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Master Thesis in Strategic HRM and Labour relations

Paid to quit

The experience of being bought out of employment

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Abstract

The purpose of this report is to explore employee buyouts from the employee's point of view and further the aim is to describe and explain former employee's experience of going through a buyout process. The theory of the psychological contract paired with theories on role exit and resistance were used to analyse and understand the empirical evidence. In addition the sociology of accounts were deployed to understand and order the given accounts in a framework. To conduct the research a qualitative approach was used. To gather the empirical evidence 15 semi structured interviews were conducted with individuals who had undergone a buyout process. The findings are presented in three parts abiding to a chronological order, where first the major reasons for employees to go from wanted to undesirable are presented: resistance, harassment and bullying, leadership and working conditions. Secondly the features of the employment buyout process are described: sick leaves, reassignments, negotiations and the settlement. Thirdly the effects of going through a buyout process are presented, first job status and then effects on identity followed by social and financial effects and finally effects on mental and physical health. In conclusion employment buyouts are complex processes that have severe effects on the well-being on the individuals involved.

Keywords: Employment buyout, severance payment, workplace harassment and bullying, working conditions, termination, unemployment.

Acknowledgements

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1. Introduction

This thesis explores the phenomenon of paying one of your employees to quit, so called employment buyouts. Employment buyouts are situations where the employer and employee, for different reasons, cannot continue working with each other and the employee is offered economic compensation for agreeing to leave their employment. In these situations the employer cannot fire the employee since the prerequisites for doing so are not upheld (see 3.3 for a discussion on Swedish labour law). The employee wants to keep the employment, or at least sees it as a bartering tool, and therefore won't give it up without compensation. The result is an agreement between the employer and employee that circumvent the Swedish labour law. There are no official numbers on the amount of employment buyouts in Sweden but there are estimates of somewhere between 5400 and 59 400 instances of employment buyouts annually (SOU 2012:62). The practice has been widely covered in different Swedish media and the two main features that have been reported is how extensive the practice is and the cost associated with the buyouts in public organisations such as municipalities, regions, the Swedish church and state agencies (for a presentation of the media coverage see 3.1).

Previous research on employment buyouts is limited, Liukkonen has published a study on employment buyouts and describes a power struggle at Stockholm University and the resulting buyouts as well as a calculation of the economic and human values involved (2014). Liukkonen is critical towards the practice, she describes it as an individualisation of the organisational problem where a scapegoat is designated and after a time of harassment and bullying a buyout is performed instead of trying to solve the initial problem (ibid). Internationally, few studies have been made on the subject and most of those focusing on the economic and legal aspects. Freyens for example (2011) calculated the contract zone where mutual gain is possible for the employer and employee if they solve the dispute without turning to the law. Jahn (2009) found that the way an employment relationship dissolves has an impact on the size of compensation, with mutual agreements resulting in the highest compensations.

The emphasis have in both scientific studies and in the medias reports, been on the employer. Hence, less studied is how the process of being bought out is experienced and perceived by the employee. This is the focus of this study, tracing a path through 15 cases of employment buyouts in order to answer the question of how it is to experience an employment buyout. In a qualitative manner 15 semi structured interviews have been conducted, transcribed, coded, translated and analysed to provide insights into the process from the perspective of the employee.

2. Objectives and research question

The objective of this study is to explore employee buyouts from the employee's point of view. The main aim is thus to describe and explain the employee's experience and view of a buyout process which is of importance to shed a light on the practice and to understand the implications. To encompass the employee buyout to a full extent, descriptions of the experience before, during and after the process are explored.

The following research questions will be answered:

- How do former employees describe and account for the buyout process from the time leading up to the buyout, the buyout process and the time after?
- How do former employees describe their experience and the effects of the buyout process?
- How can employment buyouts and the described effects be explained?

3. Background

3.1 Employment buyouts in the media

Employment buyouts have earned considerable attention in media the last years. Swedish public service radio for example had a series on the subject (Sveriges Radio, 2013). In this series they paint the picture of how women in municipalities receive a few monthly salaries to leave their long time employments (ibid) and how the practice has tripled since 2002 (Sandblad, 2013). They also asked 100 municipalities how many buyouts they have performed 2009 – 2012 and the figure came to 5500 (Sveriges Radio, 2013*). Publikt, a magazine published by the union for state workers*, have done a similar survey of six government agencies where for example the Social Insurance Agency under a 2 year period bought out 146 employees (Eriksson, 2015). Another side of the story are financial costs, buyouts of care staff at five hospitals in Sweden cost 79 million the last five years (Pirttisalo, 2015), the costs for buying out teachers 2014 was 16.6 million for the municipalities in Stockholm and Uppsala and 9.6 million for the municipality in Gothenburg (Alvén, 2015; Åhman ,2015). Prior the subject was debated by the politicians in Uppsala (Wolters, 2013). Stockholm municipality paid 56 million in 2011 and Gothenburg paid almost 30 million in 2012 (Lindstedt, 2013; Nilsson, 2013). Finally the Swedish church has paid out 115 million under a five year period for buyouts (Vision, 2014).

None of these figures, be it number of cases or cost of the practice, surmounts the whole phenomenon but the pieces together form a convincing picture of the magnitude of the practice within the church, municipalities, the regions and the state. Almost no reports from the private sector have surfaced in the media.

3.2 The commission

The state has acknowledged that there is a problem with the legal situation surrounding disputes of terminations and dismissals and therefore assigned a commission to review the rules in 2011. The commission was also tasked with proposing how costs of employers within these disputes could be limited, and to look at how these disputes are settled in practice (SOU, 2012:62). The commission set up a reference group with interested parties (employer and employee organisations) to provide information. Roughly 600 disputes are brought to court annually and the parties report that between 1% and 10% of their cases reach court every year, which would put the figure of cases handled outside of court somewhere between 5400 and 59 400 (ibid). According to the commissions survey most disputes regarding terminations are settled on the local level (between the employer and the employee) within a few months (ibid). The most common result of these disputes are that the employee leave their employment in exchange for economic compensation.

3.3 The legal and practical implications of employment buyouts

The employment protection act, hereafter LAS (Lag om anställningsskydd SFS 1982:90) govern the rules for termination and dismissals of employees. To be able to terminate or dismiss an employee with a fixed term contract certain conditions have to be upheld. The 7 § of LAS stipulates that a termination needs substantive reasons (ibid). Terminations can either be for personal reasons or on the grounds of labour shortages. Grounds of labour shortage can be economical, technical or organisational. Terminations on these grounds have to adhere to the "last in first out" principle regulated by the 22 § in LAS, meaning that the last person hired is the first one that has to leave, thus protecting people with longer tenure (ibid). However an employer can also, according to 7 § of LAS, terminate an employee for personal reasons. Personal reasons can take a multitude of forms such as not following the employment contract or having trouble working with others. Often other measures are taken before termination such as relocation, discipline meetings or warnings of different kinds. Dismissals, the more

immediate and severe version of termination, are regulated in the 18 § of LAS and stipulates that an employee can be dismissed if the employee has severely omitted their tasks owed to the employer (ibid).

A few other important paragraphs of LAS are 34 § and 39 §. The 34 § stipulates that if an employee is terminated without the employer having substantive reasons the termination is invalid. The 39 § states that if the employer refuses to comply with the invalidation the employment is seen as dissolved. The employer then have to pay for the damages based on the duration of the employment. The longer duration equals more monthly salaries (Lag om anställningsskydd SFS 1982:90).

Employment buyouts then are when an employer and an employee decide in negotiations to end an employment where substantive reasons for termination or dismissal does not exist or at the very least are uncertain. Instead an offer is made to simply ignore the rules and rights that LAS grants and end the employment with a monetary deal. The 39 § is important because labour unions and the employer organizations often base or look at the paragraph to determine the amount of monthly salaries to be paid out (SOU 2012:62).

4. Theory and links to previous research

4.1 Previous research about employee buyouts

The subject of employee buyouts is under researched both domestically and abroad. The only major study is a case study of an organisational change at Stockholm University published in three parts by Liukkonen, 2005, 2007 and 2014. The first two parts focus on the change and the direct effects of working through the organisational change. The last part however deals with the results of the change in the form of employee buyouts. Liukkonen describes a process that starts with the change of prefect at the Stockholm Business School that escalates to a conflict that encompass the whole staff at the department. Her own experience of the process is described in detail. The focus however is on the values involved in the process through which she calculates the cost of the buyouts. Both economically but also through the human capital lost or expended in the process. She calculates that the whole process amounts to $21 - 22$ million during the 10 year duration from $2004 - 2014$ (Liukkonen, 2014). Important critique against Liukkonens study is that she is a part in the conflict at the workplace, making her work more of a testimonial than a scientific study.

