UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG
SCHOOL OF BUSINESS, ECONOMICS AND LAW

# How Managers in an MNC deal with Internal Communication

*-A Single Case Study-*

Department of Business Administration
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Thesis in Management
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# Abstract

This Case Study is a Bachelor Thesis in Management about internal communication. The purpose of the study is to increase knowledge and create a better understanding on how managers work with internal communication in an MNC. To answer the purpose of the study the following research question with following sub question have been designed:

RQ - "*How do managers in an MNC deal with internal communication?* and

*S*Q- "*What communication methods and communication tools do they use?"*

The foundation of this study is a research approach based on a Single Case Study methodology where existing theories have been used in conjunction with our empirical findings. The refined theoretical framework has supported us in creating knowledge, understanding and insights about the field of internal communication. The Case Study was conducted on a unit within an MNC, a global leader within the technology area, with its headquarter situated in Gothenburg, Sweden. In the case study we used an approach of qualitative research in the form of interviews.

The themes displayed in this study are communication methods such as face-to-face interactions, informal versus formal communication and how to utilize and structure different communication tools and communication implications.

Our conclusions show that face-to-face meetings, both formal and informal, are important ways to communicate, over any other communication tool available in the organisation. In an MNC context, video conferencing is regarded as a form of face-to-face interaction, since physical meetings is often not possible. In addition, it is important to know when and how to use the different communication methods and tools. And also, how to systematise incoming information and filter it towards colleagues in order to overcome information overload. A more pulled, rather than pushed, information could help reduce overload and increase productivity in the organisation. Finally, in order to build efficiency and transparency it is important for managers to convey a clear vision towards employees.



**Keywords**: MNC, Internal Communication, Formal and Informal Communication, Business Email, CC email, Skype, Push and Pull

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# 1. Introduction

An MNC (Multinational Cooperation) with a global presence need to organise internal communication methods and communication tools in an efficient way in order to be successful. The daily situation addresses physical distance, headquarters-subsidiary relations, different cultures and many other factors which all affect internal communication. According to Li and Tallman (2011), MNCs that are geographically widespread globally strengthen their capability to manage business performance at a lower transaction cost, reducing expenses when selling and buying products or services. Bartlett and Ghoshal (as referenced by Harzing, 2000) extends this typology to creating cost advantages by reducing costs through economies of scale; by minimizing duplication of activities and through standardization of products and services creates advantages for earning profit. Thus, to avoid duplication or unnecessary administration, it is vital how the internal communication is handled (Harzing, 2000).

In a global company, communication is cascaded down through the hierarchical levels. In addition to this vertical communication there is also information shared horizontally from various stakeholders in different functions throughout the organisation. It might not be evident what is important to the business area you are part of and how to respond, filter, handle the information or how to communicate when implementing effective organisational changes (Devarajan, Maheshwari and Vohra, 2016); employee readiness and acceptance for changes (Ruben and Gigliotti, 2017). As, Czarniawska (2017) noted, organisations are communication systems, where organisations are dependent on a communication pattern, where there lies a need of a detailed hindsight that narrates how organisations shall use their energy to perform their work. Hence, internal communication is of great importance for communication effectiveness, achieving intended influence upon outcomes and sustainable financial results (Ruben and Gigliotti, 2017). A lot of information flows daily between the employees working in the company. Nowadays, more employees work remote with technologies advancements. New communication tools enable better efficiency, creativity and teamwork (Artelt, 2017). Hence, the complexity of the global context implies for understanding of internal communication methods and communication tools. Therefore, our chosen company's internal communication practices may provide good knowledge for other MNCs' and inspire for re-examination and reconstruction of their own context (Merriam, 2010).

## 1.1 Statement of the Problem

Many MNCs that operate business activities globally encounter problems with their internal communication. Rapid changes in technology and the continuously uncertain or volatile business environment show a need for well managed communication. Internal communication is considered crucial in this changing business environment (Devarajan,

Maheshwari and Vohra, 2016). Moreover, when the employees are in different geographical locations, communication differenties; there are more problems to consider and it is difficult to obtain efficiency and engagement. The methods used, how communication is done, and what communication tools are used are all dimensions that affect the communication. Also, the progress in communications technology such as virtual communication shows for instance, both advantages such as speed in forming teams globally and disadvantages such as self-interest over the good of the team (Antonakis and Atwater 2002). In addition, Bahar (2020) emphasizes the importance of internal communication since a higher overlap in working hours due to different geographical locations increase the cost and that easing the communication between the sites reduces this cost.

Few case studies have looked at how internal communication actually works in a global company where there lies problems with, for instance, business email, CCing (i.e. sending carbon copies), video conferencing, transparency and overload of information. To give an example, business email CC is under researched despite the more frequent use of it (Machili, Angouri and Harwood, 2019). The business environment is becoming more and more complex and it is crucial to recognise the impact, and the important role, of internal communication at the workplace. Hence, it is crucial to understand the imperative parameters in internal communication, which leads us to our research question (RQ):

RQ - "*How do managers in an MNC deal with internal communication?*"

To respond to this question we need to understand what methods and tools they are using in their daily communication, hence the sub research question (SQ) follows:

SQ- "*What communication methods and communication tools do they use?*"

## 1.2 Purpose

The purpose of this case study is to increase knowledge and create a better understanding on how managers work with internal communication in an MNC. This case study will contribute with knowledge and understanding about internal communications methods and communication tools; how these are dealt with, shall be dealt with and how issues can be overcome. The case study will hopefully provide new ways of thinking about something familiar such as internal communication.

## 1.3 Aspirations

With our case study we want the MNC, as well as other MNCs, to understand how internal communication works. It is our aim to display how things are done through our findings as well as to show possible directions. Thus, the actionability of our readers should be feasible in their environments and empowering them with clarity towards greater actions (Lincoln and Guba, 1990).

# 2. A Refined Theoretical Framework to understand Internal Communication

The theoretical framework aims to give our readers an overview into the theories on which we have based our study, namely Internal Communication with Communication Methods and Communication tools.

## 2.1 Internal Communication

The way to describe communication is by saying it is a transmission, exchange or sharing of information, with the aim to persuade and influence (Cornelissen, 2011). In communication the creation and transmission of a message reaches the receiver, the process seems very linear and foreseeable. Thus, communication may sound very simple, but as most people know, it is not always true that what is said is what is perceived. In addition, effective communication, where the sender of the information achieves intended outcome is very crucial for a company that wants to be successful (Ruben and Gigliotti, 2017). Internal communication is an important social phenomenon occurring between employees and managers internally within the organisation, followed by efficiency of the company and for every individual to understand and feel secure in their task and motivated to perform (Cornelissen, 2011). In addition, technical advances have led to more complex business environment with more information available through many communication tools (Bawden and Robinson, 2009). With internal communication, there are also different methods for the employees to share information. In this study, methods are divided in formal and informal and will be expanded on below.

## 2.2 Communication Methods

Czarniawska (2017) writes that managers are communicators, although she is critical about that property, she emphasizes the importance of managers for organising the work for the employees, so the employees can do what is expected by them and what needs to be done. The understanding of communication facilitates the work of designing a clear strategy of what the manager wants to achieve with their internal communication. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2010) share the same basic view as Czarniawska (2017) where they add that leadership is the establishment of overall orientation through inspirational communication and action. Successful internal communication methods inspire both managers and employees in their work and contributes to higher productivity and improved performance.

### 2.2.1 Formal Communication

The formal communication characteristics are defined as pre-scheduled in terms of the timing, participants, and agenda (Kraut et al., 1990). Formal communication such as

face-to-face meetings or teleconferences, are more restricted communication in direction and content. As Cornelissen (2011) emphasise, face-to-face is a rich form of communication since it provides immediate feedback and the communication can be adjusted along the way. Furthermore, the face-to-face communication is useful in particular for persuasive, sensitive or complex discussions (Cornelissen, 2011). Although, formal communication is considered more old-fashioned and bureaucratic, it comes with more clarity, transparency, and accountability. The use of standardized formal communication arrangements improves the rate of delivery accomplishment and is especially effective for recurrent events. When documenting on errors that occur, people learn from these mistakes and are encouraged to use standard agendas to review what has happened. Also, formal communication encourages accountability for tasks and gives all participants the possibility to address issues with the right stakeholders as stated in the protocol. Since, individuality in communication or informality might lead to misalignment in efforts and frustration about different expectations within the organisation, a formal agenda being specific, would serve as a crucial advantage for the company (Tenhiälä and Salvador, 2018).

