



# Tech Ethics, Organizational Values, and Ethical Work: Insights from a Qualitative Study of Five UK-Based Digital Technology Businesses

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## Abstract

The ethical challenges raised by the reach of digital technologies into all aspects of life highlight the moral role of the technology industry in modern society. While there is great potential for good, irresponsible development and commercialisation efforts can result in serious harm. As digital technologies and artificial intelligence become increasingly ubiquitous, technology companies face pressure from government and civil society to take their moral responsibility seriously. This paper takes a novel, virtue-ethical approach to the role and contribution of the values of technology firms. Rather than focusing on regulation, it considers how organisational values might support ethical decisions and moral conduct among employees. The paper presents findings of a qualitative study, which reveals how enacted organisational values within five technology companies support the establishment of an ethical culture that guides moral conduct. Based on our reflective thematic analysis of 30 interviews with UK employees, we identify three themes for the effective use of organisational values and the establishment of an ethical workplace culture: (i) “A lot of really, really good shiny examples”, (ii) Values should ‘talk the walk’, and (iii) “You can’t have a value if you don’t believe in it fully”. According to participant accounts, technology companies can successfully encourage moral conduct through effective use of organisational values.

**Keywords** Tech ethics · Organisational values · Organisational moral identity · Virtue ethics

## Introduction

Widespread concern regarding the influence of digital technologies across all aspects of personal and social life, has focused public attention on the moral responsibility and practices of technology firms (Bietti, 2021; Murgia, 2025; Zhao et al., 2025). Unfortunately, examples of negative outcomes associated with the design, deployment, and use of digital technology and AI abound. For example, traits of sycophancy, ‘evilness’, and a propensity to hallucinate can be seen in specific patterns of activity in large language models (LLMs; Chen et al., 2025). Such activity includes making up facts,<sup>1</sup> generating antisemitic comments, threatening content, blackmail, and manipulation

(Anthropic, 2025a; Chen et al., 2025). In one case, an update to ChatGPT’s GPT-4o in April 2025 resulted in the model becoming more sycophantic: “not just as flattery, but also as validating doubts, fuelling anger, urging impulsive actions, or reinforcing negative emotions” (OpenAI, 2025a). None of this was intended by the individuals who engineered the update, yet the outcomes were severe. Safety risks included fostering dangerous behaviour, emotional over-reliance, and negative mental health consequences such as encouraging discontinuation of psychiatric medication (Huckins, 2025; OpenAI, 2025a). The problem is not only AI. There are examples of the spread of disinformation on social media through fabricated content (Bleakley, 2023; Haider et al., 2024) or selectively amplified content relating to political events that appeals to the preferences or prejudices of a particular candidate’s

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<sup>1</sup> GPT-5, launched in early August 2025, has been found to confidently fabricate content less often (9% compared to 87.6% with the o3 model; OpenAI, 2025c), yet the aversion to admit when one doesn’t know the answer remains a prevalent concern for both computers and humans (see e.g., O’Connor, 2025).

supporters (Guess et al., 2018, 2019). The spread of disinformation and misinformation has also been identified in the medical world, where journal articles critiquing issues related to vaccine trials in the US at the height of the Covid pandemic were blocked on social media due to failures in fact checking (Abbasi, 2025). Cambridge Analytica's targeted political advertising during the 2016 US presidential election, enabled by "exploiting the sieve-like nature of Facebook's privacy policy" (Green, 2021, p. 209), is yet another example. The prevalence of such incidents has led to mounting criticism of technology firms (Foroohar, 2018; Green, 2021), which have been accused of paying insufficient attention to the ethical oversight of digital technologies. The approaches to ethics within technology firms and their ability to guide responsible product design and organisational practice have been widely critiqued (Bietti, 2021; Munn, 2023). However, agreement regarding which ethical constructs and technical standards would enable the realisation of ethical technology is lacking (Hagendorff, 2022; Jobin et al., 2019; Murgia, 2025).

This paper takes a fresh look at ethical practice in technology companies using a virtue-ethical approach. Rather than focusing on regulation, it looks internally to the values espoused by technology firms, considering how technology companies might effectively utilise organisational values to support ethical cultures, working practices, and moral agency (Moore, 2005; Robinson et al., 2013). We propose that organisational values—when deeply embedded—offer a promising way to guide moral conduct and ethical decision-making within tech companies. We also consider the importance of internal reputation and the ethical climate of an organisation's culture, both of which are identified as possible influences for ethical conduct (Harvey et al., 2022; Silver, 2019, 2025). Our argument highlights the important role that organisational values can play locally when a broader ethical framework for the sector is less evident. We draw upon reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) of interviews with 30 individuals working within five UK-based technology businesses, and identify three themes, which we propose illustrate how organisational values can support an organisational culture's ethical climate.

Before proceeding, some terminological clarifications are necessary. We begin with virtue ethics, which, as Yuan et al., (2023) write, places "one's inner goodness rather than the consequences of actions or behavioural rules of obligation at the centre of its theory" (p.121). Accordingly, we will consider how working in tech companies supports (or diminishes) individuals' moral agency—influencing the way they act and their way of being in the world (Alzola et al., 2020; Yuan et al., 2023). From a Neo-Aristotelian view, positive moral agency requires the cultivation of virtues (excellences of character) through intentional effort and practice (Aristotle, 1985; Robinson et al., 2013).

Virtue ethics is frequently distinguished from two other moral theories: deontology and consequentialism. Deontological approaches focus on rules and compliance, but are limited by the lack of formalised rules or codes within the tech-sector, the challenges of rigidity and conflicting rules in fast-changing and complex contexts, and the neglect of moral emotions (Gustafson, 2018). These limitations will be unpacked further through the article. Consequentialism is concerned with the outcomes of decisions, proceeding to determine ethicality by means of a cost–benefit analysis. For digital technology businesses, a consequentialist ethic is easily distorted from a concern for net social benefit to a dominant focus on outcomes such as efficiency, financial performance, competitive advantage, or shareholder value (Crossan et al., 2013; Gustafson, 2018; Mansell, 2013).

Possessing virtue is not simply about *doing* good but includes moral perception, emotion and motivation (Baehr, 2011; Battaly, 2018). For example, generosity disposes a person "to *notice* opportunities for giving, to *construe* ambiguous cues charitably, to *want* to help, to deliberate soundly about what would help in each particular circumstance, and to act reliably and successfully when she intends to help" (Robinson et al., 2013, p. 653). Relatedly, this may involve dialogue, questioning, and ascertaining various perspectives to acquire understanding—relying upon virtues such as intellectual humility, open-mindedness, and judgement (Kidd, 2016a, 2016b). Vices, on the other hand, are traits that stand in the way of human flourishing (Vallor, 2016). Examples of vices on display in business contexts include dishonesty, arrogance, domination, or selfish ambition (Bates et al., 2024; Robinson et al., 2013).

