



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG  
SCHOOL OF BUSINESS, ECONOMICS AND LAW  
Graduate School

**CEO: ‘We Would Never Make it With Full-Timers. I Don’t Think so’**

– A narrative study about the underpinning logic of a story behind nonstandard employment in the Swedish clothing retail industry

**School of Business, Economics and Law**

**University of Gothenburg**

**Spring 2012**

**Facilitator: Fredrik Lavén**

**Martina Blomquist 880130-2046**

**Gustav Bobeck 860703-4819**

“Stare. It's the way to educate your eyes. Pry, Listen, Eavesdrop. Die knowing something.

You are not here long.”

- Walker Evans - American photographer and photojournalist

In memory of Rolf Blomquist – the granddad – who did not stay in this world long enough to listen to this story. For the stories *he* told, however, I am forever grateful.

### **Abstract**

**Title:** CEO: ‘We would never make it with full-timers. I don’t think so.’ – A narrative study about the underpinning logic of a story behind part-time employment in the Swedish clothing retail industry

**Course:** FEA 418, Master Thesis, 15 hp, Management, Spring 2012

**Authors:** Martina Blomquist and Gustav Bobeck

**Facilitator:** Fredrik Lavén

**Examiner:** Ulla Eriksson-Zetterquist

**Keywords:** Employment, Narrative method, storytelling, clothing retail, the Union

This thesis, using a narrative approach, unfolds a story and hence questions its underpinning logic of nonstandard employment as expressed by representatives from the Swedish retail industry. As our mapping of the story indicates, the intertwined micro- and macro-stories told by the interlocutors seem to function as to legitimise a logic that favours nonstandard contracts for the employees resulting in precarious circumstances for the same. Building upon Czarniawska’s narrative methodology (2004), we explicate this story using an antenarrative causality analysis. Further, we use an objectivist explanation and reach out to the Lacanian notion of fantasy as a means to explore our findings. Hence, the fundamental argument of this thesis is that there is a shared fantasy possessed by the employers that functions as a justification for them to act according to this nonstandard employment logic. Also, through its method, this thesis argues that this story has not ended yet.

## Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1.1. A Comment Upon Nonstandard Employment in Media and Academia.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1.2. Purpose .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>1.3. Disposition .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>2. Method .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>2.1 Research Technique .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>2.2 Narrative Mapping Technique .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>2.3 Tools for Further Explanation and Exploration .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>3. Mapping the Story .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>3.1. It All Starts with the Money .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>3.2. The Internet, E-retail and Weekend Shopping as Drivers of Change.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>3.3. Adapting Employment Forms as a Means to Cope with Change .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>3.4. Conflicting Perspectives on Nonstandard Employment .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>3.5. Summary – Mapping the Story .....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>4. Discussion .....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>5. Conclusion .....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>6. References.....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>7. Appendix.....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>1. Opening of Interviews .....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>2. List of Interviews .....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>3. Inventory of Transcription Symbols.....</b>	<b>38</b>

## 1. Introduction

If someone had asked us ‘what is going on in the retail industry?’ a couple of months ago, we could not have imagined that the humble little conversation below could sum up the management opinions on the subject so well:

*[Loud-voiced conversation overheard at Retail 2 on a Tuesday afternoon in April 2012. Female employees shout at each other. A sales reduction rack serves as a physical barrier between them.]*

*Girl A to girl B: Would you mind counting the till?*

*Girl B to girl A: No, I need to continue with the sales reductions.*

*[Girl B returns to her rack a few metres away and continues to tag items with red ‘50%’ labels.*

*Girl C stops where girl A is at.]*

*Girl C to girl A: Who’ll count the till?*

*Girl A to girl C: Girl B must continue with the price reductions. Where’s Girl D?*

*Girl C to girl A: Girl D only works part-time, y’know. She went home at half past 12.*

*[Girl C walks away.]*

Arguably, the story about the girls’ shouting at each other in the store this particular Tuesday afternoon serves as an illustrative example of a ‘reality’ of clothing retail industry workers and their everyday conditions. As the girls express in the conversation above, they seem to be so understaffed and preoccupied by putting price reduction tags on clothes that they cannot handle the flow of cash properly – an essential task in any retail store. The price reduction tags are of interest since they are part of a ‘mid-season sale’ where they sell clothes from the current season to a lower price in order to reduce stock-in-trade – an indication that sales are not as good as they should be. Their store is understaffed but the company does not lack people. Why has girl D left the store early? A guess is that she is not part of the lucky few with a full-time contract – a rare employment form in this retail chain and in the retail business as a whole. During the work with this thesis, a story about precarious employment has carefully unfolded as bits and pieces from fragmental talks with our interlocutors has come to light.

The theme of transition in organisations was the fundamental point of departure of this thesis. Change, in general, we consider to be of interest due to its tendency of being recent and fresh-today. Further, we focus upon organisational transition as it is of particular interest due to

our background of being management students eager to explore what is new as well as unfamiliar.

When initially talking to a representative from the Retail Employer Union in order to gain an overview of the field, the representative depicted a tale about some kind of transition taking place approximately five years ago where the retail industry was suddenly facing hard times, changes and bankruptcy. Among other industries, he mentioned the *clothing* retail industry in particular as an illustrative example. In our search for stories about transition and its effects upon organisations, the comment uttered by the Retail Employer Union representative about unsteadiness in the clothing retail industry made us consider the clothing retail industry as a justified arena for our thesis work. Hence, we visited clothing retail stores, talked to store managers, sales managers, region managers, marketing managers, the Union and a clothing retail CEO. The stories they told us were about changes in the business and how these changed conditions force the employers to act against customers and employees. As it seems, the question of employment and nonstandard (e.g. part-time, by-the-hours) contracts serves as a major part of the stories told. We were introduced to a causality chain starting in money, which seems to force employers into executing actions that inevitably resulted in employees being put in precarious situations. By moving from profitability to e-retail to weekend shopping to timetabling difficulties, the employers seem to legitimise their logic behind nonstandard employment.

Arguably, the fantasy of monetary success shared by the employers we talked to serves as a somewhat unreachable aim hindered by the Union and the employees. As we will show later on, however, the notion of fantasy might also serve as a tool for understanding the same.

### **1.1. A Comment Upon Nonstandard Employment in Media and Academia**

The debate concerning nonstandard employment has been explicitly treated in Swedish media and press lately. During 2012 and late 2011, numerous articles regarding the drawbacks of involuntary nonstandard work have been published (Ayres, 2011; Berthelson, 2012; Nandorf, 2011; TT, 2012 etc), indicating public dissatisfaction with the current structure of full-time and part-time employment forms. It thus becomes evident that this line of thought is not new in any way, but has rather been debated for some time now. However, what we find interesting, and thus makes a call for this kind of thesis legitimate, is the need to illuminate and question the

underpinning stories, logics and arguments *behind* the evolvement of this employment form debate.

In terms of recent academic contributions to the topic, a fair share can be found commenting upon employment flexibility. The field is complex and a number of voices are raised, giving their views upon the consequences of different forms of employment and flexibility. A few exemplifying pieces are here shortly mentioned in order to more conveniently argue for this thesis' contribution to the field. Due to organisational and environmental changes in the last decades, employment has increasingly turned towards more nonstandard employment forms in order to meet pressure of e.g. profitability and efficiency put on organisations (Atkinson, 1985; Atkinson and Gregory, 1986; Kalleberg, 2000; Kalleberg, 2001 etc). Thus, many articles have been published suggesting systems and models enabling an organisation to optimise, be profitable and be cost efficient (e.g. Abernathy et al, 1973; Goodale and Thompson, 2004). Kashefi (2007), on the other hand, held a more supply-oriented perspective through addressing workers and the problem of inequalities in 'job rewards' (e.g. security, income and promotion) between standard (full-time) jobs and nonstandard jobs (Kalleberg et al, 1997). Further, Kashefi concluded that although this distinction between standard and nonstandard jobs is useful, it is not very strong. Due to the heterogeneity of nonstandard jobs, the job rewards can be better also for nonstandard jobs. Also, he mentioned that everyone does not request standard employment. In a similar manner, Dekker (2010) argued that nonstandard employment forms do not affect the levels of community feeling. However, contributing with a supply-oriented study was e.g. Humphries, Kearins and Twinaime (2006) by presenting workers failing to experience well being as a direct consequence of nonstandard employment arrangements. Notably, this applied to both core (standard) and peripheral (nonstandard) workers (ibid). Adding to the debate about marginalisation and integration of nonstandard workers, Jenkins (2004) addressed different classifications of part-time work. Also, she noted how the employees' characteristics were matched to fit the nonstandard work, as an example of problems with power imbalance in organisations. Thus, a number of authors call for recognition of a holistic view of nonstandard employment as a means to benefit all parties involved.