### 2.2.2 Informal Communication

In contrast to formal, informal communication is spontaneous communicative activities, such as emails and phone calls, where none of the variables timing, participants, or agenda, are defined in advance. Hence, informal communication is characterised by speed, flexibility and completing things (Tenhiälä and Salvador, 2018; Kraut et al., 1990). Another aspect is video based informal communication where studies show an increase and easiness in spontaneous interaction, although to less extent than informal face-to-face interactions (Fish et al. 1993). In turn, interactive informal communication considers the participants' current point of view and produces a feedback loop that might be more effective than formal communication. As participants in a conversation interact the feedback helps adjust what has been communicated to solve any misconceptions. Moreover, informal communication does not likely consider rules or hierarchies. However, social roles and relationships of the participants influences formality in a conversation. Naturally, conversations become more formal when conducted with unfamiliar people or in unequal status, than in a familiar setting. Moreover, a conversation with a manager in an official role will become formal but might move to informal when communication is more frequently used several times a day (Kraut et al., 1990).

An informal, social discussion in the corridor or in front of the coffee machine opens up for spontaneous discussions. Without informal communication collaborations would not arise, knowledge sharing, innovation and learning would stagnate. Furthermore, social relations would not become productive and successful. Informal communication is a frequent activity for many managers in order to get informed, share their opinions and in making decisions (Kraut et al., 1990).

### 2.2.3 Strategic Communication

Barrett (2002) presents a model, the Strategic Employee Communication Model in Figure 1, that originated from a high performing milieu and adds a description on improvement of employee communication. The model displays effective employee communication in seven categories (see Fig.1), also summarized in Table 1.

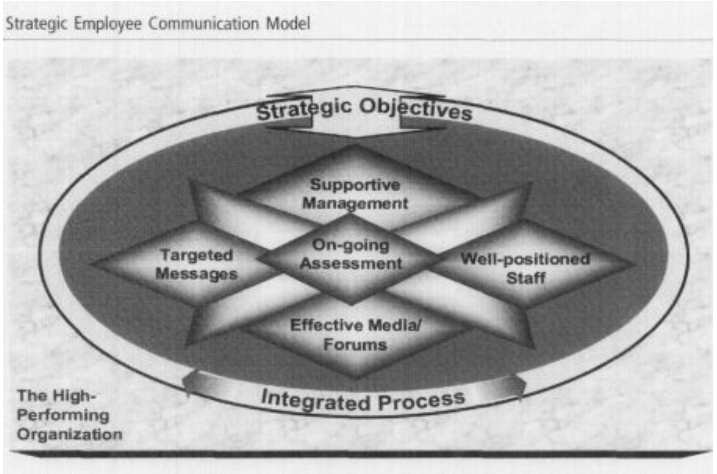


*Fig. 1 The Strategic Employee Communication Model (Barrett 2002, p.221)*

Also, the interconnection and dependence between the categories is displayed in the model closely connected to the organisation's strategy (Barrett, 2002).

Even though the model originated from change management it is still considered very suited for responding to our research question about how internal communication can be dealt with. According to Barrett (2002) communication is all about daily organizing around vision, strategy, business planning, information flow, knowledge transfer and much more. Also informing, educating, and motivating employees is considered to add meaningfulness in the communication and contributes to great financial outcomes.

| Categories | Implication |
|---|---|
| **Strategic Objectives** | Managers construct a structured message through well managed internal communication that translates the organisation's strategic goals to the employees. Hence, the vision is understood by the employees. |
| **Supportive Management** | Managers at top as well as mid-level take responsibility by setting example for the internal communication. Herein, by their behaviour the information flow is open or closed in the organisation. |
| **Targeted Messages** | Mangers tailor/filter information so it becomes relevant, consistent and meaningful to the receiver. |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Effective Media/Forums** | Managers conduct direct interaction with employees such as face-to-face communication, through meetings and direct dialogue with employees in preference over interpersonal communication or indirect, such as intranet, business email or video conferencing. |
| **Well-Positioned Staff** | Senior managers have presence and have a say in the organisation, involve the communication department in order to understand the vision and participate in the decision making. |
| **Ongoing Assessments** | Managers frequent evaluating how effective the current communication is, both for the organisation and the employee, in relation to target setting. |
| **Integrated Process** | Managers ingrain communication into processes as well as the business plan. |

*Table 1 Categories of Effective Employee Communication, from (Barrett 2002, pp. 220-221)*

Another aspect in communication is transparency, the notion of the openness in the organisation and the transparency regarding the organisations behaviour (Cornelissen, 2011). For transparency, with new technologies at hand and having the knowledge to use these in a proper way, with filtering options, personalisation of content and avoidance of over-push technology will not create overload in the organisation (Bawden and Robinson, 2009).

The vision is a desired or aspirational future state of an organisation and what provides the general direction for the organisation. In order to reach the vision, strategic objectives; short term statements, need to be formulated with the support of strategies. Strategies in turn involve actions and communications that are tied to the short-term statements and are managed by different functions in the organisation. It is important for an organisation to continuously align the vision of the organisation with the employees; that it is supported, understood, and appreciated by them (Cornelissen, 2011).

## 2.3 Communication Tools

Computer communication technologies have made it easier to produce, share, and multiply information over long distances. It has also enabled remote collaboration independently of time and place. Emails and video conferencing are among the media used by managers to communicate with employees and by employees to get informed (Cornelissen, 2011).

### 2.3.1 Business Email

Email is an essential, common, and complex part in the workplace. Email offers speed, flexibility, and effectiveness in saving time from being in meetings (Tenhiälä and Salvador, 2018). The average worker spends around 28 percent a week on managing email, when improving communication and the use of communication tools productivity could rise by 20 to 25 percent (Chui et al. 2012). Despite advances in technology and the use of video

conferencing as Skype, email still keeps to be the most favoured tool in the business environment. Since, business email is considered less time consuming it has replaced other means of communication like face-to-face interaction and certainly taken a central role in business communication (Haesevoets et al. 2019). Easiness of use and the possibility to reach geographically spread teams foster trust (Haesevoets et. al, 2019). The possibility to respond at a time of own choice are considered enablers for effectiveness and gives light to the preference of this communication method. Hence, the business email use provides important insights into the daily communication practices of organisations (Machili, Angouri and Harwood, 2019). The business environment has become more complex, for instance increasing the use of email CCing to multiple stakeholders to engage or to inform passively in decision-making and problem-solving. This has created a lot of dilemmas in expectations by the receiver, who to include or exclude when responding and how to compose the email politically correct in line of harmony. The use of CC in business email might increase the perceived transparency, the downside might be the loss of trust in the organisation (Haesevoets et. al, 2019). Also, CCing is a more commonly used method for work-related communication, even to the point to email overload (Machili, Angouri and Harwood, 2019).

The notion when someone receives emails that are more than they can handle/cope with implies an email overload. The feeling of email overload is correlated to personality/work engagement and not so much with volume of emails. The email overload is also considered having negative effects on the individual's health and productivity. Furthermore, having access to email day and night might be correlated to organisational norms about availability outside working hours and might cause the feeling of email overload. Moreover, individuals that experience less email overload might be less stressed and more engaged in their work. Hence, email overload is not only related to productivity but also to the individual’s health and engagement (Reinke and Chamorro-Premuzic, 2014).

### 2.3.2 Video Conferencing

Video conferencing applications, such as Skype, where users communicate in real time through audio and video, are frequently used in remote professional settings (Nakatsuhara et al., 2017). It is clear that face-to-face meetings are considered a better form of communication method, since those create a common ground for trust through interaction and collaboration. However, nowadays remote teams are more common in most large organisations and physical face-to-face meeting might not always be an option. Hence, video conferencing can be considered as a form of face-to-face and is a great option with many advantages. Video conferencing is very user friendly, it is easy to tell who is participating in the meeting, and it is possible to sense connection with the participants, to observe their body language and to get immediate feedback on their engagement and understanding (Karis, Wildman and Mané 2014).

However, new technology needs an effective implementation when introduced in the company. Team and team collaboration, through input and participation, are important aspects for successful implementation of new technologies in an organisation (Jones, 2018).

# 3. Methodology

## 3.1 Research Approach

Theoretical communication is the foundation of this study and has served us in our understanding internal communication and narrowing our focus on specific areas of importance as well as problems within these areas. To respond to our RQ: *"How do managers in an MNC deal with internal communication?"* and our SQ- "*What communication methods and communication tools do they use?"* have we conducted a *qualitative research* study using a *hermeneutic methodology* and a *systematic combining* method with *abductive reasoning*. These concepts will be explained in more detail further below.

### 3.1.1 Qualitative Approach

Qualitative approach focuses on what and how things are said in comparison to a quantitative approach that is more suited for statistical research. A disadvantage with qualitative studies is the difficulty to generalise conclusions in statistical way (Bryman and Bell, 2011), but this will be addressed with analytical power (Dubois and Gadde, 2014). Internal communication is a social phenomenon, it is broad and very difficult to quantify and measure. Therefore, it is appropriate to conduct this study in an approach of *qualitative* research. As Merriam (2010) points out a qualitative approach is about construction of one's reality and interpretation of one's experiences. It was therefore relevant to us, to identify the appropriate respondents that would provide empirical depth about our research question. In this study have we used a *hermeneutic* methodology, in contrast to positivism, it is an interpretation perspective, and that we have applied to capture the subjectivity of social actions and experiences of the respondents (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Since this study data is sampled through qualitative in-depth interviews, we could elaborate our questions during the interviews giving us a higher empirical value. In addition, what makes this study qualitative is our understanding and interpretation of the views of our respondents, to clarify our: "*...interest in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences.*" (Merriam 2010, p. 457).

