Perceptions of Organizational Culture among Retail Workers

A qualitative study of the corporate culture at IKEA

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Abstract

This study investigates how lower level employees in retail companies perceive attempts by management to create and maintain a robust corporate culture. In addition, the study explores how those perceptions influence workers' inclination to remain with, leave or advance within the company. In particular, this study uses a qualitative approach, based on a case study of the Swedish furniture retailer IKEA. The empirical data has been collected through 28 interviews conducted with current and former IKEA employees. Primarily, a critical perspective of corporate culture has been utilized, which discusses ethical concerns and questions if creating a strong corporate culture actually increases efficiency. The study reveals distinct differences between departments with regards to how the corporate culture is perceived, implying that the company prioritizes departments differently. This study contributes to the research field through its focus on the perceptions of lower level employees regarding organizational culture, rather than the views of managers. In addition, it shows how lower level employees can be equally enthusiastic and active as managers are in maintaining a strong corporate culture.

Keywords: Employee loyalty, Employee retention, Lower level employees, Organizational culture, Perception of culture, Retail work,

Introduction

Organizational researchers have for decades attempted to ascertain what aspects or characteristics make organizations unique. In addition, and perhaps more important, how these characteristics affect the operations of organizations. These characteristics have been labeled in different ways over time. Perhaps the most common term is organizational culture, which can be described as *"Culture is what a group learns over a period of time as that group solves its problems of survival in an external environment and its problems of internal integration."* within an organization (Schein, 1990, p. 111). As a result of using the term culture some researchers have applied the methodological tools of anthropology to organizational studies. Thus, treating companies and other organizations as cultures in their own right (Czarniawska, 2012; Meyerson & Martin, 1987). The cultural perspective in essence aims to ascertain how organizational culture impact the operations of organizations and the actors within them.

Recent research into the culture of organizational cultures have taken a multitude of approaches toward managerial creation and control of culture and the tools employed in these efforts. Hoogan and Coote (2014) focuses on the transformation of organizational values into practice, particularly as a means to encourage innovation. Smith and Stewart (2011) have studied how formalized rituals reinforce values and cultural traits among employees, something also mentioned as a tool for culture building by Hoogan and Coote (2014). Fleming and Sturdy (2009) and Müller (2017) have analyzed the recent trend among managers and executives to encourage employee freedom and enjoyment at work. As a counterpoint, Ogbonna and Harris (2014) have in an empirical study observed how lower level employees often resist change in their established organizational value systems. Note that the study by Ogbonna and Harris (2014) primarily sources its empirical data from managers, thus potentially underestimating the influence of lower level employees in organizational culture creation and maintenance.

This lack of qualitative studies on lower level employees' perception of corporate culture appears to be an issue within the field of organizational culture studies as a whole. Studies using such methodology most often target professionals, consultants or managers (Bergman & Jean 2016). This issue is addressed by Alvesson (1987), who notes that different subunits within an organization may exhibit their own cultures that may or may not correspond to the organization's culture as a whole. The subject for this case study is how lower level employees perceive their employer's effort to establish a corporate culture. The Swedish furniture retailer IKEA is particularly interesting in that regard since it is highly involved in culture building activities. Its culture is often described as 'strong', placing much emphasis on its eight core values (Salzer-Mörling, 1998; Edvardsson & Enquist, 2002; Tarnovskaya & de Chernatony, 2011). In addition, IKEA has traditionally recruited new managers internally, thus setting the company somewhat apart from other retailers by providing possible advancement for lower level employees. This makes the potential attractiveness of the corporate culture important when employees can make the decision to advance or not. With this area somewhat underresearched, we thus aim to fill a niche in the available research concerning perceptions of organizational culture. In particular, we wish to explore how such perceptions influence lower level employees' decisions to leave, remain with or advance within organizations.

Research Question
How do lower employees perceive IKEA's corporate culture and do those perceptions influence their tendency to remain with, leave or advance within the company?

Theoretical background
Theory of organizational culture
The concept of culture in organizational studies is a fairly recent one, gaining ground in the late 1970s (Barley & Kunda, 1992). Even so, this school of thought has gained a significant following in the decades since. It has notably been suggested that *"a company can gain as much as one or*

two hours of productive work per employee per day" if it exhibits a strong corporate culture (Deal & Kennedy, 1982, p. 23). This notion has in turn been cited by Barley and Kunda (1992). In their description of the historical background of managerial trends from the 1870s onwards, they note that the perspective has its roots in an anthropological tradition. This school views organizations as having their own internal cultures, even going as far as saying: *"We take the position that organizations* are *cultures."* (Meyerson & Martin, 1987, p. 623). As the 1980s began however, the notion that building and maintaining a strong organizational culture could benefit companies financially took hold both in academic and business circles (Pascale & Athos, 1981). This was largely a response by American management scholars and business leaders to the increasing economic prowess of Japan. The Japanese business culture was deemed to be more effective due to the normative effects it had on employee morale and loyalty.

> *Japan's industrial ascent was popularly attributed to the Japanese corporation's ability to inspire commitment without sacrificing flexibility and performance. Commentators suggested that American firms would do well to emulate the Japanese by developing "strong" cultures that fostered concern for quality, flexibility, and service.* (Barley & Kunda, 1992, p. 381)

This was a step away from the Systems rationalism prevalent in business circles since the 1950s, focusing on manufacturing efficiency and productivity. This conforms to the cyclical alterations between rational and normative management ideologies described by Barley and Kunda (1992). This new applied version of cultural theory largely follows three tenets. Firstly, turbulent economic environments require the employees to attribute their employer's welfare directly to their own personal welfare (Barley & Kunda, 1992). In addition, a 'strong' culture is often presented as one that give employees an increased sense of self-determination (Schein, 1996). Schein (2009) places this as the main appeal of culture as an analytical tool, using it to solve problems in a changing environment.

> *The potential insights that culture can bring to you will occur only when you discover that some problem you are trying to solve or some change that you are trying to make depends very much on cultural forces operating within you and within your organization.* (Schein, 2009, p. 77)

The second tenet states that strong cultures can be designed and maintained by management. One especially popular method of maintaining cultural cohesion is 'walking the talk'. That is, managers coming down to lower hierarchical levels and converting the cultural message into practice (Schein, 2009). Thirdly, emotional commitment and loyalty will lead to economic gains for the company (Barley & Kunda, 1992).

In the following section, three main scholarly approaches will be covered. Defined by Alvesson (1992), these consist of pragmatics, purists and academic pragmatics. The pragmatics are often management consultants who attempt to create or strengthen corporate cultures in order to reap economic benefits. The purists on the other hand are academics who may for example study organizational cultures from an anthropological stance (Czarniawska, 2012) or are analyzing the elements that make up a culture, such as artifacts and symbols (Hatch, 1993). The last group, the academic pragmatics are interested in finding out how and why organizational cultures form and

what, if any, benefits they actually create (Alvesson, 1987; Kunda, 1992; Willmott, 1993). It should be noted that different authors may move between these categories (Alvesson, 1992), exemplified by the very different tone in Schein (1985) and Schein (2009).

Pragmatic approach

When discussing organizational culture, it appears fitting to further examine how researchers have studied the phenomena previously. Meyerson and Martin (1987) outlined three major approaches when observing the cultures of organizations from an anthropological perspective. Firstly, researchers may seek aspects of integration, that is, common language and shared values within a group. Secondly, researchers may focus on instances of differentiation, dissention and lack of consensus. Thirdly, they may examine a culture based on its inherent ambiguities, its paradoxes and seemingly nonsensical elements. The first of these paradigms, looking at the integrating factors that keeps cultures coherent, has two main directions. Researchers either focus on superficial elements such as artifacts or the values of top management or they go deeper to find the basic assumptions guiding the organization (Meyerson & Martin, 1987). Regardless of which of these directions are chosen, the integration perspective assumes that culture is created at the apex of corporate management (Meyerson & Martin, 1987). This conforms to the second tenet of cultural studies as formulated by Barley and Kunda (1992), later agreed upon by Schein (2009), which states that cultures can be designed and maintained by top level management. The well-known work *Engineering culture* by Kunda (1992) described the case of an engineering firm disseminating values and ideals from the top down through the organization, creating a distinct culture in the process. A more recent example of a supposedly strong corporate culture being engineered from the top down is the case of the web-based clothing retailer Zappos, studied by Warrick, Millian & Ferguson (2016). The two core tenets of that company were a strong customer focus in combination with employee satisfaction, something that was achieved using largely the same methods described by Meyerson & Martin (1987).

> *... you will see in the Zappos example that to build a strong culture, it needs to be closely linked to the vision, values, and strategy of the company and that specific actions need to be taken to build the desired culture and align organizational systems and practices with it.* (Warrick, et al., 2016, p. 64)

Schein (1985) similarly argued that new values and assumptions can be introduced into an organization and that this usually is initiated by top level executives. In addition, the author notes that the executives are the ones who gains the credit if the engineered culture proves successful. Concerning the role of top executives and CEOs, Meyerson and Martin (1987) notes the close connection between individual leaders and the organizations they are responsible for: *"Cultural manifestations that reflect the leader's own personal value system are stressed, offering the possibility that the charisma of a particularly effective leader might be institutionalized, giving that leader an organizational form of immortality"* (Meyerson & Martin, 1987, p. 625). A similar notion is expressed by Schoenberger (2001) who states that transformation of the CEOs self can become intertwined with transformation of the organization.

