The Interpretative Crisis Of Corporate Ethics: From 'Family' Values To Job Terminations

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Abstract
Contemporary technology organisations exemplify a profound disconnect between espoused values and enacted practices, creating interpretative crises that fundamentally reshape how employees understand work, worth, and organisational belonging. Through Burrell and Morgan's (1979) Interpretative Paradigm, unethical workplace practices emerge not merely as procedural failures but as meaning-making events that corrode organisational culture from within. Mass layoffs affecting over 150,000 tech workers globally, coupled with CEO compensation packages reaching €188 million, generate symbolic hierarchies where employees interpret their disposability against executive indispensability. In India's IT sector, entry-level salaries of €4,100 juxtaposed with Western counterparts earning €40,000-60,000 for identical roles create narratives of geographic and racial devaluation that extend beyond economics into identity and dignity. Ghost job postings affecting 40% of advertised positions and systematic candidate ghosting transform recruitment from professional interaction into symbolic manipulation, where silence becomes a language of institutional contempt. Euphemistic corporate discourse - "workforce optimisation," "strategic realignment" - attempts to sanitise human suffering but instead amplifies the sensemaking burden on employees who must reconcile "family" rhetoric with sudden terminations. Through phenomenological analysis of how individuals construct meaning from these contradictions, the interpretative framework reveals workplace practices as sites of ontological rupture where professional identities fragment and organisational legitimacy dissolves. Survivors of layoffs experience moral injury and existential uncertainty, reconstructing organisational narratives through informal channels that resist corporate messaging. These collective interpretations crystallise into reputational narratives that expose the ethical bankruptcy beneath polished employer branding, demonstrating how subjective meaning-making ultimately determines organisational culture more powerfully than any managerial intervention.

1. Introduction

The Interpretative Paradigm, as conceptualised by Burrell and Morgan, offers a sociological framework for understanding organisations as socially constructed entities, where subjective meanings and sensemaking processes shape workplace dynamics [1]. Unlike the Functionalist Paradigm, which prioritises objective metrics such as financial performance, or Radical Paradigms, which address systemic power imbalances, the Interpretative Paradigm centres on how individuals' perceptions and interactions construct organisational culture. This analysis applies the paradigm to examine unethical workplace practices in the global technology sector, specifically mass layoffs by firms including, but not limited to, Microsoft, Google, Meta, Amazon, SAP, Ericsson, Nokia, and Siemens; salary disparities in India's information technology (IT) industry; exploitative work cultures driven by outsourcing demands; deceptive

recruitment practices, such as ghost positions and ghosting; and favouritism and exclusionary behaviours. These practices erode trust and integrity, as evidenced by widespread layoffs, wage inequities, and recruitment deceptions that leave candidates and employees disillusioned. This analysis investigates how subjective interpretations foster toxic organisational cultures, evaluates the paradigm's analytical strengths, and reflects on the ethical implications for leadership and organisational reform.

The global technology sector, once heralded as a driver of innovation and progress, has faced increasing scrutiny for widespread unethical practices, particularly since 2022. Mass layoffs have been extensive, with over 150,000 jobs cut across 549 companies in 2024, attributed to economic adjustments, automation, and the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) [2]. In 2023, Google eliminated 12,000 positions, while Microsoft

and Amazon collectively reduced their workforces by 28,000, often justifying these cuts as efficiency measures despite robust profits (BBC News, 2023) [3]. The European firm SAP announced a restructuring programme that led to between 9,000 and 10,000 job losses [4]. Siemens revealed in November 2024 that it could lay off up to 5,000 employees globally as part of its restructuring efforts [5]. Ericsson laid off 12% of its global workforce as part of cost-cutting initiatives amid slowing 5G investments, eliminating 9,400 jobs in 2024 alone to protect its margins [6,7]. Nokia has also implemented significant downsizing, with reports of 2,000 job cuts in Greater China, 350 in Europe, and an announcement in 2024 to eliminate approximately 11,500 jobs, aiming for a workforce of around 74,500 by the end of the restructuring [8]. Ericsson and Nokia together have reduced their workforce by approximately 20,000 positions over the past two years [6]. Beyond layoffs, stark salary disparities in India's IT sector underscore structural inequities. Entry-level professionals frequently earn approximately €4,100 per year1, while comparable roles in the United States or Europe command salaries between €40,000 and €60,000 [9,10]. Meanwhile, executive compensation remains exceptionally high. For example, Amazon CEO Andy Jassy received a €188 million remuneration package in 2023 [11]. These disparities are further exacerbated by exploitative work cultures characterised by excessive hours and widespread burnout. Recent studies indicate that 70-hour workweeks and burnout rates exceeding 80% are common among Indian IT workers, driven largely by outsourcing pressures that require alignment with Western time zones [12].