As mentioned, communication theories are integrated in the empirical part of our research. Hence, we have used *systematic combining* method with *abductive* logic, a non-linear process where we were going back and forth between framework, data sources and analysis (Dubois and Gadde, 2014). Similarly, an abductive reasoning has given us more flexibility adding emphasis to the usefulness of the theoretical framework and that envisioned cause-and-effect

characteristics specific for the findings for this study. In contrast to abductive reasoning, deductive reasoning is more used to prove theoretical aspects and induction is more about developing new theoretical frameworks (Lind, 2014).

### 3.1.2 The Single Case Study

Case study is one of the most commonly used qualitative research methodologies within social sciences. Since we aim for understanding and gaining knowledge about internal communication we have used a single case study approach with in-depth empirical data (Yazan, 2015). Dubois and Gadde (2014) argue to go deeper into one case when applying systematic combining approach since more interdependent variables may lead to miss the context and the richness that the one single case offers. Hence, we used a process of convenient sampling, easy to reach respondents, when we selected one of the companies of the MNC, herein referred to as the *company* (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Similarly, Merriam (2010) expresses case study represents clear boundaries of what is studied in-depth, the phenomenon of internal communication in a specific context; the company, the single unit within the MNC that was selected. Merriam (2010) describes a case study as descriptive, hermeneutic and for this reason we see the quotes of our respondents as representative words that communicate how internal communication works.

The case study showcases internal communication aspects of an MNC, a global leader within the technology area, with its headquarter situated in Gothenburg, Sweden. The company is a Group Function, meaning it owns the MNC agenda within its expertise area and provides strategic directions and targets for the MNC. In addition, the company has global responsibilities and provides services to the whole MNC. Furthermore, the company is organised in a matrix structure, meaning projects and tasks are conducted by cross functional teams across different countries. This could mean that an employee has both an operational manager and a functional manager, and none of them necessarily have to work in the same country.

## 3.2 Research Process

Our work started with close and direct observations of the company and the management teams, since one of us authors is working at the company the past 10 years. As a first step (phase 1 in Figure 2) of collecting empirical data we began by conducting a pilot interview to seek and find interesting topics to explore further and to gain deeper knowledge about the company. Internal communication was one of the most interesting topics that caught our attention and were we saw opportunities for improvement for the company. Another aspect we saw was that the company's methods could provide a great benchmark and valuable insights for other MNCs within the area of internal communication. It was at this point that our research question for this case study come to light. In the second step (phase 2 in Figure 2) of collecting more empirical data we conducted several in-depth interviews that ended up in finding theories to support us in our understanding and structuring of the empirical data.

As a third step (phase 3 in Figure 2) we used the empirical results to understand the field of communication and find relevant theories, we went back and forth between empirical data and finding more theories, and the more knowledge we gained (phase 4 in Figure 2) the more new theoretical insights came up. In the final stage (phase 5 in Figure 2) a lot of processing work emerged with focus on analysis of the empirical data.

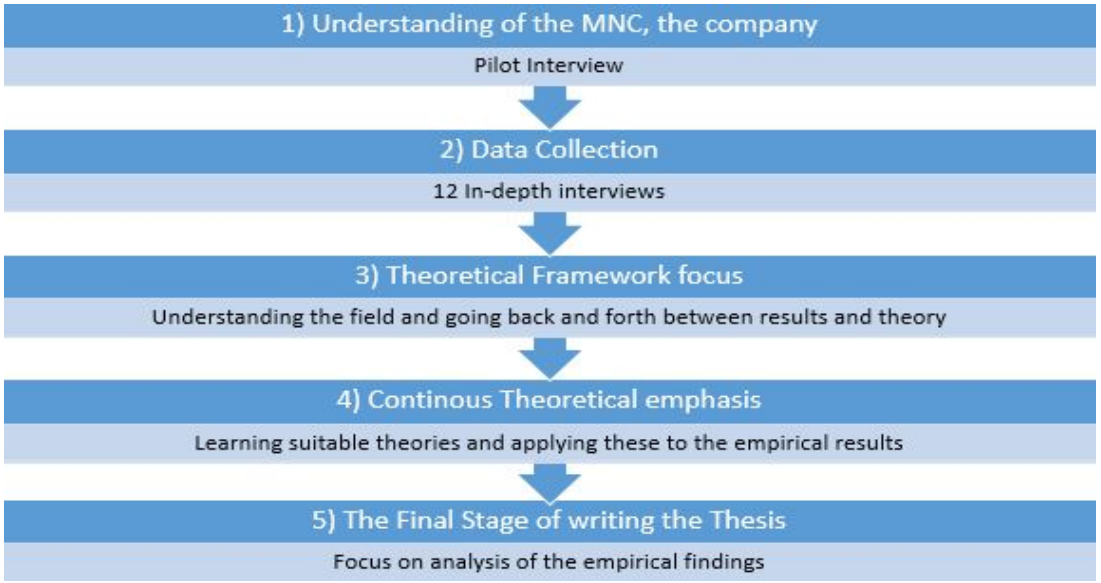


*Fig. 2 The Research Process*

## 3.3 Data Collection

In our case study we conducted certain procedures explaining from where and how the primary data was collected. Also, a very small amount of secondary data was used and is described below.

### 3.3.1 Pilot Interview

The idea about the case study commenced with a face-to-face pilot interview with a manager at the company the past 10 year, in order to explore improvement areas within the field of organisational management and to find topics of high interest for MNCs. The pilot interview took place mid-February, week 8 in 2020, with structured questions and gave us authors confidence about potential topics. It also helped us decide which questions to keep, and which to discard, in the interview guide for the case study (Bryman and Bell, 2011).

### 3.3.2 Primary Data

The study's primary data emerged from 12 in-depth interviews that took place during two consecutive weeks: 6 April-16 April in 2020. An information letter (see Appendix 1) with the purpose of the study, consent- and confidentiality terms was sent to 19 respondents in the 6 main countries of the company: Sweden, Poland, France, Belgium, India and USA. The respondents were contacted by email including the information letter and were given 3 days

to respond. They were given this short time frame to respond because of COVID-19 pandemic and the prevalent risk of not being able to get hold of the respondents if not acting immediately. During these extraordinary times there were several measures taken by different authorities in the world. In the company, were we conducted our interviews, having a global presence meant that the availability of respondents was very limited. Most of the employees were on partial layoff and could only be reached by email or phone. Hence, it was important to act firmly in order to secure the interviews. Also, the respondents were informed with the email that the interviews would take place in the next 2-3 coming weeks.

The interviews were conducted via video conferencing on Zoom and Skype, due to COVID-19 it was not possible to have any interviews via face-to-face. Zoom and Skype allowed us to observe facial expressions and the body language of our respondents, this was beneficial to us in our interpretations of their stories despite not having any face-to-face meetings. Moreover, 4 of the interviews were held in Swedish and 8 in English and lasted up to 45 min each. The interviews were recorded for the purpose of being transcribed, i.e. audio is carefully translated into text in Microsoft Word. After all qualitative research is interpretive research, our biases, convictions, and own assumptions can interfere with the analysis of the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). We authors divided the work with the recordings between us and transcribed all the collected data. This procedure was done directly after each interview to increase our knowledge about internal communication within the company in order to improve the quality of the questions as well as to give us even more flexibility on the interviews that followed. The recordings also allowed us to examine the responses and facilitated in categorization of identifying common themes (Bryman and Bell, 2011). See Table 2 below for details about the interviews.

| Interview Type | Interview Year 2020 Week | Number of respondents | Manager over Manager | Manager over Resources | Duration Time (min) | Face-to-Face | Video via Zoom/ Skype | Language Swedish | Language English |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pilot Interview | w08 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 30 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| In-depth interviews | w15-w16 | 12 | 3 | 9 | 45 | 0 | 12 | 4 | 8 |

*Table 2 Overview of Primary Data*

We used a semi structured approach for the interviews following an interview guide (see Appendix 2) with additional follow up questions during the interviews, as accustomed in a qualitative approach. Our questions were mainly open-ended to allow us to explore different themes. The words nor the order of the questions were the same at each occasion allowing us to explore further and go deeper (Merriam, 2010). Thus, the respondents could elaborate their responses with what is important to them, giving us high empirical flexibility (Bryman and Bell, 2011).

