

Course: SKOM12

Term: Spring 2021

Supervisor Howard Nothhaft

Examiner X

To Change or not to Change: A Qualitative Analysis of the Executive Search Industry's Strategic Responses to Artificial Intelligence

ANOUK BOSMAN

Lund University
Department of strategic communication
Master's thesis



Abstract

To Change or not to Change: A Qualitative Analysis of the Executive Search Industry's Strategic Responses to Artificial Intelligence

The usage of Artificial Intelligence is gaining popularity in many industries nowadays, triggering professionals to communicate about these disruptive changes in their industries. One industry has been looked at more profoundly: the executive search industry. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain more insight into the exploration of communicated strategies by professionals due to AI-related strategic change. As the basis of change communication is subjective self-perception, two consultancy tools were implemented to understand how participants see themselves compared to others: Gartner's magic quadrant and Gartner's hype cycle. The critical realism research tradition has enabled some communication strategies to be considered as right and others as wrong. This has divided the sample into leaders (first movers), challengers (awaiting the retirement of older employees), visionaries (preparing internally), and niche players (experiencing fear and resistance against AI). The results showcase that the niche players will be the first ones to experience unavoidable organisational change coming from something they believed not to become true. To ensure a smoothly communicated change, it is crucial organisations implement digitally literate change agents, work in small and flexible organisations, execute constant education sessions for all employees, implement a flat hierarchy to apply a participatory approach in the organisation, and smoothen the change process.

Keywords: Organisational Change, First Mover Advantages, Resistance, Artificial Intelligence, Strategic Communication, Executive Search industry

Word Count: 19,994

Table of contents

- 1. Introduction..... 5**
 - 1.1. Problem Formulation..... 6
 - 1.2. Study Aim & Research Question 6
 - 1.3. Contribution to the Field of Strategic Communication 7
 - 1.4. Delimitations 8

- 2. Literature Review 10**
 - 2.1. Strategic Change 10
 - 2.2. Disruptive or Innovative Technologies? 11
 - 2.3. Organisational Change Communication 12
 - 2.3.1. Drivers of Change 12
 - 2.3.2. The Importance of Internal Communication 13
 - 2.4. Resistance to change 14
 - 2.4.1. A Complex Definition 14
 - 2.4.2. Resistance is Tackled by Communication 14
 - 2.4.3. Change is not for Everyone 15
 - 2.4.4. Resistance and Fear 16
 - 2.5. Synthesis..... 16

- 3. Theory 18**
 - 3.1. Gartner’s Magic Quadrant..... 18
 - 3.1.1. Who goes Where? 19
 - 3.2. Gartner’s Hype Cycle..... 20
 - 3.2.1. Introducing the Different Phases 21
 - 3.3. First Movers 22
 - 3.3.1. Advantages 22
 - 3.3.2. Disadvantages..... 23
 - 3.4. Disruptive Innovations 23
 - 3.5. Different types of Fear 24
 - 3.6. Change..... 24
 - 3.6.1. What is it?..... 24
 - 3.6.2. Why does it happen? 25
 - 3.6.3. How does it happen? 26
 - 3.7. Resistance..... 26

3.7.1.	Why does it happen?	26
3.7.2.	How can it be addressed?	27
3.8.	Synthesis.....	27
4.	Methodology	28
4.1.	Engaged Scholarship	28
4.2.	Research approach: Critical Realism	29
4.3.	Selection of Participants	30
4.4.	Qualitative Semi-Structured Interviews	32
4.4.1.	The Interview Guide.....	32
4.4.2.	Anonymity.....	33
4.5.	Coding of Interviews	33
4.6.	Theory in Practice	34
4.6.1.	Gartner’s Magic Quadrant.....	34
4.6.2.	Gartner’s Hype Cycle.....	35
4.7.	Credibility of the Study	35
4.8.	Synthesis.....	35
5.	Analysis.....	36
5.1.	A Double-Edged Sword	36
5.1.1.	The Magic Quadrant.....	36
5.1.2.	Ability to Execute.....	37
5.1.3.	Completeness of Vision	39
5.1.4.	Practical Implications	40
5.1.5.	The Hype Cycle.....	41
5.1.6.	The Results	41
5.1.6.1.	Niche Players	42
5.1.6.2.	Visionaries	42
5.1.6.3.	Challenger	43
5.1.6.4.	Leaders	43
5.1.7.	Speed of Implementation	44
5.2.	A Leap of Faith	44
5.2.1.	Trade Secrets	45
5.2.2.	Access to Niche Segments	46
5.2.3.	Switching Costs.....	46
5.2.4.	Brand Loyalty.....	46
5.2.5.	Imitate and Improve	47
5.2.6.	Long Gone.....	48
5.3.	Against the Grain	49
5.3.1.	A Cat on a Hot Tin Roof	49
5.3.1.1.	The History of The Executive Search Industry.....	49
5.3.1.2.	Fear in Different Forms.....	51
5.3.1.3.	The Influence of Popular Culture.....	51
5.3.2.	Like a Fish out of Water.....	52
5.3.2.1.	AI hurts Employees’ Image of Expertise	52

5.3.2.2.	AI hurts Employees' Confidence	53
5.3.2.3.	Perceived AI Risks > Perceived AI Benefits	53
5.3.2.4.	Job Uncertainty	54
5.3.2.5.	Don't Break Away from the Pack.....	54
5.4.	Straight from the Horses' Mouths	55
5.4.1.	Flexibility	55
5.4.2.	(Collective) Knowledge Management	56
5.4.3.	Different Strategies for Different Structures	57
5.4.4.	Participatory & Relational approach	57
5.5.	Synthesis.....	58
6.	Discussion & Conclusion	60
6.1.	Discussion of Results	60
6.2.	Communication Strategies	61
6.2.1.	Leaders	61
6.2.2.	Challenger	61
6.2.3.	Visionaries.....	62
6.2.4.	Niche players.....	62
6.3.	Conclusion.....	62
6.4.	Contribution to the Field of Strategic Communication	63
6.5.	Limitations & Further Research	63
6.6.	Concluding Remarks	64
7.	References.....	65
8.	Appendix.....	72
8.1.	Appendix 1: Interview Guide: ES Organisations	72
8.2.	Appendix 2: Interview Guide: School.....	73

List of Figures

Figure 1. Conceptual model of communication during organisational change – reprinted from Elving (2005).....	15
Figure 2. Example of Gartner’s Magic Quadrant – reprinted from Bresciani and Eppler (2008)	19
Figure 3. Gartner’s Hype Cycle – reprinted from Linden and Fenn (2003)	20
Figure 4. Gartner’s Hype Cycle: the different phases – reprinted from Linden and Fenn (2003)	21
Figure 5. The iceberg metaphor for Critical Realism – reprinted from Fletcher (2017).....	30
Figure 6. Magic Quadrant based on interview results of participants of the research acquired from April 2021 until July 2021	37
Figure 7. Hype Cycle based on AI usage in executive search organisations, per quadrant. Acquired from April 2021 until July 2021	42

List of Tables

Table 1. Overview of final codes and their transformation into metaphors.....	34
---	----

1. Introduction

Increased usage of Artificial Intelligence (AI) can potentially bring organisations, industries, and the economy at large, major social and economic benefits and exciting (business) opportunities (Floridi et al., 2018). On the other hand, AI has given room to many provocative discussions and concerns (Duan, Edwards & Dwivedi, 2019), leading top management and organisations to remain doubtful of the usage of AI in their business and communication strategies. Guzman and Lewis (2020) explain that AI can mean two things: “encompassing efforts to understand human intelligence by recreating a mind within a machine” (p.73) and “to develop technologies that perform tasks associated with some level of human intelligence” (p.73). This entails that, whilst trying to understand the human brain capacity, one is developing a brain similar – but not identical – to the human brain. Over the years, AI has gained a presence in many different industries and has helped to efficiently carry out a variety of tasks. For example, AI can process large amounts of data, at ever-increasing speeds. The processing and reading of this data at this speed is solely possible by AI and enables existing business activities and processes to become more competitive. Businesses can then use this data effectively to understand the consumer’s needs and wishes better, stepping away from impersonalised marketing and communication strategies and making room for personal ones. This leads to an enhanced customer experience and customer loyalty. AI is not seen as a luxury anymore; it has become a necessity for companies aiming to be ahead of their competitors (Thamm, 2021). Due to this, AI has led many organisations to communicate about change in their industries, however, for the purpose and restrictions of this thesis, only one industry will be thoroughly looked at: the executive search industry. I am currently employed at the Marketing and Communications department of an executive search firm in Sweden, currently experiencing an AI-implemented organisational change. Narrowing down the research to the executive search industry was a natural decision since there is a good prior understanding of the industry’s operations and provides the student with better and easier access for data collection.

1.1. Problem Formulation

Executive search companies are categorised as a type of professional service firms that solely focus on employment searches for executive positions and/or equivalent senior positions. This explains the main difference between an executive search firm and a recruitment firm, as the latter typically sources junior positions and lower-level management. The executive search firm is hired by third-party organisations in various industries and performs the employment search (Midwinter, 2021). AI has tremendous potential in this industry as it can assist in many parts of the recruiting process: sourcing candidates, matching candidates, candidate communication (e.g., chatbots), predictive and intelligent analytics, to name a few. However, AI can also be feared since many employees fear being replaced by AI completely (Potter, 2020). The executive search industry is a niche segment of the market, therefore no previous research has been done about its relationship with AI. However, Burgess (2017) explains that AI has been around for more than 50 years and has constantly evolved ever since. Due to its recent decrease in price and commercialisation in the market, AI is now available to almost anyone who is willing to learn more. This has led innovative organisations to have the potential to outplay traditional organisations, problematic for many (Burgess, 2017). Therefore, numerous executive search companies are currently communicating about change in their industry: either by implementing, thinking about implementing, or resisting AI-driven communication and business strategies in their organisational structures.

1.2. Study Aim & Research Question

Organisational change and its navigation around it are topics that have gained popularity in academic research over the past decades. Change has been researched by scholars discussing the evolution of industries, technical or digital advances, and institutional change (Malerba, 2006) which has triggered the attention of the student to the relationship between organisational change and organisations' communicated strategies while doing so. Communication in relationship with change can be encouraged either by needs within the organisation or by needs from the surrounding environment (Cheney, Christensen, Zorn, & Ganesh, 2010). However, not much light has been shed on how organisations steer organisational change when struggling with innovative technologies. Media organisations are becoming technological organisations, communication profes-

sionals are expected to be digitally literate, etc. (Cheney et al., 2010). A possible reason why industries are innovating so quickly is due to the possibilities AI is bringing along. This is problematic since industries are undergoing change due to the constant introduction and communication of new technologies, but do not seem to know how to communicatively navigate the change. The aim of this research is therefore embedded in expanding one's knowledge on organisations' communicated strategies addressing AI-driven change. Ultimately, this thesis aims to explore how executive search agencies are communicating about AI-implemented change in their industry. This will be done by answering the following research question:

Research Question: how do executive search agencies communicatively navigate the AI-related strategic change in their industry?

1.3. Contribution to the Field of Strategic Communication

Cheney et al. (2010) explain that today, organisational environments are tumultuous and are changing at a high speed due to globalising and innovating markets and competitors. Disruptive technologies typically come hand in hand with organisational change and hectic organisational environments. "Change initiatives typically involve the implementation of and uses of new computer-based technologies [...] Technology is change." (Cheney et al., 2010, p.359). With the rise of AI in organisations and industries, many companies have felt the need to implement change communication due to rising levels of turbulence. Therefore, researching how organisations navigate change using communication due to the exponential growth of AI in their industries, is highly relevant. This research will therefore contribute and be valuable to the academic field of Strategic Communication since a communication situation becomes strategic when an industry is in transition (Zerfass, Verčič, Nothhaft & Werder, 2018). Due to the rising importance and presence of AI and a rise of doubtful actors involved, not knowing how to handle the transition (Burgess, 2017) there is a growing need for strategic communication. Strategic communication "encompasses all communication that is substantial for the survival and sustained success of an entity" (Zerfass et al., 2018, p.487). When analysing this definition of strategic communication, it can be assumed that change communication for the entity is needed by adapting to its surrounding environment for survival and success. Change communication plays a crucial role when entities or organisations

are experiencing change with the aim to be successful (Cheney et al., 2010). In their book, Cheney et al. (2010) discuss a study conducted with 1430 international executives of organisations operating in various industries. The results show that 76% of the participants think innovation is of higher importance than cost reduction, in their organisation.

This research will be of particular relevance to the academic field of Strategic Communication by understanding how organisations are communicatively handling this strategic change – introduced by disruptive technology. Next to that, it will bring more information about literature on technologies and their influence on organisational change, organisations' reactions to change, and fear of and resistance to organisational change. More light will be shed on the field of change communication and change processes, and the role disruptive technologies currently play within the field. This research is also of practical relevance to the executive search industry, however, can be generalised to various industries facing similar challenges around communicated change and disruptive technologies. The results of this thesis conclude possible communication strategies to tackle AI-related strategic change in organisations. These strategies can be used as guidelines for businesses in numerous industries, considering they are facing similar changes in their industry.

1.4. Delimitations

This research is limited to interviews with 15 executive search professionals. Additionally, one interview with an AI expert is conducted for the student to get a better grasp of the possibilities with AI and organisations' needs when taking AI classes. Next to that, the student has taken a trimester-long course in *Leadership in the AI age* at an institute specialised in AI to broaden her understanding of the potential of AI today. The course was taken from the same school the interview was later conducted with to gain more knowledge on the topic being researched. Tools such as Gartner's magic quadrant and Gartner's hype cycle, and theories such as first mover advantages and disadvantages, resistance, and several types of fear are used to frame this research to understand the communicated strategies from every type of organisation undergoing strategic change. It should be noted that the executive search industry is a competitive one, where every organisation is trying to get the most clients to build up a strong individual network and

portfolio. Because of this, the executive search industry is known for low levels of transparency between each other. One participant compared the executive search industry to a cartel, with sweetheart deals between candidates and firms, not between organisations.

Due to AI's broad definition and ambiguous meaning for different industries or people, the term AI is simplified to AI-driven tools used in executive search organisations. This refers both to tools in organisations' operational departments and marketing-driven tools in communication departments. Whenever AI is mentioned, one should keep this description in mind.

2. Literature Review

Nearly all scholars believe that, in theory, businesses need to continuously change to survive in today's competitive market, which ultimately leads to resistance among a certain profile of employees or businesses. Therefore, this chapter provides a base for the reader wherein previous work on strategic change, disruptive and/or innovative technologies, change, resistance, and fear are addressed.

Not much research has been done within the executive search industry. The research that has been done, mainly focusses the formation and legitimization of the executive search industry (Muzio, Hodgson, Faulconbridge, Beaverstock & Hall, 2011; Beaverstock, Faulconbridge & Hall, 2010), on gender inequality in the search and hiring process (Fernandez-Mateo & Fernandez, 2016; Tienari, Meriläinen, Holgersson & Bendl, 2013), and the unspoken power executive search organisations have in defining top management positions (Faulconbridge, Beaverstock, Hall & Hewitson, 2009). However, these previous topics are not relevant for this research. Therefore, the focus of this literature review is not placed on the executive search industry nor any industry in particular.

