



LUND UNIVERSITY
School of Economics and Management

‘Partly Reversed Measures’:
Critically Assessing the Management of
Resistance Within Radical Changes

Accompanying Banking Employees on Their Identity Journey During
Digital Transformation

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Abstract

The omnipresent megatrend digitalization significantly challenges traditional banking organizations. Banking employees' work life, including their job role and identity are subject of radical change. Due to banks' importance to societies and economies, those consequences of digitalization need investigation to prepare for expected future changes. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand the significance of digitalization for the underlying dynamics of employees' work life, including identity conflicts, change management, and the management of potential change resistance. We conducted interviews with a diverse group of customer-oriented banking employees and management representatives in various branches and offices within Nordea in South Sweden and Copenhagen. Following an interpretivist and abductive research approach, we establish multiple key learnings which are of interest to academics and practitioners. We argue that radical changes cause identity conflicts. Consequently, resistance is likely. We reason that an organization can ease this resistance and reach acceptance of an overall continuing change direction by partly reversing some changes. These 'partly reversed measures' offer employees the opportunity to retain parts of their pre-change identity. However, they prevent employees from engaging in identity work, which is required for creating a post-change identity stability that is altered accordingly and anchored sustainably. Banking employees perceive an elusive sense of security and, consequently, avoid to critically reflect on future changes that might impact their work life. We finally conclude that engaging in identity work is of utmost importance to process past and prepare for future changes. We invite researchers to continue examining identity work in light of digitalization due to its relevance for all kinds of industries.

Keywords: Digitalization, change, radical change, change management, managing resistance, identity, identity work, work life, banking industry

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1 Introduction

Within the first chapter of our Master's thesis, the reader is introduced to the conducted study. First, an illustration of the study background enables the reader to grasp the research context. We introduce the term digitalization and show its effects on the banking industry. Further, we give a brief overview of Nordea Bank (hereafter: 'Nordea') as our case company. Second, we present our research objectives, including the research problem, statement of purpose, our personal research motivation, and the research questions. Finally, the chapter concludes with the disposition of the thesis that offers the reader an outlook of the following thesis parts.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Introducing: Digitalization

The field of digitalization comes with a variety of definitions that can cause confusion. Nevertheless, as part of our research, they are imperative to understand. Therefore, the following section provides the reader with the necessary knowledge to differentiate between the terms digitalization, digitization, and digital (business) transformation. Finally, we show how the banking industry is impacted by digitalization.

Defining Digitalization - Shedding Light on Definitional Confusion

According to Gartner's IT Glossary (2019a, 2019b), digitalization is the use of digital technologies to create new, digital business models, whereas digitization can be understood as the process of changing an object (e.g., a product, service, process) from an analog into a digital form. In comparison to these definitions, digital business transformation, too, exploits new digital technologies for new digital business models (Gartner Inc., 2019c). Digital transformation focuses on the ability to react and deal with change related to the digital world (Bloomberg, 2018). In order to simplify this array of interrelated definitions we, from now on, solely use the word digitalization as the overarching expression for any form of digitalization, digitization, or digital (business) transformation. Additionally, our research context Nordea connects a multitude of elements related to all definitions mentioned above.

Digitalization in the Banking Industry

Digitalization is a megatrend, which is expected to influence companies, markets, and societies in an unprecedented and accelerated way (Copenhagen Institute for Future Studies, 2017). Specifically, processes related to product and business development that digitalize “human activities” are at its core (Copenhagen Institute for Future Studies, 2017, p.5). Consequently, it is imperative for all businesses, regardless of the industry, to not only be aware of this megatrend but actively prepare for it. The consulting firm Accenture views the banking industry to be one of the many industries that become digitalized to a great extent through the accelerated acceptance and usage of mobile devices (Ruotsila, Ekdahl & Vitali, 2015). The Accenture consultants Ruotsila, Ekdahl and Vitali (2015) present factors that particularly impact the banking industry. Firstly, digital technology companies such as Google, Facebook, Amazon, or Apple raise customers’ universal demands for high service levels. Even though their products do not pose direct competition to banks’ services, their particular focus on high service-delivery leads to an increase in customers’ demands and expectations in all industries. Consequently, business models of traditional banks are challenged. Secondly, new competition from other industries fuel the diversity of business models and revenue streams that have formerly been centralized in the traditional banking institutions. One concrete example is the introduction of Apple’s new credit card in cooperation with Goldman Sachs (Maldonado, 2019). Additionally, FinTechs, financial technology-focused companies, are challenging traditional financial organizations by creating faster and more convenient technological products (Dietz, HV & Lee, 2016). Due to the FinTechs’ agility, technological know-how, and highly accessible services, traditional banks are being significantly challenged in their market (Tuite, 2019). The combination and interplay of the two previously explained factors raise the bar of customer expectations and demands on speed and convenience, not only for banking but for any service today. Regulatory efforts by the European Union (EU) further increase competition within the banking industry. The EU regulation ‘Payment Service Directive (PSD2)’ aims to fuel innovation, transparency, and competition of the European payment processes and services. For instance, third-party companies attain access to customer data from traditional banks aiming to create new digital services (Light et al., 2016). This measure liberates the market of online payment. It offers opportunities to upcoming non-traditional and non-financial banking companies to further disrupt traditional banks and their services.

Ultimately, traditional banks are confronted with an array of technological, regulatory, and competitive factors that require the digitalization of their business models as well as their overall company structures in order to defend their market position.

1.1.2 The Case Company: Nordea Facts

The following section presents Nordea's history and its development up until today. A series of mergers in the 1970s and 1980s resulted in the consolidation of 300 banks into four major bank institutions. In 2001, Nordea was created through a merger of these four largest Nordic banks; namely Nordbanken, Unibank, Kreditkassen, and Meritabank (Nordea, 2019a). The name Nordea is formed by the combination of 'Nordic' and 'ideas'. It signifies how ideas are developed and shared based on Nordic values such as openness, equality, and caring for the environment (Nordea, 2019a). In 2018, more than 29,000 employees served approximately ten million customers in more than 20 countries while generating an operating income above €9 billion (Nordea, 2019b). This makes Nordea the largest financial service group in Northern Europe. Nordea's four operation pillars focus on Personal Banking, Commercial and Business Banking, Wholesale Banking, and Asset & Wealth Management (Nordea, 2019a; Nordea Bank Abp, 2019). Since 2015, Casper von Koskull guides Nordea as president and Group CEO. Traditionally, Nordea had its headquarters in Stockholm, Sweden. On 1st of October 2018, Nordea re-located to Helsinki, Finland to enter the EU banking regulatory framework (Nordea, 2019a).

1.2 Research Objectives

1.2.1 Research Problem

Digitalization is one of the global megatrends of the 21st century (Copenhagen Institute for Future Studies, 2017; Harteis, 2018). It is a current phenomenon influencing all aspects of life (Copenhagen Institute for Future Studies, 2017) and, therefore, has been and still needs to be a matter of research in various research domains (Muro et al., 2017). This megatrend has major consequences for every member of society and every business (Copenhagen Institute for Future Studies, 2017). As this study is conducted in the field of social and organizational science, the interplay of digitalization - as a de facto omnipresent phenomenon - and workplaces is of superior interest.

Especially traditional industries such as banking are profoundly challenged by new technologies connected to digitalization. These legacy companies are expected to undergo significant changes in their organizational structures and business models, which is problematic due to their size and inflexibility towards changes. Further, emerging digital competition is capitalizing on new digital technologies and takes over market shares from traditional companies (Ruotsila, Ekdahl & Vitali, 2015). This creates a multitude of problems related to banks' market position, profitability, and brand value. The way they have been conducting business during the last decades is threatened. Additionally, the banking industries' importance for a country's GDP signifies the need for a successful, digital adaptation to avoid societal problems such as unemployment. Other once powerful traditional companies that neglected technological advancements exemplify this. In sum, those problems and challenges constitute a research problem worth investigating.

Moreover, digitalization impacts the way employees work and interact with customers. It requires an adjustment of job role and identity (Regini, Kitay & Baethge, 1999). Consequently, these changes can lead to challenges or even losses of established identities. These identity conflicts can lead to resistance. Therefore, they require in-depth theoretical examination from a change management perspective. Creating acceptance and increasing employees' readiness for these changes is a problem that needs to be prioritized and understood in terms of identity.

Finally, the human element and the individuals' lifeworld are frequently neglected in the literature when assessing and discussing megatrends like digitalization (Croon Fors, 2013). We consider this neglect problematic, both in terms of economic and societal concerns. Therefore, this thesis aims to study the field of digitalization, primarily focusing on those who have to cope and accept change initiatives in the role of change recipients.

1.2.2 Statement of Purpose

This study is situated in the context of radical digital transformations within the banking industry. Our ambition is to understand the effects of radical changes on banking employees' work life. This purpose is grounded in our belief that individual employee dynamics need to be considered in order to reach successful organizational change. Further, the subordinate role of individual banking employees as a part of the inevitable megatrend digitalization was a foundation for this employee-focused research purpose. From an academic perspective, this purpose leads us to fulfilling the researchers' duty to discover and disclose various perspectives and ambiguities of a phenomenon (Styhre, 2013).

Additionally, a purpose of our study is to contribute to the field of change management by describing implications for the effective implementation of substantial, digital-focused transformation projects.

The banking sector as a traditional large-scale industry constitutes a promising and relevant research field. Banking institutions with their interrelations to any other industry are of societal importance. Thus, understanding the effects of digitalization on banking employees is interesting in terms of economical business factors as well as in terms of more macro-societal factors. Concluding, this case makes an excellent and extremely relevant study today as well as in the future.

1.2.3 Personal Motivation for This Research Topic

Our interest in the research topic is based on the general fascination for the digitalizing world and its changing influence on work and private life. Experiencing banking services from our German home banks, which we feel are not as digitalized as the Swedish banking sector, is another reason for our interest in this particular thesis topic. Moreover, we belong to a group of future banking customers with digital service expectations in terms of speed, automation, self-service, availability, mobility, and price. We chose Nordea as a case company due to its importance to the Swedish economy, its position as one of the leading and technologically-advanced banks, as well as the extensive media coverage about the positive and negative aspects of its transformational journey. This study enables us to truly understand the dynamics of digitalization efforts in practice. Having an exemplary Scandinavian institution such as Nordea as our research subject, complements the knowledge, skills, and capabilities gained through our Master's program Managing People, Knowledge, and Change.

1.2.4 Research Questions

The following research questions provided orientation throughout the entire research process:

- How is digitalization significant for banking employees' work life?
- Which implications do changes in the employees' work life have for the management of radical change?

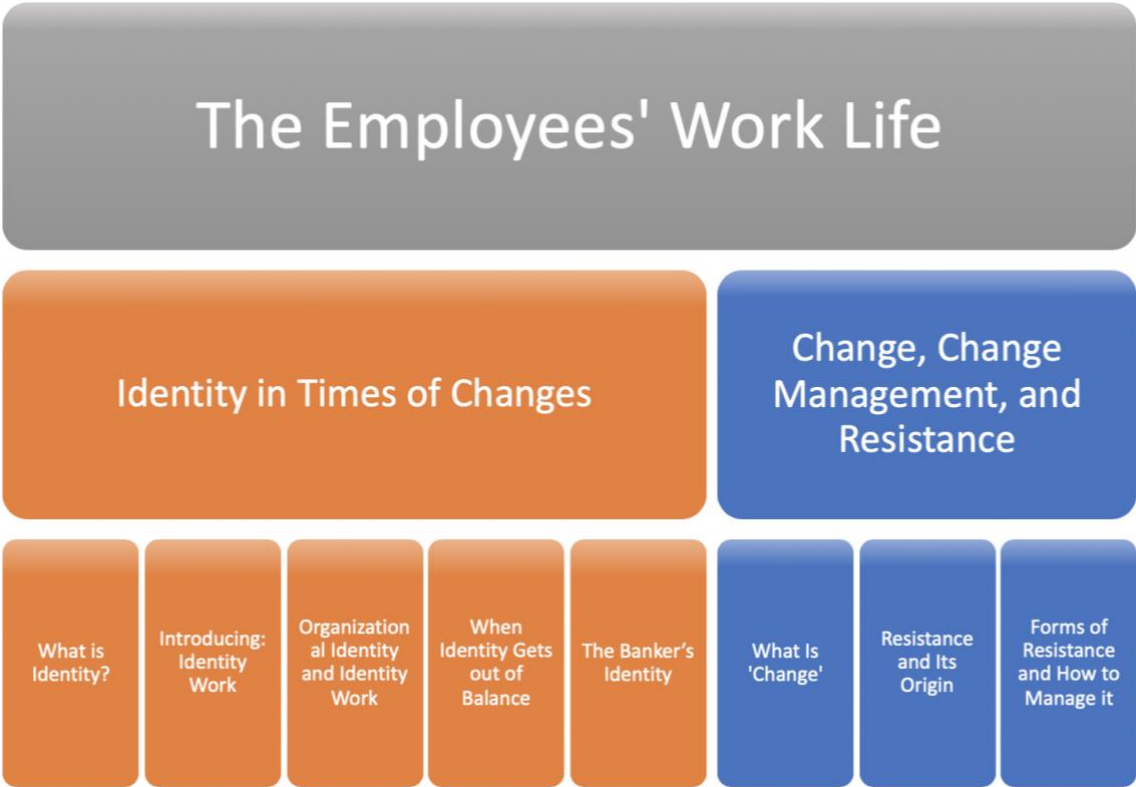
1.3 Disposition/Thesis Outline

This last section of the first chapter aids the reader with an overview of this Master's thesis. **The first chapter** provided the reader with an overview of the context of this study, its case company, and its research objectives. From the **second chapter** onwards, this thesis is organized in the light of a dichotomy between the two main theoretical pillars, identity as well as change management and resistance. Therefore, the **second chapter** entails a literature review of these two pillars. It lays the theoretical foundation for the analysis in chapter four. **Chapter three** discusses the methodology, which comprises the research foundation, the applied research approach, as well as its process and a critical reflection. **Chapter four** is an extensive collection of empirical material, sorted and analyzed according to a narrative based on the dichotomy of change management and resistance as well as identity. Here, the reader arrives at the most critical elements of Nordea's transformational journey and its impact on the banking employees' work life. **Chapter five** relates the previously established narrative to the discussed literature of chapter two. Moreover, a new metaphor aims to simplify the newly gained insights. **Chapter six** summarizes and concludes our whole thesis. It offers and reflects on the established contributions and dares a view into possible future research related to our study. The last chapter concludes with a summary of the key findings.

2 Literature Review

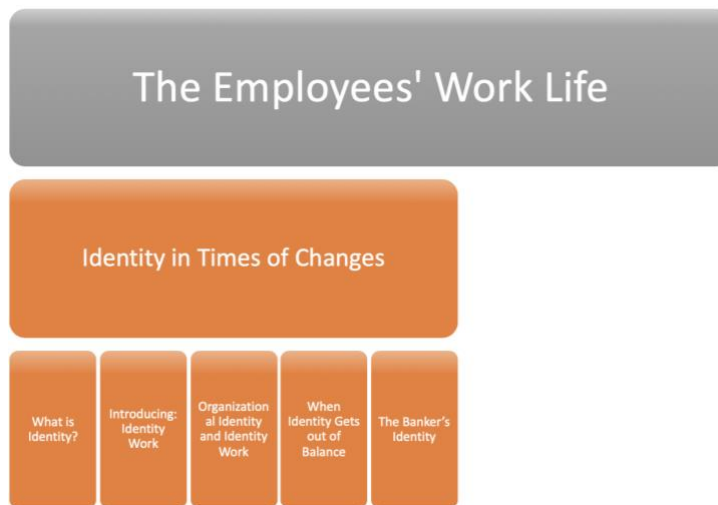
The following chapter offers the reader a literature review that aims to create the theoretical background used for the analysis followed in the next chapter. Following the above-mentioned dichotomy, we focus on two fields of literature we consider most relevant for our research: identity in times of changes as well as change, change management, and resistance. Referring back to our research questions, the employees’ work life functions as a unifying and overarching point of orientation.