Ethical climate refers to "a shared, local understanding of what constitutes ethical or unethical behaviour" (Bates et al., 2024, p.1). It is an aspect of organisational culture involving "tacit organisational understandings (e.g., assumptions, beliefs, and values) that contextualise efforts to make meaning, including internal self-definition" (Hatch & Schultz, 2002, p. 996). A values-based leader acts in accord with an underlying ethical foundation (Crossan et al., 2024). When referring to leaders and followers, we take a broadly constructionist perspective, whereby the meanings of followership and leadership are co-constructed through social processes (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). We recognise both behavioural and positional understandings of leadership. Post-holders are often referred to as leaders, but a leader can also be understood as someone who displays leadership through their conduct and relationships (with or without a formal title).

## Background

The Big Tech<sup>2</sup> companies that are the source of globally recognised technology products are among the defining institutions of our day (Birch & Bronson, 2022). Digital technologies, particularly AI, are eagerly pursued as solutions to the numerous, complex problems we face in society (Ayling & Chapman, 2022). Often connected to ideas of monopoly, corporate surveillance, and market power, Big Tech is involved to an increasing extent in our personal, social, economic, and political lives through provision of the digital infrastructure that we often depend on (Abbasi, 2025; Prainsack, 2019). The influence of technology businesses is not only economic, but moral in nature (Hess, 2025). Numerous public examples illustrate this influence, including the case of Facebook.<sup>3</sup> According to a series of investigations, the Wall Street Journal found that the social media platforms owned by Facebook were “riddled with flaws that cause harm”, flaws known in detail by the company (Wall Street Journal, 2021).

In October 2021, Frances Haugen, former Product Manager at Facebook, spoke about the firm’s persistent prioritisation of profit over ethical and moral values, underpinned by a ‘move fast and break things’ culture (Green, 2021). Within this culture, priority was given to maximising user engagement (achieved by a combination of human design and decision-making, and AI), even when it was known to contribute to political polarisation, hate speech, misinformation, ethnic violence, and worse mental health outcomes for teenagers (Hao, 2021a, 2021b). Following her testimony and the Wall Street Journal investigations (Hagey & Horwitz, 2021; Horwitz, 2021), and in response to the moral quandaries raised, Haugen proposed that stricter regulations be placed on Facebook and other powerful technology companies. Such calls for tighter control and regulation are a typical response to organisational scandal (Bailey & Shantz, 2018; Copeland, 2014),

<sup>2</sup> Big Tech is typically understood to include Amazon, Apple, Facebook/Meta, Google, OpenAI and Microsoft (Abbasi, 2025; Birch & Bronson, 2022; Murgia, 2025).

<sup>3</sup> While Facebook has rebranded its umbrella company as Meta (see e.g., Birch & Bronson, 2022; Fernandez, 2022; Kominers & Shapiro, 2024), the articles cited herein make explicit reference to Facebook, which is why we continue to use the name of one of Meta’s particular products: Facebook. Importantly, this paper is not focussed on Facebook or Meta per se, nor does it seek to claim any opposition to the organisation. The focus on Facebook in this introduction is merely used to illustrate the influence the tech-sector bears upon both its employees and society as a whole, highlighting the moral role of the tech sector at large.

## Tech Ethics

The field of tech ethics as an area of academic, political, and industry interest has arisen in response to an awareness of the harms that digital technologies—including the design and deployment of algorithms, AI, and machine learning—may cause (Bietti, 2021). So understood, tech ethics is a label that characterises the introduction of ethics into all aspects of the research, development, use, and governance of digital technology (Green, 2021). It describes efforts to respond to ethical challenges posed by rapid technological innovation and data-driven technology (Metcalf et al., 2019; Munn, 2023). Such innovation was initially received with widespread optimism. Yet, mounting tech-related controversies have left many concerned about its negative influence over individuals and society (Ayling & Chapman, 2022; Martin, 2019). Specific cases of unethical practice have raised public alarm and provide the background to regulatory interventions such as the European Union’s Data Act (2023) and AI Act (2024).

The predominant industry response to such concerns has been a form of tech ethics that has prioritised ethical codes over deeper moral inquiry (Green, 2021; Hagendorff, 2022; Munn, 2023). A common manifestation of this approach is a list of principles or statements, covering themes such as transparency, privacy, accountability, non-discrimination, and non-maleficence (Fjeld et al., 2020; Jobin et al., 2019). Such principles are often supported by ethical oversight bodies, dedicated ethics teams, and advisory boards (Green, 2021). At least, this was the case prior to numerous redundancies in the ethics teams of Big Tech firms (Murgia, 2025).

The prioritisation of ethical codes is also exemplified in the ‘Responsible Scaling Policy’ developed by Anthropic (2025b). This policy focusses on establishing a framework of risk governance to address safety and security measures that safeguard against, and reduce the risk of, developing or deploying AI “models capable of causing catastrophic harm” (Anthropic, 2025b, p. 1). As Sam Altman (2025) writes, of the various, and serious, challenges that need to be confronted with AI, there is an ‘alignment problem’: that models and systems do not always act towards what we collectively desire in society. To illustrate this particular challenge, social media utilises:

“Algorithms that...are incredible at getting you to keep scrolling and clearly understand your short-term preferences, but they do so by exploiting something in your brain that overrides your long-term preference.” (Altman, 2025)<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> We note that Altman’s view of algorithms’ ability to understand short-term preferences is frequently contrasted with comments related to the attention economy, which focusses on persuasive design and

Central to the ‘Responsible Scaling Policy’ is the mitigation of risk through use of ‘Deployment Standards’ and ‘Security Standards’. The former aims to balance the beneficial use of AI technology while mitigating against the negative outcomes that may result from misuse; the latter’s focus is on security protection against theft, unauthorised access, and use by malicious actors. Such standards are intended to address misuse and safety concerns but they do so in a way that may marginalise reflection on values. Throughout the 23-page document there is a distinct lack of consideration of values or positive engagement regarding the use of digital technology and AI for human flourishing (Cath et al., 2018).

