Gatekeeping structures and trust development in public sector organizations

Abstract

This paper examines the interaction between gatekeeping and trust in a public sector organization, where employees at lower hierarchical levels are expected to autonomously translate and transform directives into public services. This requires them to have access to operational steering information; that is, information about directives and how to interpret and apply them. This study focuses on how gatekeeping structures regulate flows of operational steering information, and how the gatekeeping structures affect the development of trust. The research design is qualitative. The data material consisted of semi-structured interviews with 26 employees in home care and schools and of eight complementary non-participant observations. Thematic analysis revealed the existence of fixed and flexible gatekeeping structures, which characterize how arrangements of information sources and channels are organised as part of working. In recurrent and preplanned fixed gatekeeping structures, managers or domain experts typically act as gatekeepers, and employees also perform gatekeeping activities collectively. Unplanned, flexible gatekeeping structures cater for *ad hoc* information intermediation which are prompted by work situations that diverge from daily routines. Within these structures employees may more readily shift roles as gatekeepers or gated. Furthermore, the gatekeeping structures for intermediation of operational steering information may support or impede employees' work, thus affecting their trust in their peers and their work organization. This study contributes conceptually by introducing gatekeeping structures and operational steering information, and empirically by providing evidence of their relationship to trust development in the public service delivery. Thus, it contributes to the research fields of information management and public administration.

Introduction

Recent trust reforms in the public sector in Scandinavian countries have emphasized the fostering of trust and the promoting of information sharing to ensure efficient public service

delivery (Bentzen, 2019; Torfing & Bentzen, 2020). Information sharing happens as part of intra-organizational information flows that connect employees and their work tasks, forming a complex information infrastructure within the organization (Bowker et al., 2009; Cortada, 2016). In public sector organizations, one aim of the information infrastructure is to support employees in translating and transforming directives into public services. This paper investigates how gatekeeping structures of information flows about the directives relate to the development of trust in public sector organizations.

Prior research in information studies has defined intra-organizational information flows as "the movements of information from one spot to another for different purposes and consequences" (Cortada, 2016, p. 137). The present research also explores the dynamics of these flows as they are mediated by gatekeepers (Allen & Cohen, 1969; Leavitt & Robinson, 2017). Gatekeepers are often viewed as trusted knowledge assets. Allen and Cohen (1969), and later Barzilai-Nahon (2008), defined gatekeepers as individuals who control intra-organizational information flows by gathering, filtering, and mediating information from various information sources and channels on the basis of what they find valuable for themselves and their colleagues. The increased information volumes and intensified digitalization have transformed modern workplaces (Byström et al., 2019; Leonardi, 2021), re-establishing the role of gatekeepers. In early research, the concept of a gatekeeper often referred to an individual who was exposed to a variety of information sources and served as a source for colleagues or a transmitter of information (e.g., Allen & Cohen, 1969). Later research expanded the concept to entail groups that regulate information flows (e.g., Leavitt & Robinson, 2017). In the present study, we broaden the concept of gatekeeper to include not only individuals or groups, but also arrangements that bring together information sources and channels. These arrangements both facilitate and control the flow of information within an organization. Examples of such arrangements include online or in-person meetings, work

social media or joint coffee breaks. Together, the individual gatekeepers, groups of gatekeepers, and gatekeeping arrangements generate gatekeeping structures to moderate the iterative, continuous, dynamic, and intentional or incidental flows of information among employees, either directly or aided by technology.

Policy implementation studies have emphasized that, within public sector organizations, information about directives, both formal and informal, circulates through intermediators, shaping the delivery of public services (e.g., Coburn & Russell, 2008; Frank et al., 2015; Sausman et al., 2016). In the present study, we conceptualize formal and informal information about directives that govern and stipulate public service delivery as operational steering information. Employees (re)use and (re)share this information in order to apply directives for correct and consistent public service delivery. Furthermore, there is a broad consensus that information sharing both initiates and is an outcome of trust (e.g., Ahmad & Huvila, 2019; Bachmann et al., 2015; Hasche et al., 2021; Hatala & George Lutta, 2009; Seppänen et al., 2014), and that information sharing is conducive to trust development (e.g., Breuer et al., 2020; Droege et al., 2003; Jarvenpaa et al., 1998). Therefore, investigating the interplay between the flows of operational steering information and the development of trust can provide insights into how employees in public sector organizations adhere to directives.

Since the concept was first termed within sociology – where "gate keeper" was defined as an individual or group who "is "in power" for making the decision between "in" or "out"" (Lewin, 1947, p. 145) – it has been used in many disciplines, including information studies. Nevertheless, research exploring gatekeeping has been limited in recent decades (e.g., Allen & Cohen, 1969; Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Leavitt & Robinson, 2017). While some studies have found that information flows support the development of trust in organizations (e.g., Droege et al., 2003; ter Hoeven & Verhoeven, 2013), research is scarce on gatekeeping in public sector organizations and on its impact on the development of trust. To fill this gap, we aim to

investigate the interplay between gatekeeping structures of intra-organizational flows of operational steering information and trust development in a public sector organization.

This article continues with a review of the literature about intra-organizational information flows, trust and gatekeeping, followed by presentation of research questions. Next, the article discusses the semi-structured interviews and observations conducted in the City of Oslo. The article then presents identified gatekeeping structures and their contribution to the development of trust. The final section discusses the role of fixed and flexible gatekeeping structures and their implications for public service delivery and concludes with a few remarks on future research on gatekeeping.