Overall, the field is complex and the views seem to be contradicting. As indicated above, the findings from previous research seem to conflict with each other in terms of implications and

possible detriments of nonstandard employment forms. Whereas a number of researchers strive for profitability ‘recipes’ that legitimise nonstandard employment forms as a means to achieve cost reductions, other researchers use an approach that appreciates the well-being of stakeholders outside the company-profitability sphere. Hence, the contribution of this thesis to the field is to respond to a demand originating a mapping and critical analysis of a story about recent changes in the retail industry in Sweden and its effects upon employment forms, as it is told by a number of people in the business. The information given to us by the interlocutors is perishable and serves as a version of how the story is told at this very moment, but our hope is that our work will be valuable to any reader who wishes to listen. Regardless, the content of this thesis will be relevant for management students who as much as consider being chief executives one day.

### **1.2. Purpose**

The purpose of this thesis is to re-tell a story and hence critically analyse the underpinning logic behind nonstandard employment, as it is expressed by representatives in the clothing retail industry.

### **1.3. Disposition**

This thesis is structured as follows: Next is an account for the method adopted in this thesis and how this method, or in our case narrative method, inevitably is very central to how the material is treated. In section 3, we re-tell and analyse key fragments of the stories we collected during our thesis work through sketching a causal map. Theme by theme, we highlight what micro- and macro-stories that dwells within these fragments and comment upon intertextual relations in-between stories and observations. In section 4, we critically discuss and question the logic behind the line of arguments accounted for in section 3 through a theoretical framework based on a Lacanian notion of fantasy. Conclusively, we elaborate upon our findings and suggest areas for further research in section 5.



## 2. Method

Our mission to shed some light upon and question an underpinning logic behind nonstandard work in the clothing retail industry could be conveniently addressed using the stories our interlocutors invited us to share with them. As Kalleberg (2001, p. 497) notes, ‘the data needed to examine the nature and consequences of labour utilization strategies should go beyond surveys that simply ask senior managers about their strategy or use of various practices, as Procter *et al* (1994: 236-8) argues.’ Thus, by moving into a narrative approach as our method, we have retrieved useful and interesting bits, pieces and fragments of reality; a few meetings with organisational managers and Union representatives, a couple of informal waiting-beside-the-slow-coffee-machine-conversations, some retail store observations and two seats at a gala awards dinner hosted by an Employer Organisation (to which we did not have access until we found ourselves seated at the fancily laid tables).

As we see it, the re-telling of stories is one of few methods to gain knowledge about the postmodern world we live in. Sigurdson and Svenungsson (2006) sum up the last half century’s philosophical debates in major changes on perspectives of subjectivity, language and knowledge. In terms of subjectivity, philosophers have debated perspectives on human self-awareness as always mediated through a specific reality, through our body, stories and language. The foundation for knowledge of this world is not the Cartesian ego separated from the bodily world, but a subject very much connected to the world out there. As a consequence, it is difficult to argue for any claims of objective access to a universal world out there. Such claims will always be met by the standard phrase ‘says who?’

Furthermore, language cannot be separated from our perception of reality, since we lack other means to perceive the reality (Sigurdson and Svenungsson, 2006). Thereby, we are stuck in a particular social-linguistic code from which we cannot free ourselves. Any outside god-like perspective or neutral descriptive language is deemed to be prejudiced from the beginning. As a consequence, the validity of a description is based on how well it fits into the surrounding society's accepted genres. Further, Ward (2004, p. 17) argues for a phenomenological approach that states that ‘subjects are unstable’, i.e. lack immediate access to knowledge about themselves.

In addition, subjects are moving within time, space and in relation to other subjects, prohibiting any timeless objective truths to be discovered.

A consequence of this line of reasoning is that all knowledge is particular and a result of interpretation and reinterpretation *ad infinitum*, since no objective description or explanation is available (Ward, 2000). What remains, is interpretations or stories that gain status and legitimacy in society through persuasion.

## **2.1 Research Technique**

To make sense of this perspective in a social science thesis, a more technical approach is needed. Czarniawska (2004) argues that all human social life is narrative to its character, both in terms of actions and events. The concept of narrative is understood as a story with a plot. Subjects or humans or authors use a repertoire of narratives to make sense of their reality and human intentions cannot be understood without these narratives. Furthermore, the telling and making of stories is not an isolated but a social task. That is, the narrative repertoires that become legitimate are dependent upon which story or stories the society is built upon. An example of this could be scientific knowledge, which requires a story to be legit knowledge but once accepted provide no legitimacy to any other kinds of knowledge, such as narratives (Czarniawska, 2004).

Czarniawska (2004) highlights that the key device if a narrative is to gain legitimacy is the strength of the plot rather than the truth behind the story. As previously discussed, access to the truth seemed to be far away from our project. Hence, a narrative approach to the stories we found could help us analyse the stories, if we could find a plot in the material.

We thought that the best way to extract stories about change when meeting with representatives of the clothing retail industry was not regular (semi-) structured interviews, but rather unstructured interviews or conversations (see interview opening in Appendix 1). To put it without the regular academic turns of speech (Czarniawska, 2004): we asked the interlocutors what has been going on in the business the past decade.

In this study, we have talked to seven people from four organisations: Two retail chains (henceforth termed 'Retail 1' and 'Retail 2' respectively), one mail order company ('E-Retail 1') and the Trade Union ('The Union'). The interlocutors hold different positions in the organisations, which is accounted for in-text in section 3 (see also list of interviews in Appendix

2). The selection of interlocutors was based primarily upon given industry, the size of the company (medium-sized) and within a reasonable travelling distance. A number of companies were contacted at random based upon these conditions, and occasionally, access to one interlocutor could open up for access to another within that organisation. We recorded the interviews and then transcribed and coded them. In terms of observations and unexpected conversations in waiting rooms etc., references are drawn from memory and field notes. Immediately, we realised that collecting stories was the easy part of the work. As dismantling a minefield seems easier than making a good translation into English and performing a proper analysis, the reader should be aware of that all material presented here is already an interpretation and a translation in every step of the process.

Czarniawska (2004) suggests a three-step strategy for such analyses, in order to do a critical reading rather than just doing *a* reading of the fragmented stories. The first step, *explication*, is to present the text in the readers' language. Put differently, it is about asking what the text is about. The second step, *explanation*, is to critically ask why the text says what it says, through a discussion about the social context. The final step, *exploration*, is where the authors step in and explicitly construct their story, i.e. bring their own perspective explicitly into the storytelling. However, as will become evident for the reader, this is not a regular three-step-model in the sense that they can easily be isolated. Rather, they will to some extent be mixed and blended in the process, as these readings will sometimes be inseparable.

## **2.2 Narrative Mapping Technique**

Boje (2001) and Czarniawska (2004) argue that actual fieldwork with a narrative approach is complex due to the lack of complete plotted narratives. Hence, we have decided to use an antenarrative approach to be able to explicate the stories in our material. Boje (2001) describes antenarrative as being before the story and at the same time betting or speculating on the story. As Czarniawska (1998; 2004) argues, a narrative requires a plot and thereby an ending. Thus, antenarrative is before story, before plot, which suggests that the actions and events accounted for are open-ended and should not be replaced by structured academic emplotments (Boje, 2001). Furthermore, 'antenarrative gives attention to the speculative, the ambiguity of sense making and guessing as to what is happening in the flow of experience' (Boje, 2001, p. 3), and thereby giving the storytellers and their stories a better chance not to be forced into a plot.

