation?
Research Question 3: <i>3. How are senior leaders supported in implementing the duality of radical and incremental innovation strategies, and what impediments do they encounter?</i> • What support mechanisms are used to enable innovation strategies? • What resistance or challenges are encountered when integrating an ambidextrous innovation strategy? • How do external drivers impact the leader's ability to be ambidextrous?

Appendix 4: Sample of Consent Letter

**Gordon Institute
of Business Science**
University of Pretoria

Informed Consent for Interviews

I am conducting research on the influence of senior leadership in creating a culture of ambidextrous innovation within organisations. Our interview is expected to last around 60 minutes and will help us identify the main internal and external factors that enable or hinder leadership's ability to foster a culture of ambidextrous innovation.

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without penalty. By signing this letter, you confirm that you have granted permission for:

- The interview to be recorded.
- Verbatim quotations from the interview may be included in the report, provided they are not identified with your name or that of your organisation.
- The data to be used as part of a report that will be publicly available once the examination process has been completed; and
- All data to be reported and stored without identifiers.

If you have any concerns, please contact my supervisor or myself. Our details are provided below.

Researcher name: Shobana Shaum Singh
Email: shobana.singh@vodacom.co.za
Phone: 082 997 2448

Research Supervisor's name: Prof. Charlene Lew
Email: lewc@gibs.co.za
Phone: Direct Tel: +27 11 771 4284

Signature of participant:  Date: 17 Nov 2025
Signature of researcher: _____ Date: _____

Appendix 5: Copyright declaration



**Gordon Institute
of Business Science**
University of Pretoria



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19.1 COPYRIGHT DECLARATION FORM

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Student number:	24130673						
Email:	●●●●●●@up.ac.za						
Phone:	●●●●●●●●						
Qualification details							
Degree:	Mphil (IB)	Year completed:	2025				
Title of research:	THE ROLE OF AMBIGUOUS LEADERSHIP CAPABILITY AND COLLECTIVE EMERGENCY IN AMBIGUOUS SITUATIONS						
Supervisor:	●●●●●●						
Supervisor email:	●●●●●●@up.ac.za						
Access							
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I give permission to display my email address on the UPSpace website <table style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="width: 30%;">Yes</td> <td style="width: 30%;"></td> <td style="width: 30%;">No</td> <td style="width: 10%; text-align: center;">x</td> </tr> </table>				Yes		No	x
Yes		No	x				
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Copyright declaration							
I hereby declare that I have not used unethical research practices nor gained material dishonesty in this electronic version of my research submitted. Where appropriate, written permission statement(s) were obtained from the owner(s) of third-party copyrighted matter included in my research, allowing distribution as specified below.							
I hereby assign, transfer and make over to the University of Pretoria my rights of copyright in the submitted work to the extent that it has not already been affected in terms of the contract I entered into at registration. I understand that all rights with regard to the intellectual property of my research, vest in the University who has the right to reproduce, distribute and/or publish the work in any manner it may deem fit.							
Signature: ●●●●●●		Date: 2025/11/20					
Supervisor signature: ●●●●		Date: 2025-11-21					