DEGREE PROJECT

Employee perspective on communication and engagement

A case study in a manufacturing organisation

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In 1961, President John F. Kennedy was visiting the NASA space center for the first time. While touring the facility, he stopped and introduced himself to a janitor by saying:

"Hi, I'm Jack Kennedy. What are you doing here at NASA?"

The janitor responded:

"Well, Mr. President. I'm helping to put a man on the moon."

-Unknown

ABSTRACT

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of how supervisor-employee communication affects the employee engagement on the shop floor of manufacturing organisations. To achieve this purpose, the two below research objectives were developed:

- ✓ To identify how supervisor-employee communication impacts employee engagement
- ✓ To identify any barriers to supervisor-employee communication

Method

The study had a deductive, qualitative research approach as a conceptual framework was developed from literature and then verified with empirical data collected through semi-structured interviews. The research strategy was holistic and single case as all eight interviews were conducted with respondents from a single organisation. The interviewees were selected using a maximum variation, purposive sampling technique. Lastly, the collected data was analysed using a form of thematic analysis.

Findings

The main finding was that supervisor-employee communication was proven to have a significant impact on the employee engagement among the shop floor workers in the manufacturing organisation. In addition, supervisor-employee communication was proven to affect the employee engagement in a similar way that literature suggested. Furthermore, the findings supported the definition of employee engagement as a shared responsibility between the employee and the supervisor.

Theoretical implications

This study provided additional data to the existing literature on supervisor-employee communication and employee engagement while investigating the relationship between these two concepts in a new setting. Not only did this study contribute with rather unique data from the manufacturing industry, but it also adopted the employee perspective of the phenomenon. Previous research has predominantly consisted of studies with the perspective of management rather than the employees. Therefore, this study offers a foundation upon which further, both qualitative and quantitative research within this area can be conducted.

Practical implications

The main practical implication that this study has offered is highlighting the importance of supervisor-employee communication when it comes to generating and maintaining employee engagement on the shop floor of manufacturing organisations. The supervisor's role and way of communicating has been identified as crucial for the employees' level of engagement and this study has provided some guidance for supervisors in this matter.

Key words: *Supervisor-employee communication; Employee engagement; Employee perspective*

SAMMANFATTNING

Syfte
Syftet med denna studie var att få en djupare förståelse av hur kommunikation mellan ledare och medarbetare påverkar medarbetarnas engagemang på fabriksgolvet i organisationer inom tillverkningsindustrin. För att uppnå detta syfte så togs de två nedanstående forskningsmålen fram:

- ✓ Att identifiera hur kommunikation mellan ledare och medarbetare påverkar medarbetarnas engagemang
- ✓ Att identifiera vilka hinder som existerar för kommunikation mellan ledare och medarbetare

Method
Denna studie anammade en deduktiv och kvalitativ forskningsansats eftersom ett konceptuellt ramverk togs fram från existerande teori, vilket sedan verifireades med empirisk data hämtad från semi-strukturerade intervjuer. Forskningsstrategin var holistisk och baserades på ett enskilt fall eftersom all åtta intervjuer utfördes inom en och samma organisation. Intervjupersonerna valdes enligt en medveten, maximal variationsbaserad urvalsteknik. Slutligen så analyserades den insamlade datan med en form av tematisk analys.

Resultat
Det främsta resultatet från denna studie var att kommunikationen mellan ledare och medarbetare visade sig ha en signifikant påverkan på medarbetarnas engagemang bland medarbetarna på fabriksgolvet inom organisationen. Dessutom så visade sig de två begreppen förhålla sig till varandra på liknande sätt som teorin förutspådde. Därutöver så stödde resultatet även bilden av medarbetarengagemang som ett delat ansvar mellan medarbetare och ledare.

Teoretiska implikationer
Denna studie bidrog med ytterligare data till den existerande litteraturen inom kommunikation mellan ledare och medarbetare och medarbetarengagemang, samtidigt som den utforskade sambandet mellan de två begreppen på ett nytt sätt. Denna studie bidrog inte bara med relativt unik data från tillverkningsindustrin, utan anammade även medarbetarnas perspektiv på de två begreppen. Majoriten av de tidigare studierna av de två begreppen har haft ledarnas perspektiv och inte medarbetarnas. Därför så erbjuder den här studien underlag för vidare studier, såväl kvalitativa som kvantitativa, inom detta forskningsområde.

Praktiska implikationer
Den främsta praktiska implikationen som den här studien har bistått med är att den har påvisat hur viktig kommunikationen mellan ledare och medarbetare är för att generera och upprätthålla medarbetarnas engagemang på fabriksgolvet av organisationer inom tillverkningsindustrin. Ledarens roll och sätt att kommunicera has bevisats vara avgörande för medarbetarnas engagemang och denna studie erbjuder vägledning för ledare att uppnå detta.

Nyckelord: *Kommunikation mellan ledare och medarbetare; medarbetarengagemang; Medarbetarnas perspektiv*

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1. INTRODUCTION

This first chapter provides an introduction to the area of research by presenting a brief background to the topic. This is followed by a problem discussion that leads to the purpose and research objectives of the study. Lastly, the delimitations of the study are presented.

1.1 Background

Organizations have measured employee satisfaction since the 1930s (Latham & Budworth, 2007), but what does this term really imply? While employee satisfaction has been proven to have a strong connection to employee retention (Rust, Stewart, Miller & Pielack, 1996), most of today's organizations are likely interested in knowing more about their employees than simply how to retain them. For example, just because employees are satisfied with their jobs does not mean that they are motivated or productive at work (Maylett & Warner, 2014).

The inability of using employee satisfaction to describe the broader picture of the employer-employee relationship has led to the development and usage of other terms. One of the most popular terms of today is employee engagement, which in contrast to employee satisfaction, has steadily grown in popularity over the last 15 years (Google Trends, 2019). So how does employee engagement differ from employee satisfaction?

Thomas (2009) refers to employee engagement as the logical successor to earlier terms in the evolution of work because of how the work has changed. He describes that today's work is more challenging and supervision is looser, which requires psychologically engaged employees. Maylett and Warner (2014) describe engaged employees as passionate, energetic and committed towards their work, who invest their best selves into the work they do.

Although the popularity of employee engagement is at an all-time high, Gallup (2019) show that 87% of employees worldwide are not engaged at work. Furthermore, they show that organisations with highly engaged employees outperform their peers by 147% in earnings per share. In addition, Adkins (2016) refers to the millennials as "the job-hopping generation", after showing that they are the least engaged generation in the workplace and most likely to switch jobs. This highlights the importance for organisations to develop an understanding of what drives employee engagement, in order to remain competitive.

Among the suggested key determinants of employee engagement is internal communication (Welch, 2011). One study showed that organisations that communicate effectively are four times as likely to report high levels of employee engagement than organisations that communicate less effectively (Iyer & Israel, 2012). Furthermore, the role of the employee's immediate supervisor and the supervisor-employee communication has been found to affect the engagement (Robinson, Perryman & Hayday, 2004; Saks, 2006). However, little empirical data is available to guide supervisors how to use communication to engage their employees.

Ruck & Welch (2012) state that managers have long recognised the importance of internal communication, however, it is seen from the perspective of management rather than the employee. Furthermore, Welch and Jackson (2007) argue that research into employee preferences for channel and content of internal corporate communication is required to ensure

it meets employees' needs. In short, exactly how supervisors should communicate with their employees to foster employee engagement is not clear.

1.2 Problem discussion

While the above story about JFK and the janitor might be too good to be true, it illustrates what employee engagement could look like in even seemingly unfulfilling jobs. However, the amount of research available on how to generate engagement in these kind of jobs is rather limited. Considering the fact that a lot of industries are dependent on workers carrying out these jobs, there ought to be an interest in knowing how to engage these people.

The manufacturing industry is one of the aforementioned industries. Given the nature of the manufacturing industry, it gives rise to a lot of standardised, repetitive jobs on the shop floor. In addition, organisations with highly engaged employees have been proven to have desirable outcomes for manufacturing organisations, such as increased profitability and production productivity and lower rates of safety incidents, defects and absenteeism (Gallup, 2016).

While the information on how supervisors should communicate with their employees to foster engagement is scares in general, it is even worse in the manufacturing industry. Therefore, more research needs to be conducted in this area to close the knowledge gap and educate supervisors in the manufacturing industry in how to communicate with their employees to make them realise that they are the ones who "put a man on the moon". This study aims to contribute to making that happen.

