How Do Employees Make Sense Of The Communication Challenges In Their Engagement During The Pandemic?

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Abstract

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The pandemic forced organizations to adopt a remote working mode which changed people's working locations and communication methods from face-to-face to online. This qualitative study has utilized an in-depth interview method to research on how the employees perceive the communication challenges and their engagement during the remote working in the pandemic from a theoretical lens of sensemaking. The interviewees work in Sweden and have presented different perceptions and engagement situations owing to various factors including the job-related personal attributes. In their sensemaking processes, the employees' perspectives have been provided compared to the previous management-centered research showing that lack of efficient and transparent internal communication reduced the emotional ties between employees and organizations. However, passion and loyalty could be less related to the format of online communication but more relevant to the employees' personal attributes. This study has put the employees' voice into the limelight in contrast to the traditional managerial-centered approach. The study ends with recommendations with the conclusion of the role of internal communication in employees' sensemaking of the challenges during the pandemic remote working.

Keyword: Employee Engagement, Internal Communication Challenges, Pandemic, Remote Working, Sensemaking, Online Communication

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1. Introduction

Based on the data gathered from the global top firms, Harvard Business Review concluded that 71% of people support the opinion that effective employee engagement is vital to each organizations' success (Kaliannan & Adjovu, 2015). However, according to a Gallup Management Journal report, nearly 70% of employees worldwide are actively disengaged (Mann & Harter, 2016). Huckerby (2002) found from the UK suggesting that up to 83% of employees are not truly engaged in the organization, 63% of whom are less engaged, and one fifth are totally disengaged. Disengagement could lead to multiple negative outcomes for the organization (James, & M. Ronald, 2015) and is one of the biggest threats facing businesses (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009). Therefore, employee engagement is of great importance for organizations to urge organizational performance. At the same time, since the outbreak of Covid-19, working from home has been the new norm of millions of workers in the EU and worldwide according to a report by the Joint Research Center of the European Commission (Milasi et al., 2020). Over half of the workers that began working from home since the pandemic have no prior experience of remote working or teleworking in many European countries (ibid.).

The Covid-19 worsened the engagement situation because it has caused various challenges and changes as is explained as follows. The pandemic crisis has striked global economy worldwide in 2020 and has brought great challenges to both individuals' lives in line with a significant rise in the unemployment rate and organizational operations, management styles and workplace modifications (Li et al., 2021; Centers for Disease & Control Prevention, 2020). This pandemic crisis is not only an external one for organizations but also an internal one. It extended the distance amongst an organization, supervisors and employees (Karranges et al., 2015) and challenged the productivity, the relationships between the employees and the organizations, and the employees' work model from office work to remote working (Wang et al., 2020).These challenges and changes have brought up uncertainties of development and require action to be taken.

1.1 Problem Statement

Employee engagement, defined as a positive, fulfilling and mindset related to work, can produce a series of benefits such as reduction in hiring and retention costs, increase in productivity, improving organizational public image & reputation, as well as increased financial returns (Welch, 2011; Schaufeli et al., 2002; Kaliannan & Adjovu, 2015). The current conceptualization of employee engagement is mostly studied from a managerial perspective and a functionalist approach centering around management which implicates that employee engagement can be intervened and affected through management and communication practices (Welch, 2011; Karanges, Johnston, Beatson & Lings, 2015; Yadav & Morya, 2019). Heide and Simonsson (2018) stated the limitations of the management-centered perspective in employee engagement and proposed another coworker-perspective which sourced from the "communication constitutes organization" (CCO). Previous research on employee engagement has been mainly focusing on role performances and instrumental perspectives (Lemon, 2019), which potentially prevents an in-depth understanding of this phenomenon. It is also of great importance to have a deeper glance at different aspects within the organization that can exert influence on the level of employee engagement. A missing part of employees is recognized in the process of engagement since the current focus is mostly on the engagement outcome (Hallahan, 2015; Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015; Heide & Simonsson, 2018). The organizational success is more than brand equity, percentage of market shares, increase in revenue but the true impetus comes from the employees (Kaliannan & Adjovu, 2015). Other than the missing studies of the employees' roles, voices and perspectives especially in turbulent times (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018) Kaliannan & Adjovu (2015) mentioned that it seems that the engagement situation is considered absolute positive and the employees are committed instead of being just satisfied.

As mentioned above, the pandemic crisis has worsened the environment of employee engagement and also brought uncertainties to the organizations. Organizations have to make adaptations to the crisis situation, such as improving internal functioning methods, adjusting strategies to manage the workforce, etc (APQC (American Productivity & Quality Center), 2020). These changes are unplanned for both organizations and employees. Under the remote working mode in the crisis, employees may come across poor engagement including a lack of interest in communication, poor attendance at online meetings, negative attitude towards work,

conflicts between clients, and fewer follow-through projects.[1] The astonishing percentage of missing employee engagement at normal times given by Gallup in combination with the newly posed challenges of remote working caused by the pandemic crisis context, shows the importance for organizations to find measures to deal with this unplanned change to maintain and even improve employee engagement. I argue that based on the above reasons, listening to the voice of employees is important to get an overview and an organic understanding of their perceptions. Thus, this study aims to explore and contribute to the employees' perceptions of employee engagement from the internal communication perspective.

Communication between employees and organizations has been an underlying factor related to employee engagement (Kahn, 1992) and a hot topic in terms of dealing with organizational changes although the research context may not be under a global pandemic crisis previously. MacLeod and Clarke (2009) highlight communication as being critically important to enhance performance via employee engagement. Employee engagement has been researched in academia in connection with the communication studies, including the strategic internal communication (O'Neill et al., 2015; MacLeod & Clarke, 2009; Seijts & Crim, 2006) and internal crisis communication (Johansen et al., 2012; Van der Meer et al., 2017). *Gallup Management Journal*'s findings include that employee engagement is less influenced by macro-economic conditions but is most likely affected by unique elements of work experiences. Closely related to the work experiences, strategic internal communication has been recognized recently as a key driver of employee engagement amongst others (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009; Seijts & Crim, 2006) and has been used to achieve optimized engagement to ensure that employees feel belonging to the internal community (Karanges et al., 2015). It is one way to connect organizations and employees (Towers Watson, 2010). Managers and research practitioners usually take actions to keep good employee-organization relationships and engage employees which is a common mechanism in the strategic internal communication (Li et al., 2021). However, the strategic internal communication's role has not been clarified during the process of helping the employees to manage the unexpected change (Yue et al., 2019), especially from the perspective of employees under such a pandemic crisis situation (Li et al., 2021).

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[1] https://www.tinypulse.com/blog/10-ways-to-engage-remote-employees-during-a-crisis

The thesis study is conducted in Sweden. From the practical perspective, Swedish organizations are experiencing the remote working mode recommended by the government which lasted from September 2020 until the end of May of 2021. Multiple aspects of the Swedish lifestyle have been changed in various organizations, such as social distancing, working from home, etc. (Government Services for Businesses, 2021). Therefore, conducting the study in Sweden can test how the crisis influenced the employees' perception of the engagement as well as the internal communication challenges. Employees from companies who have not widely implemented remote working before the pandemic and are experiencing the remote working mode now will be selected.

1.2 Aim and Purpose

Employee engagement is a surging topic in the industry and academia of organizational communication. However, the employees' perspectives have been overlooked for a long time although the employees take an important role in organizations. It's of great importance to research employee engagement from the point of view of employees. What's more, under the remote working mode during the pandemic, internal communication in organizations faced challenges in various aspects, which influenced employee engagement. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis study is twofold. The first aim is to identify and analyze how the remote working mode during the pandemic brought up the internal communication challenges. The second aim is to see how the employees make sense of the challenges and how their engagement with the organization got influenced.

The aim of this study includes contributing to the existing research from the perspective of employees with the qualitative methods, considering the fact that previous research dominantly adopts the managerial perspective (Heide & Simonsson, 2018) and mostly with quantitative methods. This study aims to bring the whole process of how the employees make sense of the uncertain situations under the remote working mode during the pandemic using sensemaking theory and qualitative research methods. In addition, the relationship between the internal communication challenges and the employee engagement is aimed to unfold.

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The employees' perceptions of their engagement could be meaningful provided by some empirical data through this study. It is hoped to provide some insights of the employees' voices and opinions to a certain extent about the engagement with their organizations.

The research questions are as the following:

- *How is the internal communication influenced by remote working during the pandemic?How do employees make sense of internal communication challenges?*

- *How is the employees' engagement influenced by the pandemic crisis context?How do employees make sense of their engagement with the organization?*

1.3 Relevance to the field of Strategic Communication

Contemporary research sees strategies as a practice where all people work strategically. From this perspective, the strategic outcomes' fundamentals all get covered including the interpretation and sensemaking of the strategy by employees, micro actions and activities in organizational everyday life (Marchiori & Bulgacov, 2015). Strategic communication as a relatively newer term is "the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission" according to Falkheim & Heide (2018, p. vii). Falkheim & Heide (2018) stated their opinion of strategic communication as how organizations reach their goals, in particular the long-term ones. Zerfass et al. (2018) defined that the field of strategic communication as that encompasses all communication substantial for the survival and sustaining success of an organization. The traditional understanding of strategic communication has been explicitly focusing on the niche of communication and various relevant activities; now more seen from a holistic overview of communication which creates and provides the conditions for an organization's existence (Falkheimer and Heide, 2018). Therefore, there is a shift to viewing organizations as communication from entities of communication (Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015; Falkheimer and Heide, 2018).

Strategic communication embraces various aspects including public relations, organizational communication and marketing communication which are integrated into the one framework (Falkheimer and Heide, 2018). Organizational communication is characterized in three aspects: a

complex environment which both influences and is influenced by internal and external environments; involving messages and their flow, direction, and medium; involving human beings and their attitudes, emotions, relationships and skills (ibid.). One aspect of the value of this study is to research the internal communication and actions towards the organization from the perspective of employees during the changing external pandemic environment.

Strategic communication includes communication that helps organizations to reach set goals in all forms and levels of communication, both internal and external, both formal and informal, both higher level in the management and at the bottom level in the employees (ibid.). Considering the aim of this study, sending feedback of employees' voice is an important part and hopefully contributes to the organizational strategic communication.