Gatekeeping, trust and information flows

Intra-organizational information flows, which drive the circulation of information within organizations, result from interactions between social relations and work structures (Allen & Cohen, 1969). These flows encompass one-to-many communications and two-way exchanges (Savolainen, 2017). They can span vertically across hierarchical levels and horizontally among peers (e.g., Barmeyer et al., 2019; Reitzig & Maciejovsky, 2015). Within these flows, information is mediated by various information sources and information channels. Information sources are commonly viewed as carriers of information that is useful to someone, whereas information channels have sometimes been defined as pointers that guide information seekers to potentially useful information sources, and other times as pure transportation or communication means (Byström & Pharo, 2019). Information sharing is the primary information activity that leads to information circulation in organizations (e.g., Berente et al., 2009; Savolainen, 2017; Talja & Hansen, 2006). In large organizations that are characterized by complex and multiple workflows, information flows enable employees to collaborate and coordinate their activities. However, the flows are not driven by linear

processes but are intertwined in manifold and parallel activities that actuate information circulation (Brown & Duguid, 2017).

Most of the information that circulates within organizations relates to the conduct of work. This work-related information actualizes when carrying out work tasks and encompasses three types: task-specific information, which consists of facts pertaining to an actual work task at hand (for example, a patient's medicine list); domain information, which contains facts and principles within the particular area of work to which the task belongs (such as possible side effects of medicines prescribed to a patient); and procedural information, which provides details on how the task be executed (for example, medicine that ought to be given under surveillance of medical professional) (cf. Byström & Järvelin, 1995). Typically, task-related factual information is specific to the task at hand and seldom useful in other tasks, whereas domain and procedural information is useful for multiple tasks within the particular area of work (Byström, 2002; Byström & Hansen, 2005). In public sector organizations, directives specify how to deliver public services, falling into the category of procedural information. However, these directives may not always consider the complexities of real-world situations, which requires employees to apply information about how to interpret and adapt directives when faced with these complexities (e.g., Keiser, 2010; Raaphorst, 2018; Siciliano et al., 2017). As a result, this information represents a context-specific and often time-sensitive subset of work-related information that provides certainty in unique circumstances. We define operational steering information as formal and informal information that includes instructions, guidelines, experiences, and insights governing and guiding the translation and implementation of directives. Employees engage in dynamic, iterative, and interactive processes to negotiate a common understanding of how to translate these directives into concrete situations, and to (re)share and (re)use this information amongst themselves (Frank

et al., 2015; Raaphorst, 2018; Sausman et al., 2016). These processes are facilitated through the flows of operational steering information.

Gatekeeping, gatekeepers and gated

Over the years, across disciplines, well-connected, information-rich information transmitters are interchangeably named gatekeepers, boundary spanners, and knowledge brokers (Haas, 2015). Boundary spanners act as interfaces between an organizational entity and its surroundings, whereas gatekeepers filter, disseminate, and control information. On the other hand, knowledge brokers transfer knowledge but usually do not belong to the groups they span (Haas, 2015; O'Brien et al., 2022). In information studies, gatekeeping refers to the process of intermediating and filtering information that has been "digested in some way" (Lu, 2007, p. 107). Gatekeepers may be seen as key actors in information flows because they filter and disseminate information, which shapes the patterns and routes of information flows (cf. Allen & Cohen, 1969; Leavitt & Robinson, 2017; Savolainen, 2020; Taylor, 1991). Due to "the social character of work – the way in which people act as resources for one another" (Brown & Duguid, 2017, p. 71), employees act as both gatekeepers and those who are gatekept. Gatekeepers in organizations are more than simply employees who are exposed to information sources and disseminate information to their colleagues. Gatekeepers emerge through cultural certifications, nominations, and social positions (Lu, 2007). They are in a position to influence the interpretation of information, either by their formally designated roles or by their informally acknowledged expertise (Haas, 2015; Lu, 2007; Savolainen, 2020), highlighting certain information and downplaying other information (Byström & Pharo, 2019). Gatekeepers rely on a broad spectrum of information artefacts that mediate information. Byström and Pharo (2019) emphasized that information artefacts are independent of intentionality but are determined by their usage as information sources or channels, and they form an integral part of the information intermediation context. The arrangements of

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information artefacts support, adapt to, and are, in turn, adapted to by the gatekeeping activities.

The digitalization of organizational workplaces and the influence of social network theories have shifted attention towards the dynamics of gatekeepers' relationships with their peers. The network gatekeeping theory (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008) focuses on how informed collaborators, the gatekeepers, disseminate information to their colleagues, the gated, within networks comprising both human and digital actors. This theory emphasizes the active involvement of both gatekeepers and the gated in processes such as selection, addition, withholding, display, channelling, shaping, manipulation, repetition, timing, localization, integration, disregard, and deletion of information, which constitute gatekeeping activities. Social interactions between gatekeepers and gated are fundamental for the process of gatekeeping; without them, gatekeeping would be meaningless (Lu, 2007). Social network membership is seen to influence information distribution. For example, "knowledge champions" or central members have been found to facilitate a consistent flow of information by intermediating within their network (Hatala & George Lutta, 2009, p. 25). Lu (2007) emphasized the preference for trusted and familiar gatekeepers, such as "colleagues who sit across the hall from one's office" (p. 106), due to their accessibility, credibility, value-laden applicability, and ease of information management and gathering.