1.3 Purpose and research objectives

The purpose and main research objective of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how supervisor-employee communication affects the employee engagement on the shop floor of manufacturing organisations. In addition to this main objective, two more tangible sub-objectives have been developed:

- ✓ To identify how supervisor-employee communication impacts employee engagement
- ✓ To identify any barriers to supervisor-employee communication

1.4 Delimitations

This study will only collect empirical data from a single organisation. Therefore, this study will not aim to seek generalisable findings. In addition, as the employees on the shop floor of the studied organisation have no computer access, this study is limited to verbal, face-to-face supervisor-employee communication. Lastly, while supervisor-employee communication is merely one of many factors that is suggested to affect employee engagement, this study solely investigates this factor.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter contains a review of the relevant literature associated with this study's two main concepts; supervisor-employee communication and employee engagement. It provides the theoretical foundation upon which, as the end of the chapter, the conceptual framework is developed.

2.1 Supervisor-employee communication

The interest and popularity of internal communication as a wider area of research has grown within management, organizational psychology, human relations and internal marketing literature (Verčič, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2012). In spite of this, some researchers (Smidts, Pruyn & Van Riel, 2001; Welch, 2011) argue that further attention should be paid to internal communication given the positive impacts it has been proven to have on both an organizational and individual level.

According to Sluss, Klimchak and Holmes (2008), all employees have two seemingly preeminent relationships at work, namely (1) the relationship with their immediate supervisor and (2) the relationship with the organisation. These two relationships constitute the two types of internal communication, the communication with the employee's immediate supervisor and the corporate communication with the organisation. This study aims to investigate the former, the communication between the employee and the employee's supervisor.

This supervisor-employee communication has been referred to with different names throughout the years, but an early and rather popular definition was given by Jablin (1979), who defined superior-subordinate communication as all exchanges of information and influence between organizational members where one of whom has formal, organisational authority to direct and evaluate the activities of other organizational members. A more recent definition was given by Karanges (2014) who defined internal supervisor communication as the communication that occurs between supervisors and their employees. In this study, all communication that occurs between the supervisor and the employee(s) will simply be referred to as supervisor-employee communication.

As the supervisor and the employee(s) are on different levels of the organization, supervisor-employee communication is an inter-level communication process. Robbins and Judge (2015) define communication that flows from one level of an organization to a lower level as downward communication. They argue that when supervisors engage in downward communication, they must explain the reasons why decisions are being made, as well-explained decisions get higher levels of employee commitment and support. Furthermore, Neeley and Leonardi (2011) show that supervisors need to say the same things twice (or more), through a variety of communication channels to get their employees to do something. Robbins and Judge (2015) argue that another problem with downward communication is that it tends to be a one-way communication process, which means that supervisors inform their employees but rarely ask for their feedback.

Hiam (2003) distinguishes between two types of downward supervisor-employee communication: functional and motivational communication. Functional communication is

defined as task/topic-oriented while motivational communication is described as any communication that aims to stimulate employee engagement by asking the employees to get involved in whatever the supervisor is thinking about. He argues that motivation is a natural response to the situation the employees are put in at work, and that cheerleading or shouting at people to work harder does not work. This is in line with Rabey (2001) who states that supervisors cannot motivate their employees, they can only create a situation to which their employees will respond because they choose to. In addition, the employee involvement aspect of motivational communication corresponds with Tuttle (2003) who argues that the key for supervisors in motivating their employees is to make the employees feel like they are working with them, rather than for them.

Hiam (2003) presents a series of motivational communication techniques that supervisors can use, he argues, to turn everyday situations into opportunities to engage their employees in their work. One of these is the participative problem-solving process, where the supervisor involves the employee(s) in solving a problem rather than making a decision without consulting the employees. He argues that it is a win-win situation as stimulating problem-solving leads to increased levels of engagement among the employees and while it might not always lead to a better solution to the problem, it never generates a worse solution.

Glen (2006) highlights the importance of supervisors to develop an open feedback-oriented environment, as it is crucial for tracking the progress of not only the individual, but also the supervisor and the organisation as a whole. Mishra, Boynton and Mishra (2014) further describe that open communication has been shown to improve trust between employees and supervisors and argue that it leads to greater employee engagement.

2.2 Employee engagement

As noted by Saks (2006), employee engagement has become a widely used and popular term within both the business and the academic world. Therefore, it is interesting that there still are quite a few gaps in knowledge when it comes to understanding the concept. In the below text, a review of literature on the definition, drivers and benefits of employee engagement is presented.

While extensive research has been carried out within the area of employee engagement, an issue with this area of research is that there is no universal definition of the concept. Therefore, employee engagement has been referred to as ‘work engagement’ (Sonnentag, 2003), ‘job engagement’ (Kong, 2009), ‘organizational engagement’ (Saks, 2006) or simply ‘engagement’ (Crawford, LePine & Rich, 2010). Although they differ slightly, what all of these definitions have in common is that they all refer to the first formal definition of engagement that was presented by Kahn (1990) 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 popularity of Kahn’s definition is likely a consequence of it describing something that is fundamental in the common perception of employee engagement. That something is arguably the word emotion. For example, Maylett and Warner (2014) define employee engagement as an emotional state where we feel passionate, energetic and committed towards our work. In

turn, we fully invest our best selves – our hearts, spirits, minds and hands – in the work we do. This is in line with Quirke (2008) who states that engaged employees feel a strong emotional bond to their employer, recommending it to others and committing time and effort to help the organization succeed.

Maylett and Warner (2014) describe employee engagement by comparing it to employee satisfaction and refer to Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory. They argue that employees get satisfied when hygiene factors are met, while employees require capacity, reason, freedom and know-how to engage. Furthermore, they say that employee satisfaction is a prerequisite for employee engagement, however, satisfaction does not lead to engagement but is merely the price of admission.

2.2.1 Drivers of employee engagement

In his renowned study, Kahn (1990) describes that the level of employee engagement is based on the fulfilment of three psychological conditions: *meaningfulness*, *safety* and *availability*. He explains that employees seem to unconsciously ask themselves the following three questions in order to decide whether or not to engage themselves in a situation:

1. How meaningful is it for me to bring myself into this performance?
2. How safe is it to do so?
3. How available am I to do so?

Meaningfulness is further defined as sense of return on investment of self in role performances and is achieved when the employee feels worthwhile, useful and valuable – as though they make a difference and are not taken for granted. Safety is defined as sense of being able to show and employ self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status or career. Employees feel safe in situations that are trustworthy, secure, predictable and clear in terms of behavioural consequences. Lastly, availability is defined as sense of possessing the physical, emotional and psychological resources necessary for investing self in role performances. In order to achieve this, employees need to feel capable of driving physical, intellectual and emotional energies into role performance.

According to Maylett and Warner (2014), one of the main differences between employee satisfaction and employee engagement is that the organization owns and controls the former while the latter is a 50-50 responsibility between supervisor and employee. They mean that both parts need to buy into the concepts: the supervisor needs to establish an engaging work environment and the employee needs to choose to engage in it. Furthermore, they argue that there are five keys to unlock the power of engagement, which are:

Meaning – achieved when employees find purpose in what they do and understand that their efforts contribute to a greater cause that is important – to them.

Autonomy – the parameters are defined and understood by the employees and they are given the freedom to do their jobs in the way that they think works best and is the most fun.

Growth – the job is the perfect amount of challenging for the employees to master new skills and develop into better versions of themselves, both professionally and personally.

Impact – employees see and understand how their work contributes to not only the organization's performance, but also the success of their team and their personal goals.

Connection – achieved when the employees connect with their colleagues, identify with the values of the organization and take pride in what they do

The way Maylett and Warner (2014) describe employee engagement as a shared responsibility between the supervisor and the employee is in line with Robinson et al. (2004) who describe engagement as two-way. Furthermore, it also ties into the principle of self-management as defined by Thomas (2009). Self-management is described as the employee's responsibility in becoming engaged and employee engagement is explained to be achieved when the job provides intrinsic rewards and the employee engages in active self-management. Thomas (2009) further describes that there are four intrinsic rewards that drive employee engagement, these are:

- Sense of meaningfulness
- Sense of choice
- Sense of competence
- Sense of progress

The importance of intrinsic factors is further supported by Katz (2005) who argues that they are the main drivers for commitment and motivation. He highlights the need of skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback. In addition, Pink (2010) argues that intrinsic factors like mastery, worker autonomy and purpose are much more effective incentives than monetary gain when it comes to driving performance and personal satisfaction. An overview of the different author's definitions of drivers of employee engagement can be found in table 1 below.