1.4 Disposition

This research aims to study how the employees regard the internal communication challenges under the remote working mode and how they make sense of the situations of the employee engagement influenced by the remote working mode in this pandemic crisis and. This study is divided into six chapters. It starts with the introduction, followed by the literature review part reviewing the previous literature of two important fields of internal communication challenges and the employee engagement. The third chapter is named the theoretical framework consisting of the sensemaking theory. Then the fourth chapter on the research methodology covering the research approach and the design. The fifth one is about the findings and analysis of the research in combination with the sensemaking theory and the literature review, followed by the discussion and conclusion, including a model illustrating the observations.

1.5 Delimitation

The results of this study may not be true of the other parts of the world since particular organizational cultures could influence people's thinking ways (Wang et al., 2021). Sweden is one of the Scandinavian countries where the concept of "co-workership " has become increasingly prominent and highlighted in the workplace (Kilhammar, & Ellström, 2015) compared to more hierarchical structure in China (Wang et al., 2021). Co-workership is associated with being responsible, higher extent of employee engagement, participation, and

influence and can be regarded as an extension of the Nordic tradition of workplace democracy (Kilhammar, & Ellström, 2015). Under such high workplace democracy, employees' general engagement level might be higher to different extent. Therefore, the internal communication background may be provided at a more employee-friendly or coworker-friendly workplace atmosphere. The results of this study cannot be generalized statistically to the other research contexts. However, the Covid-19 pandemic crisis has striked in a global range, causing similar challenges in the working mode modification and internal communication. The study conducted in Sweden can also reflect the challenges brought by the pandemic crisis.

In addition, this study takes the perceptions of the employees and their sensemaking processes, therefore excluding the opinions of and sensemaking processes of the managerial groups, who are also important compositions to be taken into consideration during the pandemic context.

2. Literature review

This chapter aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the researched literature within the field of internal communication together with the current state of employee engagement research. Firstly, there is a series of definitions and the core compositions of employee engagement so that a better understanding of this concept can be achieved. Following this, an insight into the current state of research on internal communication under crisis context is provided. Lastly, a synthesis is conducted at the end of this chapter.

2.1 Employee Engagement

Engagement is a concept that has been widely used in various fields of studies, such as management, public relations and organizational communication. Johnson & Taylor (2018) stated that the concept is still underdeveloped despite its importance and wide interest. They published the book which mentioned three themes emphasizing the natures of being social and relational, being dynamic and iterative, being cognitive, affective and behavioral (ibid.). After the exploration of the concept of engagement, how employees perceive the job and their engagement with the organization they work for come to the spotlight. This is where the term of employee engagement comes in this thesis study. Employee engagement has long been overlooked despite the popularity and importance and has come to the attention of scholars and practitioners as an essential element of organizational success until recent years (Gallup, 2012; O'Neill et al., 2015) . It is one of the challengers for business leaders across the globe (Men et al., 2020). Before diving into the influencing factors and measurement, it is important to have the overview of the definitions of this concept.

2.1.1 Definitions and Benefits

There is not a single agreed definition of the concept of employee engagement. As the academic parent of the first wave of employee engagement, Kahn (1990) explained the concept as "how people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during the role

performance" (p. 694). Kahn stated that employee engagement is a three-component construct made up of emotional, cognitive and physical aspects associated with dedication, absorption and vigour (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004; Welch, 2011). According to Schaufeli et al., (2006), vigor is characterized by a high level of energy and mental elasity towards working, willingness to invest efforts in work and persistence when facing difficulties. Dedication means to be highly involved in the work and have the sense of achievement, passion and pride as well as challenges. Absorption refers to being fully concentrating and absorbed in working. Kahn's (1990) three psychological conditions necessary for engagement (meaningfulness, safety and availability) are integrated into the model as well. Here are the detailed explanations of the three aspects. Physical expression is about the physical energies to be spent for the work responsibilities. Cognitive expression relates to how employees think of the management and the workplace. Emotional expressional is relevant to how employees feel about the workplace and employer including the positive and negative attitudes (Men et al., 2020; , 1990). Mone and London (2010) defined employee engagement as a condition where employees feel involved, committed, passionate and empowered and show these feelings into the work performance. Ewing et al. (2019) concluded after an investigation with 27 senior internal communication managers that employee engagement is that employees connecting to the organizational values and missions feel empowered, showing energies, passion and efforts to the job and advocating for it. Although the above definitions are covering different aspects, there are main common focuses which can be concluded, that is three aspects of how employees respond to the work roles physically, cognitively and emotionally. There are also some more definitions of this concept which proceed to focus on the connection between employee engagement and role performance at the workplace as well as its importance to the organization (Lemon, 2019; Men, 2012; Shen and Jiang, 2019).

There are related concepts used widely such as "job engagement" "work engagement" and organizational engagement (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). Schaufeli and Bakker considered job engagement in the context of organizational behavior and defined it as a positive, satisfying, work-related state of mind, which is portrayed by vigor, dedication, and absorption. Organizational engagement as a corporate concept describes employees' psychological presence in their organization (Akingbola & van den Berg, 2017). In this study, the definition of employee engagement leans toward the one from MacLeod and Clarke (2009) "A workplace approach

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designed to ensure that employees are committed to their organisation's goals and values, motivated to contribute to organisational success, and are able at the same time to enhance their own sense of well-being."

The benefits of employee engagement to organizations have been shown clearly based on industrial and academic studies (Men et al., 2020; Nink, 2015; Gallup, 2018). Employee engagement has been associated with ensuring economic growth and implies less frequent absenteeism, less fluctuation as well as stronger relationships between employees and organizations (Nink, 2015; Gallup, 2018). According to Robinson et al. (2004), engaged employees are aware of the business context and work collaboratively to improve the job performance for the benefit of the organization. Engagement can drive a great part of the intangible assets of organizations that create 80% of market value today (Wellins et al., 2005), such as organizational productivity, workplace relationship and so on (Pfannenberg & Zefa, 2004; Lemon, 2019).

2.1.2 Influencing Factors

There are many variables which contribute to promoting employee engagement, such as career development, recognition, rewards, job satisfaction, work meaningfulness, adequate resources, whether or not in alignment with the organizational values, work challenging level and so on (Kahn, 1990). Macleod and Clarke (2009) described 4 enablers of employee engagement: strategic narrative, engaging managers, integrity and employee voice. As mentioned before, employee voice is one of the key enablers of employee engagement and therefore should be more listened to by the management (Bridger, 2015). It is so during the normal and yet continuously changing business environment. Keating and Heslin (2015) put forward a job demand-resources model under which job demands are seen as deterrents to employee engagement and job resources as enhancers of employee engagement. The resources include autonomy, task variety, task significance, feedback, social support, transformational leadership and continuous training. There are some others such as high job security, extensive benefit packages, and career development opportunities.

Internal Communication for Engagement

There is a strong effect of internal communication on employee engagement according to several researchers (Chong, 2007; Welch & Jackson, 2007; Bedarkar & Pandita, 2014)). For example, "good communication" is believed to improve the engagement which "poor communication" hinders (Bedarkar & Pandita, 2014). They see internal communication as a practice that can effectively transport the organizational values to all employees which in turn obtain their support in achieving the organizational goals.

Internal communication within organizations is seen as something that happens between managers and employees, which is a dominating view in the literature of internal communication (Mishra et al., 2014). Welch and Jackson (2017) argue that internal communication displays management's ability to produce the relationship between internal stakeholders in an organization. Transparent communication could lead to various positive organizational outcomes such as employee trust (DiStaso & Bortree, 2012; Rawlins, 2009) and employee-organization relationships (Men & Stacks, 2014). Supervisor-employee relationship is responsible for the development of the organization-employee relationship and in turn influences employees' job life and the degree of their willingness to reciprocate favorable exchanges via engagement (Karranges et al., 2015).

There is also some previous research arguing that online communication and interactions are more inclined to have group characteristics that display the social identification instead of individual ones (Van Den Hooff, 2017; Millward et al., 2007). Millward et al. (2007) concluded that online or virtual communication does not reduce the engagement and that the remote employees' identification changed from the individual to the groupwise with engaged participation.

Organizational identification

Organizational identification has been recognized as having unique value in explaining employee engagement. Generated by social identity theory, it focuses on a sense of connection between the organization and the employee's understanding of their own values and attributes. It is demonstrated that the positive impact of organizational identification on employee organizational outcomes, such as cooperation, participation (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008), organizational commitment (Gupta, 2017; Riketta, 2005), work engagement and job satisfaction

(Karanika-Murray et al., 2015). When employees identify themselves with the organizations and have a strong bonding connection with the organizations, they are highly engaged in work, are energized and dedicated to their job, internalize the organizational mission & vision, adopt the regulations (Cheney, 2011; Karanika-Murray et al., 2015).

Organizational Culture

Cheney et al. (2008) opined that the organizational culture as a system of meaning is dynamic embedded in and expressed by patterns and habits. It helps communities to make sense of themselves and the surroundings while simultaneously being informed and shaped by the sensemaking activities. Certain organizational cultural aspects such as trust, flatter structural hierarchies as well as leadership as role models can bring up higher levels of employee engagement (Sievert and Scholz, 2017). Mishra and Mohanty (2016) also opined that employees show a higher level of engagement in the context of organizational culture portraying mutual trust, connectedness, integrity and opportunities of individual development. Workplace flexibility could enhance shared responsibility (Sekhar et al. 2016), which is a feature of job engagement. Research has also been conducted on workspace flexibility and job engagement (Richman et al. 2008; Anderson and Kelliher 2009; Ugargol and Patrick 2018). These researches concur that flexible work arrangement positively influences job engagement. Flexibility in this context is described in terms of time, place, work-sharing and career breaks. Anderson and Kelliher (2009) however concluded that flexible working has an impact on employee job engagement through a positive relationship with organizational commitment, job satisfaction and employee discretionary behavior. Besides flexibility, employees also enjoy the type of organizational environment with recognition, fairness, support, innovation, pressure, trust, autonomy and cohesiveness (Lee and Ok, 2015).

Personal attributes

Scholars have suggested that there is a relation between employee engagement and personal attributes as well as the organizational work contexts and human resources management practices (Oluwatayo & Adetoro, 2020). However, organizations were found difficult to modify personal factors because they could only consider factors within the control of organizations.