In recent years, fewer studies have explored gatekeeping due to the ease of access to information (Given et al., 2023, p. 33). Gatekeeping in digital networks has been seen as a process in which many users share or pass on information (e.g., Savolainen, 2020). However, as a result of increased digital information flows in society, the concept of gatekeepers has expanded to include search engines, like Google, which filter information access, and organizational entities, like intelligent services, aiming to identify information sources and facilitating dissemination (Haas, 2015). This development, along with visibility of

information intermediaries and their activities on work social media that is found to influence the social dynamics in the workplace, has re-established the importance of relationships between those who are gated and those who gatekeep. Keppler and Leonardi (2023) found that gatekeeping activities in work social media increased relational confidence among the gated. Leavitt and Robinson (2017) introduced another new perspective on gatekeepers as a collaborative group responsible for filtering and disseminating information. This approach introduces the concept of gatekeeping actors, including individuals, digital entities, and groups, impacting the visibility of both gatekeepers and the information for the gated. Barzilai-Nahon (2008) ascertained that the interactions between gatekeepers and the gated within a specific discourse necessitate structures that facilitate gatekeeping activities. Prior research has occasionally mentioned gatekeeping structures, but it has mostly remained as an undistinguished expression rather than a defined concept. However, gatekeeping structures have been mentioned in the context of power structures that facilitate the exchange of resources (e.g., Corra, 2014), or as an approach to operationalize gatekeeping (e.g., Payne, 2009). In the present study, gatekeeping structures are seen as settled formations of gatekeeping arrangements that moderate both information sharing and information flows.

Empirical studies have described the work of employees in public sector organizations as consultative, operating within social structures and relationships (e.g., French & Williamson, 2016; Nisar & Maroulis, 2017; Siciliano, 2015). In these organizations, employees use a variety of information sources, yet collegial interactions play a vital role in the intermediation of directives (e.g., Coburn & Russell, 2008; Frank et al., 2015; Siciliano et al., 2017). Due to time and work constraints, these employees prefer to reach out to information sources that surround them in their daily work, such as peers with the same job function, rather than seeking out new information sources (e.g., Byström & Järvelin, 1995; Cohen & Cohen, 2021; French & Williamson, 2016; Nisar & Maroulis, 2017; Siciliano, 2015). In high-workload

public service delivery settings, certain employees, typically managers, often serve as gatekeepers, mediating procedural information (e.g., Keulemans & Groeneveld, 2020; Townsend & Loudoun, 2015; Zhang et al., 2021). Frederiksen and Hansen (2022) found that trusted gatekeepers within working groups also promote trust in processes and among group members.

Empirical studies have shown that much of procedural information is mediated in formalized arrangements, such as regular work meetings (e.g., Cohen & Cohen, 2021; Känsäkoski, 2017). Information intermediation can also occur in informal interactions where colleagues filter information through *ad hoc* conversations, involving overhearing and active participation. These informal gatherings often provide valuable insights into processes and procedures (Adams et al., 2013; Barmeyer et al., 2019). Frederiksen and Hansen (2022) found that the distribution of meeting agendas and minutes enhances transparency in formalized and regular interactions. However, their and others' findings (Cohen & Cohen, 2021; Cooper & Urquhart, 2005; Frederiksen & Hansen, 2022) also indicate that employees may find formal intermediation inefficient and prefer informal interactions for obtaining information. Much ad-hoc or spontaneous information intermediation occurs in the physical co-location of employees, where their visible presence facilitates easy access to information sources, but can simultaneously create an interruptive work environment (e.g., Hertzum & Reddy, 2015; Reddy & Spence, 2008, p. 252).

Trust and intra-organizational information flows

As employees in public sector organizations are members of a social system (Keiser, 2010) and "trust takes form in the interaction of two (or more) people" (Zand, 1972, p. 232), the flows of information among these employees facilitate their interactions and become intertwined in the relationships within the social system. Previous research has viewed trust within organizations as a behavior that prevents the abuse of others' vulnerabilities, fosters

information flow, and facilitates mutual influence (e.g., Bachmann et al., 2015; Hasche et al., 2021; Seppänen et al., 2014; Zand, 1972). Extant studies have also distinguished between impersonal trust and interpersonal trust among employees. Interpersonal trust encompasses trust between managers and subordinates and among colleagues as individuals (Hasche et al., 2021), whereas impersonal trust refers to employees' trust in the organizational values, processes, and structures, which ought to be "in their proper order" to support their work (Ellonen et al., 2008, p. 162). Given that interpersonal trust is person-dependent, impersonal trust can help cover for weak or damaged interpersonal trust (Bachmann et al., 2015; Ellonen et al., 2008).

Trust is often developed through collaborative interactions in which employees share information and assess each other's trustworthiness (e.g., Breuer et al., 2020). This suggests that information sharing can lead to the development of trust (e.g., Cheung et al., 2016; Droege et al., 2003; Jarvenpaa et al., 1998; Savolainen et al., 2014). Furthermore, Droege et al. (2003) found that trust directly increases the quality and quantity of information that circulates in organizations. Ahmad and Huvila (2019), among others, claimed that trust and information sharing rely iteratively on each other.

Previous research has also indicated that intra-organizational information flows affect employees' commitment to organizational values and norms (e.g., Glaser et al., 1987; ter Hoeven & Verhoeven, 2013). Several studies have highlighted that clear, consistent, and transparent communication enhances employees' perceptions of their organization's trustworthiness, which supports the development of impersonal trust within organizations (e.g., Ellonen et al., 2008; Karhapää & Savolainen, 2018; Seppänen et al., 2014). In addition, consistent and transparent communication have been found to foster interpersonal trust among employees (e.g., Bachmann et al., 2015; Hasche et al., 2021; Tomlinson & Schnackenberg, 2022). Bachmann et al. (2015) added that trust may be rebuilt through employees exchanging

information, Seppänen et al. (Seppänen et al., 2014) argued that rich communication channels, such as two-way in-person interactions, are essential for fostering both impersonal and interpersonal trust. Empirical studies on trust and trust reforms further emphasize the significance of regular and supportive communication between managers and subordinates, along with the importance of direct in-person informal interactions (e.g., Bentzen, 2019, 2022; Hasche et al., 2021; Savolainen et al., 2014; Seppänen et al., 2014; Torfing & Bentzen, 2020).