Table 1 - Structure of the Literature Review



2.1 Identity in Times of Changes

Table 2 - Structure of the Chapter 'Identity in Times of Changes'



The following section introduces the concept of identity, identity work, and its implications for modern-day organizational and employees' work life (Table 2).

2.1.1 What Is Identity?

Looking at the concept of identity can support one's understanding of people's self-view and the way they make sense of their

surrounding lifeworld (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). Identity is defined as a stable and coherent self-view providing an idea of who we are (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016; Watson, 2009). Particularly, facing times of drastic changes in personal and professional life can result in changing expectations and demands concerning an individual's self-view (Brown, 2015; Watson, 2008). One's self-view gets rattled and, maintaining "a coherent picture of who we are and what we can do" is impeded (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016, p.16). In general, the inherent complexity of changes contradicts the need for a stable and consistent view of ourselves (Sennett, 1999). Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016) add that identity is responsible for the creation of emotions, values, and thoughts. Further, it is always dependent on the context and environment and, thus, subject to change.

2.1.2 Introducing: Identity Work

We acknowledge the interdependencies between people and contexts (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008). Therefore, we introduce the concept of identity work in the following.

"Identity work refers to people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness" (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p.1165). Further, identity work is influenced by an individual's tendency to see oneself in a positive light. This positive view constitutes a foundation for professional and private relationships and, finally, results in identities' co-

creation and development with and through others (Watson, 2008, 2009). Identity work, which Sveningsson and Alvesson also label as “becoming” (2003, p.1164), emphasizes a dynamic, but ongoing struggle of what and who we are. This negotiation of identity occurs through social and emotionally charged processes linked to improvisation and pragmatism (Brown, 2015). Further, it is influenced by dynamics of underlying dominance and potential subsequent resistance (Mumby, 1997).

2.1.3 Organizational Identity and Identity Work

The following section provides an overview of the relationship between individual and organizational identities as well as potential identity conflicts.

According to Brown (2015), the concept of identities and identity work does not only have implications for the individual but also for collectives, such as groups or organizations. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) state that a multitude of different identities influences an individual’s everyday decision-making. This applies to all life situations - also at work. Alvesson, Lee Ashcraft, and Thomas (2008) go one step further and claim that identities and identity work are to be found in almost every topic related to organizational life.

Gioia et al. (2013) view the identities of individual organizational members as the foundation for an overarching organizational identity. An organizational identity describes its members’ self-view on who they are as an organization and what the organization is about (Gioia et al., 2013). It is Gioia et al.’s (2013) belief that an organizational identity needs continuous everyday renewal, and reaffirmation through practice. Kump (2019) supports this with her view on identity as a reflection of an organization’s “routines, procedures, and beliefs” (p. 17) that is self-reinforcing through action (Tripsas, 2009). Nevertheless, a present identity may either support or restrain certain organizational practices (Kump, 2019). Shilling et al. (2012) conclude that, if an individual uses the professional identity to verify his or her own identity, any profession-related change could cause adverse reactions. According to Eilam and Shamir (2005), individuals dislike abrupt changes in their identities. They prefer stability. When an organization develops a new identity, organizational members’ individual identities might not match with it. This can result in disidentification from the organization (Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008; Gioia et al., 2013).

2.1.4 When Identity Gets out of Balance

The following section introduces how the mentioned potential identity problems take place using Sveningsson's and Alvesson's (2016) concept of identity adjustment, expression, juggling, wrestling, and crash.

According to Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016), identity adjustment is a process all workers go through in their career. It can be caused by changes in "work tasks, demands, relationships, situations, and new ideals" (p. 247). Usually, arising conflicts are managed through adapting to or compromising on them. Expressing one's own identity always comes with the potential of conflict between one's self-view and the environment created by the organization. A harmonious balance between contexts and the view on oneself is the ideal (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016).

Identity juggling can be explained as a "mild form of identity struggle" caused by conflicting environmental demands and expectations on one's self-view (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016, p.252). Usually, it is possible to manage these conflicts since one's self-view is not challenged too strong. Nevertheless, this struggle could potentially result in a more severe identity conflict, e.g., wrestling or crashing, when too much of one's self-view is compromised (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016).

Identity wrestling is "a moderately serious form of ongoing identity struggle" (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016, p.259). It can be caused by little confirmation of others resulting in doubts and uncertainty linked to one's own ideals. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016) see this particular identity struggle as a natural appearance in today's organizational world due to the ever-changing ideals of "careers, titles, leadership ideas, and other status indicators" (p. 255).

Finally, identity crashes are the most severe form of identity struggle resulting in significant conflicts between the demands and expectations created by an organization and one's self-view (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). The natural following identity struggle after a crash can be defined by people's unwillingness or inability to compromise their identity with the organization's demands and expectations.

These identity struggles are not mutually exclusive. It is possible to experience variations, co-occurrences, and different intensity levels since identity work is a continuously ongoing process (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016).

2.1.5 The Banker's Identity

In his study on the identity of Danish bankers (in the study: 'vocational identity'), Smistrup (2007) examines its importance in bankers' work life and their struggles within changing environments.

According to Smistrup (2007), identity functions as the foundation for work-related social belonging through the establishment of shared values and norms (Smistrup, 2007). It supports its members to identify who is or who is not part of the same identity group (Smistrup, 2007). Smistrup (2007) stresses that identity at the workplace is created through learning the specific norms and behaviors related to particular work practices and experiences. The author further highlights that, in order to create a coherent identity, identifying and dealing with differences and similarities of past work experiences are of high importance.

Smistrup (2007) recognizes multiple advantages of developing a steady identity in the bankers' work life. Firstly, it enables the banker to deal autonomously with the complexity of problems related to the diversity of customer demands. Secondly, bankers with a joint stable and predictable identity acknowledge each other as a member of the same community of practice. Thirdly, as a result of this identity stability, the customer can predict the bankers' behavior, which results in building a trusting relationship, reducing anxiety, and, finally, aligning expectations.

Regini, Kitay, and Baethge (1999) show that banking has been subject to changes related to technology, globalization, and increased competition. Those trends have a subsequent effect on the bankers' role and identity. Furthermore, increasing customer awareness of financial services and increasing competition shift the power towards the customers and reduce the authority and reputation of bankers (Smistrup, 2007).

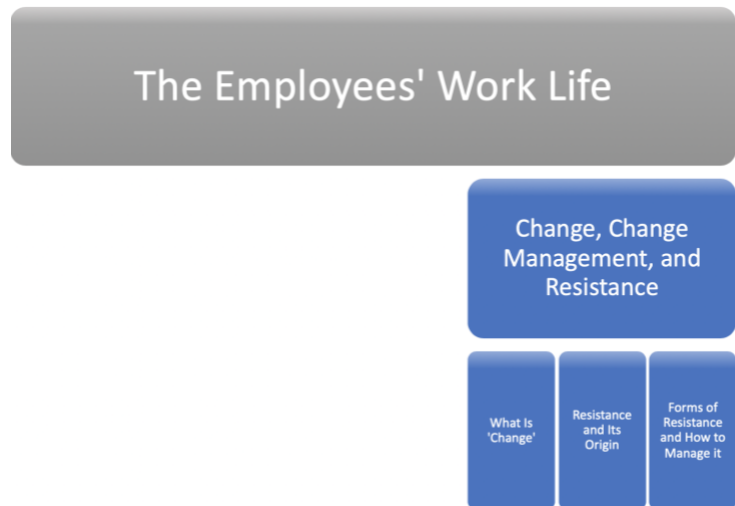
Smistrup (2007) acknowledges Sveningsson's and Alvesson's (2003) processual notion of identity work by stating that identity is "an ongoing learning process" (p.64). He further highlights the importance of the ability to continuously assess, evaluate, and adjust one's self-view to changes related to, for instance, customer expectations or other social situations. Additionally, acknowledging past identities is highly relevant when engaging in identity work due to their influence on the future (McAdams, 1993). Smistrup (2007) supports this by stating "a vocational identity is not just a construction of the present based on a reconstruction of the past, but is also a forecast of the future" (p.65). Nevertheless, Smistrup (2007) associates

identities with a rather conservative willingness to change. He stresses that this is rooted in the high effort that would be required for changing one's own identity.

2.2 Change, Change Management, and Resistance

This thesis assesses dynamics and phenomena in the context of radical changes. As a consequence of digitalization, Nordea's management changed and still changes many aspects of the company's business radically which has a high impact on Nordea's employees' work life. Therefore, the following paragraphs give an overview of the most important terms and aspects within change management of and resistance against radical changes.

Table 3 - Structure of the Chapter 'Change, Change Management, and Resistance'



2.2.1 What Is 'Change'?

In organizations of any kind, change is a predominant phenomenon (Al-Haddad & Kotnour, 2015). Therefore, literature about organizational change and change management is vast and multi-faceted (e.g., Al-Haddad & Kotnour, 2015; Choi, 2011; Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016; Smollan, 2011a). In the following, we display the main categorizations and aspects of change that hold relevance with regard to our research topic.

Many categorizations of change can be broken down to the dichotomy of viewing change as episodic or continuous (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2013; Weick & Quinn, 1999). Viewing change as the one or the other profoundly impacts the way change is approached in change management efforts. On the one hand, the episodic view of change is based on the assumptions that change always follows specific steps, that it has a beginning and an end, and that it is what happens in-between two divergent organizational equilibria (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2013; Weick & Quinn, 1999). On the other hand, within the continuous view, "organizations are treated as social constructions that are more or less constantly being reproduced" (Sveningsson

& Sörgärde, 2013, p.12). Thus, change is seen as a “constant, evolving, [and] cumulative” process (Weick & Quinn, 1999, p.366). Within the episodic view of change, change is often initiated and driven by a change agent, usually the management (see also: “the planning approach” (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016, pp.21–30)). In continuous change approaches, change managers take a rather reactive role, being involved in sense-making and identity work processes (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016; Weick & Quinn, 1999) (see also: “the process approach” (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016, pp.30–38)). Considering the concept of identity within change, episodic and continuous change differ strongly. In episodic changes, identity is substituted. There is a ‘before’ and an ‘after’. In contrast, in continuous changes, identity becomes a new identity over time (Weick & Quinn, 1999).

There are several ways to describe the scope or scale of change. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2016) resemble the dichotomy of continuous and episodic change and distinguish between evolutionary and revolutionary change. Coghlan and Rashford (2006) follow a similar distinction when talking about first-order and second-order change. Both distinctions describe the former as incremental and continuous, developing and maintaining an organization. The latter is said to be transformational, fundamentally, and discontinuously changing significant parts of an organization (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016; Coghlan & Rashford, 2006; Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016). Kump (2019) goes one step further and introduces the expression of ‘radical’ change as a form of episodic, revolutionary, or second-order change. Radical change “means the qualitative alteration of an organization’s rules of organizing” (Huy, 2002). It is disruptive, usually initiated as a top-down measure, and “manifested through the replacement of old goals, structures, and processes with new ones” (Kump, 2019, p.6).

Finally, when we look at how change functions, the individuals within an organization play a vital role. Many scholars hold that “organizations only change and act through their members” (Choi, 2011, p.480). Therefore, change only happens and persists if employees “alter their on-the-job behaviors” (Choi, 2011, p.480). Following this line of arguing, change managers need to consider the attitude of the individual employees towards particular changes in order to change an organization in the desired way (Choi, 2011).

2.2.2 Resistance and Its Origin

If the individual member of an organization is responsible for if and how change happens, the individual’s reaction towards changes needs to be assessed in more detail – in this context especially the adverse reactions.

Choi (2011) lays out four cognitive precursors that are general decisive factors for an individual's reaction to change: readiness for change, commitment to change, openness to change, and cynicism about organizational change. Additionally, Piderit (2000) lists three dimensions along which individual responses to change move between positive (support) and negative (resistance). Those dimensions are: emotional, cognitive, and intentional (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016; Piderit, 2000).

A general and widely used definition of resistance by Zaltman and Duncan (1977) describes it as “any conduct that serves to maintain the status quo in the face of pressure to alter the status quo” (p.63).

Sveningsson and Sörgärde (forthcoming) unpack the concept of resistance more detailed according to three over-arching perspectives on change in general and resistance in particular: tools perspective, process perspective, and critical perspective. Those perspectives differ in their respective knowledge interests and aims. Concerning resistance, they are further split up into different notions (Table 4).

Table 4 - Perspectives and Notions of Resistance (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, forthcoming)

Perspective	Notions of resistance
Tools perspective	Resistance as a troublesome element
	Resistance as a valuable contribution
Process perspective	Resistance as a natural occurrence
	Resistance in the form of identity work
Critical perspective	The terminology of resistance as an instrument of power
	Compliance as resistance

We focus here on the notions that are most relevant to our research project. We do not neglect that resistance has to be questioned from a critical perspective as well as that it can be seen as a valuable contribution and naturally occurring. However, we decide to focus on resistance as a troublesome element and how resistance and identity (work) interplay.

Resistance as a Troublesome Element

Within the prescriptive tools perspective, resistance is typically exercised by employees against a change that management representatives aim to implement (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, forthcoming). Therefore, within the tools perspective and in the more conventional change

management literature, resistance is seen as something negative (Al-Haddad & Kotnour, 2015; Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016; Sveningsson & Sörgärde, forthcoming). Consequently, it is the management's duty to overcome resistance (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, forthcoming) - to overcome or break the barriers to change that employees are constituting (Beech et al., 2011). Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan (2016) offer a list of possible factors that are said to cause resistance. Sveningsson and Sörgärde (forthcoming) aggregate those into four main categories: psychological reasons, political reasons, cultural reasons, and lack of sensemaking or readiness for change. As mentioned before, there exist many more descriptions of and approaches to resistance that highlight the complexity and multidimensionality of it (e.g., Beech et al., 2011; Ford & Ford, 1994; Ford, Ford & D'Amelio, 2008; Nag, Corley & Gioia, 2007; Sveningsson & Sörgärde, forthcoming). However, for this literature review, we deem an outline of the basic understandings of resistance sufficient.

Kump (2019) resembles aspects of the approach to resistance 'as a troublesome element' in her concept of radical change. She discusses three inherent problems that come with radical change and can lead to or facilitate resistance. She states that, in radical changes, individuals naturally tend to resist. Furthermore, during and after the time of transition, management control usually decreases, and political dynamics work to retain the pre-change state. Kump refers back to Lewin (1947, p.10 cited in Kump, 2019). Even though he is famous for his rather one-dimensional, episodic change model (unfreezing → changing → refreezing) (Cummings, Bridgman & Brown, 2016), he argues that "observable problems should be viewed as mere 'symptoms' that are 'surface' indications of some 'deeper-lying' facts" (Kump, 2019, p.8).

Resistance in the Form of Identity Work

This notion bridges to Sveningsson's and Sörgärde's (forthcoming) descriptive caption of resistance in the form of identity work. They are supported by several other researchers that put identity in the focus of assessing the concept of resistance (Beech et al., 2011; Fleming & Spicer, 2007; Kump, 2019; Nag, Corley & Gioia, 2007). When change attempts to alter an individual's self-view or the context in which it exists in a balance, the individual's natural desire of stability in its self-view is under scrutiny (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, forthcoming). As a consequence, the individual engages in identity work (see chapter 2.1.2 Introducing: Identity Work). This required effort can already cause resistance (Kump, 2019; Nag, Corley & Gioia, 2007; Sveningsson & Sörgärde, forthcoming). Furthermore, if change "entails a certain loss in status, or that people are forced to compromise greatly about their ideals and self-image"

(Sveningsson & Sörgärde, forthcoming, n.p.) a negative response towards the change is likely (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016).

