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Action Repertoires in the Face of Downsizing

Master's Thesis in Managing People, Knowledge and Change

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Abstract

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KEYWORDS Coping strategies, downsizing, EVLN, uncertainty

PURPOSE The purpose of this research is to gain an increased understanding of employees' experienced uncertainty and their coping strategies in the face of downsizing.

METHODOLOGY This qualitative research has been conducted with an interpretive standpoint using an abductive approach. Twelve semi-structured and two exploratory interviews with employees from different levels within the studied organization provided the source of data.

FINDINGS We discovered that employees in an uncertain situation develop and pursue varying coping strategies. This is caused by different perceptions of uncertainty, depending on the individual sense-making and multiple factors of influence.

CONTRIBUTIONS This thesis contributes to an in-depth understanding of people's coping strategies during uncertain periods. Furthermore, it adds to the existing literature on the effects of downsizing. This study provides empirical evidence to support and challenge the EVLN model.

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1 Introduction

In today's fast moving and competitive business environment organizations need to constantly change and adapt to the environment to be successful and remain competitive in the long run (Paton & McCalman, 2008). This continuous change process is driven by a pattern of endless modification and characterized by organizational instability. However, change can also occur as an occasional interruption triggered by external factors (Weick & Quinn, 1999). Downsizing can be seen as such a disruptive change since it takes place irregularly and causes an interruption of business operations (Van Dierendonck & Jacobs, 2012). Nowadays, downsizing is a widespread topic in the business environment and a highly noticeable trend in the media. It is frequently associated with employees' layoffs leading to experienced uncertainty among the employees.

Downsizing can be considered as a strategic business decision that organizations have to take in order to remain their long-term competitiveness (Jalajas & Bommer, 1999). The studied organization within our thesis project is currently facing this period of transition. In the end of 2014 it has been announced that there would be layoffs by the end of the fiscal year. In the first quarter of 2015 the CFO concretized this general information. The number of employees will be reduced by 30%, i.e. 2,100 individuals in total. Not knowing how this change will affect the individual and the organization we assume it to cause uncertainty among the employees (Bordia et al., 2004b). This period of uncertainty is considered to influence employees' thinking and behavior. Therefore it is interesting to investigate how individuals experience and cope with this uncertain situation. It is significant to acknowledge that people make sense in different ways and that their interpretations vary, leading to multiple possible coping strategies, which need to be investigated further (Lockett et al., 2014). Our focus in this paper will be to answer the following research questions:

- How do employees cope with uncertainty as an outcome of downsizing in an environment of continuous change?
- How can this be explained?

In answering these two questions we aim to understand employees' experiences of an uncertain situation on an individual level. Thereby we are not only interested in uncovering different coping strategies but also in explaining their emergence. By adding the second research question we expand our primarily descriptive approach to an explanatory approach. The major benefits of this study are to gain insights into employees' understanding of uncertainty in the face of downsizing and related coping strategies. Furthermore, we cannot

exclude the possibility that those insights can be used to improve the effective management of employees' interactions during downsizing. Simultaneously, our research project can be justified by adding to the contemporary literature on effects of downsizing the perspective of employees currently experiencing a redundancy phase. Previous literature has mainly focused on the perspective of remaining employees after the downsizing process (Armstrong-Stassen, 1994; Brockner et al., 1993; Cascio, 1993; Thornhill & Saunders, 1998).

In the following we would like to prepare the reader for what is to be expected when reading this thesis. In chapter two we will give an outline of the existing literature forming the basis for our research. In chapter three, we will present our methodological standpoint including our philosophical grounding and the design of our study. Thereafter we will display our results combined with a data discussion in chapter four. The focus of chapter five lies in the theoretical discussion, in which we relate our results to our theoretical framework. Finally the conclusion in chapter six will summarize and complete our thesis.

2 Literature review

In this chapter we are going to give an overview of the literature that informed our research and laid the foundation of our thesis. First we are going to introduce the topic of downsizing as our studied organization was currently facing this economic event. Second we are going to develop on the concept of uncertainty since we suppose it to be a possible effect of downsizing. Thereafter we will shortly refer to the concept of sense-making as we assume it to be significant in understanding individuals' coping strategies. Finally we are going to present our analytical framework, the EVLN model, including four types of coping strategies.

2.1 Downsizing

In today's business environment organizations are challenged by dynamic market developments including hyper competition, technological progress and the transformation of consumer needs. In order to keep pace with these developments organizations need to stay flexible and adaptive. Consequently, organizational change is an essential component for actors within the economic setting (Fay & Lührmann, 2004). Popular change researchers distinguish between continuous and episodic changes. 'Continuous' refers to those changes which are permanent and evolving, including small and ongoing modifications as well as recurrent improvisations in work processes. The beginning and the end of a continuous change cannot be clearly defined since it is perceived as a fluent process. On the contrary,

episodic or disruptive change is described as occasional and premeditated. It is considered to take place during times of deviation from the organizational state of equilibrium.

We assess downsizing to be a disruptive change since the beginning and end state can be recognized. However, an absolute allocation cannot be achieved as it depends on the scholar's perspective (Weick & Quinn, 1999). In the business environment the term downsizing is commonly applied as a synonym for personal layoffs and dismissals (Thornhill & Saunders, 1998). Organizations facing financial difficulties are frequently forced to lay off staff in order to reduce personnel costs (Gandolfi, 2008). Thereby the organization can return to effectiveness, productivity and competitiveness (Thornhill & Saunders, 1998). Redundancies always lead to various effects on the individual. Employees might experience mixed emotions including uncertainty, distrust, low morale and increased anger (Cascio, 1993). These effects are apparent both during the process of downsizing and after, and they activate different thoughts and behaviors. So far research has been focusing on the people having survived the redundancy phase (Armstrong-Stassen, 1994; Brockner et al., 1993; Cascio, 1993; Thornhill & Saunders, 1998). In our research we concentrate on uncertainty as an effect during the phase of downsizing and how employees perceive these impacts and cope with them.

2.2 Uncertainty

Uncertainty is one of the most commonly described phenomena in the context of organizational change (Bordia et al., 2004a). From our point of view this seems to be rather obvious as we also consider organizational change to be closely related to the feeling of uncertainty. However, we are aware of the possibility that other emotions towards downsizing do exist. Bordia et al. (2004a: 509) argue that "in times of organizational restructuring, employees feel uncertain about the changing priorities of the organization and the likelihood of lay-offs". The experienced uncertainty is attributable to the anticipated change outcome, process and goal. Uncertainty is generated by the perceived inability to predict future developments and to explain their occurrence (Bordia et al., 2004b). Bordia et al. (2004b) argue that there is a shortage of empirical research focusing on the correlation between uncertainty and the negative effects for the employee. Overall people experience psychological strain during periods of transition (Bordia et al., 2004b). According to Schweiger and Denisi (1991) uncertainty has a moderate correlation with stress. These psychological impacts may lead to reduced job satisfaction (Bordia et al., 2004b). In addition, DiFonzo and Bordia (1998) exposed that stress experienced during uncertainty influences employee morale and productivity and thereby obstruct the change effort.

Having displayed the close link between organizational change and perceived uncertainty it is inevitable to look into the concept of uncertainty in a more sophisticated way. Although there are several inquiries, the definitions of uncertainty and the understandings of this concept are rather coherent. For the purpose of this thesis we define uncertainty according to Milliken (1987: 136) as the “individual’s perceived inability to predict something accurately”. Downey and Slocum’s (1975: 571) interpretation of uncertainty is comparable but looks even deeper, stating that uncertainty is a “state that exists when an individual defines him/herself as engaging in directed behavior based upon less than complete knowledge”. Consequently, uncertainty is characterized by the absence of sufficient information and the suspense of future events. Not having concrete information about the effects on the individual and the organization is obstructive since people are not able to cope with the unknown situation appropriately (Bordia et al., 2004b). Therefore the fulfillment of their tasks might be problematic as the existing amount of information does not meet the required amount (Frishammar et al., 2011). A large volume of questions might arise and additional information are demanded. However, answers to those questions cannot be provided due to the dearth of information access (Levander et al., 2011).

Taking into consideration the definition and the emergence of uncertainty in an organizational context it becomes apparent that an increase of information is necessary to reduce the feeling of uncertainty (Levander et al., 2011). Already in 1973 Galbraith explained that organizations process information in order to reduce uncertainty (Galbraith, 1973). Factual and objective data can contribute towards decreasing uncertainty (Levander et al., 2011). Related to this, enhanced information can be obtained through communication. Thereby individuals’ perceived feelings of uncertainty can be diminished and the impression of gaining control over the situation can be created (Bordia et al., 2004b). Managing communication during times of uncertainty is significant as ineffective communication strategies can even enlarge people’s concerns (DiFonzo & Bordia, 1998). Although the attainment of further information is considered to lower uncertainty, it might not be the best solution to only provide people with information. New data might even be confusing since people interpret them differently (Levander et al., 2011). The existence of multiple meanings and varying interpretations refers to an equivocal situation, so called equivocality (Winkler et al., 2014). In an equivocal situation the main problem is not that “the real world is imperfectly understood and that additional information will render it understandable; instead, the problem is that additional information may not actually resolve misunderstandings” (Frishammar et al., 2011: 553). In comparison to uncertainty equivocality involves the inability to define which questions to ask.

Therefore equivocality is characterized by lack of clarity and understanding rather than lack of information. Consequently, the reduction of equivocality can be achieved through a richness of information instead of a magnitude of information (Levander et al., 2011). The exchange of subjective views is essential in order to resolve conflicts of interpretation and thereby create shared meaning (Frishammar et al., 2011).

In reality the two concepts of uncertainty and equivocality are closely related and are not clearly separable from one another. Nevertheless, by being aware of the existence of the two concepts and differentiating them, a more sophisticated understanding is provided (Levander et al., 2011). For the purpose of this thesis we will focus on the concept of uncertainty as it is more suitable in the context of our research.

In order to establish a framework to categorize uncertainty we will orientate our research on classification models. This classification will contribute to a more profound understanding of different types of uncertainty and their groundings. For the purpose of this paper we are interested in investigating people's perceived uncertainty as our aim is to understand the individuals' interpretation of an organizational phenomenon. This will be accomplished by orienting towards Buono's and Bowditch's (1989) work on confronting uncertainty. They differentiate between three categories, which are the external, organizational and individual level of uncertainty. The external level refers to the environment and the individual attempt "to understand, make sense out of, and respond to conditions that are external to their firm" (Buono and Bowdich, 1989: 104). These conditions include technological, sociopolitical and market forces. Although this level describes external changes it focuses on the individual perception and interpretation of them. On the organizational level it can be distinguished between structural and cultural impacts. Overall this level concentrates on the consequences of change for the organization and how people experience them. Thinking about personal consequences of the change belongs to the individual level. This could include questions and concerns about the employees' role or position and how they might be affected by the change.

As mentioned above, a lack of information leads to the notion of uncertainty. Each of the presented categories addresses uncertainty as a result of missing information. However, the type of information required to resolve the uncertainty varies among the different sections. The information available at one level can influence the perceived uncertainty on another level. Therefore it is essential to take the interrelationship between the categories into account.

2.3 Sense-making

How people experience uncertainty is among other things dependent on their individual interpretation and understanding. Weick's (1995) idea of sense-making will offer support in this paper to understand how these different perceptions are assigned to the same event. Especially during periods of organizational change people's sense-making is challenged as their previous frame of interpretation might not be suitable to the new situation and has to be adjusted. This development of schemata does not take place in a vacuum, it is rather influenced by personal experiences, backgrounds and social environments (Lockett et al., 2014). Overall, the process of sense-making emerges on the individual level (Thurlow & Mills, 2009). Furthermore, it is ongoing and transient in nature (Weick et al., 2005). Recapitulatory, using the words of Thurlow and Mills (2009: 461), sense-making "offers insight into the individual process of creating meaning". The concept of sense-making constitutes a framework that elucidates individuals' interpretation of their environment (Weick, 1995). For the purpose of this paper sense-making is not considered as an isolated theoretical framework. Instead it will serve as a method during our analysis (Mills et al., 2010).

As mentioned above organizational change and the related feeling of uncertainty can trigger sense-making. In general, organizational shocks and crises initiate sense-making (Weick, 1995), since the expected situation is perceived to deviate from the prevailing circumstances (Weick et al., 2005). Thereby individuals do not only try to determine next steps but also try to handle their feeling of uncertainty and their concerns (Mills et al., 2010). Even though they might be able to enhance their understanding, sense-making is not about uncovering the genuine truth since it is certainly possible that "they will never get the story" (Weick et al., 2005: 415).

In a retrospectively process people are influenced by past experiences and understandings. Their previous sense-making may help them to give meaning to future events. In addition, the social context and interaction with others have an impact on the individual sense-making. In this regard communication is a significant element in this process. Talking to other organizational members can shape and guide individuals' meaning creation (Weick et al., 2005). Besides, the interpretation and elucidation of information enable people to take action (Lockett et al., 2014). Consequently, talk and action are mutually dependent and sense-making functions as an intermediary between interpretation and action as it determines human behavior (Weick et al., 2005).

2.4 Coping strategies

Organizational change influences the existing state and thus challenges people's familiar field of behavior (Lockett et al., 2014). People are forced to rethink their prevalent understanding in order to make sense of the current situation. How people respond to this situation, including their thoughts and behaviors, can be described as their coping strategies, helping them to deal with the effects of changes (Grima & Glaymann, 2012). Coping strategies are created within the individuals' cognitive and behavioral systems forming the foundation of adaptability (Cheng et al., 2014). According to Teelken and Watson (2014) the capability to respond and adapt to changes is especially essential in a constantly changing environment.

Coping strategies can vary and occur on a wide range as coping strategies and the underlying sense-making arise on an individual level. People have different resources to their disposal when it comes to coping with changes. These resources include personal abilities and competences as well as their organizational scope of action (Ito & Brotheridge, 2003). Consequently, a multitude of coping strategies can be found and it seems to be reasonable to categorize them in order to provide an advanced understanding. The categorization of coping strategies has occupied a lot of theoretical and empirical researchers (Teo et al., 2013). As a result of the high level of interest in this area the possibility of overlapping categories has to be acknowledged.

The framework of Hirschman (1970), who is considered to be a pioneer in this field of research, has served as guidance for our research. Although his framework has been originally constructed to classify consumer responses, a large number of coping strategies can be integrated into his categorization (Ito & Brotheridge, 2003). Hirschman constructed three categories, namely 'exit', 'voice' and 'loyalty'. 'Exit' refers to the consumers shift to another provider due to product dissatisfaction with the former provider. 'Voice' represents the confrontation between the consumer and provider through communication. According to Hirschman these two categories are converse (Hirschman, 1970). Hirschman's third option of 'loyalty' was not clearly defined (Grima & Glaymann, 2012). Some researchers think of 'loyalty' as an independent category, whereas other scholars consider loyalty to influence the extent to which people follow the 'voice' or 'exit' option. This view is based on the assumption that people are more likely to choose 'exit' if loyalty is marginal. On the contrary, if people feel loyal they are more likely to choose the 'voice' option (Hoffmann, 2006). In this way "loyalty holds exit at bay and activates voice" (Hirschman, 1970: 78).

