Exploring Organizational Identity as a Potential Process

A multiple case study on employee-oriented companies
Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore organizational identity as a potential process.

Design/Methodology/Approach: We applied a qualitative method and followed an inductive approach that was applied to a multiple-in-depth-case study for which we conducted semi-structured interviews with 26 members of two organizations, the Swedish consulting company REACH and the Swiss digital agency WONDROUS. Following a narrative approach, both for structuring the empirical findings, as well as conducting the analysis, we used over 16 hours of interviews to create company narratives and subsequently analyzed them in multiple steps in the fashion of a narrative analysis.

Findings: Based on our empirical findings and the empirical analysis, we developed a conceptualization, the Flux Model. We contribute to the existing body of literature by proposing that the Flux Model visualizes the dynamics of how organizational members socially construct organizational identity on the premise of their own (self-)perceptions. By presenting the different parts of the model and their multiple layers, the process of how organizational identity is continuously becoming is illustrated.

Research Limitations/Implications: The scope of our study is restricted to the two case companies in question. If our abstractions from the cases in form of the Flux Model help to better understand the process of organizing, managers become liberated to make deliberate choices about their organizations’ identities. For research this means an even tighter connection to individual psychology and a deepening of the perspective that organizational identity can not only be viewed as something companies have.

Originality/Value: Out of skepticism towards the usefulness of viewing organizational identity as a process, we applied a symbolic interpretivist perspective and allowed for the possibility that we might not find a process after all. The primary value of this study we believe to be found in the extensive presentation of empirical data, together with our narrative analysis and our conceptual contribution (the Flux Model).

Type of Study: Master thesis (30 ECTS)

Keywords: Alignment, continuously becoming, dual perspective, explorative study, flux, identity as a process, narrative analysis, organizational identity, prehistory, sensegiving, sensemaking, social actor, social constructionist, symbolic interpretivism

In this upload to DIVA, we have only corrected minor grammatical errors that we found after the original deadline.
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II. Acknowledgements

Jönköping, May 2018

For quite some time, we have now been thinking about and working on this master thesis. What initially started as a curiosity for autonomous teams, ultimately led us to the question of what these teams have in common; how everybody knows where to go when nobody is giving directions. We were searching for the root of how such equality between team members can be productive because we are fascinated by this egalitarian idea. What we found was Organizational Identity. Based on our conviction for equality, it is not without acknowledging the help we received from many people that we want to introduce the following work.

Our tutor Annika Hall has relentlessly stood by our side and supported our efforts that, in our opinion, any academic scholar can only dream of. For the time, energy and conviction that Annika allocated for supporting us, we can only be endlessly thankful and humbled - we hope that we will, at some point in the future, find it in ourselves to support the work of others to this selfless extent.

In terms of topic-specific academic illumination, we wish to thank Olof Brunninge for several conversations about the field of Organizational Identity, which led in several instances to an extended and yet again extended degree of understanding of the field. Also, the extensive and detailed work of Gioia, Patvardhan, Hamilton and Corley (2013) served us well as guidance throughout the writing process and we are without doubt it helped us to keep an overview over the field. We can confidently say that these scholars fulfilled their purpose of reflecting on Organizational Identity Formation and Change.

Our work is based on empirical data whose richness exceeded all our expectations. For one part, we want to thank our friends Mia Land and André Müller through whom we learned of the companies that would ultimately participate in our study. Secondly, we which to thank REACH and WONDROUS for their fantastic support and hospitality. It has been the interaction with all organizational members we met that has made our endeavor a memorable, fun, and educative process that we feel has added quite substantially to our life experiences.

We hope our work will do justice to all the parties involved and are looking forward to a constructive dialogue.

With the best wishes,

Søren Abildgaard and Florian Köhler
III. Prologue

We can’t help but think of all the different mornings we woke up and how we felt at the specific day. Sometimes we wake up energetic, we feel like the whole world is at our feet and we are unstoppable. The very next day we are barely making it out of bed. Every step we take feels wrong, as if our bodies were telling us ‘Lie down again, today’s not your day!’ We finally arrive at the bathroom mirror and don’t recognize the image that greets us – where did the handsome and passionate person go we met yesterday?

We are still in the same body, except a much less attractive version

We still have the same memories, except we now focus on all the failures in our lives

And yes, we are still the same person, but we wished to be someone else; where is the person from yesterday? Sometimes that celebrated hero comes back, but then leaves again.

Our perceptions of who we are changes, and yet, we stay the same in very fundamental ways. We cannot change our past, yet we can choose how to frame it when looking back. If we are self-reflective enough, we can recognize how we respond to a situation differently today from how we would have responded a few years ago. But how did that happen? It’s hard to believe we followed a step-wise process, molding ourselves from one version of ourselves into another by morphing through different stages. The idea of identity resonates because it focuses on who we are (cf. Gioia, 2008; Albert & Whetten, 1985). In the following, we set out to learn more about this development, while taking a process perspective that is much more complex than thinking of it as consisting of consecutive steps. Welcome to the journey!
1. Introduction

“We are what we repeatedly do.” (Will Durant)

The question of identity is a fundamental one because, in a way, it tries to describe the ultimate purpose of our existence. Following Durant’s logic, we were what we did, we are what we do and we become what we will be doing. In our interpretation, this means that it is up to us to determine who we will become. But there is also our past that leaves a mark on our behavior (Lawrence, 1984). We act in accordance with who we believe we are, grounded in the image we have of ourselves and the one others have of us (cf. Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Schultz & Hernes, 2013). Identity is therefore inherently social because it describes who we are in relation to others (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Individuals author their personal identities through social discourses and retrospective reflections about past actions and future aspirations (Humphreys & Brown, 2002, p. 423; Schultz & Hernes, 2013, p. 1). This means that identity explains actions (Gioia, Patvardhan, Hamilton & Corley, 2013, p. 125). In everyday language, identity is the answer to “who am I?”

Some research assumes that the understanding of our identities as individuals is extendable to the identities of organizations (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 133). Individual identity and organizational identity (OI) do certainly relate to each other in the sense that both fields are concerned with the question of our existence (Gioia, 2008, p. 2). Critical to the well-being of the individual is a certain degree of stability in relation to identity (Erikson, 1968); too much change can pose a danger to the psychological health, and cause discomfort, anxiety, and loss of self-esteem (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 133). The same is assumed to be true for organizational members (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 133). Fiol (2001) is standing against this assumption by suggesting that an organization’s identity might be “continuously fluid” (p. 154).2 We do, however, believe that organizations can increase employee commitment by aligning individual self-concepts with the organization because employee satisfaction/commitment is higher when organizational goals/projects/life are aligned with personal values/beliefs/identities (Lydon, 1996, p. 193). It is therefore not only important to know who the individuals as organizational members are, but also who the organization is as a whole.

Let us therefore now take a look at what OI is. Many of the works within OI research follow the definition provided by Albert and Whetten (1985) (Gioia et al., 2013):

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2 This is not to denounce earlier work at all. To use Hitt’s (M. A. Hitt, Honorary Doctor’s Lecture, May 11, 2018) argument, we are standing on the shoulders of others who were facing a different (now historical) context. We believe this to be especially true in this case, where thirty years ago, globalization was in its infancy and the internet had not yet made its way into private homes. It is rather easy to assume that, a few decades ago, the general environment seemed rather stable (or at least more stable compared to today). In this light, we assume that our understanding of the current environment to be more flexible influences how we make sense of it (i.e., a stronger focus on change), which then in turn colors our understanding.
“For purposes of defining identity as scientific concept, we treat the criteria of central character, distinctiveness, and temporal continuity as each necessary, and as a set sufficient” (p. 265).³

This definition, however, restricts itself to viewing OI as scientific concept (cf. Albert & Whetten, 1985, p. 265) and does not entertain OI as a question of self-reflection (cf. Albert & Whetten, 1985, p. 264). Whereas the scientific concept is used by scholars to characterize and define what aspects of an organization are distinctive, enduring and central, organizations use self-reflection “to characterize aspects of themselves” (Albert & Whetten, 1985, p. 264). If organizations were to apply the scientific viewpoint, they would ask themselves ‘what aspects about our organization are distinctive, enduring and central?’ instead of asking the broader self-reflective question of ‘who are we?’

“The meanings-based approach to identity […] indicates that although identity is influenced by the social context, individuals and organizations experience it as a deeply personal phenomenon. Unless we understand identity and identity-related processes, the way organizational actors understand and experience them—and not just project them—our understanding of identity is likely to be impoverished and lacking in relevance to practitioners” (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 173).

Therefore, to understand what happens in relation to OI, we must understand the organizational members’ interpretations of it because it is ultimately them who are affected by (cf. Margolis & Hansen, 2002, p. 277), interact with, relate to, and manifest OI (cf. Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2002). This means we define OI as who we are in our qualitative study based on interviews with organizational members.

External and internal environments impact organizational identity (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 176; Plowman et al., 2007), especially in fast-paced environments (Gustafson, 1995; Gustafson & Reger, 1995; cf. Fiol, 2001), such as the globalized and digitally connected world we live in. Reacting to environmental changes can lead to unconscious responses (i.e., changes) in the identity of an organization (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 176) and can thereby cause misalignment between “who we are” and “who we want to be” (i.e., creating ‘identity gaps’) (Reger et al., 1994). Although this is the case, we delimit ourselves to applying an internal focus on organizational identity (i.e., not allowing scope for the consideration of external stakeholders).⁴ Besides external and internal factors, history is another element interacting with OI in as far as an understanding of “whether we are who we ought to be,” can only be formed if a history exists that the organization can compare itself to (Gioia et al., 2013, pp. 125-126), or if the founder(s) manage to provide a strong and clear vision (cf. Boers & Brunninge, 2011, p. 12).

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³ Emphases added
⁴ Considering the impact of Image (i.e., the view of external stakeholders on the OI) could add to the understanding of OI as a process, but would at the same time further increase the complexity of our study. We consider it as a prudent choice to go step by step instead and leave the consideration of Image in regards to OI as a potential process to future research.
The founders of our two case companies, REACH and WONDROUS, have visions so strong, they ultimately led them to founding their respective companies. In pursuit of these visions, paths were taken that ultimately led both companies off track of their desired course. Upon this self-reflective realization, they were required to adjust their courses anew. That these course-adjustments were made based on understandings gained in retrospective shows the usefulness to understand how to deliberately take steps towards a specific end from the start. Proactively understanding the underlying cause-and-effect-relationships.

Although OI has been described as process by academic research, the aim of these research publications has not been to understand the development of OI in a most detailed manner, but rather to use a process perspective as steppingstone to fulfill their ultimate research purposes (cf. Gioia et al. 2013). This is not to deny the relevance of their research purposes because these studies have in fact contributed significantly to the development of OI as an academic field (Gioia, Price, Hamilton, Thomas, 2010). The only point we are aiming to make is that, with the exception of a few (cf. Gioia & Patvardhan, 2012; Gioia et al., 2010; Schultz & Hernes, 2013), the focus on OI process research has not been on deeply understanding the process underlying OI development as argued for by process theorists (e.g., Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). It has taken until 2012, when Dennis Gioia and Shubha Patvardhan questioned looking at OI as a stepwise process and discussed perspectives of OI being in a state of *always becoming* (cf. Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) and as being in a state of *flux*, that a more elaborate discussion about the process was introduced.

As will become clearer in the Frame of Reference, the discussion about OI is not only a content-specific one. The objective to better understand OI raises the question of how to best discuss OI as well. So far, this discussion has mostly taken place from a perspective of viewing OI as a possession (i.e., OI is something that a company *has*). Under the light of viewing the world and everything in it as being subject to constant change, describing OI as rather stable property of an organization that might be object to change every once in a while, becomes a redundant view when change is believed to underlie everything (Gioia et al., 2013; cf. Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Viewing OI as a process is suggested to accommodate this change of perspective (Gioia et al., 2013, Gioia & Patvardhan, 2012; cf. Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) but it is also questionable in how far such a process perspective can be valuable (Gioia et al., 2013). Although we see the argument for viewing OI as a process, we want to avoid to ignorantly jump on a bandwagon. This we believe to achieve by taking a step back and employing an explorative mindset that is open to finding something else than a process.

Organizational theory in general faces the challenge of having to deal with humans, whose behavior can be described as notoriously unpredictable (cf. Hatch, 2006). Hence, to further contribute to the process discussion, questioning the very existence of a universal structure (i.e., a process) should be seen as fertilizer to the debate. We contribute to this more elaborate discussion by being critical about our own predisposition towards the existence of a process. This is accomplished by questioning the assumption of being able to apply any kind of structure to a development that might very well not follow one (cf. Pratt, 2012) paired with a
pragmatic mindset to avoid turning this thesis into a solely philosophical critique. Through an exploratory study, we shed light on *OI as a potential process*.

2. Research Problem

The two organizations we talked to in the buildup to our master thesis research felt like that they did not recognize when fundamental changes to their organizational identities were about to happen, causing them to be reactive instead of being able to proactively forge their own future. This means that in those two cases OI development had not been properly understood (e.g. what causes change, and how does change occur). Such finding is not surprising, considering this being a scarcely researched and only recently emerging part of the field (Gioia et al., 2013). Understanding these cause-and-effect-relationships in relation to OI is necessary because “identity is a core concept invoked to help make sense and explain action” (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 125). If researchers understand these relationships, they should be able to better make sense of the organizations they are researching and utilize this understanding to contextualize their findings. From a practical perspective, such understanding can contribute to companies’ abilities to proactively influence their own identities. Based on our critical evaluation above (incl. the part about how to discuss OI in the *Introduction*), we arrive at the following purpose statement for our thesis:

3. Purpose

*The purpose of this thesis is to explore OI as a potential process.*
4. Frame of Reference

On our endeavor to make sense of the field of Organizational Identity (OI), it was not only once that we had to look into the abyss of conflicting concepts from which contradictory-sounding terminology and thoughts emerged. As with many aspects of life, learning more about OI meant to experience different states of mind: from being confident that we were getting a grip of what the body of literature is about, to the deepest mistrust in our own capacity to properly understand what had been previously written, to seeing a dim light in the end of a tunnel. This part of our Master Thesis is the recording of what we have found on the other side; our way to approach Organizational Identity.

4.1. The Perspectives of Organizational Identity

For anybody aiming to understand OI as a theoretical discipline, it is of importance to acknowledge that different perspectives exist from which OI can be viewed. In the existing body of OI literature, four of such perspectives exist:

- The Social Constructionist View
- The Social Actor View
- The Institutional View
- The Population Ecology View

The Institutional and Population Ecology Views generally take different approaches to studying OI than the Social Constructionist and the Social Actor Perspectives. Where the former two focus more on an external view constructing the internal OI based on factors such as institutional membership status, the latter two emphasize a focus to internal factors as the main elements constructing OI (for a comprehensive contextualization of all perspectives, consult Gioia et al., 2013). This has caused some researchers to neglect the Institutional and Population Ecology Views in relation to OI formation and OI change (Gioia et al., 2013). For this reason, and because our study is focusing exclusively on the Social Actor Perspective and the Social Constructionist View, this thesis will not give more space to the other two perspectives. Instead, focus on the Social Constructionist View and the Social Actor View are granted further space for explanation.

From the Social Constructionist Perspective OI rests in the collectively shared beliefs and understandings of central and relatively stable features of an organization (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). The shared beliefs and understandings are agreed upon through sensemaking processes, where members interrogate themselves about what they believe to be central and distinctive features of the organization (Elstak, 2008; Gioia et al., 2013; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Although it is one of the two most prominent perspective of OI, the perspective has received criticism nonetheless. One of these is that the perspective treats OI as an extension of

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5 With changes occurring in these streams of research, it is suggested that these perspectives might actually gain more relevance again in relation to OI (Gioia et al., 2013).
individual identity because it “assign[s] too much influence to labels and meanings” (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 170), which makes it difficult to measure (Whetten, 2006).

The Social Actor View holds that OI is grounded in institutional claims available to its members about the central, enduring and distinctive elements of the organization. These claims are constructed through a sensegiving process where organizational leaders propose self-definitional claims on behalf of the organization. These provide the members with a consistent and legitimate narrative to construct shared labels and meanings of the organizational self. The mentioned identity claims in the perspective are considered enduring as they construct labels that are resistant to change (Gioia et al., 2013). However, the literature recognizes that the meanings of these labels are changeable over time (Gioia et al., 2010; Gioia et al., 2013; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Whetten, 2003; Whetten, 2006). Critics of this perspective claim that, although this categorization (central, enduring, distinctive) is relevant for identity, the emphasis on the categories fails to display the nuances that make a difference in perception and the drivers for action (Gioia et al., 2010).

During the past three decades, a now long-standing discussion regarding which of the perspectives best give insight into the characteristics of OI developed (cf. Gioia et al., 2010; Gioia et al., 2013; Schultz & Hernes, 2013; Whetten, 2006). In the mist of this three decades long debate, a consensus, however, seems to have somewhat been reached. Ravasi and Schultz (2006) claim that the Social Actor and Social Constructionist Views on OI “represent different aspects of the construction of organizational identities” (p. 436). The Social Actor View represents institutional claims and the Social Constructionist View represents a collective understanding of OI. Viewed under the same lens, “the social actor and social constructionist view suggest how organizational identities arise from sensemaking and sensegiving processes” (p. 436). Therefore, the two perspectives are complementary to understand how OI is constructed (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Gioia et al. (2010) take this argument one step further and argue that the Social Actor and Social Constructionist Views are not only complementary, but rather “mutually recursive and constitutive” because the two perspectives taken together “not only produce a better sense of the processes and practices involved in the forging of an identity, but also [provide] an avenue for understanding these processes” (Gioia et al., 2010, p. 6). This means researchers should recognize that OI can be considered both as a sort of entity (when viewed from the Social Actor Perspective), and a sort of process (OI is constantly in flux when viewed from the Social Constructionist Perspective) simultaneously (a.k.a. Dual-Perspective) (Gioia & Patvardhan, 2012).

4.2 Enduring vs. Dynamic

The debate regarding what perspective to employ when researching OI is far from the only substantial discussion within the literature body of OI. Another debate has been whether OI is an enduring or changing phenomenon. Some researchers have conceived OI as an enduring phenomenon that exists in some state of equilibrium that is only occasionally altered by discontinuity. Researchers from this side of the camp usually argue from a Social Actor Perspective (Gioia et al., 2013; Gioia & Patvardhan, 2012; cf. Albert & Whetten, 1985; Whetten, 2006). Contrary, other researchers conceive OI as in constant flux; always being in
motion. Researchers from this camp usually argue from a Social Constructivist Perspective (Gioia et al., 2013; Gioia & Patvardhan, 2012; cf. Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). An argument put forward by Fiol (2001), seems to push the agenda of advocates for viewing OI as a dynamic phenomenon; she argues for the infeasibility of a non-changing OI for organizations operating in a highly dynamic environment, because the highly competitive environment requires firms to “constantly destroy and cannibalize prior competencies” and not to “build up a stock of inimitable and unique competencies” (Fiol, 2001, p. 692). Instead, she suggests that organizations should adopt a strategy of “continuously changing temporary advantages” (Fiol, 2001, p. 692) and to do this, their OI must be “continuously fluid” (Fiol, 2001, p. 692; cf. Gioia et al., 2013).

4.3 Identity as Process

A continuously fluid identity is an OI in constant formation, and because of that it is necessary to understand the “deep processes” (potential processes that are common across organizations) that make up the OI formation (Gioia et al., 2013). Gioia et al. (2010) put forward a model of process of OI formation which includes seemingly deep processes such as “articulation of founders’ values [...] and the use of via negativa” (via negativa: deriving answers to who we are by answering who we aren’t) (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 182). However, extensive knowledge about these deep processes and their application across organizations is still limited and Gioia et al. (2013) therefore call for further research to examine these processes in greater detail.6 One reason for a lack of better understanding the deep processes connected to OI is that literature started off questing what OI is instead of how OI is formed; this question arose only recently (Gioia et al., 2013). To our knowledge, only two studies have explicitly examined OI formation from a process perspective (Gioia et al., 2010; Kroezen & Heugens, 2012). The OI formation process starts before the official launch of an organization (Boers & Brunninge, 2011, p. 9) and is connected to the founder’s (or founders’) personal history (or histories) (also referred to as Prehistory) (cf. Boers & Brunninge, 2011, p. 5; Kimberly & Bouchikhi, 1995, p. 17; Sarason, 1972). Depending on how many people are involved in the founding, it is suggested that individuals form personal ideas (intr subjectively) and then negotiate them between each other (intersubjectively) to then arrive at a generic understanding of their expectations (Ashforth, Rogers & Corley, 2011).

Brunninge (2009) suggests that researchers focus on how contemporary members of an organization relate to the history of the organization (how they make sense of it). This he believes to be an important determinant for how individuals in an organization behave and make decisions (Brunninge, 2009, p. 9). Because members of organizations act in accordance with how they interpret their own and their organizational history, rather than to how the actual history occurred, the interpretations are socially constructed when members collectively reflect about the past through discussions and sensengiving actions (Brunninge, 2009, p. 11). This is supported by Gioia et al. (2010) as follows:

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6 To understand how we contribute to this remark, please consult the Discussion section of this thesis.
“members use many resources to make sense of the new organizational identity, including their experiences with prior organizations. Members’ histories appear to serve as a kind of surrogate for institutional memory in nascent organizations that, by virtue of their newness, lack the quality of “identity continuity”” (p. 164).

Another, far more studied element of OI is the process of change (cf. Gioia et al., 2013). Gioia et al. (2000) put forward the idea that OI consists of labels and meanings and that identity change can manifest itself in two different ways:

“(i) a change in the labels or (ii) a change in the meanings associated with those labels” (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 143).

When there is a change in labels, it is perceived far more visible than a change in the meanings associated with these labels (Gioia et al., 2000). Similar, Margolis and Hansen (2002) suggest a categorization of what makes OI change. Instead of meanings and labels, they isolate a list of general organizational attributes, which they cluster into two categories: core attributes and application attributes. Core attributes comprise two categories purpose and philosophy, while application attributes are comprised of three categories priorities, practices, and projections (Margolis & Hansen, 2002). Margolis and Hansen (2002) posit that core attribution makes OI, and application attributes manifest OI. They argue that alterations to the core attributes impact OI, whereas changes to application attributes do not qualify as OI changes (Margolis & Hansen, 2002). Common to the two studies, their findings suggest that changes in meanings and application attributes can happen without affecting the labels and core attributes, this enables alterations of the OI over time without it being considered as a change of the OI (Gioia et al., 2000; Margolis & Hansen, 2002; cf. Gioia et al., 2013).

“Identity can change over time in a way that retains its coherence and provides a sense of continuity across the various time periods – in effect creating an illusion that it has indeed remained the same” (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 140).

Common for both, the literature on OI formation and OI change, is that many researchers assume a change still to allow for a continuation of an organization’s identity, if not see change as a way to preserve a specific OI (Gioia et al., 2013). Such changes might create an impression of stability (Gioia et al., 2013). Regardless of whether change is perceived to serve the purpose to keep an OI alive, to change it fundamentally, or to view it to emerge unexpectedly, nearly 50 articles7 assume change to happen to an otherwise rather stable OI (which is in line with the widely known step-wise change process proposed by Kurt Lewin), instead of assuming that stability does not exist as normal state (cf. Gioia & Patvardhan, 2012; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002; Weick & Quinn, 1999). To exemplify this notion, quote Tsoukas and Chia (2002):

7 For a full review, consult Gioia et al. (2013)
“Change must not be thought of as a property of organization. Rather, organization must be understood as an emergent property of change. Change is ontologically prior to organization—it is the condition of possibility for organization” (p. 570).

With this alteration of perspective, organizing becomes a property of change and we are presented with the possibility to view OI as a process rather than viewing it as a state (Gioia et al., 2013).

4.4 Organizational Identity as Flux

As introduced in the last paragraph, we now move along the scale of the dynamic nature of OI towards considering OI as being in a never-ending state of construction (Gioia & Patvardhan, 2012; Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Here, “the ongoing organizational identity construction” refers “to the continuous intersubjective negotiation of claims and understandings that constitutes organizational identity” (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 166). This literature body serves as a segway between OI formation literature and OI change literature because it delivers insights into the ways OI is “developed, maintained, or altered over time” (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 166).

In the ongoing construction literature, OI is considered a perpetual process of reproduction and reinforcement through the dynamics of interaction between the organizational members (Gioia et al., 2013; Nag et al., 2007). During this constant process of renewal, OI can seem stable through the “temporary” agreed upon consensus (Gioia et al., 2010; Magnolis & Hansen, 2002). This consensus about OI does, however, still allow room for interpretation on the individual level, meaning that two individuals might have different interpretations of the same agreed upon OI (Pratt & Foreman, 2000).