Table 1. Overview of drivers of employee engagement

Author and year	**Drivers of employee engagement**
Kahn (1990)	He argues that the level of employee engagement is based on the fulfilment of: • Meaningfulness • Safety • Availability
Maylett and Warner (2014)	They explain that the five keys to unlocking engagement are: • Meaning • Autonomy • Growth • Impact • Connection
Thomas (2009)	He explains that employee engagement is driven by the following intrinsic rewards: • Sense of meaningfulness • Sense of choice

	• Sense of competence • Sense of progress
Katz (2005)	He argues that intrinsic work motivation is a result of the following task characteristics: • Skill variety • Task identity • Task significance • Autonomy • Feedback
Pink (2010)	He highlights the importance of self-direction for engagement and the three intrinsic factors: • Mastery • Worker autonomy • Purpose

In this study, employee engagement will be considered as a four-dimensional construct consisting of sense of meaningfulness, sense of autonomy, sense of competence and sense of progress. These dimensions are similar to the ones defined by Thomas (2009), except the second one being autonomy instead of choice. The reasoning behind this decision is because autonomy is the more common terminology that describes this dimensions, used by both Maylett and Warner (2014) and Katz (2005). Furthermore, the dimensions defined by Thomas (2009) were adopted as they are easy to comprehend and they can best be used to summarise the other author's drivers. A comparison of this study's dimensions to employee engagement and the dimensions defined by the other authors can be seen in table 2.

Table 2. Comparison of this study's dimensions to employee engagement and other author's definitions

Dimensions	**Sources**
Sense of meaningfulness	Sense of meaningfulness (Thomas, 2009) Meaningfulness (Kahn, 1990) Meaning (Maylett & Warner, 2014) Task significance (Katz, 2005) Purpose (Pink, 2010)
Sense of autonomy	Sense of choice (Thomas, 2009) Availability (Kahn, 1990) Autonomy (Maylett & Warner, 2014) Autonomy (Katz, 2005) Worker autonomy (Pink, 2010)
Sense of competence	Sense of competence (Thomas, 2009) Impact (Maylett & Warner, 2014) Task identity (Katz, 2005) Mastery (Pink, 2010)
Sense of progress	Sense of progress (Thomas, 2009) Growth (Maylett & Warner, 2014) Feedback (Katz, 2005)

2.2.2 Benefits of employee engagement

Employee engagement has multiple times been linked to desirable outcomes for all kinds of businesses. While some authors quite generically have claimed that employee engagement is critical to the success of modern organisations, other authors have dug deeper and performed quantitative studies to get a more specific understanding of how engagement affects organisations. For example, Xu & Cooper Thomas (2011) discuss how higher levels of employee engagement are associated with higher performance, reduced turnover and higher earnings per employee and other benefits. In parallel, Gallup (2016) compared organisations with highly engaged employees to organisations with low employee engagement and found a median percentage difference of 21% profitability, 17% production productivity, 70% fewer safety incidents, 41% less absenteeism and 40% less quality defects. Furthermore, Thomas (2009) states that high levels of intrinsic rewards lead to higher professional development, job satisfaction, commitment to the organisation, retention and reduced stress.

The degree to which these benefits will be existing in the in the organization and among the employees can be expected to vary depending on the level of engagement among the employees. Thomas (2009) breaks down engagement in three different levels: committed members, compliant members and complacent members. Jim Clifton on Brooks (2019) also defines three groups, which he refers to as the: highly engaged, not engaged and actively disengaged. According to Maylett and Warner (2014), employees fall into one of the four categories of engagement: fully engaged, key contributors, opportunity group and fully disengaged. An overview of the different author's definition of levels of engagement is illustrated in figure 1 below.

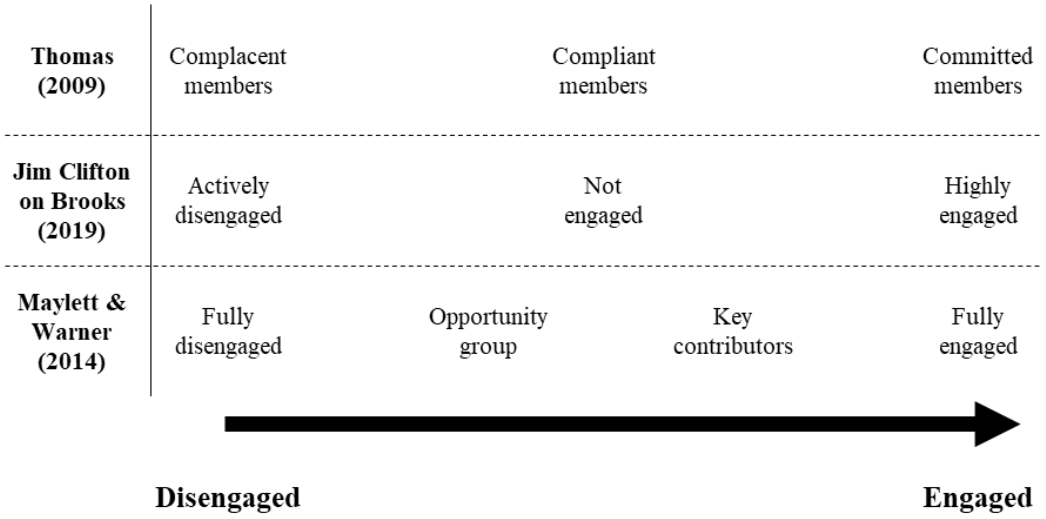

Figure 1. Visual comparison of levels of engagement
Sources: Thomas, 2009; Brooks, 2019; Maylett & Warner, 2014

What all of these definitions have in common is that the top groups (committed members, highly engaged and fully engaged) are defined as consistent and tend to remain engaged unless circumstances significantly change within the organization. This is supported by Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá and Bakker (2002) who describe engagement as a pervasive

affective cognitive state that is not tied to a specific object, event, individual or behaviour. Furthermore, the middle groups are viewed as the groups to target as they have been proven to be the largest and considered by Jim Clifton as the low hanging fruit (Brooks, 2019).

2.3 Supervisor-employee communication and employee engagement

Several researchers have noted the importance of supervisor-employee communication when it comes to generating and maintaining employee engagement (Iyer & Israel, 2012; Verčič & Vokić, 2017; Karanges, 2014). However, researchers disagree when it comes to defining who is responsible for engaging the employees within the organisation.

Quirke (2008) argues that the key to creating engagement lies with a company's leaders. He further discusses that it is their job to communicate in ways that connects the dots for their employees to see how their individual success contributes to the organisation's success, as this is argued to win commitment. In addition, Saks (2006) argues that when employees perceive a high level of support from their supervisor, they respond with higher levels of engagement. Furthermore, Robbins and Judge (2015) argue that supervisors that inspire their employees to a greater sense of mission increases employee engagement.

In contrast, Thomas (2009) argues that supervisors cannot force their employees to become engaged but instead they need to communicate with their employees in a way that triggers their self-management processes. In agreement, Maylett and Warner (2014) argue that employees will not engage until they have capacity, reason, freedom and know-how to do so. Furthermore, the way Hiam (2003) and Rabey (2001) define motivation as a natural response to the situation the employees are put in argues that supervisor-employee communication is unlikely to have a direct impact on employee engagement. Therefore, the conceptual framework developed for this study consists of three stages that illustrates how supervisor-employee communication is assumed to generate employee engagement (see figure 2 below).

Figure 2. Conceptual framework of how supervisor-employee communication generates engagement

Based on the findings in this literature review, supervisor-employee communication is thought to have an indirect impact on employee engagement, hence the arrow to the "engaging work environment"-block in the above figure. Furthermore, how engaging the work environment is for the employee is assumed to be linked to how strong the four dimensions (meaningfulness, autonomy, competence and progress) are in the job role.

As employee engagement is thought to be a shared responsibility between the supervisor and the employee, it is only achieved when an engaging work environment is established and the employee chooses to buy into it. This is illustrated with the dotted arrow between the "Engaging work environment" block and the "Employee engagement" block.

2.4 Summary

In this chapter the two main concepts of this study; supervisor-employee communication and employee engagement have been discussed separately and problematized to show how the literature suggest they relate to one another. Lastly, a conceptual framework was developed and presented to illustrate this study's view of how the concepts relate to each other.

3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter is devoted to explaining what choices were made regarding the methodology of the study and why these were chosen. At the end of the chapter, the credibility of the study is discussed. An overview of this study's methodology can be found in table 3.

Table 3. Overview of methodology

Research purpose	Descriptive-exploratory
Research approach	Deductive and qualitative
Research strategy	Holistic single case study
Empirical data collection method	Semi-structured, individual, face-to-face interviews
Sampling	Maximum variation (purposive)
Data analysis method	Thematic analysis

3.1 Research purpose

According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009) the most common classification of research purpose is the threefold one that includes exploratory, descriptive and explanatory purposes. As their names imply, studies with these purposes aim to explore, describe or explain a phenomena. As research purposes are not always straightforward enough to simply fall into one of these three categories, Saunders et al. (2009) explain that research projects may have more than one purpose.

As the objective of this study is to deepen the understanding of an already researched area, i.e. what role supervisor-employee communication plays in employee engagement, this study can be categorized as descriptive. However, this study investigates the link between these two concepts in the rather unexplored setting that is the manufacturing industry. Moreover, it considers the supervisor-employee communication from the employee perspective instead of the more traditional management perspective. This means that this study has an exploratory purpose as well, which gives the study a descriptive-exploratory purpose.