Boje (2001) argues that antenarrative opens up for a chaotic and polyphonic experience of storytelling, since stories have beginnings and middles but not necessary endings – which narrative has.

As we have previously argued, the postmodern world is a world marked by fragmentation (Boje, 2001). That is, there are no coherent stories to tell. In addition, stories without a clear plot still have properties such as a *time*, a *place* and a *mind* (ibid). For example, a story like this thesis is told at particular times every year (january and june), at particular places (smaller classrooms at our business school) and has an own mind (what our readers will do with or to our text, we cannot control). To be truthful to our story – this thesis – the context must be recognised and taken into account when retold or referenced. The same ethics should be applied to all other stories.

We asked our interlocutors what has happened in their industry the past decade, and they responded with fragmented stories, descriptions and explanations of what is going on in the industry today. To explicate these stories, we need an approach that is sensitive to an antenarrative ethic and yet allows us to deal with the causal explanations in the material and connect them into a meaningful body of text. Boje (2001) proposes one such framework called *antenarrative causality analysis*. The basic strategy is to question the causal assertions in the material, as these per definition are not equivalent to truth, if we are to follow our epistemology. From this point, we could take the narrative approach and make a causal mapping to show how the story evolves.

Our presentation of the research material will inevitably be our interpretation and retelling of our interlocutors' stories. Therefore, we perform the first part of the explication, identifying temporal language in the transcripts, as a selection procedure to choose which quotes we are to present in this thesis (Boje, 2001). The following step of the explication is to identify the macro- and micro-stories and to pinpoint the causal relationship within the story. Further, we try to establish any intertextual linkages between stories, i.e. we appreciate that these stories are part of an on-going production of stories within a social context (ibid). This, in order to provide the reader with an explanation of the story (Czarniawska, 2004).

Due to the complexity of the nature of our narrative technique, the tasks of explicating and explaining along the fragments of a plot that we have identified in our fragmented stories are

difficult to isolate. Hence, these tasks are somewhat intertwined in section 3. As a final stage of the presentation of our material, we make a causal mapping of the fragments and pieces of stories that we collected. Moreover, the reader should note that section 3 is divided into themes, or sub-sections, labelled by the authors according to the major turns or breakpoints in the story. This has been done in an attempt to assist the reader in finding a structure in the text. Furthermore, the extracts from the interviews are coded using an inventory of transcription symbols that can be found in Appendix 3.

### **2.3 Tools for Further Explanation and Exploration**

As a starting point in our discussion in section 4, we turn towards an objectivist explanation, i.e. look into power relationships as an explanatory device (Czarniawska, 2004). This, as the story we tell and re-tell indicates a social context present, which we wish to account for. Again, tasks need to be intertwined (here, explanation and exploration), as an objectivist explanatory approach considers the previous intertwined step to more or less produce the exploration (ibid).

In order to explore our material and bring ourselves as authors into the text (Czarniawska, 2004), we use a framework approaching fantasy as it is understood from a Lacanian perspective, as presented by Bloom and Cederstrom (2009). Furthermore, as our antenarrative approach allows us, we speculate with the help of the notion of fantasy in other possible outcomes of these stories. We consider this framework to be helpful in exploring the mapping of our story, as the concept of fantasy is a subversive function. That is, it undermines the demarcation between the objective and the subjective. A fantasy is not objective in the sense that it only exists outside the subject. Nor is a fantasy subjective in a constructionist sense that it only exists within the subject's mind (Bloom and Cederstrom, 2009). As we, with our mapping technique, explicate a story with the help of fragments from several interlocutors, we hold material that is neither entirely objective nor entirely subjective. Hence, the concept of fantasy would be a fitting concept to use in order to search for an understanding of our story, and especially through the fantasy characteristics referred to as the *stabilising dimension* and the *destabilising dimension*:

Within fantasies, Bloom and Cederstrom (2009) define a stabilising dimension, which is a vision for a bright and joyful future. Its function is mainly to hide the uncertainties of today, and the fantasy promises that the future will bring a sense of wholeness where everything will

work out perfectly. In a way, the fantasy is a beatific future scenario of how people wish things turn out.

Further, Bloom and Cederstrom (2009, p.165) argue that ‘a stabilizing dimension always endeavours to bring back what is by definition impossible to regain, it needs an external object, an obstacle, to which this impossibility could be projected’. This object, or obstacle, or de-stabilising dimension of a fantasy does not work as a general force of nature but as an evil force that aims to destroy the envisioned bright and joyful future in particular (Bloom and Cederstrom, 2009). In other words, the stabilising dimension of wholeness is inevitably balanced by the threat represented by the de-stabilising dimension, making the fantasy somewhat unachievable.

What will become evident as our story unfolds is how this framework can explain strife for market rationality, were this rationality to be recognised as a fantasy. Bloom and Cederstrom (2009) note that market rationality upholds a fantasy about social mobility and freedom as well as about organisational success, which will come to have great significance later on.

### 3. Mapping the Story

In the first sub-section, we re-tell our interlocutors' reflections upon a number of macro-stories and how these come to affect certain actions taken. The extracts presented are linked to money, profit line, costs, pricing, sales and stock-in-trade.

#### 3.1. It All Starts with the Money

Its all 'bout the money, as the pop singer Meja sings in her classic tune from the nineties. In her song, she interprets money as the driver for all sorts of behaviour (Absolute Lyrics, 2012). The same could be said about money and the clothing industry. During the material compiling process, we conducted participant observation as we went to visit the event of the Retail Awards – a yearly held gala dinner in Stockholm outlined to celebrate successes in the retail industry. Being there, we witnessed twelve awards being distributed among a number of nominated companies. When listening to the reasoning behind the selection of winners during the evening, it became clear that keywords such as 'increasing turnover', 'good results', 'profitability' and 'efficiency in the entire chain' flowed as freely as the wine. One of the authors was placed at a table where the neighbouring guests belonged to a nominated company. Unfortunately, the company in question did not win its category, which entailed a rather downhearted and dejected appearance at the table. Shortly, the supervisor of the group arrived (who was seated with the other nominee representatives closer to the stage) and held an intense and cheering speech to his fellow colleagues (and one of the authors) about how they would 'kick ass' next year. That is, they would make more money from their business next year.

The way one of our interlocutors – a marketing manager – puts it further demonstrates the significance and relevance of money in the stories:

*U:::hm. For him [the owner] it is all about money. He::: is so careful to say that [starts tapping with a finger at the table again] now the market is safe, damn it. Turn to the costs. Profit line will stay! [stops tapping at the table] Uhm, simple! For him, it's easy to say, u::hm, cause' otherwise (pause) it will drop two units at the stock 'cause he has lost one point two billions. (E-Retail 1, Marketing Manager, 2012)*

In this text, our interlocutor makes a big jump through several levels of macro-stories and links them to his everyday reality. He starts with the roots of the business altogether, money,

which is personalised in the owner of the company – the owner, who wishes to have as much of it as possible. The source of money in the world is the market, which seems to be able to take on different modes. At the moment, the market is still, which makes the owner very unsatisfied and causes him to take action. Since the market cannot produce more money, the owner's organisation is forced to produce more by creating less cost. For the marketing manager, this logic is simple and easy to understand, as the owner would lose a huge amount of money in an unrealised sale if the estimated value drops even by a tiny piece – a reference to a future event, which possibly could take place on the market, or more specifically at the stock market.

The marketing manager draws upon several other texts to be able to tell this story. The discussion about the market and the stock market refers to the discourse of economics and how the society is built. The story about the owner is also an indirect reference to this discourse, since the market manager seems to assume that the owner will act according to economics rationality. These texts act as drivers of a turn of focus towards costs in the organisation.