To summarize, the literature has analyzed gatekeeping from the perspectives of information processing (e.g., Allen & Cohen, 1969; Taylor, 1991) and social dynamics (e.g., Barzilai-Nahon, 2008). Previous studies have highlighted the role of gatekeeping in organizational operations (e.g., Allen & Cohen, 1969; Lu, 2007), in individual employee behaviour (e.g., Keppler & Leonardi, 2023), and in daily work of employees in public sector organizations (e.g., Byström & Järvelin, 1995; Cohen & Cohen, 2021; French & Williamson, 2016; Känsäkoski, 2017), and have suggested the significance of information flows for trust (e.g., Bachmann et al., 2015; Seppänen et al., 2014). Nevertheless, the role of gatekeeping structures for trust development remains limited.

Research questions

Based on our overall aim and the literature review above, we pursue the following research questions:

- What gatekeeping structures can be identified in a public sector organization?
- How do gatekeeping structures facilitate access to operational steering information?
- How do gatekeeping structures contribute to the development of trust?

These research questions are limited to being investigated in a public sector organization in Norway. Scandinavian countries have recently introduced trust reforms to make public sector services more efficient by taking decisions closer to service users. Thus, trust and trust

development are of central interest in these settings, which may make trust issues more prevalent and more visible in the studied organization than in other similar organizations.

Research methodology

This research adopted a qualitative, case-study approach relying on interviews and observations in home care and schools of the City of Oslo. Through interviews and observations, we focused on how participants access, mediate, and filter operational steering information in their daily work. This approach helped us reflect on the data and achieve sufficient depth and understanding of both the complexity and contingency of this phenomenon, especially when contextual conditions play a significant role (Wildemuth, 2016; Yin, 2018). The present research is part of a larger research project that investigates different aspects of implementing trust reforms in the public sector.

The case: City of Oslo

The City of Oslo, a large municipality in Norway, manages a workforce of 50,000 employees across 15 administrative districts. Its services cover a range of areas, including home care (approximately 20,000 employees) and education (approximately 17,000 employees). In 2017, the City of Oslo made a strategic decision to adopt trust-based management. This reform was intended to improve public sector efficiency by bringing services closer to service users, thereby entrusting and delegating greater work autonomy to employees at lower hierarchical levels (Eide et al., 2019; The City Council of Oslo, 2017). Within home care, districts were reorganized into generalist and specialist teams, which were granted extended autonomy. Schools did not undergo reorganization, but were already structured into teams to promote collegial support and collaboration.

The use of work social media is prevalent across the City of Oslo. Notably, Workplace Facebook serves as a communication platform for both inter- and intra-district communication within home care, whereas Microsoft Teams fulfils this role within the schools.

In home care and in schools, employees often share office space with their colleagues. In schools, several teachers typically share a single office room, particularly when they are not teaching classes or working from home. These teachers have access to dedicated office spaces with assigned seats. In home care, very few employees have assigned seats in the shared office space. Instead, they take an available seat when they arrive in an open office environment, as they do not spend their time delivering care on-site.

Data collection and analysis

The qualitative inquiry was carried out in the spring and fall of 2022. A purposive sampling strategy was applied to recruit participants who were able to provide first-hand information about working in the City of Oslo. The project contact persons in the municipality helped to establish initial contact with the representatives in the home care and the schools.

In the spring of 2022, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 participants in schools and eight participants in home care. In the fall of 2022, additional eight interviews and three non-participant observations in schools and five non-participant observations in home care were carried out. In all, we interviewed six home care employees (H1–H6) and two home care managers (HM1–HM2), 10 teachers and one inspector (T1–T11), two principals, three assistant principals and two teacher team leaders (TM1–TM7). The study also included seven non-participant meeting observations in home care and schools, as well as one observation of communication in an open office room at a school (O1–8). Additionally, the meeting observations in home care encompassed brief observations of how employees communicate in open office spaces before and after the observed meetings. During the observations, the first author manually recorded detailed notes, specifically noting the topics discussed and the intermediation of operational steering information, including the employees involved in the intermediation process and the manner of their discussions. These notes were later translated into observation minutes and thereafter analyzed for further insights.

The interview guide, which was collaboratively designed with researchers of the larger project, comprised 28 questions, covering topics both within and beyond the scope of this study. For this study, we focused on the items related to participants' perceptions of trust, experiences of being trusted by managers and colleagues, and their access to and use of operational steering information in their daily work. During the interviews, the participants were asked to provide concrete examples to illustrate both the actualization of trust and the intermediation of operational steering information as part of their daily work activities. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Before the interviews and meetings, the written introduction of the project was communicated to the participants and the contact persons in the home care and the schools.

Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo 11 software. The process began by listening to the interview recordings and transcribing them. We then analysed the transcripts of both interviews and observations, with emerging codes extracted from the text and organized into sub-themes and, ultimately, overarching themes. The coding process revealed subthemes related to how employees were informed about operational steering information, their communication channels, experiences of trust in their work, and perceptions of trust in interactions. The initial coding work was conducted by the first author. The authors then discussed the codes and the development of the analysis. The analysis of interviews and observations resulted in three main themes: conducting daily work, communicating with colleagues, and adhering to directives. Code descriptions were developed for each code in NVivo 11 to improve the consistency of coding.

