BUSINESS CYCLES AND WORK ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS FOR SICK LEAVE IN SWEDEN

A case study on consultants in the IT sector

Alberto Aguilar (1991-07-10)

Henrik Svensson (1986-06-03)

Abstract

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Purpose: This case study allows us to explore and investigate the reasons behind an increasing sick-leave ratio in a concrete field and country which are IT and Sweden. Sick leave has been continuously studied in the public sector, but little research has been done in the private sector, and even less in the IT field. Therefore, to improve our knowledge about the reasons behind the increasing sick-leave, our purpose in this study is to investigate the IT consultants' and IT managers'[1] perceptions.

Theory: In order to fulfil the purpose of the case study, two different theories will be used to shape the upcoming results. One will be focused in the economic spectrum with a more business-oriented approach, while the other relies in the sociological and psychological side. With the combination of both theories, we are aiming to give strength to the upcoming results and moreover.

Method: This master thesis draws on a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. The qualitative part is the base of our results and the quantitative data is used as a support for the economic theory and the study. The data

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[1] IT Managers: When talking about IT Managers, those can be also work as IT consultants. The definition of IT Manager is made as some managers were also named Project Managers or Business Area Managers. Since all of them work in the IT field we therefore called them IT Managers.

retrieved from the Statistics, HR analytics and other kinds of quantitative information are mixed with a qualitative approach, such as semi-structured open interviews.

Result: Making use of two theories, one appealing to control, support and demand (Karasek, 1979; Karasek & Theorell, 1990) and a business one (Nossen, 2009) the results are framed. IT Consultants and IT Managers have both appealed to the sense of belonging as one of the main factors that might be behind sick leave. Nevertheless, this factor does not go alone, and it is strictly linked to other factors, such as the work environment, the difficulty or time pressure of the project assigned. The stress that could depart from a lack of structure is as well one of the possible factors. The lack of social support in the company has also been highlighted. Activities and initiatives have been tried by the managerial board to engage the IT consultants and create the sense of belonging, believing this could help in reducing the sick-leave. Unfortunately, these activities haven't succeeded, since the IT consultants were reluctant to participate. The business cycles also play a special role and are considered as an environmental factor that has an effect on the sick-leave of the consultants. It is important to state that no major differences, but different perspectives from IT managers and IT consultants have been found.

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Foreword

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1. Introduction

To start with, we may ask ourselves: why sick leave and what does it make it still interesting to study? This matter has been studied for years by a considerable number of students and researchers and still, it is one of the issues that keeps giving room for more insights and findings. In other words, sick leave has been a matter of concern and subject of different research, being an ongoing phenomenon that it is allegedly impossible to stop; there will always be sick-leaves at work (Smith & Smith, 2017). It is also fair to state, that after carefully reading, studying and analysing the previous studies and research regarding sick-leave, it seems to arise new trends when it comes to this field in our society. According to González (2017) it is clear that the new globalised and more service-oriented labour market has been shaping those upcoming trends. The irruption of the digitalisation, new technologies and new ways of working carrying new demands, have drastically changed the labour market. As a consequence, some cases of sick leave have been changed or slightly modified.

Therefore, according to these trends that González (2017) describes, the working environment is constantly changing and leading to a new framework, not only within the economic, but also to the social and emotional implications that this might also carry. It is fair to say then, that with this new economic era and new mentality, the consequences when it comes to the workers, might be significantly different, following a pattern that hasn't been that prominent before. This can be explained by the use of new technologies, a more IT-focused market, globalisation, changes of organisational models and also a collective mentality change towards the job. According to González (2017) those are the key concepts to the appearance of this new labour market, which not only affects Europe, but worldwide. Therefore, it would be fair to think that new models and structure of work, results in new models or trends of sick leave. Within a good economic growth, new and more demanding duties at work might be appearing, along with a compromise from the employee to perform well. This due to the many opportunities we currently have to get the job done. This can be at any time or where ever your location is. This might be the reason why sick-leave is getting a new shape and following another approach or trend when there are periods of economic growth (Carlgren, 2019).

Most of the research that has been previously studied and analysed was focused on blue collar jobs. Other interesting fact is that there is an overwhelming research in sick leave regarding the

public sector. Moreover, it has been also demonstrated that higher sick leaves are in the public sector (Vester Thorse et al., 2015). The matter that this thesis has been focused on the private sector and with relatively "high" salaries within a white-collar environment already gave a new framework to consider making it more unique. The gap could be found here: IT and the consultant role are farily new and hasn't been studied in previous studies from the sick leave perspective that much in the Human Resources Management field. Moreover, taking it from the scope of consultants in the IT field (including IT managers) and not permanent employees, makes this research more interesting. Being a consultant means being employed by a company, but working in other's companies' assignment, which can be understood as working at the client. It is a complex matter when it comes to who is responsible for the work environment and other working related factors, as they are working for two companies. On one hand, they have their roots in the consultant company but at the same time, their work-place is at the client. D'Oliwa (2018) explains that from the work environment act it's the consultant´s company that has the main responsibility for the employees even though they work from another location. Furthermore, it's highlighted that in most cases the consultant company has little to no control over the work environment at the client premises. Therefore, the responsibility for the employee is a joint operation between the consultant company and the client where the client has also a protection responsibility. The daily duties with the work environment are split between the consultant company and the client. The consultant company has a more long-term professional relation and must act as the main rehabilitator of people on sick leave (Ibid.)

1.1 Sick leave and health consequences

According to Heathfield (2018), sick leave can be described as the absence of the employee at the workplace or organisation. This, is paid and has been provided as a benefit for employees, being also mandatory to be provided by the employers in the form of paid sick time. According to Sieurin, Josephson and Vingård (2009) although reporting positive values about sick-leave has been demonstrated in rare occasions during their study. Those, were more focused in an opportunity for the individual to think about their career, pursuing another job or a mind change in salary expectations. Nevertheless, it has been proven that those who were on part-time sick-

leave[2], reported many more positive insights in their private sphere, than those who were on full-time sick leave. However, even when at the same time, it carried negative consequences to the colleagues and organisation. The conclusion was that, even when sick leave could have positive effects when it is a part-time one, it mainly has negative connotations for both individual and employer in the long term. In addition to this research, the authors Gustafsson and Marklund (2011) argue in their study that those on long-term sick leave were found to have only negative health consequences during that period as well as in the future. Moreover, and which makes this study also interesting, is that sick leave and sickness absence could be used as a predictor for other possible future health impacts.

1.2 Background: Sick leave from a Case Study

During the last years with ongoing economic growth in Sweden, the IT field has been of those sectors experiencing a rise in demand and little to offer, due to the lack of those kinds of professionals. Due to this scenario, there is a new paradigm; the consultancy services are on the first line nowadays. This is because of new market demands; more competition, a better cost-efficiency mind-set, and also higher demands in less time (Plimmer, 2013). The private sector has been increasing the use of this service during last years. Therefore, what cast of doubts is, what happens when those group of employees get sick, and therefore go on sick-leave? The problem is how wellbeing and sick leave could be perceived and measured when being an IT consultant. This comes to the thought in how someone can be aware of the risks of sick leave when most are located at a client's location. According to Smith and Smith (2017), this could be measured by the employer or direct responsible at the client.

1.3 Aim and objectives of the thesis

The purpose of the study is to gain a better understanding of which factors, based on the IT consultants' and the IT managers' perceptions, they consider could contribute to increase to the sick leave in their working life in the Swedish IT field. It should be highlighted that sick leave and sickness absence will be used interchangeably, having the same meaning for the

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Part-time sick leave: This is the time of sick leave where the employee is part time at job. Therefore, full time sick leave relies on the employee who is not at the workplace at any time.

researchers in this study. It is fair to state that experiences and perceptions of the employees' experience view on sick leave is utterly needed in order to shed light on why there is a rise on sick leave during an economic growth (Hägglund & Johansson, 2016). During the last years, XXX has been experiencing an economic and fast-growing economic rise while at the same time its sick leave has been increasing exponentially. In this research, two different theories will be used; one applying to a spectrum regarding the business cycles. The second one, linked to a sociological, psychological and therefore more individual and private sphere.

1.4 Research question

The objective is giving a logical and reasonable answer to this issue through the use of a primary research question and with the support of another question that will be used to give strength and a more contextualised framework for this study:

1) *How do consultants and managers in the IT sector perceive and describe work environmental factors that could lead to sick leave at their working life in Sweden?*
2) *How does the business cycle in Sweden contribute to sick leave among consultants in the IT-sector?*

Therefore, in order to fulfil the aim and purpose when using a mixed method as it is the case, triangulation will be needed. With the quantitative and qualitative data, we will support, validate and strengthen the outcomes of the study (Bentahar & Cameron, 2015).

2. Context and Framework

According to Scheil-Adlung and Sadner (2010), sick leave is closely associated with the societal and economic status of the country. In this case, since this matter seems to do well in Sweden, the question is why the sick leave is still increasing. There is data from Sweden and Norway, which demonstrates that sick leave is associated with the economic cycles (Ibid.). More in concrete, the results show that during high periods of unemployment, sick-leave is significantly reduced. The reason could differ, but the main hypothesis is the fear from the employee of being dismissed during a recession. So, even when the worker is sick during an

economic crisis, for example, they might be more reluctant in taking sick leave (Ekonomifakta, 2019).

2.1 Sick leave in the Nordic Countries

According to the study *"Sickness absence in the Nordic Countries"* and the analysed data from The European Union Labour Force Survey, those reveal that Sweden (along with Norway) carries the highest sick-leave rate in the Nordic countries (Vester Thorse et al., 2015). Although some stricter regulations came in 2008 and seemed to decrease the high number of sick leave, this went up again during 2010 (Lidwall, Bill, Palmer, & Olsson Bohlin, 2016). Of course, doing a comparison is not the main object of this study, but it is needed to understand how sick-leave is perceived in Sweden and therefore, set the background and limitations for our research. Analysing Swedish statistics, employees in the public sector are more likely to get on sick leave than those working on private companies (Ibid.). If we look at the main causes of sick leave, according to Häggebrink and Lovén (2010) those usually are injuries, depression or mental health issues and cardiovascular diseases (Absence from work - Sweden, EuroWORK, 2010). Taking the causes in consideration, Lidwall et al. (2016), also highlight that there are special groups with a higher risk of sick leave when it comes to professional categories. Highly educated and white-collar workers are more susceptible to go on sick-leave due to mental causes. Interestingly, according to Krantz and Lundberg (2006), those employees who were on the top-level managerial group reported the lowest number of sick leave days in their study.

2.2 The labour market in Sweden

In order to understand sick leave, it is strictly necessary to have knowledge of the labour market. Therefore, with an unemployment of 6,0% in 2019, Sweden is slightly under the average of the European Union, being this a 6,5% of unemployment in the same year (*Unemployment statistics*, Eurostat, 2019). The working environment tends to be structured within a "flat" organisation, not being extremely hierarchical. Here every employee has a voice where their opinions and thoughts are heard and considered. Sweden also worked on the work-life balance, in order to combine professional and private life in the most suitable way (The Swedish Labour Market, *Information om Sverige*, 2018). It is also known, that trade unions and collective agreements are powerful and popular among Swedish workers. They provide basic security at work, better conditions and even higher pay (*"This is how the Swedish Labour Market works"* Unionen). Moreover, there are professions where they lack staff, being called

understaffed professions. These professions are usually those that require higher and vocational education, within university or University College. Among those professions, we can find those related to the IT field, such as software developers, engineers and Quality Assurance analysts ("The Swedish Labour Market, *Information om Sverige*", retrieved from Arbetsförmedlingen, 2018).

