Collective hunt means bigger prey

A study of internal communication challenges micro-enterprises face in everyday work

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to identify communication challenges in micro-organizations. This thesis defines theoretical areas such as organizational communication and internal communication, with a focus on competence, uncertainty, and work disruptions. The methods used in the collection of empirical material were participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and an e-mail survey. This material in combination with the theoretical background has showed the importance of technical competence in order for employees to be able to communicate effectively. The technological solutions available today have the potential to make a workplace much more effective and efficient by using new equipment and communication methods, but reaching this potential requires that everyone feels comfortable with the use and has sufficient competence. The results indicate that since micro-organizations have only a few employees, technical competence needs to be high for every employee. The study also reveals the lack of a theoretical framework to evaluate the resources required for optimal communication in organizations or businesses, and introduces a suitable framework for later studies.

Keywords: Communication, Technical competence, Micro-organizations, Uncertainty, Work disruptions.
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## Table of Contents

### Introduction chapter
- Introduction ............................................................................................................................. 6
- Aim ........................................................................................................................................ 7
- Research question .................................................................................................................. 7
- Disposition ............................................................................................................................. 7

### Theory
- Communication in an organization ....................................................................................... 8
- Communication ...................................................................................................................... 8
- Internal communication ........................................................................................................ 9
- Communication problems .................................................................................................... 11
- Competence and collective competence ........................................................................... 12
- Working with uncertainty ...................................................................................................... 13
- Disruptions in the workplace ............................................................................................... 13
  - Wasting time ....................................................................................................................... 14
  - Improper work .................................................................................................................. 14
- Micro-enterprises .................................................................................................................. 14
- Theoretical Choice ............................................................................................................... 15

### Method
- Choice of method .................................................................................................................. 16
- Inductive method .................................................................................................................... 16
- Ethnographic study ............................................................................................................... 16
- Participant observation ........................................................................................................... 17
- Semi-structured interviews ................................................................................................. 18
- Ethical principles .................................................................................................................... 18
- Analysis of the empiric material ......................................................................................... 19
- The delimitations of the study .............................................................................................. 19
- Material criticism .................................................................................................................. 20

### Empirical material
- The organization .................................................................................................................. 21
Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to examine the everyday communication challenges that a micro-enterprise can face. One area of interest for this study is the effect that technical competence has on organizational communication and on the use of information technology (IT) based communication methods such as e-mail or working with computers in general. Another area of interest is the challenge that internal communications may face if resources in the organization are scarce. Through communicational, organizational, and behavioural theories, these interest areas will be defined and explained using the empirical material.

The empirical material is based on interviews and observations of employees at a micro-enterprise in Stockholm. The micro-enterprise is in the service industry and has thousands of members and followers around the world. The goal of the organization is to provide valuable information to its members and to answer questions these members may have about the shared interest areas. The empirical material was collected during a two-month internship, and involved a survey, observations, and interviews with the employees of the organization. The goal of this survey was to create a small personal profile of the organization’s members to understand who they are and their interests in the organization. In situations in which resources are limited but demands and expectations are high, an organization needs to look for simple solutions that still provide value.

During the internship it became clear why good internal communication is crucial for progress in organizations and businesses, and how even small disruptions can have great negative impacts on organizational effectivity. With its focus on micro-enterprises, this thesis will address areas that need to be improved, based on the theoretical background and the empirical material. The need for such studies providing guidelines for communicational improvements in micro-enterprises is clear, and the goal of this thesis is to present ideas about organizational changes that I believe could improve internal communications.
Aim
This thesis seeks to address everyday communication challenges that micro-businesses and organizations face in everyday work. The study will present examples of problems that may occur when the work situation requires good internal communication among the employees, but the employees are hampered by a lack of technical competence and adequate financial support.

Research question
The questions that this study aims to answer are:

- How can a lack of technical competence and finances affect the internal communication within a micro-enterprise?
- How can micro-enterprises improve their internal communication?

Disposition
In the introduction chapter, the goal, questions, and disposition of the thesis are presented. In the second chapter, the theoretical framework that supports the findings in the thesis will be presented; the theories reviewed in this chapter are from previous research on communication, micro-enterprises, working with uncertainty, and disruptions in the workplace. The third chapter will describe the methods used to collect data for the study and the material that has been used to answer the research questions. In the fourth chapter the empirical material that was found during the study will be presented. In the fifth chapter an analysis will test these findings in the context of the theories described earlier in the thesis. The sixth chapter will present my own opinions on the findings, and the final chapter will summarise the study and offer conclusions.
Theory

In the second chapter the theories that are going to be used in the study will be presented to set the theoretical framework that defines this thesis. The chapter will define what a micro-enterprise is, what communication theory is, and will describe different types of internal organization disturbances and how they can affect the organization.

Communication in an organization

Organization communication is an area that Heide, Johansson & Simonsson (2012) describe as a mix of both internal and external communication. These authors write that the dividing line between internal and external communication is dim these days and difficult to define. The reason for this is that an organization’s structure may have changed as a result of employment agencies or consultant firms becoming a part of the internal communication. Furthermore, the potential of rapidly spreading information over the internet has affected the delimitation of that which can be called internal as opposed to external communication (Heide, Johansson & Simonsson 2012). To better understand the concept of communication, the next section will define the term and give explanations from several earlier studies.

Communication

Communication has been considered to be humanity’s most important tool and that which really separates humans from animals. Through verbal and written communication humans have been able to attach words to emotions, actions, and objects around us, which in turn has allowed the spread of knowledge and the development of societies (Neu Morén & Hård af Segerstad 2011). Communication can be defined as a process in which two or more people send messages to each other. The content in the message can be described as information, and the process by which the information is given is called communication (Jacobsen & Thorsvik 2002). Communication can also be described as essential for ensuring that all organizational members get the information that they need to feel included and to understand the organizational goals (cf. Barnard 1968; Bennis & Nanus 1998). Different studies have shown that the physical structure of an organization influences its communication, and that people communicate more with other people if they are physically close. Conversely, individuals tend to decrease their communication with others with an increase in physical distance, and with in-
creased time between interaction and appearance (Jacobsen & Thorsvik 2002). Face to face communication is considered to be a stronger way to communicate than other forms like writing or phoning, because it involves several ways to communicate at the same time. With writing or phoning it is less likely that the receiver can see the sender, and because of this it is impossible for the receiver to know what kind of state the sender was in when the message was sent. This lack of context leaves a risk that the message will be interpreted in a different way from how it was intended. With face to face communication the sender and the receiver are physically together, and therefore face-to-face communication includes words, vocal pitch, and body language, which taken together strengthen communication and lower the risk of misunderstanding and uncertainty (Dohen, Schwartz & Bailly 2010).

