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First line manager role and information systems

A case study at Volvo IT of how information systems can help the first line manager better balance the ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ tasks they face

Mats Malmqvist

IT University of Göteborg
Chalmers University of Technology and University of Gothenburg
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Abstract

For the last thirty years there have been many changes in how organizations work, due to among other things globalization and information technology. This has changed the way we look at leadership. One effect is that more and more tasks have been devolved to first line managers (FLM). Their most important task is their HR responsibility. It can sometimes be tough to prioritize this part of their responsibilities when some of their more ‘hard’ and visible tasks such as economy or functional activities insist on attention. This study has looked at how information systems can make information more accessible for the first line manager and to help them have a better balance between their different tasks. This was done as a case study with elements of Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) and included semi-structured interviews with FLMs and other stakeholders in the organization around them. First the FLM role was examined to see what it looks like today, then how the information systems work today, and finally what can be done to improve the use of the information systems. It was found that the problems facing the FLMs when it came to information systems were large amounts of information spread out at different places, many tools or applications to use, and these were often used in a less than efficient way. The implications here are that it is important how to structure and make available all this information for easy access; the question if there can be too many applications so that they are no longer effective but become a hindrance; and that basic education in the systems followed by continuous follow-ups to learn to use the application in a more efficient way is needed.

Keywords

First line manager, information systems, HR, leadership, training

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Göteborg, 080521

Mats Malmqvist

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Introduction

It can be said here that this thesis looks at how organizations work with strategy from what Whittington (2002) calls the processual perspective rather than the classic perspective. Where the classic approach sees strategy as a rational process where you can gather and analyze all relevant information and then follow the plan, the processual approach sees humans as less than rational – they don't gather all relevant information, they interpret it subjectively and do not choose optimal solutions. This means, contrary to the classical perspective, that organizations don't work perfectly, and don't have to, in order to survive. Strategies are developed step by step with gradual adaptation. This is also known as the science of muddling through.

Background

Businesses and organizations have since at least the early seventies had to cope with a rapidly changing world to do business in. Gone are the days when you could plan years ahead. Factors such as globalization and information technology have changed the conditions for leadership and the old ways are rapidly fading.

An important starting point, according to Müllern and Elofsson (2006), to understand why our ideal of leadership is changing is because new forms of organization are emerging. And this is because of how our society has changed. We are in a period of change, Tyrstrup (2005) says, a change on many levels and places, with reform work in organizations having been done for three decades. When society around us is changing, organizations must adapt. Some disappear, but others will adapt and change through different processes and find a way to exist in the future. This is what Checkland and Poulter (2006) says is the core systems idea/concept – "that of an adaptive whole (a 'system') which can survive through time by adapting to changes in its environment." (p. 7).

Müllern and Elofsson (2006) writes that at the bottom of many of the tendencies we see in organizations today is the shift from seeing the corporation as a stable structure to seeing it as a series of processes that needs constant maintenance, change and renewal. We know that many organizations faces tough challenges and competition that forces them to constant review of their strategies and ways of organizing. Many agree that this is due to two factors: the new information technology and global competition. These stimulate/force constant searching for new ways to organize.
To understand this new landscape better, says Müllern and Elofsson (2006), we need to look at the critique against the multidivisional form. This form gave a solution that better followed the chosen diversification strategy – every division became a corporation within the corporation with decentralized functions. Few companies have chosen another way of organizing; most build their formal structure around divisions or business areas. The multidivisional form has been criticized for creating a rigid structure that has a hard time meeting the challenges of flexibility and innovation, continues Müllern and Elofsson (2006). Today's business climate demands that the corporation develops its ability to act flexible, and this demands more developed forms of organization. The multidivisional form has not been replaced by any new way of organizing. It is within its limits that we see the big changes. It's organized for stable operations, not change, and the leaders formed in these stable conditions will

not stress change as part of their leadership. The biggest difference, Müllern and Elofsson (2006) write, between corporations today and in the sixties is the substantial increase in local responsibilities, or operational decentralization.

A central development that influences how we look at and practice leadership is that the boundary of the company is becoming blurred. This is because of the tendency to put important functions outside the company, such as outsourcing and concentrate on the core activities. Intimately connected with outsourcing is an increased tendency to enter strategic alliances and similar forms of collaboration. The driving force behind this is not least the globalization that characterizes many trades, and forces more flexible and decentralized ways to organize (Müllern & Elofsson, 2006).
We are moving, according to Tyrstrup (2005), towards a production where people's skills, experience and energy are seen as a strategic resource. We are leaving the industrial society and are on our way back to a society where a big part of our production is based on people and our ability to interact with others and work in groups. This is what Peter Drucker called knowledge workers (Scarbrough, 1999). Services and knowledge is becoming increasingly important. These services are not just a complement to the industrial business, say Tyrstrup (2005), but have a big commercial self reliance. In industrial production the workers are needed to complement the machines, while in all other production – service, knowledge or crafts – machines can be looked upon tools to help doing your job. This means, Tyrstrup (2005) writes, that we need another type of organization and leadership

All these changes mean that we are reviewing our leadership (Müllern & Elofsson, 2006; Tyrstrup, 2005) Managers are under pressure from two sides, writes Müllern and Elofsson (2006), they can't fail to notice that the old, authoritarian leadership is losing ground and the picture of what leadership is, is under review. Second, the context of leadership is also changing as the ways of organizing changes. Through the dissemination of responsibility in corporations a situation is created where managers to a growing extent is leading among peers. This makes it harder to keep up an authoritarian style towards the employees. This is also reinforced where organizational links has been cut away, which means an even bigger responsibility for middle- and first line managers (FLMs).[1] Downsizing is also a factor that gives first line managers more responsibilities and employees.

"One important starting point in these changes is summed up in the frequently used expression that 'the employees are our most important resource.'" (Tyrstrup, 2005, p. 147 [my translation]) Although this is so, Tyrstrup continues, and employees have been given attention since the Hawthorne studies in the thirties, we still haven't solved these problems yet. Or rather, we have periodically made it work. But society – economical, political and technological conditions – has changed. And with it so has the demands and expectations on leadership changed. This has led to that an increasing amount of people have increasingly demanding tasks. The question to ask, he says, is how do we take the administrative tasks (budget, planning and routine forming) and make them a part of, instead of being superior to, this new production logic.

[1] FLMs being the managers closest to the employees doing the operational work. See Theory for a description of the FLM.

One example of new processes, writes Müllern and Elofsson (2006), is how corporations work more deliberately with human resources. Experiments are made with new reward systems, competence development etc. Leaders must also take in to account the shift in what people perceive as important in life. There has been a clear reduction in how important we find work. Instead, factors as family and leisure time are perceived as more important. The change in how we look at work and wages is an important challenge for managers. More important today for an employee is, for example, nice co-workers and a good manager. The foundation for being able to motivate employees to make a contribution to the goals of the corporation is changing, and with that the conditions for leadership.

Problem

The question that follows all this is, if the employee is the most important resource and we live and work in an ever changing environment that influences how we should lead, how can the FLM today work with his or her employees so that they are happy and satisfied and perform at the top of their capacity and add value and quality to what it is they are producing? This is needed to compete with cheap foreign labor and other companies. You must also keep the employee happy to keep him in the company – you don't just want him or her to make a better product than the competition, you also want to be a better employer than the competition.
This should ideally be done so it lessens the FLMs insecurity and uncertainty by giving him/her a better overview and better alternatives when making decisions, and by increasing efficiency without risking work overload.

There is evidence in recent research (see for example Cunningham & Hyman, 1999; Whittaker & Marchington, 2003) that the changed role for the FLM can lead to a conflict between 'hard' issues such as finance and business goals, and 'soft' issues such as people management where the softer issues usually lose out. The harder issues are about controlling and monitoring work, being effective and doing things well, while the soft are about communicating, raising commitment and how to live well.

Aim

Not much has been written about how information systems[2] can help the FLM in this new role. The aim of this thesis is to see how the information that the FLM needs to do his/her job, both" the 'hard' and the 'soft' parts, can be made more accessible through the use of information systems, and tailored to their needs rather than that how they work is governed by what is available, thus making it easier to maintain a balance between the 'hard' and the 'soft' tasks they face.

[2] No distinction will be made of the terms information systems, applications, tools or programs. They will be used interchangeably.

Research questions

The question to be asked in this thesis can be formulated thus:
How can information systems support the FLM in their working role?
In order to answer that we need to look at the following:

- What does the FLM role look like today?
- How does the existing information system support the FLM role?

Delimitation

Since Volvo IT is a fairly large and global company, the thesis will only look at FLM role at Volvo I&O (Infrastructure and Operations) Site Göteborg and the information systems in use there. The hardware will not be taken into consideration. This is to ensure that the area of interest comes within a manageable size and to avoid confusion. The thesis will not be a listing of all available tools at the site, but a qualitative approach where the weight will be on the interviewees' experiences of the tools they use in their daily work.

Disposition

Here will follow a short description of the disposition of the thesis.

In the Theory section prior research that has bearing on the subject will be presented. The Method section will explain the methodological choices that have been made in the thesis. Further, in the Results section the results of the research material gathered at the company will be presented. This will be followed by the Analysis and discussion were an analysis will be carried out where the results are compared with the theory, and a discussion of what the results mean and what effect they have on the company and to what extent they can be generalized. The thesis will end with the Conclusion which will answer the research questions.

Theory

This chapter presents what has been written about the subject and has been deemed relevant for the study. This will be used as a frame of reference. The theory presented here will later be used in analyzing the empirical data.