The specific legislation governing employment protection in Sweden that have given rise to employment buyouts as a phenomenon in part or to some extent exist abroad. Components of this practice have been studied together or apart and this literature review aims to use those studies to gain insights. One way to view buyouts of employees are that they are dismissal disputes settled outside of courts. According to the report that the commission put together (SOU, 2012:62). The courts in Sweden have about 600 disputes of this kind every year which consists of between 1 and 10 percent of total estimated employee buyouts (ibid). Settling before court then seems to be the norm and there is some literature that acknowledges this and investigates the practice. One main and major critique of employment protection laws are the added costs for hiring and firing for the employer. Freyens (2011) investigates this and tries to put forward a model to calculate the contract zone. The idea is that by avoiding legal, stigmatic and uncertain costs of arbitration there is a mutual gain possible from solving the dispute without turning to the law. He estimates that most cases will settle before court and that there are enough incentives to do so (ibid). One limitation here is of course that he uses data from Australia and that the legal system is different from that of Sweden. These findings are nevertheless consistent with that of the Swedish state commission (SOU, 2012:62). Jahn (2009) studies the effects of a law change made in Germany in 2004 to reduce the financial and legal uncertainty of bargaining when firms fire workers and have to pay compensation by stipulating severance payments. Jahn found that the now expected severance payment increased the probability of compensation and that the level of compensation increased with the law (ibid). He also found that the way the employment relationship was dissolved had an impact on the size of the compensation with mutual agreements resulting in the highest compensations. Lind, Greenberg, Scott and Welchans (2000) studied the determinants of filing a wrongful-termination claim for former employees and could conclude that the way the worker felt that they were treated paired with a potentially positive outcome were most strongly correlated. Grund (2006) analysed German data from the 1990s on severance payments from both collective and individual cases and found that the biggest determinants of receiving a payment is tenure and firm size. The size of the pay-out depended on previous wage, tenure and age.

4.2 Theoretical approach

The studies above focus less on the employee and more on the employers and the legal and economic system as a whole. To move forward in understanding the situation of individuals that have been bought out I suggest looking into several theoretical models and the research

done within these models to get a clear grasp of how it is to experience the process of a buyout. This will be done through investigating the components of this phenomenon: the employment relationship, the breaches of it, the resistance caused by the breach and the eventual exit and stigmatization as a result of the nature of the exit.

A prerequisite to enjoy the privilege of a buyout instead of just being laid off is to have obtained a permanent employment, this is important because it shows that they at some point were wanted by the employer. This changes however and important is to understand and describe this change and the underlying causes from the individual's perspective.

4.2.1 The psychological contract

The psychological contract is a concept that grasp the bond between employer and employee. It is a well-researched part of the employment relationship and grants insights both into the wellbeing of the relationship but also into breaches and violations. Argyris (1960) and Schein (1965) both wrote about it separately in the 60´s but it was not until 1989 that Rousseau developed and moved the concept into the human resource management literature (Boxall & Purcell, 2011; Culliane & Dundon, 2006). According to Schein and Argyris the contract was perceived as a two way contract between the organisation and the employee but Rousseau (1989) theorised that the contract in all likelihood was only present in the employee. Rousseau's idea was that the individual has a belief about the terms that govern the individual's relationship with the employer (Boxall & Purcell, 2011). Rousseau places the psychological contract on a continuum of transaction and relation. Transaction is short term, based on economic transactions and implicit agreements while relations are more long term, based on emotions such as trust or loyalty (Rousseau, 1989; Morrison & Robinson, 1997). The individual forms an idea or a belief of what employment in an organizations means and what they should be able to receive or expect. These beliefs can in addition fall on the scale of standard to idiosyncratic, where there seem to be a trend of movement from the former to the latter (Rousseau, 2001).

The psychological contract can be breached and violated and Robinson and Rousseau argue that breaches and violation are more norm than exception (1994). Morrison and Robinson (1997) distinguishes between perceived breach which is when the organization has failed to fulfil obligations in the perceived contract and violation which is the emotional affective state when the employee perceives that the contract is not upheld. This breach can have severe effects, decreasing trust, satisfaction, perceived obligation and intentions to remain of the

employee towards the organisation (ibid; Turnley & Feldman, 1999). Furthermore violation can have negative consequences on employee behaviours where withdrawal of contributions and in extreme cases, sabotage, aggressive behaviour and theft can be the results. Mcinnis, Meyer and Feldman (2008) put forward nine features of the psychological contract; Explicitness, formality, flexibility, level, negotiation, symmetry, tangibility, scope and time frame.

In a quantitative meta-analysis investigating the impact on breach of the psychological contract on employee outcomes Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowski and Bravo looked at mediating factors between breach and outcomes and if moderators can explain variations in effect size (2007). They conclude that a perceived breach of the psychological contract have a significant impact on most work-related outcomes. Actual turnover however was not significant raising the question why employees even though they express the intention to quit as a result of the breach still remains employed (ibid). They put forth the explanation that the high cost of actually quitting is not overcome by the breach alone. A study of interest is that of Stoner, Gallagher and Stoner (2011), the authors investigates turnover intentions in connection with breaches of the psychological contract mediated by perceived supervisor loyalty. They find that it does mediate and that having loyal supervisors lessens the turnover intentions. A loyal supervisor is a supervisor that stands up for the employee when the employee perceives that they have been wronged (ibid). This act of listening, weighing and taking action in favour of the employee points towards the significance of the role of the manager in a buyout situation.

Tekleab and Taylor (2003) and Guest (2004) criticizes the view that the psychological contract is made up of only the employee's thoughts and beliefs. In his study however Guest (ibid) show several studies where the employer's perspective are present and concludes that the psychological contract is a feasible way to study employment relations. Guest continues by discussing a framework for studying the contract and highlights trust, fairness and power, these he borrows from Fox´ idea of beyond contract (1974), as variables within the contract. Using the theory about psychological contract in this research project brought insights about breaches, violations and behaviours of the employees and employers.

4.2.2 Employee resistance

Bordia, Restubog, and Tang (2008) investigates and propose in three separate studies that breach and violation of the psychological contract initiates revenge behaviours in the employee. Thus linking resistance and misbehaviour to the employment relationship. Bordia, et al (ibid) found that a perceived breach of the contract motivates the intent for deviance, they also found

that a mediator is self-control. The more control the individual possess over itself the less acts of actual deviance.

To aid in understanding employee resistance Hodsons' (1995) theory of worker resistance which contains four agendas for resistance and ways of resisting within the agenda will be presented. The first agenda is that of deflecting abuse, when a worker is treated badly and in response can resist by degrading the management, creating alternative value systems, venting frustration or other pent up feelings and pilferage. To be able to resist the workers need to employ an aura of duplicity where they both support the management and resist them and the efforts also often needs to be supported by the other workers (ibid). The second agenda described by Hodson is to regulate the amount and intensity of work often to do exactly enough and by restricting output. By creating alternative procedures to do work in a way that is less taxing for the worker, playing dumb or by having solidarity among the workers and if all else fails by absenteeism or exit (ibid). The third agenda is that of defending autonomy of the profession, either by controlling the craft, taking pride in the work and lateral conflicts between groups at the work. Important to control when it comes to autonomy is the staffing levels to keep the work load in check. The last agenda is that of worker control through worker participation where the management tries to control the workers through letting them participate in how the work should be done. The response to this by workers range from, enthusiasm, to resistance and cynicism. Ackroyd and Thompson (1999) regard resistance as a part of employee misbehaviour and divide the concept into four parts based on appropriation of time, work, product and identity. The control over these factors determine how an employee might behave or misbehave (ibid). The theories about resistance bring insights about why and how resistance can be utilized by employees in an employment buyout process.

4.2.3 Role exit and stigmatization

One aspect of a buyout process is to deal with role exit. Ebaugh (1988) describes the process of role exit where an individual disengages and disidentifies with a prior role in life. Being bought out can mean going through this process in part or full depending on what comes after. Starting a new job in a similar line of work might mean a slight or non-existent role exit. Switching career or perhaps remaining unemployed for a longer period of time might have a bigger impact on the perceived self-identity. Ebaugh describes a four stage process of role exit: First doubts where the exiter becomes aware of and began to doubt their role commitments, this is followed by seeking alternatives to the current role. The third stage is the turning point where the exiter

come to understand that the current role may not be desirable and the realisation that there are other possibilities and opportunities. The fourth stage is that of the creation of the ex-role where Ebaugh have identified six areas where the exiter struggles. Signalling that a role change has occurred to the environment, reacting to other people's reactions of the change, learning to handle intimate relationships (relevant for ex nuns and transsexuals), change in their networks of friends, change in how the exiter relates to other exes and people who are still part of whatever the exiter exited from and finally role residual in the form of still maintaining some traces of the former role. Price, Friedland and Vinokur (1998) examines research on job loss and how it affects ones identity. They found that to avoid enduring mental health outcomes of a job loss it is important to resolve the personal identity and economic consequences of the loss. If the economic consequences are not solved such as by finding a new job secondary stressors that produce turmoil and distress will continue to avail the unemployed and can result in poor mental health (ibid). Even accepting a less prestigious job can lead to effects such as stigmatization that needs to be overcome, one way is to pursue a simpler life for example by retiring and in that way cope with the threats to the personal identity. Another observation in their work was that the sense of mastery and control can be affected if the new work opportunity is less secure (ibid)

Continuing the process the ex needs to find a new role which in this case is translated to a new workplace. According to Goffman´s (1963) notion of stigmatization, being unemployed is a taint on the personal character and will have an effect on the employability of the former employee. Canziani and Petrongolo (2001) investigates firing costs and the relation to stigma in hiring new employees with regards to their employment history. They found that higher firing costs means that employers will avoid hiring individuals with poor employment histories. This would have an effect on individuals who have been bought out if being bought out is regarded as negative by employers. Kugler and Saint-Paul (2011) further investigated the issue of firing costs and this time in relation to if firms rather employ employees that already have an employment. The authors found that high firing costs generate hiring discrimination against those that are unemployed (ibid). Further and of importance for this study is that those that are unemployed for reasons that are not deemed negative such as by the seniority rule or that the contract ended and therefore did not have dismissal costs had an easier time finding a job. Which means, in reverse, that those that had a bad ending to their employment will have a harder time. The study was done on data from the United States of America where the firing cots is relatively low compared to Europe and the authors therefore argue that their research

will have more of an impact here (ibid). The theories of role exit and stigmatization give valuable tools for understanding the consequences of an employment buyout.