The classic approach of Hirschman (1970) has been developed in several ways. The Exit-Voice-Loyalty-Neglect (EVLN) model by Farrell (1983) could be seen as one extension. For the purpose of this thesis we are referring to the EVLN model as our analytical framework. According to this model, which represents a thorough and simultaneously comprehensible collection of response opportunities, employees in an organization can react to unfavorable conditions in the workplace in one of four ways. 'Exit' represents the employees' preference to leave the company. People consider to separate formally and voluntarily from their job. This can either be performed by changing position within the same company or by leaving the company. The 'exit' option is based on the individual perception that the current state is improbable to improve. Choosing this option demands a great effort of the employee but at the same time it can have a powerful impact and send out an important message to others (Farrell, 1983). However, the 'voice' option can be described as the "attempt at all to change rather than to escape from an objectionable state of affairs" (Hirschman, 1970: 30). 'Voice' refers to the effort to improve the employment relationship and thereby arrive at a previous state of performance through communication (Hirschman, 1970). Communication cannot only be directed towards authorities but also to other employees and people outside the organization (Farrell, 1983). Being substantially involved in the current situation the 'voice' option can be seen as an alternative to express dissatisfaction (Hoffmann, 2006). The third category 'loyalty' refers to the choice to stay in the organization and wait for improvement. Employees decide to stay with the organization for a longer period and optimistically await further developments without taking immediate actions (Rusbult et al., 1982). Hirschman (1970) assumes that people within this category do not take action themselves, instead expect others to act, or the conditions to improve on their own. 'Neglect', as the last category, represents the decision to distance oneself from the organization and minimize one's work effort (Grima & Glaymann, 2012). This fourth option can be seen as the most passive form of response, including a lack of interest and careless behavior (Rusbult et al., 1982). It can be expressed by distancing oneself from the situation and the organization, among other things reducing the work effort and being absent (Farrell, 1983). An inner attitude of absolute indifference might even contribute to the atrophy (Rusbult et al., 1982). Choosing the 'neglect' option the employee deliberately deteriorates the situation by minimizing one's interest and effort (Shi-bin & Yong, 2014).

3 Methodology

This chapter describes our chosen research methodology that was utilized during our research project. Within our philosophical grounding we will start with the researchers' ontological and epistemological viewpoints, followed by the description of the chosen interpretive standpoint and the qualitative research with an abductive approach. Thereafter we are going to explain our topic development and the choice of our studied organization. After demonstrating our data collection we are going to finish this chapter by presenting our data analysis including the process of analysis and our reflexive aspiration.

3.1 Philosophical grounding

In order to explore how employees cope with uncertainty as an outcome of downsizing we need to take a broader perspective and reflect upon how the composition of our thesis project is influenced by our meta-theoretical suppositions. Drafting a research project we have to consider that there are several theoretical and philosophical stances. The acknowledgement of this complexity is essential when establishing a valuable and coherent research. Underlying assumptions do not automatically provide a recipe for success as they must be aligned and closely linked to the initial research problem (Holloway & Wheeler, 1996). According to Polit and Hungler (1991) the chosen philosophical grounding is not only based on the anticipated research aim but also on the researchers' individual preferences. In the following we are going to elaborate on both our philosophical grounding and our methodological choices within our research process. We will start by explaining our ontological and epistemological standpoints, which will be followed by our selected paradigm leading our research.

3.1.1 Ontology and Epistemology

Ontological and epistemological suppositions about the nature and reality of truth have a significant impact on the research design. Ontology can be described as a philosophical belief relating to the nature of being. Our ontological standpoint is that the social world is abstract and that there is no absolute truth to be uncovered (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Following this, we do not assume that any universally valid reality exists outside of human interactions and social constructions. Instead we are convinced that there are multiple truths created by individuals' unique perspectives, understandings and contexts (Prasad, 2005). For our project it is essential to regard reality as being individually created and not concrete. We are interested in exploring how employees cope with uncertainty, and we assume it to be highly subjective. The way people make sense of their situation and cope with uncertainty can only be perceived from their individual standpoint (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Our ontology about the nature of reality leads to our consideration of epistemology. Epistemology refers to the nature of knowledge and contributes to the measurement of realities (Merriam, 2002). For the purpose of this thesis we are interested in understanding the diverse individuals' experiences, and we are going to interpret their perceptions. Consequently, our epistemological stance is that knowledge arises through interpretation (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Overall we aim to explore the social world through understanding the realities of the research participants expressed by themselves as we consider that there is no objective truth to be uncovered.

3.1.2 Interpretive standpoint

Taking our ontological and epistemological standpoint into account we chose the interpretive paradigm as it accepts multiple truths. The interpretive paradigm helps to understand and explore the construction of the social world from individuals' subjective perspectives (Prasad, 2005). This meaning construction is dependent on the context and can be modified over time leading to several interpretations and multiple realities. We are convinced that there is no single objective truth and therefore we hold an anti-positivist approach.

Conducting a research within the interpretive paradigm aims at exploring multiple truths and interpreting the underlying aspects (Denzin et al, 2003). In this context we agree to Alvesson's and Sköldbberg's (2009) assumption that individuals experience the world differently and that these perceptions need to be investigated in their specific context. In our research we take into consideration that the participants' understandings are multiple, revealed by the interpretation of their expressed meanings.

3.1.3 Qualitative research with abductive approach

We have chosen to engage in qualitative methods in order to fulfil the purpose of this thesis. Following a qualitative research strategy helps to uncover, interpret and explain a social phenomenon instead of verifying it by provable facts (Garman, 1994). That is why we concentrate on the participants' words rather than on quantifiable data (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Qualitative research contributes to a more sophisticated understanding of individuals' experiences, interactions and meanings (Merriam, 2002) as this method enables a more in-depth and flexible investigation of a social phenomenon (Conger, 1998). Utilizing a qualitative methodology is adequate for the purpose of our research as it provides insights and interpretations of a complex situation. Furthermore, applying a qualitative method is in alignment with our chosen interpretive paradigm. Qualitative research is recognized as being essentially interpretive, meaning that the empirical material is interpreted by the researcher

(Wolcott, 1994). Consequently, a qualitative research method permits us to investigate in-depth how employees perceive uncertainty related to downsizing and how they cope with it. In consideration of our second research question, explaining employees' responses, we complemented our primarily descriptive approach with an explanatory approach.

Our study is based on an abductive research approach, including characteristics of both induction and deduction. In abductive research a single observation derives to a suspicion in order to explain the observation (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009). This confirms to our hermeneutical standpoint since the hermeneutic circle enables us to move in-between our pre-understanding of the phenomenon and the understanding evolved from our empirical data (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). Hence, the starting point of our research is placed within existing theories of uncertainty and coping strategies. After having collected the empirical material the findings are going to be related to the theoretical framework.

3.2 Research topic development

Our research topic was not set in stone from the beginning. Instead we started with a basis which we modeled and brought into shape over time. We do not see research as a predetermined linear process rather as a living work in which adjustments and new or unexpected occurrences are possible. We, as the researchers and students of the 'Managing People, Knowledge and Change Program', have an affinity to topics related to organizational change and human resources. In front of this background our initial research idea had been to explore negative impacts of continuous change, such as uncertainty, from the human perspective. We were interested in investigating how the required flexibility and adaptability in an environment of permanent changing working structures and processes affect the individual employee negatively in terms of motivation and productivity. In order to figure out whether this topic is considered to be relevant for the employees in the site of interest and if there was a rationale for further exploration in this field, we decided to conduct two exploratory interviews within the site.

We interviewed one manager with people responsibility and one non-manager. Both had different periods of employment and worked in different departments of the studied site. The participants confirmed that the site was operating in a fast changing environment leading to continuous changes within the organization. The high pace and the connected adjustments resulted in unstable working conditions, requiring a great amount of flexibility. Without having asked them specifically both participants mentioned their favor of changes and how these flexible working conditions motivated and energized them. They considered the affinity

to changes as a precondition to work in this branch of industry and site. A negative impact of continuous changes on individuals' perception was not detectable during these two interviews. When having addressed negative emotions, such as uncertainty, both participants referred to the recently announced downsizing. Although both interviewees have experienced previous downsizings, they mentioned current effects on their daily work. Due to the lack of information future planning and proactive behavior were only possible to a limited extent. In addition, they described that people had different mindsets towards change and consequently perceived uncertainty related to downsizing diversely. Even though in the face of downsizing uncertainty was prevalent, people had to handle their situation and cope with uncertainty. Overall, the predominance of people's perception of uncertainty during downsizing and the related consequences became apparent during both conversations.

Appreciating the impressions from the exploratory interviews we deepened our literature research to narrow down and consolidate our topic. During this process we decided to distance from the concepts of motivation and productivity since they appeared to be too broad to cover them thoroughly within the scope of this research. Considering the results from our exploratory interviews it seemed reasonable to inductively shift from our initial research idea to the individual's strategies to cope with uncertainty. Although originally we had assumed uncertainty to be related to continuous change we discovered the need to break away from this idea. According to our participants, uncertainty was a predominant emotion rather associated to downsizing as a disruptive change. We suspected that participants might not be able to separate and free from the current dominant effects of downsizing, when being asked for the impacts of continuous change. Consequently, we came to the conclusion that the investigation of people's perception of uncertainty as an outcome of downsizing and their coping strategies was reasonable.

3.3 Site of interest

The site of interest is a global company located in southern Sweden employing roughly 2,500 individuals in Sweden and approximately 8,000 globally. This international character is attractive for us as researchers since it contributes to varying meaning constructions. This circumstance could provide wider insights into employee's understandings and thereby broaden our horizon as well as contribute to our thesis.

The studied site is operating in the technology industry. This industry is especially interesting for researchers investigating in organizational change as it is challenging due to fast and sometimes unpredictable changes. Furthermore, this industry is shaped by hyper competition,

enhanced by globalization, shorting of product lifecycles and increasingly demanding consumers. Organizations have to continuously adapt in order to stay competitive and keep pace with technological developments and consumer preferences. We assume that individuals working in an environment of continuous change might perceive change and its impacts differently than people operating in a stable environment.

Our initial contact with the site took place during a guest lecture at our university. Following a written application for conducting our master thesis at this organization we had a first meeting with the site representative. It became apparent that we have been in the right place at the right time as the impacts of downsizing were currently tangible. This encouraged our intention to investigate in individual's perception of uncertainty as an outcome of downsizing and related coping strategies.

3.4 Data collection

In a qualitative interpretive study the aim is to understand people's perceptions and meanings (Kvale, 1996). For this reason interviews were the primary source of data in our research. According to Roulstan (2010) qualitative interviews are essential in order to understand individuals' realities and gain insights into their interpretations. To complement the research purpose we conducted twelve semi-structured interviews, excluding the two already mentioned exploratory interviews. The choice for semi-structured interviews was motivated by the given flexibility and the possibility to adapt during the interview. This allowed a more flowing conversation between the participants and the researchers. For the purpose of orientation we prepared eight open-ended questions, which served as a guideline throughout the conversation (see appendix). This guideline enabled us to maintain the focus of our research but also allowed our participants to develop their statements. The interview guide was designed to start the conversation with more simple questions. Thereby we hoped to achieve a rather relaxed atmosphere and earn the participants' trust. Following this the conversation moved from the participants' cognitive perception of downsizing to their emotional perspective. In the last section we developed questions related to our analytical framework without mentioning it directly. Nevertheless, we were constantly aware of the possibility that the interviewees' answers might not be reflected in this framework. Therefore we tried not to influence their thoughts into a specific direction. To be more concrete, we had the EVLN model in mind, when setting up the last section of our interview guide, but tried to be open to coping strategies in general.

The whole interview process took several weeks. This enabled us to reflect upon various insights we received through progressive interviews. Thereby our understanding, perception and sensitivity for the topic and our participants intensified. Another aspect, which contributed to a more sophisticated understanding, was the fact that we conducted the interviews with two researchers. One researcher guided the interview and the other one asked further questions to go beyond the surface. Multiple listening to people's statements was possible as the interviews had been recorded with the interviewees' approval.

The choice of interviewees should represent a mixed sample of the organization. By composing this mixed sample we considered different factors, which we believed to have an impact on the participants' answers. We tried to ensure a gender balance within the sample as we assumed that female and male participants provide different answers due to underlying social gender constructions. We interviewed managers and non-managers since we expected them to have different information available, varying concerns of disclosing insights and be influenced by possible people responsibility. As discovered during the exploratory interviews the department and the profession seemed to affect the individual's perception of change. Therefore we aimed at interrogating people from different departments. Another factor we assumed to be important was the period of employment since previous experiences influence the employee. We considered people, who have been employed for a long time, to be differently involved concerning their degree of identification and loyalty. The above mentioned factors fulfilled our requirements for a representative sample of the organization.

We came into contact with our interview participants through the site representative, who provided us with the requested contact details. We approached them by email in order to schedule meetings. These meetings took place within the studied site and were voluntary. We paid attention to not disclosing our topic in advance to ensure impartiality of our participants. Proceeding in this manner we assumed to win participants who were willing to cooperate, contribute and give honest answers. As we consider qualitative research to be a two way process, we had to be open and trustful in order to gain authentic responses. Accordingly we assured the participants as well as the studied site of confidentiality and anonymity. We used pseudonyms when reporting and presenting any findings to exclude identifiable links to individuals. Sensitive information about the participants and the organization were treated with respect and have not been used outside of the academic research purpose. In this regard we will refer to the studied site as Enigma within this paper.

3.5 Data analysis

In a meaningful and coherent research the design, the data collection and analysis have to be aligned with the research aim and underlying theoretical assumptions (Tracy, 2010). For this reason we created our design of analysis based on our ontological and epistemological viewpoints. As a result we analyzed our empirical material bearing in mind our social constructionist standpoint under the umbrella of an interpretive paradigm. Within the interpretive paradigm the variety of individuals' perceptions and interpretations represents the predominant source of data (Kvale, 1996). The process of analysis of our empirical material will be explained in the following section. The concept of reflexivity accompanied our whole research project and was especially significant during our analysis. Hence, we will develop on this concept further in this section.

3.5.1 Process of analysis

Our goal is to establish a high degree of credibility and reliability within this research project. Therefore we will explain the process of analysis in this section as much in detail as possible. The analysis of our empirical material took place continuously and simultaneously with the data collection as the interpretation of the material could not be excluded when having the first contact with it. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) interpretation during the interview process is an essential part in qualitative research. Therefore the process of data collection and analysis were slightly overlapping. We started the process of analysis by recording the interviewees' answers in order to avoid missing significant information and being distracted by taking notes. In addition, this enabled us to listen to the conversation several times. Directly after each interview we, as the two researchers, interchanged our impressions and already identified potential dominant themes. This exchange was not only limited to the current interview but also included building connections to previous interviews. As soon as possible we transcribed each interview verbatim to establish our data references. Thereby we were cleaning up the participants' language to a certain degree without changing the initial content. During transcription we also made notes of pauses, laughing and gestures.

The transcribed empirical material was first analyzed independently by each researcher followed by a collective analysis by both researchers. For the purpose of an elaborated analysis the data was printed and color coding was used to identify themes. The same color for each theme was used within every interview to ensure data comparability. In addition, we looked for repetitions, outstanding words and missing data as they might be seen as a link between expressions and themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). After the individual analysis a common discussion and exchange fostered deeper theme identification. The previous analysis

on the individual level was beneficial in the sense that the mutual sharing broadened the perspective of each researcher. Thereby unperceived subjects were uncovered and diverse interpretations emerged. The results of this common discussion were summarized and sorted together in a table (see appendix). Related to our interview guide we divided the table into categories. These categories were filled by the expressions of our interviewees and our interpretations. Although this table turned out to be rather complex, it enabled an overview and comparison among our findings. All the above mentioned steps formed our process of analysis, always keeping our research questions in mind.