The FLM

According to Sims (2000) the description of the FLMs' job can vary a lot. It can differ even from one department to the next. But generally "FLMs are responsible for directing the work of others and accomplishing goals. They accomplish these goals by managing or supervising their employees to meet the performance goals set by higher-level managers." (p. 2). They are an important link between management and employees. According to Sims, the FLM performs four functions to do their job – planning, organizing, leading and controlling. Planning is to take the different goals and trying to figure out how to meet them at their level. This helps to put what is being done in perspective and helps the employees to keep track of what is important. "Here is what we want to achieve, and here is how we are going to do it."(Sims, 2000, p. 8) Organizing is to make sure there are resources, human and physical, to carry out the plans and meet the goals. The FLM determine what tasks are to be done, and by who. Leading is perhaps the most important function. It consists of a number of interpersonal processes, such as motivating, communication, tutoring and coaching. Sims (2000) sees this as the most important of the functions – "Leadership is such an important part of management that managing is sometimes defined as accomplishing results through people." (p. 9) Controlling is making sure that things unfold according to plan.

The decentralization of HR responsibilities

The last ten-fifteen years much research has been done on the devolution of HR[3] work to line managers and their new role. Areas discussed range from the new role for HR specialists (Cunningham & Hyman, 1999; Renwick, 2003); how line managers and HR specialists can work together in partnership (Whittaker & Marchington, 2003); to what extent line manager have actual responsibility for different HR practices (Poole & Jenkins, 1997); "hard" and "soft" interpretations of HRM, where "soft" entails motivation and empowerment and "hard" using employees as variable input (Cunningham & Hyman, 1995); to what extent leadership behavior and HR practices used by managers to influence employee attitudes and improve performance in the organization can be seen as separate factors (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007); what role the line manager has in employee learning and development, his/her contribution to achieving strategic HRM objectives, and how to facilitate and share tacit knowledge in teams (MacNeil, 2003).

Changes in markets, government deregulation and fierce competition have forced organizations to focus on quality at minimum cost. Employees are seen as the most important assets as they are as making the most significant contribution to implementing corporate strategy. Human Resource Management (HRM), emphasizing

[3] Human Resources – how organizations handles its employees.

training for the work force, is seen as a way to secure a competitive advantage. There is agreement over one structural change – many organizations have devolved HR responsibilities from personnel to line managers. (Cunningham & Hyman, 1995, 1999; Lengnick-Hall & Moritz, 2003). Devolution to the line is seen as a key characteristic to modern HRM, where line responsibility is basic to its effectiveness. One of its central tenets is that employees are the single most important asset. (Poole & Jenkins, 1997). Strategic HRM consist of two core elements – strategic integration of HRM with the business policy, and devolution of responsibility to implement HRM to line managers. When organizations' business strategy is to maximize the contribution of employees through HRM, then integrating HRM with strategic planning is likely to yield higher levels of competence, commitment and flexibility at work. (MacNeil, 2003). The strategic intent, according to MacNeil (2003), of devolving HR responsibilities to the line is to maximize the contribution of employee knowledge and skills to create a competitive advantage using human capital.

There are numerous reasons to devolve HR responsibility to line managers: HR policies are too important to be left with personnel specialists as they have failed in the past (Cunningham & Hyman, 1999); it is best left to the manager who work alongside the people they manage, as they are in the best position to adopt the most appropriate HR practices and be more immediate and appropriate in their reactions, and have solutions that better tie in with business realities and therefore contribute more to the goals of the organization. (Whittaker & Marchington, 2003; Renwick, 2003b; Poole & Jenkins, 1997); reduced costs; to provide a more comprehensive approach to HRM; speed up decision making; that it has a positive impact on organizations' performance (Renwick, 2003b); line management is critical for employee motivation and nurturing of high commitment (Poole & Jenkins, 1997).

Because of the changes mentioned above and the line managers' position between the strategic head and the operational core they now have much more responsibilities for HR work. These responsibilities include appraisal, training and development, motivation, coaching, improving quality and deploying labor. They often make decisions with HR specialists and work together with them. To share the work between the line and HR is a dominant pattern in Europe. Line managers often have the operational responsibilities while HR specialists make the strategic decisions. Ultimately it is the line manager that has the responsibility to put HR practices and strategy in effect. (Cunningham & Hyman, 1995; MacNeil, 2003; Renwick, 2003b; Whittaker & Marchington, 2003). The line manager is no longer restricted to control and organize work but also achieving "HRM goals of commitment, quality, flexibility and ultimately the profitability of subordinates." (Pole & Jenkins, 1997, p. 334). They also, as noted earlier, have to manage differently. They can not use authoritarian styles, they have to be facilitative. (Cunningham & Hyman, 1995; MacNeil, 2003).

Research has shown a number of problems concerning the devolution of HR to the line. According to Purcell and Hutchinson (1997) there is a gap between what is formally required and what is actually being done. Some of this can be explained by lack of training or interest. Cunningham and Hyman (1999) writes that the statement "people management skills are best picked up through experience" (p. 19) can explain why formal training was thought unnecessary by some. They continue by saying that if little priority is given to training, then perhaps the commitment to HRM issues are not thought to be strategically important in the organization. They found that training

budgets in the four organizations they studied were only 1 % of employment costs. Also some of the responses they had from the organizations indicated a lack of serious commitment to adopted softer HRM policies. MacNeil (2003) writes that there is little evidence of organizations providing formal training for line managers for them to be able to undertake HRM responsibility.
Another problem, associated with lack of commitment from senior management (and line managers themselves), is that line managers feel frustrated at not having enough time to integrative aspects such as appraisal, training and on-to-one contact because of "harder" priorities. (Cunningham & Hyman, 1999). "People management" issues are likely to be taken less seriously, as line managers have many other pressing tasks concerning production or service goals. In one study managers said that they did not feel any institutional pressure to consider HRM issues seriously. (Whittaker & Marchington, 2003). Scarbrough (1999) describes the conflict between harder and softer goals as a tension between the social processes involved in knowledge work and the exchange processes involved in creating economic value. These processes are not ultimately incompatible, as managers everyday finds ways to marry knowledge production with economic goals.
Another problem is the partnership between line managers and HR. This does not always work as well as could be hoped for. According to Cunningham & Hyman (1999) some managers lacked direction and leadership from personnel, and some felt that personnel only gave advice over minor issues. There was also evidence of role conflicts – who is responsible for what? Personnel were also perceived as being remote. Whittaker and Marchington's study (2003) also found that personnel specialists seemed less accessible due to reduction and their more strategic role. They were more visible in the board room, but seemed more distant to line managers. All managers agreed that HR specialists needed to be on hand. It was seen as essential to have someone to talk to. Another problem brought up by Whittaker and Marchington (2003) is that there are so many fads in management initiatives that line managers is starting to take them less seriously because they expected to be gone soon and replaced with something else.[4]

Decentralization of HR practices to the line is not just about problems. There are positive aspects as well. Purcell and Hutchinson's (2007) results suggest that perceptions of leadership behavior and employee satisfaction with HR practices lead to higher levels of commitment and job experience. They tell of their study of the retail group Selfridges, where employees were dissatisfied with performance appraisals that were supposed to be conducted twice a year. These were done with variable frequency, some having never been called. Many felt that they did not get any recognition or was asked for their view. After improvements, a year later, improved employee attitudes, commitment and job influence could be seen. Since no other changes had been made, this could only be explained by how the FLMs managed their staff. This also led to higher sales.
There is also evidence that, despite increased workloads, most line managers felt comfortable in their new role. (Cunningham & Hyman, 1999; Whittaker & Marchington, 2003).

[4] For a discussion of fads, or ”recipies”, in organizations see Kjell Arne Röviks (2000) *Moderna organisationer: trender inom organisationstänkandet vid millenieskiftet*.

E-HR (Electronic Human Resources) is one of the factors that has made it possible for the reduction and change of focus of the HR departments. E-HR has developed through three forms: first it was used to simply publish information, a one-way communication from the company to the employees and managers. Second, it was used for automating transactions where paperwork was replaced with electronic input. Employees and managers can access databases and update or search for information. Tasks that used to take a lot of time can be accomplished by end-users without face-to-face support. The third form is the transformation of HR. In this form e-HR liberates the HR function from operational tasks and lets it focus on strategic questions. The rationale for e-HR is that hours of processing are reduced to minutes and it has the potential of letting employees and managers improve their decision making capabilities. (Lengnick-Hall & Moritz, 2003). Although e-HR can be vital and necessary it does not replace personal help and well-established personal relations. Many managers, as has been noted above, found HR professionals remote and difficult to access. (Whittaker & Marchington, 2003). Future possibilities for e-HR, according to Lengnick-Hall and Morris (2003), include a personalized portal, because different people have different needs when it comes to information. This could combine what the company knows the individual (or role) needs to know, and what the individual knows he/she needs to know. This would gather all relevant information in one place. Another possibility is the growing number of decision-support systems that can provide users with step-by-step information. Some surveys, though, show that it may be hard to get users to actually use e-HR, as usage rates are low. (Lengnick-Hall & Moritz, 2003).

Information systems

What an information systems is, is not easy to define. The interpretations and meanings of terms such as information systems, management information systems and information management vary widely. (Currie & Galliers, 1999) The point, according to Allwood (1998), with using computers is to make it easier to do what we have set out to do, and to raise our productivity. We want to concentrate on our task at hand and not have to waste time on problems with the computer or the system. The productivity depends on the effective functionality – the interaction of the functionality of the program, usability and to what extent the information needs of the user are satisfied. Here it would be well to remember that, according to Olve (2006), IT in itself is not a competitive advantage. Any company can get the same programs, its how you handle the information that matter. The hard part is to develop strategies how to use the information.