First round of coding focused on identifying keywords and key phrases concerning intermediation of operational steering information. Next, the coding concentrated on how this intermediation took place, such as in meetings, via formal (digital) systems, through face-to-face interactions, or on work social media channels. The emerged codes were then grouped

into sub-themes and thereafter into two main themes. The theme of *communicating with colleagues* embeds both vertical and horizontal as well as formal and informal communication among the employees. The theme of *adhering to directives* refers to how employees receive, use, apply, and modify directives. The third overarching theme *fixed and flexible arrangements* to facilitate information intermediation was identified when comparing the subthemes and noting that operational steering information was practiced in use situations but regularly shared general settings; a realisation that led to add codes in the empirical data based on in which way the arrangements appeared within a working day.

The following analysis focuses on the interplay between the two main themes within the third overarching theme, examining how operational steering information is gatekept in daily work to facilitate adhering to directives, and the composition of the arrangements that support this intermediation.

Findings

The following sections presents the findings of the empirical study. The first part, Fixed and flexible gatekeeping structures, focus on the organization of gatekeeping arrangements and describing how they facilitate access to operational steering information. This part relates closely to the first and second research questions. The second part, Gatekeeping traits and development of trust, explains how the identified gatekeeping structures contribute to trust development, addressing the third research question.

Fixed and flexible gatekeeping structures

Based on the interviews and observations, operational steering information is mediated by managers, key resources, or groups of employees. In the data analysis, we identified instances where the participants acted as gatekeepers or gated. The gatekeepers collectively or individually obtain, filter, and disseminate information through fixed or flexible gatekeeping structures, which consist of established arrangements of information sources and channels that

facilitate access to formal and informal operational steering information. While fixed structures encompass arrangements that are established in a planned manner, flexible structures are unfixed in the organization of a working day and encompass arrangements that are prompted by work situations that diverge from daily routines. For example, regular team meetings belong to fixed structures, whereas workplace social media or *ad hoc* social interactions in the open office space exemplify flexible structures.

Dissemination via fixed gatekeeping structures

Regular meetings emerge as a common way to disseminate operational steering information, both in a one-to-many format and in discussions among meeting attendees in both home care and schools. Regular meetings are typically initiated by managers and involve a fixed group of employees who act as gatekeepers and as gated. They adhere to established and fixed communication channels, which may be in person for on-site meetings or via audio-video for digital meetings. As such, these regular meetings function as gatekeeping structures composed of fixed arrangements of information sources and channels (attending employees, shared documentation, and meeting format). One teacher (gated) said that important directives are communicated in meetings for all staff in their school, stating: "If there are significant changes [in directives], we have meetings about it" (T1). A school assistant principal (a gatekeeper) explains how employees are informed about routines in "something called climbing team meetings," which are regular meetings with teachers and school management arranged by the management and in "something called triangle meetings," which are monthly meetings involving teachers, the department head, and the counsellor (TM1). Another teacher pointed out that teachers act collectively as gatekeepers when they discuss the educational plans in "larger meetings, interdisciplinary meetings" (T2). "In those team meetings… we discuss the course of action and the process," echoed a physical therapist in home care (H1). In home care, during the observed home care meeting, the team manager (a gatekeeper) demonstrated where and how to find the contingency plan, providing a detailed explanation of

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its applicability, objectives, and responsibilities (O1). An occupational therapist (gated) regularly consults her colleagues in meetings to get informed about procedures: "I usually use those meetings to ask my colleagues [...] do you have anything to say about that procedure?" (H2).

In home care and in schools, work social media is also used frequently to inform about new or modified directives. Management typically establishes groups, chats, and forums in work social media. These groups and channels have pre-defined arrangements regarding which employees participate and the channels through which communication takes place. Some of these groups span across organizational units, while others engage employees only within their respective units. In home care, information about modified routines and procedures is posted on Workplace: "…When something [a procedure] is updated, they [quality consultants] usually post it on Workplace as a reminder that one can now access EQS [home care internal IT system] to read the new procedure" (H2). A physiotherapist (gated) echoed: "In essence, it mostly happens through Workplace" (H1). In schools, each team has a dedicated channel on work social media, in which teachers are informed about instructions, directives, and other procedures, among other things. One teacher (gated) said: "It is mostly Teams, in the sense that we receive a notification when a change is happening" (T1). There are also professional groups created in work social media across schools and home care districts. "We are a group on Facebook with 30–40 jurisprudence teachers. We met at the UDIR [Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training] seminar where we discussed a lot about what is included in these somewhat vague competence plan goals", said a jurisprudence teacher (gated) (T4). In home care, the team manager (gated) participates in a welfare technology group to receive information, among other things, about welfare directives: "these national guidelines, that they adapt to Oslo, and so they come back to us" (HM1).

The empirical data from both the interviews and the observations indicate that fixed gatekeeping structures are established of planned arrangements, and that mediation of formal and informal operational steering information is facilitated through these structures. Gatekeepers, typically managers, often mediate formal procedures, while employees collectively mediate informal information about how to apply formal operational steering information, typically in meetings or work social media groups.

Dissemination via flexible gatekeeping structures

In home care and in schools, employees praised the ease of consulting managers and key resources in an *ad hoc* manner, particularly when they need clarifications. *Ad hoc* communication often takes place in environments where information sources are available. As such, interactions in these environments act as gatekeeping structures composed of variable arrangements of information sources and channels. In home care and in schools, open-plan or shared office spaces allow for unplanned information exchanges, as does the work social media chats and phone calls.