Deceptive recruitment practices further erode candidate trust and reflect broader systemic ethical failures. An estimated 40% of job postings are ghost positions, created to collect CVs or signal organisational growth without genuine hiring intent, leaving candidates disillusioned [13]. A personal observation illustrates this: over a two-year period, one candidate submitted 8,500 job applications, encountering automated rejections within seconds or being ghosted after multiple interview rounds. In three instances, Fortune 500 companies rescinded offers after requesting sensitive documents, only for the same roles to be re- advertised. Such practices, which are increasingly common in the technology sector, expose a disconnect between corporate commitments to transparency and actual recruitment processes. Favouritism and exclusionary practices further compound these challenges. A report suggests that 45% of Indian employees experience unequal treatment at work, often based on physical appearance, gender, ethnicity, or regional identity [14]. Firsthand observations include managerial bias towards loyalists or the exclusion of individuals who do not participate in informal gatherings, reinforcing perceptions of unfairness.

The Interpretative Paradigm is especially well-suited to analysing such workplace dysfunctions by foregrounding the concept of sensemaking - the process through which individuals interpret ambiguous events and construct shared meaning. Rooted in phenomenological inquiry, this qualitative orientation allows for a nuanced exploration of how culture and perception interact to shape organisational behaviour [15]. By highlighting

subjective narratives, the paradigm captures the emotional and psychological toll of unethical practices, offering critical insights into the erosion of organisational trust and cohesion [16]. This stands in contrast to more structuralist or quantitative paradigms, which may prioritise aggregate data or systemic forces over individual agency. For instance, employees may interpret layoffs as betrayals, particularly when juxtaposed with executive bonuses, or view excessive working hours as exploitative rather than productive - interpretations that foster disengagement and cynicism. The Interpretative Paradigm thus provides an essential analytical tool to uncover the cultural and ethical contradictions embedded in contemporary organisational life.

All subsequent currency values have been converted to Euros, using original figures denominated in either Indian rupees (INR) or United States dollars (USD).

2. Foundations of the Interpretative Paradigm and Organisational Meaning-Making

The Interpretative Paradigm, as outlined by Burrell and Morgan, is grounded in subjectivism and nominalism, proposing that social reality is constructed through language, symbols, and interpersonal meanings rather than through objective measurement [1]. Organisations, within this paradigm, are not seen as rational, mechanistic systems but as dynamic cultural processes continuously shaped by how individuals interpret their experiences. Reality in organisational life is understood as pluralistic and evolving, created through collective sensemaking. This approach challenges the positivist assumptions that dominate functionalist theories, offering instead an ontology where meanings are fluid, negotiated, and often contested. The paradigm shifts the analytical focus away from structures and systems, directing it toward the experiences and interpretations of those who inhabit the organisation. This epistemological orientation enables a deeper exploration of how employees and stakeholders make sense of practices that may not be formally codified but nonetheless govern ethical climates. The focus on lived experience and micro-level sensemaking positions the paradigm as especially relevant in examining the emotional and ethical fallout of modern workplace practices that might otherwise be obscured in purely functionalist or economic analyses. It becomes especially relevant in understanding phenomena such as layoffs, hiring practices, and interpersonal bias, which acquire meaning through subjective interpretation.

Central to the paradigm is phenomenology, particularly as informed by thinkers such as Alfred Schutz and later extended by organisational theorists like Karl Weick. Schutz argued that individuals draw from "stocks of knowledge" accumulated from their social backgrounds to interpret organisational events [17]. Weick extended this to organisational life through the concept of "sensemaking" - a retrospective, socially constructed process in which individuals try to make sense of ambiguous or disruptive events by embedding them within familiar narratives [18]. In the context of layoffs or exploitative hiring, employees do not passively accept top- down explanations such as "cost restructuring" or "AI automation." Instead, they interpret these events through personal histories, peer conversations,

and organisational cues, often arriving at conclusions shaped by fear and betrayal. These interpretations are not errors or misperceptions - they are the very substance of organisational reality. When employees are dismissed despite prior promises of job stability, or when job seekers are repeatedly ghosted after multiple interview rounds, the disorientation created by these events leads to re-evaluation of organisational credibility and integrity. Such experiences are not just transactional; they are interpreted as symbolic breaches of trust. These interpretations accumulate over time, altering how individuals perceive organisational integrity, fairness, leadership ethics, and their own professional identities.