2.3 Company case of study

It is time to present the company case of study, which perfectly fits within the new labour market scenario and the context above described. Bearing this in mind, this company is the most suitable platform to build our study and answer our research questions. This, is an international company, operating in around 11 countries worldwide and with approximately 4000 employees. Their main field is the outsourcing and consultancy business in the IT sector. According to its official website, the company is defined as privately owned, basing its strategy business in a long-term period. It starts in the early '90s with the emergence of the first company (the antecedent of the new company which is a case of study, and also the parent company). In the beginning of 2000´s, the company started to grow exponentially. During this time, they decided to divide the parent company into three different companies. This third company was also divided into six different business areas, according to the specialisations that were more focused on. They were geographically situated in different parts of Sweden, being the ones that are object of this study. Therefore, the consultants can work in different business areas and different locations. The company is present in all regions of Sweden (being the most important and prominent locations Gothenburg, Malmö and Stockholm).

3. Previous research

3.1 Sick leave and the business cycle

Sickness absence has for a long time been discussed in the literature as being procyclical, which has mainly shown a negative correlation between sickness absences in relation to the unemployment rate (Pichler, 2015). There have also been clear tendencies for the sick leave to go down during the period when there is less growth in the economy and when the unemployment numbers are rising. On the other hand, there are also clear correlations between growth in the economy and lower unemployment numbers and the rise in sick leave among

workers (Marklund, Bjurvall, Hogstedt, Palmer & Theorell, 2004; Pichler, 2015). One frequently named explanation for this type of procyclical patterns are labour force composition effects. According to (Pichler, 2015; Marklund et al., 2004) this explanation is based from a group of individuals that shows higher tendency to be sick. This group of individuals feel that they have less control over their work situation. This will also lead to them being unemployed more often as well. It's further explained that these type of individuals with tendency to go in sick leave are the first in line to get laid off during times of economic downturn (Marklund et al. 2004; Pichler, 2015). However, Hägglund and Johansson (2016) argues that these are the same sort of individuals that get rehired again during times of economic growth. This means that the sick leave percentage will slowly increase again when these individuals get rehired.

Marklund et al. (2004) also explains that there can be a disciplinary effect among employees during times of economic downturn as they fear of losing their income due to the high amount of sick leave. This argument is also strengthened by Pichler (2015) as job loss can influence sickness behaviour. Marklund et al. (2004) furthermore explains that both the disciplinary effect and the accordion effect can contribute to the cyclic pattern of sick leave. Sweden has also been influenced by this type of sick leave pattern connected to the business cycle. During times of high employment in Sweden the sick leave percentage has often been high but the opposite during times of high unemployment (Unionen, 2016). It's also stated that this can also vary from what type of branch your business is operating in. It's furthermore explained by Unionen (2016) that the business cycle itself cannot explain the rise in sick leave. There are more factors involved in this matter as the growth in mental illness among the population, for example. The growth in sick leave is rising steadily in Sweden and have done so for the last couple of years during times of economic boom, but have also varied over time in Sweden (Ibid.)

3.2 Psychosocial and psychological reasons for sick leave

3.2.1 Sick leave due to the working environment

According to Ekbladh, Thorell and Haglunda (2010), the working environment could be defined as the work characteristics, the employee relations, connections and the correlation between the job satisfaction and work demands that are performed in a determined workplace. It is fair to state that from the authors, depending on the working environment and the

psychosocial factors that surround them, the employee could carry the risk of getting sick and going on sick leave. According to Ekbladh, Thorellband and Haglunda (2010), it is also important to be aware of the employee's perceptions and interactions with the clients.

The sense of that their work is valued and that the employee perfectly fits with the type of work that has been assigned. According to the Ekbladh's study, work is where most of an adult time is spent and therefore seems logical to invest in its environment. This in order to find the best fit between the job characteristics and the individual or employee (Ibid.). It is fair to state, that in their study, factors in the working environment such as social or physical ones, seem to have an effect on those employees who have already been on sick leave. It has been highlighted that the contact and connections with other colleagues and customers, have a positive effect on the employees' health, being a factor of a supportive healthy working environment. The meaningfulness of the work and being valued were also among this supportive factor. This, enhances the motivation of the worker and reduces the stress levels, improving the cooperation between colleagues. On the other hand, the time and work demands were seen as interference or factor that could damage the working environment and affect the employees' performance and health (Ibid.).

3.2.2 The sense of belonging

According to Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema and Collier (1992), the sense of belonging could be described as the individual experience towards a system or environment. It's also fundamental that the individual considers and feels like an integral part of that system or environment. Interestingly, there is a study carried out by Inalhan and Finch (2004) where this topic is treated through one theory called the place attachment theory, which is described as the combination of individuals and their environment meeting. The study is more focused on internal changes and the responses that employees have related to these strategies. Inalhan and Finch (2004) claim that nowadays the sense of belonging is undermined, mainly for personal expectations towards the company. It argues that the employee must be linked psychologically through different phases in order to create a sense of belonging towards the company. Those are strictly linked, and if there are movements or changes during the process, the creation of a sense of belonging might be broken since this requires enough time to be built. In addition, Boss (2018) argues that the lack of this sense of belonging is also serious for the company. The research from Boss shows that those employees who have that sense of

belonging feel more engaged and efficient towards the job assignment, resulting also in fewer safety accidents.

3.2.3 IT consultants and stress

According to Wallgren and Hanse (2010), IT consultants work exhibits many knowledge driven characteristics work. The work of an IT consultant is stressful and impacted by the demand of customers who put pressure on consultants to perform quality work at a fast pace. As many other jobs within the advanced industrial society job-stress have become a clear issue among employees, IT consultants counted as well. Much of this stress is results from a high amount of job demand in relation to the workers' abilities, frustration with aspiration and also disaffection with how goals are valued (Ibid.). Stressors is one factor that comes from quantitative overload, but at the same time, it can also be noticed from qualitative underload, low control and a lack of social support.

However, the IT sector relies heavily on the latest technology and the quality of qualified workers. The IT consultants will flourish in solving issues for customers which would create a feeling of competence, accomplishment and personal growth (Wallgren & Hanse, 2010). This type of feeling can, however, diminish if the demand from the customer's increases and the IT consultants loses some sense of self-efficacy. The study performed by the researcher, in this case, was based in Sweden within 10 companies and 422 respondents. The overall response rate in this study was 90 percent. The IT consultants worked full-time, mainly focused on assignments from industrial and the public sector (Wallgren & Hanse, 2010). The results from the study showed that job demands have a significant impact on the perceived stress among IT consultants. This also confirms previous studies done in this area. The study also showed the IT consultants work was plagued by strict deadlines and no real time for recovery between overlapping projects. Moreover, high job demands influence the perceived stress which might affect the decision making one may take as an IT consultant. Wallgren (2011) further presents a thesis with 5 studies where the aim was to examine the psychosocial environment of IT consultants with a focus on their motivation. The first aim of this study was to examine the relationship between IT consultants and their job characteristics. Consecutively highlighting what kind of stress, they perceive to be under, while using motivators as a mediating variable. Wallgren (2011) confirms some of the previous studies that have been done in this field. One

of the factors that were mainly confirmed was how job demand has a significant impact on perceived stress among IT consultants.

3.2.4 Sick leave due to psychiatric disorder

According to a report from Forte (2015), the number of people who get compensation due to psychiatric disorder has been gradually growing. This is due to people being less diagnosed with other issues which may cause them to be on sick leave. The correlation between compensation and which factors cause the sick leave, varies depending on which measures are being used and looked at. There have been large variations over time in Sweden when looking at the amount of sick-listed people and the amount of days away from work due to sick leave. The amount of sick leave in Sweden was at historically low levels between 2009 and 2010. However, these numbers have been growing since then, especially in relation to people being on sick leave due to psychiatric disorders (Ibid.). According to Forte (2015), the number of people that were on sick leave due to psychiatric disorder was 2% of the entire labour force during the years of 2005 until 2012. This means that the majority of people that were diagnosed with these issues weren't on sick leave. The compensation may instead come from unemployment compensation or maintenance support instead of the medical insurance policy. However, it's not known how large this group was, that gets these sorts of compensation instead of the medical insurance policy. It's also getting more common that people get more than one diagnoses, this may be the reason for the rise in psychiatric diagnoses over somatic diagnosis (Ibid.)

3.2.5 Sick leave due to psychiatric disorder among higher educated individuals

The amount of sick leave has steadily been growing among higher educated individuals in Sweden for the last couple of years. Even though the numbers are still pretty low among higher educated individuals. The rise and pace of people going on sick leave are alarming and worrying. In 2013 the number of ongoing sick leave amounted to about 120.000 individuals in Sweden. Higher educated individuals stood for around 20 percent of the total amount (Andrén, 2017). According to Andrén (2017), the data on sick leave only stretches until 2013, however, indicators speak for the rise of sick leave among individuals with higher education is following the general development in sick leave. The amount of people with an academic degree has been increasing over the years. This is also influencing the sick leave numbers, where the growth in sick leave is highest among people with higher education. It's further explained that the growth

in sick leave is largely depending on psychiatric diseases among individuals with higher education. Andrén (2017) states that there are clear risk factors for mental illness like; *high demand - low control, unclear roles, bad leadership (unfair, not supportive, excluding), unbalance between effort and reward, unbalance between work and spare time and deficiencies in employment security*.

3.3 Sick leave and the structure of the organisation

According to Baligh, Helmy, Burton and Børge (2006), the structure of an organisation is based on its employees, defined as a logical order of people in a set, creating and following an ordered pattern. It is fair stating then, that companies are usually created within processes and steps to follow, so the business can operate and be as productive as possible. An interesting article by Ashe-Edmunds (2019) shows the risks of building a non-proper structure for the company. The author states that lacking structure or processes could lead to the risk of miscommunication or misinterpretation of important facts. This can heighten the level of stress and decrease the motivation and morale among the employees (Ibid.). This kind of lack of structure affects the working environment and therefore, the employees' motivation, which can be one of the factors for a possible sick-leave in the long term. Moreover, if the lack of structure is permanent in time, with no intentions of improving, this will keep the unhealthy working environment, leading also to unsatisfied customers. According to Ashe-Edmunds (2019) this can create a bad reputation towards the company, losing customers and affecting the revenues for the business. The leadership in the structure is also needed in order to keep a healthy working environment and prevent potential sick-leaves (Nyberg, Peggy, & Theorell, 2005).