4.3 Account theory

Talking about an experience and giving an account on what happened from the individual's point of view demands a theoretical tool for classifying and explaining how individuals talk about what happened in the situation and excuse or justify their behaviour. Mills (1940) theorises in his essay on vocabularies of motives of how motives are verbalised in question situations. Scott and Lyman (1968) build upon Mills reasoning and divide given accounts into excuses and justifications. Using excuses an individual admits guilt for a situation or behaviour but tries to minimize their responsibility. Justifications occurs when an individual admits being responsible for the behaviour or situation but still argue the behaviours legitimacy. The basic idea is to look at an account and to analyse how the informant talks about their perception of the situation and verbalise their role, acts and behaviours in the situation. Studying the motive behind the behaviour. Schönbach (1980) continues in the vein of Scott and Lyman and adds concessions of the guilt and refusals. Larsson and Jakobsson (2012) employs the sociology of accounts in their study on over indebtedness to classify the debtor's accounts in a framework. They used five main categories of accounts: refusals, justifications, excuses, concessions and appeals in a model, developed by Fritsche (2002), which aims to make visible how an actor can cover by confessing guilt. The theory of accounts and the five categories put forward above are tools that help to classify and explain the individual's accounts of a situation. Being unwanted imply that some action have been taken to grant this status, it is therefore interesting to use the theory of accounts to understand these situations.

5. Method

5.1 General design decisions

The main unit of analysis in this study are individuals that have undergone the process of being bought out of their employment. While you could argue that this is a case study Bryman (2012) argues that the geographic location is important within the concept of case studies. While the sampling in this research project is done from a conceptual angle (with consideration to practicality such as geography) a cross sectional design is therefore more suitable and was

deployed. Using a cross sectional design means only collecting data at one point in time unlike a longitudinal design where a research project would for example collect information, before during and after a researched event (ibid). A qualitative approach was used which according to Bryman (2012) is possible with a cross sectional design and furthermore is ideal for extracting individuals experiences and stories. The research questions for this project aim to explore experiences of individuals which a qualitative approach is well suited for. I was with qualitative interviews able to hear and analyse the experiences as told by the informants in their own wording. As described by Bryman (2012) where the informant is asked to reflect upon a process such as being bought out. Both before and after the event itself can be captured this way, in a cross sectional study. While a quantitative approach would also have been very interesting and much needed, finding a big enough sample to conduct it would with my current contacts and scope not be possible.

5.2 Population and sampling

The target population for the study were individuals that had been bought out from their employment in Sweden. Which is a substantial group and therefore a few limiters were needed, first I would like to argue that the event should have taken place within a few years period, to still remain relatively fresh and accurate in the informants mind. Secondly a geographical limiter was needed for the practicality of the study, here Västra Götalands län is practical and differentiated enough to allow for different living conditions such as living in the city or on the countryside. The third limiter concerned the possibilities of finding and contacting the informants. Fortunately I have contacts within one of the unions and I was able to use their resources to construct a population. This could be seen as a sampling of context (Bryman, 2012). This third limiter thus limited the population to only their members which will mean that the population will have certain jobs, work in certain organizations and to some degree have a certain education level (which is discussed in section 5.3).

The aim of the sampling process was to achieve as diverse a pool of informants that the union could provide when it comes to aspects such as age, sex and ethnicity and type of organisation. In total 31 names of individuals that had been bought out the last couple of years were acquired from the union. An introductory email containing information about the study and what their contribution would be were sent to them and after two weeks calls to remind them of the study were placed. Fifteen gave a positive answer and were interviewed. The last

sixteen either never answered or answered that they weren't interested, the main reasons being that it would affect them too much to talk about an incident they rather forget. The informants were given the choice of having the interview face to face, either at my workplace, at the university or any other location they chose or to do the interview over the phone. Ten chose to do the interviews in person and five for practical reasons chose to do them over the phone. The reasons were mostly geographical or for flexibility reasons, a phone call can be ended at a moment's notice and redialled when time permits. One of the phone interviews were conducted in two sessions since the informant had problems concentrating for longer periods as a result of the buyout process. The disadvantage however with doing telephone interviews is that the tool of non-verbal cues disappear and it is harder to direct the interviewee to the topics of interest (Berg, 2009). An advantage however is that the distance provides a perceived anonymity that is helpful when discussing highly sensitive subjects as I would argue that a buyout could be (ibid). The duration of the interview's ranged from 45 minutes to 90 minutes with most being around 60 minutes.

5.3 Sample description

The fifteen informants had all been bought out from their respective organisations that spanned municipalities, private companies, foundations and both conformist and non-conformist churches. Thirteen of the informants were women and two male, no comparisons between the genders will thus be made, and the reason for the skewness is in part because the union for the most part organise employees in female oriented occupations. A reflection however is that the contacted males were less interested in talking about their situation. The youngest participant were 27 years old and the oldest 65 giving a substantial spread. Twelve were of Swedish descent and three had migrated to Sweden. Two had managerial roles in their organisations and the rest were employees. As for education the informants had a spread from high school education to master's degree, with the older in general having more basic education and the younger more advanced. The duration of their employment varied between one year and 37 with an average of 14 years of employment. Most of the buyouts ended 2015 but a few date back a few years and the older ones add information of the time afterwards but have less remembered and immediate information of the experience of the process. In the findings the interview persons have been given a random number in-between 1 – 15 and are denoted as IP 1, IP 2 and so forth.

5.4 Empirics

To answer the research questions empirical evidence was gathered. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The goal of the interviews was to record the experience and as well as understanding what the effects of the termination ultimately became. The semi structured interview as a tool enabled themes or questions surrounding the different steps in the process to be investigated until depleted before moving on to the next step (Bryman, 2012).

5.4.1 Interview guide

The interview guide was developed to be semi structured with four sections where section one covered background information of a more orienting character, the goal was to form a picture of the person being interviewed and to understand the trajectory the person has gone through to land where he/she finally ended up. As well as setting up the important rapport between the interviewer and interviewee to be able to tackle the much more sensitive questions of the buyout (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The following three sections were based on the theoretical framework and covered the different parts of the buyout process. The first being the initial relationship to the former workplace and the formation of the psychological contract, here it is important to form a picture of the informants role and attitude towards the workplace. Mcinnis et al (2008) developed a measuring tool for their nine features that make up the psychological contract. The features: Explicitness, formality, flexibility, level, negotiation, symmetry, tangibility, scope and time frame were all covered in this section, giving an adequate portrayal of the parts of the employment relationship. The second covered the breach of the psychological contract or the process or incident leading up to the actual negotiations of the buyout. The theory of accounts was attached here where the informant will talk about their role in this process. The third was about the actual agreement and the end of the employment, here the theory of role exit was of importance and the eventual adjustment the informant had to go through. Important was also asking about the effect the process has had on the individual mentally, socially, financially and on moving on and finding new work. Finding out if going through a buyout process carries with it a measure of stigmatization. The sections in themselves were not necessary autonomous, the interview often moved between them. They acted more as a checklist of information or themes that had to be extracted before the recorder was turned off.

5.5 Analysis

The collected data in the form of recorded audio were transcribed in full with the help of the software Nvivo 10, which was also used to perform the coding. To perform the analysis a thematic approach was used as laid out by Braun and Clarke (2006) in six steps, familiarizing with the data by transcribing and reading the material, generating initial codes and breaking them down into themes and sub themes in step three – five and finally writing the report. Thematic analysis is an analytic method which identifies, analyses and reports patterns within the data (ibid). The thematic analysis was suitable as a counter measure to the theory driven interview guide and research design, allowing the data to speak without the constraints of the theory. A chronological order of the events associated with a buyout were picked to order the themes and their respective sub-themes. One issue to note is that the interviews were conducted in Swedish and the quotes in the text were translated to English.

5.6 Ethical considerations

Prior to undertaking this study the Swedish research council's ethical research principles were considered. Four demands are put forward as important: the information demand, the consent demand, the confidentiality demand and the usage demand (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002). These demands aim to protect the individual and this project complied with them in full. The informants were informed of them both in the introduction letter and before the interviews. The subject is very sensitive and for some very unsettling to talk about. To add some support I have after the interviews were finished shut down the recording device and given the informants however much time they needed to talk about the interview experience in an effort to ease their participation.

Another ethical issue that demands some attention is that of bias. I worked for one of the unions while conducting this research. The union could be seen as one of the social partners acting within the labour market which would put me in a situation of double allegiance, to the union but also to objective research. To handle this potential for bias I will reflect upon my situation and conduct the research with as much transparency as possible, towards the informants and the readers. The union's sole task in this thesis have been to supply a list of potential informants, after this they have had no direct say in the research project.

