Communication within a geographically dispersed organisation
An analysis and evaluation

Nina Henriksson

DISSERTATION

International Project Management
CHALMERS UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY
NORTHUMBRIA UNIVERSITY
Gothenburg, Sweden 2007

Dissertation for the joint degree

MSc in International Project Management
Teknologie magisterexamen i International Project Management

Communication within a geographically dispersed organisation
An analysis and evaluation

Nina Henriksson

International Project Management
CHALMERS UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY
NORTHUMBRIA UNIVERSITY
Gothenburg, Sweden 2007

Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the support of some people. First I like to thank my supervisor at the studied department, Per Rödjer, for his support and encouragement throughout the research. I would also like to thank Tord Hermansson and the rest of the staff at the department for their interest and contribution to the study. Secondly I would like to thank my university supervisor Lisbeth Hedelin at the Department of Psychology, Göteborg University, for her support and patience and for all help in terms of giving me ideas and feedback on my work. Last I would like to thank students and staff at Chalmers University of Technology and Northumbria University for their input, knowledge and support.

Nina Henriksson Gothenburg 2007

Abstract

Abstract. The communication within an organisation is essential in order to make the business function. A well functioning communication does not only make the work more effective and productive but it also generates a working climate with good prerequisites for people to be comfortable and willing to make an effort. More and more organisations today have their co-workers located on different sites around the world and in these cases, when people who are geographically scattered are collaborating, the communication are even more essential and at the same time also more vulnerable. This study has looked at the communication at a department in a large Swedish organisation. The department's members are situated all over the world, in Sweden and Germany as well as in Japan and USA. The study first looked at the theory that exists today about communication in geographically dispersed environments and virtual teams, what the concept of communication in a global environment means, what facilitators and barriers exists to this communication and actions that can be taken in order to improve it. Secondly the study consisted of an analytical part of the communication at the researched department where qualitative interviews were performed with the department's members. These interviews showed the members perception of what does and does not function with the communication and their ideas for improvements. The study of the theory and the findings from the interviews showed that the communication at the department work well in general but there are measures that can and need to be taken in order to improve the communication, both measures to keep and retain positive behaviours that exists today and to introduce new behaviours in order to improve the communication and to make it more effective.

Keywords: global communication, geographically dispersed work, international communication, communication cross cultural boundaries, communication cross geographical boundaries.

Table of contents

List of figures and tables

1 Introduction

Communication is possibly the most crucial factor in order to make an organisation function and be effective. If the communication is poor it affects not only the organisation's daily work but the relations that exist between people on all levels and their perception and feelings about their work, themselves and their co-workers. This study has focused on communication between people at a department because of the impact it has on every function and because of its complex nature.

1.1 Background

This study has been performed at a department that performs and has the responsibility for market research and analyses of the surrounding world within a large organisation, they execute for example competitor and market analyses for other departments. The main part of the department is situated at the head office in Gothenburg, Sweden, but they have employees situated all over the world, for example in Japan, in the USA and in many European countries.

The communication between co-workers at the department over the world takes place on a daily basis through e-mail, telephone meetings, video conferences and text messages. There are also physical face-to-face meetings that happen on both regular and irregular basis with varying composition and occurrence. Co-workers situated in Gothenburg participate in physical meetings more frequently than co-workers located in other parts of the world. This infrequency of contact in person puts high demands on a functioning and effective communication to make every co-worker feel as part of the department as the people situated in Gothenburg.

1.2 Problem discussion

When working in such a geographically dispersed environment as the department in question does the communication is most crucial in order to make the daily work function. There has been no current analysis and evaluation to see how the communication actually works and if there are measures that can be taken in order to improve it and make it more effective.

The possible problems with the communication within the department may not only exist because of the geographical distances but this dissertation has focused on the aspects that are typical for communication cross geographical and cultural boundaries. The study has also taken both communications for operative reasons and for social reasons in consideration though they are difficult to separate. The focal point for the research has been communication between co-workers on and management on different levels.

1.3 Purpose

The purpose with this study was to investigate the communication between co-workers at a department that are situated all over the world. The study has tried to find the functioning and non-functioning parts of the current communication. Information that has been gathered has been used to see how the communication is experienced by parties involved, what they felt helped and hindered the communication that exists today cross the geographical and cultural boundaries. The focus has been, not on the amount of communication that takes place or the content, but on what makes effective communication, what causes problems and misunderstandings and measures that can be taken in order to prevent this and to develop a more effective and uncomplicated communication. The study had the ambition to result in a number of concrete suggestions for improvements.

2 Theoretical framework

The purpose of this chapter is to give an overview of the existing knowledge in the area regarding communication strategies in a global environment. The theoretical framework will give an understanding and a frame of references of the subject area of this dissertation and it will explain important concepts. The first section will give a theoretical and empirical background to communication in a global environment and explain certain conceptions. The second section describes a number of facilitators and barriers to efficient global communication. The third and last section gives a number of actions that can be taken in order to improve the communication.

2.1 Communication in a global environment

Encyclopaedia Britannica states that communication is “the exchange of meanings between individuals through a common system of symbols” (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2007). The primary functions of communication are to give information through statements, to get information through questions, and to give directives through requests. In order to make these functions more differentiated they are usually supplemented by talk and gesturing (Ne.se, 2006). It can be difficult to make a clear distinction between communicating and sharing information. One clear feature of communicating is its momentary nature, compared to information sharing which is more constant and structured (Mark, Grudin, & Poltrock, 1999). Communicating is also a two way exchange of messages while information sharing is a one-way sending of messages (Kalla, 2005). These two concepts are very much integrated, but there is not always a need to make a clear division between them. The importance is to consider that work requires both communication and information sharing and when one is absent frustration will appear (Mark et al., 1999). For an organisation to be profitable and effective, the communication within the organisation needs to be effective. Effective communication is commonly defined as an interactive two-way communication process, which results in an action or decision, intended or not. By comparison, regular communication is just a two-way exchange of messages, which commonly do not result in actions (Kalla, 2005).

When it comes to analysing the communication of an organisation it is important to acknowledge the difference between an organisation’s external and internal communication. An organisation’s internal communication, which is the focus of this research, is all communication taking place internally at all levels of an organisation. In order to develop an effective communication it is useful to see that internal communication consists of different parts of communication; business, management, organisational and corporate communication. If this integrated view is adopted it is clear that employees receive information from various sources. This balance has to be right, meaning that all aspects have to function, all four communications have to work well and just not fail to corroborate with employees’ expectations. Figure 1 illustrates integrated internal communications (Kalla, 2005).

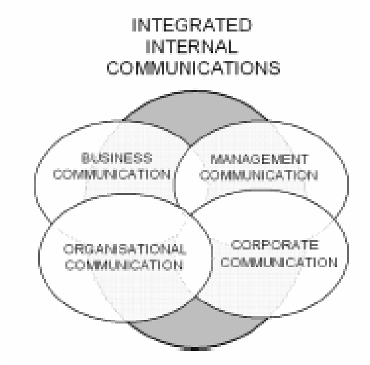

Figure 1 Integrated internal communications (source: Kalla, 2005).

In the global environment of today more and more organisations perform their work in teams where members are situated in different geographical locations; i.e. they are working in global virtual teams. A virtual team can be defined as a group of employees, situated in distant locations, whose members must collaborate by using technology across space and time to accomplish important organisational tasks (Kirkman et al., 2004). The number of organisations that is participating on the global business arena steadily increases. Therefore will global virtual teams likely become an ongoing structure and a common component of the global work environment rather than short-term work units that are project specific (Zakaria et al., 2004).

The communication within a virtual team is, due to the difference in time and space, to a very great extent computer-mediated. This type of communication brings a context and environment that demands other skills than face-to-face communication, such as written skills, articulative ability, and writing speed (George & Sleeth, 2000). It is not only the space and time gap that contributes to the fact that global virtual teams face more challenges than local virtual teams. A team that works in a global environment differs also when it comes to national, cultural, and linguistic aspects (Zakaria et al., 2004).

Kalla (2005) sums it up with that in order to have a strategic view on internal communication it is important to see it as all formal and informal communication taking place internally at all levels of an organisation. It is important when analysing the communication to look at all communication in order to get a full and correct picture, communication on one level may, and probably will, affect the communication on all other levels as well.

2.2 Facilitators and barriers

There are always different barriers and facilitators when it comes to communication, whether people are co-located or geographically dispersed. What is distinctive for virtual teams is to the great extent they have to rely on other communication channels than face-to-face meetings. It is a fact that despite all use of distance technologies, differences in local physical context, time zones, culture, and language will persist, and that is why distance will remain as an important element of human experience (Olson & Olson, 2000). Information and communication technologies is a major, and necessary, asset to virtual teams but it also takes intra-team trust and relationship, leadership, intercultural communication in order to create a knowledge-based environment. There has to exist an allowing space where virtual team members are encouraged to participate in a regular shared cross-cultural exchange of ideas and team-created solutions in order to reach an successful communication (Zakaria et al., 2004). For the information and communication to be rich and successful it takes an interaction between the people, tasks, the organisational context, and familiarity with technology (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999).

In order to overcome the problems and to improve the situation in geographically dispersed teams, there are four key concepts that need to be considered. Is there a *common ground* established, how *coupled* is the work, and does the team have *collaboration readiness* and *technology readiness*. All these factors need to be looked at when planning and executing the communication. For example work that is tightly coupled is hard to perform remotely, the technology that exists today does not support fast back and forth in conversation or awareness and repair of ambiguity that this type of work demands. The other three concepts will be dealt with further on the report (Olson & Olson, 2000).

In a global virtual team it is essential to encourage global communication skills to enable collaboration, conflict addressing and solving, sustaining of intra-team relations and creation of effective knowledge-sharing culture. It is also necessary to have a commitment to develop new patterns of knowledge sharing, communication and social exchange by global virtual teams in a computer mediated environment (Zakaria et al., 2004). For teams that meet rarely it is important with team empowerment, more important than if a team is co-located. If team members have positive assessments of their organisational tasks, the motivation will increase and thereby can team empowerment be accomplished. In order to empower team, the members need to feel enabled to improve processes and creatively solve problems and emergency situations. Though, it is hard to gain team problem solving if the members do not see how their efforts contribute to team and organisational performance. The members must know the team work is beneficial for them and they need to have a strong commitment to the team and the organisation (Kirkman et al., 2004). What is important to take in to consideration is that commitment within an organisation is connected to the daily communication processes that motivate employees; it is the task related communication that affects the commitment (de Ridder, 2004). To improve this communication and to create a knowledge-sharing culture within the organisation and the team demands intra-team respect, mutual trust, reciprocity, and positive individual and group relationships (Zakaria et al., 2004).

It is not necessary that high performing global teams communicate more often or more efficient than lower performing teams. It seems to be more a question about communicating deeply and focused and to develop routines for efficient communication strategies and completion of tasks (DeSanctis, Wright & Jiang, 2001).

2.2.1 Knowledge

There is a clear connection between knowledge management and company growth. Companies with a comprehensive and strategic approach to knowledge grow more than companies with a less balanced approach (Salojärvi et al., 2005). In order to obtain true effectiveness within an organisation it is important to incorporate all organisational members and to view knowledge sharing as a function of integrated internal communications and to see how it contributes to an organisations competitive advantage (Kalla, 2005). When it comes to knowledge within an organisation, it is important to take in to consideration that it is most of the time the human component in the virtual environment that facilitate or hinder the development of organisational learning and a shared knowledge base (Zakaria et al., 2004).

2.2.2 Trust

One of the most important factors when working and communicating in a global environment together with colleagues situated in remote sites is trust. When team members work in different locations and primarily communicates via telephone or computer, people has to trust each other because there are no feasible way of monitoring and controlling others work. In order to have effectiveness in work and functioning communication, trust plays a critical role (Wilson, Straus & McEvily, 2006). Both the sources and consequences of trust are located in the day-to-day interactions of managers and employees (Wells & Kipnis, 2001). It has been shown that that employee’s development of trust is highly connected to communication that reassures them, such as openness and information about organisational policy. As in comparison to commitment, which is related to task related communication, trust is developed and maintained to great extent in the non-task related communication (de Ridder, 2004).