For this case study we purposefully sampled 19 respondents based on the representativeness of the phenomenon internal communication and accessibility to authentic information in

order to respond to our research questions (Bryman and Bell, 2011). 12 out of the 19 respondents responded and agreed to take the interview. Hence, the sample size of for the in-depth interviews was strategically selected and of large size in order to assure a substantial degree of acceptance and also to offer good empirical saturation for the case study. Because the goal of the study was to display managerial perceptions of internal communication it was important that the respondents had managerial experience for the past 2 years. The managers also had a team or teams (direct-, functional reports or consultants) situated worldwide reflecting the complexity of the organisational structure. Furthermore, 3 of the 12 respondents hold a manager over manager position (Level 4- manager). We chose to include a few respondents on a manager-over-manager level since the access to these was more limited. However, we still wanted to include them in our sample since we wanted to have a broader view on our research topic about internal communication.

### 3.3.3 Secondary Data

The vast majority of our data is primary information that was collected in our interviews. However, one respondent had since 2010 tracked their email-habits and shared with us the data, this gave us some insight of the magnitude of emails and different types of emails and how it has changed over the last 10 years. Also, for statistical data regarding Skype and Microsoft Teams we have used the website Venturebeat to increase our knowledge about the importance of these communication tools in the near future.

### 3.3.4 Analysis Process

For the analysis work we have used a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software program NVivo to find common themes. The coding of data was primarily managed by creating nodes in NVivo and using internal communication parameters based on both the empirical and theoretical findings. The interviews were read carefully again as the work progressed to make sure nodes were not missed out. A comparative method was used where we went through the transcripts from the recordings several occasions. Followed, we named some categories in the coded interviews and worked with tentative themes to finally reach the refined categories that were applied to the final product.

During the different stages of the research process, as seen in Figure 1, several theories have been considered but as we gained knowledge about the subject and listened to our respondents, we selected the theories that most suited our research questions. This has affected and shaped our theoretical framework after our own interpretations, as done with abductive logic, and we might have missed out on some theories. Hence, we used and developed our theoretical framework for the analysis, while considering our empirical findings in the different themes.

## 3.4 Quality of the Study

The four criteria for determining the trustworthiness of the report *dependability, credibility, confirmability,* and *transferability* have been used to display the qualitative approach we have undertaken, in order to respond to our research question (Guba, 1981). The quality of this case study is based on a process that gives the reader an overview over the judgements we as authors have made along the way. Therefore, for judging the quality of this case study; its trustworthiness and its authenticity, it is critical for us to be fully transparent about our procedures and narrate those for the reader in a clear manner, as displayed in Figure 2 above (Guba, 1981). Lind (2014) emphasize that a qualitative study that is linked to authenticity, reliability and accuracy ensures that the conclusions reached in the case study are adequate and relevant.

### 3.4.1 Dependability

The research process mentioned above clarifies step wise the methods we have used to increase dependability. The consistency through our research process creates an audit trail, the processes within the study are reported in detail to enable our readers to replicate our efforts but not necessarily coming to the exact same results. A proper research showcases correct practices and detailed descriptions of how the study was conducted (Shenton, 2004). Furthermore, we emphasise the process between theoretical framework and empirical data that brings the possibility to track the development of our theoretical insights. Also, the empirical data collected from the respondents in two different levels of responsibility provided a variety of perspectives regarding internal communication which established the empirical dependability of the case study. The variety of perspectives from 12 interviews gives us the possibility to triangulate the empirical data; presenting respondents with different perspectives about internal communication (Guba, 1981). Furthermore, the authenticity of the empirical data is leaving an audit trail by allowing to examine the audio recordings and transcriptions (Bryman and Bell, 2011). In line with Lind (2014) who emphasizes the importance of conducting a study in a transparent, consistent reliable way that anyone can understand how we came to our conclusions. Moreover, we authors want to engage our readers, to evoke interest and involve our readers. Hence, we have used the language of our respondents through quotations to demonstrate this elegance and power in our case study (Lincoln and Guba, 1990).

### 3.4.2 Credibility

One of us authors is employed at the MNC and is bringing in the study background information. This knowledge was valuable in the semi-structured interview questions by giving us prior knowledge and wittiness for details in our questioning during the interviews. As Guba (1981) emphasizes: "*Extended interaction with a situation or a milieu leads inquirers to an understanding of what is essential or characteristic of it.*" Also, Bryman and

Bell (2011) highlight the importance of internal observations for constructing theoretical insights for our framework. Furthermore, the familiarity with the respondents enabled a very open and trustful dialogue (Guba, 1981).

The interaction between respondents, context and us authors reflects our personal self-critical commitments for the validity of this case study (Lincoln and Guba, 1990). For the interpretation of the empirical data, the interview recordings and the transcriptions, played a very important role in neutralising personal beliefs in the development of themes about the sampled data. Also, triangulating; the variety of respondents allowed us to cross check the data for contradictions and verify our data from at least two data points (Guba, 1981), in order to find common themes. In line with Yin (2013) data source triangulation strengthens the validity of the case study. In addition, for credibility reasons and to explore extensively the respondents' experiences the in-depth interviews lasted approximately up to 45 minutes. Also, the use of a qualitative data analysis software program NVivo cleared an objective approach. Furthermore, the empirical findings stated in this study give our readers the possibility to evaluate our findings followed by the analysis we provide.

### 3.4.3 Confirmability

It is critical for us in our research to be fully transparent about our methodological procedures as well as neutralizing personal bias and acting in good faith (Guba, 1981; Bryman and Bell, 2011). We authors acknowledge that this work related background, since one of us being part of the context as well as having personal beliefs and bias, could influence the respondents during the interviews as well as the interpretation of the data collected. However, this work knowledge background has been very rewarding for this study when identifying the right respondents as well as giving immediate access to a large sample size of 12 respondents. In particular, during the extraordinary circumstances with COVID-19 where almost all employees at the MNC were on short-term layoff. Also, the interviews were conducted by the one of us not working at the company, but with the presence of both authors. This procedure allowed us both to come up with follow up questions and to keep an objective position and not to influence the outcome of the interviews as well as not permitting personal values to affect the results of the case study (Lincoln and Guba, 1989). Furthermore, the search for theories in parallel with collecting the empirical data and working with the analysis, by triangulating several sources eliminated bias in the result of the case study. Hench, a theoretical trail in our work that can be observed by our readers (Shenton, 2004; Guba, 1981).

### 3.4.4 Transferability

For the reader to draw conclusion in his/her own context have we provided useful insights that shall help the reader to discover how this case study may serve as inspiration for re-examination and reconstruction of their own context (Merriam, 2010). According to Dubois and Gadde (2014) there lies analytical power in a single case study as ours compared to adding more cases for deeper probing. Hence, replication of more cases would not offer

more analytical power, it is agreed upon by tradition that case studies rely on analytical rather than statistical generalization. In contrast, focusing on doing a number of case studies may lead to believe that this will increase the explanatory power of the study (Dubois and Gadde, 2014).

According to Guba (1981) and Shenton (2004) a *"thick description*" of the context for the study will enable judgement about the possibility of transferability to another context. To clarify, thick description concerns richness in the details for building a database in judgement that enables transferability, to compare the internal communication phenomenon described in the case study with what is visible in their situations (Shenton, 2004; Bryman and Bell, 2011). Both for the managers at the company and other MNCs the learnings and understanding are by looking at similarities as well as differences in the situation they are, in regard to internal communication (Lincoln and Guba, 1990).

## 3.5 Ethics

There are several ethical principles to take into account when conducting a case study, and four main themes are not to cause harm to participants, to not deceive them, not to invade their privacy and to have informed consent (Bryman and Bell, 2011). To ensure these principles, before starting with the interview the respondents were informed about the purpose of the study. The information letter was mentioned, as well as the confidentiality terms regarding full anonymity for both themselves and the company. According to practice, we choose to anonymize the company and the respondents. Participating in an interview was seen as voluntary and we ensured the respondents that their answers were confidential (Lind, 2014). Also, we asked the respondents for their permission before starting the recording of the interview, we explained that the recording will be transcribed by us authors solely for the purpose to facilitate the data handling for the analysis work process and for categorisation of the data material. It was important to us, in the relationship between researcher-respondent not to engage in any deception but to build a relationship upon mutual respect, dignity, and trust (Lincoln and Guba, 1989).

# 4. Empirical Result

We authors examined how internal communication between manager and employees works in the company. Most of the company's internal communication takes place via face-to-face meetings, Skype, email, Teamplace, SharePoint, Microsoft Teams, and more.

As described in the methodology chapter above, our empirical data is derived, through a qualitative approach, from 12 interviews. In order to keep our respondents anonymous, we will refer to them as R1-R12 in the following text. As noted in the interview guide (Appendix 2), we asked our respondents questions regarding structure, how they deal with internal communication, what communication tools they use, problems and possible improvement

areas they can identify. The categories that emerged were communication methods (face-to-face interactions, informal communication) and communication tools (Business Email, Skype and Microsoft Teams) and communication implications from both categories.