Another area in which communication is important is the social aspect. Communication is not just a way of delivering information, but also a way to socially connect with others and to show mutual understanding. To demonstrate to others that you understand what they are saying by communicating in their language or at their skill level builds trust and strengthens relationships (Neu Morén & Hård af Segerstad 2011). Under the next heading the term internal communication will be explained, as an example of areas in which communication is important and how it is used in practice.

**Internal communication**

The main problem with internal communication within organizations and businesses is that in most cases there are so many different positions that it is hard to be sure which channel to send the information through and who should receive it. A single employee, or the communication manager if this position exists, cannot be involved in all communications that take place, so it is vital that good communication strategies and guidelines are developed to make sure that everyone that gets the appropriate information through the appropriate channel (Whitworth 2011).

Good communication is not important only to an organization’s leaders, but also to its employees. With the growth of the knowledge-intensive organizations these last years, not only the value of an employee has increased, but also the need of coaching between the co-work-
ers. These internal communication dialogues generate more decision making, innovations and learning processes among the employees (Heide, Johansson & Simonsson 2012).

The use of e-mail in organizations and businesses is well established, as it was first used in 1971 (Vezza & Licklider 1978), and it can be said to be a mature communication channel. It is claimed, because of this establishment, that e-mail has not evolved at the same rate as other communication areas of organizations (Powell, Sims & Vidgen 2011). E-mail was initially believed to increase both organizational and personal effectiveness, but because of the amounts of e-mail that some individuals have to handle, this increase in effectiveness has been replaced by information overload. Information overload can be defined as that which the individual experiences when the amount of information received is more than that which the individual can process (Soucek & Moser 2010). A study done on an organization of 2,850 employees showed that the organization would save a minimum of 8% of the cost of e-mails with improved e-mail handling. For a micro-enterprise the numbers of employees would be much smaller, but the same monetary percentage would be saved if the same criteria were met (Jackson, Burgess & Edwards 2006).

The book “Hur moderna organisationer fungerar” (How modern organizations work, Jacobsen & Thorsvik 2002) asserts that many researchers believe that good internal communication is a vital factor for the success of modern businesses and organizations. Areas within internal communication that are thought to be most important are the appropriate and timely spread of information, and good development of communication channels. Because an organization’s competence can be improved as a result of co-operative and motivating work, it is especially important to have these good internal communication qualities, especially in light of modern competition and marketing conditions.

Cognitive theory suggests that communication is the most important tool for motivating people, while expectation theory suggests that people can be motivated to perform and deliver if they feel that the goal is worth the effort. For expectations to motivate people requires that the goals are communicated in such a way that the goals are accepted. The next step is to have good ways of reporting the progress from these people so that they can visualise their contribution to the completion of the goal. It has been shown that it will further motivate an individual if they feel that the reward they receive is of at least of similar worth as the time that is used (Jacobsen & Thorsvik 2002, p. 337).
Another area that is important for internal communication is the phenomenon called “role-taking”. This phenomenon is similar to empathy, and it occurs when one can imagine how others felt and thought in a certain situation. One places one’s self mentally in the other’s described situation, and is thereby able to understand the other individual’s experience. This process is important for one’s understanding of why something can be experienced by someone else as troubling, when one does not experience that thing in the same troubling way (Trost & Levin 2008).

Communication and information can create problems for different reasons in organizations or businesses. If these problems are to be avoided, they need to be defined. In the next section, examples of communication problems will be given, to better understand why they can occur.

**Communication problems**

Communication problems can occur when either management or employees feel that they do not get the information they need, or alternately that they get too much information and so lose sight of what is important. An example of such a problem is full e-mail in-boxes (Heide, Johansson & Simonsson 2012, Jacobsen & Thorsvik 2002). Such information problems may result in uncertainty, which can impede everyday work.

Another way in which information can create problems in an organization or business is if necessary information is available but unevenly distributed among the employees. This phenomenon is called information asymmetry and can occur in two different forms.

The first form is called “hidden information”, which refers to situations in which some employees are better informed than others about important relations, events and circumstances. The result is that some employees are overall better informed than others about what is going to happen inside the organization in the future.

The second form of information asymmetry is called “hidden action”, which results when a person chooses to act in a different way than what was agreed upon with someone else.
Both these information problems can occur as a result of opportunistic behaviour, meaning that someone intentionally withholds information from someone else with the purpose of using the situation for his or her own gain (Jacobsen & Thorsvik 2002).

The opposite of these communication problems is a phenomenon called collective competence. This phenomenon can happen when people in a group co-operate in an optimal way, and it will be explained in the following section.

**Competence and collective competence**

What is defined as competence can vary among subject areas, but the standard is to consider an individual’s competence as that individual’s ability to perform a series of tasks with a certain speed and error rate (Hager & Gonczi 1996). Collective competence can be defined as a situation in which more than one person’s competence is needed to solve a task. For instance, a timeframe might be involved that would prevent a single person from doing the whole task alone, or one person might not have all the skills required to solve the task. An extensive job often requires that several operations are done simultaneously, and is therefore not doable for only one person.

When several people work together to handle a situation or solve a task, they bring their own personal competences as tools that can be used for some areas of problem solving. When these individuals work together and combine their competences, the phenomenon called collective competence is developed. This is a type of competence that can never be reached by an individual alone. In the book *Ledning och förståelse: Ett kompetensperspektiv på organisationer* (Leadership and understanding: A perspective on competence in organizations) written by Sandberg & Targama (1998), the authors use the process of controlling a big ship in and out of a port as an example of collective competence. In this example, several people have to do their task more or less at the same time, based on someone else’s feedback, in order to prevent accidents (Sandberg & Targama 1998). This is an example of how people can work together to achieve something that is greater than that which an individual could achieve, but this work still requires that each individual is sure of what they are doing and feels comfortable in their situation.
Working with uncertainty

Uncertainty can in many cases create stress and a feeling of discomfort for an individual. To work on assignments when one does not know how they should be prioritized, or working with equipment that is outside one’s comfort zone or skill level can build uncertainty. To manage uncertainty, employees use a variety of strategies, such as looking for information from sources like friends, supervisors, family, co-workers and subordinates (Teboul 1994). It has been shown that written communication based on computer technology is often more thorough and uses questions that are more direct and precise. The reason for this is because of the absence of facial and vocal expressions (Tidwell & Walther 2002).

