Clarifying product management
- A study of the sensemaking outcome in a management practice

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Abstract

Today’s technological development has shed new light upon the management practice of product management and it is considered more important than ever to manage products. Moreover, organisations to a growing extent face external bodies that evaluate them and impose organisational structures that they need to comply with. Product management is nevertheless characterised with ambiguity, broad definitions and various depictions. A scattered research field together with practitioners struggle to define the area stress the need to clarify product management structuring. This thesis uses a sensemaking perspective and a kaleidoscopic approach in order to capture product management structuring in a fragmented area. It means that we investigate what the sensemaking outcome of product management is and why organisational members make sense this way. This thesis has found that product management is understood on two main levels and that the practice comprises both consistency and inconsistency on an inter-organisational level. Findings suggest that shared identity, strong commitment, cues, metaphors and expectations have influenced consistent understandings and crystallised the sensemaking outcome. In addition, product governance influences product management and therefore the sensemaking outcome are inconsistent in several structuring elements. The thesis concludes that our contemporary product management practice is comprised with general components that can be structured similarly but also components that require a customised structuring due to the product governance trait.

Keywords: Product management, sensemaking outcome, understanding, product governance
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1. Introduction

1.1 The importance of managing products

The area of managing products and product processes has become increasingly important in today’s society characterised of a rapid technological development (Stark, 2011). In times of technological change product development is subject to frequent failure (Stark, 2011; Iansiti, 1994; Henderson & Clark, 1990). Many products fail due to companies’ unilateral focus on manufacture and design and ignorance of consumer demand (Schneider & Hall, 2011) and some companies face unexpected environments that require change in almost their whole product line or expansion of their markets. Since products are essential for companies’ success and constitute a competitive advantage, the development of the right products has become more central than ever for organisational survival (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1995).

These external societal shifts and the new context for organisations have shed light on, and increased the importance of, the management idea product management. Even though product management has existed since the 1930s (Kittlaus & Clough, 2009) it now experiences a new context that changes the conditions for its existence and operations.

Product management today is a widely used but somewhat fuzzy concept that lacks a common standard definition (Maglyas et al., 2012). The academic field reveals that organisational research concerning product management definition and structuring is limited and that conclusions are scattered (cf. Kittlaus & Clough, 2009; Gorchels, 2006; Cooper, 2001; Brown & Eisenhardt, 1995). The definitions often contain various depictions and are of broad character, i.e. Maglyas et al. (2012) describes it as a process that involves elicitation, prioritisation and selection together with strategic and practical implications on the product analysis, development, marketing and sales. Broad definitions are also given by practitioners, that state it is an organisational practice that spans between sales and marketing and research and development (Tolpagorni, 2014). Steinhardt (2010) argues that such diverse interpretations of product management circulates and that this has created an untenable situation that people struggle to define. This creates a problematic situation where product management on the one hand is an increasingly important practice, but that on the other hand is difficult to comprehend both for researchers and practitioners.
1.2 Changed requirements for an ambiguous practice
During the past decades something has happened in the organisational field. Organisations increasingly face a demand to control internal operations. Power et al. (2009) argue that an explanation for this transformation is that organisations sense an urge to respond to the growth of external bodies that evaluates them. According to Power (1996) these external bodies create the so-called “audit society”, which produce standards that organisations perceive that they have to comply with (Power, 1999). While other organisational practices such as budgeting (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 1998), business process engineering, lean management and corporate social responsibility (Furusten, 2013) recognised this new context and responded by consensus in internal standardised structures and organisational practice, product management remains ambiguous. Product management has been around since 1930’s without any observed need to be investigated, clarified or standardised. However, the “audit society” brings about an interest to clarify the equivocality in the practice’s composition, organisational location and responsibilities. The “audit society” does currently not express any particular requirements towards product management, but it highlights an interest to clarify organisational practices with attributes similar to product management. We therefore consider clarification of product management structures and its components imperative and due to the practice’s ambiguity it is necessary to study the phenomenon from individuals involved in practice point of view.

1.3 Understanding and structuring of product management
The preceding paragraphs propose two reasons for how the presence of a new context has imposed a need for the organisational practice product management to be clarified. First it is emphasised that managing products have become increasingly important for companies due to rapid technological development. Secondly, it is stressed that organisations face a growth of external bodies that evaluate their organisational quality and impose organisational structures to comply with (Power et al., 2009). As product management is confined with ambiguity, individuals within this function lack compelling standards to structure their management practice. This suggests that an internal perspective that focuses on interpretations and meaning creation within the function would assist the clarification of the product management practice. For the purpose of clarifying an activity by how it is interpreted, a sensemaking approach is appropriate (Weick, 1995). The sensemaking perspective aims to identify the creation of meaning and make incomprehensible activities
conceivable for organisations, leaders and other stakeholders. Thus, to clarify the current structures in the product management practice, we will investigate with what outcome and why product management has been sense made by the people working with it.

1.4 Research Questions
What is the sensemaking outcome for the product management practice? Why has organisational members understood product management in this way?

1.5 Aim and definitions
Managing the product development process has become imperative for companies in order to stay competitive. At the same time the world has shifted towards increased scrutiny that placed new requirements on companies’ organisational structure, which however lacks in the product management practice. This highlights the interest to clarify the ambiguous product management practice and its structures. Therefore, the aim is to investigate product management as a practice on an inter-organisational level and crystallise the outcome of organisational members sensemaking and why it has been understood this way. Sensemaking can be used to study the meaning creation process (Weick, 1995), however this thesis aims to take a snapshot the current understanding, i.e. where in the process they currently are and why this is. The sensemaking perspective will provide tools to examine the understanding and action of people involved in the practice (cf. Klein et al., 2006). We aim to contribute with clarification of product management structuring by investigating what and why product management understandings have come about. This empirically extends the sensemaking perspective with a new research context and will add research to the fragmented product management field.

In order to follow the remaining parts in this thesis appropriately, some frequent expressions require further explanation. In this thesis, made sense of means understanding. Organisational members’ sensemaking outcome refers to what actual form their understanding has taken in reality. The terms will be further explained in the conceptual framework. Organisational members are people working within a product management function. Inter-organisational understanding denotes the general understanding of the practice that does not focus on a single organisation. This is a central part of our study.
because we aim to investigate the practice at large, and not individual organisations’ specific understanding.

1.6 Disposition

The introductory part of this thesis discuss in how product management has gained importance and attention in a society characterised of technological development. Product management is not a new practice, in which one could expect standardised organising and structuring due to the contemporary “audit society”. Yet, product management is confined with ambiguity and may lack organisational structuring consensus. A study that focuses on individual interpretations of the practice is hence motivated. Interpretative studies that aim to clarify an activity are beneficially conducted with a sensemaking perspective.

Following this is the conceptual framework, section 2. It starts with a presentation of the scattered product management research and continues with a description and discussion of sensemaking theory. The framework composes key pillars of sensemaking and product management and the section ends with a concluding summary and an analysis model.

The methodological part, section 3, guides the reader through the research process. The exploratory approach is explained, the case and respondent selection is discussed and also how the data is gathered, presented and analysed. The thesis utilise a self-selected sample, data collection is conducted through semi-structured open-ended interviews and analysed with a narrative data presentation and an analysis approach.

The empirical part, section 4, presents the data gathered. We employ narrative presentation of the data under headings derived from identified understandings of product management.

In the analysis, section 5, we treat the empirical findings with the key pillars discussed in the conceptual framework. The analysis is presented in main patterns occurring on two levels of inter-organisational understanding.

In the concluding part, section 6, we summarise and highlight important findings and answer our research questions. We continue with theoretical and practical contributions and sum up with a few words about limitations for our study and interesting areas for future research.
2. Product management and sensemaking – a conceptual framework

2.1 Delving into product management

The explicit management idea was invented in 1931 by Procter and Gamble, who was the first to appoint product managers to control a product line (Kittlaus & Clough, 2009). Since then the idea has spread and firms implemented it. Previous product management research have focused on the practice’s constituents and described how this contributes to enhance business value. Kittlaus & Clough (2009) argue that activities within the function vary with the type of product, company culture and history, but with the common goal of optimising product success. Brown & Eisenhardt (1995) emphasise leadership, teamwork and communication as essential parts for product success. The product manager often is in charge of the product management function, responsible for one or several products from inception to phase-out in order to maximise business value (Gorchels, 2006). This research jointly highlights product success as the desired outcome but emphasise different product management constituents as key. Corresponding to Stark’s (2011) argument of the increased importance to manage products, these studies highlight what constituents that are part of a successful management.

Other researchers have described how to manage the product through its whole life, sometimes referred to as product lifecycle management (Stark, 2011). Product lifecycle management gives a comprehensive overview of the general product life and may indicate organisational roles and responsibilities required in the practice. Similar to this states Ebert (2007) that product management covers all phases from strategy definition to delivery, market launch, service and retirement of the product. Cooper (2001) further argues that it is essential for product management to control product introduction and steering the product life-cycle process. Gorchels (2006) describes product management as a central and interactive organisational function, accentuating the importance of managing the relation with marketing and sales due to increased customer sophistication.
Chunawalla (2009) summarises his interpretation of product management with a model (See Figure 1) that demonstrates different objectives that constitute the practice. His model summarises the many interpretations described previously.

