Chair of Business Administration with a Focus on Governance

Universität Passau
Wirtschaftswissenschaftliche Fakultät

THESIS TOPICS
(APPLICATION DEADLINE: 04 OCTOBER 2026)

All topics may be completed as either a bachelor's or master's thesis. The specific research question and methodological design will be agreed individually.

TOPIC: FLEXIBLE WORK BETWEEN PRIVILEGE AND PERFORMANCE NORMS

(Supervisor: Sophie Ringler)

Topic Block I: *"Whose Time Counts?" – Temporal Performance Norms in Flexible Work*

Temporal flexibility is widely regarded as a central promise of remote and hybrid work. Yet it does not automatically mean freedom from temporal demands. Rapid responses, continuous availability, and adaptation to organisational time rhythms are often interpreted as signs of commitment and performance. Yousafzai (2026) describes the translation of such norms into performance standards as "temporal injustice". Baric et al. (2026) further show that working time is not valued equally for all employees and that control over one's own time is unevenly distributed. This tension becomes particularly visible in flexible work: employees formally gain more autonomy, but often have to ensure their availability through evening work, rapid responses, or the private organisation of care.

The aim of the thesis is to examine **which temporal expectations shape flexible work and how they become criteria of organisational performance evaluation**. The focus is on who can conform to the ideal of an employee who is always available and responsive—and who must privately absorb the temporal costs of flexible work.

Possible Methods:

- Systematic literature review
- Qualitative interviews with employees working flexibly
- Qualitative analysis of organisational rules on availability and meeting times

Possible Research Questions:

- Which temporal expectations shape remote and hybrid work?
- How do responsiveness and continuous availability become criteria of organisational performance evaluation?
- Which employees can meet these expectations, and who must privately absorb the associated temporal costs?

References: Yousafzai, S. (2026). Whose Time Counts? A Commentary on Temporal Injustice and Crip Time. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 33(5), 1613–1621. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.70174

Baric, M., Nayani, R., Sheng, I.X. & Connolly, S. (2026) The winner doesn't need to take it all: Unravelling the gendered value of work time. *International Journal of Management Reviews* e70035. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.70035

Hermann, A., Clar-Novak, M. and Claes, M.-T. (2025), Gender-Specific Time Poverty: Examining the Impact of Teleworking in the Austrian Context. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 32(5): 1863-1874. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.13231

Topic Block II: *Flexibility as a Privilege? – Who Can Work Hybrid?*

Remote and hybrid work are regarded as central elements of a flexible world of work. However, they are not equally available to all employees. Access and use depend substantially on the type of work performed, occupational position, and organisational context. While knowledge-intensive, administrative, and managerial roles often allow spatial flexibility, employees in people-facing, manual, or location-bound jobs are frequently excluded. Flexible work may therefore constitute an unequally distributed occupational privilege.

The aim of the thesis is to use available quantitative secondary data to create a **"Map of Flexibility"**. It should show in which occupational and social groups flexible working arrangements are used particularly often or rarely. Characteristics such as gender, parenthood, education, working hours, and occupational position may be considered. The thesis is primarily **descriptive**: the focus is on the distribution of flexible work, not its causal effects. The analysis should preferably be conducted using **Stata or SPSS**. Basic knowledge of quantitative research methods is desirable.

Possible Research Questions:

- How does the use of working from home and hybrid work differ across occupational groups?
- Which social groups use flexible work particularly often or rarely, especially by gender, parenthood, education, and occupational position?
- Is there a gap between the general opportunity to work flexibly and its actual use?

References: Lott, Y., & Abendroth, A. K. (2020). The non-use of telework in an ideal worker culture: why women perceive more cultural barriers. *Community, Work & Family*, 23(5), 593–611. https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2020.1817726

Carrasco-Garrido, C., Raya, A. M., & Cabanes, A. M. (2026). Entrepreneurship and inequality in access to remote work: A longitudinal study of social groups in the United States. *International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal*, 22(2), 89. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11365-026-01220-x

Topic Block III: *From the "Ideal Worker" to the "Ideal Teleworker" – The Dynamic Evolution of an Organisational Ideal*

The traditional ideal worker is characterised by unrestricted availability, physical presence, long working hours, and freedom from care responsibilities (Acker, 1990). Digitalisation, remote work, and the COVID-19 pandemic have fundamentally changed the spatial and temporal organisation of work. Current research nevertheless suggests that the ideal worker norm has not disappeared. Rather, traditional expectations may persist and have been supplemented by new expectations of digital connectedness, virtual visibility, responsiveness, and location-independent readiness to work.

The aim of the thesis is to use a **systematic literature review** to reconstruct the **historical and dynamic evolution** from the ideal worker to a possible "ideal teleworker". The thesis examines which expectations persist, which new ones emerge, and which societal, technological, or organisational changes may be considered turning points. The developmental phases are not predefined; instead, they should be derived independently from the literature and integrated into a **periodisation** or **process model**.