In global work environments there are much potential for trust distortion. In work environments that highly depend on information and communication technologies can unacknowledged conflict hinder trust within teams and team cohesion. This especially as in these contexts a non-response is not necessarily seen as indication of conflict (Zakaria et al., 2004). Other factors that can be seen as barriers to trust are failure to communicate, failure to retain contextual information, failure to provide information evenly, difficulties in interpreting the meaning of silence and critical behavioural incidents (Henttonen & Blomqvist, 2005).

Trust is primarily created via communication behaviours that are established at the very beginning of teamwork (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). Timely response, in-depth feedback and open communication are communication behaviours that very much enhance the development of trust. Taking the initiative, delivering agreed results and fostering cooperation are also seen as communication behaviours that enhance the evolution of trust and so are also favourable team-leader actions like letting employees participate in decision-making (Henttonen & Blomqvist, 2005). For trust to develop there also has to be a sharing of personal emotions and there has to be a clear expression that there is belief in other people’s competencies (DeSanctis et al., 2001). Communication about project and task helps to maintain trust while social communication is needed in order to strengthen and improve trust (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). Both managers and subordinates focus on personal rather than job-related issues when explaining and confer about trust and distrust (Wells & Kipnis, 2001). Table 1 shows communication behaviours and team members actions that facilitate trust.

Table 1 Trust-facilitating communication behaviours and member actions.

Communication behaviours that facilitates trust early in group's life	**Communication behaviours that helped maintain trust later in a group's life**
• Social communication • Communication of enthusiasm	• Predictable communication • Substantial and timely responses
Member actions that facilitates trust early in a group's life	**Member actions that maintain trust later in a group's life**
• Coping with technical uncertainty • Individual initiative	• Successful transition from social to procedural to task focus • Positive leadership • Phlegmatic response to crises

(Source: Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999).

One of the key factors in building trust is to do it through actions (Henttonen & Blomqvist, 2005). Especially trust in managers by subordinates is created by actions. For managers to establish, maintain and increase subordinates' trust, the manager must show in action that they trust their subordinates, offer help and guidance, show appreciation, and solve problems in adequate ways. Trust-creating leadership is action or is perceived as action (Andersen, 2005).

Technology-mediated teams develop over time the same level of trust as face-to-face teams. The communication medium that is used affects the speed of trust development, but it does not affect the level of trust that is created. The reason why trust takes longer time to develop in computer-mediated teams is because it requires more time to exchange social information. Due to this prolonged time, it may take longer time for groups to move through stages of uncertainty and conflict, which are necessary to achieve trust (Wilson et al., 2006).

2.2.3 Technology

Every working team, whether they are co-located or not, use communication technologies. Communication technology can support teams whose members are dispersed, working in their separate conference rooms, offices, homes or other locations. It can also support face-to-face meetings that occur in one physical setting, for example in conference or board rooms (Peters, 2006). What is distinctive for a dispersed, virtual team is that they have no option as to whether or not to use the technology, because they depend on it in order to function at all (Zakaria et al., 2004). Distributed teams in organisations need to adopt networked and collaborative technologies to conduct their work (Mark & Poltrock, 2004). In teams with members situated in different sites, information and communication technologies are functional tools that, if used properly, can overcome certain cultural challenges within the team and provide a common medium for work. In today's global business environment and especially in the development of new global work structures and virtual work environments, new information and communication technologies play an increasingly important part. Even if information and communication technologies are vital for knowledge-sharing organisations and teams who are geographically dispersed, the technology is only as effective as those using it (Zakaria et al., 2004).

Before any organisation adopts new technologies they need to reach technology readiness, they need to be good candidates for adopting the appropriate technologies (Olson & Olson, 2000). Adoption of for example groupware is especially challenging when people are distributed geographically. The technology needs to be informed about; the decision to use it must be coordinated and it needs to be implemented. In distributed teams can there also be special tension when adopting because of the constraints due to different organisational policies (Mark & Poltrock, 2004). Another big reason why adoption of groupware and other technologies fails is motivation. People need to see why the new technology is beneficial for them (Olson & Olson, 2000). To reach success when accommodating to different communication technologies, feedback plays an essential role. It reinforces correct behaviour in the group and it directs people away from inappropriate actions (Mark, 2002).

To describe and understand for example technology adoption in an organisation Mark and Poltrock (2004) describe the phenomena of social worlds. It has to be understood that people are part of different social worlds in between, which are units of collective actions. Social worlds as a concept can describe either co-located groups or distributed teams. In the workplace, people are usually members of multiple social worlds, which they act as bridges. Social worlds can also be identified as work spheres. The behaviours and decisions of a social world are influenced by the characteristics of its members and its collective shared knowledge, skills and history. The nature of a social world influences its ability and willingness to adopt new technologies and ways to work. Each social world has a unique assemblage of colleagues, experiences, conditions and tasks. When adopting new technologies people need to make decisions in different contexts, according to their working spheres. A person can adopt one technique for use in a distributed team, but not for use at home due to different constraints. The technology is only used in one social world; a choice based on the references of that specific social world. Though, social worlds as a concept have a limitation in that it does not explain adoption of technologies according to individual characteristics. For example, a distributed social world needs technology to enable interaction at meetings (Mark & Poltrock, 2004).

In order to reach success in a global virtual team it is critical to evaluate the suitability of the media (Henttonen & Blomqvist, 2005). Spreading knowledge within an organisation or a team is often facilitated by sending information via several dimensions such as visual cues, voice tones, oral and written ways using examples and metaphors. There can be problems though in cross-cultural contexts where different communication techniques may differ between people who do not share the same culture cues. Many ways of communicating are also impossible in a virtual environment. Information transferring in virtual environments is flattened and less dynamic and may be more difficult to retain and learn (Zakaria et al., 2004). An important aspect of the interactive elements of communication technology is the extent to which the flow of information is under control of the user. For example, many features of especially e-mail seem to both help and hinder the users' control. Mass distributions of e-mails often lack coordination and target. Many managers experience a need for greater control when it comes to e-mail; an ability to identify and filter received messages is asked for. This can for example be done through a number of criteria, including sender, subject, urgency and need for response (Peters, 2006).

For a team's success it is vital with both asynchronous and synchronous communication tools. In teams that are separated by cultural and time zone distance, it seems that asynchronous tools such as electronic group discussion and e-mail are more important than synchronous tools such as chat technologies. In group discussion forums there are time for people with language differences and less expertise to take the time and develop their postings (DeSanctis et al., 2001). When it comes to the information communicated through the different technologies, it can be interpreted in different ways depending on the medium through which it is delivered. Byrne and LeMay (2006) talk about the concept of media richness, different communication technologies such as phone, e-mail and memos can be said to have different levels of richness. With richness means the amount of information shared via the medium. Phone calls, face-to-face meetings, or written memos supply differing amounts of data and the more data that is shared, the richer is the medium. The richness of a communication technology affects how it is perceived and interpreted by the receiver. For employees, information about their job is most satisfying when it is received from rich communication channels such as face-to-face meetings and phone conversations. On the opposite, employees are most satisfied with information about the company delivered through lean mediums like memos and newsletters. Receiving information that is not directly relevant, people does not need the additional data that comes via for example face expressions. When information comes from top management it is perceived as accurate, timely, and useful when delivered via a lean medium. The same thing goes for urgent organisational news such as critical information about organisational change. It is perceived as quality information when sent via lean medium. To sum it up, information about the company can be shared through lean communication channels while personal information about the job should be shared through rich channels.

As mentioned, people perceive different communication technologies to be more or less suitable depending on the objective of the communication. In a company where employees used the communication technologies telephone, e-mail and NetMeeting, there was a preference for the two first ones. When they used groupware it was merely as a databank. The choice of technology was much influenced by the timing because of work around the globe (Henttonen & Blomqvist, 2005). In another study, team members rated meetings in which NetMeeting was used as to be high in quality, with good use of time and extensive participation. The biggest success at the meetings was attained when they had a formal structure to them or was facilitated (Olson & Olson, 2000). The opinions about different communication technologies differ a lot depending on the context in which it is used. Dispersed teams working in a virtual context can make great benefits by using application sharing, such as NetMeeting, as a complement to audio conferencing. There is a great value in shared references and viewing, to get relevant material at an instant. Members in many dispersed teams feel that application sharing is sufficient for good distant participation in meetings, although not for audio conferencing alone (Mark et al., 1999).

Compared to traditional meetings, videoconference meetings tend to be more formalised and structured. Overall, the processes within meetings seem to be more efficient using this technology. There are however one important constraint and that is the lack of social interaction, which can lead to a decrease in social related activities such as informal communication and social conversation (Campbell, 1997). In a study made on companies using telephone conferencing, it was shown that remote participants could more easily follow the meeting and feel as part of it if the facilitator coordinating the meeting governed speaking turns. The facilitator knew their individual expertise and directed questions and comments accordingly which made their knowledge and role clearer to the group. The facilitator also continually identified who was present at all the sites participating in the meeting, making clear who is present and who has left the meeting temporarily or permanently (Mark et al., 1999).

E-mail primarily supports groups with members that are distributed geographically. It is useful in situations where there is a need for one-to-one and one-to-many communications but it is not useful in many-to-many situations. There always has to be caution when using techniques such as e-mail. What means easy and quick information sharing seems in many cases to rather than accelerating business processes, such as information distribution, inhibit efficiency and effectiveness. People always need to reflect when choosing technology for communicating, which is the best media to distribute the information through, both by the sender and the receiver. Members in teams that are distributed geographically tend to be the ones using Intranets and the Internet the most. This is a media that supports both one-to-many and many-to-many communication (Peters, 2006). Table 2 below shows the control of contact and the impact that different communication technologies have on work and business processes. These features are useful to be aware in order to choose the appropriate media when communicating. It is especially useful to look at the communication model, has the communication the objective to communicate information from one person to another or from one person to many, and what media is then most suitable.

Table 2 Control of contact, summary of structural and spiritual features of communication media.

	E-mail	**Groupware**	**Web**	**Face-to-face**
Structural features: control of contact				
Physical arrangements of groups supported	Members are dispersed	Members may be dispersed or co-located	Members are dispersed	Members are co-located
Communication model	One-to-one One-to-many	One-to-many Many-to-many	One-to-many Many-to-many	One-to-one One-to-many Many-to-many
Communication style	Very asynchronous	Both synchronous and asynchronous	Very asynchronous	Very synchronous
Spiritual features: control of contact				
Impact/value creation	Accelerated business processes Reduce information float Replicate scarce knowledge	Accelerated business processes Reduce information float Replicate scarce knowledge Create service excellence Recapture scale Ensure global management control Bypass intermediaries Build navel string	Accelerated business processes Reduce information float Replicate scarce knowledge Create service excellence Recapture scale Ensure global management control Bypass intermediaries Build navel string Penetrate new markets	

(Source: Peters, 2006).

Table 3 presents the control of content that different technologies means. These are also important to be aware of when choosing media. Should the communication be formal or informal, are there decisions that needs to be taken and if so, how should they be taken, individualistic or by consensus. By getting this overview and to see the characteristics of different technologies the decision of choosing a certain technology can be more consciously and thereby the communication can be better and more effective.

Table 3 Control of content, summary of structural and spiritual features of communication media.

	E-mail	**Groupware**	**Web**	**Face-to-face**
Structural features: control of content				
Level of communication	Communication only	Decision modelling and group decision-making	Expert advice, filtering and structuring of information	Members are co-located
Intervention		Expert advice, filtering and structuring of information		
Social context cues	Low	Medium	Medium	High
Spiritual features: control of content				
Group vs. individual saliency	Individual saliency	Group saliency	Individual saliency	Group saliency
Decision processes	Individualistic	Individualistic and consensus	Individualistic	Consensus
Conflict management	More chaotic, emphasises conflict resolution	May be chaotic or orderly, emphasises conflict awareness and/or resolution	More chaotic, emphasises conflict resolution	May be chaotic or orderly, emphasises conflict awareness and/or resolution
Interaction	More informal	May be formal/informal and structured or unstructured	More formal	May be formal/informal and structured or unstructured
	Less structured		More structured	

(Source: Peters, 2006).