2.1.1 Structuring product management

It is evident that many researchers have tried to define and describe product management and that this has resulted in a fragmented research field. Following the previous academic dialogue and professional discussions on product management forums reveal ideas on product management structuring. Cagan (2006) argues it is important to have clear responsibilities attached to roles in specific companies rather than to implement a general structure applicable to many organisations. A product management journal, Product Focus, suggests that no product management model fits every organisation as the optimal structure depends on the philosophical approach to product management, company size and product portfolio (Dickenson & Lunn, 2011). However, Brown & Eisenhardt (1995) argue that a clearly articulated structuring is important for product success and call for further research in defining structuring aspects of the practice to clarify the purpose of this function. Earlier product management literature shows how researchers and practitioners differs in how such a well-known and frequently used practice could be structured and simultaneously a willingness to create a coherent view of it.
Products’ amplified influence on companies has made the practice increasingly sought after and much research highlights its importance for product success and maximising business value (cf. Kittlaus & Clough, 2009; Ebert, 2007; Gorchels, 2006; Brown & Eisenhardt, 1995). However, apart from this common understanding researchers differ in their views upon the importance of the various product management constituents and emphasise different aspects as key (cf. Cooper, 2011; Cagan, 2006; Gorchels, 2006). We have argued that this ambiguity and lack of perceived standards to comply with opens for a study of the practice by an internal interpretative approach. We will have a closer look into an interpretative research perspective that has been widely used to study phenomenon that seem incomprehensible. The intention is to clarify product management structuring and crystallise a fragmented practice in order to make it conceivable for organisations, practitioners and researchers, which will be facilitated by studying the sensemaking outcomes for the practice.

2.2 The sensemaking perspective

The sensemaking perspective is a common way to study phenomenon and behaviour within organisations. The perspective has previously been used in product development and innovation research (cf. Akgün et al., 2012; Brorström, 2010; Allen, 2001) and some researchers applied it in product management studies (cf. Jantunen et al., 2010). Overall researchers have issued various understandings and the perspective has branched out differently. This thesis builds on the organisational and social psychologist researcher Karl Weick’s idea of sensemaking as a way to rationalise around an incomprehensible activity. In short, Weick’s view of sensemaking suggests that people structure incomprehensible activities as meaningful and rational to be able to act upon them (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). Sensemaking an activity starts when people experience something. By considering current knowledge and simultaneously interacting with others, they create an interpretation of this experience. To focus on sensemaking is to search for answers to the questions “what is the story?” (Weick et al., 2005:410) and “what is the effect?” (Weick, 1995:4). The sensemaking theory is of subjective kind and researchers argue that it might suffer from myopia and memory lapses (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1995). However, sensemaking has been seen as a way through which people work to understand issues or activities that are novel, ambiguous or confusing (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014) and it is argued to help leaders better understand shifting environments (Ancona, 2012). It aims to identify the creation of meaning
and describe how, why and with what outcome incomprehensible activities become conceivable for organisations and their leaders.

Previous research has analysed and extended Weick’s work by applying a sensemaking lens. The extended research is of vital importance to understand the sensemaking perspective, especially since Weick only applied it in a narrow empirical context (Mills et al., 2010). Considerate amount of empirical studies have focused on sensemaking in organisational crisis to illustrate Weick’s original idea of interruptions in routine practices (cf. Boudes & Laroche, 2009; Brown, 2004; Stein, 2004). This narrow utilisation opens, according to Brown et al. (2015), for ample opportunities to extend the perspective with everyday activities. Earlier research applied sensemaking in areas closely related to structuring (cf. Ancona, 2012; Brorström, 2010; Klein et al., 2006; Schwandt, 2005; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) but only limited research exists within product management structuring, which makes it a suitable extension of sensemaking research.

It is evident that sensemaking requires a situation where something needs to be clarified and/or structured (Brorström, 2010; Weick, 2001; Weick, 1993). It is further obvious that sensemaking often is seen as a process of how people understand activities (Weick, 1995). However, this thesis focuses on the sensemaking outcome, i.e. the understanding that is generated by the sensemaking process and that equals the question “what is the effect” on a certain stage in this process. By investigating why the respective understandings has come about it will clarify the current structuring of the practice product management.

2.2.1 The six-step model – different steps in sensemaking
In order to clarify with what outcome and why organisational members have made sense of product management in a certain way and make conclusions of product management structuring it is fruitful to get a deeper understanding of sensemaking and its features. According to Weick (1995) sensemaking can be seen as steps that constitute different levels of sensemaking. The first step is when something is completely incomprehensible and the last step is when clarification and/or consensus about the activities or phenomenon have come about (Weick, 1995). From this one is able to both follow the sensemaking as a process or to depict on which stage an activity is sense made and understood. The steps, or chain of
activities, described below is also called the six-step model (Weick, 1995) and captures sensemaking at large:

1. Something happens that needs to be clarified
2. Individuals detect cues
3. Reasonable explanations are found
4. Explanations are communicated and spread
5. Explanations become universal to their art
6. Consensus around clarification and structuring of the activities

The first step equals when individuals face something that needs to be clarified (Brorström, 2010; Weick, 1995). In practice this is when organisational members experience something new and “a million things that go on” (Weick et al., 2005:411), as in a practice with attached roles, responsibilities and working activities. At this step the individuals are confused and lacks understanding of the activity or situation. In the next step individuals detect cues, which indicate a possible clarification or structuring in order to increase the understanding and as a first attempt to understand the activity. In step three reasonable explanations are found (Weick, 1995) and the understanding deepens. In practical terms this means that individuals has simplified the reality by “noticing and bracketing, based on experiences from work and personal life” (Weick et al., 2005), which build expectations to the activity (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). In step four the explanations are communicated and spread (Weick et al., 2005). In this step individuals influence the sensemaking and create commitment to the task. For example, previous empirical research shows that leaders play a crucial role in this step by understanding, aligning and communicating the interpretations of situations (Ancona, 2012; Patriotta & Spedale, 2009). Thomas (2000) has shown that when leaders not understand the interpretations, the differing views within the firm may lead to controversies. In a structuring perspective, this means different views of how the practice is structured and work should be carried out. This communication varies from highly formal communication in forms of presentations, reports, and documentation, to informal communication such as gossip and storytelling (Balogun & Johnson, 2005). Lastly, in step five the explanations become more universal to their art, which means that individuals understand the practice in a similar way. In step six there is more or less consensus around the clarification and/or structuring of the situation or activity (Weick et al., 2005). At this step the individuals have made sense of the organisational practice in a certain way and the understanding is shared. However, it is still
possible that several meanings exists and differ between different groups of people that interpret the organisational practice (Brorström, 2010). Maitlis & Sonenshein (2010) showed that cultural differences, ethical or emotional feelings might affect the sensemaking and provide divergent actions of the same practice in different groups of people.

Together these steps show different levels of sensemaking and the attached features. It ranges from the first individual impression of a new practice to a collective awareness, and lastly an organisational consensus of a management practice. Important to note is also that sensemaking an activity is ongoing and never stops and further that individuals constantly act upon the current understanding. The six-step model does not necessarily have to be used to study sensemaking as a process; rather we consider it to assist us by a snapshot of the understanding at a specific time and a to what extent there is a shared understanding.

2.2.2 Sensemaking characteristics
Sensemaking is, as stated above, argued to be a suitable way for clarifying the structure of activities or situations (Brorström, 2010; Weick, 2001; Weick, 1993). As Steinhardt (2010) argues product management has suffered from diverse interpretations, which created an untenable practice that people struggle to define. In order to clarify with what outcome and why such incomprehensible activity is understood and structured in a certain way, researchers can be guided by the sensemaking characteristics identified by Weick (1995). The characteristics are defined as identity, retrospection, enactment, social, ongoing, cues and plausibility (Weick, 1995). Maitlis & Sonenshein (2010) explain that sensemaking further can be described by two additional characteristics, commitment and expectations, which also play a crucial role in how people interpret and understand a situation. When individuals in an organisation experience incomprehensible activities may these characteristics help to explain how, with what effect and why they make sense, and further that this influences their actions (Weick, 1995; Liu et al., 2014). Earlier product management research shows that these characteristics are partly overlapping and can serve as a guide to clarify how product management is sense made (cf. Weick, 1995).

2.3 Essential pillars for understanding and structuring product management
We have identified four general pillars that may facilitate understanding and structuring of product management practices. These pillars compile earlier product management research,

2.3.1 The identity of individuals and organisations

Liu et al. (2014) argue that individuals rely on their appreciation of their identity when an organisation comprehends management practices. This means that they reflect on how they see themselves and others and in turn how others seize them (Liu et al., 2014; Parry, 2003; Weick, 1995). Degn (2014) has researched how individuals reflect upon themselves in relation to a management practice. She argues that individuals have a need for positive cognitive construction of self and that they for example tend to seek and stick to information that supports this picture. Further, individuals reflect upon themselves from the need of feeling competent and the need to feel coherency in their identity construction (Degn, 2014).

Besides how they seize the self, how individuals define and identify with the organisation and other members also influences their understanding of the practice (Gioia & Thomas, 1996). Scott et al. (2006) show how officers make sense of their role by creating an identity using humour in relation to criminals. By employing humour “they emphasise and define their identity in the process of interpreting situations, clients, and task” (Scott et al., 2006:301).

Research shows that the many interpretations of the product management function and roles have impeded a common understanding and a unified structure. Steinhardt (2010) states that fails to establish a common understanding and structure of the function due to its very broad definition results in a lack of professional focus.

For leaders identity construction is concerned with how he or she tries to establish a role and relationships with stakeholders (Pye, 2005). The individual and organisational identity thus is subject for interpretation by others and impacts the sensemaking occurring on both individual and on group level (Patriotta & Spedale, 2009; Weick, 1995). The aspect of identity can facilitate or inhibit sensemaking in organisations, and this is for example evident in earlier sensemaking research covering organisational change (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Identity can facilitate sensemaking when individuals believe in their own or the organisation’s

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1 Definition of product management derived from Maglyas’ (2012), Steinhardt’s (2010), Chunawalla’s (2009) understanding of its many components.
capacity and identify themselves in line with it (ibid). Such positive beliefs lead to increased alertness and reduced defensiveness (Weick, 1988). On the other hand identity inhibit sensemaking when a too strong identity blinds individuals from realising crucial aspects, such as miners’ identity as “real men” blinds them from realising inherent dangers in their job (Wicks, 2001; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Changed or replaced identities could lead to resistance since members have a problem with making sense of their new roles and work activities (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Maitlis & Sonenshein (2010) highlights that shared identity is crucial, since it could work as an anchor for sensemaking. Shared identity can be obtained by for example communicating and coordinating information (ibid).