In her attempt to create an integrated model, Kump (2019) combines more process and more tools-oriented notions of resistance. She includes identity in a model containing three balanced factors that can lead to resistance if their balance is unsettled. Within radical changes, alterations of and “incongruences between ‘what they do’ (practice), ‘what they know’ (knowledge), and ‘who they are’ (identity)” (Kump, 2019, p.5) are likely to occur and potential determinants of resistance. ‘They’ refers to the change recipients. Furthermore, the model highlights the reciprocal effects of changes in practice, knowledge, and identity. This exponentiates the relevance of all three factors in terms of resistance. Kump (2019) especially points out that radical change almost always involves changes in practice. This, following her model, finally suggests that identity (work) is always part of radical change. Thus, it needs to be considered when engaging in radical change management and encountering resistance.

2.2.3 Forms of Resistance and How to Manage It

Looking at how resistance manifests itself, several researchers suggest different categories illustrating different forms of resistance (Bovey & Hede, 2001; Hultman, 1995; Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016; Smollan, 2011a). Smollan (2011a) describes five categories of which three overlap with the discussion of triggers of resistance from before. The other two indicate concrete appearances (or non-appearance) of resistance: active vs. passive resistance and overt/visible vs. covert/invisible resistance (Smollan, 2011a). On the one hand, resistance can appear in active forms “of outright refusal or rebellion or it might manifest in complaints, queries and counter-suggestions” (Smollan, 2011a, p.832). On the other hand, passive resistance can, for instance, occur as “feigning ignorance”, manipulation of the change through “withholding information, suggestions, support”, or “procrastination” (Hultman, 1995, p.16). Apart from this, resistance can be visible. In this case it is clear that resistance exists and who is resisting (Smollan, 2011a). Resistance can also be invisible. Often, it is passive and emotional or cognitive resistance, that is not appearing overt (Smollan, 2011a). Resistance in the form of identity work is also part of this category (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, forthcoming). However, it has to be stated that those dimensions are not mutually exclusive; they often overlap or co-occur simultaneously (Smollan, 2011a). Fleming and Spicer (2007) provide a more abstract list of forms of resistance. They list expressions of resistance as refusal to change, voice (actively trying to gather support or representation), escape (distancing from the realities of power

through cynicism, irony, or humor), and creation (crafting an alternative identity). All of those models or categorizations show that practitioners involved in change should be aware and consider resistance that might not appear as clear and active opposition.

Before assessing ways and possibilities to deal with resistance, more fundamental questions have to be posed: If resistance can be passive and covert, how can a change manager deal with it in the first place (Beech et al., 2011)? Is resistance a phenomenon that can be ‘overcome’ or should change managers focus on avoiding it from the beginning (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016)? Should they attempt to react on resistance, after all (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016)? Researchers have discussed answers to these questions; however, due to the scope of this chapter, they cannot be reviewed in-depth here (e.g., Beech et al., 2011; Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016; Smollan, 2011a, 2011b). Nonetheless, the questions illustrate the complexity of this topic, which, for instance, Lewin (1943, 1951) aims to break down in his force-field analysis. He introduces a seemingly straightforward model of two reciprocal forces: driving forces (positive forces for change) and restraining forces (obstacles to change). Consequently, Palmer, Dunford, and Buchanan (2016) suggest that, in order to prevent or overcome resistance, restraining forces should be reduced. Multiple other authors attempt to create more detailed prescriptive checklists, step-by-step processes, or guidelines for managing resistance (e.g., Agboola & Salawu, 2010; Hultman, 1995; Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008; Mento, Jones & Dirndorfer, 2002). Nevertheless, they all have to respect the contingency of contexts. For instance, Kotter and Schlesinger suggest to, first, “analyze situational factors” (2008, p.1). Afterward, change managers are recommended to “determine the optimal speed for change” (Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008, p.1). Finally, “methods for managing resistance” should be considered (Table 5) (Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008, p.1).

Table 5 - Methods for Managing Resistance (Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008)

Method	How to Use	When to Use	Advantages	Drawbacks
Education	Communicate the desired changes and reasons for them	Employees lack information about the change's implications	Once persuaded, people often help implement the change	Time consuming if lots of people are involved
Participation	Involve potential resisters in designing and implementing the change	Change initiators lack sufficient information to design the change	People feel more committed to making the change happen	Time consuming, and employees may design inappropriate change
Facilitation	Provide skills training and emotional support	People are resisting because they fear they can't make the needed adjustments	No other approach works as well with adjustment problems	Can be time consuming and expensive; can still fail
Negotiation	Offer incentives for making the change	People will lose out in the change and have considerable power to resist	It's a relatively easy way to defuse major resistance	Can be expensive and open managers to the possibility of blackmail
Coercion	Threaten loss of jobs or promotion opportunities; fire or transfer those who can't or won't change	Speed is essential and change initiators possess considerable power	It works quickly and can overcome any kind of resistance	Can spark intense resentment toward change initiators

Some of the mentioned authors (and increasingly more) resemble one another in terms of focusing on communication, participation of change recipients, and seeing resistance as something productive (e.g. Agboola & Salawu, 2010; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016; Hultman, 1995; Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008; Mento, Jones & Dirndorfer, 2002; Sveningsson & Sörgärde, forthcoming). Other scholars even refer to other conceptual areas to approach potential resistance to change, for instance, leadership (Al-Haddad & Kotnour, 2015; Sveningsson & Sörgärde, forthcoming).

This literature review has provided a brief overview of the topics change, change management, and resistance. Due to the complexity and multi-dimensionality of the topics, it can, by no means, be seen as comprehensive. However, it offers a foundation for our further analytical work within this research project.

2.3 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we offered the reader an overview of both overarching research pillars, identity, and change management.

Within the first part, relevant definitions of identity and its importance to the interpretation of a person's understanding of oneself were linked to an organizational context. People prefer stability. Thus, identity conflicts arise when significant changes challenge it. We examined different variations and severities of identity conflicts appearing within an organization: adjustment, expression, juggling, wrestling, and crash. Due to various developments within the banking sector, the development of bankers' identities showcases the potential of identity conflicts and struggles due to organizational and environmental changes.

Further, we examined relevant change management literature, illustrating dynamics and phenomena concerning significant changes within organizations. Different dichotomies of change are presented: episodic vs. continuous, first-order vs. second-order, evolutionary vs. revolutionary. Most important to this study, is the introduction of top-down radical change, which combines elements of the beforementioned dichotomies. Moreover, organizational changes require consideration of the individuals who are affected. Naturally, resistance becomes an essential part when top-down radical changes are implemented. An overview of the multi-dimensionality of resistance guided the reader towards possible ways to manage it. Specifically, resistance as identity work appearing during radical changes is most relevant to our research.

3 Methodology

In the following chapter, we will map out how we designed our research. We will first give an overview of the philosophical grounding that inspired it. Furthermore, we will state which research approaches functioned as concrete guidance for our study and illustrate how our processes of data collection and analysis were structured. Finally, we will critically reflect on the chosen methods, point out potential limitations, and assess the credibility of our study.

3.1 Philosophical Grounding

Our research primarily focuses on how radical changes affect the work life of banking employees. Therefore, we are interested in the perceptions, interpretations, and emotions of individuals – in how they make sense about what is happening around and with them. To be able to extract the essence of what we encounter during our data collection, we follow an interpretivist research tradition (Merriam, 2002; Prasad, 2017). Taking an empathetic stance, we attempt to “enter the social world of our research subjects and understand their world from their point of view” (Saunders, Thornhill & Lewis, 2009, p.116). Our study is in line with the ideas of symbolic interactionism paying respect to the importance of the employees’ roles and symbolic lifeworld in the context of socially negotiated realities (Prasad, 2017; Saunders, Thornhill & Lewis, 2009).

A consequence of valuing a subjective socially constructed lifeworld and favoring interpretivism over, for instance, positivism is to face a plurality of truths and realities (Saunders, Thornhill & Lewis, 2009). We have to accept that there is not one truth leading to pure knowledge (Spender, 1992). This dilemma shows the ambiguity of our role as researchers. On the one hand, it emphasizes our function as the interpreting actor. On the other hand, it shows the natural limits of knowledge creation through our research.

Nevertheless, even though it has to be subject of critical reflection, we honor our active analytical and interpretive role as researchers (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). We cherish the metaphor of ‘research as a craft’ referring to both, our own creative as well as profound, systematic aspects of how research is constructed and executed (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Focusing on employees being affected by a major global trend tends to connote the trend (here: digitalization) negatively and suggests classifying it as a threat to banking employees. Thus, to a certain degree, our research follows a critical theory tradition emphasizing the

subordinate role of employees (Prasad, 2017). However, we do not objectify employees as an incapacitated group of change recipients that are exposed to a superior force. On the contrary, we aim to remain open to be led by their stories and experiences and, subsequently, to understand their subjective socially constructed lifeworld (Saunders, Thornhill & Lewis, 2009). We, thus, honor the critical traditions by giving the employees a voice without refusing to condemn digitalization dogmatically.

3.2 Research Approach

3.2.1 Qualitative Research

Our research project is from pure qualitative nature. We are engaged in investigating a topic that is contingent on social phenomena, human interaction, and the context in which it appears. According to Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), questions from this nature are best approached with methods of qualitative research. Additionally, qualitative research qualifies to assess potential contradictions and tensions within as well as the meaning of a particular phenomenon (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). This resembles the ambitions of our research. Consequently, we are committed to starting our research from the perspective of the research subject, putting ourselves into the position of the banking employees (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018).

3.2.2 Abduction: “What Is Going on Here?”

From the start of our research, we knew that digitalization, as an omnipresent trend, and its impact on banking employees’ work life was a topic that offers potential to find interesting phenomena. This awareness was grounded in insights gained during the preparation of our final assignment for a Research Methods course at Lund University School of Economics and Management. Nevertheless, our main starting point of the research was the empirical material, thus, the banking employees that we interviewed (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008). The interviews were designed to revolve around digitalization, but we were highly inspired by the topics that our interviewees introduced or accentuated from their own realities. Therefore, our research processes involve aspects of induction and deduction (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). Consequently, our study can be labeled as abductive and resembles the description of abductive research processes by Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) as to

“work with the challenge of accomplishing a good trade-off between theoretical inspiration and openness toward empirical material, between reading into data a certain vocabulary and certain preferred results and a naïve empiricism in which theory-free data are believed to lead the researcher to the truth” (p. 968).

The abductive approach enabled us to understand the banking employees’ work life at its core in the light of digitalization and find answers to the question “What is going on here?” (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016, p.8).

3.2.3 Research Inspiration: Research with a Point, Reflective Research, Constructing a Mystery

As underlying guidance for conducting our research, we refer to three approaches emphasized by Alvesson and colleagues (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011, 2013; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008, 2018; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018): research with a point, reflective research, and constructing a mystery.

Following the notion of research with a point allows the researcher to engage with the material in a free and unrestricted manner (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Alvesson argues that the generation of valuable output is more important than closely following particular methodological conventions and techniques (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013). This, by no means, implies a careless research design or execution. We are convinced that investigating topics, such as subjective individual identities in employees’ work life, requires a high degree of interpretive freedom to reveal the underlying truths (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008). Researchers have to have the possibility to critically question methodological norms and the empirical material in order to develop creative ways of approaching it (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

Another discourse that we refer to in our research work is Alvesson’s and Sköldberg’s (2018) reflective research. On the one hand, this approach highlights that empirical material as such cannot be taken at face value: “The idea that [...] statements of interview subjects [...] have an unequivocal or unproblematic relationship to anything outside the empirical material is rejected on principle” (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018, p.11). The researchers’ role as the interpreters of what they encounter in the empirical material is highlighted. On the other hand, reflective research means to apply interpretive freedom cautiously. Researchers have to consider that their interpretive work is influenced by their predispositions and lifeworld (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). Reflective research, thus, puts another interpretive layer on the researchers’ work, which

Alvesson and Sköldbberg call “interpretation of interpretation” (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018, p.11).

Finally, our ambition with this research project is to contribute valuable knowledge about a surprising, new, and unsolved phenomenon. Thus, our research was oriented on the quest of discovering a mystery. A mystery is an empirical finding within qualitative research that is deviant from what is expected (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). It “emerges as a combination of the researcher’s preunderstanding, including access to the theoretical framework(s) and vocabularies, and the inspiration of empirical material” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, p.1278). The final contribution is based on the discovery and, subsequently, on the solving of the mystery which Alvesson and Kärreman describe as a form of theorizing (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007).

3.3 Research Design and Process

3.3.1 Data Collection

Our primary source of data is semi-structured interviews with banking employees that have customer-oriented positions. Through a personal contact at Nordea, we had the chance to get in touch with Peter Sølund¹ (First Vice President & Facilitator of Transformation). He functioned as a facilitator throughout the whole project. After having his mandate for our research, we, through him, got in touch with the regional management of South Sweden (Head of Region and one Management Partner). The acquisition and coordination of interviewees were conducted by a customer service specialist from Nordea’s Malmö branch, who was entrusted with this task by the regional management. She paid attention to win over a rather diverse group of banking employees in terms of age, area, job position, and gender for our interviews. We will come back to this in chapter 3.4 (Credibility and Limitations). Furthermore, our interviewees did not know more about us and the content of the interview than that it would be conducted in English and that it would touch upon the topic of digitalization. Through this, we hoped to facilitate unimpaired responses instead of prepared standard answers and, thus, gain better data (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Saunders, Thornhill & Lewis, 2009). We interviewed six personal banking advisors, one savings and pensions specialist, one premium banking advisor, one

¹ All names mentioned in this chapter are real. The named persons were not interviewed.

customer service specialist, and one branch manager. The interviews were conducted in four branches of Nordea in the region of Southern Sweden within one and a half weeks. Even though our research subject were customer-oriented banking employees, we complemented those ten interviews with more strategic actors from the Copenhagen headquarters of Nordea. We added three interviews with one management partner, one union representative, and two representatives from Nordea's strategic Group Digital². We can state that the choice between only focusing on interviewees that were part of our primary research subject (banking employees) and including a more strategic level was the subject of controversial discussions between us. Finally, we chose to include strategic actors in our data collection to gain an overview of the bigger picture of Nordea's digital transformation and to give the management side a chance to express their view on the discussed topic. In retrospect, it can be concluded that this decision proved worthwhile since it added crucial insights to our findings on the quest of discovering a mystery. We conducted the interviews with the more strategic actors under the label of contextualization providing us with background and extra information that could be used in the further course of our analysis (Saunders, Thornhill & Lewis, 2009). Therefore, we conducted them after finalizing all interviews with customer-oriented employees. As additional sources for contextualization, we included smaller observations from our visits at Nordea's branches and Copenhagen headquarters, impressions from our preparatory meetings with our contact persons at Nordea, as well as insights from our research about Nordea as our case company into our analysis (Dingwall, 1997) (see chapter 4.1 Setting the Scene: Nordea as Our Research Context).

All interviews, except one with the union representative, which was conducted via Skype, were conducted face-to-face at premises of Nordea. Both of us were present in all interviews. Through this, one of us could always listen more actively, take notes, and prepare follow-up questions to bring the interview forward. Simultaneously, the other one was able to create a deeper level of conversation with the interviewee. In order to create a feeling of a natural conversation and a more informal environment, we did not allocate fixed parts of the interview to each one of us. Out of the same reason, we decided to choose a semi-structured interview approach and to only create a rough guideline for the interviews stating the most important topics we wanted to talk about. This conscious decision was grounded in our belief that the

² Generally speaking, a high-level strategic department focusing on future technological developments and trends, and their impact on the banking industry

interviewees will subconsciously guide the interview to the most relevant topics concerning their work life (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Kvale, 1983; Saunders, Thornhill & Lewis, 2009).

Additionally, prior to the interviews, we agreed on some general guiding interview principles (Table 6) that were, in retrospect, much more valuable than a comprehensive interview guideline could ever have been. Those guiding principles evolved from studying relevant literature (Denscombe, 2010; Kvale, 1983, 1994) about conducting interviews and from our former work experiences as recruiters and coaches.