Most programs, Allwood (1998) writes, are so complex that the user needs some sort of support to be able to make better use of it. These can be computer-based (which won’t be discussed here) or others, such as people or manuals. Users, at least non-experts, prefer other people rather than manuals. These can be colleagues, people who are in the vicinity, can be expected to know local conditions and will be available to speak face to face. Experts are usually placed elsewhere, in data-processing centers or information centers. This generally means that you have non-direct communication or have to seek him or her out.

To use the available systems effectively you must have training. This training must, according to Allwood (1998), be adapted to the competency and characteristics of the group. Intensive training, cramming, is not effective. If the training is spread out on different occasions it will give better memory retention in the same total time. It is easier to handle the new knowledge if you are not overwhelmed with information. When the user is back at his or her desk and using the program it is important that he or she has access to documentation or someone to ask. It is common that the users' learning stops here and they do not go on and learn to use the program's full repertoire of commands. The user gets by with much less and less powerful commands than he or she could use. Education and follow-up is, according to Allwood (1998), the obvious way to help the user to better make use of the program. Motivation affects the willingness to make an effort in the learning situation, and motivating the users to further education can sometimes be hard, sometimes depending on lack of time. But they will be more motivated if they understand how it will help them. Most of the time they are interested. When programs are in use the effectiveness with which they are used and how large a part is being used are seldom evaluated, and there are seldom analyses made of the need for further education.

The problem of studying information systems

According to Checkland (1999) what makes an ill-defined area of research such as management (where he places the study of management information systems) difficult is that there is no language to discuss it with. In physical chemistry there is no problem understanding what entropy means, but terms such as role, culture and information systems are ambiguous. This is something researchers must be aware of.

System is just such an ambiguous word that is used casually in everyday language. What a system truly is, writes Checkland (1999), is "the name of an abstract concept, that of a complex whole entity of a particular kind." (p. 46). Still, a phrase such as 'management information system' is still very ambiguous, but systems thinking can help clarify its unclear meaning.

There are three varieties of systems thinking. They are natural systems, designed systems and the study of human affairs, including management and information systems. Mapping between systems concept and the real world is not all that difficult within the first two varieties. When, in the seventies and eighties, trying systems thinking in real life (in human affairs, so to speak) it was found that what made situations problematic was to define objects precisely due to their changing nature and ambiguousness. (Checkland, 1999) This lead to the development of Soft Systems Methodology, SSM.

The 'soft' in SSM means that it sometimes can be difficult to find approval for a holistic methodology that searches for the roots of problems instead of treating symptoms or quick, measurable outcomes. SSM is concerned with learning, not only with efficiency (Kreher, 1994). SSM grew out of the questions if Systems Engineering, which worked fine on technically defined problematic situations, could be used on management problems. The answer was no, and work started (by Peter Checkland) on a methodology that moved away from positivism and functionalism ('hard') toward phenomenology and interpretive sociology ('soft'). The difference here lying in looking at the world as static and something 'out there' which can be studied objectively, while the soft approach takes into account different worldviews and sees reality as something that is continually constructed by human beings in talk and action. This shift is essential if we are to make sense of experiences in human situations (Checkland & Poulter, 2006).

System thinking is recognized as being able to help managers and others to better understand complex organizational issues and 'messy' problems. SSM helps these people to develop new perspectives by recognizing and taking into account factors that are often ignored and thus challenging prevailing attitudes and assumptions. It provides people a coherent way to think about context, complexity and ambiguity (Jacobs, 2004). "It enables policy makers and others to regard different perceptions as positive contributions to organizational improvement rather than seeing them as threats." (Jacobs, 2004, p.148). It does this by helping participants to see underlying roles, norms and values in the subjective standpoints of those involved. This helps coming to terms with and understanding what terms like change, vision, quality etc. means. Terms such as these often come from policy and their meaning is fluent rather than fixed. SSM empowers people in an organization by helping them with an "improved understanding and control of change-related issues and problems." (Jacobs, 2004, p. 140).

It would be wrong to see the 'soft' replacing the 'hard' or that it defines two groups. Rather, it describes two sets of ideas that anyone can use. There are situations, usually at a basic operational level, where what needs to be done is quite unproblematic. Above that level, though, what needs to be done is much harder to agree upon. The well-defined problem needing a solution ('hard'), Checkland (1985) writes, is the special case within the general case of issues needing accommodations ('soft').

The crucial nature of information systems is that they do not just concern processing data, but creating meaning. Information is what you get when humans give data meaning. This entails that information systems is much more than data processing systems. "An 'information system', in the full sense, will be a 'meaning attribution system' in which people select certain data and get them processed to make them meaningful in a particular context in order to support people who are engaged in purposeful action." (Checkland, 1999, p. 53). Certain pieces of data are selected as being important and processed in a meaningful way to become information. This information "may itself be incorporated into broader structures of what we may describe as 'knowledge'." (Checkland, 1999, p. 54). From this follows the important insight that information systems are not made for their own sake, but to support people engaged in meaningful action. When you have one system that is thought of as serving the other, in order to think about and conceptualize the supporting system, it is important that you understand the system being served to be able to ascertain what counts as support to it. What is needed in different pursuits will differ, and it is not unusual that a system is bought off the shelf and ends up being something else than what was needed. According to Checkland (1999) soft systems thinking can help provide a way to conceptualize social processes in particular organizational contexts so that a group of people can understand their world and the purposeful action they hope to carry out. That is the basis for making sure what the informational support is that is needed to undertake these actions. "This is to see information systems as systems which attribute meaning to selected data in which someone has an interest … by processing it – usually by means of IT – in a way which makes it meaningful to users of the system." (Checkland, 1999, p. 55)

Method

This chapter presents the methods used to answer the research questions and attain the aim of the study. Further it describes the sources used and how the study was carried out.

Research approach

This thesis uses a qualitative, rather than quantitative, approach. In the quantitative, or positivist, perspective reality is seen as more or less objective, whereas in the qualitative it is seen as subjective. Reality in the qualitative perspective is seen as an individual, social and cultural construction. The positive perspective separates the individual from the world and tries to explain what objective reality looks like and how it works. In the qualitative the question is how the individual interprets and shapes his/her reality. You study people in their real-life context, not in laboratories, and what characterize the qualitative perspective are processes or events rather than products and results (Backman, 1998). What is examined in the two perspectives is fundamentally different. Unlike the atoms and molecules examined by positivist science, people can attach different meanings to the world around them, and this means that the scientist must interpret what these meanings means to the observed people (Lee, 1994). The objects of study are in the positivist tradition not unpredictable, the results are always the same, if the same methods are applied. Social phenomena on the other hand, are unpredictable and subject to changing and multiple interpretations. (Checkland & Poulter, 2006). The two perspectives are not mutually exclusive though, they can be used together (Lee, 1994).
In view of this it is easy to see why a qualitative approach is used to make sense of and trying to improve conditions in an organization. There are no obvious objects to measure when starting out on a study such as this, and an organization is not a laboratory, but a complex, ever changing environment.

The approach used will be a case study. “A case study examines a phenomenon in its natural setting, employing multiple methods of data collection to gather information from one or a few entities (people, groups, or organizations). The boundaries of the phenomenon are not clearly evident at the outset of the research and no experimental control or manipulation is used.” (Benbasat, Goldstein & Mead, 1987, p. 370). The case study is particularly useful in Information Systems research, write Benbasat et al. (1987), since the technology is relatively new and there has been a shift away from technical issues toward issues of organization and management. “Case methodology is clearly useful when a natural setting or a focus on contemporary events is needed.” (Benbasat et al., 1987, p. 372). It is applicable when studying situations that are complex, where one tries to understand and describe big organizations, phenomena or systems. The aim of the case study in this thesis is exploratory, since we are trying to understand and explore how an organization works and how to make it work better (Backman, 1998). In case studies you typically work with multiple methods of data sources such as documents, archival records, interviews and so on. These different sources are used to capture the contextual complexity (Benbasat et al., 1987).
The problem with qualitative studies is that they are not repeatable as no situation is ever as another. The answer to this, according to Checkland and Poulter (2006), is to use recoverability as the criterion. That is to make the activity of the researcher as explicit as possible, so that other researchers (or readers) can follow the process and

understand how the results have been reached. Benbasat et al. (1987) says that this is achieved by making as much as possible of the contextual and data richness available to the reader. Another problem associated with case studies is the trustworthiness of the generalizations made, where the researcher must be very open and show to what extent the case in question resembles or is in contrast to other cases (Denscombe, 2000).

Soft systems methodology

As we have seen above, Systems thinking can be used in situations that are hard to grasp and understand. One way to do this is through SSM. SSM can be used, according to Checkland and Poulter (2006), in human situations whenever “the feeling arises that ‘this could/should be improved’, or ‘something needs to be done about this’, or ‘I feel uneasy about this, it needs looking at’.” (p196).