2.3.2 Interaction

The co-presence of individuals and their actual face-to-face interaction is vital for sensemaking (Klein et al., 2010; Patriotta & Spedale, 2009; Weick, 1995). It refers to the social process by which a whole group coordinate their efforts to explain and make sense of a situation (Klein et al., 2010; Weick, 1995). This may take expression through use of verbal language and body language (Patriotta & Spedale, 2009; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) and shows that communication is an important area of sensemaking (Parry, 2003). Liu et al. (2014) discuss how one can evaluate the extent of sensemaking of an organisational practice by using metaphors within the organisation. Metaphors are seen as cognitive representations that provide meaning, establish importance, and reflect values and beliefs. The research shows that positive metaphors creates a positive mind-set towards the practice and legitimise it within the organisation. Patriotta & Spedale (2009) exemplifies the use of verbal language by arguing that consensus in specific terms and managerial jargon is imperative in the sensemaking of work tasks and roles. If consensus is not achieved controversies over meaning of the task will appear and challenge the ability to cooperate within the roles and responsibilities. As Perry (2003) states this indicates that sensemaking is about socially accepted and credible rationalisation of activities within the organisation. Work tasks and roles are understood by being talked about, which highlights Weick’s (1995) enactment characteristic. More specifically enactment is seen as the reciprocal exchanges between people that result in an understanding of the management practice (Weick et al., 2005).

It is vital to understand that interaction influence sensemaking in two main ways. As understood from Weick’s (1995) six-step model communication is an important factor in
sensemaking as it is the tool for spreading potential “explanations” to the activity or phenomenon that needs to be clarified. This is the link between the individual and the group and both constitute the way sensemaking occurs during interaction and also how it is spread to a larger mass in order to subsequently becomes more or less universal (Weick, 1995).

2.3.3 Expectations and commitment

As mentioned initially in this framework individuals’ sensemaking is influenced by their commitment and expectations (Weick, 1995; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Commitment and expectations are seen as key levers for sensemaking (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010) and equal important forces on organisations when these experience incomprehensible situations (Ning & Jing, 2012). They are closely related to the enactment and cues characteristics of sensemaking (Weick, 1988).

People use cues or point of references to interpret the information and situations they meet (Parry, 2003; Weick, 1995; Weick, 1988; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010) in order to build expectations of which direction the organisation may emerge (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Sensemaking is constantly ongoing and retrospective (Parry, 2003; Weick, 1995), which means that people continuously make sense of an activity using past experience. Weick et al. (2005) exemplifies this with a nurse treating a patient. When the nurse tries to make sense of the patient’s health he or she recalls what the patient looked like on the last visit in order to decide what to do next. Seeing what one has done previously and what the consequences of those actions were makes one realise how to proceed forward (Weick, 2005). The interpreted information and previous experience create expectations and may induce commitment to a task, and impacts peoples’ idea of the organisational appearance. Shared expectations within organisations can be both positive and negative for sensemaking. Research has shown that positive expectations facilitate sensemaking. Weick (1993) argue that positive expectations emerge from routine practices and familiar situations, e.g. when people create a common understanding by labelling it in a certain way. Negative or poor expectations transfer from top-management to lower employees and realise the poor expectations in terms of poor work performance (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010).

Commitment is connected to the individual’s professional role and can both facilitate and impede sensemaking in organisations. It facilitates in terms of envisioning and energising and
can thus mobilise action (Cornelissen, 2012; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick, 1988). For instance, a boss’ strong commitment to a vision may stimulate sensemaking activities. The commitment of individuals can lead to great accomplishments, due to that it contributes meaning and helps individuals to adapt to the current situation (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Christianson et al., 2009; Weick, 1979). Weick (1979) exemplifies this with a story of lost soldiers finding their way and surviving in the Alps, even though the map showed the Pyrenees, which no one knew at the time. It also creates blind spots, where individuals risk to commit to a failing vision (Weick, 1988). Earlier research has shown that individuals fall trap for their misleading commitment in times of technological change (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010).

2.3.4 Action
Central in sensemaking an activity is action (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is about the interplay between action and interpretation where one cannot choose how to act but rather acts on interpretation of the context, which subsequently creates new interpretations to act on (Weick et al., 2005). Researchers have used this to explain organisational appearance (Liu et al., 2014; Schwandt, 2005). Action can be seen as the sensemaking outcome (Mills et al., 2010) and corresponds to Weick’s enactment characteristic, which means that individuals construct the reality by acting on interpretations of it (Mills et al., 2010; Weick, 2005; Perry, 2003). Weick (1988) exemplifies this with an explorer who cannot know what he explores until he explored it, and acted upon the situation. By acting, the explorer influences and structures the situation. “The explorer understands the problem he face only after he faced it and only after his action has become inextricably wound into it” (Weick, 1988:306). People interpret the context in which product management appear and creates an understanding. The interpretation shows action, which in turn show the organisational structure.

2.4 Summarising the conceptual framework
Even though the explicit management idea product management was invented in 1931, a common understanding of the practice lacks. Earlier product management literature unites around a description of a practice with many components. In order to comprehend the product management structuring we employ the sensemaking perspective, since it enables organisational members to reflect upon the product management function. Sensemaking theory has been applied in different contexts and is argued to constitute a good way to
rationalise incomprehensible activities. It is defined as how, why and with what effect activities become conceivable for organisations. This thesis aims to apprehend the sensemaking outcome, i.e. the understanding that is generated by the sensemaking process and that equals the question “what is the effect”, and why it is understood this way. By investigating this it will clarify the structuring of the practice. Weick’s (1995) six-step model makes it possible to take a snapshot of the inter-organisational understanding and analyse the extent of understanding. Characteristics of sensemaking together with the six-step model and previous product management literature have generated four main sensemaking pillars. Three pillars constitute an appropriate analytical tool to investigate understanding: individual and organisational identity, interaction and commitment and expectations. Due to the reciprocal relationship in this theory these equals the fourth one; action. People interpret the practice and their understanding equals how they act. This constructs reality, which parallels the structure of a practice.

Figure 2. Product management structuring (own appreciation of the conceptual framework).

Figure 2 describes the link between sensemaking theory and product management research that derived three pillars. These three pillars indicate why organisational members understand product management in a certain way. The fourth pillar, action, explains the reciprocal relationship where understanding and action intertwine and tells us about the structure of product management.
3. Method

3.1 Research approach
Given that the purpose of this study is to answer with what outcome and why product management is sense made in a certain way and further structured within organisations, an exploratory approach was chosen. An exploratory approach is suitable because clarification and structuring the product management practice is a limitedly researched phenomenon in academia. In this thesis we want to depict an incomprehensible situation that lack sufficient research, which according to Saunders et al. (2007) advocate an exploratory approach. An exploratory approach however is less suitable for describing situations and explaining why a phenomenon occurs (Saunders et al., 2007). Therefore we will combine it with a descriptive approach so it will be possible to both understand outcomes, i.e. with what outcome the function is sense made, and the reason for this in order to describe the structure.

3.2 Case selection
The research sample in this thesis was self-selected. Exploratory research benefits from self-selected samples as it may reveal what type of respondents that are interested in the subject (Saunders et al., 2007). Self-selection ensured that respondents were not pressured to participate in the study (Saunders et al., 2007). In order to pursue our purpose and get a reliable set of respondents we initially aimed for organisations that are familiar with product management and use a self-defined version of it. This criterion stem from the assumption that the practice lacks compelling standards for companies and that some companies never heard of the actual term product management and would not be able to talk about its existence. In addition, to find organisations that have not defined it would be very difficult. To pursue this approach we together with a consulting firm\(^2\) contacted organisations that met our criterion and informed them of our research. The consulting firm contacted organisations in their network that they previously had been in contact with regarding their product management function. The organisations where contacted regardless of satisfaction with the consulting firm’s services. Among companies that chose to participate we selected a sample from a variety industries. This approach may highlight the question of generalizability, as self-

\(^2\) Tolpagorni Product Management (http://tolpagorni.com)
selective samples seldom are representative (Saunders et al., 2007). Product management practices appear in several industries, both in start-ups and large multinational firms. This indicates a fragmented field with a practice occurring simultaneously in multiple contexts (Czarniawska, 1998). Similar to Strannegård & Friberg (2001) we thus define the case selection as kaleidoscopic. It means that we study product management in different industries interviewing organisational members all within the organisational function product management. The different industries and organisational members will contribute with organising fragments that according to Czarniawska (1998) facilitate the capturing of structuring at large. This way we can provide one reality of how product management is made sense of and structured in organisations, mitigate subjective myopia stemming from single informants (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1995) and contribute to research. Sensemaking research generally utilise case studies and aim for a smaller number of respondents. Weick (1995) argue that it is because access to organisational members is more important than their overall representativeness. We have in line with this chosen to study a smaller number of organisations and in some of them interviewed several members. This thesis consists of eight firms and eleven respondents. This sample will as mentioned not be generalizable to a population as it is not representative of a whole population (Saunders et al., 2007).