Such consideration is understandable but also implies that personal attributes should also be taken into account in this thesis study in terms of employee engagement.

Kahn (1990) mentioned five conditions that should be in place for employees to realize a full engagement in their role. First, they need to be provided with all needed for the carried tasks. Second, they need to have opportunities to practice and improve on the skills. Third, they need to be persuaded that they are part of some significant work together with their colleagues. Fourth, they need to know the job expectations. Fifth, they need to have a sense of fulfillment in the job. The above listed conditions showcased that employees' engagement also signals individual characteristics and working environment by the organizations besides the job characteristics (Lee and Ok 2015). Lee and Ok (2015) suggested that employees with positive self-appraisal are more likely to also positively appraise the workplace environment, leading to engagement. Self-appraisal is used to describe a person who holds about their worth, capability, and the performance at the role with locus of control, self-efficacy, self-esteem and emotional stability. Personal characteristics such as self-efficacy, organization-based self-esteem, and optimism are also considered resources impacting on the level of control an individual has on the environment and therefore job engagement (Oluwatayo & Adetoro, 2020).

2.2 Internal communication Challenges During the Pandemic

Considering the wide knowledge of the meaning of internal communication, it is less discussed about the importance of internal communication but more about the traditional perspectives of internal communication, the challenges and barriers in the internal communication practice, especially in the remote working mode under the Covid-19 pandemic context. In the next subsection, the synthesis of internal communication and employee engagement is discussed.

Internal communication is one of the growing specialties in public relations and refers to the organization-employee communication that can help create trust (Mishra et al., 2014; Thomas et al., 2009), knowledge and understanding, relationship building (Welch, 2012) and engagement (Ewing et al., 2019). Welch and Jackson (2007) strengthened effective internal communication as crucial for organizational success because of its impact on strategic managers' abilities to engage employees and achieve organizational goals. Welch (2011) clarified the four dimensions of

internal communication, corporate communication, internal line manager communication, internal team communication, and internal project peer communication.

Robson & Tourish (2005) identified barriers to effective internal communication practices. There are problems related to how much information people need, problems with the sources they receive, the channels through which information is transmitted and how much information is in turn sent by most organisational members. They state that there are problems related to the amount, the sources, the channels and the receiving information back and that these issues should be considered in the internal communication research. They also found that managers' unwillingness to investigate their communication practices and their low awareness of the communication form key obstacles to the development of communications policies.

It is also much needed to see how the complex environment can impact the communication process (Philip, 2002). The research above on some difficulties resulting in communication problems didn't consider a context of unexpected change, even crisis context. More information on internal communication development is needed as it is often a problematic issue in organizations. During the Covid-19, many organizations have been experiencing communication challenges due to the dramatically changing business environment. Related research on the internal communication challenges have been made. Orangefiery (2020a) conducted a survey to investigate employees' perspectives of what needs for communication is needed : (1) transparency about what they know and do not know (2) information about the resources for emotional and mental to deal with the stress and anxiety (3) stronger acknowledgement of the difficult situation. Orangefiery (2020b) put forward some suggestions that organizational leaders can take to enhance communication such as showing empathy for subordinates, showing genuine care to employees and being available to help and lead. Li et al. (2021) explored a certain mechanism in which strategic internal communication works to facilitate employees' coping with organizational unplanned change events. Li et al. argues that such a mechanism can help organizations to have a better understanding and communication with employees and promote effective coping among them based on the theory of uncertainty management and transaction theory of stressing and coping, which is more inclined to the psychological way.

In relation to remote working, some more specific research on communication has been made. Wang et al. (2020) conducted a quantitative research on exploring the major challenges remote

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workers were struggling (work-home interference, ineffective communication, procrastination, and loneliness) in the crisis context, verifying how the characteristics of the remote working (social support, job autonomy, monitoring, and workload) shaped the challenges in the pandemic context in China based on the Kahn's definition of employee engagement. Li et al. (2021) researched the role of transparent internal communication from the process of how employees cope with organizational unplanned change under the Covid-19 crisis context. Bartsch et al. (2020) focused on leadership during the Covid-19 crisis-induced digital transformation of the working environment, specifically leading service employees.

2.2.1 Internal Communication From the Perspective of Employees

Previous research on communication within organizations has been extensively targeting management(Quirke 1996, Van Vuuren et al. 2006, Barrett, 2006), supervisor and teams (Thomas et al., 2009, Alleyne et al. 2005, Thomson & Hecker 2000, Barrett 2006 and Smythe 1996) but sparse attention was given to the employee perspective. As early as in 1938, Barnard has put forward the statement that the first and foremost function of the executive is to develop and maintain communications, which reflected that communication's important role in organizations. The ongoing external business changes both complicated and competitive, could "put pressure on today's employees and create the need for a more coordinated approach to employee communications" (Argenti, 1998, p. 199). Therefore, in order to deal with these changes, his research based on the board from over 200 companies showed that effective communication ought to include morale, a positive relationship between employees and management, coordinated communication about changes, employee care and a shared understanding of the organization's goals and culture (Troy, 1988). The previous one-way communication is being replaced by two-way communication or interactions. Smith & Mounter (2005) argue that the conventional model of communication favoured by many organizations is top-down. Under such management-centered research, many public relations literature focus on internal communication as a tool to realize organizational information transmission that can result in employee obedience. (Gill, 2015; Karanges, Beatson, Johnston, & Lings, 2014; Mishra, Boynton, & Mishra, 2014). Therefore, it is not surprising that employee engagement still resides in the functionalist perspective which has been the focus of recent foundational literature (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Taylor, 2018). It is worth researching employee perceptions about the internal

communication in an organization as Pollitt & Brow (2008), Goudge (2006) and Smythe (2008) highlight its importance. Employee perceptions provide a lot of insight for internal communication development. Goudge (2006, p. 15) states that employee research could help to demonstrate that senior managers regard employees as contributing to the planning process and that the management is concerned about solving problems raised by employees. Pollitt & Brow (2008) found that most successful companies highly value the employees through listening to them and incorporating their opinions and suggestions into the management policy.

2.2.2 Social Interactions Within Organizations

The importance of interactive communication to employee engagement has been explored although the dominant perspective regards communication as transmission of information and one driving factor of employee engagement (Welch & Jackson, 2007). The emphasis on interaction has been missing and the social dynamic relationship has been limited to between managers and employees (ibid.). Social interactions are playing a key role during how people reach their understanding and collaborations with others (Pearce, 2007). Pearce (2007) also said that informal communication is the process of building social worlds, facilitating mutual trust and competent practices instead of the pure information transmission amongst employees.

Similarly, Heide and Simonsson (2018) proposed an alternative grounded in the CCO approach that presumes that it is in communication and interaction that organizational worlds are produced and reproduced (Putnam & Nicotera, 2009). In other words, CCO perspective views organizations are being communicated with communication as a tool. Their forwarding has provided a different view on communication, interaction, engagement and their relations. CCO approach regards engagement as a product of social and interactive sensemaking processes and where the co-workers are communicators or conversation partners. In this regard, the CCO approach has put much emphasis on the role and importance of co-workers' communication and interaction.

2.3 The context of change

Change is in the central part of the organizational management and behavior and can take many forms as planned and unplanned, incremental or radical, recurrent and unprecedented (Cooper and Argyris, 1998). Unplanned change is often imposed by unexpected external forces rather

than proactively initiated by the organization itself (Li et al., 2021). A problematic situation could cause such unplanned change and disrupt organizations' operations (Shaw, 2018). The main goal of such unplanned and unexpected change is to minimize negative effects and transform such crises or situations into an opportunity for development (ibid. Shaw, 2018). In this study, the challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic crisis are the external factors that forced the organizations to partially or fully adopt the remote working mode, which is changing the previous office communication from face-to-face to online format. The organizational stakeholders, especially employees, face difficulties, uncertainties and challenges by such unplanned change together with the new working patterns(Rafferty & Griffin, 2006). It has been mentioned before that such changes are posing complexities to the communication and the employee engagement.

2.4 Synthesis

The relationship between employee engagement and internal communication is important based on which research is important to be conducted on how employees perceive such challenges during the pandemic with a meaning-making approach.

There is a clear connection between the communication field and employee engagement. Internal communication has been a driver for engaging employees. With effective communication, organizations can experience less turnover and resistance, more understanding, and an increased level of employee commitment and engagement (Goodman & Truss, 2006). Baumruk et al. (2006) put forward five steps to increasing engagement of which the fifth step is communication that includes frequent and regular conversations to interact with each other and share information, feedback and opinions. Welch (2011) also stressed that effective internal corporate communication can promote employee engagement by achieving the organizational outcomes including innovation, competitiveness and organisational effectiveness. Internal communication is a part of the organisational context where engagement behavior (or disengagement) occurs (Welch, 2011; Bakker et al., 2011; MacLeod and Clarke, 2009). It is an organisational practice with the potential to effectively transmit the organizational values to all employees, and involve them with the organizational goals. Well-designed internal communication programmes are an important factor to engender employee engagement (Papalexandris and Galanaki, 2009). Senior

management communication and open, effective communication strategies are recognised as having a crucial role in the development of positive employee engagement (Bakker et al., 2011).

There is some other research proving that internal communication could indirectly influence the overall attitudes of employees towards their organizations. Research by Welsch and La Van (1981) found that communication was an influencing factor in the general organizational climate which links between individuals and the organization. Communication was also one of five variables Welsch and La Van (1981) introduced and they found that communication affected employees' overall feelings towards their organizations.

There is also academic research on how to engender engagement from the perspective of internal communication. The internal communication is closely relevant to employee satisfaction and employee-organization relationships as well as the corporate cultural environment (Sievert and Scholz, 2017). Optimized engagement can be achieved via internal communication which ensures that employees feel belonging to the internal community (Karanges et al., 2015). Internal communication tools like enterprise softwares are used to provide convenient platforms for employees to engage with the company and the decision-making process via sharing information and knowledge besides building connections (Verghese, 2012). The use of internal social media can foster stronger employee engagement based on a minimum extent of trust (Sievert and Scholz, 2017). Karanges et al. also put forward the suggestions on internal communication strategies including that more discussions, interactions, and workplace relationships should be encouraged to create an optimized engagement.