In this thesis only parts of SSM will be used. There are at least two reasons for this. First of all, the experience and knowledge of SSM of the present author is small, having come in contact with it some weeks into the study. Difficulties can arise from the difference of SSM on paper and in the real world (Kreher, 1994), and you learn it better from partaking in a study than reading about it, although there are many examples of people having learnt it from written accounts (Checkland & Poulter, 2006). A second reason is connected with the fact of it being unknown to the author at the start of the study. It is an interventionist approach, action research, which is where the researcher makes a collaborative analysis of the situation with the subjects of the research and then tries to implement changes and study the effects (Baskerville & Wood-Harper, 1996). This would entail leaving the track we are on (the case study) and start from the beginning in designing the study. This did not seem to be a feasible option. The way forward instead is incorporating parts of the methodology that has been deemed useful in to the current framework. SSM is not cut in stone. It can be adapted to specific situations, and two ways of using it are never the same. Parts of it can be used even if the full methodology is not used.[5] The best way to learn SSM is to use it, however crudely. Its principles are very resilient and can stand up to rough use. However, using SSM prescriptively wastes much of its value as a methodology (Checkland & Poulter, 2006). How this has been done in this study will be discussed below in Procedure.

Data collection

The primary sources consist of interviews with employees at the company. Three preliminary interviews were made (see Appendix A), and later nine interviews were made to elicit problems and possible ways to handle these (see Appendix B). Other sources include internal company documents such as a Role mission for the FLM and an Organizational Handbook.
The secondary sources consist of books and scholarly articles about methodology, change in management and the FLMs role in this, and about information systems.

[5] For a full account of SSM see Peter Checkland and John Poulters’ *Learning for action*.

Procedure

I came in contact with Volvo IT when it was time to start thesis work at the IT University. They wanted to look over the situation for their first line manager, and since I had studied and was interested in how organizations worked I thought that it was a very interesting challenge. We discussed what aspects to focus on, and after the preliminary interviews and to fit into the subject of Informatics we decided that the thesis should look at how the first line managers could get more time to work with their staff by looking at how they used their information systems and how it could be done more efficiently.

At the start of the study three semi-structured interviews were made with FLMs at the company. The semi-structured interview involves having a number of questions and guidelines to follow, but is flexible in the order these are asked and lets the interviewee develop his or her ideas and talk freely about the subjects discussed (Denscombe, 2000). This was done to better understand the FLMs role in the company and to get a grip on the organization. To 'understand the system being served' (see Theory) so to speak. It was also done to try to find a problem area, as the problem at the outset was somewhat vague. This is what Currie and Galliers (1999), in the introduction to the first part of their book, calls first-order questions which is used to elicit factual information about the phenomena being investigated. Second-order questions dedicated to understanding the processes and results from the first-order questions. "In the social sciences, the second-order questions may arise from understanding the answers to first-order or factual questions." (Currie & Galliers, 1999, p. 4).

Then followed a period of reading relevant literature to be able to design the study and better understand what has been written about the subject (see Theory). Later, six interviews were made with seven persons, the second-order questions mentioned above (although some first-order questions were present here as well). In most accounts of SSM use, there is usually a session with a group working together making an activity model and trying to find possibilities of change. This was deemed to be a bit too much for just one inexperienced researcher, and the choice fell on doing interviews one person at the time and then comparing the results. What is lost here is the possibility for the participants to see the others worldview and to learn from each other. This also takes away the possibility to accommodate the different proposals of change. The parts of SSM that was explicitly used was to choose the interviewees (described below) and consisted of a rich picture and the CATWOE mnemonic. According to Monk and Howard (1998) a rich picture is "a cartoon-like representation that identifies all the stakeholders, their concerns, and some of the structure underlying the work context." (p. 22). It helps to organize and reason about the information that is provided (Monk & Howard, 1998). To further enrich the thinking about the situation the mnemonic CATWOE (which stands for Customer, Actors, Transformation process, Worldview, Owner and Environmental constraints) can be used. (Checkland & Poulter, 2006). This approximates SSM's 'finding out about the situation'. (Checkland & Poulter, 2006).

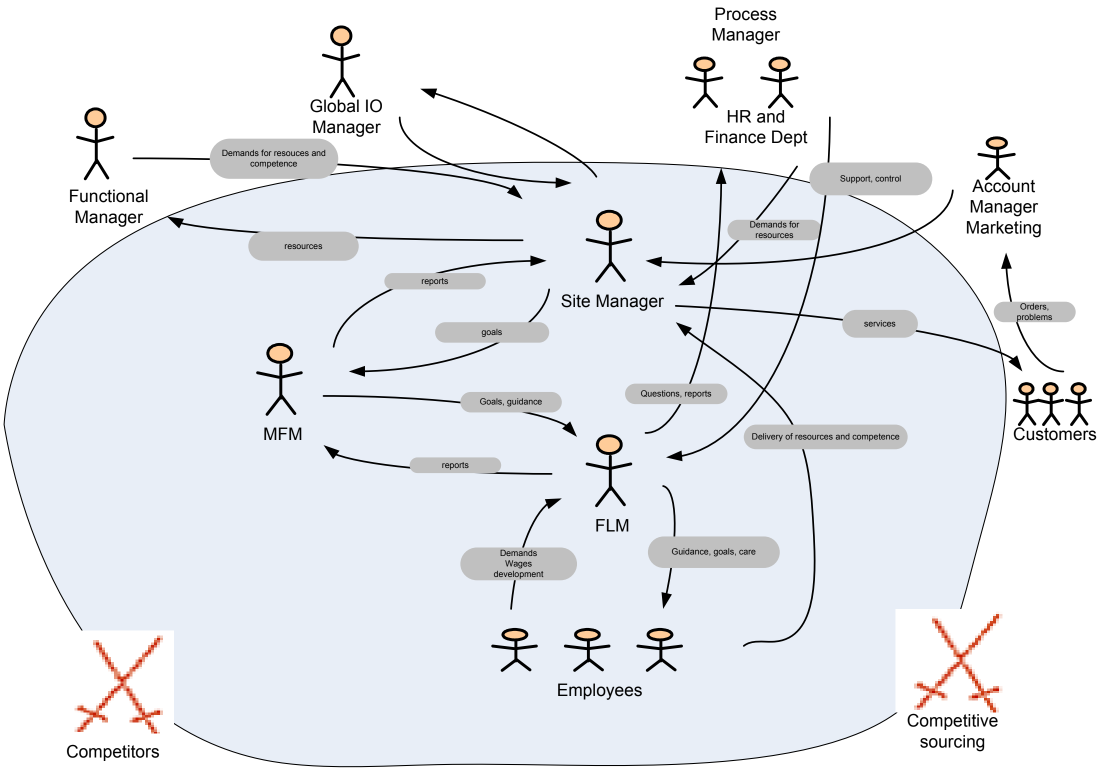

Figure 1 Rich picture of I&O Site Göteborg, with the FLM in the middle.

The interviewees were chosen by the author and the Volvo I&O supervisor, with the help of a rich picture (see Figure 1) and the CATWOE mnemonic (the C, the A, and the O – comprising the people involved). CATWOE and the rich picture helped identify the stakeholders in the part of the organization being studied, and a selection was made of people working at different levels but within the same area. They consisted of the Site Manager, a Manager for Managers, an FLM, two employees, and two process owners, one from HR and one from finance. Some of these also worked, or had worked as an FLM. With these semi-structured interviews was made (see Appendix B). Two interviews could not be realized, one with an FLM and one with a Functional Manager.

The interviews were then transcribed and broken down into units in the result part to look for patterns, themes and categories. (Backman, 1998; Denscombe, 2000; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Approximately 75 pages of transcribed interviews were copied and pasted into themes relating to the questions asked, and then more closely reviewed and reduced to what could be deemed interesting. Then the result chapter was written from this material. This included translating what had been said into English, as the interviews were made in Swedish.

Results

This chapter presents the empirical data that has been collected during the study through interviews. The empirical data is then used in the analysis where it is compared with the frame of reference presented in Theory.

An introduction to Volvo IT and I&O Site Göteborg

Volvo Information Technology AB is a global company that is wholly-owned by AB Volvo. It has offices in Europe, North and South America, Asia, Africa and Australia. The company supports all of AB Volvo with IT solutions and has external customers such as Ford owned Volvo Car Corporation, SCA and Nobel Biocare (http://www.volvo.com/volvoit/global/en-gb/about_us/). Its activities, according to the annual report of 2006, consist of systems development, system operations, technical support and education within the IT-area. The company is responsible for the operation of networks for the corporation's data communication worldwide. (Annual report, Volvo Information Technology AB, 2006) As we can see below Volvo Group follows the multidivisional form mentioned in the introduction and is organized in eight business areas, and to support these there are six business units, where Volvo IT is one.