In addition to the research question our theoretical framework attended the process of analysis. Based on our abductive approach we were able to move back and forth between theory and our empirical data (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). A consequence of this iterative process is the achievement of valid and reliable data (Merriam, 2002). The possibility to adjust during the process was encouraged by our hermeneutic approach. We engaged in a “dialectic relationship between theory, practice, research questions, and personal experience” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999: 25).

3.5.2 Reflexivity

Qualitative research is frequently accused of being subjective in nature and its findings of being misunderstood (Pope & Mays, 1999). The researchers’ thought processes are driven by their subjective pre-understandings, which influence the way they see phenomena. Within the interpretive paradigm the world is seen as socially constructed (Prasad, 2005). Researchers are affected by their subjective view leading them to become “prisoners of [their] own social construction” (Prasad, 2005: 14). In order to overcome these biases it is necessary to stay reflexive and be aware of personal pre-understandings and assumptions (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). Reflexivity can be defined as the ongoing process of self-reflection “that researchers engage in to generate awareness about their actions, feelings and perceptions” (Darawsheh, 2014: 561). This awareness is not only related to the researchers’ assumptions and biases but also to other perspectives enabling them to see the broader picture (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). In other words, thinking out of the box and delving into diverse positions contributes to a more sophisticated study. In addition, reflexivity can enhance the transparency of a research by raising the awareness of personal biases, which may have an impact on the research process (Darawsheh, 2014). Our thesis will benefit from a reflexive standpoint since our transparency about the strengths and shortcomings of our study foster its credibility (Tracy, 2010).

It is important for us as researchers to stay reflexive during the whole thesis project. Our individual assumptions are already present with the start of our research project and have been accompanying it all along the process. The fact that we are two researchers engaged in this project enables us to take different perspectives since we have individual pre-understandings. The exchange of these assumptions has strengthened our interpretations and broadened our horizons. The reflexivity during the process of analysis was achieved by spreading the period of data collection over several weeks. This facilitated a deeper examination of each interview and the sink-in of impressions and information. Thereby we were able to center ourselves before the next interview and avoid mixing participants' statements. Furthermore, the preceding individual analysis of each interview made us think about the conditions for our personal interpretations. This broadened our understandings (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009), and the comparison enhanced our confidence in the existence of themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Moreover, we were aware that it might be necessary to revise our theoretical framework as reflexivity requires flexibility to avoid being caught in one framework. In our research project we strove to use theories to our advantages instead of letting the theory control us (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Consequently, we did not force our data into given theoretical categories, rather we were open to adjustments or extensions.

Throughout our research we, as the researchers, were “the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis” (Merriam, 2002: 5). We took an active part in the whole process by collecting, interpreting and making sense of our empirical material. Thereby it is important to consider the significant impact of our pre-understandings and assumptions. Using the words of Piantanida and Garman (1999: 24): “the researcher’s thinking lies at the heart of the inquiry”.

4 Results and data discussion

In this chapter we will present our findings gained through our interviews and provide a discussion of our obtained data. Our findings are primarily based on our interpretations, and the discussion is essential to justify and substantiate our interpretations. Consequently, it is reasonable to combine the result and the data discussion. We will start with presenting our identified coping strategies within Enigma. The described coping strategies reveal how our participants deal with the uncertainty as an outcome of downsizing. Thereafter we will describe the perceived uncertainty within Enigma discovered by our interviews. Overall, our findings are underpinned by quotes of our participants.

4.1 Coping strategies within Enigma

In this section we will start by explaining our assumptions, which have to be considered when assessing our coping strategies. Thereby we take into account the individuality of coping strategies and their possibility of being either conscious or unconscious in nature. Subsequently, we are going to present the coping strategies we discovered through our data analysis. Within this analysis we clustered the participants' descriptions of their behavior into categories and summarized them into eight coping strategies. Although we thoughtfully allocated our findings to the developed coping strategies, we are aware of the fact that the lines are blurry and some elements of categories might overlap.

4.1.1 Assumptions coping strategies

Within our analysis we revealed that people can adapt different coping strategies in order to deal with uncertainty as an outcome of downsizing. Some of our participants even claimed to see that people within Enigma coped in various ways. William pointed out that "there are very different strategies". During periods of transition people's behavior varies and according to Michael "there is everything, the whole scale". Employees at Enigma do not only seem to recognize the variety of coping strategies but also tolerate them. Cathrine indicated that employees accept people's diverse ways of coping as they are aware that people are affected differently by the big change Enigma is facing. She argued: "There is a very open feeling. [...] Whichever way you chose to handle, it is alright". This tolerance facilitates the employees to pursue a coping strategy in accordance with their personal situation and needs.

"But everybody, I think, needs to [...] take a decision from their situation."
- Cathrine

This quote indicates that people intentionally choose a coping strategy. However, during our data collection we disclosed that there are also participants pursuing their strategy unconsciously. It became apparent that some employees are not aware of having chosen a strategy to cope with the uncertain situation. A few participants even confessed not having developed a conscious coping strategy. Harry declared: "Unconsciously I think I have [developed a coping strategy]". Although many of our participants did not claim to have developed a strategy, they still described patterns of behavior which we interpret as their unconscious coping strategy. Often the chosen strategy remained unconscious since employees did not reflect their behavior holistically to discover a coping strategy behind.

"When you watch yourself, you do not really see what is happening." - William

Altogether, we are aware of the fact that people develop and pursue coping strategies both unconsciously and consciously. During our data collection and analysis we treated the identified strategies similarly and considered them to be equally important. After respecting and clarifying this circumstance we will not concentrate and develop further on this within the following discussion.

4.1.2 Types of coping strategies

Wait, see and continue working

This category is one of the most frequently occurring coping strategies. Therefore this category has been chosen to commence the portrayal of our findings. Participants, who described their behavior according to this pattern, continue their work while they were simultaneously waiting for more information and seeing the emerging developments. They are awaiting further information in order to clarify the current situation and the consequences.

“I just continue working and I have a lot of things to do [...]. So it is just continue working and see what comes next.” - Alexander

The clarification of the situation seems to be necessary for the participants when trying to determine further action. Having more information would enable them to adopt an appropriate behavior according to the situation. As long as the situation remains unsettled employees avoid making decisions on their next steps. Lisa explained: “You need to have all facts on the table before you can take the next decision”. We discovered that participants do not only adopt this strategy because they are not able to determine future behavior, but also because they do not dare to do so. Due to their lack of information people fear to take inaccurate decisions. Consequently, people decide to wait and continue working until they receive more information, enabling them to take a well-grounded decision, leading to certain actions, which are justifiable for them. Without having further information some participants perceive not having another choice as to pursue the strategy of ‘wait, see and continue working’. One might even argue that people assume being forced to wait since they are not able to influence the flow of information by themselves.

“The information will come and there is nothing to do about it.” - Richard

Another indicator for the argument that people perceive not having another choice than to wait and continue working is that they feel responsible to fulfil their work task. Our empirical material reveals that this responsibility refers to different expectations. Alexander described his duty towards Enigma to perform his work task: “It is just to wait at the moment and continue working. For me I feel that if we stop doing what we try to do right now, then the

situation will be in a bad situation anyway”. This duty towards the organization was also exposed by Cathrine: “We know that for the time being [...] we need to get going and have the work done”. The responsibility towards colleagues is another important factor to pursue the ‘wait, see and continue working’ strategy. Laura pointed out: “Things are going to keep running. People keep expecting deliverables”. Richard’s statement complied to that by saying: “I continue as I have always done because, I mean, there is always somebody depending on you. [...] You cannot just stop, [...] you have to continue”. The responsibility towards the organization and to others exerts pressure on the participants to maintain performance. This pressure contributes to the perception of having no choice other than to wait, see and continue working.

Another reason of following this coping strategy is the inability to predict the consequences of the current change. During our interviews we could witness that some people are thinking about the consequences on the individual level or on the organization. Some employees are not able to fulfil their tasks as long as they do not know how the organizational change will affect the strategic direction. They claimed to continue working within the realms of possibility.

“We just continue working and if we need to change due to any new directions, we will change that later-on as well.” - Alexander

On the individual level people wonder about the effects the downsizing might have for them personally. Thereby they consider the influences on their job situation and related development opportunities. Since people do not have enough information to be able to predict the consequences on the individual level they decide to wait and continue working.

“I need to see what does this mean to me and what will happen. After that we need to take the decision.” - Lisa

The situation can develop in several directions and the related effects on the individual can be manifold. Due to the multiplicity of consequences of downsizing the participants described that they are not able to prepare for every thinkable scenario. Lisa revealed: “We do not have a plan for every scenario yet”. Some participants assumed that it might be easier for them to accept the situation and the lack of information rather than to imagine every possible outcome. The preparation for each scenario is associated with high expenditures and considered to lead to nothing. Antonio argued that it was pointless to occupy oneself with these thoughts as he suggested to “take it as it comes”. Cathrine complemented: “I am just focusing on here and now and that is why it is easier for me to handle”. These interviewees

showed that they remained in their situation, continued working and waited for more information and progress.

Furthermore, we saw that some participants are opposed to take hasty actions. They suggested to thoroughly think about the current situation and possible behaviors. Lisa explained that it would be beneficial for the individual to closely evaluate the situation before taking imprudent actions: “You will win more if you just stay out a little while and go through things and see what do you really want to do [...] and not just run”. In addition, Lisa indicated that she did not only take the time to sort her thoughts but also simultaneously to deal with her emotions.

“I just sit there and do my work and take care of all of the feelings.” - Lisa

A distinct reason why some participants choose the ‘wait, see and continue working’ coping strategy is ascribed to financial calculation. As prescribed by law Enigma as a company has to pay for severances in case of enforced redundancies. A few interviewees spoke frankly about their own and others’ expectations to receive a good severance package. This expectation motivates them to stay and continue working.

“Some people are gambling on that they will get a very good severance package when they stay.” - William

Steve developed even further on this as he claimed that this strategy seems to be more attractive for people who have been working at Enigma for a longer period: “If people have been here for ten years, they will probably get quite well recompensed”. The longer the person has worked at Enigma the higher the compensation payment would turn out to be.

The coping strategy ‘wait, see and continue working’ is based on the assumption that more information is needed to act reasonably. We discovered that several participants have adopted this strategy because of different motives. We could streamline these motives into four factors: inability to determine the next steps and/ or individual and organizational effects; avoidance of precipitate actions; responsibility to deliver and expectation of severance package.

Hide behind role

Within our data analysis we discovered that several participants hide behind their role. This hiding is not only related to the repression of feelings, it rather includes the attempt not to think about possible effects of downsizing due to the high importance of the job related role for the individual. Participants hide behind varying excuses, and some participants did even refer to more than one excuse.

“We are the only team that is actually doing what we do. So it would seem kind of crazy for them to fire us.” - Steve

This quote shows that Steve was talking himself into believing that his function is essential and thereby he reduced the perceived threat of being affected by the downsizing. We saw several participants arguing in that way and hiding behind the assumed importance of their department, including their position as well. Michael pointed out: “I do feel that I and the sourcing [department] are having a rather important part to play here”. It is interesting to see how many participants are claiming that their position and their department is essential for Enigma as it provides unique features, which renders them immune against downsizing. Larissa asserted that she would not be made redundant as she was “the only one working with expense claims [...]. So it would not make really sense”. On the basis of our data it can be argued that some participants do not only hide behind the importance of their work but also behind the great amount of workload. These two matters are closely related since a heavy workload is seen as a legitimation for the necessity and the existence of the job position. Alexander believes that his job is highly needed as he has “a lot of things to do in the work”. Employees, using this argumentation, hide behind their job role in order to better cope with the effects of uncertainty during downsizing.

Another expression of this coping strategy is a strong concentration on the work task and the fulfillment of expectations related to it. Laura explained: “For me it is more my objective work through this [...] being as professional as possible and keep providing supporting services for managers and our employees”. Although this focusing on the job is part of the ‘hide behind role’ coping strategy it is different from the one mentioned above. We interpret that participants hide behind their role and their importance in order to diminish their perceived threat of being made redundant. Yet, the concentration on the work tasks indicates that some interviewees are trying to suppress their thoughts about the effects of downsizing. William said that he was “focusing very much on the daily duties” and was not thinking too much about the threat of downsizing. Consequently, it can be argued that these participants hide behind their work tasks. This was also highlighted by Lisa as she explained that the fulfillment of her work within the human resource department was even more important than the consideration of her own needs and thoughts.

“When you work inside HR, you need to handle the other people first, because that is my work to do.” - Lisa

Although Lisa is aware of her own thoughts and emotions she tries to hide them to be able to perform her role as a human resource person: “In a strange way they [other employees] come

first but there is a me also. [...] I need to handle my own reactions and feelings”. We interpret this behavior as an extreme manifestation of the ‘hide behind role’ strategy. It was interesting to see that this coping strategy is particularly pursued by participants within the human resource department.

The degree of personal identification with the company and / or the profession is related to this pattern of behavior. During our data analysis we investigated that the participants, which pursued the ‘hide behind role’ strategy, have a strong identification with their job, their perceived role and/ or with Enigma. Lisa stated: “I belong to this company and I need to do my work”. It appears to be logical from the employees’ point of view that they strive to fulfil their role related to their job task since they highly identify with it. Some participants might not have been aware of hiding behind their role since their role became part of their personality based on their strong work identification. Lisa talked about her “role as an HR person” and declared: “I love to work with people and that is my mission inside here”.

Although we considered the identification with the job as well as with the organization, we found different emphasis on both. The job related identification was more pronounced by our participants. Regarding the feeling towards the organization, most participants talked about loyalty. We can argue that the participants, who orientate towards the ‘hide behind role’ strategy, stated to be loyal to the company. Lisa described Enigma as “a great place to work” and Alexander explained that “people are committed and they want to deliver good things”. In this context the term ‘hide’ does not only describe the attempt to avoid thoughts about potential effects of downsizing due to the high workload but also due to the fulfillment of the role and the perceived duty towards the organization. Employees might even think that they have a responsibility towards Enigma and need to help the organization to overcome this period of transition. Lisa argued: “People inside here are very motivated anyway [...]. They want to keep [Enigma] as a company and they hope keeping [Enigma] here”.

Related to this perceived responsibility we found another reason during our interviews why the ‘hide behind role’ strategy was pursued. Participants being in a position of a people manager experience responsibility towards their team members. Harry mentioned: “I need to take care of my team to keep them out of the zone of uncertainty, because that is actually stabilizing them”. One could even argue that employees have certain expectations towards their manager how s/he has to behave during an uncertain period. Our managerial participants feel that they need to meet these expectations and therefore control their own behavior and emotions. This generates tensions for the manager. Harry did even refer to it as a “conflict” between the role as a manager and the individual needs of the manager.

The coping strategy 'hide behind role' does not only refer to the related workload and the assumed importance of one's task or function but also to the fulfillment of expectations especially in a management position. We saw that the degree of identification with the personal profession and loyalty towards the organization plays a significant part. Employees pursuing this strategy use the above mentioned aspects as an evasion to reduce the perceived threat of downsizing or avoid thinking about its possible effects for them personally.