2.2.4 Informal communication

More and more organisations understand the importance of the informal communication network, and it is a great help to make the organisational and team work function. If the informal communication is handled strategically it can lead to non-twisted and quick distribution of information (Subramanian, 2006). Informal communication can be divided into four different types: (1) scheduled, which are meetings planned in advance by both parties, (2) intended, one person seeks out another to discuss a certain matter but there is no pre-arranged plan to talk, (3) opportunistic, one person happens to see another and remember wanting to discuss a certain topic with them, and (4) spontaneous, two people happen to see each other and get into a conversation on a topic not prepared by either (Kraut, Fish, Root & Chalfonte, 1990).

Informal communication operates in an organisation as non-official network where most of the time official matters are discussed and decisions are taken. Informal communication is, as mentioned situational and spontaneous. In order for informal communication to arise people need to experience other members of the network as reliable and they need to feel that there exists friendship and trust. Through this people can then air their feelings, build up a sense of belonging and have discussions about concerns off the record (Subramanian, 2006). If the relational communication is paid attention to, it can enhance the social presence and create a better functioning work environment (Henttonen & Blomqvist, 2005).

2.2.5 Common ground and conventions for effective communication

Teams that will be working together over a long period of time must think about how to develop and maintain trust and cohesion, and other appropriate social behaviours (Mark et al., 1999). The capabilities of global virtual teams to be creative and to solve problems are originated from their culturally mediated knowledge structure and shared knowledge base (Zakaria et al., 2004). In order for the work to function and the communication to be effective there has to be common ground and conventions established at the beginning of team work in order to know how to collaborate and respond to each other. In group interaction, conventions are especially important because they reduce the trial and error and confusion in that they regulate mutually interdependent activities so that they do not interfere with each other (Mark, 2002).

When communicating, people interpret what they hear against the background of their references and of what are known of the speaker and the speaker’s intentions (Ne.se, 2006). The foundation and functioning communication can be said to be a common ground, which is the knowledge the participants have, and are aware that they have, in common (Olson & Olson, 2000). Common ground helps the sender and the receiver of communication and information on how to compose, send and interpret sentence utterances. In comparison, conventions are agreements among team members for performing work, in electronic work the conventions can be on methods for local control of a computer system. It is important to establish conventions in a group to effectively manage interaction in electronic work. By establishing conventions, a group can more easily keep track of processes; it is a way for new members to smoothly adapt, and it help members to understand intergroup perspectives and processes. They are especially essential for work in distributed teams because the members cannot just be given a groupware system and be expected to optimally use it without some common agreements on the means of operation (Mark, 2002).

Common ground is established from the cues that exist at the moment. The fewer cues there are the more effort it takes to constructing common ground, and the greater the chance for misinterpretations is. The amount of effort it takes for people to reach common ground depends on the media. Below is a figure of different media (see Table 4), which are described by different dimensions, factors that can contribute to the establishment of common ground. The dimensions are:

- Copresence – same physical environment
- Visibility – visible to each other
- Audibility – speech
- Contemporality – message received immediately
- Simultaneity – both speakers can send and receive
- Sequentiality – turns cannot get out of sequence
- Reviewability – able to review others messages
- Revisability – can revise messages before they are sent

(Source: Olson & Olson, 2000).

Table 4 (as Tables 2 and 3) can be a great asset when an organisation or an individual person decides which technology or media to choose for communicating. By communicating face-to-face, there are a lot of dimensions present that enriches and deepens the communication. There are visibility and audibility, which often are essential factors when communicating, but sometimes it is more important to have the possibility to review and to revise the communication and then it is more useful to utilise e-mail. These types of conscious decisions about the media can improve the communication to a great extent.

Table 4 Characteristics of media that contributes to achieving common ground.

Medium	**Copresence**	**Visibility**	**Audibility**	**Contemporality**	**Simultaneity**	**Sequentiality**	**Reviewability**	**Revisability**
Face-to-face	*	*	*	*	*	*		
Telephone			*	*	*	*		
Video conference		*	*	*	*	*		
Two-way chat				*	*	*		
Answering machine			*				*	
E-mail							*	*
Letter							*	*

(Source: Olson & Olson, 2000).

When teams are fully co-located, it is relatively easy to establish common ground, while those who are remote complain about the opposite. It is for example difficult to tell who is speaking when connected via audio conferencing, and references to local events that are understood by the locals make the remote people feel even more remote. A major issue that is missing in dispersed teams is the awareness of the state of co-workers, both their presence-absence and their mental state (Olson & Olson, 2000). Face-to-face meetings are a way to increase the level of social and task information sharing, and the awareness of the other team members (Henttonen & Blomqvist, 2005). Bringing the virtual team together for periodic face-to-face meetings will increase the effectiveness and will lead to enhanced team empowerment. It is important for managers to make extra efforts to empower virtual teams to deal directly and determinedly with process improvement issues, in order to be effective and to establish common ground and conventions (Kirkman et al., 2004). Common ground can also be established by using other communication channels than face-to-face meetings, especially channels that allows as many cues as possible, such as telephone and videoconference. When finally common ground has been established, people can communicate well even over poor media. If the communication is improved by establishing common ground, the productivity is also likely to rise (Olson & Olson, 2000).

However, in a study made by Kalla (2005), it was shown that there was a great importance to have a balance between technology-mediated communication and face-to-face communication in order to make social interaction and knowledge sharing possible.

2.2.6 Communication behaviour

Effective communication within an organisation demands both sender and receiver to be active participants engaged in transferring knowledge. In a cross-cultural environment all participants has to have the abilities to decode and encode messages in a winning manner so that the messages are understood within the others' cultural settings (Zakaria et al., 2004). The effectiveness of intercultural and interpersonal communication depends to a great extent on social skills. Social skills include a process where social behaviours, which are learned and controlled, are put into practice by an individual. One of the key aspects of social skills is that they are goal-directed meaning that certain behaviours are selected in order to reach a specific wanted result. When an individual decides to pursue a certain goal there are two major factors that influence this decision. They are *desirability*, how attractive is it to attain the goal, and *feasibility*, to what extent does the individual believe that the goal can be achieved. Another important aspect of social skills is appropriateness to situation. Social skills are behaviours that are adjusted in order to be suitable for the situation and context. Individuals skilled in interpersonal communication understand the social situation and the types of behaviours that are acquired for that specific situation (Hargie, 2006).

When learning oral communication you also learn the signals that support to the communication and shows that you understand, for example 'Ok', and how you react to statements, for example 'Good'. Similar return signals make an importance in other types of communications as well (Ne.se, 2006). These signals can be seen as reinforcements or so called backchannel responses. Reinforcement is an essential skill in human communication which is used by all which are involved in communication. There are three aspects that make the reinforcement relevant to the communication. The reinforcement has to have personal validity; it has to have some personal real meaning for the receiver to be able to see it as reinforcing. It has to have personal valence; the message has to contain enough power for the receiver to understand its value for it to have an impact. The reinforcement also needs to have contingency, which means that the message has to be reliant and related to the response in order for it to be reinforcing (Hargie, 2006). In her article "Backchannel responses as strategic responses in bilingual speakers' conversations", Heinz (2003) examines the differences in backchannel responses between different nationalities; in this case between Germans and Americans. The study made shows that Germans produce both fewer and different backchannel responses compared to Americans. The study supports the theory that backchannel responses are a universal form of conversational behaviour but it is important to recognise the differences in between different languages.

Heinz found that backchannel responses are produced to have an effective conversation and satisfy the need for feedback with the speaker and the listener. Failure in producing the right amount of responses and at the right time can be a big obstacle in phone conversations and can easily lead to misunderstandings. In the article Heinz also stresses the significance of backchannel responses considering that they are an unconscious action that are acquired through the language culture or system and not by explicit language training. This makes it hard for individuals' learning a language to be aware of the backchannel production and its impact on conversations. Even though there were differences in the study, it also showed a great deal of similarities. The most common function of the backchannel responses was for both Germans and Americans to express support and to encourage the speaker to continue (Heinz, 2003). In communication and management within business the understanding and effect of verbal reinforcement and backchannel responses is well grounded. It is necessary for handling effective communication in every area. With the development of new media new ways of communication is emerging and with these new ways of reinforcement (Hargie, 2006).

Another important part of interpersonal communication is questioning. It may seem as a straightforward attribute of communication but deeper analysis shows that questioning is a complex phenomenon with many different aspects. In general terms there is often the person of higher status and in control that poses the questions. The reasons for this are amongst others fear of negative reactions and lack of knowledge on what to inquire about. One of the major issues to take in to consideration about questions is that they need to be responded to, and if possible in a way that generates some kind of answer. It is also important to create a working environment which allows questioning to exist on all levels of the organisation (Dickson & Hargie, 2006).

2.2.7 Culture

To develop a successful knowledge-sharing base and environment it is most crucial to have an understanding of how both national and organisational culture influence team dynamics (Zakaria et al., 2004). Hofstede (2001) presents five aspects of culture that has influence of the work of global virtual teams. These are differences in thinking and social action between people from different countries, which are developed in early childhood and then later on reinforced in schools and organisations. Theses five differences, or “mental programs”, are: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity and long-term versus short-term orientation. In a study Zakaria et al. (2004) show some of these concepts can affect virtual teams. Team members that come from cultures that value collectivism may feel isolated because the team members are geographically dispersed and works without frequent group input. For people that comes from cultures that value individual effort, team members from collectivist cultures can be perceived as needy and demanding while individualist team members can be seen as cold and not true team players by collectivist members. Members from cultures that rank low on uncertainty avoidance need established clear procedures and rules or else they may feel anxious about working with new, unfamiliar situations and technology.

The cultural differences in a team such as work emphasis, deadline adherence and project management style need to be transparent and clearly understood. Otherwise may information and communication technology usage lead to an escalation of conflict and not to a shared-knowledge culture and learning environment (Zakaria et al., 2004). There are a lot of assumptions today that communication technology such as e-mail and Internet will join people over the world in collaborations where cultural differences will not matter. However, this may be an illusion; even though the software of the technologies is globalised the minds of the people using them are not; they still have the values that origin from their culture. The amount of information increases vastly through these technologies but the capacity to take in and sift through the information is still the same as before the introduction of for example e-mail. The users chose and utilise the information according to the values and beliefs of their culture. When sifting through the information presented to them, users chose the information that confirms and reinforces the ideas that the user already have (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). Both national and organisational culture has great impact on the work of global virtual teams, and needs to be considered when using information and communication technologies. In order to meet the demands and pressures from the national and organisational cultures, organisational management, team leaders and members need to develop consensus-building processes. These processes have to be responsive to diverse conflict situations and flexible to change (Zakaria et al., 2004).

In order to work and to communicate in a global work context, people need to have intercultural communication skills. To acquire intercultural communication skills there has to be a process which includes three stages: awareness, knowledge and skills. The awareness comes first: the insight that every person has a set of values and beliefs that are shaped from their background and other persons from other backgrounds have different values and beliefs that are shaped from their background. The next step is knowledge. To be able to have an interaction with other cultures some knowledge of these cultures has to exist. Even if the values and beliefs will not be shared there is knowledge about how the values differ. The third phase is skills, which are based on awareness, knowledge and practice. The knowledge about the other cultures has to practiced and used. There has to be a feeling and satisfaction of managing a global intercultural environment (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). It also has to be acknowledged that the choice of language affects the team work to a great extent. The use of for example English as conversational language in geographically and culturally dispersed teams can cloud intended meaning and hinder knowledge management due to assumptions that terms and slang in one English-language culture have the same meaning in another English-language environment (Zakaria et al., 2004).