Purist approach

In his earlier research, Schein (1985) claims that cultures exist in three different depths. Firstly, on the surface there are tangible artifacts. Secondly, there are values or accepted social principles. Finally, on the bottom exists assumptions which are beliefs taken for granted by individuals. According to Hatch (1993) this model has a large gap which neglect symbols and process within organizational culture. She further emphasizes, in a model (see figure 1 below), that culture rather is altered or stabilized by local processes between artifacts, values, assumptions and symbols in the different organizations.
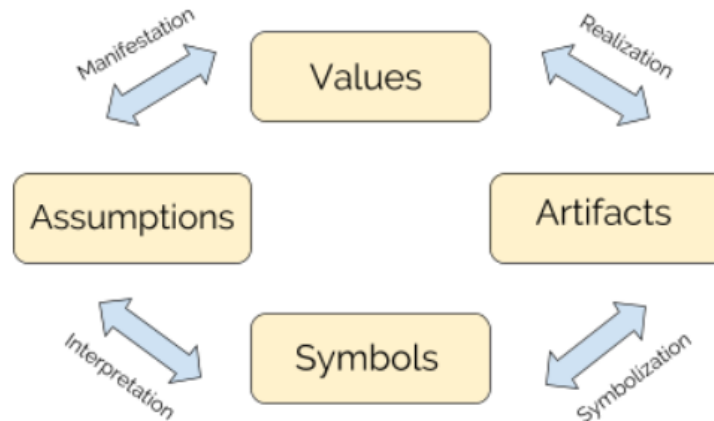

Figure 1. Adapted from Hatch (1993)

The added symbolic dimension is intended to expand upon Schein's theory by highlighting the symbolic properties of certain artifacts as well as basic assumptions that may be interpreted through a symbolic perspective (Hatch, 1993). As Schein (1985) pointed out in his original theory, assumptions are at the core of any culture, organizational or otherwise. Hatch (1993) moves this notion into a dynamic structure, showing how artifacts, values and symbols are formed by said assumptions through proactive/reactive processes. Geertz (1973) had previously placed even higher importance on symbols and symbolism, naming it the basis for all cultures.

Of the four aspects of culture described in the Hatch model, artifacts are the most tangible and thus easiest to observe (Schein, 1985). Some researchers using a symbolic interpretive approach have noted that all artifacts contain symbolic qualities, thus making artifacts and symbols one and the same (Hatch, 1993; Tompkins, 1987). However, Morgan, Frost, and Pondy (1983) argues that not all artifacts contains symbolic properties, this is disputed by Hatch (1993) as it, according to her, undermines the symbolic interpretation of Schein's model.

Academic pragmatic approach

Criticism of Hatch's model

The model developed by Schein and expanded upon by Hatch is however not without its critics. Indeed, Schein (2009) himself criticized the oversimplified way organizational culture is often analyzed. Notions such as 'basic values' and 'corporate climate' merely explains manifestations of culture and not the deeper assumptions which actually comprise the culture (Schein, 2009). This

line of thinking was previously explored by Geertz (1973) who argued that simplification of complex organizational cultures is sometimes necessary from an explanatory point of view but that it often leads to loss of clarity. Hatch (1993) also problematized the field of cultural studies itself, noting that many other factors can influence events in organizations.

Schein (2009) further expands upon his somewhat changed view on organizational culture, as opposed to Schein (1985) when stating that culture is *"deep, extensive, and stable"* (Schein, 2009, p. 215). From this perspective, the author views organizational culture as much deeper than previously thought and in extension, more resistant to change (Schein, 2009). To do a proper analysis of an organization's cultural core, an historical perspective is needed. In particular with regards to the values and assumptions of the studied company's founders (Schein, 2009). In summation, the Hatch model described in figure 1 can be seen as providing an abstracted view of the culture of organizations. It illustrates the cultural interactions within an organization but does not consider the historical background and origins of its basic assumptions.

Schein's new critical view
As noted in the previous section, the pragmatic approach to studying organizational culture and its effects on efficiency and employee well-being has been met with some criticism. Schein (2009) outlines three major issues he identifies as problematic when analyzing the culture of companies and other organizations. These consist of the problem of establishing a culture initially, changing that culture once it has been adopted and the moral implications of engineering cultures (Schein, 2009). Firstly, Schein points out that even in the cases where an organizational culture has been established and accepted, scholars are unsure of how this happens. It has been observed however, that if the executives of a company wish to impose certain values and norms upon their employees, they themselves have to be committed to these ideals. Otherwise, they will fail to take root in the first place (Alvesson, 1987; Schein, 1996).

Secondly, Schein does not deny that 'strong' cultures exist and that they can increase efficiency. He does point out however, that a culture once created, efficient or not, is difficult to change (Schein, 2009). The reasons for this could be for example previous successes. If an established culture has proven successful in the past, there will be resistance from all levels to change it. But in a changing environment, previously beneficial practices and beliefs may prove to be detrimental to the organization's efficiency (Schein, 2009). But even in those cases, where a change in deeply held beliefs may be deemed necessary, there will be resistance. *"Proposals to deliberately change the culture, whether from inside or outside, are therefore likely to be totally ignored or resisted. Instead, dominant members or coalitions attempt to preserve and enhance the culture."* (Schein, 2009, p. 133). These coalitions of resistance may be found at any level of an organization, from the executives to lower level 'operators'. The remedy would be to remove these individuals or groups, however even that may not be enough: *"... you cannot change the core cultural assumptions by which an organization runs without removing the carriers of those cultural assumptions, but even then some of those assumptions will survive and resurface in other organizational contexts"* (Schein, 2009, p. 180). Similarly, Alvesson (1987) points to subunits within organizations being

governed by the same cultural dynamics as the organization as a whole, thus being smaller cultures in themselves. The level of change resistance is also dependent on the type of actors in the organization, as Schein (2009) remarks, older employees might be more deeply rooted in their beliefs and values. This would in theory make them less susceptible to the symbols and artifacts presented as carriers of culture.

Lastly, Schein (2009) discusses the ethical implications of creating and maintaining a coherent organizational culture. He claims that different cultures have different views on the nature of man and whether people can change their basic assumptions (Schein, 2009). Moreover, whether a well-defined and enforced culture is good or evil depends on the observer's perspective: *"When we disapprove, we call it a cult and deplore it; when we approve, we call it an effective indoctrination program, such as a boot camp or academy."* (Schein, 2009, p. 7). In the end, he concludes that it is not possible to ascertain whether or not an organization is objectively moral, one can only observe its actions in relation to the outside environment in an attempt to understand its intentions (Schein, 2009).

General criticism versus pragmatic control
Criticism aimed toward the engineering of corporate culture has been centered on two main topics. Firstly, ethical concerns such as those mentioned above by Schein (2009), and secondly whether *"corporate culturism"* (Willmott, 1993, p. 516) actually increases efficiency.

In his study of a high-tech engineering firm, Kunda (1992) describes the very conscious attempt by the management to 'engineer' a strong corporate culture based on employee self-determination and personal freedom. This is accomplished through intense use of training courses and seminars. The use of these techniques and symbolically charged artifacts (Hatch, 1993) is meant to substitute the employees' own goals and desires with the company's (Kunda, 1992). Schwartz (1987) describes this pragmatic normative process as employees disciplining themselves into conforming to organizational norms, governed by feelings of shame and anxiety. If an employee fails to meet the expectations of the organizational culture, he or she risks being ostracized or expelled (Goffman, 1961; Kunda, 1992). Even authors with a more positive attitude towards the merits of the pragmatic approach expresses such views, saying there are *"no halfway house for most people in the excellent companies"* (Peters & Waterman, 1982, p. 77).

Willmott (1993) refers to pragmatic management methods, or as he refers to it, 'corporate culturism' as a way of governing *"the employee's soul"* (Willmott, 1993, p. 517). Implying that the practice strips the involved actors of their free will, he further describes 'corporate culturism' thusly: *"it aspires to extend management control by colonizing the affective domain. It does this by promoting employee commitment to a monolithic structure of feeling and thought, a development that is seen to be incipiently totalitarian"* (Willmott, 1993, p. 517). Similarly, Kunda (1992) suggests that the engineered culture at companies like the one in his study is nothing but a disguised form of tyranny and invasion of employees' privacy. When arguing that the company imposes its own values upon its employees, he also notes that the tech company in his study rarely

highlighted economic compensation as a way of incentivizing its workers. Instead the reward is a feeling of community and inclusion (Kunda, 1992).

Concerning the actual benefits from a strong corporate culture and what that term actually means, Schein (2009) argues that any possible benefits from an organizational culture must be seen in relation to a company's organizational maturity. An organizational culture would then be at its strongest in a relatively newly formed organization but become more diluted as the organization grows (Schein, 2009). Willmott (1993) however, suggests that a culture is strong only if there are no other rival value systems, either internally or externally. A strong culture is thus one which do not allow for any distracting messages to reach the employees. Kunda (1992) also stresses the importance of a unified message but claims that the deliberate creation of a corporate culture is a futile exercise as it will lead to fatigue and cynicism among many of the employees. He summarizes this conclusion as follows: *"We have come full circle. If the attempt to engineer culture and accomplish normative control is aimed at defining the members' selves for them, this very attempt undermines its own assumptions."* (Kunda, 1992, p. 368). Alvesson (1987) goes as far as to question the possibility of reaching a consensus within large organizations, questioning the very existence of unified organizational cultures. He further develops this statement when pointing out that the influence and significance of society is often neglected. He states that an individual's values are rather founded from the society a person is raised within, which is where the 'goal-attainment' of an individual is influenced before entering a professional context (Alvesson, 1987). However, he also states that organizational culture has the power of motivating individuals through emotional connections more effectively than for example ideologies. This since organizational culture influence operations on a daily basis.