Personal attitude

Another quite frequently discovered coping strategy can be assigned under the umbrella of 'personal attitude'. Participants even directly stated that their way of dealing with situations, which are perceived to be rather uncomfortable and uncertain, is highly dependent on their personal attitude towards such situations.

"I think the strategies as such are probably [...] due to the individual properties." - William

Steve even wondered whether his behavior could be considered to be a strategy or rather a "general attitude to life". The individuals' way of dealing with an uncertain situation seems to be based on their personal mindset and approach towards changes in general. It might not be of such importance which particular change they are facing. People's general attitude to life, and especially to changes, influences the way they cope with the specific situation. Harry explained: "What matters is not what impact, what will hit you, but how you react to it". The particular characteristic of a situation, which people are facing, is not the factor that influences their behavior. It is how they encounter such a situation and deal with the related impacts, or, to put it in the words of Harry: "It is how you look at it".

As we consider people to have various mindsets, it did not come as a surprise for us to discover multiple attitudes towards the situation of downsizing and the related feeling of uncertainty. Several participants showed a rather positive and optimistic attitude towards change. Harry pointed out: "Developing some kind of positive initiative [helps] you in surviving situations that are terrible for you". In other words, it is considered to be beneficial for an individual to adopt a positive attitude towards challenging situations in order to facilitate coping. In this sense several participants keep up the belief that they will not be unemployed for a long period as there is a need for them somewhere in another organization. This positive and sometimes even humorous stance might have enabled them not to perceive such a high degree of uncertainty.

*“I am a strong believer of that there is a need for me somewhere in the world.
[...] I expect to actually be the substitute for Obama or something like that
(laughing).” - Harry*

Some participants even try to turn the originally perceived severe situation into something positive. The situation is considered to possibly deliver new opportunities or chances for the future. Laura argued that one might see “a possibility that opens up” within the situation of downsizing. Downsizing is not only perceived to provide new job opportunities but also to bring learning possibilities. Cathrine, for instance, expressed to be “very interested in the whole process [as] you can always learn more and more”. Especially working within the human resource department can enable employees to directly be involved in the downsizing process and to learn how it is conducted professionally. However, not all participants showed a positive attitude towards the situation of downsizing. Just a few interviewees directly expressed their negative attitude, even by the use of harsh words and expressions.

“I am just pissed off, not annoyed!” - Antonio

Nevertheless, it appears to be more common that participants are trying to suppress their feelings and thoughts related to the downsizing. It seems that they were talking themselves into believing not to care and think about their situation. Expressions like “I could not care less” by Antonio or “to be honest I have not really thought that much about it” by Alexander show how the employees try to distance themselves by either not thinking about the situation or by trying not to let negative thoughts affect them.

*“One logical conclusion would be that they will move the whole staff to Tokyo,
but I could not care less.” - Antonio*

This quote reveals that, as soon as Antonio realized that he was starting to speculate and digging deeper into the topic of the current downsizing, he was scotching these thoughts by expressing his carelessness. This suppression and denial of thoughts and feelings as well as the effort in distancing emotionally from the situation seems to make it easier for these participants to cope with the uncertainty. Some interviewees even appear to be rather naïve in their attitude towards the situation. They naïvely talk themselves into believing that the situation is not that severe. Lisa argued: “People are so engaged, so willing to give from themselves”. Antonio confessed: “You always try to find a logical reason around why it will not hit you”. This quote displays the attempt not to see the truth and to talk oneself into believing that the situation is not that serious.

During our interviews we discovered that another characteristic belonging to the ‘personal attitude’ coping strategy is the expressed feeling of powerlessness. Michael outlined: “I am

shrugging my shoulders in the way I say ok, I cannot do much about it". Since some individuals do not believe that they will be able to change or enhance the situation, the only possible way of dealing with it is to accept it. Although one might argue that participants appear to be carefree, we rather believe that, due to their perceived inability to influence the situation in a positive way, they have resigned and accept the fact that they as employees do not have enough power to change the situation.

"You just realize that you are one piece in the big Lego castle and if you remove that piece the castle will still be in the place." - Antonio

This quote shows the frequently perceived powerlessness amongst the employees. Even though they are part of the organization, their influence is limited and when being dismissed it will not have a significant impact on the organization itself.

The aforementioned patterns of behavior are considered to depend on the individual's personal attitude. Thereby participants can be identified to either adopt a positive attitude towards the situation of downsizing or they can be perceived to suppress their feelings and thoughts. This suppression is considered to be achieved by distancing oneself emotionally or by talking oneself into believing that the situation is not that serious. Other participants expressed their powerlessness towards the downsizing in our interviews. Dependent on their general personal attitude participants chose their individual way of coping with the related impacts of downsizing.

Talking

In order to cope with the perceived uncertainty due to downsizing employees talk with each other, to the manager and to people outside of the organization. This talk is aimed at receiving more information by exchanging their state of knowledge to generate a better understanding of the current situation. Antonio explained: "People talk about that they want to get some clear answers". Clear answers facilitate the handling with the unknown situation as possible impacts on the individual can be estimated. A few participants indicated that the degree of information between organizational members varies and therefore they hope the exchange to be beneficial for them. Laura pointed out: "Working in the HR department people often assume that we know a lot more than everyone else". Talking to others was not only oriented towards the exchange of information but also to share emotions in order to better deal with them. Larissa portrayed: "There is a lot of talk. So people are sharing their feelings".

Some participants described a trustworthy and honest team environment in which people care about each other and tolerate different perceptions. Laura stated: "We have a very open

climate in our team, where we talk about these things”. Thereby people do not only express their own emotions but rather are interested to hear about how others experience the situation. Cathrine suggested: “You need to sit down and discuss ‘ok, how does it feel for you?’ “. A few participants argued that the emotional aspect was even more discussed within the external work environment, with family and friends. Cathrine illustrated: “Everybody is talking about that [...] talk with your colleagues and, I am pretty sure, even more talk privately with their families and friends”.

During our interviews we discovered that participants started speculating when the information received was insufficient and dissatisfactory. Rumors were easily created and spread. Steve mentioned: “There has been rumors circling around here for months”. Although these rumors were not based on reliable facts rather on speculations, employees believe in them.

“There is a lot of people thinking that they know. [...] People have had too much time to look into different scenarios [...] and the more people talk about that the more ‘truths’ are added to it.” - Malin

This quote shows that some employees tend to cling to the rumors during their search for information. The rumors created when people are talking to each other and guess about possible impacts of downsizing, are spread quickly within the organization. According to Lisa “words go from mouth to mouth”. The more people talk about it, the more rumors appear to be reliable facts, in which employees believe in. We as researchers assume that the increased participation in rumors and speculations is due to the individuals’ attempt to make sense of the unknown situation. We saw that our participants strive to make sense of their situation. At this point in time our interviewees did not receive further valid information, which would facilitate their sense-making. Consequently, it was not surprising to observe that many participants engaged in rumors. William declared: “People are taking more time to drink coffee and talk to each other than to do the actual work”. It has to be considered that rumors are not only beneficial as they are likely to harm the employees as well as the organization. A few participants argued that rumors could even enhance uncertainty among employees as they were not based on reliable facts. Therefore it is difficult for the employee to decide which information to rely on. Laura described: “There are a lot of rumors which feed uncertainty, [...] because people do not know which information to trust”. During our analysis we detected a vicious circle: In order to reduce their perceived uncertainty employees take part in rumors, which in turn increase their perceived uncertainty. On the organizational level a few participants argued that rumors affected efficiency negatively. Antonio spoke of a “huge loss

for the company” as employees do not use their breaks to talk about technology related topics, rather they talk about their perceived uncertainty and speculate. However, some participants are aware of the negative impacts of rumors and try to avoid them.

“I chose not to comment on any rumors, [...] because I do not want to feed any gossip or anyone else’s insecurity. I try to stay out of it.” - Laura

Inaccurate information can have negative consequences. Therefore it is essential to carefully decide which information to pass on and which not. In this context the manager has a significant role. We saw that some participants rely on their manager’s communication and believe in his/ her words. Steve declared: “I am more focused on exactly what my manager says to me and not listen to other people and their rumors”. Consequently, it is essential for the manager not to participate in speculations and rumors to avoid the circulation of false information. Michael claimed: “As a manager I also have certain responsibility. I cannot start speculating too widely and be too negative neither about my own situation nor about the company’s”. Especially within the role of the manager it is considered to be not only important to stay out of rumors but also to stop their spreading.

“One of the managers’ biggest part is to make sure that they keep business on track, give the employees as much information as they can.” - Laura

As mentioned above people try to make sense of their uncertain situation by talking to each other. The manager can have a significant impact on individuals’ sense-making as s/he is able to support the employee in this process by providing information. Larissa pointed out: “The manager has the ability to calm you down, talk to you and explain. Then you can get a sense of ‘Do I need to worry or not?’ ”. A few conversations revealed that the manager can even be perceived as a sense-maker for the individual. S/he has the ability to take care of the employees, provide them with information and contribute to the understanding of their current situation. When asking Harry, a manager, about his perception of this described ability, he was proud to confirm being a sense-maker for his team.

Another characteristic we found during our analysis related to the ‘talking’ strategy was the attempt to express the personal opinion about the current situation. Participants choosing to express their opinion are aware of the fact that the influence of raising their voice towards the management is only limited. Antonio mentioned: “You have to be politically correct” when raising your voice to the upper management. Laura agreed that organizational members “are afraid to be seen as a difficult employee”. We assume that due to these reasons we did not observe participants who directly raised their voice towards the management, instead they talked among each other and shared their thoughts. When expressing their thoughts we saw

participants making fun of the situation in order to cope with it. During one interview the participant was frequently laughing and thereby ridiculing the topic of downsizing. Michael expressed: “Humoristic kind of people say ‘Well we can move that action to next week because on Monday I will get fired anyway’ ”.

Thus, people pursue the ‘talking’ strategy in order to make sense of their situation by talking to each other or to family members. The understanding is enhanced by the exchange of information and emotions. Speculations and rumors occur to compensate insufficient information. However, these rumors have negative outcomes on the individual and organizational level. The manager plays a significant role when contributing to the individuals’ sense-making. The possibility to raise the voice against management is noticed by a few participants but not exercised as the impacts appear to be limited.

Preparing

Another possible strategy we found of how participants cope with the uncertainty due to downsizing is ‘preparing’. In this context we saw that participants prepare themselves by developing alternative plans and thinking about possible scenarios. Thereby they try to predict possible effects on the individual level and determine their future behavior.

“When you hear the word ‘reorganize’ you are preparing, [...] people try to put up an action plan for themselves.” - Cathrine

This quote shows that the downsizing and the resulting uncertain situation is described as a trigger to start preparation. People try to prepare themselves in order to facilitate dealing with the unknown situation. Some participants might feel powerless as they cannot change or even influence the current situation Enigma is facing. Preparing themselves gives them the feeling to at least achieve something. Cathrine described: “I see an awful lot of preparations”. We can confirm Cathrine’s observation as the majority of our participants declared to prepare themselves. This preparation commonly takes place in the form of developing a plan B. In other words, people engage in picturing the denouement of the situation by thinking about different scenarios and alternatives. Lisa stated: “If I do not have new opportunities in this company, [...] then I have a plan B. [...] Then I need to [...] cope back in my bag again to see what I have with me, [...] go through my own thoughts, what do I want to do for the next step“. This determination of next steps is part of the ‘preparing’ coping strategy as it helps the individual to deal with the uncertain situation. Larissa even argued that this strategy was not only aimed at preparing oneself but also at preparing family members. She described: “You kind of bring the anxiety home and talk to your husband and children. Maybe prepare them and yourself”.

Some participants prepare themselves by expecting the worst case. They assume that a mental preparedness would help them to deal with the worst case, if it happens.

“I am kind of prepared to lose my job this time.” - Malin

The creation of the worst case scenario might facilitate the situation for the individual as s/he will already be prepared for the worst outcome of the downsizing. This might enable the individual to better cope with the uncertainty and the corresponding emotions. Malin described herself as being prepared to lose her job, claiming that: “I would not be shocked, if I was made redundant”. We would even interpret this mental preparation as a mechanism of self-protection since some participants seemed to talk themselves into believing of a certain assumption in order to protect themselves. Malin pointed out: “I do not know if this is a defense mechanism or if I really feel like this”.

The overall preparation can help the individual to reduce the perceived uncertainty as plans can give security. This might be one explanation why the majority of our participants claimed to have developed a plan and started preparing themselves.

“So if the shit hits the fan, we have a plan.” - Harry

Harry explained that the preparedness was essential in order to cope with the situation. Despite their perceived uncertainty people might feel more secure when having alternative plans. Thereby the coping with the situation can be facilitated. Harry mentioned: “They get this certainty about ‘hey something is going on in a positive way’ ”. Any form of preparation can lead to the return of security and control over the situation on the individual level.

The coping strategy ‘preparing’ can help the employee to deal with the uncertain situation and the possible effects of the downsizing. The preparation includes the creation of plans, the determination of next steps and the serious analysis of the worst case. However, we have to acknowledge that some participants might utilize this strategy as a self-protection mechanism. Nevertheless, the preparation and its outcome can give a sense of security during periods of transition.

Alternative employment opportunities

This coping strategy describes the engagement of our participants with alternative job opportunities. It involves the participants’ thoughts about the possibility to leave the company as well as searching for new employment opportunities. Although the former could be classified into the ‘preparing’ coping strategy, we decided to treat it separately by creating the coping strategy ‘alternative employment’ in order to account for its significance.

“You would be stupid if you were not looking around.” - Michael

Within our interviews we disclosed that many participants are looking for alternative employment opportunities in order to cope with the announced downsizing and the resulting uncertainty. Michael's quote shows that he even sees a necessity to look for alternatives as the situation is perceived as very unstable and insecure. Some participants described the job search as a preparation since the consequences of the downsizing are still unknown. Richard pointed out: "If you get affected, then you actually have started something". We assume that the willingness to look for alternatives is highly dependent on the perceived uncertainty of the individual. Alexander contributed: "If you are in a high risk of being affected, then the chance that you are actually looking for something else than your current work [...] is normal". This was confirmed by the majority of our participants. Out of our twelve interviewees only one participant denied looking for alternatives. Consequently, we infer that there is a high activity of people within Enigma looking for new jobs. This is among others noticeable by an increase in networking efforts and people starting to work on their applications. Steve described: "Start applying for stuff or start hitting your contact network and seeing who you know and what opportunities are there for you". Although there is an enlargement in people's efforts in looking for alternatives, a few participants claimed to always look for alternative employments. Antonio confessed: "You constantly look for other opportunities". These participants justified their search efforts with the perpetual need to keep in touch with the external job market. Malin explained: "I am being aware of what is happening on the market". It is not only about following the current development on the job market but also to estimate the personal market value. Antonio argued: "Keeping in touch with what is out there, because you need to stay competitive on a personal level".

During our interview analysis we identified that the market evaluation among the participants varies. Some participants assessed the market situation to be negative. Antonio explained: "People are concerned because it is obvious that the job market is quite saturated. It is tough to find a job". Other participants were more optimistic and confident depicting the market as offering alternatives. Michael said: "It is possible and there are quite a lot of jobs around". Related to their market assessment the participants evaluated their personal possibility to find alternative employments. For us as the researchers it was interesting to see that the personal attitude towards the possibility to find an alternative was influenced by the profession pursued by the individual. Especially the engineers we talked to have been quite confident about their personal market value and their chances to find alternative employments.