Table 6 - Guiding Interview Principles

Give time to elaborate. / Try to stay rather passive.	Silence is fine.	Formulate open questions.	Observe body language.
Stay informal. Avoid formal or technical terms.	Be careful with jumping between topics.	It is okay to openly communicate between us.	Try to create a connection with the interviewees

After remarking that all interviewees would be anonymized and the explicit permission of every interviewee was given, we recorded the interviews. For anonymization purposes, we decided to use fake names and generalize job titles ('banking employees' and 'management representatives'). We decided to include the interviewed union representative into the group of management representatives and the branch manager into the group of banking employees. Both categorizations do not exactly live up to their actual functions. However, preserving the anonymity of our interviews was most important. Considering the used excerpts and the positioning of both interviewees in the overall context, we deem this categorization as reasonable. Our interviewees encountered us very open and friendly. They shared, both positive as well as negative, personal, stories, opinions, and experiences showing trust in us as researchers of integrity.

In retrospect, we can reflect that throughout the interviews we gradually won better understandings of the dynamics at Nordea which led to a steady improvement of how we conducted the interviews in terms of questions, structure, or reactivity. On the one hand, we see this as a natural learning process. On the other hand, a more detailed document analysis or background research (exceeding what we did for chapter 4.1) could have been helpful to start into the interviews on an already higher level of interviewer performance.

3.3.2 Data Analysis

It is difficult to state when exactly we commenced with our analysis process. Certainly, we consciously and subconsciously engaged in analysis work already when designing our interview guideline, leading the interviews in certain directions, or discussing and taking down notes about our impressions after every interview (Daft, 1983; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). This is in line with Styhre (2013) who suggests that an analytical process is no linear step-by-step but a rather iterative and messy process.

After transcribing the interviews with the help of the online tool ‘otter.ai,’ we, initially, collected our subjective ideas of what seemed most interesting and relevant from the empirical material. This process was essential to sort and clarify our thoughts that evolved during and after the interviews as well as while transcribing. Afterward, we followed Rennstam’s and Wästerfors’s (2018) recommendation to spend time with the actual material – to get ‘intimate’ with the data. We decided to individually work ourselves through all the transcripts looking for themes that were repeatedly stressed, that had a clear connection to the academic literature, that suggested differences and contradictions, and that we personally found remarkable (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). We were mainly looking for themes that potentially challenged or extended our formerly collected themes. Through that, we guaranteed to stay reflexive concerning our interpretive role as researchers. We decided to approach this process of thematization (Alvehus, 2013) individually to stay uninfluenced from each other and, thus, reach a higher degree of credibility of the identified themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

The next step involved discussing and reducing the number of collected themes. Extracting the themes that are most relevant in light of our research objectives was determined not by how frequently the themes appeared (Weick, 1989). Our ambition was to create a narrative that contains interesting themes that, together, form a coherent illustration of a phenomenon or mystery evolving from the material (Riessman, 2008). In order to fulfill this ambition, we followed Alvesson’ and Sandberg’s (2013) recommendation to look for clashes or breakdowns between the empirical data and theoretical assumptions. This required a creative and rigorous interpretation process with the readiness to ‘killing our darlings’. Through this, we were able to create an independent narrative that can serve as a foundation for finding and solving a mystery and is coherent, relevant, as well as interesting (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018; Riessman, 2008). This process finally led us to the narrative we use in the following to structure our analysis and discussion chapters (see Figure 1 - Illustration of the Transformational and Identity Journey at Nordea).

Afterward, we went back to the material and collected the most meaningful quotes from the interviews to illustrate our narrative. We used those quotes as anchors for every section in the analysis chapter and constructed the sections around them. Through this, we stayed true to our abductive approach speaking on behalf of the material (Styhre, 2013). Furthermore, we structured every analytical section following the design of ‘excerpt-commentary units’ further putting the empirical quotes (‘excerpts’) in the center of our analytical process. They are each framed by a main analytical point, an empirical orientation, and an analytical comment (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

In general, we explicitly decided to vary between working together side-by-side and working individually. Besides our belief that this way of working is most efficient, we are further convinced that this process fuels reflection and individual processing of discussed topics leading to more reasoned discussions and grounded decisions. Especially in the later phases of our analysis, we applied the same dynamic to our work with the empirical material. Phases of more intensive work with the material alternated with phases of more abstract discussions on a more macro level (Bowen, 2009; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Through this, we were able to keep the bigger picture and overall purpose as guidance for our analysis while still staying connected to the voice of the material.

Finally, we aimed to aggregate our multi-faceted insights and stories into four main findings. This concentration proved helpful when taking the next step towards the more abstract discussion chapter based on the main findings.

3.4 Credibility and Limitations

In order to establish our credibility as researchers and thus, for this study, multiple potential limitations deserve attention.

With our focus on one particular company, our study can be categorized as a single case study (Robson, 2002). Consequently, our task is to extract insights from this limited research field (ed. Valsiner, 1986). Even though this reasoning is ground for criticism (Bromley, 1986), we are aware of this limitation and do not claim to create a general contribution. Nevertheless, we aim to create an analytical and theoretical generalization with practical relevance for practitioners involved in change management.

In order to enhance the reflexivity and, thus, the quality of our study, we lean on a set of sophisticated source criticism criteria by Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018) who deem this

appropriate for case studies. Since our study embraces qualitative methods of data collection, source criticism is, according to Thompson (1978) and Vansina (1961), relevant. Furthermore, it enhances the quality of our interpretations (Kristensson Ugglå, 2004), which further supports us within our research approach of “What is going on here?” (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016, p.8). The following source criticism criteria will be examined: *Authenticity, bias, distance, and dependence* (Alvesson & Sköldbërg, 2018). The authors offer a set of rules for executing source criticism. However, they recommend researchers to refer to the criteria more as guidelines and with “Fingerspitzgeföhl” (p.142). The following section examines each source criticism criteria in the light of this ‘Fingerspitzgeföhl’ and in relation to our research context.

The *authenticity* or genuineness of our sources was examined through cross-checking facts, stories, and particular elements of interest with other suitable sources. Due to our overall critical stance to not accept empirical material at face value (Alvesson & Sköldbërg, 2018), particular emphasis was put on this.

We aimed to gather each source’s partial perspective to create a whole picture of the story at Nordea. However, multiple factors could have led to potential *biases* in this process. Firstly, the interviewees were chosen by Nordea itself. This process could have led to the potential bias of the choice of our interviewees. One of the main criteria related to this bias was the fact that we needed to conduct the interviews in English, which naturally increased the homogeneousness of our interviewee group. Nevertheless, within this English category, our interviewees are still diverse in terms of hierarchy, age, and seniority. Therefore, the potential second bias of the interviewees based on who they are, their purpose and background as well as their potential interest to skew information was prevented (Alvesson & Sköldbërg, 2018). Lastly, Alvesson and Sköldbërg (2018) state that every interpretation of a complex reality is subjective. They highlight the importance of critically merging the interviewees’ perspectives. Additionally, our role as researchers, interviewers, and, simultaneously, narrators of this story creates an interviewer bias based on our subjectivity, which, consequently, influences the direction of this study. The ‘interpretivist business’ is a double-edged sword, but we embrace this nature of qualitative research.

Moreover, source criticism in terms of *distance* (time and space) and *dependence* puts limitations on our research in the following manner. We collected qualitative data about Nordea’s top-down transformation journey, which mainly lies in the past. According to Alvesson and Sköldbërg (2018), this distance or gap in time between the event and the data collection poses a research limitation. However, the number of interviews and background

research mitigate this limitation by confirming past events. Further, a few interviewees joined Nordea when this radical change had started to be implemented. Due to their natural inability to compare with the situation before, this limits their contribution to our story. Since we interviewed people from multiple branches and offices, a limitation focusing on space is possible, since each location possibly experienced Nordea's top-down transformation journey differently. Our data was collected from primary sources, who have personally experienced these changes, which reduces the limitation on the element of dependency.

Concluding, our source criticism analysis for this research encouraged us to reflect on the credibility of our sources. Through this, the limitations of our study were brought to light. These limitations were considered in the analysis process, ensuring a higher level of credibility.

3.5 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we introduced how we approached our research from a methodological perspective. We felt inspired by an interpretivist research tradition realizing that our realities are socially constructed and that we face a plurality of truths and realities. On a more concrete level, our research was purely qualitative and included both inductive as well as deductive research elements. We, therefore, followed an abductive approach. We were highly inspired by the stories of our interviewees and their emphases. Our research process was oriented on three notions of research with a point, reflective research, and constructing a mystery highlighting our pragmatic, critical, and explorative manner of research. We collected our data through semi-structured interviews with customer-oriented banking employees of our case company Nordea. In the following, the material was analyzed to create a narrative that can serve as a foundation for finding and solving a mystery. However, we have to be reflective of the limitations of our study and their impact on its credibility. By using a single case, our study is limited to an analytical and theoretical contribution. Furthermore, our data collection and interpretation processes are influenced by multiple biases which are examined through a source criticism criteria analysis with regard to *authenticity, bias, distance, and dependence*.

4 Analysis & Empirical Findings

In the following analysis chapter, our empirical findings are presented. Beforehand, we set the scene by introducing the research context: the banking industry in general and Nordea’s business as well as digital strategy. Afterward, we present an extracted series of events based on the empirical material - a narrative that is from relevance when assessing how digitalization affects banking employees’ work life and which implications for the management of radical changes can be inferred. Thus, this narrative is connected to the topics of identity and change management (including change resistance). Both topics occur as foundation and justification as well as results of the narrative and its events, processes, and phenomena. They are closely interwoven but, at the same time, offer different lenses through which the empirical material can be assessed. We, thus, decided to follow this dichotomy through dividing the analysis chapter into two parts. We, first, analyze the empirical narrative through the lens of change management and change resistance. Afterward, we show which role the topic of identity plays within the narrative. Our interpretations are, in both parts, substantiated by excerpts from interviews with banking employees and management representatives from Nordea.

Figure 1 - Illustration of the Transformational and Identity Journey at Nordea



4.1 Setting the Scene: Nordea as Our Research Context

The Industry Context: Banking

The financial industry represents 4.1% of Sweden's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) providing work for more than 90,000 people, 40,000 within the banking sector (Nilsson, 2018). 124 banks operate in Sweden, which are divided into the following four categories: commercial, foreign, savings and co-operative banks (Svenska Bankföreningen - Swedish Bankers' Association, 2019). The 'Svenska Bankföreningen' (2019) observed significant changes to the Swedish banking industry in the areas of digitalization. Daily bank services are increasingly performed by using electronic devices, which reduce the importance of branch offices for these services. Technological advancements, such as 'Swish', real-time payment, 'bankID', and e-invoices paved the way for new financial service companies (FinTechs) and, thus, increase competition for traditional banks from local as well as foreign companies (Svenska Bankföreningen - Swedish Bankers' Association, 2019). This trend impacted the number of branches operated by banks throughout Europe. Specifically, European banks have closed down over 9,000 branches in 2016, while in the last four years one-quarter of all branches in Sweden was shut down (Malmstrom & Wincent, 2018). Due to the rise of mobile payment apps, the usage of cash has declined significantly in the last eight years as shown by an annual survey by Sveriges Riksbank (2018). Customers' expectations are shifting towards high quality of mobile services in terms of accessibility, simplified usability, and personalization (Nordea Bank Abp, 2019). Accenture's (2019) study on digital disruption in Nordic retail banking highlights convenience and efficiency as one of the crucial elements to meet customer expectations, too. Further, big technology firms, such as Google, Facebook, Apple, and Amazon enter the banking industry and raise the level of service, which puts additional pressure on traditional banks (Giesen, 2018).

Nordea's Business Strategy

As mentioned before, the banking industry - and with that Nordea - is struck by significant changes of external influencing factors. Therefore, in 2016, Nordea began a process of significant transformations with effects on all parts of the bank's business (Nordea Bank Abp, 2019). These transformations include four main areas: *risk and compliance setup, simplification, digital strategy, and cost and capital efficiency*. The *risk and compliance setup* concerns all regulatory and legislative matters as well as risk prevention. Focusing on the Nordics as the market of interest and unifying the internal digital tool landscape are central

parts of the *simplification strategy*. Furthermore, reacting to technological advancements and digital customer experiences are crucial in Nordea's *digital strategy*. Finally, *cost and capital efficiency* are an objective of the former three areas as well as a means to an end itself. It includes measures like consolidating the branch networks, centralization, and downsizing personnel.

Karen Tobiasen, Chief People Office at Nordea, highlights in the bank's annual report of 2018 that "there is no business transformation without a human transformation." (Nordea Bank Abp, 2019, p.35). Aligned with the overall transformation process, it is the objective to create a flatter and more flexible organization. This also includes cutting 6,000 jobs worldwide by 2021 (Haaramo, 2017). However, Nordea points out that reducing the workforce does not mean to lay off 6,000 Nordea employees actively. Included in the 6,000 jobs are a significant number of external consultants and people that leave Nordea to go on pension or seek new job opportunities elsewhere on their own account (Hoikkala & Schwartzkopff, 2017). Furthermore, Nordea offers employability support for those who leave the company (Nordea Bank Abp, 2019).

Nordea's Digital Journey

As mentioned before, the digital strategy of Nordea is one central aspect of the bank's transformational process (Nordea Bank Abp, 2019). Nordea CEO von Konsull urges that the bank needs "to go digital and remote [...] very, very fast" (Pohjanpalo, 2018). The goal is to "transform into a scalable, resilient, efficient and digital relationship bank by 2021" (Nordea Bank Abp, 2019, p.10). The setup of Nordea's centralized 'core banking programme' is a crucial factor in reaching this goal. It is aimed to simply- and unify the complex legacy of a multitude of tools and software in use. Furthermore, this path includes the prioritization of digital service distribution over physical services (Nordea Bank Abp, 2019). Additionally, the digital strategy emphasizes an increasing relevance of robotics (e.g., they introduced 'Nora' as an online savings robot in 2018 (Magnusson & Hoikkala, 2018)), artificial intelligence, as well as the establishment of e-branches (Nordea Bank Abp, 2019). However, Nordea is aware that those changes will disrupt the traditional system of roles within the bank as well as with regard to the whole society. It will affect the people who work at Nordea (Nordea Bank Abp, 2019). Nordea states that human interaction will remain a crucial part of the banking service business, which will go hand in hand with efficiency-driven automated technical solutions (Institutional Money, 2019).

4.2 Analysis Part I: Nordea's Transformational Journey

4.2.1 Nordea's Grand Strategic Plan: A Top-Down Change

Nordea's transformational journey is, in the following, illustrated by means of three exemplary changes that, repeatedly, came to light during the interviews: Consolidation of the tool landscape ('core banking programme'), the shift of the customer-advisor relationship (increasing relevance of online meetings), and the change in the system of personally allocated banking advisors (development from 'my' to 'our' customer). These changes function as an anchor and read thread throughout our whole analysis.

The conducted interviews with mostly customer-oriented banking advisors indicate that, from the beginning, this transformational process has been rolled out through a top-down business-focused approach. There is no reliable evidence of how the changes were communicated. However, the way of implementation of specific measures shows that this transformation was part of a management-driven grand strategic plan. It was primarily aimed towards ensuring the company's future business success. It can be extracted from the interviews that the management responsible for the transformation did not include employees in the design of the change process. The following excerpt supports the argument of a top-down change approach. The interviewee refers to the negative feedback that the employees gave concerning specific changes.

"It was [...] shut down saying 'This is the way that it's been decided, this is what we're going to do.' " (Lucas, banking employee)

"Take it or leave it?" (interviewer)

"Yeah, pretty much. And there were a few people that did leave." (Lucas, banking employee)

This excerpt indicates the top-down approach, which excluded the employees in the decision on how the transformation was to be rolled out. The Nordea management did not allow any choice or room for alternative options resulting in employees either accepting the plan or leaving Nordea.

Besides the way they were rolled out, the scope of changes has to be noted. The transformation affected and still affects all areas of the bank significantly. The excerpt below signifies the all-encompassing scope of change that the banking industry in general and banking employees' at Nordea in particular were facing.