2.1. Strategic Change

Literature on organisations' strategies regarding the AI-related strategic change is relatively absent, although the topic of strategic change is widely researched over the years. In the past, Boeker (1989) researched circumstances under which organisations would undergo strategic change and differentiate between circumstances before an organisation's foundation and after. He concluded that the dominance of initial strategies during the foundation of the organisation played a big role in assessing whether that organisation was open for strategic change or not. Besides, top management and people of influence supporting the leading strategy, and the organisation still being owned by its initial founders are also crucial factors. Typically, the more dominant the initial strategy in one's organisation, people of influence supporting it, and the founders still owning the

company, resulted in low levels of openness for strategic change. The author continues that an organisation's age, length of tenure by one owner, and general performance of the organisation also play a big role in whether the leading initial strategy is sustained or not. So, Boeker (1989) believed organisations' success for strategic change could be predicted. Hsiao and Ormerod (1998) disagree and expressed that every strategic change should be looked at from a dynamic perspective, since implementations for strategic change also change over time. The authors explain that when an organisation is implementing strategic changes using certain tools and communication strategies, those same techniques will not be valid anymore in different (organisational) contexts or over different times. "The management of strategic change needs to be considered in terms of different change patterns over time with contingent change elements" (Hsiao & Ormerod, 1998, p.45), thereby introducing a whole new perspective to strategic change. Fitzgerald, Kruschwitz, Bonnet, and Welch (2014) have researched the digital transformation that many organisations mean to aspire, also defined as a strategic (digital) change. In the results of their quantitative study with 1559 executives, they explain that 78% believe that digital transformations were going to be crucial in the next two years that followed. 63% agreed that the pace with which the current digital transformation in their organisation was going too slow. However, where 93% of the employees have confidence in the succession of a digital transformation within the organisation, only 36% of CEOs share that same belief. Therefore, Fitzgerald et al. (2014) concluded that it is especially important to get CEOs and higher management on board of (digital) strategic change for it to succeed, no matter the context nor the given time.

2.2. Disruptive or Innovative Technologies?

There is no academic consensus on whether technologies are disruptive or innovative. Cheney et al. (2010) look at different events over the past decades and how they have encouraged organisational – and individual – change. They give the example of the introduction of emails in 1965 and notice that it only got widely used in the early 1990s. The authors interpret this by looking at the amount of discourse around innovative technologies. When hearing about new technology, one shapes certain expectations around these technologies, predicting organisational transformations both for the better and for the worst. Li (1997) – and later Küng (2013) – are of the opinion that organisations in any industry have always had to innovate (or change) but that over the last decades it

has become more challenging due to the high speed and range of technological advancements. Küng (2013) explains that organisations are required to continuously innovate if they want to be able to keep up with the latest advancements. This has caused strategic difficulties for the organisations that have not been able to carry on with technology. Christensen (2013) has researched why previously well-functioning organisations that have always listened to their customers, invested heavily in the newest technologies, and are known for their innovative perspectives and ways of working, tend to lose their position in the market anyway. “Precisely because these firms listened to their customers, invested aggressively in new technologies that would provide their customers more and better products of the sort they wanted, and because they carefully studied market trends and systematically allocated investment capital to innovations that promised the best returns, they lost their positions of leadership” (p.9). The author explains that listening to the needs of customers is appropriate, depending on the context that organisation is in. “There are times at which it is right not to listen to customers, right to invest in developing lower-performance products that promise lower margins, and right to aggressively pursue small, rather than substantial, markets” (p.9).

2.3. Organisational Change Communication

Within the academic field of organisational change communication, two main topics come to light: what drives the change and how this change is reconstructed subjectively within the organisation. Both will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

2.3.1. Drivers of Change

According to scholars, change is executed for many different reasons. Johannes and Heide (2008) and Iles and Sutherland (2001) – among others – discuss how change is typically initiated by factors rising from both an organisation’s external environment (stakeholders’ needs, urge for innovation for a competitive advantage, adaptation to clients’ wishes, etc.) as well as the internal environment (needs from employees or higher management). If organisations want to keep up with the competitive market, innovative technological tools, or customers’ demands, it is required to be on the continuous lookout for different tools and methods to navigate successfully in the fast-changing and unpredictable market. This is where organisational change comes into play. In Zerfass et al.’s (2018) research, the authors provide exemplar influences in which stra-

tegic communication can and/or should be implemented: resource-, competition-, environment-, risk-, innovation-, engagement-, and operationally driven. These factors are all potential drivers that can influence the implementation of (continuous) organisational change.

2.3.2. The Importance of Internal Communication

Another highly researched topic within change is its surrounding communication, with different academic outcomes. Frahm and Brown (2005) discuss three communication models regarding sustained organisational change. The first one is monologic change communication and is defined as monologic since the change communication comes from one (shared) voice within the organisation, where the control lies with those who are in power and take the decisions regarding the implemented change. This contradicts Goodman and Truss's (2004) theory about two-sided communication, wherein the authors discuss that communication should be two-sided to ensure the receiver interprets the communicated message in the same way the sender intended to. However, the latter has similarities with Frahm and Brown's (2005) second model, defined as dialogic change. Dialogic change communication refers to the exchange of opinions and ideas between anyone who is "dialogically competent" (Frahm and Brown, 2005, p.2) and focusses on a positive, result-oriented, and interpersonal exchange of communication. The third model can be understood as the background talk of change. Background talks refer to conversations of the unwillingness of acceptance, uncritical self-satisfaction, and scepticism toward change. These background conversations arise after foreground conversations about change have occurred. It is important to look at all three models of change communication to get a full understanding of how continuous change is progressing in organisations.

Kitchen and Daly (2002) shed more light on the content of communicated messages. They highlight the necessity for three types of information that potentially influence employees during change. "What employees *must* know: key job-specific information, what employees *should* know: essential but desirable organisational information e.g., changes in senior management, what employees *could* know: relatively unimportant or office gossip" (Kitchen & Daly, 2002, p.49). Naturally, employees will want to know as much as possible about the intended change. However, it appears to be important to

differentiate between the three types of communication to be able to prioritise messages based on relevance and importance. Goodman and Truss (2004) conclude that the communicated content during change is of high significance since it helps “spreading a vision, involving employees by seeking their input into the process and content of the change, minimising uncertainty, overcoming barriers to change, gaining employee commitment, and challenging the status quo” (p.220).

2.4. Resistance to change

2.4.1. A Complex Definition

Resistance studies are relatively diverse. Some scholars (Dent & Goldberg, 1999; Meron, 1993) advocate deserting resistance studies, reasoning it misconceives what is truly happening in the field of change. Dent and Goldberg (1999) explain that employees are solely resistant to high levels of job insecurity and not to the changes perse. Following this line of thought, organisations are not understanding why employees resist change and thus not tackling the problems correctly. Other studies (George & Jones, 2001; Piderit, 2000) showcase that resistance is a multilateral concept and that research typically approaches resistance as a uniform conception. George and Jones (2001) explain through their conceptual model that resistance complies with cognitive and affective elements, that arise in different parts of the resistance process. Since resistance is a complex concept to grasp, this thesis considers the multifaceted concept of resistance, as will be explained more in the following paragraphs.

2.4.2. Resistance is Tackled by Communication

The lack of communication during change can derive in informal communication (e.g., gossip), the spread of false information (e.g., magnification of negative outcomes), high levels of job insecurity, and ultimately leads to resistance to change (Elving, 2005). Robertson et al. (1993) have previously constructed a model that guides efficient planned organisational change. Within this model, they have identified four interdependent factors that ultimately impact employees’ organisational practices: organising arrangements, social factors, technology, and physical setting. These four factors have an influence on employees’ individual behaviour, which affects the organisational per-

formance and employees' individual development within the organisation. The researchers conclude that, following their theoretical model, "planned organisational change generates positive change in work setting variables" (Robertson et al., 1993, p.627). Elving (2005) argues that "since an organisation's functioning depends on the actions of its members, the organisation can change only when members' behaviour changes" (p.131). He explains that organisational communication has two objectives to prevent resistance, first as an informative task to notify employees about their tasks and policies within the change, and second to create a community within the organisation. It is also interesting to look at how these community feelings develop over time: before, during, and after, since communication generally shapes employees' levels of dedication to the organisation and therefore to the change. Elving (2005) embeds his theories into a conceptual model as can be seen in Figure 1. Through this model, he aims to avoid resistance to organisational change.

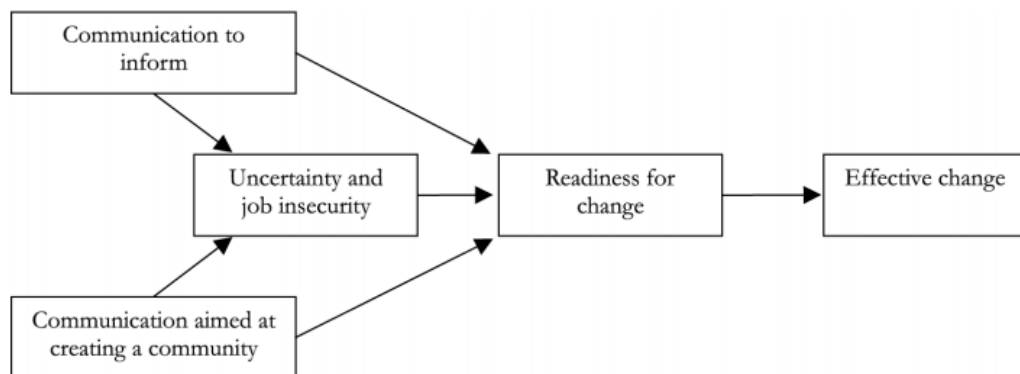


Figure 1. Conceptual model of communication during organisational change – reprinted from Elving (2005)

2.4.3. Change is not for Everyone

Oreg (2006) takes a different and more personal approach. He clarifies that resistance both comes from within the individual and from the individual's surroundings. Studies commonly solely focus on employees' contextual characteristics and don't take employees' individual dissimilarities into account. Hence, the author looks at the relationship between context and personality (affective, behavioural, and cognitive elements) when foreseeing employees' reactions to organisational change. He illuminates that "the affective component regards how someone feels about the change (e.g., angry, anxious); the cognitive component involves what one thinks about the change (e.g., is it neces-

sary? Will it be beneficial?); and the behavioural component involves actions or intention to act in response to the change (e.g., complaining about the change, trying to convince others the change is bad)” (Oreg, 2006, p.76), all three are dependent on one another. By looking at these three elements separately, one gets a better understanding of where the employees’ resistance is coming from and how to act upon it. On top of that, his model also suggests that some employees are more likely to experience change negatively due to their personality traits, trust in management, social influence and environment, loyalty to the organisation, etc.

2.4.4. Resistance and Fear

Ashkanasy and Nicholson (2003) discuss that fear typically derives from operating in highly competitive markets and explain that fear hinders the quality of work and negatively influences organisational learning. On the other hand, fear is also discussed in Lewin’s field theory, stating that fear can have a positive influence on people (Cartwright, 1976 as cited in Ashkanasy & Nicholson, 2003) although no further connection to organisational change is mentioned. Visagie and Steyn (2011) clarify that, whenever organisations are implementing significant changes that distress employees’ perception of the organisation and its environment, fear and uncertainty arise. This typically leads to a decrease in trust among employees and toward higher management. They divide the organisation into two groups: “some employees may approach organisational change as an opportunity for growth and improvement, while others may associate it with instability and risk” (p.103). Negative responses typically come up due to “increased stress, pressure, and uncertainty” (p.103). The authors suggest implementing organisational training about the change helps fight uncertainty and fear. Training help provide truthful information about the motives for change, and the potential impact it can have on actors involved. This helps to generate positive understandings of the need for change.

2.5. Synthesis

Although academic research focusing on AI-related strategic changes is absent, a lot of research is done in the field of strategic change. Next to that, the role of technology is discussed within the framework of change and wherein authors discuss how technology is either disruptive to some or innovate for others. Within organisational change communication, most research has focused on the drivers of change and how internal com-

munication can aid organisations in implementing change successfully. Resistance is widely tackled by firstly looking at its meaning, followed by how communication can also aid whenever resistance to change arises in the organisation. Some scholars are of the opinion that showing resistance is a personally rooted problem, other academics discuss how resistance can eventually turn into fear.

3. Theory

The essence of (change) communication is the subjective observation of oneself. In the literature review, it is argued that the subjective reconstruction of reality is extremely important in change. Consultancy tools such Gartner's magic quadrant and Gartner's hype cycle are often introduced to catalyse this process of retrieving one's identity. The reason they are successful tools is that they resonate with practitioners. Theories such as first mover advantages and disadvantages, disruptive innovations, different types of fear, change, and resistance to change will further build on the conceptualisations in the previous chapter and aid in the understanding of organisations' communication approaches during AI-related strategic change.

3.1. Gartner's Magic Quadrant

To understand how organisations communicatively navigate, one should first look at how they subjectively see themselves. Based on that, organisations communicate. Bresciani and Eppler (2008) put this thought into practice and discuss the possibilities of Gartner's magic quadrant, allowing the researcher to comprehend organisations' subjective situations and how they defend their actions based on that perception. The magic quadrant is typically used by organisations before, during, or after implementing a major change in the organisation. This is done through numerous objective and subjective criteria of the researcher, dividing them into two categories: ability to execute (on the y-axis) and completion of vision (on the x-axis). The results are divided into four different quadrants: "leaders, challengers, visionaries, and niche players" (p.3), see Figure 2 below. The graph ultimately portrays how different organisations in the same industry communicate about their differently perceived situations and is meant to assist organisations to plan strategically, therefore continuing the line of thought from chapter 2.1.



Figure 2. Example of Gartner's Magic Quadrant – reprinted from Bresciani and Eppler (2008)

3.1.1. Who goes Where?

Ability to execute entails “the ability to execute its vision, i.e., the vendors’ financial stability, the depth and breadth of services offered, the ability to satisfy clients’ needs, service and support reputation” (Bresciani & Eppler, 2008, p.4). Completeness of vision involves “a vendor’s strategic vision, measuring its knowledge of the market, of key market trends and of customers, the allocation of resources and skill-building, the investment in R&D, the quality of methodologies, alliances and partnerships” (p.4). Organisations who score both high on ability to execute and completeness of vision are named leaders. They typically have a profound understanding of the market and are well-positioned for tomorrow. Leaders can influence the market’s direction. Challengers have a high ability to execute but low completeness of vision. They have the potential to become a leader if their vision broadens, but don’t have the full understanding of how the market will change and lack innovation. Visionaries have high completeness of vision but are not able to execute it. They comprehend where the market is going to but do not execute well or do so incoherently. Oftentimes, visionaries present innovations of any kind but do not possess financial strength. Niche players do well in a specific segment of the market but cannot outperform bigger practitioners due to low completion of vision and low ability to execute.

3.2. Gartner's Hype Cycle

In organisational change processes, one needs to not only visualise who you are, but also where you are. The Gartner hype cycle is a tool for that (Linden & Fenn, 2003). The cycle, shown in Figure 3, was introduced with the aim to provide a model for organisations to understand the early stages of the maturity of technologies, differentiating hype from reality. With this model, organisations can increase their levels of certainty before communicating new technologies in their business and can therefore communicate organisational change with more certainty to their employees. Or, as mentioned in chapter 2.2, understand when a technology will be disruptive.