5.7 Limitations and validity

The limitations of this project lies in part in the validity of testimonials. The informants have had a possibility to tell a story without anyone disputing them on what actually happened. The counterparts in the conflicts has not been heard and therefore the objectivity of the situations cannot be verified. Instead we have fifteen distinct subjective experiences and have to treat the data as such, subjective. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) states that validity could be interpreted as if a method investigates what it claims to investigate. To limit this the theoretical approach of account theory have been applied in the findings and in the discussions to problematize the action of giving an account.

6. Findings

The findings are divided into three main categories arranged in chronological order. The logic behind this is to present the buyout process to the reader as the process occur. The first theme covers the background to the buyout, why the employee in the end is bought out. The second theme regards the actual process and the features present in a buyout process. The last theme concerns the time after the buyout and the effects the buyout has had on the informants. The composite picture of fifteen buyouts will be presented with the aim of giving the reader an insight into how it is to experience a process like this and to give an understanding of the phenomenon.

6.1 Before the buyout process

The first theme regards the time before the buyout process starts. The aim is to present, describe and analyse the backgrounds of why the informants in the end were bought out. In some of the cases there have been one major incident or cataclysmic event behind the buyout but in most there are several reasons, processes or incidents over a long period of time. The sub-themes will be presented below starting with resistance and conflict two interlinked themes, followed by harassment and bullying, leadership and working conditions. After these reasons two sub-themes of a different nature will be discussed, the informant's guilt in the situation and why they decided to stay even though they perceived the situation as bad.

6.1.1 Employee resistance and conflict

One frequent quote from the informants that came in a few different versions was "Because I am one of those who say what I feel and think" (IP, 10). This statement and various acts described below can be seen as instances of employee resistance. Some of the informants were active within the union during their employment others were just verbal and explicit about their opinions. Bordia, et al (2008) found in their study that breaches to the psychological contract initiates revengeful behaviours. They also found that self-control mediated the relationship and the following quotation validates their results: "I have a tough time keeping quiet, I don't like injustice and I don't like foul play" (IP, 9). Three of Hodson's agendas of why resistance is performed could also be found. The most common was deflecting abuse and this was done by venting frustration or by degrading the management. Interesting was that the informants did not always see their acts as resistance. One informant for example created an alternative way to manage her work, which made her tasks less straining which correspond to the second agenda of Hodson's, the idea of regulating the amount and intensity of work (1995). The informant however saw it as an improvement on how things should be done, not as an act of resistance. The third agenda of controlling the craft were also widely present, one informant for example described how a longer period of sick leave left her with a new perspective:

> You come back with new eyes and ears and as I said I didn't like what I saw and heard and I started opposing on how things were and I didn't want to be in on what they did anymore (IP, 7).

Things had changed at the workplace while the informant was absent which in her opinion meant a lower quality of work, which she started opposing.

The discrepancy between policy and reality created difficulties for the informants, often cited "high ceilings" by the management did not exist in reality, which was perceived as very negative by the informants and could be seen as a breach of the psychological contract (Bordia et al, 2008). One informant describes a conversation she had with one of her managers about having talked to her colleagues about her situation: "You understand the consequences, yes I answered, I'm not going to sit in there, I'm not going to be quiet, that's how it was" (IP, 6). The consequence for her was that they started discussing to end her employment. Even though she knew what was at stake, she still continued with what she believed to be right.

What often started as just voicing their opinions as described by the informants, often escalated to conflicts between the manager and the employee. Two examples of when voiced

opinions escalated to conflicts are: "I pretty quickly got into clinch with him because I voiced the faults" (IP, 1) while another one emphasized that: "We didn't have the same ideas him and me about how the business should be run" (IP, 8). In some of the conflicts both the employee and the employer recognized their part and had knowledge of the effects of the conflict. Other conflicts were more one sided where all the power were congregated on one side of the conflict, as described by one interviewee: "It was after this meeting that the fear started coming, I had poked something that I shouldn't touch" (IP, 14). Resistance and conflict in different forms were present in most of the cases this report is based on.

6.1.2 Harassment and bullying

Resistance and conflict as noted above were described as one of the precursors to harassment and bullying. The informants often felt that resistance and the conflicts were a thorn in the employer or managers side and that they therefore were regarded as uncomfortable by the management. Netting them bad treatment, harassment, bullying and to varying degrees ostracism. Tactics were employed to make the employee feel unwanted, small things at first but escalating: "It was hard to put words on it, meetings were moved without you getting to know, some of the papers in the material were missing for me" (IP, 14). Other examples are master suppression techniques in meetings, not including the employee in decision making "Yes, because this is one way, they bullied me out, they applied master suppression techniques and then it says on my paper that I was fired on the grounds of work shortage" (IP, 11). Harassment and bullying in different forms were by some of the informants described as the reason for not wanting to fight for their employment anymore, for giving up or agreeing to be forced out. Harassment and bullying were perceived as a tactic or tool for the managers and employers to get rid of employees that were not deemed well enough for the workplace.

One performed tactic was that of ostracism or isolation, moving the employee far from former colleges, and not recognizing their existence by ignoring and hindering contact with colleagues: "The managers did not greet me, I was moved and had to sit on another floor far away from my former colleges. I was almost sitting totally isolated" (IP, 14). After receiving this treatment for four months the interviewee gave in and left the workplace. In some cases the bullying crossed the lines to threats and were obvious and blatant: "She came up to me, threateningly, she stood this close, and she says: I am going to keep my eye on you, just so you know" (IP, 6). In others the denial was a part of the treatment:

It's not only the physical work environment that is the problem it is to a big degree the psychological and you are a big part of that I told my manager and then he countered with saying that is a matter of interpretation (IP, 14).

The silent, not recognized bullying worked to an extent as put by the same interviewee: "It crawls under the skin on me, even if I tried to keep it away from me it was starting to be hard" (IP, 14). The bullying had real tangible effects which had an impact on the lives of the interviewees: "I was bullied, treated differently on my workplace which has led to that I really have become ill" (IP, 6).

The reasons for the bullying varied, being a result of the conflict and resistance described above to: "In my case it became pretty clear, it was me as a person, not really the work" (IP, 14). Often the informant had no idea why they were being targeted: "Because she didn't explain what I did wrong" (IP, 6) and "Because I have not got an explanation for anything" (IP, 10) are two examples of the informants being kept in the blind. Not knowing the reasons for the treatment have had severe effects and is cited as very psychologically taxing. Many of the informants have spent a lot of time during and after their buyout trying to figure out what it was that happened.

Another phenomenon described in the interviews was that of how inhuman the process and treatment was "There are no humans behind, there were terribly few humans behind everything, really scary and then that is what you are supposed to work with, humans" (IP, 11). How people were enacting and entering roles to get a result without seeing what effects it had for the individual:

This person from the employer organisation, I don't know what it was with him, something terrible, they just sat there and bombarded me for what a bad human I was (IP, 9).

Getting the job done, getting rid of the undesired individual was more important than treating another human being with basic human dignity.

6.1.3 Leadership

Conflicts, harassment and bullying were heavily described in conjunction with the leadership, managers were often the counterpart in conflicts or the ones leading the harassment and bullying, at least allowing or setting the tone. It was evident from the interviewee's responses

about the leadership that it was lacking at most of the workplaces. Stoner et al showed in their research how important perceived supervisor loyalty is in regards to turnover intentions (2011). A clear trend and something that the informants saw as troubling were the number of managers they had during their employment, one example of this is: "in three years I had five managers" (IP, 13). This had consequences, changes every time a new manager tries to put their mark on the workplace. One informant described the situation as: "If you had a performance appraisal with one you had a follow up appraisal with one you didn't know" (IP, 15). Trust and loyalty was hard to build during these circumstances.

In a few of the workplaces getting a new manager could almost be described as a purging process, the people who were unwanted got targeted and removed from the workplace. One interviewee described a chain of events where one employee after the other were targeted for removal: "I stood up for two that took their stuff and quit eventually, and then I became the target" (IP, 10). In the end six employees had left the workplace, either quit voluntarily after harassment and bullying from the manager, early retirement or as a result of a buyout.

Another important aspect of leadership were if you were compatible with your particular manager or not. Several interviewees described how the personal relationship with the manager were the issue: "All other managers, around 135, I have been able to a high degree agree with […] but the 136th, he and I we couldn't agree". That it depends this much on the personal relationship to one individual was described as a major vulnerability.

6.1.4 Working environment and work load

Two factors often cited as reasons to not being able to live up to the expectations set by the managers are work load and different factors in the working environment. The work load being too substantial for some of the informants to handle have had negative consequences for them with the results of being sick or injuring themselves physically and psychologically. Some tactics were deployed by the informants to handle the situation for example by covering up for yourself by starting your work day before it was intended:

> And then I told her you cannot put more people on my schedule because there is no time, but it's only for two three days, then it didn't happen, that person stayed. Because I cut and pasted in my schedule, started a quarter earlier to be able to make it, I didn't charge for that (IP, 2).

Other tactics employed by the interviewees to handle the situation was to work when they were home sick or do a lot of overtime, one informant described how she wouldn't have gotten her permanent position if she didn't work as much overtime as she did. One vulnerable situation is to be the only one doing a job at a work place. When there was no one to back the informant's up when they were sick or to unload them during peaks they were in difficult positions. One informant described how she had to look outside of the organisation to be able to obtain the knowledge and skills to perform her work, since there was no one to ask.