## 4.1 Communication Methods

Communication arrangements such as face-to-face communication and informal communication are very important for the company. Below we present our empirical findings in these two themes.

### 4.1.1 Face-to-Face Communication

Although not generally considered a communication "tool", most of our respondents mentioned face-to-face interaction, as the most important way of communicating when being asked what tools they used. Generally, all the other tools were used whenever face-to-face interactions was not possible. The exception was when sending information that does not require discussion, then email was the preferred communication tool. Worth to mention is also that when our respondents talked about face-to-face interactions, they for the most part meant in person, but sometimes they would also refer to video Skype. Skype will be discussed further below. One of our respondents summarised very well the reason why face-to-face interactions is a preferred communication method:

*"It becomes much **more of a dialogue** when you meet physically, an exchange but another type of interaction. I don't think you can replace all meetings with virtual meetings, especially not if you are going to **discuss goals, direction, purpose** and where there may be some **conflicts**. It is very **easy to misunderstand** one another and even more so when using such tools. It **affects the dialogue and the interaction**, only this when you are 8 people connecting, whose turn it is to talk, you need to keep track of how much each person has talked, **you do not get the natural rhythm** that you may have when you meet physically."-R9*

In the quote above our respondent mention a few different things; firstly how the dialogue improves and interaction is affected when using tools, something that also other respondents mentioned with the addition that they want to be able to read the body language of the person they talked to. The second thing in the quote above is the reason for the meeting where the same respondent mentions that discussion around vision and conflicts need a physical meeting, the latter aspect is also something another respondent emphasizes. Several other respondents point out if a discussion is needed, email is the wrong communication tool since it is so easy to misunderstand each other and is more of a one-way communication tool.

### 4.1.2 Informal Communication

I our empirical findings it was evident that not all face-to-face interaction was through official meetings and 7 out of 12 respondents commented that the informal communication

that flows in the company is both important as well as problematic. One of our respondents, a level 4 manager, mentioned the importance of informal communication for meeting innovation and finding new solutions to old problems. Also, informal communication was mentioned as necessary due to the complexity and size of the company. Some respondents talked about having an open-door policy, meaning allowing spontaneous dialogue and giving availability of themselves to the employees. Another respondent mentioned talking and listening to employees will built trust, which built respect and understanding, and in turn laid a base for a functioning communication with Skype and Microsoft Teams and email as well. Following, several of the respondents talked about informal communication and networking as a way to increase effectiveness and getting the latest information. They mention that since the company is large, information will be cascaded down through the layers, but it will take time and they will sometimes receive the information too late. One of the respondents confirms this by saying: *"networks can give you plenty of nice information, informal communication channels, this is key in a very large company to know the right people to get the right information. Networking is crucial."-R4*

When asked about informal meeting places the respondents frequently mentioned the corridor or the coffee machine. One of the respondents mentioned both these places in regard to being up to date with information at the company. In this way the respondent was always mostly up to date about how things are running in the organisation: *"And those kind of informal updates are often in the corridor or next to the coffee machine."-R1.* Or as another respondent simply states: *"it's amazing how much information you can get over a cup of coffee at a coffee machine."-R4*

Aside from informal communication being important, or even necessary, our respondents also pointed out a few problems. One of our respondents observes that productivity might be effected *"I think open landscape improves informal meetings, but it also creates a lot of interruptions for people. A lot of small interruptions can make you less effective."* Informal communication was also affected by hierarchical belonging. When we interviewed the level 4 managers, they all stressed that informal information can be problematic since the higher up you are in the hierarchy, the greater was the pressure on getting the communication right. As a senior manager, even if a relaxed and informal communication is preferred, it might be difficult for some employees to handle. It can be hard for them to determine if it is the company's or a personal point of view that is being expressed. Two of the level 4 respondents discussed if it is even possible for a manager to have informal communication at all, as exemplified below:

*"You should not underestimate that there is a difference between being a team leader and being the manager's boss /.../ One may question whether managers can have informal communication, or when communicating you are always the representative of the company."-R9*

In sum, informal communication is great for innovation and to keep you updated by building trust, by networking your way through the organisation and to know what is going on. The coffee machine and the corridor are where informal communication takes place. Furthermore, there are implications to these informal communication flows such as hierarchical belonging constraining the manager to be accurate in their communication and constant interruptions while sitting in an open landscape.

## 4.2 Communication Tools

*"Overall in the organisation such as this big one, the issue is that we have too many communication channels and there are plenty of newsletters, there are plenty of emails, sometimes you do not know what to read and what to follow"- R1*

As stated above, there are many different communication tools used within the company. The respondents mentioned Email, Skype (both audio only and with video), Microsoft Teams, Sharepoint, Town Hall meetings, Teamplace and the company's intranet. Due to the global context of the company many of the respondents also confirmed that there is a lot of communication coming in from several directions and creating an overload of information. Email, Skype and Microsoft Teams were quickly identified as the most used and influential communication tools in addition to face-to-face interaction. Therefore, those will be elaborated on below.

### 4.2.1 Business Email

Emails are one of the most used ways of sharing information within the company, but in preference by one respondent only. Our respondents mentioned emails as primarily used for short and specific information sharing which require little to no discussion, or when face-to-face is not possible. When not constructing the information themselves, emails was cascaded as information down within the company. We summarised our respondents' answers regarding the numerical data below in Table 3 displaying managerial level, roughly how many emails the respondent receive on an average day, how many of those require action and how many are CC emails.

| | R1 | R2 | R3 | R4 | R5 | R6 | R7 | R8 | R9 | R10 | R11 | R12 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Manegerial level | 5 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 5 |
| mail/day | 20-30 | 100 | 20-30 | 100 | 100 | 150-200 | 40-50 | 100-150 | 100-150 | 40 | 75 | 700 |
| require action | 70% | 40% | 50% | 10-20% | 40-50% | 50% | 50% | 50-60% | "very few" | 50% | 60% | 1-2% |
| CC | 30% | 60% | N/A | 50% | 40% | 30-40% | 50% | N/A | N/A | 50% | 10% | 75% |

*Table 3 Summary of respondents' answers regarding emails.*

Our respondents estimate that they receive between 20 and 700 emails every day. An email that requires action was described as a long- or short-time consuming activity; either you had to write an answer, or the required action was about approval. Also, CC emails sometimes

required a response but generally they were sent just for information. Because of this most of our respondents have a system where CC emails will be automatically sorted to a folder in the email system and either these emails were read when there was time or never read at all. In addition to CC emails, a lot of the low priority emails that flooded their inbox, was newsletters and computer-generated emails. One of our respondents shared that they have tracked their email habits for the last 10 years and noted that the frequency of computer-generated emails had escalated from 2,8% in 2011 to almost 30% in 2019. Another respondent also mentioned that they received a lot of email that they should not have in the first place. The fact that being in a specific role meant they are on more mailing lists and they need to filter out or delete information.

To be able to sort out the important messages between all the newsletters, computer generated emails and carbon copies our respondents describe that they have different systems in order to be able to filter the emails received during a day. The most common way was to set rules and filters in outlook, meaning CC emails goes automatically to folders with a rule. As one of the respondent describes: *"I use rules a lot when I send out an invite so I automatically can have these responses to a folder and I try to use my inbox as my- to do."* In addition, another respondent mentioned that they prioritize by sender, where their closest boss and colleagues had the highest priority, regardless of the content, and in addition to that one respondent had a special rule for emails that needed approval, something they would handle first thing in the morning, not stopping workflow. Throughout our respondents almost all mentioned that they used filters to some extent. For instance, some of them set reminders on their outlook or use the flag system in outlook to tag their emails with deadlines. Another common way of structuring emails was a more unofficial use of the subject line. They would write FYA "For Your Action" or FYI "For Your Information" in the subject line so that the receiver of the email would know what to do with it. Finally, a way of handling email overload was to simply wait and do nothing, until the problem either solved itself or the sender would reach out a second time. This would help them prioritize the things that they were most needed for.

### 4.2.2 Skype

Skype is a video calling up platform that is commonly used in many companies. At the time of writing, Skype has over 40 million daily active users (Protalinski, 2020). When talking about Skype, the respondents made a difference between audio and video meetings where "audio only"-meetings would be used like a phone call and video Skype was generally counted as a face-to-face meeting. Due to the global workplace setting and collaboration between teams and functions, Skype meetings is not only a daily occurrence, it is a necessity to be able to work. As one respondent puts it: *"Skype, I think I live with it. It's always on. I'm either chatting, videoing or in a meeting."* In fact, most of the respondents seemed to think Skype was such a natural way of communicating that most of them did not even bother to elaborate on it. One of the respondents even stated that sometimes it was more convenient to

join a meeting via Skype instead of walking to the meeting room. They said that *"It is an efficiency that is driven by the fact that there are very many meetings at the company, and you do not have time to run between meeting rooms"*.