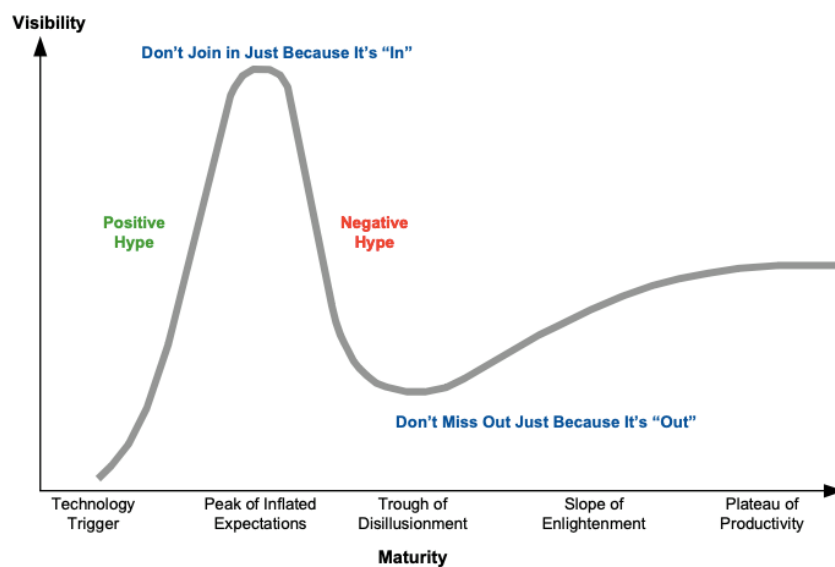


Figure 3. Gartner's Hype Cycle – reprinted from Linden and Fenn (2003)

With this model, organisations can apprehend whether technology is still in its early stages of development and how the typical progression of that technology will look like. An important take-away for organisations from Gartner's hype cycle is that they should not implement technologies simply because they are trendy. Also, organisations should not ignore technologies simply because they are “not living up to early over-expectations” (Linden & Fenn, 2003, p.1). Typically, in the initial stages of the hype cycle when organisations are facing many doubts and fears about technology, the position of that technology on the hype cycle is more defined by its trendiness than its maturity level. At later stages in the cycle, when more information is obtained and communicated by organisations, its position on the hype cycle is solely defined by its maturity level. Bresciani and Eppler (2008) explain that technologies do not advance at a

constant pace through the hype cycle. Each technology on the hype cycle is categorised according to how quickly that technology will reach the plateau of productivity (i.e., how far the technology is from reaching mainstream adoption).

3.2.1. Introducing the Different Phases

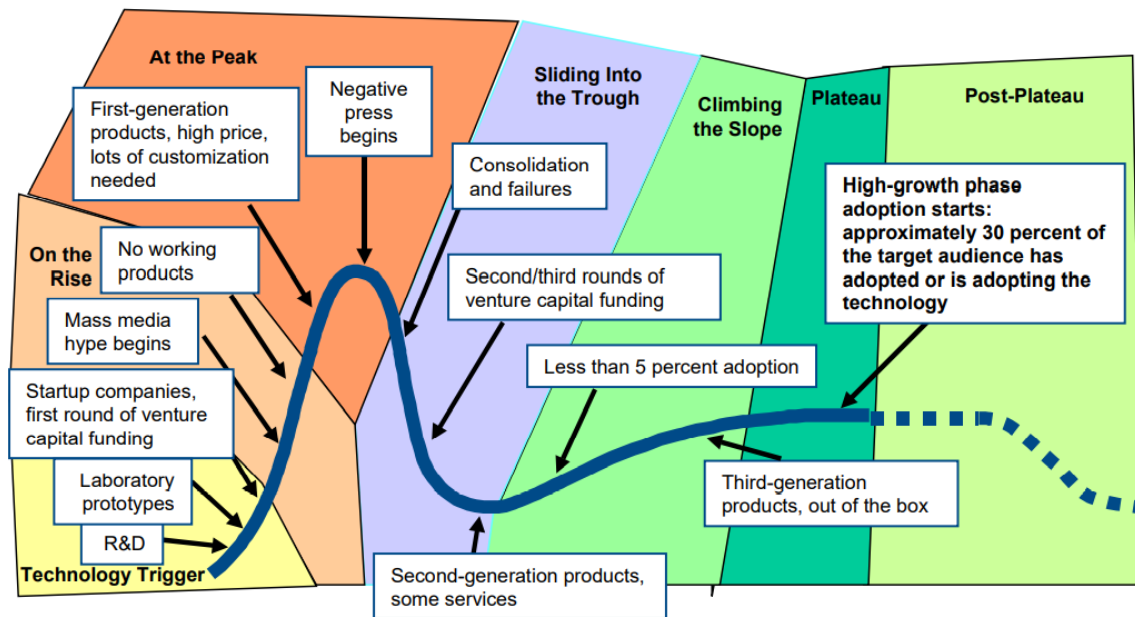


Figure 4. Gartner’s Hype Cycle: the different phases – reprinted from Linden and Fenn (2003)

In Figure 4, five different phases of the hype cycle can be seen. The first one is the technology trigger and is typically characterised by a “breakthrough, product launch or other events that generate significant press coverage and interest” (Bresciani & Eppler, 2008, p.11). Second is the peak of inflated expectations, wherein “a frenzy of publicity typically generates overenthusiasm and unrealistic expectations. There may be some successful applications of a technology, but there are typically more failures” (p.11). Third is the trough of disillusionment, technologies typically set foot in this phase “because they fail to meet expectations and quickly become unfashionable. Consequently, the press usually abandons the topic and the technology” (p.11). Fourth is the slope of enlightenment and entails that “although the press may have stopped covering the technology, some businesses continue through the slope of enlightenment and experiment to understand the benefits and practical application of the technology” (p.11). The fifth and final stage is the plateau of productivity, where technologies’ “benefits of it become widely demonstrated and accepted. The technology becomes increasingly stable and

evolves in second and third generations” (p.11). The hype cycle also gives importance to speed and differentiates “fast-track”, “normal”, and “long-fuse” technologies. This implies that certain technologies are expected to move to the plateau of productivity quicker than others. The fast-track technologies go into the maturity stage between two to four years and tend to catch organisations by surprise. Normal speed technologies take five to eight years, and long-fuse technologies can take one to two decades to travel across the hype cycle (Bresciani & Eppler, 2008). It is important for organisations to understand where technologies are placed and how long they will take to reach the desired maturity level to ensure they do not start communicating about technology when it is too early or too late.

3.3. First Movers

Organisations implement change for a variety of reasons. One of these reasons is explained by Lieberman and Montgomery (1988), who introduce first mover advantages in their paper, potential drivers of change (see chapter 2.3.1). They discuss the advantages and disadvantages of being a first mover and conceptualise the latter as the potential to be more fortunate than the competitors deriving from being the first to market a new product or service category.

3.3.1. Advantages

Lieberman and Montgomery (1988) highlight four main advantages. First, when a technological advantage is primarily rising from research and development outlays, forerunners can gain an advantage by patenting or keeping as trade secrets. Second, a first mover typically attracts the most interesting niche markets and can take strategic measures that reduce the amount of room available for successive entrants. Third, first movers can benefit from potential switching costs. Switching costs can be explained as the costs consumers have to pay rising from switching companies. Examples consist of monetary, psychological, effort-based, and time-based advantages. So, late entrants must invest additional assets to appeal customers away from the first mover. Fourth, when introducing a new product range or service to the market, first movers experience the advantage of brand loyalty. These organisations typically establish a good reputation in the market, inclining customers to purchase other products from the first mover.

3.3.2. Disadvantages

On the other hand, Lieberman and Montgomery (1988) mention several disadvantages of being a first mover. Late movers can copy first movers' strategies, research and development outcomes, buyer education, and infrastructure progression. The authors mention that "imitation costs are lower than innovation costs in most industries. However, innovators enjoy an initial period of monopoly that is not available to imitator firms" (Lieberman & Montgomery, 1988, p.47). Another disadvantage is the technological and/or market uncertainty. Late movers can take advantage of first movers' mistakes during the introduction phase and introduce a better product or service. However, there has been plenty of research showcasing that 'me-too strategies' typically turn out to be unsuccessful (Bond & Lean, 1977). These strategies seem to be effective solely when the first-mover's marketing strategies have not been done appropriately. It is thus important to differentiate from the competitors to avoid me-too marketing. Arrow (1962) is the first academic author to introduce the conceptual and academic reasoning that a leading monopolist is less likely to innovate than a new entrant to the market.

3.4. Disruptive Innovations

Continuing Christensen's (2013) line of thought in chapter 2.2, Cressman (2019) explains that in theory, well-functioning organisations are constantly developing sustainable innovations for their products or services to increase their incomes and their growth. This is typically done by listening to one's existing clients and implementing changes according to their needs. However, by focussing on an organisation's most profitable clients, they forget to take their potential clients into account. This is where disruptive innovations or disruptive technologies come into play. Typically, entrants to the market – seen as disruptive – will start focussing on those unmet demands by organisations' potential clients and produce similar services but tend to be cheaper, quicker, and more convenient. The incumbent organisations whose main priority is to increase their profitability in their traditional way, typically do not respond to such entrants. This leaves room for the entrants to go more upmarket and provide the service that the incumbent organisations were initially providing, plus to provide the service that led to their early success. "When mainstream customers start adopting the new products of new entrants in volume, disruption has occurred" (Cressman, 2019, p.23). Ross (2009) adds that disruptive changes demand innovative communication strategies since the preceding ones

are no longer relevant or successful. She explains that “it can be hard to let go of these approaches if they have been a source of competitive advantage” (p. 2).

3.5. Different types of Fear

Extending on what has been researched in 2.4.4, Cressman (2019) explains that fear and disruptive innovations have been linked since “the dot-com bust and 9/11” (p.32) since managers started fearing technology. Different types of fear arise, “fear of losing human agency [...] fear of technology’s existential threats [...] and fear of falling behind” (p.33). Organisations are aware of the necessity to implement continuous change but are afraid to fall behind and that their solutions will seem out of date. Edmonds (2011) writes that fear in organisations is the most common reason why employees resist change and originates from the “fear of the unknown, of loss, or leaving a comfort zone” (p.351). The problem with organisations experiencing fear is that they typically see the risk of changing as greater than the risk of remaining the same. So, he explains that these organisations will have to be persuaded that change will offer them more benefits than continuing with their traditional ways of working.

Next to real-life events, people also seem to adopt fear from popular culture. Favaro (2019) researched numerous movies wherein AI plays a role and concludes that each narrative contains the possibility of a “not too distant future in which machines will reach, and then exceed, the level of human intelligence” (p.75). The author continues that, in the movies, the AI machine is portrayed as an unpredictable creature wherein humans do not have agency over AI’s evolution, expansion, and potential collaboration with other AIs, explaining why people fear AI in real life.

3.6. Change

3.6.1. What is it?

To carry on what has been discussed in chapter 2.3, change is conceptualised differently by a broad range of academics but only one will be reviewed in this thesis. In their book, Cheney et al. (2010) recognise its ambiguous definition but simplify it to “the process by which alteration occurs in the structure and function of a social system” (p.325). The authors explain the

necessity for continuous communicated change and recommend organisations to be highly flexible to change more easily. On the one hand, change can be understood as a concept that can be controlled, by actively evaluating projects or tools to make them more efficient in the future. On the other hand, it can also be understood as something that is completely out of one's control, something that happens to someone or something. If organisations want to control the change, Alshawi, Irani, and Baldwin (2003) discuss the importance of being on the lookout for areas in which other organisations are investing in knowledge management. Cheney et al. (2010) state multiple characteristics of change, however one jumps out "organisational change occurs within a socio-historical context" (p.330). This implies that any type of change is shaped by a discursive context in which the organisation is placed. In other words, an organisation's background and way of working has a major impact on the strategies to achieve organisational change, and therefore also on its succession. The authors bring up the need for continuous communication throughout the organisational change process and highlight the importance of collective knowledge in the organisation, the more stakeholders are continuously educated about the change, the more successful the result. Ströh (2007) explains that current research and theories about change communication are relatively traditional since decisions are structured and solely made at top management levels. However, technological changes (amongst others) in the environment require a revaluation in the way organisations are changing and communicating about that. Ströh (2007) suggests a more modern approach to organisational change communication and brings up a participatory and relational approach "this approach can help an organisation cope with change, ensures a positive reputation, builds internal loyalty, and aligns it as a responsible citizen in the larger societal structure" (Ströh, 2007, p.123).

3.6.2. Why does it happen?

It is interesting to look at why change is occurring in so many industries nowadays. DiMaggio and Powell (1991) discuss the rising trend of the homogenisation of organisations and clarify that that is the reason why change is currently happening. Today's businesses do not want to differ too much from one another, conceptualised as isomorphism (Cheney et al., 2010). Isomorphism is a compelling process that obliges one item in a population to mirror other items in the population that encounter similar environmental settings. The authors delve a little deeper and introduce three types of isomor-

phisms, although only one will be used: mimetic isomorphism, which describes how uncertainty stimulates imitation.

3.6.3. How does it happen?

In line with what has previously been written in chapter 2.3.2, Battilana and Casciaro (2012) explain that organisational change is oftentimes political in nature. Therefore, the authors suggest introducing as many organisational change agents as possible to overcome resistance and get employees excited about the change. The authors compare it to the practice of social influence, wherein an individual's feelings or actions are transformed in reaction to another individual's actions. Battilana and Casciaro (2012) highlight the importance of change agents whenever that change deviates from the status quo and define it as divergent organisational changes. These changes are specifically demanding to communicate and require (informal) change agents to "distance themselves from their existing institutions and persuade other organisation members to adapt practices that not only are new, but also break with the norms of their institutional environment" (p.381). Next to change agents, Frahm and Brown (2005) discuss the importance of effective internal communication during change and define it as issue selling "the way issues are sold to organisational members, becomes an instrument of change" (p.1). The better the essential process of internal communication or issue selling is grasped, the better the change is accomplished.

3.7. Resistance

3.7.1. Why does it happen?

Delving deeper on what has been said in chapter 2.4.1, Cheney et al. (2010) give four reasons for the rejection of change initiatives: change threatens personal values of the self (e.g., interpersonal relationships, status, compensation, etc.), change implies criticism and thus endangers one's self-esteem (i.e., because one's skills or performances were not sufficient for the job anymore), the outcomes of changes are often uncertain (e.g., work becomes displeasing, the promised benefits are uncertain, etc.), and finally: job uncertainty. Wineburg (1987) provides another possible reason for resistance, name-

ly self-fulfilling prophecies. He explains that the prophecy is a process through which initially incorrect assumptions lead to their own confirmation.

3.7.2. How can it be addressed?

Next to tackling resistance by communication (chapter 2.4.2) Zerfass et al. (2018) mention the necessity for strategic listening, especially important when organisations want to make sense of foundational changes in the environment (within or outside of the organisation) at a quicker rate than their competitors. Additionally, Bordia, Hobman, Jones, Gallois, and Callan (2004) offer a solution to the internal resistance and explain that whenever employees are rejecting change, it is important to give them back some sense of control. By including employees in decision-making processes, employees will let their feelings of uncertainty and insecurity vanish by giving them more control over their circumstances.

3.8. Synthesis

The inclusion of Gartner's magic quadrant and Gartner's hype cycle allows the student to grasp how organisations communicatively navigate by looking at their individual situation first, gaining a better understanding of who is experiencing first mover advantages and disadvantages. Next to that, disruptive innovations are tackled, leading some organisations to experience different types of fear and/or resistance to fear.

4. Methodology

This chapter introduces Van de Ven's (2018) values of engaged scholarship, therefore adopting an iterative research approach. The ontology and epistemology of the study's methodology are provided, shedding light on the critical realism research tradition. This enables answering the research question: how do executive search agencies communicatively navigate the AI-related strategic change in the industry, using semi-structured qualitative interviews.