“I think the only constant is basically change [...]. So this is about understanding that you cannot kind of walk in and 50 years after walk out of the door basically having done the same, [all the time].” (Charlie, management representative)

This statement illustrates that working in a bank today is, compared to the past, invariably connected to dealing with major changes. Moreover, the excerpt demonstrates that a lifelong career in one function of banking is a thing of the past. This transformational journey is massively impacting all banking employees for years to come. The following exemplary measures further illustrate the management’s top-down approach to change.

Entering the Online World: Consolidation of Tool Landscape

To cut costs, simplify work processes, and prepare the company for an increasingly digital future, the project of consolidating the heterogeneous legacy of evolved digital tools and software was initiated in 2016. The overarching objective was and still is to create a ‘core banking programme’ which is used for all services in the whole Nordea organization. When asked about this consolidation one of the banking employees described this process as: *“To squeeze and comprise [all the tools] so it would be maybe 2, 3, or 4.” (Oscar, banking employee)*. The consolidated new digital systems were prematurely pushed into the organization. Thus, the banking employees were repeatedly experiencing difficulties in their usability due to continuous changes and updates, software breakdowns, and down-times (see chapter 4.2.2 The Grand Strategic Plan: Breakdowns and the Rise of Resistance). This part of Nordea’s transformational journey is still ongoing and continues to impact all employees’ work life and their ability to conduct their daily work.

Entering the Online World: Online Meetings

Formerly, customers visited the bank in person to discuss any banking issue. A personal relationship was built through regular, personal face-to-face contact. This traditional way of attending to customers was changed. Online meetings were introduced as the primary means of customer-communication and customer-relation. The following excerpt shows the thoughts and opinions of a banking employee about this decision.

*“Because [the management] does really, really big changes like this *snaps finger*. And then they were like [...] ‘Now we’re all going to do only online meetings, no physical meetings, this is what we’re going to do’. And we were like, ‘Well, that’s not really going to work.’ But we needed to get on board for that. And then everyone moans a little, but that’s also when [the management] will start*

watching the people that aren't going to fall into line, and then sort them out afterwards.” (Ella, banking employee)

The reaction of the interviewee in relation to this top-down decision shows that the banking employees were purely change recipients not having any influence on the changes they were exposed to and the way they were implemented.

Additionally, advisors were obliged to have a certain amount of online customer meetings every week in order to enforce the overall shift to the ‘online world’. The following statement by one of the banking employees highlights the initially introduced quotas: *“But what the business decided was that everyone in my role [as personal advisor] needed to have [three] online meetings every week without question.” (Ella, banking employee).*

Impersonalization: From ‘My’ to ‘Our’ Customer

Another change within the bigger transformational plan was the withdrawal of Nordea’s former model of personally allocated bankers. Traditionally, specific banking advisors were taking care of a fixed stock of customers. The advisors were their personal bankers and maintained a close personal relationship with them. The Nordea management decided to cut this exclusive relationship between advisors and customers in order to allow more efficient handling of customer requests by any advisor anywhere, independent from an individual.

For instance, eventually, a large group of customers in South Sweden was transferred to an ‘online group’ which meant that they were only able to contact the bank through online tools or services. The following excerpt can be regarded as a bridging element between the preceding paragraphs about entering the ‘online world’ and the following illustration of changes in the customer-advisor relationship.

“In 2017, they made the decision that around 40% of the customers [...] will automatically be transferred to an ‘online group’. And then [...] we opened an ‘online group’ and [this special team of online advisors was] available for the customers online only. The customers called and said ‘I had an advisor in [branch X]. Why am I having another advisor?’ [...] – ‘You are transferred to Nordea Online.’ - ‘But I haven't been asked to be transferred, I would like to contact my Nordea advisor in [branch X]’. So that was a very bad experience.” (Lucas, banking employee)

The customers were, from one day to another, transferred away from their personal advisor to the Nordea ‘online group’. Additionally, the excerpt proves customers’ discontent with this measure. There was no communication about this change beforehand. It is apparent that this

management decision was executed top-down and severely affected the customer-advisor relationship. This is further supported by the following excerpt.

“I think that, before, [the customers] had a long period of time where they've been used to knowing the person that they've had as their advisor, they've had a personal contact with that person. It's been the same person for years. At least in this area of the country it has been like that. And now [the customer] is more like 'Do we get to keep you?' And they were very happy when they were allowed to keep the same person. (Ella, banking employee)

This excerpt further exemplifies what this top-down decision caused concerning the customer-advisor relationship. The customers experienced difficulties in accepting that their personal advisor, with which a relationship has sometimes been nurtured over years, is not their main point of contact anymore.

Previously, phone calls and emails were used to communicate personally between customers and their personal advisors. However, the top-down ‘impersonalization’ of the customer-advisor relationship was accompanied by reducing communication channels. Direct phone calls and emails were suppressed. The following excerpt states how the banking employees felt with this management decision:

“They also decided that we shouldn't have any direct phone numbers. So, my customers couldn't deal with me. They couldn't call me. And we were not really allowed to send emails - normal emails - either. Which I can accept more than the fact that I wasn't allowed a phone number.” (Ella, banking employee)

A formerly, widely used way for customers to interact with the banking employees was eliminated. This decision created disapproval within the branches. The statement illustrates the force Nordea management used to undermine or cut the personal customer-advisor relationship.

4.2.2 The Grand Strategic Plan: Breakdowns and the Rise of Resistance

The employees and customers were severely struck by the top-down changes. The following three sub-sections exemplify the perceived breakdowns in employees’ work life. One of them already illustrates clear active resistance. Before providing specific examples for change measures and their effects, a general excerpt shows what reactions Nordea’s transformational journey evoked in customers and banking employees.

“So, I think that the customer feedbacks - we work a lot with customer feedback - must have shut down a lot. And the management must have seen that a lot of

people left the bank. So, the customers weren't happy. And the staff also, every year, we did an evaluation on how we felt. And that went down very much. Like, everyone pretty much said that they were very scared of their job. Are we going to stay here and all? Yeah, so I think it's a combined effect" (Ella, banking employee)

This excerpt exemplifies the customers' as well as the banking employees' reaction to Nordea's top-down transformational journey. The result was a significant drop in customer as well as employee satisfaction. The banking employees became scared about their work position which had a massive effect on their work life.

The following paragraphs give concrete examples of how banking employees reacted to changes connected to the efforts to more and more enter the 'online world' and to impersonalize the customer-advisor relationship.

Software Breakdowns Impacting Bankers' Work Life

Part of Nordea's consolidation of their banking system was the introduction of a new customer management tool that employees were required to work with when advising customers. Employees frequently experienced technical difficulties which hindered them from attending their customers' needs. The following excerpt illustrates the effects on the employees' work life.

"So, they had to rebuild the whole system, and there were so many bugs. When we started using it beginning of 2018, nothing was working. Nothing was working. And I do understand that you cannot just build a system and then everything will work because you will have so much input from clients or from users. But it was horrible, it was really horrible trying to talk to [customers] about [their] money not being able to fill in the things that I had to fill in [...]. So, we had so much trouble with it for almost a year. And it turns out that they did not really get the feedback, the people who were doing this in Denmark." (Alice, banking employee)

This excerpt proves the level of difficulties Nordea employees endured caused by the digitalization efforts. Suddenly, they were not able to sustain the excellent customer service that they aimed to deliver and were continuously hindered for almost one year. Naturally, rejection of digitalization efforts rose. Banking employees lost face to the customers over problems that they did not cause. Moreover, the interviewee states that the feedback provided did not reach the responsible IT departments in Denmark which further fueled dissatisfaction. Consequently, the bankers associated those problems with the digital transformation as a whole. All in all, the job role and, with that, the employees' work life as a banker was rattled.

Online Quotas: Tricking the System

The following excerpt of our empirical material introduces employee resistance towards the increasing relevance of the digital tool landscape that Nordea enforced by introducing quotas on online meetings in relation to physical meetings per week. The interviewee refers to meetings with customers which needed to be tracked as online meetings in order to meet these quotas:

"They made a requirement that everybody had to click on the [online meeting] link. That meant that we share the screen [with our customer]. [There were] people that weren't really comfortable with having that kind of meeting. [...] So, it was easy to click in the booking, that it was an online meeting. And then we would all just say: 'Well, it was technical difficulties.' [And] we just had a phone meeting [instead]". Which means that you trick the systems." (Ella, banking employee)

This example showcases that employees actively resisted new requirements about how they were supposed to use digital tools, as well as interact and advise their customers. This resistance is shown through tricking the system in order to achieve the quotas for online meetings with customers. The employees counted phone meetings as online meetings and blamed allegedly dysfunctioning technology for not being able to have online meetings. This example of resistance illustrates that the management was, in certain ways, detached from the employees' reality. Put in other words, the management did not adequately consider the effects of the implemented changes on the employees' work life.

Losing the Older Generations

Digitalization measures connected to tool usage and service delivery brought significant adjustments to Nordea employees' work environment which they were not prepared for. Especially more elderly co-workers had problems to keep up with various parts of the radical changes. The following excerpt sheds light on how older Nordea employees' work life was affected. The described experiences are based on personal stories and opinions shared by a younger banking employee.

"I was rented out to an office [...]. There [were] only three [people working] there, and they were all in their 50s. And they all worked there for 30 years. So, they've experienced all changes. And they were very pessimistic, they were very against how Nordea has handled this whole change with [...] closing offices and everything. They were like: 'Everything is just getting worse, worse, worse. Our bonuses are less than before, and we have to work harder than before because

we've let go so many people. We have that added workload now.' So, whenever I was in contact with them: really very, very openly displayed discomfort with how Nordea has handled this whole change. [From] changing this whole named advisors [system] to other small changes and working hours and goals and requirements per advice or what you need to do per month. Everyone felt like the workload has just increased. And we [already] couldn't handle the previous workload. So, conditions were just getting worse. A lot of people were moving to different banks. A lot of employees left Nordea to different banks – advisors especially.” (Elias, banking employee)

As shown in the excerpt, older Nordea employees had a negative perception of the way Nordea implemented the digitalization of work processes, the consolidation of tools and software, the introduction of quotas, the ‘impersonalization’ of the customer-advisor relationship, the closing of branches, and its subsequent increase in workload. As a consequence, many employees left the company which, reportedly, resulted in a significant knowledge and experience loss.

4.2.3 ‘Partly Reversed Measures’: A Mechanism of Change Concessions

We can narrow it down to the year 2017 when employee as well as customer satisfaction were down as a consequence of how negatively the formerly outlined changes were received. Resistance from the employees was present, and the banking staff was struggling with the radical changes that they had been exposed to.

A clear pattern that emerged during the interviews was that management took some smaller steps back to the pre-transformation status-quo. We argue that those smaller concessions were made while continuing with the execution of the overall grand strategic plan. The small concessions do not express renunciation of the overall strategic direction. One banking employee described this development focusing on the system of personally allocated bankers (‘my’ vs. ‘our’ customers).

“But now they're focusing more on going back to our roots, saying ‘We need to give our customers a named personal banker.’ They removed that whole concept two years ago. [...] So that's what they added now again. Because customers really complained: ‘For 40 years, I've had this banker and now I have to go to someone else who I don't know. And then after that, I have to go to another one.’ [...] So that's going back to the roots in a way [...] with the named advisor thing and some other small initiatives that they removed before. Now they went back to it. Changing doesn't have to be that it's something that hasn't been done before. The whole part of understanding that, ‘Okay, we've made mistakes [...] and we'll

go back to how it was' [...] The organization is willing to learn from its mistakes and swallow its pride in a way." (Elias, banking employee)

We see this as a reaction to the negative effects of the radical changes outlined before. Here, the interviewee refers to 'my' or 'our' customers. Customers were allocated their personal bankers again. Another example is, that customers could, again, decide together with their advisors which way they want to interact. The fixed quotas for online meetings per week were dismissed which is indicated by another banking employee.

"It has gone from making set requirements on how we are meant to implement that to [...] that it's up to us [...]. I'm glad I don't have a requirement on having to have three online meetings every week." (Ella, banking employee)

We cannot say with certainty what the intentions behind those 'partly reversed measures' were. Was it purely a reaction to business struggles? Did management genuinely reflect on mistakes that were done and improved their change management accordingly? Did management go through a paradigm shift, valuing more the role of the employees? However, what can be concluded is that those 'partly reversed measures' led to a calming of employees' struggles and resistance (see next chapter 4.2.4 Acceptance of Radical Change: A Mystery). Furthermore, we infer that the implementation of the 'partly reversed measures' can be attributed to a change in the regional management of South Sweden. A banking employee states:

"The people around me were saying that she's had a positive effect on how things are now. And the previous one [...] was more of [...] a numbers person. He said [...] he was all about people, but you could never really count on that [...]. I think it's a positive change." (Ella, banking employee)

A manager that was described as a "numbers person" was replaced by a more relationship- and people-oriented manager. This shows that the implementation of the 'partly reversed measures' has been a conscious act connected to a change in the leadership team. Even though the intentions behind those measures remain relatively unclear, we can state that the measures were the result of management considerations and not a random sporadic phenomenon.

Even though the 'partly reversed measures' give credit to the employees and their wishes, they only constitute smaller adjustments to and concessions within the grand strategic plan that is continuing. We want to illustrate those concessions with the help of an analogy: They are only 'little treats' that are dispensed to the employees. This interpretation is supported by a management representative who explicitly refers to the 'little treat' of reinitiating the system of personally allocated bankers.

“And I know Sweden has moved a little, again, towards having this, but it creates a lot of bottle-necks. Again, we know where we're heading. And we may take a different kind of tempo. [...] [But] I can't see us right now going back to a situation where it's 'my' customer again, because everything that we are doing is so much towards 'our' customers. But there are differences that you have to be aware, they are different markets, a different history. But we cannot develop four banks kind of. That would be costly.” (Charlie, management representative)

He refers to the reversed measure in Sweden and clearly states that, eventually, the customers will not have a personally allocated banker anymore. Different regions take different ways and speed within this transformation. However, Nordea aims to, eventually, have the same standards and processes in all regions and countries. This interpretation is in line with other processes indicating that the grand strategic plan is still continuing unimpeded by the ‘little treats’. Even though quotas were removed, online meetings are increasingly becoming the norm. More and more services will be done automatically and online without the need for a personal banking advisor. This is supported by the following excerpt.

“[In the future] I believe that we won't go to the bank. We will get help through our computer or phone [...]. So that's why we [as Nordea] also want to be in the online sector to be able to give advice through the phone, through Skype, set up a camera so that they can see us as well. And also, some offices will be there in the future. But I don't believe that it will be many offices in Sweden. I don't believe that. Maybe one in Malmö, one in Gothenburg, and one in Stockholm.” (Lucas, banking employee)

Furthermore, customers still have the opportunity to contact advisors deviating from their formerly personally allocated advisor.

“So, [now, customers] keep the same advisor. [...] But if they are not free, [customers] have an option to book with the next available one. And that can be anyone across the country.” (Ella, banking employee)

In sum, we conclude that the ‘little treats’ were effective in calming the banking employees’ resistance and led to an overall acceptance of the grand strategic plan. This holds true even though it becomes evident that, in general, the grand transformational plan is continuing. The ‘partly reversed measures’ seem to be only small temporary deviations from the grand strategic plan.

4.2.4 Acceptance of Radical Change: A Mystery

Looking at how, today, banking employees interpret the aforementioned top-down changes is, keeping in mind the vast problems from the past, surprising. The following excerpt showcases that a majority of the banking employees, in retrospect, did not see major difficulties in adapting to the different elements of Nordea's transformational journey.