In our network of interlocutors, we have several other accounts of cost focus and its origins, to which this previous text is linked through us. A sales manager expresses a similar causality in the following extract:

*Uhm, in your processes, you spill money. You can't do that today, but have to be extremely, uhm, uhm, slick in your processes. Cause' otherwise, you-, you don't get enough in the end (pause). So, it's very very clear that, uhm, one has to be on the ball and in particular one must be able to change, uhm, in the organisation, to adapt to the market. Uhm, and one has to be prepared to slim when it's bad times. And, uhm, speed up when the times are better. Not to stay flat as one used to do before (pause). We are waiting for better times, but we cannot afford it (.) today. (Retail 2, Sales Manager)*

Building a story dependent on several metaphors, the sales manager constructs a case where the macro-concept of the market serves as a natural force to which the organisation has to adapt. She starts out by a reference to organisational acts and events as processes, a mechanical term that belongs to computer engineering (Eriksson-Zetterquist, Kalling and Styhre, 2006). These processes cannot leak money, which could threaten the survival of the organisation. That is, control of this is essential, and acceptable levels are set (caused) by the market. A macro-story, with similar behaviour as earlier, determines the conditions at the micro-level.

Also, the text provides us with a couple of indications of the status of who is doing the interpretation of the organisation's relation to the market. The process metaphor has a relation to computer science where programmers control the processes in the computer (Eriksson-



Zetterquist, Kalling and Styhre, 2006). Furthermore, the ball-game metaphor gives an indication that the organisation is engaged in a game with rules. Both metaphors provide the sales manager with a sense of control over the organisation. The seasonal mode of the market sets the conditions and the manager directs action so that the organisation can live on. This gives an indication that the person telling us this story is a person who is in power as well as in control of the organisation.

A further example of economical stories that cause changes in the organisation and for its customers is the following extract from the interview with the marketing manager:

*.hhh U:::hm it's a:: (.) perhaps one could see then that in the economic .hhh climate that is, y'know perhaps (.) it can-, we can, so that the margin is different for different brands and for (.) for our own products. The quality, yeah it's-, it's not as big a difference between them. The difference is the price and the margin, y'know. The price for the customer and the margin for us. U:::hm, perhaps we see a current towards our own collection, yeah. (E-Retail 1, Marketing Manager)*

Here, it is not the mode of the market but rather the weather in the economy that gives rise to changes among the customers. These must be met by action, which in this case is a differentiation in price and margin between the labels of the products. The weather in the economy has forced the organisation into change, and now they can observe the effects in changed customer behaviour and profitability.

While this story, as told to us, appeals to a macro-story of the economy (a country known for its rough weather), it is connected with other stories from the sales manager, insofar that they both describe and explain the same phenomena:

*And, u:::hm, and the price reductions are extremely high, y' know. That-, it's a lot of sales, and-, and then you see that the turnover (.) increases! But it doesn't, (...), rather you only get more volume in to a lower price, y'know, because you trigger the customer at the price. And it's very very clear too (.) lately, that the markets have been more price driven. (Retail 2, Sales Manager)*

In this extract, the mode of the markets has changed and become more price driven. This is seen in the recent increases of price reductions. The macro-concept is not only an actor, but also a force that makes the organisation into a change of strategy to a low-price-high-volume strategy. Not by choice, but indirect by changes in customer behaviour. The customers are now triggered by price, which has something to do with the markets. Not only does the manager speak of price reductions and that they are common, she also speaks of how the organisation's actions do not increase profitability. In a conversation with a regional manager in the same

organisation, we got further fragments that gave clues about what effects these macro-stories caused at Retail 2:

*'Think that the companies that survive such a::: pretty lo:::ng recession that it actually has been, I guess that's the ones who have 'taken care of their house' (pause) so that one does not get stuck with too high stock-in-trade (pause). Too many in staff, too many costs, put simply. When one does not have the strength to pull off (pause) y'know, what one had expected in the other end, it-. Y'know, u:::hm (pause). (Retail 2, Regional Manager)*

As the previous statement was concerned with increases in volume without effects on profits, this statement expands the story. The market is not simply in any mood, but it has been in a recession – a part of economic macro-stories where the society and business is having a hard time. Here, the regional manager tells us the micro-story of how one, or how the manager, has managed to survive these awful times caused by the macro-concept – the recession. It required cost cuts, lowered stock-in-trade and a reduced workforce, all caused by the recession.

A description of a long recession such as this gives rise to echoes in the organisation. Cost cuts and drawbacks on personnel are events that are possible to observe. At the level below, a store manager speaks of these events:

*Around five years ago, it was kind of hard- .hhh, don't give a shit about anything else, just keep the costs down. [All are laughing] And of course that is wise, when it, sort of, when you are forced to pull all the brakes and look over all the costs. And, y'know, it was down at the banana level (pause) in the coffee room and of course, the biggest thing is personnel costs. That's what has affected me the most. (Retail 2, Store Manager)*

Even though this extract does not hold any explicit attributions to causality behind the change other than vague reference to a force or a power, the power of this force is described in the micro-story about how all things were overlooked – even the bananas in the coffee room. In the light of previous stories about the market, the recession and the climate of the economy, this text gives us a taste of what effects those macro-stories induced in the lower levels of the organisation. Those bananas were not previously eaten by managers or analysts with macro perspective, but rather by sales people at the bottom floor of the organisation.

This sub-section has explored the impact from economical macro-stories and how these stories are used to explain actions such as cost cuts, personnel and price reductions. Now, we will continue to explore stories at the other end of the organisations, and turn our focus towards the customers and their changes in behaviour.

### **3.2. The Internet, E-retail and Weekend Shopping as Drivers of Change**

Most of our interlocutors depict an image about changes in how their customers (or customers in general) have changed the way they act when they go shopping. In the past subsection, two of the interlocutors explained how the market is now more price driven and how customers choose different kinds of brands. The sales manager elaborates on this in the following extract:

*...Because the customer is more choosy. The customer is so much more enlightened! And that is also something that has affected the purchasing behaviour extremely clearly in recent years. I:::t's that the consumer is so incredibly well-read today. So one can't kinda fool them, y'know. U::hm, and the e-retail has entered extremely clearly. U::hm, and partly-partly-partly one has built a knowledge base in (pause) u::hm, that is, the consumer has built a knowledge base. .hhh in itself, which makes that 'I want that but not that and I know why'. .hhh u::hm, and that makes the case that when one goes shopping in the regular retail out there they [the consumers] are a lot more (.) choosy and know more about their products. That also affects the purchasing behaviour, of course. (Retail 2, Sales Manager).*

Our first observation is how the sales manager talks about the customer or the consumer. The concepts are used in the same way as other macro-concepts, e.g. the market. The story starts with the statement that the consumer has now become enlightened in recent years. This enlightenment has caused the organisation to stop fooling its customers. Who the consumer or the customer are, is not explained in this text. It could be their customers or someone else's customers. There seems to be room for everybody to fit into the concept, i.e. the sales manager interprets that all citizens are possible consumers/customers. Whether we like it or not, everyone is included in the story.

A particular event that has caused the enlightenment is the entrance of e-retail, which changed the behaviour of the macro-actor *the consumer/customer*. In the extract, the sales manager fails to reach the micro-level but only tells us what is happening at the macro-level. Also, other interlocutors have recognised and pinpointed this macro-story, for instance the CEO at Retail 1. The CEO explores this story as if it was a drama:

*I'm not that dramatic (...). Some would probably say that it was a major difference (pause) and I can say yes, I guess it's a bit of difference. Natural difference, maybe. (Pause) but nothing that I believe is dramatic, not during the 2000s I don't think. The most dramatic, if it is dramatic, is that the e-retail has arrived. (Retail 1, CEO)*

Apart from elaborating upon the Internet's mere existence, the interlocutors also relate the Internet to the increasing amount of shopping malls. The story about the expansion of e-retail

was also told at Retail Awards. Apart from having a category named 'E-retail of the year' where 'the shining star of the e-retail sky' was rewarded, a lot of e-retail companies had started to become nominees (or winners) in other categories as well. One e-retail company was even announced the winner of two categories.

Below, the sales manager explains why the Internet has become a driver of change in purchasing behaviour:

*It's hard, y'know, when the purchasing behaviours are changed. And another part of it, y'know, is also that it's driven by the Internet. That the availability is::s, uhm, one-hundred-per-cent today! Uhm, we ha:::ve, y'know'-, most shopping malls today are open 363 days a year (.) at least. (Retail 2, Sales Manager)*

If previous extracts within this sub-section are concerned with the exploration of changes in customer behaviour, we are now told in explicit terms what causes these changes – the Internet. In this story, the Internet is the provider of all goods at all times. It is an invisible force that makes organisations build shopping malls to guarantee the availability of goods to the consumer almost all year around.