“It also depends on what field you are in. If you are an engineer, [...] there will probably be no problem at all. There is a huge demand for software developers. If you are a manager, it could be much more difficult, because the need for managers recruited externally is not that big.” - William

None of our participants told us to already have an alternative employment and to plan to leave the company. However, some of our participants talked about their colleagues who plan to leave or have left Enigma voluntarily. Larissa mentioned: “There are colleagues who maybe want to move on. They go to the manager and they say ‘I want to be the one leaving’. So somebody else, who is supposed to leave, actually gets to stay”. A few participants argued that they would take the chance to leave the company in order to find something more stable. Richard said: “When the downsizing is that heavy, I think, people start thinking that it might actually be time to switch the company”. Furthermore, a few participants explained that choosing the ‘alternative employment’ strategy and implementing it by leaving the organization can be seen as a statement. Antonio pointed out: “Sometimes exit speaks a lot”. Through the voluntary leave Enigma is expected to lose many skilled and competent people. Harry summarized: “During downsizing we generally lose the best”. According to Richard the loss of key people will affect the organization and their level of performance, including productivity and innovation capability.

During our analysis we disclosed that the willingness to think about alternative employments or even proactively exit the company is highly influenced by the individual’s degree of loyalty towards the organization. Those participants, who described themselves as not being that loyal to Enigma, talked more openly about their effort in looking for alternatives.

“I do not have to be at [Enigma]. I could be somewhere else doing a similar kind of work.” - Malin

Loyalty towards the company includes a sense of belonging and commitment. Consequently, it is easier for employees, who do not feel loyal to a great extent, to leave the organization or to think about alternative opportunities.

The discovered coping strategy ‘alternative employment’ does not only include the decision and execution of leaving the organization. The cognitive and emotional engagement is also part of this strategy. We saw the majority of our participants looking for alternative employment opportunities. Some of them even argued to continuously keep in touch with the external job market. Although none of our participants confessed to leave Enigma at own request, some referred to colleagues leaving voluntarily. The willingness to engage in this

strategy and to think about alternative employments is among others influenced by the degree of loyalty towards the organization.

Control

During our data analysis we discovered that the coping strategies of some interviewees can be assigned to the heading of 'control'. Some participants presented an attempt to get back in control of the situation in order to cope with their uncertainty due to the downsizing. Hereby we recognized individuals' various efforts in regaining their personal power and influence.

“Whatever you can control, that is what you go in and manage as best as you can to your ability, and then whatever you cannot control just take it in.”

- Laura

One way of regaining the feeling of being in control, shown by our participants, was to focus on what can be controlled by the individual in an uncertain situation. This focus might subliminally have given the impression of not being in such a serious and uncertain situation. Keeping up the belief that there is an area, which can be controlled, might reduce the entire degree of the perceived uncertainty. Steve agreed by stating that “it is trying to stay positive and trying to control the controllable”. Focusing on the controllable areas of influence enables the individual to transfer this impression of being in control of small parts to the whole situation. Steve depicted: “Small things that can have a kind of an instant feedback for you or you can actually get some results [...], try to concentrate on stuff that you have the final outcome”. Paying attention to minor tasks, whose execution directly reveals a success, can be a way of dealing with uncertain situations in practice. Having the impression that their work still has a positive and important impact helps the participants to better cope with the general perception of uncertainty.

Being in the position of a manager participants showed a certain obligation to be in control. Laura stated that it was generally expected that “one of the manager's biggest part is to make sure that they keep business on track [and] give the employees as much information as they can”. However, not only employees expected this behavior from their managers, but also our managerial participants demanded it of themselves. Having this responsibility managers seem to put a great effort in giving the impression of being in control of the situation and providing their employees with appropriate and sufficient information. Harry, occupying a manager position, pointed out: “I have to take care of my team to keep them out of the zone of uncertainty, because that is actually stabilizing them, giving them as much information as I can.” Nevertheless, this expected managerial behavior is not based on the fact that the managers necessarily possess further information or control. Even without knowing more than

their employees managers try to give the impression of being in control to avoid increasing their employees' perceived degree of uncertainty.

*“I am working on absolutely f**king nothing, but I am taking control of the situation.” - Harry*

Apart from taking control of the situation by giving the impression of having and providing more information, we discovered that managers contribute to decrease the degree of uncertainty amongst their employees by trying to capture it. Harry told us: “I am trying to limit their uncertainty and actually [...] quantify the uncertainty [...] and frame it”. This attempt is aimed at reducing employees' perceived uncertainty. Harry described that he divided the overall uncertainty into smaller parts to be able to treat them separately and thereby diminish the general magnitude of uncertainty. Providing a scope or frame of uncertainty can enable individuals to get a better grasp and understanding of their situation. Following this better understanding individuals are assumed to feel less insecure.

Another way of trying to control or influence the situation was suggested by one managerial participant. This way of coping is not specified to be pursued by managers and can be conducted by other employees as well. It is characterized by gaining time in order to enable an increased flow of information and then trying to approach the decision-maker. Harry specified: “When you have a crisis try to buy time, because when you get more time you have more time to get information. [...] Buy time but also try to get back of control”. The interviewee was convinced of being able to regain his control by receiving more time and thereby more information. Although the participant did not explain how time should be gained, he described the way he still interfered without having explicit information.

“First of all I try to identify who is the real decision-maker on my department's future. [...] And then I work with these stakeholders [...], making them aware that I am here. [...] So I create a plan to be able to meet with this guy. He knows me now - first step achieved. Second thing: I was starting to develop a good impression in his head about me and my department, making him understand what I was doing, what I was doing in a good way. [...] Despite I do not know anything I still try to interfere.” - Harry

Although this quote might appear to represent a rather isolated case, we as the researchers do not want to withhold it. Engaging in this strategy we assume the participant to have the impression of not only being in control of the situation but also of actively doing something to improve it. This might have an impact on the individual's perceived uncertainty as well as on the perception of the other team members or employees.

The attempt to get back in control of or to influence either the situation, the related perceived uncertainty, the small work tasks, the team members or the decision-maker can all be allocated under the umbrella of the ‘control’ strategy. By focusing on the impression that one is still in control of at least some areas can be suggestive of being in control of the whole situation. Consequently, the related feeling of uncertainty can be reduced by the attempt to get back in control.

Stability

During our analysis we identified a further way of coping with an uncertain situation, closely related to the aforementioned ‘control’ strategy, which we chose to term ‘stability’. Participants having pursued this strategy focus on their personal stability and their individual mental and emotional strength. The contact to others is used to gain information, facilitate sense-making and perceive security.

Our data analysis revealed that several participants mentioned the need to take care of one’s own feelings with the aim to reach mental stability for themselves. Lisa expressed: “I need to handle my own reaction and feeling” or as Antonio put it: “You just turn and give a f**k to that and look at your own agenda”. Gaining stability for oneself seems to be one way of dealing with an uncertain situation. Being aware of what is going on, and what effects the specific situation might have on the individual, is considered to be essential in order to minimize the perceived uncertainty. It can be assumed that establishing a rather stable mental and emotional stance enables the individual to reduce the possible negative effects of the uncertain situation.

We identified mental and physical training to be another characteristic of the ‘stability’ strategy. Harry narrated: “Doing something that I like [...] I am able to stabilize myself again. [...] I have a lot of mental techniques, where I can actually focus and visualize and so on”. This quote illustrates that individuals are able to stabilize themselves mentally without having an influence from the outside. Being mentally prepared can have a positive effect on one’s perceived uncertainty. Panic and nervousness can be diminished or even avoided.

“Another thing is that sometimes you have to walk to do something physically. Then you burn some of your uncertainty or nervousness. The physical aspects can actually help you controlling your emotions and vice versa.” - Harry

Not only engaging in emotions and mental techniques can establish stability. Being physically active, by taking a walk or practicing sport, is considered to support the handling of uncertain situations. It is expected to reduce the feeling of uncertainty and nervousness.

In order to keep this mental stability some participants choose to avoid taking part in rumors. Catherine pointed out: “As soon as I hear a rumor situation or discussion I try to stay out of that”. Taking part in rumors can have a negative impact on employees in an uncertain situation. The more people participate in these discussions and speculations, the higher the extent of rumors. A consequence of this increase and variety might be that the uncertainty among the members rises. Laura elucidated: “I choose not to comment on any rumors, just because I do not want to feed any gossip or anyone else’s insecurity. I try to stay out of it”. Instead of taking part in rumors or discussions a few participants mentioned to rather rely on the information provided by their manager. Steve admitted: “I am more focused on exactly what my manager says to me and not listen to other people and their rumors”. We already discussed the finding that managers among our participants appeared to be perceived as sense-maker within the coping strategy of ‘talking’. Seeing the manager as the person that gives stability to others is another way of coping with an uncertain situation. Additionally, team members can embody this ability. Laura described: “Hopefully a lot of managers and all our employees feel that they can talk to each other and can support each other”. This support might facilitate the individual’s effort of stabilizing oneself personally. Furthermore, a few participants experience that someone stable next to them can give confidence and the feeling of stability. Harry reported: “A lot of management colleagues coming to me because they look at me like some kind of a rock”. Talking to someone stable might arise the feeling of stability and thereby reduce the perceived uncertainty. In general, conversations with others and the individual cognitive engagement with the situation can help to find stability and control over emotions and in particular over uncertainty.

The discovered behavior allocated under the heading of ‘stability’ refers to the efforts to reach personal and inner stability. This was revealed to be possible by either talking to others or by distancing oneself and engaging in mental and physical training.

4.2 Uncertainty within Enigma

In the previous chapter we presented various ways of how people cope with their experienced uncertainty. The existing variety of coping strategies is reasonable as people perceive uncertainty differently. People develop and pursue distinct coping strategies depending on their individual perception of uncertainty. During our interviews participants confirmed that there was the feeling of uncertainty at Enigma.

“Oh yes, there is a lot of uncertainty.” - William

A few participants even argued that in this period of transition Enigma was facing, the sense of uncertainty is a logical consequence. Michael explained: “There is of course uncertainty around. Anything else would be strange”. The experienced uncertainty is resulting from being in an unknown situation and having insufficient information. This correlation between uncertainty and lack of information was already described within our theoretical framework and it has also been approved by our participants. People are concerned about their situation since they lack information. Lisa stated: “An unknown situation [...] is the worst situation, because we do not know anything”. More information would decrease the perception of uncertainty by helping the employees to better evaluate the situation. Laura endorsed: “In general in these times of transitions, I think, people need information”. Some participants claimed that more information was necessary in order to determine their future steps and behavior. As long as further information are missing future developments are barely foreseeable and assessable. Alexander described: “We do not really know what will be the situation in a couple of weeks right now”. Due to the unpredictable developments employees experience uncertainty as the effects on the individual level are unratable. Steve outlined that in the current situation “all of a sudden nobody knows if [s/he is] affected or not”.

During our analysis we discovered that the degree of experienced uncertainty depends on the individual. Some participants are more concerned about the downsizing and possible effects, whereas others are less worried.

“There are different thoughts with something that is so big.” - Laura

Our participants showed an awareness of the different degrees of uncertainty within their working environment. We could identify that all of our interviewees engaged in thoughts related to the downsizing and assume that the majority of employees within Enigma was concerned about the current situation. Alexander affirmed: “Many people start thinking about what will happen with their job and what happens if they are part of the reduction”. However, some participants seemed to experience more uncertainty than others. These different

perceptions were noticed by Michael, stating that “some people are really worried and really concerned what will happen”.

Within our research we observed these different degrees of uncertainty and their dependence on the individual’s perception. By closer examination we discovered the individual’s perception to be contingent on various personal factors. We identified eight ‘factors of influence’ impacting the individuals’ degree of perceived uncertainty. These factors will be presented and discussed later within this chapter. In addition, we see the personal perception of uncertainty as being influenced by the individuals’ sense-making. Therefore we take individuals’ sense-making into consideration and will develop on this correlation further in the following section. We will terminate this chapter by explaining the effects of uncertainty on the daily work. The description of the effects on the daily work substantiate that uncertainty is present in the real work life and indeed has an impact. In order to deal with these impacts people develop and pursue a certain coping strategy.

4.2.1 Sense-making

Referring to our literature review sense-making is defined as a concept explaining individuals’ meaning creation and interpretations of their situation (Weick, 1995). For the purpose of our thesis it is important to consider the concept of sense-making in order to understand people’s interpretations. We are convinced that the individual’s sense-making constitutes the basis of people’s responses to changes. Multiple coping strategies can occur since people’s sense-making varies. During our analysis we saw that participants interpreted and understood the current situation of downsizing differently. Laura outlined: “There are different thoughts with something that is so big”. As a result of the individual sense-making we revealed that people perceive uncertainty as an outcome of downsizing differently and thereby pursue various coping strategies. Therefore, it seems reasonable not to separate coping strategies and the underlying sense-making. Instead of exploring the sense-making of our participants, we rather use this concept subliminally as method during our analysis.

According to Weick (1995) organizational changes initiate sense-making. The downsizing at Enigma can be seen as a trigger for sense-making. Thereby individuals try to gain an understanding of their situation in order to conceive an appropriate handling. During our interviews we realized that the majority of our participants tried to make sense of their situation by making the downsizing decision justifiable and reasonable for them.

“It is logical that if a company loses money for six years that they have to turn around their business.” - Antonio

This quote exemplifies participants' understanding of the decision to downsize given the difficult economic situation Enigma is facing. Michael agreed: "I understand the reason behind why it is happening". We assume participants' understanding of the cause of their situation and their sense-making to be central in order to facilitate their handling with the effects of this situation. Being able to comprehend the reason for the downsizing influences the way participants perceive the effects and interpret them. In turn, people's perception and process of interpretation is based on their individual sense-making.

The process of sense-making also includes the handling of emotions, such as uncertainty, and the determination of next steps (Mills. et al., 2010). The comprehension and meaning creation of the situation is considered to be facilitated by gathering more information. This was confirmed by our interviewees since they were looking for more information to make sense of their situation. Antonio argued: "People [...] want to get some clear answers". Participants described information to contribute to a better understanding and thereby facilitate their sense-making.

"I need to see what does this mean to me and what will happen. After that we need to take the decision." - Lisa

According to Thurlow and Mills (2009) the process of sense-making occurs on the individual level. People decide individually how they make sense of their situation and cope with the related effects. Our participants also described the process to be based on the personal perceptions. Lisa pointed out: "You need to have the information and then you need to take it to you the way you know it by yourself". Various interpretations and meaning creations might be established with the result that a broad range of different coping strategies exists. We observed that participants' sense-making influenced their thoughts and behaviors. Consequently, sense-making can be characterized as an intermediary between interpretation and action by determining people's behavior (Weick et al., 2005).

4.2.2 Factors of influence

As already mentioned above we identified eight factors influencing people's perception of uncertainty. These factors impact individuals differently and can occur simultaneously. In the following we will present our determined factors of influence.

Character traits

All of our participants were very diverse in character and their attitude towards life in general. Regarding their described thoughts and perceptions we interpret that there is an influential connection between the individual character traits and the degree of experienced uncertainty.

In this context the degree of experienced uncertainty does not only include the extent of uncertainty but also the way people let affect themselves by this uncertainty.