Studies have also shown that when people manage to overcome their uncertainty, they will experience different positive effects, such as a better understanding of the organizational structure that they are connected to, and a stronger identification with the organization. Other effects are a deeper understanding of norms and the expectations of their own role. They can feel a stronger commitment to what they are doing and simply more satisfaction (Scott & Myers 2010).

On the other hand, studies have also shown that more information does not always reduce uncertainty. Increased information can actually increase uncertainty, especially if the information is negative or unexpected (e.g., Afifi & Burgoon 2000). Other studies have also shown that people are not always interested in reducing overall uncertainty. People may, in different situations, wish to only manage their own uncertainty, which can result in preserving their uncertainty or even increasing it, instead of working on reducing it (e.g., Brashers 2001; Brashers, Goldsmith & Hsieh 2002). An effect of this behaviour can be that someone else has to help with or perform another individual’s assignment, and this is something that can be experienced as disturbing and frustrating.

Disruptions in the workplace

Although good emotions are related to improved good business practise, negative emotions are more memorable and can create a focal point for organizational members (Kitayama 1996). These emotions are often related to disruptions of good business practise and harmful to rational business performance. In a study done by Dougherty & Drumheller (2006) on sensemaking and emotions in organizations, four particular disruptions were mentioned by
the people interviewed. The four disruptions were time wasting, unfair work, improper work, and process disruption. In this thesis only two disruptions will be treated, since only time wasting and improper work occurred in the interviews and observations.

**Wasting time**

The term “wasting time” can be used as an expression for time that someone feels is lost to actions that have no worth for that given situation. The phrase can also describe the emotion a person feels when something goes wrong when an action is not done according to what that person thinks was the correct way of doing it (Dougherty & Drumheller 2006).

**Improper work**

Improper work describes a situation in which an individual has to do more work than what has been agreed upon in the employment. This situation can occur as a result of inadequate skills, a lack of care, or improper training, and such a situation can be threatening for the integrity of the business (Dougherty & Drumheller 2006).

**Micro-enterprises**

Micro-enterprises are categorised as small organizations or businesses with ten or fewer employees. Small organizations and businesses play a vital financial part all around the world by bringing financial resources and job options to a country’s socio-economic development. Through this, micro-enterprises contribute to at least two areas of improved industrialization. The first is that they can grow and become larger enterprises and the second is that micro-enterprises can save financial resources that can be used to start new and bigger companies for the next generation (Grosh & Somolekae 1996).

Well-chosen technology can help micro-enterprises in several ways. IT can be a support to new and better information for the businesses, and it can present the micro-enterprises for new customers and markets. IT can also make it easier to reach both expertise that may be needed as well as more stakeholders. Proper use of IT can help to administer the organizations or businesses more effectively and efficiently, and to run the businesses better (Qureshi 2005). Earlier studies have shown that micro-enterprises can be influenced in their adoption of new computer-based technology because of their own estimation of the benefits of the
technology (Beckinsale et al. 2006; Dholakia & Kshetri 2004). Other influencing factors can be the absence of economic resources (Foong 1999), and the absence of employees with appropriate technical competence (Beckinsale et al. 2006; Igbaria et al. 1998).

**Theoretical Choice**

The theories that are presented in this thesis are the most prominent ones regarding communication, internal communication, and organizations. These theories were selected to set the empirical material in a theoretical context and to provide a framework for the different areas of communication described by this study. These theories will be used in an analysis to show how organizational situations that occurred during the internship affected communication within the organization.
Method
This chapter will describe the different scientific approaches used in this study and how they were used in the collection of the empirical material. The material was collected during an internship of two months in a micro-enterprise with four employees and one intern. An explanation of some of the analytical decisions I made after the material was collected will be given in the end of this chapter, to make it easier to understand the choices of empirical material presented later in the thesis.

Choice of method
To be able to address the aim of the study, I needed to see how a micro-organization worked and handled everyday communicative challenges. The material was collected through an ethnographic study with participant observations, but since observations are subjective I also used semi-structured interviews and an email survey (which was an assignment given during the internship) for data collection. In other words, a triangulation strategy (i.e., use of more than one method) was employed in order to get a rich empirical background. Because the material was collected from one small organization, these three methods were chosen to provide the study with more than one angle of approach, in order to lower risk of getting incorrect or misguided answers, and to strengthen the conclusion of the thesis (Bryman & Bell 2005).

Inductive method
The theoretical approach for this thesis was the inductive method. This method means that the theories chosen as the basis for analysis resulted from the empirical material collected during the study, and not the other way around. Using the inductive approach makes it easier to do an ethnographic study with an open mind, as opposed to risking the study becoming a subconscious search for confirmation of an already decided-upon point of view (Patel & Davidson 2003).
**Ethnographic study**

An ethnographic study, with participant observation and semi-structured interviews, was done to get a good understanding of how the employees in the organization worked and communicated with each other and with others outside the organization. During the observations, notes were taken to capture the detail of the situations, and after each interview, the recorded conversation was transcribed to text. The ethnographic research method is viewed by many as the most thorough method to understand how individuals or organizations act within the context in which they are observed. The semi-structured interviews would in many cases have been enough to understand the communicative structure, but the additional observational studies made it clear that the ethnographic method was more appropriate for this study than the interviews alone (Silverman, 2010).

**Participant observation**

Participant observation is a way of data gathering in which the observer participates in the daily life and routines of the observed group or organization. The observer watches the people that are studied to see what situations they ordinarily find themselves in, and how they ordinarily behave. The observer also enters conversations with some or all of the participants in these situations and records their interpretation of the events that are observed (Aspers 2011, p. 109).