4.1. Engaged Scholarship

This thesis is following Van de Ven's (2018) principles of engaged scholarship. Engaged scholarship is typically used when studying complex social problems that benefit from a participative form of research, continuously obtaining advice from key stakeholders in the field. This ensures more relevance and meaning by including others in the research process, in this case for both practitioners and academics. Van de Ven (2018) explains that engaged scholarship is more intuitive and penetrative than working on a complex social problem alone. The problem is here identified as researching an underdeveloped area in AI-driven organisational change and exploring organisations' communication strategies navigating this change. Engaged scholarship applies to the framework of this thesis since the student has, simultaneously with developing the thesis, followed a course at a school specialised in AI about Leadership in the AI age. Next to that, continuous feedback throughout every stage of the study is received from practitioners and scholars through interviews, lectures, and meetings.

Due to previously mentioned reasons, an iterative reasoning approach is taken. Van de Ven (2018) recommends using an iterative approach, which enables the researcher to go back and forth between problem formulation, relevant theory, and gathered data. When doing so, it becomes possible to narrow down the relatively broad initial theories to more relevant and specific ones – as more insights are gained on how executive search

agencies are communicatively navigating the AI-related strategic change and how that links to theory.

4.2. Research approach: Critical Realism

This research is conducted with a critical realist perspective on reality. This research tradition is a philosophy of social science and differentiates between the real world and the observable world. It is unique in the sense that it has roots in realist ontology and subjective epistemology. The realist ontology indicates that there is a reality independent from human beings and, simultaneously, the subjective epistemology indicates that one's understanding and knowledge is inevitably subjective or influenced by the person and their context and/or environment. This entails that it is crucial for social scientists that their qualitative research participants are correct representations of the social reality the participants are a part of. Critical realism was coined by Roy Bhaskar and was introduced as a substitute for both positivism and constructivism – the last two both narrowing down reality to human comprehension (Fletcher, 2017).

Critical realism sees the world as “theory-laden, but not theory-determined” (Fletcher, 2017, p.182). This implies that critical realism acknowledges there is a social world one can aim to apprehend through social science, however some understandings are nearer reality than others. The author explains that knowledge can aid one in getting closer to reality or “help us identify causal mechanisms driving social events, activities, or phenomena, [...] selected and formed using rational judgment of these social events” (p.182). This suggests that critical realism is beneficial for researching social challenges and providing solutions for organisational change. It is critical realism's look for causation that aids explicating experiences or phenomena and proposes practical and strategic suggestions to bring up current challenges. In Figure 3, it becomes clearer how critical realism aims to explain events and problems through causal mechanisms and the consequences they have throughout the three different coats of the “iceberg of reality” (p.183).

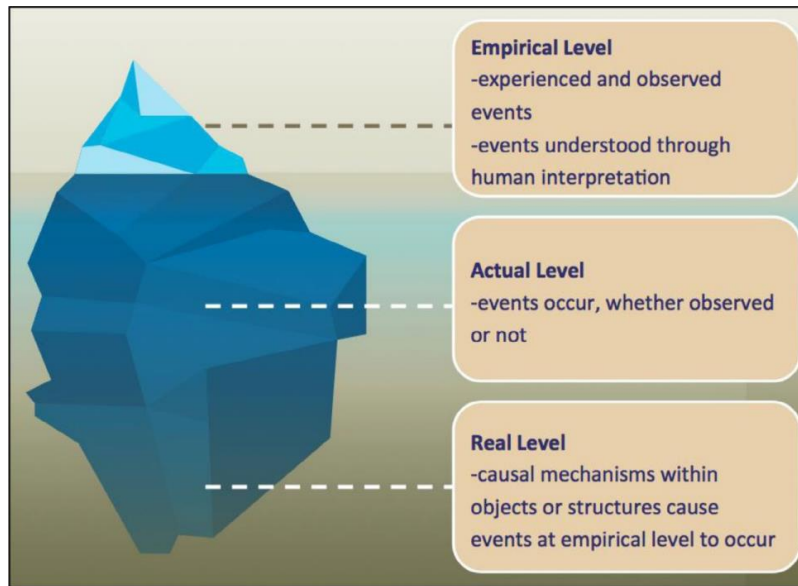


Figure 5. The iceberg metaphor for Critical Realism – reprinted from Fletcher (2017)

4.3. Selection of Participants

Since critical realism puts extra emphasis on incorporating a correct representation of social reality that the participants are a part of, the selection of participants was done with utmost care. There are three criteria for the selection of participants for this research. The first one is that participants work for an organisation operating in the executive search industry. It is important that participants do not work for a recruitment firm. It is necessary to make that distinction since, unlike recruitment firms, executive search agencies operate on a very personal basis with their clients, which can affect the way they envision AI to cause disruption or opportunity within their organisation. The second criterion is that the participant needs to be a communication professional or someone with a good understanding of the organisation's communication strategies in connection with the ultimate goals of the organisation (e.g., CEO). This is done to ensure participants give relevant and insightful answers to the questions. The third criterion is that the participants are not external consultants or freelancers, but in-house communication professionals due to the dynamics this role brings with it.

With both these criteria and the theoretical approach in mind, a list was made up consisting of main executive search organisations that were interesting to include in the study. These organisations were acquired by recommendations of close colleagues working in the executive search industry who had a profound understanding of the research topic, framework, and proposed method. Also, online research was conducted by

the student. All the selected organisations were then put in a structured table to keep an overview of the characteristics of the population of the study to ensure the sample was not too homogenous. E.g., organisations both small and big, with and without communication about AI on their corporate website, with a flat hierarchy and hierarchical organisations were included. The main argument was that the participants all speak English, enabling the student to conduct all the interviews in the same language. This is done to avoid wrongful linguistic translations or wrongful interpretations of the data. In total, 72 organisations were contacted by email – contact details found on their corporate website – or through LinkedIn, including a short personal presentation, aim and purpose of the research, what was expected from them, and assurance of their anonymity in the study. Nobody received the interview guide beforehand ensuring the answers came spontaneously and were not scripted. After leaving out the ones who did not reply, who did not show interest, or eventually did not seem fit for the research, 14 executive search organisations were interviewed, including one organisation who was interviewed twice due to the participant's lack of understanding of their communication strategies. Besides, one interview was conducted with a professional from a specialised AI school, who provided more information about the subject and general experiences he/she encountered when teaching organisations about AI. This was done to ensure the student had a profound understanding of the subject being researched. So, there was a total of 16 participants in the study. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) opt for the use of 10-15 interviews for this type of study. In qualitative studies, it generally depends on the depth and on the understanding of the presented issue, not on the number of participants. All the interviews were conducted through the online platform Teams, due to the COVID-19 restrictions and the geographical dispersion of the participants and were later transcribed. Although several hindrances of online interviews compared to face-to-face interviews are acknowledged (Seitz, 2016) the participants were all used to online meetings due to a previous year and a half of remote work. Therefore, it is assumed that these professionals felt comfortable sharing their communication strategies and how they feel about these newly implemented strategies, online.

These 15 participants employed in executive search organisations are all communication professionals or CEOs and have worked in the industry for at least five years, it is implied they have a good understanding of their organisational practices. Since the interviews were all conducted online, there was no geographical limitation. So, partici-

pants from Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and the UK make up the sample. The organisations ranged from start-ups, to SMEs, to large enterprises, either operating locally or globally.

4.4. Qualitative Semi-Structured Interviews

To answer the research question, qualitative semi-structured interviews were used to collect primary data. Semi-structured interviews are particularly valuable when understanding perspectives of different key players within an industry as it permits the participants to partake in the process and explicate the challenges they are facing (Ahlin, 2019). Since professionals from different executive search agencies were researched – with diverse reactions to AI-related change depending on their organisation – it is necessary to leave room for accustomed discussions and follow-up questions. This allows the student to delve deeper into each professional’s communicated strategies regarding the AI-related change. It is recognised that qualitative interviews rely on participants’ accuracy of the topic being researched, which was assessed by the student after every interview. Therefore, since one organisation was not able to provide the envisioned material, two interviews with two different employees were conducted. The participants’ inability to express their ignorance about AI for e.g., social reasons was addressed by making the participant at ease and highlighting there are no right or wrong answers. A lack of time and/or possible emotional state during the interview was also considered but never seemed the case within this research.

4.4.1. The Interview Guide

The interview guide is constructed in such a way that different themes, inspired from previous literature, can be extracted, and used for the analysis in the next chapter. The interviews started with introductory questions, mainly asking about the professional’s position and role within the organisation. Seitz (2017) mentions the loss of intimacy in online qualitative interviews, making it harder to pose personal questions and receive genuine answers. This was solved by asking more probing and laddering questions, as these questions tend to provide richer data than other forms of questioning. Price (2002) defines laddering questions as an interview method whereby the interviewer asks a series of questions tackling different perspectives on the same topic to ensure the interviewees’ answers are as elaborate and thorough as possible. Since the executive search

industry is a highly competitive industry, it was expected that not everyone was going to be transparent about why and how they communicate about change. The laddering questions helped the student delving deeper into the subject and ensuring participants were opening up as time went by.

4.4.2. Anonymity

Keeping the identity of the participants and the names of the organisations they work for anonymous plays a key role in this research. As mentioned previously, all the organisations in the executive search industry are currently undergoing change and do not want their information, shared with the student, to be known by the competitors, as this could potentially affect their business. Sullivan (2012) brings up that ethical considerations are subjective to every researcher; what might seem ethical to one might not seem ethical to another. Therefore, the issue of consent has been discussed individually with every participant. All participants have given their consent to record the interviews and were promised their anonymity would remain respected. After the finalisation of the thesis, every participant will receive an identical summarised report of the research for individual professional purposes. By doing so, it was unanimously decided (among the student and the participants) that the research is ethically correct.

4.5. Coding of Interviews

Tracy and Hinrichs (2017) put forward the phronetic iterative approach for qualitative data analysis. “Phronetic iterative qualitative data analysis is a qualitative method that tags between grounded analysis of qualitative data (such as interviews, participant observation field notes, documents, and visuals) on the one hand, and existing literature and theory on the other” (p.1). The approach is considered phronetic due to the early pinpointing of a practical research problem and interest in the area. It differs from the grounded analysis approach due to the constant recognition and referral to past literature for constructing the analysis of the given study. Then, a steering research question is generated while always considering previous literature, and simultaneously examining the gathered data. “The analysis is done by constructing first-level descriptive and second-level analytic codes that attend to the research question - and then turning to more advanced qualitative interpretive approaches (such as metaphor or exemplar analysis) when needed to make interesting claims that impact practice” (Tracy and Hinrichs,

2017, p.1). This analysis was applied by utilising the transcribed interviews and coding these into first-level descriptive and second-level analytic codes. A third round of coding was necessary to connect the codes to the theoretical framework of this study. After gathering the four final codes structuring the analysis chapter, each code was transformed into a metaphor for better visualisation of the codes, as can be seen in Table 1. The flexibility of this method allowed the student to go back and forth throughout the analysis, to have relevant and thought-provoking codes/metaphors to discuss in the next chapter.

Final Code	Metaphor
Where are the Players in the Industry? Assessment of AI tools in ES	A Double-Edged sword
The Change is Addressed	A Leap of Faith
Fear of AI (Purposefully) uninformed	Against the Grain - A Cat on a Hot Tin Roof - Like a Fish out of Water
Practitioners' advice	Straight from the Horses' Mouths

Table 1. Overview of final codes and their transformation into metaphors

4.6. Theory in Practice

In the theoretical framework of this research, Gartner's magic quadrant and Gartner's hype cycle appeared. These have both been recreated in the following ways.

4.6.1. Gartner's Magic Quadrant

Gartner's magic quadrant is utilised and transformed in the analysis chapter to compare how the participating organisations are viewing their own situation. So, each dot represents how one person navigates AI communicatively on behalf of the organisation. This was done by carefully analysing each participant's interview and assess how high each scored on ability to execute and completeness of vision (Bresciani & Eppler, 2008). Based on this score, all organisations were placed on the magic quadrant with different coloured and numbered dots.

4.6.2. Gartner's Hype Cycle

Gartner's hype cycle was also utilised and transformed in the analysis chapter to understand how far the participants of the research think they are with the disruptive technology. Thus, this was based on the characteristics of the five phases of the cycle, provided by Bresciani and Eppler (2008) and Linden and Fenn (2003). AI's usage in the executive search industry was then placed on the hype cycle with a dot. This was done for every quadrant of Gartner's magic quadrant, resulting in a total of four dots, each dot representing an average of the participants' subjective interpretations and self-understandings that affect the way AI-related change is navigated.

4.7. Credibility of the Study

Due to low levels of transparency and high levels of competitiveness in the industry, every participant was assured of the importance of anonymity in the research, ensuring none of their competitors would get an understanding of who was saying what. Interestingly, due to the lack of research within the executive search industry, all participants were extremely pleased to participate in the research. Several repeatedly asked about the anonymity of the study and if the student could not include certain sections of their interview in the thesis since the purpose was more that the student would get a full understanding of the organisation. Thus, the student has reasons to believe, except for minor cases, that she has been told the truth throughout nearly all interviews. Every participant of the research is a professional in their field, therefore it can be assumed their answers were filled with logic and reason.

4.8. Synthesis

This chapter has discussed how semi-structured qualitative interviews, influenced by the critical realist approach and following Van de Ven's (2018) principles of engaged scholarship, are utilised to answer the research question. Participants of the study are from start-ups, SMEs, and large organisations from 10 different countries, ensuring a good variety in the sample. The codes that were extracted from the transcribed interviews are transformed into metaphors, enabling an interesting analysis in the next chapter.

5. Analysis

This chapter starts with a subjective point of view, which is not questioned, however the methodological framework allows to take sides. The results are presented through the introduction of four final codes, transformed into metaphors, and connecting the results to the previously written chapters. The aim is to understand if theory and practice corresponds. A double-edged sword, a leap of faith, and against the grain are answering the research question, straight from the horses' mouths serves as a guideline for practitioners and scholars.

5.1. A Double-Edged Sword

5.1.1. The Magic Quadrant

The starting point for communication is the self-understanding of the business. This can be, in critical realism, correct or not. It is necessary to get a better understanding of how the participants of this research currently see themselves handling the transition due to AI-related changes in the industry, to understand their communication strategies more profoundly. Bresciani and Eppler (2008) bring forth the magic quadrant, seen as crucial before, during, or after implementing a big change in the organisation – the big change referring to each organisation's subjective reconstruction of AI.