Skype, however, is not without problems, there are both technical and leadership issues. For instance, one respondent discussed the size of meetings, and that *"sometimes when there are big video Skype meetings it is clear that people do not think about that they are being filmed, so they sit and do something else which is demotivating (for the one leading the meeting)."* They also noted the importance of leadership in meetings to make sure that time and attention is divided equally between the different participants and matters. And last, but not least, there is the issue with technology itself; Respondent 10 mentions in regard to big global team meetings:*"we have not run Skype video, we have tried sometimes but it is still the wonders of technology, so it most just Skype (audio)."*

### 4.2.3 Microsoft Teams

At the time of the interviews, Microsoft Teams was about four months into its adaptation process within the company and still a very new communication tool. Our respondents were somewhat divided on their opinion about Teams but seem to agree that it is in need to be developed further. Quite a few mentioned that there is a learning curve and one respondent observed that most new tools will take around 6 months or so to be implemented properly. 3 out of 12 respondents were the only ones expressing positive opinions towards Teams, and then in a very reserved manner. The quote below summarises the respondents view, the tool is considered unstructured and a source of overload creator by its many channels:

"*At this point I am not a fan of Microsoft Teams. It's a bit of an unstructured tool. You are being added to an infinite amount of teams and it is hard to understand which teams search for what channels. I understand the purpose of the tool, but it is not yet on the level it needs to be. More improvement is needed" - R6*

Microsoft Teams was launched worldwide in March 2017 and passed 32 million daily active users in March 2020 (Protalinski, 2020). As of today, Microsoft Teams is only used as a tool for written communication and information sharing but in the future it might take over the current Skype function in the company.

## 4.3 Communication Implications

When talking about the different tools and methods we noticed communication implications. All of the respondents agreed that there was an overload of information, weather it was emails pouring into their inbox, getting summoned to an infinite number of Skype meetings or trying to navigate Microsoft Teams. When asked about why they thought the overload of information was so common there was two main answers: the company's strive for transparency and the support functions will to justify their own existence. One of the

respondent elaborates on transparency within the company by explaining that there lies a wish to show transparency which is positive but you all the other channels that also hit the employees are forgotten:"*so in reality you can be overloading employees or the line organisation with the same content."* Many of the other respondents exemplified this behaviour by their managers sending them unfiltered PowerPoints and news regarding the entirety of the company without specifying what is important for their particular team or function. One respondent exemplifies by saying that some information are not filtered:"*they are basically passing everything they are receiving and passing to further and further down the line and then it is important for us as managers to filter that towards our employees."*

They express that information is sometimes late, too long, too complicated and lack explanation. This was something that many of our respondents saw as a problem; they want the right information at the right time, with an explanation of what is important and why a decision was made, not all the information, from everywhere, all the time. One explanation that is given is that there is notion that everyone is entitled to all information and that is why so much information is being pushed out. As mentioned by one respondent:

*"it might be enough to trust that the right people have the information and that it is enough that they are aware. You might be able to reduce the number of CC email and instead of push have pull where you know where to go to retrieve information instead of sending it out."- R2*

As exemplified above, our respondents express a desire to have more of a pull, rather than a push, function regarding information. Meaning that it should be transparent where the information can be found if needed rather than distributed by default. There are many channels in the company; pull information from the company's intranet and push information from central communications. Information is sent from the site dimension, the host management team, the line organisation structure: *"from all different levels and a lot of times it is the same information being regurgitated and condensed in different ways*". We could see frustration in their facial expressions when discussing this subject.

The respondents in this study where asked to specify if there were any problems with how the business communication works in the company and where communication regularly fails. What we noticed was that 3 out of 12 respondents brought up vision as a problematic area and stressed the importance of where improvement is needed. Since the respondents came from 3 geographical locations, namely Sweden, France, and USA, it showed us that this is a very important aspect to mention in our findings. One respondent explains the importance of both having a clear vision and being able to convey it:

*"All managers need to know that the below level understand the vision and see how they can contribute. In this company we have plenty of managers but sometimes with different visions so sometimes we see conflicts between teams. "- R4*

Similarly, another respondent stated problems with communication and emphasized the importance of understanding how to convey the vision to the employees. The respondent was eager to explain that if communication is not clear in the direction, the teams will be questioning, pondering and losing trust in the leadership in the company. Furthermore, similar concern was raised about when the vision-mission is poorly communicated in organisational changes, it might lead to create new dissatisfaction and create even more problems. More concerns were mentioned, where they stressed the importance of having an overall vision of what shall be accomplished. They said there lies a need of more shared information and by having everybody onboard. The respondent recognised the importance of strategic communication in explaining and repeat what is tried to be accomplished *"there was no vision /.../ If you don't understand what we're trying to achieve, we need to go back and have more communication."-R12*

# 5. Analysis of Internal Communication

The analysis is following the purpose of the study with the aim of responding to our research question. An abductive analysis approach, as described in the methodology chapter, is applied upon the themes taken partly from interviews and partly from the theoretical framework. The empirical material is partially reproduced in quotes and analysed based on the theoretical framework and our empirical findings.

## 5.1 Communication Methods

The methods for internal communication in the company are characterised by both formal and informal flows, this has been clearly displayed to us through our interviews.

### 5.1.1 Face-to-Face Communication

No matter the amount of communication methods and tools available at the company, our empirical findings show that a face-to-face interaction is the most important way of communicating for our respondents. The respondents mention how aspects of clarity and richness in a dialogue affects the relations. In a formal communication setting, such a face-to-face, aspects of clarity, transparency, and accountability are more visible (Tenhiälä and Salvador, 2018). This is also something that is highlighted in our empirical findings where the importance of goals, direction and purpose was mentioned. Furthermore, the use of other communication tools other than the formal communication methods was discussed by our respondents as these might lead to misunderstanding and frustration in the organisation. This is in line with Tenhiälä and Salvador (2018) that emphasise that misalignment in

communication due to individual aspects, as different expectations lead to frustration and misalignment in delivery accomplishment, followed by Ruben and Gigliotti (2017) that state the importance of effective communication in achieving intended and successful outcome.

In the company with remote workplace setting it became clear to us through the interviews, that video conferencing can never replace face-to-face interaction to the full extent and is causing frustration in the organisation. Also, Barrett (2002) emphasise direct dialogue over indirect communication as intranet, business email or Skype video conferencing. The respondents recognised having a dialogue face-to-face with the possibility of immediate feedback, for instance by reading body language, improved the interaction between stakeholders in the company (Karis, Wildman and Mané 2014), increase clarity and lead to better organisational results. This is in line with Tenhiälä and Salvador (2018) that emphasise formal communication as providing structure with clarity and documenting procedures. Moreover, the respondents mentioned that discussions regarding conflicts need a physical meeting and, as Cornelissen (2011) emphasise, face-to-face is a rich form of communication and is useful in particular for persuasive, sensitive or complex discussions.

### 5.1.2 Informal Communication

Since the company is being technology driven, innovation and networking are of great importance. Thus, speed and flexibility are necessary components in the communication method for the accomplishment of delivering results (Tenhiälä and Salvador, 2018; Kraut et al., 1990). For instance, some respondents pointed out the necessity and importance of informal communication as incredibly important in meeting innovation, finding new solutions to old problems, gaining trust, information sharing as well as dealing with the complexity and size of the company. Similarly, Kraut et al. (1990) argue that feedback becomes more effective in informal communication setting, since the method adjust any misunderstandings, which is truly beneficial for innovation. In addition, Fish et al. (1993) states, increase and easiness in spontaneous interaction through video based informal communication. As argued by Kraut et al. (1990), lack of informal communication in the company would make collaboration more difficult around innovation, knowledge- and information sharing.

In our empirical findings we clearly see that the respondents are very well aware and exercise informal communication deliberately. For instance they mention the corridor and the coffee machine, a place where they get informal updates by saying: *"it's amazing how much information you can get over a cup of coffee at a coffee machine"*. Likewise, Kraut et al. (1990) emphasise the importance of these open and spontaneous social discussions in the corridor or in front of the coffee machine as informational, productive and successful all at once.

There are of course implications with informal communication flows in the company. Our respondents mention interruptions creating inefficiency and loss in productivity from open landscape settings as well as hierarchical belonging adding pressure to communicate in an accurate manner and the transition in their role when formal versus informal. This is fully in line (Reinke and Chamorro-Premuzic, 2014) that state loss of productivity with interruptions, exemplified with email overload at the workplace and in line with the arguments of Kraut et al. (1990) that relationships and roles influence formality and the conversation might change back and forth from formal to informal.

## 5.2 Communication Tools

Through the interviews we have seen that the most influential communication tools in the company are Email, Skype and Microsoft Teams.