4. Theory

4.1 Business cycle and health behaviours

The business cycle is defined as the pattern of expansion, contraction and recovery in economy. In this thesis a theory on business cycle will be used to identify different patterns that can help to explain why sick leave goes up during times of economic boom. There are three hypothesis of this theory that can help explain a rise in sick leave; *discipline hypothesis*, *the compositions hypothesis* and *stress hypothesis*. These three hypotheses will be used to analyse sick leave from the descriptive data collected from the company in this study.

4.1.1 Discipline hypothesis

The discipline hypothesis first originated from the economic environment. The main thoughts on this hypothesis is that the employees' costs for being on sick leave increases during times of higher unemployment (Nossen, 2009). This type of cost can be in the form that you might lose your job and not finding any new work opportunities. Nossen (2009) explains that high sick leave in a business can increase the pressure on the need for downsizing due to higher economic losses. It can also mean that some of the employees' sick absence might affect the individual risk of being laid off. The disciplinary effect seems to be strongest among people with temporary employment and junior staff (younger people). This is also more common in the private sector as it is more exposed to the economic cycle (Ibid.). It is furthermore argued by Nossen (2009) that some employees might feel responsibility for the business and/ or the society which means that they are less prone to be on sick leave during times of recession. During times of recession, people want to keep their own sick leave as low as possible compared to other employees, especially at workplaces where the staffing is low (Ibid.)

4.1.2 The composition hypothesis

This hypothesis focuses on the people that are not on the labour market as they have a history of bad health, functional capacity or elevated levels of sick absence. These are the people that get laid off during recession but gets hired or retain their job during times of high employment. In such times it can be hard for companies to find the right form of competences (Nossen, 2009; Hägglund & Johansson, 2016). The composition hypothesis is strongly associated with the business cycle. Of importance for this hypothesis is the difference between temporary and

permanent employees as they have a different kind of employment, when it comes to work security (Nossen, 2009).

4.1.3 Stress hypothesis

According to Nossen (2009) the stress hypothesis is formed from the correlation between sick absence and economic conditions in relation to health consequences of high or increasing activity level. Furthermore, the stress hypothesis is based on what effect the increasing activity in a company can lead to in the end. This can be the increase in work pace, more customer contact, fewer breaks from work tasks and more overtime tasks. It can also be higher staff turnover and stronger competitiveness on the market in general (Ibid.). All these factors mentioned above can cause damages to the health and wellbeing of employees such as burnout and stress-related diseases. The increase in activity does not automatically mean a negative impact on the individual. In some cases, higher activity means employment of new staff, but without an increase in production per hour and per employee.

4.2 Demand, control and support model

The demand and control model were developed by Karasek (1979) and includes two dimensions. One is the *demand* that work puts on you and the other dimension is how much *control* the individual has over the current work situation. The model was initially created by Karasek (1979) with the purpose to do empirical studies within a different type of professions regarding heart- and lung diseases. The aim was also set to predict if someone would get these types of issues before it happened. With this model, Karasek would be able to measure the presence of negative stress that could become harmful. According to Karasek (1979) there are two main variables that were looked upon which were demand and control. These two variables in combination with each other result in a different type of jobs. Karasek was able to find four ideal types of work with this demand and control model depending on a combination of high/low demands and high/low control. The four ideal types that Karasek found from these combinations were; active jobs, passive jobs, low-stress jobs and high-stress jobs. According to Karasek (1979) the control and demand variables are mutually dependent on each other. This is what makes it possible to identify experienced stress-level and the psychosocial work environment. Issues with bad health and psychic pressure occur when there's an unbalance

between the demand put on the work and the control that the employee has over the situation (Ibid.)

The demand and control model were further improved on adding the part of the social support (Johnson & Hall 1988; Thorell, 1990). Karasek and Theorell (1990) focused on trying to develop this model to analyse empirical material connected to the psychosocial work environment. They also defined that psychosocial in this case is the mutual interaction between psychological- and social factors. When analysing the interaction between humans in the work field it's possible to look on which type of characteristics the individual has. Also, the environment around the individual and what consequences this interaction gets could be visible. The main purpose of the demand and control model is analysing the issues behind the psychosocial environment problem within a workplace. This means that the model doesn't investigate the consequences these issues may cause.

4.2.1 Control

According to Karasek and Theorell (1990) the purpose of the control variable is to measure how much power an employee has over the decision making regarding their own work performance. This control variable regarding decision making can also be split into two things; "*control in work*" and "*control over work*". The "*control in work*" is mainly about small things that are associated with work tasks. The "*control over work*" is more focused on the big picture when it comes to decision making regarding work tasks (Ibid.). There are two core components when it comes to the decision- and action space; *opportunities for influence* and *knowledge control*. Opportunities for influence is about the amount of latitude you have and the chance the employee has to influence the plan and perform their work tasks. For example, this might be that you can influence how you plan your breaks while working. It can also be what kind of strategies the employee use to perform their work duties (Ibid.). Knowledge control is focused on how the employee's competences are being valued and nourished inside of the company. It's also focused on if the employee has the right set of tools and knowledge to handle these types of demands and if there are possibilities for development and growth.

4.2.2 Demand

According to Karasek and Theorell (1990) the demand part in this model concerns outer physical- and psychological factors that individuals meet in their work life. These types of

physical demands might be the pressure that is required to perform the work needed but it can also be that the individual is affected by other risks at work. An example of a physical demand might be that you work in some sort of industry that requires that you handle heavy equipment which in the long run might cause wear and tear on the body. This can, for example, be back injuries or other bodily damages. The psychological demands are a burden that arise when the environmental requirements are higher than the individuals own control over things at work. There can be a split when looking at demand regarding qualitative and quantitative demand. The qualitative demands can be about things as the degree of difficulty when it comes to work tasks. For example, could be the need for high concentration and attention. According to Karasek and Theorell (1990) there are other factors that can cause stress for the employees. Those could include role conflicts at work or the fear losing their jobs; these are negative associated stress factors. The quantitative demands are mainly about how much time, how hard or fast someone needs to work to fulfil the work tasks in front of them (Ibid.). The psychological demands can either generate stress that leads to a learning and development outcome. However, this is heavily depending on the control that the employee has over the work situation. Stress can also come in a negative way which may be caused by the unbalance between the psychological strain and demand in contrast to how the individual cope with these demands. If the employee has high control over work tasks and can manoeuvre around them it gives the employee a possibility to reduce the negative aspect of psychological demands (Karasek & Theorell, 1990).

4.2.3 Combination of control and demand

As mentioned above the demand and control model makes it possible to categorise different types of work into four ideal types of psychosocial jobs from the variables control and demand. *Figure 4.1* below shows us these types of different categories which work can be placed into; *passive job*, *high strain job*, *low strain job* and *active job*.
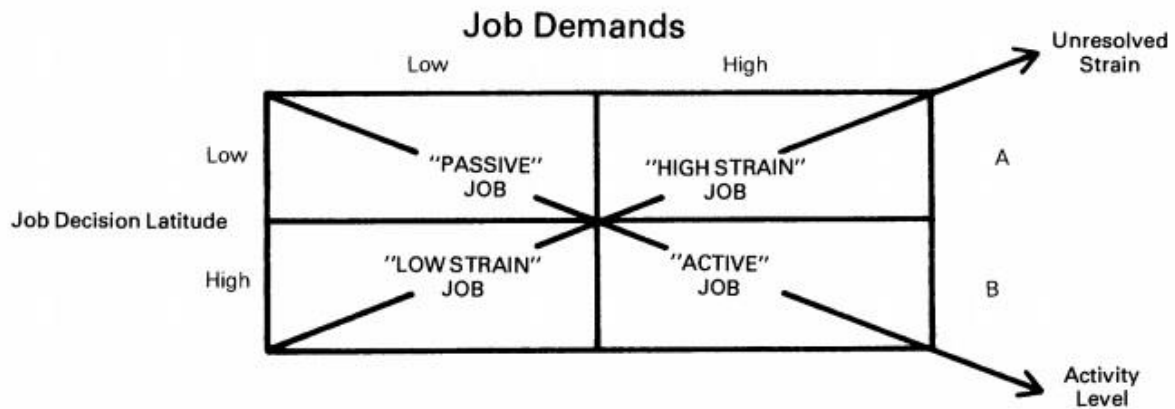
Figure 4.1: Job demands (Karasek, 1979)

4.2.4 Low-stress jobs

These jobs do most of the time generate less negative stress and cause less work-related illnesses than the other three categories below. According to Karasek and Theorell (1990) low stressed job can be defined by characters as low psychosocial work demand and a high degree of control over work tasks. One of the key factors why the sick leave is lower in this category is because of the control the individuals have over their work-related tasks. This means that they can tackle issues and solve problems with higher efficiency (Ibid.). Karasek and Theorell further explain that there are risks in this category as well. This involves the risks of not being satisfied enough or not being challenged enough and not getting the opportunity to solve problems.

4.2.5 High-stress jobs

Karasek and Theorell (1990) argue that high-stress jobs are the category that generates the highest amount of negative stress which can lead to severe problems. These problems can be depression, anxiety and burn-out or even cause people physical harm. These types of jobs are the ones that we can find in the service sector like assistant nurses and jobs within the manufacturing industry. Individuals within this category have a low amount of control over their work tasks in comparison to the demands that are put upon them. People within this category might lose their motivation and will to perform at a high level. This would be due if they lack control over their work-environment which may lead to less productivity for the company (Ibid.).

4.2.6 Active jobs

According to Karasek and Theorell (1990) active jobs are those which are categorised as teachers, doctors, nurses and CEO, for example. These jobs are defined with a high amount of psychological work demand but at the same time a high level of control. This is one of the most ideal forms when it comes to the psychosocial work-environment. This, even though it increases the demand on the individual, also brings the person a lot of room to manoeuvre around the work tasks. The people in this category are free to use their competence and work around a different type of strategies to handle the stress to create a healthy work-life balance (Ibid.). Active works are not seen to create long-time negative stress on individuals but rather help to develop a healthy psychosocial environment for the individuals.

4.2.7 Passive jobs

According to Karasek and Theorell (1990) this category is defined by the low amount of control and the low amount of psychosocial demand. These types of jobs do not give to the individual the same freedom as the active jobs, where the individuals flourish under challenges and problem-solving. The risk within this category is that individuals are not being stimulated enough, which may cause them to gradually lose some of their knowledge and competence. These types of jobs can be a real threat to the psychosocial work environment. The negative aspects that can be seen after a long period of a passive type of job are that people lose their motivation, will-power and it might also cause negative stress which can lead to illnesses.

4.2.8 Social support

The social support of the demand-control model was later added by Johnson and Hall (1988). They had done research that showed that people who are working within "active jobs" show positive response to social support. According to Karasek and Theorell (1990) the social support part of the model involves the type support that you get from social contacts or social interaction with other people. These interactions are key factors for people to sustain a healthy life and work balance. The social support can be found in the work environment as well and can be the social interaction between a manager and an employee. Karasek and Theorell further explain that if there's a lack of social support for the employee there might be issues further on with stress-related diseases like depression. There are two defined key components in the social

support part of the model which are emotional support and instrumental support. The emotional part is based on that individuals need emotional support to be able to face and tackle psychological demands that are put on them. This emotional trust can be found from co-workers, managers or from other people close to the individual which helps build a good foundation of trust factor (Ibid.). The instrumental part is more based around that individuals need some unloading of work tasks which may be assisted from co-workers or managers within the company (Ibid.).