2.3 Actions

To achieve a functioning and effective communication there are several actions to take by both leaders and employees. When planning for communication and working in the global environment leaders need to recognise that employees perceive leadership in terms of actions. There is no use to have rules and conventions if they are not implemented practically in the daily work (Andersen, 2005). To create an effective global virtual team and a knowledge-sharing environment, team leadership has to involve effective cross-cultural communication and understanding. Leaders need to make sure that team members have cross-cultural training, which is crucial in a global environment. It can help people recognise, adapt and adjust to culturally diverse work contexts and develop a global mindset. People need to understand and see cultural differences, they need to feel comfortable with different cultures and they need to act accordingly to suit cultural differences (Zakaria et al., 2004). Team members need to have an open discussion about cultural differences and similarities. It is important to identify the own and others working context and to recognise the organisational cultures. Members of geographically dispersed teams also have to be familiar with the other members' competencies and personal attributes, and through this establish trust (Gibson & Cohen, 2003).

Employees that have had higher levels of training in communication skills are more satisfied with the overall communication climate. The reasons might be that they are more aware of the constraints on management and their own responsibilities (Hargie, Tourish & Wilson, 2002). Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) talk about two ways of learning intercultural communication. One way focuses on learning specific facts about the other culture such as facts abut the country, its geography, its language and its history. This is useful information but does not give any insight of effects of the culture on the perception and use of communication. The other way of learning intercultural communication is to focus on awareness and general knowledge about cultural differences. This type of education is focused on how the own mind and its values can differ from others' minds and values. This knowledge is not specific for a certain country; the abilities and skills that are taught can be applied in every type of unknown culture. It focuses not on how people live in a country but rather on how work is performed; how to get a work done. Studies has shown that one of the biggest problems people working in strange culture experiences is the lack of understanding and support from the contact at the organisation at home that is not experiencing the differences at first hand. It is therefore important for the contact to also have an understanding of the differences in culture that exists.

It is useful with face-to-face meetings when forming the global virtual team in order to foster strong relationships between members that are geographically dispersed (Zakaria et al., 2004). Leaders need to conduct a limited number of critical face-to-face meetings where members can develop an agreement, norms, roles, and deliverables. It is recommended that the team meet regularly, for example every fourth month, two to three days at a time (Gibson & Cohen, 2003). These face-to-face meetings can also encourage members to share individuating information, which is a major aid to decrease the depersonalisation that often exists in global teams (Wilson et al., 2006).

It is important for leaders to make clear definitions of responsibilities in order to have smooth coordination when forming a global team. It is especially important when the work in the team is only part of the members' responsibilities. By providing guidelines on how often to communicate and by implementing a regular communication pattern the predictability can be increased and the uncertainty reduced which will help the teams' coordination (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). Leaders should also create goal alignment across organisational boundaries, making sure that the activities and the output are aligned with local and global objectives (Gibson & Cohen, 2003). To improve cross-cultural communication it is important for managers to appreciate diversity, relate to the individual, be respectful and practice clarity (Picardi, 2001). Another important action that leaders should take is to increase the quality of task-related communication. By doing this the management can stimulate employee commitment to the organisation. This involves making sure that the right information gets to the right place at the right time. If employees perceive the task-related communication as high quality, they develop a supportive attitude to the managers and the organisation. This supportive attitude can also be achieved through employee trust in the management, which is developed when an organisation's management is upright and explains its goals and is open about problems (de Ridder, 2004). Table 5 shows the types of knowledge, skills and abilities that are needed in order to building a successful virtual team. It is important to be aware of that there are things to do both as an individual member and as a team to make the work function in a virtual context. The individual member needs be aware of the cultural differences that exists, learn to communicate and to be familiar with the technologies that are used while the team as a whole must establish norms and goals and to learn to solve problems and conflicts.

Table 5 Building a winning virtual team: types of knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs).

At individual level	**Description**	**At team level**	**Description**
1. Self management	1. Become one's own coach and leader 2. Set personal agendas 3. Motivated to take appropriate action 4. Behave proactively and manage themselves	1. Establish team's goals	1. Clearly establish and define team's roles 2. Preliminary face-to-face meetings and series of team building exercises 3. Reach consensus around goals and roles
2. Communication	1. Select appropriate transmission medium 2. Learn to interpret signals sent by team members 3. Clarify misunderstandings by overcoming language and cultural barriers	2. Establish team's norms	1. Develop a code of conduct and set of norms 2. Use specific modes of communication and acceptable response time 3. Document archiving in shared space 4. Establish task priorities
3. Cultural sensitivity and awareness	1. Cognitively understand the myriad differences 2. Perceptively aware of the team member's cultural values and patterns 3. Ability to identify and recognise potential cultural conflicts	3. Team problem solving and conflict management	1. Ability to solve complex problems by bargaining and negotiating 2. Develop creative mechanism by combining computer technology and videoconferencing 3. Develop early warning systems to alert potential conflict
4. Trust	1. Develop trust based on perceived similarities, responsiveness and dependability 2. Understand worthiness is assessed based on behaviours and not merely good intentions	4. Team learning	1. Learn from each other 2. Build on each other's work 3. Create a safe, secure team environment 4. Encourage easy collaboration 5. Create a 'community of practice'
5. Comfort with technology	1. Competent and confident to use information and communication technologies 2. Openness to learn new technology 3. Changed mindset for use of technology to collaborate in new ways	5. Balancing relationship and task team	1. Take opportunities to build social ties 2. Share learning experiences 3. Get together and reconnect in space as much as possible

(Source: Blackburn, Furst & Rosen, 2003 in Zakaria, 2004).

Members in global teams need to communicate frequently by using different media. They must plan advanced technology use carefully and they need to develop communication norms that facilitate technology use and bridge differences (Gibson & Cohen, 2003). When introducing techniques that will help collaboration, management should asses where the need to collaborate exists in the organisation and target those working spheres. Management also needs to make sure that standards for the technologies are uniformly adopted cross the organisation. If conflicting technology standards exist, they can create problems which can hinder the functions of distributed teams (Mark & Poltrock, 2004). Leaders need to make sure to develop infrastructure and technologies that connect dispersed members, to establish selection, development, and training programs for virtuality, and build performance management systems that enable strategic alignment. Leaders must also design dynamic systems that are responsive to changes across contexts (Gibson & Cohen, 2003). The interesting question is to what extent the department fulfils these various considerations of making an effective and efficient communication culture.

3 Research methodology

This chapter presents the method used in the study. The study comprised two rounds of interviews. The first round had the objective to orientate the researcher in general communication routines at the investigated department, and the second to investigate facilitators and barriers for effective and efficient communication.

3.1 Design

This study has been performed as a qualitative research. In a qualitative research the emphasis is on description and discovery and the data are in the form of thoughts mediated via words. When studying the communication at the department in question a qualitative method was necessary in order to get a rich and in-depth understanding of the individuals and their perceptions of facilitators and barriers for effective and efficient communication. A major reason for using a qualitative approach as opposed to use a quantitative approach was because a quantitative approach lacks in details and does not offer the subjects to respond in their own way. This could lead to lack of information and personal experiences, which has been essential for this study.

3.2 Participants

The participants in the study were all employees at the investigated department. In the first round of interviews, with the objective to get an orientation of the current communication, the subjects were members of the management group at the department and they were chosen in order to get a balanced perspective from different markets. Another factor as to why the specific respondents were chosen was the availability. Three subjects were managers situated at the office in Gothenburg, and two were managers that normally are situated in offices in other parts of Europe but for the time being were in Gothenburg to attend a meeting.

In the second round of interviews, with the objective to analyse the communication, fourteen employees were selected for the interviews. In order to get as broad and balanced view of the communication, people from all levels and from all involved countries at the department were chosen. The top manager at the department was chosen as a respondent and also five of the managers who were a part of the management group at the department, two of them situated in Gothenburg and the other three situated in Germany, Belgium and France. A manager situated in USA was also chosen as subject. The remaining seven are employees at the department situated in Gothenburg (Sweden), Belgium, Italy and USA, see Table 6 below.

Table 6 Participating subjects in the interviews.

Management level	Country	Number of subjects
Top	Sweden	1
Middle	Sweden	2
	Germany	1
	Belgium	1
	France	1
	USA	1
Regular employees	Sweden	4
	Belgium	1
	Italy	1
	USA	1

Note. Unfortunately Japan representative did not participate.

3.3 Instruments

The data for this study has been gathered by using unstructured and semi-structured interviews as instruments. The first round of interviews had the aim to give a general picture of the communication and therefore was unstructured interviews best suited for this. Unstructured interviews give the respondents room to answer freely around a subject, which was necessary to get a comprehensive picture of the communication. In the second round the aim was to analyse the communication and therefore were semi-structured interviews used. It directs the respondents to specific subject areas but gives them the possibility to answer freely within these areas.

The basis for the interview guide to the semi-structured interviews was taken from the book *Handbook of communication audits for organisations* by Hargie and Tourish (2000). It contained general questions for analysing and auditing the communication within an organisation which were modified to better suit the research. The guide was also altered as the interviews proceeded and new subjects and questions aroused. The interviews revolved around the categories in Table 7, for the full interview guide that worked as a basis for the interviews, see Appendix 1.

Table 7 Interview areas.

- Amount of communication
- Bad communication situations
- Barriers and weaknesses
- Communication channels
- Communication behaviour
- Communication topics
- Cultural and language differences
- Facilitators and strengths
- Feel part of the department
- Good communication situations
- Ideal communication
- Improvements
- Internal newsletter
- Annual face-to-face meetings
- Trust

3.4 Procedure

This chapter describes the procedures for the three sections of the research.

3.4.1 Literature review

The first part of the research consisted of a major literature search. In the literature search books and articles were scanned in order to get a theoretical framework for the research. The focus of the search was articles form scientific journals in order to get hold of relatively new and current theory and study results. The search for articles was conducted via databases at the websites of Northumbria University Library (Nora), Chalmers Library and Göteborg University Library. Typical search terms used were: *organisational communication, communication audits, trust, knowledge sharing, intercultural communication, interpersonal communication, global teams, computer-mediated communication, virtual teams*.

3.4.2 Interviews

The primary data collection for this study was gathered through interviews. The first round of interviews was all performed face-to-face at the head office of the department in Gothenburg. Present at the interviews were the researcher, the respondent and the researchers supervisor at the department who were there as support to explain possible incoherencies. The interviews were captured by the researcher taking notes.

In the second round of interviews eight was conducted face-to-face and six via telephone, this due to the geographical dispersion of the respondents. Present at the interviews were only the researcher and the respondents in order to avoid inhibited and censored answers. Before the interviews started the subjects were informed that the interviews were confidential and that they participated anonymously. None but the researcher would know what exactly they had said. The interviews were recorded in order to capture all that was mentioned for a complete and correct analysis, before starting the recording the respondents were informed and asked for permission. The duration of the interviews varied from half an hour to an hour.

3.4.3 Data analysis

The first set of interviews were summarised in one document in order to get an overview of the communication.

All interviews in the second round were transcribed in the original language. The extracts from the non-English interviews presented in the result were translated in to English but not the whole documents. The transcripts were coded by using categorisation, the content of each transcribed interview were sorted in to the categories that are listed in Table 7. The result was presented in a structure based on the categories, with some categories collected under the same headline. In each section of the result some quotes were presented in order to emphasise and highlight the findings. All the answers and quotes were presented anonymously in order to keep the confidentiality.

4 Result

This chapter presents the result from the two rounds of interviews. The first set of interviews had the objective to give the researcher an orientation in how the department and the communication functioned. The second round of interviews, which was the main part of the research, analysed the communication by looking at what the members at the department perceived to be the facilitators and the barriers to the communication and if they had any suggestions for actions to take in order to make improvements.

4.1 Result from the orientation interviews

Here is the result from the first set of interviews presented. It gives an overview of how the department and its communication functions. The purpose with these interviews was to give the researcher a foundation for the analytical interviews and therefore does this section consist of a summary with no deeper analysis.

The communication within department is mostly executed via telephone and e-mail, those are the two most used medias. They also have an intranet where they can search for information, which is mostly intended to be a sort of window for their clients. There is also a shared hard drive where everybody at the department can upload and take part of information. There is no access limitations on the drive, anyone can go in to any document and take part of it and make changes. This is used especially in projects where people easily can share documents that they work with. The department has in addition to this access to so called e-rooms, which can be used for document sharing and chats like group discussions but they are rarely utilised.