Studies of corporate culture
Previous studies of organizational culture have tended to gather empirical data from employees in managerial or executive positions. Thus, to a large extent, non-managerial, low- and medium-skilled employees have become underrepresented in organizational studies (Bergman & Jean, 2016; Feldman, 1990; Hulin & Glomb, 1999; Mintzberg, 1980). In a meta-analysis of previous empirical research, Bergman and Jean (2016) found that from a sample of 811 studies from previous years, only 9 percent collected data exclusively from lower level employees. This is problematic since non-managerial workers represent the bulk of the workforce in most, if not all, economies (Bergman & Jean, 2016). For example, the three largest occupations in United States in 2014 were retail salespersons, cashiers and food service personnel (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Similarly, personal services and sales employees make up 9.5 percent of the workforce in the European Union, the single largest group (Eurostat, 2017). Bergman and Jean (2016) argues that this skewed representation risks leading researchers to inaccurate conclusions since their results will fail to capture workers' perceptions of their organizations. This may in turn add to the academic-practice gap and ultimately, decrease the generalizability of findings (Bergman & Jean, 2016).

Even though qualitative studies involving lower level employees is fairly uncommon, what follows is a brief review of research conducted in the last ten years. Some of these may not rely on lower level data exclusively, however they rely on the same theoretical foundation as this study. This emphasize the need for further studies of employees' perception of organizational culture. Using what was previously described as purist approach, Hoogan and Coote (2014) couples the concepts of organizational culture and innovation. The authors emphasize the need for values and norms that encourage innovation and a need for these to be transformed into actual processes. In this case, the responsibility for performing this dissemination of new values is placed on the management but the values themselves must reward openness, flexibility and cooperation among the workers. The authors conclude by asserting that these values are of great importance if an organization wishes to promote innovation and that further study of the connection between corporate culture and innovation is needed (Hoogan & Coote, 2014).

In their study of a top football club in the English Premier League, Ogbonna and Harris (2014) touches on similar topics as Hoogan and Coote (2014). This includes introducing new values into an existing organization and how managers and executives often are the driving force behind such initiatives. In their study, Ogbonna and Harris (2014) notes the tendency of 'core' cultural assumptions and values to be perpetuated on their own, especially when they are being conveyed through symbolically charged artifacts. Newcomers into the organization are influenced by its symbols and adapt their value system to match. The empirical data suggests that its lower level members are both shapers and carriers of culture, maintaining symbols connecting the past with the present. The authors conclude that a 'strong' organizational culture represents a strength as well as a source of frustration for managers who try to change it (Ogbonna & Harris, 2014).

Smith and Stewart (2011) uses a similar theoretical framework as Ogbonna and Harris (2014) but points to the importance of rituals in culture building, rather than artifacts. The authors acknowledge that formal rituals have symbolic power that both communicates important values and reinforces those values in their execution. In addition to establishing values and norms deemed to be important by the organization's leadership, rituals also reinforce social structures and roles among the workers. The invariability of events such as retirement parties or the introduction for new employees contributes to a sense of continuity and reinforcement of established norms (Hoogan & Coote, 2014; Smith & Stewart, 2011).

Writing from an academic pragmatic approach, Fleming and Sturdy (2009) casts doubt on whether managerial normative control of organizational culture is effective or even desirable. They question rituals and work tasks as ways of establishing a workplace culture among lower level employees. Instead, they propose freedom of emotional expression as a managerial tool better suited to enhance work enjoyment and ultimately work efficiency. The authors calls this 'neo-normative control', and while it emphasizes employee self-actualization it is essentially a slightly modernized tool for managers to instill organizational values (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009).

Lastly, Müller (2017) also approaches the issue of managerial control over organizational culture from a academic pragmatic approach. In her study of a German branch of IKEA, the author notes the connection between internal communication of values and the company's external branding efforts. The conclusion is that a successful internal branding effort (based around established corporate values and norms) will blur the line between the employees' professional and private selves. Thus, making them acutely aware of their status as brand spokespersons when confronted with an external audience, no matter if it is in a work-related setting or not. The study is presented as a first entry into a line of research directed toward the internal-external branding dichotomy and its use as a new tool for managerial control (Müller, 2017).

Previous studies at IKEA

Studies of IKEA's corporate culture often emphasize the uniqueness of its corporate message and describe its culture as 'strong' (Salzer-Mörling, 1998; Edvardsson & Enquist, 2002; Tarnovskaya & de Chernatony, 2011). However, it would appear that much of what has been written about IKEA's corporate culture falls into two categories. First, some focus on the external marketing implications of the company's internal culture. Examples of this include Edvardsson & Enquist (2002) and Edvardsson, Enquist & Hay (2006) who suggests that a strong corporate culture enables IKEA to build a relationship with its customers, which in turn would add value. The second category identified is the literature describing the culture building among managers and executives at IKEA. Stenebo (2009) writes from the perspective of a former executive and his views might be affected due to that background. However, many of the details are echoed in Salzer-Mörling's in-depth studies of the traditions and practices in the management training courses in Älmhult (Salzer, 1994; Salzer-Mörling, 1998). These courses are described in depth and they include the history of the company, attending seminars and workshops and participating in traditional Swedish festivities. The Swedish aspect of the company culture is again emphasized. A Canadian executive even claims that learning the Swedish language basically is a requirement for advancement through the top levels of the corporation (Salzer, 1994).

To summarize, the body of work within organizational culture studies appear to be lacking in studies focused on lower level employees. In addition, the available studies are often concerned with the methods utilized to establish organizational cultures. Less attention is paid to how the organizational culture is perceived by the workforce. This has also been the case with studies of IKEA, its practices and traditions have been extensively analyzed but the effects on employee commitment and loyalty less so. This study will explore this further, filling a gap in the present research on organizational culture.

Methodology

Research design

In order to get a deeper understanding of the employees' perception of IKEA's corporate culture and answer our research question: '*How do lower employees perceive IKEA's corporate culture and do those perceptions influence their tendency to remain with, leave or advance within*

the company?' we performed a single-case study (Czarniawska, 2014; Yin, 2003). IKEA is a unique, global corporation within its segment which made them a relevant case. Initially, the company from rural Småland was a mail order business founded in 1943, selling furniture produced cheaply in Sweden. Kamprad found that logistical costs could be reduced if the customers assembled the furniture themselves. Soon after, the first store was opened in Älmhult, Småland (Salzer, 1994). The concept was very successful and the company soon expanded outside Sweden. Today the retailer has 412 stores in 49 countries, this makes it the largest furniture and home decoration retailer in the world (Inter IKEA Systems B.V., 2017). Most of sales occur in Western countries with around 72% of sales taking place in Europe and 18% in North America (Rana, 2016). However, the sourcing of goods is increasingly taking place in East Asia where many suppliers produce almost exclusively for IKEA (Ivarsson & Alvstam, 2010).

Data collection - Interviews
We mainly based this study on 20 semi-structured interviews and eight email interviews, since we believe it to be the best tool for obtaining perceptions and accounts of IKEA's organizational culture (Schein, 2009). Early on, we realized that we had some acquaintances working at different IKEA stores in western Sweden. Immediate contact was therefore established with these IKEA workers. Our hope was foremost to interview them, but we also made sure to ask every interviewee to help us to get in contact with other former or current employees at IKEA through the snowballing method. This approach made the number of potential interviewees grow quickly and resulted in 20 interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). The main reason for this choice of method was that it gave us the opportunity to interview both current and former workers at IKEA. This made it possible to explore grievances and complains that might have lead workers to leave the company. In addition, not having formal interactions with the company allowed us to later take a more critical analytical stance when deemed necessary. The average age of the interviewees were 23.5 years old and were in average employed at an age of 20.5 years old, staying within the firm for about 2.5 years. Further, general information about the interviewees may be found in the figures below. Note that the category 'Administration' does not equate to managers but rather clerks and cashiers.
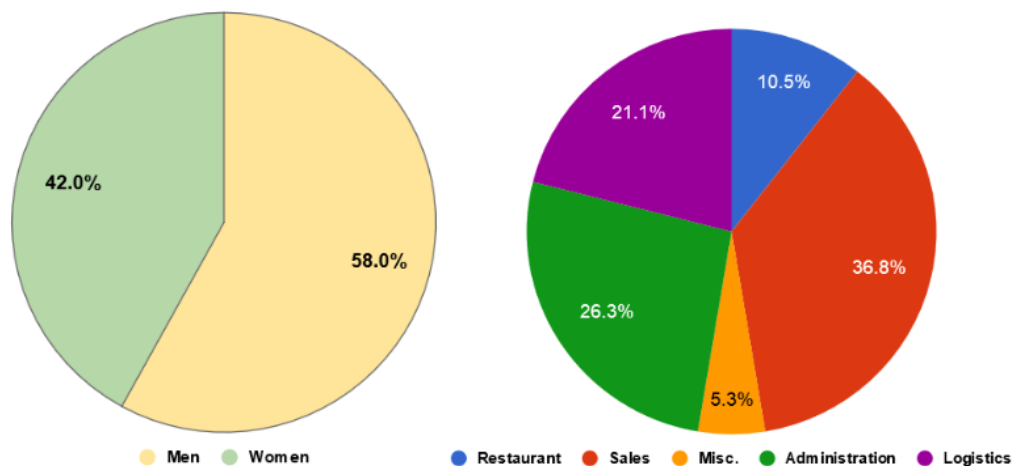

Figure 2. Face-to-face gender distribution.   Figure 3. Face-to-face departmental distribution.