Possible Research Questions:

- How has the organisational image of the ideal employee changed through digitalisation?
- Which traditional characteristics of the ideal worker persist, and which new expectations have emerged through remote and hybrid work?
- Which developmental phases and turning points can be identified?

References: Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations. *Gender & Society*, 4(2), 139–158. https://doi.org/10.1177/089124390004002002
McDonald, P., Bradley, L., & Brown, K. (2008). Visibility in the workplace: Still an essential ingredient for career success? *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 19(12), 2198–2215. https://doi.org/10.1080/09585190802479447
Zanhour, Mona, and Dana McDaniel Sumpter. 2024. The entrenchment of the ideal worker norm during the COVID-19 pandemic: Evidence from working mothers in the United States. *Gender, Work & Organization*: 31(2): 625–643. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12885.
Müller, Jan, and Heejung Chung. 2026. "From the Ideal Worker to the Inclusive Worker: Measuring Norm Shifts Within Occupational Contexts." *Gender, Work & Organization*: 33(1): 261–276. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.70038.

Topic Block IV: *Flexibility for All or a Special Arrangement? – Organisational Framing and Perceptions of Flexible Work*

Remote work can be framed in different ways within organisations: as a general working model for all employees, as an instrument for increasing productivity and employer attractiveness, as an individually granted privilege, or as a support measure for parents and people with care responsibilities. These framings convey the purpose that flexible work serves and who is considered a legitimate user of such arrangements.
The design and communication of flexible working models may influence whether remote work is perceived as a standard part of work organisation or as an exception requiring justification. When remote work is offered as a general arrangement, this may strengthen its organisational legitimacy. By contrast, an arrangement specifically directed at parents or mothers may associate flexible work more strongly with care responsibilities and thereby activate gendered assumptions about commitment, availability, and career ambitions. The extent to which such relationships depend on the organisational and cultural context is a further question.
The aim of the thesis is to examine how the **design and communication of flexible work** shape its organisational meaning and legitimacy. The focus is particularly on the distinction between universal and group-specific arrangements. Gender, parenthood, leadership responsibility, and organisational context may be considered.
Possible Methods:

- Systematic literature review
- Qualitative analysis of organisational remote-work policies or career websites
- Qualitative interviews with managers or HR professionals

Possible Research Questions:

- How is remote work framed in organisational policies and corporate communication?
- Under what conditions is flexible work perceived as a right, a privilege, or an exception requiring justification?
- Which organisational design and communication practices help establish flexible work as a standard part of work organisation?

References: Wang, S., & Chung, H. (2026). Revisiting Flexibility Stigma: How Framing Remote Working Shapes Bias Against Remote Workers. *Gender, Work & Organization*, n/a(n/a). https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.70115
Noury, Lucie, Stéphan Pezé, and Sébastien Gand. (2026). "Consultants Who Pick Up Their Children Every Day Don't Exist": How Professionals Experience Conflicting Norms Through Successive Gendered Trials, *Gender, Work & Organization*: 33(4), 1310–1326. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.70129
Williams, J.C., Blair-Loy, M. and Berdahl, J.L. (2013), Cultural Schemas, Social Class, and the Flexibility Stigma. *Journal of Social Issues*, 69: 209-234. https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12012

TOPIC: ORGANIZATIONAL STIGMA

(Supervisor: Tim Emmel)

Topic Block I:

When Does Public Criticism Become an Organizational Stigma?

This subtopic addresses the question under what conditions public criticism of a company persists beyond a specific incident and becomes an organizational stigma. Organizational stigma is understood here as a collectively shared attribution according to which an organization has a fundamental and deeply rooted flaw that discredits it in the eyes of relevant stakeholders (DEVERS ET AL., 2009). Thus, stigma — as a socially constructed label — must be explicitly distinguished from individual negative assessments, temporary criticism, or a poor reputation. Central to this subtopic is the observation that a criticized event and a persistent stigma affecting the entire organization are not the same thing; however, a sufficiently serious event can give rise to an organizational stigma (HUDSON, 2008). The focus of the study is therefore on how different stakeholders develop and disseminate such assessments and link them to perceptions of a company's legitimacy. The public reaction to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill and the company BP can serve as an example; however, the choice of case study is left to the students. The expected submission should systematically examine the emergence of organizational stigma. Methodologically, a qualitative analysis of public statements, media reports, and other documents related to a case of the student's choice is appropriate. A theory-driven literature review is also possible, comparing existing explanations and clarifying when temporary criticism gives rise to a persistent negative assessment of the organization.

Literature: DEVERS, C. E., DEWETT, T., MISHINA, Y., & BELSITO, C. A. (2009). A general theory of organizational stigma. Organization Science, 20(1), 154–171. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1080.0367

HUDSON, B. A. (2008). Against all odds: A consideration of core-stigmatized organizations. Academy of Management Review, 33(1), 252–266. https://doi.org/10.5465/AMR.2008.27752775

Topic Block II:

How Do Employees Experience and Communicate Their Employer's Stigma?