The development of regulatory frameworks and governance structures are important, but they are insufficient when it comes to addressing questions of values, purpose, and culture, which are major drivers of organisational behaviour (Bietti, 2021). They have been described as “vague and toothless”, having “a myopic focus on individual engineers and technology design”, and “subsumed into corporate logics and incentives” (Green, 2021, pp.209–214; Mittelstadt, 2019). Furthermore, governance structures are often superficial, lacking in effective implementation. As Bietti (2021) notes, accusations of tech companies’ engagement in ‘ethics washing’ has prompted criticism from both academic and tech communities. ‘Ethics washing’ involves self-regulatory efforts that evidence shallow ethical behaviour, including the use of ethics language and adoption of initiatives to avoid regulatory implications and reduce public scrutiny, and funding of academic research and conferences on tech ethics (Murgia, 2025). This enables tech companies to “perform a sleight-of-hand...[shifting] structural questions about power and profit out of view...[and painting] a self-portrait of ethical behaviour without meaningfully altering their practices” (Green, 2021, p.215). Firms have learnt how to speak and perform ethics, rather than make the structural changes required for technology that prioritises social good (Metcalf et al., 2019).

Addressing the substantial gap left by prevalent tech ethics approaches when it comes to ethical inquiry and decision-making is a task beyond the scope of this paper. Our concern focuses on what individual tech companies do at the local level to encourage an ethos that endorses ethical practice. We present empirical findings to address this smaller gap, exploring how organisational values can support an ethical organisational climate.

## Organisational Values

Organisational values are widely considered as a basis for understanding organisational priorities, shaping attitudes, preferences, and behaviour (Bourne & Jenkins, 2013; Dominick et al., 2021; Rokeach, 1968). Such values can be held by individuals and also serve an external facing purpose (Ladkin, 2021). Bourne et al. (2019) note a distinction between organisational values that are *espoused* and those that are *enacted* (Bourne & Jenkins, 2013; Howell et al., 2012). Espoused values are highly visible and accessible, seen on corporate documents and company websites (Harvey et al., 2022; Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Pruzan, 2001). Enacted values are those that are evident in practice and implicitly guide organisational decision-making (Bourne et al., 2019; Howell et al., 2012). Enacted values are influential in establishing organisational culture and internal perceptions of organisational reputation (Harvey et al., 2022; Hatch, 1993; Hatch & Schultz, 2002). Simply espousing organisational values is of little ethical use. Indeed, despite the familiarity of inherently admirable values statements and ethical codes throughout the business world, scandals remain commonplace, “fuelling scepticism about the effectiveness or truthfulness of organisational values stated by firms” (Adla et al., 2020, p.81).

Yet, *how* values are internalised within organisations is poorly understood (Dominick et al., 2021; Harvey et al., 2022; Ravasi, et al., 2018). This gap is significant, for subsequently little is understood about how organisations can successfully embed their values to the extent that they become enacted, rather than merely espoused (Harvey et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2019; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Internal reputation research indicates that organisational inner-workings—internal reputation and culture—appear most influential in guiding ethical action (Cornelissen et al., 2021; Hartman, 2006; Harvey et al., 2022). As noted above, discussion of ethics in the tech sector has been perceived as a reactive response to concerns over external reputation: a move to preserve self-regulation and prevent oversight, a superficial reaction to legitimate concerns that has led to accusations of ethics-washing (Ochigame, 2019). Our focus here is on the internal culture of technology firms, specifically their internal reputation and enacted organisational values, which might provide a pathway to addressing broader matters of ethical concern.

## Research Questions

The literature referenced above frames the focus of this paper, which originally set out as an inquiry to an overarching research question concerning the character strengths most important within the UK digital technology sector.

Footnote 4 (continued)

humans’ appetite for distraction—raising further, concerning ethical questions (see e.g., Williams, 2018). User engagement is an important, consequentialist metric linked with advertising revenue and shareholder profit (Abassi, 2025; Hao, 2021a).

Within this broader inquiry, we focussed our attention on the following two exploratory research questions:

1. Which virtues or character strengths are considered most important for ethical leadership in these tech companies?
2. What organisational practices, both implicit and explicit, cultivate or limit the expression of these virtues in the workplace?

The particular interest in organisational values and their contribution to ethical conduct by means of organisational culture arose during data analysis. This process, which relied upon Reflective Thematic Analysis (RTA), is detailed in the methodology section below.

## Method

Semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately one hour, were conducted online with 30 employees of varying rank and experience, across five UK-based digital technology businesses, during the period June 2021 to March 2022. Participants and their organisations were recruited by means of purposive sampling (Miles et al., 2020). Companies were first presented with a two-page document detailing the research project, and expectations of participating companies. The industry engagement officer then met with HR representatives and/or senior directors to answer any questions. We aimed to recruit from a range of organisations to represent the breadth of tech workers in the UK. Our participating companies included one large multi-national internet provider, two large software companies, a digital services provider, and a small start-up tech-based recruitment company. Within each company, we sought to recruit across various seniority levels, from senior directors, mid-level managers, and junior members where size and structure allowed. From these interviews, we felt that rich and detailed accounts had been captured, attaining substantial breadth and especially depth within the dataset. While some qualitative researchers seek saturation across participant accounts, following Braun and Clarke's (2022) guidance for RTA, we instead sought information power, acquired from perceived strength and richness of data—which we felt was attained following 30 interviews.

Interview participants were between the ages of 19 and 64 ( $M = 43.27$  years,  $SD = 11.68$  years), comprised 12 females and 18 males, with 83.33% of the sample identifying as White, 6.67% as Asian, 3.33% as Black and 6.67% simply putting "British". Level of rank, responsibility, and experience, as well as participant titles and roles, varied throughout. Of the 30 participants, 13 worked in an engineering capacity (e.g., software engineer, geospatial engineer,

project management), nine in senior management or directorship roles (e.g., Director, CEO, many with engineering backgrounds), three in marketing, three in human resources, one in sales, and one in procurement. Eligible participants were required to speak fluent English and were invited based on sector relevance, availability, and role within the company.

Interview questions related to participants' knowledge, understanding, and perception of their respective organisation's values, the ways in which this knowledge, understanding, and perception were developed, and the extent to which individuals felt the values influenced or guided their conduct (see Online Appendix A for the interview schedule).

Data were analysed using the method of reflective thematic analysis, whereby key themes in the transcripts are identified and investigated through an iterative process of meaning-making (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). The *reflexive* element of this process, as advocated by Braun and Clarke (2022), recognises that the research process is necessarily and valuably subjective. Thematic analysis, with the use of NVivo to code and analyse data, enabled the researcher<sup>5</sup> to inductively interpret patterns identified within the dataset. The first author conducted the analysis and met regularly with the other authors of the team to present and discuss potential identified themes. These meetings enabled the other authors to ensure the themes were representative of the data, particularly those involved in the interview and transcription process, and who had read the transcripts. The identified themes were consequently refined throughout the process and ultimately deemed to be an accurate representation of the data.<sup>6</sup> Participants have been randomly allocated pseudonymous labels of P1-P30, with identifying information removed to preserve the anonymity of individual participants and their organisations. Ethical approval was granted by the Central University Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford.