The department has a somewhat regular meeting routine. Every week there are meetings with the office in Sweden and the European markets that are participating via phone, calling in to the conference room. Japan or USA odes not participate in these meetings, partly because they are not part of the same service centre as Sweden and the rest of Europe and partly due to the time difference. There are instead monthly meetings with these markets where the management from the office in Sweden participate, or are intended to participate. The managers for the different markets in Europe travel to Sweden around once every second month for a face-to-face meeting with the managers in Sweden for a meeting off location where more individualistic issues are discussed, not only facts and figures. The only times the whole department gets together is at a face-to-face meeting, or event, twice a year where everybody travel to Sweden for a two day get together with meetings, presentations and other activities. In addition to these meetings, every group get together once or twice a week, the frequency depends on the group, where different issues are discussed, both facts and figures and more personal topics like team and individual development.

The department also has a newsletter that is sent out via e-mail around once every second week. This newsletter contains information about what is happening in the different groups and in the different projects, and what will happen in the near future. The objective is to give everybody a knowledge on what is going on at the department in order to give people the chance to contribute with information or participate in the project or activities that happen in their market or in their area of expertise.

4.2 Result from the analytical interviews

Under this section is the result from the analytical interviews presented. The result is divided in to ten categories around which the interviews focused. The categories do not perfectly match the interview questions; some topics have been collected under the same categorical headline.

4.2.1 Communication topics

The major part of the communication concerns two major areas, communication about projects and the running daily work and communication about management questions. A big part of the communication seems to be connected to information sharing. It is for the most part people in Sweden that need information from the different markets around different subjects for projects; it is not as common with information sending the other way around. People also communicate when they need in-put to projects, feed back on certain activities or if someone else has done a similar project that person may have something useful to contribute with. This communication goes in all directions within the department. The communication can also be about new activities or projects that are being launched or information in order to keep people up-to-date on what is going on in the projects. The other type of communication is about management questions. This involves issues about staff and management and it is also about coaching and support to people, concerning both work and personal development questions.

4.2.2 Communication channels

Almost all available communication techniques are used within the department. Most of the communication happens through e-mail and telephone due to the geographical dispersion, where it is possible, mainly at the office in Sweden, people have face-to-face communication. Meetings involving people from the different markets are usually performed as telephone conferences that are supported by the groupware NetMeeting. This enables the participants, even though they are not at the same location, to have the same view on their computers, for example to watch the same PowerPoint presentation.

Even though how and when people use the different communication channels varies, the reasons for why to chose a specific channel is pretty much the same among all interviewees. In general, e-mail seems to be used for information sharing while telephone is more used when there is something that needs to be discussed. E-mail is used when the communication is not urgent, when people need the time to compose the information and need to specify in writing in order to explain to make things clear. The time difference within the department makes e-mail a much used tool; people can read and respond when they have the time. Many interviewees also felt that e-mail was useful because it is a written proof that the communication has taken place, that information has or has not been shared.

> “Sometimes you can be much more precise communicating via e-mail, mainly if it is a delicate subject and you need to discuss about details, I think it’s an advantage to do that via e-mail. Other things are better to have an open discussion about with someone over the phone. It depends really on the subject and time”.

Telephone seems to be more used when the communication concerns something that needs to be dealt with immediately, something urgent. Most of the respondents felt that telephone gave a much more personal contact which is necessary for some communication. Some concerns or problems that are needed to be discussed with short respondent time are better suited to be communicated via telephone. Telephone is also used for direct questions where there is no need for a big amount of information sharing.

> "In one project that I had there was a lot of discussions back and forward by e-mail between me and my contact person in the market. Finally, I felt that I had to talk to the person instead. So I called over the phone and we solved everything in one call".

The communication channel that is the far most popular is face-to-face communication. At the office in Sweden this seems to be the most frequent way to communicate, but it s only there for obvious reasons where this communication channel is possible. It is only there where it is possible to walk up to your colleague's desk and ask a question or have a discussion.

When and how often the different communication channels are used vary a lot between the respondents. Some people use e-mail as much as possible and possibly supplements with a telephone call if necessary while others prefer to call as much as possible, only using e-mail when needed. This behaviour does not seem to be connected to country or nationality. People with the same nationality or sitting in the same country or office did not necessarily communicate in the same way; the differences seem to be more due to personality, and individual preferences. The communication frequency also seems to be related to personality. Some interviewees had frequent daily communication with their manager or colleagues at the department, wanting constant feedback and input, while others communicated about once a week.

4.2.3 Amount of communication

Almost every one of the interviewees is contented with the amount of communication within the department. Both the information sharing and the frequency of meetings seem to be satisfying.

> "I don't know which information I need to receive that I haven't received. All information that is relevant has been communicated".

What some experienced as redundant was the mass dispatch from higher management regarding information about the whole company but not the information coming from the closest managers. Some respondents, especially with managerial positions, receive a major amount of e-mail every day but they did not experience this as a problem.

> "It's about being able to prioritise and sift. And I see that as a competence that you need to have in a modern working environment".

To handle the amount of information that comes via e-mail the respondents felt that it is crucial to sort and prioritise, either with the help of Outlook or by a home made system. Overall the amount of communication was satisfying. There was only one respondent that felt that there should be more communication, and then especially via telephone. He or she asked for more calls regarding up-dates on what is happening within the department and about what is going on for the moment that are interesting.

4.2.4 Annual face-to-face meetings

The general opinions and thoughts about the annual meetings are similar for all interviewees. The big profit and the major benefit is the social part, to get to know each other and to get a face and a personality to the persons that are part of the communication. It is a good opportunity to catch up on what is going on in projects and in the everyday work. The interviewees also appreciated the opportunity to see each other in a relaxed environment, to have dinner and maybe a drink together. The social part was the major benefit that all interviewees stated.

> "I really appreciate the meetings because it's a perfect opportunity to meet the other markets, to catch up, organise a few small meetings. That and the social part to get to know each other are the benefits rather than the content of the meeting."

As shown in the statement above, the social part of the meetings are very much appreciated, while the actual content is of no significance. A big part of the interviewees felt that the meetings' focus was too much on reporting of results and other lectures resulting in too much one-way communication. The timetable was experienced as jam-packed making the open-meeting times, which is time set apart for mingle and social interaction, to suffer. The respondents stated that there is not time enough to speak to everyone, and this specially applies when everybody want to get some face-to-face time with the participants from Japan and USA who only come to Sweden twice a year.

Another problem with the meetings that some interviewees experienced is clustering. People sitting in Sweden tend to stick together and the other participators stick together at open-meeting time and at lunch and dinner inhibiting the social interaction. People from Sweden also tend to speak Swedish to a great extent making it hard for people from the other markets to engage freely in a conversation.

The people interviewed presented a number of improvements for the meetings. The most common suggestion is to change the set-up to focus more on social interaction and less on numbers and figure presentations. Some interviewees came with the suggestion to have a sort of team building activities or lectures around cultural differences in order to increase the feeling of all being part of the same department and to see the obstacles that hinder an efficient and effective communication. There were suggestions of fewer big meetings with one presenter and more group discussions in order to increase the two-way communication. When there are presentations, there were several comments on making them relevant for everybody; for both the people sitting at the central office and for the people working out in the markets.

> "The presentations from the markets should have a broader perspective, not saying that they are not interesting now for some but they need to be interesting for everybody, the whole meeting should be relevant to everybody who participates".

Another issue that was raised by a number of the interviewees was commitment. Everybody that participates need to take the meeting seriously and to participate actively, to make it a priority. In connection to this issue some of the interviewees talked about the location. They had experienced in previous meetings when having the meeting in a remote location where everybody spent the night that people were more engaged and committed to the meeting. There was no stress over going home or to other engagements; the meeting was the only thing that day and people could relax and interact in a better way. In the interviews there were also suggestions from different directions to have these meetings in other countries but Sweden in order to get insights in the local markets and to take turn on travelling. Not everybody felt that the meetings should be held outside of Gothenburg; some people living in Gothenburg wanted to return home in the evening to their own bed and some of the people travelling did not appreciate the extra time it takes to travel to a location outside of the city.

When it comes to the frequency, the major part of the interviewees felt that two times a year was enough. Two people felt that it would be nice with maybe three to four times a year while another suggested once a year but for more days. The concern is the time it takes from the ordinary work, especially for those travelling, and it is costly in time and money to stop the operations on an entire department for several days. The key issue that everybody felt was that no matter the frequency, the time spent must feel like well invested.

> "A lot of people feel that the time could be used in a better way because this is the only time we all get together. To have more activities that creates a team feeling, to get to know each other better. It is much easier to communicate if you know each other".

The overall major thought that everybody had was that focus of the meetings should be social interaction. To get to know each other, peoples' competencies and abilities, how they react in different situations and to different problems. A suggestion that was made by several interviewees was, in order to work counter to the clustering, at dinner and lunch make an active placing in order to increase the interaction between people in the different markets.

4.2.5 Culture and language differences

Although the major part of the respondents in the interviews experienced cultural differences within the department in connection with the communication, few saw the differences as problems.

> "That it's not a problem doesn't mean that you don't misinterpret each other. It's a problem if you can't get pass it, but if you can it's not a problem".

One issue that was raised was the differences in the way to communicate at meetings. People from southern European countries can sometimes have an aggressive communication style. During meetings people can have big loud argumentations but when the meeting is over they are back to being friends. For people in Sweden and other countries it can be hard to leave those feelings at the meeting and to not let them influence the perception of the person in the daily job.

> "I have had that several times that a Swedish person has confronted me with something and the day after they call me to apologise. And I think, why are you apologising, I already forgot about it, that's a normal way of discussing".

> "We are pretty calm; you don't come to bad terms and have a row about something at a meeting as a Swedish person. In other cultures you can start fighting and then you walk out and you're friends again. It does not really work like that if you have a good relation. If you get in to an argumentation at a meeting you probably don't like that person very much".

The biggest differences that the interviewees experienced were Europe in comparison with USA and Japan. When it comes to USA some respondents felt that they have a more straightforward and demanding communication. The American communication style is more abrupt and demanding, nothing is sugar-coated which can be experienced as much more aggressive and unpleasant than supposed to by inexperienced people. Even respondents in USA mentioned that they understood that, especially, Swedish people could be put off and feel that the American style is a bit bossy and obnoxious. On the other end of communication behaviour is Japan. People had the experience that when communicating with Japan a yes is not always a yes and that people there do not always say straight out what they think and feel. Another concern that was raised in connection with Japan was the language. So far no one has experienced any major difficulties because the person sitting in Japan has worked at the department for long time and speaks good English and is well familiar with everybody, but with a new person taking over that position people felt that there may be issues.

Some of the respondents in the interviews said that they communicated differently depending on which country the person they communicated with came from while others stated that they communicated in the same way no matter nationality. The biggest difference and what must be considered according to some were the tonality, how people express themselves varies, and specifically in written messages.

> “Every time I write an e-mail I try to think about the nuances so that it won’t sound unpleasant when I send it”.

Most of the respondents felt that the differences in communicating was due to personality, while some felt that the culture was cause and others thought that it was a combination. What everybody agreed on was that both the personality and the country have to be considered when for example composing an e-mail.

> “You have to take in consideration which countries are involved in the projects”.

> “It’s a different way of working there and you need to take that in to know that, otherwise it can create frustration with those people”.

When it comes to language, nobody in the interviews experienced any major problems. The level of English differs within the department and there can sometimes be small misunderstandings or incorrect formulations, but there are never any big problems that hinder the communication. The most important reason why the communication functions despite the cultural and linguistic differences is according to almost every respondent that everybody knows each other quite well. The employees at the department have worked together for a longer period of time and have gotten know the way people communicate, react and respond. The interviewees seem to consider the differences as an asset in their communication and daily work and not as a barrier.

> “I experience cultural differences within the department but I think there is a value adds. I don’t see it at all as a problem. I see that as something positive, that we are working differently, that we are thinking differently. I think it’s positive”.