5. Methodology

5.1 Mixed method approach

The main aim and goal of using mixed method design is to combine both qualitative and quantitative data with the aim to strengthen the study's conclusion. This means that the use of a mixed method should contribute to answering the research questions of the study. Mixed method design research aims to heighten knowledge and validity (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). Yin (2014) also argues that when doing a case study, it might be a good option for the researcher to gather information from more than one source to get a greater and deeper understanding of the subject. In this case, the qualitative data can give deeper insights from the perspective of IT consultants and IT managers on what may cause sick leave to rise within the IT-sector. Meanwhile, the quantitative approach plays a complementary part to enhance the results of the qualitative data (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017).

The research approach in this study was in the form of an abductive approach done by both of the researchers. This type of research approach combines both deductive and inductive processes. This means that the research is partly based on predetermined theories that have been studied by the researchers, in this case, demand and control model and a theory on business cycles. It also allows the researcher to explore themes and categories found during the analysis (Råholm, 2010). The researchers have been also focused on the company background and previous studies. During this process, collected data was coded into different themes and categories which could later be discussed from the existing theoretical framework. To explore and investigate the complex phenomena of sick leave a single-case study was chosen. According to Yin (2014), the advantage of a case study is that the researcher can demonstrate the complexity that characterises reality.

The data in this study was collected from semi-structured open interviews. These type of interviews are guided by an interview guide but gives the researcher the ability to ask follow-up questions to the respondent. This form of interview invites the respondent to a more dialogue-oriented interview (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Ahrne, 2013).

5.2 Empirical data collection

The purpose of the study is to gain a better understanding of which factors, based on the IT consultant's and the IT managers perceptions, they consider could contribute to increase the sick leave at the workplace in the Swedish IT field. Yin (2014) argues that when doing a case-study it might be a good option for the researcher to gather information from more than one source to be able to get a deeper knowledge thus, an understanding of the case. It was necessary to gather information from the company's own HR-system and other databases from the company to get a grasp on how much the company's sick leave has been increasing. Getting the understanding and the perceptions of the issue from the employees was of main focus to later triangulate this with quantitative data. To understand and explain the rise in sick leave we needed to understand why and how it's growing and the reasons behind it. As mentioned above, the first quantitative data was collected from the company's new HR-system, which showed us that how sick leave has been rising during the last 2 years. This is during a period when the company has been growing both in staff and economically. However, this data were not enough and only showed us data from 2017 until 2019. With the help from a business controller in the company, we got further data from other databases within the company that granted us data from 2011 to 2019. This was primarily focused on statistics on IT consultants' sick leave.

The qualitative data was collected from fifteen semi-structured open interviews with employees from four different business units in Sweden. The interviews were carried out with both individuals within IT managerial positions as well as IT consultants. Some of the managers interviewed also work as IT consultants, which means they have both the view as manager and consultant. Seven interviews were carried out with individuals in a managerial position and eight interviews were held with IT consultants from the company. The selection of participants was done in the form of a snowball selection, as it started with the HR-manager recommending new candidates to interview. This was further snowballed into the IT managers that referred consultants to us. The advantage of this selection is that it's easy to find new candidates as each person recommend two or three more candidates (Denscombe, 2014). The interviews were both

carried out in Swedish and English as some of the interviewees preferred Swedish as it's their native speaking language. The interviews were also divided between the researchers. Six out of fifteen interviews were carried out face-to-face and the other nine interviews were carried out over the telephone where they allowed us to record them. The interviews with the IT managers lasted from 30-60 minutes overall and the interviews with the consultants lasted from 25-35 minutes. There has been some criticism against telephone interviews as a tool for collecting qualitative data as it's been said that the lack of visual cues could lead to data loss or distortion (Novick, 2008). However, there's yet little evidence for that claim, but instead, there are arguments that telephone interviews may instead allow respondents to release information more freely (Ibid.). All of the interviewees in this study were briefly informed in an email about the aim and the purpose of the study,

5.3 Data analysis

To analyse the collected data in this study we chose to do it in the form of a thematic analysis. This is something that is common when doing a qualitative study (Bryman, 2011).

The thematic analysis bears some similarities with grounded theory but however, it doesn't require the researcher of creating plausible or grounded in the data theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While reading the material it is possible to separate themes and sub-themes from the quotes that the respondents gave during the interviews. This means that the researcher will continuously work through with the material while adding quotes that fit into the themes and sub-themes. There are negative aspects in analysing the material through this method as Bryman (2011) explains, as there is no real clear course of action when doing this type of analysis. We still argued that this was the best possible way for us to analyse the collected data from the semi-structured open interviews as we believed it would bring the most out of the material. During the first part of the transcripts, we could identify certain themes that kept on being repeated by the interviewees from time to time. Bryman (2011) further explains that when the researcher looks for themes in the material, they need to consider several aspects, as repetitions, metaphors, transitions, similarities and differences, linguistic links and theory related material. The alternative in this case of identifying themes and codes would have been grounded theory. However, we argued that there were enough theories available for us to use and therefore this data analysis method was not chosen.

The results have gradually been growing due to the thematization mentioned above. The first part of the action was to transcribe all interviews verbatim to make sure nothing was missed during this initial phase of the analysis. During the first analysis, we decided to go through each of the transcripts separately, while having the aim and the purpose in mind during this process. The initial coding was also done without focusing on the theoretical concepts as we wanted to identify what reasons the participants thought were behind the rise in sick leave among IT consultants. During this phase of the coding, certain quotes were coded in certain colours to attach them to themes that we thought was appropriate. Themes were further on named and divided into subcategories. These themes were later on aligned and with the concepts of the previous research and the theoretical framework in the discussion.

The quantitative data was collected from the company of the case study own database, which includes the number of working hours, sick leave hours and number of employees. The working hours and the sick leave hours were divided against one and other to get the amount of sick leave percentage among IT consultants. These numbers were later added into Excel, using the "*data analysis tool*" with the purpose of doing graphs. These would showcase the total amount of sick leave, sick leave in all of the business units and the growth of employees from 2011 until 2019.

5.4 Ethical considerations

For this case study, there are several serious ethical considerations that need to be acknowledged. Due to this case handling sensitive information about sick leave it was important to state that everyone involved would be granted anonymity. This includes both the name of the company as well as the names of the people being interviewed in this study. The HR-manager also sent out an information letter through the internal networks explaining the purpose of our presence at the company and the purpose of our study. The researchers also had in mind that one of the researchers had a personal relationship with the company due to being an employee which could influence the trust of the people being interviewed. However, due to the size of the company, it's certain that not everyone had a personal relationship with the researcher. It was made clear that this was a study separated from the other task that one of the researchers has at the company and that it's not associated with any type of work-related tasks. We as researchers also decided to follow Vetenskapsrådet (2002), four main requirements which are the following; the information requirement, the consent requirement, the

confidentiality and useful requirement. All these steps are done to try to ensure to the respondents that we handle all information with the utmost care as possible. All the people that participated and got interviewed in the study were sent an email with an interview clarification as well as the interview guide too. This step was done with the purpose of having the interviewees as prepared as possible on which type of questions what would be asked during the interview.

5.5 Validity and reliability

Validity and reliability are two important concepts within research to evaluate the quality of the research. Validity has the aim to measure what is relevant in the context, how well do you measure what you intend to measure. Validity is also to what extent the researcher gives the correct answer to the research question. How well does the research match previous studies within the field and do the results match results from other methods (Smith, 2015). There are procedures that can be used to increase the validity in research as; triangulation, comparing researchers coding, participant feedback, disconfirming case analysis and a paper trail (Ibid.).

To strengthen the research in this case study we used the following concepts mentioned above; triangulation and comparing researchers coding. The first technique used in this, was inter-rater comparison, which means that the researchers have discussions and meetings about the coding to ensure better validity from the research (Smith, 2015). In our research, we coded separately and discussed the coding afterwards to see if we would find the same answer to the research questions. The second technique used in this research was – triangulation, which is one of the main objectives for a researcher when doing a mixed method approach. Mixing methods where the main objective is to study the same phenomenon is called triangulation. This means that the researcher is out to corroborate and support the results of both quantitative- and qualitative data collection (Bentahar & Cameron, 2015). According to Bentahar and Cameron (2015) the purpose is also to ameliorate internal and external validity. In our research, we used both qualitative and quantitative data to validate if the business cycle influences the sick leave at the company where the case-study is done.

The reliability aspect concerns how well the instrument measures it, regardless of what it measures (Zohrabi, 2013). Reliability is however measured in a different way in qualitative research, as it's mainly focused on how researchers have gathered and processed the data

(Smith, 2015) In our case, to ensure that the information was reliable we gave both the IT managers and the IT consultants the same base questions, as to be consistent to the issue about sick leave within the IT-sector. The second step was to collect data in an extensive and thoroughly way as possible, which has been described above.

6. Results

Reminding the aim of this thesis and the research questions formulated, the results will be therefore presented. The aim is using the IT consultants' and IT managers' perceptions in order to know the reasons behind a high sick leave, taking them into consideration as a future basis for promoting quality work within the working climate. This, is built through the research questions:

> *1) How do consultants and managers in the IT sector in Sweden perceive and describe work environmental factors that could lead to sick leave at their working life?*
> *2) How do the business cycles in Sweden contribute to sick leave among consultants in the IT-sector?*

The findings from the research, case of study, will be therefore explained; following a structure where the information retrieved from both, qualitative and quantitative data shapes and strengths the theoretical framework used. The quantitative results will be explained first with the help of the company's report, as they are descriptive statistics. Using this descriptive part first, we aim to start from a broader spectrum to later, narrow down the results with the qualitative part of the study.