Gioia and Patvardhan (2012) refer to the ongoing state of construction as an “ongoing state of flux that we enact on an ongoing basis via our constructions and actions” (p. 4). They argue that if we desire to understand the ongoing state of flux, then we must understand the individuals’ perceptions of their own identities and also how an individual’s identity interacts with the other individuals’ identities at the organization (Gioia & Patvardhan, 2012). Furthermore, we must understand how individuals construct and reconstruct their own identity today, and perhaps in relation to yesterday (referring back to the concept of Prehistory). Gioia and Patvardhan (2012) phrase it as follows:

“to achieve a truly comprehensive understanding of identity, we need to capture not only the features, but also the flow of her [an individual’s] identity in motion” (p. 4).

Looking at the field of OI again in more general terms, the field seems to currently pass “a transition point” (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 167) where it is moving from researching OI as a phenomenon, to instead utilizing OI as a theoretical lens to understand other phenomena (i.e. culture and/or learning) (Gioia et al., 2013).
5. Method

“The worst thing one can do with words, is to surrender to them.” (George Orwell)

5.1. Research Philosophy

We are looking at OI as a process, while also trying to stay aware of our presumption that OI development can even be usefully described as a process. This dichotomous view comes from an intrinsically critical worldview. At the same time, we are expecting of ourselves to not turn this thesis on OI into a merely philosophical debate about ontology and epistemology. This we ensure by assuming the existence of a process and then challenging this presumption because assuming the nonexistence of a process would deny us the possibility to assess OI as a process. In postmodern manner, we are therefore trying to not surrender to words but to challenge meaning.

Observing OI from a process perspective means we operate from the assumption that OI is a continuous and changing phenomenon moving through aspects of sensemaking and sensegiving by the members of the organization (cf. Gioia & Patvardhan, 2012). Because of the roles we assign to sensemaking and sensegiving, our understanding of reality is dependent on the realities interpreted and constructed by the individual members of an organization (i.e., facts/realities are derived from human creations). Because every member’s perspective of the organization is considered relevant, no perspective is considered more correct than another. This understanding derives from a relativistic world view (cf. Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015) and means that we, throughout this thesis, operate form a relativistic ontology (also referred to as subjectivism (cf. Hatch, 2006, p. 14)) with the epistemology of constructionism (Esterby-Smith et al., 2015) (also referred to as interpretivism (cf. Hatch, 2006, p. 14)). By doing so, we are applying the organizational theory perspective of symbolic interpretivism (cf. Hatch, 2006).

5.2. Research Purpose & Approach

To fulfill our research purpose of exploring organizational identity as potential process, we cannot restrict ourselves to theory that has already been generated, but must be as open as we can be to what we might find on our explorative endeavor. In strict terms this would also mean to not assume the existence of any process, but for pragmatic reasons argued for above, we believe this inference to be useful. We are employing an inductive approach because of the exploratory nature of our purpose (cf. Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill., 2009, p. 490). Much like explorers setting out to travel the world, we think that plotting out a detailed path of an unexplored terrain might not generate the best way through it. Rather, one ought to be sensitive to the terrain right in front of one’s eyes and decide whether to step left or right based on the information obtained in the moment.
5.3. Research Design

It has been established that trying to understand OI by only looking at a snapshot is insufficient (Gioia & Patvardhan, 2012; Boers & Brunninge, 2011, p. 2; cf. Gioia et al., 2010; Corley & Gioia, 2004; Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2000; Gioia, Bouchiki, Fiol, Golden-Biddle, Hatch, Rao, Rindova, Schultz, Fombrun, Kimberly & Thomas, 1998). Whereas our fellow Jönköping-educated scholars (i.e., Boers & Brunninge, 2011) and others (cf. Corley & Gioia, 2004) point to the importance of longitudinal studies, we, in our youthful desire to explore, believe that also applying an entirely retrospective perspective can be valuable. Our understanding is that we are deemed to use the past as sensemaking mechanism, as reference point if you will, to understand more recent situations. We are hereby advocating for total contextualization. Motivated by face-to-face discussions with Olof Brunninge (February 7, 2018; February 27, 2018) and a study by Kimberly and Bouchikhi (1995), who suggest that a biographical approach to business research is useful in as far as it informs context, as well as “yesterday’s events shape today’s behavior” (Kimberly & Bouchikhi, 1995, p. 10), we explore the potential process of OI through narrative case studies. The narrative approach is applied in both, the data collection and data analysis. We understand the concept of “narrative” as proposed by Rostron (2014):

“Narrative may be understood as a way of organizing and making sense of scattered events: it is an active process of conceptual framing (Hawkins and Saleem, 2012) and a particular way of constructing social realities (Cunliffe et al., 2004) by selectively distilling disparate and often contradictory events and experiences into a coherent whole (Boje, 2001)” (p. 97).

We understand process as “the progression of events in an organizational entity’s existence over time” (Van De Ven & Poole, 1995, p. 512). To gain insight into the process of OI, we collect organizational members’ constructions of OI during different timespans of the organization’s lifetime. Since we believe OI is best understood when looking at the past (cf. Hatch & Schultz, 1997; Normann, 1975; Rhenman, 1973), we emphasize attention to the history of both selected organizations and their organizational members; this we do by documenting foregone events and their contexts, as well as the interviewees’ interpretations of these. Through interviews with organizational members, insight into how individual members of the organizations make sense of these events and actions in relation to the organization were gathered. From these insights, interrelations and causal links between the narratives were sought to establish coherent narratives that give insight into the potential process of OI in the selected organizations (cf. Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Rostron, 2014).

In accordance with an inductive approach to our qualitative study, the focus lies on the empirical data we gathered and we view the section Frame of Reference as opportunity to introduce the reader to the field of OI (i.e., it is not intended to serve as an in-depth elaboration on the field). Extensively discussing the whole field of OI in the Frame of Reference would not have contributed to our overall approach, as it only became clear during the writing process which academic contributions would be focal points for our study. Focal points that lay beyond the scope of introducing the field of OI (as done in the Frame of Reference), we introduce in the Theoretical Discussion where their relationships to our work
are portrayed. We are aware that applying such an approach has led to a rather hefty imbalance in size between our case company descriptions and the presentation of theory in the *Frame of Reference*. We do however believe that this approach allows us to fulfill our purpose most accurately because we are avoiding to lead the reader through content not directly related to our thesis.

### 5.4. Data Collection: Interviews

Our purpose is to study OI as a potential process. We must therefore focus on how identity comes about and how it changes, but also be prepared to pay attention to individual OI features if they proof to be valuable for visualizing the process of identity (cf. Gioia & Patvardhan, 2012, p. 8). We are interested in the prehistory of the company (focusing on the founder’s history predating the founding of the company), the founding stage, as well as the subsequent lifecycle stage during which the management teams realize that the organizations develops differently as initially planned and expected.

Recognizing and understanding context is one of the core elements in our research. It was therefore relevant to pre-structure the interviews not too tightly, but leave space for the interviewee to take the lead about what stories to share. The semi-structured nature of the interviews conducted was grounded in the development and application of a topic guide (cf. Easterby-Smith et al., 2015, p. 140), which was used throughout each interview. An outline of the topic guide can be found in Appendix V. VIII. In developing a topic guide, our main expectation was to find ways in which we would be able to find common ground with each interviewee to create a comfortable environment in which s/he would be willing to share personal experiences and thoughts. The idea was to construct situations in which we would be able to take the interviewee by the hand in case s/he would have a blackout and would not know what to say. In this process, we were drawing inspiration from Edgar Schein’s Process Consultation approach. This meant that we tried to tailor the topic guide to the environment of the interviewees. This was helpful in facilitating a useful exchange of information (cf. Schein, 1999). To position ourselves better for the analysis process, we recorded every interview except three, where technical issues prohibited us to do so.

Before the first interviews, we prepared an introduction video to inform interviewees about what to expect in relation to the upcoming interviews (see Appendix V. III.). During the first interviews, we had expected to simply ask the interviewees to share different stories with us that they connected with their companies. However, it became clear that this demand was more confusing than helpful. Also, it contradicted our approach of creating situations in which conversation could take place on eye-level because of the confusion we created by asking such an ambiguous question. We were, however, lucky because we realized that even when we were not asking for stories, our conversation partners would tell their own stories by sharing their thoughts, feelings, and interpretations with us. This was not apparent to us in the beginning because we had our minds set on a specific structure, but after reflecting over the first interview experiences we realized that we were told stories even when we were not directly asking for them. In terms of how we fostered constructive conversations, we employed the laddering up and down technique (cf. Easterby-Smith et al., 2015, p. 142); we
asked questions such as “can you elaborate on why that matters to you?” and “can you give us an example of that?” In these terms, we basically encouraged the interviewees to reflect over enactment (i.e., reflect over their sensemaking in the very moment of situations but also in retrospect and their actions grounded in these reflections). We planned for one-hour long interviews with each member of the top management, but often ended up exceeding the time. With the employees, we planned for 30 minutes long interviews, due to restrictions from the side of our case organizations. We had our worries, whether it was possible to gain deep enough insights within that time frame, but it turned out to be a satisfying duration time to accommodate our purpose.

5.5. Sampling Strategy

We conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews (cf. Easterby-Smith et al., 2015, pp. 133, 139) with 9 employees from REACH and 11 employees from WONDROUS, as well as the management team, consisting of 3 people each. This resulted in a total of 26 interviews and a combined duration of 16 hours, 26 minutes, and 15 seconds (see Appendix V.V.IV. for a more detailed illustration). Conducting interviews allowed us to access contextualized information (cf. Easterby-Smith et al., 2015, p. 134). To understand the applied sampling strategy, it is helpful to differentiate between two levels: the company level and the interviewee level. The company level refers to how we chose the companies participating in this study. The interviewee level explains how interviewees within each company were selected.

5.5.1. Sampling Strategy: The Company Level

In the beginning of January, we conducted pre-thesis interviews with three organizations. The purpose of conducting pre-thesis interviews with companies was to honor our personal expectation to create a work that will be both, of academic and managerial relevance. Our idea was to understand what kind of question companies have around OI and how we might be able to contribute to answering them through our master thesis. We were lucky to find two companies with an allegedly strong focus on culture and identity in the very beginning. The two companies were REACH and WONDROUS who turned out to be rather similar in certain aspects. As we progressed with our thesis preparations, we realized that a collaboration with the third organization seemed less relevant for both parties and we decided to discontinue negotiations.

While a friendly affiliation with REACH helped to identify the organization as a potentially suitable case company, contact with WONDROUS was established based on a blog post (see Appendix V.VII.). We read on their website. The post was about organizational culture, which created interest from our side. Besides being aware of the importance of organizational culture and identity, a second selection criterion was that the development of OI was not completely clear to the management team and that it was thought to have caused unexpected results.

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8 Enactment is a concept developed by Weick (1979): “In Weick’s theory of organizing, organizational realities are socially constructed by organizational members as they try to make sense of what is happening both as it occurs and in retrospect, and then act on that understanding” (Hatch, 2006, p. 45).
9 We have been, however, encouraged by our contact person to share our progress.
Although initially contacting these three companies was the result of applying an ad-hoc sampling strategy (cf. Easterby-Smith et al., 2015, p. 138), the decision-making process of whom to include in our study was somewhat more complex. We refer to this decision-making approach as belief-guided sampling strategy (inspired by theory-guided sampling, cf. Easterby-Smith et al., 2015, p. 138). This meant that the organizations had to regard organizational culture and identity as important elements they were willing to work with.

5.5.2. Sampling Strategy: The Interviewee Level

Our empirical data was collected by conducting interviews with individuals at REACH and at WONDROUS. What we sought was a maximum-variation sampling (cf. Easterby-Smith et al., 2015, p. 138) in relation to time employed in the company, to get as much insight into how OI had progressed over time. We tried to gather primary empirical data under four different premises. These are the understanding of

1. employees who have been with the companies the longest
2. the most recent hires
3. employees who have been working there for about half the time of the employees who have been with the respective company the longest
4. the management teams

When applying this sampling approach at REACH, we landed closer to an ad-hoc sampling because not everybody we initially selected wanted to participate in our study. We filled the open spots by asking the employees “next in line” to participate. In the process, we realized that the division of employees in groups was less relevant than we had initially expected. We thought it to be relevant because we wanted to understand the role of history in the organizations, but did not manage to collect enough relevant data to apply this approach.

5.6. Data Analysis Strategy

Organizational identity is inherently based on how people make sense of the past and relate it to the organization (cf. Brunninge, 2009). Because of this nature, we consider narrative analysis to be an appropriate analysis approach, because of its focus on how organizational members create and use stories to make sense of the world (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). As “[...] research accounts are partial fictions because they are products of the situated perspective of their authors” (Hatch, 2006, p. 46), also we as researchers contribute to these narratives by interpreting and restructuring them.

Narrative analysis generally consists of four different steps: Selection, Analysis of the narrative, Re-contextualization, as well as Interpretation and Evaluation (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). These steps are also the pillars of our data analysis, with a specific emphasis on the contexts and effects of the narratives because, as explained before, context informs sensemaking efforts. Easterby-Smith et al. (2015) refer to this emphasis as “interaction analysis” and highlight that the steps of Re-contextualization and Interpretation and Evaluation receive more attention under this premise (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015, pp. 208-209).
5.6.1. Selection

By listening to the audio recordings and revisiting our hand-written notes for each interview, we prepared the data for further analysis. We applied the approach of Data Sampling, which consisted of transcribing the most relevant parts of each interview (cf. Saunders et al., 2009, p. 486). Every interview was understood as an entity in its own right. This enabled us to include findings that were different from what other interviewees had shared. At the same time, we acknowledge a layer common to all interviewees who come from the same company. What we mean by this is that what one employee told us we were in some instances able to better understand by interpreting it in the light of what other interviewees from the same company told us (each interview extended the context in which we interpreted the content of the other interviews). This enabled us to make decisions about what data to include/exclude based not only on the importance of specific data points to the individual interviewee, but also allowed us to seek out “red threads” unconscious to the interviewees. The data points we deemed as “most relevant” were the ones that had meanings connected to them (potential insights into the underlying identity). Information that informed the context (incl. observational data) we collected in a separate context document (it is not included in the thesis because it contained information about identities of the interviewees). To collect accounts that were significant to the interviewees was assured by asking them to recall past events and reflect on situations (i.e., laddering up and down) (cf., Easterby-Smith et al., 2015, p. 142).

We structured the content of our interviews in the format of apparent stories that appeared within each interview. We understand the concept of story in the following way:

“stories are [...] ’devices through which people present themselves and their worlds to themselves [...] and to others’ (Lawler, 2002: 242)” (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015, p. 207) that are “defined as narratives which have both plots and characters and generate emotion in the story teller and their audience using elaboration and poetic licence [sic] (Gabriel 2000)” (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 514). This was important because to be able to conduct a narrative analysis, accounts ought to be of significance to the narrator as presented in the following definition:

“A narrative is defined broadly as an account of an experience that is told in a sequenced way, indicating a flow of related events that, taken together, are significant for the narrator and which convey meaning to the researcher (Coffey and Atkinson 1996)” (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 514).

In three cases, we were not able to audio-record the interview because of technical complications. We tried to accommodate for lacking an audio recording by taking more precise notes during the interview and by translating our notes and our thoughts in a consensus-based document that ought to function as foundation and memory safe, like the audio recordings. After the two of us had created a document for each interview that divided the different data points into stories individually, we created consensus between ourselves
before moving to data analysis. This we did by comparing our notes, discussing our decisions and creating one interview document per interviewee from our individual interviewee documents.

From the individual interview documents, we created one document per company to establish a narrative for our two case studies. We started with the individual interview documents of the management teams because these consisted of the whole time-span of the organizations’ lifetimes. After having established the foundation for the two narratives, we introduced all the stories from each employee into the document. After having grouped all the narratives relating to the organizations based on similarities, we collected all the remaining stories in a context document that we revisited in the remaining steps of the analysis.

5.6.2. Analysis of Narrative
For each of the two organizations we created a narrative. We then began a detailed examination by pinpointing the main actors, the pivoting moments, and different interpretations of the same events. We then rewrote the narrative into a more coherent storyline loosely based on a chronological order while keeping context and background of each individual narrative in mind (compare to sections 6.2. & 7.2.). Specifically, we looked for alignment and misalignment between perspectives and defining moments for the different parts in the perspective of the organizational members. After the story was complete, we sent it to the top management members of each company, to get their take on our interpretation and correctness of it.

5.6.3. Re-contextualization
The step of Re-contextualization we applied during the steps of Analysis of Narrative (5.6.2.) and Interpretation and Evaluation (5.6.4.). We utilized the context document that we compiled in the Selection phase of the analysis to revisit each part of the narratives with an interpretation of context while formulating the narrative. Further, we reflected on observational data that we gathered when we were present at the companies in relation to the organizations’ narratives.

5.6.4. Interpretation and Evaluation
We as researchers believe that consensus between people only exists in the moment (i.e., temporarily). This means agreement (or also disagreement for that matter) are connected to specific issues (cf. Martin, 1992 in Hatch, 2006). Therefore, it is relevant to focus on context and to not forgo the opportunity of painting a more colorful picture of the narratives and their interpretations by fragmenting the narratives (cf. Hatch, 2006) (although others might find fragmentation inappropriate) (cf. Saunders et al., 2009, p. 497) instead of adhering to presenting continuously coherent stories and thereby sacrificing the chance to analyze in greater detail. To understand motivations behind actions, the following is therefore suggested:

“if you study the various narratives and plotlines created by particular groups and individuals along with their assumptions, rationalizations and biases, then you have a chance to trace their intertextual linkages across time” (based on Boje, 2001 in Hatch, 2006, p. 206).
In this step, we therefore fragmented the two narratives based on the dimensions of assumptions, rationalizations, and biases and grouped the fragments in these dimensions. These dimensions we defined in the following manner:

Rationalization

“The action of attempting to explain or justify behaviour or an attitude with logical reasons, even if these are not appropriate” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018a)
Is the statement used as argument?
  o What is an argument?
  o “A reason or set of reasons given in support of an idea, action or theory”
    Oxford Dictionaries, 2018b (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018b)
    ▪ Keyword: “because”

Assumption

“A thing that is accepted as true or as certain to happen, without proof” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018c)
- What is accepted as true or as certain to happen without an argument?
  o Is this statement portrayed as reality without an argument?

Bias

“A concentration on or interest in one particular area or subject” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018d)
- Does the statement focus on one particular area or subject?
- Are other views neglected or downplayed?

Subsequently, we divided all fragments into Issues (a list for each company showing these divisions can be found in Appendix V.IV. & V.V.) and then re-grouped rationalizations, assumptions and biases based on the Issue they had in common based on the context. We then re-contextualized the Issues with the narratives and enriched these with our personal experiences gained from the interviews and the company visits as texts (the titles of these texts start with “Issue - ...”). In the following, we identified Intertextual Linkages between the different Issues of each case company and described their relationships (see headline Intertextual Linkages). We define Intertextual Linkages as connections we were able to draw between the different Issues of each company. These links might for example be based on a common theme that we identified based on the Issues and/or the organizational context. We proceeded by abstracting Factors from the Intertextual Linkages. These Factors could also be described as overarching themes we identified from the Intertextual Linkages by, once again, making sense of the texts (this time, the descriptions of the Intertextual Linkages) under consideration of the Context. To be very explicit, the Factors we identified were Preliminary Factors that were specific to organizational contexts (a compiled list of these Preliminary

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10 The context consists of our memories and of a separate document that contains further interview material and observations we made during our company visits. This information is not openly available because it would compromise the promises we made to the interviewees.
Factors can be found in Appendix V.VI.). From these Preliminary Factors we derived the final Factors by aligning ourselves regarding the conceptual purpose we thought them to fulfill and named them accordingly (see 8. Combined Empirical Analysis (Conceptualization)). Some of these Preliminary Factors were summarized into one Factor by creating consensus between ourselves for what conceptual purpose we thought each Factor to fulfill (which is why the list showing the Preliminary Factors is longer than the list portraying the final Factors; the list with the final Factors can be found under the headline 8. Combined Empirical Analysis (Conceptualization)). The final step consisted of conceptualizing the factors and their relationships in writing, as well as creating visual representations of these interpretations. By describing the relationships between the Factors, we arrived at our conceptualizations. The descriptions of these relationships (see Combined Empirical Analysis (Conceptualization)) justify the locations of each Factor in our conceptualizations.

To illustrate the process of data collection and data analysis, the following (Illustration 1) depicts the descriptions from above:
Illustration 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th>Conducting Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Transcribing the most significant parts of each interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td>Creating narratives for each company based on the transcriptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4</td>
<td>Fragmenting each company narrative based on assumptions, rationalizations, biases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 5</td>
<td>For each company, sorting the fragments into Issues while keeping assumptions, rationalizations, biases separated from each other (Appendix)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 6</td>
<td>Re-grouping assumptions, rationalizations, biases based on the Issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 7</td>
<td>Developing texts from the Issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 8</td>
<td>Identifying and describing Intertextual Linkages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 9</td>
<td>Abstracting Preliminary Factors from the Intertextual Linkages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 10</td>
<td>Deriving the final Factors based on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 11</td>
<td>Conceptualizing the relationships and functions of the Factors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Illustration 1, Source: Authors.
5.7. Research Ethics
We recognize that conducting research within the field of management and business can potentially have an effect on involved organizations and their individuals within. Bell and Bryman (2007), arrived at these ten principles through a “content analysis of the ethical principles of nine professional associations in the social sciences” (Eastherby-Smith et al., 2015, p.122). Hence our turf in this thesis is within the realm of social sciences, we choose to adhere to these principles. Instead of a rigorous walk through of each individual principle, we will instead explain how we attempted to protect our research participants, and the integrity of the research community.

5.7.1. Protection of Participants
Although our study is not concerned with the specific personal opinions, feelings and thoughts of the individuals we interviewed, this personal information is of fundamental importance to the successful completion of our research. We might not be interested in what the interviewees’ personal opinions/thoughts/feelings are in relation to the individuals, but we are interested in how these opinions/thoughts/feelings relate to the ones of the other interviewees. Because of this, we had to be particularly careful with the information that was entrusted to us. To clarify our intended use of the data we were asking for from our conversation partners, and to inform them about their rights regarding our study, each interviewee was presented with an informed consent form that s/he was asked to read and to sign as formalization of their understanding. Part of this was our promise to all employees (with the exception of employees in the management teams) to keep their identities disconnected from the data points presented in this thesis. For this purpose, we took out all names of all interviewees, except the top management members, to disguise personal identities. We choose to disclose the identities of the members of the management teams in the thesis because the content of what they said revealed their identity in itself. This we could do, since REACH and WONDROUS gave us permission to publicly use their company names, and identities of the members of the management teams in this case study. This meant in practice, that we had two different informed consent forms; a separate one for the leaders which did not include a promise to protect their personal, and company identities (the informed consent templates can be found in the Appendix V.I. & V. II.). To protect their data, after collection, we stored all the material on a password protected server that only the authors of this thesis had access to.

5.7.2. Protection of Integrity of the Research Community
By applying an honest communication from beginning to end, in relation to the purpose of our study with all involved stakeholders, we have avoided deception about our aim of the study. Further, no funding has been received of any kind that could have influenced the findings in a biased manner. To avoid misleading or false reporting of findings, we gave both management teams the opportunity to comment on our interpretations, which ensured alignment.

5.7.3. Trustworthiness
Trustworthiness of our research can be directly linked to the quality of our findings, and given our choice of a case study design, limitations on the extendibility of our findings are unavoidable. We did however take active considerations to ensure the highest degree of
trustworthiness of your study possible. This we did through the lens of Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) suggestion for judging trustworthiness of qualitative research through a discussion about credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

**Credibility**

To enable a confident belief that our findings are true, we, as mentioned above, gave the management teams of the case study organizations an opportunity to comment on our narrative interpretations. This approach can be compared to the strategy of Member Checking put forward by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Further, we attempted to stay as critical to our findings as possible, motivated by our knowledge of the currently existing literature on the subject. To ensure honest data from our interviewees, we attempted to be straightforward about our intentions, and prepare them for the interviews with an “introduction” video about what they could expect. Further, by ensuring full privacy to the employees interviewed, we created a safe environment for them to air their opinions without concerns. This we believed helped to raise the credibility of our findings.

**Transferability**

Transferability is referring to the concept of generalization, how generalizable can we claim our findings to be? Although it is assumed that case studies cannot be generalizable because of their singularity in nature, generalized theoretical propositions can be made through analytical generalizations (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2009). The analytical generalization is a two-step procedure: the case study must investigate a specific issue or theory, and then attempt to extend the case study to other contexts (Yin, 2014). The first step we do through our Frame of Reference, Empirical Findings (company cases), and finally Empirical Analysis (Combined Empirical Analysis (Conceptualization) & Empirical Analytical Conclusion). The latter step we do in our Theoretical Discussion.