When it comes to the working environment the issues were often structural, a faulty accounting system, organisational change, co-workers not pulling their part, as expressed by one informant: "Then I had to take that on, it only became more and more which led to that I went into a depression" (IP, 2). Several of the informants have described how their former positions were enlarged following their exit: "In addition they have expanded my post to full time" (IP, 14). Showing that the work load was too much for the allocated resources not the employed individual.

6.1.5 Guilt

One distinct and important topic when it comes to discuss the reasons for the buyout is the informant's own guilt in the process. The notion that there is a reason for an employer to want to get rid of a specific individual. Interesting then is to discuss the account given by the informants of the given situations and the process. Here the sociology of accounts or account theory is a useful theoretical and methodical tool when it comes to handling guilt (Scott & Lyman, 1968; Schönbach, 1980). One interviewee admitted the following: "I sat there and tried to maintain an illusion that I only really lived up to 90% of" (IP, 13). The interviewee concedes her own blame for the situation and this quote sums up the experience described by a few of the informants, doing the bare minimum to still maintain the job. The given justifications for this behaviour were boredom, low job satisfaction or the lack of support. For example one informant cite a family tragedy and the lack of support and understanding through the process as a turning point in exuding efforts. The individuals belief of what the employers should upheld, in this case support and understanding, during and after the tragedy was not fulfilled, a breach then of the psychological contract in line with Rousseau's theory occurred and the employee started loafing as a result (1989). Another have a similar story where her efforts to get a permanent employment is not rewarded, she describes the situation: "I'm not appreciated, why did I spend so much time? Why am I doing this?" (IP, 12). She justified her lower efforts

and absence from the workplace with that she isn't getting the rewards she perceive she has a right to.

One way the informants admitted their guilt was to take responsibility for their part in a conflict: "I was as bad towards my boss as we were towards each other, we were incompatible people" (IP, 4). Here there is an understanding of the situation and a conclusion that there were two individuals in the conflict both sharing a responsibility.

6.1.6 Staying

Whatever the reason cited above most of the informants in this study decided to stay on through a period of time even though they were harassed, bullied, over worked or subject to other reasons. The reasons for staying on were many and some were more practical such as proximity to work, being able to pick up the kids, even laziness: "I don't know, maybe, not laziness, a little laziness maybe, in a way, I did not have the priority to look for a new job" (IP, 13). Others cited loyalty too either the work tasks, the colleges or the profession:

> I have a very strong feeling of loyalty if I take something on then I will try to fix
> it too. From this workplace I should've gone a lot earlier. You stay too long
> unfortunately and you do that because you are loyal to both co-workers and your
> work, your work tasks (IP, 14).

Others had experiences of unemployment from earlier in their careers or saw finding a new job as an obstacle from moving on: "Because it is not fun when you are 50+ too look for a new job I can tell you that" (IP, 7). The obstacles described to find a new job were many such as age-issues, lack of education or not being able to work full time. On top of this were often a feeling of that this is temporary, it will stop and work itself out as one interviewee believed: "I thought in my stupidity that he will change, he will see that I do a good work" (IP, 3). For a period of time most stayed and as described by the informants endured their situations until they couldn't anymore and that is when they started their process of being bought out. Zhao et al (2007) concluded in their meta-analysis that a breach of the psychological contract wasn't enough for an employee to actually quit. The cost was seen as too high. The rewards and perceived safety of being bought out in the terms of monetary compensation might then be needed to push the employee from staying in a situation and a work environment that is harmful.

6.2 During the buyout process

The second theme covers the actual buyout process, the steps taken from the employer and the employee towards ending the employment. The aim is to give an overview of the different steps and features of this process. Pinpointing exactly when a process is started is not always easy, some cases have clear distinct timelines with events while others have a more blurred nature. The duration of the process also varies with some cases ending in weeks while others last for years. The buyout process is divided into six sub-themes; sick leaves and rehabilitations, reassignments, negotiations and union participation, trust, the settlement itself and finally the informant's experience of the process.

6.2.1 Sick leave and rehabilitation

A prominent feature of all but two of the buyouts in this thesis was being declared sick and staying home. The reasons for the sick leaves differed between the respondents here divided in psychological and physical. The more common reasons for becoming ill were psychological, some became sick from stress from the working conditions, as one informants puts it: "Stress induced panic disorder, it simply became too much" (IP, 2). Some were feeling bad mentally from the treatment on the workplace and some couldn't go back after a conflict as shown here: "I hadn't done this but I couldn't swear free. She simply didn't believe me. So it ended with that I went home sick" (IP, 9). The physical problems could be divided up into two causes, internal from the working conditions, as in this example where the informant used a bicycle as a mode of transportation in her work:

> I got problems with my back and what they thought were from probably making
> a lift, that in itself isn't dangerous, but since I have been biking I have exposed
> the back to cold and draught which caused an inflammation (IP, 2).

And external from accidents and non-work related illnesses either prior or during the employment as was the problem for one interviewee who had a non-work related accident which affected her ability to work: "I start to get problems from aches in my old neck and in my arms and fingers, the last period of time I could barely touch a computer" (IP, 14).

In these cases when an employee falls sick the employer has a responsibility to help them get back to the work place. To do this a rehabilitation plan is mandatory and should be set up in conjunction with all involved parties the employee and the employer but also the Swedish Social Insurance Agency, a doctor and if needed a union representative. These plans were often

the first step in the buyout process. Or rather if the rehabilitation plan failed the result were often a buyout.

Sick leaves were also used to stall or as a means to keep the parties separate pending negotiations. In one instance the negotiations were postponed by the employer and the employee was home sick for another month without being sick, when asked about if she had any say in this decision she answered: "But no one cared, I was home sick, I was home sick the whole summer" (IP, 9). The rehabilitation process was described by most of the informants as long and difficult. Some were harassed by the employer side and it were obvious that the employer took the chance to make it difficult in the hopes that the employee would leave their employment. Another issue was that of the responsibility, where the employee often had to carry the whole process, organise it, carry it out and seek alternatives when none were offered:

> The ball was in my court in some way, it was them who had the responsibility
> but they passed it over to me. It was I who had to be better or become healthy or
> get competence to manage this (IP, 14).

It was up to the employees to stop being sick and when this could not be achieved the offer of a buyout were seen as the only remaining option.

6.2.2 Reassignments

One possibility to handle a situation where the problem is interpersonal or with the working environment or conditions is to reassign the employee to another unit. This often came up in conjunction with the rehabilitation process where the employee in some instances were given the option to practice working with other tasks or in other parts of the organisation as a step to come back to work. But the most striking finding about reassignments were the lack of or willingness to use this practice by both the employers and the employees. One employee saw it as being a burden for the receiving manager and unit, a testament in itself on how much the self-esteem had been damaged in her case. She didn't want to be a burden and instead choose to exit her employment through a buyout.

Often the reassignment offers were steps down to positions that were perceived as lesser and this was a barrier for some of the interviewees. The issue then became why the informant should be the one to move an example is: "When I got back I was transferred to answering the phones again" (IP, 6) which the informant hadn't done in several years. In another instance a

reassignment was made from the so to speak floor to the office and the change was satisfactory for the employee but the employer said no to a permanent move and thereby closed the door, which lead to the only option being terminating the employment.

When coming back from longer periods of sick leave some of the informants was given other work tasks, and in a few instances this was perceived as a punishment or as an action with the goal of pushing out the employee, as one informant described it:

> Then he created work tasks that were far from, I didn't even get to do what I did before, but it was mostly administration, again work tasks that I felt I didn't have competence for, I stayed four months before I was home sick again (IP, 14).

6.2.3 Negotiations and union participation

As mentioned above, when a rehabilitation process failed, the negotiations of the buyout started. At this stage local union representatives were often already involved and if not this was when the employee contacted the union. Engaging the union late in the process were common and several of them would've done different if they had a second chance. The union in question have a clear policy of trying to keep their members employed but when they are attached to the process at a late stage there are few options other than a buyout. There are a few reasons for this. Firstly, both the employee and employer have decided that they want to part ways. Secondly, the issue of trust (see 6.2.4) and, thirdly, that the rehabilitative process have not had the intended effect and the employee were still not able to come back to work.

Partaking in the actual negotiations were from the employer sides often the manager, a person from the HR-function, if one exists, and a representative from the employer organisation. Representing the employee were often the local union and an ombudsman from the centre and most of the time the employee. In some cases the employees have left the negotiations to the union completely and their role have only been to approve of the final deal or not. Most of the time the employee however were part of the negotiations. In most cases the suggestion for solving the situation with an agreement came from the employer. An offer was made and then the back and forth started ending with the deal, in a few of the cases there were no back and forth which gave rise to feelings of powerlessness "I felt very embarrassed in that sense, when you come and there is no negotiation whatsoever" (IP, 15). Freyens (2011) put forth in his research that there exists a contract zone where both the employee and employer would be able to obtain mutual gain from settling instead of going to court. A few of the interviewees had

plans to take the issue to court but in the end didn't. The reasons were in line with Freyens research, the more prominent ones were the time it would take and the insecurity of winning and actually receiving a settlement. The informants perceived themselves to be at a disadvantage, if they didn't receive the settlement now they thought they would be without livelihood until their case could be tried in court.