6.1 Descriptive statistics

The company's own report starts with an overall view in how sick leave affects as a whole in the country of Sweden. From the official report of the company (which also retrieved the information from Näringsliv), clarified that the sick leave average in Sweden in the private sector is around 2,3%. From the statistics, it appears that the 50% of their employees are never sick or on sick-leave. If we keep narrowing it, based on the total of employees, 33% of them were sick less than 7 days per year. In conclusion, the 4% represents the people stands for most

of the sick leave with a total sick-leave for the company levelling up to the 3,0%. Both short and long term (which is equivalent to 6 workdays per year and employee), being slightly over the average 2,3 % earlier mentioned. Below follows the gathered data from the HR-system and the other databases within the company.
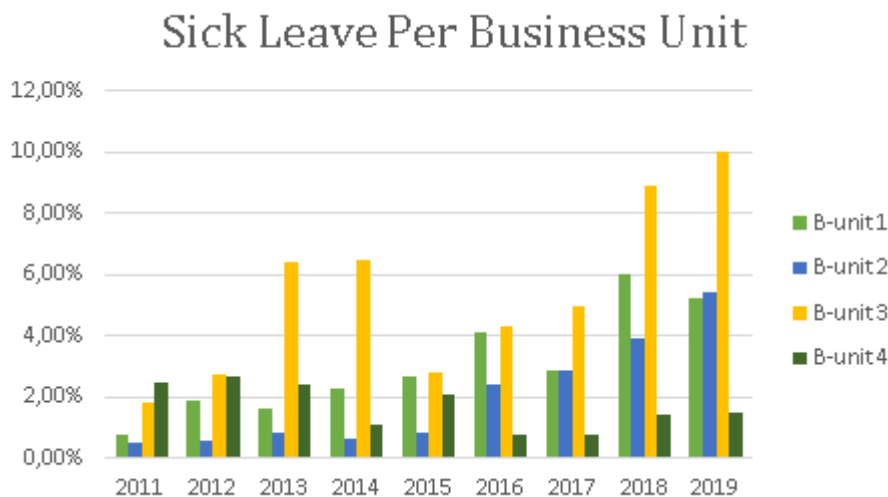
Figure 6.1.1 Sick leave on all of the business units

The figure above shows us the different business units and how sick leave has been proceeding between 2011 until 2019. There are clear differences from each business unit when looking at their sick leave ratio from year to year. Business unit 3 stands out the most from the rest of the business units when it comes to high sick leave. They had a sick leave of 8,9% during 2018 and is still growing during 2019 with the current sick leave landing at 10% so far during the first 4 months of the year.
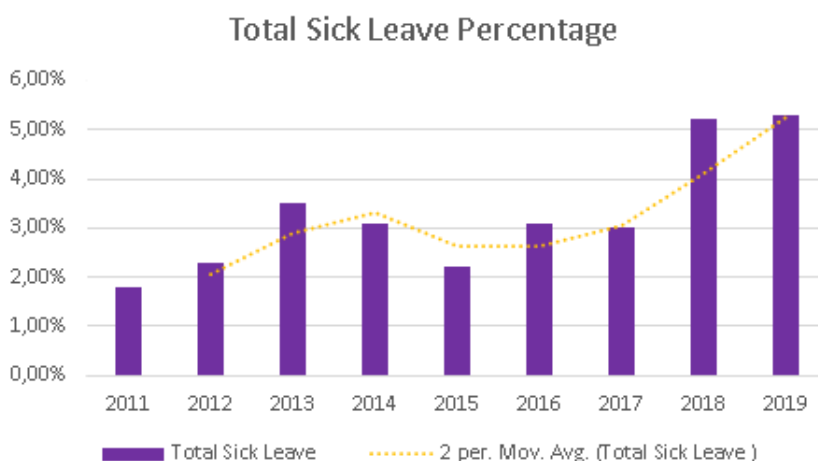
Figure 6.1.2 Total sick leave percentage among IT consultants

The figure above shows us the sick leave pattern among the IT consultants from 2011 until 2019. As we can see from *figure 6.1.2* the sick leave has exponentially grown the most from 2017 to 2019. During 2018 the IT consultants in the case studied company had a 5,2% sick leave in total, these numbers have also been growing during 2019 and is at 5,3% so far during the writing of this thesis.
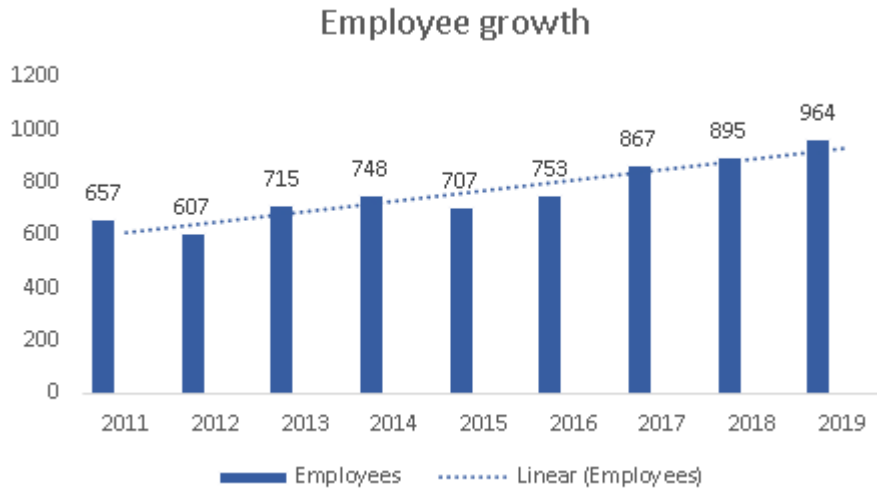
Figure 6.1.3 Employee growth in the company

As we can see from the figure above, the employee count is growing for each year, especially between 2015 and 2019 as there was a growth of almost 300 more employees. There was also a decline of employees between 2011 and 2012 as well between 2014 and 2015, however the percentage increases in staff from 2011 to 2019 is still 38%.

Figure 6.1.4 Sick leave in business unit 1

B-unit 1 has gone from extreme low numbers in sick leave in 2011 to high rises in sick leave both during 2016, 2018 and 2019. We can see from the marker that the sick leave had been growing steadily since 2011 with some exceptions of decrease in sick leave during 2017.
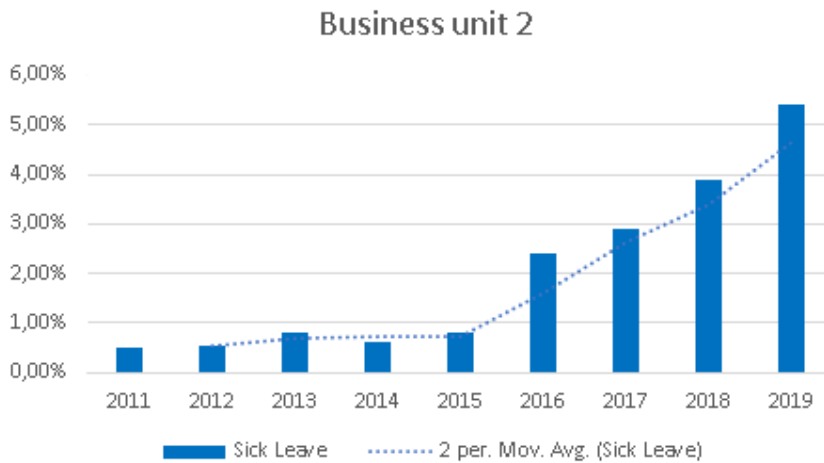
Figure 6.1.5 Sick leave in business unit 2

The rise in sick leave in B-unit 2 has been propelling since 2011 and have been increasing in a rapid pace from 2015 ever since. The sick leave has been increasing for each year in B-unit 3 except for 2014 when it slightly decreased. During 2017, 2018 and 2019 the sick leave percentage started to rise even faster as we can see from figure 6.4.
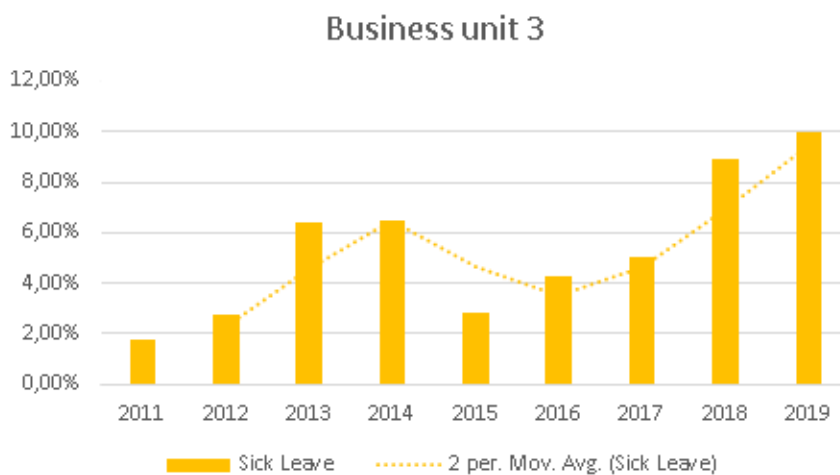
Figure 6.1.6 Sick leave in business unit 3

B-unit 3 has also been experiencing a rise in sick leave from 2016 to 2019.What stands out most, is the high sick leave percentage compared to the other units. This b-unit has gone from having 1,8% in sick leave during 2011 to 8,9% in 2018. The sick leave hasn't been slowing

down during the beginning of 2019 either and have reached a height of 10%, which is 8.2% higher sick leave than during 2011.
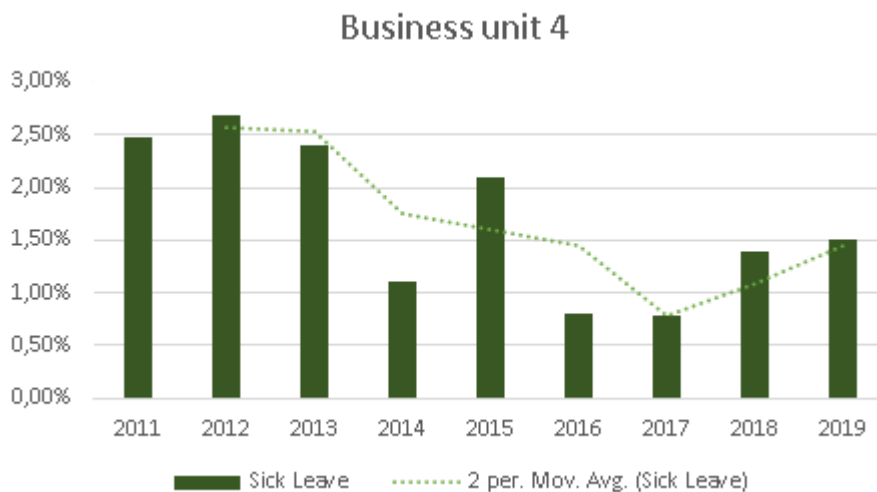
Figure 6.1.7 Sick leave in business unit 4

B-unit 4 stands out from the 3 other units when looking at the figure above. We can see that during 2011, 2012 and 2013 the sick leave was higher than it is today. The sick leave doesn't follow the pattern of the other units except from 2017 until 2019 where we can see that the sick leave percentage has started to increase slowly again. During 2017 the sick leave percentage was at a low of 0,78% growing to 1,5% during the beginning of 2019.

6.2 Qualitative results

The qualitative results will be displayed under different themes[3]; the first one *"Structure and organisation",* concerns the definition itself of that theme and how it is related to the studied group. It will be explained, putting an emphasis on how the pattern was visible during the research, involving the *"work environment"*. Next, will be *"High pressure and demands";* highlighting the respondents´ perceptions of it and how it relates to the sick leave with the subcategory *"stress"*. The third will be *"Work-life balance"* which will include "*Social support"*, to end up with the final theme: *"The sense of belonging".* It is important to state that no major differences, but different perspectives from IT managers and IT consultants have been found.

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[3] "Theme" and "pattern" will be used interchangeably

6.2.1 Structure and organisation

According to respondents' results, this pattern was latent while the qualitative part was analysed. The structure and organisation of the company has a clear effect on how the group of study responds, affecting their behaviour, their job tasks and daily duties. Those answered that meetings are scarce, often once every month at the office. But even when those meetings were already scheduled, some consultants were not able to attend them due to the high workload at the client, prioritising their tasks rather than the meetings.