**Dependability**

Dependability refers to the replicability of the empirical data collection and analysis of such. To raise the dependability of our study, we have attempted to report every smallest step taken in our research design, data collection process, and analysis of findings. This detailed reporting can be found in the method section of our thesis.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to the degree of neutrality the thesis portrays (are the findings of the thesis a product of unbiased and objective analysis of the collected data? Or the product of a biased interpretation of the authors?). To raise the confirmability of our research, we strived to avoid unsupported assumptions or findings by always putting them in relation to greater context. Further, the already mentioned Member Checking approach enabled us to mitigate the risk of substantial misleading interpretations of our data collected. This we believe has raised the confirmability of our thesis, although, we do acknowledge that ultimate objectivity in business research is in essence impossible (Bryman & Bell, 2014).
6. Case Company: REACH

6.1. Empirical Data – REACH: General Company Description

REACH is a Sweden-based consulting company that employs mechanical, electronic, and software engineers to client projects (assignments). The company operates from its headquarters in the heart of Jönköping, where the two founders and two (overhead) employees (together referred to as the management team) are located. Besides their office in Jönköping, REACH also has an office in Linköping that accommodates their consultants serving clients in that geographical area. The consultants usually work on location at the clients’ offices. The firm was founded in 2014, and will consist of 31 organizational members by August.

6.2. Empirical Data – REACH: Company Narrative

Charlie, is one of the two founders of REACH. She started her career within recruiting at another Swedish consultancy, which she joined at an early stage of its existence and during her time there she was a big part of their company development. Among the things she was driving forward for them, the founding of their Stockholm and Linköping offices are especially noteworthy. In the beginning of her time at the previous consultancy, there was a good sense of belonging and pride connected to what they were doing. However, as they grew in size, the company started to develop more bureaucracy. This development removed the pride of her progression for Charlie. They began to

“box things in where you couldn’t be who you are anymore.”

“They just silent the guys who don’t agree”

Charlie did not like the way in which the company developed and expressed her opinions very vocally. This made her standing in the company unstable, and, as it developed, her desire to stay with the company vanished.

“I’m not likely to follow rules”

“I’m not really good having someone else tell me what to do”

“I’m quite stubborn”

It has always been a career goal for Charlie to work as a CEO and to do it on her own way.

“I’m not really good at following other people’s ideas, I have a lot of ideas and sort of a visionary mindset”

“Follow my intuition [...] because that’s the way I work as a person”

This seemed like a good time to focus on it because she
“was quite tired of being employed.”

And as faith wanted it, Charlie got an opportunity to go her own way. In the fall of 2013, she received an offer to start a company in Stockholm on her own. Her desires to live in Stockholm again was however nonexistent, and she therefore responded that it would be interesting for her if she could found it in Jönköping. Around this time, she received a call from her old high school friend Yoppe. He called her because he wanted a new job.

“‘Hey, I need to get out, give me a new job [...] you owe me’ [...] I think his precise words were” - Charlie

“You need to give me a new job” - Yoppe

Yoppe came from a sales background in the same industry as Charlie. Yoppe still thought that Charlie was in recruiting, so his intention with the call was to get a new job from her, as she had matched him with his then current employer. However, given the opportunity she was offered, Charlie told him that he could start a company with her instead.

A proposal that Yoppe found interesting

“I have a problem with authority of all kinds [...] I’m a terrible employee [...] because I question everything” - Yoppe

Also because in University he built this dream of creating a company that “focused on human beings.”

“I had a company in my head [...] called Squarepants Inc. and the slogan was ‘bringing bubbles to the world’ ... and the essence was ‘have fun at work’ ’cause if you have fun at work, you excel at what you do” - Yoppe

News spread that Charlie and Yoppe were to found a company in Jönköping and several investors turned out to be interested.

“It was scary and exciting and really surprising that they... believed in us so quickly”- Yoppe

The two entrepreneurs chose an investor based on the finances available because

“We had great ideas but no money” - Yoppe

and so, REACH came into being as an entity rather quickly. They pitched the idea of REACH in December 2013, and by February 2014 they had officially founded REACH.

“We don’t think about stuff too long, we just make decisions” - Yoppe
Their background experience from the industry they were now re-entering gave them a clear picture of what they did not want for REACH. They wanted to avoid the bad behaviors they saw other companies develop. Based on own statements, Charlie and Yoppe are not the kind of people who tend to fit in. This is a problem in Sweden because the culture is all about fitting in. This factor fostered a desire to create a company where everyone can be themselves.

“We want to be part of the group and we want to have sort of a context where [...] you feel that you belong and you can be yourself” - Charlie

“We wanna be a company that provides a good atmosphere where people can excel at what they do, where they can work with what they love, because every company should be like that” - Yoppe

Beside an atmosphere where people can be themselves, a fundamental part of the vision for REACH was that the company should operate on common sense.

“Keep it simple stupid” - Yoppe

“Don’t make things too difficult” - Yoppe

Further, that people should have a passion for what they do.

“Someone told me that somewhere...some part in my life ‘find your passion and then find someone to pay you to do that’ and that’s something that stuck in my head” - Yoppe

“Do what you love doing, nothing else” - Yoppe

“For me it’s really simple, have fun at work!” - Yoppe

“If you have fun at work, you excel at what you do” - Yoppe

“I hate doing boring things” - Yoppe

“They see it as a very important thing that the consultants they’re hiring enjoy the work they are hired out to” (employee)

“You can tell, the people who have passion for something, they excel in it and the people that didn’t like it [...] they were dead weight” - Yoppe

And finally, a foundation based on honesty.

“Honesty is one of the most important aspects of a human” - Yoppe
“You have to be careful with honesty, too much honesty is no good”  - Yoppe

“You have to be able to receive honesty as a critique”  - Yoppe

To the question on why they ended up with a company in consulting, Charlie and Yoppe believe the reason to be their shared past within the industry.

“I think we could have possibly done anything”  - Charlie

“Why do we work with people, can’t we just sell bolts and screws? That would be much easier!”  - Charlie

“I guess it was a mixture of wanting to work more with people like that and also sort of the natural way of doing it because that was the business that we knew, we both worked in the consultancy business”  - Yoppe

“We’ve had some seriously bad experiences and that’s why we started REACH”  - Yoppe

As mentioned in the beginning of this narrative, Charlie and Yoppe are the “bosses” of REACH and that is well recognized within the organization. Therefore, we include a deeper insight about the founders and how they relate to their company.

“I can’t separate REACH from me and the thing is, REACH is me and Charlie”

It becomes apparent how much they actually care, when asked to reflect about what a good day at the office looks like. For Charlie specifically, a good day includes episodes where:

“We do things differently”
“We do things caringly”
“We have a familiar feeling”
“We let each other grow”
“We give each other space”
“We help each other”

For Yoppe, a great day at the office focuses on social interactions

“Eat with consultants”
“Meet consultants and clients and bring them stuff”

and the lack of any kind of distractions from such

“no emails.”
This focus on people is summarized by Charlie as follows

“I think that’s a personality trait which me and Yoppe share, we care extremely much about people”

And confirmed by an employee:

“Whenever we meet them, they are really happy.”

But both are still aware that they also have to run a business:

“It’s funny ‘cause people think Charlie is the evil one but, when it comes to salaries and stuff, she has nothing on me [...] I’m the one you don’t wanna mess with” - Yoppe

In these tasks, they complement each other:

“When it’s good-cop-bad-cop, I’m mostly bad-cop, but in reality it’s the other way around” - Charlie

“We have a really straight and open dialogue. I’m extremely frank in the way I communicate [...] And sometimes Yoppe acts as a buffer if I’m too straightforward [...] Which is really funny ‘cause I care the most” - Charlie

But it is still clear where the focus lies:

“Even if you give me like 4000 [kr] an hour, selling someone who doesn’t wanna be there just because of the money...I know companies that would...but they would quit, the consultant would quit. They would be there for like 2-3 months until they find something else and they would quit. And what’s the point of that? [...] That goes against everything that we are” - Yoppe

For the purpose of understanding, we will give a short introduction to how REACH is operating in practice. REACH is a consultancy company employing engineers (mechanical, electronical, and software engineers) on client tasks. This means the consultants are placed on so called assignments on location at clients. In the main office of REACH (Jönköping), the overhead team, consisting of four people (the two founders, one recruiter and one sales manager), is located. REACH has a second office in Linköping, which is used flexibly whenever needed, for example for company breakfasts, meetings and interviews. All their consultants are usually placed remotely at their clients’ offices, mostly in and around Jönköping and Linköping. This structure is different from a more traditional office structure where people are placed in the same office. However, it is a normal structure within the consulting industry.

The consultants at REACH
“have an extremely high IQ but they’re also really nerdy in the way that they sort of deep-dive into all sorts of different weird things and it’s fun to be a part of that every day and to work with people who have a passion for things” - Charlie

Their personalities add another layer of joy to the daily work.

“It’s fun to work with these guys who are so extremely smart and so extremely different sometimes from like the general public” - Charlie

REACH is presented with a task of building bridges between the people in the overhead team and the consultants, since their personalities can be quite different and the overhead team generally operates from a completely different mindset compared to the consultants.

“We realized quite early on that it was a big gap between ‘them and us’ [...] which we don’t want it to be” - Charlie

“I think [...] that’s the gap that’s being most difficult [...] unexpectedly difficult to work with because we tend to...as humans we tend to believe that people around us work sort of like we work [...] it takes a lot” - Charlie

“We’ve done a lot of work with that as result of us realizing that our communication wasn’t what we perceived that we were saying” - Charlie

“We worked a lot with the personal analysis and communication skills and so on and so forth at conferences and we do [job appraisals] most companies do once a year, we do it four times a year” - Charlie

By learning about the differences and talking about them, they have established some initiatives such as monthly meetings, conferences and an extensive development process that facilitate this bridge building.

The task is however not solely on the leadership, their initiatives cannot work unless their people buy into it. This Charlie and Yoppe are aware of, and are only seeking a certain kind of consultant because of it. One company story exemplifies what kind of consultant REACH is looking for. Two newly hired consultants were on their first REACH assignment and got the task to organize a container with 30,000 stick shifts. The only guidance they had was a manual in French. The assigned supervisor was on vacation, and none of them spoke French, yet they took initiative and ultimately solved the task it in a positive manner. To be a REACH consultant means to work proactively, even when facing great odds. This story serves as a positive story within REACH and as a “HOW TO BE IN REACH” -example. They look for these qualities during the interview process, but do not try to teach or foster them after hiring.
“We take that as an example for how a consultant should be [...] that they should be like ready for anything and like be very relaxed and like confident that everything will work out in the end”

“Of course, they should be curious and driven, but maybe it’s hard to teach someone to be driven, it’s more something that you have from the beginning I would say.”

While REACH is looking for these qualities in potential new hires, the candidates are faced with a rather untraditional interviewing process. One of their early hires reports the following:

“I got more the feeling that I was like more entering someone’s home than I was entering someone’s company”

“I think it was a very relaxed interview, which I appreciated”

“I felt it was more that they tried to sell their company on me than me trying to explain why I were a good fit for them”

Charlie and Yoppe were described as visionaries and creative people with a big focus on meanings and feelings instead of the goal of profit.

“They talked a lot about feelings [...] like that you should work with something that you would like to do and that you should be happy at your workplace”

“The importance on like ‘why are we doing this? Why is this important’ [...] and feeling more than just making money”

“It felt good also because the company is quite small, so it felt that they had a good mindset from the start and they wanted to build it a bit differently than other companies”

“They have this broad idea...this overview where they want to take the company but I don’t think they bother much about the details and Charlie has a very clear idea [...] of how she wants this company to be and it’s again about openness, and mostly partnership almost rather than pyramid structure [...] and this is really nice”

We learned that, according to one employee, it is more common to have two rounds of interviews during the application process, whereas with REACH there were a total of 4 meetings before signing the contract.

“It’s a big thing when we recruit people [...] to look at personality and what they want” - Charlie
The first meeting was mainly about REACH, the second meeting was about the personal fit. The third meeting was to meet with current consultants at REACH. The fourth and final meeting was with Charlie and Yoppe and concerned their vision for REACH. Although longer, it seems to be useful:

“I think it was a very good interview process actually”

“I got a very good feeling of the people”

“Here I was like, okay, we can work together because we understand each other, and we can sit together, have a really nice time as well”

One thing that is a fundamental part of REACH is honesty and openness, and this also becomes visible in the hiring process for potential new hires.

“I was surprised by the [...] openness [...] that they were using in the interview [...] they’re not hiding anything”

“I figure they are honest”

Many interviewees referred to having a good feeling about REACH and the willingness to take a leap of faith in terms of trusting the company to see if it holds what it promises.

“okay, feeling is good, let’s go”

Others reported the difference of the REACH interview as

“What stands out for me that it’s they’re more interested in the person than in the actual skills you have”

“have a person that matches the job and that office”

instead of the traditional approach where

“You come into a room and two people are sitting in front of you and they ask stupid questions.”

REACH differentiates itself in the consultancy industry by closely relating to the people within the company, similar to a family. Although they recognize that their competitors are doing a lot of good things with competent people, Charlie’s and Yoppe’s main business idea is to create an atmosphere where people strive, work with something they love, and feel at home.

“The basis of our entire business idea is that you should be able to work with what you think is most fun, what you enjoy most, ’cause that’s the only way you can be extremely good at something, the only way you can excel; if you work at something
that you’re really passionate about and to be able to do that to the full extent, you also need to be able to be yourself.” - Charlie

“is...has always been [...] where we say ‘how hard can it be to be different?’ and sort of just take all the good things from the other companies and make it better ourselves. Because the biggest challenge you have when you work with consultants that are out on assignment every day is that it’s hard for us to keep them close; for them to feel like ‘okay, I’m on assignment at [company name] but this is where I work, it’s REACH [...] that’s my home” - Charlie

“We want that feeling, we want that sort of safety for these guys [...] that’s what we offer” - Charlie

And it seems to work:

“That’s the problem when you work as a consultant that, after a while you can feel [...] more at home when you are on your assignments with the people you meet every day than you do with your ...consultant company [...] but with REACH I feel that is my home office. We are working quite hard to keep it that way”

Another employee reports,

“I think it’s quite familiar” “you learn to know people quite fast and you get a face on everyone”

“I get direct, and good response from REACH”

“They are trying to do their best for all their employees and that attract me”

“They try to get them [the staff] to feel really like familiar”

The custom in the industry is that the client reaches out to consultancies with a list of required skills for an assignment. Then standard consulting firms simply check who of their consultants has these skills and based on that, they arrange an interview without giving much consideration to whether the consultant has a personal fit or not.

“That’s basically selling a CV and we don’t want to work like that” - Charlie

If REACH receives that kind of email from one of their clients, they call them and ask for a face-to-face meeting where they then talk about the actual assignment.

“We don’t sell CVs, we sell a person with actual feelings and thoughts” - Charlie

“We don’t sell on skill set mainly we sell on people” - Yoppe
“The way we run our business [...] to an extreme, is to know people well. And also to know our clients well because we have to be able to make the match” - Charlie

“We’re out talking to clients all the time” - Yoppe

“let’s talk about the actual assignment” - Charlie

And,

“more often than not,” the listed skills were not what the client really needed

“they needed something else” - Charlie

“We work differently [...] and that’s the way we want to work because that makes us able to deliver better and it makes us able to drive [...] our consultants’ experience and their development” - Charlie

“It’s not quite as easy to sell you doing something where you also grow and get to build your experience because that takes something from the client as well” - Charlie

“How hard can it be? ...it’s quite a lot harder than...than we thought” - Yoppe

To find work for their consultants that they actually like, the management and the consultants work together in the assignment selection.

“there is a dialogue regarding the assignments”

“you’re a part of the assignment selection as an employee”

“they try to give you the chance to really tell them what you would like to do”

“They really try to listen to you”

“they try to find assignments that you really are interested in”

“And I think that’s really important [...] If you get really boring assignments then I think you won’t stay for long”

An employee sees this as a proof that REACH actually walk-the-talk with their promises.

“Making good on the promise that basically that it’s about finding assignments that [...] we as consultants want to do”
Charlie remembers one time in particular, where they sold one of their consultants to a client without even showing his CV.

“He began there, working for a year, the client hadn’t even seen his CV” - Charlie

According to Yoppe, one of their clear strengths is to find potential where others do not.

“What me and Charlie are good at, we find the diamonds in the rough [...] A lot of people, they don’t know how to sell themselves, they don’t know how to present themselves [...] That’s why we do it” - Yoppe

One employee reports on the same matter.

“Here [at REACH], what I am is a strength for me and it’s a strength for REACH and that [...] is the difference between REACH and other consulting companies”

“We are nerds, we are very proud of this and if the customer thinks of nerds as something geeky and maybe a bit awkward, they do not see the value in the nerd and then maybe they shouldn’t work with us?”

“It’s not just something that we say, we are nerds and we are proud of it. And I’ve never seen that in another consulting company.”

REACH finds these hidden diamonds and then their passion (because sometimes the people themselves don’t even know what that passion is) and then they find a way in which they can work with it

“because then they will excel, they will have more fun, everyone will have more fun, we will make more money. Yeah...it’s not rocket science.” - Yoppe

Going back to their desire of having a family feeling in the company, REACH is creating this through social events and food.

“A lot of things we do is based around fika and food and drinks and social things [...] and that makes us a bit different I think” - Charlie

“We don’t have any groups basically...we don’t, it’s like anyone can sit next to anyone and it sort of just works. It doesn’t matter that they are completely different as people, there is something with everyone that just makes it work [...] One big happy family” - Charlie

“People have loads of different interests and different backgrounds and extremely different views politically” but still, “Everyone is welcome, so I think that we’re extremely tolerant” - Charlie
“We want everybody to really be a part” (employee)

And although people are very different on a personal front, they have something that unites them:

“And although people are very different on a personal front, they have something that unites them:

“Curiosity is a big thing with most who work here” - Charlie

One employee offers an exemplifying story:

“It was a terrible day at the assignment; boring and uneventful. What followed was a REACH lunch, where they talked about exoskeletons, cats, zombies, what their last suppers would be, and whether pirates are consultants. It was a very weird conversation, but touching upon deeper levels and it lifted the employee’s mood. The experience provided confirmation that REACH is the “home company”

“I felt at home and I felt like this is important stuff that we are discussing”

“I’m not the only weird person in the world”

“I was relieved, I had to go back [to the assignment] but I still had this home thing, this is my real home, and that’s just the place where I spend my days”

This family feeling, is however presenting a future challenge for REACH, and they recognize that the more the organization grows, the harder that feeling will be to preserve.

“So, the challenge for us now is to grow and keep that [family feeling] and develop that” - Charlie

This challenge had presented itself rather early on already when Charlie and Yoppe had less and less time to spend with early employees (e.g., daily lunches) because the company was growing.

Both Charlie and Yoppe are well aware of the challenge ahead of them. Keeping this family feeling alive while their organization is growing in a steady pace is described as not being an easy task. In the beginning, it was often Charlie who acted in the role of “hens mom” (i.e., taking care of everybody) to arrange social events (e.g., afterworks), which created an expectation from the consultants that top management was in charge of the coordination of such events:

“We had a situation early on where the..the expectation from our consultants was that we were supposed to sort of ’set the table’ for them every time, but if...if they want to do something then they also have to contribute [...] it’s a two-way street [...] And I realized it was my fault because I had spoiled them” - Charlie
“‘Oooh we have no after-works planned...boring...’ So why don’t you plan one?” - Charlie

“It’s up to them [the consultants] to drive [...] we give them a lot of responsibility” - Charlie

“We repeatedly nag them...no, we talk about it every monthly meeting, every time we see each other, we have breakfast every other week here where everyone comes in, it’s during work hours, so they get paid to come here and have breakfast...we sort of push them and we talk a lot about it” – Charlie

This has developed into a strong feeling of belonging where people deeply care for each other. Today one might even leave their bed despite being sick just to make sure to fulfill the role they play at the team breakfast:

“some weeks ago he was ill, 7 o’clock in the morning, door knocks oh, are you here, aren’t you sick? Yeah but i know you like cheese a lot, so I bought you some cheese. Here, I have to go home to bed again”

“Nobody asked him but he just did that”

“It’s more like you come up with something to show that you care”

These roles might even develop so strongly that when Charlie and Yoppe bring other cheese for example, it stays untouched by the consultants. But we also learned that nobody is pressured to act in similar ways.

“When new people comes it’s even more important that they get this feeling, that I should go to the breakfast, I should be a part of the team”

In general, one of the key elements behind the REACH feeling, seems to be internal communication.

“There’s a lot of companies that treat their staff like cattle” - Yoppe

“We talk to our consultants a lot” - Yoppe

“People struck me as genuinely interested in me.”

The following reflection is an example for this open internal communication (this conversation took place during one of the development talks when an employee was asked how things were)
“Everything is good, but eh… you never answer my emails… Yeah I do… Nah…it might take like 2-3-4 days sometimes. I know you’re busy but it would be nice if you could just, you know, respond straight away” - Yoppe

This conversation helped Yoppe realize that some people do not appreciate his style of responding to emails, which made him set out to change it.

Besides talking the talk, REACH is putting emphasize on making a plan for each of their employee’s development. This enables both REACH and their employees to also walk-the-talk. Through this plan, they locate passion and ideas for what future assignments will benefit both REACH and their consultants.

“When you start here, we have something called ‘The Plan’ which is basically a number of questions that they have to answer” - Charlie

Charlie compared the plan to the goal-oriented approach professional athletes use.

“We sort of try to build our guys in that very deliberate way” - Charlie

“We mapped what I’ve been doing in the past, what I like doing, what I am good at and then we tried to translate it”

“basically just trying to find solutions for [...] me to do something that I want to do”

“The point is that you should always think about where you’re going and what you want to do [...] ‘What am I doing today to move towards the goal in five years?’” - Charlie

Everyone who works at REACH has such a plan. The consultants follow their personal plans and at least once a year they review them to see if that is still what they want to do. If one wants to do something different, then it is just to start doing it:

“fake it till you make it”

An employee told us s/he feels that REACH is prepared to enable personal development through e.g., further education

“I can do changes as I please.”

But also through commitment to the employees’ goals

“they were listening to me”

where they try make things happen
“oh, maybe we can find a way”

New hires who have not experienced this commitment can also be sceptical

“Sounds good but you never know if it will be reality or not”

This confidence in REACH comes from repeated communication by the management

“The people have been talking about like a mantra almost that it’s important that you enjoy the work that you are being put in.”

“If you are satisfied with your work and what you are doing you will also create a good result and that will give money to the company as well”

as well as from simply walking their talk

“It was confirmed by the monthly meetings they held [...] I mean the full transparency to us [...] we know the monthly budget. That has never happened to me!”

But new hires also provide the company with a lot of trust

“I think they are being honest in what they are saying and what their goals are”

“If I feel like if I would like to move to another company [assignment], I think I would have that opportunity without having my bosses say ’no, you have to stay here because we don’t have any other contract and it’s good money’ [...] so I think my possibilities here are quite good and I can do changes in my work as I see fit”

But such commitment to the employees does not come for free; Charlie and Yoppe expect proactiveness

“One thing that we try to do a lot is to challenge people [...] to take responsibility and to do stuff themselves” - Yoppe

“They don’t really give you the guidelines, they give you a mission [...] try to solve this.”

“When you’re given a specific task, it’s up to you to solve it in a good way.”

“You have to show that you can deliver of course, but if you do, there are a lot of chances to develop. That’s what I like”

So, this freedom is also appreciated. One employee told us:
“To me, it was perfect because I like to be able to create things myself [...] At REACH, we have so much possibilities to do things”

“I think that I felt that this was the right choice for me based on very much the freedom that I got”

And another said

“ [...] I think that suits me quite well, because I can be very proactive”

“It’s a lot of freedom in the company, which means that I work a lot with making myself happy [...] like I’m structuring my own role, like how would I like to do it, what would I like to do in order to be more satisfied with my work role”

At REACH, individual job appraisals are held four times a year, and this is appreciated (although we realized that not everybody was really sure about how many times these talks were taking place in a year)

“Four times a year is a lot, but it also allows me to get better a lot faster [...] and I also enjoy it a lot”

“It’s also a good reminder for me as an employee to kind of not forget...not get caught up in just doing the daily work routine”

“That you have this talk about your plan four times a year is surprising.”

During these talks, they look at what the employees have done, and what the company has done. Working with hobbies that can be contributing to a consultant’s work does also find an open ear at REACH

“You can have an open discussion”

As well as bold ideas in general

“If they have a good idea [...] that’s unusual...yeah go for it. Do it. You know, you might crash and burn, that’s fine. At least we tried.” – Yoppe

Having four development talks a year is not the only custom in place at REACH. Part of their routine are monthly meetings and conferences. The monthly meetings are in place to keep the organization aligned and enforce transparency. In these meetings they talk about the company’s economic situation and potential new employees or clients.

“We try to be as open as possible about everything” - Charlie
Everybody’s pay is reviewed once a year but no specific criteria are in place to determine if someone should get a raise. Recently they have had a workshop regarding criteria.

“We have to begin somewhere” – Charlie

Twice a year, REACH holds company-wide conferences. Last time they went to a house in the middle of the woods in Sweden. These conferences are, according to Charlie, a big talking subject in the organization.

“We talk a lot about our conferences” - Charlie

This was confirmed during our interview sessions with employees. One employee reported that the conferences feel more like leisure-time than actual work. The conferences do not follow a rigorous structure; it is up to the individuals to spark conversations. REACH however, does also plan activities and workshops during these conferences. However, the majority of the time is spent on being social with each other. We also heard reports from an employee that everyone is “all-in” at these conferences. This consultant had never experienced such an eager participation from the entire organization. The employee remembered having had a specific conversation with one of the founders where he was told:

“We need 10 more people, and then we can do really crazy stuff.”