However, it remains unclear how the new remote working mode influences the employees' engagement and how they perceive the internal communication challenges brought by the new crisis context which could affect their engagement. In this study, the employee engagement will be investigated from the point of view of employees in the interview according to the compositions of employee engagement, the physical, cognitive, emotional aspects. The internal communication challenges are to be found accordingly.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study takes the sensemaking theory into account to explore the perceptions of employees on employee engagement as well as the internal communication challenges brought about by the remote working in the pandemic crisis. Heide and Simonsson (2018) also encouraged researchers to investigate the meaning-making approach associated with employee engagement, through which the process of how employees construct, understand and make sense of the phenomenon can further the theory building and can generalize it theoretically.

3.1 Sensemaking theory

Sensemaking is a natural lens through which individuals and organizations make sense of some phenomenon, issues or challenges showing up in different situations. Sensemaking is understood as a socially constructed process with an ontological foundation on constructivism, which indicates the recognition of different and yet shared social realities. Remote working mode as a circumstance has turned into a continuing situation to be comprehended in words and to be served as a board to action (Weick et al., 2005). Considering the process of how employees perceive the internal communication challenges and engagement during the remote working mode under pandemic conditions, sensemaking theory fits well to in the context to help explain the active interpretation of certain realities by certain individuals to make sense of encountered situations (Van Vuuren and Elvin, 2008).

As the most arguably influential scholar in the sensemaking literature, Karl Weick connected the sensemaking to organizational studies and stressed that sensemaking is a process of "making the sense" (Weick, 1995, p. 4) and emphasized that this is a processual phenomenon to be continuously and constantly re-enacted. Generally, sensemaking is described as a process through which ambiguous and uncertain situations are interpreted for meaning and understanding realized by a dynamic process directed by social *cues* and enacted by the environment (Weick, 1995; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Choo, Ch. 3, 2007; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010).

3.2 The Processes of Sensemaking

Although there is no formal model for organizational sensemaking, Weick (1979) introduced the organizing sensemaking recipe which contains three main stages of sensemaking: environmental changes, enactment, selection, and enhancement. Klein et al. (2006) said that this is a motivated and continuous effort to understand intra-connections among people, places or events in order to predict their actions and react effectively. The discontinuity of some state of the environment including common understandings and routines created a change to be made sense of by a sensemaker or sensemakers (Weick, 1995). When such interruptions take place, individuals may find themselves in an ignorant state where they try to solve engaging in different processes. In the enactment stage, people actively construct their surrounding environment by the brackets, rearrangements and labels of various experiences in order to understand the new situation and adapt to it. Through taking action, people interact with interruption factors that caused the whole process. Next stage is the selection stage where people choose meanings to be posed onto the equivocal data and overwrite the past interpretations to the current situations, producing enacted environments which provide an explanation of what is going on. In the last stage of retention, organizations preserve the results of successful sensemaking (enacted or meaningful interpretations) so as to retrieve them in the future (Weick, 1995).

3.3. Sensemaking in Organizational Context

Up to now, the sensemaking process seems to be micro in an individual process in the organizational studies as a wider context. There are also four categories defined in sociology by Wiley, that are intersubjective, intersubjective, generic subjectivity and extra subjective (Wiley, 1988) whereas the first two belong to micro level and the last two are in macro level. Wiley (1988) argued that all levels are under ongoing change and there's always feedback back and forth amongst all four levels taking the example of organizational culture which form and influence the routines and norms within organizations.

Organizational sensemaking can be triggered by ecological change (Weick et al. 2005), which may take the form of organizational crises (Christianson et al. 2009), threats to identity (Petriglieri 2011) and planned change interventions (Mantere et al. 2012). Such factors imply the flow of events and new inputs surrounding participants (Weick et al., 2005). When

information is being interpreted in light of the existing organizations norms (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011), there may come into being expectation gaps that disrupt the continuity of collective organizational action. Then it proves that the current situation is perceived to be different from the expected state (Weick et al., 2005). This is where the need for the enactment of sensemaking is formed (Balogun and Johnson 2005).

The need for sensemaking in organizations is more obvious in situations that require shared understanding among relevant stakeholders for collective action (Weick, 1993). For the top management, sensemaking activities include environmental scanning and problem interpretation (Thomas et al., 1993), which is critical for organizational decision-making (Maitlis, 2005) and strategic change initiation (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). For the other organizational stakeholders, sensemaking affects how they perceive their organizational identity in the organizational adaptation (Pratt, 2000), respond to pressure and participate during the organizational change initiatives (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011).

Weick (1995) stated that organizational sensemaking can be driven by beliefs or by actions. In the belief processes, employees start from an initial set of clear and plausible beliefs and use them as nodes to connect more information into larger sets of meaning structures. Employees could use beliefs as expectations to guide their choice of plausible interpretations or may argue about beliefs and relevancy to the current situations. So is the case when the people's beliefs and cues of the environment are contradictory. In the action-driven processes of organizational sensemaking, employees start from their actions and grow their structures of meaning about the surrounding environment, modifying structures so as to give meaning to their actions. People may create meanings to justify their visible, deliberate and irreversible actions or to explain that their actions were taken in order to induce changes in the environment.

Constructions of reality are structured around pieces of information coming from the organizational environment (Olsen et al., 2020). Such information could have sources from organizational situations including narratives of past management decisions, operational occurrences and so on (ibid.). In the organizational studies literature, sensemaking scholars claim that individuals cope with equivocal events by constructing reasonings about those events (Weick 1995), that help them manage the ambiguities of change (Brown 1998).

In the organizational studies, sensemaking occurs in the organizations when the organizational members confront events, issues, and actions that are to a certain extent confusing and surprising, in particular as organizations address uncertain and ambiguous situations (Weick, 1995). The two types of sensemaking occasions common to the organizations are ambiguity and uncertainty. In terms of ambiguity, people get engaged in sensemaking owing to their confusion by many interpretations, whilst when facing uncertainty, people make sense since they have no interpretations (Weick, 1995). In the aggregate, sensemaking as a theoretical lens explains a process of how organizational members create situational awareness and understand the situations with high complexity or uncertainty so as to make decisions to enact (Jeong & Brower, 2008).

3.4 Communication's Role in Sensemaking

Weick et al. (2005) stated that sensemaking is a process of meaning-making involved with language, talks and communication when organizational situations and environments are talked into existence, which highlighted the role of communication in the sensemaking process. Madesen (2016) stated that sensemaking has become a social process where organizational coworkers share an understanding of a situation through communicating with each other.

In terms of internal communication, especially during an unexpected crisis environment, there are various changing situations in the organizations which could render that information to be collectively sensed and understood differently (Weick, 1988). Sensemaking emphasizes communication as a facilitator of meaning-making (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick, 1995), thereby emphasizing aspects of the change process itself and the interpretations they engender as a key factor in explaining employee engagement with strategic change. Georgia and Chittipeddi (1991) described the organizational change as a negotiation process where management needs to give new interpretations about the organization's change, suggesting that managers could generate the cues for sensemakers to use in their process of sensemaking. Such negotiation and generation processes are about internal communication. When managers communicate a new strategic organizational direction, employees also have a broader understanding of how and why the change happens (Barry and Elmes 1997). This helps employees' constructing change as a part of a broader coherent plan and not some partially planned movement by top managers. It

thus helps employees interpret the strategic direction as part of a broader narrative about how the organization will change (ibid.).

3.4 Employee Engagement in the Process of Sensemaking

Sensemaking is widely taken seriously in organizational life or even success. Besides, March (1984) argued that organizational life is about making decisions, coping with the environment as well as interpreting, fitting the history into the understanding of life. Such organizational life is both a process of employee engagement and also a process of sensemaking. Maitlis & Christianson (2014) also argued that organizational life is full of ambiguous and uncertain moments which require employees to make sense of. Johnston (2014) gave a definition of the engagement from the perspective of social construction and the communicative process of meaning-making. If this definition is placed into the employees' context, the complexity of the employee engagement can be more clearly understood. Johnston (2014) also stated that the engagement highlighted organizational power constructions and requirements, increasing the meaning of interacting with various stakeholder groups to arrive at new meanings and understanding (Johnston, 2014). Therefore, the result could be that engagement could make it possible to develop meaningful relationships with and within stakeholders (Kang, 2014).

3.5 Reflection

Through the above sections of sensemaking process, sensemaking in the organizational context, the relationship between sensemaking and communication as well as employee engagement, there is an overview of the theoretical foundation for this thesis study. Facing the continuously and jointly generated and exchanged meanings, employees share understandings and expectations within the organizational context from the relational perspective of organizing (Vogus et al., 2014).

The upcoming chapter presents the research design which includes the research paradigm, methods and the methodological considerations.

4. Methodology and Research Design

In this chapter, the aspects are explained that relate to the methods. It comprises 6 sections. First, the paradigm of the paper was presented, followed by the adopted research methods - in-depth interviews as a qualitative research method. Then, the sampling strategy and the inclusion criteria for the study participants were presented. Subsequently, how the research questions were designed and how the data were collected were emphasized. This was followed by validity and reliability as a reflexivity statement as well as the ethical considerations.

4.1 Research Paradigm

This study utilizes the sensemaking theory and seeks to identify the employees' perceptions on engagement and communication challenges which involve the social process. Therefore, the individual opinions, thoughts and experiences are of importance to answer the research questions. As such, the research paradigm social constructionism was applied in this thesis study. Social constructionism as the research paradigm embraces the understanding that there is no absolute reality or truth but rather about individuals' perceptions and sensitivity that constructed the past, the present, and the future in open-minded dialogues and workplace negotiation and networking scenarios (Berger & Luckmann, 1991).

There is quite a few research on employee engagement which adopted the positivist approach and regarded the engagement as facts, tring to seek for correlation of some factors via quantitative methods. Berger and Luckmann (1966) stated that reality is a social construction which implies that such societal reality with complex environments and long time of progressing are not stable facts to be found. This study views the nature and the existence of organizational social reality as relational and socially constructed through individuals' interpretation and social interactions thereby being open to investigation of people's beliefs, opinions, feelings and understandings and so on (Alvesson, 2002). For example, employees create meanings and make sense of the organizations to achieve some common understanding which could influence the future action. The adoption of sensemaking theory is embedded in emphasizing the social construction where people's reflection, action, and discourse is central to interpret and construct (Weick, 1995).