The concept of shopping malls seems to source a discourse of its own, as we can see in the following extract:

*Beacu-, because we- we as customers, yeah .hhh also turns more towards that we want to shop Friday-Saturday-Sunday, y'know. Uhm, it's just to go and have a look at the large shopping malls and you see how it looks Friday-Saturday-Sunday. They're empty at the beginning of the week, and full at weekends, y'know. So it's-, yeah .hhh so as I'm working with this I say that, uhm (pause) that they should-. It surprises me that it's such a family amusement. Goin' shopping. There must be other values here in this world- in this world that-, that can be more valuable than goin' shopping a Sunday. (The Union, Union Representative)*

Not only are the customers more informed, but they have also changed which weekdays they go shopping. Constant availability might be of interest, but in this story, consumers are more focused on shopping at the weekend. According to the Union representative we spoke to, the availability of the shopping malls is not fully exploited by its customers. As he tells the story, the customers utilise these facilities as a weekend pleasure rather than consumption out of necessity. The Union representative provides us with an interesting piece to the story about the consumers. These consumers have the means to transport themselves to the shopping malls, which often are located outside city centres. Thus, only those capable of paying for transportation are invited to participate in this form of family amusement.

This sub-section reflected much upon macro-stories and how the interlocutors handled these concepts. When putting the extracts together, the story unfolds a changed behaviour in how customers perform their shopping. In the next sub-section, we reach what seems to be a turning point, as actual consequences for the organisations are dealt with.

### **3.3. Adapting Employment Forms as a Means to Cope with Change**

As we approach these phenomena within the stories, the interconnectedness between the stories told seems to indicate that the interlocutors are part of the same discourse. However, it is also the case that they do not share the views about what actions these stories generate. In the following sub-section and the next, we will explore how these views are connected and where they are in conflict.

Organisations holding stores in shopping malls have pressure put on them. Below, the Union representative explains:

*And especially in shopping malls, it's- (.) There's a very large turnover in the stores. .hh and it has also got to do with that the ones who own the shop-, shopping malls also raise demands upon the working- or the working-, or the stores that are, y'know. That one is supposed to have certain opening hours. One should generate certain money and all that, y'know. (...) Without it, there's something else you need to take from. Then it's gonna be the staff y'know and then perhaps one has to lose someone or two and then it is the case that the ones who are left have to run more and faster, y'know. Which in turn generates that we get a-a-a sickliness in one way or another. One gets discord between staff, one gets relational problems. And then this spiral is on, y'know. (The Union, Union Representative)*

Holding a store in a shopping mall is, according to the story, a lucrative business. All involved seem to be aware of this, which is why the mall owners charge high rents and put pressure on the store owners. In this story, there are no apparent macro-stories other than that organisations and store owners are portrayed as group, not individuals, and as a group they are attributed certain behaviour.

The same could be said about the store owners. The Union representative attributes specific actions to this group. The shopping mall owners' behaviour causes the store owners into certain actions, such as reductions of personnel. In this fragment, the personnel are the only group without power, they are only acted upon and the result is human suffering. Essentially, this story is about how the exercise of economic power causes human suffering.

Unfortunately, within the limitations of this study we did not have the opportunity to talk to mall owners, but as the retail chains own more than a few stores in shopping malls we present their stories about shopping malls and the turn towards weekend shopping:

*So it's really a major difference! Uhm, and to get it out. Y'know, the potential for turnover is placed at a Saturday. .hh and then, you need to have all staff there too. At a Saturday so that we can provide service for those who enter and want to shop. Uhm, that is a problem for all retail. One doesn't want fixed contracts anymore. Y'know, one doesn't want that old 40-hour contract, that has to work eight hours, eight hours, eight hours .hh because if so you're-, you're completely screwed. It's impossible to be profitable! U::hm, when you got as much staff on a Monday as you have on a Thursday or Friday. It becomes completely crazy, uhm, so what one is trying to do then, uhm, is to work with hours as much as possible. (Retail 2, Sales Manager)*

In this passage we find several interesting stories that are connected, but there are gaps in between. Firstly, the key driver in this reasoning is the potential turnover at Saturdays. This statement taken for a fact is the foundation for a staffing requirements philosophy. At this day, the need for personnel is higher than any other day in the week. This chain of causality presented ends with a definition of the problem.

The solution is given – certain kinds of contracts, such as standard employment contracts, do not work in this setting. The sales manager talks about the contracts as if the contracts as such force the personnel into working eight-hour-days at a regular basis – a story that the sales manager reads into the contracts. However, this story causes the organisation into staffing with employments by the hours instead of fixed contracts.

Below, a store manager at retail 1 addresses the same problem:

*In reality what we've done paperwise, y'know, is that we have minimised our schedule really much, as (.) to get some kind of productivity in this. (Pause) so of course we have, y'know::w (pause) well, we've been a bit (.) yeah, less manned, uhm. Kinda'. (Retail 1, Store Manager)*

Saturday shopping is not the point of conflict here, but whether employment by hours is the only means to deal with it. The Union representative we spoke to seems to understand the problem:

*Thursday-Friday-Saturday-Sunday .hhh and there is, y'know, a problem of course, huh. Because, you're only supposed to-, earlier-, if you're only putting the full-timers, y'know. Then they have to work very much Thursday-Friday-Saturday-Sunday. And u::hm, so that, uhm, I can understand that this is a problem. (The Union, Union Representative)*

If standard employees are to work forty hours a week, that will be a lot of hours during the weekend, which is a difficult equation. As this story progresses, the parties seem to be

familiar with the current situation in the industry though they are not on the best terms with each other. One of our interlocutors, the CEO, literally sketched the situation with variations in shopping behaviour over the weekdays using a napkin and a pen from his inner pocket. He came to the following conclusion:

*...The Union ought to fit together in some way, how one can have full time here [draws a circle at the lines representing the weekend]. Should we do that-, if we do it according to tha:::t (pause), then, we have no sales here [points at Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, and laughs]. And then, you can't afford to be there. (Pause) And if one acts according to tha:::t, one will end up in the ditch of bankruptcy. (Retail 1, CEO)*

As the CEO sketches the variations with almost no sales in the beginning of the week and then peaking sales at the end of the week, the sketch represents a description of the conditions that render standard employment impossible and thereby he disqualifies the Union. However, the Union narrates a different story:

*Why doesn't one look at, y'know, the question of timetabling? U::hm, ho-, why doesn't one look at that much-much-much more? 'Cause we believe they make it far too easy for themselves.'Ye::ah, we want only twelve-, or we want heads instead y'know, that's much easier!' Y'kno::w (pause) one doesn't think it through (.) uhm, so that, this is increasingly worked with. At-, with-, especially with full-time. (The Union, Union Representative)*

The Union representative labels this kind of reasoning as laziness and clearly attributes this trait to employers. Rather than taking responsibility and get into the timetabling question, the organisations utilise employment by-the-hour contracts – heads.

The CEO at Retail 1, however, comments on the question of timetabling in a slightly different way:

*And sometimes they cross boundaries 'cause the people are not allowed to work more than x hours a day and then they must have a break or something [makes a fast wave with his hand as to trivialise the subject]. Not a break, but (pause) well, they are not allowed to work more than a certain amount of hours. And it's about balancing that, too. (Retail 1, CEO)*

As the reader probably has noticed by now, if our interlocutors would have talked to each other instead of us, they would have agreed in their views regarding the macro-stories about the clothing retail industry. However, there is a fine line between them, which the previous extracts show. In the next sub-section, we will elaborate even further upon the differing perspectives on employment form and the stories about the consequences of the employers' perspective.