“So, I would imagine there was a phasing-in period where the mindset of the employees had to change. But as time went on, it became more normal rather than a difficulty for any part.” (Vincent, banking employee)

“You said change in mindset. [...] Was it easy for people here at Nordea? Do you feel consequences still from this change?” (interviewer)

“I don't think it was difficult. That would be wrong to say. But I don't think it was easy either. [...] And as long as you accept that this is the future, obviously it made it easier. But I think they had a reset period of a short time frame just to put their own mindset into it. [...] Maybe a little period I'm sure, yeah.” (Vincent, banking employee)

The employees seem to have collectively forgotten how painful it was when they were exposed to the past radical changes. The interviewee downplays the difficulties which were mentioned throughout the interviews and outlined before. When talking about employee turnover and layoffs, the interviewees even seem to detach this development from Nordea's overall transformational journey. The excerpt below highlights this detachment.

“Well, obviously, whatever work you have, you want to have job security. But there's so many employees leaving naturally reaching the pension age, getting another job and so on and so forth. Having that number in your face, it kind of is 'Wow, 6000!'. But a lot of those change automatically, naturally kind of evolves into it. So sure, I would be lying if I said that employees didn't react to it. Obviously, at any work we would. But I think it has sorted itself out. I mean, it depends really on what kind of departments. Maybe it's consultants. You know what I mean? If you need to cut down on 6000 it doesn't mean it's 6000 advisors.” (Vincent, banking employee)

This excerpt shows decoupling of the interviewee by downplaying personnel restructuring efforts by Nordea management. From both excerpts, we conclude overall acceptance of the current situation as well as the past and future planned changes in relation to the transformational journey.

We also encountered some banking employees who forgot or did not recognize how much their job has changed through digitalization. The following excerpt shows one example of forgetting what has changed in their work.

“But you know, my job has not changed a lot I'd say. Apart from, you know, now we can sign the forms digitally, so I don't have to give you a paper.” (Alice, banking employee)

This excerpt illustrates that this interviewee has entirely accepted the new status-quo in terms of digitalization and the new way of working with customers. She does not remember any other changes except a new digital signature feature.

It is remarkable to see that during the course of the interviews the interviewees refer to the digitalization as an abstract concept and do not link it to the concrete past struggles. Therefore, the banking employees seem to decouple the concept of digitalization from the experienced difficulties and perceive it as less frightening which explains why they have accepted the new status quo. The fact that the interviewees seem to have entirely accepted the past changes and forgot past struggles or difficulties of the process is linked to the ‘partly reverses measures’. The acceptance of the overall transformation of the business and, consequently, of their work life after a relatively short time, can be categorized as a mystery. It can be concluded from this analysis section that small adjustments to a grand strategic change plan and some conceding to the resistance that arises, can lead to acceptance of the grand plan as a whole. This holds true even though the overall transformation continues in a direction that was a source of resistance before.

4.2.5 The Happy Place: Un-reflexive Employees

Today, the interviewees provide a remarkably positive view on their role at Nordea. They repeatedly state that they are happy at work and proud to be part of the bank that is said to be the most digitally advanced bank in Scandinavia. The majority of interviewees, now, see the digitalization as something helpful, something that makes their jobs easier. Further, they express their trust in Nordea as an employer that considers and values the employees’ work life. This is supported by the following statements of two banking employees.

“But again, just to give an example some people were laid off, but they kept repeating to us, and I believe them, that for those that want to work in Nordea, there are always opportunities coming. We have a lot of information internally,

positions opening up. So, there's places to go. Especially if you want to stay at Nordea.” (Vincent, banking employee)

“I'll call [the customer], go through a couple of stuff, 20 minutes then the case is done. So instead of coming into Nordea, sitting down, offering coffee and small talking to each other - so the time goes on and on, and it gets one hour - the same type of work can now be done in 20 minutes.” (Lucas, banking employee)

However, asked about their thoughts and ideas about the future of banks as a workplace, the answers remain mostly vague and superficial. Some interviewees hold the view that not much will change. The following excerpt provides more details on the banking employees' view of future change.

“I think everything will be way more digital, obviously, [...]. As for the interaction between the bank and customers, I haven't given this any thought. I really don't know. I mean, I would say it will be the same as it is now. Because everything is digital now. The only difference [I see is that] there will be more people who are digital. So, there will be more online meetings in a way. But I don't think robots like computerized systems are going to replace us completely. I really hope not. I really think that people will always be insecure. And they need that human confirmation in certain cases. [...] Because the computer systems aren't smart enough right now to look through all the data and [...] there are way too many variables that matter for a computer system that doesn't have that knowledge to give an answer. We will still be needed,[...] we will still have to stay there, we will still be needed as much as before.” (Elias, banking employee)

The interviewee expects no significant changes impacting his role as a banking employee in the future. He hopes that the insignificance and inability of current artificial intelligence systems will continue in the future and, thus, will not threaten the position of the personal advisors in the banking industry. Moreover, he highlights the need for human interaction and expects that it will stay one of the cornerstones of the future customer-advisor relationship.

Only a few interviewees draw a future picture of more powerful technology, a rise of artificial intelligence, or a further decline in the importance of the human banking advisor role. However, the following excerpt exemplifies the more predominant unwillingness to engage in and avoidance of reflection on future developments that could affect the banking employees.

“And this whole thing of artificial intelligence, really smart algorithms and machines: Do you think that they will be able to replace human employees in the banking sector?” (interviewer)

“Probably, I mean, there's quite a lot of things that I do that could be done by somebody else. But I don't want to go all the way there because then I'm talking

myself out of the job. And I think banking [...], in a lot of ways, could be done by computers and by [...] the customer themselves.” (Ella, banking employee)

Some employees do not know what is coming in the future. Others do not reflect on the effects of what they think could come in the future. One of the key elements which deserves particular attention is the fact that the interviewee consciously avoids thinking about the future of banking and potential influences on her work life. This is fueled by viewing digitalization only as an abstract concept. The excerpt suggests that not only the employees forgot the turmoil of the past. They, too, stay un-reflexive regarding their future. This might play a role when they will be struck by the next wave of radical changes. Combined with the overarching feeling of happiness at work and the fact that only ‘little treats’ were needed to bring the employees to this feeling, these conclusions offer grounding for problematization.

This problematization is supported by notions that became clear during the interviews with strategic functions in the Copenhagen headquarters of Nordea. Nobody was able to predict the long-term future of banking (“*So nobody can tell you exactly what banking will be in the future.*” (Saga, management representative)). Nevertheless, the view on future digital changes and transformation differs significantly between management and employees. One example is the feeling of pride about being a part of the most digitally advanced Scandinavian bank which is shown by this statement made by one of the interviewed banking employees.

“With Nordea I mean it's a total package because- not to try to sell Nordea in any way - but they're very much in the forefront of most things, simply put.”
(Vincent, banking employee)

Through this, they feel safe and project possible threats due to digitalization mainly on the competition (other major banks in Sweden (SEB, Swedbank, etc.)) that are not perceived as digital as Nordea. However, management interviewees see smaller, younger, more innovative, and more flexible FinTechs as the real benchmark when assessing the degree of digitalization at Nordea.

“The darkest risk for brands like Nordea and other banks is, that we become completely invisible, that the customers will interact with an aggregate like [the FinTech] tink.com or other third-party providers. So, you would have the front-end dialogue with a technology provider and banks are just the loan and account factory in the back.” (Saga, management representative)

FinTechs are expected to define the norm of the new banking services. Their competitive pressure will also play a decisive role in shaping Nordea's bankers' future. Another more general comparison supports the analysis of avoidance of facing the potential change consequences. Whereas banking employees perceive the current status-quo as relatively stable, management representatives make clear that the only constant in the future will be constant change. This is a fact that employees fail to reflect upon which might stem from absent learnings from past bad experiences - blinded by 'little treats'.

4.3 Analysis Part II: Banking Employees' Identity Journey

The following second part of our analysis chapter focuses on the role that the identity of banking employees played within Nordea's digital transformation. We describe an identity journey that Nordea's banking employees took during the narrative outlined in the first part of the analysis above (see Figure 1 - Illustration of the Transformational and Identity Journey at Nordea).

4.3.1 Pre-Change Identity

Before embarking on the banking employees' identity journey, we want to illustrate the job role and, with that, the identity of banking employees before Nordea's start into transforming its business.

Nordea's banking advisors had a central role within Nordea's business model. They were aware of their power and indispensability which constituted a strong pre-change identity. This is supported by the following excerpt. A management representative who started his career as a personal banking advisor (here: PBA) describes the self-view of banking-employees before the digital transformation:

"The PBA was the center of the universe. He was the one point of contact. We were treated quite well when [I was] a PBA. [It's been us] talking to the customer, everybody was happy. And [the PBA] was kind of [the] one point of contact to the bank. So [for] everything the customer needs, he talked to the PBA [...]. When I was a PBA, you were able to say 'yes' or 'no'. You can't be more proud. People come in and say, 'I would like to buy a house' and you can say 'Yes, buy a house.' or you can say 'No, don't buy a house'. That was good. That's power. That was the pride of being a banker. You can say 'yes' or 'no'. It's nearly like going to the church, you know. But then, suddenly, we got an engine which can actually predict with higher possibility than you if the customer will repay the amount. You've

known the people, the family, you know everything. [...] And then, suddenly, a machine is telling you that this customer is not good, or this customer is good? That was kind of taking pride out of the work. 'By the way, you're not God anymore, you're just one of the channels that the customer can contact the bank through.' I think that has been a huge, huge change for people." (Charlie, management representative)

This quote illustrates clearly how personal banking advisors were seen and, subsequently, how they saw themselves. Their identity was strong and positive. It was filled with pride, self-confidence, professional ambition, and satisfaction. This self-view was grounded in and evolved out of their job role, which was characterized and grounded in power, independence, job security, appreciation from others, and the fact that they were indispensable as the one point of contact for customers (Figure 2). However, this quote already indicates identity struggles related to upcoming changes in the job role.

Figure 2 - Job Role Characteristics as Foundations for Pre-Change Identity



4.3.2 Identity Struggles: Trouble in Paradise

As indicated before, the next stop on our identity journey brings about troubles in the identity paradise. We argue that changes in the job role resulted in identity struggles grounded in a disequilibrium between the banking employees' self-view and new organizational expectations and demands. Slightly later, the same management representative as above refers to those struggles and describes the change from having a fixed group of customers ('my' customer) to being the advisor for any Nordea customer that needs support ('our' customer).

“In terms of formulations, we went from ‘my’ customer to ‘our’ customer. And that sounds like a small change. But it was a huge change, actually, [referring] back again to this [...] ‘being the center of the universe’. [We said to the PBAs], ‘No, it’s Nordea’s customer, can you have a role in that?’ I think that was a huge change in understanding what the consequences are, even though it’s only one word changing. A lot of mindset in that.” (Charlie, management representative)

The management representative states that Nordea’s top-down change in the system of personally allocated advisors demonstrated a huge change in the job role. It, subsequently, resulted in identity conflicts for banking employees. Referring back to Figure 2, we can clearly see where identity struggles originated from only by looking at the change of ‘my’ to ‘our’ customer. Banking employees were deprived of their authority when it came to decisions about the customers’ finances. Thus, they lost power. Further, a system where every customer can be handled by any advisor implies a set of universal rules and standard processes taking away much of the banking employees’ independence. Additionally, the change meant that banking employees were increasingly replaceable due to the decline of relevance of tacit relationship knowledge with regard to the customers. Naturally, a feeling of being less appreciated evolved. Those apparent adjustments of the banking employees’ job role were only caused by one change (‘my’ to ‘our’ customer) and indicate how severely the foundations of the banking employees’ pre-change identity were compromised or even eliminated in toto. This is in line with the indication of identity problems in the excerpt before.

4.3.3 ‘Partly Reversed Measures’: A Refuge for Identity

In the first part of the analysis chapter, we introduced ‘partly reversed measures’ as an element of our change narrative concerning change resistance. We argue that identity was a decisive factor in how the ‘partly reversed measures’ functioned and how they had an impact on the employees’ resistance to change. We state that they offered an opportunity to retain parts of the banking employees’ pre-change identity. In the following excerpt, a banking employee talks about the changes in the relationship with customers and the effects of Nordea starting to value the relevance of personal face-to-face meetings again.

“This bank and many other banks were like: ‘Oh God, everyone is going to want online meetings. You can discuss pensions and buying houses!’ Of course, you can. But [...] [customers] feel more comfortable sitting here, [...] that is my experience! [...] So the bank really had to back off on that, which was good because [before] they gave us the impression that everything was going to be online [with] just a few branches left to meet those few people who wanted to

come in, those 'crazy' people. And it turns out that a lot of people want to come in and sit here because this is important to them. [...] So what I mean is that in the like almost 20 years I have been in the bank, in the core not much has changed. Because people are the same. We do not change that much, I mean our fears and what we scared of and our insecurities they do not change, do they? Not much at least.” (Alice, banking employee)

The interviewee supports the occurrence of ‘partly reversed measures’. She states that, through those measures, she does not feel that much of her job role changed during the past years. With this, her job role as the indispensable, powerful, independent, and appreciated point of contact with the customer and, consequently, her identity remained relatively stable. Therefore, the excerpt supports that, through ‘partly reversed measures’, parts of the banking employees’ identity could be retained throughout the overall transformational journey.

4.3.4 Acceptance: Identity Stability Makes Satisfied Employees

As a consequence of having the chance to retain certain aspects of their pre-change identity, we argue that banking employees quickly reached a point in their identity journey where they could create a new state of identity stability. With that, they reached general satisfaction with their work life and acceptance of the digital transformation. Asked if changes in the course of digitalization made his job more efficient, a banking employee replies:

“Yeah, for sure. Much more. As long as [...] you can adapt, and you can use the new technologies. Because you really have to want to try it out as well. You can do the paperwork. It's easier because you've always done it [...]. But there are the systems being put into place so you can use them instead if you want to. And I would say in a year or two you need to use [them] because the other parts would be faced out. But yeah, changes like those, they're nice.” (Hugo, banking employee)

The excerpt illustrates how ‘partly reversed measures’ helped the employees to, again, reach an equilibrium between their self-view and external organizational demands and expectations. We referred to the changes in new tool implementation and the rise of online meetings in the first analysis part. We also stated that giving the employees a choice of how to use the tools and how to interact with customers can be categorized as a ‘partly reversed measure’ - as a concession within the grand strategic plan. We argue that this freedom to choose, that was also pointed out in this excerpt, led to the banking employees’ overall acceptance of the changes connected to Nordea’s digital transformation. The employees seem to ignore the identity struggles and breakdowns of an earlier stage of their identity journey. We conclude that this process of

intentional avoidance is in line with the mechanism of ‘partly reversed measures’ aiming to maintain (parts of) the pre-change identity. However, the banking employee in this excerpt still refers to the grand strategic plan stating that, eventually, employees will have to adapt to the new tools and ways to interact with customers. Therefore, we conclude that it is questionable if the identity stability reached through the ‘partly reversed measures’ will be of long duration. The interviewee implies that a new identity must include readiness for change and ability to adapt to them. We come back to that in the next section.

4.3.5 The Happy Place: Illusive Identity Stability?

The final stage of the identity journey illustrates the post-change identity and dares to take a look into the future by assessing how the banking employees’ post-change identity is positioned within the continuing grand strategic plan.

We claim that the employees’ post-change identity does not vary to a great extent from the pre-change identity. Furthermore, we argue that keeping up parts of their pre-change identity is responsible for their belief that their post-change identity will not be at risk in the near future. In the following excerpt, a banking employee illustrates his thoughts about the future of banking.