> *But in my team we have one day at the office every month, so you can meet. But even then, people could not attend because they were busy in their projects, and they were not allowed to leave for that... so, you don't meet them every week or every month. It is like that for a consultant.* (IT-Consultant 1)

Managers had also a similar view as the consultants regarding the structure of the company. According to the answers, the structure is getting more rigid and stricter, from the managers point of view. This is believed to provide a better working environment and allowing to help the consultants to visualise what is really happening.

> *I am not sure, but I think the structure is getting a bit harder, a bit stricter, a bit better, if you ask me. And I think that would be great for the work environment, it is easier for the consultants to see what we want them to do and everything like that, Yeah I think that's most "decent.* (IT-Manager 2)

Moreover, from the managerial perspective, a lack of structure within the company can cause issues that haven't been noticed before.

> *We grow very fast ... would say... That if we are not the fastest growing then we are absolutely one of the fastest growing private companies in Sweden in our industry... with that said... with a high degree of freedom and high growth rate and a lot of entrepreneurship...So, there will be a few growing pains too ... so little lack of structure and order. After all, it is in some parts... for some individuals it can be more stressful than for others.* (IT-Manager 1)

The low levels of sick leave have started to rise during a period of expansion. The manager explains this due to some "growing pains". The amount of freedom that employees are granted in the company can also cause issues for some employees. On the other hand, there were also not positive responses to this matter. From other consultants, the lack of a proper structure ends up with no knowledge of the IT Company, and what is happening in it. Moreover, the continuous change of responsibilities is seen as an overall problem of constant reorganisation in the IT Company.

> *They are always changing responsibilities, but overall, the problem is the reorganisation.* (IT-Consultant 4)

A common denominator from the answers seems to be that the structure is slowly changing in the IT Company according to some of the respondents. This seems to be coming from the increased competition within the IT-sector as well as the pressure to deliver a good product to the clients. The structure is changing to a more complex image, with offices in more cities and in more countries. This also meets with a high amount of turnover in staff which influence a change in the structure.

> *We are very good at recruiting people but on the other hand, we are bleeding on the side of retention. We talked about that a lot, I think one thing is that the market is so competitive, it's very wild sort to say. But also I think it is important for us as managers to see what we can do.* (IT-Manager 3).

The consultants are also aware of the growth in the company, and how this could lead to complexity when it comes to the structure as mentioned above. Since the company is also in different countries, and the consultants also have the handicap of working with clients and maybe another kind of structure, it gets harder to create a general framework for all offices and locations.

> *Yeah, I think the last couple of years I mean... as the company grows, you get... the company is getting more complex and located in many different countries, and you have also the turnover of staff... I think in general it is a harder now..... [...] Maybe the pressure to deliver has changed and also increased during the competition.* (IT-Consultant 3)

Consultants are heavily affected by the client's structure and organisation as that's where they work from daily basis. Being a consultant can seemingly be a lonely job for some, depending what client you're working for as IT-consultant. Moreover, the structure also involves communication between company and client.

6.2.2 Work environment

How the working environment looks, differ from each of the respondents in this study due to them being either IT consultants located at different client offices. They can also be project leaders or IT managers, working for the consultant company with the base in the consultant company office. There is a big difference when it comes to risk factors among the respondents which, as mentioned above can be explained due to them being at other offices than the consultant company. One of the IT managers describes the work environment and the challenges that the consultant company is facing when asked about the work environment.

> *But we have done some changes in the work environment somehow from our perspective but it's certainly a limitation in this case... That we can't rule, or we can't manage the working climate or environment at the actual client site.* (IT-Manager 5)

The answer from the IT manager shows that they struggle to control the work environment for the IT consultants due to them working from somewhere else and not at the office where the managers are located. There have been efforts to enhance the work environment from the IT consultants, but it seems to be hard to get the right amount of effect that is needed to change things. Some clients seem to put more pressure on the IT consultants that they hire to perform duties at their company.

> *We have one client, which is famous in *name of a city*, to push the consultants very very hard and we saw some signs in some consultants that didn't feel good at all, so we talked to them, to that company.* (IT-Manager 2)

As the IT manager describes above, the consulting company took action to prevent people from being on sick leave. Clear and good communication between the IT consultants and the client company, therefore, prevented further damage in this case. Work environment seems to be one of the key factors in causing sick leave according to the IT manager below.

> *I believe that is the work environment, and the sense of responsibility in certain cases are the most key factors to work with in order to reduce sick-leave.* (IT Manager 5)

However, it is important to point out that sickness absence can be reduced by further working on the working climate as the IT manager below explains, strengthening the bond between the consultant and the consulting company. How stimulated you are at work can also be one factor that answers why people tend to be on sick leave or how valued you are as a team member in the group. We can see this argument from the respondent below.

> *So I think the work environment has a quite high impact on sick-leave. I mean, what are their daily works, how stimulated, how are working days, how important are as member of the team? The less important you are, the more chances to have sick leave you have [...]* (IT-Manager 5)

Feeling important seems to be a factor as well, or even taking responsibility in some cases. This may cause people to go on sick leave, if they aren't being valued enough. Therefore, the workplace where you go involves a lot according to the respondent's answers. Nevertheless, at the same time, some respondents answered that as a consultant you should have boundaries, since you can be in a long assignment and you get more along with the client. Sometimes a crossover could not be good for the consultants.

> *So I think that the balance that I said is really important, it is a hard question. If you are in a long assignment you get more along with the client. If you crossover maybe it's not good. As a consultant, you should have boundaries.* (IT-Consultant 2)

Respondents also argued to do a lot of activities to improve the working environment. IT Managers answers rely on that since the consultants are most of the time at the client. Activities and mingles are needed to create a relationship to the main company. Nevertheless, they claim attempts to put that in practice without meeting high success. The consultants were reluctant in taking part in such activities during their spare time since they prefer being with their family and friends, for example.

But we tried to do a lot of activities and because I think the key word is seeing each other, and we don't do that during the week, because they are out at the customer. And some people don't want to do the activities during their spare time, then they want to be with their families and... Friends and so on... so... at the same time the only way we are making money is when they are actually at the customer. (IT-Manager 3)

The working environment has a high impact on sick leave according to the respondents. Answers made clear that the daily tasks, the stimulation of the consultant and how does he feel towards the group and the client it is extremely important.

6.2.3 High pressure and demand

A clear pattern of high pressure and demand emerged during the initial interviews with the respondents, both IT consultants and IT managers in connection to work tasks and expectation from both clients and consultants. High demands could be defined as a putting high pressure on themselves to perform well for the clients. This seemed to relate to sick leave among the consultants. The consultant below explains how some assignments can be very stressful.

High demands and then you might feel some pressure, like being productive and fulfil those demands, because you have a big customer-focus when you are a consultant at an assignment. You want to make the customer happy. You want to deliver your work, you want to be productive. So that can be stressful. (IT-Consultant 3)

Keeping customers happy and focusing on being a productive employee for both the client as well as to the main company also seems to be important. The IT consultant wants to deliver good performance, but this can, in fact, lead to stressful situations where they can have a hard time managing those demands. Working extra hours due to high pressure is a common denominator among the respondents. However, this decision is often not made from the client but from the IT consultants themselves.

It was quite often that happen to work some extra hours, it was up to me to decide to work that way... so it was kind of my decision, and it wasn't anything from XXX. I could choose pretty much myself. (IT-Consultant 1)

Therefore, timing is key when it comes to pressure and demands; getting more assignments while having the same number of hours, was among the respondents´ answers. It was confirmed that the deadlines for each assignment felt tighter, leading to an increase in the demand and more pressure to the consultant. Those were perceived by the respondents as important issues and visible factors that could be behind not only in the sick leave increase during the last years, but also a high turnover. Being able to manage your own time, set your limits and how much you can or are willing to work overtime, appears to be highly dependent on what kind of client the IT consultant is working at.

And also the time for projects, it is a bit tighter, so for each year it seems like deadlines are shorter, it's about the competition. You need to focus and do your best. (IT-Consultant 3)

Planning your work tasks and keeping to that plan is a way of handling the work tasks and not falling into the trap of over working. Having clear communication with the client and setting the expectations to a limit where the IT consultants can manage it is important as mentioned above. This planning helps the IT consultants to manage the work tasks during the week to know what to prioritise. Contrary to what was said by the IT consultant 3 above, it seems that this type of control over your work tasks doesn't exist everywhere as the IT consultant below explains.

At my last customer I had 40 hours of appointment a week so I did not have to work overtime if it wasn't a decision from the management … if you have to do it …you had to work more efficiently during the time you had under 40 - hours of the week otherwise you would get help from the customer what you would focus on if the time was not enough. (IT-Consultant 5)

Layers of work tasks could be added but no extra time to perform these was added, which in this case, created high pressure in the IT consultant. They had to work even harder during the 40-hour week to be able to finish their work tasks. The control over the work was in this case in the hands of the client and not in the IT consultant as the other respondents have explained above. However, the client in this case would support the IT consultant with guidelines in how to manage their work tasks. These were so, the most important things would be to get done on

time. The ability to handle this type of pressure from clients can be rough as a junior IT consultant but becomes better with seniority as one of the respondents describes.

> *Yes... by the more experienced people you get it... but those people have a self-knowledge, that is a little more senior ones who dare to say no to the customers and those who also hear from us ... unfortunately so are they the people... who are actually sick-listed are in fact usually the people who do not tell... those who bite together and bite together and bite together until it just stops.* (IT-Manager 4)

Saying no to a client can be hard as a junior IT consultant; you want to prove that you are capable to perform top work for the client and company. Senior consultants are more willing to say no because they have already the knowledge in how they would handle that type of pressure that comes with high workload. Not communicating the issues in time or not knowing the own limitations seems to be an issue as the manger above explains.

6.2.4 Stress

Above we presented how high pressure and demand can affect the IT consultants. In this part we will dig deeper to understand how this is displayed. Work related stress is clearly an issue among the interviewed group in this study. There are clear tendencies where stress can lead to negative outcomes as sick leave, which causes a lack of income both for the IT consultants and the consultant company. It's not good for either party and is clearly rooted on the high demand for people with knowledge in the IT field as well of the lack of individuals with the right knowledge. The high pace of IT as a work, also puts extra stress on the IT consultants as one of the respondents explains below:

> *The stress factors are usually that it is very high pressure... I mean comparing with how the working life looked like 50 years ago, so the press is huge today... I mean you are expected to do things ... that it should go faster.* (IT-Consultant 6)

This argument is also strengthened when asked about stress in relation to sick leave.

> *The stressors ... IT has a very fast pace all the time so you have to happen in the latest trends in IT, customers want high pace and deliver quickly to the market... high-tempo*

culture maybe ... is one of the stressors .. Then as a consultant you have extra stressors as especially when you come to a new company ... you have to get to know the company and how it works. (IT-Consultant 5)

If so, it has been found that when there is a heavy workload, there are periods when IT consultants feel overwhelmed, since they bring work related concerns home. Then they feel extremely stressed about it and affecting the home and private situation of the respondents.