### 3.4. Conflicting Perspectives on Nonstandard Employment

Here, we will explore the tensions in the perspectives of how the transition of the clothing retail industry is managed. On the one hand, we have the employers and on the other, the Union. The former argues for the necessity of nonstandard or by-the-hour employment contracts. The Union questions this necessity from a shared perspective regarding the change, but with a different ethic. First, we look into the employers' arguments by listening to the CEO:

*Uhm, the competition is larger today, so there's no:: (pause) there's nothing to use from, one could say. 'Cause- (.) if it's 5 % plus or minus, that might be the question for that store (pause). To survive or not. And the rents have increased so much that-, so, soon they'll be as high as salary costs (...). So that, one must-, one can't do that-, that one must know more about, the why, and one gotta know about that later. Of course if (.) the Union-, they can only accept and support one (.) . Perhaps they won't even accept to have the dialogue properly, I don't know, but... uhm. But one must know more about it, a::nd, (.) see how it works. (Retail 1, CEO)*

In this extract, the action is presented with a background – the competition. What competition it is or who is competing is not specified, but' the others' clearly have an impact upon the company. What is at stake is the survival of the store, which balances on a fine line if the percentage is not right. Besides competition, the rental fees for the store space have increased, which soon reaches the same level as the salary costs. The story now turns towards the Union, to which the CEO attributes lack of communication as well as insight into the business. This, even though the Union representative we spoke to did talk about the cause in a similar manner as the CEO.

Among our interlocutors, the sales manager also explains the Union's failures, but in slightly different terms:

*U::hm, uhm, and they uhm oppose of course, the Union, then, cause' the Union wants a security for the employee who y'know indeed should have a safe environment every day. But that's also a bit-, that, because we haven't-. We're a bit behind. It's always the case that the system of Sweden is late in development. (Retail 2, Sales Manager)*

What can be read out of this extract is a changed causal direction compared to most other stories in this material. Here, it is the Union's opinion and ambition to fight for their members' security and safeness that causes disturbance in the development of Sweden compared to the rest of the world. Unfortunately, some of the underlying meanings got lost in translation and in the transcription of this extract, such as the tone of the sales manager's voice, which tells us that the manager is talking about the Union as the troublesome part.



What is especially interesting to point out in terms of intertextual conditions is that both these representatives are senior managers in their organisations respectively. They talk about and attribute meaning to their opponents from a secure position. The CEO could sell his stocks and earn that much money that he would not have to work another day in his life. The sales manager would not walk away empty-handed either. However, the people at the bottom floor have their life conditions set by these people's reasoning in these issues – a topic that the Union representative points out:

*We have this slogan y'know, that full time is kinda a right y'know (pause) and uhm, part time is a possibility (...). And, it should then be like, y'know, the opinion we have, then, is that one should be able to live at one's salary kinda y'know. 'Cause today it's the case that more and more people are dependent upon someone else. And that's not very nice, y'know. Especially not if we're gonna talk about youths. (The Union, Union Representative)*

From the Union's perspective, the society today is a hard place to live, where a lot of people are dependent upon someone else for their breadwinning. To be able to do that, a standard employment provides both living and security for a person, which should be a right. Nonstandard work should only be considered a possibility – an ethic that corresponds to the Swedish children's' book author Astrid Lindgren's famous motto that the one who is very strong must also be very kind (Astrid Lindgren Website, 2012).

Furthermore, the Union representative provides us with a historical perspective of the employers' view that the forty working hours-weeks are obsolete:

*And I think that is related to:::, u:::hm, to, what should we say::: (pause) those inconvenient hours that are included in the collective agreement 'Cause there one wants to claim that they are too::: (.) weird or are too-, too old, antique and all that, y'know. .hhh u:::hm, but u:::hm, historically speaking it is the case that the time we terminated this working time law-, some time seventy three- seventy four somewhere. Then, we didn't have those problems. At the time, one, y'know, one put in into the agreement just beca:::use. At the time, one didn't work that much, y'know. But at the time, the stores closed at six o'clock during weekdays y'know. And at twelve o' clock Saturdays, huh. Then, one didn't have those rules. Now, one has increased and increased the working hours. It started sometime in the 80s. When one opened up Saturdays. (The Union, Union Representative)*

Here, The Union representative attributes this entire debate to a section in the collective agreements that deal with work at inconvenient hours. The entire Swedish labour law system builds upon collective agreements between the labour market parties rather than regulating labour market details in the law code. Some minimum levels are regulated in the law code, such as employment contract forms. From the employer's' statements we have explored so far, they

seem to agree that the passage about inconvenient hours salary belongs to the past i.e. those hours are expensive. Historically speaking, this was not a problem until the seventies, when the working time law was terminated and replaced by the collective agreement. However, this structure is out-dated, since the stores increased their opening hours to include all days of the week, which is connected to the subject of shopping malls. This story also makes sense of the sales manager's statements about Sweden as an underdeveloped country in these matters. However, there is a difference in ethics and in which direction in development that is to be considered *downhill*, as expressed in the following extract by the sales manager:

*We have SO many that work in the stores who believe it's bloody good, y'know. To work Thursday Friday Saturday Sunday! That's splendid! And perhaps do up to forty hours even, but not Monday to Friday. And perhaps they experience it really good so::: (pause). While the Union has one understanding often that this is not good, y'know. Uhm, so that I believe that they- (.) uhm, I believe that, uhm, vi should sorta' adapt there too. Society must adapt after that as well. Or else, we won't be able to run business at all. (Retail 2, Sales Manager)*

The story is about the happy workers who enjoy their work – and especially at inconvenient hours. As discussed in the introduction, there is heterogeneity within the group of non-standard workers, as some like it while some do not. The Union has positioned itself towards the latter, according to this story. The sales manager interprets that society is going in the same direction, which poses a problem for the companies' ability to run their businesses.

Whereas the sales manager seems to speak about how society needs to adapt to a change in terms of employment, the following extract, by contrast, indicates that the phenomenon is not as much a change as it is something that has been relevant over time. Here, the Union representative reflects upon in-need workers historically:

*And there, one likes to have zero-contracts. In-need-contracts. And these kinda' things, y'know. It's-, as one has a lot of youths especially up to twenty-twenty five-year-olds who sit at home and are waiting for them to call. 'We have work for you today, can you be here?' .hh a:::nd, I'd like to actually compare that to::: (pause) roughly a hundred years ago. When we had a number of people who were unemployed and were standing outside of the shipyard over there on the other side [points across the river towards the shipyards at Norra Älvstranden], uhm, who were standing with their caps outside the front door uhm, the day workers, as we called them. .hh y'know I-, we-, I think it's the same thing today. Really. Only that we do it in a more delicate way. We sit at home with a phone. Home alone, instead-, instead of standing in a group, with a cap in our hands. (...) We should be aware of that, y'know, our big companies (pause). They make money, y'know. (The Union, Union Representative)*

This story concerns how precarious employments are constructed and how they have changed appearance over time. A century ago, Gothenburg had a major shipbuilding industry, where people were employed on a day-to-day basis. The foremen pointed at the workers they wanted to hire for the day and the workers were paid when they went home. The Union representative suggests that the same thing is going on today, but technology has made it possible to hide the phenomena. Since almost everyone has a phone nowadays there is no need to gather in a crowd outside the company gates. Rather, they wait at home for the company to call and give them job for a day.

### **3.5. Summary – Mapping the Story**

As we interpret the fragments of stories, there are two macro-stories that mark a beginning; the economy and the market. The economy is portrayed as a country with a climate of its own, which sometimes is labelled recession depending on season. These fragments are used to explain demands upon the organisation. The market, or the recession, forces the organisation owner to implement cost cuts, personnel reductions included. The economy makes the customers change behaviour and the organisation to change strategy. Our interlocutors tell us about how these low-cost-high-volume strategies helped them survive but not raised their profitability.

Next, the Internet is the key piece in the macro-story. The evolution of the Internet has been dramatic. The Internet, and the development of successful e-retail changed two things: The competence of the customers and the availability of consumer goods. First, the consumers can now choose from and gain access to basically everything, and are thereby more cautious about their expenditures. Second, all goods are available on the Internet all day around, all year around. As a response, a shopping mall movement has grown, where the stores are forced to be open 363 days a year. However, the customers are mostly utilising these facilities at the weekends.