“I mean, without banking, a society cannot exist. So, the ones who are working in a bank are also the ones who can help the society to go forward. And if you compare the banking system many years ago, [...] today it’s completely different. Today, it’s more a relationship bank. You have a relationship with your bank. The bank is there for a reason. [...] Many will say that the digital world will take over the banking system completely. So, people will not visit the bank. That will never be the case, people will always go to the bank.” (Oscar, banking employee)

He is convinced that banking employees will still be needed as their customer-relation will still be face-to-face in the future. Characteristics of the pre-change identity are taken up again. The feelings of being indispensable, having power, and being appreciated are complemented by a feeling of having a higher purpose. Those characteristics indicate that the post-change identity resembles the pre-change identity. The interviewee does not refer back to Nordea’s attempts to impersonalize the customers from the advisors. On the contrary, he sees the relationship factor as central today and in the future. This feeling of having a stable individual identity in balance with the surrounding results in pride of being a banker, self-confidence, and perception of security. The interviewee categorically denies that the personal relationship between advisors and customers will be further diminished. If we follow our line of reasoning that the digital

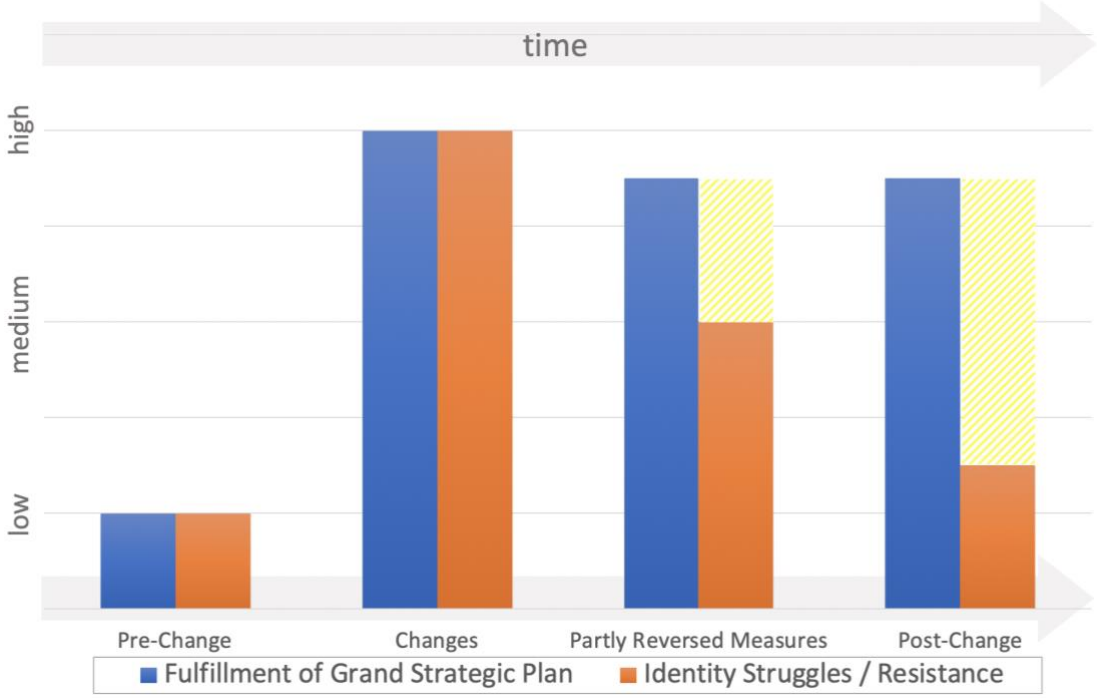
transformation of banking will bring about more changes to the job role of banking employees and their way to interact with customers, further identity struggles are likely. The banking employees' identity journey is not completed.

4.4 Chapter Summary

In this analysis chapter, we assembled our empirical material and created one narrative which is divided into two parts following the dichotomy of Nordea's transformational and the banking employees' identity journey. Our analysis concludes the following four main findings. *Firstly*, banking employees' work life was strongly impacted by digitalization and resulted in changes in their job role and identity. Consequently, resistance arose. *Secondly*, the resistance of banking employees was eased by Nordea management through small concessions, 'little treats' or 'partly reversed measures', resulting in the acceptance of Nordea's grand strategic plan. *Thirdly*, these 'partly reversed measures' enabled the banking employees to retain parts of their pre-change identity leading to a reduction or even the reversing of identity struggles. *Fourthly*, retaining parts of the pre-change identity created a feeling of identity stability for the banking employees. We interpret an elusive sense of security that prevented any critical reflection about possible future changes in their job role and identity.

Due to their importance for our study, the 'partly reversed measures' deserve particular attention. Therefore, we illustrate the functioning of the 'partly reversed measures' in Figure 3. It shows in a simplified way the degree of fulfillment of the overall grand strategic plan and the degree of identity struggles and resistance throughout the relevant parts of Nordea's transformational journey. The deviation of plan fulfillment and identity struggles/resistance is highlighted in yellow to point out the divergent effects of the 'partly reversed measures'.

Figure 3 - Illustration of Fulfillment of the Grand Strategic Plan and the Degree of Identity Struggles & Resistance over Time



5 Discussion

In the following discussion chapter, we will further describe and interpret our empirical findings. After giving a brief overview of the main findings (Table 7), we will link them to the existing literature about the concepts of identity and change management.

5.1 Recap: Our Main Findings

Table 7 briefly summarizes the four main findings from our empirical material.

Table 7 - Main Findings Summarized

<p>Main Finding I</p> <p>Digitalization has a strong impact on banking employees' work life. Job roles are altered which has a huge effect on their identity. This results in resistance against the changes that are connected to digitalization.</p>	<p>Main Finding II</p> <p>Small concessions within a grand strategic change plan in favor of the change recipients can quickly result in ease of resistance. Further, through those 'partly reversed measures', management can reach overall acceptance of the whole grand strategic plan. This holds true even if the initial grand strategic plan continues only marginally diverted by the 'partly reversed measures'.</p>
<p>Main Finding III</p> <p>Through 'partly reversed measures', employees have the opportunity to retain parts of their pre-change identity. Identity struggles are reduced or reversed.</p>	<p>Main Finding IV</p> <p>Retaining parts of the pre-change identity throughout the transformational journey quickly results in a feeling of identity stability again. Therefore, employees do not perceive that their identity has been much altered at all. Their self-view (post-change identity) resembles the pre-change identity. As a result employees do not reflect about the future and potential future identity struggles, for instance, in connection with the continuing grand strategic plan.</p>

5.2 Identity Journey Through the Lens of Identity Literature

Firstly, the relevance of our empirical findings in the area of identity work is shown. Afterward, we discuss each step of the identity journey and link them to identity literature. Finally, the new status quo of identity stability is specifically illustrated.

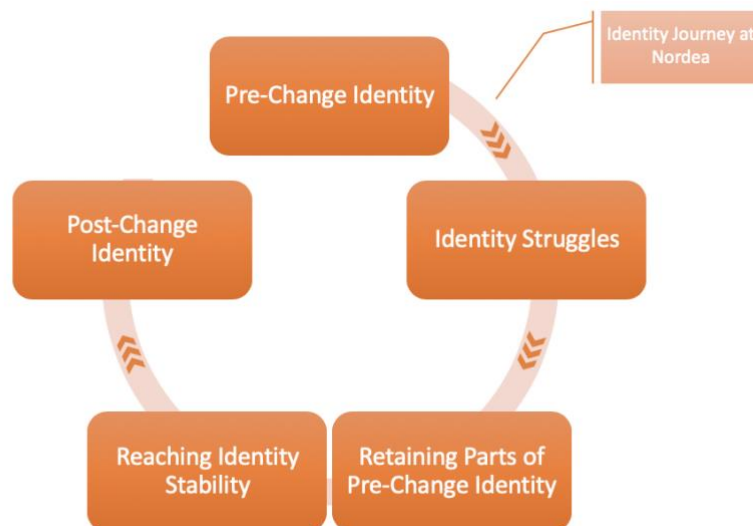
5.2.1 Identity Work within Nordea’s Transformational Journey

First of all, the findings of our study demonstrate that Nordea’s radical changes influenced the identity of the banking employees. They, therefore, support Alvesson’s, Lee Ashcraft’s, and Thomas’ (2008) notion of the relevance of identity and identity work in changing organizations. Our study proves that the implemented radical changes as part of Nordea’s grand strategic plan had significant consequences on how the banking employees viewed themselves and, thus, on their identity. This supports Brown’s (2015) and Watson’s (2008) viewpoint of drastic changes impacting an individual’s self-view and expectations. Nordea’s top-down transformational journey and their influence on the customer as well as on the banking employees identity are a precursor of identity work (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008).

5.2.2 Forms of Identity Work Throughout the Identity Journey

The banking employees’ stories about the impact of the tool consolidation (‘core banking programme’), the development towards entering the ‘online world’, as well as the change from ‘my’ to ‘our’ customer show the necessity to engage in identity work throughout the described identity journey as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4 - Identity Journey at Nordea



The *pre-change identity*, which is based on the pre-change job role, has been under scrutiny due to, for instance, the top-down change from ‘my’ to ‘our’ customer. It undermined the traditional banker’s identity as the main responsible for the customer relationship. The result of this is what Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) view as identity work or “becoming” (p.1164) caused by struggles on what and who the banking employees are. Together with the tool

consolidation and the development towards the ‘online world,’ those exemplary changes in their job role resulted in the need to “repair and revise” their identity to regain a “sense of coherence” (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p.1165).

In the following, we use Sveningsson’s and Alvesson’s (2016) five forms of identity work to explain the different forms of the employees’ *identity struggles* throughout their identity journey which we concluded from the empirical material. The top-down change from ‘my’ to ‘our’ customer was the most severe identity change examined in our study and, therefore, suggests a rather serious form of identity work (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). The reaction to this decision by the banking employees as well as the customers entailed a significant decrease in satisfaction. This indicates the severity of this exemplary change. Therefore, our empirical findings suggest that, depending on the interviewee, this identity struggle can be categorized as identity wrestling or even as an identity crash. Other top-down changes such as the consolidation of the tool landscape or the increasing relevance of the ‘online world’ were perceived as milder forms of identity struggles such as identity juggling or identity adjustment. We argue that those changes did not rattle the core of job role and identity enough to justify the categorization as identity wrestling or crash. Nevertheless, the banking employees fled into different types and levels of resistance against all those top-down changes which will be examined in detail in chapter 5.3 (Discussion: Implications for Change Management).

Our findings demonstrate Nordea’s ‘partly reversed measures’ reduced these identity struggles. They helped to *retain parts of the pre-change identity* and smoothed resistance. This mechanism resulted in reaching new identity stability.

Consequently, the banking employees accepted the new job role status quo. Our empirical material is in line with Kump’s (2019) model of practice, knowledge, and identity. We equate job role with “routines, procedures, and beliefs” (Kump, 2019, p.17). Our findings highlight the interplay of practice and identity stated in Kump’s model. However, they marginalize the relevance of knowledge in our context. In sum, we saw that the job role profoundly impacted identity (Regini, Kitay & Baethge, 1999). *Identity stability* is consequently reached through everyday reinforcement of organizational practices (Gioia et al., 2013). Subsequently, this creates a new organizational identity that is manifested through the individual, *post-change identity*.

5.2.3 Reaching Identity Stability

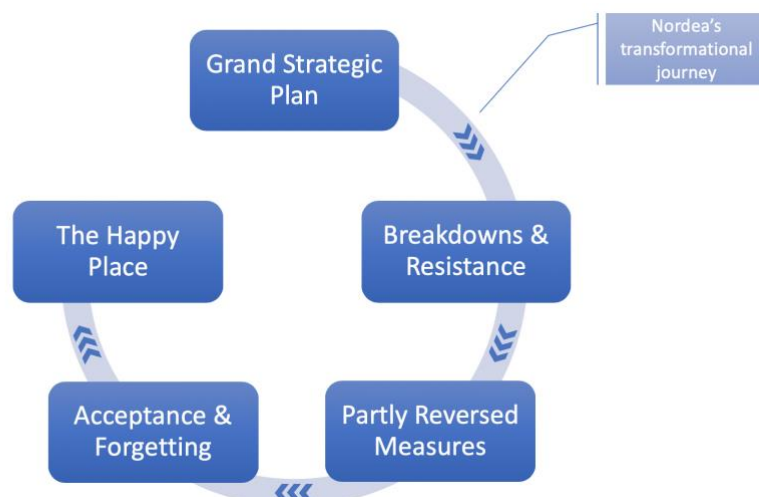
We identified reaching identity stability as the primary factor in forgetting the struggles and difficulties the banking employees had to endure during the changes in their job role and identity. Identity stability can be achieved through a new status quo of both, job role and, consequently, identity which creates an ideal and harmonious balance between reality and the self-view (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). Identity stability comes, as Smistrup (2007) explains, with multiple advantages which positively influence the banking employees' work life. Additionally, our empirical findings show that the difference between pre-change and post-change identity is minor. Therefore, when assessing an identity status quo, former identities need to be considered which is supported by McAdams notion on the importance of past identities for future identity work (1993).

We conclude that this resemblance of pre- and post-change identity and, thus, the general relatively stable identity, is a factor that plays a significant part in the overall acceptance of the grand strategic plan. It leads to general satisfaction of the banking employees. When thinking about the future, our findings suggest that banking employees do not assume that the achieved identity stability will be under scrutiny again. We argue that the interviewees actively avoid considering and reflecting on how their work life at Nordea will be further influenced by the general digitalization of the banking industry.

5.3 Discussion: Implications for Change Management

The following section will integrate our empirical findings in the discourse of change management and change resistance. The structure of this section, again, refers back to the formerly outlined transformational journey (Figure 5).

Figure 5 - Transformational Journey at Nordea



5.3.1 Nordea's Transformational Journey: Conceptual Unboxing

Firstly, we like to assess Nordea's transformational journey from a theoretical change management perspective. The bigger picture of Nordea's digital transformation, as well as the concrete changes in the employees' work life, suggest that Nordea's management follows a somewhat episodic view on change. Nordea's management justifies this transformational journey or grand strategic plan by referring to digitalization as a cause and sets out a clear desired outcome. In their eyes, this transformation has a beginning and an end which is deemed typical for episodic change perspectives (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2013; Weick & Quinn, 1999). In the empirical material, it becomes evident that Nordea followed a top-down management-centric approach to implementing change. Therefore, it resembles the "planning approach" to change (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016, pp.21–30).

During our analysis, we repeatedly used the expression of transformational journey as coined by Nordea. Even before assessing the changes at Nordea in connection to the literature within this discussion chapter, we, ourselves, were confident to categorize Nordea's journey as transformational. Having the insights from our background research (see chapter 4.1 Setting the Scene: Nordea as Our Research Context) and the impressions from the interviews functioned as justification. Examining the scope and scale of the changes as a whole, they can serve as an example of revolutionary, and second-order changes (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016; Coghlan & Rashford, 2006; Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016). Nordea's transformational journey severely alters the business model and structure. Additionally, and more importantly for our research project, our analysis showed that the employees' work life was rattled. Furthermore, combining the scope, scale, and the ways of change implementation, we are confident to categorize Nordea's transformation as a radical change following the definition of Kump (2019).

5.3.2 Honoring the Individual's Emotions, Cognition, and Intentions

The empirical material illustrates the individuals' role in organizational changes that is highlighted by Choi (2011) as a crucial success factor for change. Taking the example of the change from 'my' to 'our' customer it was the individual customer-advisor relationship that was broken down by an organization-wide change effort. The impact on the employees' work life was, in this case, perceived negative by the employees who were individual change recipients. The management realized problems and resistance regarding this change and reversed it subsequently. Here, in turn, an individual dynamic had a clear effect on the

organizational level. This holds true throughout our whole narrative that we mapped out in our analysis chapter. Nordea failed to consider the attitude of the individual employees (and, in this case, of the customers) towards the changes (Choi, 2011). Looking at how, in general, employees reacted to Nordea's radical change efforts, we can refer back to Piderit's (2000) three dimensions of reactions towards change: emotional, cognitive, and intentional. Referring back to the dynamics illustrated in our analysis, all three dimensions come into play. We will give short examples in the following: Cutting the personal relationship between customers and their personal advisors led to negative emotional reactions of both, the employees and the customers. The eventual acceptance of digitalization efforts and the perception that the new digital processes can actually help to work more efficient is a rather rational and positive cognitive process. Finally, actively tricking the system of online meeting quotas per week is a negative intentional reaction to the change in the customer-advisor relationship. During the course of our narrative, we see that reactions to the radical changes move on a continuum between positive and negative in all three dimensions. Piderit's (2000) model, therefore, helps to assess the effects of, for instance, the 'partly reversed measures' on the employees' reactions to change.