In home care, a coordinating nurse (a gatekeeper) who serves as an administrative key resource, said that she is often consulted by peers in an *ad hoc* manner in open office space: "It can be a procedure or a case where people just come and ask" (H3). Similarly, in schools, one teacher (a gatekeeper) exemplified how his colleagues approach him for information because he participated in work on process-oriented assessments: "people often come to me and ask how it works" (T3).

A senior nurse noted that, in an open-plan office space, she often overhears the conversations of others and contributes when she can (H5). Another senior nurse said, "We discuss things while walking or in the corridor, that is, we discuss things all the time" (H4). Another home care employee said, "Because we sit in an open office space, I often find that it's easier to look at it together" (H1). One teacher (a gatekeeper and a gated) observed that teachers often

converse "because they share an office space" (T2). A teacher at another school said, "You learn a lot because you sit together" (T8).

The empirical data from both the interviews and the observations indicate that flexible gatekeeping structures consist of arrangements that emerge spontaneously or ad hoc to mediate operational steering information, and that gatekeeper and gated roles are not constant, but can change depending on the situation or the matter at hand.

Gatekeeping traits and the development of trust
Filtering
Employees who serve as gatekeepers in schools and home care, individually and collectively, decide where, to whom, and through which channels to disseminate information. A home care team manager (a gatekeeper) considers the extent to which information is important when selecting channels: "Is this information so critical? Do we need to send it out via SMS to all employees or is it enough to use Workplace?" (HM1). An assistant principal (a gatekeeper) decides who needs the information about routines: "If someone else has changed the procedure, we try to be good at informing those who need to receive the information [about it]" (TM2). A home care manager (a gatekeeper) mediates information from top management to her team leads, "who then need to communicate it further if they decide that they have to pass it" (HM2).

Disseminated operational steering information varies based on the meeting type and agenda. It undergoes filtering for relevance to attendees and the meeting topics. A home care team manager (a gatekeeper) explained that the discussion topic determines whether it is addressed in subject-specific meetings: "If it's related to medical procedures, prescription procedures, then it may be relevant to bring up at the nurses' meeting" (HM1).

In home care and in schools, meetings are often used to collaboratively filter information. At the school, an assistant principal (a gatekeeper) tells how teachers worked together to sort out

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information about the regulations to use masks during the pandemic: "We strived to have several team meetings to sort out the things that needed to be addressed" (TM4). During the observed meeting in home care (O2), the participants exchanged information about new rules for aid support funding. One home care professional mentioned that they had received information about paused funding and thus advised them to stop applying for funds. However, another participant stated that it still seemed possible to apply for funding. Together, they concluded that they still should advise to apply.

Several participants have mentioned that filtering sometimes fails, which has led to dissatisfaction and frustration. One principal (a gatekeeper) found it frustrating that not all employees read the information in the internal IT system: "then it has to be addressed in the general meetings, and that's probably a source of frustration" (TM6). In home care, despite the use of multiple channels, not all employees receive information:

> "We also talked about it in Rapport [daily morning meetings], day and night, and informed that now we will be making changes. We also posted that on Workplace, but we have many employees who are not digital, and who cannot even access their email. This is a challenge for us, as we cannot reach everyone." (HM2)

One home care employee (gated) is missing out on information about what is happening in other teams: "I could actually use a bit more information about what's happening with others here [...] we only get information that concerns us" (H4). Several participants consider filtering to be a manager's responsibility. One teacher (gated) expressed dissatisfaction with the way that former management had filtered information. She felt that it resulted in a lack of trust in managers' ability to perform their duties: "If I have to find out things myself then [...] you couldn't trust that they knew what it was about" (T7). In another school, a senior teacher (gated) complained about how inconsistently mediated information makes teachers doubt the

processes and structures: "I feel a lot of dissatisfaction among the teachers, the information flow is too poor" (T5).

The empirical data from both the interviews and observations indicate that participants expect their managers to filter the flow of operational steering information for them and that well-functioning filtering is important for participants to trust in managers and processes.

Visible gatekeepers

Both in home care and in schools, employees appreciate having visible managers and key resources, as this facilitates the ease of spontaneous contact. One team leader of teachers (a gatekeeper) pointed out that informing employees necessitates the visibility of those who inform to whom information is mediated. She illustrated this by listing actions such as: "Eating lunch in the staff room. Visiting the workrooms. Being easily accessible and visible" (TM3). A senior nurse in home care (gated) describes her manager's practice of positioning herself visible in shared office space as a way of signalling her availability:

> "She is visible to the employees, to me and other employees, and there is always room
>
> to take contact [...] so you can just reach out spontaneously to discuss, it's very helpful
>
> [...] you get a close relationship with the leader." (H3)

Gatekeepers also signal intentionally their presence for *ad hoc* social interactions. In schools, one senior teacher (a gatekeeper) purposefully circulates in office rooms: "I aim to be more present in the different subject teams and stop by to see how things are going [...] if I can help with anything" (T5). One assistant principal (a gatekeeper) conducts daily walkabouts through her school to let teachers know that she is approachable: "I want my employees to feel that I am there for them and that they can come to me" (TM1). Assigning mentorships and placing employees next to each other is another way of facilitating access to gatekeepers. One teacher explained how new employees are provided access to information they need: "All new

employees get assigned a mentor who sits next to them in the office, whom they can ask questions about everything" (T3).

In home care and in schools, most participants value regular team meetings as a way of accessing important information. An assistant principal (a gatekeeper) emphasized that they "must have these meetings" where employees are informed about routines; if they "don't have these general meetings, then, for example, the counsellors won't be able to inform all employees" (TM1). A senior nurse (a gatekeeper) in home care described her work: "We function as a team, and we have regular meetings. We have the 'Rapport' [a team meeting] every day" (H3).