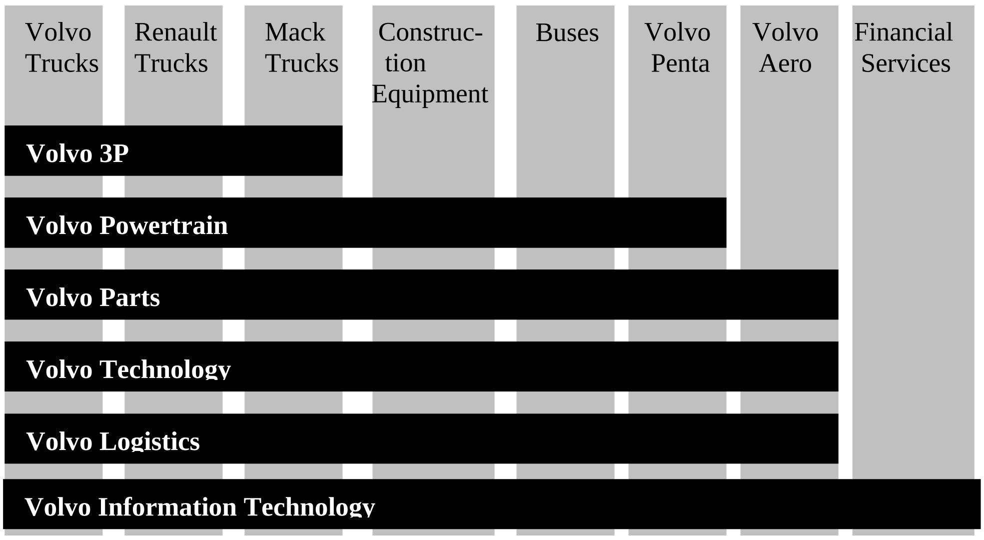

Figure 2 Organization chart, AB Volvo (Source: http://www.volvo.com/group/global/en-gb/volvo+group/our+companies/)

I&O Site Göteborg primary task is the operations of all hardware such as servers and networks, and software that has been developed and managed for the company's customers, as well as their own, internal, systems. There exists some development as well, such as packaging of releases to customers, and some application development that relates to the platforms, Unix and Windows. (Person 1, Person 2).
I&O has a matrix structure where the Functional Management is responsible for process efficiency, product quality, long term planning and setting goals and so on,

while the Site Management is responsible for the day-to-day operations, HR for all employees at the site, and the implementation of the directives and strategies of the Functional Management (Organizational handbook: Global Infrastructure & Operations in Volvo IT). Functional Management has the money and “buys” services from the line (Person 2). In this thesis we will principally look at the I&O Site, and look at Functional Management as a customer of the Site’s resources and competence. Some departments are classed as Service Production (SP) and some as Infrastructure Management (IM). IM works with development and updating of systems, looking at new software and tools, and preparing update packages that SP implements and operates (Person 2). A first line manager (FLM) under SP can still have teams of IM-people working under them (Person 1). “It’s a bit messy actually” (Person 2).

The work of the FLM

The FLM at the company has three primary tasks: functional responsibility, economic responsibility and HR responsibility. It is seen by higher management as an important and demanding role.

The functional part has, in the interviews, been called daily activities, quality, product economy and services. Every group has a function, a task to fulfill – new products, operations or perhaps support. “… a role – to secure that you fill the role and deliver what you are supposed to deliver.” (Person 4) This is controlled to a large extent from the Functional Management who decides what is to be done with the products, while the FLM gets to decide who does what, how it is set up, estimate the time it will take and so on. The products can range in turnover from a couple of hundred thousand kronor in some groups, to many millions in others.

The economic responsibility, by some termed ‘administration’, entails making a budget for your group, making monthly follow ups, forecasting, securing revenue. It also involves routines such as time reporting and keeping an eye on what the employees are working with. This must be reported with the right codes, since customer invoices are based on this. “I think the economy is a pretty small part of what we do totally. It is pretty easy to handle today.” (Person 9)

The HR responsibility is “the big part, and the most important part.” (Person 2) The FLM has a responsibility for about a dozen to thirty employees. “…it is a total ownership of the employees and what they do within the company and what they will do ahead … a giant undertaking in itself…” (Person 9) They have the final responsibility for their staff, since they are their employers. That it is an important part of the FLMs’ job seems natural – “obviously to lead and develop the staff, of course” (Person 10) – is the answer to what an FLMs’ typical tasks are. Included in the HR responsibility is managing and caring for the employees, including supporting and developing them; rehabilitation; hiring new employees and sometimes terminating employments; seeing that the competency needed is where it should be, and that what needs to be done gets done; leading and delegating work.

That this part of the FLMs’ job is the most important is something all interviewees seem to agree on, although a few also mentions functional responsibility and development as equally important. If that part is in place, the other parts will follow. Economy, though important, is something that just should work. “And then, economy and parts like that, why that is a hygiene factor that should work of course.” (Person 4).

There is a connection between HR and delivering results. “When all is said and done it is the employees who do the job. (…) But then… the big business is… economically it is the products where it happens, that’s where the activity is where we use the people.” (Person 9). “… priority one is to handle the employees, that is what I think. It is really difficult of course, as an economist I should say that delivering a good result and so on… deliver what you have committed, but at the same time, they are so closely tied together...” (Person 10). One interviewee sees Volvo as a humane company where the focus is on the individuals – “So I guess I think it is a very humane company, (…) this is a very soft company in that respect, (…) there are very sound ideas and so on. We run a business of course, but it is not as some other companies in the eighties and nineties (…) We are a knowledge company and the focus is really our individuals.” (Person 5).
There is no evidence that HR responsibilities do not get priority. “Not generally, absolutely not, rather the other way around, they prioritize it. There is a very big interest in HR among the FLMs and they think that it is both important and interesting, they see a value in working with their staff.” (Person 6). One interviewee sees the time planned for the employees as “sacred time”.

That does not mean that HR work does not sometimes have to stand aside when something comes up that needs to be solved quickly. “No, unfortunately I think to a certain extent that is the way it is. I think you have a point, because you can’t get away from the economy really, it is to be delivered at certain points, you have to deliver your budget, you have to deliver your results and your prognosis and your commentaries. You are hounded, and the activities are insisting. And you involve yourself in that pretty much, and it easily happens that you don’t put the focus on your staff that you should. But you should devote a lot of time to your staff.” (Person 4). The functional and economic parts are more visible, and thus get priority. “And that is understandable, I don’t say that it is this way, but I mean that both quality and economy is measured and can be measured in a simpler way than you can measure HR activities that are more long-term. So that is why I am saying, if you think in short-term on what you have to deliver, then it is easier to get an OK to deliver something in finance or quality compared to HR, but I still think our FLMs holds HR on the agenda.” (Person 6).
It can be very tough to be an FLM, with pressure coming from all sides. “It can be very tough for many, I think, the FLMs is probably the most exposed position there is where you sort of gets squeezed from all directions.” (Person 10). “… and of course you work pretty much (…) and to drive these parts, of course it is tough.” (Person 5). “There are always a lot of meetings and stuff like that. We don’t only have the line responsibility, but we also have a functional responsibility because our organization is a matrix organization, thus we have functionally responsible and then we have the line. And the line is really responsible for the day to day work, while the function is responsible for products and so on, so there are managers in both lines that pulls and tears, so it can come to prioritizing and such.” (Person 2). This can lead to frustration when you can’t give your group the time you want.
Because of this it is important to make it clear what is expected of an FLM. “But I believe that it is very important to be clear in the role description, what is expected of the FLMs. That they can’t just put something aside. They must manage these (…)” (Person 4). What you give priority to also has to do with who you are as a person and where you come from. “But then again, people are different, if you look at how it works then people have different skills, they have different alignments and

preferences, thus someone may be very good at economy and devotes a lot of time there, and someone might focus more on employees and someone might focus on the actual activities. But it is important to be clear in the role description so that they know that they must manage a number of things. You can't choose – I like these two things but I don't like the third so I won't bother." (Person 4). "But I guess it is usually on a personal level as well, what your main interest as a manager is, it depends on what side you're from, if you're from economy or from products, or where you're from? (…) When it really matters, then it is usually the last part that counts, what my basic priority is that counts." (Person 9).

How then do you keep a balance? Are there any tricks? Somehow you must make it work, otherwise most companies would just fail. "I guess everybody feels insufficient, you can't keep up, there is always more to do. So you see that you deal with it in a good enough way, then maybe most want to do a little bit more than they have time for. (…) It is a continuous struggle there as well." (Person 4). Planning your work seems to be a key. "I think that we as FLMs, me anyway, could be much better at planning (…) …because I have colleagues… a colleague who is extremely structured. He does not have the problem with time at all, because he really plans what he will do. And I believe that is the secret a lot of the time. Perhaps we are a bit too creative to plan. I don't know. But some planning, that's self-preservation. You must have that." (Person 5). If you plan your time, it will be easier to deal with the unexpected. "…if you are well planned in your life, I think you can handle re-planning a little bit easier. If you don't know what will come next week, then you can't handle the day either. (…) I believe how you get it to work everyday… (…) it is to have a base-plan and a base-structure somewhere to be able to handle it. (…) to be mentally prepared that it will be something different than what it is." (Person 9). This can be done in different ways depending on who you are. "But I believe that most find the way they like best." (Person 6). One way to do this is to book time for yourself in Outlook. "That's the drawback with Outlook, that you can book meetings [in others' calendars] and so on. It's very effective and flexible, but it gets to be terribly many meetings. (…) and one trick is to manage your calendar and book some time for yourself in the calendar so that you actually have some time to sit and work for yourself so to speak (…) Even if it (…) it feels almost a little bit wrong to do it, you feel disloyal in some way if you take time in the calendar so that you wont get booked up. (…) I think many does that." (Person 10). Another way is to delegate work. "… a lot of what I do is because she does not have the time to be here. (…) otherwise they wouldn't keep up, it doesn't work." (Person 7). "… I go in and support a little bit, especially so that she can have some more time with the group. Maybe I do a lot of routine work…" (Person 8). You can also try to work somewhere else. "I choose many times to sit somewhere else so as not to be disturbed. All the work you get is a more strategic and demand time to think. If I get interrupted it won't be good either. And short deadlines do not make it easier either. (…) …and then you work on, and then you come back, but then you have a back-log." (Person 1)