As this study was performed by two authors, this gave us the opportunity to focus on different tasks during the interview. One of us was focusing on conducting the interview, while the other was given the possibility to analyze the body language and answers of the interviewee directly during the interview as well as taking notes (Eisenhardt, 1989). The interviews were performed with open-ended questions which we believe allowed the interviewees to talk more freely about their work and associate the questions accordingly to their experiences at IKEA (Kvale, 1996; Silverman, 2011). Examples of questions include the method of hiring, why the individual wished to work at IKEA, why they remained with the company and whether they were thinking of advancing within the company. If necessary, we had different follow-up questions to the interviewee if we wanted them to elaborate on something. It was crucial that we got the approval to record every interview before they started, since we knew it would give us the best chance to deeply analyze the data after the interviews were transcribed. For the findings sections, chosen quotes were translated to English in verbatim, only omitting pauses and small repetitions. All the interviewees were anonymized to protect their integrity and to encourage them to talk more freely without any fears of their opinions getting back to their superiors (Hedin, 1996).

After conducting 20 interviews we felt a saturation of information. However, we wanted to strengthen the validity of the study and include more interviewees so in addition we conducted eight email interviews (Eisenhardt, 1989). Previously approached individuals who had turned down face-to-face interviews, mostly because of time restraints, had because of this the possibility to participate. This approach helped us to increase the geographical spread to IKEA stores in eastern Sweden which provided additional insight of the interviewees' perception of the corporate culture at IKEA (Eisenhardt, 1989). At the same time, many of the interviews conducted actually had more developed answers than a lot of the interviews conducted face-to-face. We believe that the interviewees felt more comfortable and had more time to develop their answers when we were not present to ask the questions. The questions sent via email were fundamentally the same which made the analysis of the material easier. The average age of the interviewee were 23 years old and were in average employed at an age of 21 years old, staying within the firm for about 1.25 years. General information about the interviewees contacted via mail may be found in the figures below.
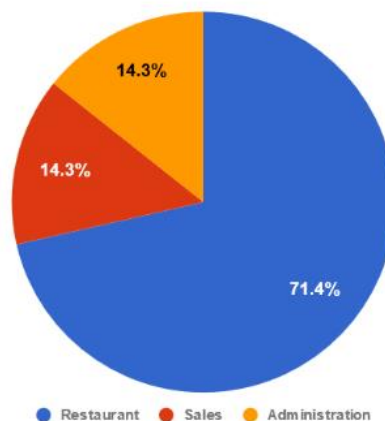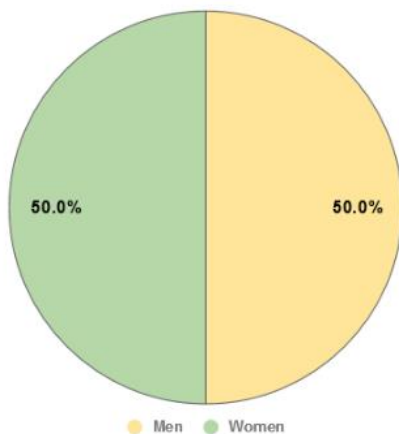

Figure 4. Email interview gender distribution   *Figure 5. Email interview departmental distribution*

During this process we realized that there are both positive and negative sides of conducting interviews. Foremost, we chose to use interviews as it provides deeper insight, especially when analyzing organizational cultures (Schein, 2009). Later, we used grounded theory in order to structure this deeper understanding into a manageable data set (Martin & Turner, 1986). The usage of interviews provided IKEA's lower level employees an opportunity to express their views (Kvale, 2006). But most importantly, conducting interviews made it possible for us to get access of the employees' perception of the organizational culture at IKEA since it gave us the opportunity to cover different topics and ask follow-up questions (Schein, 2009). After the first couple of interviews, parts of the interview guide were redesigned in order to eliminate redundant questions which did not contribute to the research. During the interviews, we increasingly endeavored to ask as open-ended questions as possible, which allowed the interviewee to freely interpret the question. This contributed to a cordial atmosphere and assured that we would not ask leading questions. Furthermore, we believe that our previous experience in writing academic papers made us suitable to interpret empirical data, even though we had a monopoly on interpreting the collected data (Kvale, 2006).

Document review

As a complement to the empirical data, we collected data from several sources on subjects such as the background of IKEA and different theories. This to gain as much insight as possible into the work being done by IKEA when developing its corporate culture. The additional literature and documents helped to strengthen the validity of this study (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Data analysis

During this study we used grounded theory to analyze the different data collected, because the majority of our material was conducted through interviews and grounded theory is a well-suited approach to interpret interviews (Martin & Turner, 1986). This approach made it possible for us to analyze the material thoroughly in different stages as a comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). After the interviews were transcribed, we started to code them using codes corresponding to IKEAs eight core values as specified in table 1. The use of these core values is motivated by the fact that they are highly visible in the company's communication, both internally and externally. To what extent employees perceived this value system as being utilized in everyday operations was explored in conjunction with their views of their work situation. This created a more complete picture of their perception of IKEA's corporate culture.

IKEA's eight core values	Description
Togetherness	Encouraging teamwork
Environmental concern	Minimize ecological footprint
Cost-consciousness	Minimize economic expenditures

Simplicity	Striving for simple solutions
Innovation	Incremental increases in efficiency
Daring to be different	Unconventional solutions to everyday problems
Accept and delegate responsibility	Encourage employees to develop as individuals
Leading by example	Setting an example based on the company values

Table 1. IKEA's core values (Inter IKEA Systems B.V., 2018)

In order to assess the interviewees' perception on their work situation, codes such as introduction to the workplace and workload were used. In addition, the interviewees had a multitude of thoughts about their employer regarding subjects such as colleagues, culture and possibility of advancement. In total, 35 different codes were used to cover what we believed to be relevant data. After the coding process, the different codes were categorized into groupings with similar themes (Martin & Turner, 1986). These groupings were the mentioned core values, administration and personal opinions. To ensure relevant codes, we initiated the coding process after around 20 interviews, this minimized the risk of categorizing irrelevant data. This also gave us the means to conduct the best possible analysis (Martin & Turner, 1986). For the next section, the findings have been presented in a structure similar to the schools of thought presented in the theoretical background, having used codes from the three groupings mentioned above. Thus, creating a consistent structure throughout the study, including the analysis section.

Findings

Motivations for employment and job retention

Reasons for applying

When speaking with numerous former and current IKEA employees, a multitude of motivations for their desire to work within the company became apparent. In addition, different interviewees gave very different reasons for remaining with or leaving the company. One of the more expressive individuals emphasized his commitment to the company's goals and vision.

> *My vision is to get where I want to be, where that is I'm not quite sure of yet. But I want to keep working with people who have a burning interest in the company and home decoration, and who wants to take that extra step to attain our goals and strengthen our*
> *IKEA vision.* - Ewan, salesman

However, others point to perceived problems with the level of commitment expected of them. In particular, one salesman saw it as a way of keeping employees on twelve hours per week part-time contracts.

Everyone can't be dedicated to the values. But at IKEA it feels like everyone is expected to love working there. They don't do that anywhere else. Then you can give people full-time contracts, but they get part-time anyway. You can get full-time at others work places. - Scott, salesman

Nevertheless, a majority of the interviewees expressed a positive attitude towards the corporate values. Even if they did not always embrace those values fully. An administrative worker with previous experience in food service and clothing retailing compared the poor quality of the products she sold there with the perception of IKEA as a "cheap" brand. *"In a way, IKEA is something I can stand for. Even if I know the prices are low because they skimp on the quality, I know that the Swedish people know that the quality isn't there."* - Natalie, administrative worker. Similarly, an absolute majority of the interviewees already had a positive view of the company when seeking employment there, as exemplified. *"They have done a great job with employer branding, I sought them out actively since I've heard good things about them."* - Karl, salesman. Additionally, some mentioned a more personal connection with the company, as well as it being a good match with their education.

Personally, it was because I had studied to be a textile engineer and I knew that wanted to continue my studies. I had a year when I would study half-time, so I wanted a part-time job connected to textile. Even if I didn't end up at the textile department. But then I've always had a pretty close relationship with IKEA, I've known people who've worked there, I have always heard good things about the company. - Nichelle, saleswoman

Another saleswoman, who chose business studies because of her job at IKEA, expressed an even higher degree of emotional attachment to the company.

It was mostly so that I felt such a personal connection with IKEA somehow. I grew up very close to the store in Kungens kurva [In Segeltorp outside Stockholm] so I told them the first day that 'I sort of grew in Småland', that is, the play room there. I have many memories from when we went there shopping. I also remember when I was younger and wrote suggestions for one of those mailboxes where you could put your suggestions, and I was always there with a bunch of ideas. So, I have felt a strong connection. - Nicole, saleswoman

In summation, most of the people interviewed had a positive view of the company before seeking employment. Even if the level of interest in the company philosophy varies, most tend to agree that its values sends an essentially good message.