5.3.3 Nordea's Transformational Journey: Illustrating Resistance

For the purpose of our study, there is little value of classifying specific negative reactions to change at Nordea into resistance categories as suggested in the literature. We saw different conducts that serve "to maintain the status quo in the face of pressure to alter the status quo" (Zaltman & Duncan, 1977, p.63). We observed notions of resistance in active and passive as well as in overt and covert forms (Smollan, 2011a). On the contrary, since it was not the focus of our study, it is difficult to say how Nordea management perceived the resistance. Referring back to the top-down implementation of change, they supposedly saw the negative reactions of employees as a 'troublesome element' (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, forthcoming). They did not listen to feedback from the change recipients. Therefore, it is evident that they did not perceive resistance as a 'valuable contribution' (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016; Sveningsson & Sörgärde, forthcoming). Additionally, the 'partly reversed measures' indicated in our analysis do not exemplify the productive approach to employees' resistance, either, since they are only deemed to be from temporary continuance. Kump (2019) states that, in radical changes, resistance can be seen as a 'natural occurrence' (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, forthcoming) which points out that, in our case, resistance was inevitable. Furthermore, the notion of 'identity work

as resistance' (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, forthcoming) lends itself to closer investigation. We referred to the desired state of identity stability before. Our empirical findings show that Nordea's radical changes rattled the banking employees' identity. Subsequently, resistance occurred. Here, our empirical findings support the literature by confirming that unbalancing employees' identity itself and, consequently, the need to engage in identity work can lead to resistance. We can state that the radical scope of change was a reinforcing element of resistance within an evolving vicious circle. The totality and top-down approach resulted in employees holding on to their pre-change identity even more. This, in turn might have led to an even stronger feeling of identity threat by the radical change, which finally made resistance even more likely (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016; Kump, 2019; Nag, Corley & Gioia, 2007; Sveningsson & Sörgärde, forthcoming). On the contrary, having the opportunity to retain (parts of the) pre-change identity stability would, following this line of argument, result in ease of resistance. This statement leads us to the mechanism of the identified 'partly reversed measures'.

5.3.4 'Partly Reversed Measures' as a Way to Manage Resistance?

Our empirical findings brought to light the mechanism of 'partly reversed measures' (the 'little treats') in contexts of radical changes. In short, they show that acceptance for a grand strategic change plan can be acquired through small concessions in favor of the change recipients and contradicting the initial change plan. As mentioned before, those concessions offer the employees the opportunity to retain parts of their former identity. Subsequently, change recipients quickly recover apparent identity stability. Consequently, they accept the remaining parts of the grand strategic plan, even though it was, as a whole, source of resistance in the first place.

This mechanism illustrates a way to ease or even overcome resistance that overlaps with claims of other literature. We will briefly collate our 'partly reversed measures' with this literature. With the 'partly reversed measures', the Nordea management adjusted their change management approach. Initially, they attempted to implement planned radical changes in light of digitalization in a top-down manner. They followed a 'planning approach' to change. With the 'little treats' they proceed with a more processual notion honoring and responding to the contexts and reactions to the changes (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016). This approach of change management is in line with 'incrementalism'. 'Incrementalism' is defined as a management learning process honoring social and political processes within a changing

organizational context (Johnson, 1988). ‘Incrementalism’ as a way to manage change builds upon current as well as past modes and states of the organization (Nelson & Winter, 1985) enabling contingency in how to bring upon change. It “results in enactment, selection and retention processes” (Johnson, 1988, p.75) of change, which is also true for the identified ‘partly reversed measures’. Johnson (1988) further highlights that ‘incrementalism’ can specifically support the implementation of radical changes if they threaten strong existing paradigms within an organization. This dynamic resembles the aforementioned significance of strong existing identities preventing radical changes in our case. On a more concrete level, Kotter and Schlesinger (2008) give recommendations to “defuse major resistance” by offering incentives “for making the change” (2008, p.1). The ‘little treats’ or ‘partly reversed measures’ from our case display the characteristics of incentives in a way that they increase employees’ commitment to the change. However, they do not particularly refer to smaller concessions in the opposite direction of the initial grand change. Palmer, Dunford, and Buchanan (2016) refer to the force-field-analysis and very broadly recommend to analyze and, subsequently, decrease restraining forces (including resistance) in order to manage change successfully. Concessions, in our sense, do weaken the restraining force of resistance and can, therefore, be part of the analysis of the force-field within changing organizations. Finally, Mento, Jones, and Dirndorfer (2002) suggest to “create small wins for motivation” (p.54) and “integrate lessons learned” (p.56) in order to manage change successfully. Those resemble characteristics of our ‘partly reversed measures’. However, Mento, Jones, and Dirndorfer (2002) attempt to create a prescriptive model for successful change management as a whole. On the contrary, our ‘little treats’ take full effect where resistance is already present but, still, a bigger transformational change plan needs to be followed through with.

In sum, with the discovery of the ‘partly reversed measures’, we illustrate a notion of dealing with resistance that can be found in the literature with slight deviations in the contexts, preconditions, results, and knowledge interest. In general, the long-term effectiveness of our concrete ‘partly reversed measures’ cannot be assessed in the course of our research project and is suggested for further research. The dynamics in our case company Nordea and the future outlook indicate that the ‘little treats’ can only serve as a short-term measure to ease the symptoms that are “‘surface’ indications of some ‘deeper-lying’ facts” (Lewin, 1947, p.10 cited in Kump, 2019, p.8).

5.4 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we connected our empirical findings with the prevalent literature in the fields of identity and change management.

Firstly, the literature confirms the relevance of identity and identity work in changing organizations, especially in radical changes. Secondly, we illustrated that, throughout the identity journey of Nordea's banking employees, different forms of identity struggles came into play. Through this, we were able to assess what happened with the employees' identity in every stage of the identity journey. The final stage of the illustrated identity journey entails reaching new identity stability, which has a positive effect on the acceptance of change and employees' general satisfaction. However, the literature suggests that this identity stability has to be assessed critically due to its deterring effects on the necessary reflection on the changes in employees' work life.

Concerning change management, we, firstly, connected the findings from our empirical material with categorizations of change in the literature. Nordea's transformational journey constitutes a strong form of change in terms of scale and scope, showing characteristics of transformational, revolutionary, second-order, and radical change. In the following, we assessed the bases of the employees' reaction to change, considering emotional, cognitive, and intentional dimensions. Since the most evident reaction towards Nordea's transformational journey was resistance, we, in the following, assessed possible dynamics leading to resistance, which included identity work. Further, we assessed the management's view on the apparent resistance leading to an illustration of 'partly reversed measures' as their reaction on it. Since the 'partly reversed measures' are at the core of our empirical findings, they are particularly examined in this chapter. We illustrated literature that overlaps with the mechanism of 'partly reversed measures' strengthening our narrative of small change concessions as a means to ease resistance and reach change acceptance.

6 Conclusion

Within the following conclusion chapter, we first give an overview of our research objectives including the research questions and purpose of our study. Afterward, we present the results of our study by describing our learnings, summarizing main limitations, and illustrating the process of mystery solving. Finally, we show the contribution and relevance of our study in light of our research purpose and research questions, briefly relate the study to existing theory, and suggest further research.

6.1 The Results: What have We Learned?

Our research project aimed to assess the significance of digitalization for banking employees' work life. Furthermore, our objective was to extract implications from changes in employees' work life for the management of radical change. Those objectives, and, thus, our research questions, were accompanied by our aspiration to discover a mystery within the empirical material. During our study, we learned how severe changes in banking employees' work life affect the employees' identity. Furthermore, we extracted implications for how to approach resistance and gave indications of how to manage radical change successfully. To this end, we conducted 13 semi-structured interviews with customer-oriented banking employees at Nordea in South Sweden and management representatives in the Copenhagen headquarters of the bank. The interviews suggested a narrative of Nordea's transformational journey in light of digitalization that is still ongoing. Following an interpretivist and abductive research approach, we were able to examine deeper lying dynamics and processes happening throughout the created narrative. All in all, we argue that our empirical findings fulfill our research objectives.

First of all, our findings clearly show that digitalization, and the connected radical changes within the banking industry, have a strong impact on banking employees' work life. They alter the employees' job role, which consequently causes severe identity struggles. Resistance against digitalization is likely to arise. We argue that applying a top-down approach to radical change is fertile ground for adverse reactions to digital transformation.

The quest for discovering a mystery in the empirical material gained momentum when looking at how our case company reacted on the occurring resistance. The discovery of 'partly reversed measures' in our material was a crucial moment of our research. We reason that it is possible to ease resistance and awaken acceptance for overall radical changes by offering the change

recipients the opportunity to retain parts of their pre-change identity after they experienced first breakdowns and struggles. This can be fulfilled through small concessions in favor of the employees who express themselves through resistance. Those concessions illustrate certain responsiveness of Nordea towards the employees' resistance. However, selectively backing down on aspects of the radical changes that cause employee resistance seems sufficient. This holds true even though the overall transformation continues only marginally and temporarily adjusted by the 'partly reversed measures.' The mechanism of 'partly reversed measures' (figuratively labeled: 'little treats') suggests a significant implication for the processes of radical changes and could serve as a change management recipe to overcome resistance.

However, another characteristic of the mechanism of 'partly reversed measures' is that, through retaining parts of their pre-change identity, most parts of the employees' self-view and their job role is preserved. We see that through the effect of the 'partly reversed measures' the post-change identity strongly resembles the pre-change identity. As a consequence, employees avoid reflecting on past problems, do not draw learnings from the change journey that impacted their work life, and, finally, do not reflect on the future. Regained identity stability suggests a feeling of security. This is ground for problematization and should serve as a learning for change management, too. Even the literature, as presented before, strengthens that past identities and identity work have to be processed and fed into the creation of a new identity that can serve as a starting point for the future. The mechanism of 'partly reversed measures' does not allow this processing, which leaves employees un-reflexive and, therefore, vulnerable concerning potential future waves of radical changes. As another learning, we want to encourage critical reflection about the mechanism of 'partly reversed measures.' We argue that to be able to implement radical change successfully, identities have to be proactively altered through identity work and anchored as a post-change identity deviating from the past. Our case company and the empirical material suggest that, in contemporary organizations at large, changes will more and more become the norm. This additionally accentuates the need for more identity flexibility and people's willingness to engage in identity work. The 'partly reversed measures' - or 'little treats' - prevent organizations and individuals from this process. They only serve as a measure to ease resistance in the short term.

However, certain limitations need to be considered. Firstly, by using a single case study, we can only generalize on a theoretical and analytical level rather than create general contributions. Secondly, we used source criticism criteria to reflect on and evaluate the empirical material

during our interpretation process. Through this, we were able to disclose limitations and potential biases ensuring a high level of credibility.

Based on our preunderstanding of digitalization, the assessment of existing change management theory, and the narrative from the empirical material we extracted breakdowns that led to a revelation of a mystery (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). Referring back to our material, the banking employees' acceptance of changes that were formerly reason for the resistance was surprising. With this acceptance, general approval of and satisfaction with the overall direction of Nordea's digital transformation went hand in hand, which was also unexpected considering the severe struggles this transformation caused. Throughout our analysis, we were able to solve this mystery by our narrative, and the introduction of 'partly reversed measures' (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Styhre, 2013). These concessions explain how the employees' acceptance developed but also require critical reflection on their mechanism in the future. Through this critical reflection with regard to identity work, we demystified the mystery. By extensively assessing the mechanism of 'partly reversed measures', we reached a contribution that shows "the ability to simultaneously look both backward and forward, to anticipate both the new and what is in the making" (Styhre, 2013, p.14).

6.2 Referring Back to Our Purpose: Why Is This Interesting?

In our methodology chapter, we pointed out that, due to the scope of our research project, our thesis can only contribute with an analytical or theoretical generalization. However, in the following, we want to strengthen the relevance of our study with regard to our statement of purpose and show why our findings are from interest to practitioners and academics.

First of all, we are confident that our findings have a significant value for our case company Nordea. The Nordea management has to recognize that the apparent acceptance of the overall digital transformation can be traced back to 'partly reversed measures.' They need to realize that the identities of banking employees are not significantly changed. This leads to an elusive perception that the radical changes are now well embedded and accepted. We see a risk that the resistance throughout the transformational journey has only been perceived as a 'flash in the pan' that could be extinguished by some small change concessions. On the contrary, we admonish that in the future, the apparent identity stability will easily be broken down by any further radical change. It appears that the banking employees are on board with Nordea's

transformational journey. However, they do not realize how much their work life as banking employees has already been altered and will be altered in the future. Therefore, Nordea needs to transparently involve and incorporate the employees more in order to reach new future-oriented identity stability.

Besides detailed insights for our case company Nordea, our study is relevant in the following ways. Our research provides insights on how to manage radical change and resistance. We illustrate dynamics in the banking industry in light of digitalization that can be of value for other banks as well as for other comparable industries that are impacted by digitalization. Further, we show a facet of how employees' work life and identity can play a role in digital transformation efforts. We remind that employees need to (be able to) reflect about their past and their future in their work life in order to create long-term identity stability.

As described in the discussion chapter, especially episodic views on change and top-down approaches to change management are well-described in the traditional mainstream literature. In our narrative, those approaches lead to problems that open up another level of impact. Identity becomes a decisive factor in those contexts. Therefore, we see the outcomes of our study in the tradition of more continuous and processual notions of change management. With the 'partly reversed measures', we illustrate a way to respond to change resistance that is, in a similar fashion, mentioned in the literature. However, the 'partly reversed measures' show their shortcomings when assessing their long-term effects on change management, employees' work life, and identity.

We argue that the topic of digitalization and its effect on employees' work life needs to be subject to further research extending the scope and content of our study. As outlined before, our study can only offer theoretical generalization. It is narrowed down to one single case in a specific context and only suggests insights, indications, as well as inspiration. We invite for further research in a broader context to create universal generalization about how digitalizing contexts impact the role of employees. Moreover, we see the great value of further specifically studying identity in light of digitalization. Our study suggests that identity is crucial to consider in order to achieve a successful digital transformation. Furthermore, digitalization is a contemporary phenomenon, which is why the set of available literature is still relatively superficial and developing. Our empirical material suggests that changes connected to digitalization will, for the time being, be part of organizations reality. Because of this recency, further studies are required. Finally, our study highlights the importance of identity work in light of radical digitalization changes. However, it cannot give concrete recommendations on

how to encourage it in this specific context of digitalization. This serves as a final rationale for further research in this field.

6.3 Key Learnings Summarized

To complement our thesis, the following key learnings can be concluded:

- Radical changes within organizations in light of digitalization strategies have a vast impact on employees' work life, can cause severe identity struggles, and constitute a ground for resistance.
- Applying a top-down approach to change management increases the risk for the aforementioned adverse effects.
- Change managers can ease resistance by responding with small selective concessions within the overall change plan that enable to retain parts of the employees' pre-change identity.
- Those concessions ('partly reversed measures') can lead to the overall acceptance of the greater change plan even though it might continue in a direction that would further impair the employees' work life.
- Retaining parts of the pre-change identity through the 'partly reversed measures' inhibit the employees from engaging in identity work. The identity of the employees is not significantly altered in relation to the significant changes.
- Not being urged to process changes, enables the employees to avoid reflection about further consequences of digitalization for their future work life.
- For change managers: In order to implement radical changes, identity work has to be facilitated. Identities need to be altered and anchored as a post-change identity deviating from the past. Achieving change acceptance through 'partly reversed measures' is not sufficient.
- For change recipients: In contemporary organizations, change is more and more becoming the norm. Therefore, identities must become more flexible, and employees need to be willing to engage in identity work.

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