To better understand how the employees communicate with each other inside the organization, an ethnographic study was performed. An additional reason that the ethnographic study was performed was to see if there were any differences between how the employees themselves described their work compared to how their communication was experienced by an observer. Notes were taken during the observations to capture the details of specific situations or to record the general feeling, in the hopes of revealing patterns of behaviour and attitudes among the employees. Making these observations allowed me to get a fairly clear picture of the communicative situation in the workplace. After I had observed, participated, and taken notes about the daily work for some time, some salient aspects regarding the communicative situation started to emerge. In order to investigate these issues more in depth, I began to develop questions to guide my interviews with the employees. The aim of these interviews was to test the findings from my observations and to deepen my understanding of the challenges and opportunities that the employees experienced within the organization.
Semi-structured interviews
The semi-structured interview is a type of interview in which the interviewer reads pre-made questions on a specific topic to the respondent, but the interviewer can also give follow-up questions based on the respondent’s answers. In this way of interviewing it is possible to conduct a dialog based on the received answers to both the initial and the follow-up questions. The reason this is called a semi-structured interview is because the interviewer has decided in advance which area the interview is going to consist of, and what questions that will be used (Aspers 2011, p. 143).

The interviews in this study were semi-structured with 15 questions divided over the following four categories: personal background, assigned tasks, opinions about the workplace, and technical understanding. The interviews were conducted over a three week time period. The goal of the interviews was to see how the employees’ own perceptions of their work situations compared with my observations. I also wanted to better understand the persons in the organization, what they liked and disliked about their jobs, and what they thought about the organization’s use of communication channels. In all there were five interviews, and the answers that were given led to from one to 14 follow-up questions, depending on the answers to the initial questions.

Ethical principles
The ethical principles of this thesis are referring to Swedish research council’s (Vetenskapsrådet) publication on ethical principles in the field of humanist and social sciences (Forskningsetiska principer inom humanistisk-samhällsvetenskaplig forskning, 2002). All the informants were told the reason for the collection of the material and that their identities and the raw observation and interview material collected was confidential.

The interview and observation subjects were told that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw their participation at any time. They all gave the permission for the use of the collected data for this study.

The survey subjects could choose to not answer the survey, and were given the option to recuse themselves from any later surveys from the company in connection with this survey.
The information collected through the survey was meant to strengthen the relationship between the organization and its members. The organization has also given permission for the use of this material in this thesis.

All text is written in such a way that the organization and its members’ identities are kept as confidential as possible.

**Analysis of the empirical material**

The material I collected for this thesis was analysed in several stages. The first stage of analysis was performed during the observations with the subjective selections of which incidents I wanted in my empirical material and notes after the interviews. To record everything that happens during the daily work for several individuals through observations is not possible, and I don’t believe it would be necessary for my study. Since I was going to have a communication perspective on my thesis, I focused on the incidents that involved the internal communication between the employees and how they used the different communication channels. With these selections I wanted to capture my own experience of a situation that I felt was significant and that could be used in the main analysis.

After every interview I transcribed the recordings to make it easier to see patterns in the respondent's answers. The written text compared to the sound recordings made it possible to use search functions in the interviews too list out which terms that were repeated in the material. The second stage was when I went through every interview and observation, and copied text that pertained to the same theme into new documents. Through this second analysis the patterns of which terms that were in focus began to emerge. Finally in the main analysis these documents were read several times and re-analysed in comparison to each other to show the emerging connections between the areas, and to see whether the observations and/or interview answers were compatible with background theories.

**The delimitations of the study**

It is important to acknowledge that this study is centered on a very small organization. This means that the answers that came out from the interviews cannot be taken as representative of all small organizations, but rather could only serve as observations that support earlier studies. Another important consideration was that since there were only five people in the inter-
view group, it would not be possible to use the answers exactly as they were given without breaking the confidentiality agreement.

The survey that was done during the internship was not constructed mainly to support the question that this thesis is built upon, but rather for the internship assignment. The reason for the survey was to create small personal profiles of members in the organization, in order to understand their interest in the organization and what they wanted the organization to focus on in the future. To lower the risk of people not answering the survey, it was decided that the survey should not take more than around ten minutes to complete. The members that could participate in this survey were people that had added their e-mail addresses to their organization profile. Because of the significant number of e-mail addresses, members were selected manually to ensure that members from each of the six major continents were chosen to participate in the survey. This meant that the answers received from the survey could not be taken as a scientific sample of all the members, but rather to reflect the age and sex distribution in the member database and their key interest points in the organization.

Material criticism

After the internship period’s observations, survey and interviews, the collected data revealed a different, more interesting angle from which to look at the empirical material. As a result, not all of the interview and survey questions could be used for this study because they were directed towards a different topic. It became more interesting to look at why the organization wanted a survey to be sent out in the first place, and to examine the decisions made during the survey’s development, rather than to look at the answers themselves.
**Empirical material**

In this chapter the empirical material that was collected during the internship will be presented and compared to the theories that have been introduced in this thesis. The material will be analysed to see how the theories can help to explain the meaning of some incidents, and to help to better understand why these incidents occurred.

**The organization**

The organization was very small with just four individual employees, and had a collected employment of just two and a half full-time employments. These employees had different roles, including a Secretary General, a Financial Manager, an Administration Manager and a Communication Manager. As one employee explained the organizational structure, “*In this organization the employees have titles to indicate to others what kind of work they do, but in reality everyone works more or less in every area, and co-operates to do the organizations’s assignments.*” To lighten the workload of the employees, the organization has had interns for specific projects during the last five years.

The organization has about 40,000 registered members divided into two groups, paying members and community members. The difference between the two memberships had been that the organizational newspaper was reserved for paying members. The newspaper was sent out through the mail four times a year in a printed paper format, but after the third publication in 2012, the newspaper was digitalized and it is now sent out to the e-mail addresses of all registered members. Since the differences between the memberships are now nearly nonexistent, both groups will be referred to as members in this thesis. One of the employees expressed her/his thoughts about the membership situation like this: “*It can from time to time feel like it is a thankless job, since everyone now gets the newspaper, and if our organization works out a beneficial solution for our interest group, it will benefit everyone, not only our paying members.*”

Besides the newspaper, other ways by which the organization communicates with its members are with newsletters, information on the organizational homepage, and on Facebook. The newsletters are written by the Secretary General and are sent out digitally two to three times a year. The idea behind the newsletters is to give the members a more personal message about
the recent activities in the organization, and at the same time to bring in money through advertisement.