This created a feeling of being involved and confidence that REACH really practices openness about the strategy.
6.3. Empirical Analysis – REACH

As explained in the Method section (5.6.4.) we now present Issues that have been re-contextualized from the narratives, and enriched with our personal experiences gained from the interviews and the company visits as texts. Subsequently, we identify Intertextual Linkages between the different Issues and describe their relationships. We define Intertextual Linkages as connections we were able to draw between the different Issues of each company.

**Issue – The Urgency Creator**

When Charlie’s old employer began to “box things in” to an extent where “you couldn’t be who you are anymore,” an urgency to move on from the company seemed to have started developing. Her rebellious character “I’m not likely to follow rules” and her “visionary mindset” made her express her own opinions “very” vocally and this made her assume “her standing in the company unstable.” The company was in a maturing phase, and the freedom to create her own path she had in the past was getting buried in bureaucracy. She was well aware of her lacking capability to follow others’ ideas, and since the company “[silenced] the guys who [didn’t] agree,” she became “tired of being employed.” Reflecting about The Urgency Creator in relation to the bigger context invites us to make a proposition for a deeper meaning. It seems as if Charlie has a need for professional freedom and a potential to influence her environment. Despite her bias towards employment (“tired of being employed”), she did not make a change until her employer started to limit who she could be in the company. This perceived necessity to be who you are and the possibility to influence her environment could be seen as the first antecedent for why she created REACH.

**Issue – The Misfits**

As persons, Yoppe and Charlie categorize themselves as people who do not “tend to fit in” and that is a problem because “in Sweden […] the culture is all about fitting in.” They both have a lot of ideas and a mindset to “question everything.” This makes them in their own eyes “a terrible employee.” They further have an instinct need to follow their intuition and their stubbornness ensures they follow it through. This is seen in Yoppe’s change of career, “I hate doing boring things,” “give me a new job” and Charlie’s desire to operate from Jönköping, which got fulfilled. Reflecting in a bigger context invites us to make a proposition for a deeper meaning. Even though they insist to be terrible employees, they both were in fact high-performing employees, which enabled them to get multiple different offers on funding for their new company. According to Yoppe, these performances were the key to the offers. This contradicts their belief of being bad employees and instead indicates that perhaps it is a certain environment that makes them become a “bad employee.”

**Issue – Fun**

A foundational pillar of REACH is to “have fun at work.” With fun is meant that their consultants enjoy the work they are hired to do. It is rationalized in the belief that “if you have fun at work, you excel in what you do” and their underlying assumption is that when they excel, “they will have more fun, everyone will have more fun, [and REACH] will make more money.” Further, “if you get really boring assignments, then I think you won’t stay for long,” “It’s not rocket science.” Reflecting over this issue in the bigger contexts makes it apparent that REACH perceives “fun” as personal development for themselves and their consultants.
This became visible in our conversations with them; in multiple interviews we saw that the fun part of working at REACH was the journey of working towards a desired goal, position, or capability (e.g., starting in one possible position that enabled them to move closer to the future desired position). This is exemplified in their rationalization for why having “fun” at work is important “that’s the only way you can be extremely good at something, the only way you can excel.” One might wonder if it would be possible to say that REACH is therefore a performance-oriented company and just has a very different view on how best performance is achieved compared to other companies.

**Issue – Room for All**

Another foundational pillar of REACH is the “desire to create a company where everyone can be themselves.” Having “really nerdy” consultants with “an extremely high IQ” on one side and an overhead team who operates from a different mindset on the other side creates a gap. This gap is recognized “big gap between ‘them and us,’ which we don’t want it to be.” The focus on “everybody to be [a] part” and their intrinsic desire to “eat with consultants” and meet with them (things Charlie and Yoppe have told us when they were asked to describe a good day at work) seems to pay off. Some of the assumptions within the organization are reported as the following “we have a familiar feeling,” “we help each other,” “everyone is all-in at these conferences,” and the rationalization “everyone is welcome, so I think that we’re extremely tolerant.” REACH assumes that the challenge now is “to grow and keep that [feeling] and develop [it],” and they are already “working quite hard to keep it that way” to keep the gap on a satisfactory level. Looking at Room for All in the bigger context, we can hypothesize that the organization is operated like a traditional relationship. There seems to be a reciprocal expectation of everyone to help each other and everyone is “all-in,” instead of one person facilitating the others’ growth. It also becomes apparent when Charlie says, “it’s like a relationship, but you’re with 30 people.” Curiosity is mentioned as a trait that unites everybody, but to us the common ground might lie even deeper, maybe on the level of personal values that include tolerance and empathy.

**Issue – The Drive**

Charlie and Yoppe seem to believe that passion is the main driver, and therefore they try to enable people to work with what they love. They assume that “people who have a passion for something, they excel in it” and that the ability to be yourself is a necessity to enable this. It is an intrinsic belief that you should only “do what you love, nothing else,” and they believe it is fun to be around people who have this passion for things. It does not come easy to everyone to find their passion, their individual drive, and keep it present, and it can therefore be a challenge to find the individual drive and keep it present. Reflecting on The Drive in a bigger context, it then seems as if the common “passion” in REACH among both the management team and their consultants is to have hunger for progress. All the people we talked to seemed to be on a personal path to developing something either personal or professional and whatever it was, REACH was somehow part of it; either as the enabler, or the mean to fulfill their desires.
**Issue – Work Differently**

Even though this is both Charlie’s and Yoppe’s first company, they still seem to have a clear idea of how they want to run their business, or perhaps how not to do it. They “had great ideas but no money” in the beginning; ideas that on one side stem from previous work experience and on the other side from past aspirations for how a company should be, as well as what they wanted to avoid should they ever have their own company. Regardless of the origin of the ideas, Charlie and Yoppe are certain that at REACH they “work differently.” For Charlie, the “different” approach seems to be based on her experiences at her previous employer, and for Yoppe a mixture of previous work experience and the dream of bringing his imaginary university company “Squarepants, Inc.” to life by “bringing bubbles to the world.” Reflecting over the issue in the context we are aware of, to us, it becomes apparent that Charlie and Yoppe emphasize a practice of trial and error and it might be this approach that allows them to “work differently” (“we don’t think about stuff too long, we just make decisions,” “If you run fast enough, you’ll stumble across the holes; you won’t fall in because you’re running too fast”).

**Issue – Focus**

A focus within REACH is their people. It seems as if everything starts with the individual and then, from there, opportunities for the whole company (and its clients) are derived. Charlie and Yoppe see it as one of their strengths to “find the diamonds in the rough” and then facilitate their journey into becoming a cut diamond. The key to this facilitation, according to the two, is to “know people well” and “also to know [their] clients.” Therefore, they always operate from the premise of the individual “we don’t sell CVs, we sell a person with actual feelings and thoughts,” “we don’t sell on skillset mainly we sell on people,” “we care extremely much about people.” This is also recognized among their consultants “people [REACH] struck me as genuinely interested in me,” “they try to find assignments that you really are interested in.” Considering our impressions, it then seems as if the people at REACH are valued equally to their clients’ needs. Yoppe for instance reports “even if you give me like 4000 [kr] an hour...selling someone who doesn’t wanna be there just because of the money...I know companies that would...but they would quit, the consultant would quit. They would be there for like 2-3 months until they find something else and they would quit. And what’s the point of that? [...] That goes against everything that we are.” Another employee within REACH reports “we are nerds, we are very proud of this and if the customer thinks of nerds as something geeky and maybe a bit awkward, they do not see the value in the nerd and then maybe they shouldn’t work with us?” It seems as if REACH is doing “things caringly” with respect to both, clients and their own people. Further, it seems as if trying is valued over excellence when it comes to consultants who desire to develop themselves on new turf. One consultant who is currently on new turf reported that s/he is doing this through the mantra “fake it till you make it.”

**Issue – Union**

Despite their differences, it seems as if REACH has something that unites all of them “there is something with everyone that just makes it work.” Reflecting on the issue in relation to the bigger context then, this “unifying” element seems to be a feeling of belonging to the group and deep appreciation for it from everyone involved in the organization: “I felt at home and I
felt like this is important stuff that we are discussing,” “Here I was like, okay, we can work together because we understand each other, and we can sit together, have a really nice time as well,” “I’m not the only weird person in the world,” “we are nerds and we are proud of it.” REACH has “done a lot of work with that,” “we talk to our consultants a lot” and their work seems to reward REACH with this unification of the organization. Reflecting about their slogan “lite nördigare, lite bättre” (a little nerdier, a little better) then, this could be one of the artifacts that the people of REACH use as a manifestation of believing that it is best to be who they are.

**Issue – Facilitating the Moments**

At one point in time, Charlie and Yoppe were expected by consultants to arrange and host social activities for their consultants. Charlie realized that “it was my fault because I had spoiled them,” it then became an annoying factor for her because she assumed that “it’s up to them to drive” the social activities if they want them, “if they want to do something then they also have to contribute, it’s a two-way street.” Reflecting on Facilitating the Moments in the bigger context, it then becomes interesting because both Charlie and Yoppe deem these social activities important. However, even more important than participation is ownership over the social activities from the consultants’ side. This could indicate that for Charlie and Yoppe REACH is a mean to facilitate one’s development in one’s own way, it’s a facilitation tool. It only works if you take ownership, otherwise it is redundant.

**Issue - Development**

Another focus of REACH is constant development “the point is that you should always think about where you’re going and what you want to do [...] ‘What am I doing today to move towards the goal in five years?’” through their appraisal talks four times a year. It seems as if they try to define where the individual is today, and then lay out the journey to get them to where they desire. The frequency of the talks serves as guidance to keep the development on track. This focus can create certain expectations on the people within REACH, and one of these seems to be a certain curiosity towards development; “curiosity is a big thing with most who work here,” “it’s a big thing when we recruit people [...] to look at personality and what they want.” REACH has an intrinsic believe that “it’s hard to teach someone to be driven, it’s more something that you have from the beginning,” and therefore they have a certain idea about “how to be in REACH.” From this perspective, it seems as if one of the determining factors to whether one will thrive in REACH is one’s curiosity. However, despite development being perceived as fundamental part of REACH, the success criteria do not seem to be whether they fulfill their development goals or not. Instead, it seems as if the success criterion is effort “at least we tried.” They apparently work this way because “that makes us able to deliver better” and they therefore really attempt to “let each other grow.” One goal that might have been important to an employee three months ago might lose its importance while pursuing it.

**Issue – Talk, or Walk the Talk**

Given the young age of REACH as a company, uncertainty about whether they talk or walk their talk has been up to interpretation. This becomes apparent when new people join the company “sounds good but you never know if it will be reality or not.” To employees,
REACH does, however, come across as an organization that walks the talk. “I got a very good feeling,” “feeling is good, let’s go” and it further seems as if they really walk the talk after people get into the daily routines of the company, “it was confirmed by the monthly meetings they held [...] I mean the full transparency to us [...] we know the monthly budget. That has never happened to me!” Reflecting about what it is that gives this feeling to the people in the organization, it seems as if the key word is honesty; “I figure they are honest,” “they’re not hiding anything,” “I think they are being honest in what they are saying and what their goals are.” On a personal level, the management team also deems honesty highly valuable, “honesty is one of the most important aspects of a human” but at the same time they also see a potential danger with it “you have to be careful with honesty, too much honesty is no good.” This seems to be creating another character trait that REACH consultants must possess: “you have to be able to receive honesty in form of critical feedback.” Reflecting on a deeper level, it then seems as it is the honesty of Charlie’s and Yoppe’s promises and self-awareness about their current position, as well as taking actions to fulfill their promises, that give a certain credibility to their words, both to clients (who commit to a consultant without having seen their CV) and consultants.

Intertextual Linkages
Reflecting on the Issues in a manner that allows us to look for intertextual linkages between the Issues, enables us to dive a level deeper in our analysis. Based on our personal knowledge of the deeper context of each interview in relation to the narrative, we seek out these linkages and from them abstract factors that we can utilize to build the foundation for a conceptualization. Throughout this section of the thesis, we included footnotes as a means to indicate the different Issues we are referring to.

For example, the perceived intrinsic need of Charlie and Yoppe for having a possibility to influence the environment around them might be an explanation for why they expect initiative and ownership from the individuals in their organization as it seems to be the case. This expectation, and Charlie and Yoppe’s own intrinsic need to have influence, we abstract to the Factor of Proactiveness for REACH.

Further, it got hypothesized that REACH is perhaps more of a facilitating tool to enable development of its members, than it is a goal in itself. Supporting this is what seems to be the overall focus of REACH – its people, in almost all the issues of REACH everything seems to boil down to the well-being and/or development of the people within REACH. This we abstract to the Factor of Learning because from the context, it was clear that with development both, the individuals and the management team, was considering learning to be the driver of development.

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11 Issue – The Urgency creator
12 Issue – Facilitating the moments
13 Issue – Facilitating the moments
It is established that everything in REACH starts with the individuals’ personal and professional desires. Further, the type of people interesting for REACH is established; passionate people. Since they assume “people who have a passion for something, they excel in it.” This we abstract to the Factor of Hunger for Learning because with the deeper meaning with being passionate, was the desire to learn more and excel in the area the individuals were passionate about.

The ability to be yourself is a necessity to enable learning, which might explain why they emphasize the “desire to create a company where everyone can be themselves.” This desire, we translate to the Factor of People Tolerance, because we perceived it as REACH created this room to be one self through celebrating the differences between their members.

Further, the “ideal” REACH individual is extended from being driven by passion to also being a curious individual. Finally, there is an emphasized focus on making sure the people of REACH “have fun at work” because REACH believes that when “you have fun at work, you excel in what you do.”

Another intertextual linkage is the perceived trial and error approach which seems to be the approach to learning in REACH. Emphasize seems to be put on whether efforts have been made instead of excellence of task “at least we tried.” This focus on effort over excellence of task, we abstract into the factor Scope for Proactiveness because we believe it creates the necessary scope to allow the individuals of the organization to act proactively.

Similarly, the perception of working differently seems to be coming from an approach where failure is accounted for, instead of sought to be avoided “If you run fast enough, you’ll stumble across the holes; you won’t fall in because you’re running too fast.” This we abstract to the Factor Error Tolerance. An antecedent for this culture, could potentially be found within the personalities of the founders. Since it becomes apparent that Yoppe “hate[s] doing boring things.” In his mind, boring things is the old well-known stuff, fun is new stuff, and with new stuff, it is usually hard to achieve excellence in first try, therefore an approach that celebrates the desire and attempt to strive in a new area seems to be a beneficial choice. Similarly, for Charlie it can be perceived as her satisfaction level within her past company disappeared, when they began to “box things in” prohibiting her from trying initiatives outside the box. These past experiences, and mentalities could be explanations for the learning approach within REACH. Daring to challenge oneself in a new area, or thinking

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14 Issue - Focus  
15 Issue – The Drive  
16 Issue – Room for All  
17 Issue - Development  
18 Issue - Fun  
19 Issue – Issue - Development  
20 Issue – Work Differently  
21 Issue – The Misfits  
22 Issue- The Urgency Creator
outside the box, put and requirement on the individual organization for investing energy into challenging one self. Something that is allowed for with their error tolerance.

Another Intertextual Linkage is the unifying element of REACH; REACH seems to recognize an existing gap between the management team and its consultants, a gap they work hard to keep at a minimum. It can be perceived as they are succeeding in their efforts because some of the consultants report “I felt at home” and “there is something with everyone that just makes it work.” The desire to keep the gap to a minimum, we abstract to the Factor Equality because we understand the desire to close this gap as a sign that equality is important, and further the fact that they recognize a gap, and willingness to close it we abstract into the Factor of Empathy. That “something” we hypothesized as the celebration of being who they are. This celebration of who they are was in the context also often present in the shape of appreciation of both relationship and task efforts. This we abstract into the Factor Perceived Appreciation, we used the word perceived because it was often present that individuals understood these celebrations differently. However, that “something” could perhaps also be extended to a high emphasize to honesty within the organization that might also contribute to the unification of the organizational members. By having an organization where honesty is practiced to a level that raises awareness about differences, they can celebrate the differences instead of oppressing them and ultimately avoid getting to the stage Charlie experienced at her past employer. This we translate directly into a Factor of Honesty, but also into another Factor of Trust because we saw in the context that trust was an essential element for daring to be different and it seemed as if the product of their honesty to each other established a bond of trust.

Further, on the meta level, we derived two additional Factors from REACH, Personal Investment, and Self-awareness. The personal investment Factor is grounded in the context of how REACH build their community. We saw from the context, that the individual’s position in the organization was remembered by their personal investment. As an example, it was highlighted that one individual came with cheese to his/her colleagues for breakfast, despite being sick. This was recognized by organizational members, and shows how personal investment into the community determines/legitimizes an individuals’ role in the community.

Finally, across all Factors, we saw that self-awareness had an influence. We believe this is because REACH emphasizes the individual, and therefore everything starts with the individual. It is the individual’s self-awareness that determines how all the other Factors are perceived by the individual and thereby serves as the foundation for the individuals’ behaviour in relation to each Factor. We therefore consider self-awareness to be one overarching Factor that is in some way or another interacting with all the other Factors.

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23 Issue – Room for All  
24 Issue - Union  
25 Issue – Talk, or Walk the talk  
26 Issue – The Urgency Creator
In summary, we abstracted the following *Factors* from REACH:

- Proactiveness
- Learning
- Hunger for Learning
- People Tolerance
- Scope for Proactiveness
- Error Tolerance
- Equality
- Empathy
- Perceived Appreciation
- Honesty
- Trust
- Personal Investment
- Self-awareness
7. Case Company: WONDROUS

7.1. Empirical Data – WONDROUS: General Company Description

WONDROUS is a Switzerland-based digital agency that consults companies on design, service experiences and web applications as well as realizes these corporate platforms. From their office in Basel they have around 20 people serving their clients. Originally the company was founded in 2008 under a different name. For the first three years of its existence it was a one-man company with tight connections (first a partnership, then a merger) to a German company. This partnership stopped making sense for Mitch (the founder of WONDROUS) when the number of local projects in Switzerland reached a critical point (at this time, the Basel office included already several employees). Therefore, Mitch ended the legal relationship with the German partner and initiated a re-branding phase for his company in Switzerland, from where today’s version of WONDROUS emerged.

7.2. Empirical Data – WONDROUS: Company Narrative

Michael ‘Mitch’ Beglinger is the CEO and founder of WONDROUS. He grew up in an academic family with a strong entrepreneurial mindset. Despite (or maybe because of) the academic family background, Mitch decided to drop out of university at a relatively early stage. Instead of finishing his degree, he went to work full-time as a consultant.

“I just started […] like everything in my life, I quit university quite roughly, after two years I thought ‘okay come on, you can forge yourself to do that’”

“I always felt uncomfortable when everyone was running into one direction […] like I was forced to do it exactly the other way around […] I think I was always interested in doing stuff differently and to think differently”

“I’m a guts guy […] I always trusted my gut.”

As a consultant, he worked for 6 years, mostly in a PR agency where he made his way all the way to becoming a partner at the company. In his role as a consultant, he realized that something was missing. He started to feel a need for doing more than just selling concepts. Being a “hands-on” person, he also wanted to have an influence on the realization process of the conceptual ideas. The digital creation industry was on its rise. He saw an opportunity to create a realization department in their existing business and consulted his partners about the idea. To his disappointment his partners did not support his suggestion, which left him at a crossroads:

“I had two choices: find another employer or start my own thing and I chose the second one, pretty simple”

Mitch decided to jump straight into it and just start his own company in the shape of a digital consulting agency.
“Why? I think because I wanted, I had no plan, I was pretty naive, I was 28, I had no responsibilities but myself.”

At around the same time, during a skiing vacation, he met a German entrepreneur at a bar who happened to work with realizing digital projects; exactly the part Mitch wanted to integrate into his working process! A few weeks later they met in Basel, which initiated a stream of additional meetings that led to the beginning of a partnership between the two. Mitch was comfortable with his decision, it was the right time, he did not have any responsibilities and this meant he could focus only on work.

“I just jumped into work and that’s it [...] I always believed that I can design my own life [...] I was always a kind of an emotional person and a passionate person”

The fit seemed perfect, Mitch was the entrepreneurial conceptualist who could bring in knowledge about leadership, concept creation, and design. The German counterpart had the resources needed to realize the concepts, as well as technical and financial experience. It was in this time that Mitch started testing out some of the leadership theories he had heard of to be used by his idols in Silicon Valley.

Although Mitch was born in Switzerland, he spent a few years of his upbringing in California. Being in this environment, with a dad who is heavily influenced by the Californian spirit to try stuff, to do stuff, to do what you love, and not necessarily please society, made a big impact on him. He thinks that his cultural awareness is connected to “The Valley” and “Those Guys.” The connection to “The Valley” became the benchmark for his new company. Ever since the first digital agencies were formed in Silicon Valley, he kept an eye on how they developed and benchmarked against them. His company was a small player in the field.

“We were small fishes in the lake”

Ever since the very founding of his company, Mitch makes efforts to travel where the innovation is and to stay close to The Valley’s culture and spirit. Since early on, he travels to California on a yearly basis to meet with other CEOs to learn how they handle challenges regarding company culture.

Mitch spent half of his working time as an entrepreneur in Germany because the realization-part had its office there and an office in Basel was not needed. By 2011, however, so many Swiss companies had become clients that it made sense to Mitch to also have someone on location in Basel. This is when he hired his first employee. Because he could not afford to hire a well experienced person, he was aiming for recent graduates. He also did not think that the profile he was looking for could be easily matched. Therefore, the most important factor was cultural fit.

“Cultural fit was more important back in the days than everything else”
Everything else Mitch believes one can learn, as he did himself

“I taught myself everything I knew for the business, so I knew that this is possible”

Esther, his first employee, started in 2011 as content manager. Over the years, she took on other roles such as project manager and consultant. In the end of 2017 she became part of the management team where she functions as HR manager and as COO. Mitch values that Esther tries to get things done; she does not ask what she should do, she just tries.

Mitch saw a good cultural fit in Esther, who had just completed her master’s degree in philosophy27

“I knew that she is not able to do anything but she was so intelligent in our conversation and we had a good vibe that it was clear for me to hire her”

From Esther’s perspective, the initial interview was quite unusual; the normal interview lasted 10 minutes, and then they started talking about cooking and wine. She thinks she got hired because of common grounds on a personal level and not because of her professional skills (she confessed to us that she even had to google what a content manager did).

“If you hire people like me who have no idea of what they are actually doing, it’s very hard to do the actual stakeholder management” (Esther)

This was also recognized by following hires. The interview was of the relaxed kind with the objective to get to know each other. One employee noticed:

“people are more important than skills”

and that

“If you’re not a complete idiot you can learn everything because it’s just a computer and some internet stuff [...] skill is not everything”

Another employee shared with us that it would not be possible for him/her to work with his/her amount of responsibility at other companies because of a restricted amount of experience

“I think this is invaluable because I don’t think it would be possible to find another company where at this point I could have done so many things and get support to do it in my own way, and if something fails we talk about and see how else we could do it”

27 Several employees have an academic education not directly related to their current jobs
With time, professional expertise has gained importance in the hiring process to be able to match more and more complex client demands. Still, personal fit is important to Mitch and he plans to stay involved in the hiring process by meeting most potential employee at least once to ensure that new hires are aligned with his vision.\textsuperscript{28}

After Esther’s first week, Mitch went on vacation and Esther had to run the Basel office by herself

“but hey, that’s life - you learn it the hard way and hands-on” (Mitch)\textsuperscript{29}

At that time, they rented office space at another agency in Basel. There were around 12 people in the other company and they had overlapping assignments with them, so it did not feel like a two-man company. Even though it got a bit lonely when Mitch went on vacation, this was not the case for long, because the second employee joined a couple of weeks later.

As the client base in Switzerland continued to grow, the German-Swiss partnership no longer made sense and Mitch felt the necessity to make a change. During this time, Rainer and Mitch (who knew each other from the international partnership) had many conversations about what is going wrong in the industry and what they could do about it. They realized that many companies in Basel would go to London or Zurich for their digital work and the two discussed setting up a company on location in Basel. Rainer told us that Mitch can sell anything and that he himself as a computer scientist had the capabilities to facilitate these digital projects. The goal was to build a trustful company that developed good digital products that sell themselves:

“[a company] that develops good products where we don’t need to really sell stuff but just...we want it to sell it for itself.” (Rainer)

And to bring a little bit of London, Palo Alto and Zurich to Basel. They wanted to be a reliable and trustworthy company that is always going the extra mile.

“So, we wanted to build up a company in which you could trust, which develops really, really good stuff and to make this as our company identity to the outside” (Rainer)

This was the vision from the beginning “and then clients come and because of clients you change.”