3.3 Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with opened-ended questions, some group interviews and a study of contemporary journals and web pages about product management. It is argued that sensemaking research does not aim for an ultimate truth, rather a plausible analysis that enriches the understanding of a social phenomenon (Brown, 2000). Fulton (2005) states that a qualitative research approach is the most compatible research methodology in such situations. As we investigates with what outcome and why people working with product management have made sense of it, data collection will benefit from interviewing organisational members linked to the practice. In-depth, open-ended interviewing is the far most common form of data collection for sensemaking scholars (Fulton, 2005). Interviewing a sample of people is according to Saunders et al. (2007) very helpful to find out what has happened, which corresponds well with our sensemaking perspective.
Validity in qualitative research has historically been criticised (Cho & Trent, 2006; Atkinson et al., 2003). According to Cho & Trent (2006) runs qualitative research the risk of influencing creation of reality. A common problem is to avoid formulate leading questions, as those affect and limits the respondents answers to some extent (Cleary et al., 2014; Loftus, 1975). Further, leading questions may contain presuppositions, which directs answers unconsciously (Loftus, 1975). We are aware that it might jeopardise the validity of our research and have tried to keep the pre-determined questions as similar as possible throughout the whole research process. We also informed respondents of the possibility to validate their answers in hindsight in order to make sure that we understood their interpretations correctly (Cho & Trent, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All this in order to strengthen the validity and let the respondents theorise their own experience, which according to Harvey (2015) is vital in qualitative research. Open-ended questions enabled us to gain deeper knowledge and experience from the respondent, which indicates a reliable way to gather qualitative data and minimises the risk of biasing answers with our knowledge (Bryman & Bell, 2007). We tried not to interrupt the interviewee during the interview, but as we had to get answers we sought after within a certain time limit this was occasionally inevitable. We are aware of that it might have probed the answers somewhat (cf. Saunders et al., 2007).

In descriptive studies structured interviews are often used to identify general patterns (Saunders et al., 2007). The pre-determined questions served as interviewing themes and helped us get the answers we aimed for. As we employed semi-structured interviews it allowed us to capture both the exploratory (open-ended questions) and descriptive nature (structured themes/questions) of the research questions. Our research was broadened with two group interviews. The aim was to reveal how respondents reflected on product management with a colleague and to add an additional perspective on interaction. They were semi-structured and enabled the respondents to interact and argue with each other. However, the limited amount made it difficult to make any general findings but we consider them useful as they deepened the discussions and made respondents reveal even more information. Group interviews are great for discussion purposes and exploration of topics; however, they might result in a “group effect” where a certain person dominates the interview (Saunders et al., 2007). To encourage involvement of all participants the word was distributed evenly and also individual questions directed to all group interview participants.
The thesis does not aim to compare the different fragments captured in the interviews in order to contrast industries or organisations, rather depict and create a larger picture of the phenomenon in line with the kaleidoscopic approach (Strannegård & Friberg, 2001; Czarniawska, 1998). An interview guide with themes was constructed in order to conduct the semi-structured interviews. Themes were based on the fundamental pillars we derived from previous product management literature and discussions and the sensemaking research using characteristics and the six-step model, but did not include difficult theoretical wordings that could be misunderstood by the respondent. Each theme had a set of questions related to it (See Appendix 1). However, as the interviews were semi-structured the sub-questions varied throughout the interview process. Some questions in the guide were occasionally not used in the same form as in the guide and sometimes were additional follow-up questions asked. This enabled us to more fully understand how each organisation reflected upon product management and provided us everyone’s specific story. We tried not to make leading themes and questions in order to mitigate biased answers from the respondents. Prior to each interview, the interview guide themes were sent to the respondent together with an explanation of the purpose of the thesis and other technicalities. This enabled the respondents to understand the purpose and to reflect over the subject and compile their thoughts. It was also a way to let each respondent give informed consent to the data we aimed to collect (Saunders et al., 2007). We are aware of that reproducing understandings and thoughts may suffer from memory lapses and that this constitutes a draw back of this kind of qualitative sensemaking study.

Each interview was recorded and subsequently transcribed. This minimised the risk of misunderstandings that may appear when only notes are taken. In addition it allowed us to have respondents clarifying or extending some parts in hindsight. Respondents were asked for approval of the recording prior each interview and all respondents are anonymous in this thesis to the extent of industry. To know the companies’ and respondents’ names will not contribute to the content and analysis and were thus eliminated from this thesis. What industry the respondents are active within adds to the kaleidoscopic perspective and are visualised in the table below (See Table 1). To keep respondents anonymous also helped us obtain data, as the respondents felt less anxious about being interviewed. All interviews were conducted in Swedish and the content were thus subsequently translated into English. Translated data runs the risk of losing the respondent’s personal emphasis and we therefore employed extra precaution in the translation process, focusing on the whole story.
Table 1. List of respondents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Length</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>MedTech</td>
<td>Individual + Group</td>
<td>60 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>MedTech</td>
<td>Individual + Group</td>
<td>60 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Software</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>45 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Software</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>45 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Healthcare</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>45 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Telecom</td>
<td>Individual + Group</td>
<td>60 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Telecom</td>
<td>Individual + Group</td>
<td>60 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>Cosmetic</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>45 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Telecom</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>45 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>Software</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>45 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>Wholesale</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>45 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Moreover, data collection also included a study of product management journals as this is argued to provide good background information for qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2007). According to Bologun & Johnson (1998) and Gephart (1993) corporate reports are good for studying organisational sensemaking. The use of multiple sources allowed us to triangulate the information from interviews and assured us that we had understood the subject correctly (Saunders et al., 2007; Cho & Trent, 2006).

3.4 Data presentation and analysis

Previous sensemaking studies have used a narrative approach (Fulton, 2005; Currie & Brown, 2003). Primarily because people think narratively: in stories where they share an ongoing flow and sequence of experience (Weick, 1995) and also because it captures feelings such as anxiety and ambiguity, complexity and organisational phenomenon (Mitchell & Egudo, 2004). A main method to collect data for narrative analysis is to perform in-depth interviews where interviewees can provide interpretations in the form of stories (Saunders et al., 2007). In this thesis we aim to capture the inter-organisational product management phenomenon. Consequently, after collecting the empirical material we decided to present it using narratives told about product management. In the interviews general patterns were found, which represent different narratives of product management. This allows us to unfold product management in a comprehensible and not fragmented way and it will facilitate the
subsequent analysis. The empirical material is summarised in Table 2 and 3 and highlights essential citations.

As set out earlier the purpose of this study is to investigate with what outcome and why product management have been sense made. According to the conceptual framework sensemaking and action is intertwined. This means that the respondents’ understanding of product management equal the structuring of the practice, and we are therefore able to answer the research questions of what outcome sensemaking have had by investigating why product management is understood in a certain way. So, by exploring in what way and why it is made sense of by the people involved in it conclusions will be drawn of the structuring on an inter-organisational level. Weick (1995) argue that narrative analysis is very helpful in understanding activities and Brown (1998) further explains that narrative analysis conveys a clear sense of an organisation in an area where a variety of perspectives co-exist. When analysing data retrieved from interviews, we have, similar to Mishler (1986), studied the why and with what effect people attempt to order, organise and expresses meaning of an activity. Our narrative analysis does, in line with Mishler (1986), aim to tie the stories together and investigate how they relate to each other. Bryman (2008) states one can argue that a narrative analysis is sensitive to (1) people’s sense of their place within specific activities and states of affairs (2) the stories they generate about them, and (3) people’s sense of their role within them. These three elements correspond well with the purpose of our thesis and the sensemaking perspective. We have studied people’s understanding of an activity, explored the stories and the roles they generate about it. During data collection, the narratives told by interviewees (raw material derived from interviews) were used as a basis to explore themes and common patterns of understandings of product management practices (cf. Bryman, 2008; Fulton, 2005). The patterns were analysed to capture an overarching view of what outcome the sensemaking of product management have had and why it is sense made the way it is (cf. Fulton, 2005).

3.5 Operationalization

This thesis aims to contribute to the research area of sensemaking, by exploring and describing with what outcome and why organisational members have made sense of product management and its influences on structures for the product management practice. We decided to use a sensemaking perspective since it is considered a useful way to investigate
the understanding. Further we consider it appropriate due to its use in closely related areas (cf. Ancona, 2012; Brorström, 2010; Klein et al., 2006; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), but it is obvious lacking in this particular research area. Our operationalization already started in the conceptual framework where we chose to crystallize the large amount of existing research. What we call the essential pillars for understanding and organising a management practice was chosen and shaped out of theory, research and different angles upon sensemaking characteristics, and turned into somewhat more concrete topics. According to other researchers, which applied sensemaking this constitutes an approach rather than a theoretical model, explaining the focus individuals, communication, activities and stories (Brorström, 2010). Using sensemaking as a perspective meant for us that we built our interview guide upon the essential pillars. We selected core themes and words in the conceptual framework and turned these into open-ended questions. In line with Brorström (2010) we consider this to be of central as the respondents themselves could discuss and answer from their particular point of view. By asking the respondents questions concerning these pillars we could identify why individuals created interpretations of the practice, acted towards it and structured it. By asking the respondents to give examples, explain and develop reasoning we acquired a more dynamic and holistic picture of understandings and structuring actually influences product management. By further building questions on sensemaking theory we are able to capture respondents understanding.

As understood from our reasoning, the operationalization of the sensemaking perspective is ongoing throughout the empirics and analysis, due to the theory’s special art. Brorström (2010) argues that sensemaking as a perspective is a tool for understanding, in this case a practice, and that the operationalization can be viewed as a part of the result of the study.
4. Empirical findings

The empirical study revealed that the sensemaking outcome of product management is the respondents’ use of constituents. They describe, reflect and discuss the practice with the help of constituents and these are therefore central in the presentation of the empirical material. The study shows various understandings that are recognised as consistent or inconsistent understandings of product management. Consistent refer to understandings common for all the case companies and inconsistent means understandings of product management that differ within and among the case companies. The presentation of the respondents’ understanding of product management (and the constituents) will help us explore the structuring of the practice since understanding and structuring is intertwined (see Figure 2).