On the homepage, new information is presented about two times per week, and the members can log in and take part in the community on the organizational forum. There members can discuss shared interest areas and help each other by answering questions. The homepage itself was created over ten years ago and has received only minor changes and updates over the years. Advertisements are featured prominently and the homepage has only a small area for news and updates. One employee told me: “I usually work a little bit on the homepage, for instance with maintenance, but for the issues I don’t understand and that I have had to call someone previously to fix, I am now trying to get our technical intern to handle.” From the interviews and observations, I got the feeling that any single employee’s opinion of the urgency of a new homepage depended on the technical understanding of the individual and his/her trust of the in-house technical competence. However, regardless of specific technical competence, the general feeling expressed by employees was that the homepage would benefit from a major update of design.

In several cases, concerns were expressed about the status of the information that the organization had about its members. The situation was observed to become stressful and uncomfortable because it was not clear whether the tasks that were done and the products that were made were the ones the members wanted. Observations made also gave the impression that the products were produced the same way they had been for a long time, and were based on outdated opinions of how they should be. It was also said that a new homepage was one of the focus areas that the organization was working on, and that this new homepage was one of the reasons they wanted a survey done. Through the survey, the organization intended to get an updated picture of the interest areas that the members found most important, to make sure to have those interests represented on the new homepage and in the other communication channels.

The organization joined Facebook in April 2011 and although its presence was initially low, it has been increasing over time. In 2012 the total number of posts on the page was 20, and from January to the middle of May in 2013 the total number of posts had reached 34. During the last three months the Facebook page has had a great increase of “Likes” and followers, and it has now a direct link from the organization’s homepage.
The organization has a board, which follows the activities of the organization and gives directions from the background. The board members are seldom present in the office during daily work, because they have other jobs beside the one in the studied organization. The board is made up of 15 people with a great influence in Swedish economy and businesses. They all share an interest in the organization’s key questions and have a close cooperation and influence on the organization’s work areas. About every second month, the office and the board has a meeting in which they discuss new ideas and give status updates on ongoing projects. In contrast, the Secretary General has a closer and more frequent cooperation with the board members. Information is then given by the Secretary General to the rest of the office in the weekly Monday meeting if deemed necessary.

Other groups that have an interest in what the organization is doing include sponsors and investors. It is the Secretary General’s particular responsibility to sell the organization’s activities to these interest groups. A new approach to get these businesses and organizations interested is to have predesigned projects in which budgets and timeframes are already estimated. During the interviews it was said that the organization is not good enough to follow up and finish ongoing projects. Not being able to finish ongoing projects wastes time and money, is demotivating for the employees, and looks bad for the purpose of creating new relations with sponsors and investors. The organization hopes to attract new sponsors and investors more easily with this new approach, since the interest groups will know in advance what they will invest money in and how long the project will take.

**The office**

**Internal Communication**

**Face to face communication**

Face to face communication is said to be the strongest form of communication, since it involves several communication methods at the same time (Dohen, Schwartz & Bailly 2010). During the internship I was told that almost every task involved more than one person, something that requires good communication to be effective. From the observations the employees were cooperating with face to face communication quite extensively when they were at the office the same time. The issue was that a majority of the work hours that the employees had
were not collective, and this prevented them from face to face communication. Even on the days when the employees worked at the office, they often arrived and left at different times. A wish to synchronise the work hours was expressed by the employees during the interviews, because it was felt that doing so would make the internal communication better. It was also expressed that with more work hours it should be easier to plan and distribute the workload for big events and projects over a longer period of time. Doing so might ease the pressure on the preparations and give a better result and reduce the stress. Face to face communication lowers the risk for misunderstandings, and by having the employees working at the same time at the same place, the amount of time wasted from not getting a needed answer is also reduced.

E-mail

E-mail has from 1971 (Vezza & Licklider 1978) had a major impact on the communication between organizations and the employees in them. Old-fashioned paper mail has been exchanged for e-mail in most cases. E-mail is free and can be sent to thousands of receivers around the world in a matter of seconds. In comparison, paper mail costs money and it can take days before the receiver gets the mail. In most cases, e-mail is the better choice for communication, and because of this it has been said to improve both organizational and personal effectivity (Soucek & Moser 2010). E-mails are not used just to communicate with individuals outside of the organization or business, but also between co-workers. Even employees sitting in offices right next to each other can in some cases send e-mails to one another. The reason for this can be that the individual next door happened to be in the receiving group for a message. Other reasons can be that the individual was not in his or her office when the sender wanted to give a message, or that the receiver was simply busy, and this made it more convenient to send the message then give it face to face. There are many reasons why e-mail is used among co-workers, but all this internal e-mail is added to that which comes from outside of the organization. This amount of e-mail causes employees, to a growing extent, to receive more e-mails than they can handle, and to spend more time on sorting, reading and redirecting e-mails than they should (Soucek & Moser 2010). During the internship, this topic came up several times. The employees told me that they spend one to three hours each day answering and writing e-mails. The general feeling was that e-mail took too much time to organize and read through, especially when the employees felt that they already had a too big workload for the work hours they got paid. “I work three to four hours in front
of the computer every morning, and most of this time is used for answering e-mails. If it is a Thursday or Wednesday I have 20 to 30 e-mails in the inbox when I come to work. A lot of these are spam that I have to delete, while some e-mails are important. This task takes approximately one to one and a half hours, although on Mondays, when my inbox contains around 250 e-mails, it takes at least two hours.”

Post-it notes
The Post-it is a sticky note invented by a man named Dr. Spencer Silver in the 1980s. The original Post-it was a 3-inch square in a canary yellow color, but today the product comes in many different sizes and colors. The reason for the Post-it note’s success is that it has a re-adherable strip on one of side and it leaves no mark on the surface after it is removed. The surface of a Post-it is small, since the idea behind it is that it should be used for reminders and short messages. They were initially thought of as bookmarks, but today they are used in several areas (Post-it® Brand 2013). As I saw during the internship, Post-it notes are used for both personal reminders and internal communication. The employees used Post-its as personal reminders to different extents, from just one or two on the desk to 16. In some cases they even choose to use Post-its instead of e-mail to communicate inside the office. It was said that they do not always trust that the other person will see the e-mail that they sent because of e-mail overload. “Sometimes I use a Post-it instead of e-mail to give messages to my co-workers, because I am afraid that the message won’t be read because of all the mail the employees get”.