For Mitch, after splitting up, rebranding became a necessary effort to re-position the company in the light they wanted to create it. He told us that what he would like to achieve after all is to

\textsuperscript{28} His plan is to otherwise extract himself from the operational business
\textsuperscript{29} This attitude we also shared with us by a more recent hire who described having started to work with a client right away after joining, which was hard but also good because it meant fast learning
have created a company that people are happy to go to work at every morning and to enable everyone to have a meaningful job. For him this means to have direct impact on the project one is working on and nobody should be in an assistant role (unless maybe to learn the ropes in the beginning). Everything is connected to self-responsibility. He also highlights personal growth

“in here you should learn something every day”

and how to obtain it

“I think people should be challenged in here.”

Mitch seeks to facilitate this by trying to hire people who appreciate constant development with a “drive to innovate permanently.” Employees should be here “to do stuff that [they] love.”

One day he would like to see WONDROUS to be able to exist autonomous of his leadership. An employee described Mitch as great motivator who is always positive and forward thinking. Sometimes even too much forward thinking for this employee’s taste, although it is still appreciated that Mitch is always pushing, which helps the employee to stay motivated

“He [Mitch] is always thinking big, bigger than we are”

The rebranding effort included coming up with a new name and Mitch decided to democratize this process by involving every employee in it. Over a couple of weeks, they collected and weeded through name suggestions based on different parameters (e.g., is the name already taken by another company?). At some point the list included around 120 suggestions. Ultimately, a democratic voting let WONDROUS emerge as the new name (The Green Ketchup Club was one of the competing suggestions). In the beginning, there was a lot of energy in the company, which one employee attributed to the democratic name finding process and others to being deeply involved in the rebranding process in general.

In fashion of following Mitch’s innovation-ids from California, a surf office in Gran Canaria was organized where the new website for WONDROUS should be created. During a little more than a week, the team was learning how to surf in the afternoons and was working on their company-internal project during the first half of the days. Although the company’s professional know-how of such projects helped to roll out the overall rebranding project rather successfully, we got the impression that the retreat to the Atlantic turned into something more similar to a battlefield rather than a beach party.

“There [during the surf office] we discovered that good energy, good vibes and being nice to each other is not enough for a company [...] and not for accomplishing work”

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30 This seems to be the case; one employee told us “It’s nice to work with something I’m actually interested in”
“We did the retreat to Gran Canaria where we wanted to create the branding and the website for the new company and all that we did was shouting at each other”

The team did not manage to reach their goal of completing the new website because differences in personalities and an unclear division of roles led to many arguments. It was explained to us that the group was so passionate about the project that it was hard to find solutions that everybody thought to be the best one.

“We all were very enthusiastic about it, but we forgot the basics […] We did not define the roles for the project”

We also learned about the concern that cultural differences between German and Swiss culture contributed to misunderstandings

“We just did not speak the same language”

One might imagine that German and Swiss culture are very similar to each other but, reportedly, rather big differences exist. A German told us:

“In Switzerland, you always try to be very nice and to wrap things in nice words even if you mean bad things […] I try to be very direct”

When WONDROUS hired their first non-German-speaking employee in 2017, they decided to change the company language to English. Sometimes this becomes a problem because they still also have German-speaking clients, but it can also be an advantage because it raises the awareness of cultural differences. One German employee explained to us that speaking English levels the playing ground because nobody at WONDROUS is a native English-speaker and it sensitizes team members to pay more attention to potential misunderstandings caused by cultural differences. This opinion is not shared by all employees, as exemplified by the statement of a Swiss employee who voiced that changing the company language to English made working together more complicated.

From the ashes of the battlefield in Gran Canaria a new company called WONDROUS emerged. Despite cultural differences and language barriers, there seems to be something uniting all people working at this digital agency. We asked all interviewees the existential question of why they think WONDROUS exits. Multiple employees used the term “the groove” when they were describing the office atmosphere.

Once again, Mitch’s admiration for “The Valley” has served as inspiration. Mitch designed the office in collaboration with an interior designer, but he is also always open to suggestions and implements these. Esther says about Mitch that “he gives himself in” and that “he’s not cheap with the company and the employees.”
The main office room is structured as an open area with many workstations, a big meeting room and an area that allows for small meetings and a calmer working environment (people are free to move around as they please). The office also includes a separate kitchen (eating at your desk is not appreciated at WONDROUS because people should focus on one or the other; one of the few regulations, although snacks are always allowed). Coffee and other (alcoholic) drinks are readily available. A big hall (its initial purpose is that of a loading zone) connects the rooms and offers space for a Ping-Pong table (as well as a beer delivery truck of a company renting storage space in the basement).

The weekly work routines include working, playing table tennis or other (video) games during small breaks, a weekly meeting (Team Standup) where updates are shared by the management team and is concluded by a company lunch, football training with the work team during working hours, and having a beer together in the evenings. Although people seem to be generally good at practicing self-control, we have also heard that sometimes it can be hard to switch between work and the little breaks and people have to remind themselves: “Hey, you also have to work.” In general, it was shared with us that the company encourages people to work in the ways that are right for them.

“It’s like they say hey, feel comfortable like at home, do it like you need to do it”

The company lunch is appreciated,

“It doesn’t feel like you have lunch at work”

especially because nobody had asked for it. Sitting down and having a beer together after the weekly football training, where everybody stays for some time just to hang out was described as one example of how the WONDROUS spirit can be felt the most.

WONDROUS also organizes activities such as:
- Talks/Presentations
- Skiing trips
- An October Fest event
- BBQs
- A Christmas party
- Visiting conferences
- Go-karting

To understand where “the groove” at WONDROUS is coming from, it seems useful to take a little detour in our story and share a fundamental assumption that Rainer had shared with us:

“I just want to work as the person who I am and I want to work on the work that I want to do and this is what I am trying to build up here for myself […] We try to give as much freedom as we would like to have […] We [the management team] try to
create this working environment where we really like to work and that’s why we always also choose the people that we would really like to work with and not only that could help us professionally”

The underlying mentality is that at WONDROUS, people have the possibility to be who they really are. In terms of what Rainer wants to build up for himself, this means that he tries to hire people who want this also. The result is the following:

“Everyone inside here is in some way a little bit crazy”

The complete company is built on trust. The credit card information, for example, is available to everyone in the company, so they do not have to ask for permission.

“The credit card data is visible for every employee [...] This is a level of trust that we give the people and we get a lot more back than we give”

“It’s cool that the company for which I work gives me that much of opportunities and freedom so I definitely want to give them that back with my work and with my personality” (employee)

And it seems to work because people build strong ties with each other

“I think it’s the company which I go for and not the work at the moment”

An employee shared with us that everyone is on the same level, the communication style between Mitch and an employee or two employees is the same; everybody can talk to anybody about anything. “I have never thought about reporting, but yes” was the response of one employee when we asked if s/he was reporting to the management. The team moves as one entity; no one is really following, but everyone is going in the same direction. This s/he believes makes the team strong.

During our interviews, many people have used to concept of familiarness to describe one core element of WONDROUS. Creating a feeling of familiarness is a key concept at WONDROUS, but it does not come without effort:

“That family feeling and so on, it does not come easy it does not just appear, you have to do something for it”

According to Esther, the family feeling has started unconsciously and developed over time until it became addressed in conscious efforts

“The more I became involved in the company and the more roles I had and the more awareness I got, the more it became conscious”
She then went on and gave the example that she had bought breakfast for us during the morning of the interview and prepared the meeting room for us to be used. This was a conscious choice of hers to shape the environment to make us feel welcome because she felt responsible. To her, these little things, like for example paying for each other’s lunches when somebody had forgotten their wallet, or asking if somebody wants something from the store when one is going there, make the difference and create the familiar environment. The other agency that they used to rent office space from had little traditions (e.g., bringing a cake for the team on your birthday) and she says WONDROUS puts a lot of effort into such kinds of traditions. But it is not only about traditions, but also about proactively looking for ways to help others; supporting a co-worker when one of the team members is sick, for example. She does, however, also point out that not everybody does this. To Esther, this is normal behavior, she thinks that she was raised that way and that she simply brings herself to the office. She remembers that everybody would know what the others were working on and they would ask if they could support each other until they grew to around 10 people. Keeping this kind of overview now is impossible because they have too many clients and too many employees. A certain kind of loyalty can still be found, however, when true WONDROUS-men and WONDROUS-women meet. Multiple occasions have been described to us where a personal fit existed, but a most suitable role was not available. In these cases, WONDROUS would get in touch when a more suitable position needed to be filled.

Although the WONDORUS culture is described as trust-based, sometimes quality checks are necessary to prevent failures

“Four eyes are better than two.”

People feel responsibility for their tasks and expect from themselves to do a good job.

“I could never find anyone in here who just wanted to do just the job and done. Everyone wants to do it very well. Probably that's why we fight so much, or back then fought so much.”

This expectation comes from the vision to be one of the best digital agencies and to be known for being that good. Being on their way to achieving their goal through really hard work by everyone, also personal goals are said to have influenced getting closer to manifesting their vision, such as the personal expectations of getting things done and doing a great job, as well as being proactive, as reflected in the following quote:

“You always do what you feel comfortable with, and what needs to get done.”

(employee)

Rainer describes everyone at WONDROUS as being on fire for creating really nice web applications. To be able to do that, one strategic goal is to work for clients that can pay for the projects that they want to do.
“One vision is to work for big clients that have so much money that we can create really, really great products”

Creating “really, really great products” has a couple of different implications, one being the equation with being an innovative company:

“Because we really try to build the best possible product at the end for the customer we always need to be on the edge of what is possible technically and also from a consulting perspective, so that we know what’s going on in the industry and we really make this a part of the company, learning culture is here, and we always try to improve ourselves, we are never settled with what we have, we always try to improve.” (Rainer)

Part of Mitch’s vision for the company is to always innovate, which also means that constant learning is one of the focal areas. WONDROUS takes on projects where it is not clear what the solution will turn out to be

“They [clients] don’t hire us for having a solution already, they hire us because they have a complex problem they didn’t solve so far”

These complex projects are forcing WONDROUS to innovate. The team is equipped for such tasks through the facilitation of personal development and professional learning. Each employee has a personal yearly budget, which ought to be spent on personal development. On top of that, an unlimited educational budget aimed toward professional education is provided and used for example to take online courses or visit conferences. We were told that every employee is expected to spend at least 3500 CHF for development each year. The company does, however, also support more expensive learning initiatives (e.g., additional school-education and learning German).

“There is a thin line between ‘I just want to do this now for myself to learn this’ or ‘I want to learn this because I want to make this as an impact for the company’ [...] That's where I would draw the line, when a person would come to me and say he wants to learn something completely different that we do not use here in the company, will never use, don’t intend to use, then he can take his personal education budget and do this but not the professional budget” (Rainer)

Guidance is provided by three annual job appraisals, where the employee’s well-being and future goals are in focus. It is also a general option to speak when a problem arises. As mentioned, Mitch himself spends 10 days of every year in San Francisco where he works remotely and meets with other CEOs to see how they do their work and how they treat cultural issues. In the founding years, he invested all his money into traveling

“I really wanted to go where the innovation is.” (Mitch)
“We always try to improve ourselves, we’re never settled” (Rainer)

Such focus on continuous learning is however not something for everyone and it turned out that some people felt stressed in such an environment.

“There are people that are really resilient to learning new stuff” (Rainer)

But others are thankful for these opportunities and one employee told us that having an educational budget shows trust from the side of the company and creates additional motivation

“I like it, I appreciate it, I don’t think it’s the norm to have it.”

WONDROUS has achieved their goal of getting very big clients. The challenge now is to be able to support more and more projects, which these clients want to tackle together with WONDROUS because it means many people are needed. More work is available than people, but at the same time the current office is getting too small

“we already lose money when we do not grow.”

Hiring new employees with the right skills and experience who can start working on projects nearly immediately has turned into a priority for WONDROUS

“we have not the time anymore to build up the skills”

The recruitment process now focuses on personal fit, but also on technical expertise. For the development team, it includes a meeting to get to know the person and a meeting with the technical team to determine skill level and team-fit. According to one employee, getting technical questions from the development team was a positive experience because it showed that they were interested. Somewhere along these lines Mitch meets the recruit as well. The team has influence on the hiring process; if a person is found to be not “WONDROUS enough,” the person will not be hired, which makes it not easy to find a complete fit. But there are reasons to be picky:

“I don’t know how to explain this but we’re a small company and many things, like you said, like playing football or drinking beers in the afternoon, it sometimes gets a little bit familiar [...] we really need and want that people fit into the company culture and don’t stand aside.”

An employee has raised concern that it will be harder in the future to find people who fit the WONDROUS culture because having the right skills seems to become more and more important. So far, everybody at the company fits “the groove” very well, although intercultural differences between different nationalities arise
“it is tough to work with people from countries and regions of the world with complete
different mindset, so it got harder.”

Although it has been described as positive that always new people are joining the company

“There was a period of time last year, the last two years where the spirit was not that
high, not that good, I don’t know why, we had so many talks about that, but actually
now, since end last year it is getting better and better because new team members are
joining the team and they have new mindsets, or new ideas I think that’s quite
refreshing for the whole team”

and that onboarding of new team members to the WONDROUS groove has so far been very
successful, concerns have been raised in terms of how the WONDROUS spirit might get
affected in the future when hiring more people and how the understanding of who
WONDROUS is might differ between employees. One employee reports:

“I started realizing that it’s very complex for the people that come new to the
company, because for me the culture is something that was grown, and I have grown
into it with the other guys, because I was always there […] I realized that everybody is
not feeling about WONDROUS as I do.”

This was supported by another employee saying that experienced people joining the company
are harder to mold than young people without experience. Also, it creates the challenge of
feeling “junior” again for recent hires because they have to learn how things are done at
WONDROUS first. It is described that new people who come to the company take the
company as it is and that they count on the people who have been there for longer to show
them what WONDROUS is. In this employee’s opinion, the people who have worked there
longer are the people who built the community, and thereby decide what WONDROUS is and
what it should be.

One example of new employees learning from the ones who have been there longer is the
flexible working schedule. One of the more recently hired employees told us that s/he was
told during the interview that they can work whenever they want and come and go as they
please, as well as to work from home. In the beginning, the employee started early in the
mornings but now starts some hours later. This change occurred because it was apparent how
the other employees are coming and going, but also because of gained confidence in the
quality of the work s/he delivers. Depending on the workload, the hours worked vary;
sometimes s/he works a lot of hours, and other times less. The flexible working schedule also
includes taking days off. Several of the employees praised the freedom they have in their
daily work. For one employee, the freedom they get was unbelievable, which created
skepticism that was soon dismantled

“I always thought it’s a joke, but it’s already [since I started] like this.”
Differences between employees can be mitigated by the joint activities WONDROUS organizes. It is five to six times a year that they celebrate together. Our impression is that this is happening on unofficial occasions much more frequently. One employee shared with us one of the effects to do something together outside of work. Going skiing, for example, changes the dynamics of the group because people are good at different things and learning more about every individual creates a richer picture of each person, so that people are not only seen as their work function but as a multifaceted individual with many abilities but also shortcomings. The employee appreciates to know personal things about co-workers because it helps to understand their behaviors better in professional settings. Social gatherings create this understanding. Another employee described the power of being able to identify as a group and differentiate yourself from other groups, when they go to conferences for example and they are all wearing WONDROUS t-shirts and having other merchandise like stickers with them, which shows that

“we are from WONDROUS”

“I think these events are very community building, because you have a night, a day, an event, a moment, where you can share a memory together, and you can always connect with the other people about these moments”

This connects to the finding that some employees join conferences where other team members are involved because they want to do stuff with the team. For them it seems to be the activity of doing something with the group that is in focus, compared to the learnings connected to a specific conference. According to the management team, some people show initiative for personal development and others have to be forced (some employees have also admitted to us that they could be more proactive in this regard) but because WONDROUS is small enough to handle each person individually, it is not important that everybody is proactive to the same degree.

In the beginning, when the company consisted of around six to seven people, they had a “Cultural Officer” who was working with the company culture. At the time, it seemed premature because of the small size of the company, so they discontinued the function. One might wonder if such a position might gain relevance again because WONDROUS recently grew to a size that required implementing more organizational structures in the company. Counterintuitively to their overall approach, the management team had the idea to implement a silo structure, which turned out to be a bad idea, precisely because it contradicts their overall approach to management. The idea is to remove the management team from the daily operational business. Mitch announced that they are now planning on implementing a more circular organizational structure that will remove the current “bottlenecks” (i.e., Mitch, Esther and Rainer). We were told by one employee that such a change is welcomed and already started to become visible. It was mentioned that there is still room for giving up more control over operational tasks because the management is hiring skilled people who are good at their jobs and who can be trusted with their work.
“2018 is transformation” (Mitch)

which is also why our visit to study the organizational identity at WONDROUS was welcomed.

The management team follows a process when it comes to strategic decision making; the team meets every second week for two hours to align themselves with each other. In addition to that, they talk about the company’s situation and how to move forward during a monthly dinner. Every three months the team allocates one day for planning the next three months and once a year Mitch, Esther and Rainer meet for three days to formulate the goals for the next year, the second year from now, and the year after that

“global planning for the next year what we want to try to achieve”

The frequent discussions about strategy and other problems that arise in daily business lead to changing the vision every half a year. The personal differences between the three individuals can lead to problems but it also allows them to complement each other

“Together we can look at the problem from different perspectives and then can make the best decision for the company.”

What is seen as best for the company can differ from person to person, and also employees have their opinions about it. As exemplified in the case of the Surf Office on Gran Canaria, conflicts arise because everybody wants to do their job perfect and that can lead to problems when a shared understanding of what perfect means does not exist. This happens for example from time to time when developers and designers collaborate. These conflicts are dealt with through communication, but no formal structures exist to address them. In the end, it seems to come down to a certain mindset as described by one employee:

“in the end, we’re dealing just with websites [...] drink a beer in the end of the day and then everything is fine.”

Finding people who agree on this mentality has to be done somehow. When asking different employees about the interview process when they initially joined, we learned that several of them joined the company within only a few weeks’ time, if not even within just a few days as in some cases

“Everything was quite spontaneous.”

We learned that the company is seen as entrepreneurial because of existing inefficiencies and that, as already hinted, the hiring process became more structured over the years; now actual job descriptions exist and one person is in charge of HR. Some employees mentioned their appreciation for working with relatively young people
“I wanted to be in a young environment - Young people thinking forward, playing table tennis, hanging around after work or do something together as a side-project”

The quote above also describes the overall mentality we have experienced during our company visit, which also includes the mindset of working not because one has to, but because one wants to. It does not seem to be financial gain that unites the people at WONDORUS. One employee told us that s/he wants to contribute to the company because s/he didn’t become a part of WONDORUS just to make money, and another said

“If I would like to make business and money and stuff like that, I wouldn’t work in Basel because the big playground is in Zurich or international I think.”

We understood that work life and private life become intertwined when working at WONDORUS. One employee described this floating border between work and private life as a lifestyle, but that also days exist when it is not as appreciated as on other days. This particular employee thought it not to be necessary to separate between work and life at the moment, but to us, this also means that this opinion might change with time.

“If you like what you do it’s more like to connect what you like in your spare-time with your job, and then that’s the good thing, but it can be also not that nice because you spend a lot of time, especially after work, if you play ping pong ‘til 9pm or 10pm.”

Although the interview process was described as becoming more focused on professional skills, it still seems to be rather relaxed because it might include joining the team for football practice, having a coffee or a beer and relaxing as ways of getting to know each other. The getting to know each other part seems to play a rather big role, also for the employees who join, because multiple interviewees mentioned that they joined because of the people and that the people are a factor that determines whether one wants to work here or not.31

“I decided for WONDORUS because of the people”

“Everyone was so friendly and you could feel the spirit of the team”

There is this word again, team spirit, just like groove and vibe and culture. But what is it really that the interviewees are referring to? When asked, even for them it was difficult to describe. The word passion came up, though. One person said that others are referring to it as a special team spirit, but for this employee it is the fact that the people at WONDORUS are friends and even enjoy doing things together outside of work, like for example sticking around after football practice and drinking a beer together instead of going home soon after. Or also that conversations take place on a genuine level that goes deeper than small talk. Somebody else described this feeling as “easy and relaxed” and once again the word familiar

31 The open office structure was mentioned to facilitate talking to everyone and through that getting to know the people who work at WONDORUS
is used to describe the feeling connected to the group. Another one mentions that people have partly complementing, partly matching interests. This might serve as common ground for creating this feeling of familiarness.

“I really feel comfort here.”

One might get the idea that such strong group dynamics would lead to pressure, but when asking if it felt like a must to join group activities, we were assured that

“nobody is mean if you say sorry, I have no time, I wanna see friends.”

As mentioned before, getting to know people is seen as helpful for working together. We were told that it is helpful to know how to talk to different individuals and to know how every person would react and how everybody works. It also seems to create a level of clarity and safety because “they know what I can do and what I can’t do.” This seems to be achieved by applying a lean attitude toward trial and error

“Mitch always says fail forward”

focused on separating the person from their work, as well as a focus on constructive feedback

“When you talk about work, it’s on a work-level, so not personal and then when you change to free time it’s on a personal [...] these two levels are quite good in here.”

When this separation between the work level and the personal level fails, though, troubles can arise. Some people take feedback allegedly more personally than others. Introducing new people to the company is an additional challenge. More recently hired employees thought that they were not properly introduced to the company’s work processes; there was so much client work that onboarding became a secondary task. Onboarding was described as an unstructured process that consisted primarily of being proactive about asking a lot of questions.

“The onboarding process was like three months later when I began to ask, ‘how do you do that,’ ‘how are we gonna do that,’ ‘how you do that’ and ‘which tool is for this’ and it was more about my initiative”

The management team is aware of this

“They also apologized that they didn’t onboard me that right.”

Having to take care of a lot of client work is something we heard many times as explanation for why there was no time to address specific strategic issues because resources are very

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32 It has also been mentioned to us that WONDROUS does not talk much about why a problem arises because that’s not contributing to solving it
limited. Employees seem to be very understanding for the strong focus on operational tasks and client work that keeps the company running. It did, however also feel as if one or the other was getting impatient about hearing the same explanation (to not use the word *excuse*) over and over again. Finding the balance between strategic implementation and cash flow generating client work could be seen as an underlying challenge for WONDROUS.

### 7.3. Empirical Analysis – WONDROUS

As explained in the *Method* section (5.6.4.) we now present *Issues* that have been re-contextualized from the narratives, and enriched with our personal experiences gained from the interviews and the company visits as texts. Subsequently, we identify *Intertextual Linkages* between the different *Issues* and describe their relationships. We define *Intertextual Linkages* as connections we were able to draw between the different *Issues* of each company.

**Issue – Mitch the Entrepreneur**

As an individual, the founder of WONDROUS, Mitch, is an entrepreneur who believes that progress is occurring through taking on challenges “I think people should be challenged in here.” However, every challenge represents a choice also. After Mitch reached the partner position at his previous employer, the new challenge for him seemed to be extending the current company into a new line of work; the realization of digital products. However, as that presented a challenge in the shape of disagreeing partners, he was met with a new challenge and a choice to make; “find a new employer, or start his own company,” “I [Mitch] chose the second one, pretty simple.” Reflecting in relation to the bigger context, it then seems as if Mitch operates from a biased premise because he never seemed to have considered the option of staying with his partners and continuing business as usual. The decision to start his own company might have been driven by the belief that it was needed to take his own development to the next stage

“I think because I wanted, I had no plan, I was pretty naive, I was 28, I had no responsibilities but myself,”

or by his intrinsic desire to go a different direction than the mainstream

“I always felt uncomfortable when everyone was running into one direction […] like I was forced to do it exactly the other way around”

and a belief in the ability to shape his own destiny

“I always believed that I can design my own life.”

This mentality seems to cause Mitch to think in a bigger scale than most; one employee reports

“He [Mitch] is always thinking big, bigger than we are,”
which, according to the same employee, is a good characteristic because his forward thinking and positive mindset towards one’s abilities to shape the future serves as a great motivational factor for him/her in the daily work.

**Issue – The Valley**

Mitch is fascinated with Silicon Valley and characters like Steve Jobs. He described a *California Spirit* to us that consists of trying stuff, to just do things, to do what you are passionate about and to not be afraid to operate outside of societal norms. To stay connected to this *Valley Mindset*, Mitch travels to California every year. He assumes that his focus on company culture comes from “The Valley” that was introduced to him as a child by living in California and by his father. One example for how Mitch is influenced by his positive bias towards the *Silicon Valley Vibe* is that the team made a company retreat in form of a *Surf Office* to work on rebranding the company as WONDROUS, whereas the Swiss Alps are just around the corner and could have served (pun intended) the same purpose. One might therefore wonder if benchmarking the approaches used in “The Valley” sometimes happens for the sake of benchmarking in itself instead of adjusting Californian ideas to a European context.