3.2 Research approach

Saunders et al. (2009) explain that research projects can be either inductive or deductive. The main difference between the two approaches is the order of which the data is collected. The inductive researcher collects the data first and develops the theory afterwards, while the deductive researcher explores theory first to develop a conceptual framework which is then tested against empirical data.

As this study is based on existing theory and research on supervisor-employee communication and employee engagement and a conceptual framework has been developed, a deductive approach was deemed to be most suitable. In addition to the study having a deductive approach, it has a non-numerical qualitative approach as it aims to provide a better understanding of a phenomena in a new context. For such purposes, Saunders et al. (2009) argue that a qualitative approach is most suitable.

3.3 Research strategy

When choosing a research strategy, Yin (2009) presents the following alternatives: experiment, survey, archive analysis, history and case study. While he states that all of these strategies can be used for any of the three research purposes, Saunders et al (2009) argue that whether the study has an inductive or a deductive approach affects the applicability of the research strategies.

According to Saunders et al. (2009) the choice of research strategy should be based on the objective of the study. In addition, Yin (2009) states that each research strategy has advantages and disadvantages depending on (a) the type of research question posed, (b) the extent of control an investigator has over actual behavioural events, and (c) the degree of focus on contemporary as opposed to historical events. Yin (2009) explains that case studies are preferred when (a) 'how' or 'why' questions are being posed, (b) the investigator has little control over events and (c) the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life experience. Based on this information, this study was conducted with a case study research strategy.

Yin (2003) explains that there are four different case study strategies, defined within the two dimensions: (1) single case vs multiple case and (2) holistic case vs embedded case. Saunders et al. (2009) argue that single case studies are most commonly used when the goal is to observe and analyse a critical, extreme or unique phenomena that few have considered before. In addition, Saunders et al. (2009) explain that the difference between a holistic and embedded case is the unit of analysis, as holistic cases tend to use one unit of analysis and exclude other factors to enable a more specific investigation.

As the findings of this study are not intended to be generalized further than within the rather specific setting as discussed, and all data will be collected from one organization, this study is classified as a single case study. Furthermore, this study aims to investigate the impact of supervisor-employee communication on employee engagement and therefore assumes it to be the only factor affecting employee engagement. In other words, supervisor-employee communication is the only unit of analysis, which means that this study is classified as a holistic case.

3.4 Data collection method

The data collection methods that were used in this study differed with the type of data that was collected. Therefore, the methods for theoretical and empirical data collection are discussed separately in the two headers below.

3.4.1 Theoretical data collection

The theoretical data that was collected for this study was mainly collected through Google Scholar and Luleå University of Technology's electronic library. Key search words were identified for the area of research and the articles/books that were referenced were chosen out of relevance and number of citations. Among the key search words were: *Supervisor-employee communication and employee engagement; Internal communication and employee engagement; Engagement in the manufacturing industry; Drivers of employee engagement; Consequences of employee engagement*.

3.4.2 Empirical data collection

The empirical data collected for this study was collected via semi-structured, individual, face-to-face interviews with employees from the shop floor of the organisation studied. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as Saunders et al (2009) argue that they allow for more freedom to ask for follow-up questions that might not have been planned, which in turn offers the possibility to gain a deeper understanding of the problem of phenomenon. Furthermore, King (2004) refers to semi-structured interviews as qualitative research interviews due to their frequent usage in that particular type of research. As this study used a qualitative approach, this further supported the use of semi-structured interviews. The interview structure used for the interviews in this study can be found in appendix A.

All interviews took place during working hours and in order to avoid any disturbances to the production, all interviews were scheduled on the day of the interview. This way the production teams could ensure that the employee that was interviewed was properly covered and the interview had a minimal impact on the production. Furthermore, each interview was limited to 30 minutes, as this time frame was agreed with the management.

As the interviewees' prior knowledge about supervisor-employee communication and employee engagement varied, the first five minutes of each interview was allocated to provide an introduction to the two concepts. When the interviewee had been familiarised with the concepts, the interview started.

With the interviewees' permission, all interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. However, to guarantee the anonymity of the interviewees, a promise was given to never share these recordings with a third party and for the recordings to be deleted when all required analysis had been carried out.

3.5 Sampling

According to Saunders et al. (2009) there are two main sampling techniques: probability sampling and non-probability sampling. In the former, all individuals of the studied population have the same probability of being selected while in the latter they do not.

Given the setting of this study and the fact that it was a single case study, the studied population was limited to the shop floor of the studied organisation. Furthermore, due to limited accessibility within the organisation, the studied population was further limited to the shop floor of one of the organisation's production departments. The studied department consisted of 11 production areas working two shifts, totalling 22 supervisors and an estimate of 200-250 employees. For data credibility reasons, a decision was made to limit the data collection to one interview per supervisor, limiting the data collection to 22 interviews. Saunders et al. (2009) refer to this sampling technique as maximum variation purposive sampling.

In order to find volunteer interviewees within the studied population, a participant information sheet (see appendix A) was prepared and sent out to all 22 production teams. As some teams had no volunteers and some teams had no capability to spare an employee, only eight interviews could be conducted. In two teams there were more than one volunteer, in those cases a convenience sampling technique was used.

3.6 Data analysis method

Merriam (2014) highlights the importance of not separating the collection and analysis of data in qualitative research, as it might make the researcher oblivious to potential trends in the data. With this in mind, the empirical data analysis in this study was an ongoing process that started with the first interview and went on until the analysis was completed.

The data analysis method that was used in this study was a type of thematic analysis. This method was chosen as Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that it is a very common and effective analysis method used in qualitative research. Its effectiveness comes from the standardised way of identifying, analysing and defining the connection between data using themes. This way, Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that the method enables the researcher to more clearly see what each interview contributes with.

For the data relating to the four dimensions of employee engagement, the data analysis structure presented by Gioia, Corley and Hamilton (2013) was used. Their method consists of three phases: identifying 1st order concepts, developing 2nd order themes and defining the aggregate dimensions. As this investigates supervisor-employee communication as an antecedent to employee engagement, these aggregate dimensions were pre-defined as the four dimensions of employee engagement (meaningfulness, autonomy, competence & progress). A visualisation of the data analysis structure can be seen in figure 3 below.

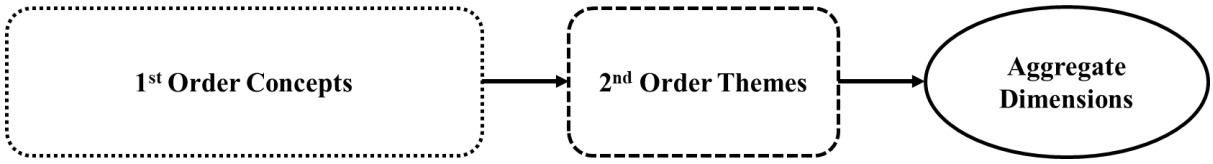

Figure 3. Data analysis method. Adapted from Corley & Gioia (2004) p.184

The *first phase* of this method consisted of reading and re-reading the transcriptions, while 1st order codes were highlighted and written down on a separate sheet, according to Gioia et al. (2013). As many codes as possible were noted and simultaneously assessed to ensure their relevance to the study and how they compare to the literature review. When no more codes could be identified, they were cross-analysed and the 1st order concepts were developed.

The *second phase* consisted of analysing and grouping the 1st order concepts to develop more generic themes, as suggested by Gioia et al. (2013). Once again, as many themes as possible were developed and afterwards all irrelevant, insufficiently supported by data or too similar themes were removed.

In the *third phase* the themes were cross-analysed and compared to understand how they relate to each other and what impact they have on the aggregate dimensions. According to Gioia et al (2013), the third phase is also where the aggregate dimensions should be defined, but as explained above these were pre-defined on purpose.

3.7 Credibility

Saunders et al. (2009), Yin (2009) and Merriam (2014) all highlight the importance of considering the reliability and validity when conducting research, regardless of research type, to attain credible findings. Saunders et al. (2009) argue that the quality of a study increases if

the researcher simply keeps the reliability and validity in mind when conducting the research. However, there are several quality-assuring activities that can be performed to increase a study's credibility and in the below sections the activities performed in this study are discussed.

3.7.1 Reliability

Saunders et al. (2009) explain that reliability refers to how consistent the results would be if the data collection and analysis of a study would be repeated by other researchers. Merriam (2014) argues that it is impossible to achieve 100% reliability due to the fact that human behaviour is never static. Furthermore, she addresses qualitative research separately and says that reliability is extra difficult to attain using this approach as it is based on interpretations which vary depending on the researcher's perspective. Robson (2002) emphasises four threats to reliability; participant error, participant bias, observer error and observer bias.

To reduce participant error in this study, several interviews were conducted, at different times of the day, over the course of a week's time. In addition, all eight interviews investigated eight different supervisor-employee relationships. Merriam (2014) refers to this as maximum variation in the sample selection and lists is as a strategy for promoting reliability. Furthermore, in order to reduce participant bias all interviews were conducted in a secluded meeting room, with employees who had volunteered to be interviewed and their anonymity was guaranteed.