4.1 Consistent understandings of product management

4.1.1 A central and communicative function

All respondents were united in the belief that the product manager constitutes a coordinating role “in the heart of things” and described it as a “mini-CEO”. They underlined the communicative and integrative role of the product manager by explaining that it is important to be social and outgoing. Some respondents even explicitly said that it is the above all most important characteristic of a product manager and the entire function (Respondent A; B; E). The respondents interpreted product management as embodying several interfaces, which in detail differed between the respondents’ narratives. Being a “mini-CEO” was among respondents interpreted as a widespread idea, and one respondent expressed this by saying that he had heard others talk about it.

“I have heard the expression that the product manager is a “mini-CEO.”” (Respondent K)

The respondents used previous experience and others’ definition of product management in order to comprehend it themselves. They further relied on the belief that their role is essential for the organisation, which together with ample communication creates important commitment. Overall, respondents explained that the product management function interact with almost every other organisational department from R&D to marketing, sales, support, and internal and external management teams. Common for the respondents was that they tended to see their role as essential for the organisation and hence were very committed to its
purpose. Some even argued it to be inevitable to do business without a product management function.

“Without me there would not be any products to sell.” (Respondent H)

In addition to the coordinating aspect, all respondents interpreted the function as communicative and described similar ways of communicating in their roles as product managers.

”(...) It is the coordinating and communicative elements that makes the product process work properly.” (Respondent E)

They “ran between offices” several times a day and especially to their boss’ office or the R&D department. They also used e-mail and telephone, and all respondents stated that they travelled in their work, and that the role would benefit if they could travel more than they do.

It was expressed that the most interesting parts took place outside the scheduled meetings, at lunches or coffee breaks. Distance was viewed as a threshold among most respondents, which put obstacles in the collaboration across borders.

4.1.2 Broad competence

A common understanding among respondents was that product management is a complex function that cooperates with a majority of the firm’s departments and often requires that the employee possesses broad competence. Overall respondents argued it requires both commercial and technical competences albeit to a varying extent. What united all appreciations of product management was that the team preferably should possess both capabilities in order to succeed in managing the product process. Respondent K have interpreted the function as in the below quote, which highlights the need for broad competence.

“(…) One needs to have strategic and operative competence, to understand our product portfolio and road map and simultaneously understand the target group for our product and what needs to be changed. It can be a small dot that is wrong. One needs to know all the projects’ time plans and that we have the exact right message and that there are products in
stock. To handle high and low, be diplomatic but still pushing limits. And much, much more.” (Respondent K)

Respondents united in the importance of keeping the technical understanding in the product management function, as they must have the ability to formulate specifications for both the commercial and technical departments and hence need to understand both worlds. Altogether product management must get along the rapidly changing customer trends and simultaneously make R&D to move in the same direction. One respondent visualised it with a well-known Swedish sign, which illustrates that the product management function coordinates and tries to steer change in the right direction at the right pace, not to fast or to slow.

“Imagine the Swedish sign for pedestrian crossing where “Herr Gårman” has a chewing gum under his foot. Marketing and sales represent him when he tries to cross the street (...) and R&D the white lines on the crossing that look the same and will do so forever. Product management is the chewing gum in between stopping “Herr Gårman” from running too fast and simultaneously tries to get the crossing lines to adapt to the changing environment, not getting stuck in an effective but undesired product.” (Respondent I)

A majority stated that education, training or a deep interest within the product area made work easier and some even argued it to be a prerequisite. However, all respondents identified marketing as growing in importance and expected product management teams to need deep knowledge within that area as well.

4.1.3 Future vision – A marketing perspective
Almost all respondents expressed that the product management function have changed and continues to change towards an increased focus on market and the commercialisation of products. They experienced intensified customer power and consciousness and believed the world is moving faster. Product management was interpreted as a growing function that gains in importance as competition and customer power increase. As visualised in the quotes below trends and customer demand rather than what technology is capable of was seen as determinants of direction. The latter quote adds the importance of producing the right products.
"It (the future direction) is foremost to learn to manage the new retail market. The power of customers and their knowledge about everything.” (Respondent H)

“The future will require us to understand end customer needs in order to deliver great product solutions.” (Respondent G)

Future expectations coincided around marketing and pointed out that producing the right products will be of great value for organisations in order to stay competitive. Respondent H argued that her firm is and will continue to be affected by the rapid technology development in e-commerce and Internet based media and networks. The general future vision of product management is clearly Internet and customer focused.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consistent understandings</th>
<th>A central &amp; communicative function</th>
<th>Broad competence</th>
<th>Future vision – marketing focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aspects with common understandings for all the case companies</td>
<td>“A practice in the heart of things. (All respondents) “I have heard the expression that the product manager is a &quot;mini-CEO.&quot; (Respondent K) &quot;Without me there would not be any products to sell.&quot; (Respondent H) &quot;(…) It is the coordinating and communicative elements that makes the product process work properly. “ (Respondent E)</td>
<td>“…one need to have strategic and operative competence, to understand our product portfolio and road map and simultaneously understand the target group for our product and what needs to be changed. It can be a small dot that is wrong. One needs to know all the projects’ time plans and that we have the exact right message and that there are products in stock. To handle high and low, be diplomatic but still pushing limits. And much, much more.” (Respondent K)</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Consistent aspects in product management: citation summary.

Table 2 summarises the consistent understanding and common aspects captured in the interviews. The table shows all citations that we highlighted in the preceding text and provides an overview in order to simplify understanding.
4.2 Inconsistent understandings of product management

4.2.1 A technology or marketing focused practice

Respondents explained that the firm specific product management structure is set on behalf of what emphasis the management team and the president put on the function. In terms of organisation chart the product management function was located differently within the case companies. It varied from being defined as either belonging to the marketing department, where the product manager reports to a marketing manager, to constitute a separate unit that reports directly to top management. Respondent K explained how their product management function had been relocated between departments the past ten years to find the optimal structure. It was initially placed in the R&D department and subsequently relocated to the marketing department. Eventually it was defined as a separate department with close connections to its previous host departments. Other respondents explained a similar story and argued that relocations were motivated by the lost focus that came from having a host department. One respondent argued explicitly that the product management function contains four distinct parts; (1) pure product management, which means to specify requirements to R&D and developing roadmaps (2) product marketing, which is how to formulate a message to the market (3) business activity, where one needs to manage aspects as profitability, and finally (4) operations, which deals with issues of how to deliver the product to the market. This can be dealt with by dividing the responsibility areas on several managers, who reports to different bosses. The first two parts are also named inbound or outbound.

“It is difficult when you are required to be both outbound and inbound at once. It does not work for me. I can manage large and small issues if I am allowed to focus on either inbound towards R&D or outbound towards marketing. But to cross that line equals too much task switching, you will not get anything done.” (Respondent J)

Respondents in technology-focused companies industries stressed knowledge within technology related to their product as vital. Two product managers participating in a group interview agreed upon that technical education were essential for working in product management as you have to communicate with R&D.
“I find it difficult to believe that one could hire a graduate economist, because I do not believe that this person could understand the necessary discussions you must engage in with R&D.” (Respondent F)

Respondents with more commercial products emphasised the marketing aspect as key and a smaller part of the respondents mentioned previous experiences or competence in marketing and sales as equally important as the technical experience. This was expressed as knowing little about everything but still enough to pull it all together. Some respondents said that building internal product management teams with different expertise does this; in order to incorporate both the business oriented mind and the technical knowledge. In the same way teams can be built up with people focused on operative respectively strategy focused tasks.

4.2.2 Work tasks, processes and operations

How to structure actual work assignments, processes and operations differed in the case companies, however, regardless of view all respondents did touch upon the matter. Some of the respondents understood their product management function as very process intense with clear deadlines and milestones to reach, whereas others only mentioned formal processes briefly and some experienced a lack of them. Respondent F explained that formal processes within product management occurred but were seldom acknowledged and followed.

The respondents emphasised different responsibilities in the function. One respondent interpreted this product development as an extensive process as in the below quote.

“It is a responsibility that ranges from farm to table. Product managers runs a project through every step in the process, from the development part to the launching part.” (Respondent K)

Respondent E expressed that the roles within their product management team are very well defined. The same applied for Respondent K who stated that the roles and responsibilities along the entire product lifecycle process were clearly communicated and structured. Respondent J and I explained that their product management department had checklists, documentations, regular meetings and internal IT systems to keep track of work. This vision did not account for all case companies. Respondent C and D did not have well-defined roles
within their company and they experienced an undesirably heavy workload, which they understood originated in a lack of defined procedures, roles and a rapid increase of work tasks. The lack of defined roles and responsibility was dealt with differently and occasionally product managers themselves decided how to manage it. One respondent even created a model for it herself in order to understand work.

“So in this chaos that can occur you may think about situations, documents, groups, people, and apply RACI. When am I responsible, when should I approve something, when can I require to be consulted, and when do I think that I need to be informed?” (Respondent J)

It is obvious that when it comes to job descriptions the product manager partly is steered by company visions, but some respondents comprehended the role as very free. This leaves room for interpretations and different identifications of the role among the respondents. As expressed below, some even thought that the role required freedom.

“I believe the position requires it because it varies so much and has so many ingredients. It would be almost impossible to control it in detail. I believe we have great authority and freedom.” (Respondent F)

One respondent explained that the only instruction she got was to do her job; consequently a product manager needs to be driven and committed. This promotes new ideas and practices that facilitates and improves the work procedures. Nevertheless, one respondent argued that the free job description does create expectation problems.