## Results

While the idea of 'tech ethics' is abstract and challenging to implement practically, our findings indicate that organisational values can be concrete and tangible, and emphasise their influence on formally promoting ethical decision-making and guiding an informal, ethical work climate (Harvey et al., 2022). During the interviews, participants were asked if they knew of their organisational values and were invited

<sup>5</sup> The reflective thematic analysis of this dataset was undertaken by the lead author of the paper.

<sup>6</sup> See Online Appendix B for a simplified illustrative example of theme generation for Theme 1 (adapted from Gioia et al., 2012).

to list and discuss them. For most participants, their organisation's values were well-known and central to their work-life, resulting in discussions around the values dominating much of the interview. This came as a surprise to the lead author, whose previous work on professional ethical codes (e.g., Maile et al., 2023) typically revealed little knowledge of existing codes by professionals in the field. The extent to which participants were knowledgeable about their organisation's values, and the extent to which participants spoke about them in meaningful ways, seemed significant.

Because organisational values (and their contribution to organisational culture, conduct, and decision-making) featured so centrally within individual interviewee accounts, the reasons *why* participants found them to be so influential are presented here. The results comprise three themes: (i) "A lot of really, really good shiny examples", (ii) Values should 'talk the walk', and (iii) "You can't have a value if you don't believe in it fully". The themes are detailed in the following sub-sections and illustrated in the thematic map below (see Fig. 1).

### "A Lot of Really, Really Good Shiny Examples"

This theme identifies that both leaders and followers can be exemplars of organisational values, which need to be lived within the organisation. Participants spoke about the need "to be a role model, when it comes to these values" (P30), and to "demonstrate these beliefs" (P25). How values might be lived—evident and observable—is illustrated by quotes that reference their use in everyday conversations:

*They actually do generally, I'm not sort of bullshitting, they actually generally come up in conversation all the time, it's part of the vocabulary of the company (P4).*

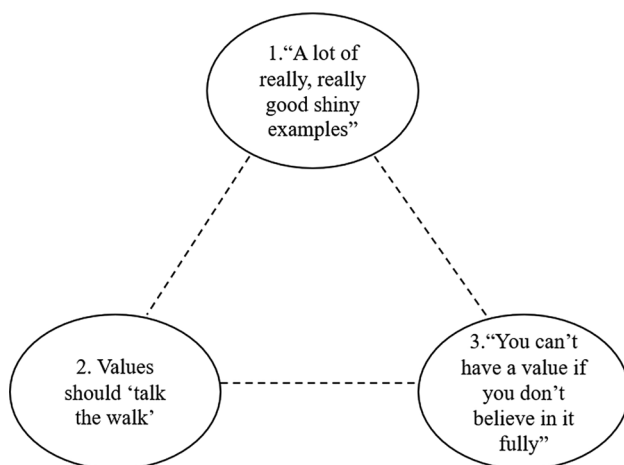


Fig. 1 Thematic map

For example, a core organisational value across participant accounts related to teamwork and collaboration:

*"If I phone up somebody that I haven't worked with in two years because I need some help, it won't be 'I am too busy'... [despite people being] over-stacked in terms of workload... they know [I'm] only going to be asking for something because [I] need help, it's what we do, right? It is a case of drop things, help somebody out, get them moving on and that for me is a clear demonstration" (P5).*

For another person, this value "isn't about...an individual's development above or at the cost of others... [rather it means] let's not leave people out, [or] behind, or tread on others to succeed internally" (P16). As this participant indicated, this is not always easy: "a lot of people who come in from... big US tech firms can struggle... because they might come in and want to exercise their big idea and... perhaps an ego" (P16). In contrast, this value informs a culture, "people describe it as antibodies towards that kind of behaviour" (P16).

Yet there are also "counter examples...people who don't do team work well, it's all about them...they steal the lime-light from other people, they're seen as political operators" (P25). People who would be given "a negative score" (P25) for collaboration and teamwork—are contrasted with "a manager who took on a slightly invisible role that was essential to glue together... the organisation with very little self-aggrandisement, that ended up being excellent on [teamwork and collaboration]" (P25). This participant uses good and bad examples to illustrate how organisational values are demonstrated—even 'counter examples' can guide one towards the value when their behaviour is negatively viewed by others. For example:

*I wouldn't say people hold up flags or call people out, going "[Teamwork, collaborate; teamwork, collaborate]" but...if somebody came in [and was] very individualistic, ego driven... The corridor comments would be, "It's not very [teamwork and collaboration]" (P16)*

Another organisational value that participants felt had been exemplified was 'challenge the status quo' (rephrased to preserve firm anonymity), a value which informs "how I should show up... [and] how the organisation works from a behavioural perspective...why, when I have an idea, someone challenges it, [with] expectations of me in terms of challenging others" (P27). For our participants, this informs a "culture where it's reasonable to go and ask what might seem stupid questions, or [to] explore that curiosity, and people are open and willing to talk to you and explain things to you" (P4). Thus, where challenging the status quo is exemplified in daily organisational life, this encourages

asking questions, a willingness to respond, and an ability to quench one's curiosity.

Yet, creating the right culture is important, "*you have to feel safe to be able to [ask] questions and not have someone laugh at you*" (P20). Here, the need for trust and psychological safety is important for a culture of open questioning. For this participant, "*if there is something you don't know, ask. I mean, I have learnt this a lot more because our current line manager is not actually a domain expert*" (P20). Accordingly, because this participant's line manager lacks relevant expertise, they have demonstrated the importance of asking questions to acquire knowledge and understanding. Willingness to ask questions is seen with another participant; "*I would say I'm always one that I need to know, if I don't know something I will go out there and I will find the answer*" (P6).

For others, "*challenging the status quo...is about innovation*" (P7). Indeed, "*if we challenge the status quo, we can imagine new horizons to improve the world*" (P28). With this value, "*you can agree to disagree, that's okay... [and] just because our leader, [A.B.], says we're going this way... that's okay too, because we can challenge the status quo*" (P11). This value encourages important conversations and facilitates collaboration: "*I would like to think that everyone within [my department] ...would feel very open to kind of challenging things, and having those conversations that they needed to*" (P8). Similarly, where "*innovation as a value*" (P7) is considered important within a firm, it is linked with "*being open-minded... I'm never too proud to steal anybody's good idea... [and] to learn from others as well*" (P7).

As one participant expressed, "*if you have been in the company for a week, you would have started to see a real demonstration of them...I think it kind of is in our DNA, right*" (P5). Echoing this sentiment, "*a lot of the solutions and pieces that we put together for customers, are built on that, on those...core values, whether it's [‘teamwork and collaboration’] or having the customer first*" (P8). For this participant, the organisational value of ‘customer at the heart’ (rephrased) features prominently within their problem-solving work for clients, "*that definitely pulls through because it's kind of just engrained in what we're trying to do*" (P8). Overall, our participants spoke about how the values are "*reflective and inwardly looking, about how we behave and how we work within the organisation...it does shy away from...[hitting] sales targets and deadlines... [and is rather about] how we do our day-to-day business, how we develop within our teams*" (P13).