**Issue - Pragmatism**

Within WONDROUS, there seems to be a certain degree of pragmatism as the antecedent for many of the decisions made. When Mitch started the company, he needed a realization resource, he found such a resource on a skiing trip, the fit seemed great, so they partnered up. In the beginning, Mitch worked from Germany because that’s where the realization department had its office. As the client base in Switzerland grew, this behavior changed. It seems as if the pragmatism stems from a belief that “you can forge yourself to do that” and that the decision about what direction to proceed in is based on his “gut feeling,”

> “I’m a guts guy.”

Either there is a positive or a negative feeling about endeavors

> “I was always a kind of emotional person and a passionate person”

and these feelings determine how he relates to them. Both concepts can also be found in the way Mitch hired the first employee for the Basel office. He “did not think that the profile he was looking for could be easily matched” and he could not afford an experienced person, so the pragmatic choice became a student and the premise for selection was cultural (personal) fit

> “cultural fit was more important back in the days than everything else.”

Reflecting over this in a bigger context, then the believe that “you can forge yourself” to learn what is necessary could have been a deciding factor for why he believed an unexperienced
individual could be an asset and his mantra to “fail forward” seems to allow room for failure and thereby room for learning as described by one employee

“if something fails we talk about it and see how else we could do,”

which also implies a solution-oriented mindset. An approach that seems to be necessary when operating under the mantra “fail forward” since they have come to realize that “good energy, good vibes and being nice to each other is not enough for a company.” Sometimes they “just don’t speak the same language” within the organization and when they “forget the basic” and fail to “define the roles for the project,” the room for failure becomes vital to move forward. This pragmatic approach towards decision making seems to make WONDROUS “fail forward” at a fast pace.

**Issue – Learning by Doing**

Mitch “taught [himself] everything [he] knew for the business” and therefore believes that “skill is not everything.” His attitude toward learning-by-doing seems to be shared within the organization, as an employee reports

“If you’re not a complete idiot you can learn everything because it’s just a computer and some internet stuff.”

This approach is further valued by the employees who recognize the strength of learning by doing because it ultimately means bigger responsibilities for the individual and therefore more room to grow

“I don’t think it would be possible to find another company where at this point I could have done so many things and get support to do it in my own way.”

However, this approach is not for everyone; it seems to require a certain type of personality, one that values this kind of freedom (or lack of instruction)

“It’s cool that the company for which I work gives me that much of opportunities and freedom so I definitely want to give them that back with my work and with my personality.”

This is recognized by WONDROUS “people are more important than skills.” However, the people who work there, “learn it the hard way, and hands-on.” To Mitch, “that’s life,” which the employees “think is invaluable.”

**Issue – Vision aka creating WONDROUS**

Mitch and Rainer had rather specific ideas for how they wanted to create WONDROUS, including bringing a bit of Palo Alto to Basel and to build a trustworthy company that builds “really, really good stuff.” For Mitch, it is important to have built a company that will be able to exist independently of himself as a person. The mindset of “If you like what you do it’s
more like to connect what you like in your spare-time with your job, and then that’s the good thing” is central to WONDROUS’ existence as well, because people should “do stuff that [they] love.” This shows a clear bias toward that work should be enjoyable, but also confidence in themselves that their opinions are important.

Issue – Misfits
Hiring for personal fit is described as hiring people who are “in some way a little bit crazy.” But value is also seen in being different from each other because “together we can look at the problem from different perspectives and then can make the best decision for the company.” That focus on personal fit is understood as an approach that is out of the ordinary based on the assumption that the way job interviews are conducted at WONDROUS are quite unusual. We would say that following the norm is not necessarily always the right way, but during our time at WONDROUS we did not get the feeling that WONDROUS would spend much time bothering about the opinions of others once they have decided their position on a question anyway. Taking pride in being different might strengthen their confidence to do things their way. On the other hand, it might be worth to remember Mitch’s fascination with “The Valley” and question how different WONDROUS is from digital agencies in California.

Issue – Initiative
There is a certain mindset of proactiveness

“You always do what [...] needs to get done”

and feeling of duty for helping others, which is grounded in the assumption that one should work to achieve a certain outcome

“That family feeling and so on, it does not come easy it does not just appear”

and that the pursuit of such is elemental

“Hey, you also have to work.”

Also in the sense that personal goals contribute to achieving the company vision. It is assumed that such approach is based on the character and upbringing of each individual, but also that one can become more conscious about reinforcing such behavior

“The more I became involved in the company and the more roles I had and the more awareness I got, the more it became conscious.”

To some extent this is said to not be true for every employee, but at the same time this seems to depend on the perspective or personal expectation because it was also stated that one “could never find anyone in here who just wanted to do just the job and done. Everyone wants to do it very well.” This general mindset is reinsured by the expectation to only hire people with a “drive to innovate permanently.” It is assumed that having impact on a project can only
be achieved through direct involvement and not by only contributing with assisting tasks. This hints toward how *ownership* of and *responsibility* for a project might be understood.

**Issue – Socialization**

It is assumed that some kind of socialization needs to take place to introduce new employees to the company (or any company for that matter). Experienced people have already undergone this process in the beginning of their careers at their previous employers. This, and their professional experience, are described as reasons for them to be harder to integrate into another’s company culture. On a similar note, time spent at WONDROUS is assumed to have a positive impact on the understanding of the company culture

“I started realizing that it’s very complex for the people that come new to the company, because for me the culture is something that was grown, and I have grown into it with the other guys, because I was always there.”

A positive bias exists towards the believe that time spent at a company increases the level of authority regarding deciding what the company should be: the people who have worked at the company the longest have the authority to decide what WONDROUS should be based on their impact on what the company is today. One might recognize the contradiction in using the concept of seniority (in terms of “time served) to exclude future employees from shaping the culture, because this concept would have prevented current employees from having had impact earlier. We believe this bias to be the foundation for assuming that new hires expectedly take the current culture for granted and expect senior employees to socialize them to it. A negative bias exists against changing the WONDROUS spirit. This fear of change might come from the strong emotional connection to the company, which we, as advocates of *The Second Curve –thinking* see as a risk for stagnation.

**Issue – Passion**

Every person working at WONDROUS seems to be emotionally invested into the company in one way or another. This investment can come from different sources, such as a person bringing new thinking to the company

“new team members are joining the team and they have new mindsets, or new ideas I think that's quite refreshing for the whole team”

or allowing for involvement in fundamental activities, such as deciding for a new company name. Strong involvement in the re-branding efforts are assumed to have had a strong impact that brought lots of energy to the company

“We all were very enthusiastic about it.”

The passion for the re-branding project was exemplified by the conflicts they had during the Surf Office (“all that we did was shouting at each other”). This is based on the bias that fighting shows personal commitment. Overall commitment seems to be based on an intrinsic
individual bias that working at WONDROUS is not only a means to earn money, but functions as an extension of the personal identity.

**Issue - Lateral Leadership / Stewardship**

Where some employees do not feel like they are reporting to any supervisor

> “I have never thought about reporting,”

Others would be happy about a lower degree of reporting. These different perceptions seem to be dependent on the individual supervisor. A general perception, however, seems to be the perceived level of equality between all team members, which is perceived as strength. In our opinion, the team moving in one direction as one entity can only work if alignment exists (explanations for how such alignment can be created might be found in the interlinkages between issues). For starters, we believe trust to be one of the enabling factors for this perception (an example is that the company’s credit card information is visible to all employees “This is a level of trust that we give the people”) because it is explained that this trust from the management team leads to receiving much more back from the rest of the team

> “We get a lot more back than we give.”

This high level of trust might also serve as support for honesty being assumed to exist within WONDROUS. For example, it is assumed that “nobody is mean if you say sorry, I have no time” to hang our or to join football practice, whereas we see potential for one or the other getting offended, based on an otherwise strong sense of community.

**Issue – Community**

Despite a diverse organization with a variety of nationalities and languages, there seems to be a community within WONDROUS. Many of the employees characterize this community as having a certain “groove” that attracts them

> “I think it’s the company which I go for and not the work at the moment.”

> “I wanted to be in a young environment - Young people thinking forward, playing table tennis, hanging around after work or do something together as a side-project.”

> “everybody at the company fits ‘the groove’ very well.”

The groove and the community in general seem to be created by traditions and activities within WONDROUS such as weekly sports, almost daily drinking, and conference visits as a team. “WONDROUS puts a lot of effort into such kinds of traditions.” One employee describes these events as memory creators
“I think these events are very community building, because you have a night, a day, an event, a moment, where you can share a memory together, and you can always connect with the other people about these moments”

especially when they go as a team to these events, where they wear matching outfits and pass around WONDROUS merchandise; these situations create a feeling of “we are from WONDROUS.” This groove is important for WONDROUS and they therefore “really need and want that people fit into the company culture and don’t stand aside” if a potential new hire is found to be not “WONDROUS enough” the person will not be hired. The reasoning is that the present differences between employees can be mitigated by these joint activities. However, there seems to be a balance. Since these activities take up a lot of time, every once in a while, some employees see them as less of a positive thing “but it can be also not that nice because you spend a lot of time, especially after work, if you play ping pong ‘til 9pm or 10pm.”

Issue – Reasons why (aka Excuses)

Several changes have been taking place at WONDROUS (such as changing the company language), which are partly rationalized with the influence of clients

“because of clients you change.”

Onboarding for example, lost priority because of facing much client work. It is not that this is an unconscious development; the management team is aware of it

“They also apologized that they didn’t onboard me that right.”

To accommodate big clients, more employees are needed, which gives more importance to professional expertise of potential hires compared to cultural fit (which used to be the most important factor in hiring) because it is assumed that they “have not the time anymore to build up the skills.” This is the case because of a focus on opportunity costs

“we already lose money when we do not grow.”

Yet, WONDROUS is perceived to be small enough to ensure that each employee is developing in terms of personal education if they are not proactive about it themselves. To Mitch, “2018 is transformation,” although the company vision has been described to change every half a year. We get the feeling that the way of operating is on its way of distancing itself from the overall company values because economic factors are used to rationalize why early beliefs (e.g., cultural fit is most important, learning on-the-job) are less rigorously enacted. It seems as if the management team was now under compulsion to make a move to realign with their overarching value system.
Issue – Innovation
Within WONDROUS, an expectation to be innovative exists; the company vision is biased toward innovation (always innovate). It is exemplified in the focus on personal development

"we really make this a part of the company, learning culture is here"
"in here you should learn something every day"

grounded in the assumption that education and being “on the edge of what is possible” facilitate innovation. The clients are seen as enablers for WONDROUS to innovate because they have complex problems that WONDROUS does not have a solution for in advance either

“[The clients] don’t hire us for having a solution already, they hire us because they have a complex problem they didn’t solve so far.”

WONDROUS assumes that they “always try to improve” and that they “are never settled.” A bias towards innovation exists also in terms of financial muscle because “really great products” are believed to be expensive

“One vision is to work for big clients that have so much money that we can create really, really great products.”

Intertextual Linkages
Reflecting on the Issues in a manner that allows us to look for intertextual linkages between the Issues, enables us to dive a level deeper in our analysis. Based on our personal knowledge of the deeper context of each interview in relation to the narrative, we seek out these linkages and from them abstract factors that we can utilize to build the foundation for a conceptualization. Throughout this section of the thesis, we included footnotes as a means to indicate the different Issues we are referring to.

Based on the claim that something is (or was) wrong with the industry, we infer Mitch and Rainer believe that they know what is best for the industry. For Mitch, this confidence might come from him trusting his gut feeling. It might also explain his behavior to follow through with entrepreneurial activities in terms of starting them based on the belief that he can complete them (cf. self-efficacy). This confidence might be grounded in, or reinforced by, his belief that he and anyone else can forge their own future and him being able to learn whatever he needs to know.33 34 This self-efficacy, we abstract into the Factor Proactiveness because they believe that one can forge ones’ future, we saw it as an antecedent for being proactive in the context of WONDROUS.

The general assumption that one’s abilities can be extended through learning are present as basic concept throughout WONDROUS, as personal fit trumps professional skills (although

33 Issue - Pragmatism
34 Issue Learning by Doing
skillsets have gained relevance in this relationship lately).\(^{35}\) Personal fit we believe to be defined as something personal (possibly based on character and individual upbringing) compared to a focus of looking for professional skills. A certain combination of factors leads individuals who are good fits for WONDROUS to wanting to do the things they do really well.\(^{36}\) This does not mean that learning in general is seen as less important because we see a certain drive or hunger toward developing as a unifying trait of the WONDROUS team.\(^{37}\) Therefore, we abstract this to a Factor of Hunger for Learning.

Perhaps it is one element that contributes to personal fit. This is not to say that all people are necessarily hungry or driven to the same extent, but rather to point out that we speculate everyone to portray this behavior to an extent that is in line with their individual personalities; everyone is as driven as the best version of themselves allows them to be.\(^{38}\) This, at least, would be an explanation for why employees who are not actively seeking out professional development initiatives are accepted as part of the team; because knowing the individuals allows to understand their personal contexts. The room for everyone to be accepted as the best version of themselves, and not in comparison to the best version of others, we abstract as a Factor of People Tolerance.

We view the explanation, that the company has enough time to push these employees to be more active, as a rationalization for a deeper appreciation for the individuals in question. As we have learned, not everybody is the same, but rather a bit crazy in their own ways.\(^{39}\) The applied approach to dealing with such diversity can be described as pragmatic because it allows for finding effective solutions; if someone appreciates group activities but is less proactive about signing up for learning initiatives, schedule a learning initiative for the group.\(^{40}\) This appreciation is naturally perceived differently, depending on the individual on the receiving end and therefore we abstract this appreciation as a Factor of Perceived Appreciation.

Somehow learning needs to be reassured because innovation is understood to be enabled by personal development.\(^{41}\) Taking ownership/responsibility for learning and for projects might function as antecedents because they reinforce learning.\(^{42}\) Equality is portrayed as necessity for the company to be able to strive in the future without Mitch’s charismatic leadership\(^{43}\), but it also fosters innovation because equality implies that everybody is actively pushing forward and can manage their personal tasks and responsibilities autonomously (In this case, tasks and responsibilities might be one and the same because it is believed that fulfilling one’s own responsibilities) (and having responsibilities in the first place) creates fulfillment. The

\(^{35}\) Issue – Learning by Doing
\(^{36}\) Issue - Initiative
\(^{37}\) Issue – Learning by Doing
\(^{38}\) Issue – Initiative
\(^{39}\) Issue - Misfits
\(^{40}\) Issue - Pragmatism
\(^{41}\) Issue - Innovation
\(^{42}\) Issue – Learning by Doing
\(^{43}\) Issue – Vision aka creating WONDROUS
antecedent for this fulfillment, is the presence of equality as just described, therefore, we abstract **Equality** as a *Factor*.

For people to be willing to take on challenges, we believe it requires self-efficacy, as well as encouragement in form of a constructive error management culture (failing forward for people to dare to take responsibility for projects that they still have to grow into)\(^{44}\). Trusting that people will be supported when endeavoring into unknown waters could be an additional explanation for why employees might continue taking initiative.\(^{45}\) This trusting in their people we abstract as a factor of **Trust**. We can posit that employees trust their supervisors to not condemn them for errors that might occur. At the same time, the management team trusts the other organizational members to act in accordance with the WONDROUS goals.\(^{46}\) In how far trust exists between organizational members on a micro level is somewhat in question because of relationship conflicts that occasionally arise. Because a positive error culture (i.e., error tolerance), which lets proactive and innovative actions of employees appear as manifestations of the WONDROUS spirit,\(^{37}\) **Scope for Proactiveness** can be seen in the implementation of a positive error culture because it allows organizational members to take initiative. The constructive error management culture, we abstract as the *Factor Error Tolerance*.

No time for onboarding as well as the rising importance of professional expertise of hires can be seen as pragmatism, but also as the previously described inconsistency. Viewing it as pragmatism does, require us to assume that their value base (focus on personal fit and learning by doing) shifted, or that learning by doing has never been a value but just a pragmatic response to a situation of ‘resource scarcity.’ Or, focusing too much on gut feeling (i.e., getting too excited), might lead to forgetting about the basics (i.e., following structures that define the boundaries of an effort). An example would be the description of focusing on clients with financial strength to realize the kind of projects they want to work on as vision. Instead of answering the question why these clients are needed. Simultaneously, it is a pragmatic approach to keeping a company afloat. Pragmatism also relates to learning by doing in the sense that learning by doing assumes to be able to learn skills when they are needed. It can also be understood as grounded in accepting failures as learning experiences (fail forward). Under this light, failing forward is a pragmatic approach as well.\(^ {48}\)\(^ {49}\) The assumption that skills will be learned appropriately, when needed, we abstract into the *Factor Learning*.

The mindset to follow one’s passion turns WONDROUS into a passion enabler. The result is emotional investment into the company and the need for oneself to contribute because one’s

\(^{44}\) Issue - Pragmatism

\(^{45}\) Issue – Learning by Doing

\(^{46}\) Issue – Lateral Leadership / Stewardship

\(^{47}\) Issue - Innovation

\(^{48}\) Issue - Pragmatism

\(^{49}\) Issue – Learning by Doing
individual identity gets extended to their work or even the company as a whole.\textsuperscript{50} To us, this is a possible explanation for why fighting (arguing) is interpreted as manifestation of passion. Our assumption is that challenging one’s suggestions/ideas is in that case understood as challenging one’s identity of self. It is illuminating to note that such extension does not reach all the way to where not joining group activities would be interpreted as an assault on the very existence of the team or WONDROUS.\textsuperscript{51} The emotional investment, and the challenging of one’s identity of self, we abstract as a Factor of Personal Investment.

Finally, we saw that Self-awareness seemed to be a Factor of overarching influence. Throughout the interviews, it became clear that the individuals’ self-awareness influences how each individual is making sense of their surroundings. As an example, one employee showed awareness of how his behaviour under pressure can be misinterpreted by co-workers. We posit that self-awareness as a concept determines how all the other Factors are perceived by the individual and thereby takes on a foundational role in how individuals interact to the other Factors. We therefore consider self-awareness as a meta factor interacting with all the other Factors in one way or another.

In summary, we abstracted the following factors for WONDROUS:

- Proactiveness
- Learning
- Hunger for Learning
- People Tolerance
- Scope for Proactiveness
- Error Tolerance
- Equality
- Perceived Appreciation
- Trust
- Personal Investment
- Self-awareness

Two Factors we initially identified for REACH but not for WONDROUS were Empathy and Honesty. We believe this to be the case because of the data that is available to us, but still believe both of them to be present at WONDROUS as well. For one part this is the case because of the tacit understanding we gained of WONDROUS during our visit to Basel, but also because Empathy is an Antecedent Factor for Equality (which we found at to be present in the WONDROUS data) and Honesty is an Antecedent Factor for Trust, which we also identified from the WONDROUS data.

\textsuperscript{50} Issue - Passion
\textsuperscript{51} Issue – Lateral Leadership / Stewardship
8. Combined Empirical Analysis (Conceptualization)

Based on the preceding steps in the analysis, we identified 13 factors that seem to be of overarching importance at either one, or both companies to explain how they understand themselves. These factors are:

- Proactiveness
- Scope for Proactiveness
- Learning
- Hunger for Learning
- People Tolerance
- Error Tolerance
- Equality
- Empathy
- Trust
- Honesty
- Perceived Appreciation
- Personal Investment
- Self-awareness

In an effort to describe the relationships between the Factors and to make sense of how individuals relate to them, as well as make use of them, we divided the Factors into different parts that, taken together, make up a whole, which we call The Flux Model. Based on our understanding, we created four visual representations that illustrate the different parts and the whole of the Flux Model. The parts taken together we call The Flux Model, which is first described in general terms and then dissected in its different pieces. In general terms, The Flux Model illustrates the process of how the people involved in REACH and WONDROUS make sense of their organizations and how alignment for determining organizational identities is created. The model got its name from the understanding that a constant alignment process between members of an organization is taking place because individuals constantly make sense of their surroundings, which is why an organization’s identity can be perceived as being in a state of flux.
To understand what we are actually looking at, we start by describing what the different elements in the illustration stand for. We will work our way from the outside in. The four groups of circles consisting of three circles each (termed Individual), represent individuals who work at the organization. These four groups are identical in function and serve as an example. In this case, the organization in question consists of four individuals. Between the individuals, two differences exist; the thickness of the lines of which their circles are made up, and the location of their green and blue circles in relation to the grey dashed circle. The thickness of the lines shows the degree of influence one individual has on the others; the thicker the line, the more resolute an individual is in imposing their views (interpretations) on the other individuals. The locations of the green and blue circles in relation to the grey dashed circle illustrate in how far an individual is aligned with the norm of OI as prescribed by the organization as an entity. The green and the blue circle function as two necessary parts of one whole.

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Figure 2: The Flux Model, Source: Authors

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52 You might have noticed that also the lines of the grey dashed circles vary in thickness. These show the degree of conviction of an individual to what the individual believes the organization’s identity is. This thought does, however, go beyond the scope of this thesis and we only set out to hint it for particularly curious scholars.
The Individual Level of The Flux Model

The blue circle represents the perceived involvement of an individual in the organizational community. It describes *how* members of the organization believe themselves to behave in relation to their organization. The more the blue circle overlaps with the grey dashed circle, the greater the alignment between the organization’s prescribed *norm* for behavior (i.e., *how* to behave) and the organizational member’s interpretation of their own behavior.53

The green circle represents an organizational member’s interpretation of *what* the organization expects its members to do. The more the green circle overlaps with the grey dashed circle, the greater the alignment between the organization’s prescribed *norm* for what kind of actions to take and the organizational member’s interpretation of their actions.

In a later stage, we will describe what elements the green and blue circles consist of and how these elements relate to each other. For now, let us be satisfied with the explanation that the blue circle describes how the actions the green circle consists of ought to be executed.

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**The Organizational Level of the Flux Model**

We are now turning our attention to the central part of the model as depicted in Figure 1: The Flux Model, the three dashed circles in the middle that are termed *Organization*. The grey dashed circle we already introduced as *the norm* is created by the founder’s expectations on who the organization should be. This *norm* can potentially be altered through the alignment of the different organizational members on who the organization is (or should be). Through the claims made by the founders (or the alignment of the organizational members), the *norm* becomes institutionalized and serves as foundation for the individuals’ *sensemaking processes* of who the organization is and should be.

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53 **Behavior**: “The way in which one acts or conducts oneself, especially towards others”
(https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/behaviour)
**Action**: “The fact or process of doing something, typically to achieve an aim”
(https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/action)
The Central Part of The Flux Model

Individual understandings (as portrayed by the green and blue circles of each individual) are accumulated in one dashed blue circle and one dashed green circle. This accumulation we call alignment process because the process is affected by each individual’s potentially varying degree of influence between all members on determining what the organizational identity is (or should be). Subsequently, the newly created alignment affects the individual’s previous understandings and vice versa.

The blue circle and the green circle can be analyzed independently, but to understand their overall functions, they should be looked at in liaison as we have done just now. Taken together, they allow us to explain the perceived organizational identity. Now that we have created an overview of what the main functions of the Flux Model are, let us examine the blue and the green circles in more detail.

The 13 factors we previously identified come into play as either describing the dynamics of the organizational community (blue circle), or informing us about the internal focus of the organization (green circle). Only one of these Factors is present in both parts of the Flux Model: Self-awareness as a Factor is somewhat overarching the entire model. At the same time, we understand it as meta factor because its identification as Factor is justified by the premise of the Flux Model in that the model describes perceived behavior (process) and we assume one’s perception to be influenced by one’s degree of self-awareness.

Perceived Individual Behavior in Relation to the Organizational Community

This part of the Flux Model describes the rules of the game. The factors directly involved are

- Equality
- Empathy
- People Tolerance
- Personal Investment
- Perceived Appreciation
- Trust
- Honesty

and explain how to behave if one is to be accepted as part of the organizational community. The illustration (Figure 4) does, however, not serve as a step-wise guide to “how to behave” but rather describes how an individual might legitimate their belonging to the organizational community and the dynamics of this process. In the following, we describe the relationships between the Factors.

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54 As argued for in the Intertextual Linkages parts of both cases
55 The influence of self-awareness on the factors is shown by the color orange but we cannot say anything about it in detail because it lies beyond the scope of this thesis.
Equality, Empathy, People Tolerance, Trust and Honesty
This community functions on the assumption that everybody is equal, not necessarily in terms of managerial decision-making power, but in the way how individuals interact with each other. This kind of **Equality** is created by showing **Empathy** to one another and being tolerant toward differences (i.e., **People Tolerance**). Equality can be viewed from a fundamental human level where differences between people do not determine the value of each individual as a human being. In our case studies, empathy was perceived as antecedent for equality between individuals because it allows one to put themselves into somebody else’s shoes; having the ability to feel what other people feel creates room for equality on an emotional level.56

With these factors functioning as integral parts of the community, **Trust** and **Honesty** are the foundation that the organizational community is based upon. Without Honesty, no Trust can be created and trusting one another is an antecedent for the existence of the organizational community; Trust legitimizes an individual’s participation in the community.