Observer error was minimised by repeating and re-phrasing questions, without leading the respondent, when there was an ambiguity in the answer provided. In addition, as all of the interviews were recorded, any initial observer errors could be identified when listening to the recordings and transcribing the data. In addition, when presenting the empirical data, as many direct quotes as possible were used (see chapter 4). This also minimises the risk of observer bias, as any biased interpretation of data will be noticed by peer-reviewers and other readers of this report.

3.7.2 Validity

Saunders et al. (2009) describe validity as whether the findings are really about what they appear to be about. Both Saunders et al. (2009) and Merriam (2014) further define that there are two types of validity, internal and external validity.

Merriam (2014) describes that internal validity deals with how well the research findings match reality. She mentions that this is an issue in qualitative research, as this kind of research is based on the respondents' perception of reality. However, Merriam (2014) discusses several strategies to improving the internal validity and the main strategy that has been used in this study is peer-reviewing. Throughout this study, input has been given on all chapters of this report by co-students and the academic supervisor.

The second type of validity is external validity, which Merriam (2014) describes as the generalisability of the study's findings. Yin (2009) discusses the issue of generalising the findings of case studies, as they often are too specific and are based on insufficient amount of data. This is further highlighted to be extra difficult for single case studies. However, this study has never been intended to generalise the findings further than within the specific setting so it is not a significant weakness.

3.8 Summary

This chapter has been dedicated to presenting the choices made for the methodology of this study. For most choices, the available alternatives have been presented and then arguments have been presented to why the specific selection was made. In addition to the methodology choices, the credibility of the study has been discussed.

4. EMPIRICAL DATA

This chapter contains a presentation of the empirical data collected for this study. The data is presented following the same structure that was used when the data was collected (see appendix A). An important note is that the organisation studied refers to supervisors on the shop floor as process supporters (abbreviated PS).

4.1 Supervisor-employee communication

Sense of meaningfulness

When the respondents were asked about how their daily communication with their supervisor affects their sense of meaningfulness, all but one respondent expressed that it has an impact. R6 was the only respondent who did not see a clear connection, R6 said *"I definitely feel part of something bigger, but I am not sure it is due to my PS. I think it comes from upper management"*.

The seven respondents that said it has an impact were asked to elaborate on what kind of interactions affect their sense of meaningfulness and how. R1 argued that communication that enhanced a sense of involvement had a positive impact on the sense of meaningfulness. R1 said *"It is nice to hear what is going on rather than just getting a list and getting told to start producing parts. A lot of information is filtered down via the PS and the more you get involved the more you feel valued and meaningful"*. R7 expressed similar thoughts by saying *"Sometimes lifting the focus from production to a business level makes me feel more meaningful"*. R7 continued with *"If I was to get more information about the company itself it would help me see the bigger picture and how I am a part of it"*. R8 brought up involvement too, but in a slightly different context. R8 said that *"I am working very closely with my PS and I feel involved in what is going on. The encouragement I get makes me feel important and meaningful"*.

Another factor that several respondents brought up was the feeling that their work had an impact outside of their production area. R3, who has been working for the organisation for several years explained that *"As the business has grown, there is less communication and recognition. It used to be a lot more personal and it felt like I had a lot more impact on the end product"*. R5 also mentioned this to be an important factor, by saying *"I make a quite important part of the end product so I feel like I have a major impact"*. R4 pointed to the feeling of making an impact as a factor for a sense of meaningfulness by saying *"My PS acknowledges that I am an expert in my area, which makes me feel like I have a big influence. That provides me with meaning"*. Lastly, R2 also brought up the importance of feeling like an expert when expressing that *"If you know every process for your product you feel more involved in the end product and you feel like an expert"*.

Sense of autonomy

When the respondents were asked about their sense of autonomy in their job roles, all of them mentioned that they experienced it as being limited. However, no one described it as being due to their PS but rather the job role itself. R1 said that *"Autonomy is limited due to the nature of the job role"*. In fact, all of the respondents explained that their interactions with their PS has a positive impact on their sense of autonomy. R2 said that *"My PS rarely tells me what to do, he mainly supports me and that shows trust. He gives me all the freedom my job role allows for"*. R5 and R7 both used the words "mutual trust" to describe their relationship with their PS

and explained that it gives them a sense of autonomy. R3 expressed similar thoughts it in a different way when saying that *"My PS leaves me alone and I like that, it shows confidence"*.

R4, R6 and R8 all discussed how their sense of autonomy is affected by following work instructions. Although, R6 felt like it was possible to be creative because *"If I find a better way to do a process I can just bring it up with my PS and it will be looked into"*. R8 expressed similar thoughts when saying that *"Of course it has to be standardised but I have the possibility to change because my PS listens to me"*. R4's opinion on the work instructions was that they are necessary because *"In the end, they are there to protect me really"*.

Sense of competence

While all of the respondents stated that they felt competent in their respective job roles, not everyone was convinced that it was due to their communication with their PS. R7, the least experienced respondent with eight months of working experience in the organisation said that *"I do feel competent, yes. I would say a lot of it due to the communication with my PS"*. R7 further explained that *"When I do something good I get recognition and I feel like my PS appreciates my work. When I do something not so good I get constructive feedback that helps me grow"*. The most experienced respondent with ten years of working experience in the organisation, R3, stated that *"I have been here for so long that I rarely get any feedback on my performance. To be honest, I do not really mind getting more feedback either"*. Instead, R3 explained that *"Being asked to train a new starter gives me a sense of competence"*. This was also highlighted by R1, R4 and R8. In addition, R5 discussed that *"If we have a problem, my PS and I discuss the alternatives and pick the best way together"* and explained that it led to a greater sense of competence.

All respondents but R3 brought up the importance of recognition from their PS as a driver for their sense of competence. R8 explained it as *"If you go above and beyond your expectations and not get recognition for it you will start asking yourself why"*. R1, R2, R4 and R6 all said that they thought that more feedback from their PS, both recognition and constructive feedback would increase their sense of competence. Furthermore, both R2 and R6 would appreciate more individual feedback and less team performance measures to boost their sense of competence. R2 explained that *"Sometimes you might feel like you are being 'dragged down' by average team measures"*.

Both R1 and R5 highlighted that there is an important difference between feedback that is suitable to share to the team and feedback that should be addressed one-to-one. R1 stated that *"When recognition is given in a meeting it is more rewarding for me personally"*. Furthermore, R5 explained that although it is rare *"You feel less competent when your PS highlights an issue and brings up your name in a meeting in front of a big group. I think that should be communicated one-to-one"*.

Sense of progress

Out of all respondents, only R5 and R8 said that they could see a progress from day to day. R5 said *"We get constant feedback from the next station and from that you can track your progress. As a team at least"*. R5 continued by mentioning that feedback on the individual progress was given by the PS every six months, by assessing the 'training matrix' in one-to-one meetings. R5 explained that *"They always compare the training matrix to the previous one. If there are no changes, they try to train you on a new job stick"*. R8 described that *"My PS gives me*

continuous feedback on my performance, it helps me grow and I feel like I get better in my job".

The other respondents expressed similar opinions to R1 who said that *"Our days are pretty much the same from day to day"*. R2, R3 and R4 all expressed that they felt as if it was up to them to track their own progress. R2 explained that *"My PS does not update me, I look at the training matrix myself"*. Similarly, R3 said that *"I track my progress by counting mistakes, quality defects and so on"*.

R6 and R7 both described that they felt like they made a lot of progress in the first months but that it eventually slowed down. R7 continued by saying that *"In a way it is logical, because you get a hang of it. It becomes a routine"*.

How comfortable are you in providing feedback to your PS?

To this questions, all respondents answered that they were very comfortable in providing feedback to their PS. When asked to elaborate on what has made them feel comfortable, several explanations were given. R1 said that *"My PS is very approachable, which is an important factor. Feeling valued by and having trust in your PS greatly increases your comfortability in providing feedback"*. R4 also highlighted the importance of the PS being 'approachable' to generate comfortableness in providing feedback and R3 said *"My PS is just very easy to speak to"*. R8 also highlighted the importance of the PS being a good communicator.

R5 explained that *"I have a good relationship with my PS and I think it is about their personality. If they are nice to you, you are nice to them and you want to make sure you deliver"*. R7 described that *"What I appreciate is that, no matter how busy my PS is – I mean he might have 10 papers in from of him and someone on the phone, he always has time for me. His openness and attitude makes me feel important"*. R2 and R6 could not specify what trait of their respective PS that made them feel comfortable in providing feedback to them.

Do you experience any barriers to communicating with your PS?