This development is explored in depth as the interlocutors talk about ways to adapt to changes in the landscape. The shopping malls seem to be lucrative businesses, which the owners have realised and thus adjusted the rents accordingly. In addition, the increased rents have put profitability demands upon the employers, which leads to personnel reductions. The changes towards weekend shopping added with the pressure from mall owners have rendered a somewhat complex situation. To deal with this, the employers have almost completely stopped hiring personnel on fixed contracts. Instead, part-time contracts, employment by-the-hour and

exclusively at the weekend is the model. However, this causes health and social problems with the personnel according to the Union, which recognises the complexity in the situation. The parties – the employers and the Union – have until this point a shared understanding of what is going on. As the Union fights for secure employments and believe that the employers can solve this with better timetabling, the employers are annoyed by the Union's lack of cooperation.

Henceforth, the story splits into two separate tracks, almost like a debate. The employers recognise the competition (a macro-actor) and the high rents as basic conditions that the Union do not appreciate. One of our interlocutors even tells us that the Union's fight for job security is the cause behind Sweden's lack of development, while the Union points out that people today are dependent on the employers, which have a responsibility towards their personnel. The Swedish Labour Model explains the lack of development in Sweden, where civil law has been replaced by collective agreements. The inconvenient-hours salary, which is a large part of the salary, is regulated in these agreements. However, the shopping behaviour has changed while the agreements have not changed, which the conflict is all about. With the Union's resistance to changes, the parties debate which way to go. In the perception of the employers, the Union must give in, as it will otherwise be impossible to run a business in Sweden.

Lastly, the Union representative challenges the employers' view by stating that these nonstandard contract forms are not a new invention – they have a history. The most extreme example is the shipbuilders in Gothenburg a century ago. They waited in line every morning in hope to get to work for a day. Today, young people wait by the phone at home for the company to call. It is the same kind of employment in a new shape. Please note that we do not know if any of the companies we talked to used these extremely flexible employment forms. Rather, this story simply indicates that the issues of employment forms have been around for a long time.

#### **4. Discussion**

In order to not only explicate the story, but to additionally aim for explaining why the story evolves the way it does, we look more closely upon power relationships (Czarniawska, 2004). It is both interesting and relevant to elaborate upon and understand where the foundation of the logic insinuated by management is sprung. With the Union representative as the only exception, all of our respondents represent positions ranging between the second level to the highest level in the organisational chain. Even though the organisations we met are rather flat in comparison with multinational corporations, the people at the top are expected to have an overall perspective of what is going on in the world and in the organisation. That is, they have a need to handle a mind-set as well as a language to talk about the phenomena on a general level.

Following this reasoning, these interlocutors are held responsible for different economical measures depending on what level in the organisation they belong to. With the responsibility for a financial key figure come not only the calculative device, but also language, concepts, stories and assumptions about the world. Accounting devices are connected with theory of management and organising as a response to different outcomes of the calculative functions. That is, certain rationality is expected using these instruments and in extension being a part of the organisation at a higher level.

This rationality is concerned with making money – for the owners. The employees are only part of the machinery making this possible. Their role in this system is to perform organisational tasks in exchange for a salary and other benefits, and the ways the salary and the benefits are designed are dependent upon the organisational rationality. As our interlocutors explore these issues, their organisations are under pressure from the market, customers, the Internet, shopping mall owners etc. In this rationality, then, employee benefits thus become a major factor in the machinery left to configure to deal with this situation. Since the top managers are in a position where they can exercise power over their employees and their lives, a debate or dispute has emerged as their solutions to deal with this situation are challenged.

To explore the story we use the notion of fantasy (Bloom and Cederstrom, 2009). Most of the stories we have encountered are pessimistic and tell us about all the phenomena standing

between the organisations and profitability, success, efficiency and so on. However, some key pieces of the stabilising dimension have been uncovered. The gala dinner in Stockholm gave us some insights in what is most valued in this industry – profitability. Some are closer than others to the position where they make the company earn enough money. For the owner of E-retail 1, unimaginable sums of money are at stake, which indicates that the owner has succeeded in the capitalist dream and now has to defend that position. Others, such as the managers at Retail 2, fight for their survival on an everyday basis. The stabilising fantasy lies in the hope of a future where money will be earned without threats of the market, the Internet, or any other force. That is, where uncompromised success rather than survival is on top of the agenda.

However, as the stabilising fantasies for one reason or another fail to be reachable, a destabilising dimension is added in the stories as to legitimise this failure. In the story we re-tell, more than a few phenomena are brought up that stand in-between the organisations and their successes. That is, most of the accounts explain how the organisations are threatened by the market, the Internet, E-retail, enlightened weekend-shopping customers, greedy shopping mall owners and an unappreciative Union. Interestingly, we noted that most of these forces are impersonal, i.e. outside the possibility to be controlled by the organisation. However, the Union is controllable since they actually have representatives that have a relation to the companies. With the Union, negotiation is a possibility, which is not the case with e.g. the market.

To what extent the story is only a fantasy and not a description of reality is out of our reach to determine. However, we can point towards a few weak links in the chain of causality. One of them is the unappreciative stance towards the Union. As the story unfolds, the Union gives us very similar accounts of economic factors as the different retail companies give us. Arguably, this indicates that they share a perspective in the sense that their fantasies about the organisation and its drives follow the same route. The point where they disagree is how the organisations treat their employees. While the employers argue for by-the-hour contracts, the Union suggests better timetabling and standard contracts. This could be interpreted as a simple disagreement but the employers state that this behaviour threatens the survival of their entire businesses (yet all of our interlocutors organisation's show considerable profits). Their claims that the Union does not understand their reality could easily be dismissed. However, in this

setting, the Union should not be accused of not understanding the reality but rather not sharing their fantasy of easily accessible profits.

The Union provides us with pieces that point out weaknesses in the fantasy. The arguments behind the non-standard employment forms, as a necessity out of survival seems rather thin when the Union points out that this issue has been around in different forms the past century. The story about the shipyard workers is nurtured and kept alive through the young people today that sit at home and wait by the phone for a few more hours of work. If the fantasy of capitalism should be fulfilled, it seems as the workers should have to work almost for free and only at useful hours.

By arguing this way, we have reduced the economic concepts into a mere fantasy. Simultaneously as this could be considered a simplifying act failing to capture the complexity within, it also allows us to question the logic behind adhering to a system that inevitably cannot be favourable for everyone. Arguably, such a less rigid interpretation of the concepts makes a sensible discussion or solution more likely to occur, provided that the macro-stories of the market are undermined.

Hence, from using the fantasy framework, we assign the conflict a certain level of ridicule, which successfully makes its implications for employees easier to question. In the light of this perspective, we re-value the entire story and ask ourselves if this money driven ethic is acceptable. The Union representative point out that employers have a responsibility towards their employees, and that they can afford to employ their personnel on fixed contracts. That is, they could afford fixed contract because they are making a great deal of money.

## 5. Conclusion

What has become evident during the work with this thesis, is that the question of nonstandard employment is a frequently debated subject in both media, academia and among the interlocutors in this study.

Stemming from what the representatives from the Swedish retail industry told us, we re-told their stories through mapping them in an attempt to highlight a causality chain that could explain why nonstandard employment is an inevitable end in this logic. Hence, we found a line of causality between different micro- and macro-stories indicating that in order to be successful, the organisations need to respond to changes in customer behaviour, the development of e-retail, the emergence of shopping malls and similar as efficiently as possible. As a result, the conveyed stories told by the employers insinuate that nonstandard employment and by-the-hour-contracts are a necessity for the business' survival. Thus, the underpinning logic behind nonstandard employment seems to be constructed as a means to legitimise the cost reducing activities performed by top management, which directly lead to employees being offered nonstandard contracts rather than standard, full-time contracts.