The process is inherently social and narrative-driven, where meanings are shaped not in isolation but through interactions with others in the organisation. Thus, the paradigm also challenges the assumption of rational decision-making in organisations. Instead of viewing leaders as rational agents optimising efficiency, it sees them as embedded actors navigating multiple, often conflicting interpretations of organisational purpose and legitimacy. This perspective is particularly illuminating when examining executive decisions such as layoffs during profitable quarters or inflated C-suite compensations amid workforce cuts. These decisions may be justified in boardrooms as strategic imperatives but are interpreted by employees as moral failures. Under the Interpretative Paradigm, such contradictions are not anomalies, rather, they are cultural flashpoints that reveal the deeper narratives shaping organisational identity and legitimacy. Organisational language and ritual are key mechanisms through which meaning is constructed and contested. The Interpretative Paradigm foregrounds how words, symbols, and informal practices convey implicit values, shaping how employees interpret their roles and relationships. Euphemisms like "workforce optimisation" or "streamlining talent" obscure the real consequences of job loss, creating a gap between official discourse and employee experience. Official statements, feedback sessions, performance reviews, HR communications, and even leadership emails during layoffs are not neutral artefacts - they are symbolic actions through which organisations attempt to manage meaning. These rhetorical devices serve a legitimising function, but they can also erode authenticity and moral clarity. When organisational communication is experienced as manipulative or dishonest, it undermines the legitimacy of leadership and fosters cynicism. The paradigm allows analysis of how such symbolic dissonance contributes to cultural breakdown, where public-facing values - such as inclusivity, transparency, or empathy - conflict with internal practices. This tension between espoused values and enacted behaviours forms a crucial site of ethical inquiry within interpretative paradigm.

2.1 Power, Exclusion, and the Symbolism of Recruitment Practices

The paradigm pays close attention to power as embedded in meaning-making, rather than as a structural force alone. In exclusionary or favouritism-based workplace cultures, it is not only formal hierarchies that shape inequality, but also informal networks, narratives, and assumptions about who is seen as "culturally fit" or "team player material." Cultural norms, appearance-based judgments, language preferences, or social affiliations all influence inclusion and exclusion in ways not always captured by formal policy. In many organisational cultures, rewards and recognition are not always tied to performance or merit. When managers reward those who conform to dominant cultural scripts - such as participating in informal social gatherings or aligning with the dominant linguistic group - employees begin to interpret success as contingent on assimilation rather than merit. These interpretations shape perceptions of fairness and belonging. These implicit judgments often escape formal accountability mechanisms, yet deeply affect who gets promoted, heard, or supported. Employees excluded from informal networks or overlooked for advancement construct narratives of partiality and injustice. These stories are circulated among peers, reinforcing shared understandings of bias and resentment. The paradigm enables analysis of these micro-level interactions, which are not peripheral but essential, and their cumulative effect on organisational climate, allowing for a layered understanding of how exclusion is socially produced and sustained. Candidates engage with organisations not only through resumes and interviews but also through interpretive acts - reading job descriptions, assessing tone during interviews, and decoding silence, delays, or rejection. When recruitment processes lack transparency, or when communication is abruptly terminated, candidates interpret these actions as reflective of organisational ethics and characters of individuals involved in the process. When organisations post misleading job adverts, run ghost interviews, or fail to respond to applicants, these actions are not experienced as neutral procedural lapses. They are read as symbols - reflections of organisational values, ethics, and respect for human dignity.

The interpretive burden falls disproportionately on the candidate, while organisations remain structurally silent and morally unaccountable. In the absence of closure, be it through ghosting, vague rejections, or disappearing job offers - individuals invest considerable emotional and cognitive energy in trying to make sense of the silence. They often internalise the experience as a personal failure or a sign of inadequacy, despite the reality often lying in systemic flaws or the deliberate opacity and bureaucratic coldness of recruitment processes. This meaning-making is intensified when candidates have invested time, hope, and effort into the process, only to be met with institutional silence. The paradigm, therefore, helps to illuminate how such moments are not isolated disappointments but are collectively experienced and socially narrated, shaping communal perceptions of an organisation's moral fabric. Practices such as mass CV collection without follow-up, performative diversity hiring, or posting phantom roles to satisfy compliance mandates are not merely procedural flaws. They constitute symbolic manipulation, instances where individuals are engaged without intent, reducing the interaction to a form of ethical misrecognition. From an interpretive standpoint, these are not minor slippages but a relational rupture. They reveal a refusal to acknowledge candidates as subjects with agency, emotion, and meaning-making capacity. Such micro-level disappointments gradually crystallise into collective scepticism, shaping how entire labour markets perceive employer integrity, while also becoming emotionally