Sometimes it affects me privately if there is heavy load on the job it can come in periods when you are extremely stressed and it affects the home situation also you may not relax at home and stop thinking about it. (IT-Consultant 5)

Things need to move in a fast-pace way in the IT sector with new technologies and new assignments, which makes the IT consultants in this case feel stressed about performing work tasks on time. Even more pressure is put on them as they need to adapt to a new company without knowing the culture and the structure of it. This can be a hard thing to solve as mentioned by IT consultant 5 and 6. However it's just not the high pace that might cause stress among the consultant, it can also be a lack of stimulating work.

It is much more stressful to have colleagues who are not really satisfied or have inspiring work to do... it is much more stressful than having to say no to a customer... But for the consultants out in the assignment so the stress level increases... […] It will be that the customer tries to put more and more jobs on the teams they have where our consultants sit. (IT-Manager 4)

What is retrieved from the results of the semi-structured open interviews of the respondents is that stress is usually difficult to manage. Nevertheless, some of the respondents showed that they have put boundaries and limitations regarding this matter. Stress was then the main result that has been highlighted during the research. Moreover, it has been stated by the respondents that stress could also be related to consultants' capabilities. Concluding that those who are not experienced enough might need to put more effort to the assignments, leading them to more stressful situations.

There could be more stress factors, some people can put more effort into the assignments because of their capabilities. (IT-Consultant 4)

Not only were those who are not managing the capabilities needed struggling with stress. Since the consultants have the feeling of delivering fast to the market, they are aware of the high-tempo working culture of the sector. From the IT managers' perspective, stress has also been highlighted. They must see how profitable the consultant is being, and that, can lead to stressful situations. It has been claimed that being in this "IT economic boom" and missing staff also leads to stressful situations for both the managerial and consultants' groups, as they still need to deliver to the client what has been agreed.

We charge per hour and we have a krona per hour down on each person so it is very easy to see how profitable I am and that is why it can be very stressful if you do not think you are so profitable or if one is unoccupied and similar. So I think so, and then generally so we are inside an economic boom that is very stressful and missing staff on the project as well as in the company. And you try to make magic with your knees to still deliver to customers. (IT-Manager 4)

In fact, the people that go on sick leave seem to be people with high ambitions, less experience or the ones that put too much pressure on themselves to perform at a high level all the time. Not communicating the issues in time or not knowing your own boundaries can be an issue in the long run.

6.2.5 Work life balance

Having a good work life balance to manage stress at work, personal activities, family and other obligations is important for the respondents in this study. Even without having a good working life balance, some of the respondents have claimed to have possibilities to manage their flex hours, with activities that enhance the wellbeing of the individual. Managing this can be challenging for some people, as pressure and demand keep on increasing during times of economic expansion. One consultant below explains the struggles of not having a good work-life balance and how it can be damaging to health.

Sometimes it affects me privately if there is heavy load on the job. It can come in periods when you are extremely stressed and it affects the home situation. Also you may not relax at home and stop thinking about it. (IT-Consultant 5)

It seems that this can be due to what kind of working environment the client has and where from the consultant is working at. Moreover, what kind of responsibilities you have on your own shoulder, as the consultant further explains, shapes the kind of work-life balance the consultant might have.

When I work as a senior project manager, it is quite a heavy workload ... in those last two assignments I would say so it can be a lot of stress in principle at work and not always balanced ... with jobs, leisure and family situation. (IT-Consultant 5)

Building your own limits seems to be an issue among some of the consultants when it comes to taking on more tasks than they can handle. This leads to problems with the work life balance. Getting time over for own activities can be a struggle, where you can refill your energy to do a good job. It seems to come down to a lack of motivation and due to too much work and less time spent on family and free time as one need to have good health.

You have to fix something really fast, so it can be... the balance isn't that good... and I also know that this is something that I hear from my colleagues when we talk about it... many of us have.. Yeah, you need to rest and refill your energy when you come home. And maybe, you will not do activities that you would like to do, because you don't feel like it, or you don't have the motivation for it, so you really have to build your limits. (IT-consultant 3)

Managing stress through different physical activities seems to be a prone thing among several of the respondents. This helps people to relieve some of the work-related stress and just work on themselves for a while and shut everything out.

I think it's mainly because I can just let things go when I got basketball practice for example... I don't have to think about anything... As some... If I would not have had the basketball and gotten home... I would probably feel worse... because I would probably

think I gotta do that and I gotta do this" instead of just letting things go. (IT-Consultant 8)

IT consultant 8 in this case believes that without the basketball practice it would be way harder to relax at home because it would mean that he/she would think about what could have been done differently at work. Nevertheless, boundaries and limitations from part of the consultants are also perceived. Even when the respondents have stated that they need to fix or solve things putting the work-life balance in risk, they have also learnt to put their own limitations in order to keep the motivation and their performance at work.

6.2.6 Social support

The results showed that "*social support*" is an important factor for staying away from long term sick leave. This support can come from the colleagues that you work with, family members or from social interactions with friends. Several of the consultants argue that having a good relationship with the IT managers at the consultant company is an important key to get the support you need. Therefore, they can talk to them and have the sense of being listened with the aim of change things if needed.

> *Yeah, but I think if you and the manager have a good relationship, and the manager knows your capabilities, so you would be on an assignment that is suitable for you, but if it is over your capabilities, you would be very stressed, so, that's the way I see it.* (IT-Consultant 7)

From the IT manager's point of view, this kind of relationship also allows them to keep track of each other and being more responsive to the consultant company perspective. It has been discussed that the legislation has also changed, making more serious the responsibility of the working environment according to the respondents. Knowing the consultant and what they bring to the company is important, as they are the ones that make the money flowing into the company. The employer needs to take responsibility for them and show that they care, especially in the competitive market of today.

> *We must first and foremost be more responsive from the employer's side ... since the competition for competence is hard and tough ... even the legislation has been tightened*

in recent years so it has ... legally so it has been much harder regulated responsibility today .. Especially around the psychosocial work environment. (IT-Manager 1)

Stricter legislations mean that the employer needs to be even more aware about the psychosocial environment and make an effort of knowing the workplace where the IT-consultants are assigned to. But it's not just legislation that should guide these types of things, but also the awareness of each other and being there when someone needs the help:

Yes, as I have said before, we try to keep track of each other ... purely practical and concrete, it is purely on the level of detail not to call or send mail at all hours of the day ... And it must be a cliché but to live and learn. That you put... a role model... we do not want to act in a way that younger or junior people think that...okay that is how you have to work or act to succeed at XXX. (IT-Manager 1)

From the IT managers perceptions and descriptions there has also emerged the feeling of coaching the consultant, so they can feel safe and good, and thus with less stress. Discussions are welcome if the consultant starts to feel issue or any other health indicator. Therefore, the IT manager can talk to the customer. This is so the pressure does not rely on the consultant or a team.

We try to coach them so that they feel safe and that they are good at actually good at hearing from us ... When they feel the pressure gets too hard we can take a discussion with the customer instead so it does not land on individual consultants. (IT-Manager 4)

Some of the IT managers need to fall into a coaching role to assist people that needs more support than others. This can be for example keeping an open discussion with the client side to make sure that the IT consultant has a good work environment. People with less experience within the IT-field seem to be the ones that need more of a coaching role to handle the pressure from clients or from other work-environment related issues.

6.2.7 The sense of belonging

Feeling that you belong somewhere is something that emerged from talking to both the IT consultants as well as the IT managers. This seems to be a complex matter of where you belong. The question would rely in if you belong more at the client or to the consultant company. The sense of belonging, overall, seems to be an important factor as one of the consultants below explains:

> *But the sense of belonging is important. Some people need that social belonging. Some can separate work and colleagues, and others need the energy from the group and belong somewhere.* (IT-Consultant 3).

It's not about just belonging to the company that is important for the IT consultants, but the sense that they belong to the group where they can get energy from in order to manage their work tasks. The argument of why you do not feel any sense of belonging to the consultant company is further argued below by the same consultant.

> *Because you are often located at the client, so it is not easy to have that sense of belonging, and that is a problem.* (IT-Consultant 3)

The sense of belonging was also highlighted by the IT managers' responses. Their answers were that their perceptions are a bit mixed when it comes to the sense of belonging to the company. Also, the length of the assignments at the client is an important factor. Moreover, it has been stated that consultants are not participating in any events and not reading the e-mails from the company. Then, that means from the IT managers' point of view, that the person does not really mind about the company itself, just the monetary part.

> *It is a hard question, I feel more belonging here at XXX since I am more involved with the company and the managerial group, it's hard for me to just be the consultant, my consultant "eyes" are a bit mixed, and also my client is next door, I literally just work there, over the desk.* (IT-Manager 3)

When there is also a high staff rotation, it is difficult to get that sense of belonging to fit into the group, since as consultant, you spend all your working hours and the location at the client site. The consultant feels what the client has to offer rather than the company itself.

> *I think that is a major part that we actually have a really high turnover of staff, and it is hard to get the belonging to actually fit in… because as a consultant, at the end you spend 40 or even more hours at the client, so what they feel is what the client has to offer.* (IT-Manager 7)

From the consultants' answers, being involved in long assignments means that they do not have close contact to the company itself. Claiming that their loyalty or sense of belonging then, was with the client. Moreover, they have argued to feel lost at some points even when they know that XXX was their employer, but with a sense of belonging and loyalty to the client instead. When this happens, respondents answered that after being on consultancy period, it is common then to be permanently employed later by the client, due to the belonging feeling created.

> *After a while, you are a bit lost, but in my case, I felt I belong more to the client rather than here, because you have more contact with them, but I always remember that I have XXX is my main company, they pay my salary so... Yeah, I have some other colleagues switch from XXX to the client, to be permanently employed because they felt they belong more to the client. It is quite common.* (IT-Consultant 1)

Therefore, the workplace where you go involves a lot according to the respondents' answer. From their point of view, sometimes they can feel from XXX and other times from the client. Since they all have the "customer focus" they must think like the client, not like XXX, so at the end, the consultant ends up thinking and feeling as the client does.

> *Yeah, my workplace is not in this building, and that involves a lot. The workplace where you go… you feel like sometimes you are from here, sometimes not. But my mind-set is with the client anyway although I know that they are not the ones paying my salary… If you have that "customer focus" then you want to fulfil it, you cannot think like "xxx" you have to think like the client if you want to fulfil this focus.* (IT-Consultant 4)

The issue with the sense of belonging seems to fall into a circle with high turnover according to some of the respondents. This is the complex matter of being a consultant, where you spend most of your hours working at the client's office and therefore, not knowing what's going on at the consultant company office. The manager from the consultant company argues for this case below.

> *One thing could be that most of us want to have a belonging and if the reality is not like that at that moment, since we have this high turnover, and so on and they don't feel that, maybe those kind of people that feel secure to the belonging part.. That can be maybe create stress, and yeah they feel insecure maybe and… I am just guessing.* (IT-Manager 3)

The IT manager explains that the struggle of high turnover could be because of consultants have any sense of belonging to the consultant company. This is because they spend most of their time at the client office and not having any real contact with the management of the consultant company. The feeling of being "used" to certain degree in the company can create issues for the employees' wellbeing, as one of the IT managers explains.