To stay or not stay?
When discussing possible advancement within the organization, one of the more common reasons given for a possible career at IKEA was the perceived job security the company affords its employees. *"It's a large company and I feel that it's a company that gives you a safe workplace, a secure workplace."* - Mark, salesman. Others emphasized their appreciation of the corporate culture and even stated that they chose their college education based on its advantages for a possible IKEA career.

Yes, and then I chose to take economics at college. That is knowledge you can use in large companies. When you think about how large IKEA is and which questions they ask themselves. A lot of the time that is economics.
- Harrison, former logistics worker

Another interviewee who studied natural science in high school chose to enter a business program at college after she started working at IKEA. This was intended to help her advance within the company. Even if the prospect of staying with the same employer for *"50 years"* did make her feel somewhat uneasy, she still enjoyed the culture and vision of the company enough to give it serious consideration. In total, approximately half of the people interviewed would consider an extended career within IKEA. Apart from the reason mentioned above, others pointed to an interest in retailing in general or specific work tasks as motivators for staying with the company. Even if other opportunities presented themselves, one person remarked *"I will never close the door to IKEA."* - Scott, salesman.

However, a substantial number of interviewees closed the door to IKEA rather quickly. These were people who while not averse to the idea of advancement, took issue with the fact that the company headquarters is located in Älmhult, Småland, a province seen by them as remote and rural. When a graduated chemical engineer was asked why he didn't seek further advancement within IKEA, she replied. *"Mostly because Älmhult is in Älmhult so to speak. I would like to work with chemistry in product development and production. And that doesn't exist here in the Gothenburg area."* - Nichelle, saleswoman. Another significant group of interviewees would not even consider a further career within the company, citing a variety of grievances (some of which will be further explored below). One restaurant worker, who was previously employed in a store restaurant had expectation which were not fulfilled.

> *Again, it was a lot of* [talk] *before you got the job about how you could advance if you worked there, but I don't think that it was very good at all. Shift manager was the next step. It was no difference in pay and not that appreciated by the ones I worked with.* - Leonard, former restaurant worker

Thus, this employee felt that he had been misled during the recruitment process, and that the possibilities for meaningful advancement in that department were few. A similar story of disappointment was conveyed by a former summer worker at the logistics department. He also felt that the promises from recruiters were exaggerated. *"When I worked there, there were many who was in the same situation as me and just as disappointed."* - Jonathan, former logistics worker.

Interactions with management
Even though IKEA portraits itself as a rather flat organization, exemplified by the dress code that includes all employees at the stores, including the store manager. The *"ugly yellow shirt"* as one interviewee put it, makes it difficult to distinguish what hierarchical level other employees are at and *"...that means that you don't always know who your talking to, but that doesn't matter very much"* - Mark, salesman. However, a rather common comment was that even though the organization portraits itself as flat, lower level employees have a difficult time enacting change outside their immediate work space. Two proposed reasons for this were a slow moving corporate bureaucracy and the strict uniformity enforced on every store worldwide.

You are supposed to use the same methods in many stores, the software is old and such. The bureaucracy is heavy, sometimes it feels like you're stuck in a loop. You learn that if you tap the computer three times it'll start, stuff like that. But everybody knows this. - Scott, salesman

A counterpoint to the comments on bureaucratic control is that many express satisfaction with the general atmosphere of the work environment. In particular, the IKEA values of *simplicity* and *being different* are frequently cited as positive aspects of the day-to-day activities.

Simplicity, diversity, everyone gets to be themselves. The simplicity especially is very prominent when you work. You are supposed to do everything as simple as possible, not just for the customers but for yourself. That is something I appreciate very much and why I want to stay on. You really are yourself at work, you don't need to put on an extra smile like earlier when I worked at other stores or cafés. - Daisy, saleswoman

The theme of diversity is further elaborated on by several interviewees as an important component of their perception of their employer and their role within the company. *"I actually think everyone are different, that's one of their values as well … In other companies you may notice that everyone are the same."* - Kate, administrative worker.

Initiation into the corporate culture
The recruitment process has changed over the last few years and most of the interviewees took part in group interviews as a part of the recruitment. The reasons for this were twofold, primarily it was implemented as a cost saving measure and secondarily as a way of meeting as many applicants as possible. *"The reason for group interviews, it was more a question of resources since it took up so much time* [previously]*"* - Patrick, salesman. The group interviews are heavily focused on the eight company values, including discussion in smaller groups and cases, each themed around one of the values.

[The values] *were mentioned more or less constantly, there was a case on them is well. Now in hindsight you understand that it was them they were looking for. Some couldn't answer, and they weren't employed either. Then there were some who answered, but not according to their values, totally different. You can't walk into that trap.* - Harrison, former logistics worker

Discussing the same issue of the value centered recruitment process, another interviewee felt that only the applicants already exhibiting those values were chosen for employment. So even if the recruitment process did not appeal to everyone, for those who could answer, the message seems to have resonated with them. Some interviewees appear to have been thoroughly impressed, not by the company's success but by its core value system. Exemplified by an employee in the returns department experience from her group interview.

The first twenty minutes there was just the recruiters who explained 'this is us, this is what we stand for'. Then I just felt that 'I want to stand there in a couple of years'. You did get a sort of wow-moment … Just as they showed us that 'we want you', I felt that 'I want to be here'. - Natalie, administrative worker

For those who succeeded in the recruitment process, the emphasis on the company values continued into the introduction and initial job training. New employees receive brochures with the eight 'commandments' of the founder Ingvar Kamprad. Additionally, they contain stories about

Kamprad's background and the history of the company. According to one salesman, these texts are the basis for the current corporate philosophy and very important to some employees.

It's very important with values for the staff, especially for those who have worked there for a longer period. The longer you work there, you become more of a 'sponsor' as they call it, then you get to school newcomers in IKEA's way of working and thinking. All of this was Kamprad's fundamental idea, and his commandments are still central even though they were written thirty, forty years ago. - Avery, salesman

Even if the value system is imparted on new employees in a highly structured manner, other aspects of the introduction process appears to be lacking. A not uncommon view, among employees in different departments, is that the introduction of the work tasks themselves was disorganized and insufficient.

Then you were sort of thrown into certain areas. It feels like it's not really organized in parts. For example, I was asked to close up the cash register, but I had never done that and didn't know how to do it. I should have had an introduction on that, but they had forgotten that. - Felicity, restaurant worker

Similar accounts like the quote above was recorded with relative frequency, with no obvious link to any particular department.

Daily exposure to corporate values

The use of the value system is, according to many interviewees, prevalent in the day-to-day activities as well as in the furnishing in employee areas. For instance, many mention the framed eight 'commandments' and quotes by Kamprad in the break rooms. In addition, quotes and pastoral images from Småland are a common occurrence in stores in Sweden and abroad. This is clearly stated by one of the interviewees.

The company's values are mentioned every day, often as quotes on the walls of the employee areas. Stories of and sayings from Kamprad are also there, but most often in assorted documents or on the intranet, especially in the form of 'The testament of a furniture dealer'. In [the store she worked in] *there was a letter in the lunchroom from Kamprad to the employees. His quote 'most things are still undone, glorious future'* [sic] *is often occurring within the company.* - Daniel, former salesman

Some of these quotes are heard and seen so frequently by the employees that one interviewee remarked on how they are seen as somewhat clichéd, for example, *"Only while sleeping one makes no mistakes"* is mentioned by the salesman Patrick as inspirational but perhaps overused. Quotes such as these and the core values are mentioned *"several times a week, in weekly newsletters, departmental meetings, performance reviews et cetera."* - Emilia, restaurant worker. As a cashier noted, *"You do get 'imprinted' with this to a high degree. It's not common in other companies but at IKEA it feels like everyone knows some of this stuff."* - Jeri, administrative worker. In summation, a majority of the interviewed employees acknowledge that the company's philosophy is very prevalent from the recruitment stage onwards. This is succinctly expressed as *"the business idea and the corporate culture permeates everything."* - Ian, former administrative worker.

One of the most frequent comments during the interview sessions was that the company does not demand any specific academic merits from its applicants. This does not apply to more specialized executive positions, only the lower level positions. On the other hand, IKEA performs internal recruitment to a high degree, encouraging employees to advance within the company. This is mentioned, according to the interviewees, even at the initial recruitment phase. When asked about internal training programs and their popularity, one administrative worker in the returns department said the following.

> *People attend a lot of those internal training programs. And since that's completely in line with the company they may also be people without college degrees and such. But they're still competent and driven and can get management training internally within the company* - William, administrative worker

The general view seems to be that the company affords possibilities to employees regardless of their background. However, there are instances of criticism among some, firstly, the growth of the company is seen in itself as a problem since the pool of employees is not sufficient to fill all management positions. *"Then again, IKEA is booming and so it's kind of not enough, the will and the capability may not always there but the core idea has always been to recruit internally."* - Patrick, salesman. Furthermore, some concerns were raised over the criteria by which employees are selected for management training.