To make sure that the communication with sticky notes works well, a message needs to contain a few key elements. The date when the note was written is important to determine if the message is still valid. It is also vital that the receiver has the necessary background information or competence to understand the message. It also eases the communication if the name of the sender is on the note, as this will decrease the risk for misunderstanding and more easily lead to dialog after the note is read. The last important element is that the message on the Post-it is something that can wait until the receiver sees the sticky note. The sender has no control over when the receiver will see the Post-it if the only communication is done is through the sticky note, and this lack of control determines what kind of messages are fitting for this media. In the observed organization, the employees worked closely with each
other on most assignments, which made good internal communication vital, and put an even greater pressure on the use of Post-it notes to make communication work well.

**Technical competence**

Technical competence is used in this study to define how well the employees in the studied organization could use computer-based communication technology and computers overall. How individuals solved specific tasks will not be described, but rather examples of how they defined their own technical skill will be compared to that which was observed.

During the interviews the employees were asked to define their own technical competence; in most cases, the average answer was that they believed they were above average compared to others of their own age. The answers among the employees ranged from use of mail and text writing programs to an understanding how computer structures like databases are made. With this large range in technical competence, it became clear that quite often that the more technically competent employees had to assist the other employees with technical problems or challenges. Doing so was described to be frustrating for the more technically competent employees, since their own tasks got delayed when they had to help others with computer issues.

“For example, when we have interns in the organization, I tend to be the one that has to answer a lot of technical questions even though I am neither the mentor nor the closest contact person for the intern. This happens simply because the mentor is either not present as a result of our few paid working hours, or because the mentor lacks technical competence.”

It was also mentioned several times that the technical situation in the organization should be improved. Desires for improvements included faster computers, more stable internet connections and faster support if needed. Concern was expressed that the organization’s external technical support is too distant. This external support attends to areas like the databases and the homepage, but does not give support with internal communication.

The organization’s only printer could be found in one of the offices, connected to the local network, and with the correct drivers installed on a laptop it could be reached through Wi-Fi. It became clear that a more stable internet connection and a more accessible printer would improve communication. The printer’s IP address switched from time to time, which disabled the possibility to reach it on the intranet and no one knew why it happened or how to fix it. The only known solution to this problem was to enter the printer’s web page and click a re-
fresh button. After that, the computer that was trying to use the printer had to be restarted. In other words, this problem with the printer forced the employee to shut down all programs that were running in order to restart the computer. For an older computer, restarting could take quite a long time, and then the employee had to restart all the programs and log in again in order to get back to the same state that the employee was in before the restart. The most frustrating element was that it was not certain that this whole procedure would fix the problem. This was a re-occurring problem several times during the two months internship. On one occasion an employee could not connect to the printer to get the papers that the person was going to bring to a meeting. Then the employee was told by a co-worker to bring the documents to the meeting and print them out there. It was observed that this situation was far from the optimal way to prepare for the meeting, and created an element of stress that should have been avoided.

There was a similar problem with the internet connection. The internet was distributed from one of the organization’s computers, and the internet connection disappeared from the employees once a day on average. When this happened, it was something wrong with that computer, and the connection would be gone until that computer was restarted. As with the example with the printer, the employees that needed a stable internet connection to do their job were the ones who were suffering the most. An employee told me that to have someone employed to support the technical side would have been handy and comforting. “With downtime on the network, work becomes inefficient, and the solutions we use today take lots of time away from the employees. That time is valuable and should have been put to better use.”

A few times a year, a key person in the organization travels to different places around the world to meet members and other interest groups. During these trips the employee collects material for the member newspaper by interviewing the members that attend to ceremonies and meetings. Another important task for the person is to talk about the organization and recruit new members. During the observations and interviews, I did not experience any doubt that these trips are important and productive. I did however experience a concern about the internal communication, since the organization’s structure means that more than one member is involved in most tasks. This means that the traveling employee has to be a part of the organization’s internal communications even during these trips. Maintaining contact with the organization requires the traveling employee to be connected to internet as often as possible,
and to check mail several times during workdays in order to not slow down – or in the worst case, prevent – the other employees from progressing on a task.

**Ambitions**
The organization observed in this study had employees with great personal interest in the organization’s area of work. Ambitious employees were one of the most important strengths the organization had, but being ambitious led to some of the most frustrating parts of the job as the employees explained. A frequent answer received in the interviews was that employees had too many goals and too few work hours to achieve to them. These goals involved work with key questions that are the organization’s main areas of interest, and which are worked on through several projects. These areas of interest are shared by both office employees and board members. The employees expressed on several occasions a desire to work more than they were scheduled to do, and the result was often that they worked more time than they got paid for. One of the employees described the situation: “I work a lot outside the office, and if you add the extra work hours to my 50% employment, I work 25% more. This is because I am interested in the area of work and I want my results to be good.” A larger number of paid work hours would mean more hours at the office, something that the employees believe would have made the decision making processes and the communication inside the organization easier. Or as another employee said:

“It is often stressful to feel as if the paid work hours we have are not enough, and you have the option to either work overtime, or to accept that you are behind. It is also hard to set limits when you have a personal interest in the area of work, and when both the board and members pressure you to deliver results.”

**Finances**
A recurring theme during the observations and interviews was the financial situation the organization was in. The monetary situation affected everything, from how many work hours the employees got paid, to the communication issues the organization experienced inside the office. The counter force that kept the organization moving forward was the strong personal interest the employees had to the organization’s area of work. Their dedication shown to the
organization through overtime work without pay and self-financed business trips was impres-
sive, but during the interviews their real thoughts came through. On the questions about what
the employees did not like about their job, or things they would like to have changed to make
their situation better, all of them mentioned that the situation would have been improved if
the finances of the organization were better. More money would have allowed the employees
to focus on more productive assignments that were in the organization’s direct interests, in-
stead of working under the constraints of very small budgets and being on a constant hunt for
sponsors.