Information needs

To do your job as an FLM there is a lot of information that you need, and a lot of places to find it. "… there is no complete system for everything, but there is a number of systems within economy, and a number within HR. When it comes to the functional part it depends on what function you have." (Person 4). When it comes to

economy there is SAP, where you can, if you know how, get a lot of reports. “Yes, there is a lot you can get out from there. All kinds of economy are there, really. That is the main system.” (Person 8). In SAP you handle your budget and keep track of what hours your employees have worked goes where, to become invoices sent to customers.
When it comes to HR activities you can use SAP to keep track of all the facts about your employees and follow up PBP-talks (Personal Business Plan).
The support from the HR department consists of a model with fours tiers. At tier 0 there is a HR-handbook on the intranet, Employee center. If you do not find what you need here you can go on to tier 1, which is the help-desk at the HR service center. You can mail or call and get help for most problems. Some areas are more complex, such as pensions which is at tier 2, also at the HR service center. When it comes to policies, if there for instance should be two conflicting policies, it is handled at tier 3, where the HR policies are created. Then there are other places to get information. Wages are outsourced, and then there are health services and business partners.
Then there are other systems – Outlook, mentioned above, where you can book your own (as well as others’) time; Faros, a system where you can order all that you need to be able to work, such as programs, IT-services. “A lot of things are ordered there. Almost everything.” (Person 8). Another tool is Teamplace. “Teamplace is a solution provided by Volvo IT to facilitate information sharing, document management and collaboration.” (http://www.volvo.com/volvoit/global/en-gb/services/enduserservices/collaboration+workplace/information+worker/teamplace/). And there is, of course, more than is mentioned here.

All information does not come from systems. “Partly they get input from a lot of projects and individuals in their environment. (…) When it comes to the economy they get all their follow up and support from the systems and the persons around them, our economists…” (Person 9). One of the most common ways to information is to ask a colleague. “That is being done a lot, I would say. I guess that it may differ, some may be too proud, but many have informal cooperative partners, FLM to FLM and so on. You ask questions, you help each other. And there are informal networks, and there are informal coaches and mentors and so on.” (Person 4). “I suppose talking to colleagues, which is probably the most common I’d say, to ask an FLM-colleague. Or you call HR too of course, but a lot of the time you get referred to some sort of HR Service Center or intranet. I believe you get better help from your colleagues. (…) Often you have one or more colleagues that have worked longer than yourself and they know how things work. So that is probably the best way to learn. There are risks associated with it naturally, that you don’t get to learn things in exactly the right way and the way it is intended.” (Person 10). “... you get very good help from your colleagues (…) and then you ask stupid questions, and then someone ‘no, but it’s this way’, and everybody thinks in the same way. (…) I like it a lot…” (Person 3).

How much an FLM uses his or her computer systems is a difficult question, one whose answer depend on what function he or she works at, how this person gets his information and so on. “… my opinion is that it varies very much, some managers are really good and work in the systems themselves and run reports, and are there maybe daily or at least weekly and keeps an eye on their results etc., while others never work in the systems and sort of rely on the help of their local controller to run reports.” (Person 10). “I believe that it differs very much depending on what kind of assignment you have … how stable the organization is, how stable the economy is and what it is that happens … So it probably differs a lot.” (Person 9).

How well collected, then, is the information? With all the systems and all the sources of information it would seem that it is spread all over the place. The systems are developed for different purposes and at different times. “I can think that it [talking about the HR systems] is a little bit straggling… But I believe that it has stuck pretty good, so I think that they have a pretty good idea where to find the different parts in different places… I guess it takes a little while but they’ll probably learn and it is not immense in any way.” (Person 6). “I believe that it is tolerably well collected… My view, I guess, is that we do not suffer any lack of information, you actually have it the other way around, you have an abundance of information… And then it might not always be so bloody easy… we may not have the most effective structure, so that sometimes you use a lot of time to find things…” (Person 4). “… if you look at our economy system, we put a lot of information in it regarding the economy of course, but there are also a part about how we use our staff. (…) how much do they work, are they on the sick-list or not, those are parameters we put in an economic system. Then we have an HR system where we to some extent do the same thing, where we can put in such parameters and take out… and they are not synchronized (…) we follow up in Excel, so that it finally becomes a third variant.” (Person 9). “With the Teamplaces it is a bit difficult… you can’t find it easily, because you need the link to be able to find it. You can’t search… There is a portal, but it is still…” (Person 7). But again, how much you can find, and how easily, depend on where you come from. “…but I have a vast background when it comes to work with the functional line. For me that’s not a problem. I understand why we have three different systems when it comes to economic follow-up.” (Person 5).

A tool like Teamplace is developed by Volvo IT, but many are systems bought of the shelf and then adapted, to Swedish conditions and to Volvo’s needs, and sometimes to fit the needs of the FLMs. SAP is one example. “Volvo has tried to adapt R/3 [SAP] (…) but I can feel that is very expensive to work with R/3. (…) At the same time we have gotten a common system and they have tried to adapt it very much…” (Person 5). “Yes I believe that we have succeeded in developing report templates and such things.“ (Person 9). “Yes, if I again talk of our economy system and economic reports, then we have developed report-packages or whatever you want to call them, which are adapted to the FLMs and contain the information that they as FLMs in some way could ask for or should ask for.” (Person 10).

Improvement

The systems seem to be more or less accepted. Some are mandatory and can’t be ignored. But they can still be experienced as difficult. “On the other hand, our systems are rigid, that is, our IT support. It can be a source of irritation on the other hand, that you can’t get out real reports and you don’t know how to do. We get a lot of support from our controllers there, but they [the systems] are pretty rigid actually. (…) I’ve even asked for help, because I don’t know how to get past it. And that is pretty basic follow-up really…” (Person 1). “If a tool is easy to use and has valuable information, then of course you will use it a lot, if it is a complicated tool then perhaps you don’t use it the right way. (…) You really must take some time, learn the tools, because it can give you very good support and lead to your working more effectively.” (Person

4). And you must know, and understand, what you are doing. “But I know that many grumble over it [SAP], but I think it is pretty… pretty good actually. I believe that you in order to understand numbers you need to work with them, I don’t see that as a problem, it’s just a question of knowledge actually if I may say so, it’s pretty easy.” (Person 5). “…but then I can think that it is not especially hard to take out a report for your own area of responsibility if you are an FLM, so all FLMs should be able to do it themselves. And I think that is a really important part of being a manager, that you have an economic responsibility, and if you have an economic responsibility I think you should take that responsibility and keep an eye on your economy for yourself. And I think that the FLM should run their reports themselves, and not trust a controller to do it. I can imagine that it differs pretty much depending on who you are talking to. (…) So it is not that there is not a good support, but it is probably more about… in the first place information, to know that this [the features] is available … and then perhaps to a certain extent it is about a will to… but I’d say that the prerequisites are definitely there.” (Person 10).

To find what you need seems to work, but is not always easy. Once you’ve learned something it is easier. “I must say that I think I have a good relationship with the HR department. It was a bit messy at first before I understood how to use them and before we had established contact, but that is the way it always is.” (Person 5). But it can be hard to know what to do with it. “No, not on a general level. (…) information is probably not a problem, it is the way we manage information that is a problem, I think. The information that I take out and save somewhere for further distribution, I guess that is where we start losing our way. There is very, very much information, but it is spread out on a number of different places…” (Person 9). There seem to be a general satisfaction with answers you get from the system. What is hard to get is an overview. “Yes, I guess it’s this overall picture you can’t get. I can get some parts from an HR system, some parts from a competence inventory system, some part from an economy system and within the economy system, if we say the economy system is one, then there are parts that give me answers for different things.” (Person 9). Recurring questions are usually of the kind that there is no simple answer. “Sure there are recurring questions, but those are questions that I consider don’t have an easy answer, the kind of questions you have to discuss.” (Person 6).

The information generally comes in a shape that works, although it also depends one who is the receiver. You have to take some time to learn, but not too much time. “That is probably up to each and sundry to ponder that, it is probably… if you buy a TV, do you read the manual, or do you turn it on first? It is exactly the same thing here. That is governed more by the individual than by the quality of what you get, I think. No, I would like to say that the quality is pretty good on what we get.” (Person 9). “I think that it varies a lot – some systems are really easy to use, while it feels like others are totally illogical. (…) it’s so damned hard, you… we are so differ… it depends on the person too.” (Person 10). “I think so. Of course that varies too. There comes… when you introduce a new tool for example there comes some sort of tutorial, and most are pretty well made today with pictures and all that – you click here, and so on. But you have to devote some time to learn.” (Person 4). “I’m not, as a person, very keen on sitting down with a tutorial. …if I have learned the system then I remember (…) But to sit with tutorials, there’s not a chance. (…) It is about priorities. If I’m to learn all systems, then I don’t think I’m doing the right job.” (Person 1). “It can be a jungle of course, if you’re looking for something specific, then it is not always easy. There is so damned much information. (…) Yes, it takes a lot of time. And it's hard to, some things are really easy to find, but some things I think are difficult to find and that takes a lot of time … of course you can call HR, but that's, it doesn't really feel like you, I don't know how to explain… it feels like you're not awfully welcome to call them and ask. You are very much referred to finding information yourself, and then that takes a lot of time." (Person 10). "But that is an adjustment all the time, that it can't be… the information I send out can't be so short that it raises more questions than there was before. (…) and Employee Center has that adjustment as well – how much information should we put up so that people are up to reading it versus what is the least you can put up for it to have any value." (Person 6).