> *They're not manager material, that is, they're not made to be managers. Of course, the higher-ups are, but our immediate bosses are people who IKEA have raised up from our level. In those cases, they have taken people they can mold themselves, forming them exactly like they want them. They're quiet and not as driven, they may not have what it takes.* - Felicity, restaurant worker

The employees thus have positive and negative feelings toward the internal recruitment process. In general, however, the employees interviewed appear to be appreciative of the possibility of advancement without higher education as a prerequisite. One person summed this up thus when asked about his reasons for remaining with the company. *"The possibilities to grow, the belief in people and their knowledge, not just their expertise, not just academic degrees and grades."* - Ewan, salesman.

Perception of management interactions

Views on IKEA's corporate culture in general

As described in the previous sections, the general view among the interviewees seem to be that IKEA is diligently spreading the message about its values. This is done throughout the recruitment process and then actively among the workforce. The views on this work to establish a corporate culture is in the data split equally in positive and negative parts. One salesman noted how many appear be proud to be IKEA employees, even though they may work less hours than desired and receive comparatively low wages.

> *I've always been fascinated of how they can get people to work this hard and still feel pride and loyalty when they don't pay better and don't assign more hours. I'm very fascinated of that, without giving anything on paper,*

they do provide them with feelings and such which makes people proud. Many people mention how long they've been employed, without me asking, there's a sense of pride in how long you've worked there. - Scott, salesman

Others agree on this, but also remark on how the company is seen as a 'secure' employer, providing a pleasant, long-term employment, with the caveat being low wages. Some are much more vocal about how important they find IKEA's value system, calling their employer a 'second home'. *"At first it was probably a refuge since I didn't want to study, and it was like 'nice, money'. But now, and this sound silly, but it has become my hobby."* - Natalie, administrative worker. In another example, a saleswoman notes how the corporate culture has become one with her personality.

I would say it's more than a place and more than a company. It's sort of a culture, a spirit in some way and I'm so wrapped up in it that I feel that IKEA is a part of my identity now. That's sort of how it is for me, if I was to describe myself, I would say 'IKEA'. - Nicole, saleswoman

Others commented on how they perceived the values of IKEA to be put into practice. In particular, a number of interviewees mentioned how they saw the company as unconventional in its problem solving. One salesman recalled an instance in which the dining area became filled to capacity during a Christmas lunch event. The staff then opened up the employee lunch room in order to make room. This simple solution impressed the salesman in question and according to him, strengthened his view of IKEA as a creative company. Similarly, a former logistics worker described some low-cost measures to attract publicity.

They've done some productive stuff out there. They've put sun loungers in the roundabouts and stuff like that, they had to pay a fine to the municipality but had still sold a lot of chairs since all the papers came and wrote about it ... That's one of the stories they tell out there. Another thing, when they were changing beds [new models]. *It's kind of crazy but they placed all the* [old] *beds outside and you slept in one the entire night during the summer, you got to take it home with you.* - Harrison, former logistics worker

These comments illustrate an environment that promotes creativity and being open to unconventional ideas and solutions. While some of the more critical interviewees regard these aspects as positives, they also remark that one will not be remaining with the company for long if one does not embrace these values. Another former employee in the logistics department describes the company as very bound by its traditions and values, one of which being equality. However, she claims that equality may be superseded by clamorous personalities.

The culture at IKEA is kind of like, everyone should be equal, wear the same outfit and don't care at all what you've done before. It doesn't really suit me, it's like the person who's the loudest right here and now, that's the person we [management] *think is the best.* - Carrie, former logistics worker

On the subject of internal recruitment, even though most take a positive stance, problems may arise for new employees recruited from the outside. One salesman recalls when a new store manager was recruited from one of IKEA's holding companies. As he points out, this manager was very familiar with the company but did not earn her subordinates respect since that she had not started 'at the bottom'. As stated previously, a clear majority of the interviewed employees had a positive perception of the company philosophy. But again, a significant number of them expressed concerns

that the value system did not always translate well into practice. An especially prevalent observation was the decoupling between different departments. This is exemplified by a former restaurant employee. *"There was a pretty clear divide between those who worked in the restaurant and those who worked in the store."* - Billy, former restaurant worker. A similar sense of segmentation but between sales and logistics was noted by former workers in the logistics department.

> *A part of the IKEA culture is that you should listen to everyone, bring problems up to the surface and so on. And that's a great idea but it doesn't work in practice, they don't want to listen at all. Logistics and sales only cared about their own areas. The totality was lost a bit there.* - Jonathan, former logistics worker

The same logistics worker recollected several instances when managers from the sales and logistics departments gave contradictory orders. This was common during the early mornings when goods were brought from the depot to the store. They were told by managers not to *"listen to sales"*, this proved difficult as this activity took place in the sales department. He summarized by saying that working at the IKEA logistics department was like working in any other warehouse, the corporate culture was according to him, not very prevalent. Most of the interviewed restaurant workers also spoke of the perceived difference between their work environment and the one in the sales department. Many wished to become salespeople, partly due to the lighter workload, and partly due to what they saw as more rewarding tasks. *"There was a certain bitterness among some over having been 'placed' in the restaurant and not the store."* - Billy, former restaurant worker. Another restaurant worker stated that she would not recommend anyone to seek employment at IKEA, at least not in the restaurant, mainly due to the lack of the inclusive atmosphere she had expected. The sentiment is even more clearly exemplified by one of her former colleagues who had transferred to the sales department.

> *Since it was in the restaurant, it was of course stressful and filled with impressions that has followed me throughout my journey through the restaurant. When I started in sales it was a completely different company culture, a calmer tempo as well as customer interaction that I never saw before. At the same time, I've always felt welcome and my drive has been answered with responsibility.* - Ewan, salesman

These perceptions of an asymmetry between the departments appear to be quite common among the restaurant and logistics staff. However, such observations were rare if not missing among the sales and administrative staff. That group is more concerned with their departments and expressing a sense of belonging. Taken together, these views appear to be same in IKEA stores on both the west and east coast of Sweden. One saleswoman who have worked in stores on both coasts confirmed this by describing the local atmospheres as being the same.

> *I feel that it's fun to have been able to do that comparison since I think it's exactly the same. It feels like I've ended up at the same place, only new faces really. The people are the same. Everyone is open and kind of curious about each other. You care about each other and there's a very nice and cozy atmosphere in the workplace.* - Nicole, saleswoman

In summation, the perception of IKEA's corporate culture is divided equally in positive and negative groups. In particular, the perceptions differ between departments, with sales generally

having a more positive view of their role within the company than other departments. This appears to be the case no matter in which store the interviewees worked.

Effects of IKEA's corporate culture in practice
During the interview sessions, a theme touched upon by a large percentage of the employees was IKEA's cost consciousness. The interviewees were split on the merits of certain policies, but a slight majority found some cost saving measures to be excessive. One salesman expressed this duality in his comments, pointing out both what he saw as positives and negatives. *"Then there's no Stasi organization regarding that, there's no pettiness in it but there's a clear and prevalent cost consciousness."* - Mark, salesman. This line of thinking can lead to both reduction of costs and simplification of everyday tasks. One example of this was what a saleswoman in the rug department had to say about a new piece of equipment used for repackaging returned products in the store itself, instead of sending them away.

> *I know that in the store* [name redacted] *there is a kind of plastic roll. Because it's a big problem for us when people return rugs with the packaging opened. Therefore, we have bought this plastic roll, so instead of giving it to Recovery* [returns] *since that would cost a lot of money. Just in 2017 I think we've saved eighty thousand on that.* - Nichelle, saleswoman

However, some told of instances of cost saving were the result was primarily frustration. For example, one woman formerly employed in the logistics department recalled how the coordination was lacking when she first started. There were no pants in her size in the storage room. Thus, she had to work in much too large pants for the first few weeks. She said that the only way to remedy the situation was to be persistent and constantly ask for the correct uniform. According to her, the managers seemed to be satisfied with the shirt being yellow and the pants blue, the size was of less importance. The two examples above illustrate two different ways in which the company's cost saving measures can materialize. Another worker in the depot also expressed some concerns that these measures could at times, cause irritation. *"'Cheap' is a good word and I think they stand for that as well. 'Cheap' can be both positive and negative, it's about being cheap in the right way. They could be miserly at times, that's a good term."* - Jonathan, former logistics worker. When asked for exemplify this so called 'miserly' behavior, he recalled the situation in the early mornings before business hours.

> *Well, I'll never work at IKEA again. Maybe it's different if you're a clerk, but they're so extremely cheap with most things. Just the fact that when we worked in the store, putting products on the shelves, they had some sort of mid-level lighting. The time was like five or six in the morning, so you needed a bit of light. Then at ten o'clock they turned on the lights for the customers. In some places it was so dark that it was difficult to read the orders. I can only see one reason for this, it was just so they could save a bit of money on electricity. I just hate that sort of culture.* - Jonathan, former logistics worker

Similarly, a large proportion of the interviewees had negative views on the hourly wage. The individuals who work primarily during the weekends often cited the benefits as generous due to the extra compensation from working during uncomfortable hours. This group also point out that they would not have been satisfied if they worked full time during the day shift with the same hourly

wage. In addition, one restaurant worker questioned the policy of obligatory meal deduction, prompting employees to eat in the employee cafeteria. *"I think it should be voluntary to get the meal deduction or if you want to bring your own food."* - Lupita, restaurant worker. An additional, quite frequent comment was that in addition to somewhat poor hourly wages, the number of available employees often felt insufficient. For instance, an administrative worker commented on the lack of personnel, linking it directly to active cost saving measures. This view seems to be shared with the sales department. A salesman and a saleswoman, working in two different stores, expressed similar concerns, saying that they never have enough colleagues at hand. The saleswoman went as far as calling it the 'dark side' of cost consciousness. Another administrative worker noted how this culture of cost savings is well within the company. She also speculated that this is due to the company's roots in Småland, a province whose inhabitants have a reputation for thriftiness.