None of the respondents could think of any apparent barriers to communication with their PS other than occasional time pressure, which was brought up by all respondents but R2 and R6. R1 described it as *"They are very busy sometimes but when they are there they are the best people you can have. You have to respect that they are busy"*. R3 mentioned that *"The general barrier is time pressure. It is normally ok – but if I need to properly talk to my PS it is not always possible"*. This was also brought up by R7 who said that *"The only thing I can think of is when my PS has to go to meetings. Working without a PS can be tough"*. R2 and R6 could not think of any barriers at all and R5 said that *"Time pressure is not really affecting me. I think the most important thing is being able to communicate openly, which I can"*.

4.2 Engaging work environment

Does your work environment encourage you to become engaged?

To this question, all respondents but one said that their work environment encourages them to become engaged but that it could be better. R2 was the only respondent that did not give a straight answer to this question, but instead described it as *"I tend to motivate myself. I cannot evaluate if the work environment pushes me to become engaged of if it is myself"*.

The other respondents were asked to elaborate on what has made their work environment engaging. R1, who has been working within the organisation for 10 months said that *"This is*

the first time I am doing this kind of work but I definitely enjoy it more than I thought I would. Learning new things and being challenged keeps engagement up". R6 described that *"Some people I know are very restricted in their jobs. That is not the case for me. Also, our team is rather small and it helps our PS understand each person's goals. If you have 20 people in your team it is difficult for the PS to understand each person and you cannot build that confidence"*.

R5 explained that things had drastically improved from a previous working environment where the communication with the PS was described as non-existent. R5 said *"My current work environment is really good. If the relationship with your PS is bad you do not want to progress, you just do what you have to. If it is good, you want to give 100%"*. R8 also described how the work environment had become much more engaging since they got a new PS by saying that *"My previous PS was very negative and did not encourage me to improve myself or my area. It made you come in, do your job and go home. You did not get involved because it did not feel like it was worth it"*. R8 continued by explaining that *"The team was very despondent and it did not feel like things were changing for the better. Now it definitely does"*. R3, R4 and R7 could not specify what makes their work environment engaging.

How could your work environment become more engaging for you?

When the respondents were asked how their respective work environments could become more engaging for them, R1, R2 and R3 all brought up involvement. R1 said *"Being more involved in quality issues and general discussions in my area. I want to know as much as I possibly can, even if I might not have the answers"*. Furthermore, R2 highlighted the importance of *"Getting involved when showing interest in doing so"*. In addition, R3 discussed how the work environment has changed over the years by saying that *"Nowadays it feels like a conveyor belt. Before you were way more involved from start to finish and it gave me a greater sense of achievement"*. R3 continued by explaining that *"Sometimes I would come in a bit earlier because I wanted to put some extra time into the product. If you were not done by the end of the shift you would stay. Nowadays we are on a takt and if I am not done when the shift ends it is not really my fault"*.

R2, R5 and R7 all discussed recognition and responsibility. R2 highlighted the importance of *"Being noticed for going the extra mile"*. R5 explained that *"I was recently given a bit more responsibility and now I am motivated to give more to show I can handle it"*. R7 said that direct recognition, not only from the PS but also higher management does a lot. R4, R6 and R8 could not think of any improvements.

4.3 Employee engagement

How engaged do you consider yourself to be in your job role?

All respondents considered themselves to be mid-to-high engaged. R2 was the only one who claimed to be fully engaged, when asked to elaborate R2 said *"I am fully committed to my job role. Normally, people's motivation naturally drops with time. In a funny way, to me it is vice versa. I cannot really explain it but I truly enjoy what I do"*.

The other respondents can be divided into two different groups, because while R1, R4 and R8 said that their work environments could be more engaging, R3, R6 and R7 thought that they were the reason they are not fully engaged. R3 described it as *"I think I would be more engaged if I was in a higher position and I have been offered one, but I am happy where I am"*. R6 expressed that *"I am not always going all in because I have more work to do at home. When it*

quiets down I can put myself in more at work and go the extra mile". Lastly R7 explained that *"I would say I am medium engaged, mainly due to myself. I enjoy my job but this is not really what I want to do"*. R5 could not say what could be improved.

What are the most important factors for your level of engagement?

When the respondents were asked about what factors are most important for their engagement, a lot of different answers were provided. However, R1, R2 and R7 all highlighted the importance of sense of progress. R1 also discussed the sense of meaningfulness, which was brought up by R3 too. R4 and R6 both said that they are all equally important and could therefore not pick one of two. Lastly, R5 and R8 both discussed the relationship with their PS to be the most important factor. R8 argued that the relationship with the PS affects most of the factors for R8's engagement by saying *"If you do not get along with your PS you are less likely to put yourself out and help your PS and your team"*.

4.4 Summary

In this chapter the raw empirical data collected for this study has been presented question by question, following the interview structure used. In the next chapter, this data is broken down, analysed and linked to theory.

5. ANALYSIS

This chapter contains an analysis of the empirical data that was presented in the previous chapter and compares it to the findings in the literature review. To attain a logical structure to the analysis, this chapter uses the same sub-headers as in the empirical data chapter.

5.1 Supervisor-employee communication

Sense of meaningfulness

As all but one respondent acknowledged that their daily communication with their supervisor affects their sense of meaningfulness, this relationship is clearly active. Furthermore, when assessing the answers provided to what type of interactions affect the respondents' sense of meaningfulness, two themes surfaced.

The first theme is *involvement*. R1 and R7 both expressed that when they get involved in communication relating to the bigger picture and not just their production area, it makes them feel more meaningful. In addition, R8 discussed involvement from a slightly different perspective. R8 said that working closely with the supervisor boosted the sense of involvement of what is going, which in turn boosted R8's sense of meaningfulness. Both of these two discussions on involvement relate to the motivational communication defined by Hiam (2003) as stimulating employees' engagement by asking them to get involved in whatever the supervisor is thinking about. It also relates to Tuttle (2003) who argues that supervisors need to make their employees feel like they are working with them, rather than for them.

The second theme is *impact*. R2, R3, R4 and R5 all described how feeling like their work made an impact on the end product was a driver for their sense of meaningfulness. This is very much in line with Maylett and Warner (2014) who argue that impact is one of the 'five keys' to engagement. While the importance of impact is clear, the empirical findings in this study argue that impact is a driver for sense of meaningfulness rather than a direct driver for employee engagement (see figure 4).

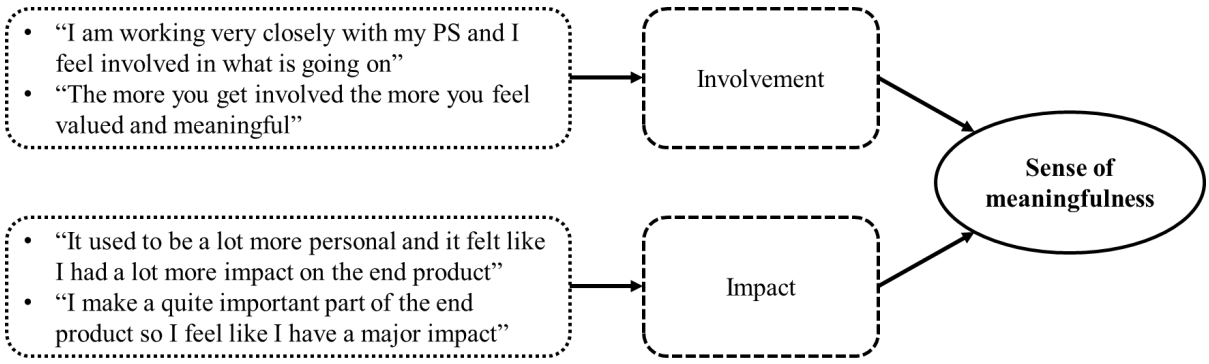

Figure 4. Dimension 1 - Sense of meaningfulness

Sense of autonomy

As anticipated, all respondents described their sense of autonomy as being limited in their job roles. However, interestingly enough, none of the respondents highlighted this as a big issue as they felt that their supervisors gave them all the freedom their job roles allowed for. Once again, two themes appeared when analysing the feedback on the sense of autonomy dimension.

The first theme is *trust*. R2, R3, R5 and R7 all mentioned or alluded to the importance of trust when it comes to fostering a sense of autonomy. The respondents who felt like they could trust their supervisors and that their supervisors trusted them expressed that the mutual trust had a positive impact on their sense of autonomy. This is in agreement with Mishra et al. (2014) and Thomas, Zolin and Hartman (2009) who argue that communication improves trust between employees and supervisors and that trust in turn leads to greater employee engagement. However, rather than having a direct impact on employee engagement, the findings of this study show that trust has an indirect impact on employee engagement.