### Values Should ‘Talk the Walk’

As illustrated above, values can contribute significantly to organisational culture, shaping norms and expectations. This theme suggests that the contribution of values

to culture occurs in a dialectical way: values ought to effectively articulate a culture that is tangible and evident within the organisation. In this way, values can both guide culture and be informed by it, highlighting the importance of internal reputational coherence. Accordingly, organisational integrity and authenticity is required, whereby organisations advocate for values that are evident within their culture and practices. The values should be "*quite authentic*", "*quite straightforward...[not] decoupled from [the] reality of how our employees feel*" (P5). Employees should not be "*confused as to what they are, what they mean and how to demonstrate them...you would...see a real demonstration of them*" (P5).

There are certain overlaps between this theme and Theme 1. However, where Theme 1 is about "*walking the talk, showing that you are hands-on, you're willing to sweep the sheds*" (P11)—by both leaders and followers—this second theme captures the need for the values to ‘talk the walk’. As such, the organisational values need to authentically represent what it's like working in the organisation, it's about "*telling them the true story*" (P9). Internal reputational coherence requires articulating the culture truthfully. For example, "*if it's a crazy, fast, busy place to work, they need to know that right at the start...Is it truthful? Are we saying what it really is like here?*" (P9). Furthermore, it is also important that the culture is evident in "*how we treat one another and communicate with one another when it's good and when things are tough*" (P15).

Participants spoke about organisational values being truthful reflections of personal experiences, something that is tangible in daily working life and exchanges with colleagues. In this way, organisational values can make a genuine and significant contribution to personal experiences of organisational culture. For example, "*the core beliefs are essentially in the DNA of the organisation [, because] everyone's operating in this way...the leaders are demonstrating the core beliefs in how they operate, it's just a part of the culture*" (P4). This sentiment was echoed by others who felt that "*...the whole company ethos is around its people and its values*" (P26), which "*really sort of underpin everything we do*" (P9). Another stated that organisational values "*build our legacy*" and "*pertain to our purpose*" (P11).

In contrast, for one company founder, organisational values were less about culture; rather, they were representative of individuals who possessed power: the founder and members of the board. Accordingly, an early-stage enterprise's values "*will disproportionately come from the founder...disproportionately representing [their] flaws and...strengths*" (P14).

Despite overall positive perceptions of organisational values and their contribution to the workplace, comments from two participants contrasting these perceptions were identified.

The company founder quoted above considered organisational values as “*corporatey things*” (P14). Similarly, a graduate recruit spoke of the values being “*all sorts of corporate garb really...we’re very buzz-wordy, say the right words, but you scratch the surface and there’s not much there to prove what you’re doing*” (P21). These views emphasise the need for the values to be tangible, evident within the behaviour and speech of individuals.

One participant working in HR remembered “*conversations where engineers said to me, ‘Oh it’s all...it’s all rubbish. It’s all HR speak. Culture’s not a thing.’ And I said, ‘Well okay...fine, I get you. Tell me what you care about? Why do you come to work?’ And...what they would do is articulate to you beautifully why culture is so important*” (P27).

Evident in this quote is an indication of how organisational values capture the essence of culture, offer guidance on how individuals should ‘show up’ to work, and different ways that they might be expected to engage, especially new staff. These accounts make clear that values should reflect the existent culture, that culture can be built and developed, and that organisational values make a significant contribution.

### **“You Can’t Have a Value if You Don’t Believe in it Fully”**

Tangibility of organisational values and the importance of internal reputational coherence is likely underpinned by the extent to which organisational values ‘align’ and ‘resonate’ with individuals. This theme encapsulates the importance of alignment between personal and organisational values.

When asked how their own values related to the tech company’s values, responses varied from “*quite closely -*” (P5), “*fairly well -*” (P19) and “*pretty well aligned*” (P8) through to “*definitely resonat[ing] with me*” (P28) and “*very, very aligned*” (P7). Due to perceived ‘resonance’ and ‘alignment’, participants commented that “*it feels like a very comfortable match*” (P11), such that “*me and [the organisation] kind of make sense*” (P15). This aspect of overlap and similarity between personal and organisational values speaks to the importance of integrity in the workplace. Indeed, for an organisational value to be adopted or incorporated into one’s conduct, the value needs to be personally relevant, maintaining one’s sense of moral integrity. As one participant stated, “*you can’t have a value if you don’t believe in it fully*” (P26).

Since participants’ “*own personal core beliefs are very...attuned to [the] organisation*” (P4), findings reveal that they have “*never really...conflicted against them*” (P13), nor have they had to say “*I’m absolutely not doing that, that’s wrong...[and been told], ‘Yes, you are. You will break that rule, you will ignore that concern’*” (P19). On the contrary, this sense of moral coherence and personal-organisational

integrity has enabled participants to “*really challenge certain things*” (P28). Despite “*align[ing] with the corporate goals of the organisation*”, as one participant revealed, “*it is not as if I believe that [the company] can do no wrong*” (P18). Rather, “*people constantly are calling out decisions that we make internally...[and are]...not afraid of calling out [the company] locally, internally*” (P18). Organisational values may provide useful “*terminology to discuss behaviour, or where they see challenges, [which] does get used daily*” (P16). Accordingly, values-led tech companies may foster a greater willingness to challenge organisational status quo, raise concerns over ethical decisions, and equip individuals with terminology to articulate this.

If perceived ‘resonance’ between personal and organisational values is lacking, it seems likely that organisations might have higher staff-turnover: “*they do relate... if they didn’t, I would struggle to stay with the organisation*” (P29). When the company is “*mission driven, if you’re not, you wouldn’t hang around, why would you work here?*” (P3). Indeed, “*that’s why people stay so long within the company, because... the values that they have match the company values*” (P17). In summary, “*if the core beliefs aren’t for you then you might not be for [this company] really, it might not be a good cultural fit*” (P25).

Participants also spoke about the values attracting them to the company initially: “*values [such as] teamwork, ethics, integrity...really appealed*” (P6), because the “*people [and] culture...embodied [the organisational values, and] was really apparent...in the interview process...[which] attracted me*” (P8). At times, this perceived sense of moral alignment extended beyond values to a wider sense of organisational purpose. Participants “*really value what [the organisation is] doing...to make the worlds information accessible to everybody, to improve the world*” (P3). For another, “*I feel very strongly aligned*” to the company, because “*they do want to imagine change. I think it’s part of my DNA too*” (P23). In this way, organisations with deeply rooted and tangible values are likely to attract employees motivated by the same purpose, and whose moral values align with the company’s.