> And all of IKEA knows this, the company sets up a budget every year that you always try to raise, setting higher goals and make more money. And since IKEA people generally are from Småland, you always try to save on more things, saving on work hours. We employees are getting fewer and fewer but are doing more and more. This creates stress and we're on our knees ... IKEA themselves knows this, they know they're doing this, but they're just trying so damn hard to save and make money, but it doesn't add up. - Natalie, administrative worker

Some interviewees attribute a variety of problems to this perceived lack of personnel described above. For example, one former logistics worker recalled a period when her team almost never met their quota of unpacked pallets due to understaffing. She even stated that there was no time to call in reserve personnel in case an employee called in sick. The high workload in the end caused her to call in sick herself, claiming that she could not muster up the energy to report to work. *"I was home for maybe three or four days because I didn't have the energy to come in. And I usually don't do that at a job."* - Carrie, former logistics worker. Another former worker in the logistics department commented on the high employee turnover, claiming that barely any of his colleagues stayed for long since the conditions were so poor. Additionally, the high turnover led to him having to train new employees very shortly after his own employment. *"As early as a month after I started, I had to introduce new summer recruits who came in in June or even later."* - Jonathan, former logistics worker. The turnover seems to be in part applicable to the managers as well. One saleswoman remarked on how many of her managers had left recently and how she and her colleagues were often left to their own devices.

Unrelated to questions regarding personnel matters, another aspect which influences the daily activities are environmental concerns. Several interviewees recognize that IKEA encourages environmental thinking among the employees and regard this as a positive feature of the company. In particular, several employees note that they are encouraged to bring forward their own ideas and suggestions with regards to waste reduction. A saleswoman in the candle section mentioned how there was an ongoing process to discontinue carcinogenic paraffin candles. Instead, a less toxic and environmental alternative was being considered. A couple of the interviewees also mentioned the massive amounts of waste being produced each day and the measures taken by the company to reduce that amount. *"When you take out the garbage, it's written how much every ton of waste*

costs. A lot of those little things. Then there's a sort contradiction in the sustainability idea since we sell an enormous amount of stuff." - Karl, salesman. However, like above, others mention similar contradictions where there is a perceived decoupling between policy and practice.

> *There's an incredible consumption of paper at IKEA. We use regular A4 paper for orders, information to customers, et cetera. I think it's completely unnecessary. Now they're trying to introduce iPads for us to use when selling. But you also use it to print out various pieces of information, why am I supposed to have the iPad then? But it's probably going to become more digital with the new generation.* - Natalie, administrative worker

Even though most agree that the company policy toward more environmentally friendly solutions and products is well defined. However, there are some who identifies cases when the implementation has been less than successful.

<u>We're all in this together</u>
Taken together, a majority of the interviewed employees expressed a largely positive view of IKEA as an employer. Frequently used words to describe the work climate were 'non- prestigious' and 'family like'. One saleswoman summed up her feelings of the atmosphere with *"easy going, relaxed, it's kind of prestigeless, people have fun."* - Daisy, saleswoman. Others had largely positive view of the company and its brand even before they were employed. For many, that favorable take on the brand was reinforced over time and led to a sense of pride in the company and its values.

Many also described a prevalent sense of togetherness and team spirit, attributing a large part of the company's success to those aspects. *"I think it's a very good work place since everybody is very open and positive to innovation. It's together that IKEA has come so far today."* - Emilia, restaurant worker. Others agree with this interpretation but note that this 'family like' climate may have its consequences.

> *I can probably say that what is distinct about IKEA, and it's an advantage, and also a disadvantage ... 'incest' sounds wrong you know what I mean. I really don't want say that word but if you know someone you'll get far. If you don't make yourself seen and heard, you won't get as far. But at the same time, if come to IKEA you want to show off, everyone is sociable. We're like a big family, 'family like' is probably a better word* [than 'incest'].
> - Natalie, administrative worker

However, some frame the family like atmosphere mentioned by others as company mandated conformity, downplaying individuality. *"It feels like nobody's larger than the process. No one is irreplaceable, except some in the core."* - Scott, salesman. In addition, another consequence of this conformity was noted by a former logistics worker. Namely, an unclear command structure. *"First and foremost, it should be equal, and everybody should be the same. And some things fall through the cracks. It's a bit unclear who's supposed to take care of problems, it's so decentralized, that's opinion of it"* - Carrie, former logistics worker. Another former logistics worker recounted a practice meant to enforce the equality or conformity of the entire staff. Sometimes, a bell was rung and the entire staff, including clerks and the store manager went down to store floor and assisted in stocking the shelves. While it was portrayed as a team building exercise, the former logistics

worker noted how the office staff did not necessarily know the best way to perform this task. He noted, *"and when you see the store manager doing this wrong, what am I supposed to say?"* - Jonathan, former logistics worker. He and his colleagues saw this exercise as something completely symbolic, adding that the office workers would do more good in their regular positions.

When summarizing her views on the company as an employer, one saleswoman had a largely positive attitude, noting that managers tend to care about the employees and take their suggestions into consideration. However, she also recalled how an ambitious colleague who was denied advancement and internal training without explanation.

> *For example, I had a colleague who resigned because she had tried for a long time to advance and take courses. But she got tired of applying so she resigned. That's not really the picture you have of IKEA so that's an interesting case.* - Daisy, saleswoman

She saw it as odd how an ambitious employee who showed significant loyalty to the company and an interest in advancement did not get the opportunity. In summation, the view of IKEA's corporate culture appears to be rather polarized. Most of the interviewees had a positive view initially when they were employed. But over time, either those positive attitudes were strengthened, or they were replaced with more critical ones. Generally, few had a neutral standpoint as most expressed strong opinions in either direction.

Discussion

In the interest of clarity, the following section will be presented in a similar structure to the one in the theoretical framework section.

Organizational culture efforts

This study showed that IKEA indeed is a company that can be regarded as a culture in its own right (Mayerson & Martin, 1987). This was a widely held view among the interviewees, as most were highly aware of IKEA's conscious efforts to build and maintain a 'strong' corporate culture. Conscious or not, IKEA's efforts largely conforms to Barley and Kunda's (1992) three tenets. The employees appeared to intertwine their interests with those of the company's. In addition, managers adhered to the value system in their behavior and actions. Whether or not IKEA's attempts to build a strong culture has resulted in concrete financial gains, as stated in the third tenet, is more difficult to ascertain. This is an avenue for further research in the retail sector. The methodology and orientation of this study did not allow for any deeper financial analysis, researchers from other disciplines would be able to explore this aspect further.

Managers and longtime employees at IKEA were portrayed as representatives of not only the company itself, but its entire value system (Warrick et al., 2016). In particular, the interviews highlighted the importance placed upon the late founder Ingvar Kamprad. His quotes and inspirational stories manifested themselves as physical artifacts such as newsletter and posters (Hatch, 1993), emphasizing his importance as founder (Meyerson & Martin, 1987). From the interviews, it became apparent how the company management has utilized the values and the

personality of the company's founder to direct the cultural development from the top-down (Barley & Kunda, 1992; Meyerson & Martin, 1987).

Throughout the empirical data, several examples of how IKEA communicate its values through deliberate use of artifacts became apparent (Hatch, 1993). Foremost, new employees received brochures containing Kamprad's 'commandments'. Another frequently cited example was the uniforms employees wear regardless of rank. This is perhaps the most obvious example of IKEA's egalitarian policy of 'togetherness'. Interestingly, the employees' exposure to the company philosophy was largely done through very simple means. The fact is that low-tech methods such as brochures and group recruitment interviews resulted in a widespread cultural awareness. This suggests that further research on low cost organizational culture efforts is warranted. In addition, this further strengthens the need for studies of the economic gains to be made from corporate culture building.

The study indicated that the environmental care value may need a critical evaluation the most. With relatively high frequency, employees mentioned how they perceived many environmental efforts to have an ulterior economic motive, for instance the rug repackaging machine. This and other examples confirmed our suspicion that the primary motivating factor at IKEA is cost consciousness, which we viewed as a basic assumption (Hatch, 1993). This attitude extended to marketing tactics such as the simplicity of sun loungers illegally placed in a roundabout, a stunt perceived positively primarily for its low cost. This further contributes to the observations of Schein (2009) who linked the ways in which problem solving occurs within organizations with the cultural forces within those organizations.

Even though IKEA is very open with its cost consciousness, internally as well as externally, the interviews indicated that some of its policies was perceived as confusing among its employees. This was especially the case with the twelve hours per week contracts that are standard among part time employees. Some expressed bewilderment over the fact that many employees who wished for full time contracts did not receive them. We observed that many perceived this as disregarding the core value of 'togetherness' which they had been told was a cornerstone in the IKEA philosophy. This suggested that the company places financial concerns over the wishes and goals of at least some of its employees. Thus, this further strengthens the idea that IKEA's basic assumption primarily is cost consciousness.