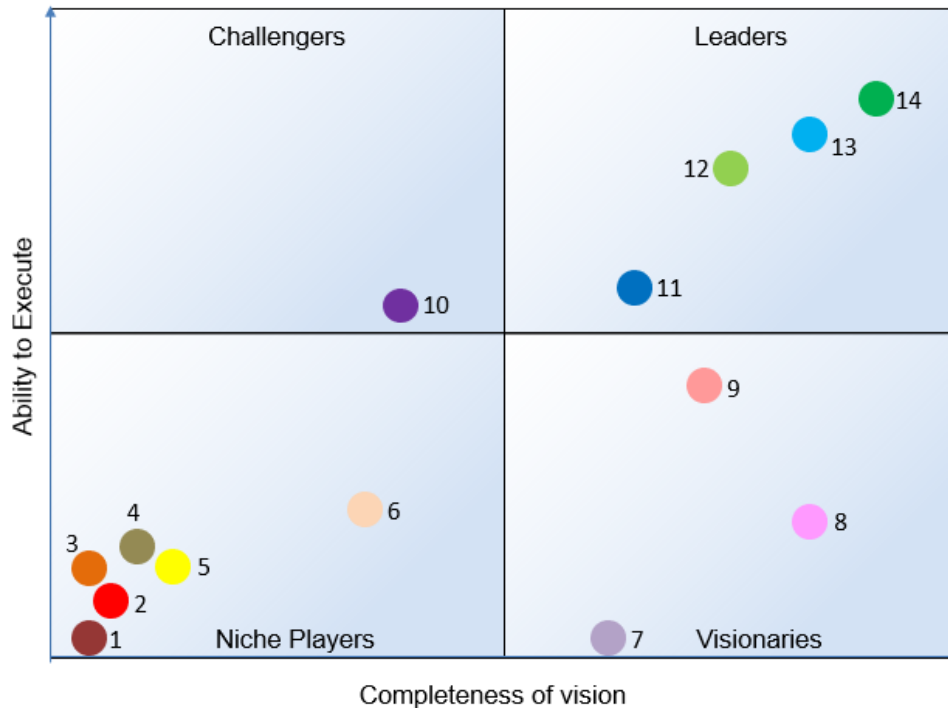


Figure 6. Magic Quadrant based on interview results of participants of the research acquired from April 2021 until July 2021

5.1.2. Ability to Execute

In this context, the ability to execute refers to organisations’ ability to implement AI in their communication and/or organisational strategies. This means that the reasons for why the dots are scattered on both the upper and lower half of the quadrants are due to “the ability to execute its vision, i.e. the vendors’ financial stability, the depth and breadth of services offered, the ability to satisfy clients’ needs, service and support reputation” (Bresciani & Eppler, 2008, p.4). So, when organisations score low on ability to execute, they are placed in the two lower quadrants, if they score high, they are placed in the two upper quadrants. Organisations on the lower half do not have enough financial stability, as one participant in the niche player quadrant mentions - participant 3 (P3) in the magic quadrant: *we get approached with marketing materials about AI, and we look through it, evaluate it, but at the moment, I don't think we have the resources to take on board any other systems.* On an empirical level, nearly every participant located in the niche player quadrant expressed they do not possess sufficient funds to be working with AI. However, on an actual level, it is assumed that organisations do not see themselves prioritising AI over any other aspect of the business. On the other hand, nearly all organisations positioned on the upper half of the quadrants do see them-

selves prioritising AI and are acquiring partnerships with AI-driven organisations to continuously grow their business, which can imply financial stability, as explained by a leader: *we're not coming from the tech world. We're getting partnerships with people who know more about AI than us, we're doing some joint ventures, we're working on international relations all the time. So, we have access to people who know more about that than us* (P14).

The range in depth and breadth of the executive search services also varies as organisations go up on the y-axis. Organisations on the upper half understand themselves as outsmarting their clients in every single sector using a variety of different tools, and organisations on the lower half understand themselves more as providing more specific services within specific sectors e.g., working with the same handful of clients from the same sector year-long. Participants were also asked about the flexibility of the organisation and how they typically handle changes. This was done to comprehend organisations' ability to respond to clients' evolving needs. The difference here between the lower and upper half lies in organisations' proactiveness toward clients' changing needs. Every organisation in the lower half expressed that they see the executive search industry as a traditional industry with traditional ways of working, such as the following niche players: *I think we don't talk about AI because it hasn't really been a huge part of executive search. And at least for a lot of the companies, we are very traditional* (P2), *or we kind of concluded that our clients wouldn't want to work via AI. They appreciate the human touch. So, we always kind of laugh AI off a little bit* (P4).

On the other side of the spectrum lie companies who see themselves as constantly trying to get rid of the traditional ways of working and trying to challenge their clients simultaneously. One communication strategist emphasised his/her company's strength: *we are very digital and try to automate as much as possible. We are also trying to challenge old-fashioned boards, and old fashion ways of recruiting so that the companies are not choosing the same type of profiles every time for C-level positions* (P12). The organisations on the lower half of the quadrants are known by their clients to be communicating traditionally *we also send handwritten letters to all the people, which is between 50 and 80 people after every assignment* (P2). Others do not post anything on social media or on their corporate website because they prefer working discretely with their clients and do not want to communicate anything online – as they have always

done it. Organisations on the upper half of the quadrants see themselves as clients' coaches through the global digitalisation (also due to COVID-19) and communicate with their clients about the digital future of leadership in relation to AI.

5.1.3. Completeness of Vision

On the x-axis lies completeness of vision and can be understood in this context by organisations' level of understanding of their range of possibilities regarding AI. According to Bresciani and Eppler (2008), the completeness of vision encompasses "a vendor's strategic vision, measuring its knowledge of the market, of key market trends and of customers, the allocation of resources and skill-building, the investment in R&D, the quality of methodologies, alliances and partnerships" (p.4). Therefore, organisations were also assessed on those factors and were placed in one of the two left quadrants if completeness of vision is low, and in one of the two right quadrants when they scored high.

The organisations placed in the left quadrants expressed they had no information about what their competitors were currently doing, no information about the possibilities AI is offering, and assumed their clients want to be helped with traditional tools instead of using AI. A participant in the niche quadrant explains *it's probably just a lack of exposure and a lack of a need to understand* (P6). The respondents in the left quadrants understand themselves as more traditional organisations, resulting in a low basis of communicating AI in the organisation. Whereas organisations placed in the right quadrants see themselves as investing heavily in market research to understand which AI tools are available and potentially interesting for them to use. This is mirrored in their communication as they have weekly internal feedback rounds to share ideas on how to innovate and automate the business and have occasional feedback rounds with clients to comprehend clients' needs better.

Organisations on the left parts explained they currently do not want to prioritise investing resources in AI and will only do so when it becomes highly crucial for their business' survival, as this niche player states *if I feel that I'm the last one not using any AI-driven tools, I will jump off the traditional ship* (P5). Whereas almost every organisation on the right side is providing their employees with continuous training to stay up to date

with the latest tools and methods, they either invest in AI as much as in any other parts of their business, or they invest more, and they give high importance to an AI literate workforce.

Lastly, one organisation on the left quadrants has recently acquired a partnership with an AI knowledgeable organisation, whereas more than half of the organisations on the right quadrants are currently investing and on the lookout for more partnerships with AI start-ups or organisations more skilful in that field than they are. A leader explains: *acquiring partnerships with different organisations is going to be the future, and we want to be ready* (P14). The organisations on the left do not see themselves getting partnerships since their business is operating fine without partnerships, although some in the visionary quadrant are starting to question their strategies: *I think that the executive search industry must think more about their role in this disruptive change* (P7).

5.1.4. Practical Implications

There is a clear relationship between how participants see their business and their levels of communicating AI in the organisation. In this context, the niche players are either satisfied with the way their business is going now or are resisting looking up more information about how to implement AI in their business. They are doing well in their segment of the market, for now. This is seen in their low levels of communication about AI, internally and externally. The visionaries are acknowledging that change is coming in the industry, but do not have the resources (AI literate workforce, motivation from employees/management, money, etc.) to implement it in their daily work style. They have a good understanding of where their competitors are thriving to but cannot implement it on a consistent basis yet. Their internal communication about AI is relatively high, but there is little to no external communication. The challenger has the potential of becoming a leader but is missing a better understanding of what AI has to offer them and how they can use it to their competitive advantage. The employees are not on board (yet) and the organisation is not investing enough in AI and how AI will change the market since the challenger puts its priorities in different areas. There is inconsistent external communication, but little to no internal communication about AI. The leaders are operating well and have implemented AI almost completely in their daily work. They understand AI is here to stay, have fully embraced it, and are looking for more and

more ways to automate and innovate their business. The three dots on the right side of the leader quadrant have the power to influence where the market is going. They are communicating frequently about AI, both internally and externally.

5.1.5. The Hype Cycle

Linden (2003) roots for the implementation of Gartner's hype cycle to provide a better understanding of organisations' perception of a technology's maturity level and visibility, to give organisations more certainty when to communicate about new technology and when it is too early to do so, or too late. During the interviews, there was a reoccurring theme and question among the participants: how many organisations are using AI, and to what extent? Nearly all the interviewees asked directly or indirectly about the AI-related communication strategies of their competitors. To provide a better overview of the perceived maturity level of AI used in executive search organisations, and to differentiate the hype from the trend, the use of AI in executive search will be placed on the hype cycle. This is done based on the participants' answers to questions about how long they have been hearing about AI in executive search, how they feel about AI being implemented, the level of awareness around AI, the amount of current AI-related tools being used, and how they see the future of AI in their industry. 50% of the participants are actively using AI and have a high level of understanding of what AI has to offer (i.e., have been working with/been exposed to AI for >10 years) and are highly aware of how it can help their organisation. Less than 10% have been exposed to AI for more than five years, around 30% have been exposed to AI for less than five years, and less than 15% claim to not have heard much about AI in executive search before this research.

5.1.6. The Results

Since each quadrant of the magic quadrant is characterised differently and the subjective interpretations of the participants in relation to AI therefore differed, the usage of AI is positioned differently depending on the quadrant.



Figure 7. Hype Cycle based on AI usage in executive search organisations, per quadrant. Acquired from April 2021 until July 2021

5.1.6.1. *Niche Players*

As can be seen in Figure 7, the niche players in this research see themselves positioned in the first phase: technology trigger. They have expressed that there is no beneficial AI tool for the executive search industry yet because the industry is so niche. Others have explained they fear AI and do not want to implement it or research more about it. *Some recruiters somewhere in the States wrote “for all of you recruiters out there, AI is a wonderful thing. And it can be your friend, it isn't, it's out to kill you” and they were absolutely right. You won't find AI here (P1).* For others, AI is too expensive to understand or to apply. Although nearly all the niche players understand that AI is getting increasingly more popular due to e.g., a high media coverage, they choose not to implement it as of now, which Linden and Fenn (2003) define as “the mass media hype begins” (p.7).

5.1.6.2. *Visionaries*

The visionaries find themselves as sliding into through of disillusionment since the tools are not living up to their expectations yet. *I get these once a week, new tool, new AI, new automation, let's have a demo. And I said, it's really neat, but come back to me when it's Superman (P8).* Other participants do not implement AI due to the language

restrictions (AI tools only operating in English. Visionaries are aware of the tools available but are not convinced the tools can be used to their benefit yet. *To say that we're going to automate or, you know, to use the word automation, or bot or AI, it almost makes the thing sexy. So, we want to drive attention to our new system, and get people engaged* (P8). This participant explains that using the word AI in their communication is making them more desirable toward their audience. However, Linden and Fenn (2003) point out that it is crucial organisations do not apply technologies in their communication strategies because of the hype. Neither should they disregard technologies because they are not meeting people's overly high estimations of the tools (yet). It is important for organisations to understand the importance of this, else they will be left behind by the competitors who do implement and communicate about AI tools for their intended benefit.

5.1.6.3. Challenger

The challenger categorises him/herself as slowly climbing the slope of enlightenment. He/she has a profound understanding of the possibilities AI can offer them but is awaiting communication strategies from competitors to imitate and improve them when the time is right. This organisation is also awaiting the older employees to retire to have a digitally driven workforce, which will smoothen the implementation process. *Within five to ten years, most of them will be retired. I think by then, a lot of changes will happen and naturally evolve because we are currently acquiring a big and young workforce who are more interested in that and know how to work with it* (P10). This organisation is not in a hurry as, according to them, they have heard of some organisations implementing AI, but it is not that threatening yet. This goes in line with what Linden and Fenn (2003) have explained. Whenever organisations are climbing the slope of enlightenment, less than 5% has adopted the technology as only several have adopted the technology and are currently experimenting with it to understand how it suits them best.

5.1.6.4. Leaders

The leaders identify themselves as positioned in the plateau of productivity. The usage of AI tools in their organisation has become mainstream, stable, and all employees understand and accept the benefits AI is bringing them. A leader explains: *I think it was Einstein who said, "the people who are the most intelligent, are not the ones who are*

*most intelligent but are the ones who are able to adapt” and that’s exactly what we’re doing (P14). The leaders are aware that innovation is the key to success and that implementing AI in their ways of working is currently that innovation. Another participant is very aware of AI’s recent gain in popularity and explains *I had a seminar on embracing technology in Montreal, three years ago. All the other executive searchers just left the room and said, that was not executive search. Then last year, they asked me to come back and tell the exact same because now they’re ready to hear it (P12).* He/she is discussing how his/her expertise with AI is currently something everyone wants to hear about, due to AI becoming more mainstream for all and more organisations identifying with AI.*

5.1.7. Speed of Implementation

Bresciana & Eppler (2008) bring up that each technology’s goal is to reach the plateau of productivity, but its speed to get there alters, differentiating between fast-track, normal, and long-fuse. When asking the participants how they see their organisation with regards to AI in the future (e.g., in five years), every participant was convinced that in five years their organisational structure or way of working will change tremendously with regards to AI, even the nice players. *I think there will be more technology available. I think in five years we’ll probably have to use it, even if we don’t want to, because if we don’t, our competition might (P1).* Other participants think that AI will be used to perform smaller, easier tasks. Participants who are leaning more toward the leader quadrant are of the opinion that not much will change for them *I think for the moment everyone just wants to rely on AI. But we will see the limits at some point (P14).* Most of the participants highlight that AI is here to stay and that nobody will be able to go back anymore. Therefore, AI tools used in executive search are placed on the fast track and will therefore reach the plateau of productivity in two to four years. This is crucial information for organisations since it predicts the maturity level of the AI tools available in the future based on how the organisations experience it and when the best time would be for them to communicate and implement these tools to ensure they are not too late.

5.2. A Leap of Faith

In the previous section, the organisations have been categorised into four different groups determining how far they see themselves in the implementation of AI and its

associated communication. This section will focus on the advantages and disadvantages of the organisations leading the AI-related change in the executive search industry. During the interviews, it became clear that there are three obvious market leaders in this sample (P12, P13, P14). These three organisations are currently encountering first-mover advantages (Lieberman & Montgomery, 1988) and are seen to be more privileged compared to their competitors as they are introducing the usage of AI tools to the industry and therefore also conducting the market.

5.2.1. Trade Secrets

All three first movers have implemented AI tools around ten years ago. The opportunity for implementing these tools came for all three while doing market research. *Many executive searchers said they would not work with AI-driven tools. It was not posh enough. But we embraced the technology right away* (P12). They noticed that many of their competitors were not as enthusiastic about AI as they were, so they have stayed quiet about their AI tools by keeping them as trade secrets (Lieberman & Montgomery, 1988). This was done for two reasons. First, due to potential fear and distrust of the technology from their clients as, especially ten years ago, AI was talked about with certain negative connotations and a lot of people did not trust it. So, they did not want to risk their current clients leaving them or potential clients going to the competitors. *Clients are mostly interested in the result, not in the process* (P13), as explained by a leader, therefore, they did not see the benefit of telling the clients about their tools. The second reason was to make sure they would stay a front runner and that competitors would not start implementing me-too strategies (Bond & Lean, 1977) or here: implementing the same AI tools in their business to remove the first movers' advantages. Interestingly, one organisation has recently started communicating about the importance of the implementation of AI in organisations: *my main goal is talking about the digital transformation that occurs right now, and to ensure my clients that they have the right people and the right talent in their organisation, that we will be able to help them understand that and to make this shift together* (P14). This leader has thus used the communication about AI tools in their advantage by being the first one, to persuade their clients that they are the knowledgeable and skilful organisation that can help these clients transform into a digital company like theirs. On an actual level, this participant is encountering first mover advantages, based on its initial first mover advantages.