Lastly, participants expressed how the organisational values and culture had influenced their own moral frameworks. While one participant felt that “*I don’t think I’ve actually had to change in any kind of way*” because “*I’ve always had values which have aligned to [company] values*” (P28), others felt that “*it absolutely has shaped me*” (P4) and “*definitely does change you as a person*” (P29). One reason is that organisational values offer guidance on “*how we expect you to be showing up to work...what we esteem as a company, and therefore what you should try and fit into*” (P25). Accordingly, the values were seen by many as a “*useful tool*” (P13), guiding “*their action and behaviour at work*” (P25). Another reason concerns time: “*half my life for*

the last 20 years...[working] 12-hour days” (P4) is likely to have “a huge influence over me as a person, and also what I value and care about” (P5).

Despite accusations that organisational values and purpose might be considered “*corporate garb*” (P21) undertaken because it is fashionable, this theme highlights the importance for participants from these tech companies for a strong sense of moral alignment between organisational and personal values. Furthermore, the theme suggests that values might ultimately shape the company culture—by means of the recruits it attracts—and employee values, by moulding or influencing their experiences within the company. That a values-based form of leadership is something both leaders and followers need to exemplify, while unexpected, was a very encouraging finding during the data analysis process. We were also interested in the conceptual distinction between espoused and enacted organisational values generated in the second theme, highlighting the inadequacy of efforts at ‘ethics-washing’ internally. In the third theme, an important personal dimension of the role and contribution of organisational values is identified, which seems pertinent to a virtue-ethical conceptualisation of organisational values. Both the emphases on internal reputational coherence and moral alignment were encouraging research findings.

## Discussion

Digital technology, the widespread deployment of AI, and the sector from which they arise, are ethically charged subjects on account of the pervasive influence of digital technologies, and their ethically ambiguous impact (Birch & Bronson, 2022; Hao, 2021a, 2021b; Prainsack, 2019; Wernaart, 2022). Concerns include in-built bias, inequality, unfairness, and a lack of institutional accountability and transparency (Martin, 2022; Noble, 2018; Phan et al., 2022; Resnik, 2025). There is a further concern that sector-wide self-regulation means that prevalent tech ethics approaches may fail to inform or guide the conduct and moral agency of employees towards work that is good for society (Green, 2021; Foroohar, 2018). Indeed, its focus is often on providing a framework for safety concerns that are managed by security protocol, rather than appealing to the moral agency of actors within the sector (Anthropic, 2025b).

By contrast, our research considered ways that moral agency may be engaged in practice *within* organisations. In exploring the role of organisational values within these tech sector firms, we sought to consider how organisations’ values might encourage ethical behaviour and inhibit unethical behaviour. We were also interested to investigate how organisational values move beyond behaviour, contributing to the moral agency of tech sector employees as they seek to

pursue the right course of action (de Bruin, 2013; de Rooij & de Bruin, 2022; Weaver, 2006).

Evident from the first theme in our findings is the role of exemplars. From our data, we see the role of an exemplar as someone who displays the organisational values of (particular) tech firms in their conduct—either directly through interpersonal exchanges whereby evidence of the value is experienced, or indirectly, where evidence of the value is observed. From a virtue-ethical framing, it is personal excellences or virtues, which make someone admirable (Crossan et al., 2013; Yuan et al., 2023). Within organisational contexts exemplars elicit admiration and subsequent emulation by their practice of organizational values as habitual moral traits (David, 2025; Zagzebski, 2013). This ability to elicit admiration through the exercise of virtues is linked to the second and third themes.

The second theme points to the importance of organisational values that articulate an existing culture—that values talk the walk—and reflect the reality of working within that organisation (Harvey et al., 2022; Moore, 2005). The third theme highlights the importance of resonance between what individuals hold to be ethically important, and the values that they are guided by within their organisations. In this way, employees can “fully believe” (P26) in the values promoted by their tech firms because they mirror their own, personal values. Accordingly, exemplary conduct can support the development of moral learning and cultivation of personal character (Bandura, 1977; David, 2025). Moreover, it is these qualities of character that support good decision-making and wise action in response to the grand social challenges that sectors like the tech industry are required to face (Ayling & Chapman, 2022; Crossan et al., 2024; Prainsack, 2019).

As indicated by our participants, many examples can be called to mind when their colleagues have evidenced organisational values, such as ‘teamwork and collaboration’—either through observation or through interpersonal exchanges. From these accounts, we see that exemplars (good examples) provide helpful guidance concerning *how* the values can be lived in their day-to-day working lives. Anti-exemplars (or bad examples) are those who offer counterexamples of the organisational values—what not to do—and do not display admirable virtues, but rather vices of character (Baird & Calvard, 2019; Cassam, 2014; de Bruin, 2013). Accordingly, an exemplar may elicit admiration from another because of how they have been virtuous in a particular situation or circumstance, or through conversations that recognise discordance between the way an individual has acted and the values of their organisation (Zagzebski, 2013).

Motivated by admiration for how one has displayed virtuous behaviour in their ‘living out’ of an organisational value, observers of moral exemplarity may be fuelled with a desire to emulate the virtue they have observed in action

(Henderson, 2022; Zagzebski, 2013, 2017). Individuals may develop their own virtuous moral agency as they seek to emulate the virtues they have witnessed (Crossan et al., 2013, 2024). To become habituated in virtue takes effort and intention, requiring motivation to exercise virtue for the attainment of specific goods (Baehr, 2011; Battaly, 2018; Robinson et al., 2013). From a virtue ethics perspective, through conscious attention and effort, an individual is shaped by the actions and behaviours (as well as cognitions and emotions) which they repeatedly engage in (Crossan et al., 2017, 2024; Moore, 2005). Seeing that this may be possible in organisations guided by organisational values that cohere with personal values, offers a novel insight into how workplaces might support the habituation of virtues (de Rooij & de Bruin, 2022).

‘Teamwork and collaboration’ was identified as a cluster organisational value across participating tech firms. Participant accounts bring to light how evidence of this value invokes the virtues of humility and helpfulness, amongst others. The exercise of humility—including epistemic humility (Roberts & Wood, 2007)—can be seen across several accounts: (i) the manager who took on a slightly invisible role that served as the glue for the organisation, without self-aggrandisement (P25); (ii) knowing that your ideas will be challenged, and that you should challenge ideas in return (P27); or (iii) the employee who sees that the only way to gain new knowledge is by asking questions, something which was exemplified by their line manager who lacked particular expertise (P20). Relatedly, participants spoke about the importance of questioning and dialogue in the pursuit of understanding and problem-solving—a willingness to challenge things (P8), to be open-minded and learn from others (P7), and to find the answers to their query (P6). An environment in which employees are encouraged and feel free to ask questions, to share their knowledge, to engage in dialogue that involves criticism as well as inquiry, is evidence of an organisation that is conducive to epistemic virtue (de Rooij & de Bruin, 2022).