### 5.2.1 Business Email

Our empirical finding show that email is used for short, no discussion needed content or when face-to-face is not applicable, which is in line with Tenhiälä and Salvador (2018) where speed by email and, easiness (Machili, Angouri and Harwood, 2019; Haesevoets et. al, 2019), leads to effectiveness in saving time from being in meetings. Many of our respondents pointed out a problem with receiving a large volume business email such as CC emails, as well as sorting/filtering those out in an effective way, in line with Barrett's (2002) view that the role of the manger is to tailor/filter and decode information to a meaningful format. Also, having a formal role as manager implied overload of email for our respondents. Many of the respondents set rules and prioritized in their inboxes, as stated by one respondent: "*I use rules a lot.*" They used some structured way to filter the overload, meaning CC email goes automatically to folders, responses to invites go directly to folders, prioritization is done by sender, filtering by emails that needed approval, setting reminders on outlook or using the flag system to tag emails with deadlines, unofficial use of the subject line, write FYA or FYI in the subject line so that the receiver of the email would know what to do with it or chose to be passive and take no action. As we interpret these empirical findings, some of our respondents, showed excellent characteristics in reducing email overload by being either technology savvy or showing confidence and having control over the email overload, as Reinke and Chamorro-Premuzic (2014) point out, email overload is rather correlated to personality and not so much with volume of emails. Similarly, Chui et al. (2012) argues managing emails correctly increase productivity in the organisation.

Computer generated emails is also something that one of the respondents brought up to our attention by displaying a huge increase, from 2,8% in 2011 to close to 30% in 2019, in those automated emails. This is in agreement with Machili, Angouri and Harwood (2019), that argue business emails is becoming more complex part in the workplace and providing important insights into the daily communication practices of organisations.

### 5.2.2 Skype

Skype video conferencing was commonly used and perceived by the respondents as a face-to-face communication tool since its communality, as part of a global context, and when not possible to run physical face-to-face meeting. Through our interviews it was evident that Skype is a natural part of the organisation: *"Skype, I think I live with it. It's always on."* and its users live with it day and night. This is in line with Nakatsuhara et al. (2017) that state the commonality of the video conferencing technology and the perception of a face-to-face interaction through this communication tool in remote professional settings. Similarly, Karis, Wildman and Mané (2014) argue video conferencing to be considered a form of face-to-face, unlike Barrett (2002), who argues management effectiveness mainly rely on direct face-to-face communication rather than video conferencing communication. In contradiction to Barrett (2002) and in line with Karis, Wildman and Mané (2014). Another aspect that our respondents pointed out was the multitude of meetings at the company and their perception of Skype meetings to drive efficiency and convenience, by opting time effectiveness between meetings over face-to-face meetings. This also in line with Haesevoets et. al, (2019) considering Skype as less time consuming and replacing face-to-face interaction.

In big global meetings with Skype video conferencing, was mentioned by the respondents, comes with technical difficulties. Also, our respondents mentioned leadership effectiveness, by interaction and by involvement, on keeping people engaged online in big global meetings. This is in line with Karis, Wildman and Mané (2014) about the benefits of video conferencing on observing stakeholders and receiving immediate feedback on their engagement.

### 5.2.3 Microsoft Teams

In our interviews Microsoft Teams communication tool was mentioned as a relatively new tool with some concern regarding adaptation; its structure by too many channels of information might be constructing overload. As Reinke and Chamorro-Premuzic (2014) point out personality aspects on dealing with overload, too much data overwhelming the receiver. It was evident this tool is liked only by a minority of the respondents since very few expressed a positive opinion about the tool and this with hesitation. As Jones (2018) emphasise the importance of implementation in introducing new technologies together with the human factor.

## 5.3 Communication Implications

Our respondents mentioned concern on overload of information through business email. They also mentioned information overlapping in eagerness to be transparent, build trust and be seen by stakeholders, in agreement with Machili, Angouri and Harwood, (2019) unfiltered communication and an overuse of CCing is mostly the main concern creating overload in a

company. As stated in our empirical findings: "*they are basically passing everything they are receiving and passing to further and further down the line"*. We interpret that our respondents lack clarity in decision-making, experience confusion and concernment of what is truly important in the company. In line with Haesevoets et. al. (2019) the notion of CCing in business email displays the perception of creating trustfulness and transparency in the company.
However, it was clear to us through the interviews that transparency in the company is not creating the intended results and there lies a desire for more pulled rather than pushed information by the respondents with the intention to reduce overload of information: *"it might be enough to trust that the right people have the information and that it is enough that they are aware. You might be able to reduce the number of CC email and instead of push have pull where you know where to go to retrieve information instead of sending it out."* In line with, Haesevoets et. al. (2019) who argues CCing is creating problems about how to deal with emails such as constructing those for a perceived increase in transparency, that might lead to loss of trust in the organisation, or overload (Machili, Angouri and Harwood, 2019).

Through the interviews the respondents express this desire to have more of a pull, rather than a push, communication, since there are many channels: *"from all different levels and a lot of times it is the same information being regurgitated and condensed in different ways.*" This is in line with Bawden and Robinson (2009) that state having the knowledge to use filtering options in avoidance of over-push that will create overload in the organisation.

Strategic objectives communication in the company is identified as a problematic area in our empirical findings. In our interviews we interpret that our respondents miss clarity and express unclear overall vision, driving individuality over the common goal of the company. One respondent narrowed down to this aspect by saying*: "In this company we have plenty of managers but sometimes with different visions so sometimes we see conflicts between teams."* This is line with Cornelissen (2011) that emphasize the importance of alignment between the organisational vision and its employees support, understanding and appreciation of the vision. Our respondents believe clarity in vision need to be taken seriously by the company since it constructs dissatisfaction in a changing environment, imposes individual thinking behaviour and adds confusion.

Barrett (2002) states that a structured message envisions the strategic goals in a clear and consistent manner to the employees, as organising activities daily around vision. Teams without vision will be questioning, pondering and losing trust in the leadership in the company is something that was brought up in our interviews. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2010) and Czarniawska (2017) argue as well the importance of leadership in providing overall orientation. Hence, formal communication that mirror clarity and gives all stakeholders the possibility to address issues as noted in a formal agenda, would serve as a crucial advantage for the company (Tenhiälä and Salvador, 2018).

# 6. Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this case study was to increase knowledge and create a better understanding on how managers work with internal communication in an MNC. Through our qualitative interviews, we have gathered empirical data that has been analysed through a refined theoretical framework. Hence, to respond to our research question *"How do managers in an MNC deal with internal communication?"* we have been guided by our sub research question *"What communication methods and communication tools do they use?".* In this concluding chapter we briefly present our empirical conclusions with our own comments. Thereafter follows the study's theoretical implications, managerial implications, limitations, and our suggestions for future research.

## 6.1 Empirical Conclusions

In response to our research question, face-to-face communication remains the most important communication method for managers at all levels. For sensitive or complex discussions, we recommend formal face-to-face meetings for effective communication and elimination of misunderstandings. In contrast, informal meetings are very informative and increase flexibility and innovation in the organisation and is also considered an important method for communicative interaction. Moreover, Skype and business email are the most commonly used and important communication tools, but they can create overload problems unless managers learn how to use them to their advantage and deliberately systematise their work. They need to learn how to filter incoming information, either by rule setting, prioritization, or a communication strategy with their team to not create overload in the organisation. For clarity, there are implications with internal communication such as overload, lack of transparency and clarity in vision with strategic communication. If these aspects are taken care of it will lead to better collaboration and performance in the organisation. Thus, as displayed in the analysis the use of pull over push methodology would empower employees to seek information themselves, instead of pushing it out to the organisation. Hence, we believe that we have fulfilled the purpose of this study by presenting below how managers deal with internal communication by presenting what communication methods and communication tools they use and how to handle the implications that arise. Thus, this case study contributes with knowledge and understanding about internal communication.

### 6.1.1 Communication Methods

In our analysis we observed that both formal and informal communication is necessary for an effective work environment and in line with Kraut et al. (1990) we argue that despite the multitude of communication tools and the global nature of the business environment, the need for face-to-face meetings and spontaneous coffee machine conversations should not be disregarded. Formal interaction provides clarity by reducing the risk for misunderstandings, it

gives immediate feedback and you can observe the body language of the person you are interacting with. Also, it brings a richer dialogue around priorities and purpose, goals and directions. Further, we also argue that informal communication is vital for efficiency and innovation in the company to be able to reach organisational goals. Networking, exchanging ideas, information sharing, flexibility and speed are important characteristics that enables collaboration in an organisation. There are disadvantages with formal communication, it can be time consuming and be perceived as rigid and less effective. Informal communication on the other hand could decrease productivity due to interruptions. It might also add pressure to communicate accurate as a manager. Hence, we argue that managers need to be deliberate in their communication, both formally and informally, to achieve continuous intended and successful results.