4.2 In-depth interviews

Silverman (2017) stated that qualitative research methods aim to understand the social interactions in various situations, people's perceptions or some special processes that the quantitative research methods could not fit. Taking into account the exploratory nature of the research questions of this thesis that is related to employees' personal perceptions of the internal communication challenges and the impact of remote working on employee engagement, a qualitative research method was utilized in this study. Since this research aims to achieve a sufficient depth of the information and knowledge on the perceptions and practices of participants, in-depth interviews can allow the author of the study to get a detailed and deep understanding of the empirical data on the phenomenon (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The interviews were also taken as a useful tool in order to gain *extensive* descriptions of individuals' feelings, thoughts and world views so that their points of views can be understood, their experiences can be unfolded and their lived world can be uncovered (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Moustakas (1994) stated that participants' perceptions of experiences could be the primary source of knowledge where every perception could add value. Although people may have different opinions and experiences, similar ones could help arrive at the essence of the phenomenon while the multiple realities could help identify variation and insights (Thompson et al., 1989). In order to obtain relevant rich data, semi-structured in-depth interviews were particularly relevant as the most common of all qualitative research methods (O'Reilly, 2005; Alvesson and Deetz, 2000) which give a clear structure, an outline of topics while also giving space to the probing questions. Compared to the fixed structured interviews, semi-structured ones could be more flexible so that the interviewer can adapt the questions according to what is given in the last answers. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) recommended that it should be avoided to ask predefined questions on the interview guide but rather better engage into the conversations.

4.2 Selection and criteria of interviewees

In this study, 8 interviews were finished considering the available resources. The number is close to what was recommended by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) that the number of interviews tend to

be around 10-15 but also can be adjusted to real-life situations, including time consideration and resources available for the investigation as well as the diminishing information return.

The purposeful sampling strategy was applied based on the criteria to seek for appropriate interviewees: (1) has a full-time job; (2) has worked at home remotely for at least 3 months; (3) did not have adopted working at home as a main working mode before the pandemic; (4) work in Sweden. I first found some acquaintances who met the above conditions. They mostly agreed to my quest. From them, I got the information that several big Swedish companies have adopted the remote working mode for a long time, therefore I searched on linkedin, sent out a friendly message introducing myself and the purpose of the interview invitation. However, after sending out the messages, only one answered and turned out not meeting one of the preconditions. Later, I applied the snowball sampling strategy with which I asked my interviewee friends to recommend me to their friends who are relevant to this research topic. Such a way of using contacts to continue contacting others helped me to get another 2 new contacts although the linkedin contact became quiet when I kindly asked for a recommendation of her colleague who might meet the conditions. Besides, I sent out two emails to 2 municipality offices to enrich the variety of the organizations where I could find people with different job experiences. However, I received one rejection email at last. This is the process of how I finally finished 8 interviews who were working in different sizes, industries and cultures of organizations.

4.3 Interview Proceedings

The first step to prepare for the interviews was to design an interview guide (Appendix A). Three main sections were included…The interview guide was prepared with identified themes in a consistent and dynamic manner intersected with probes which could generate more elaborate responses. All interviewees approved the consent statements (Appendix B) regarding the anonymity, confidentiality of all their personal information, the zoom recording, possible quote in text as well as the certain deletion three months after the thesis study was to be finished. One day before each interview, the meeting time and zoom link would have been sent in an email to the interviewee. A reminder message would usually also be sent out one hour before the meeting time in case of any unexpectations. The interviews were usually notified to the interviewees beforehand with a longer period so that they could set a schedule and find a comfortable place to

sit down with the camera on, in case they arranged the meeting in a short timespan or on a public space with noise.

Taking into account the current worsening pandemic situation in Sweden, virtual meetings on zoom were arranged instead of offline interviews for the sake of safety of both the interviewees and the interviewer. Each interview began with a brief introduction of the research purpose, research subject and a consent. The interviews were then started with some small talks about the hobbies they have in this special pandemic context, as well as some questions about the professional life, such as the positions that the interviewees are holding, how many years of working experiences, how long they have been working remotely, etc.. In this case the relationship between the interviewee and the researcher could be a bit closer than strangers and benefit the atmosphere of the interviews to be more relaxed.

In terms of the interview questions design, I followed the recommendations by Kvale (1996) that include introducing questions, follow-up questions, probing questions, specifying questions, direct and indirect questions, structuring questions, silence and interpreting questions as well as throw-away questions. Such a variety of questions were asked depending on each interview's situation and how the interviewee answered. For example, the interviews were always started with introductory questions to form a relatively relaxed atmosphere so that the interviewee could be more open-minded. Follow-up questions and interpreting questions were asked so that some brief answers could be uncovered to a greater extent. The interview questions were asked in different orders in different interviews, even sometimes were omitted considering some interviewees already mentioned. There were situations when a few questions were not applicable in a certain interview and thus would not be asked since the interviews should be arranged based on each interviewee's condition although the interviewer would want rich and detailed answers (Bryman, 2015).

All interviews were conducted within 6 weeks, lasting from 33 minutes up to 89min with an average length of 45.9min. All recordings were done by zoom and transcribed verbatim. Each interview was transcribed directly within one day and before the next interview so that the fresh memory could be helpful to correct some mistakes made by the transcription software. The software was paid in a private account and was deleted from the website once the transcriptions were finished.

Some interviews were conducted in English while some were in Chinese, the native language of both certain interviewees and the interviewer. Speaking the native language was considered in order to keep as much original information from the interviewee as possible. All interviewees could express themselves in a language that they can express well to the interviewer.

The collection of the qualitative research data continued until new data no longer added much significance to the existing themes (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011). Mason (2010) concluded that it is generally agreed that saturation is achieved at a comparatively low level. The saturation point in this study was reached relatively early, i.e., the main themes were present when seven interviews were gathered. A variety of the job-related personal features of each interviewee has prospered a variety of themes and added much value. The internal communication challenges that emerged during the interviews gradually appeared to be similar to what the first interviewee had experienced as an organizational communicator.

Table 1: An overview of the Interview Samples

Interviewees	Job title	Organization Description	attitude towards remote working	Interview length
interviewee A	communicator	a startup with 6-7 employees	Offline Positive	49 min
interviewee B	catalogue planner	a Europe-based importing company	Offline Positive	40 min
interviewee C	product developer	a Swedish local healthcare company	Offline Positive	89 min
interviewee D	test automation	a Sweden-based international company	Remote Positive	42 min
interviewee E	need planner	an Swedein-based international company	Offline Positive hoping for a mix	42 min
interviewee F	Consultant as software developer /data scientist	left a job in an international company and come to a Swedish local company with 10 employees	Remote Positive	49 min
interviewee G	data engineer	a Swedish branch office of	Remote Positive	33 min

		an international company		
interviewee H	Leaving the job of client coordinator. New job as accounting & finance consultant	leaving a Sweden-based importing company and come to a Sweden-based international company	Offline Positive	72 min

4.4 Data Analytical Process

In order to analyze the collected data, the thematic analysis coding strategy was done in combination with deductive and inductive approaches (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015). It was deductive because the questionnaire was designed based on the theoretical framework and literature review of internal communication and employee engagement, which also guided the analysis process. It was inductive because the new codes were allowed to emerge in the process of coding of the transcripts and also because one of the aims of the research is to generate theoretical analysis from the interviews.

Thematic analysis strategy was adopted since it is one of the most common approaches for analyzing qualitative data (Bryman, 2015). First, I transcribed all the recordings into text, read and corrected some mistakes all the way through. Then, I began coding the words as much as possible so that I could cover the rich data. Afterwards, I tried to find similar codes and categorized them together into one theme. All related data were grouped into themes, some of which were relevant to the topic of the interviews while some others were new. After further exploration, the themes came into pairs and into different categories. I color coded the data into a google sheet as a code frame where relevant quotes were inserted. Subsequently, the themes' relations were found and could answer the research questions. Lastly, I interpreted the result according to the theoretical framework and previous literature.

As is said in the previous recommendations for coding qualitative study's data, it is important and of great necessity for the researchers to firstly immerse themselves in the research context (Creswell, 2003). As the author of this study, I have started to study at home in the same country, Sweden, since April 2020. Although a few physical workshops took place in September 2020, it has been again 5 months since the one hundred percent of online studies without physical

meetings with classmates or professors during the Covid-19 crisis context. Therefore, the remote working and studying experience is not new to the researcher during the covid-19 crisis.

4.5 Reliability and Validity

During the course of the entire thesis study, the importance of reliability and validity were kept in mind to decrease the researcher's bias and increase the transparency.

According to Brinkmann & Kvale (2015), reliability was conceptualized as consistent writing and trustworthy research findings ensuring the finds are reproducible. The interviews were conducted in a free atmosphere where interviewees could answer questions anyway they wanted. The internal consistency of the interview questions were realized as much as possible through follow-up questions according to each interviewee's answers. The assumptions were tried to avoid before they answered. The data were transcribed in line with the recordings and were coded into themes based on the literature review and theoretical framework. The research was provided in detail so that the research could be reproduced in similar settings to keep the transferability of this study (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Validity was aimed to ask if the method could investigate what was intended to investigate (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). In this study, the in-depth interview method was chosen validly based on the research purposes and research questions based on the interviewees' experiences, feelings and thoughts. Furthermore, the interview guide was designed based on the literature review and theories which decreased the researcher's self bias and increased the credibility of the findings. The interviews were conducted with respect to the interviewees who were notified the freedom to raise any questions or withdraw at any time. The consent form was informing about the research and interviewees' rights. Anytime when the interviewees didn't understand the questions, I would ask in another angle. Or in other cases, when I didn't really understand the answer, I would confirm and ask in another angle to make sure bothe the interviewer and the interviewees were on the same page.