“Just try to stay positive and not let it get you down too much.” - Steve

Participants, who claimed to have a positive attitude, appeared to be able to handle their uncertainty better. This does not mean that they can diminish their uncertainty entirely but they try to avoid letting the feeling of uncertainty affect them too much. Michael agreed: “Uncertainty yes, but maybe I am optimistic. I think it will work out”. A few participants explained that their general mindset supported them during an uncertain situation. Laura pointed out: “In general people have just a sort of a mindset, when it comes to how to deal with uncertainty”. Especially, when having a positive attitude towards life, employees get the impression that this uncertain situation will unravel for them. Some of our participants claimed to have this positive attitude and thereby reduced their perceived uncertainty. Michael asserted: “If I will lose my job, I will probably work something out”.

During our analysis we disclosed that not only a positive mindset in general but also related towards change in particular can influence the perception of uncertainty. Some of our participants described to have a certain affinity towards change. Laura explained: “I am affected by change and I am often a person that strives in a very dynamic environment”. This affinity towards change seems to help the individual to deal with the experienced uncertainty. Downsizing causing this uncertainty can be viewed as a positive change connoting new opportunities. We assume that those employees, who do not have this attitude towards change and prefer stability, are more susceptible to uncertainty as they would try to maintain the familiar situation. Laura composed: “As a human being you are a creature of habits, and if you like it somewhere, you like the sense of staying”. Consequently, the individual’s attitude and character take an influence on the perception of uncertainty and might reduce its effects.

Profession

We identified individuals’ educational background and their practiced profession as a factor of influence on the perceived uncertainty. The occupation held as well as related qualifications and skills are considered to impact the opportunity to find alternative employments. Depending on the individual assessment of personal qualifications and skills the experienced uncertainty due to downsizing can be either increased or decreased.

Our participants confirmed the connection between the practiced profession and the perceived uncertainty due to reduced job alternatives. William stated: “It depends on what field you are in”. Larissa was even more specific, arguing: “When you have studied and work with

administrative and financial work, then you have a little more options”. Overall our participants evaluated the job market differently, but we recognized a tendency towards apprehension.

“People are concerned because it is obvious that the job market is quite saturated. It is tough to find a job.” - Antonio

For us as the researchers it was interesting to see that especially our participants with an engineering background were less concerned about the job market and seemed to be confident to find alternative employments. William explained: “Working as an engineer, there will probably be no problem at all. [...] If you are a manager, it could be much more difficult”. This argument was based on William’s assessment of the job market as he saw engineers to be in a strong demand. Consequently, he was not that concerned about possible consequences of the downsizing and felt less uncertain. He explained: “I do not know more than the rest but I am less uncertain, because I know I will get plenty of jobs”. This sense of security to be able to find an alternative employment was prevalent among our participants pursuing a career as an engineer or having an engineering background, and it influenced their perception of uncertainty.

Within our analysis we ascertained that the nature of the employment contract was also impacting people’s experience of uncertainty. We identified varying perceptions of uncertainty between participants who have been employed with an indefinite contract and those working at Enigma on a temporary contract.

“Emotions to the change I do not have much further, because I know that I probably need to move on in a year time.” - Cathrine

This quote indicates that employees working on a temporary contract are less affected by the threat of downsizing as they know that they have a time limit within Enigma. Thereby their perceived uncertainty might be lower than for the ones being employed at Enigma unrestrictedly. One of our participants experienced the downsizing from both perspectives, being employed temporarily and permanently, and acknowledged differences. Richard described: “This time it feels maybe a bit different, because this time I am actually employed”. Employees on an indefinite contract might have expected to have a future within Enigma and hence experience a greater uncertainty. As a result it can be argued that the nature of the employment contract as well as the occupied profession affect the individual’s perception of uncertainty during downsizing.

Life circumstances

Another factor influencing the degree of uncertainty perceived by our participants was their family status. Some participants argued that the degree of perceived uncertainty is increased due to the circumstance that they had families, which they are responsible and need to care for. Larissa pointed out: “If you have a family, the worries are even larger”. Having a responsibility not only for themselves but also for their family members reduces the individual’s flexibility. Employees with families are obliged and therefore less willing to leave. Antonio added: “Those, that are single, could easily move”. Without having a family or other dependencies, such as properties or houses, employees seem to be less uncertain.

“I can afford being here one year and maybe take the step the year after. [...] But of course it is tricky. I am thinking of all the people working here, who have families. I am pretty sure that it is a very scary time.” - Cathrine

In addition to the family status, participants’ age seemed to have a significant role in determining their degree of uncertainty. Antonio even stated directly: “If you are a bit older, you are more concerned”. Having reached a rather advanced age was considered to increase the perceived uncertainty as it is more difficult to find a new job opportunity. Harry confessed: “When you are 54, it may not be that easy to get a new job. [...] I worry definitely”.

Concluding, participants’ personal circumstances in life, such as their age or their family status, influence the extent of their perceived uncertainty during the process of downsizing. Participants being rather old or having family dependencies are considered to feel more uncertain than their colleagues.

Role as a manager

Not only having responsibility outside the company, such as within a family, but also being a manager and having certain people responsibility in the organization was identified as taking an impact on individual’s degree of perceived uncertainty. Occupying the role of a manager is accompanied by the responsibility for the subordinates. In order to live up to their and the organization’s expectations managers try to reduce their negative emotions.

“As a manager I also have certain responsibility. I cannot start speculating too widely and be too negative neither about my own situation nor about the company’s. [...] You need to keep a certain profile.” - Michael

This quote shows that managers tried to avoid influencing their subordinates’ emotions and behaviors negatively and thereby increasing employees’ concerns. In fact, during our interviews we discovered that subordinates had certain expectations of their managers. Steve

outlined: “I am more focused on exactly what my manager says to me and not listen to other people and their rumors”. Being aware of this focus and subordinates’ expectations managers seem to accept the responsibility for their employees and try to reduce their uncertainty.

“If you are a manager or are responsible, you try to stop it, because that will actually be a self-fulfilling prophecy.” - Harry

This quote implies that managers, having people responsibility within the organization, try to reduce the subordinates’ perceived uncertainty in order to avoid negative effects on the organization. Additionally, it became apparent during our interviews that managers are expected to possess more information than their subordinates. Malin confessed: “I might know as I am a manager on a higher level”. Being in the position of a manager could have a positive impact on the degree of uncertainty, as more information decreases the perceived uncertainty. It could be interpreted that managers, possessing more information, are expected to feel less uncertain than their subordinates.

Consequently, occupying a manager role does not only influence the perceived uncertainty by the circumstance that they are expected to provide stability for their subordinates but also because they de facto have more information at hand.

Loyalty and Identification

We discovered the degree of loyalty towards the organization as well as the identification with it and the profession to impact the degree of experienced uncertainty during downsizing. Depending on the magnitude of loyalty and identification employees’ uncertainty can be either reduced or increased.

According to the statements of some participants we detected that loyalty and strong identification with Enigma increase the probability of experiencing uncertainty during downsizing. The identification is closely related to the period of employment. Participants who have been working for Enigma for a long time are commonly more loyal and show a stronger identification. We assume that those participants are more vulnerable towards uncertainty as their life has become intertwined with Enigma.

“They created a life which is very much entangled in [Enigma] and their employment.” - Laura

Due to this interference of employees’ lives and the organization, individuals perceived a higher degree of uncertainty as the danger of losing their employment at Enigma might have grave effects on their personal lives. On the contrary, employees with a shorter period of employment might experience less uncertainty as they are not that identified with the

organization. Cathrine confirmed: “In some ways it is maybe easier for me. Because if I have been working here for six years, that would be a different kind of emotional aspect”.

Participants, who described themselves as feeling less loyal, are less concerned about the downsizing and possible effects than those participants with a higher loyalty towards Enigma.

“I don’t have to be at [Enigma] [...]. I could be somewhere else, doing a similar kind of work.” - Malin

This quote indicates that a lower degree of loyalty towards the organization let the danger of being made redundant appear to be less stressful and thereby decreases the perceived uncertainty for the individual. The threat of losing one’s employment might not be that scary for a disloyal person, who could easily imagine working for a different organization. We assume that loyal employees perceive greater uncertainty because Enigma and their job constitute an essential part in their life. Seeing this part under threat due to downsizing might lead to a higher degree of uncertainty. Lisa pointed out: “I belong to this company and I need to do my work [...]. I love to work with people and that is my mission inside here”. Lisa’s feeling of loyalty could be interpreted as an amplifier of her perceived uncertainty. Consequently, the degree of loyalty and identification has an impact on the perceived uncertainty.

Environment and contacts

Analyzing the statements of our participants we saw that the environment they engaged in and their contact persons can affect their perceived uncertainty. The general attitude towards change within that environment and the susceptibility to uncertainty influence the individual’s perception. Being surrounded by uncertain people intensifies individual’s personal experience of uncertainty. A few participants tended to draw inferences from the prevalent feeling of uncertainty among others to their personal uncertainty. Lisa acknowledged her personal feeling of uncertainty and explained: “I meet afraid people in different levels and different situations”. We interpret that the feeling of uncertainty could be even enhanced due to an uncertain environment. We also noticed that a low degree of uncertainty within the environment can reduce the individual perception of uncertainty. Being surrounded by less uncertain and more stable people can foster a sense of security for the individual. Alexander described himself as being less concerned about the downsizing, mentioning: “In my department we are pretty much all the same [...]. It could be that in some areas people are more affected”. Consequently, the working environment and contacts people engage in influence their perception of uncertainty.

“We should never underestimate the power of group dynamics.” - Harry

We explored that people’s attitude and personal opinion can impact other employees. This interference seemed to happen especially through communication and the exchange of meanings and emotions between employees. Participants described that they communicated with others in order to share their thoughts and feelings about the downsizing. Larissa stated: “There is a lot of talk. People are sharing their feelings”. This sharing of emotions impacts the employees’ assessment of their own emotions. Seeing uncertainty being described as a predominant feeling by others might increase the perception of the personal uncertainty. Furthermore, we identified that the communication between employees in this situation can involve speculations leading to rumors. Some of our participants explained that they were confronted with these rumors within their working environment or do even participate, although they are aware of the negative impacts.

“There are a lot of rumors, which feed uncertainty, because people do not know which information to trust.” - Laura

This quote reveals that rumors can increase the feeling of uncertainty as the variety of speculative information leads to even more confusion and insecurity. The environment, in which people are acting, and the people they talk to, can have an influence on their degree of uncertainty. Within our analysis we detected that this influence could be either positive or negative and thereby increase or reduce the individual perception of uncertainty during downsizing.

Industry environment

Another factor having a certain influence on the participants’ perception of uncertainty was identified as the industry environment. As mentioned above, the studied organization operates in the technology business. This industry is characterized by its fast developments and continuous changes. We discovered that working for an organization within such an environment has an impact on employees’ degree of perceived uncertainty.

“In this industry we see a lot of rapid development. We see a lot of changes going on all the time.” - Harry

Employees being faced with constant changes in the industry are expected to be more flexible and willing to adapt. Being used to continuous changes their degree of perceived uncertainty seems to be reduced. Richard pointed out: “The whole industry and the way they work: people are more flexible, changes happen and so on”. According to Malin, even people from the outside would say: “You guys are always in this mode. [...] It goes up and down”.

Working within this continuously changing environment not only employees' flexibility was conspicuous but also their esteem when faced with changes.

"I am not afraid of changes. If you are afraid of changes, this is not the right company." - Lisa

This quote implicates that a certain affinity to changes is essential if working for Enigma. When talking about people having left the organization, Alexander revealed: "Most people actually miss being part of this [organization], because here things are happening very, very fast".

Being faced with constant changes in the technology industry and related expectations to be flexible it seems that employees at Enigma perceive less uncertainty due to downsizing. We could even discover an affinity towards change in general. As individuals at Enigma are considered to be used to changes we even speculate that they perceive downsizing not as a disruptive but rather as a continuous change. This might not only be because of their previous experiences with redundancy phases but also because of being in an environment of continuous changes. Richard described: "The volatile in companies is much bigger than before". Disruptive and large scale changes might in the meantime be perceived as continuous changes. As a result, employees in a fast changing environment might perceive downsizing as creating less uncertainty than individuals working within a stable environment.

Experiences of previous downsizing

During our data analysis we explored that the perceived uncertainty of our participants was influenced by their experiences of previous downsizing. All of our interviewees had gone through redundancy phases before, either within or outside Enigma. The experiences gained by that have impacted the employees positively or negatively when facing downsizing again.

"The whole experiences you have with you can be used in this situation." - Lisa

This experience is based on having gone through the process of downsizing before. Steve illustrated: "I have been through a number of changes and a number of reorganizations and different rounds of redundancies". Every participant was able to remember past times of redundancies and could describe related circumstances and emotions. Participants reported that Enigma has downsized a number of times before and a few participants even argued that it became a constant issue. Steve confirmed: "Here we are again, especially at this site, where there have been redundancies on and off [...]. So it is a constant thing". This quote also verifies the assumption of downsizing being rather perceived as a continuous change as mentioned above. Within our interviews we gained the impression that employees at Enigma

are getting used to the process of downsizing. Several of our participants approved this suspicion. William outlined: “A lot of employees here get used to it”. We identified that this kind of practice and the related experiences can have either negative or positive impacts on the perceived uncertainty.

“Yes, you do [get used to it], but it does not mean that it makes it any more comfortable. In fact, it probably makes it more uncomfortable, because obviously the more ones you go through, it is like ‘yeah, my head is on the block now’. It feels like there is less of a buffer around you [...]. It is like ‘ok, do I survive this time?’ That is always a concern.” - Steve

This quote indicates that it is also possible that the more redundancies employees have passed the more concerned they become. Recognizing the organization becoming smaller and thereby alternatives within the organization being reduced the individual uncertainty might increase. Nevertheless, during our interviews it was more prevalent that the experiences gained from previous downsizing helped the employees to scale down their uncertainty and to handle it. Some participants described that knowing the process of redundancies enabled them to estimate the steps within the current downsizing. A foreseeable period might be less scary. Alexander stated: “Most people know what is happening and know more about the process [...]. So people are quite calm about it“. Having experienced downsizing several times changes employees’ perception and concernment. Harry explained: “If this was the first time in my life [...], I would probably be scared like hell”. Michael even depicted that “it is more of a mental maturity thing“. It can be assumed that there are employees that come to maturity through the experience of previous redundancies and thereby hold their perceived uncertainty at bay.

4.2.3 Effects on daily work

Within our research we witnessed that uncertainty is a prevailing feeling among employees at Enigma facing downsizing. Furthermore, we ascertained that the degree of experienced uncertainty varies and depends on several factors. During our analysis we saw that the experienced uncertainty impacts participants’ work and their ability to perform as usual. This serves as an evidence for the existence of uncertainty within Enigma and its effects on the daily work.

“So yes, it is impacting my job both from my emotional perspective, from a practical perspective, but also from my professional perspective.” - Harry

Although the majority of our participants confessed to be impacted within their daily work, a few participants denied an effect on their work. However, by analyzing their statements and

descriptions we can identify that their ability to perform is influenced indeed. The impact is not only based on the personal perception of uncertainty but also on the overall uncertain atmosphere in Enigma during the period of transition.