Personal Investment and Perceived Appreciation
The factor **Personal Investment** describes how much time or effort or commitment an individual perceives to put into the organization. The degree of Personal Investment is influenced by the **Perceived Appreciation** an individual receives for their contributions. The community and receiving trust can influence the level of Personal Investment when it creates a feeling of indebtedness towards the community or other members of it in relation to the organization. A feeling of receiving too much appreciation for one’s efforts might lead to a perception of being indebted to the company (or community), which could lead to an increase in effort to match the amount of appreciation received. Perceiving to not receive as much appreciation as one believes to deserve, might lead to the opposite behavior manifested in reducing one’s Personal Investment.

Tying the Factors Together
Making a personal investment does also have an influence on the organizational community because Personal Investment is seen as **Factor** contributing to the legitimization of one’s perceived standing in the community (in Figure 4, the Perceived Appreciation arrow pointing to the right, points to Trust as well as to the Community). This legitimization has its foundation in Honesty because investing one personally shows that the individual is “walking the talk” and can therefore be trusted. The trust one perceives to receive from the community then confirms one’s efforts to be personally invested.

Additional Thoughts on the Dynamics
Equality can be challenged in team settings when individuals understand their contributions to be extensions of themselves. This means that judging contributions might get understood as judging a person (i.e., when relationship conflict (in contrast to task conflict) arises). One

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56 “The ability to understand and share the feelings of another” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018e).
might communicate on a task-level, but this feedback might still cause relationship conflict because of the personal investment in the task and the perceived lack of the expected appreciation. In our case studies, one organization seemed to work around the potential pitfall by celebrating (i.e., acknowledging) the individual efforts that a group effort is made up of. Although Personal Investment in a company can pose a challenge when individual effort is not rewarded to the expected degree, such investment seems to be required for the purpose of community building as manifestation that everyone is going in the same direction. The feeling of community was described as enabling factor for people to stay energized about their work and feel comfortable in their company environments. Part of the community feeling is the trust that the management team extends to their employees, who therefore extend it back to their management team (or possibly the other way around).

Figure 4: Perceived Individual Behavior in Relation to the Organizational Community, Source: Authors
Perceived Organizational Expectations on Organizational Members’ Behavior

This part of the Flux Model describes in what internal context to apply the rules of the game. The factors directly involved are

- Error Tolerance
- Scope for Proactiveness
- Proactiveness
- Hunger for Learning
- Learning

and explain what the organization expects its members to do (i.e., it shows the individual’s perceptions of what the organization expects from its members). In the following, we describe the relationships between the Factors.

Proactiveness is the central organizational expectation. To enable organizational members to take initiative, scope to be proactive (Scope for Proactiveness) needs to be granted. Error Tolerance is the foundation for such scope to exist because tolerance towards making errors allows for dealing with errors in a constructive manner (i.e., learning from them) and does not function as determinant for how much autonomy organizational members are granted. Errors are understood as part of the learning process (e.g., failing forward / stumbling across holes) and are separated from the individuals who cause these. What, on the other hand, is expected from organizational members is a Hunger for Learning because, in our cases, personal development (i.e., Learning) is an integral part of the organizations’ identities.

![Figure 5: Perceived Organizational Expectations on Organizational Members’ Behavior, Source: Authors](image-url)
9. Empirical Analytical Conclusion

For this study, we had the expectation to explore OI as a potential process. This meant that we were not really sure if there was a process to be found. But from what we had understood, if a process was to be found, it would show itself in the meta (i.e., based on assumptions, biases and rationalizations). We did not want to make any presumptions about the existence of a process, which is why we believe to have been rather critical in our endeavor. This critical approach also accompanies us now in the sense that we are not willing to claim to have actually found a process. Rather, that the way the data presented itself to us (or more scientifically spoken, the way we interpreted the data) created an opportunity to frame our findings as a process.

This process consists of three focal areas; the desired organizational identity as seen by the founder (or the organization as an entity) (norm as prescribed by the organization, a.k.a. the dashed grey circle), the individual perceptions of how things are expected to be done (a.k.a. the blue circle; Perceived Individual Behavior in Relation to The Organizational Community), as well as the individual perceptions of what is of importance to the organization in terms of what actions to take (a.k.a. the green circle; Perceived Organizational Expectations on Organizational Members’ Behavior). Within the interplay of these focal areas, the process of OI occurs; it is through the connections between the Factors and the way the three parts relate to each other that we can interpret the construction process of OI. This process we found to be occurring whenever an individual interacts with one of the Factors.

The fundamental assumption of who an organization is, as illustrated by the grey dashed circle, creates a starting point for how the organization can be understood. This is, however, only the beginning of the story, as each individual involved in the organization seems to have scope to understand the OI in their own way due to the existence of identity ambiguity. This means that understanding an organization’s identity does not necessarily mean that organizational members must be aligned to 100% in their perception of the OI. Indeed, it seems rather unlikely to understand this situation fully due to the level of complexity created by the interactions between the individuals involved.

The individual understanding of an organization’s identity, in our case studies, seems to take place on two levels. This duality unites an organization-wide understanding with an individual understanding (i.e., individual interpretation) of OI that suggests OI to become institutionalized through the effort of alignment of the involved individuals with the norm as prescribed by the organization.

For the purpose of being critical towards ourselves, it is questionable whether it is useful to focus on a norm for OI if the central part of our conceptualization is the assumption that each organizational member interprets their surroundings in their individual ways anyway. It is then not only questionable if one could arrive at a reasonable description of such norm, but it might also become an irrelevant effort if individual perceptions ought to distort these norms in many different ways. Under this premise, one might argue that it is more likely that individual
identities are the ones altered when organizational members interact with each other. This, then, would also mean that alignment is, if at all, only taking place on an individual level. In this sense, it might be more valuable to study in what ways the environment affects the individual instead of looking at how individuals affect their environment.

In more general terms, our conceptualization might include unnecessary details. On one level, we need to be aware that, of course, the Flux Model is only based on the data we collected at our case companies and similar efforts would need to be made at other companies to see in how far our conceptualization is useful as generalization. Communities at other companies might value very different elements than described by us. Taking a more critical look at the Factors we identified, it seems reasonable to question if Antecedent Factors, such as Honesty, contribute to the overall conceptualization as these could possibly be assumed to exist (based on their very character, i.e., being functioning as antecedents).

The aforementioned alternative interpretations and potential shortcomings of our Flux Model let us look forward to other scholars scrutinizing our suggestions, so that, together, we can take yet another step toward understanding the properties of OI, particularly as a process.

10. Theoretical Discussion

This section of our thesis we see as opportunity to mingle with our fellow researchers in the field of OI, much similar to attending an academic cocktail party. Here we take our work and discuss it in relation to the work of others. We have structured the discussion in coherence with the different parts of OI as a field. In an attempt to create a good reading flow, we have stayed away from sub-headings in a belief that they would interrupted the intended flow. Within this structure, we highlight the conclusions, contributions and limitations in relation to our study, and suggestions for future research in the given field of OI.

Gioia et al. (2013) believe viewing OI as ongoing construction to be an important element that serves as bridge between research on OI formation and OI change “because it sheds light on the ways in which organizational identity can be developed, maintained, or altered over time” (p. 166). This reasoning gives justification to our research in general terms, but also reminds us that the lime light is directed toward development, alteration, and maintenance of OI.

Exploring OI as a potential process lead us down the road of thinking about these elements. And with little work having been done on “Identity-as-Process” (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 154), we make a contribution to the growth of this body of literature with our proposal for how OI can potentially be described as process (i.e., the processes within the blue and the green circle and the interplay between the two, as well as the interplay between all three circles (blue, green, grey) in the Flux Model), countering the predominant view of studying OI as a “thing” (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 180). Being open to understanding OI as a process allowed us to gain deeper understanding in how OI might work instead of getting hung up on trying to define it in one way or the other. Ironically, having abstained from getting distracted by potential
properties of OI (such as the concepts of centrality, endurability, distinctiveness), we believe to have learned more about these than we might have otherwise. Gioia et al. (2013) suggest that many studies (concerned with change processes) are separating OI into structural components. To us, this implies having knowledge of what these components might be. In our explorative effort, we avoided any inferences about what OI might structurally consist of (i.e., avoiding getting biased by others, much in line with an inductive research approach) and only focused on what we found (i.e., our Issues and Factors). We then examined these and tried to make sense of them and their relationships as represented by our conceptualization (cf. the visual representation of it).

Gioia and Patvardhan (2012) ask their readers “to consider the possibility that [organizational] identity might be usefully construed not as something that exists as a possession, but rather an ongoing state of flux that we enact on an ongoing basis via our constructions and actions” (p. 4). Similar thinking has been expressed by Hatch and Schultz (2002). By assessing OI from the process perspective, we contribute to the literature by proposing a conceptual model that visualizes the dynamics of how individuals socially construct an OI on the premise of their own self-perceptions. These perceptions are granted to deviate from the norm to a certain degree. Given that the perceptions individual members have are always based on their own interpretations, because of this, a conclusion is to assume that OI is actually always in the state of flux, as individuals continuously reinterpret their surroundings. This is directly in line with Gioia and Patvardhan’s (2012) view that “identity is always in process, always in a state of ‘becoming’” (p. 5).

With our focus on insiders of organizations, we can contribute with support to Gioia et al. (2002) to the extent that we see interaction between individuals to be a necessity for OI alignment, and thereby for the OI creation process. This finding is, however, to be evaluated critically since our research has been conducted mainly from a Social Constructionist Perspective. In specific terms, this means that a limitation of our finding is that it is only valuable under the assumption that OI is actually created via a process of social construction by the organizational members, which allows the Social Constructionist View to take a predominant position. Under, for example, the Social Actor View as dominant perspective, interaction between employees would take a redundant role in terms of OI because the focus would be on top management telling their staff what the OI would be and they would be expected to take it as is. In the line of adhering to the Dual-Perspective on OI (seeing the Social Actor Perspective and the Social Constructionist Perspective as mutually constitutive) as suggested by Gioia et al. (2010), we contribute to literature with an empirical study that applies this temporal perspective on OI and suggest extending research in this direction based on the additional questions that our study introduces.

Whereas the relative stability of cultures might be up for debate (a debate outside the scope of our thesis), having conceptualized our work based on expectations and individual

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57 The Social Actor View does play a just as important role, as stated, but a Social Constructionist View played a more rudimentary role, as our research is built on the concept of social construction.
involvement, we cannot help but note the similarity to Fiol’s (1991) initial description of OI as an interface between an organization’s actions and values. Although we believe our findings to also highlight the linkages between beliefs and behaviors, we do not see the two to be connected by a “bridge” that represents OI (as suggested by Fiol, 1991), but rather as two pieces of a whole that, taken together, make up an individual’s understanding of an organization’s identity. In our understanding, an organization’s actual identity should then become visible by accumulating (aligning) all interpretations of individuals involved in an organization. Following this line of thought, our conceptualization aligns with the assertion of Nag and colleagues (2007) that a reaffirmation process of OI is taking place through everyday interaction and continuously adhering to favored practices.

In terms of linguistic choices, in Pratt’s (2012) theorizing about what words to use to best relate to OI as a process, co-creation of identity is suggested; such active engagement of “making/maintaining/changing identity” in collaboration (p. 11) aligns with our conceptualization of the notion to create alignment from Identity ambiguity. The alignment process we are describing to take place between organizational members can easily also be described as co-creation and we believe it to be a term rather fitting to describe this process because the collaborative effort it implies.

Borrowing the concept of identity gaps from Reger et al. (1994), we wonder if it could be used to describe the interplay between the interactions between the Social Actor and the Social Constructionist Views in the sense that “who we are” might answer the question of identity through consensus creation by the different actors (i.e., the green and the blue dashed circle in our conceptualization), and “who we want to be” (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 141) from employing a Social Actor Perspective on who the organization ought to be (i.e., the grey dashed circle in our model). We see this as an interesting opportunity for future research to see how far apart the circles could distance themselves from each other (i.e., reducing their intersecting areas) before a reaction from the organization would be caused (or if such would cause a reaction at all). The assumption here is that a certain degree of alignment between the members is necessary. We therefore suggest future research to consider this question.

According to Pratt and Foreman (2000), different understandings of which factors are viewed as central, enduring and distinctive might co-exist in one organization. Although we are not adhering to an a priori application of the CED perspective, comparing to our conceptualization, their assertion is in line with our understanding that different views can indeed co-exist (although our understanding would take it a step further and assume that different interpretations are a natural part of the collective sensemaking process). The main contribution of our study is here the point that 100% alignment between organizational members does not need to be a prerequisite for an OI to exist.

According to many, OI serves as a guide that influences organizational members’ action processes and how they interpret issues (Dutton et al., 1994; Gioia & Thomas 1996; Reger et al., 1994). Our study contributes by supporting this assertion, because our conceptual model suggests that the OI as perceived by the individual members might guide their interpretation
of issues and actions within the organization. An example is found in WONDROUS, when all members of the organization participate in additional learning activities, because learning is perceived as a fundamental part of OI at WONDROUS.

Whereas Margolis and Hansen (2002) understand OI as a foundation for action, we believe that this understanding does not go far enough. We have shown with our conceptualization that actions might very well be seen as part of OI also; particularly when applying a belief that favors the interplay of the Social Actor and Social Constructionist Perspectives (Gioia et al., 2010; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006), as ground for defining who we are (i.e., we are what we repeatedly do). We believe that Margolis and Hansen (2002) arrived at their understanding by applying the “scientist definition” of OI as proposed by Albert and Whetten (1985). To us, this is a clear confirmation that also considering Albert and Whetten’s (1985) “company definition” (a.k.a. self-reflection) (as done by us) can be fruitful for increasing our knowledge about OI. Based on Albert and Whetten’s (1985) interpretation of OI as guide for organizational members to know what to do, Gioia et al. (2013) state that, as one purpose, it serves internal coordination efforts. Taking it one step further, our findings suggest that, on an internal level, OI does not only inform what members of an organization should do, but also how they should do it, inferring interaction between members instead of mere coordination of them. It would be interesting to see if future research might uncover similar findings or if such are only true in the context of our case companies. In general terms, building on our study by focusing on other companies can already create valuable contributions. In our understanding, it is the manifoldness of in-depth case studies that might ultimately create a convincing argument when reaching a critical mass. We therefore welcome any further in-depth case studies within the field.

Pratt (2012) asks the question “can we meaningfully talk about identity while ignoring the self?” with it he argues that focusing on construction in and around organization without an inclusiveness to the individual self can be too limiting (Pratt, 2012 p. 24). An argument which we support, given our finding of self-awareness seemed to have an influence on all the 13 factors that made up the OI of our two case organizations. Therefore, we call for future research of the specific impact of self in the process of OI. At this point, we should also point out that, as described in the Frame of Reference, individual identities of course play a role in determining how individuals make sense of their environment (Gioia & Patvardhan, 2012). Not having focused on individual histories of employees can therefore be seen as limitation of our study, although we received information about interviewees’ pasts, we did, however, focus somewhat more on the histories of the founders, but did agreeably not focus extensively on it as a focal area in its own right.

Gioia et al. (2013) point towards the importance for research to be explicit in “declaring the criteria they employ to measure identity” (p. 177). This we have tried to adhere to by being explicit in our conceptualization of OI and how we derived the specific Factors that are part of this conceptualization. In relation to the field of identity formation, Gioia et al. (2013) call for additional research about what identity content forms. They suggest that research could contribute by providing a “thick description of identity content formation in organizations”
Although our research has not emphasized the description of identity content formation, we are contributing with the identity content (13 Factors) found in relation to our two case studies as depicted in the Combined Empirical Analysis (Conceptualization). Although we are not focusing on the reasons why a specific identity forms (our empirical data might very well be suited to answer parts of this question and should therefore be considered as basis for future research), our conceptualization connects what OI might consist of and how organizational members believe to be expected to behave. Our approach allows for a somewhat different perspective on OI formation because, under this light, formation becomes a constant part of OI and might serve as a link between OI formation literature (e.g., Kroezen & Heugens, 2012; Gioia et al., 2010) and what OI means in everyday organizational life (e.g., Fiol, 2001; Gioia & Patvardhan, 2012; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006).

Ashforth et al. (2011) argues that “the intrasubjective meanings of the founders come together at the intersubjective level to create a social reality about ‘who we are’ as an organization” (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 157). In both of our organizational cases, we saw traces of the same pattern occurring in the early phases of the organizations lifetime, supporting their argumentation. Many organizational members referred to the founders’ ideas and visions for the companies as reasoning for the current states the companies were in. The process of moving from the intrasubjective, to the intersubjective, to the generic level is also captured in our conceptualization, the Flux Model. It is, however, rather implicitly and it might be valuable for future research to make these relationships more explicit.

In line with Corley (2004), we found some signs indicating that upper management might have a stronger focus on strategy and the external environment and understand OI as more fluid than employees on lower echelons. An example from our findings is the focus of employees on the concern about how OI might change based on hiring additional employees, whereas the management team did not make the impression of thinking about organizational development in these terms. Similar to Biggart (1977), we also found that new people are easier to convince to adopt a new ideology, possibly because they have less commitment to the old ideology. In both cases, we saw instances where longer employed individuals raised concerns about the recent changes of practices, whereas the newer employees did not see these as an issue. The role of how long an individual had been employed at a company was, however, not an explicit focal point of our study after all, but rather part of the contextual understanding we created between ourselves in terms of each company. We therefore suggest that future research might compare the reactions of different individuals more systematically.

Relating to the works of other researchers,58 we also found that organizational members described who they are through via negativa (i.e., who we are not); during the interviews, organizational members would frequently describe REACH and WONDROUS in relation to their previous employers and how they were different from each other. On the same note,

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58 Including the research of Clegg et al. (2007), Corley and Gioia (2004), Elsbach and Battacharya (2001), Gioia et al. (2010)
making use of their prehistories in this way might serve as implication to not restricting oneself to the prehistory of the founder. Under this light, prehistory becomes an antecedent for via negativa and, because of that, might be understood as deep process of its own (which we see as interesting consideration for future research). That we found the application of via negativa in our study suggests that the approach might extend beyond the identity formation phase (in relation to which the approach was initially termed), or supports the notion of treating OI as being always in the state of becoming. Which one is the case, or if possibly both is true, we leave to future research.

Fiol (1991; 2001) propose that strong identification, “a person’s sense of oneness or belongingness with an organization” (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 134) leads to more collective efforts. Connecting this to our conceptual model, we see potential for a connection between an individual’s degree of perceived Personal Investment and the perceived identification with the company. One might hypothesize that a stronger individual identification with one’s company might lead to more collective efforts. We therefore propose to further research our proposed connection between Personal Investment and the concept of Indebtedness to develop a basis on which such hypothesis could actually be tested.

Gioia et al. (2013) argue that the OI research field is at a transition point, where the study of identity can transition into using OI as a lens for understanding other phenomena, such as strategy, learning and knowledge. Already with our conceptualizations, we saw some insights regarding learning approaches applied in our two case organizations in terms of a connection between the perceived OI of the organizations, and the practicality for how the organizations approached learning. Therefore, future research on this connection could be insightful to gain a deeper understanding about the phenomenon of Learning and potentially also other phenomena. Further, our conceptualization questions the boundary between the phenomenon of Learning and OI in the cases of our two organizations because Learning is conceptualized as fundamental part of an organization’s identity.

Gioia et al. (2000) suggest the term continuity to describe the changing property of OI. They argue that OI can change over time in a manner that makes the change subtle, because only the meanings to the labels change and not the labels themselves; this creates an illusion of sameness. They further recognize that the meanings can change to a degree where it becomes necessary to change the labels also. We wonder how big the difference between meanings and labels has to be to create urgency to reconsider the prevailing misalignment between the two because it could give insight into the degree of misalignment.

If the scope of a master thesis had not restricted us, we would have found it valuable to structure our research as more in-depth case studies that would have allowed for also adopting elements of a Participant-as-observer (Easterby-Smith et al., p. 162) approach. Such approach would have enabled us to create deeper alignment between our interpretations and the positions of the organizations. We therefore suggest such approach for future case studies that approach the subject in ways similar to ours.
Our study is exclusively focusing on internal factors. Therefore, a limitation of our study is that external stakeholders and the influence of image lie beyond the scope of this thesis. We recognize that such narrow focus does not resemble reality and we suggest expanding the focus to the impact of the external environment on organizational members’ perceptions of OI. There are studies available that link internal and external environments (e.g., Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Gioia et al., 2000; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006) but our suggestion would be to carefully extend our conceptualization to, with time, incorporate more and more layers of the prevailing environments and portray these from different perspectives. We made an effort to link the individual member perspective with the collective perspective, but we are not elaborating very much on the influence of a newly aligned OI on the individual members. We believe this part of the process therefore does deserve more attention in future studies.

As pointed out by Pratt (2012), “almost anything can be depicted in [...] process terms” (p. 4). Our study is not to be excluded from this statement. We have tried to accommodate this assumption by relativizing our explorative effort to be aimed toward OI as potential process instead of assuming OI to be a process per se and treating it as such. In a concluding manner we therefore believe to have kept our promise to explore OI as a potential process. In how far we managed to adhere to this claim, we leave to the readers to scrutinize and are looking forward to a constructive dialogue.

11. Managerial Implications

The Flux Model gives insights into the dynamics of OI creation and alignment. Understanding the Flux Model can help practitioners to improve their processes of onboarding new organizational members in terms of introducing them to the organization’s identity. Being aware of the degree of scope organizational members are granted to make sense of the OI in their own way, and that it is okay for individual perceptions to subtly divert from the organizational norm (as supported by our conceptualization and Pratt and Foreman (2000)), introduces managers to sensitize to become aware of what diversions from the norm can be accepted and which might pose existential threads to the organization (not necessarily to the prevailing OI). In how far potential hires feel affiliated to the identified factors might serve as indication for recruiters for the potential fit of job candidates to the organization and might be able to avoid hiring people who do not fit the OI.

Further, we see a value in the realization that organizations essentially do not “own” identity. As proclaimed by Gioia and Patvardhan (2012) and supported by our conceptualization, each individual interprets the prescribed OI norm accordingly to their own self-awareness. This means that organizations can do nothing but attempt to guide the interpretation. This realization we believe can facilitate practitioners better when they strategize OI efforts.

Additionally, our conceptualization can also help organizations to prepare for a deliberate change of their OI. Knowing the factors involved in OI creation means that one should be able to take more deliberate action toward changing these. Also, being aware that some
individuals might have more influence in the OI alignment process can enable organizations to utilize these individuals in their change efforts. Besides this, the finding of Biggart (1977) that newer people in an organization are easier adapting to a new ideology, can be an enabling factor for change initiatives.

Finally, like Hatch and Schultz (2002), we believe that through the knowledge of how OI dynamics function, organizations are better equipped to work more effectively and avoid potential harmful OI misalignments.
IV. References


V. Appendix

V.I. Informed Consent
Research for Master’s thesis by Søren Abildgaard and Florian Köhler

Thank you for taking time to engage in a discussion with us for the purpose of generating data for our master’s thesis. The expected outcome of this conversation is to help illuminate how organizational identity changes over time and to explore its individual interpretation by employees. Please read through the following information carefully. By providing your signature you state that you have read through and understood the following:

1) Your participation in our study is voluntary and you are entitled to stop this collaboration at any time.
2) Your participation is not linked to any kind of compensation in exchange for your involvement.
3) You agree to be interviewed for the purpose of the above-mentioned study.
4) You are entitled to request a copy of the text summary we will create based on the audio recording produced during our conversation. This copy you can use to submit comments to clarify your statements and/or reassure confidential treatment of your identity. If you do not wish for your interview to be recorded, such a request will be honored.
5) Access to the audio recording produced during the meeting will be restricted to the above-mentioned researchers.
6) Any content from the interview (e.g., summaries, direct quotes) will only be publicized in ways that protect your anonymity.
7) The use of the content derived from this discussion will be restricted to the above-mentioned master’s thesis.
8) You are free to ask questions at any time and are more than welcome to contact the thesis authors at any point for further clarifications.

____________________  __________________
Place, Date  Søren Abildgaard

____________________  __________________
Signature Interviewee  Printed Name Interviewee

Søren Abildgaard  Florian Köhler
V.II. Informed Consent Founders

Research for Master’s thesis by Søren Abildgaard and Florian Köhler

Thank you for taking time to engage in a discussion with us for the purpose of generating data for our master’s thesis. The expected outcome of this conversation is to help illuminate how organizational identity changes over time and to explore its individual interpretation by employees. Please read through the following information carefully. By providing your signature you state that you have read through and understood the following:

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7) You are free to ask questions at any time and are more than welcome to contact the thesis authors at any point for further clarifications.

_______________________
Place, Date

_______________________   _________________________
Signature Interviewee        Søren Abildgaard

_______________________   _________________________
Printed Name Interviewee    Florian Köhler
V.III. Script for Video Presentation

Link to the video: https://vimeo.com/260031511

FLORIAN
Hi, my name is Florian

SØREN
And I am Søren.

FLORIAN
Together we are researching organizational Identity and how identity evolves in companies.

SØREN
Exactly! In human words, organizational identity is to agree on whether or not we should buy organic apples for company breakfasts. This decision might change over time and we are interested in the factors that make a company move from buying one kind of apples to the other.