This subtopic examines the significance of organizational stigma for people who work in a publicly controversial organization. Of particular interest is how employees explain their work to others, deal with critical reactions, and describe their relationship with their employer. For example, working for a company like Rheinmetal l— which, as an arms manufacturer, is part of a stigmatized industry (Vergne, 2012) — can be viewed very differently in one's personal life and, consequently, communicated in very different ways.

This study aims to identify the experiences employees have with such evaluations and to explore how organizations can support them in dealing with these situations. A distinction must be made between the stigma associated with an organization and negative evaluations of individual job duties. Methodologically, qualitative interviews are appropriate, and their analysis can be guided, for example, by Gioia et al. (2013). Alternatively, a theory-driven literature review could examine how organizational stigma, professional identity, and commitment to an employer are interrelated.

Literature: ASHFORTH, B. E., KREINER, G. E., CLARK, M. A., & FUGATE, M. (2007). Normalizing dirty work: Managerial tactics for countering occupational taint. *Academy of Management Journal, 50*(1), 149–174. https://doi.org/10.5465/AMJ.2007.24162092

GIOIA, D. A., CORLEY, K. G., & HAMILTON, A. L. (2013). Seeking qualitative rigor in inductive research: Notes on the Gioia methodology. *Organizational Research Methods, 16*(1), 15–31. https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428112452151

VERGNE, J.-P. (2012). Stigmatized categories and public disapproval of organizations: A mixed-methods study of the global arms industry, 1996–2007. *Academy of Management Journal, 55*(5), 1027–1052. https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2010.0599

TOPIC: STAKEHOLDER MANAGEMENT AND SOCIAL EVALUATION

(Supervisor: Tim Emmel)

Topic Block III:

Balancing the Expectations of Different Stakeholders in Organizational Decision-Making Processes

This subtopic focuses on the question of how companies deal with expectations that cannot all be met at the same time. Of particular interest is the criteria organizations use to identify, weigh, and incorporate the concerns of various stakeholders into their decisions. At the Tesla plant in Grünheide, for example, hopes for jobs and economic development coexist with concerns about water consumption and the environment. The paper should use a case study of the author's choosing to examine what expectations are placed on a company, how it responds to them, and how it justifies its decisions to the stakeholders. Building on this, a practical framework could be developed, for example, to guide companies in dealing with competing demands. Methodologically, a qualitative analysis of interviews, public statements, and other documents is recommended. Another option is a theory-driven literature review that compares existing approaches to identifying and prioritizing stakeholders and discusses their applicability to specific decision-making situations. Key to a successful thesis in this subtopic is not only the presentation of existing stakeholder management tools, but also the independent evaluation and combination of such tools with the aim of tailoring their application to the specific case.

Literature: BUNDY, J., SHROPSHIRE, C., & BUCHHOLTZ, A. K. (2013). Strategic cognition and issue salience: Toward an explanation of firm responsiveness to stakeholder concerns. *Academy of Management Review, 38*(3), 352–376. https://doi.org/10.5465/AMR.2011.0179

MITCHELL, R. K., AGLE, B. R., & WOOD, D. J. (1997). Toward a theory of stakeholder identification and salience: Defining the principle of who and what really counts. *Academy of Management Review, 22*(4), 853–886. https://doi.org/10.5465/AMR.1997.9711022105

Topic Block IV:

Stakeholder Expectations Between Medical Use and Misuse of Medications in the Pharmaceutical Industry

Products such as medical cannabis or prescription opioids can be crucial for the proper treatment of patients. At the same time, their non-medical use, potential health risks, and marketing issues raise social conflicts. Against this backdrop, this subtopic examines how providers of such products respond to the varying expectations of healthcare providers, patient groups, regulatory agencies, addiction prevention organizations, and other stakeholders. Of particular interest is how companies structure and justify access to their products, communication about benefits and risks, and the limits of their marketing.

Possible examples are medical cannabis manufacturers such as Tilray Germany or Demecan. Similarly, companies that manufacture or distribute opioids can be examined. The study aims to identify which expectations converge in the chosen context, where tensions arise, and what specific measures a company takes in response. This analysis may also examine whether different stakeholders assess the same measure as responsible, insufficient, or contradictory. The goal is to clarify under what conditions such measures can contribute to a company's legitimacy and where their limits lie.

Methodologically, a qualitative analysis of corporate documents, public statements, and comments from relevant stakeholders is appropriate. Alternatively, a theory-driven literature review can compare organizational responses to conflicting expectations and develop practical conclusions for the described context. The focus here is on organizational decisions and the reasoning behind them.

Literature: HSU, G., KOÇAK, Ö., & KOVÁCS, B. (2018). Co-opt or coexist? A study of medical cannabis dispensaries' identity-based responses to recreational-use legalization in Colorado and Washington. *Organization Science, 29*(1), 172–190. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2017.1167