“It did not go well at all. He did not understand what he was supposed to do as a product manager. There are tons of mails about different situations that need to be solved and he got totally paralysed. He could not sort the information and did not know where to start. So it did not go well, even though he came from the exact right industry.” (Respondent J)

Some respondents experienced confusion concerning the product management role, which forced the product manager to control questions, issues and situations that stemmed from every part of the organisation. They expressed a lack of shared meaning of the function in their organisations and got the impression that their colleagues had a hard time to know when to approach them. Several managers stated they had to set limits and when they confront
situations think whether or not it is their task to deal with. They often felt torn between R&D and marketing’s different incentives. However, in firms where formal processes and clear role descriptions are communicated no such confusion could be seen, since they can rely on a coherent product management vision.

Respondent I stated that most operations were governed through templates. Respondent E and F on the other hand expressed their operations to be of reactive kind, where operations lacked templates and instead occurred without structure. Such approach impacted where the product management function put their attention, and it could eventually lead to focus on certain “problem-areas”.

“Of course it (boss’ appreciation of important activities) affects where I chose to focus my attention in my work. We raised the quality but we might have lost other important tasks in the product manager role.” (Respondent F)

4.2.3 Communication channels

Some product management functions perceived R&D as a particularly important interface, whereas others had limited contact with that interface and rather emphasised the marketing department as key. One respondent underlined his understanding of the market requirement:

“It is very important for us to understand the market. To understand how our customers think and what they do” (Respondent A)

In general, technology-focused companies had an active communication with R&D and marketing. On the other hand, a commercial focused company explained their contact with R&D as informative. R&D informed product management about new products coming up, which gave them the possibility to decide whether or not to bring the product to the market. Similarly, product management gave feedback to R&D after the products were produced and did not specify requirements to the same extent as a technology-focused firm. It was evident that the interpretation of communication channels and interfaces for product management varied immensely, but that it seemed to be related to the kind of product the company sells. For some of our respondents the first interpretations of product management interaction was how to communicate with R&D. For others did business orientation and communication with
marketing and sales equal R&D, but for the many it was the second consideration. Additional others mentioned marketing and sales as the most important relation, and education related to business as appropriate. Communication is overall differently apprehended and organisational members differ in their views depending on the emphasis on technology, marketing and sales.

Very few respondents expressed that they had formal reporting to their bosses; it seems it was more common to communicate informally on a daily basis. However, the product manager often had close contact with the top management team and the CEO. In general the communication seems to differ between being ad-hoc and scheduled. Some were steered by processes and others were not, and this to a certain extent coincided with the company’s focus.

“Communication with R&D is quite well-structured, it is scheduled and there is no way you can skip these meetings.” (Respondent F)

“Communication with the sales organisation is less structured and communication therefore becomes poor (...) the sales organisation is spread geographically and communication is not even every week. (...) The amount of communication depends largely on the individuals within the function.” (Respondent G)

It was important to build networks in order to get the will through, because the product manager seldom has staff liability but rather is dependent on several other departments. Respondent B explained how he managed this issue.

“You have to communicate, reconcile, and compromise.” (Respondent B)

Respondent I visualised it by saying that “you need to be a good warrior”, which means that product managers need to battle different interfaces in order to stick to the core strategy. A product management team often had goals to reach and in order to get there was communication of these of vital importance. If not all team members knew where to go; the outcome would not be very good. This was managed differently, where the respondents expressed that they were steered by organisational objectives and economical goals, but also more operative and short-term goals. Respondent H explained how her product management
team steered other vital functions to work in the desired direction through the use of shorter sales cycles. In this situation the role of the product manager’s communication is to steer the team, telling other functions what to perform, how and in what time in order to fulfil the goals.

4.2.4 Future visions – product management as a profession
Understandings of how easily one would be able to switch jobs within the product management field in the future differed between respondents from different companies but the understanding was similar within the same company. Some respondents argued that knowledge within the product area were essential to accomplish work and that one was tied to the product in which one currently worked. These respondents however argued that the marketing aspect of product management was similar regardless of industry, the aim is to sell products, not to understand the specific nature of one product area.

“Commercial aspects are common in product management irrespective of industry, but it is clearly a difference between companies in the lettuce industry and us (telecom).”
(Respondent F)

Others had an even more open future vision and suggested that product management could become a profession with common procedures that could apply to different products.

“During my years product management has developed from something undefined towards a profession. Of course, you cannot be product manager for a processor and then switch to shampoo, but as long as you stay within your domain, it is going to become a profession.”
(Respondent J)

Respondent J sensed a development towards a standardised function, which other respondents did not interpret as possible due to the product’s strong power on the product management functional structure.


**Table 3: Inconsistent aspects in product management: citation summary.**

Table 3 summarises the inconsistent understanding and common aspects captured in the interviews. It shows all citations that we highlighted in the preceding text and provides an overview in order to simplify understanding.
5. Analysis

We began this thesis by discussing the increased importance for companies to manage products and the perceived lack of external evaluation on product management practices. We identified product management as an ambiguous management practice in terms of organisational structure and argued that it was interesting to study the structure from the perspective of organisational members involved in the function. Thus, the overarching aim of the thesis is to identify organisational structures of product management. It all boiled down to our research questions: What is the sensemaking outcome for the product management practice? Why has organisational members understood product management in this way? The empirical study identified two levels of understanding the practice inter-organisationally. In some aspects were respondents consistent in their understanding and in others were their understanding inconsistent. In the following analysis we will first discuss these different levels of understanding and then use the analysis model from our conceptual framework to analyse why these understandings have come about.

5.1 Product management and levels of understanding

Previous product management literature describes a function with many definitions, constituents and objectives (c.f. Maglyas, 2012; Chunawalla, 2009; Cooper, 2001; Ebert, 2007), which implies a non-uniform practice. Three of the theoretical pillars derived in the conceptual framework propose explanations for why organisational members understand something in a certain way and together sum up in the fourth pillar that show total understanding (see Figure 2). According to Weick (1995) this total understanding, also called the sensemaking outcome, is the same as the action organisational members take when structuring a practice. Compiling the different fragments of product management understandings from interviews, our empirical study reveals that the sensemaking outcome of product management coincides on two main levels. These two levels were identified using Weick’s (1995) six-step model and the different steps of coherent or non-coherent understanding. In line with Weick’s (1995) argument of universal understanding, some aspects of product management were understood similarly in all case companies, which show a consistent structure. These aspects have reached higher steps in the six-steps model and therefore indicate a universal structure. Other aspects were understood differently within and between case companies and therefore create an inconsistent structure of the product management function on an inter-organisational level. In line with Weick (1995) these
aspects occurred in all case companies but as respondents differed in their understandings on an inter-organisational level, the practice has only reached lower steps in the six-steps model.

5.2 The consistent understanding of product management

5.2.1 A central role and communicative function

All respondents were united in the understanding and structuring of product management as “in the heart of things” and/or a “mini-CEO”, and they emphasised characteristics such as social and outgoing. Respondents expressed that they had heard others label the role as a “mini-CEO”, which indicates why this aspect appears to be spread and communicated inter-organisationally (cf. Weick, 1995). They were further united in the belief that some of the main tasks of the function was to be communicative and coordinating, and that the function aims to work close to other organisational departments such as sales, marketing, R&D, and similar. This understanding of the function is consistent and not questioned by either product managers or their co-workers. In line with Weick (1995) and the reasoning in the action pillar, the practice is structured in such a way, since understanding and action is intertwined. A description as a “mini-CEO” brings in mind a competent role, which goes in line with how Degn (2014) says that individuals preferably reflect upon the self. The below quote from the empirical material strengthens the respondents understanding of the role as essential for the organisation.

“Without me there would not be any products to sell” (Respondent H)

Since all respondents understand the role as a “mini-CEO” and as essential to the organisation we considered this to constitute a shared identity for product management. In line with Gioia & Thomas (1996) and Liu et al. (2014) this implies that structuring of the function builds on this appreciation. According to Christianson et al. (2009) the respondents’ strong commitment towards this identity most likely influences others to understand them in a similar way, which fuels consistency. The identity as essential could therefore, in line with Maitlis & Sonenshein (2010), facilitated why this understanding occur at its current universal step.

With the identity as a “mini-CEO” follows the understanding of communication and interaction with other departments and stakeholders as central for product management,
irrespective of organisation. The identified tools for communicating are similar and consist for example of e-mail, telephone, and travelling. In line with Gioia & Thomas (1996) the respondents understand the function in accordance with how others seize it. For instance, the respondents describe that they constantly are approached with questions and that they are expected to travel to meet others. This contributes to that they make sense of the function as communicating, since others expect it. In our fragmented sample we recognise communication as a shared understanding. In accordance to Maitlis & Sonenshein (2010) a shared understanding of this aspect contributes to sensemaking and explains why all respondents interpreted it as a communicative function. Further it explains why the practice is structured in such a way (cf. Weick, 1995).

5.2.2 Broad competence

Further, there is consensus (Weick, 1995) around the understanding and structuring that employees within product management need to have a broad set of competence. Without a broad competence product management cannot interact with the necessary interfaces, which is required by the central role as a “mini-CEO”. Previous interaction failures due to lack of broad competence may have constituted cues (cf. Weick, 1995) that helped organisational members to understand the practice. Respondents also developed metaphors, which may contribute to the spread of the understanding derived from cues (cf. Weick et al., 2005).

“Imagine the Swedish sign for pedestrian crossing where “Herr Gårman” has a chewing gum under his foot. Marketing and sales represent him when he tries to cross the street (...) and R&D the white lines on the crossing that look the same and will do so forever. Product management is the chewing gum in between stopping “Herr Gårman” from running too fast and simultaneously tries to get the crossing lines to adapt to the changing environment, not getting stuck in an effective but undesired product.” (Respondent I)

In line with Liu et al. (2014) metaphors helps establish importance and reflects beliefs, and equals representations of sensemaking. Similar narratives from other respondents strengthen this aspect of product management as consistent. It seem to be a universal understanding (cf. Weick et al., 2005) of how a person should be in order to be able to perform the job within the function, regardless of the organisation. Later steps in Weick’s (1995) six-step model are reached and the practice is structured according to the understanding of a broad competence.
as a necessity. One should be technically competent and marketing focused, perhaps not expert in any of these, but able to communicate in both languages. One should also be a “people-person” in order to succeed and there is a common understanding of the need to handle the gap between lacking staff liability and the dependency on others.