4.6 Methodological Reflection

There were a variety of ethical issues in the stages of qualitative research (Bryman, 2015). A few risks were seen in this study although several ethical concerns were considered carefully in the

process of this thesis study. First, although the interviewees were notified about the time and the link, it was still unavoidable that few of them forgot and then came in a rush to the zoom meeting and one of them got distracted by the work messages which could affect the relaxing atmosphere and the fluent answers. Under such circumstances, I would ask them to calm down a bit and have a small talk about the weather or wait for one minute. Second, I regarded confidentiality and anonymity highly important and thus secured well. I guaranteed to the interviewees that their private information such as their names and company names would be kept confidential and would only be used for my thesis study. I also orally clarified to the interviewees that they were voluntary to participate and free to say anything. The audio recordings were only for the purpose of thesis transcription and would be deleted three months after. More questions might be asked from me further if necessary after the interview. Lastly, for some interviewees who come from the same country as the researcher and spoke native language other than English. It is argued that speaking native language is one way of shortening the distance between the interviewees and the researcher and also providing richer information to the questions during the interviews. I tried to translate the text which was not in English to the greatest extent to stay true to the original meanings although to a certain extent the translation may have lost a part of the meaning of words.

5. Data Presentation and Analysis

During the pandemic, lots of organizations of various sizes and in different industries followed the Swedish governmental recommendations and adopted remote working mode. The interviewees have at least three months of working from home experiences and have provided different feelings and emotions towards the remote working mode, the communication situations as well as the engagement with organizations. From a sensemaking perspective, finding out the characteristics of the current situation does not happen automatically (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 79). Different understandings of the present situation implicate certain actions as appropriate. This means that analysis of 'what is going on here' also holds implications for 'what we should do next' (Olsen et al., 2020). Therefore, it is important to present and analyse what is going on from the perspectives of internal communication challenges, and the employee engagement from the lens of sensemaking theory.

Facing an uncertain situation of remote working mode in their workplace during the pandemic, the employees met internal communication changes and challenges and made sense of the situations which internalized into their engagement with the organizations. All the interviewees faced similar challenges of the uncertain future and remote working-from-home mode caused by pandemic conditions. They had various perceptions towards the challenges and various levels of engagement in their workplaces. This chapter analyzed the different practices with a sensemaking lens in order to observe the employee's perceptions and actions. Moreover, it deeply explored the relations between internal communication and employee engagement as well as some job-related personal features. Ultimately, it aimed to answer the research questions via providing explanations based on the analysis of the employees' perceptions and practices.

There are many aspects of remote working which have an impact on the employees based on the transcribed data. Positive ones include saving commuting time, more sleeping time in the morning, being more flexible and free of their work style, such as listening to some music or looking up at the room to think about answers to some problems, etc. In addition to the above

influence in personal life, the employees also met with some communication challenges in relation to their work performance in regards to communication efficiency, extended distance with other colleagues, relationships between employees and organizations, social interactions, etc., similar to what was found in the research of Karranges et al. (2015) and Wang et al. (2020). Such challenges together with their personal attributes as well as other influencing factors could present different engagement performance.

The following analysis is divided into 2 sections based on the categorized data: how the employees perceive the internal communication challenges; how the employees made sense of the changes brought by the pandemic context.

5.1 Work-related Changes Brought By Remote Working

There are positive and negative changes brought by the pandemic in terms of the communication methods, working environment and so on. Following sections are listing work-related changes brought by remote working mentioned by the employee interviewees.

5.1.1 Internal Communication Challenges

Through the interviews, the three main internal communication challenges were identified. They are (1) Lower communication efficiency; (2) Work-home interference; (3) Missing social interactions. The interviewees have adopted various perceptions towards the communication challenges. The interviewees have had various perceptions towards these challenges based on their personal attributes or features which is to be explained in the next part. Following is the analysis of how employees made sense of these internal communication changes and challenges.

Less transparency and efficiency

The transfer from offline to online meant that the working mode became more flexible in terms of working locations, working style and working time as well, which has brought a long list of challenges for the employees. Communication efficiency has been affected to a great extent as well as the transparency about what the employees know and do not know in organizations during remote working.

"I don't have to know that at all to do my job, but I'm very interested in that because it affects the whole company like I care about how the company is going there. So I want to have as much Information about the company. But they don't have time to tell me about every little thing. When I work from home, I don't get as much Information about the company." As quoted from Interviewee C.

Problems in relation to how much information employees need constitutes one of the barriers for effective internal communication as well as the channels through which information is transmitted (Robson & Tourish, 2005). Interviewees reflected that the lack of working efficiency and transparency could lag the working pace and even feel frustrated. Without effective communication, the greater involvement of employees is less possible since effective communication is "an integral part of a well-constructed strategy for driving employee engagement (Zajkowska, 2012).

Work-home Interference

Most of the interviewees have reflected on the work-life interference, including home-work distractions and work-life balance. Owing to the more flexible working mode, people can choose when to take lunch and when to stop working.

"I saved three hours of commuting time every day. I can focus on my job at home. However, home became a place to work so I can't really relax. I can't walk out of the stressful emotions as I walked out of the home office room. Every morning, I needed to instantly start working from walking up. I felt a sense of dislike and the long hours working all the time alone." As quoted from Interviewee H.

"I have more personal time for training, jogging and less commuting time." As quoted by Interviewee B and similar phrases mentioned by most interviewees.

The study by Chi et al. (2021) demonstrated that working-from-home could be a double-edged blade leading to both positive and negative employee behavioral outcomes. They also found that owing to the work-home interference, the working-from-home mode has minimized the positive effects of personal dedication and magnified the negative effects of emotional burnouts. Such interference could be later explained by the emotional tiredness.

Less offline social interactions

Owing to the remote working environment, employees work from home and have conversations to meet with colleagues and supervisors digitally instead of face to face. Hereinafter in this thesis, the social interactions include supervisor - employee interaction and peer - to - peer interactions. Generally speaking, online social interactions became less appreciated by most interviewees compared to physical interactions.

> *"There are more gaps between different teams as we seldom meet each other now..No opportunities for talking with other teams if there are no cooperation projects. The relationship between colleagues within one team got closer because we talk to each other every day. I had less networking with teams, other colleagues or even with other companies"* As Interviewee B said.

All interviewees mentioned that social interactions are to a large extent being cut down considering the remote working mode. They previously interacted with each other mostly during lunch breaks, fika time, etc., which is much less available even with online alternatives. Social interactions can not only provide the feedback towards one's work but also co-constructed the realities which compose the organizational environment (Lee and Ok, 2015). Poundsford (2007) found that communication strategies such as informal communication and storytelling could lead to greater employee engagement and increasing levels of trust to the organizations. Korzynski (2015) indicated that employee engagement is positively associated with the leader-employee networking time, the code of online networking conduct and the availability of an open organizational culture. This is also supported by interviewees positive feedback towards digital fika even though not all of them show up at all sessions of digital fikas. Locke and Taylor (1990) recognized that the employees with rewarding interpersonal interactions with colleagues recognized a higher level of the meaning in the workplace. Lacking the social interactions have led to obvious negative effects to quite many interviewees' emotional disconnection and less availability of networking resources. The effects are to be discussed in the last part of this chapter.

5.1.2 Organizational Extra Support

Owing to less offline interactions, some organizations have taken action to create more space for socialization in forms of social media sharing, digital fikas, material support, mental care and regular email greetings, etc.

> *"But it relaxes me to have a talk with people after a long day. I feel positive generally although digital fika is not as relaxed as face-to-face conversations in offline fika. I look forward to seeing my colleagues to be honest. I always think it might become easier with offline working, especially if lots of information could be obtained by offline talks, not the formal talks."* As Interviewee E said.

> *"We started to share online about the dinner, some personal life pictures. I saw my colleagues go for a run every day so I decided to exercise as well so that I don't gain too much weight when we finally meet in the office."* As Interviewee B said.

Online sharing and online chat have become the most common interactive behaviors, which comforted the employees' needs for informal communication and interactions. Zajkowska (2012) argued that healthy co-worker relationships at all levels could contribute to increasing engagement. He also mentioned honesty, cooperation and trust in the working environment are vital for forming such relationships. Those three attributes are usually formed in social interactions which is one of the most important means of forming and maintaining organizational relationships. In this regard, the digital fika also functions as a window of forming relationships and continuing social interactions.

Internal surveys have been mentioned by several interviewees that the communicators colleagues or human resources send out asking what help is needed. They felt cared about and closer to the company, which reflected closer emotional ties between the employees and the organizations. On the other hand, the organizations who did not show any care or extra support to employees are commented with lower attraction and loyalty. This has been supported by the researches that ethical organizations cost communication efforts to take care of the employees, working to build trust with them who will in turn trust the managers to the extent of being demonstrated with honesty, transparency, caring, and the willingness to listen (Carroll, 2006; Mishra et al., 2014).

"My company is too focused on the economic interests, too little on the employees' care and cultivation of loyalty...We only have some official meetings for a big team. We don't have fika or online talk rooms. I only schedule meetings with people for specific meetings. We used to have offline fika in the office but not online ones. We don't have any activities which could relax us a bit. Our boss doesn't care about such mental care. " As quoted by Interviewee H.

Employee development is regarded as an important part of the organization's growth objectives , which explicates that employees should receive the needed support for them to perform well in their jobs to the best (Peter, 2007). However, Cheney (1999) pointed out that most organizations don't care a great deal about their employees amid the rushes toward business competitiveness and efficiency. In this regard, the mentioned company of Interviewee H did not incorporate into the business strategy two-way internal communication and engaging employees proactively. Heide and Simonsson (2018) argue that if the organization focuses the information distribution and overlooks interaction, manager-coworker communication, it will be problematic and coworkers are not proactive. In this scenario, Interviewee H has not received any mental care but been pushed in the work during the pandemic, which finally added on to the reasons he/she resigned.

5.2 Job Related Personal Features

In this research, interviewees more or less mention their personal features when they talk about their attitudes towards remote working and their opinions on current situations. As was shown in the literature review, personal features are amongst those influencing factors related to employee engagement. Personal features in this study include personality, single/ with family/with partner living status, expectations for a job which include financial payment, individual growth in terms of networking and skills practice and so on. In terms of the work-home interference, for the people who enjoy remote working, they seem not bothered by such interference but enjoy it more as freedom. The personal family or relationship difference was also influencing people's attitude towards working from home. Interviewee B, D, E, F and G who have been chasing for the networking opportunities, salary payment, social well being, and stability are passionate about their work although they did not display high levels of loyalty. Interviewee F mentioned that

he/she did not need social interactions but rather kept a pure colleague working relationship in the workplace.