Recognising the importance of engaging in these open and challenging conversations, and evidence of seeing this in action, brings to light the additional virtues of open-mindedness and curiosity (Kidd, 2016a, b). These epistemic virtues are associated with a willingness to consider alternative ideas when it is appropriate to do so, and the pursuit of worthwhile knowledge to overcome an obstacle, or solve a problem, encouraging evidence-based practice and willingness to learn from one another (Baehr, 2011; Baird & Calvard, 2019; Watson, 2018, 2019). Accordingly, risk of pretence of knowledge that undermines the importance of ethics and ethical-conduct, and which is unconducive to addressing the complex problems typical of the tech sector, can be circumvented (Hühn, 2014; Phan et al., 2022; Sadler-Smith & Cojuharenco, 2021). There seems to be evidence

from these accounts that, at minimum, colleagues pay attention to one another (and listen to what each other has to say), acknowledge the value of their query or input openly, and are willing to change their minds accordingly—if this is so, these are further indications of an environment in which virtue cultivation is supported (de Rooij & de Bruin, 2022).

Moreover, willingness to respond to that open-mindedness and curiosity by engaging in discussion and dialogue appear evident—thus a form of epistemic generosity can be identified (Baehr, 2011; de Rooij & de Bruin, 2022; Robinson et al., 2013). Indeed, participants spoke about a culture where colleagues were helpful and supportive, where questions were encouraged and could be asked without embarrassment (again fostering epistemic humility, nurturing curiosity), and in which they could expect knowledge or practical guidance to be shared in response. These actions and behaviours from participant accounts further reveal cultures of generosity and respect, where questions are viewed charitably, where opportunities to help are identified, and where there is a desire to support a colleague in overcoming their challenge or finding a resolution to their problem (Baehr, 2011; Robinson et al., 2013).

The virtues that can be associated with individuals ‘living’ the organisational values, as detailed above, offer important insight regarding moral agency in the uncertain contexts where ‘tech ethics’ policies, such as the Responsible Scaling Policy (RSP) by Anthropic (2025b), are utilised. For example, the RSP suggests producing a ‘Capability Report’, a document detailing the analysis and findings from an assessment of the capability thresholds—which indicate when an upgrade to digital technology protections is required, as well as which ‘standard’<sup>7</sup> from the corresponding ‘required safeguards’ should apply. According to the policy, the capability report “will be escalated to the CEO and the Responsible Scaling Officer [(RSO)], who will (1) make the ultimate determination as to whether we have sufficiently established that we are unlikely to reach the Capability Threshold and (2) decide any deployment-related issues” (Anthropic, 2025b, p. 7). In their decision-making process, the CEO and RSO “will likely solicit internal and external feedback... prior to making any decisions” (Anthropic, 2025b, p. 7)—decisions for which they ultimately take joint-ownership of, and whose judgement will be relied upon in situations of policy ambiguity. The CEO and RSO clearly have an important role to play, and their colleagues may, possibly, be able to contribute to their decision-making process. It seems evident that environments conducive to the exercise of

<sup>7</sup> These are the AI Safety Level Standards (ASL Standards), categorised into ‘Deployment Standards’ or ‘Safety Standards’. They provide the operational and technical measures for the safe training and deployment of frontier AI models (Anthropic, 2025b).

intellectual (as well as moral) virtues mentioned above (e.g., open-mindedness, curiosity, critical thinking, epistemic generosity, humility, etc.)—where proposals and ideas are dialogically engaged with, critiqued, and challenged as part of a cultural norm—would benefit such a process (see e.g., Maile, forthcoming; cf. Sadler-Smith et al., 2019).

Similarly, participants (e.g., P28, P11) spoke about being expected and able to ‘challenge the status quo’, an act which arguably calls for the epistemic virtues of courage and critical thinking. From a Neo-Aristotelian perspective, courage is located between the extremes of recklessness (the vice of excess) and cowardice (the vice of deficiency)—its epistemic counterpart involves the pursuit of knowledge or understanding (Baehr, 2011; de Bruin, 2013). Accordingly, courage is required to speak up and raise concerns, to challenge dominant ideas, or to question a colleague whose status might be higher than one’s own, or whose knowledge and expertise might be highly regarded in the organisation. Such acts are likely to be limited in contexts where epistemic vices—such as insouciance, malevolence, hubris, and injustice—predominate (Baird & Calvard, 2019; see e.g., Hao, 2021a, b, c). Such vices are often regarded as prevalent in the tech sector, where they are attached to framings of Big Tech (Murgia, 2025; Phan et al., 2022) and ‘Tech Bros’ (Aaronson & Moreno, 2025; Abbasi, 2025)—whose ‘status quo’ is associated with monopoly, power, misogyny, and the absolute pursuit of wealth and political power (Birch & Bronson, 2022).

In contrast to such vices and related to the value of ‘challenge the status quo’ was the call to innovation, to imagine new possibilities—evoking notions of creativity and imagination that might drive other epistemically virtuous acts (Baehr, 2011). Thus, alongside previously discussed virtues of curiosity and open-mindedness, this value appears to foster a desire to pursue new insights. This pursuit might involve experimentation and reflection, the exercise of different talents and skills, and require input from others across different teams or departments. Accordingly, by encouraging employees to challenge the status quo, and being provided with exemplars for employees to observe (or experience) how this can be done and responded to, organisations can foster various epistemic virtues and remedy against vice (de Rooij & de Bruin, 2022).

Vices were identified and associated with counterexamples or anti-exemplars. Indeed, because an organisation’s ethos was counter-cultural for new recruits from “big US tech firms” (P16), the virtues identified above were contrasted with vices of hubris: people wanting to prioritise their ideas and feed their ego. Pride, arrogance, overconfidence, and contempt for critique and advice from others are all attributes of hubris (Baird & Calvard, 2019; Sadler-Smith & Cojuharenco, 2021). Vice (like virtue) can function collectively, characterising individual teams, departments,

boards of directors, or entire corporations (Burton et al., 2025; de Rooij & de Bruin, 2022; Silver, 2019, 2025). At both the individual and collective level, antidotes for vice need to be identified. A potential route by which this can be achieved is through anti-exemplars. When anti-exemplars are able to feature in corridor conversations about conduct that is not appropriate and counter to an organisation’s values, this can inadvertently serve as a form of guidance towards conduct that is both appropriate and ethically conducive, thus reinforcing individual moral agency.