5.2.3 Future vision – A marketing perspective

The respondents are united in the belief that product management will become a more consumer and marketing focused function in the future. In line with Ning & Jing (2012) and Maitlis & Sonenshein (2010) the respondents make sense of product management by expectations and commitment regarding the future. This also implies that the structuring of the practice depends upon such expectations and commitment (See Figure 2). Regardless of the respondents’ responsibility and previous experience all united in that future product management have to place greater emphasis on customer consciousness and pointed towards increased importance of the marketing aspect. This sensemaking outcome most certainly is an effect of the rapid technological development that recently increased its influence (cf. Stark, 2011) and the amplified importance of products for companies (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1995). For instance one respondent expressed the belief that customer power has increased due to the technological development. It enables easier access to a greater range of products and another respondent identified customer trends as the most important factor for change. In this comprehension of future product management we can reveal shared commitment in a fragmented sample, which in accordance with Maitlis & Sonenshein (2010) help explain one sensemaking outcome narrative of future change. The belief of greater emphasis on the marketing aspect within product management further is an example of shared identity that works as an anchor for all organisations, which results in reduced resistance for work tasks and facilitates sensemaking and a consistent understanding at an inter-organisational level (cf. Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). It may affect the risk of committing to a failing vision (Weick, 1998) in the sense that all firms are committed to a less efficient structuring. However it may also illustrate the opposite that nobody is on the wrong track regarding future product management structures. In this aspect has the sensemaking outcome reached latter steps in Weick’s (1995) six-step model and the understanding and structuring of the practice with a marketing focused future can be seen as universal.
5.3 The inconsistent understanding of product management

5.3.1 A technology or marketing focused practice

The understanding of the practice differs in terms of for example technology or marketing focus depending on the characteristics of the product (i.e. computers or shampoo). This indicates that respondents clearly ascribed products an identity and created organisational roles and responsibilities that corresponded to this identity (cf. Cagan, 2006; Weick, 1995). This is further evident looking at how the case companies have chosen to locate the product management function geographically and organisationally, and hence how they structure the function (cf. Weick, 1995). For instance technically focused companies locate product management in the same building as R&D and marketing focused companies tend to have greater geographical distance to R&D and hence the structuring differs. Moreover, technology focused companies saw a technical education as a prerequisite when hiring and emphasised communication with R&D. This requirement to have product related education or previous experience to be able to communicate and understand the procedures corresponds to Patriotta & Spedale’s (2009) argument that collectively understood managerial jargon and specific terms facilitates sensemaking. The quote below illustrates that some organisations may have an internal universal understanding and emphasise the importance to speak the same language to understand each other and the function.

“I find it difficult to believe that one could hire a graduate economist, because I do not believe that this person could understand the necessary discussions you must engage in with R&D.” (Respondent F)

However, the understandings and structuring differs on an inter-organisational level as it is tied to the organisation’s focus. Marketing focused companies put less attention to the competence and communication concerning technology and R&D. The company’s focus and product requirement influenced how product management teams were structured in terms of individuals’ previous experience and competence (cf. Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). By enactment was products’ identity interpreted and it subsequently influenced respondents’ sensemaking of the product management function (cf. Patriotta & Spedale, 2009; Weick, 1995).
5.3.2 Work tasks, processes and operations

The respondents relate the identity of the function to the work tasks and assignments. From the empirical material it is captured that product management lacks a consistent understanding concerning this. To some extent work tasks and assignments clearly overlaps, as mentioned above concerning the identity as a “mini-CEO”. But in opposite to a very specific description presented in the conceptual model (Chunawalla, 2009) the respondents reveal a fragmented picture of their daily work and areas of responsibility, and in other words inconsistent structuring on an inter-organisational level (cf. Weick, 1995). While some respondents talked about a process similar to product life cycle (cf. Stark, 2011), ranging from farm to table, others did not recognise such broad responsibility. Instead some considered their responsibility to be focused on separate parts of this process, such as Respondent J who considered “inbound” product management and marketing to be her area of responsibility. The empirical material further showed inconsistent operations. Some argued it to be a necessity, as seen in the quote below.

“I believe the position requires it because it varies so much and has so many ingredients. It would be almost impossible to control it in detail. I believe we have great authority and freedom.” (Respondent F)

Several respondents for instance stated that their work was reactive rather than proactive. Some product managers revealed they were told to focus on certain “problem-areas”, such as the quality issue. In line with Weick (1995) this impacted how they perceived the function’s purpose due to the enactment characteristic and that structure and understandings are intertwined (see Figure 2). This suggests that product management sometimes is influenced by reactive behaviour steered by management, which can have structuring effects such as product management being seen as a problem-solving function. Other respondents said their work to be more proactive, and emphasised processes and the use of templates. These differences in understandings and structuring put obstacles into the sensemaking process and impede it on an inter-organisational level as the identity is fragmented (cf. Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010).
The presence of processes pervaded all case companies, but to different extents. Companies with extensive processes including checklists, IT-systems and clearly defined product life cycle components understood and structured their product management function accordingly. These checklists, IT-systems and so on can be seen as attempts to create identity, which gives meaning to organisational roles, relationships and product management work tasks which accelerates sensemaking (cf. Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Pye, 2005). Further, extensive processes were often linked to clear goals and milestones, which according to Cornelissen (2012) creates an envisioning work environment and commitment to task that facilitates sensemaking in one particular organisation. Such strong process commitment risk that their product management function falls trap and continue on a track that not corresponds to our fast changing environment (cf. Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Weick, 1988). Internal processes facilitate sensemaking of product management intra-organisationally, as processes involve interaction with several departments and make responsibilities and work tasks clarified and rationalised for that organisation (Parry 2003; Weick, 1995). However, even if these processes helped organisational members make sense of the function internally, it stops there. The empirical material revealed that some companies almost lacked processes and expressed a desire to develop new. One respondent explained that she created her own processes as she recognised that people did not know when to approach her, which indicates a fragmented identity and difficulty to make sense in her company. The empirical study further discovered how some firms, even though they had formal processes, ignored them in favour for individual decision-making. In line with Weick (1995) these diverse understandings might be a result of not communicated and spread explanations of product management processes within their companies. It is clear that even though processes and work tasks are understood as a constituent of the practice, there is inconsistency outside individual organisations.

It is evident that processes springs from a desire to clarify and the members detect cues, find and communicate explanations of how product management could be structured by the use of them (Brorström, 2010; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Weick, 1995). Overall, well-defined processes are integral and sought after but reality is not created accordingly. We can see that this is an area where sensemaking is ongoing and the initial steps in Weick’s (1995) six-step model are identified. However, the latter steps are not yet reached due to the lack of consistent use of work processes and there is no consistent structuring concerning these aspects on an inter-organisational level.
5.3.3 Communication channels

The empirical material shows an inconsistent picture of the used communication channels. Depending on the company’s focus as either marketing or technically oriented, the communication channels differed in terms of being active or passive with other units in their organisation. The respondents tried to make sense of the function during interaction with other organisational members, or interfaces as they titled it. There is a potential connection between with whom the product managers interact and why the organisational members consequently perceive and make sense of the function product management, and subsequently what effects this has for the organisational structure. Case companies understood the function by what interfaces it had and it thus seems as, in line with Weick (1995), face-to-face contact is vital for why they made sense this way. It leaves other possible interaction and sensemaking possibilities aside and explains that product management lack consistency, since they interact to a different extent with different units at different organisations. The inconsistent communication channels seems to be dependent on the focus of the function and therefore also affects with whom product management interact and hence structuring (cf. Weick, 1995). A technically oriented company expressed the difference in communication with the two main interfaces as below.

“Communication with R&D is quite well-structured, it is scheduled and there is no way you can skip these meetings.” (Respondent F)

“Communication with the sales organisation is less structured and communication therefore becomes poor (...) the sales organisation is spread geographically and communication is not even every week. (...) The amount of communication depends largely on the individuals within the function.” (Respondent G)

Except that the focus matters for communication channels, difference may be due to factors outside the scope of product management, for example company culture. In line with Kittlaus & Clough’s (2009) and Dickenson & Lunn (2011) who argues that product management activities is a result of company culture, some respondents reveal a very ad-hoc perspective upon meetings and briefings with others in the organisation, while others argue interaction to be regularly scheduled. This shows inconsistent communication on the inter-organisational level. The consistent understanding that product management is a communicative function is interpreted differently in the case companies and given a variety of identities (cf. Weick,
One respondent expressed that he “needs to be a good warrior” and battle other interfaces. In line with Scott et al. (2006) this is a humoristic way of creating an identity of the function. According to Wicks (2001) the view of him as the very strong warrior might obstruct inter-organisational understanding since a too strong identity blinds individuals from realising crucial aspects. Such narrow and distinct interpretation, which differs from all other appreciation of how product management communicate, obstructs a universal understanding.

5.3.4 Future vision – Product management as a profession

The vision of product management becoming a profession is not a coherent understanding. Several respondents expressed a belief of a more formalised practice in the future, where product management could be a profession. Some had the vision that a product manager should be able to work within whatever organisation and irrespective of the product. Others understood the future as still bound to somewhat different industries even though it would have more profession-alike elements. In formal product journals, it is stated that no product management model fits every organisation and that the optimal structure depends on the philosophical approach to the practice (Dickenson & Lunn, 2011), which could explain why this aspect not corresponds to latter steps in Weick’s (1995) six-step model, and hence not a universal understanding. However, in opposite to the formal message of product management structuring, it is in line with Balogun & Johnsson (2005) possible that the vision of the practice as a profession could be spread and interpreted inter-organisationally by the use of informal gossip and storytelling in the future.