“You just feel that kind of different vibe and atmosphere in the group. [...]. Because it is such a big building, you just feel that the pulse is not the same way as it was.” - Cathrine

The effects on the daily work became noticeable in a number of different ways. Some participants described that due to the unknown situation they were missing strategic direction. Alexander pointed out: “It could be that some things, that we want to do, we should not do, because we will have a different strategy”. Participants argued that the lack of strategic direction hindered a proactive behavior and restrained the planning process. This impacted employees’ daily work. Malin stated: “We do not know what budget we will have. And if you do not know that, you do not know which directions to follow. So that affects the strategic work definitely”. Furthermore, a few participants mentioned that the decision making process in general was decelerated because of the vague strategic orientation. Steve commented: “There is a bit of a direction, but it does not feel like the whole company is singing the same song”. Closely related to this missing strategic direction was the difficulty for the management to provide coherent guidance for the employees. A few of our participants were experiencing this incoherent guidance as a lack of leadership.

“When I have needed clarification from my boss, he could not provide the answers, because he did not know. And then you are left in a limbo.” - Antonio

Moreover, this quote indicates that the lack of orientation can also lead to a shift in daily tasks. Without having explicit information about management’s expectations and strategic objectives employees showed an orientation towards other tasks, they had considered to be meaningful. Lisa outlined: “You have to leave your comfort zone and need to focus on different things. [...] This leads to another daily work”. It became apparent during our analysis that some participants changed their work priorities. This was due to several factors. A few participants described a change of their priorities since their daily work routines were affected. Lisa reported: “Of course it affects me, because I cannot work with my ordinary things. I need to prioritize, and I need to prioritize totally different things”. We also saw participants changing their priorities in order to prepare themselves for the work expected during the downsizing process. Cathrine explained: “From a human resource point of view, now we are preparing for the amount of work that is probably going to come”. It was

interesting to see that this awareness and preparation was prevalent among participants working with matters affecting employees.

During our analysis we explored that the perceived uncertainty influences participants' work effort both positively and negatively. We saw participants increasing their work effort since their workload was enhanced due to the effects of downsizing. Harry, working with security issues, declared: "It is impacting my job absolutely [...]. If we have this time of uncertainty and layoffs, people start to steal more". Other participants argued that they increased their work effort because they wanted to contribute to Enigma. Lisa explained: "People inside here are very motivated anyway. [...] They want to keep [Enigma] as a company".

"Some people working probably a lot more and they need to take extra work, if others are under-delivering." - Laura

This quote shows that the workload of some might be increased as others have reduced their work effort. Employees' reduction of work effort does not only occur deliberately but may also happen subliminally. We discovered that people seem to be distracted from their work as thoughts about the downsizing and the possible effects are predominant. In Steve's words, it is a "kind of constant thing in the back of the mind". Additionally, within our analysis we could identify the reduction of work effort happening deliberately. As already mentioned the daily work might have shifted or even be diminished. William described: "Others see that actually they do not have any daily tasks anymore".

The lower workload, the lack of information and missing strategic direction impacts employee's motivation. Steve pointed out: "It is totally demotivating". As a consequence of demotivation participants minimize their contribution and performance. Larissa questioned: "Why should I do that little extra that is not my task? I do not know if I am going to stay". Due to the unknown situation and the unpredictable future some employees did not see the reason to enhance their work effort. A few participants even mentioned to shift their focus from work related issues to personal needs.

"Screw it! Why should I work? If I work on anything it would be my CV."
- Steve

A few participants described that the people's demotivation affects the general working atmosphere negatively. Some employees tend to lose their incitement and disregard their work responsibilities and duties. This became noticeable by employees' tardiness and their extension of breaks. William asserted: "People are taking more time to drink coffee and talk to each other than to do the actual work". We further could discover a connection between

employee's motivation and their commitment to the company. Michael argued: "Overall the loyalty is quite limited". In this regard Steve affirmed: "A lot of people want to move on and find something that is a bit more stable". We interpret employees' search for stability as a consequence of the changes within Enigma and the perceived uncertainty.

5 Theoretical discussion

In this chapter we will discuss our results in connection with our theoretical framework. Our gained data will be contemplated in relation to the existing literature. Thereby we will examine to what extent our results confirm with our initial theoretical assumptions. The theoretical discussion is applied to the concept of uncertainty as well as to our analytical framework, the EVLN model.

5.1 Types of uncertainty

This section is devoted to the theoretical discussion of uncertainty. We will examine the distinction between uncertainty and equivocality concerning the applicability on the situation within our studied site. In addition, we will refer to the different levels of uncertainty presented in our theoretical framework. By that we will scrutinize which level of uncertainty was prevalent within our results.

5.1.1 Distinction from equivocality

In our theoretical framework we have already discussed the differences between the concepts of uncertainty and equivocality. We presented these two concepts in order to raise awareness of their distinct characteristics. For the purpose of our thesis we decided to concentrate on the concept of uncertainty. During our analysis this presupposition has been endorsed by our results.

We have defined uncertainty as the "individual's perceived inability to predict something accurately" (Milliken, 1987: 136). It results from a lack of information and can be decreased by factual and objective data (Levander et al., 2011). The perceived uncertainty of our participants was also due to insufficient information impairing them to predict the personal effects of downsizing. Lisa stated that being in an "unknown situation is the worst situation, because we do not know anything". Our participants described that they were searching for more information in order to minimize their perceived uncertainty, even though the information might be uncomfortable. Cathrine argued: "It is always tougher not to know and have that negative feeling, than to know". In addition to that Harry explained that more information could help people to better assess the current situation by stating: "It might be

totally different tomorrow when I get more information”. Moreover, we discovered that the feeling of uncertainty can even be reduced by knowing the point of time when further information will come. Richard expounded: “If you know already when the announcement comes then it is easier”. Being able to foresee the date of further information facilitates employees’ dealing with the unknown situation as they can predict the next step and thereby assume to be able to estimate the period of uncertainty.

“I see the uncertainty was much more before the announcement. The announcement gave some specifics [...]. It gave us the understanding that we are going to know the exact quite soon. And I think that gives you a bit of certainty.” - Cathrine

This quote shows directly that the experienced uncertainty is reduced by gaining more information. As described in our literature review this information can be obtained through communication. The provided information through communication helps the employee to clarify the situation. Antonio pointed out: “Maybe I will actually change my opinion when the real communication comes”. As long as no further information is communicated the employee feels kept in a vague condition. The way this communication is organized and performed is essential as imprecise communication could even increase people’s concerns (DiFonzo & Bordia, 1998). Larissa described that she experienced the communication being rather vague: “The information is really not that specific. Even from that email you start to worry”. Therefore it is significant to communicate information precisely and timely. Following our line of argumentation and the theoretical underpinning we argue that the concept of uncertainty is more suitable in the context of our research.

In terms of a holistic research we nevertheless considered the concept of equivocality. Based on our findings we could exclude it to be applicable for our research. According to Winkler et al. (2014) an equivocal situation is due to multiple meanings and varying interpretations. In comparison to uncertainty additional information does not contribute to a better understanding of the current situation. New data might lead to confusion as there are different interpretations possible (Levander et al., 2011). However, our findings have revealed that more information would help the employees to understand the situation and thereby reduce their experienced uncertainty. Laura commented: “There is a lot of uncertainty and people need to have the same information”. This demonstrates a lack of information in general whereas equivocality refers to the lack of clarity of the given information. In our case the majority of our participants perceived the information not being unclear but rather not sufficient to evaluate the situation. Harry confirmed: “You do not have sufficient information”. Furthermore, an

equivocal situation implicates the inability to define which questions to ask. This inability was not approved by our findings. Participants could develop questions whose answers would help them to reduce their uncertainty. Cathrine outlined: “Everything was in an ‘ifish’ situation: if, when, who?” Alexander specified: “Many people start thinking about what will happen with their job and what happens if they are part of the reduction”. Employees at Enigma are interested to know the effects of the downsizing: who will be made redundant, when, and what will be the consequences.

Within our theoretical framework we outlined the exchange of subjective views to be essential to resolve equivocality (Frishammar et al., 2011). Considering our findings we cannot approve this circumstance. On the contrary, the exchange of individual interpretations was revealed to increase employees’ concerns.

“There are a lot of rumors which feed uncertainty, because people do not know which information to trust.” - Laura

The communication between employees does not contribute to resolve the unknown situation. On the contrary, in our research we asserted that the communication between employees leads to speculation and rumors and thereby even increase the individual concerns. As employees’ apprehensions cannot be reduced by the exchange we cannot refer to an equivocal situation.

Taking our chain of reasoning into account it is justifiable to retain to the concept of uncertainty. We consider the concept of equivocality as being inappropriate to describe the concerns of our participants currently facing downsizing.

5.1.2 Level of uncertainty

In our theoretical framework we presented three different levels of uncertainty: external, organizational and individual. During our analysis we identified that the majority of our participants was located on the individual level of uncertainty.

Buono and Bowdich (1989) define the external level as the individual attempt to understand, interpret and react to external conditions. It refers to the individual’s evaluation and prediction of environmental changes. Our participants were not concerned about the changes on the external level as their uncertainty was not based on their perception of the fast moving technology industry. Participants were aware of the constantly changing environment and the high degree of required flexibility. Harry argued: “In this industry we see a lot of rapid development. We see a lot of changes going on all the time”. Employees recognized the pressure to stay competitive. Therefore, all of our participants showed an understanding for Enigmas necessity to downsize. William stated: “I realized that we have a difficult economic

situation and that we have to do something”. As the external influences can be estimated by our participants they do not experience uncertainty on the external level.

On the organizational level of uncertainty structural and cultural impacts are considered (Buono & Bowdich, 1989). We noticed that employees were speculating about the future organizational structure. Antonio guessed: “One logical conclusion would be that they will move the whole staff to Tokyo”. Many of our participants engaged in thoughts about the effects of downsizing on the organization. Some interviewees expressed their concerns that Enigma would lose people with key competences during the process of downsizing.

“I am very concerned about that, because I also know the competences of the people in this building and [...] it will be tough for [Enigma] without some of them.” - William

For us as the researchers it was interesting to see that especially managers remarked their concerns on the organizational level. Having the responsibility for one department contributed to their organizational perspective. Harry described: “For my department I have global function [...]. That is my biggest concern”. We even detected a certain expectation of managers to consider the organizational issues due to their role. Michael explained: “As a manager I also have certain responsibility. I cannot start speculating too widely and be too negative neither about my own situation nor about the company's [...]. You need to keep a certain profile”. Besides the structural dimension participants mentioned their concerns about the impacts of downsizing on the organizational culture. Laura questioned: “What will be the vibe of this workplace”. Within this apprehension there was a special focus on the consequences for remaining employees. Cathrine revealed: “There are going to be people left behind. Let us see how it is going to be for them”. Our analysis has shown that some participants are concerned about structural and cultural impacts of the downsizing and thereby experience uncertainty on the organizational level.

For the purpose of our thesis we are mainly interested in participant’s perception of uncertainty on the individual level. Although we can identify concerns on the organizational level, the majority of our participants are mostly concerned about the impacts of downsizing for them personally. A few participants even mentioned that it was obvious to think about oneself facing such a situation.

“You do not think about the company when you are about to maybe lose your job. So it gets on a personal level.” - Larissa

On the individual level participants were thinking about personal consequences including their professional future. Alexander outlined: “Many people start thinking about what will

happen with their job and what happens if they are part of the reduction”. Being part of the reduction implicates a change in employee’s personal life. In addition, we explored that even those participants, who are not expecting to be made redundant, are concerned on the individual level. Alexander recognized: “It is not like I am worried about my job [...]. Whatever happens, it will affect me in a way or in another way. It does not necessarily mean that I will be part of the reduction, but it could be”. This quote indicates that participants are confronted with the effects of downsizing on the individual level, whether it is them being made redundant or others. Furthermore, we can describe a connection between all of the three levels as they are interrelated in a cascaded way. Uncertainty perceived on the organizational level can influence the uncertainty on the individual level. Laura illustrated: “When you know that the business is not doing too well [...], you also know what that can mean further down the line”. The amount of information available on one level can impact the degree of uncertainty on the subjacent level. For example, knowing that the department, one is employed in, will remain, reduces the uncertainty on the individual level.

Taking the above mentioned into consideration we conclude that our participants are primarily uncertain on the individual level. However, this does not exclude the possibility that participants simultaneously experience uncertainty on another level.

5.2 Extended EVLN model

In this section we are going to relate our findings to our analytical framework, the EVLN model by Farrell (1983). We are going to discuss how our strategies, presented in chapter 4.1.2, are applicable to the categories of ‘exit’, ‘voice’, ‘loyalty’ and ‘neglect’. Within this process it will be necessary to adjust and extend the initial meaning of these categories in order to provide a suitable framework for our findings. Additionally, the creation of a new category will be required as our findings exceed the given theoretical framework. Consequently, we will end up our theoretical discussion having five categories of coping strategies. Within these categories we will allocate our discovered coping strategies.

For the purpose of distinction we decided to refer to the five theoretical categories as coping ‘options’ and to our findings as coping ‘strategies’. The allocations of our findings into the ‘options’ are not set in stones and depend on the individuals’ perspectives and interpretations. Furthermore, our ‘strategies’ cannot be separated explicitly and may overlap. The occurrence of a ‘strategy’ in more than one ‘option’ is possible as a strategy consists of several elements. Therefore, one ‘strategy’ can be allocated to various ‘options’ focusing on different elements (overview, see appendix).

Overall, the categorization of our findings contributes to the understanding of individual coping strategies related to uncertainty as an outcome of downsizing. Furthermore, our eight discovered coping ‘strategies’ provide a broader picture of existing strategies within Enigma. Relating them to the EVLN model they gain theoretical legitimation. As a result a more sophisticated research is rendered.

Exit

Regarding our theoretical framework ‘exit’ represents the employee’s preference to leave the company. This does not only include to leave the organization but also to switch jobs within the company (Farrell, 1983). Individuals choosing this strategy expect that the situation is unlikely to improve. Consequently, the only possibility to resolve the situation is ending the relationship and quit. For the purpose of our thesis we adopt the ‘exit’ option in order to categorize our findings. However, we understand ‘exit’ to be not only related to the execution of leaving the job but also to the consideration of and thoughts about alternative employments.

Accordingly, our initial strategy ‘alternative employment’ matches with this part of our theoretical framework. Within this strategy we have described that some people leave voluntarily, whereas others simply consider taking this step and look for alternative employments. Both of these behaviors might be motivated by the belief that the current situation can probably not be improved. Our participants expressed that it was reasonable to look for alternatives during periods of reorganization. Furthermore, we discovered that the willingness of leaving the company or looking for alternatives is highly influenced by individual’s loyalty towards and identification with the company. Consequently, our findings confirm our theoretical presumption since according to Hirschman (1970) people rather choose the ‘exit’ option, if loyalty is marginal. Interviewees having described themselves as being loyal and highly committed to the company rather chose to stay with the company as they believe the situation to improve.

Taking into account our theoretical starting point, Farrell (1983) described the ‘exit’ option as a powerful tool as it could set an example for others. ‘Exit’ as a statement could influence the remaining employees in orienting towards this behavior as well as the organization to be aware of this consequence and take it seriously. Our findings support this theoretical assumption as one of our participants argued that choosing the ‘exit’ option can represent an expressive statement.