Another topic of concern among the employees was that the office and the board were not
performing well in following up with and finishing ongoing projects. It was apparently quite
common that projects started from good ideas were met with a half-hearted interest or little
enthusiasm, which meant that the project was never finished. An employee also said that the
board’s attitude could in some cases be experienced as old fashioned. “It feels as if the board
is bound by tradition and is afraid that it does not know how to change. Just to hold one
seminar with no follow-up, or to make a Facebook page, is not enough to attract new mem-
ers.” It was said that the board did desire to improve, but that the fear of not knowing how
to do it was too great. “If just one board member goes against a new suggestion, the sugges-
tion will never go through and this can slow down the recruitment of new members.” To not
finish an ongoing project looks very bad from an investor’s perspective. All investors and
sponsors want to know that their money is well used, and a good way for the organization to
prove this is to show results from earlier projects. Another important income source is the
paying members, so good communication strategies to recruit new members should be in the
organization’s interest. During the internship I was shown a preliminary strategy document
that the board was working on, as the organization did not have any document of this type
operating at that point. This document showed that the board was interested on working on
strategic improvements.
Analyses

Disruptions in the workplace

*Human disruptions*

Good communication is essential and vital for the success in an organization. As Whitworth (2011) pointed out, a typical communication issue today is that an individual organization can have many defined job positions, but despite this, it is not always clear which job position should get what information. Furthermore, in some organizations, a single employee can hold more than a single job position, which can make it more complicated to determine who should get certain information and who should not. In a micro-enterprise like the one in this study, there are very few employees and each one has a defined role, and so it would seem reasonable to assume that communication should be easier. In reality the organizational structure is a little less precise than how it looks like on paper, which makes effective communication tougher than it looks at the first glance. As came up in the interviews and was seen during the observations, almost all tasks done in the organization involved more than one person. This meant that to a large extent most of the employees in the organization had to get a lot of information on different areas in order to do their job. According to the theory of Hager & Gonczi (1996), employees working partially across professions require a wide range of individual competences. The goal with an organizational structure like this one is to optimize the synergy between the employees so they strengthen each other and drive the organization forward with their collective competence, as expressed by Sandberg & Targama (1998).

The challenge is to maintain this synergy, because such synergy in a micro-enterprise with very few employees is less likely to arise, whereas in a bigger company it is more likely that someone can do someone else’s job, or would have the time to frequently assist them. In light of what Dougherty & Drumheller (2006) describe as improper work, and from what was observed and expressed during the interviews, the need for a good collective technical understanding is important in all organizations and enterprises. This argument does not mean that employees should never help each other, since this activity also stimulates better decision making, innovation, and the learning processes, as was argued by (Heide, Johansson & Simonsson 2012). For dialogues to be productive requires people to be on approximately the same technical level. However, the people with good technical understanding should not be
forced to discuss and to solve the technical problems experienced by employees whose technical understanding is lower.

**Technical disruptions**
The technical issues mentioned in the interviews can be viewed as “wasting time” according to the definition written by Dougherty & Drumheller (2006). These issues were a growing irritation in everyday work, and were not an effective use of resources. These irritations were mentioned to be stressing and disruptive. When the internet was lost or the printer could not be reached, these disruptions wasted precious time for the employees. The problems generated irritation because of unnecessary downtime and the complicated re-starting procedures that followed. The challenge was to get this understanding through to the decision makers, since the problems did not concern everyone in the organization to the same degree. If a communication problem does not affect you personally, it can be hard to understand and see the frustration that can be building up for someone else. If an economic struggle is also constantly present, it becomes even harder to prioritize a solution that appears unimportant if you don’t look at the big picture. A way to handle this problem is to focus on a process called “role-taking”, described by Trost & Levin (2008) to be when an individual places him- or herself mentally in the same situation as another individual in order to try to better understand what the other person is going through. An action such as this may be comforting for a troubled individual, and it will strengthen communication and problem solving between the persons involved. In this organization’s situation, role-taking could be used as a means to view the technical issues, so that these issues might be seen as a high priority, and so that the small amount of resources that exist would not be wasted.

**Working with uncertainty**

**Joint work hours**
Through the opinions that came up in the interviews it can be concluded that the employees think that more paid work hours would strengthen the internal communication. The reason for this is because of the way tasks are solved in the organization, with close co-operation among the employees. During the observations, it was said that almost all of the tasks done in the or-
ganization involved more than one person, and because of this way of working, the employees have to use the telephone or e-mail to communicate with each other inside the organization. These time-consuming ways of communicating can mean that even small questions can be greatly delayed if the employees don’t get the answers they urgently need. If the employees were at the workplace at the same time to a greater extent, faster face to face communication could be used to solve small but hindering issues. What these opinions reveal is that an organizational problem has been recognized in the way the work hours are used in the office, and that this problem has a negative effect on internal communication. As it looks today the financial situation is not going to drastically change in the organization, which means that the best that can be done to improve communication is to reorganize the work hours. The earlier studies done by Jacobsen & Thorsvik (2002) have shown that people communicate more with others that are physically close, and that an increase in communication leads to more effective processes. It is therefore easy to assume that more joint hours at the office could increase the production and the finances of the organization.

For communication inside of the office, a small message on a Post-it note can in some cases be sufficient, but this mode of communication requires that the receiver finds and reads it. It also requires that the message that is given is of such a type that the information can wait until the receiver sees it. Another potential issue may be that in some cases the employees are sharing desks, which means that a person other than whom the Post-it was meant for can use the desk and possibly move or cover the Post-it. If there is uncertainty about whether co-worker is going to see an e-mail because of e-mail overload, and that this is the reason to use Post-its (as was expressed during the observations), then it is more important to look at solutions for e-mail use rather than to look for solutions to how to secure these notes. With joint work hours the use of Post-its would be more fitting, because they would be used when someone is away from the desk just a few minutes and not for days.

**Technical uncertainty**

As was described in the previous section, the employees rely on communication channels like telephone, e-mail and to some extent Post-its notes to communicate with each other when face to face communication is not an option.

E-mail can be an effective communication method between individuals and is frequently used in organizations and businesses today. It allows the receiver to answer whenever he or she
feels fitting, which can be experienced as comfortable for the receiver but stressing to the
sender. Since the organization in this study was very small, but was in contact with a great
number of people for various reasons, the number of e-mails the employees received every
day was significant. It was mentioned as a concern that e-mails sent between co-workers
were not seen and answered within the timeframe expected by the sender. In the worst cases
the e-mails were not even read because they were lost in the overload, which brought
up the question of whether e-mail was a good channel for internal communication. In the
studies done by Soucek & Moser (2010) the same question of e-mail overload was brought
up, but I believe a question like this can suggest that the technical competence is not as high
as it should be among the employees. The problem with lost mail should not exist with a
good folder structure in the e-mail system. Beckinsale et al. (2006) and Igbaria et al. (1998)
point out that the lack of technical competence in micro-enterprises can get in the way of see-
ing solutions to small problems and the possibilities that IT competence could offer to solve
these problems. It is important to mention that this particular solution – that is, having a good
folder structure – would help to lower the risk of losing important e-mails in the overload.
Good folder structure would not solve the problem with wasted time from reading too much
e-mail, but this solution can give a helping hand by prioritizing which e-mail should be read
first.