5.2.2. Access to Niche Segments

A second advantage of being a first mover is that these organisations have the power to attract the most interesting niche segments (Lieberman & Montgomery, 1988) who are also interested in AI tools or in AI-driven solutions and to get these niche segments fascinated from the start. *Clients are insecure about techniques and technologies. They don't have the tools in their business in their daily life, and they are very happy to have our agency as a partner, that gives them security. What they are buying from us is something they really need* (P13). By doing so, the first movers are attracting clients who have also been thinking about implementing AI in their organisation and are possibly helping their clients becoming first movers. First movers can thus take strategic action to decrease the chances of successfully entering competitors.

5.2.3. Switching Costs

The executive search industry puts a huge emphasis on trust and is mainly relationship-based. Therefore, whenever a client goes into business with an executive search organisation, it is very likely that the client will keep on doing business with that same organisation for a longer period. Therefore, switching costs are a first mover's third advantage (Lieberman & Montgomery, 1988). *AI gives us a jumpstart. And sometimes we can shorten the process by two weeks by doing this* (P12). Whenever a client becomes aware of the potential of implementing AI-driven tools due to a first mover's external communication or the purchasing of a first mover's service, that client will think twice before going to another executive search agency where the process takes longer and/or the costs are higher. That client will typically not go to another executive search organisation, which only recently implemented AI in their strategies due to monetary, psychological (trust), effort-based, and time-based disadvantages compared to the first mover (Lieberman & Montgomery, 1988). Therefore, late entrants must come up with new reasons why clients should be doing business with them and not with the first movers.

5.2.4. Brand Loyalty

Executive search is very much a people game, so everything you do will be people related (P14). Executive search companies are characterised by highly personal connections with their clients, leading to higher levels of trust and thus of brand loyalty. Therefore, first movers have the advantage of brand loyalty not only by making existing cli-

ents more loyal but also by attracting new clients who are interested in the first movers' AI-driven solutions. If all goes well, the first mover experiences a good reputation in the market and an increase in clients purchasing from them instead of from late movers, as explained by a leader. *This is one of our main advantages, because we have been quite successful with AI in the past and because we started quite early, so we have a lot of experience and recognition* (P13).

5.2.5. Imitate and Improve

The previous four advantages could be major reasons for organisations to aspire to be first movers in the industry, however, being a first mover also has its disadvantages. *AI is something that the business is speaking about a lot, but I haven't really seen a good example of what it can do or who is using it* (P10). This is a quote from a participant in the challenger quadrant, this organisation has a high ability to execute but low completeness of vision due to the lack of communication from competitors (which is precisely what all three first movers were initially aiming for). The first movers have likely implemented this strategy because late movers can easily copy the first movers' strategies, research and development results, education sources, and organisational progression. This is because imitation costs are typically lower than innovation costs (Lieberman & Montgomery, 1988). Interestingly, all late movers have asked about the specific tools that were being used by their competitors. Possibly to imitate the first movers, but no information was given to them due to the high levels of anonymity of the research. Thus, as can be seen in the quote, the challenger is waiting for competitors to start communicating about their AI-related strategies so that the challenger can copy and improve these strategies. The same challenger clarifies *there have been huge changes in our company the last few years, and we are still changing a lot today. So, we'd rather focus on and invest in optimising the business in other areas. When we'll see that the competitors are investing in AI, we'll start looking into that too* (P10). Naturally, first movers can take advantage of the primary implementation period wherein the AI-driven solution is new to everyone in the market, which is an advantage the late movers do not have. On an actual level, that is why one of the first movers is now communicating about their strategies with their stakeholders, as that organisation believes they are too far ahead for anyone to copy and become a first mover.

Another participant in the research with very high completeness of vision explains *we have a development program wherein seven to eight people are constantly exploring and researching: what is out there? What could disrupt us? What are the new robots that could put us out of business? What are the things we could use? So, we have a lot of information stored and AI tools that have been tested, but the organisation is not entirely ready yet* (P8). This technological uncertainty is seen as another disadvantage for first movers (Lieberman & Montgomery, 1988). Late movers can take advantage of errors made by the first movers and launch an even better service or AI-driven tool to the market than the first mover. As the participant is explaining in the quote, they are not looking for me-too strategies (Bond & Lean, 1977), but they are preparing their organisation for a big shift based on years of research from their competitors and from their clients, and years of internal communication ensuring their employees are on board.

5.2.6. Long Gone

Additionally, it is relatively risky to implement AI tools to automate the business to the fullest since, according to some of the niche players, the executive search industry puts personal connections at the core of what they do. Since they see themselves as such an organisation, it would hinder the implementation and communication of AI in their organisation. This line of thought explains why so many niche players have been careful when implementing AI tools in their business or are assuming their clients are not interested in AI-driven solutions. However, the opposite seems true for this leader *my clients are incredibly interested in AI, and we are a client-centric organisation, so we do not have another choice than to embrace it* (P14). The organisations that have not implemented AI in their organisation, could have been waiting for a moment wherein a leader is not able to innovate or where that organisation innovates quicker than the leader. Typically, a leading monopolist is less likely to innovate than a new entrant to the market (Arrow, 1962). However, in this case, there is not a singular first mover, but three at the same time who are continuously researching and internally communicating about the newest tools in the market *we invest in many tools and give our employees constant training. If they cannot keep up, they are out* (P14). This coincidence rejects the theory and has made it even harder for late movers to initiate innovative competitive advantages since the first movers have been (secretly) in front for a long time already,

competing between themselves, as this leader explains: *I think that if other companies would operate as we operate, it's fine because things are moving so fast in our organisation. Even if they would implement a tool when we already have it, it's already too late for them* (P12).

5.3. Against the Grain

Change is either seen as an element one can control (Cheney et al., 2010) – typical for the people who identify themselves with an AI-driven organisation – or as something that is happening to them where they have no control over (Cheney et al., 2010). The latter is generally, but not always, the mindset of those resistant to change. A bit less than half of the participants has indicated they are not willing to, interested in, or do not see the benefit of communicatively navigating AI in their organisation. This is mainly due to two reasons: the participants fear AI or the participants are ignorant to the possibilities of AI. Both reasons have multiple explanations that will be clarified in the following paragraphs.

5.3.1. A Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

It became clear that the participants not subjectively reconstructing AI in their organisation are experiencing fear and distrust toward AI. Several reasons for this came to light.

5.3.1.1. The History of The Executive Search Industry

Firstly, three participants highlighted the history of the executive search industry, which provides an explanation of why a lot of organisations are not communicating about or implementing these changes. The participants explained that whenever one got an executive search assignment back in 1995, one could look at the Yellow Pages, buy an expensive catalogue with C-Level management's contact details (which had to be yearly updated), or find a candidate based on one's own personal network by calling each potential candidate one by one (highly time-consuming). But the consultant did not know anything about that person's competencies or whatsoever. Thus, it made it difficult for the consultant to find the appropriate candidate for a certain position. Once the consultant had found a potential candidate, that candidate was the consultant's gold. If that person was not going to be taken for this position, it could be a good opportunity for another

er potential position. All these potential candidates were then stored in an in-house database, worth a lot back in the days, but not worth anything today since nearly everyone can voluntarily be found on LinkedIn. So, there is no gold anymore in the traditional way of working and employees are seeing that their profession is slowly being taken over by technologies since mostly the same people who were looking up candidates in the Yellow Pages are now looking for candidates on LinkedIn, as explained by a leader. *A new generation is coming into work life. You're getting into management positions, you wouldn't accept someone to say, let's look at the CV database, which you collected in the 90s. Everything is changing lightning fast (P11).*

The organisations, currently in the niche player quadrant, are still recovering from the switch from Yellow Pages toward LinkedIn and do not see themselves letting go of their initial competitive advantage (Ross, 2009). The executive search industry is changing fast, and organisations need to constantly keep up with the latest changes in the industry. If they do not, it leaves room for new entrants to introduce disruptive innovations while the traditional executive search organisations stick to their traditional ways of working, solely developing sustainable innovations (Cressman, 2019). *The classic story is that people start in this business around 40 years old and have a good network around 50 or more. At that point, they do not trust some tool to do a better job than relying on their own network. The industry is filled with that profile: old and stubborn men (P11).* The result is that a traditional executive search assignment could take several months to one year or more, but for AI-driven organisations the same assignment can be performed at a much faster and cheaper rate. Clients who have been working with traditional executive search organisations are likely to stay with them for a bit longer out of loyalty, however it can be assumed that at some point that will not be enough. *I say we're of a certain age, we've worked here for a while, whereby it mainly is heavily based on relationships and people who know people and things like that. So, AI sounds interesting, I just haven't had the time or inclination to look at it (P1).* The four dots in the leader quadrant are all start-ups or new entrants that have been driven by innovative tools from the launch of their start-up onward. They have thus not experienced and do not identify with these traditional ways of working within their organisation, making them more agile toward innovating. It is therefore important for traditional executive search organisations to continuously communicate and implement sustaining and disruptive innovations to stay in business (Cressman, 2019).

5.3.1.2. *Fear in Different Forms*

Due to the industry's history and a rising trend to implement more and more technologies in the workforce, nearly all participants who have said not to have carried through AI tools, have expressed fear toward technology. Cressman (2019) presented different types of fear. The first type is the fear of losing human agency *some fear has been, you know, like data and AI will take jobs from people, from us, and then what?* (P10). This challenger is expressing his/her loss of human agency through the possible loss of his/her job. The participant's theory is that by ignoring AI and its surrounding communications strategies, his/her human agency will remain intact.

Another type of fear is fear of technology's existential threats. *I've been to a seminar where people come up to speak about AI and they scare you with: AI is going to take over everything and stuff like that. I discussed it then with someone, like is this really going to happen? Everyone kind of scared, I haven't been to those seminars again* (P5). This participant has been in the industry for more than ten years, has never worked with social media, and has only recently launched a corporate website. The participant works in a small organisation with like-minded people to him/her and does not feel encouraged to try it out. Due to his/her ignorance about AI and a speaker at a seminar telling him/her about the possible threats – confirming his/her initial beliefs – the participant got scared and will probably not look at it again.

The last type of fear is that of falling behind on trends. *We were the first ones to implement websites, that was awesome. But now I mean, I've become a bit more set in my ways. AI looks very nice. Thank you. I just simply don't understand enough about what it can do. We are all consultants in our mid-50s and don't have the energy for it anymore* (P1). This participant – and CEO of the organisation – has witnessed the technological changes in the industry but does not want to invest his/her energy in staying up to date with technology anymore out of fear to fall behind anyhow.

5.3.1.3. *The Influence of Popular Culture*

Where theory has failed to accommodate so far is the intuitive fears that arise from popular culture. Four participants have stated that their fear of AI is based on movies, books, podcasts, etc. Favaro (2019) explains that numerous movies discuss not-so-

futuristic technologies wherein these technologies take over humanity and people lose their agency. This goes in line with this participant's view: *the machines can be so clever. They will bypass our slow human brain and just move to themselves. And that is one of the theories, that we will create something that in the end, will make us realise how useless we are* (P10). When asking the participant where he/she got this information from, he/she clarified it came from a recently watched movie. This participant is also working in an organisation where the implementation of AI is going relatively slowly and where he/she is seen as a potential change agent. However, when analysing this on an actual level, if a change agent is getting information about AI from popular culture, it explains why the implementation of AI is going so slowly. Another participant – in the leader quadrant – explained that their organisation did not communicate about AI to their clients due to the controversial debate around it. *I am not afraid of AI, but I am afraid of the political debate around it. Just look in the media, you'll quickly realise how controversial it is and that's a problem. It will divide people into pros and cons* (P13). Due to the negative connotations of AI in the media, this participant usually explains to his/her clients how helpful AI is in their work to let them understand there is nothing to fear.

5.3.2. Like a Fish out of Water

A bit less than half of the participants is resisting the implementation of AI in their organisation, possibly resulting from fear. This is done for four different reasons.

5.3.2.1. AI hurts Employees' Image of Expertise

Firstly, because change threatens their personal values of the self (Cheney et al., 2010). *We are in a denial phase, like what is this thing out there? I've heard of it. I'm not quite sure what it does. I'm sure it won't affect us at all. It's not possible for a machine to take over our jobs* (P1). As explained in the previous paragraphs, back in the days, consultants working for executive search organisations were seen as experts in their fields since nobody else had access to the information they had. However, this has changed over the years. When looking at this on an actual level, there is a possibility that participants are ignoring the opportunities regarding AI so that their communicated image of the expert consultant is not damaged or lowered to the statement that a machine can do their job as well – if not better. It is also possible that, due to this reason, organisations have been

telling themselves that machines cannot ever take over their jobs nor can they assist them, so it is better to leave the topic aside – also conceptualised as a self-fulfilling prophecy (Wineburg, 1987). Two participants have expressed that they are surrounded by people both in the business as outside the business who also believe that the AI trend will pass quickly, constantly reconfirming the prophecy. Interestingly, organisations tend to homogenise to feel more confident about their strategic business plan, called isomorphism (Cheney et al., 2010). This will be discussed later in the chapter. On top of that, according to Elving (2005), the lack of communication (i.e., about the possibilities of AI-tools) from organisations to their employees, can turn into informal communication (telling each other the AI trend will pass quickly), which can turn to the spread of false information (AI is going to take over the world), ultimately leading to resistance to change.

5.3.2.2. *AI hurts Employees' Confidence*

A second reason is that AI-related change could suggest criticism of one's work and can potentially hurt one's self-esteem (Cheney et al., 2010). *We haven't done anything wrong. I mean, I can't really see what we should have done, instead of doing nothing* (P3). After probing this participant several times asking about why the organisation was not e.g., communicating more about AI tools, he/she got defensive and thought the interviewee was suggesting that the organisation had done something wrong. This participant is the founder of the organisation and possibly felt that the student was critiquing his/her business. This participant has built up his/her organisation more than 20 years ago, has always worked using traditional tools, and does not know much about technologies. It can be implied that the participant does not incorporate AI tools in his/her business to prevent having the realisation his/her expertise is not good enough for the job anymore. Another reason for this is the theory of (negative) issue selling (Frahm & Brown, 2005). If the CEO is not on board with the latest innovative technologies, and therefore sells it negatively to his/her employees who have also been in the organisation for more than 20 years, convincing them all it is not necessary to change will have a large influence on them. Issue selling can thus also be used in the opposite direction.

5.3.2.3. *Perceived AI Risks > Perceived AI Benefits*

A third reason is that the results of the changes are often uncertain, meaning that the promised benefits become uncertain too. *The process of an executive search assignment has not changed substantially in 40 years. So, we're in a profitable business that hasn't required us to change in terms of process. So, when something new comes along, that will cost me money and effort and is not solving a problem, we're not so fast to change* (P8). The participant is explaining that their organisation does not want to take the risk of changing anything to their business, since it is working and is profitable the way it is now. As they do not know if implementing AI in their organisation will make them more or less profitable, they would rather stay the same. A niche player adds *we're not going to be talking about AI, just because I don't think we've got anything new or original to say* (P3). This participant prefers not to communicate about AI because the organisation has never done so and does not feel comfortable not knowing how their audience will react to that. This goes in line with what Edmonds (2011) had characterised as resistant to change due to fear of the unknown, of loss, or of leaving the comfort zone.

5.3.2.4. Job Uncertainty

The last reason is the most popular one, namely that AI will take over employees' jobs. *I hope AI doesn't replace what we do, because you know, I'll be out of a job* (P1). This participant is the CEO and founder and has not implemented any sort of AI tool in their organisation. He/she believes and communicates to others that AI is here to replace people, instead of making the tasks more interesting for everyone.

While looking at all four reasons, it can be assumed that once one understands where the resistance is coming from, it can potentially be handled and approached using different methods, conceptualised as strategic listening (Zerfass et al., 2018).