### 6.1.2 Communication Tools and Communication Implications

Concerning communication tools, we agree with Barrett (2002), that understanding filtering options and utilize built-in functions is something that all employees need to learn. When the manager was good at setting rules in outlook and utilizing the build-in technological resources, for example by sending CC email automatically to folders, write FYA or FYI in the subject line and filtering emails by sender, approval or deadlines, they did not perceive any particular overload despite having more than hundreds of emails coming in daily. In line with that we also argue that filtering information and cautiousness with business email CCing are crucial not to construct overload and an untrustful business environment. We argue for more pulled, rather than pushed information and that this methodology would reduce overload in the organisation. We believe that it is possible to reduce overload and be transparent at the same time by uploading information, for example to a blog or to the intranet, for pulled communication instead of pushing it out through email. We have composed the model, see Figure 3 below that illustrate the risk and advantages of pushed and pulled information.

| | Advantage | Risk |
|---|---|---|
| Push | Transparency | Overload |
| Pull | Productivity | Unawareness |

*Fig. 3 Own Model - The Push and Pull Matrix (2020)*

As illustrated in the model above, we believe the advantage with pushed information is that it is inclusive and provides transparency, but it can lead to overload. In contrast, pulled information requires the employees to be proactive and know where to access it, something that empowers them. At the same time, with more pulled information there will be less unnecessary emails to filter through, leading to higher productivity. Though, we see a risk that if they do not pull the information, by choice or ignorance, they will stay unaware. In line with Cornelissen (2011) we recognise the importance of every individual to feel secure and

understand their task to stay motivated to perform well, something that can be difficult if they are unaware of new information. Hence, the managers and the organisation need to be deliberate about when to push or to pull information.

One important finding is the surge of computer-generated emails that is adding another complexity in the workplace. When Barrett created their model in 2002, the digital landscape was very different from today, where digital communication has become an integrated part of our modern society. With that in mind we observed that, in line with Nakatsuhara et al. (2017), and as showed in our analysis, our respondents did perceive Skype as a form of face-to-face interaction. Since Skype is so ingrained in the business culture, and Microsoft Teams is not yet, could that be one reason why the respondents are hesitant towards the new platform? Another reason could be that employees have still to figure out the tool. We argue that this hesitation about new technologies as shown in the analysis needs to be addressed by the company both from an implementation perspective but also in order to keep up in a continuously changing business environment. Hence, we argue it is important to have the employees onboard when introducing new tools and to provide trainings.

Finally, we argue that it is a crucial strategic communication skill to be able to convey a vision that translates the organisational goals in a comprehensive way to increase collaboration in the company. Common goals provide clarity in the organisation, promote collaboration, and prevent individual thinking between functions, since the latter can create confusion.

## 6.2 Theoretical Implications

The main theoretical contributions of this study are a deepened understanding of the importance of internal communication, within the areas of formal and informal communication, the usage of communication tools and strategic communication management. As the world is becoming more and more digitalized, with a multitude of communication tools, face-to-face is still the most important method to communicate. The line between physical and virtual meetings has been blurred over the past 20 years and in line with Karis, Wildman and Mané (2014) we have observed Skype to be considered a form of face-to-face interaction, in contradiction to Barrett (2002) who argues communication effectiveness is always better with physical face-to-face. Therefore, we argue that Barrett's model needs to be revised in regard to the modern digital business context. Another theoretical implication we recognise is that even though Kraut et al. (1990) observed that informal communication is important for innovation over 30 years ago, our study indicate that it is still very valid. Furthermore, we have contributed with empirical findings regarding computer generated emails, an area that is increasing and needs more research.

## 6.3 Managerial Implications

Internal communication is a complex social phenomenon where effective employee communication can be the success or failure of an organisation. We suggest that managers need to consider the importance of communication methods, formal and informal communication, in relation to communication tools and how these aspects will foster trust, effectiveness, and innovation in the organisation. We argue the importance of using the right communication tool for the right occasion, for example, emails should primarily be used for short and distinctive communication and not for discussions and conflict management, where formal, face to face meetings would be preferred.

Managers should be mindful about new technologies; the importance to master those and to provide training upon the new technology for the team. To not construct but to manage overload, it is important to set clear and distinct rules on who should receive what information and through which tool it should be distributed. Managers can help decrease overload by utilizing filtering options effectively; automatically sorting emails into folders and not send unfiltered and unexplained emails unless all the information is important to the receiver. Hence, if the information does not help to convey vision, context, or job-related tasks, it is most likely information overload. In addition, managers need to consider the use of more pulled over pushed methodology when conducting effective internal communication. An eagerness to be transparent can easily lead to over-communication. Moreover, strategic communication is important, as it establishes a clear vision for the direction of company which will engage employees and facilitate collaboration in the organisation.

## 6.5 Limitations and Future Research

This study provides both theoretical and managerial contributions on internal communication on an MNC, although there are some limitations to this study, and these will be presented below. The scope of the study was limited to a single unit in an MNC and the transferability of the findings to another context could be questioned. However, we argue that there lies analytical power of a single case study and more cases from other parts of the MNC, or other MNCs, would not increase analytical and explanatory power, since by tradition case studies rely on analytical rather than statistical generalization (Dubois and Gadde, 2014). Also, as argued by Guba (1981) and Shenton (2004), that a richness in detail will enable judgement about replication to other contexts.

In addition, a major limitation that was out of our control was the pandemic COVID-19, which made it impossible to have any face-to-face interviews with the respondents. We would also have liked to observe one of the respondents for a full day at the office in order to gather more details about the internal communication and formal/informal information flows at the company. And as we argue in this study, one should not disregard the importance of

face-to-face interaction. Moreover, it was almost impossible to get a hold of respondents and employees, for instance potential respondents in India did not answer to our information letter. We believe that interviewing respondents from India would have given an even deeper understanding of the subject and added another business context.

In regard to the topics mentioned above, and to deepen the understanding regarding internal communication, we would recommend future research within communication from an employee perspective. This study has solely focused on the managerial side and we believe that there would be an added benefit to research the employee side of business communication. Through our study there were also some other themes that came up that were not directly connected to our research question but could be of interest for future research. One theme was that formal and informal communication differs due to generational shift; the younger generation seem to be more focused on work-life balance and affirm to their privacy at the workplace. Another theme was the rapid growth of computer-generated emails and their implications for the business environment.

Internal communication as a social phenomenon is indeed a very important research area and even though this study has provided many relevant insights, we believe there will always be more areas to be explored for effective internal communication.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1 - Information Letter

We are two students, Maria Avramidi och Hanna Nejstgaard from School of Business, Economics and Law at the University of Gothenburg studying Economics with specialisation - Leadership and organisational Theory. We are conducting our Bachelor Thesis in Management and the subject we want to study is Internal Communication within the *Company name*. Furthermore, we will analyze and reflect upon Internal Communication mainly from a leadership perspective. We would like to perform our study using qualitative method ie. interviews. We would appreciate if you would be interested in conducting an interview with us where we guarantee full anonymity for both you and your company.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of our study is to examine Internal Communication from a leadership perspective in an MNC.

**Consent and Confidentiality Terms**

Participation is completely voluntary and you are free to cancel the interview at any point in time without having to provide any specific reason. All participants in our study will be kept anonymous. The recordings of the video interviews will be kept confidential and will be used solely for the purpose of being transcribed, ie. audio is translated into text.

**Utilization Requirements**

All data collected is for research purposes only and will not be used or borrowed for any other purposes than for this thesis.

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SCHOOL OF BUSINESS, ECONOMICS AND LAW

# Appendix 2 - Interview Guide

Introduction- by Maria approx. 5 min
Presentation, purpose, themes, length of interview and reminder of confidentiality.

Structure

- Can you give a short overview on where you are in the organisation? And how long you've been here? (how long have you been with volvo? )
- (how many people do you answer to and how many are you in charge of?)
- How would you describe your team? (how many are they, where are they located, etc)

Communication now

- What tools for communication do you use to communicate with your team?
- How often do you use the different tools?
- In what type of situations do you use the different tools? can you give examples?
- How many business emails do you get on an average day?
- How many require action from you? is it always clear when you need to answer?
- How do you manage any communication overload if any?
- Do you have a preferred tool of communicating? Is there any you dislike?
- Does your way and tools of communicating change depending on how well you know your colleague?
- How do you manage informal communication in the workplace?

Communication- problems and solutions

- What kind of problems can you see with how business communication works today?
- Can you identify any specific situation or circumstance when your communication regularly fails?
- How would you like the communication to work? Is there anything you'd like more of? Less of?

Wrap up

- Thank you for taking your time to do this interview with us.
- Is there anything regarding this subject that you'd like to add?
- Can we contact you if we have any follow-up questions?
- Our thesis will be finished in June and then published online. If you like, we can send you a copy?
- Have a nice day.