4.2.6 Feel part of the department

The respondents in the interviews that are not situated at the head office in Gothenburg were asked if they felt as if they were a part of the department. Most of the interviewees feel so but when they were asked to grade on a scale how much part of the department they felt the answers varied. The scale was graded from one to five where five were completely part of the department and one not part at all. The answers varied from two to four with an average of three. The reason why they do not feel completely as part of the department is mainly that the social part is missing.

> “There are things that we can’t participate in, like the Friday cake, the local department meetings, the informal meetings in the cafeteria. We don’t have that but we are still part of the team”.

Because of the geographical distance people that are not situated at the head office misses out on all the informal encounters. They miss information from meetings that are not booked in advance but just happen by chance when people pass each other in the corridor. It is not only the geographical distance that makes people feel less part of the department. One respondent felt that it was more due to that person’s work speciality than the distance. Of the interviewees, one person did not feel as part of the department. This was not only because of the distance, but more due to the management and the answering situation.

4.2.7 Trust

Every respondent in the interviews felt that they can trust their co-worker at the department and the information that they receive. A major reason, that several stated, is the routine that exists within the department. People felt that they can trust each other because they have shown themselves to be trustworthy before.

> “You have full confidence that they will find the best solution, they have shown that they can”.

Some interviewees felt that if there ever are any doubts it is in connection with people newly employed, people that does not yet have the routine and experience. In those cases people double check just to see that everything is correct. People also felt that the person asking for information has a responsibility when it comes to trust. When asking for information or in put it has to be clear what it is going to be used for in order for the respondent to give correct and accurate information.

> “It is essential to be obvious in the beginning. For me it is about communicating the essentials of what you do. It is important when asking a question to be clear about what you expect. Then it’s up to me as receiver of information to be aware that I can’t use the information any how”.

The experience of working together for several years and people knowing each other were throughout the interviews mentioned as ground for the trusting climate. The respondents felt that if incorrect information is distributed it will always come back to the source.

4.2.8 Facilitators and strengths

The major strength in the communication that all respondents in the interviews experienced was the open climate that exists at the department. People experience a communication climate that allows them to raise any issues or questions no matter the level that they work on.

> "It's all around the open climate because we know that we can raise issues, we can talk to each other. It's really the open atmosphere, and it's the open climate that strongly supports open communication".

> "We have a very open dialogue, via mail and partially in the management group, where everybody has the space to talk and listen".

The respondents experienced the department's communication to be transparent. There are no hidden agendas and most information is open and accessible to everyone that wants and need to take part of it. People do not have any hidden purposes when communicating, but are very direct and sincere.

> "People are very natural, there are not much of a political agenda, you never have to look for a underlying purpose, what does he mean by this, what is he trying, which you can be forced to do in the rest of the organisation".

A common opinion was that everyone at the department is very approachable. People state in the interviews that if there are any problems or questions that need to be discussed, it is easy to deal directly with the person in question; there is no necessity to go via a manager at first hand. Another factor that is a great strength within the department, which many of the respondents stated as the key to the communication, is the personal relations. Most of the employees at the department have been working together for a longer period of time meaning that they know each other and each others communication behaviours well. They are aware of what people tries to say when they express themselves in a certain way and how they react to different types of communication and information. When sending out information and questions people know the receiver and have the possibility to adjust the communication accordingly. Because they know each other people also show consideration and care towards one and other, people have understanding and patience if there is a malfunction or other problems. One respondent said in the interviews that since they know each other, communication that normally may be needed to have face-to-face is possible to have via the telephone instead.

The major factor why the communication in most cases actually works is according to several respondents the management of the department.

> "It's mainly related to the team manager. This person is influencing the way we work together and how the relation is between the different people. That's my conclusion and really why I enjoy working at this department".

People in the interviews were satisfied with the way that the managers on all levels at the department handled the communication. The managers were perceived as being open and easy to approach. Respondents felt that the managers shared all the information that they were allowed to, making the department transparent and people aware of what is happening for the moment and in the near future. They also felt that the managers contributed to and withheld a structure that facilitated the communication between all employees at the department.

4.2.9 Barriers and weaknesses

There are a number of issues that seem to be the barriers to effective communication. Almost all hindering factors revealed during the interviews were connected to the fact that the department and a big part of the everyday work are geographically dispersed.

One issue that was raised in the interviews was priorities. Being a global department and acting in different markets makes people prioritising different things. Especially the respondents sitting in the markets felt that prioritising was a problem; not a major problem but something that sometimes creates difficulties. They get demands both from their local sales company and from the head office in Gothenburg which can create a difficult balance about what communication and information need to prioritise. Some of the respondents also stated that there can be confusion when the head office asks both the responsible person in the market and the sales company for information or if the sales company does the same thing the other way around. This can lead to unnecessary ineffective communication and double work. Another factor that was raised in the connection with priorities is that people within the department has different visions and information needs that sometimes can clash.

> "We want to look in to detail in our countries whereas Sweden they want the global overview, they want to see the big picture. And that often also creates some conflicts".

The most frequent factor that was raised as a weakness was that almost all interviewees touched in some way was information involvement. There is a problem in distributing information to everybody that need it and can benefit from it.

> "It can sometimes happen that I forget to contact a person for telling them that I'm doing a project in their market because there are so many other things to think about when working with a project and you may not spontaneously see why they should be involved".

The result of this was that many of the interviewees felt that they did not know what was going on in the department, what projects and activities that are up and running and which ones can be interesting and beneficial for them. Many respondents felt a conflict in connection to this. There is an ambition to share the information with everyone that has an interest in it but everybody is at the same aware of that it might lead to an information overload that hinders instead of helps. One tool that is used in order to inform everyone within the department on what is going on right now and in the near future is the internal newsletter. The feelings about the news letter varied amongst the interviewees, although most of them saw it as a very good idea but far from all read and took part of its content. Some felt that it was too heavy to swift through, too much information that was of no concern for them. Another opinion that was raised was that once the activities or project start they are already forgotten because too much time has passed since they read it.

> "It talks about, let's say a project that will start in one month in your market, but you're really not in to that at that time you're reading the newsletter, and then you forget".

Most of the respondents were aware that everybody has an individual responsibility to make an effort to know what is going on in their market or area, but due to the workload it comes far down on the priority list. Not everybody though felt that it was malfunctioning; some saw it as a very useful tool that they read with great profit. Another matter that was raised in connection with information involvement was to who the recipients should be when communicating, mainly concerning e-mail. Should the e-mail be sent directly to the specific person or should it go via the manager, who else should be the receivers of this information. Should this question be directed directly to the local sales company in the market or should it go via the department's person situated there, these were questions that were mentioned in the interviews that had caused concerns in the past. People had also experienced that when they finally were informed about a project that was happening in their market or area it was often too late, and there was no time for them to come up with ideas or inputs that could benefit the project. Some of the respondents said that if communicating the right information to the right person the competencies within the department could be used in a better and more efficient way.

Many respondents, at all locations, felt that there were a big gap between Europe and USA and Japan. The head office in Sweden together with the other markets in Europe was experienced as being the main parts of the department with USA and Japan on each edge functioning more as data providers than equal parties. A major factor that had led to this is the time difference between the markets. There is no convenient time during the day when all locations can be on the telephone for a conference or communicate in any other way directly with each other the same time, and this inhibits the communication to a great extent.

> "What hinders is that we have the geographical distance and the time difference. It's not as easy to get a quick respond from USA".

Another detail that was experienced as contributing to the gap was the fact that the people sitting in USA and Japan do not have a direct reporting line to the manager of the department that is situated in Sweden, they reports firstly to their manager in their own country and secondly to Sweden. This also leads to that neither USA nor Japan is part of the management group meetings that are held once a week, alienating them even more from the rest of the department. There are separate meetings with USA and Japan once every month in order to discuss the same type of questions. All the members of the management group that are situated at the head office in Gothenburg are supposed to participate but normally it is only the head manager who attends these meetings. According to the responses in the interviews the reason does not seem to be ignorance or unwillingness but a heavy work load and time constraints. A remark that respondents had in association with this issue was that the communication between the markets is a two way communication. People experienced that they had made attempts to communicate within good time margins and in an informative way, but that communication was not always recognised or responded to. Also here the reasons were appreciated to be heavy workload and time constraints.

> "But it is a two-way communication, it is important that the respondent also notice it or else may they make as much effort as they can to no use".

Due to the geographical dispersion, the major part of the meetings within the department is executed through telephone conferences where some participants' phone in from the markets and some are present in the actual conference room at the head office. The respondents in the interviews that participated via the phone experienced this to be some what unfulfilling. When participating via the telephone people felt that they missed out of a big part of the communication. They felt it as being difficult not being able to have eye contact with the other participants and not being able to see people's body language and reactions.

> "The problem is when you are over the phone, you don't have eye contact, you don't see what is going on, and so that complicates things a little bit".

> "It's not only what you are saying, it's also the way you are saying it, and to see how other people is reacting to what you are saying. One problem that we have when we are on the phone and the Gothenburg people are on a conference phone in a conference room is that we don't see how they interact when we say something, and we especially don't see when is the right moment to say something".

One person also felt that it was difficult to sit over the telephone for a long period of time; it is hard to keep up the concentration and easy to loose focus. Interviewees that participated in the telephone conference sitting in the actual conference room also felt it to be problematic. They had difficulties hearing what everybody says and felt that people easily started talking at the same time making it confusing on who should actually have the word.

A big barrier to effective and working communication was experienced by many to be the absence of social interaction. Again, because of the department being geographically dispersed a lot of its members felt that they misses out on the daily social interaction that they experienced to be a foundation to building relations and foundations for good communication. One person said that personal communication is the key to have a well functioning team that can collaborate in an effective way and that kind of communication is difficult to have over the phone.

> "I have excellent professional relationships with my colleagues in Gothenburg but the informal part is a little bit missing".

Respondents also stated that they missed the spontaneous communication that can be when working at the same location.

> "You always have to plan to have contact whereas if you sit in the same room it's very easy to just have a chat if something pos up".

When communicating, it is crucial that the recipient interprets the information in the way that the sender has intended it to be interpreted. A problem that some interviewees pointed out was communication interpretation. People experienced that senders of information did not always take the time for revising and reflecting on if the information and the communication channel suited the recipient and the situation. Problems had occurred because people interpreted the information and used it in other ways than it was intended to.

> "We have a lot of misunderstandings that are generated because we compose e-mails that are interpreted in other ways than they were intended to. There are a lot of misunderstandings generated that creates a snow balling affect on e-mailing".

Respondents felt that it was easy to get stuck in a treadmill of e-mailing back and forth for weeks about an issue that could be solved in just one phone call. There have also been situations where people communicated through e-mail with their closets neighbour at the office instead of just having a quick face-to-face conversation. Some respondents mentioned in relation with ineffective communication that they had felt people sometimes do not remember to listen. A lot of situations that they had experienced only contained one-way communication where people were so focused on communicating their information or their ideas that they forgot or disregarded to listen to what others had to say.

4.2.10 Improvements

In the interviews the respondents were asked if they had an idea of an ideal communication and if they had any improvements that could be made to have a better and more efficient communication.

One idea that several respondents mentioned was to have work exchange programme meaning people could go for a shorter period of time and work in another market and location. This sort of exchange programme has been done before and all of the respondents that had experienced it had very positive feelings about it, both people that went to another location and people situated at the locations that got a new desk neighbour.

> "Someone for example from Sweden comes and sits here for a week, I think it's a very good thing. It might not be very efficient in the short-term, but it gives you an idea of what other people are doing".

> "To see how it looks at their offices, in their home environment, how heavy their work load is, they seem to have it pretty stressful".

People in the interviews thought that by going to other locations the understanding for their co-workers situation would be more comprehensive and there would be a better nearness. It seemed in the interviews that people from all locations appreciated this kind of programme, people situated in Sweden could imagine going to the different markets and people in the markets to go to Sweden. Every respondent that once had worked closely with a person from another location stated that the communication between them were better than with the other colleagues at the department. The key point here seemed to be, as mentioned in the chapter "Facilitators and strengths", that by working closely together people get to know each other and thereby the communication becomes better and more effective.