5.3.2.5. Don't Break Away from the Pack

Another possible reason why organisations are showing resistance to change is due to rising trends of homogenisation. Companies feel safe whenever they do not differ too much from each other, termed isomorphism (Cheney et al., 2010). *If one of the big competitors would adopt AI, then everyone in the industry would have to adopt it* (P4) and another participant says *we're trying to keep up with the trends and if others start implementing it, then we'll probably jump on that trend as well* (P2). Both quotes show

that participants feel more comfortable implementing a change once they see their competitors communicating the same. Organisations in the executive search industry all look nearly identical in terms of products or services they offer (performing executive search assignments, providing coaching, leadership advisory, etc.) and can therefore truly differentiate – next to the range of services offered depending on its size – on the personal contact with the client. Typically, consultants will do their utmost to build a strong personal connection with their clients, clarifying why clients remain so loyal to one organisation. Since the inside of the industry looks so similar, it becomes clear why organisations tend to mirror competitors' behaviour: to ensure clients do not go to the competitor because of a better, cheaper, quicker service. By doing so, it has forced organisations to mimic others in a similar environmental setting (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991), namely those offering the same range of services. Interestingly, this trend of homogenisation is also seen among the participants in the leader quadrant: *every company is talking about AI right now, in every three-year strategic plan, you will find a big piece on technology. I'm not sure if everyone knows that much, though. I think it's a new keyword that everyone is using at many different moments* (P14). So, it can be said that organisations tend to surround themselves with organisations resembling their environmental settings; communicatively navigating the change or not. On an actual level, one can see that mimetic isomorphism (Cheney et al., 2010) is especially important in this context since organisations' uncertainty about implementing, communicating, and/or researching about AI tools make them mimic each other's strategies – at least what is available for them from the outside.

5.4. Straight from the Horses' Mouths

During the interviews with the participants, several suggestions from practitioners, having undergone the AI-related change smoothly, came to light. The purpose of this metaphor is to highlight these tips for an effective navigation through an AI-related strategic change.

5.4.1. Flexibility

For organisations to implement continuous change, Cheney et al. (2010) explicate the necessity for a highly flexible business. This is achieved when the organisation controls the change and proactively evaluates projects and tools to make them more efficient in

the future. A practitioner agrees and states that *the younger they are the more open-minded toward AI they are. I'm the old guy, so my employees are constantly coming up with new tool suggestions and ensuring I keep an open mind toward these tools. That's the hard part for them, but it is crucial and necessary* (P9). This participant is the CEO of the organisation and has his/her younger employees on a continuous look-out for better AI-driven tools, ensuring they control the constant changes. He/she understands the differences in mindset between him/her and his/her employees, and thus recommends having a fully flexible workforce with transparent communication between everyone. Another participant also highlights the importance of a flexible organisation *no matter what challenge we have given our employees, they have embraced it. They're very flexible and very open-minded toward new things [...] to survive in this business, you must be very agile* (P13). On an actual level, the leader is stating that if one is not flexible in the executive search industry, the competitors will drown you.

5.4.2. (Collective) Knowledge Management

Alshawi, Irani, and Baldwin (2003) advise organisations to be continuously investing in knowledge management to understand what other organisations are educating their employees about and to have highly skilled employees on a constant basis. *We push everyone to pursue an MBA or another form of higher education. People need to have this continuous flow of education* (P14). This leader agrees with the authors although he/she does not bring up researching other organisations' learning programs – possibly due to highly untransparent competitors in the industry. *We are training our people all the time regarding our tools, constantly, not that we take them out for a day and train them, no, just continuously* (P12). Although the first participant discussed the need for higher education to ensure a certain way of thinking and basic knowledge one gets with higher education, the second participant puts emphasis on continuous training with the tools they have available. Cheney et al. (2010) add that it is also important to attain collective knowledge about the upcoming changes by continuously educating and communicating with everyone in the organisation. However, several participants disagree. *We try not to overwhelm people who don't need to know just because it adds extra stress* (P12). Practitioners explain that during a change, it is best to only communicate with the directly involved employees, especially if continuous changes are the norm.

5.4.3. Different Strategies for Different Structures

Implementing changes in one's organisation might work well in theory, but Cheney et al. (2010) discuss the need for looking at an organisation's background and specific ways of working first, as this can have an impact on their communicated strategies. This practitioner has built up the organisation many years ago together with the current employees and is now soon to retire. *Our employees are not as innovative as we might wish. They work the way they have always worked because they are old. Old in their ways of thinking* (P3). This niche player has only implemented the necessary technological changes to keep them afloat. His/her employees are not flexible and of a certain age. On top of that, the CEO shares the same age and sees the business working well enough, making it very hard for them to implement AI-driven tools in their organisation as everyone in the organisation is resisting the change. Another participant explains what he/she would have done differently regarding the AI-related change *I would have gotten rid of my older colleagues earlier because they have stopped our innovation* (P9). Many practitioners have expressed that employing younger employees would have made their organisation more tech-driven from an earlier stage. Next to age, the organisation's size and hierarchy levels also play a role according to the following leader. *We are very flexible because we have no huge hierarchies and we are small. The bigger a company is, the more difficult it is to implement new tools. As we are quite tiny and we don't have any hierarchies, we have a very fast communication stream* (P13). Depending on the age, size, and degrees of hierarchy, communication strategies to implement successful change need to be adapted.

5.4.4. Participatory & Relational approach

This point goes in line with the previous paragraph. Ströh (2007) introduced a participatory and relational approach during change communication. Many participants agree with her modern perspective. *For our business, it's very important to have ideas. And this is what I really want to tell my employees: to focus on entrepreneurship, and to have good ideas that everyone will listen to* (P13). This leader explains that it keeps his/her employees motivated and loyal to the organisation and its ways of working. Another practitioner explains *we're a small organisation and we know each other well, so I just talk to them. I say I'm trying this and it's great, you know, normally you get approached by some seller and you never fully trust those anyway* (P11). This participant

is mainly focusing on his/her personal relationships and on personal communication instead of using power play to implement change in the organisation (seen as more traditional ways of working). By doing so, employees feel more respected and will listen quicker when undergoing change. Bastilanna and Casciaro (2012) add that organisational change tends to be political in nature and are therefore highlighting the importance of social influence. This can only be achieved with high levels of trust, mention several of the participants. *If there's a tool that we want to show, we ask providers to set up a proof of concept that we can demonstrate to people before buying it. But the 1-1 chats at the bar or the hallway chats, are hugely important. If I am telling you about this great tool through Zoom, or after a demo in the hallway and I tell you how good this thing was for me, it's going to hit you much more* (P8). This is what the authors define as social influence, since the person who is having that chat with the practitioner, will alter their feelings or actions after that conversation. Additionally, Battilana and Casciaro (2012) highlight the need for change agents, especially useful when the change deviates from the regular way of working. In this research, change agents were typically the CEO or communication professionals in the organisation. In other words, people that the employees know and trust. However, when nobody in the organisation is aware of the changes they could implement, an external change agent is required. *The co-founder has a Ph.D. in artificial intelligence. But he doesn't believe that AI is going to do anything in executive search, so we have dropped the topic* (P4). People of influence also influence employees to not implement any more changes or innovations, which also tends to be believed by its employees. A change agent's role can thus go both ways.

5.5. Synthesis

This chapter has discussed four different metaphors: double-edged sword, a leap of faith, against the grain (including both a cat on a hot tin roof and like a fish out of water), and straight from the horses' mouths. The first three are answering the research question and the last one is serving as a guideline for practitioners and scholars. So, how do executive search agencies communicatively navigate the AI-related strategic change in their industry? The leaders communicatively navigate by (all but one) being first movers in the industry and enjoying its advantages. The challenger and visionaries are communicatively navigating the change by sitting on the fence – for now – and awaiting

its competitors' strategies to copy and improve them. Although they differ in the sense that the challenger is communicating more externally, and the visionaries are communicating heavily internally. Niche players are communicatively navigating through the change by ignoring AI and its possibilities, therefore continuing their traditional ways of working out of fear, distrust, and resistance.

6. Discussion & Conclusion

6.1. Discussion of Results

On a real level, some underlying mechanisms have been recognised and will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

The self-perception of ‘this is all a hype’ and ‘it will not impact my career’ determines how one is going to communicate about it, although sometimes it has some dissonances. Several participants in the niche player quadrant are CEOs toward their mid-fifties, which could illustrate that they are solely resisting the AI revolution as they want to make it to their retirement before AI kicks off. Younger people do not tend to do that as they have their entire careers ahead of them. So, the self-understanding affects how participants communicate it: either how participants communicatively navigate it genuinely because they truly believe in their chosen strategies, or because participants are communicating strategically in the sense that they are talking in a way to delay to revolution somehow and do not want to embrace it.

The argument of not wanting to use AI to not endanger the personal aspect or human touch with their clients is also questioned since AI does not exclude having a personal connection with the clients. It is perfectly possible to have deeply rooted personal connections with clients and have a fully automated organisation, as is the case for most leaders. It can be implied that the aforementioned argument is a pseudo argument, as participants are subjectively constructing by communicating how their company is positioned in this debate. The argument is possibly hiding a deeper truth.

The deeply rooted fear that participants in the niche player quadrant have expressed is not believed to come from the potential AI-driven work they are delivering but is com-

ing from the popular culture they are consuming. This possibly leads them to think they are working toward the destruction of humanity, explaining the high level of resistance.

Although the executive search industry is characterised with low levels of transparency between the organisations, there is a huge noticeable need among the participants to start communicating about their strategies due to the uprising disruptive change. Once worked out appropriately, this could lead to the opportunity to move the industry forward as a whole.

6.2. Communication Strategies

It has taken some background information before coming to the communication aspect. This was necessary since the whole understanding of the constellation was not there, due to a lack of research. So, after having provided the strategic context, several communication strategies have come to light.

6.2.1. Leaders

One group of the leaders are milking their first mover advantages by heavily communicating internally but remaining silent externally to keep it as their strategic advantage, as explained by this leader: *our keywords are data-driven, tools, technique, so more solution-driven instead of AI-driven, even though you and I both know what it truly means* (P13). Another group is aggressively communicating externally to convince their clients that any organisation that cannot deliver AI-related strategies is passé. *I'm a head-hunter, so I will be someone that will find another someone for them. So, I need to be more intelligent sometimes than my client on these aspects, because I am bringing about the new change for them* (P14).

6.2.2. Challenger

The challenger occasionally communicates externally but does not communicate internally as they want to break into the industry when the older employees are retired. The challenger is sporadically publishing blog posts and white papers about disruptive leadership and hosting webinars with AI experts as speakers to inform clients to communicate their way into the future. One can thus assume that the challenger wants to prepare

its external audience while waiting for the resistant and closed-minded employees to leave the organisation.

6.2.3. Visionaries

Visionaries are communicating regularly internally to get their employees ready for the change and to understand the market they are trying to break into. One participant explains they are using the word AI to get their people more engaged. *Outside of the direct technology, that communication around AI is almost making it more interesting for people. Suddenly, people are listening a little bit more* (P8). By incorporating AI-related terms in their internal communication strategies, it makes their employees more engaged and eager to read more. The participant explained they are not implemented AI in their organisation yet because they are waiting for the perfect moment to implement it, however the employees seem to be ready. Typically, participants clarified they have weekly or biweekly meetings wherein everyone can bring ideas to the table and discuss further innovations, no matter one's position in the organisation

6.2.4. Niche players

Some of the niche players are trying to delay the AI revolution by communicating it out of existence by emphasising other aspects: personal connection, size of the organisation, lack of resources, etc. Another possible explanation is that some of the niche players are exploiting their business to let it die once AI has become the norm in the industry. Others again are tricksters because they are breaking into a market where they do not have expertise. *We probably oversell. We do talk about being data driven, and like the promises about data analytics. I mean, we are a pretty data driven company, but that's not the same as AI* (P4).

6.3. Conclusion

This thesis has researched communication strategies against a backdrop of disruptive massive change. As can be seen on the hype cycle, a communicated change is not something straightforward. Every organisation has their own personal survival strategies within the change (enjoying first mover advantages, letting the business survive until retirement, slowly but steadily preparing for the change in the background, etc.). Organ-

isations successfully steering disruptive change are the ones proactively embracing a systematic internal communication to mobilise the internal employees and have a maximum of opportunities discovered and developed by the full workforce. It has become clear that organisations do not always communicate the same internally as externally, determined by competitors' strategies and how they want to prevail.

6.4. Contribution to the Field of Strategic Communication

“Change initiatives typically involve the implementation of and uses of new computer-based technologies [...] Technology is change.” (Cheney et al., 2010, p.359). As organisations in the executive search industry are undergoing change caused by disruptive technologies, there is a huge need for strategic communication. Organisations positioned in the leader quadrant demand strategic communication to keep their competitive position in the market and thrive for further first mover advantages. Organisations in the challenger and visionary quadrants require strategic communication whenever introducing AI in their organisations and get their employees on board. Organisations in the niche player quadrant necessitate strategic communication as they tend to get drowned first by their competitors utilising and communicating about AI, therefore they will have to (re)position themselves in the market strategically.

Although this study has solely focused on the executive search industry, I argue that my strategic advices can be generalised to any organisation in any industry facing similar conditions due to AI-related strategic changes. As previously mentioned, there are no universal guidelines on how to operate strategic change. However, operating in a highly flexible organisation with open-minded employees, where investing in continuous knowledge management for all employees is a top priority, and acquiring a digitally literate workforce (typically younger/tech-natives) in a smaller organisation to encourage a participatory and relational approach are characteristics that any business in any industry can implement and that the results of this thesis stand behind.

6.5. Limitations & Further Research

Only 14 different organisations were used, neglecting any other executive search organisation in the market. It would have been interesting if more organisations of the indus-

try would have participated to have a more comprehensive understanding of the market and of their strategies communicating about change. On top of that, all organisations' answers (but one) are based on one employee, not exploring a possible internal inconsistency. Further research could thus delve deeper and include several employees from the same organisation to increase the level of credibility. Moreover, this research has focused on what the organisations are doing, necessary for a basic and strategic understanding of the market. Further research could focus on how they are implementing organisational change strategies into their communication strategies by analysing their corporate websites, social media channels etc.

6.6. Concluding Remarks

We have always positioned AI as something which is, the robots are coming to kill us. But in fact, the robots are coming to serve us coffee (P8). Successful change depends on how organisations construct and communicatively navigate about AI. Those who position it as robots are here to bring us coffee might be more successful in changing and getting the best out of the technology than those who perceive it as robots are here to take over humanity.