Lee and Ok (2015) suggested that employees with positive self-appraisal are more likely to link with the positive appraisal towards the working environment, leading to the engagement. Oluwatayo and Adetoro (2020)also mentioned that personal characteristics such as self-efficacy, organization-based self-esteem and optimism are being considered as influencing the level of personal control on the environment and therefore job engagement. Taking the fact into consideration that different interviewees with various personalities and other characteristics, it is plausible to conclude that such job-related personal features are also influencing their interpretations of what is going on in the workplace and whether they keep going on with their old company.

5.3 How employees Interpret and Act Upon the Challenges

Under this background of the pandemic crisis in the whole society, the situation has been full of uncertainties and ambiguity. The pandemic has not only changed employees' working locations but also generated an uncertain future in which he/she made sense of the situation. Facing different internal challenges such as less efficient internal communication, work-life interference and less social interactions, employees have had different interpretations and have shown various reactions. For example, some interviewees have been feeling bothered by the work-home interference and longing for social interactions while some others have adapted themselves well in the new situations.

Three pertinent features described by Weick et al. (2005) and Kudesia (2017) correspond to the three stages of sensemaking process in the literature chapter: organizational operate in a changing environment full of chaos and fluctuations; people develop plausible interpretations of the environment and certain pieces of information; people act upon the interpretations and enhance the surroundings to be more orderly and better understood. What's more, such sensemaking is highlighted as a recursive and ongoing process which never ends and is always subject to disruptions and continually being re-accomplished (Kudesia, 2017).

5.3.1 Physical Exhaustion but Loyal

As is discussed before, some interviewees showed tiredness in waiting for results and inefficient communication with lower engagement intentions. The work-home interference has been mentioned quite often amongst interviewees when they talked about the vigor and attitude towards remote working and the engagement. Social interactions as one way of relaxing and connecting with colleagues and one way of networking have been missing and longing for by quite many interviewees. Facing these challenges, people have shown frustration and tiredness and loyalty in their organizations.

> *"More workload; less rest during all-day long meetings...The business idea and the solutions are interesting and meaningful. "* As quoted from Interviewee A.

> *"I do feel more exhausted than I think I would if I had worked at the office...the days' variation in your daily life is very low. It is quite exhausting. Since we communicate less which means that you are more detached from the company..I don't have any plans to change jobs."* As quoted from Interviewee C.

The physical exhaustion by working from home could consume energies to a certain extent which made people tired. Zajkowska (2012) stated that the physical aspect concerns the energies exerted by individual employees to accomplish their roles. Internal communication is not only important for transparency and information transmission (Mishra et al., 2014). Less variations from the work routine due to less communication could also highlight another effect of social interactions to drive engagement besides the transmission of information (Welch & Jackson, 2007). Kalla (2005) reflected that social interactions are realized through messages and all levels of communication between internal stakeholders could help build relationships. With the internal communication challenges of less transparent and efficient communication and less interactions, the positive communication effects such as relationship building and trust building face a hard time, which could explain the reason why some feel exhausted and tired.

Loyalty is not affected for some interviewees. Interviewee A, B, C, D, and G stick to the company during the pandemic no matter how many difficulties they met in terms of internal communication and organizational support. Loyalty as one important metric in employee engagement is not affected by the lack of internal communication although it is revealed that

loyalty is one of the six outcomes of effective internal communication (Asif and Sargeant, 2000). However, they did not mention if less efficient and transparent internal communication could decrease loyalty. Engaged employees regard loyalty more than a paycheck or other benefits accompanied with employment within the organization but their loyalty exceeds the expectations by the organizations because they want to instead of having to (Peter, 2007).

5.3.2 Unchanging Passion but Not Necessarily Loyal

The dedication part of employee engagement refers to high involvement in the work and a sense of passion (Kahn, 1995). There are interesting differences in the interviewee group that some are still actively engaging themselves in the work while some already left or chose to leave the old company, which apparently lack engagement. There are a few interviewees showing unchanging passion towards their job although they have either changed jobs during the pandemic or planned to accept another offer. At the same time, some others are less passionate about their project and loyal to their organizations.

> *"If I hadn't changed the project, I would have changed to another job.But now I'm satisfied with the project, so I will stay. My passion is not changing, nor my focus.. since I only judge my own work if I'm satisfied or not. I don't have a high expectation of this [recognizing the mission of my company], as long as I finish the goals that I set, I feel happy. Maybe I'm practical. I don't seek the sense of achievement from my job but I feel I have achieved something when I see my own growth."* As quoted by Interviewee B.

It is important to see the definition and concept of passion so as to clarify how employees' unchanging passion represents their engagement levels. Passion is an important metric in employee engagement (Zigarmi et al., 2009). When researched the employee work passion in relation to employee engagement, Zigarmi et al. (2009, p. 310) constructed this element as "an individual's persistent, emotionally positive, meaning-based, state of wellbeing stemming from reoccurring cognitive and affective appraisals of various job and organizational situations that results in consistent, constructive work intentions and behaviors." In other words, employees' work passion could stem from appraisals and self-produced meaning-based state. This can explain why some employees displayed unchanging passion but less loyalty and some others are less passionate but unchanging loyal. The former mentioned that they work for the well-being,

meaning, or individual growth while the latter got less passionate due to less feedback and appraisal (as Interviewee C mentioned in a quote).

5.3.3 Final Decision: Stay vs. Chose Another Job

There are a few interviewees who have chosen another job during the pandemic or plan to hop over to another job opportunity. Compared to some people sticking to their old companies, it is undeniable that some others' final decision to leave displayed a low level of unloyalty even with high levels of frustration, passion or absorption in their previous job.

> *"First of all, I guess I was a little bit far away from my old company. I didn't have related tasks I wanted to do. But I guess, because of the uncertainty and since I knew that some time in the future, I want to change to uh to tasks that must suit what I want to do. I guess, because of the uncertainty if the economy gets bad, now maybe it will take 2 or 3 years before...We didn't know how long the things were going to last. Maybe it would crash down. But if I get a chance to move now, better move for a while."* As is quoted from Interviewee F.

> *"In October or November some time, I guess I was a bit pessimistic, I thought that maybe you know they could call me back. That's what's basically based my decision to move while I have a chance. and Now, I guess I'm quite optimistic. Um Because yeah we have vaccines, it's not going to get worse."*

In the last stage of the sensemaking process and also one of the three pertinent features of the sensemaking perspective in organizations: people organize and make their environments more understandable via acting based on their interpretations (MacKenzie & Millo, 2003, as cited by Kudesia, 2017). Similarly, choosing another company to work for is a final decision of some interviewees after they live and work in the pandemic context for some time. They had an experience of interpreting the environment as uncertain and had an unclear opinion on the future of professional life. Therefore, when the opportunity came, they didn't want to lose the chance in case of any bad developments in the future. This process also involved their unsatisfying previous working experience such as "a bit far away", "didn't have related tasks I wanted to do", and "quite fine". The job-related personal features of Interviewee F, who had a consulting role in data science and had a quite positive attitude towards remote working, have also been in the

process of the sensemaking. As for how some interviewees chose to leave their old company, this is regarded as a way of how they deal with the environmental change and interpret the *cues* in the sensemaking processes. The contextual environment within which the organizations operate and possible impact on the employees are both an antecedent and an outcome (Turner & SpringerLink, 2020). Therefore, when some interviewees predict the uncertain situation to be long, they intend to accept a new offer in case in future there is no more opportunity, which lowers their loyalty considerations.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Multiple internal communication challenges have been presented in the last chapter together with employees' engagement situations. In this chapter, I review from the problematization, the research purposes, and how this study fills the gap of the previous research as well as the concluded model based on the observations.

6.1 Discussion

The problematization of this research stands for the lack of research about the employees' perspective on their engagement in the sensemaking process during the pandemic context. Currently, academic research about the employee engagement during the pandemic change is mostly from the managerial perspective such as exploring communication challenges facing the management teams (Eerika & Maarit, 2015), how to strengthen leadership and build workplace relationships (Welch, 2011; Dirani et al., 2020) as well as the influence of social media usage on employee engagement (Men et al., 2020), etc. Under this background, Heide and Simonsson (2018) argue that engagement has been viewed as dependent on managers in the traditional functionalist perspective instead of from the employee-centered perspective, which should be valued. Employee voicing can enhance employee engagement (Dirani et al., 2015) and is one of the 4 enablers of employee engagement according to Macleod and Clarke (2009).

Under such research aims, the interviews were conducted and got rich data. The data analysis has been surrounding interviewees' interpretations and reactions towards their respective challenges triggered by operational changes and work communication changes. Before discussing the connection between employee engagement and the sensemaking process, it is important to pay attention to their components. As Kahn (1990, p. 694) clarified the definitions of employee engagement as "the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances." The three features of employee engagement have been separately connected and analyzed in the sensemaking process. Kudesia (2017) stated that from a narrow construct, sensemaking describes the process whereby people notice and interpret environmental events and coordinate a response to clarify the meaning behind. From a more broad perspective,

sensemaking offers a unique view on organizations. This could call attention to how employees reach the understanding of the environments and ongoing changes via verbal and embodied behaviors, how such understandings enable and cultivate their following behaviors as well as how the changes could reformulate the environment and generate new understandings. sensemaking process is a recursive and ongoing one, which is always subject to disruption and therefore continually re-accomplished (ibid.).