Organisational values appear to be embedded in several ways. They are made evident in practice by colleagues and managers identified as exemplars, and where counterexamples are observed, it appears that people take equal notice—not merely in a punitive way, but in a way that encourages virtue instead of vice, by bringing the organisational values into regular conversations amongst colleagues (e.g., P4, P16). Another route by which values can become embedded, requiring a move from *espoused* values to *enacted* values, is by incorporating them into meaningful appraisal processes. In this way, enacting the values becomes, in essence, part of the job (Dominick et al., 2021) and where organisations both ‘walk the talk’ and ‘talk the walk’ (Auster & Freeman, 2013; Cording et al., 2014; Freeman & Auster, 2011). Ultimately, different values will guide different behaviours, leading to different outcomes. For example, Facebook’s value of ‘move fast’ will likely have different outcomes (c.f. ‘move fast break things’, Green, 2021; Hao, 2021b) to PWC’s value of ‘care’,<sup>8</sup> or Samsung’s value of ‘integrity’.<sup>9</sup>

Our data also indicate the benefit when organisational values have a sense of coherence or alignment with one’s personal values (Bezrukova et al., 2012; Kim & Hess, 2023). For Weaver (2006), individual virtue and personal identity are connected. Where value misalignment exists, organisations can establish a context in which personal identity might be compartmentalised, resulting in situations where individuals lose sight of their personal identity—they feel unable to exercise personal character and moral agency (Crossan et al., 2013; Scott & Lane, 2000; Weaver, 2006). In contrast, as our participants reveal, when there is a sense of resonance between personal and organisational values, moral agency can be exercised in ways that fulfil organisational values

<sup>8</sup> Despite not being a tech company, PWC’s value of ‘care’ was selected here because it arose anecdotally with peers during conversation about organisational values, and because it offers a contrast perspective to a value of ‘move fast’. PWC’s values can be found on their website: <https://www.pwc.co.uk/careers/about-us.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Again, this value has been selected for its ethical focus, and to illustrate that certain tech companies do utilise ethically oriented organisational values. Samsung’s values can be found online: <https://www.samsung.com/uk/about-us/brand-identity/brand-story/>; [https://www.sgs.samsung.com/newpage/newpage.php?f\\_id=samsung\\_value](https://www.sgs.samsung.com/newpage/newpage.php?f_id=samsung_value).

and expectations (Dominick et al., 2021; O’Fallon & Butterfield, 2005, 2011). Selecting organisational values that reflect human (and not only professional) virtues, and avoiding organisational values that are jingoistic or ‘corporate’, may support their enactment (Hess, 2025; Robinson et al., 2013; Silver, 2019, 2025).

## Considerations

Several considerations of the qualitative methodology applied in our research are worth noting briefly. Sampling of participants was reliant upon gatekeepers at each organisation,<sup>10</sup> resulting in diversity of experience, seniority, and background (e.g., Director, Engineer, HR manager) of our participants. The framing of the research with concepts such as ‘character strengths’, ‘values’, and ‘leadership development’ (see Online Appendix A) may have denoted the desire for more positive connotations and responses from participants. Accordingly, issues of social-desirability bias, self-deception bias, and self-confirmation bias may have been present in the data. However, the inclusion of alternative, negative or contradictory accounts of organisational values in the findings above, as well as the assurance of research confidentiality and anonymity, have ameliorated some of these limitations. Researcher bias is also possible. Practices of reflexivity and bracketing, and a thorough internal and blind peer-review process, will have helped to limit this.

Another important consideration concerns the recent prevalence of LLMs in all aspects of society, the use of which, and involvement in our daily lives, has risen to prominence in recent years (Floridi, 2025). The launch of OpenAI’s ChatGPT in November 2022 has introduced significant new technological capabilities, which continue to advance, and become ever more implicated in the way people, society, and technology interact (Dwivedi et al., 2024; OpenAI, 2022). The ethical questions this raises are ever present, and important ones to address (Anthropic, 2025a; Chen et al., 2025; Huckins, 2025). Due to the fact that our data collection occurred before generative AI and LLMs such as ChatGPT took the world by storm, our research has not been able to directly address these particular ethical issues. However, we note that this is now a major focus for ongoing research in this field (see e.g., Zhao et al., 2025). With this consideration in mind, we do not think that this reduces the impact of our findings. Indeed, if organisational values in tech companies may support the cultivation of

virtues and development of moral agency, as our findings suggest, they remain relevant, even if the data were collected prior to the widespread adoption of LLMs.

## Conclusion

Organisational values are considered by certain scholars to feature merely as instrumental corporate features (Bourne et al., 2019), with little impact on preventing unethical practices (Adla et al., 2020), or perhaps as part of ‘ethics-washing’ efforts in the tech sector (Bietti, 2021; Murgia, 2025). Yet, in contrast, our participants spoke about how organisational values were influential in how they conducted themselves in the workplace, engaged with their colleagues, and sought to find innovative solutions to the complex problems faced within their firms. ‘Teamwork and collaboration’, ‘challenge the status quo’, and ‘customer at the heart’ were identified as organisational value clusters that were shared across participating tech firms in our data. From the participant accounts of how these values are enacted, certain virtues are brought to light. Accordingly, our participant accounts offer insight as to how well-embedded organisational values can guide ethical conduct.

These personal experiences from within the tech sector indicate how organisational values can foster virtue and counteract vice, something we believe is significant for a sector that lacks a rigorous ethical foundation (Green, 2021; Hagendorff, 2022; Mittelstadt, 2019; Munn, 2023). As de Rooij and de Bruin (2022) suggest, to reliably ensure that an organisations various epistemic ends are achieved, the senior management responsible for these outcomes ought to ensure that members of the organisation possess—and are supported to develop and pursue—the virtues (be they epistemic, moral, or service oriented) that their roles and responsibilities require. We hope that our findings help to put some empirical meat onto the bones of their conceptual proposal.

Based on qualitative findings, organisational values—when aligned with the three themes (Themes 1–3), and conducive to virtue cultivation as identified above—present an opportunity to fill the ethical gap existent in prevalent compliance-focused approaches to tech ethics. These findings offer an avenue for ongoing moral development, and insight to the perpetual business ethics concern: how to cultivate an ethical climate that endorses moral conduct (Kim & Hess, 2023). Accordingly, our findings indicate that, while the challenges facing tech ethics present a significant ethical gap for the sector, tech companies can encourage much needed moral conduct through effective use of organisational values. Moreover, we suggest that a virtue-ethical framing of organisational values offers compelling guidance toward

<sup>10</sup> Organisations were assured of the anonymisation of all findings, reducing the incentive to select participants that would present only positive impressions of the company. Furthermore, a range of experience levels was requested.

ethical conduct and the establishment of an ethical work climate that is much needed in the tech sector.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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