There seems to be a general consensus that the systems are not used to their full extent. "I absolutely don't think that's done. I absolutely think that we can improve ourselves, and I also think we can improve our competence in certain tools…" (Person 5). "I don't think so. And that is probably a lack of knowledge and … what can I say… lack of interest. (…) I think there is a lot more information there to extract, than what actually get out today." (Person 9). "I think so, and it's about education of course. (…) Then I believe… given time, then it will probably be that way, because the more that starts using them and the simpler tools we get, more will see the profit in doing it for themselves instead of trusting someone else." (Person 10). But learning the tools takes time, something that is scarce for an FLM. And many times you have a balance, you get what you need to do done, but maybe not in the most effective way. "So if I'm to learn the economic system, I won't do that until someone tells me to. I do it so that I can follow up monthly … see how it is progressing, and if something is strange, then I'll ask business-support for reports. (…) I've found a balance there. (…) Now I know how to traverse the jungle, and it's with the help of others. (…) I think that if you as a manager are to learn all these systems, it takes too much time. We must have supporting functions because it would be too ineffective if we were to learn everything. I have a hard time seeing that work." (Person 1). "… many are under pressure and lack time, and naturally taking two days and you know, take a course in something that feels half important and still works with the help of someone else. I can imagine that many feel that they don't have that time to prioritize. That's maybe why it should be mandatory if you really want to…" (Person 10).
But still, it can be worth it. "… the tools have more functionality in them that you really don't use. (…) You actually must devote some time to it, learn the tools, because it can give you really good support, it can lead to you working more effectively. (…) And you can see that, I believe some don't have very good knowledge, and some have devoted a lot of time into learning the tool and they can extract special reports and they can get into it and so on. They benefit from it a lot, they can do analyses in a completely different way. (…) But then you're back to the time issue, you do what you have to do, but the refinement it actually could have given … the effectiveness to be, perhaps you don't always set aside. (…) Most probably try, they realize that you need… if you are to do a good piece of work then it's better to do an investment, two days, can make my work more effective later." (Person 4).
To alleviate this problem, education seems to be the way to go. There is no doubt that there is a smorgasbord of courses to choose from, but it still does not seem to be quite adequate."… all new managers receive training so that they are familiar with what they are to do." (Person 4). "The training we receive is a sort of crib where to look for

information, and where to find it and what kinds of information there is. It is not like we get trained it that and that and that. (…) So there is a lot of general information that you get. Something I don't think we get enough of as new managers is economy training on budget, economic follow-up, how to think etc. Even if we have support, it's not the same thing. Because I'm still the one responsible. (…) Yes, we use SAP, and that's a dark jungle seeing how we have not had enough information, but it seems like it is working, and we get the information we need, but it had been fun to know some more. (…) you have to prioritize, but the economy is so important that you should know more SAP." (Person 2). "I think that there is a lot of information lacking about, when you are new as a manager for example, as far as I know there is no really good package that you can sort of get and say that this is what you as a manager is, in some way what your responsibilities are, towards the staff for example. I know that there is a checklist when you're about to hire people, then there is a checklist on the intranet what to think about. But as far as I know there is none when you come in as a new manager where it says what is part of your responsibilities, and what your powers are. (…) Yes, I would somehow want a checklist. (…) I have not had it [training in the systems]… but if you want it, then you have to ask for it. (…) I can't say that you don't get any training, because that varies naturally, but the systems I use as a manager so to speak, such as HR systems and so on, when you sort of are registering wages and do that type of thing, I have never received any training in that, that was more like 'now you have the application, here's your password, ask if there's anything you need to know'." (Person 10).

Higher management wants the FLMs to educate themselves. But what then should the training look like to be successful? There should be basic training so that you get a base to stand on and know what possibilities there are. This should be followed later by more in-depth, continuous training. And it should probably be mandatory. "At least a reasonable basic level where you can raise interest and show that this is available and then point to that if you want more… But I think you definitely should have that. And I'm surprised that it's not already available. As I've said before, you have an economic responsibility as a manager, and obviously you must have the prerequisites… (…) I can imagine that many feel that they don't have the time to prioritize. That's why maybe it should be mandatory if you really want to… (…) …it has really been some sort of step 2 training for managers. It has not mainly been intended for new managers, but has been intended for those that have worked as manager for a while, and that probably know some of this, but… Yes, that is why I think that you should have a general manager training at first, so that maybe you can take just a small part of it, and still review that you have an economic responsibility and that these tools are available to manage that responsibility, but if you want more in-depth information there's this course. (…)And when you are at a course like that, then there are many who says 'all right, we can do this? That's good!'" (Person 10). "Yes, I think it is a matter of finding this base platform to stand on, to cover some part of the basic need. Then I think you in someway should describe or show that there is much more to get and how to do it. (…) It's so to speak about finding the base part. I don't think you should make it too big. And then adapt it individually. (…) Yes, I definitely think it should be [mandatory]. There are certain base parts in our business that is a requirement, and then you must be able to say that this is mandatory. I definitely think we should be able to do that. At the same time, you must be able to say that you can depart from that, there's no rule without an exception. You must be open for that as well. (…) It's about having the whole palette in between to be able to adapt to me as an individual. I might think that interactive training is really great, while some others might think that it's the worst ever. And it's about understanding that it doesn't work to just have interactive training. There are people who don't understand it that way." (Person 9). "…and the best you can do is really just… if we're talking about economy – follow-up for Dummies. (…) I think the economy department sometimes has done this actually, but it's worth doing again, because it is fortunate when you do it. And I believe that would be the model. Even for me. Actually. (…) Yes, absolutely [mandatory]! (…) I can't say what everybody else needs, but I need training, even if I'm pretty good at… I can enter systems and find exactly… but I still need training in…" (Person 5).

How could things be done differently? That is not an easy question to answer, but it did put the finger on some of the problems. "Really, I think basically they have tried to consider this and tried to make it simple so to speak. But it's just that it is so damn much information! So it is probably the amount that does it, I basically don't think it is… the structure in itself is probably not completely wrong, but it is very hard because it gets to be so damn much information. (…) The systems in themselves, again, probably works pretty good, but it's… still, perhaps there is a problem with structure, that it isn't structured well enough… (…) I don't know, well I think the search engine on the intranet is pretty useless. You should improve the search engine so that it is simpler and that you get better hits so to speak when you search, on keywords and so on. That's a concrete proposal for improvement." (Person 10). "…we have talked about it in finance that instead of finding the information it could be presented, get a simple compilation at the end of each month – this is your economy this month, instead of digging it up yourself. It is possible to lay out the information perhaps more effectively than what we are doing today, within different areas. I think so." (Person 4).

To have a portal to collect all the systems and information for the FLM seems to be a good idea, but not without problems. "Yes, absolutely!" (Person 4). "And then it would be nice if it was almost like a Teamplace, a place where the manager could enter … what you need to do." (Person 8). "Yes, but at the same time you make a portal, then you have generalized it, and that's sort of what the danger of making portals is. What value does it add really? (…) Most of the time I know quite well what I'm after, and then you have to make it, what should we call it, findable in some way. Do you make it simpler with a portal, or do you hide it a step further? (…) Most of the time I know if I'm working on an HR related matter, then I know it is HR I should go to, if it's economy then I know it's economy I should go to. Otherwise I must, if we were to make an FLM portal, think hmmm, is this an FLM-related matter, then I have to go there first, and then I have to categorize my way from there to that in the FLM matter I'm dealing with now there's some economy, and then you have to muddle on that way. I don't think that is entirely positive. (…) I don't think it matters if I'm a product owner, if I'm an FLM, manager for manager, if I'm a functional manager – if I have something to do with economy then I should look at the economy part, you shouldn't go to an FLM- or product owner catalogue or… (…) There is very, very much information, but it is spread out on a number of different places, and I don't think we should start there, so to speak build hierarchies, information structures on the FLM role, which furthermore is a very generic role." (Person 9).

And what should the support to the FLM look like? "And then I'm not so sure that the most effective way is for managers to do everything by themselves either, but maybe it would be better to have some support functions, things that you don't do very often as a manager, that is to say take out economy reports should be done once a week perhaps, or once a month, you should be able to learn to do that for yourself, but if it is activities that you do once a year, or once every six months, then the question is if it's not more effective to have another support function that does it for all managers instead. (…) I can think that it has gone a bit too far so to speak … put out too much self-service on the managers. I'm not so sure that it saves money." (Person 10).

Analysis and discussion

This chapter compares the frame of reference with the empirical data and discusses its implications.

It’s easy to recognize the FLM at the company when compared to what has been written in earlier research. Although their tasks can be quite different, they have the same basic responsibilities. These may be described somewhat differently than how Sims (2002, see Theory) depicts them, but there is really no big difference.
Though the phrase that the employee is the most important asset many times may sound hollow, it seems to a large extent be true at Volvo IT. Most, if not all, interviewees said that the HR responsibility was the most important task for the FLM, and there is no evidence that this isn’t taken seriously at all levels. It seems to be natural that this is the case. This differs a bit from what has been reported elsewhere. This may have to do with that most of the findings presented in this study come from Great Britain. It would probably not be too much to say, without going into details here, that there is a marked difference between organizational culture in Sweden (and perhaps Scandinavia) and Great Britain. There are probably a lot of similarities between large companies in the western hemisphere, but it may be that organizational culture in Sweden is ‘softer’ and cares more for the individual. But that is for other research to show.
Although the fact that the FLM has the final responsibility for the staff is unproblematic, there is frustration at not being able to devote the time you want to your group, and sometimes HR responsibilities can get stuck in between other more pressing matters. This does not seem to be because of lack of interest, or that HR matters are not prioritized. Rather, HR matters are many times prioritized, but sometimes the functional or economic activities demand instant attention, and then it’s easy to let other matters take the back seat. This can, according to some of the interviewees, be somewhat alleviated by careful planning, thus making it possible to manage the HR parts despite other concerns.
The managers in the study seem to have found a balance between the different parts they are responsible for, and know how to cope and how to use the help available from the finance- and HR departments. They are to a large extent satisfied with their role. Still there can be a certain irritation that the FLM gets more and more tasks landing on their table, things they feel shouldn’t be their responsibility, such as refine the goals from the functional side or some of the less frequent tasks they have to handle that were previously handled by experts. There sometimes seem to be a bit of confusion when it comes to who is responsible for what, and also what the balance should look like between support and self-service. Or perhaps not confusion, but a feeling that this isn’t up their alley. As we have seen in earlier research this is nothing new, and in this case most, although not all, seem to have found ways to work with the supporting functions.