7. References

- Ahlin, E. M. (2019). Semi-structured interviews with expert practitioners: Their validity and significant contribution to translational research. *SAGE Publications Ltd. Advance online publication*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781526466037>
- Alshawi, S., Irani, Z., & Baldwin, L. (2003). Benchmarking: information and communication technologies. *Benchmarking: An International Journal*, 10(4), 312-324. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/14635770310484953>
- Arrow, K. J. (1962). Economic welfare and the allocation of resource for inventions, in the rate and direction of inventive activity: economic and social factors. *RR Nelson (red.), Princeton University, Princeton*.
- Ashkanasy, N. M., & Nicholson, G. J. (2003). Climate of fear in organisational settings: Construct definition, measurement and a test of theory. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 55(1), 24-29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530412331312834>
- Battilana, J., & Casciaro, T. (2012). Change agents, networks, and institutions: A contingency theory of organisational change. *Academy of Management Journal*, 55(2), 381-398. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2009.0891>
- Beaverstock, J. V., Faulconbridge, J. R., & Hall, S. J. (2010). Professionalization, legitimization and the creation of executive search markets in Europe. *Journal of Economic Geography*, 10(6), 825-843. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jeg/lbp058>
- Boeker, W. (1989). Strategic change: The effects of founding and history. *Academy of Management journal*, 32(3), 489-515. <https://doi.org/10.5465/256432>
- Bond, R. S., & Lean, D. F. (1977). Sales, promotion, and product differentiation in two prescription drug markets. *Federal Trade Commission, Bureau of Economics*. Retrieved from [https://books.google.be/books?hl=nl&lr=&id=NpZsQJ1g5ZQC&oi=fnd&pg=PA1&dq=Bond,+R.+S.,+%26+Lean,+D.+F.+\(1977\).+Sales,+promotion,+and+product+differentiation+in+two+prescription+drug+markets.+Federal+Trade+Commission,+Bureau+of+Economics.&ots=Aelx2jVelJ&sig=MZubT_bIhewLrhArlRjGM54VCpE&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.be/books?hl=nl&lr=&id=NpZsQJ1g5ZQC&oi=fnd&pg=PA1&dq=Bond,+R.+S.,+%26+Lean,+D.+F.+(1977).+Sales,+promotion,+and+product+differentiation+in+two+prescription+drug+markets.+Federal+Trade+Commission,+Bureau+of+Economics.&ots=Aelx2jVelJ&sig=MZubT_bIhewLrhArlRjGM54VCpE&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false)

- Bordia, P., Hobman, E., Jones, E., Gallois, C., & Callan, V. J. (2004). Uncertainty during organizational change: Types, consequences, and management strategies. *Journal of business and psychology*, 18(4), 507-532. <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:JOBU.0000028449.99127.f7>
- Bresciani, S., & Eppler, M. J. (2008). Gartner's magic quadrant and hype cycle. Institute of Marketing and Communication Management (IMCA), Università della Svizzera italiana, Faculty of Communication Sciences, Case, (2), 19. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Martin-Eppler/publication/265407275_GARTNER%27S_MAGIC_QUADRANT_and_HYPE_CYCLE/links/54e285680cf296663796a20a/GARTNERS-MAGIC-QUADRANT-and-HYPE-CYCLE.pdf
- Brinkmann, S., & Kvale, S. (2015). Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing. *Sage*. Retrieved from [https://books.google.be/books?hl=nl&lr=&id=bZGvwsP1BRwC&oi=fnd&pg=PR1&dq=Brinkmann,+S.,+%26+Kvale,+S.+\(2015\).+Interviews:+Learning+the+craft+of+qualitative+research+interviewing+\(Vol.+3\).+Thousand+Oaks,+CA:+Sage.&ots=q8ERxgryNc&sig=0LDZGqd0K9VWvaeCmKaQmph8bCQ&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.be/books?hl=nl&lr=&id=bZGvwsP1BRwC&oi=fnd&pg=PR1&dq=Brinkmann,+S.,+%26+Kvale,+S.+(2015).+Interviews:+Learning+the+craft+of+qualitative+research+interviewing+(Vol.+3).+Thousand+Oaks,+CA:+Sage.&ots=q8ERxgryNc&sig=0LDZGqd0K9VWvaeCmKaQmph8bCQ&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false)
- Burgess, A. (2017). The Executive Guide to Artificial Intelligence: How to identify and implement applications for AI in your organization. *Springer*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-63820-1>
- Cressman, D. (2019). Disruptive Innovation and the Idea of Technology. *Novation: Critical Studies of Innovation*, (1), 18-40. Retrieved from <http://novation.inrs.ca/index.php/novation/article/view/7/2>
- Cheney, G., Christensen, L. T., Zorn Jr, T. E., & Ganesh, S. (2010). Organisational communication in an age of globalisation: Issues, reflections, practices. *Waveland Press*.
- Christensen, C. M. (2013). The Innovator's dilemma: when new technologies cause great firms to fail. *Harvard Business Review Press*.
- Dent, E. B. & Goldberg, S. G. (1999). Challenging 'resistance to change'. *The Journal of applied behavioural science*, 35(1), 25-41. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021886399351003>

- DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organisational fields. *American sociological review*, 48(2), 147-160. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2095101>
- Duan, Y., Edwards, J.S., & Dwivedi, Y.K. (2019). Artificial Intelligence for decision making in the era of Big Data-evolution, challenges and research agenda. *International Journal of Information Management*, 48, 63-71. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2019.01.021>
- Edmonds, J. (2011). Managing successful change. *Industrial and commercial training*, 43(6), 349-353. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00197851111160478>
- Elving, W. J. (2005). The role of communication in organisational change. *Corporate communications: an international journal*, 10(2), 129-138. <http://doi.org/10.1108/13563280510596943>
- Faulconbridge, J. R., Beaverstock, J. V., Hall, S., & Hewitson, A. (2009). The ‘war for talent’: The gatekeeper role of executive search firms in elite labour markets. *Geoforum*, 40(5), 800-808. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2009.02.001>
- Favaro, A. (2019). Digital Culture: Fears, Hopes And Uncertainty About Artificial Intelligence In Sci-Fi Movies. *New Approaches in Media and Communication*, 61-79. <https://doi.org/10.3726/b15661>
- Fernandez-Mateo, I., & Fernandez, R. M. (2016). Bending the pipeline? Executive search and gender inequality in hiring for top management jobs. *Management Science*, 62(12), 3636-3655. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2015.2315>
- Fitzgerald, M., Kruschwitz, N., Bonnet, D., & Welch, M. (2014). Embracing digital technology: A new strategic imperative. *MIT sloan management review*, 55(2), 1. Retrieved from <https://emergenceweb.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/embracing-digital-technology.pdf>
- Fletcher, A. J. (2017). Applying critical realism in qualitative research: methodology meets method. *International journal of social research methodology*, 20(2), 181-194. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2016.1144401>
- Floridi, L., Cowls, J., Beltrametti, M., Chatila, R., Chazerand, P., Dignum, V., Luetge, C., Madelin, R., Pagallo, U., Rossi, F., Schafer, B., Valcke, P., & Vayena, E. (2018). AI4People – An ethical framework for a good AI society: opportunities, risks, principles, and recommendations. *Minds and Machines*, 28(4), 689-707. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11023-018-9482-5>

- Frahm, J. A., & Brown, K. A. (2005). Building an organisational change communication theory. *Academy of Management Proceedings*, 2005(1). <https://doi.org/10.5465/ambpp.2005.18781296>
- George, J. M., & Jones, G. R. (2001). Towards a process model of individual change in organisations. *Human relations*, 54(4), 419-444. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726701544002>
- Goodman, J., & Truss, C. (2004). The medium and the message: communicating effectively during a major change initiative. *Journal of change management*, 4(3), 217-228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1469701042000255392>
- Guzman, A. L., & Lewis, S. C. (2020). Artificial intelligence and communication: A Human–Machine Communication research agenda. *New Media & Society*, 22(1), 70-86. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819858691>
- Hsiao, R. L., & Ormerod, R. J. (1998). A new perspective on the dynamics of information technology-enabled strategic change. *Information Systems Journal*, 8(1), 21-52. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2575.1998.00003.x>
- Iles, V., & Sutherland, K. (2001). A review for health care managers, professionals and researchers. [Review of the book *Managing change by NHS*, by T. Upton & B. Brooks]. Retrieved from https://www.healthknowledge.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/publichealthtextbook/5c/5c2_review.pdf
- Johansson, C., & Heide, M. (2008). Speaking of change: three communication approaches in studies of organisational change. *Corporate communications: an international journal*, 13(3), 288-305. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13563280810893661>
- Kitchen, P. J., & Daly, F. (2002). Internal communication during change management. *Corporate Communications: an international journal*, 7(1), 46-53. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13563280210416035>
- Küing, L. (2013). Innovation, technology, and organisational change. Legacy media's big challenges. An introduction'. *Media innovations: A multidisciplinary study of change*, 9-12. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Arne-Krumsvik/publication/270510055_Media_Innovations_A_Multidisciplinary_Study_of_Change_2013/links/54ac3eab0cf21c477139b5fc/Media-Innovations-A-Multidisciplinary-Study-of-Change-2013.pdf#page=11

- Li, F. (1997). From compromise to harmony: Organisational redesign through information and communication technologies. *International Journal of Information Management*, 17(6), 451-464. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0268-4012\(97\)00027-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0268-4012(97)00027-3)
- Lieberman, M. B., & Montgomery, D. B. (1988). First-mover advantages. *Strategic management journal*, 9(S1), 41-58. <https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.4250090706>
- Linden, A., & Fenn, J. (2003). Understanding Gartner's hype cycles. Strategic Analysis Report N R-20-1971. Gartner Inc, 88. Retrieved from <http://www.ask-force.org/web/Discourse/Linden-HypeCycle-2003.pdf>
- Malerba F. (2007) Innovation and the evolution of industries. In U. Cantner & F. Malerba (Eds.), *Innovation, Industrial Dynamics and Structural Transformation* (pp.7–27). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-540-49465-2_2
- Merron, K. (1993). Let's bury the term 'resistance'. *Organisation Development Journal*, 11(4), 77-86. Retrieved from <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1994-23624-001>
- Midwinter, J. (2021, January 12). What is the difference between executive search and contingent recruitment? SRG Talent. <https://www.srgtalent.com/blog/what-is-the-difference-between-executive-search-and-alternative-recruitment-solutions>
- Muzio, D., Hodgson, D., Faulconbridge, J., Beaverstock, J., & Hall, S. (2011). Towards corporate professionalization: The case of project management, management consultancy and executive search. *Current Sociology*, 59(4), 443-464. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392111402587>
- Oreg, S. (2006). Personality, context, and resistance to organisational change. *European journal of work and organisational psychology*, 15(1), 73-101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13594320500451247>
- Piderit, S. K. (2000). Rethinking resistance and recognising ambivalence: A multidimensional view of attitudes toward an organisational change. *Academy of management review*, 25(4), 783-794. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2000.3707722>
- Potter, S. (2020, April 13). Artificial Intelligence is going to revolutionize the executive search world. Brink News. Retrieved from <https://www.brinknews.com/how-artificial-intelligence-is-poised-to-shake-up-the-executive-search-world-jobs-recruitment/>

- Price, B. (2002). Laddered questions and qualitative data research interviews. *Journal of advanced nursing*, 37(3), 273-281. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.2002.02086.x>
- Robertson, P. J., Roberts, D. R., & Porras, J. I. (1993). Dynamics of planned organisational change: Assessing empirical support for a theoretical model. *Academy of Management Journal*, 36(3), 619-634. <https://doi.org/10.5465/256595>
- Ross, L. (2009). A strategic approach to disruptive technologies. Chartered Institute of Management Accountants. *Advance online publication*. Retrieved from https://www.cimaglobal.com/Documents/ImportedDocuments/cid_dispap_strategic_approach_disruptive_technologies_nov09.pdf
- Seitz, S. (2016). Pixilated partnerships, overcoming obstacles in qualitative interviews via Skype: A research note. *Qualitative Research*, 16(2), 229-235. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794115577011>
- Ströh, U. (2007). Relationships and participation: A complexity science approach to change communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 1(2), 123-137. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15531180701298916>
- Sullivan, J. R. (2012). Skype: An appropriate method of data collection for qualitative interviews?. *The Hilltop Review*, 6(1), 54-60. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/hilltopreview/vol6/iss1/10>
- Thamm, A. (2021). The five elements of AI to leverage data and dominate your industry. In V. Nestle, P. Glauner & P. Plugmann (Eds.), *Creating innovation spaces* (pp. 235-258). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-57642-4_18
- Tienari, J., Meriläinen, S., Holgersson, C., & Bendl, R. (2013). And then there are none: on the exclusion of women in processes of executive search. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 28(1), 43-62. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17542411311301565>
- Tracy, S. J., & Hinrichs, M. M. (2017). Phronetic iterative data analysis. *The international encyclopedia of communication research methods*, 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118901731.iecrm0187>
- Van de Ven, A. H. (2018). Academic-practitioner engaged scholarship. *Information and organisation*, 28(1), 37-43. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.infoandorg.2018.02.002>
- Visagie, C. M., & Steyn, C. (2011). Organisational commitment and responses to planned organisational change: An exploratory study. *Southern African Business*

Review, 15(3), 98-121. Retrieved from

<https://journals.co.za/doi/pdf/10.10520/EJC92934>

Wineburg, S. S. (1987). The self-fulfillment of the self-fulfilling prophecy. *Educational Researcher*, 16(9), 28-37. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X016009028>

Zerfass, A., Verčič, D., Nothhaft, H., & Werder, K. P. (2018). Strategic communication: Defining the field and its contribution to research and practice. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(4), 487-505.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2018.1493485>

8. Appendix

8.1. Appendix 1: Interview Guide: ES Organisations

1. Could you tell me a bit about yourself and your role within your organisation?

2. When was the first time you heard about Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the Executive Search (ES) industry?

3. How do you see the role of AI in your industry?

4. Generally speaking, how do you feel about AI being implemented in your industry?

1. Do you have experience with AI within your organisation from a communication's perspective?

a. Internal

b. And external (e.g. types of communication activities that your organisation is engaging in)

c. Currently, how much do you communicate about AI in your organisation?

2. How does the amount of communication about AI differ to e.g. 5 years ago?

3. Currently, how important is AI to your organisation?

a. Do you see this change in the future? In what way(s)?

4. When did you first start to communicate about AI in your organisation (if at all)?

a. How did that start?

5. How do you experience the presence and communication of AI in your organisation?

a. Do you feel like it should be more / less?

b. Do you feel like you understand what AI has to offer to the ES industry?

6. How do the rest of the employees of your organisation experience AI, in your opinion?

a. Have you received/asked for feedback?

7. If you think about the future of AI in the ES industry (for example in 5 years) – where do you see your organisation in relationship to AI?

1. Do you think your organisation is ‘flexible’ when it comes to change in the industry?

2. Is change usually easily accepted by fellow employees?

a. How is this usually communicated?

3. How do you think your organisation is handling the AI-related change in the ES industry?

4. How do you think the rest of the employees feel regarding the (possible) implementation of AI in your organisation?

5. Are there any feedback rounds regarding the AI-related change in your organisation?

a. If so, are these employees active participants?

6. Do you think you could / want to do anything differently?

a. If yes, why do you think that is not already happening today?

Is there something else you would like to talk about that has not been covered yet?

8.2. Appendix 2: Interview Guide: School

1. Could you tell me a bit about yourself and your role within your organisation?

2. How do you see the role of AI in today’s society?

3. How does a partnership between X school and your clients usually start?

a. Do you find companies to work with or is it the other way around?

4. On your website, it’s clear that you have worked with many different companies to enrol them in the world of AI.

- a. Is there usually a ‘typical profile’ of companies that would like to get classes from you?
- b. How does this profile look like (e.g. big/small, innovative/traditional, first encounter with AI/known with AI, etc.?)
- 5. When a company would like to get classes in AI from you, how AI-literate are they before the classes start?
 - a. Do you usually experience companies that are rather reluctant to AI or excited about AI?
- 6. What would you say is a company’s main goal of getting acquainted with AI?
 - a. To sound ‘sexy’ to their clients?
 - b. To learn more about AI to implement it in their business strategies?
 - c. To have more common knowledge?
- 7. Which type of classes are most popular by organisations?
 - a. Why?
- 8. Do you think your ‘clients’ are implementing your classes in their day-to-day business / communication strategies?
 - a. Why (not)?
- 9. After you have worked with a company, do they usually communicate about your partnership on their (social) media platforms?
 - a. Why (not)?

Is there something else you would like to talk about that has not been covered yet?