However, in the light of critically considering different power relationships and applying a framework that labels market rationality as an unreachable fantasy (whose probability of being achieved is very small), we find that the reasoning behind the causality advocated for by the employers is not flawless. Rather, we conclude that, as the story hints, the Union has a better understanding of the situation than the employers are ready to admit. If the employers would consider a discussion not only regarding possible solutions to their concerns of their future survival but a deeper discussion about their very notion of what survival constitutes, the underpinning logic of this causality chain would arguably look differently. Hopefully, the findings of this thesis will make other management students, like us, in their future work think twice about the stories behind restructuring decisions. In addition, we also hope that the practitioners from the clothing retail industry who reads this can visualise that the future of the employees and the business is in their hands, and that their is hope to find in that their businesses are still alive after a hundred years of fighting over these issues.



We believe that this thesis complement previous research insofar that we present a few accounts about the necessity behind nonstandard employment and highlight the explanatory story behind it. This is especially valuable as a complement to functionalist research on the subject, since storytelling is considered to be knowledge below acceptable standard. However, as we previously have argued, storytelling is nonetheless structured knowledge.

If someone feels compelled to continue explore these stories, we would like to recommend them to include a couple of people we lacked time to talk to, e.g. store employees and shopping mall owners. Their voices have been missing in our work. Yet, we hope that they will be included in the future, both in research and in cooperation to build a more sustainable business in Sweden.

## 6. References

Abernathy, W. J., Baloff, N., Hershey, J. C. and Wandel, S. (1973), A Three-Stage Manpower Planning and Scheduling Model - A Service Sector Example, *Operations Research*, vol. 21, no. 3, pp. 693- 711

Absolute Lyrics (2012), available at:

[http://www.absolutelyrics.com/lyrics/view/meja/it's\\_all\\_about\\_the\\_money](http://www.absolutelyrics.com/lyrics/view/meja/it's_all_about_the_money) [accessed 2012-05-19]

Astrid Lindgren Website (2012), available at:

<http://www.astridlindgren.se/faq> [accessed 2012-05-21]

Ayres, J (2011), *Full-time becomes part-time at Akademibokhandeln*, *Handelsnytt* [online] 2011-03-07, available at:

<http://www.handelsnytt.se/heltid-blir-deltid-pa-akademibokhandeln>, accessed [2012-05-19]

Berthelson, L (2012), *The Union Awaits Labour Court-verdict concerning part-time work*, *Handelsnytt* [online] 2012-04-26, available at: <http://www.handelsnytt.se/handels-avvaktar-ad-dom-om-deltider>, accessed [2012-05-19]

Bloom, P. and Cederstrom, C. (2009), "The Sky is the Limit": Fantasy in the Age of Market Rationality, *Journal of Organisational Change Management*, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 159-180

Boje, D. M. (1991), The Storytelling Organization: A Study of Story Performance in an Office-Supply Firm, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 1, pp. 106-126

Boje, D. M. (2001), *Narrative Methods for Organizational and Communication Research*, London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Czarniawska, B. (1998), *A Narrative Approach to Organization Studies*, London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Czarniawska, B. (2004), *Narratives in Social Science Research*, London: Sage Publication Ltd.

Martina Blomquist 880130-2046  
Gustav Bobeck 860703-4819  
FEA 418 VT-12 Master Thesis, 15 hp

35(38)  
2012-05-23

Dekker, F. (2010), Labour Flexibility, Risks and the Welfare State, *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, vol. 31, no. 4, pp. 593-611

Eriksson-Zetterquist, U., Kalling, T. and Styhre, A. (2006), *Organisation och organisering*, 2nd ed., Malmö: Liber AB

Goodale, J. C. and Thompson, G. M. (2004), A Comparison of Heuristics for Assigning Individual Employees to Labor Tour Schedules, *Annals of Operations Research*, vol. 128, no. 1, pp. 47-63

Humphries, M., Kearins, K. and Twiname, L. J. (2006) Flexibility on Whose Terms?, *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 335-355

Jenkins, S. (2004), Restructuring Flexibility: Case Studies of Part-Time Female Workers in Six Workplaces, *Gender, Work and Organization*, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 306 – 333

Kalleberg, A., Rasaell, E., Hudson, K., Webster, D., Reskin, B. Cassirer, N. and Appelbaum, E. (1997), *Nonstandard Work, Substandard Jobs: Flexible Work Arrangement in the US*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.

Kalleberg, A. (2000), Nonstandard employment relations: Part-time, temporary and contract work, *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 341-365

Kalleberg, A. (2001), Organizing Flexibility: The Flexible Firm in a New Century, *British Industrial Relations*, vol. 39, no. 4, pp. 479-504

Kashefi, M. (2007), Work Flexibility and its Individual Consequences, *The Canadian Journal of Sociology*, vol. 32, no. 3, pp. 341-369

Nandorf, T (2011), *Difficult to make the salary suffice when working part-time*, DN [online] 2011-11-14, available at:

<http://www.dn.se/ekonomi/jobbsvart-fa-lonen-att-racka-med-deltidsarbete>, accessed [2012-05-19]

Procter, S. J., Rowlinson, M., McArdle, L., Hassard, J. and Forrester, P. (1994), Flexibility, Politics and Strategy: in defense of the model of the ‘flexible firm’, *Work, Employment and Society*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 221-242

Martina Blomquist 880130-2046  
Gustav Bobeck 860703-4819  
FEA 418 VT-12 Master Thesis, 15 hp

36(38)  
2012-05-23

Sigurdson, O. and Svenungsson, J. eds. (2006), *Postmodern teologi - en introduktion*, Stockholm: Verbum

Silverman, D. (2006) *Interpreting Qualitative Data – Methods for Analyzing Talk, Text and Interaction*, 3rd ed., London: SAGE Publications Ltd

TT (2012), *More part-time work within retail*, DN [online] 2012-01-31, available at: <http://www.dn.se/ekonomi/fler-deltidsjobb-inom-handeln>, accessed [2012-05-19]

Ward, G. (2000), *Cities of God*, London: Routledge

## 7. Appendix

### 1. Opening of Interviews

The same introductory comment was conveyed to all interlocutors during the interviews: ‘When we talked to a representative from [the Retail Employer Union], he depicted that from the Nineties’ and onwards, the retail industry has flourished and in general been profitable. However, approximately five years ago, something ‘happened’, and the industry faced harder times.

We are interested in what this ‘happening’ looked like from the perspectives of different positions in different organisations – how the stories are told. Who are you, and how would you explain this ‘happening’ from your horizon?’

*Based upon the telephone interview with the Retail Employer Union Representative*

### 2. List of Interviews

#### Interviews

Position	Organisation	Date of interview	Type of interview
Store Manager	Retail 1	2012-04-20	In person
CEO	Retail 1	2012-04-27	In person
Store Manager	Retail 2	2012-04-26	In person
Region Manager	Retail 2	2012-04-23	In person
Sales Manager	Retail 2	2012-04-17	In person
Marketing Manager	E-Retail 1	2012-04-25	In person
Union Representative	The Union	2012-04-26	In person
Representative	The Retail Employer Union		Telephone

#### Observations

Place	Organisation	Date of observation
In-store	Retail 1	2012-04-17
In-store	Retail 1	2012-04-20
In-store	Retail 2	2012-04-17
Waiting room	Retail 1	2012-04-27
Waiting room	E-Retail 1	2012-04-25
Guided warehouse tour	E-Retail 1	2012-04-25
Retail Awards Gala Dinner	The Retail Employer Union	2012-05-07

### 3. Inventory of Transcription Symbols

<b>Symbol</b>	<b>Description</b>
(.)	Very short pause or ‘hesitation’ in choosing wording.
(pause)	Longer pause or silence.
:::	Indicates prolongation of a sound or letter. The length of the prolongation is illustrated by the length of the row of colons.
.hhh	Represents an inbreath or a sigh. The length of The inbreath or sigh is illustrated by The length of The row of h’s.
‘uhm’	Is the common expression for sounds similar to, often prolonged, ‘mmm’, ‘ehm’ and ‘eh’.
[text in square brackets]	This illustrates our descriptions of actions not captured in audio.
(...)	Represents a gap of excluded conversation from the recordings.
-	A word or a sentence is cut.
Capital letters	The interlocutor emphasises a particular word.

*Based upon the transcription symbols presented by Silverman (2006, pp. 398-399), including minor modifications and additions.*