Based on the data analysis, it is concluded how the employees' engagement is affected in their sensemaking process. During the pandemic environment, employees could have their own interpretations of what was going on and what the future would be. They enacted the surrounding environment, taking *cues* out of the information. Employees' physical tiredness, loyalty, and passion towards their job are being affected by the environment and their personal understandings of such ongoing uncertain situations. Internal communication has explicitly helped with employees' sensemaking process, which corresponds with the CCO perspective. Individuals cope with equivocal events by constructing reasonings about those events (Weick 1995), that help them manage the ambiguities of change (Brown 1998). The interviewees have been working in the unexpected changing pandemic context in which employees work from home and continue working. Such a phenomenon was interpreted and made sense based on their previous experiences and then opinions, followed by actions according to their interpretations. The employees' engagement features in physical, emotional and cognitive reactions are displayed in their sensemaking processes. Based on such, a model that illustrates the observations has been developed as below.
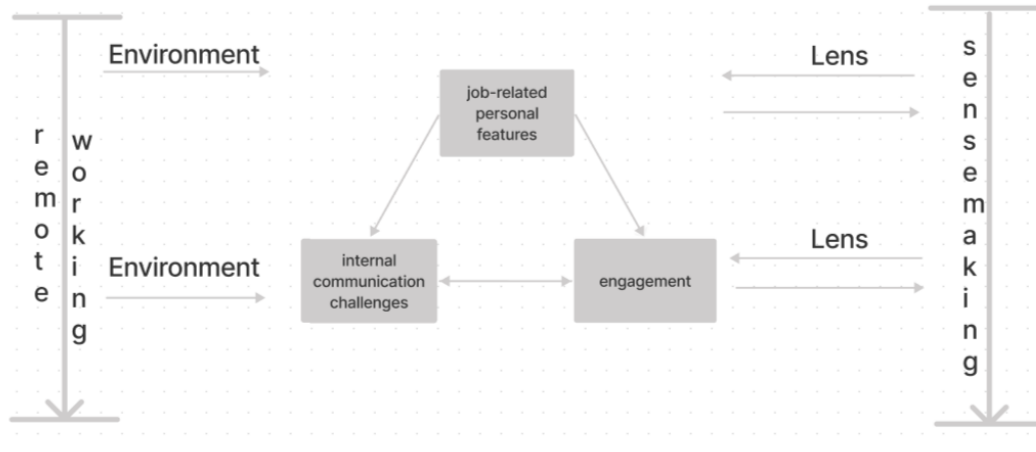
In this model, during the process of employees ' engagement being influenced by the individual sensemaking together with the other factors of job-related personal features and the pandemic context, the relationship between internal communication and employee engagement has also been highlighted. The internal communication between employees has been put into the limelight as researchers have appealed to (Heide & Simonsson, 2011). "Communication is vital in constituting the engagement, but the engagement is enacted in communication (Heide & Simonsson, 2018, p. 209), which is proved by those negative reactions by the lack of internal communication.

But at the same time, as Millward et al. (2007) concluded that online or virtual communication does not reduce the engagement that the employees working remotely could change their identification from the individual to the groupwise with engaged participation, it was observed that all the interviewees reflected that their engagement in terms of the passion/ interest/ commitment /loyalty/ involvement were not highly affected by the online communication during remote working. Digital fika has been popular and functions as a way of social interactions for employees. Based on such, the online communication did not play a significant role in influencing the employees' engagement situations.

6.2 Conclusions

This thesis study has answered the research questions about what challenges employees met and how they perceived their engagement in the workplace during the remote working environment

during the pandemic. The sensemaking theory has explained how employees perceive their environment and interact with those *cues* during the course of their interpretation before taking actions. The internal communication challenges mainly focused on the employees' social interactions in the workplace which those digital activities could help but were not able to replace physical interactions. The team communication was realized mainly through online technologies and platforms taking the example of Zoom meetings and Microsoft Teams as well as emails. However, team communication taking place on the social media channels could bring a sense of lower working efficiency to the employees, some of whom sometimes felt tired. The employees' engagement situations have been analyzed that the vigour got affected by both the personality and the interest in their job itself with a lower relevance to the remote working mode.

The problematization of this research was that there were no significant number of qualitative studies focusing on how employees perceive the situations of the remote working environment in relation to their engagement. This research adopted the qualitative in-depth interview methods so that it was well noted how employees made sense of the remote working and how they felt about themselves in the workplace communication in relation to the engagement. The factors of influencing employees' engagement levels were also categorized. Amongst all data, there were two quite interesting and surprising factors. The job-related factors have played a significant role in how employees made sense of the current pandemic situation, their feelings towards the internal communication challenges as well as the level of engagement. Those people with outgoing and passionate personalities would be more likely to keep the passion and interest in working and overcome challenges. Those having a consulting job or tech expertise were more satisfied with working from home and involved much less in both formal team communication and informal social interactions. However, when an involved personality encounters a tech position, such a person would still be eager for social interactions and offline working mode.

As is clarified in the model mentioned above, the process of job-related features influencing the internal communication challenges perception and the engagement perception is embedded as a sensemaking process amongst all sensemaking actions.

6.3 Contribution to Research and Practice

In this study, my research purpose has been to investigate the employees' perspectives of how they make sense of the uncertain environment under the new remote working mode which sheds challenges to the internal communication and how they make sense of their engagement.

Firstly, my study analysis and the results helped unfold the relationship between internal communication and employee engagement. The data finding supported the importance of strategic internal communication to employees' engagement and also the other influencing factors. More specifically, the results from the empirical study correspond with the concept and process of organizational sensemaking which highlights the role of social interactions (Jeong & Brower, 2008). Organizational members can take the cues and interpret them based on their individual experiences and personal attributes before they act correspondingly. In the aggregate, this whole process pinpointed the role of strategic internal communication in cultivating and maintaining employee engagement.

Secondly, my study has been based on the employees' voices which have been less heard. Coworkers or employees have received remarkably little attention from the academic and practitioners in the field of strategic communication (Heide & Simonsson, 2011). That's why their voices deserve more generic attention so as to get a holistic overview on how employees perceive and make sense of the internal and external organizational changes. This study has finished a research on employees' perceptions from the perspective of internal communication. The employees' views of points have been fully displayed from the interviewees as well as the personal attributes. It is revealed in this study that internal communication has been one of the key drivers of employee engagement through how the employees perceive internal communication challenges and how the employees' engagement is being affected.

Thirdly, my study has been considering the personal attributes that have not been put in much spotlight in the research of employee engagement. Personal attributes as a contextual information can explain a lot of employees' various engagement reactions upon changes.

Lastly, in practical life, this study has explicitly explained the relationship between internal communication, employee engagement and the sensemaking process. This thesis study has illuminated the internal communication's role as employee engagement enabler in their

sensemaking process advocating the employees' perspective during the remote working mode. Organizations could have a holistic view about how employees perceive and make sense of the new working mode and the communication within the organizational environment. When organizations aim to keep employees' engagement and attain the financial goal, it is of high importance to know about their sensemaking process with internal communication included.

6.4 Limitations and Suggestions

This study has confirmed the previous research on the importance of internal communication in employee engagement and researched deep into their relationship with the theoretical lens of sensemaking during an external crisis and changing working environment.

However, owing to the limited number of invited interviewees, there is not enough data for employees from various countries, industries, positions and age groups. Brown (2013) has noted that employee engagement could vary with context. Mishra and Mohanty (2016) have suggested the engagement research should take into account the various industrial contexts to fully explain and understand the concept. For future research, it is recommended to take the above mentioned influencing aspects to verify the employees' engagement in different contextual factors. This study has focused on people's sensemaking process during the pandemic. It might be of relevance to investigate in future how individuals perceive their reactions after the pandemic, corresponding with the ongoing nature of the sensemaking process.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: An interview guide

Introductory questions

1. How long have you worked for the current company?
2. What's the work routine in your position?

Internal Communication Challenges

The remote working mode during the pandemic has been going on for a while in Sweden.

3. What do you think of the influence of remote working mode on your work?
4. What's your experience of communicating with your teams during the remote working mode? How does that feel?
5. What do you think of the internal social interactions in your company?
6. What do you think of the relationship with other colleagues under the remote working?

Employee engagement

7. Have you received any form of support, either physical or emotional, from your company for remote working? If yes, what are they?
8. How do you feel about the support?
9. Has your energy/satisfaction/ passion/ interest towards the company changed? How did they change?/ Why did they (not) change?
10. In what ways? Can you give an example? What made you feel that way?
11. Has your sense of attachment/ achievement/ involvement/ loyalty/ commitment towards the company changed? How did they change?/ Why did they (not) change?
12. In what ways? Can you give an example? What made you feel that way?
13. Have the following aspects changed or not? What made you feel this way?
14. How do you see this ambiguous pandemic situation full of uncertainties?

Appendix B: The Consent Form

This consent form is part of the process required for ethical treatment of participants in research. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about the research process or procedures, please ask.

Invitation to Participate

We are researching how student representatives perceive their role and if, why and how they see themselves as making changes in educational quality through the communication with the university management. This research is conducted by Amanda Öberg and Tiantian Wang for a qualitative research methods class at Lund University.

Research Purpose

The purpose of the study is to explore student representatives' perceptions of their role in the improvement of university educational quality.

Research Method

If you decide to participate, we will invite you to participate in a semi-structured in-depth interview. For example, you will be asked: (Q1: What were your expectations of the role responsibilities before being appointed a student representative? Q2: What kind of feedback do you put forward in meetings with the management?) Your answers will be reported together with data from other research participants.

Benefit

By participating, you will contribute to a better understanding of the communication between student representatives and university management and hence a better understanding of how student representatives perceive their contribution to educational quality.

Confidentiality - Anonymity - Security

If you decide to participate, your identity as a participant in this study, and any other personal information gathered about you during the study, will be kept strictly confidential and will never be made public. All data containing personal information from which you could be identified will be deleted after the data analysis. Electronic data will be password protected. When the study is completed, all data containing personal information will be destroyed. The published results of the study will contain only data from which no individual participant can be identified.

Voluntary participation

You are being asked to make a voluntary decision whether or not to participate in this study. If there is any part of the information that is not clear, please feel free to ask for clarifications. If you would like to consult with someone not associated with this study, that will be all right, too. If you decide not to participate, or if you later decide to discontinue your participation, your decision will not affect your present or future relations with the researchers or Lund University. Upon request, a copy of the information, data, and results will be made available to you. You will always be free to discontinue participation at any time, and all data collected up to that time as a result of your partial participation will be destroyed without being used in the study. If you decide to participate, please provide your signature as indicated below.

What Your Signature Means

Your signature on this Consent Form indicates that you have understood to you satisfaction the information regarding participation in this research project and agree to participate as a participant. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without any consequences. Your continued participation should be informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

_____

Signature of Participant   Date

Print Name:

Signature of Investigator   Date

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