A major factor that was mentioned in the interviews that people felt would improve the communication was to enhance the involvement of all markets. One simple thing that was brought up was that people needed to think twice before sending out information, about which other persons at the department that could have a benefit of the information.

> "Essentially it's about thinking about each other, to think that, ok now I'm doing this, if I were them what information would I want to have, I should probably send this to them. To have that foundation in everything that you do would be good I think".

Another suggestion that was made pointed on the fact that the whole department should be organised as one. Now the head office in Sweden together with the European markets forms a business service centre that does not include Japan or USA which makes them alienated from the rest of the department. If this was changed and if Japan and USA participated in more meetings with the head office and the other markets the involvement would be greater and everybody would feel more as a whole department, several respondents stated. There was also a suggestion made that the manager in Sweden should have the same responsibility for all employees at the department and not as it is for the moment, share the responsibility for the people in some markets with the local manager. Some respondents located out in the markets also felt that they wanted to have a more collaborative role in the departmental work instead of just being data providers; they felt that they had useful information and exclusive insights that in many cases could improve and make projects more effective.

Another proposal to improvement that was made was to have more directions and established processes on how to communicate. One respondent mentioned that when starting up a project that involves several markets or locations there should be a clear process on how to communicate with each other and with the client, how and where to set up the first meeting in order to involve everybody that needs to be involved. Other respondents stated that in some cases it must be more clearly defined who is asking for the information, who is supposed to answer to the communication and what the purpose with it is. There were suggestions made in the interviews about arranging a course in English in order to brush up on the language skills. Something that two respondents mentioned was that the communication could be more correct, there were remarks that the communication sometimes is a bit sloppy, with misspellings and bad grammar. One person said that there would be useful with a walk through of how to communicate in a correct and understandable manner, how should the communication be formulated in order for it to be correct and understood in the same way in all markets, what is the accurate and suitable terminology.

A remark that a number of people in the interviews made was that the dialogue between people needs to be improved. For the first, people need to think again when communicating. By only taking a few moments extra to review or rethink the purpose with the communication, is it correct, is it understandable, is it necessary, and to whom the communication should be directed to, a lot of misunderstandings could by avoided. People in the interviews thought that by doing this the communication could be much more efficient.

> "It is important to think about using the right communication channel so that it suits the recipient, and not necessarily me as sender".

Secondly, many respondents said that people needed to listen more. In many cases people focused only on communicating what they needed to communicate, forgetting to listen when people tried to respond.

> "We have to think about listening. That it is more important to listen than to talk, we need to remind us of that sometimes because it is to believe that I have the most important things to say or to write".

> "People felt that it is important to show respect when communicating, to say what needs to be said and then step back to avoid monopolising the time. There is a limited amount of time for communication and by taking up to much someone else's communication will suffer".

One remark that was made in the interviews was that the technology used should be revised; the equipment that is used at the telephone conference is in many cases inferior. People experienced that when communicating via telephone it is easy to hear everyone participating in the same way but not the people sitting in the actual conference room. It was also suggested that today's possibilities for videoconferences should be looked in to and see if that could be something to use in order to get an extra dimension when having meetings. Another interviewee proposed that when having a telephone conference, all participants should partake via telephone even the people situated at the head office in order to give everybody the same prerequisites.

> "Everybody should have the same conditions for communicating; I think that is the key".

5 Discussion

In this chapter the theory and the results from the study will be discussed and practical implications that this research has resulted in will be presented. None of the suggested improvements has been revised considering economical or organisational factors but are meant to be a foundation for further and more in-depth discussions about what could be improved in the communication.

5.1 Theory and Result

The interview session of this study showed at a first review that the employees at the department in general see the communication as well-functioning and effective, especially when they compared it to other departments. When analysing and evaluating any behaviour it is always a risk when comparing against other organisations or departments. If the benchmarked department has a higher performance it becomes a carrot, something to strive after. However, if the department that the performance is compared to has a lower performance it is easy to relax and accept the own work as good enough even though there may be a number of improving measures that can be taken. This is a phenomenon that was shown in several of the interviews at the department. Many of the people in the interviews could not think of any direct weaknesses at the start but as the interviews went on more and more barriers and limitations came up. The studied department had a good foundation for communication and it seemed to work in general in the daily work, but there are things that can and needs to be improved.

The major issue that gave this study its distinctive character and made it especially interesting was the department's geographical dispersion. The members are situated at locations all over the world but belong to the same departmental office and basically have the same objectives and directions for their work. In these sort of situations there are few occasions where everybody meets and get together face-to-face as a group. Zakaria et al. (2004), Gibson and Cohen (2003), and Wilson et al. (2006) all stresses the importance of meeting face-to-face in order to develop norms and roles and to share personal information that brings the team closer together. Gibson and Cohen recommend meeting every fourth month two to three days at the time. The studied department meets twice a year for two days at the time which seems to work fine, there does not seem to be a need for meeting more often. What could be altered is the lengths of the meetings, instead of two days increase it to three or four days. People travelling from other markets, especially from Japan and USA seemed to feel that the time spent travelling could generate more meeting time. There might be enough with just an extra morning or afternoon, the important thing is that the set-up of the meetings should be made to use the time people from other markets spend in Sweden to a max.

With these meetings there seem to be two major issues. For the first, people were not satisfied with the content. The focus of the meeting should be shifted from presentations of result to social interaction; the emphasis ought to be on two-way instead of one-way communication. The meetings should contain more personal interaction from everybody and more discussions that gives the members a personality to the person that they usually only interacts with via e-mail or telephone. If there are results and figures that need to be accounted they could be presented in another form, in some way that increases the interaction. The second issue with the meetings seems to be engagement. As mentioned earlier several researchers emphasise the importance of face-to-face meetings but they are a waist of time if the participators do not fully take advantage of them.

At the meetings there often seemed to be clustering, people from Sweden gathers in small groups and people from the markets in other groups at meals and open meeting time hindering the social interaction that is the objective and what people say wanting. The reason for this may be laziness or convenience or lack of confidence. However, in these situations people need to take personal responsibility and actively work for interaction with co-workers which they rarely meet. There may be enough with small reminders of this, it might be a phenomenon that few are aware of, or there may be a need to more actively bring people together through for example placing at dinner. It can be simple measures that are enough to enhance the grade of interface. The most important thing with the meetings, no matter the content, is to make the time spent feel like well invested.

The department in the study, as all geographically dispersed departments, depended to a great extent on different technologies in order to communicate. As Zakaria et al. (2004) pointed out communication technologies are very useful tools for overcoming cultural challenges and play an essential part in developing work structures, but they are only as effective as the ones using it. At the department people seemed to be satisfied and skilled in the technologies they used every day, which are telephone and e-mail. What could be improved is the use of the shared hard drive and the intranet. People used these tools but not to the extent they could, if the tools were modified to be more user friendly and educated about they could be a much better complement to the telephone and the e-mail than they are today. Another thing that should be revised is the possible communication technologies available on the market today. Maybe it is time to introduce video conferences or at least update the equipment used today when having telephone conferences. Make a survey on the technologies available that could improve the communication and bring the department closer together. However, what is important to think about when introducing a new technology is, as Mark and Poltrock (2004) mentioned, to target those places and situations where the technology could be most beneficial. When that is done it is also important to make sure that they are uniformly adopted cross the department. If the technology is not available to all it can not be fully used. In the end, the responsibility for the technology is very much up to the managers. As Gibson and Cohen (2003) wrote, it is the leaders that must develop infrastructure and systems that connect the dispersed members.

One measure that can generate a better communication is to look at how the technology is used today. A suggestion that was made in the interviews was to make everybody that participates at telephone conferences to participate via phone, even those situated at the head office in Sweden. By making everybody communicate via the telephone everybody would participate on the same conditions. Doing this, with support from NetMeeting, those people that must participate via telephone would not be as alienated, people would hear each other better and people would not miss out on body language and looks that are being made in the actual conference room. When choosing the technology to use for communication it is important to remember that every technology has different characteristics. As Olson and Olson (2000) wrote, with telephone there is audibility, contemporality, simultaneity, and sequentiality, while e-mail has none of those characters but instead there is reviewability and Revisability, (see Table 4, page 13). It is important to consider which characteristics are vital for the communication and chose technology from that, here Olson and Olson's table, as well as Table 2 and 3 pages 10 and 11 by Peters (2006), can be a helpful tool in order to see different technologies characteristics.

The single most important factor for a functioning geographically dispersed working environment is according to a lot of the theory trust; see for example Wilson et al. (2006), de Ridder

(2004), Zakaria et al. (2004), Henttonen & Blomqvist (2005) and Jarvenpaa & Leidner (1999). According to the interviews trust never seemed to be an issue at the department. According to Henttonen & Blomqvist (2005) timely response, in-depth feedback and open communication are behaviours that develop and enhance trust and these seemed to be behaviours that very much exist within the department. The challenge for the department is to retain the level of trust through changing member composition and other organisational changes. For people to trust each other there has to be a social interaction and sharing of individuating information (DeSanctis et al., 2001; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). This may be the key to future trust development, the structures are already there but people need to get to know each other, especially when new members join the department this needs to be a priority in order to keep and increase the trust. Another feature that is essential for trust and functioning work in an international environment is, as both Mark (2002) and Zakaria et al. (2004) wrote, common ground and established conventions and structures. This seemed to exist at the department, the routines was one important factor to why people trusted one another. This common ground and these established conventions are important to preserve and make clear, especially for new members, in order to keep the trust and make the work run smoothly and be effective.

Although the major part of the participants in the interviews experienced cultural differences, few saw it as a problem. The major reason for this was perceived to be the routines that existed and that people knew each other. Zakaria et al. (2004) has stated that in order to avoid cultural differences to create problems they need to be clearly understood and transparent. If this is the case at the studied department is not clarified, it seemed to be, as mentioned, more a question of experience from working together before. But if, or maybe more when, the organisation and set-up of the department change, new constellations will be created that do not have the shared history. At that point it is important to be aware of possible trouble makers, to recognise when problems occur if there are cultural differences behind and if so recognise them and make them clear and see what can be done in order to overcome the obstacles they create.

The communication seemed to work well in general at the researched department. Dickson and Hargie (2006) states that in order to have good working environment there has to be room for questioning on and between all levels in an organisation, and this seemed very much to be the case. People felt that the climate was very open, there were no hidden agendas, if there were any questions people did not hesitate to ask. In order to create these conditions that Dickson and Hargie talks about the responsibility is very much on the management. It is important when people have questions to respond to them in some way, even if there is no answer at the time they at least need to be recognised and noticed. At the department the management seemed to have taken and administered this responsibility well because they were according to many of the interviewees the reason for the open and transparent climate. The challenge is to maintain this openness even though the management and the composition of the rest of the department will change. People also seemed to have trust in the management, which is as de Ridder (2004) pointed out important in order for people to have a supportive attitude towards the department. This is developed by the management being upright and explains its goals and is open about problems, which is very the case at the department.

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter people at first considered the communication to be well functioning but as the study went on more and more barriers were revealed. Most of the hindering factors were due to the fact that the department is geographically dispersed. There a problems in involving everybody, issues with prioritising due to conflicting demands and alienation of some markets for example. However, all of the barriers can be erased or at least diminished by some measures that has been presented in this section and will be in the next.

5.2 Implications for practice

There are a number of improvements that can be made at the studied department in order to enhance the communication and make it more effective. The previous section has already in connection with the theory and the result from the study discussed some measures that can be taken, this section present some further improvements drawn from the result of the interview section.

In order to improve the communication the level of social interaction need to be enhanced in order for people to get to know each other. One important event for increasing the socialisation is the meetings that are held twice every year, which already has been discussed and suggestions for improvements has been made earlier in this chapter. One thing that could complement these suggestions is to have exchange programmes where people go to other markets than the own and work there for a week up to a month. These kinds of exchange programs has been done before and those in the interviews that had taken part in them, both people travelling to new locations and people getting visits, only had positive comments. It would be especially beneficial when new members join the department in order for them to get an understanding of the level of geographical dispersion and internationality at the department. By visiting another market and work in another context the understanding for co-workers situation would be better and thereby can the communication more easily be adjusted in order to be more effective. By working together people also get to know each other on another level which eases the process of communication. It is easier to call someone you know than a stranger, it is also more likely that you come to think of a person that you have a personal relation to when sending out information via e-mail or other communication channels than a stranger.