The negotiations were described by the informants as ordeals, accusations and harassment were common and the need to delve into what had happened were emotionally taxing and in most instances described as horrible, the experience of the process is described more below.

6.2.4 Trust

One recurring sub-theme through the transcribed material were that of trust, which is one aspect of the psychological contract as put forth by Rousseau (1989). Trusting your employer and your manager were very important for most of the informants. The situations that the informants have gone through left little trust, and trust was often cited as one of the main reasons for not being able to go back to the workplace: "Then the union representative asked me what I wanted, I never wanted to set my foot there again, I wanted to never be there again" (IP, 11). A breach of the informants trust in the organisation that employed them were interlaced with that of performance as described by one interviewee: "In my situation I would never have gone back even if they offered that, no I had no trust for the company, zero trust, how could I perform?" (IP, 12). A legitimate question but at the same time a justification of her absenteeism. Even if the problems at the workplace, the source of the issue could be fixed the issue of trust would still be present, it acted as a barrier, after the informants had made up their mind that they would not be able to go back, as put by one informant: "I didn't want to go back in the end, I would've felt so terrible if I went back to a place where I have an employer that totally doesn't care about you" (IP, 2). When the conflicts had escalated to a certain point there seemed for the informants to be no turning back, not until the trust could be repaired. One issue with these processes is that the conflicts escalate to a point where there are no other solutions than to part way and often the unions aren't contacted until this point is reached, giving them few options in supporting through the process.

6.2.5 The settlement

Accepting the settlement in the end came down to a few different factors. First the size of the settlement of course and what it would mean to the informants whom had different economic backgrounds. For one informant getting a symbolic settlement of one month's pay and not having to wait through the qualifying days for the social insurance was seen as a victory. For another the line was drawn at one year since she was a few years from retiring and finding new employment at her age would be difficult. For some the issue were principal, getting away with as much as possible to hurt the employer as a payback.

A settlement like this means that the informant won't be eligible for the social insurance during the time that the payments were made, if the payments were made in bulk the duration for which they were not eligible were calculated. So if they don't manage to find a new employment the benefits will be marginally better than that of the unemployment pay-outs they otherwise would be eligible for. For some accepting the deal was a way to end the process and to move on as described by one informant: "I felt at that instance that I just wanted to get an end to it, I wanted to avoid those calls, texts and this undertone that were present in everything" (IP, 14). For others the relationship with the employer were so badly burned that they couldn't go back.

The deals in the end were in a range of two weeks to two years. What decided the size of the deal were a combination of the duration of employment, what the incident had been, how badly the employee had been treated, what policy the organisation had for paying out settlements and of course the negotiation. Grunds (2006) research on the size of severance payments are in line with these findings in that they highlight tenure and, as a natural consequence of that, age as big determinants.

Some of the informants were offered outplacement programs as part of the settlements. These programs had the function of establishing the former employee on the labour market again and were appreciated by those who received them: "Money is really good, but it is also a benefit to get like, like this help then" (IP, 10). Other factors that differed between the settlements were pension depositions, additions for inconvenient work hours and perhaps most importantly freedom to collaborate. Freedom to collaborate is a clause meaning that if the former employee finds other work the payments would stop, none of the settlements had this clause in the accepted deal however.

6.2.6 Experience of the process

Going through this process have left few of the informants untouched, most are dealing with some lasting effects which are discussed below. The experience of the process in itself is important to describe to give understanding, one informant put it as: "It was the worst thing I have ever been through, it was horrible, I thought I was becoming mad from time to time" (IP, 11). Most described the situation in a similar vein, citing the experience as horrible and very tough mentally and emotionally to go through. With feelings of worthlessness and a deep questioning of ones self-worth: "I felt worthless, was I not worth more than that?" (IP, 2). The truth that the informants had to accept were that the employer wanted to get rid of them and this was hard:

> This with the emotions, it is emotional, you feel that you are not a bad person, but somewhere that you, because the thing with buyouts is that it is done with people that have done something (IP, 10).

The situation were very tough for some of the informants, emotionally, psychologically and physically draining as one interviewee described: "Then I slept, several weeks almost a month to recover" (IP, 3). The experience of the situation shook some of the informants to a degree of helplessness and loss of control, one informant spoke about the moment when she couldn't fight anymore:

> Then it snapped, I just stood there and cried, this is sick. I went to my health centre, and just sat there and cried, I don't normally cry, but I just cried until they declared me sick (IP, 11).

Another issue were the degree of suddenness that these things happened with, some of the informants were employed for ten, twenty even thirty years and suddenly it ended. One informant had worked for over 30 years for the same employer with no major problems and after a few troublesome years at the end the rest of the employment history mattered little, as she put it: "That you valued me, even if it has been bad the last years […] That they valued me in another way, it would've felt much better" (IP, 15). The shock of suddenly losing something that you took for granted, had depended on for most of a life time were evident, the suddenness of job loss: "The worst thing was the shock of being kicked out of the security" (IP, 13). The lack of a long-term perspective made the situation tough for them to understand and accept. The notion that the value they had produced over the years wasn't worth anything in the end were a truth they had to handle.

6.3 After the buyout process

After the settlement were accepted and the papers were signed the employment for the informants ended, with this came uncertainty for the future. Under this theme we will look at the current work situation, and how the experience of applying for new jobs have been. We will continue with looking at how leaving long term roles have affected the informants identity. After that we will go into the financial and social effects as well as the effects on the informant's health, both mentally and physically. Finally we will look at their opinions of buyouts as a practice to gain insights into what going through this process have left them thinking.

6.3.1 Job Status

Around half of the informants had found new employment at the time of the interviews. Those with university degrees seem to have had an easier time of finding jobs and in a few instances even found better or more desirable jobs, as described by one informant: "The rumour travelled that I left [organisation] and only a few days after they called from here" (IP, 11). For those that didn't have university education the job search have been less positive, a few of the informants have managed to land part time jobs, in some cases at several companies. The expectations of how the job hunt would go mediated the experience, as one informant put it: "It isn't full time and it is not permanent, but it is better than nothing, it has actually gone better than expected" (IP, 14). Going from having a secure employment with guaranteed salary and hours to unsecure employment, no fixed hours and often varying work tasks, still the experience were better than expected. Another informant saw the job loss as an opportunity to scale down: "I worry, I absolutely do, but I will make it, I will. I had planned to scale down" (IP, 13). These findings are in line with Price et al's findings (1998) where they highlight that one way to cope is to scale down and that by accepting less secure jobs the perceived mastery and control of the situation will be lower. Others have had to work their way up the ladder again, starting with part time temporary employment and over time have worked their way up to permanent positions and full time.

The other half of the informants have been less successful and at the time of their respective interviews still remained unemployed. The two factors that stood out for this group were age and their health. Regarding health a few were still sick either as an effect of their previous work or of other unrelated health issues. Depending on their situations they were adjusting or trying to get back to the labour market through different efforts, coaches, work

training or educations designed to get them back on the labour market. Or struggling with their health conditions with the intent on returning when and if possible as one of the informants declared: "I will make myself available to the labour market as soon as I am well again" (IP, 15).

The older you are the harder it seemed to find new work and the more aware the informants was of their predicament. One informant had been looking for work for a few years when the interview took place and had had no offers or interviews: "I never came to an interview not once, even though I applied for jobs that I were both under and over qualified for" (IP, 8). A Meta study showed a negative relationship between age and reemployment, which became stronger over the age of 50 (Wanberg, Kanfer, Hamann and Zhang, 2015). Two of the informants cited similar studies or sources during the interviews showing how aware they were of their age as a problem for finding new employment. Wanberg et al cites job search self-efficacy as a moderator for success and it was obvious that the knowledge of age as a factor affected the informants in their job search, either to motivate or demotivate (2015).

6.3.2 Experience of the job search

The factors highlighted above, education, age and health are common issues for reemployment studies, of more interest to this study are those reasons connected to being bought out. The theoretical angle on this issue is that of Goffman's stigmatization (1971). The basic question is how will a potential new employer view the history of the buyout and how have the informants tackled the presentation of the history to potential employers? Canzianis and Petrongolos (2001) research on stigma and hiring new employees concludes that employment history is important and if negative would hinder employment if the firing costs were experienced as high. The first issue moving forward from an employment is to obtain the necessary paperwork, work testimonial or job certificate to be able to show future employers what tasks you have performed, how well you have performed them and for how long. Some informants viewed this as very important and made sure to make demands about how these should be written when negotiating the settlement. More important and harder to control is the reference from the employer, one informant explained her situation: "Not so well, because I didn't get any references […] No I have nothing, which makes me very stressed" (IP, 6). The informant had worked for the same company for almost 20 years and left without a reference, it made her very stressed and she didn't think it was fair, she continues: "I feel I was worth more, to walk out of

there as a zero, thrown out, a paper where it stood that I couldn't do it, I couldn't even open the mail" (IP, 6). A few of the informants shared this predicament, not receiving a reference or being told they would be given a negative reference. To solve this they used colleagues or other managers in the organisation that they trusted more, the practice were deemed necessary but as one informant put it: "Now I have a former college that has promised to help, but it feels like already there it halts a bit, it's hard." (IP, 14). Most were confident that this would affect their job search in a negative manner. And some chose to not use the employer as a reference and only lean on the written documentation that they managed to get: "I don't trust them so I wouldn't ask my employer to call them, which was why we wanted the work testimonial" (IP, 12).