The study showed that the prevalence of cost reducing efforts may be a result of the company's and its founder's background in Småland. This connection was at least very commonly made among the interviewees. The thinking was that the region's reputation for tightfistedness contributed to IKEA's economic policies. Indeed, this connection was and is frequently made by both the late founder and the corporation itself, often as a source of pride (Meyerson & Martin, 1987; Warrick et al., 2016). If one assumes that IKEA is exhibiting traditional values from Småland (or at the least, the popular perception of those values) it may be of interest for other researchers to study the spread of regional cultural traits into other countries. If regional cultural differences are

taken into account when studying corporate expansion into other countries, new insights may be gained. This might have further developed Müller's (2017) study of internal branding at a German branch of IKEA.

Criticism of organizational culture efforts

<u>Is communication of values necessary?</u>

When the empirical data was analyzed, the value system of IKEA showed itself to be resilient to external influences. The company seemed to fall back on already established norms and practices, shying away from extensive change efforts, for instance, the implementation of tablet computers. This strengthens Schein's (2009) ideas about organizational culture as 'deep, extensive, and stable'. In other words, we can show that a centrally governed organizational culture such as at IKEA is possible to maintain even over long periods of time. However, enacting larger changes has proven to be difficult, if not impossible. This in turn has led to frustration among some lower level employees, rather than the intended sense of security. Others had a more positive perception, remarking that the stable nature of IKEA's culture provides a source of strength in otherwise changing surroundings. In extension, this feeling of tradition and continuity makes IKEA appear unique in the eyes of some employees, providing a reason to remain with the company or even advance to higher positions.

In the collected interview material, we found several cases of managerial reinforcement of the company ideals and values. None was more conspicuous than the almost ceremonial assistance from managers in stocking the shelves. The lower level employees perceived this little more than a nuisance, seeing it as forced team building producing additional work. While the intended purpose was to emphasize company values, it may have been wasted effort since most employees seemed to already be familiar with the company philosophy. Senior employees in particular were described as extremely adherent to the corporate ideals and more than willing to share their beliefs with others. In addition, the findings suggest that having long time employees is a source of pride for the company. This implies the possibility of IKEA possessing a self-sustaining corporate culture (Schein, 2009). Taken together, this begs the question whether the company's intense internal communication is necessary at all after the initial recruitment.

The stable nature of IKEA's corporate culture may be a part of an intentional strategy. The interviewees perceived the recruitment process as playing a pivotal role in spreading the company values to new employees and at the same time excluding those not deemed to be compliant with those values. Using Kunda's (1992) words, these methods can be viewed as a 'disguised form of tyranny', promoting conformity. A possible sign of this might be the standardized nature of the application process, job offerings often do not specify what department the application is for. We have recognized that the primary goal is to find potential employees with the 'correct' set of preexisting values. This notion of conformity is in the case of IKEA quite possibly the main reason behind the company's resistance toward major changes. These findings suggest that companies intentionally or not, must make a choice between a 'strong' but inflexible or a 'weak' and adaptable

culture. In essence, a choice between predictable and loyal or unpredictable and independent employees.

Ethical dilemmas

Expanding on the recruitment process, the interview data indicated that a common complaint among the employees was the feeling of being arbitrarily 'placed' in departments. This would not be perceived as a problem by the employees if the working conditions were the same in every department. However, the empirical data strongly suggested clear interdepartmental differences. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the logistics department. Four out of the four interview employees from that section had already left the company at the time of the interviews. The fact that different subunits of large organizations develop their own cultural characteristics is to be expected (Alvesson, 1987). Although, in the case of IKEA, these differences have not emerged spontaneously but rather due to the way in which management prioritizes the departments unevenly. Perhaps the most telling example came from a logistics worker who explained that the store lighting was at minimal level when they were stocking the shelves at five in the morning. However, when the customers arrived, the lights were turned up to full brightness. This practice was one of the reasons that this particular worker left the company. Even though all four logistics workers had different specific reasons for leaving, none of them took issue with the company philosophy in theory. Their complaints were instead largely based on how the value system was, or rather was not, manifested in practice. Similar complaints were recorded from the restaurant workers. Nonetheless, they generally wished to remain with the company. This is due to the fact that in contrast with the logistics workers, they only worked part time during their education. Thus, they were willing to accept worse conditions since they were in need of extra income.

Consequently, all employees were introduced to the company as being part of one big family, but each department appear to have been prioritized differently. Expanding on Alvesson's (1987) thinking, we find that the emergence of different cultures in subunits can to a certain degree be explained by departments being managed unequally. As indicated above, these differences between departments may influence workers' tendency to advance within, remain with or leave an organization.

In contrast to the logistics and restaurant staff, the employees in the sales department appeared to stand out in the empirical data as perceiving corporate communications much more positively. Interviewees from the sales staff were more inclined to praise IKEA's values and less likely to have complaints about their work situation. After the initial recruitment, the sales staff was prioritized with regards to training courses, seminars and working conditions. This would probably make them more likely to substitute their own goals for that of the company (Kunda, 1992). The findings thus suggest that employees who have daily contact with customers receive the most attention. Largely, the sales staff feel included in, and identify with, the company culture. This is a powerful contributing factor as to why almost all of the interviewed salespersons wish to advance within, or at least remain with the company.

We find that there is an ethical dilemma in prioritizing certain departments over others when all potential employees are recruited on the same premises, introducing the same values and portraying the company as highly egalitarian. This practice becomes especially problematic since the clear majority of new employees are young adults, whom for IKEA is their first employer. They would have little or no experience of signing agreements or understanding corporate bureaucracies. In that sense, it could be argued that IKEA is exploiting the labor of their younger employees and is creating loyalty based on emotional manipulation.

Given how the findings show that IKEA focuses on recruiting young and mostly inexperienced workers, this strengthens our position on strong and inflexible corporate cultures. By having such a policy, the company ensures that there are no competing value systems (Willmott, 1993). If the corporate cultural message is disseminated successfully throughout the workforce, there is less chance of new, radical ideas emerging. In other words, not only is the strong culture a result of conscious efforts, so is IKEA's somewhat change resistant nature. This opens for future research into whether other combinations of cultural strength and flexibility exists, such as organizations with a strong emphasis on conformity while still allowing initiatives from lower level employees.

Ethical considerations notwithstanding, a majority of the interviewed employees indicated a positive perception of IKEA's corporate culture and the company as an employer. This is strengthened by the fact that many remain within the company even though economic incentives are downplayed (Kunda, 1992). It should be noted however, that many, mostly salespersons also referred to the company culture as having a 'Swedish' character. This was largely perceived as something positive and a reason to not only remain with the company, but to advance and promote its message. This conforms to Alvesson (1987) who states that a person's values is mostly a product of the society in which they were raised. This suggests that corporate culture can function as a supplement to national culture. Thus, providing insight into that national culture. However, this study is limited to interview material from Swedish nationals, if the empirical data included more interviewees and had greater geographical spread among other nations, other conclusions may have been drawn.

Conclusion

IKEA's work to establish a 'deep, extensive and stable' corporate culture has been ongoing for decades and have by all accounts created a high level of awareness, internally as well as externally. But as is the case with other organizations, research into the area of culture building has largely been confined to a managerial perspective. In this study, we have instead given lower level employees the opportunity to share their perceptions. First and foremost, there is a rather widespread positive perception toward IKEA both as an employer and a communicator of ideals. This makes employees more likely to remain with or advance within the company. Although, there are significant exceptions to this general view, especially in the logistics departments and the restaurants. We have observed how those employees tend to feel neglected and forgotten in comparison with the sales staff. Even though they have a positive perception of the corporate

culture as a whole, seeing that culture fail to materialize in their work environment leads to disappointment. In turn, we find that this is often the root cause for resignation among the workers in those departments. Although this is a known phenomenon at IKEA according to the interviewees, this state of affairs is unlikely to change in the near future. This is due to the fact that the positive perception of IKEA is not only prevalent among most of its employees, but also in the general population, leading to a steady stream of new applicants.

Previous studies have pointed to the importance of building strong corporate cultures and how they can foster innovation and work satisfaction. The culture building is often portrayed as a top-down process, spearheaded by managers. This study however, indicates that lower level employees can be just as enthusiastic about corporate cultures, even though they themselves have little influence over how those values are being developed and implemented. However, consistent implementation across organizational subunits is necessary if universal acceptance is to be achieved. Otherwise, there is a risk of some subunits exhibiting discontent due to perceived special treatment of other groups. In the long run, companies such as IKEA risk losing credibility if their cultural values are not adhered to universally.

Furthermore, since there is a widespread view of IKEA's values as being congruent with Swedish values, its corporate culture could function as a supplement to national culture. The role of corporations in integrating new citizens today is largely limited to providing employment and improving language skills. However, we wish to also emphasize the important role of corporations in introducing national values to new citizens. Thus, as corporate cultures are being conveyed to employees, the underlying assumptions stemming from the corporation's background can be conveyed as well.

The case of IKEA is an example of a corporate culture deeply rooted in tradition. This has resulted in a stable but somewhat inflexible organization. This inflexibility may be a hindrance for IKEA as a traditional retailing company encountering new e-commerce actors. Shopping at IKEA has become something of a tradition in itself, but will this be enough to counter the convenience of shopping in one's own sofa? In IKEA's case it is possible that it will be enough due to its global reach, other retailers may not be as lucky. The changing landscape of retailing has the potential to dramatically alter the labor market, causing jobs to disappear. In particular, this would affect young adults searching for their first employment, increasing an already high unemployment among youths.

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