As was explained in the study by Afifi & Burgoon (2000), when the use of a computer is out-
side someone’s comfort zone, it is reasonable to assume that the person will use the computer
as little as possible, because the use of the computer builds stress and uncertainty for the in-
dividual. The individual might reduce computer use as much as possible in order to avoid
confirming their lack of competence. If the internal communication relies on frequent sur-
veillance and answering of e-mail, the technical uncertainty that one employee has regarding
e-mail can be perceived by other employees as more generalized uncertainty because of the
lack of communication. At this point, the individual technical problem has converted to an
organizational communication problem. The phenomenon described as “hidden information”
by Jacobsen & Thorsvik (2002) is then preventing optimal information spread in the
organization, even though it is not being done intentionally by the individual. For this prob-
lem to be solved, the uncertainty needs to be lowered. If the individual is shown understand-
ing for his or her uncertainty, cooperation and social bonds will be strengthened through im-
proved internal communication, as written by Neu Morén & Hård af Segerstad (2011).
A shout in the fog

As it has been mentioned, the reason for the survey was to gather valid member information to strengthen the bond between the organization and its members. In this organization the members were a very important group both for the finances and motivation. Since the products the organization produced were based to a large extent on the member’s wishes and demands, the need for this information became clear during the creation of the survey. It became clear that the organization was suffering from a lack of updated information about its members and that this deficiency affected the way the organization communicated with those members. What the organization knew before the survey answers were collected was how many registered members it had in the database, and how many members had added an e-mail address, age and a country to their member profile. This was the underlying information used in the request for participants for the survey, but since the member registry was more than ten years old it was impossible to know how many replies the request would generate.

E-mail addresses are free and take only minutes to create. It is not unusual that people have several e-mail addresses, and that old ones are exchanged for new ones. Age can be a sensitive issue for some, so it is not unlikely that people adjust their age in an online registration. And it is not unusual that people move to different places during their life, which means that the place that was listed when the online registration was done does not need to be the currently correct one. The uncertainty in these factors show that even the small amount of information that the organization had was potentially incorrect, and it underlines the importance of good communication with the members. As described by Heide, Johansson & Simonsson (2012), it can be hard to define what is internal and what is external communication in today’s organizations. This is because the internet facilitates the availability of information, which makes it possible to have close connections to external partners and interest groups. This availability puts an even stronger pressure on the information that is delivered to keep the members satisfied. Since the member traffic on the homepage was an important finance source to the organization because of advertisements, it was important to confirm that the information given was of interest. Also, advertisement through e-mails brought in money to the organization, but advertising in this way requires that the receiver associates e-mails from the organization with interesting information, and opens the e-mail instead of deleting it or tagging it as spam. The discrepancy between the number of surveys sent out and the answers that were received made it clear that number of active members was significantly lower than the registered number in the database.
The uncertainty about valid member information, which the employees had to deal with in their production and daily work before the survey was completed, was demotivating. They did not know if the ways in which they communicated were the ideal ones or if the information was of interest. After the answers from the survey had been received, it became possible to understand who the members are and what they want. As a result of this information the uncertainty was reduced, in the manner described by Jacobsen & Thorsvik (2002), and the collective competence generated through improved internal communication could be used to enhance the products, as explained by Sandberg & Targama (1998).
Discussion

A lack of technical competence can hinder direct internal communication, and can also affect the possibility for “role taking” or empathizing with someone else’s frustration and problems with the technical infrastructure in the organization. I do not think that the lack of empathy is intentional, since it can be hard to understand the seriousness of a problem if one is not familiar with the context. I do believe though that the lack of empathy can build even more frustration for the affected person, if that individual feels that his or her problem is not recognized because of the lack of technical competence in the superiors. On the other hand it is not easy to recognize that you don’t have the technical insight that is required in today’s workplace. I do believe that this is a two-sided internal communication challenge that requires individuals of different technical skill levels to communicate with each other, if the challenge is to be solved. The individuals that feel that today’s technical solutions are difficult need to show an interest in improving their technical competence. On the other hand, it is equally as important that the individuals with high technical competence show understanding for the situation and are interested to help. It is a collective benefit that everyone in an organization has the required technical competence for the job, though the skill level required depends on the organization’s work areas, relations and size. The smaller the organization is, the more important the collective technical competence is. In this digitalized world it is nearly impossible to have an effective business or organization without computer technology. As it was mentioned earlier in this thesis, micro-enterprises with small finances cannot afford to spend resources on employees who are doing someone else’s job, or have their own work disrupted in order to solve what can be recognized as someone else’s trivial problems.

When the internet goes down at least once a day and it is a struggle to get something printed, it is understandable that employees will choose to work outside the office. Again, it is hard to see a situation from someone else’s perspective. The employees that are not disturbed by the technical issues can have a harder time understanding why someone would prefer to work outside the office. If removing the technical problems mentioned could result in a better work environment for everyone, hours spent at the office could be increased. Since internal communication depends on frequent dialog between the employees, communication may benefit since the employees can use face to face communication rather than digital communication. And to take this idea even further, an improvement like synchronized work hours could increase productivity, which may increase income, which could in turn be used on more paid work hours or a new employment.
**Conclusion**

With very few employees in an organization, the average technical understanding needs to be fairly high, so as to prevent the employees that do not have a high level of technical understanding from stealing time from the ones that do possess it, especially if there is no dedicated technical support person in the organization. When the finances are so scarce that it prevents the employees from working full time, it is important to ensure that the productivity is as high as possible. Since communication is essential to good productivity, the synchronizing of work hours at the office is a good first step to improve the financial situation.

For further studies in the field of organizational communication, I see a benefit to making a framework for the required resources needed for good communication in organizations. This framework should contain structural guidelines for the employee’s technical skill level, to ensure that everyone has the technical insight that is required. The framework should also say something about the technical infrastructure, maybe even to the installation level. Lastly, the framework should suggest training in order to improve the structure of daily work, as for example using an e-mail handling program or scheme to increase effectiveness and lower uncertainty and stress. Having this framework in place would help organizations ensure that their resources were used efficiently and would be a helpful tool for identifying and solving communication problems. I would especially see a tool like this as helpful to small organizations with limited finances and competences.
References


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