FLORIAN
So, the way we can understand this kind of decision-making is by collecting stories and your feelings about them. What we would like to do is to listen to anecdotes and little stories you tell about the company and how you relate to them. There's no 'right' or 'wrong' at all, because your personal interpretations are what we are really interested in.

SØREN
By listening to the stories of different employees, we will construct a bigger picture of the situation, where all the individual interpretations create the organizational identity as a whole.

FLORIAN
So, what we are focusing on in the stories you tell is how you feel about them, what you think about them and what they mean to you. But also the context in which they have been created and when that was.

SØREN
Okay, we're really looking forward to meeting all of you and if you have any questions or doubts, please feel free to get in touch at any time!
V.IV. REACH – Issues

Issue - The urgency creator

Rationalizations

• “box things in where you couldn’t be who you are anymore.”
• “They just silent the guys who don’t agree”

Assumption

• This made her standing in the company unstable
• I’m not likely to follow rules”
• I’m extremely frank in the way I communicate

Bias

• “was quite tired of being employed.”

Issue - The Misfits

Rationalizations

• “I’m not really good at following other people’s ideas, I have a lot of ideas and sort of a visionary mindset”
• “Follow my intuition [...] because that’s the way I work as a person”
• you owe me
• “I have a problem with authority of all kinds [...] I’m a terrible employee [...] because I question everything”
• This is a problem in Sweden because the culture is all about fitting in

Assumptions

• “I’m not really good having someone else tell me what to do”
• “I’m quite stubborn”
• I need to get out
• not the kind of people who tend to fit in

Bias

• desires to live in Stockholm again was however nonexistent
• it would be interesting for her if she could found it in Jönköping.
• give me a new job
• “You need to give me a new job”
• “I hate doing boring things”
Issue - Fun

Rationalization

- the essence was ‘have fun at work’ ‘cause if you have fun at work, you excel at what you do
- should be able to work with what you think is most fun, what you enjoy most, ‘cause that’s the only way you can be extremely good at something, the only way you can excel

Assumption

- “If you have fun at work, you excel at what you do”
- “They see it as a very important thing that the consultants they’re hiring enjoy the work they are hired out to”
- because then they will excel, they will have more fun, everyone will have more fun, we will make more money
- If you get really boring assignments then I think you won’t stay for long”

Bias

- “For me it’s really simple, have fun at work!”
- The people that didn’t like it [...] they were dead weight”
- work with something that you would like to do and that you should be happy at your workplace”
- .it’s not rocket science

Issue - Room for All

Rationalization

- This factor fostered a desire to create a company where everyone can be themselves.
- “We want to be part of the group and we want to have sort of a context where [...] you feel that you belong and you can be yourself”
- Everyone is welcome, so I think that we’re extremely tolerant

Assumption

- “A lot of things we do is based around fika and food and drinks and social things [...] and that makes us a bit different I think”
- it’s hard for us to keep them close;
- We are working quite hard to keep it that way
- The consultants at REACH “have an extremely high IQ but they’re also really nerdy
- the overhead team generally operates from a completely different mindset
- that’s the gap that’s being most difficult
- “They try to get them [the staff] to feel really like familiar”
- the challenge for us now is to grow and...and keep that [family feeling] and develop that”
• everyone is “all-in” at these conferences
• “We have a familiar feeling”
• “We help each other”

Bias
• “We wanna be a company that provides a good atmosphere where people can excel at
• big gap between ‘them and us’ […] which we don’t want it to be”
• One big happy family
• “We want everybody to really be a part
• “Eat with consultants”
• “Meet consultants and clients and bring them stuff”
• “We want that feeling, we want that sort of safety for these guys

Issue - The Drive
Rationalizations
• “Someone told me that somewhere…some part in my life ‘find your passion and then
find someone to pay you to do that’ and that’s something that stuck in my head”

Assumptions
• “You can tell, the people who have passion for something, they excel in it
• if you work at something that you’re really passionate about and to be able to do that
to the full extent, you also need to be able to be yourself.

Bias
• what they do, where they can work with what they love, because every company
should be like that”
• “Do what you love doing, nothing else”
• it’s fun to be a part of that every day and to work with people who have a passion for
things”
• “The importance on like ‘why are we doing this? Why is this important’ […] and
feeling more than just making money”

Issue - Work Differently
Rationalizations
• “We had great ideas but no money”
• Their background experience from the industry they were now re-entering gave them a
clear picture of what they did not want for REACH.
• “I guess it was a mixture of wanting to work more with people like that and also sort
of the natural way of doing it because that was the business that we knew, we both
worked in the consultancy business”
“We’ve had some seriously bad experiences and that’s why we started REACH”

Assumptions
- We work differently
- Charlie has a very clear idea […] of how she wants this company to be and it’s again about openness,
- “is…has always been […] where we say ‘how hard can it be to be different?’ and sort of just take all the good things from the other companies and make it better ourselves
- I don’t think they bother much about the details
- “I think we could have possibly done anything”

Bias
- “Don’t make things too difficult”
- “We don’t think about stuff too long, we just make decisions”
- “How hard can it be?”
- “We do things differently”

Issue - Focus

Rationalizations
- “We don’t sell CVs, we sell a person with actual feelings and thoughts”
- “We don’t sell on skill set mainly we sell on people”
- “The way we run our business […] to an extreme, is to know people well. And also to know our clients well because we have to be able to make the match”
- “What me and Charlie are good at, we find the diamonds in the rough […] A lot of people, they don’t know how to sell themselves, they don’t know how to present themselves […] That's why we do it”
- “It’s not quite as easy to sell you doing something where you also grow and get to build your experience because that takes something from the client as well

Assumptions
- there was a good sense of belonging and pride connected to what they were doing
- “Why do we work with people, can’t we just sell bolts and screws? That would be much easier!”
- we care extremely much about people”
- they’re more interested in the person than in the actual skills you have”
- “People struck me as genuinely interested in me.”
- I care the most
- “they try to find assignments that you really are interested in”
- they tried to sell their company on me
- “Here [at REACH], what I am is a strength for me and it’s a strength for REACH and that […] is the difference between REACH and other consulting companies”
- “I can do changes as I please.”
Bias

- “Even if you give me like 4000 [kr] an hour...selling someone who doesn’t wanna be there just because of the money...I know companies that would...but they would quit, the consultant would quit. They would be there for like 2-3 months until they find something else and they would quit. And what’s the point of that? [...] That goes against everything that we are”
- “We do things caringly
- “We are nerds, we are very proud of this and if the customer thinks of nerds as something geeky and maybe a bit awkward, they do not see the value in the nerd and then maybe they shouldn’t work with us?”
- “focused on human beings.”
- “fake it till you make it”
- “That’s basically selling a CV and we don’t want to work like that”

**Issue - Union**

Rationalizations

- “We don’t have any groups basically...we don’t, it’s like anyone can sit next to anyone and it sort of just works. It doesn’t matter that they are completely different as people, there is something with everyone that just makes it work

Assumptions

- We’ve done a lot of work with that
- “We talk to our consultants a lot”
- we are nerds and we are proud of it.
- “I’m not the only weird person in the world”

Bias

- “We give each other space”
- “I felt at home and I felt like this is important stuff that we are discussing”
- “Here I was like, okay, we can work together because we understand each other, and we can sit together, have a really nice time as well”

**Issue - Facilitating The Moments**

Rationalizations

- it was my fault because I had spoiled them

Assumption

- “It’s up to them [the consultants] to drive
- “We have a really straight and open dialogue
Bias
- if they want to do something then they also have to contribute [...] it’s a two-way street
- [...] we give them a lot of responsibility”

Issue - Development

Rationalizations
- “The point is that you should always think about where you’re going and what you want to do [...] ‘What am I doing today to move towards the goal in five years?’”
- “You have to show that you can deliver of course, but if you do, there are a lot of chances to develop.
- Four times a year is a lot, but it also allows me to get better a lot faster

Assumptions
- “If you are satisfied with your work and what you are doing you will also create a good result and that will give money to the company as well”
- “Curiosity is a big thing with most who work here”
- “It’s a big thing when we recruit people [...] to look at personality and what they want” –
  - it’s hard to teach someone to be driven, it’s more something that you have from the beginning
  - most companies do once a year

Bias
- “We let each other grow”
- At least we tried.
- “HOW TO BE IN REACH”
  - that’s the way we want to work because that makes us able to deliver better

Issue – Talk, or Walk the Talk

Rationalizations
- “Sounds good but you never know if it will be reality or not”
- “It was confirmed by the monthly meetings they held [...] I mean the full transparency to us [...] we know the monthly budget. That has never happened to me!”
- “We need 10 more people, and then we can do really crazy stuff.”

Assumptions
- they’re not hiding anything”
- “I figure they are honest”
- “I think they are being honest in what they are saying and what their goals are”
• “If I feel like if I would like to move to another company [assignment], I think I would have that opportunity
• “You have to be careful with honesty, too much honesty is no good”
• “You have to be able to receive honesty as a critique”
• “We have to begin somewhere”
• “Whenever we meet them, they are really happy.”
• “They are trying to do their best for all their employees

Bias
• “Honesty is one of the most important aspects of a human”
• mostly partnership almost rather than eh… pyramid structure [...] and this is...this is really nice”
• “I got a very good feeling of the people”
• “okay, feeling is good, let’s go”
V.V. WONDROUS - Issues

Issue – Mitch the Entrepreneur

Rationalizations
- with a strong entrepreneurial mindset
- helps the employee to stay motivated
- “I think people should be challenged in here.”
- “I think because I wanted, I had no plan, I was pretty naive, I was 28, I had no responsibilities but myself.”
- it was the right time, he did not have any responsibilities
- The digital agency industry was on its rise
- many companies in Basel would go to London or Zurich for their digital work

Assumptions
- even too much forward thinking for this employee’s taste,
- “He [Mitch] is always thinking big, bigger than we are”
- “I had two choices”
- “I always felt uncomfortable when everyone was running into one direction [...] like I was forced to do it exactly the other way around”
- “I always believed that I can design my own life”

Biases
- An employee described Mitch as great motivator who is always positive and forward thinking.
- rebranding became a necessary effort to re-position the company in the light he wanted to create it.
- “I chose the second one, pretty simple”
- what is going wrong in the industry
- Mitch felt the necessity to make a change

Issue – The Valley

Rationalizations
- Although Mitch was born in Switzerland, he spent five years of his upbringing in California. Being in this environment, with a dad who is heavily influenced by the Californian spirit to try stuff, to do stuff, to do what you love, and not necessarily please society, made a big impact on him.
- Mitch himself spends 10 days of every year in San Francisco where he works remotely and meets with other CEOs to see how they do their work and how they treat cultural issues.
- stay close to The Valley’s culture and spirit
- where the new website for WONDROUS should be created
Assumptions
- He [Mitch] thinks that his cultural awareness is connected to “The Valley” and “Those Guys.”

Biases
- surf office in Gran Canaria
- Silicon Valley

Issue - Pragmatism
Rationalizations
- Mitch was the entrepreneurial conceptualist who could bring in knowledge about leadership, concept creation, and design. The German counterpart had the resources needed to realize the concepts, as well as technical and financial experience.
- the realization-part had its office there and an office in Basel was not needed
- He grew up in an academic family
- many Swiss companies had become clients
- the client base in Basel continued to grow
- to implement a silo structure, which turned out to be a bad idea, precisely because it contradicts their overall approach to management.
- our visit to study the organizational identity at WONDROUS was welcomed.
- we forgot the basics [...] We did not define the roles for the project”
- differences in personalities and an unclear division of roles lead to many arguments
- We just did not speak the same language
- when a person would come to me and say he wants to learn something completely different that we do not use here in the company, will never use, don’t intend to use, then he can take his personal education budget and do this but not the professional budget”

Assumptions
- if something fails we talk about and see how else we could do it
- Being a “hands-on” person
- ‘okay come on, you can forge yourself to do that’
- “When you talk about work, it’s on a work-level, so not personal and then when you change to free time it’s on a personal [...] these two levels are quite good in here.”
- the German-Swiss partnership no longer made sense
- “Four eyes are better than two.”
- The fit seemed perfect
- “We were small fishes in the lake”
- good energy, good vibes and being nice to each other is not enough for a company
- He also did not think that the profile he was looking for could be easily matched
- this meant he could focus only on work
- “I’m a guts guy”
- “I was always a kind of an emotional person and a passionate person”
Biases
- “in the end, we’re dealing just with websites [...] drink a beer in the end of the day and then everything is fine.”
- Depending on the workload, the hours worked vary; sometimes s/he works a lot of hours, and other times less
- “Mitch always says fail forward”
- he also wanted to have an influence on the realization process of the conceptual ideas
- “Cultural fit was more important back in the days than everything else”

Issue – Learning by Doing
Rationalizations
- he could not afford to hire a well experienced person
- “I taught myself everything I knew for the business”
- Esther tries to get things done; she does not ask what she should do, she just tries.
- she was so intelligent
- she got hired because of common grounds on a personal level and not because of her professional skills
- “skill is not everything”
- because of a restricted amount of experience
- that’s life

Assumptions
- “I knew that this is possible”
- “If you’re not a complete idiot you can learn everything because it’s just a computer and some internet stuff”
- not be possible for him/her to work with his/her amount of responsibility at other companies
- I don’t think it would be possible to find another company where at this point I could have done so many things and get support to do it in my own way
- “If you hire people like me who have no idea of what they are actually doing, it’s very hard to do the actual stakeholder management”
- “people are more important than skills”

Biases
- “I think this is invaluable
- you learn it the hard way and hands-on
- she is not able to do anything
Issue – Vision aka creating WONDROUS

Rationalizations
- The goal was to build a trustful company that developed good products that sell themselves
- And to bring a little bit of London, Palo Alto and Zurich to Basel.
- They wanted to be a reliable and trustworthy company that is always going the extra mile.
- "we wanted to build up a company in which you could trust, which develops really, really good stuff and to make this as our company identity to the outside"
- "I just want to work as the person who I am and I want to work on the work that I want to do and this is what I am trying to build up here for myself"
- he would like to see WONDROUS to be able to exist autonomous of his leadership.

Assumptions
- what they could do about it

Biases
- to be one of the best and to be known for being that good
- "If you like what you do it’s more like to connect what you like in your spare-time with your job, and then that’s the good thing”
- to have created a company that people are happy to go to work at every morning and to enable everyone to have a meaningful job
- Employees should be here “to do stuff that [they] love.”
- It’s cool that the company for which I work gives me that much of opportunities and freedom
- “It’s like they say hey, feel comfortable like at home, do it like you need to do it”

Issue – Misfits

Rationalizations
- “Together we can look at the problem from different perspectives and then can make the best decision for the company.”

Assumptions
- the initial interview was quite unusual

Biases
- “Everyone inside here is in some way a little bit crazy”
Issue – Socialization

Rationalizations
- experienced people joining the company are harder to mold than young people without experience

Assumptions
- “I started realizing that it’s very complex for the people that come new to the company, because for me the culture is something that was grown, and I have grown into it with the other guys, because I was always there [...] I realized that everybody is not feeling about WONDROUS as I do.”
- new people who come to the company take the company as it is and that they count on the people who have been there for longer to show them what WONDROUS is
- onboarding them to the WONDROUS groove has so far been very successful

Biases
- the WONDROUS spirit might get affected in the future when hiring more people
- the people who have worked there longer are the people who built the community, and thereby decide what WONDROUS is and what it should be.
- “It is tough to work with people from countries and regions of the world with complete different mindset, so it got harder.”

Issue – Initiative

Rationalizations
- “Hey, you also have to work.”
- That family feeling and so on, it does not come easy it does not just appear

Assumptions
- she thinks that she was raised that way and that she simply brings herself to the office.
- “The more I became involved in the company and the more roles I had and the more awareness I got, the more it became conscious”
- personal goals are said to have influenced getting closer to manifesting their vision
- “I could never find anyone in here who just wanted to do just the job and done. Everyone wants to do it very well.
- to have direct impact on the project one is working on and nobody should be in an assistant role (unless maybe to learn the ropes in the beginning). Everything is connected to self-responsibility.
- hire people who appreciate constant development with a “drive to innovate permanently.”
Biases
- “You always do what you feel comfortable with, and what needs to get done.”
- proactively looking for ways to help others

Issue – Passion
Rationalizations
- the group was so passionate about the project
- it is getting better and better because new team members are joining the team and they have new mindsets, or new ideas I think that's quite refreshing for the whole team”
- democratic name finding process and others to being deeply involved in the rebranding process in general.

Assumptions
- everyone at WONDROUS as being on fire for creating really nice web applications
- “We all were very enthusiastic about it,
- there was a lot of energy in the company

Biases
- s/he wants to contribute to the company because s/he didn’t become a part of WONDROUS just to make money
- all that we did was shouting at each other

Issue – Lateral Leadership / Stewardship
Rationalizations
- to ensure that new hires are aligned with his vision
- This is a level of trust that we give the people
- “We did the retreat to Gran Canaria where we wanted to create the branding and the website for the new company
- no one is really following, but everyone is going in the same direction.

Assumptions
- “we get a lot more back than we give”
- he is also always open to suggestions
- everyone is on the same level
- The team moves as one entity
- “nobody is mean if you say sorry, I have no time”

Biases
- “I have never thought about reporting.,”
- This s/he believes makes the team strong.
Issue – Community

Rationalizations
- The employee appreciates to know personal things about co-workers because it helps to understand their behaviors better in professional settings.
- “I think these events are very community building, because you have a night, a day, an event, a moment, where you can share a memory together, and you can always connect with the other people about these moments”
- There were around 20 people in the other company and they had overlapping assignments with them
- everybody stays for some time just to hang out

Assumptions
- Differences between employees can be mitigated by the joint activities WONDROUS organizes.
- WONDROUS puts a lot of effort into such kinds of traditions
- “the groove”
- “I think it’s the company which I go for and not the work at the moment”
- a good cultural fit in Esther,
- by meeting each potential employee at least once
- everybody at the company fits “the groove” very well

Biases
- “I wanted to be in a young environment - Young people thinking forward, playing table tennis, hanging around after work or do something together as a side-project”
- WONDROUS also organizes activities
- nobody had asked for it
- multiple interviewees mentioned that they joined because of the people
- Creating a feeling of familiarness is a key concept at WONDROUS
- “we are from WONDROUS”
- we really need and want that people fit into the company culture and don’t stand aside.”
- if a person is found to be not “WONDROUS enough,” the person will not be hired
- “but it can be also not that nice because you spend a lot of time, especially after work, if you play ping pong 'til 9pm or 10pm.”
- she felt responsible

Issue – Reasons why (aka Excuses)

Rationalizations
- they have too many clients and too many employees
- because WONDROUS is small enough to handle each person individually, it is not important that everybody is proactive to the same degree.
- professional expertise has gained importance in the hiring process to be able to match client demands
- “because of clients you change.”
- there was so much client work that onboarding became a secondary task.
- hired their first non-German-speaking employee
- The frequent discussions about strategy and other problems that arise in daily business lead to changing the vision every half a year.
- the firm is seen as entrepreneurial because of existing inefficiencies

Assumptions
- “we have not the time anymore to build up the skills”

Biases
- “we already lose money when we do not grow.”
- “They also apologized that they didn’t onboard me that right.”
- “2018 is transformation”

Issue – Innovation

Rationalizations
- work for clients that can pay for the projects that they want to do
- “Because we really try to build the best possible product at the end for the customer”
- “we really make this a part of the company, learning culture is here”

Assumptions
- complex projects are forcing WONDROUS to innovate
- we always need to be on the edge of what is possible technically and also from a consulting perspective, so that we know what’s going on in the industry
- “we always try to improve ourselves, we are never settled with what we have, we always try to improve.”

Biases
- “One vision is to work for big clients that have so much money that we can create really, really great products”
- always innovate
- “They [clients] don’t hire us for having a solution already, they hire us because they have a complex problem they didn’t solve so far”
- employee is expected to spend at least 2000 CHF for development each year
- “in here you should learn something every day”
V.VI. Compiled List of Preliminary Factors

- Taking Initiative and ownership
- Freedom to take initiative and ownership
- Drive peoples development
- hunger for development
- Self-aware
- Tolerance
- Empathy
- Have fun at work
- Failure is accounted for, instead of sought to be avoided
- Equality
- Constructive honesty
- Individual before unit
- People works for the company, and the company work for its people
- Self-efficacy
- Downward Trust
- Unit before individual (because individual is not celebrated)
- Being personally invested in the company
- People work for the company, and get opportunities in return
About the Value of a Strong Company Culture

They say: «Culture eats strategy for breakfast». I don't think that's true; at least not entirely.

Culture vs. strategy

«Culture guides discretionary behavior and it picks up where the employee handbook leaves off. (...) Employees make hundreds of decisions on their own every day, and culture is our guide. Culture tells us what to do when the CEO isn’t in the room, which is of course most of the time.»

This quote gives us quite a good idea of the function of company culture and makes it obvious why we should give company culture so much attention to. What this quote doesn't tell us is how this culture arises and who defines it. At WONDROUS, our company culture is part of our strategy.

How so?

Corporate strategy is commonly understood as a long-term plan designed to achieve certain business goals. Digging a little deeper, we will get a more holistic view on the term. The word «strategy» has its origin in ancient Greek, derived from the two words «stratos» (= army) and «ago» (= leading). Knowing this, we could say that strategy is more of a leadership plan and less of a business plan. And looking at it from that perspective, strategy and culture coexist; one can't survive without the other.

The key factors

Now, aiming to finally get to the centre of the meaning of this blog post's title, to value a strong company culture we first have to raise the question of what a strong company culture is. While company strategy is commonly measured by KPIs that define the success of the business, the quality of a company culture shows itself in factors like:

Low labor turnover rates  Happiness of employers  Proactivity of employees  Affiliation with the company and it's brand  Accountability

While some of these factors are better to measure than others, all of them are hard to interpret. They are all multilayered and consist of intangible qualities. But only the motives behind the metrics tell us something about the quality of a company culture.

Let me explain with an example: Company A, a startup in Switzerland, has a high labor turnover rate. The majority of that company's employees are around 20. Company B, an old-fashioned insurance company also based in Switzerland, has a low labor turnover rate. From only the labor turnover rate it cannot be said whether the company culture is strong or weak.
because naturally, young people in Switzerland are more likely to leave the job for traveling, collecting experiences while employees with families tend to value financial security.

**The thing with evaluations**

When it comes to evaluating company culture, one has to be very careful. Regular and qualified assessments with every single employee of the company are necessary. Also, these interviews – or as we like to call them conversations – should alternate when it comes to the participants. Room must be given for the exchange of thoughts and ideas, personally and professionally. And finally, there's nothing that beats real interest and a profound sympathy towards another person.

**Adding value**

**Strategic approach for culture**

Put in a nutshell, I believe, a strong company culture can be achieved only with a strategic approach. Any culture can only live through actions – often called rituals. And it's the leadership plan, that defines the importance of these rituals and gives the necessary room for the (wait for it:) cultivation of them. So, when it comes to company culture, and the rituals of that culture, you must «walk the talk». No excuses here.

**Time to harvest**

There are many studies that prove the value of a strong company culture related to productivity. At WONDROUS, we challenge our company culture with regular initiatives. An initiative is launched whenever a (systemic) tension arises. Anyone can come up with an initiative at any time. But HR leaders are required to do so, because they supposed to see, feel and know the tensions first as they are part of every single structured conversation in the company.

#failforward

We recently launched the initiative #failforward, because we felt that our young and dedicated team members allow no room for error to themselves because they seem to believe that they have to be perfect. That is, in my opinion, completely wrong as we never learn as much as we do after we made a mistake.

**The WONDROUS way**

If it is the culture that tells us what to do after the CEO left the room, the culture can be observed best, when the CEO is in the room. I am convinced that we have a strong and good company culture, because I experience it every day, when...
people share their personal experiences, for example after a vacation or weekends, people trust me with private information and ask for my advice, our managing director goes the extra mile to organise a wedding gift for an employee personally, people don't talk about work-life-balance but are very balanced at work.

And finally, I think the greatest asset of a strong company culture is that fundamental feeling of trust towards each other. This is how and why you sleep well – even in stressful times.

1Article (https://hbr.org/2012/05/culture-takes-over-when-the-ce) in HBR by Francis Frei and Anne Morriss
V.VIII Topic Guide

Ice Breakers
- We’re currently working on our thesis as you know…
- What are you working on right now?
  o In this work, are you benefitting from some of your personal interests or hobbies?
- What do you do in your spare time?

Story starters
- What is the first story about the company that pops into your mind?
  o Fail-safe: if the company was an animal, what animal would it be?
  o Or: if the company was [something related to their hobbies], what would it be?
- Who/what do you think the company is?
- Who/what do you think the company tries to be?
- Why does this company exist?
- Why did you end up working for REACH?
- HISTORY
  o How would you have reacted if it was in your previous company

Round-up
- Do you have anything to add?
- Thank you very much for your time and for sharing your stories with us!

Founder question
- Ask founders why they founded the company!

Check list
- Informed consent
- Create a safe environment
- Meaningful conversations
V.VIV Interview Log Overview

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