How they chose to present the story differed a bit as well, some chose to be upfront about the story and the reasons for the buyout, as one put it: "That the employer had a record of being bad means many have an understanding" (IP, 1). Those however were in situations that were easier to explain:

> Because it isn't like I have been bought out and been sick because I have done anything wrong, it is because I have simply had a bad working environment, I really hope a future employer thinks this (IP, 2).

Being able to put forth this situation means you have to get to a position where you are able to explain. In some cases the reputation of the employer have worked in the informants favour and explanation was not necessary. In other instances the informant knew the employer privately or through work making explaining the situation easier, but as one informant put it:

> If they ask why you left your former workplace and then you start telling: I did a deal with my employer and they gave me a sum of money and then I left, it sounds really weird, any employer will wonder what lies behind this. So it feels like you aren't in the best situation (IP, 14).

This is in line with Kugler and Saint-Pauls (2011) research where they find that justified reasons for losing your job such as work shortage had a lower negative impact on re-employability. Being bought out is in no way however justified if not explained properly. You simply start at a disadvantage and to mitigate this some informants chose to be less upfront about the situation. Some simply haven't explained to their employer, either citing work shortage at the former employer or by keeping the information vague: "No I haven't told them anything, I told them that I didn't want to stay because I didn't develop, so I haven't talked about it" (IP, 12). In

conclusion being bought out is seen as a negative experience by most of the informants when it comes to obtaining a new employment.

6.3.3 Identity and roles

One theoretical theme explored in the interviews were that of role exit, in this case leaving an employment or a profession, one informant summed up her thoughts of identity and work as follows:

> It is an identity in Sweden, it is in a way that work is your identity, you ask someone what they work with before you ask what they find fun in life, […] It is ones identity, it is a bit frightening actually (IP, 10).

Losing this identity then in a sudden and climactic way such as a buyout could have consequences, however for some this was a non-issue or even a positive experience. Finally leaving what in the end turned out to be a bad experience. This signals that they managed to resolve or didn't have to resolve the problem areas that Ebaugh identified in her study (1988). Most stayed within their professional field when looking for new employment even though a few made some adjustments in their criteria for future jobs. A few who had specific health issues have started looking for other types of jobs that will match their limitations. Overall the pragmatism of the informants have been evident in that they will accept whatever work that is available to them, for example: "It isn't exactly a dream job, I can't say that" (IP, 13). The informant had started working on the phones on a survey company, which was a step down from her previous employment. Several individuals while not switching professions were actively looking for less stressful and less demanding positions:

> I am a bit careful about that, I feel, I have applied for some that are similar […] But if they have task descriptions where it clearly states that you have to be stress-hardy, you have to, you have to, you have to, then I haven't applied for those positions (IP, 3).

Looking for less demanding positions is a way to cope with the situation and handle the threats to the personal identity (Price et al, 1998).

Going back to the process of role-exit as theorised by Ebaugh (1988) one issue that was raised was that of a change in how to relate to the former colleagues. One informant described how she distanced herself from her colleagues since she didn't want to hear more about the

former workplace. Reacting to others reactions of the role exit were also an issue brought up by a few of the respondents, people had a hard time understanding what had happened and why the results were buyouts. The subject of self-worth or efficacy were brought up several times:

> It could be a really big issue in a individuals life really, that might be hard to move on from if you have taken the message in to deep that you aren't good enough […] That you aren't good enough and we don't want you and we will do whatever it takes to be rid of you, it's a heavy message, […] If you aren't careful to keep the message away from yourself (IP, 4).

Getting through these thoughts and managing to arrive at a point where you can feel confident in your professional role again were seen as important and not easy.

6.3.4 Effects

Being bought out have affected the informants in several different ways, below we go through how it has affected them financially, socially and both the mental and physical health. The most tangible effect is the financial and as noted above the economic background of the informants were different and the effects of the buyout have affected the informants in different ways. For the informants that have remained unemployed throughout the duration of the buyout the benefits of the buyout have been marginally better than if they had been fired without the severance pay. Since they weren't eligible for the social insurance pay-outs until they stopped receiving a salary. For those that managed to get a new employment the situation were of course a lot better and one informant described how she paid of her debt with the money and how it was like winning on the lottery. One informant described how it didn't really matter for her, she paid tax for most of the money and in the end the only one who were affected were the employer who had to pay up. One effect described by some of the informants however were how aware they had become about their financial situation and how it affected how they lived their lives. One moved to a smaller apartment, another made a plan for how much she needed to make in order to make it to her retirement.

The effects on how the buyout affected the social aspects of the informant's life are for the most part less tangible. One informant were excluded from an association, she described the situation as: "I lost most of my friends and work at the same time" (IP, 13). With this came an isolation that a few of the informants have either been through or have worked to actively avoid. The most common effect were that of a lowered self-confidence. Trust or rather mistrust

were highlighted in a few interviews as an effect as one interviewee put it: "I don't dare to take the step to try new things, I notice that I am very distrustful, I don't trust people anymore" (IP, 14). Several informants described how they were a lot more careful and tried to avoid to take things for granted:

> Now I double check everything, at the new workplace I ask about everything, some say that there are unstated rules, but there I say no, I have to check how it really is, so I don't get blamed for it later (IP, 1).

Lastly the informants described some of the health problems they had acquired during and after this process and how it affected them even after the employment were terminated. Mental issues were prevalent even in mild forms such as dwelling or obsessing with the process and what had happened, one interviewee described her situation as: "As soon as we got the money it was over, but processing, this with the psychological, we are different as individuals […] For me I dwelled upon it a lot" (IP, 12). The informant felt that there were some sort of support lacking after the process was finished, the trauma induced by the process in her case went untreated, and she hasn't been able to resolve the trauma to the personal identity which has affected her mental health (Price et al, 1998). Some other informants have described how they have had the possibility to talk to doctors or occupational health service and agreed that talking the situation through were helpful. Other issues such as being tired to the point of breaking down were also common, as one interviewee described: "I was so tired all the time and there was no way out, I understood that too, that there wasn't" (IP, 6). Real tangible psychological and physical issues developed during the process:

> This workplace had affected me so strongly that I felt bad both physically and psychologically, I had started to get panic disorder attacks, I haven't had them before in my whole life (IP, 14).

Another issue were that of triggers that bring up the past, which were perceived as preventing the informants from moving on, one described the situation as follows "Sometimes I am at meetings with the old manager and inside I feel so bad that I almost puke, I feel physically ill" (IP, 11). Those that had a history of depression or other psychological issues described how it drove them back into their respective issues and in some cases furthered the symptoms significantly with grave consequences:

> But psychologically it has affected me terribly and I was so broken down, I couldn't eat and lost 11 kilos […] I didn't want to be anymore when it was as

worst […] You have it at the back of your head that I didn't want to be here anymore (IP, 13).

The informant said she didn't contemplate suicide but she simply didn't want to exist anymore during and after the process. She described that finding a part time job was what brought her out of her depression, resolving the economic consequences helped her mental health (Price et al, 1998)

6.3.5 Opinion of the practice

At the core it feels like a failure, it does because you choose. It feels like you leave for the wrong reason (IP, 14).

This quote sums up the sentiment of several of the informants, it was described as moving the victim instead of the bully. Followed by the opinion that the employer never really got to answer for their actions, prior and during the process, they simply got away to easy. Another aspect of the process that was described by several informants was the fear of conflict or disinclination to try to solve the conflict, the buyout was here again described as the easy way out: "They were really bad at handling the conflict […] In many instances employers take the easiest way out and a buyout is the easiest way" (IP, 5). The problem however can persist at the workplace with the result that other people can end up in similar positions, one interviewees opinion was: "Cowardly, cowardly, […] to buy out people doesn't solve the problem" (IP, 10). One informant described how it created a consensus culture where questioning the normative culture were seen as bad with stagnation as the result and preservation in the form of the buyout as a tool, she explained her thoughts as follows:

I think that this possibility that they are allowed to buyout those that do not fit with this environment will mean that the environment will persist, and that isn't good (IP, 4).

At the same time most were happy that they got compensated, when they were in the situation they couldn't see any other way out than by removing themselves. Several pointed out that it is cynical but practical.

7. Discussion

The objective of this study have been to explore employee buyouts from the employee's point of view through their descriptions of going through the process and through the generated effects. A further objective was to offer an explanation of the buyout process and the effects with the aid of theoretical perspectives. The aim of the discussion is to connect the findings to the purpose and the research questions.

First a discussion on the experience of going through the process will be held with a focus on how to become undesirable and how to remove the undesirable employee. Then a discussion on the effects and how they can be described and explained and lastly some concluding words on the implications of the buyout process as a frequently used practice of termination.