The empirical data from both the interviews and observations indicate that the gatekept information is vital for participants' work and that the visibility of gatekeepers is important for trust in gatekeepers.

Transparency and consistency

The participants appreciate consistent and transparent information dissemination because it supports their work. One teacher (gated) emphasized the importance of understanding who participated in the discussions and what has been discussed in order for him to trust his colleagues and processes: "I seldom have a feeling that things are happening here which I'm not aware of [...] There is a very strong sense of transparency" (T5). Another teacher (gated) highly appreciates the practice of incorporating discussed information about changes and directives from meetings into the meeting minutes for giving him confidence in the processes at his school:

> "[The team lead] always writes minutes from the meetings; that's where the changes happen, and in addition, it's usually brought up every time there's been a change [...] It's actually well-informed, orderly conditions." (T3)

Another teacher (gated) emphasized the importance of consistency in directives for teaching, stating: "there must be agreement on how to interpret it within a section" (T2). One school principal (a gatekeeper) strives to work transparently with strategic documents in order to engage subordinates and promote their confidence in the strategic process: "Everything is about openness, as I mentioned earlier. There's no hidden agenda, but good and open communication." (TM6)

Several participants voiced concerns about the inconsistency in the channelling of information, which created difficulties in supporting their work. One teacher (gated) voiced their dissatisfaction with the inconsistent use of multiple channels, which made it difficult to follow up on their daily work:

> "Some things are sent out by email, some things are sent out via a digital archive system, and some things are sent out via Workplace. This makes it a bit difficult to know where to find the information. It's a bit hopeless." (T6)

One home care manager (a gatekeeper) complained about the redundancy of channels: "We are using Teams, Workplace, email, phone, and SMS [...] it is coming from all over the place" (HM1).

The empirical data from both the interviews and the observations indicate that the transparency and consistency of gatekept information appears to be important for participants' trust in their colleagues and in organizational processes.

Discussion

The findings suggest that a variety of gatekeeping structures affect the development of trust. Some structures promote trust in information, its sources, and the related processes through transparent, consistent, and visible mediation. Others, due to inconsistencies in handling

information, can lead to a lack of support for employees in their work, which may potentially prevent or decrease the development of trust.

The first research question was: *What gatekeeping structures are identified in a public sector organization?* Operational steering information is often mediated by individual gatekeepers, such as managers, key resources (for example, domain experts or administrative resources), or collective gatekeepers, such as a group of meeting attendees. These gatekeepers use fixed and flexible gatekeeping structures to filter and distribute information to the gated. All employees can participate in collective gatekeeping where they collaborate in gatekeepers' activities, such as gathering, filtering, interpreting, and disseminating information.

Within fixed gatekeeping structures, such as regular team meetings or dedicated work social media channels, a fixed number of gatekeepers and the gated gather, filter, and mediate information. These fixed structures appear to primarily facilitate the intermediation of operational steering information, with the aim of informing employees at the group level about new or modified directives in a planned manner. In these structures, due to the fixed arrangements of information sources and channels, managers and domain experts often act as gatekeepers. Moreover, collective gatekeeping typically takes place in fixed gatekeeping structures, such as meetings or work social media.

The flexible gatekeeping structures appear to support *ad hoc* social interactions among employees in their daily work. Often engaging in one-to-one or a few-to-few interactions, employees informally intermediate more time-sensitive and context- and situation-specific information. These gatekeeping structures typically embed arrangements where variable numbers of gatekeepers and gated interact in person or via digital tools. In these structures, employees can act as gatekeepers in some situations, and as gated in others. The variable arrangements and informal nature of interactions within flexible gatekeeping structures do indeed make it easier for employees to switch between the roles of gatekeeper and gated.

Whereas some of the participants (particularly the managers and team leaders) act as gatekeepers more often, others act as gatekeepers more seldom, in specific matters where they are viewed as experts. This allows for a variety of opportunities in which information can be obtained and filtered flexibly.

Due to the clear distinction between fixed and flexible gatekeeping structures, the empirical data indicate that fixed and flexible structures are mutually exclusive, at least in the work setting of this study. However, the material affordances seem to differ between the structures and create separate opportunities for arrangements within them. The material setting of a regular workplace such as an office, generates equal opportunities for fixed and flexible arrangements to take place, whereas working outside the office seems to be geared towards flexible arrangements.

The findings resonate with research on trust reforms, emphasizing the significance of information sharing and social interactions among managers, subordinates, and colleagues in daily work in trust-based organizations (Bentzen, 2019; Torfing & Bentzen, 2020). Although previous research in public sector organizations has reported the use of various arrangements for information intermediation in employees daily work (cf. Frederiksen & Hansen, 2022; Hertzum & Reddy, 2015; Känsäkoski, 2017), our identification of the intertwined role of fixed and flexible gatekeeping structures that support public service delivery is a novel contribution to the fields of information management and public administration.

The second research question was: *How do gatekeeping structures facilitate access to operational steering information*? The findings indicate that arrangements within both fixed and flexible gatekeeping structures consolidate information sources by using one or a few channels to transparently mediate information. This makes gatekeepers and their activities more visible to those who are gated. Through their visibility, gatekeepers signal their capacity and willingness to share information. As a result, the gated gain insights into where and how

to access operational steering information, which increases their confidence in reaching out for information without a fear of rejection.