The second theme is having *parameters defined and explained*. This theme is based on the feedback gathered from R4, R6 and R8 who all acknowledged that following work instructions restricts their sense of autonomy but still think that they are necessary. R4 expressed it as *"In the end, they are there to protect me really"* which is a good example of how the parameters of the job have been explained to R4. R6 and R8 shared R4's view of the work instructions and said that they felt like they had a sense of autonomy because if they figured out a better way to do a process they could bring it up with their supervisor. The importance of defining and making sure the employees understand the parameters of their jobs is highlighted by Maylett and Warner (2014), so this findings also relate to literature. The two themes of the sense of autonomy dimension are illustrated in figure 5 below.

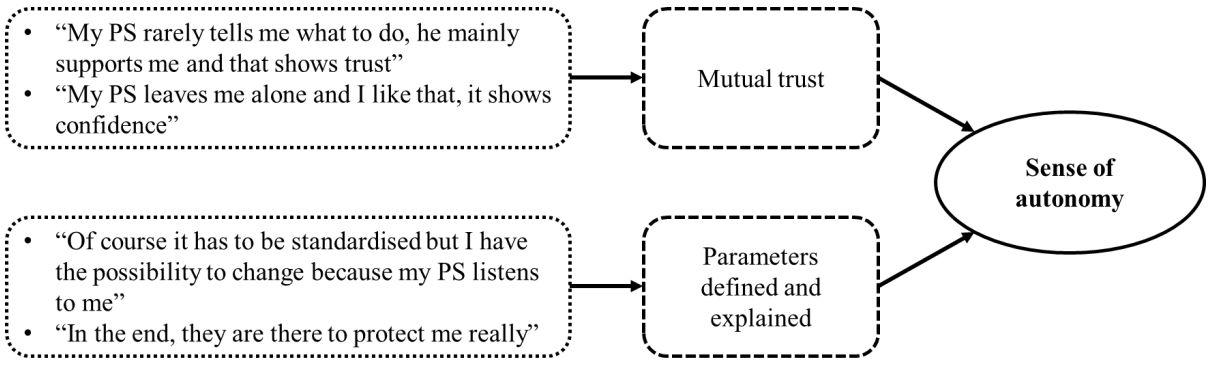

Figure 5. Dimension 2 - Sense of autonomy

Sense of competence

This dimension was harder than the two above dimensions to prove as active, because while all respondents stated that they felt competent in their job roles, only R7 and R8 explained that communication with their supervisors was a main driver for their sense of competence. However, R1, R2, R4 and R6 all thought that more *recognition and feedback* from their supervisor would increase their sense of competence, so in the end all respondents but R3 believed that communication with their supervisor had an impact on their sense of autonomy. This is further supported by theory, as Thomas (2009) argues that skill recognition and positive feedback both are building blocks for the sense of competence dimension. Hence, recognition and feedback became the first theme for driving a sense of competence.

The second theme is *responsibility*. This is defined as responsibilities given to the employees from the supervisor as a result of their competence. This theme is based on the feedback provided by R1, R3, R4 and R8 who all said that their sense of competence was positively affected when their supervisor asked them to train new starters in their production areas. In

addition, it is also based on R5 who discussed that *"If we have a problem, my PS and I discuss the alternatives and pick the best way together"*. This increased responsibility is an excellent example of the participative problem-solving process defined by Hiam (2003), which is argued to increase engagement. The two themes discussed for sense of competence is visualised in figure 6 below.

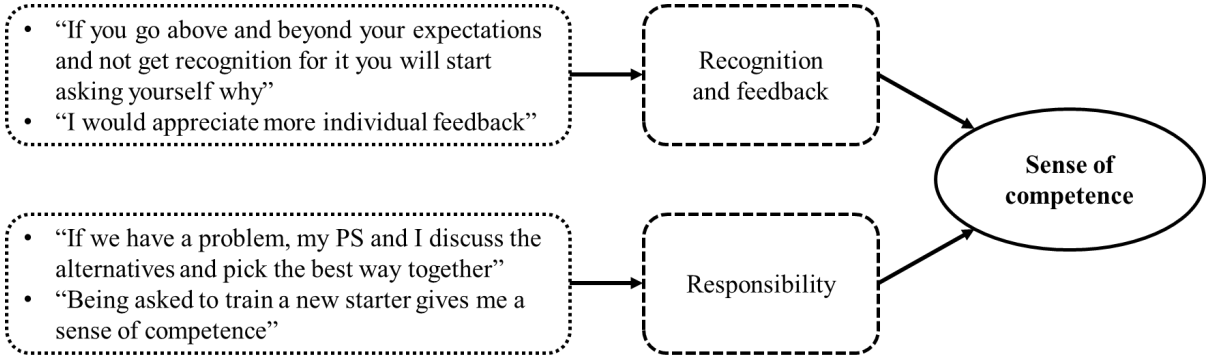

Figure 6. Dimension 3 - Sense of competence

Sense of progress

Out of the four dimensions to employee engagement, this was the hardest one to prove to be affected by supervisor-employee communication. Mainly because R2, R3 and R4 expressed that they all felt like it was up to them to track their own progress, but also because R6 and R7 both discussed that there is only so much progress to be made before it becomes routine.

The only respondents who said that they could see a progress was R5 and R8. However, both of them explained that it was due to communication with their supervisors. Furthermore, R5 and R8 described the feedback from the supervisor as "constant" and "continuous" in contrast to the other respondents who mentioned their bi-yearly one-to-ones with their supervisors. This sounds familiar to the 'open feedback-oriented environment' as defined by Glen (2006), which is described as crucial for tracking the progress of not only the individual, but also the supervisor and the organisation as a whole. Although this was only discussed by two respondents and there was no possibility to check it with the other respondents, developing an *open feedback-oriented environment* is defined as a theme for a sense of progress. This is done due to the strong correlation between its existence and the two respondents' sense of progress (see figure 7 below).

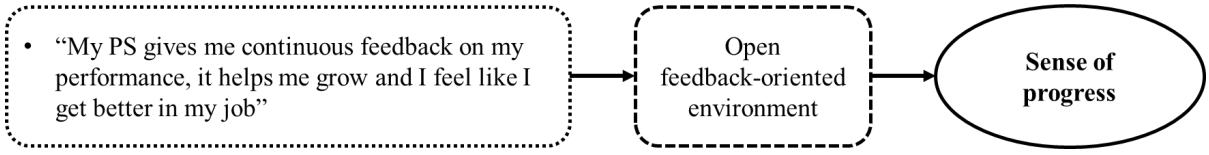

Figure 7. Dimension 4 - Sense of progress

How comfortable are you in providing feedback to your PS?

As all respondents described themselves as very comfortable in providing feedback to their supervisors, the data collected became very one-sided highlighting "dos" and not a lot of "don'ts" for supervisors. Furthermore, most respondents explained their comfort in providing feedback to their supervisor with rather vague descriptions of their supervisors as being

"approachable" or "easy to speak to". Therefore, the data collected via this question became hard to analyse.

Do you experience any barriers to communicating with your PS?

Similarly to the previous question, the data collected via this question was also very one-sided as none of the respondents highlighted any apparent barriers to communicating with their supervisors. Although all but two respondents brought up time pressure as an occasional barrier to communicating with their supervisor, none of the respondents considered it to be a big barrier as most of the time they felt like they had enough time to communicate. Hence, no barriers could be identified to supervisor-employee communication in this study.

5.2 Engaging work environment

Does your work environment encourage you to become engaged?

Although seven out of eight respondents answered yes to this question, only four were able to specify what makes their work environment engaging. Moreover, these four respondents' answers were rather different. While R1 pointed towards learning new things and being challenged as being the engaging factor, R6 argued that the sense of autonomy in the job role was the key for R6. However, R6 continued by discussing the size of the team and explained that *"Our team is rather small"* and that it helped their supervisor understand each employee's goal. It makes sense that the size of the team has an impact on the quality of the supervisor-employee, as the bigger the team is the less time the supervisor has to communicate with each employee.

R5 and R8 both described their current, engaging work environments by comparing them to their previous, not so engaging work environments. What both respondents agreed was the main difference was the change in supervisor. They both described that their relationships with their previous supervisors were poor and that it kept them from wanting to *"give 100%"* and get involved because *"it did not feel like it was worth it"*. They both described how they used to come into work, do only what they were told to do and go home, which is a rather good description of disengaged employees. This also confirms Maylett and Warner (2014) who argue that employees require reason to engage. In their previous, not so engaging work environments R5 and R8 were clearly not given enough incentives to become engaged. Their new supervisors appear to have created a work environment that does.

How could your work environment become more engaging for you?

Unsurprisingly, the answers to this question varied quite a lot from respondent to respondent. However, when compiling the data collected via this question, two main themes surfaced. The first theme is involvement, which was brought up by R1, R2 and R3. Interestingly, out of the three respondents who brought up involvement, only R1 had discussed involvement earlier in the interview. Therefore, the fact that R2 and R3 brought up involvement here further underlines the importance of involvement as a theme for sense of meaningfulness. Especially considering R3's description of how *"Before you were way more involved from start to finish and it gave me a greater sense of achievement"* which made R3 want to come in earlier to work *"to put some extra time into the product"*. That passion and drive is close to the very definition of employee engagement.