Another crucial action that needs to be taken at the department is to bring all markets together, especially to bring USA and Japan closer to Europe. One thing that could have big impact is to make all markets belong to the same business service centre and to make all members no matter their location answer to the same manager. All markets should to be part of the weekly meetings, which is not possible in practice due to the time difference, but the set up needs to be changed. The meetings could be held very other week in the morning together with Japan and every other week in the afternoon together with USA. In order to make the communication and the work in general in a widely spread department people need to be flexible and adjustable to the prevailing situations. It is also essential to include USA and Japan when communicating as soon as there is a project or activity that concerns those markets. Especially in the beginning of projects, they are surely to have useful exclusive insights and information about their markets that could be of great benefit. Make those markets be more than just data providers; if the collaboration would be increased the competencies of the department could be used in a much more efficient way.

A risk in every type of communication is misunderstandings. To diminish this risk and to avoid double work, there needs to be an establishment of directions and processes on how to communicate. Who should be contacted at the beginning of projects, how should the communication look like, internally and with the client. This is a measure that would make sure that everybody that needs to be involved is contacted and given the time and opportunity to make contribution to the project. In the interviews there was also an indication that there is a want for a walk through on how to communicate in a correct manner, how to express oneself in order to be correct and understood in the intended way, to be aware of the accurate and suitable terminology. In order to avoid misunderstandings and make the communication more effective it is also important to improve the dialogue. Every member must review the purpose for the communication, especially when it is in written. Is it correct, is it understandable, is it necessary, is the purpose clear, and is the receiver/s of the communication accurate. In complement to this people also needs to be good listeners. When communicating people must listen to what others are trying to say and not only concentrate on the own communication, or the whole communication will be of no use. Another thing that is important to consider is that a lot of misunderstandings can have there origin in cultural differences. Therefore could discussions about similarities and differences be very fruitful in order to improve the communication. If people are aware of how others interpret different types of communications and ways of expressing, a lot of the chances for misunderstandings could be eliminated right from the beginning.

What needs to remembered is that when striving to improve the communication and the work in general, there are measures that can be taken on both individual and team level. When planning improvements and action plans it can be useful to look at the types of knowledge, skills and abilities that are needed in order to building a successful geographically dispersed team. Blackburn, et al. (2003) present, in Zakaria (2004), a table over these skills (see table 5). For the communication they stress, for example on individual level, the importance, which has been discussed before, of selecting the appropriate communication technology and how crucial it is to clarify misunderstandings by overcoming language and cultural barriers. This table can be a helpful tool when designing a plan over measures that needs to be taken.

The most important thing when launching actions in order to improve the communication is that people see how these contribute to their work. They need to see that the measures that affect them in their daily work are beneficial for them now and in the long run.

5.3 Limitations

There are some limitations of the current study. Due to changes in the composition at the department, no one from the Japanese office were interviewed which could have given exclusive and useful insights to the study. None of the suggested measures have been evaluated considering economy or time. Depending on the time the department is willing to spend on improving the communication and depending on the budget all suggestions may not be appropriate or possible to realise. The study has looked at what the department can do in order to improve the communication and not the entire organisation. There might be measures that can be taken on higher level in the organisation that will have a positive effect on the communication at the department but that has not been taken into consideration in this study.

6 Conclusion

This chapter presents conclusion derived from the analysis in the Discussion chapter. It also presents suggestions for further studies.

6.1 Managerial implications

The communication within the studied department works well in general but there are measures that need to be taken in order to enhance the communication and make it more effective. The measures are of two different types, it is measures with the objective to retain a well functioning behaviour or quality, and it is measures to improve malfunctioning activities or to introduce new improving activities.

The retaining measures should have the focus to keep the trust that exists within the department and between its members and to preserve the open and transparent climate. These are mechanisms that run well today but must be noticed and observed in order to maintain them in the future as the department's composition, structure and activities will change. The improvements that need to be done are of different characters. First the yearly big meetings with the whole department need to be revised; especially the social interaction at those meetings must be increased. This can be done by revising the content and set up of the meetings and to enhance the participators commitment. To increase the social interaction in general and to bring people closer a sort of exchange program would be useful. People could go to other markets to work for a period of time and thereby get a better understanding for their co-workers situation and factors that affects their communication. The communication technology that is used needs to be looked over to see how it is functioning. There may be a need to update the current technology or bring in new technologies. How the technology is used should also be revised, maybe it can be used in another way to make the communication run smoother, to give everybody the same conditions for communicating.

One important and crucial enhancement that must be done is to bring all markets closer together. All markets needs to be involved early on in projects if the projects affect them. The departments' competencies can be used in a better way if the markets become more than just data providers. There also seems to be a need for establishing processes and common ground on how to communicate. By setting clear directions on how and with whom to communicate with at for example the start of a project, both a lot of misunderstandings and double work could be avoided. A big part of the possible improvements can be done by individual members at the department. People need to listen more and not only focus on communicating what they want to, people also need to revise before communicating to make sure that the information and communication is correct and suitable. Members at the department must also be aware of the cultural differences that exist in order to prevent them from causing problems and misunderstandings.

6.2 Suggestions for further studies

The next step in this study would be to evaluate which of the suggested improvements to implement and turn them in to concrete activities. For each measure an action plan needs to be sketched, including a step by step plan on how to go about, assigned responsible person and objective for each activity to make it possible to evaluate and see if the measure's been successful or not.

7 References

Andersen, J. A. (2005) ‘Trust in managers: a study of why Swedish subordinates trust their managers’, *Business Ethics: a European Review*, 14 (4), pp. 492-404.

Byrne, Z. S. & Le May, E. (2006) ‘Different media for organisational communication: perceptions of quality and satisfaction’, *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 21 (2), pp. 149-173.

Campbell, J. (1997) ‘The impact of videoconferenced meetings on the pattern and structure of organisational communication’, *Singapore Management Review*, 19 (1), pp. 77-93.

DeSanctis, G., Wright, M. & Jiang, L. (2001) ‘Building a global learning community’, *Communications of the ACM*, 44 (12), pp. 80-82.

Dickson, D. & Hargie, O. (2006) ‘Questioning’, in Hargie, O. (ed.) *The handbook of communication skills* (pp. 121-145). East Sussex: Routledge.

Encyclopaedia Britannica (2007) ‘Communication’, *Encyclopaedia Britannica online, academic edition* [Online]. Available at: http://search.eb.com/eb/article-9109625 (Accessed: 25 January 2007).

George, G. & Sleeth, R. G. (2000) ‘Leadership in computer-mediated communication: implications and research directions’, *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 15 (2), pp. 287-310.

Gibson, C. B. & Cohen, S. G. (2003) *Virtual teams that work*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Hargie, O. (2006) ‘Skill in theory: communication as skilled performance’, in O. Hargie (ed.) *The handbook of communication skills* (pp. 7-36). East Sussex: Routledge.

Hargie, O., Tourish, D. & Wilson, N. (2002) ‘Communication audits and the effects of increased information: a follow-up study’, *The Journal of Business Communication*, 39 (4), pp. 414-436.

Heinz, Bettina, (2003) ‘Backchannel responses as strategic responses in bilingual speakers’ conversations’, *Journal of Pragmatics*, 35, pp. 1113–1142.

Hofstede, G. (2001) *Cultures consequences*. 2^{nd} edn. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

Hofstede, G. & Hofstede G. J. (2005) *Organisationer och kulturer*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Jarvenpaa, S. L. & Leidner, D. E. (2000) ’Communication and trust in global virtual teams’, *Organization Science*, 10 (6), pp. 791-815.

Kalla, H. K. (2005) ‘Integrated internal communications: a multidisciplinary perspective’, *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 10 (4), pp. 302-314.

Kirkman, B. L. et al. (2004) ‘The impact of team empowerment on virtual team performance : the moderating role of face-to-face interaction’, *Academy of Management Journal*, 47 (2), pp. 175-192.

Kraut, R., Fish, R., Root, B., & Chalfonte, B. (1990) ‘Informal communication in organizations: Form, function and technology’ in Oskamp, S. & Spacapan, S. (Eds.), ‘People's reactions to technology in factories, offices and aerospace’ (pp. 145-199), *The Claremont Symposium on Applied Social Psychology*, Sage Publications.

Mark, G. (2002) ‘Conventions and commitments in distributed CSCW groups’, *Computer Supported Cooperative Work*, 11, pp. 349-387.

Mark, G. & Poltrock, S. (2004) ‘Groupware adoption in a distributed organization: transporting and transforming technology through social worlds’, *Information and Organization*, 14, pp. 297-327.

Mark, G., Grudin, J. & Poltrock, S. E. (1999) ’Meeting at the desktop: an empirical study of virtually collocated teams’, *Proceedings of ECSCW’99*. The 6th European on computer supported cooperative work, 12-16 September 1999, Copenhagen, Denmark.

Ne.se (2006) ‘Kommunikation’, *Nationalencyklopedin* [Online]. Available at: http://www.ne.se/jsp/search/article.jsp?i_art_id=228277&i_word=kommunikation (Accessed: 21 August 2006).

Peters, L. (2006) ‘Conceptualising computer-mediated communication technology and its use in organisations’, *International Journal of Information Management*, 26, pp. 142-152.

Picardi, R. (2001) *Skills of workplace communication: a handbook for T&D specialists and their organizations* Chalmers library [Online]. Available at: http://site.ebrary.com/lib/chalmers/Doc?id=10020845 (Accessed: 28 November 2006).

de Ridder, J. A. (2004) ‘Organisational communication and supportive employees’, *Human Resource Management Journal*, 14 (3), pp. 20-30.

Salojärvi, S., Furu, P. & Sveiby, K-E. (2005) ’Knowledge management and growth in Finnish SMEs’, *Journal of Knowledge Management*, 9 (2), pp. 103-122.

Subramanian, S. (2006) ’An ”open eye and ear” approach to managerial communication’, *The Journal of Business Perspective*, 10 (2), pp. 1-10.

Wells, C. V. & Kipnis, D. (2001) ‘Trust, dependency, and control in the contemporary organization’, *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 15 (4), pp. 593-603.

Wilson, J. M., Straus, S. G. & McEvily, B. (2006) ‘All in due time: the development of trust in computer-mediated and face-to-face teams’, *Organizational Behaviour and Human Decision Processes*, 99, pp. 16-33.

Zakaria, N., Amelinckx, A. & Wilemon, D. (2004) 'Working together apart? Building a knowledge-sharing culture for global virtual teams', *Creativity and Innovation Management*, 13 (1), pp. 15-29.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview questions

- What are your chief's responsibilities and duties concerning information flows and communication climate?
- With what colleagues or your customers (i.e., other work units) do you communicate, and what position do they have?
- What kinds of communication are necessary for you to have with other work units? How well does this communication work?
- Describe the formal/informal channels through which you typically receive information. What kind of information do you tend to receive? How often? Too much? Too little?
- What channels do you use through which you send information to your colleagues and other work units within company?
- What factors tend to facilitate your effectiveness in communication on the job?
- What inhibits your effectiveness in communication?
- What is your idea of ideal communication possibilities at your work?
- Do you trust the information you receive? When do you not trust the information you search for or receive?
- What are the major communication strengths of the organisation?
- What are the major communication weaknesses of the organisation?
- How would you describe the general communication climate of today within the organization?
- What would you like to see to be done to improve the communication within the organization? Why hasn't it been done? What are the major obstacles? Suggestions for improvement?
- Please, give examples of good and bad communication situations.
- To what extent do you feel part of the department? (on a 5-point scale)
- What do you think about the amount of communication?
- Do you experience any cultural differences?
- Is there anything that you would like to add?