The empirical material further shows that the future vision of product management is influenced by company-specific product(s). Respondents stated that their forthcoming product management strategy aligned to how their products would prosper and generate business value. Evidently, in order to distinguish future changes and to get a feeling of the emerging direction in product management respondents used cues and point of references derived from their product (cf. Parry, 2003; Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Cues could for instance be their own products’ technical ability or customer trends in the product area. As argued by Maitlis & Sonenshein (2010) such future envisioning equal commitment to the product and guides sensemaking, as a strong vision within a company may result in shared meaning. However, even if this understanding is shared internally, it still differs between organisations and a shared inter-organisational understanding of the practice cannot be seen.
6. Conclusion

In the beginning of this thesis we stated that companies with a product management function faced a new context. The new context was argued to encompass an increased importance to manage the product development process and the intensified external scrutiny of companies’ management processes. However, product management appeared to be a longstanding but yet ambiguous practice with a perceived lack of compelling standards. It was therefore of interest to study it from a sensemaking perspective to reveal what the sensemaking outcome of product management organising was and why it is understood accordingly, in order to make conclusions of its structuring. From the empirical findings it was evident that the respondents describe, reflect and discuss the practice with the help of what they themselves considered to be the constituents of the practice.

6.1 What is the sensemaking outcome for product management?

Our snapshot shows that the inter-organisational sensemaking outcome of product management is twofaced. Considering Weick’s (1995) six-step model we can conclude that understandings of the practice occur on two main levels. The analysis show that product management on the one hand is a practice with consistent understandings and structuring but that it on the other hand is comprised with inconsistency in some aspects. With the help of Figure 2 it can be concluded that the consistent level’s inter-organisational outcome of sensemaking is that the practice it is structured as (I) a central role “in the heart of things”, (II) a function that requires a broad competence, and (III) a function with a marketing focused future vision. These consistent aspects have reached the latter steps in Weick’s (1995) six-step model and are seen as universal understandings and ways of structuring the practice. The inconsistent level comprises (I) the focus of the practice, (II) work tasks, process and operations, (III) communication channels, (IV) and the future vision of product management as a profession. Those inconsistent understandings are characterised by confusion and different understandings, and have only reached initial steps in the six-step model on an inter-organisational level. This implies that even if the inconsistent level comprises the same aspects irrespective of organisation, the respective aspects are structured differently within organisations.
6.2 Why is product management made sense this way?

Why organisational members have made sense in the above described way can be found in a number of sensemaking features. We can conclude that the consistent understanding as a central role “in the heart of things” is due to a shared identity as competent and essential for the organisation, a strong commitment towards this identity and also that organisational members absorb what other people have said about the function, e.g. the concept “mini-CEO” and hence how individuals think that others seize them. The consistent understanding of a practice that requires a broad competence is due to the cues derived from previous interaction failures due to lack of such competence, and the widely used metaphors establishing such importance. Lastly, the consistent understanding of a marketing focused future vision is due to shared expectations and commitment regarding the future and is most likely influenced by the rapid technology development. This belief equals a shared identity and works as an anchor for all organisations. To summarise, it can be concluded that the consistent level of product management organising is made sense in the described way due to spread of, and shared, understandings.

This thesis further shows that the inconsistent level have not reached a universal, inter-organisational sensemaking due to that the aspects it encompasses are dependent upon the company specific product(s). So it can be concluded that the sensemaking outcome concerning these aspects is due to product governance. We could see that organisational members had given the function different identities and hence created a practice comprised with different purposes similar to “it is very free” and “it is process intense”. The various identity constructions together with cues derived from the company specific product requirements are key determinants on the inconsistent level. They show that the function is not steered by external compelling standards and that the manager (or equivalent) and the specific product decide what the practice is about. To conclude, the product guides the function and one can therefore talk about product governance as an important factor in the practice. This was particularly obvious when respondents mentioned communication channels and the focus of the practice, which both was steered by the product’s technical or commercial focus.
6.3 The product management practice

The overarching aim in this thesis was to clarify structures in the product management practice. The findings in this thesis suggest that the fuzziness concerning product management is clarified to the extent that two inter-organisational structural elements labelled consistent and inconsistent understandings can be established. These findings open up for a further discussion concerning structures of the practice. Structural consistency in a practice corresponds to Power’s (1999) argument that there is a tendency of standardisation in organisational practices. Standardisation may have implications for the practice product management. It implies that individuals could transfer between organisations in the same industry without major obstacles. Inconsistent aspects are to a large extent governed by the company specific products, which have and may continue to tie organisational members to certain industries and inhibit full-grown standardisation. Similar to management practices such as lean and business process engineering, the context in which the practice operates influences the content of practice. However, given that the roles and responsibilities of the product management function are steady, we argue that product management has inconsistent aspects with consistency potential. For example, the use of work processes is currently understood and structured differently, but as we could capture a desire to incorporate more formal processes and a shared understanding of their prominence, it is obvious that further clarification and subsequent consistency is possible. This thesis cannot distinguish if the intensification of an “audit society” will be part of this transformation. However, the contemporary technological development has certainly affected companies’ acknowledgement of a product management practice and to further elaborate on structural consistency may both be due to a standardising requirement and the best way to deliver successful products. What can be said is that our contemporary product management practice is comprised with general components that can be structured similarly but also components that require a customised structuring due to the product governance trait.

6.4 Theoretical and practical contributions

This study has added to the scattered product management research field by identifying that product management is understood and acted upon, and hence structured, on two levels. It has further presented new insights concerning specific aspects on the consistent and inconsistent level, and therefore extended the research field. Moreover, it has extended sensemaking research with a new perspective, a study that focus on a snapshot of the
sensemaking outcome of the incomprehensible activity product management. There might be indications of how other management practices are sense made and how sensemaking can constitute a valuable tool to comprehend such areas.

From a practical viewpoint this thesis has contributed to clarification and a crystallised picture of the practice product management. Earlier research reveals a confused picture with various depictions and broad definitions of the practice. These definitions and depictions has been narrowed down to a hopefully more easy to grasp practice. Due to the contemporary external development the practice product management is likely to increase in importance, and it is therefore relevant for practitioners to get the practice straight – something this thesis have contributed with. The findings that product management is structured on two levels and that structure depends on the recognised aspects and product governance gives managers structuring inputs for successful product management.

6.5 Limitations and suggestions for further research
This study only covers a small amount of product management cases and we can therefore not consider our conclusions generalizable to all companies with a product management function. The study is further limited by the choice of providing a snapshot of the sensemaking outcome; this means that we are not able to elaborate with the process of the sensemaking and the interactive element, only the outcome at this particular point in time. As the study to some extent not recognises different team members within one case company and it thereby not cover the interaction element within product management functions. Future research in product management with a sensemaking perspective could preferably be conducted more in depth in each product management team to reveal understanding and structuring through interaction and hence show an ampler depiction of the reasons for product management structuring. In such way our findings of two distinctive levels in product management structuring can be further investigated, and additional aspects could perhaps be added. Moreover, our thesis is limited by the choice of sensemaking as research approach. Essential findings such as the importance of product governance for product management structuring or the consistent understandings of some central features would benefit from additional research with another theoretical approach in order to extend the product management research field and validate our findings.
7. References


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8. Appendix

Appendix 1: Interview guide
The purpose of this interview guide is to gather empirical data on how firms understand and thus structure product management within their firm. The interview guide is for individual interviews and divided into five parts with different themes. The interview questions are open-ended, meaning that the respondents’ reflections of each theme are important. However, in order to not lose track we have listed some structuring questions below each theme. Respondents and companies are allowed to be anonymous; however what industry the company operates in is of interest.

1. Information about the respondent’s position (basic info, identity, expectations)
   a. Background?
   b. Current position and role within the firm?
   c. Responsibilities within this position?

2. Information about the company from the respondent’s view (basic info, identity)
   a. Describe your company
   b. Industry? Products/services?

3. Your role and view upon product management in your company (identity, enactment, social characteristic, cues, plausibility)
   a. What is product management to you?
   b. How would you describe yourself in relation to the company? (Do you identify your self with the company?)
   c. Describe the roles related to product management in your company? What functions do it “consist” of (i.e. marketing, sales, R&D, planning)?
   d. When was product management introduced to you and to your company? Have your role changed with the introduction?
   e. Have your role and responsibilities developed or changed during your time in product management? Why? Have you influenced this?

4. Interaction with team members and/or other parts of company (interaction, enactment, identity)
a. Describe your team
b. Describe how your team work is carried out (is there clear goals and shared meaning of what is important?)
c. Explain how you communicate within your role and function. How is communication and relations with other product management teams and other departments within your company?
d. Who do you report your work to? How? How often? Feedback?

5. What expectations and commitment there is for product management in your firm
(Commitment, expectations, identity, enactment, interaction)
a. When you entered this role, how did you utilise your previous experience? (Can you use this to decide on an appropriate way forward?)
b. Can you feel that you are negatively impacted by your earlier experiences in any way?
c. How are new colleagues ideas about product management received in your company/team?
d. Have any of your actions/ideas resulted in changes in how you work with product management? I.e. has the practice developed? How? Examples.
e. Do you have any examples of when you were committed to an idea that failed?
Your company (product management) at large?
f. Explain why you find your job meaningful
g. Do you meet your boss’ expectations? Is it difficult/easy?
h. What are your expectations for your future career within product management?
i. How do you work with the development of product management?
j. Do you consider it valuable for your company to work with product management? What do you gain from it? What might you miss out on?