and cognitively taxing for individuals, who are compelled to construct private narratives of inadequacy, unworthiness, or betrayal. The gap between declared employer branding - emphasising transparency, justice, truth, or innovation - and the experienced reality of evasive communication generates a semiotic crisis: official narratives lose credibility, and candidates turn to informal channels like social media, Glassdoor, or peer networks to reconstruct the organisation's "true" character. These emergent narratives serve as counter-discourses that resist and reinterpret the polished image corporations often project. In this way, recruitment becomes a theatre of meaning-making, where ethical impressions are not dictated by HR protocols but are continually produced and contested in the interpretive space between employer and applicant.

2.2 Interpreting Compensation, Value, and Organisational Ethics

Wages are not neutral figures but are interpreted relationally, especially in transnational contexts where workers in India or Southeast Asia perform the same functions as counterparts in the West for a fraction of the compensation. These wage gaps are not simply market-driven; they are interpreted by employees as reflections of how organisations value different geographies, races, or identities. When Indian engineers are offered €4,100 per year, while colleagues in the U.S. earn ten times as much for comparable roles, the disparity produces a symbolic hierarchy of worth that extends beyond economics into identity and dignity. Employees come to see themselves as marginalized participants in a global division of labour that systematically devalues their contributions, despite differences in cost-of-living standards. Such interpretations are reinforced by everyday interactions with global teams or when international colleagues are flown in for training or leadership, or when local workers are excluded from decision-making despite being operationally central.

Lowballing offers within the same national context, such as offering below-market compensation to early- career professionals or exploiting those in urgent financial need, further illuminate how power operates through meaning. While organisations may justify these practices through cost-saving rationales or market saturation narratives, candidates interpret them as signals of exploitation and organisational opportunism. This dynamic is especially harmful in economies with high unemployment or large numbers of graduates, where desperation meets institutional indifference. In India, for example, the youth unemployment rate (ages 15-29) stood at 13.8% in April 2025 [19]. The interpretative paradigm situates these encounters not as isolated negotiations but as moments in which individuals must reconcile their aspirations with a perceived lack of recognition. The offer letter becomes a document not just of terms, but of perceived organisational character: is this an employer that values my skills, or one that seeks to extract maximum labour at minimal cost? Over time, such experiences contribute to a culture of disillusionment, where loyalty is weakened, job-hopping increases, and professional identities become fractured.

Recent data highlights the stark salary disparities within India's IT sector, revealing a disconnect between executive compensation and entry-level remuneration. Over the past five years, CEOs at India's top IT firms have witnessed a staggering 160% increase in their compensation packages, with median annual salaries soaring to approximately ₹84 crore (around €924,000) [20]. In contrast, fresher salaries have seen a meager 4% rise, moving from ₹3.5 lakh to ₹3.75 lakh annually (roughly €3,850 to €4,125) [21]. This disparity is further highlighted by the CEO-to-fresher pay ratios, with companies like Wipro and Tech Mahindra exhibiting ratios of 1,702:1 and 1,383:1, respectively [22]. Deloitte India's 2025 Executive Performance and Rewards Survey further noted a 13% year-on-year increase in median CEO pay, now approximately ₹10 crore (around €1.1 million) [23]. Entry-level employees interpret these disparities not as accidental outcomes but as reflections of organisational ethics. The figures imply a symbolic hierarchy where executive leadership is celebrated while foundational talent is marginalised. These interpretations affect more than morale; they reshape how young professionals form their occupational identities. Thus, salaries become a site of interpretative conflict when compensation is perceived not merely as remuneration for labour, but as an organisational statement of value, dignity, and inclusion. From this standpoint, lowball offers are not experienced as unfortunate market realities but as interpretive events that cast doubt on the employer's ethics and credibility. When early-career professionals receive disproportionately low salaries - often justified by "exposure," "learning," or "industry standards" - the message received is that their time and skills are exploitable. In response, individuals begin to negotiate their self-worth not only against peers but against the tacit cultural narratives of the organisation.