Voice

The 'voice' option was originally defined as the attempt to improve the employment relationship through communication and thereby return to the previous state (Hirschman, 1970). According to Farrell (1983) this communication can be directed towards authorities, other employees and external people. Based on our findings we decided to extend the original meaning of the 'voice' option. We do not only consider the communication aimed at improving the relationship but also the communication and talk in general, in which people engage in, in order to deal with the uncertain situation. We deem this extension to be necessary since it is conspicuous that many of our participants engage in talking to others. The communication can be seen as an attempt to gain a better understanding, make-sense of the situation and facilitate coping. Regarding this interpretation it is reasonable for us to assign our 'talking' strategy to the 'voice' option. Some of our participants argued that the communication and the exchange of information within the organization was helping them to comprehend the situation. This is in alignment with our theoretical framework since Rusbult et al. (1988) describe that employees can communicate their problems with their colleagues and supervisors. During our analysis we discovered that this communication does not only take place within the organization but also with people outside the organization. Talking to others can be seen as an expression of the personal opinion. According to Hoffmann (2006) the 'voice' option can also represent the possibility to state personal dissatisfaction. Although our research showed that employees rarely raise their voice towards management as they doubt to achieve anything and have to ensure political correctness, they rather talk and express their opinion towards their colleagues.

Another dominant part of the 'voice' option we found was that people start speculating and creating rumors. Despite the fact that some of our participants are aware of the negative effects of rumors the majority of interviewees participate in them since they are searching for more information. In the original definition of the 'voice' option rumors are not mentioned directly. However, regarding our interpretation of it, we consider rumors to be important as they help people to deal with their situation through communication. In this context we consider parts of two other strategies to be relevant within the 'voice' option, although they are not precisely mentioned in our theoretical framework. The 'control' strategy needs to be acknowledged as we have shown that it includes the attempt to influence the decision maker through communication. This is in agreement with the initial theoretical demonstration of Hirschman (1970) claiming that efforts to improve the employment relationship should be allocated to the 'voice' option. Moreover, parts of the 'stability' strategy have to be considered in this regard. Within the 'stability' strategy we displayed that some of our

participants look for someone supposed to be stable and talk to that person. This talking serves to stabilize the employee and thereby reduce uncertainty. Especially managers are assigned to this stable role by some of our participants. They even describe the manager as a kind of sense-maker for them. Following Rusbult et al.'s (1988) statement that employees can address their problems with their supervisor, we interpret our findings regarding the role of the manager as being consistent with the theory.

Loyalty

The original understanding of the third option, namely 'loyalty', is described as the choice to stay in the organization and wait for improvement. People stick to the organization and await further developments. This is according to Rusbult et al. (1982) done without taking individual actions. We agree to this understanding by adding that people do not only wait for improvement but also for more information to be able to determine their next steps. Expanding the 'loyalty' option accordingly enables us to include three of our strategies: 'wait, see and continue working'; 'control' and 'hide behind role'. We found the 'wait, see and continue working' strategy to be dominant when coping with uncertainty during downsizing. Participants described that they continue their work while waiting for more information. More information was perceived to be necessary to reduce uncertainty and determine the next steps. This finding is aligned with the theoretical starting point considering our extension. From our point of view the waiting for improvement can also include waiting for more information since more information is expected to improve the situation for the individual. In this context our 'wait, see and continue working' strategy matches the initial 'loyalty' option. However, we question Rusbult et al.'s (1982) assertion that 'loyalty' refers to the decision to stay and wait. Some of our participants described not having another choice than to wait and continue their work since more information was needed to determine future behavior. Furthermore, they claimed to have to continue working because they were responsible towards Enigma and their colleagues since deliverables were expected. Consequently, we argue that pursuing the 'loyalty' option is not only based on a free decision. Following this strategy might also be based on the perception of being forced to wait and continue working. From a critical stance it could be argued that the term 'loyalty' is not suitable to cover the described pressure to pursue this option. Being aware of this controversy we do not assume loyalty to be reduced towards the degree of identification with the organization. We rather see loyalty in a wider sense and consider various reasons for employees to stay and continue their work.

Applying the common understanding of the term 'loyalty' including the degree of identification with the organization, we can assign the 'hide behind role' strategy to the

‘loyalty’ option. Participants within the ‘hide behind role’ strategy describe themselves as being highly committed and loyal to Enigma or their profession. They are focused on their workload, the importance of their work and their responsibilities. In order to satisfy their role expectations they stay at the organization and continue working. Therefore, we can allocate the ‘hide behind role’ strategy to the ‘loyalty’ option.

During our analysis we noticed that we could assign a part of the ‘control’ strategy to the ‘loyalty’ option. Within the ‘control’ strategy we discovered that a few participants continue their work by concentrating on small tasks with direct feedback. These participants stay at Enigma and try to keep up with their work while waiting for the situation to improve. This behavior conforms to our theoretical framework as Rusbult et al. (1982) mention that people within the ‘loyalty’ option stay at the organization and wait for developments without taking instant actions to improve the situation.

Neglect

Within our theoretical framework the ‘neglect’ option is understood as the choice to distance oneself from the organization and reduce one’s work effort (Grima & Glaymann, 2012). For the purpose of our thesis we stick to this definition. We assume the ‘neglect’ option to be characterized by apathetic behavior. Employees dissociate from the organization and minimize their work according to regulations. The ‘neglect’ option is closely associated with individuals’ inner attitude and their mindset. Therefore, we can allocate our ‘personal attitude’ strategy to the ‘neglect’ option. Within this strategy we outlined that some participants feel indifferent and powerless since they have the impression of not being able to change the situation. We discovered resignation to be a result. This finding is in accordance with Rusbult et al. (1982) arguing that a careless and indifferent attitude can increase the tendency to resign. Another behavior, which we assume to be appropriate within the ‘neglect’ option, is a part of the ‘stability’ strategy. Some participants pursuing this strategy described themselves as taking care of their own thoughts and emotions, rather of work related issues. This dissociation can be found in our theoretical framework. Farrell (1983) exposed that the ‘neglect’ option includes distancing oneself from the organization.

Furthermore, our ‘preparing’ strategy can be allocated to the ‘neglect’ option. Although it might not be suitable at first glance as it involves active preparation, we still assume that the engagement with non-task related subjects leads to dissociation. We talked to participants who confessed that they occupied themselves with scenario planning and preparing for alternatives. Thereby their focus shifts from their initial work tasks to more personal interests and needs. This finding is reflected within our theoretical starting point as a part of the

‘neglect’ option is the unconcerned deterioration of the situation due to minimized interest and work efforts (Shi-bin & Yong, 2014).

Self-regulation

During the process of analysis we came to the conclusion that our analytical framework was insufficient in order to cover all of our identified coping strategies. Although we first categorized our findings into different strategies, we ascertained during our theoretical discussion that the majority of our findings correlates with one of the EVLN-options. Nevertheless, we consider our findings related to the participants’ mindset and their cognitive handling with the situation to not be suitable with the already existing options within the theoretical framework. These not yet assigned findings do not include active behavior aiming at improving the employment situation. Therefore, we perceive them to be rather passive and we can exclude the conformity with the ‘exit’ and/ or ‘voice’ option. These two options are classified to include active responses. Regarding the passiveness one could argue that our remaining findings could match either the ‘loyalty’ or ‘neglect’ option. However, we do not assume the ‘loyalty’ option to be appropriate since it implies the individual to stay with the organization and wait. Our remaining findings do not require the employee to stay. The response rather takes place irrespective of possible future steps within this period of transition. Although the ‘neglect’ option appears to be more corresponding to our remaining findings as it considers the individual’s cognitive engagement, we do not approve a matching. The ‘neglect’ option is connected to negative effects since the personal work effort is reduced. According to this negative connotation our findings, which are predominantly positive in nature, do not fit into the ‘neglect’ option. Consequently, we decided to create a new category within our analytical framework, namely ‘self-regulation’.

This new category describes a coping option occurring on the individual’s cognitive level. The aim of this coping option is to facilitate the handling of the uncertain situation through the cognitive engagement and the development of a certain inner attitude. According to this characterization we allocated parts of our ‘personal attitude’ strategy to the ‘self-regulation’ option. During our interviews we assigned some participants on the basis of their statements to be rather naïve and not seeing the situation realistically. They seem to do not want to see the truth and talk themselves into believing that they will not be affected by the downsizing. We interpret these thoughts to be naïve as well as constituting a self-protection mechanism. By trying to avoid the cognitive engagement with negative potential consequences of the downsizing participants tend to protect themselves against the feeling of uncertainty. Besides, we talked to participants who seemed to suppress their emotions and denied the situation. It

could be argued that this behavior also serves as a self-protection mechanism since participants do not allow thoughts and feelings about the downsizing and its effects to come close to them. Another element of the 'self-regulation' option is the positive inner attitude towards the situation. Some participants expressed to stay optimistic and see the period of transition in a positive light. This positive attitude even made a few participants turn the worst case into something positive seeing the redundancy phase as an opportunity rather than as a threat.

In addition to the 'personal attitude' strategy we regard a part of the 'stability' strategy as belonging to the 'self-regulation' option. Regarding the cognitive engagement characterizing this option we see the effort to stabilize oneself as a component of the 'self-regulation' option since it also takes place on the cognitive level. A few participants described that they engaged in physical and mental trainings in order to stabilize themselves. This cognitive stabilization serves as a facilitator for coping with the uncertain situation and reduces emerging strain.

6 Conclusion

In this final chapter we will summarize our results and thereby provide answers to both of our research questions. Furthermore, we will outline the contribution of our study as well as possible limitations. Moreover, we will suggest directions for future research within the topic of downsizing.

The purpose of our study was to gain an increased understanding of employees' perceived uncertainty and their coping strategies during the period of downsizing. Within our analysis we discovered a variety of coping strategies, developed and pursued by our interview participants, to cope with the experienced uncertainty in the face of downsizing. We were able to cluster our results into categories and summarized them into eight coping strategies. The most frequently occurred coping strategy was the 'wait, see and continue working' strategy. It is characterized by participants waiting for further information and developments while simultaneously continuing their daily work. The 'hide behind role' strategy refers to participants hiding themselves behind their organizational role and related work tasks and expectations. Within the 'personal attitude' strategy participants tend to adopt a certain attitude. Thereby participants show either a positive attitude towards the situation or suppressed their feelings and thoughts. The 'talking' strategy includes any form of communication to exchange information and emotions. Rumors and speculations are identified to be dominant issues within this category. Participants pursuing the 'preparing' strategy create plans, determine next steps and analyze the worst case. This preparation can

provide a sense of security during periods of transition. Related to that we identified the ‘alternative employment opportunities’ strategy, which includes thoughts about leaving the organization as well as the actual execution. The ‘control’ strategy covers the participants’ attempt to get back in control by influencing the situation, team members or the decision-maker. Finally, the efforts in gaining personal stability, individual mental and emotional strength characterize the ‘stability’ strategy. Within our theoretical discussion we were mainly able to allocate our discovered coping strategies into the existing classification of Grima and Glaymann (2012), the EVLN model. In order to do justice to our findings we had to adjust and extend the initial meaning of these categories. Moreover, we created the new category ‘self-regulation’, which takes into account the participants’ mindset and their cognitive handling of the situation. The above mentioned results constitute an answer to our first research question. Our identified coping strategies reveal how employees deal with uncertainty as an outcome of downsizing in an environment of continuous change. In general it needs to be acknowledged that coping strategies can be developed and pursued both consciously and unconsciously.

Within our research we could further discover that the existence of different coping strategies is ascribed to people’s varying perceptions of uncertainty during downsizing. The participants showed different degrees of uncertainty depending on their individual assessment. We recognized that the individual’s perception is affected by their sense-making and several other factors of influence. We identified eight factors influencing individuals’ perception of uncertainty, namely: character traits; profession; life circumstances; role as a manager; loyalty and identification; environment and contacts; industry environment and experiences of previous downsizing. When relating our findings to our theoretical framework we ascertained that our participants were mainly uncertain on the individual level. This contributed to our research project since we were primarily interested in the effects of downsizing on the individual. Furthermore, within our theoretical discussion, we reasoned that the concept of uncertainty, in contrast to equivocality, was appropriate to describe the concerns of our participants. The preceding explanations provide an answer to our second research question as they explain why people cope differently with uncertainty during downsizing. Different degrees of perceived uncertainty among our participants were revealed to lead to varying coping strategies.

Our research project contributes to deeper insights into employees’ understanding and related thoughts and behaviors during downsizing. We investigated how uncertainty, as an effect of downsizing, impacts the individual, and which coping strategies each person develops and

pursues. Since we conducted our research directly during the beginning of the downsizing phase, we add to the existing literature on effects of downsizing. Previous literature was mainly interested in the perspective of surviving employees after a downsizing process, whereas we consider the perspective of employees currently experiencing downsizing. Moreover, our study provides empirical evidence to support and challenge the EVLN model. Our findings prove the existence of these four categories but also question their applicability by contributing to an expansion of the model.

While conducting our research we had to acknowledge that it is not without limitations. A qualitative study, based on interviews as primary source, is strongly dependent on the interviewees' honesty and willingness to contribute. Although we tried to build a trustworthy relationship with our participants, we cannot entirely exclude the possibility of incomplete and dishonest answers. Furthermore, we are aware of the constraint that our participants might have heard about our research topic prior to the interview. Their answers might have been influenced by that, and spontaneous answers could have been prevented.

Based on our empirical analysis we identified subthemes that would have been interesting to study and we believe that there is scope for further research. We acknowledge that it would have been attractive to explore how people, who voluntarily have left the organization, experienced the uncertainty. Although we were not able to conduct interviews with them, we suppose that their proactive behavior is due to a different perception of uncertainty resulting from deviant factors of influence. Furthermore, it would be interesting to investigate in the order of dismissals and its effects on the employee. The currently valid 'last in first out' principal at Enigma may lead to the dismissal of highly motivated employees, whereas employees being less motivated are allowed to stay. Thereby it can be assumed that the overall productivity is reduced due to decreased motivation among the remaining employees.

7 References

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8 Appendix

Interview -Guide

1. What is your job at Enigma and what tasks does it include?
 - a. How long have you been employed at Enigma?
 - b. What motivates you to stand up in the morning and go to work?
(Identification with Enigma or with the profession?)
 - c. Do you have a family?
2. What is your opinion about the announced downsizing?
(cognitive perspective)
3. How do you feel about the announced downsizing? How does it affect you?
(emotional perspective)
4. Do you experience uncertainty?
5. What kind of uncertainty?
6. How does uncertainty influence your behavior? How do you react/ respond?
7. Which strategy do you choose to cope with uncertainty?
8. Why did you choose this strategy?

Table of Findings

	Name of interviewee A	Name of interviewee B
Job (task, department and people responsibility)		
Period of employment		
Family status		
Opinion downsizing (cognitive perspective)		
Experiences previous downsizing		
Is there uncertainty? (in general at Enigma)		
Personal uncertainty		
Uncertainty perceived by others		
Effects on daily work (personally)		
Coping strategies (personally)		
Effects of uncertainty (organization in general)		
Working atmosphere (industry environment)		
Summary		

Overview allocation strategies

Extended EVLN model (options)	Discovered coping strategies (strategies)
Exit	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Alternative employment
Voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Talking▪ Control▪ Stability
Loyalty	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Wait, see and continue working▪ Hide behind role▪ Control
Neglect	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Personal attitude▪ Stability▪ Preparing
Self-regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Personal attitude▪ Stability