7.1 Becoming undesirable

The first part in the chain of events that is a buyout process is the act of becoming undesirable, to explain the act this thesis turned to the psychological contract and looked for an understanding of why individuals become regarded as undesirables. The psychological contract is a theoretical model of a relationship between two parties, breaches and violations in this relationship can occur with the result of acts of vengeful behaviour. Here I think it is pertinent to acknowledge the duality of the contract as pointed out by Guest (2004) and Tekleab and Taylor (2003), the spited acts of vengeful behaviour by the other party can be perceived as breaches and violations in their own right, which might prompt further acts which can create a spiral of actions that will lead to a collapsing employment relationship. With the sociology of accounts the notion of awareness of the employees own part in the spiral of breaches and violations have been recorded and interesting to conclude is that most excused or justified their behaviour which is in line with the notion of breach and avenge as put forward by Bordia et al, (2008). The employees blamed actions by the other party as reasons for their own behaviour. Very few on the other hand refused or denied their own guilt, instead concessions were common. The prior discussion covers those that became undesirable through conflicts and resistance, a portion of the informants instead suffered some sort of productive inhibition, most commonly deteriorating health from the working conditions which in the end made them undesirable as employees.

The responsibility of why an employee have become undesirable cannot simply be generalized either to the employers or the employees own fault, these processes are complicated and varied to a high degree making generalizations of less use. Of interest to discuss however is the responsibility that can be taken for the situation. Or rather the responsibility of resolving the situation. Here I think a shared responsibility is of importance, a responsibility that is lacking in many of the 15 cases on both sides. There was little will of trying to repair or fix the situation that the employees had ended up within, from both the managers but also from the employees. Here I would like to mention the HR function, HR was in most of these cases perceived to be on the manager's side against the employee. This polarization is not helpful in resolving the situation and I would like to suggest that HRs role should be more neutral. Instead assessing the situation and offering up mediation in an effort to diffuse the situation.

7.2 Removing the undesirable

With a collapsed, or swiftly declining, employment relationship began the process of ridding the organisation of the undesirable employee, whether aware of this process or not. Acts of harassment and bullying were part of almost all of the buyout processes and were in many cases perceived as carried out with the goal of getting the employee to leave the organisation. To establish a turnover intention in the employee. The person perceived as the carrier of the other end of the psychological contract is the employee's manager. They represent the organisation and therefore in different ways are the recipients of the undesirable employee's actions that could be perceived to be against the organisation. They therefore can act on what they see as breaches and violations of the contract towards the employee resulting in what is perceived as harassment and bullying. The employment relationship has thus become a part of an interpersonal struggle between a manager and an employee. Since turnover intention is mediated by loyal mangers the interpersonal conflict between employee and manager's works to increase the intention (Price et al, 1998). The collapse of the employment relationship however is not enough to make employees quit (Zhao et al, 2007), instead the employee's stay on until they either can take no more and go home sick or the employer offers enough monetary compensation to push the employee from intention to actual turnover. A clear majority of the interviewees went home sick explained in part by deteriorating health and in part by avoidance of conflict.

The psychological contract lies on a continuum of transaction and relation and I would like to argue that most of the cases in this study were closer to relation meaning that when a breach occurs the implications affect trust and loyalty to a higher degree (Rousseau, 1989). With the addition of more contracts being idiosyncratic instead of standard employers will in the future have to deal with a plethora of different expectations from their employees (Rousseau, 2001). The width in these expectations will demand managers with the skills to manage the expectations in a way to avoid breaches and this I would like to argue is a major challenge.

One way to break of the interpersonal conflict would be to reassign the employee to another part of the organisation. However reassignments were not regarded as positive solutions by the employees, in part because most suggested reassignments were to lower positions and in part because the reassignments were seen as a defeat. Mistrust toward the organization builds as the process furthers, what starts as a conflict with the closest manager ends with a conflict between the employee and the whole organization, in the end most informants couldn't see themselves going back to any part of the organization thus ruling out reassignments. Here again I would highlight the possibility of developing HR as a neutral function. If the employees could avoid developing a conflict with the organisation and instead only remain in conflict with the closest manager the psychological contract and in extension the actual employment contract could be saved.

The main finding about union participation was that the unions were connected to the case at a late stage, when the employment relationship already in some cases were damaged beyond repair. The reason given for this was that the employees did not call the unions early enough and the reasons given for this were that the approachability of the unions were low. The local representatives were seen in a few of the cases to be too friendly with the employers and thereby did not have the employee's trust which postponed contacting and utilizing the union. Since the union in question is a white collar union the distance between management and the union representative can at times be short, which was shown to be problematic. A further point here is that being part of a union might come with implications, such as a stronger voice and knowledge of rights which can be perceived as resistance by the organisation, support from the union can balance this but as was evident the interviewees found the support lacking.

The culmination of the process of getting rid of the employee were the negotiations, which were described as horrible and dehumanised. The participants taking their respective roles and enacting them without regarding the effects on the individual. Especially the HR-

representatives were perceived to enact their roles in a harsh and tough way towards the informants. In the end came the settlement, by now most employees broken down and willing to accept being forced out. The previous employment history mattered little when it was time to rid the organization of an employee, at the same time when it comes to hiring a new employee their employment history matters a lot creating in effect an unjust situation (Canziani & Petrongolo 2001).

7.3 Effects of the removal

The immediate effect of being bought out of your employment is of course unemployment, two informants managed to have a new employment starting in conjunction with the exit, the rest however were unemployed. Age, education level and health were the three big determinants in finding new work. To a degree also motivation or rather knowledge of the difficulties associated with the particular situation, some of the employees over the age of 50 for example did not think they would be able to find new employment and thus adjusted their expectations and level of effort (Wanberg et al, 2015). The work the informants managed to find were in most instances steps down from their prior employments. No set work hours, lower pay, part time and less security overall, this was however often regarded as positive. Price et al explains that a scale down in this case of intensity and graveness of work can be used as a coping technique (1998).

Being bought out were by most employees perceived to be some sort of stigma in their effort to find new employment, which is in line with prior research (Kugler & Saint-Paul, 2011). Work testimonials, job certificates and more importantly references were mentioned in most interviews as important and being bought out made the former employees employ different tactics to present these in a light that did not highlight the act of being bought out. This however were a big source of stress and anxiety, that they were regarded in a negative light. Finding new work were important to resolve the situation and had effects on health and identity. Being able to move on and resolve the threats to one's economic situation and personal identity were important to minimize enduring mental health outcomes (Price et al, 1998).

The financial consequences of the buyout were unsurprisingly positive for those that managed to find work and negative or neutral for those who remained unemployed. Finding new work meant two incomes for a duration but having to pay more tax mitigated the gain. For the other group the situation were worse, no unemployment insurance payments would be paid

out during the severance payments, in effect neutralizing much of the positive outcome. The result is that the responsibility is shifted from the unemployment insurance fund to the employer for a duration of time. Both Freyens (2011) and Jahn (2009) found that mutual agreements instead of turning to the law were beneficial for both the employer and the employee. The findings in this thesis point toward a mixed message, or rather that other circumstances, such as finding new employment, affect the outcome to a high degree. A decrease in trust and some instances of exclusion from social contexts were the major social effects described by the informants.

The effects of the informants health however were graver, especially the mental health. Going through the buyout process were described as taxing, stressful, emotional and horrible which resulted in mental problems from delving on what and why this happened to full scale diagnostic depression and anxiety. Again those who had not managed to move on were the ones with the worst problems. An interesting observation from those that had managed to move on were that they often cited the fact that they had managed to move on as their salvation, they perceived that if they hadn't managed to move on they would be a lot worse off. This idea is supported in Price et al's research (1998).

7.4 Opinion of the removal

Most of the informants saw a buyout as the only feasible solution for their situation but they regarded the practice as a bad way to end an employment. Still the fact is that they saw no other solution for themselves and this is interesting because this is an indication of how people reason, employment buyouts were regarded as bad, but for them in their situation good. The employment relationship has eroded down to nothing giving no possibility of a continuation of the employment, the employee cannot see themselves continuing working at the employer. At the same time the interviewees perceive that their exit won't solve the problem which made them undesirable. The root of the problem will continue to exist after they are gone and perhaps another employee will go through a similar process and be removed. Outspoken employees can be seen as threats to the prevailing organisational culture at the workplace and by removing them the status quo can be upheld.

8. Conclusion

To conclude I would like to state that this thesis have presented descriptions of how it is to experience an employment buyout and to some degree approached offering explanations for the phenomenon. As is evident by the 15 cases presented going through this process is not a positive experience and it might affect you for a long duration. The gains are relatively small and didn't materialize in more than a few of the cases. Being bought out is not something to strive for. Yet it will continue to happen and it therefore needs to be more researched. The area of employment buyouts is lacking in research both quantitatively and qualitatively. The field has not been charted and lies relatively unknown with the only source of information available highly political estimations of the extent. Further both the employee and the employer perspective is lacking in the research. In addition the legal and economic perspectives need to be applied to the phenomenon in conjunction with the psychological and sociological perspectives to create knowledge that encompass the whole phenomenon. This thesis have offered a starting point for further research within the field by supplying researchers with insights into how the process have been experienced by 15 individuals.

In addition this thesis have offered practitioners an insight into how the process can be experienced by the employee and thus given them an idea of how actions taken as a practitioner can effect individuals that are going through similar processes. Hopefully a heightened understanding of employment buyouts have been achieved. Further the issue of employment buyouts need to be discussed among employer and employee organisations and other parties within the labour market to assess the extent, the effects both financially for the employers but more importantly the varying effects for the individuals.

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