As we have seen, the FLM have many sources of information, not just computer systems. They get it from different projects, meetings, colleagues, HR service center or financial support. How much they use their systems varies. But however you get your information, you want it readily available. You don’t want to have to look around for a long time. Computers and systems should just work, and information

should be easy to find. As we have seen, I&O have very much information and many systems, and it is not always easy to find what you need. This is of course also something that you gradually learn, where and how you can find and use the information you need. How to manage and structure all this information is one of the keys to how to make work easier for the FLMs.
How well you adapt and learn depends on what your background is and where you have come from. It has been clear that some interviewees have no trouble at all using SAP and extracting different kinds of reports. And while the economic part of the FLMs' responsibilities may be simple and HR being the most important part, much of the problems discussed have been the difficulty in using SAP and getting the economic information you want from it. Some feel that this is something you need to do yourself, so that you understand where the figures you have come from and what they mean. SAP has been modified to better fit the needs of Volvo and at the same time there are initiatives to simplify this process and give the managers the information they need served at the end of the month. What you prefer here is probably individual. Managers not so strong on economy might think this is really good, while others may see this as superfluous. Still, a basic knowledge of what you are doing is a prerequisite for it to have any value. This can probably be done in numerous areas, not just economy, but it's the same here – you have to understand what it is you are doing.

Users need some sort of support to use their applications better. As we have seen, they usually prefer another person rather than manuals. This seems to be well provided for at I&O, with both informal networks of managers and experts to call. Colleagues seem to be closer at hand, both physically and mentally. This obviously works, the job gets done and the FLMs have found a balance. But most interviewees agreed that it could be done more efficient, the tools could be used better. The systems (particularly SAP) are to a certain extent seen as rigid and hard to use for simple matters. Education and follow-up is, as we have seen, the obvious answer. As one interviewee said, the ones who have learned can do much more than those who have not.
There is at Volvo IT satisfactory opportunities to do this, even if the interviewees had somewhat different opinions about how this works for new managers. A basic course should, according both to earlier research and the interviewees, not have too much information, but should arouse interest and show what possibilities there are. The important thing is to follow up this training. According to research follow-up is seldom done, but according to the interviewees there are many opportunities to do this. The problem is to take, or have, the time to do it. This is why perhaps it should be mandatory. According to some you have to take the time, it will reward itself. Others are not so sure. And the user must be motivated. According to Allwood (1998, see Theory) this might come if the persons concerned finds out how it may help them. Users are as a rule interested. The problem here is do you have the time to stop and think about it if you're not motivated or interested? But if finding the information and using the tools eats a lot of time, maybe using two days to learn to do it faster makes sense.
Follow-up is, as we have seen, the best way to learn the tools better. This helps you remember better if the training is spread out. Some interviewees implied that this needed to be more hands-on than what is currently the case. Not just an overview, but practical information on how to solve specific problems. And as we have seen, it is important to have some sort of support once you are back at your desk. Perhaps this

can be done with the help of the informal networks, FLM to FLM, which exists. Formalize their actions somewhat.

As we have seen above two of the problems here are that there is very much information, and the systems are not used as well as they could be. There is a third problem connected with these, there are very many systems. In the results we could see that most of these are accepted and work well enough. That is not where the problem lies. The problem is that perhaps there are too many. It is in this light we should see the dichotomy between statements about that you have to take the time to learn the tools and the sentiment that you are not doing your job if you learn all the tools. It would seem to be a good idea to make available good efficient tools, but maybe there is a limit, a place were there's just too many and they become counterproductive. Then a new tool will not be seen as a possibility, but rather as a nuisance. But of course, many times there is a reason for them being there. They have a separate duty, something that is needed to complement other tools. But are all these tools necessary, you may ask? Can the same tasks be done in other, already available systems? Perhaps all these systems just make it harder to control and manage the information instead. So to help the FLM, maybe you should review the tools and see if they actually are needed and are of any help.

Generalizing is quite difficult when it comes to case studies, since the material collected is unique for the examined situation and does not automatically transfer to other similar cases. In this case we have only looked at one company. We can assume that Volvo IT has in some respects an easier way to walk than many other companies apart perhaps from organizations in the IT area, seeing how most, if not all, of their managers are quite used to using computers and the different tools they provide. We can also assume that the problem with not using the applications to their full extent is a very common one. Also, the large amount of information and how to handle it, and that a company gets more and more tools to work with, is probably quite common as well. At a general level these are probably common problems facing most large organizations today. As long as we do not make too much of it we can say that these problems, and how humans react to them, can be found in many organizations.

As all research, this study has also raised new questions. It has become apparent that one of the big questions is how to handle and structure all the information available for easy access. This was at first seen as one of the answer to the question 'What are the problems?' and not understood as a question that needed an answer. Unfortunately the importance of this question was understood quite late in the proceedings, which made it hard to answer without making further iterations and risking getting caught in the research spiral. One question that would be interesting to look further into is if, where and when do the tools used in an organization become too many, where is the point when they are no longer a help but a burden? Another question is of course how the training, both basic and follow-up, should look like in a case such as this. No doubt there is a wealth of research to tap into to understand these questions better.

Conclusion

This chapter presents the answers to the research questions.

What does the FLM role look like today?
The FLM role at Volvo IT I&O Site Göteborg is quite demanding. They have many factors to take into consideration when doing their work – goals and guidelines from the line, functional management, HR- and finance departments. Generally this seems to work quite well, and they are comfortable in their role and accept their HR responsibilities as their most important. Naturally there is still frustration at not having enough time to spend with their employees and HR matters can still get caught in between, though prioritized. There is also a certain feeling that more and more things are devolved to the FLM, maybe too much. What the balance between self-service and support should be is not obvious.

How does the existing information system support the FLM role?
How much an FLM uses computers and information systems varies, but as we have seen it is not really the systems in themselves that are the problem. One of the problems rather is that there are too many systems. Some are seen as easy to work with, others as quite rigid. How they are seen also depends on the background of the FLM. Another problem is that they are not used as efficiently as they could. Still another problem that has become apparent is the large amount of information available and generated.

How can information systems support the FLM in their working role?
To support the FLM role information systems needs to be used more efficiently, they are many times used to only a small degree of their capacity. This can be remedied by training and continuous follow-ups. This should probably be mandatory and adapted to the individuals' needs and background. At the same time there can not be too many systems or tools. Somewhere along the line efficiency will probably wane as users have too many to choose from. Which ones are necessary? Are there tools that can be discarded? Can a specific task be done in an already available system? The systems can also help managing and handling the large amount of information. How do you find your way around it all? Here compilations of recurring information needed by the FLM being served at regular intervals are one possibility. This requires that the FLM have an understanding of his or her responsibilities. How you structure and manage the information is also very important to make it accessible. As seen above, how to do this regrettably falls outside this study.

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Appendix A

Preliminary interviews

- What are your name and your main task?
- Tell me about I&O, its place and task in the organization, in a simple concrete way.
- Describe the FLMs role in I&O.
- Describe your work.
- What is working and what is not working, and why?
- Is there enough time for all parts of your job, or are there things that have to suffer? Are you torn between responsibilities?
- How does the support to the FLM work?

Appendix B

Final interviews

Background

- Name and age
- Position
- How long have you worked (in this postition)
- Background/education

What is the role of the FLM?

- What are the typical tasks for an FLM?
- Which one do you consider most important? Is there a task that you feel is more important than the others?
    - Do the tasks have different priorities?
- Does the FLM have the time/opportunity to perform these tasks?
    - Is there a conflict of priorities? How do you balance to be able to have time with what is less prioritized? Are there any tricks to get the daily rounds to work?

What information does the FLM need and how does he get a hold of it?

- What do you need to know to deal with the tasks mentioned above and where do you find that information? What kind of information is it?
- In what way is the information available?
    - Do you get verbal information from for example your colleagues, other sources? How does that work?
    - How often do you enter a computer system to get information?
        - How well collected is the information?
    - The systems, are they systems many different people use, or are they adapted to the FLM?

How can you structure and present this information in a better way?

- Does it work to get the information from the systems? Are they accepted?
- Do you think the FLM gets the answers needed from the systems?
- Are you happy with the answers? Are there questions you don’t get an answer to?
- Does the information from the systems come in a shape so that it is useful, convenient, and easy to work with?
    - Do you have time to read manuals/templates (that is available in e-HR)?
- Is it the case that the systems aren’t used as well as they could be?
    - How do you go about getting the systems used to a larger extent and to their full potential?

- Could you do it another way so that it would be easier and more convenient to access the information?