Feelings of being undervalued, taken for granted, or treated as dispensable lead to disengagement and transactional attitudes toward work. The psychological toll of such symbolic inequality is cumulative. Employees do not merely remember how much they were paid, they remember who undervalued them, who ghosted them, who dismissed them in interviews, and who treated them as invisible. These experiences are woven into professional identities, influencing how individuals narrate their careers, choose future employers, and define their sense of belonging in the workplace. People start questioning the authenticity of the company's professed values. From the interpretative lens, an organisational culture is not built by slogans or offsites, but through remembered meaning-making: the quiet humiliation of a lowball offer, the indifference of a non- response, the erosion of dignity in repeated rejection. Over time, this produces reputational narratives that organisations cannot easily manage through positive branding or HR communication, as they are socially constructed through everyday meaning-making, whether whispered in cafés, posted anonymously online, or passed between colleagues. Such experiences, therefore, become a moral language: a medium through which employees make sense of their significance within a system that speaks of equity but practises hierarchy.

3. Concluding Remarks
The Interpretative Paradigm, rooted in phenomenological sociology, frames organisations as communities of sensemaking,

where employees continuously interpret signals, language, and behaviours to understand their place within the system. Organisational culture, from this perspective, is not a managerial asset to be engineered but an emergent property arising from ongoing interaction. Within organisational life, employees frequently encounter contradictions between official discourse and lived realities - for example, being referred to as "family" while simultaneously facing abrupt terminations [24]. These inconsistencies are not dismissed as mere miscommunications; rather, they reveal the interpretive complexity underpinning organisational culture and identity. Euphemisms such as "strategic realignment," "optimising headcount," or "right-sizing" serve a symbolic function: they attempt to mitigate reputational damage, soften the emotional impact of layoffs, and maintain legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders. However, from an interpretative standpoint, such rhetorical strategies only expose the growing disconnect between institutional narratives and lived employee experiences. The emotional and ethical gravity of being discarded is often masked by corporate vocabulary, which transforms painful human events into managerial abstractions. Such sensemaking corrodes the moral fabric of the organisation as perceived by its members.

The experience of being laid off under such conditions poses existential questions about identity and value. If one's labour, loyalty, and emotional investment can be discarded with minimal explanation, the worker is compelled to reassess the meaning of work itself. A sudden layoff without recognition or closure constitutes an ontological rupture; it signals to the employee that their existence within the organisational narrative was either incidental or illusory. Organisations, from this interpretative frame, are not simply sites of employment but spaces of meaning-making. When they withdraw recognition, they do not just terminate a contract - they dissolve the very structure through which individuals understand their social worth. Remaining employees, often termed "survivors," experience what has been described as "workplace survivor syndrome" or "layoff survivor sickness" - a condition marked by guilt, anxiety, moral injury and fear [25]. These employees attempt to make sense of their new organisational landscape: who might be next, what values are actually upheld, and whether loyalty holds any real value. Their continued employment may come to be interpreted not as recognition of their contribution but as a precarious stroke of luck.

Salary disparities and lowballing practices, particularly in the global technology sector, are not experienced solely as economic arrangements but as deeply symbolic acts that shape employees' perceptions of self-worth, institutional fairness, and organisational culture. The interpretative paradigm also reveals how salary secrecy and opacity contribute to these dynamics. When organisations discourage or penalise open conversations about pay, they do more than protect confidential information - they actively inhibit shared meaning-making around fairness and equity. In such conditions, employees are left to speculate, compare informally, and construct private explanations for why some are paid than others, often attributing differences to bias, favouritism, or systemic injustice. This sensemaking is intensified in performance review cycles or promotion rounds where outcomes are justified through vague behavioural assessments or subjective leadership evaluations. In the absence of transparent benchmarks, employees interpret these disparities as evidence of arbitrary or politicised decision-making. This fosters a workplace culture where suspicion, rather than trust, governs both interpersonal and institutional relationships.

Furthermore, current employees as well as potential candidates often begin reconstructing these events through informal channels - WhatsApp groups, LinkedIn posts, anonymous reviews on sites like Glassdoor, or in personal conversations. These platforms become alternative spaces for narrative repair, where individuals collectively reframe what has happened. As a result, the symbolic order of the workplace becomes unstable, encouraging cynicism and detachment. Over time, such interpretative responses inform the broader reputational narrative of the organisation, influencing how it is perceived by external stakeholders and future job seekers. Trust, once eroded, is difficult to reconstruct through managerial rhetoric alone, especially when previous commitments have been undone without dialogue or accountability. What begins as an administrative procedure of interviewing, salary negotiation, favouritism, and dismissal, becomes a symbolic performance that communicates value, respect, or disregard.

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