The findings also indicate that the visibility of managers or senior resources can contribute to the perception of them as trustworthy contacts by those who are gated. This may be because the gated can more easily assess the trustworthiness of gatekeepers when gatekeepers are visible. This increased trustworthiness may lead to increased access to and intermediation of operational steering information. As operational steering information is often time-sensitive, context-specific, or even situation-specific, increased visibility of both information and gatekeepers contributes to better information access. Furthermore, flexible gatekeeping structures facilitate communication between gated and gatekeepers by establishing an environment that enables direct – digital or in-person – channels of interaction. In such settings, conversations are easily initiated, guidance sought, and information shared, in close collaboration with gatekeepers. These findings are consistent with previous studies that highlight the role of gatekeepers' visibility in the development of relational confidence (Keppler & Leonardi, 2023), as well as with studies that emphasize that access to information generates increased information flows (Berente et al., 2009). These findings also align with research on trust reforms that emphasize direct interactions between managers and subordinates, as well as among colleagues, enabling the facilitation of awareness regarding each other's areas of expertise (Bentzen, 2019; Torfing & Bentzen, 2020).

The third research question was: *How do gatekeeping structures contribute to the development of trust*? The findings indicate that both fixed and flexible gatekeeping structures in information flows are essential for facilitating transparent and consistent intermediation of operational steering information. In both home care and schools, the participants express frustration when gatekeeping fails, leading to a lack of information, inconsistent information, or inconsistent delivery of information. Previous research has emphasized that consistent and

clear information intermediation promotes both impersonal and interpersonal trust in organizations (e.g., Ellonen et al., 2008; Hasche et al., 2021; Seppänen et al., 2014). Thus, the gatekeeping structures that promote transparency and consistency in the intermediation of information contribute to the development of employees' trust in their colleagues, as well as in the processes, values, and norms of their organizations.

The flexible gatekeeping structures facilitate social interactions between managers and subordinates, and among employees, which can contribute to the assessment of each other's trustworthiness and lead to the development of interpersonal trust. This is supported by previous research on how collegial trustworthiness is built (Breuer et al., 2020). The consistency of operational steering information is required to effectively manage the complexity of context-specific situations that this information addresses. Therefore, the fixed gatekeeping structures that ensure transparent and consistent intermediation of operational steering information support employees in their work, which helps build impersonal trust in organizational processes and values. This is consistent with prior studies that have explored how impersonal trust is developed through consistent and transparent communication (Ellonen et al., 2008; Keulemans & Groeneveld, 2020; Seppänen et al., 2014). However, prior research has highlighted the iterative influence between information flows and trust (Bachmann et al., 2015; Breuer et al., 2020; Droege et al., 2003; Hasche et al., 2021). This means that while gatekeeping structures contribute to the development of trust, trust between gatekeepers and gated also plays a role in information intermediation.

Moreover, the findings indicate that fixed gatekeeping structures often require gatekeepers to collaborate in the filtering process. For instance, during meetings, participants collectively perform gatekeeping activities. This collaborative approach may lead to more transparency in intermediated operational steering information, thus fostering more impersonal trust in processes. Because these gatekeeping structures embed arrangements that bring together

sources, gatekeepers, and gated through a single channel, the quality and consistency of operational steering information may be enhanced, especially in cases when operational steering information is situation-specific and time-sensitive. This is supported by policy implementation studies that highlight the importance of restricting channels through which procedural information is mediated to ensure its quality (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Frank et al., 2015).

It appears that fixed and flexible gatekeeping structures, particularly when managers serve as gatekeepers, can support more frequent direct interactions between managers and subordinates. This finding, combined with improved visibility of intermediated operational steering information, can make it easier for managers to entrust their subordinates to know how to apply directives in different situations. As a result, managers can have more opportunities for transformational leadership, which may lead to a deeper adoption of trust-based management (Torfing & Bentzen, 2020).

Although the present study included both interviews and observations, these primarily occurred within scheduled and pre-arranged activities, rather than capturing the nuances of the typical daily work of teachers and home care employees. As a result, certain perspectives may have been unintentionally omitted. Additionally, the participants were recruited through the City of Oslo contact people, which may have impacted their status or perception in some way. Moreover, the study was conducted in the City of Oslo, a specific organization with its own unique set of values, norms, and processes. The trust-based management in the City of Oslo is likely not representative of all public sector organizations.

Conclusion

Fixed and flexible gatekeeping structures for intra-organizational flows of operational steering information play a crucial role in connecting employees with directives. These structures are established in different kinds of arrangements of information sources and channels. Together

with the visibility of gatekeepers and their activities, the structures contribute to the development of both impersonal and interpersonal trust within organizations. While this study was conducted in just one organization, our conceptual contributions are likely to be useful not only in other public sector organizations, but also in any type of large organizations. The flows of operational steering information and the gatekeeping structures are conceptual constructs that seek to enhance the understanding of this type of information may be managed and how trust can be fostered in such large organizations. In practical terms, identifying and fostering gatekeeping structures can play a significant role in promoting trust within these organizations.

Given the rise of digitalization and digital exhaust, the need for employees in public sector organizations to filter large volumes of information is increasingly urgent, which highlights the importance of further research on gatekeeping. Other important topics for further research are to explore gatekeeping structures that mitigate unintended withholding of information. Gatekeeping structures that consolidate information sources within team boundaries can inadvertently create silos, which restricts the intermediation of information to other teams. This could limit collaboration within the organization and potentially decrease employees' trust in the organizational processes. Future research may also find it beneficial to investigate the role of technology in gatekeeping and how this influences the development of trust. Researching these topics may become particularly essential as working life develops towards increasingly distributed work.

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