The second theme is recognition and responsibility, which was brought up by R2, R5 and R7. As presented above, recognition and responsibility separately make up for the two themes that were identified for sense of competence. Therefore, this further highlights the importance

5.3 Employee engagement

How engaged do you consider yourself to be in your job role?

As discussed when the empirical data for this question was presented in section 4.3 above, the respondents' answers to this question could be divided into two quite distinct groups: (1) respondents who would become more engaged if their work environment would be more engaging and (2) respondents who admitted they were the reason they are not fully engaged. This binary description of engagement is very much in line with the authors who define employee engagement as a shared responsibility between the supervisor and the employee (Maylett & Warner, 2014; Robinson et al., 2004; Thomas, 2009).

R3, R6 and R7 all provided reasons to why they are not fully committed to their jobs and these varied. This further confirms Maylett and Warner (2014) who argue that employees require capacity to become engaged. R6's description of *"Not always going all in because I have more work to do at home"* is a clear indication of lack of capacity to engage.

What are the most important factors for your level of engagement?

As sense of progress was the weakest dimension among the respondents, with only R5 and R8 acknowledging that they saw a progress in their job roles, it is remarkable that this dimension got the most mentions in this question. Furthermore, R1, R2 and R7 who all highlighted the importance of sense of progress in this question earlier expressed that they felt like it was up to them to track their own progress and that their supervisors had little to do with it. In addition, R5 and R8 who both felt a sense of progress were the only respondents who argued that they relationship with the supervisor was the most important factor for their engagement. If the fact that their supervisors provide them with a sense of progress has led them to consider their relationship with their supervisors as the most important factor for engagement cannot be determined, but is an interesting observation. Although, what does appear to be evident is that the frequency of feedback is linked to the employees' sense of progress, which now further underlines the importance of developing an open feedback-oriented environment (Glen, 2006). Lastly, the fact that both R5 and R8 consider their relationship with their supervisors as the most important factor for their engagement further highlights the impact supervisor-employee communication has on employee engagement.

5.4 Summary

This chapter has compared the empirical data presented in chapter four with the literature reviewed and presented in chapter two. The next chapter contains a summary of the findings brought up in this chapter and presents the key conclusions made.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter contains a summary of the main conclusions of this study, provides recommendations for practitioners and discusses the study's theoretical contributions. Lastly, it presents the limitations of the study and provides suggestions for future research.

6.1 Conclusions

The main conclusion of this study is that supervisor-employee communication has been proven to have a significant impact on employee engagement among shop floor workers in a manufacturing organisation. As discussed in the first chapter of this study, this relationship has long been unexplored in the manufacturing industry. Therefore, it is noteworthy that this study was able to find such a strong connection between the two concepts. Furthermore, the themes that were defined in the empirical data very much align with what literature and previous research suggests. This indicates that supervisor-employee communication affects employee engagement in similar ways in the manufacturing industry as it has been proven to do in other industries.

The findings from this study further suggest that employee engagement should be considered a shared responsibility, as discussed in both the literature review and the empirical data chapter. The fact that about half of the interviewees considered their work environment as the limiting factor to their employee engagement and the other half argued that it was themselves clearly supports this claim.

Lastly, the fact that sense of progress was the least fulfilled and simultaneously considered to be the most important dimension of employee engagement among the respondents is interesting. However, if this says something about the industry in general or is simply a consequence of it being the least fulfilled dimension could not be defined.

6.2 Recommendations for practitioners

As this study has investigated the supervisor-employee communication of an organisation within the manufacturing industry, practitioners in this case is mainly supervisors within the said organisation. However, the below points could possibly be of benefit to supervisors within other manufacturing organisations as well.

The main recommendation for supervisors from this study is to be aware of the importance of supervisor-employee communication when it comes to generating and maintaining employee engagement on the shop floor. This study has provided empirical data that confirms the before questioned relationship between the two concepts in a manufacturing setting. What and how the supervisor communicates with the employees is of great importance to unlocking the benefits of employee engagement as discussed in section 2.2.2 of this study. Therefore, the recommendation for supervisors is to educate themselves on the importance of their roles and learn how to create engaging work environments for their employees. Hopefully this study has provided some guidance in how to go on about this.

6.3 Theoretical contributions

As discussed in the first chapter of this study, employee engagement and internal communication are two very well researched concepts separately. This study has looked closer at the supervisor-employee communication part of internal communication and assessed what impact it has on employee engagement on the shop floor of manufacturing organisations. This makes this study rather unique of its kind. In addition, as this study has been based on the perspective of the employees further increases its usefulness as Welch and Jackson (2007) highlight that further research considering the employee preferences is required. Lastly, this study has, as discussed above, provided additional empirical data to support the definition of employee engagement as a shared responsibility between the supervisor and employee.

6.4 Limitations

As with any study, there are certain factors that have limited this study from becoming perfect. The main weakness of this study is that it is a single case study based solely on interviews, with only eight respondents. To enable generalisation of the findings of this study, multiple case studies should have been performed where interviews should have been complemented with other data collection techniques to triangulate the findings. Another limitation of this study is the questions that were developed for the interviews. These could have been more clearly linked to the research objectives to ensure a better consistency throughout the report.

6.5 Suggestions for future research

Given the findings of this study, a general suggestion for future research is to further investigate the importance of supervisor-employee communication on employee engagement. By investigating this relationship in other industries and including the perspective of the supervisors, a deeper understanding can be achieved.

Assessing if the sense of progress dimension is considered the least fulfilled and yet most important dimension in other organisations and industries could also be interesting. This could potentially say something about the manufacturing industry as a whole, but this remains to be confirmed.

Although no barriers could be identified to supervisor-employee communication in this study, it would be interesting to investigate this from the supervisor perspective. Time pressure was discussed by several respondents but not highlighted as a barrier. However, it could be assumed to be a bigger issue for supervisors simply because they have many more people to interact with on a daily basis.

Lastly, further research on the relationship between both parts of internal communication and employee engagement within the manufacturing industry would be interesting. Hopefully this study has aroused an interest and provided a foundation upon further, both qualitative and quantitative research within the field can be conducted.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Participant Information Sheet

Appendix A – Participant Information Sheet

In the organisation studied, the employees on the shop floor's immediate supervisors are referred to as process supporters (abbreviated PS). Furthermore, in order to ensure the anonymity of the organisation, some information in the below participant information sheet has been censored by replacing the information with an italic description in brackets.

Nature of the research

The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how supervisor-employee communication affects employee engagement on the shop floor of manufacturing organisations. This will be assessed by investigating the associate perspective of the process supporter-associate communication in (*department code*), by conducting interviews with associates from different production areas of the (*department*). This study is carried out by Martin Sköld (*department code*) as part of his master's thesis in industrial engineering and management.

Requirements of taking part

All empirical data collected for this study will be collected through semi-structured, one-to-one interviews with Martin as the interviewer and a voluntary associate as the interviewee. All interviews will be conducted in the management room, to avoid any disturbances from production.

In order to minimise the time these interviews take away from production, each interview will occur over the course of one production takt (30 minutes). For a breakdown of the interview structure, please see page 2. The target dates for carrying out these interviews are presented below:

Calendar week 17			
Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
23/4	24/4	25/4	26/4

Implications of taking part and participants' rights

Participating in this study is voluntary and everyone that chooses to participate have the right to decline to answer a question or set of questions at any time during the interview. All interviews will be recorded to allow for post-interview analysis of the answers provided. However, these recordings will never be shared with a third party and they will be deleted as soon as all required analysis of the data has been carried out. All interviewees will remain anonymous throughout the entirety of this study.

Usage of the data collected

The data collected via these interviews will be used to compare to the conceptual framework that has been developed from reviewing the relevant literature and research on the topic.

Contact details

For any questions regarding this study or the interviews that will be carried out, please contact Martin Sköld in (*department code*) at:

(*Internal e-mail and phone number*)

Interview structure
Below is the general structure of these interviews presented.

When?	What?
First **5 min**	Introduction to the study's two main concepts: • Supervisor-employee communication • Employee engagement
Middle **20 min**	Main part of the interview takes place, circling around the below questions; **Supervisor-employee communication** 1. How does communication with your PS affect your o Sense of meaningfulness? o Sense of autonomy? o Sense of competence? o Sense of progress? 2. How comfortable are you in providing feedback to your PS? 3. Do you experience any barriers to communicating with your PS? **Engaging work environment** 4. Does your work environment encourage you to become engaged? 5. How could your work environment become more engaging for you? **Employee engagement** 6. How engaged do you consider yourself to be in your job role? 7. What are the most important factors for your level of engagement? ***Note: Variations of the above questions and relevant follow-up questions might be added***
Final **5 min**	Wrap-up and summary before returning to work