> *Yeah, I think that just being an employee it is very easy you get the feeling that you are "used" in some way.* (IT-Manager 3)

The sense of belonging seems to, in general, influence the wellbeing in some cases as the respondents have explained. There is also work being done to enhance the sense of belonging with activities outside of work. Those were trying to build the trust between employee and employer to some extent, but not with the best success.

7. Discussion

To start the discussion with, the researchers aimed to separate the first theme (the sense of belonging) in its own category, separated from the others. The reason for this decision is that this can be interpreted in different ways. Interestingly enough, this, connects to the rest of the themes. This will be followed by the psychosocial pattern. The third will be the organisational pattern. As the finale, the economic pattern will be discussed.

7.1 The client- or the consultant company? The sense of belonging

The sense of belonging has been highlighted since the very first moment in this research. During the first interviews, the pattern started to be clear, from both managerial and consultant perspective. It is fair to state then, that the sense of belonging has a clear effect on the performance and wellbeing of the consultants. According to Hagerty et al. (1992), the sense of belonging could be described as the individual experience towards a system or environment. It is fundamental that the individual considers and feels like an integral part of that system or environment. Analysing the results, it was clear that the sense of belonging is a crucial factor. Seems logical that when interviewing consultants, this was the first pattern to arise, since they work for both, the consultancy company and the client. It is also important to the extent of the well-being of all employees, including also their performance and their commitment towards the project or job (Inalhan & Finch, 2004). If we carefully analyse the respondents' interviews, we could perceive that they lack attachment or belonging to the consultancy company.

It seems that it is difficult to create this sense of belonging between the consultants and the consultancy company. It is also interesting discussing what other consequences a part of intensifying the sick leave, the lack of belonging has. According to Boss (2018), the loneliness that the lack of sense belonging carries can also be dangerous for the business itself. In fact, this connection is not purely towards the company, this is built within human interactions. Therefore, it is claimed by the respondents that not having a colleague or responsible you can trust or talk to in the consultancy company undermines the possibility of creating a sense of belonging to the company. Boss also argues that from studied research, it has been demonstrated that those employees with this sense of belonging, feel more comfortable and happier at the workplace. Moreover, the company experiences fewer safety incidents and more engaged customers. It has been shown during the qualitative study of this study that many consultants have ended up working permanently at the client they were sitting as a consultant.

Since connections are established and they feel closer to the client, this leads to a loss of staff and drain of human capital in the consultant company. What is put into question now is if the consultancy company can do something about it and if there is any formula to create this sense of belonging, which, in the core, is built with human interactions and connections. During the qualitative study, the researchers noticed from the respondents' answers that, in fact, there is a willingness to improve that sense of belonging towards the consultancy company. This has been demonstrated with the activities that the company does for all the employees. Nevertheless, it seems that the attempts are failing, and the consultants do not participate in the organised activities. According to Inalhan and Finch (2004), the efforts from the managers to engage the employees with initiatives, as for example, changes in the working place, are common to fail. The reasoning is that employees are resistant to change or fearful to them. If we look at the respondents' results, they stated that they prefer being with their families and friends rather than with colleagues from a company that barely knows.

To summarise this first pattern, is interesting to highlight the lack of sense of belonging is also attached to a lack of loyalty towards the company. This statement could be argued when it has been proven that many consultants have ended up working at the client after the consultancy assignment or project. This could be translated to more pressure and a not proper combination of control and demand (Karasek & Theorell, 1990) to the remaining consultants, contributing to a higher risk in sick leave.

7.2 The psychosocial pattern: Stress, work-life balance and social support

Being an IT consultant nowadays means that you are highly wanted on the labour market as there is a lack of educated people within this field that can fill this void of knowledge that exist. This means that the IT consultants are often under heavy pressure to produce qualitative work in a short amount of time. This clearly seems to have an impact on the wellbeing among the consultants in this study as the pressure seem to be a common denominator among the answers from the respondents. Wallgren and Hanse (2010) argued that the IT consultants are heavily impacted by the demand of the customers that expect quality work in a short amount at a quick pace. This pace seems to be a common occurrence as the respondents in this study also as showcased from the answers that the IT sector is plagued by high pace culture. Karasek (1979) argued that control and demand are variables that are mutually dependent on each other. If

there's unbalance between these two variables it can lead to issues with psychic pressure and bad health. Wallgren and Hanse (2010) illustrate that much of the stress that consultants may feel comes from the high demand in relation to the workers' abilities. Being a consultant is a complex matter as you can experience different work environments from time to time as well as different workloads. There are also clear risk factors with high demand and low control and unbalance between work and spare time (Andrén, 2017). In this case, we can clearly see that high demand and low control over the amount of work can play a part as a risk factor for sick leave. Some individuals take this stress home and have a hard time to relax and refill with energy. What is interesting to see from the results is that high pressure and high control is present among some of the respondents, taking the decision on working overtime into their own hands. Karasek and Theorell (1990) illustrate in the demand- and control theory that "*active jobs*" are defined with high psychological demand and high control, which is one of the most ideal forms when it comes to manoeuvring among work tasks. The consultants in this study do not showcase all the criteria to fit into that category as it can heavily vary from consultant to consultant. This variation is due to the amount of freedom you get to manage your work tasks. It seems that consultants can both be in the "*active jobs*" and in "*high-stress job*s" or in between these categories. Some of the respondents in this study showcase more patterns close to "*high-stress jobs*" as they have less control over their work tasks in comparison to the amount of demand that is put on them. Karasek and Theorell (1990) argue that this might cause people to lose their motivation, go into a depression or be burnt-out, this is also bad for the company as they will lose both productivity and income.

High pressure and demand seem to lead to stress among the IT consultants in this study which confirms earlier research done by Wallgren (2011). The results in this study see clear indications that the high demand and pressure brings quantitative work-overload, higher pace, and capability issues. These factors can, of course, cause negative stress among the consultants which can be hard to manage without the right support. According to Karasek and Theorell (1990) social support can come from social contact or social interactions with managers or others within the company. Wallgren and Hanse (2010) argue that a lack of social support can lead to negative issues as problems with health. The consultants showcase that the support from IT managers from the consultant company plays an important role among several of the respondents. This supportive role can be established as some sort of coaching role where the consultants can get some sort of a helping hand when trouble occurs. The social support also

seems to be a factor when it comes to having some sort of work-life balance where you can combine work, family and activities. Having emotional support from the surrounding may also play a big part in how you cope with psychological demands, this is an instrumental factor in building trust (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). The respondents illustrate that physical activities can contribute to a better working environment and aid people to handle the amount of high pressure and demand that comes with the job. Stress can cause negative effects on the IT consultants and cause issues with their work-life balance as it's hard to release this if there's no chance to recuperation.

To conclude this pattern, it's clear that stress comes from the high demand and the lack of control that it brings. Karasek and Theorell (1990) strengthen this argument as they explain that stress occurs when demand is higher than the control, this can come from a quantitative overload of tasks. We would also argue that social support from IT managers, clients, co-workers' and other social interactions play is large factor to reduce work-related stress that can cause sick leave. To support healthy work-life, consultants need to be aware of their limits and communicate when issues arise.

7.3 The company's structure and the work environment

The structure of the company has also shaped the answers in this study. According to the respondents' answers, structure has also an effect in the group and how it affects their daily work, tasks and performance. As it has been shown during the previous research, according to Baligh et al. (2006) the structure of an organisation is based on its employees. This could be defined as a logical order of people in a set, creating and following an ordered pattern. In this case, it is difficult to analyse and discuss the structure of the company due to several implications. First, is a consultancy company, meaning that we cannot rely on the respondents' consultants without any risk of bias. This is because the consultant might mix the structure of the consultancy with the structure of the client where they are located. Second, although this is a case study and we focus in this company, this is present in different locations and countries. Therefore, it is difficult to generalise or create a single structure to follow in all offices in each of the countries where the company is present. Third, since it is growing, the existing structure is still up for changes and further developments. If we take under consideration what has been found during the qualitative study of this thesis, we can presume a first problem. This, in fact,

the lack of structure within the company, since this is growing fast, or because of the "freedom" that employees have. These can of course carry several consequences for both, the company and the consultant. If we see it from the positive consequences, as the company and assignments are growing, and the freedom for the consultants is still ongoing. This is a great combination to enhance the motivation and the personal growth of the consultants (Wallgren & Hanse, 2010), this has been noticed from the managerial perspective. Nevertheless, this amount of freedom has the problem in a lack of knowledge about the consultant company, and therefore, affecting the working environment. On the other hand, the lack of structure and a non-clear or poor leadership can also lead to the damage of the working environment (Nyberg, Peggy & Theorell, 2005). This issue has also been highlighted during the study, stating that the working environment is a key factor for the consultant when it comes to their health and wellbeing. As Ashe-Edmunds (2019) discussed, the lack of structure could lead to risks in the business between employees and managers. Implying that miscommunication or misunderstandings that could affect the operations of the company and the delivery of the assignment. Those could be considered as factors increasing stress and downsizing the morale among the employees, affecting the work environment, health and employees' performance.

According to Ekbladh et al. (2010) working environment could be defined as the work characteristics, the employee relations and the correlation between the job satisfaction and work demands. Those are performed in a determined workplace as has been shown during the previous research of this study. The pattern that has been found in the working environment is closely related to the pattern of sense of belonging. It has also been shown during the interviews that the work environment can differ from client to client. Obviously, it also differs from the consultancy company to the client where the consultant is at. This has been highlighted several times by both the consultants and the managerial group during the qualitative part of this study. It is therefore important, that the consultant is comfortable within their assignment and duties assigned. That way, the consultant can feel valued and capable of the duties, contributing to a better working environment (Ekbladh et al., 2010). It is also important to analyse the effects that the lack of structure and therefore the possibility of creating factors that are not promoting a healthy working environment. Those could be the direct causes of psychosocial damages in the consultants and also could create a bias or misinterpretation of the roles as some of the respondents argued. It has been claimed by several consultants, that their functions were constantly changing or not clearly defined. According to Karasek and Theorell (1990), then,

this could be an associated stress factor, leading the consultant to control his own work situation and job duties. Therefore, intensifying the poor psychosocial wellbeing that has direct effect to the working environment and the rest of the consultants as Sieurin et al. (2009) also argued.

7.4 The business cycle as a factor for sick leave

One of the initial aims of this study was to investigate if the business cycle had any effect on the sick leave among IT consultants in the studied company. Sick leave is foremost a complex matter and cannot just be explained with one variable as there are numerous factors behind. Marklund et al (2004) explain that there have been clear correlations between sick leave and the business cycle when looking back at the growth in the economy and the sick leave percentage. Pichler (2015) also argues that during times of low unemployment the sick leave rises steadily, it's a procyclical pattern that occurs with the sick leave. While looking at the statistics on sick leave from the company, in comparison with the economic growth in Sweden from the graph on BNP (appendix 6) we can see that the company is following the same pattern as argued by earlier researchers.

We can also see from *figure 6.3* that sick leave was low during the periods when there was an economic downturn in Sweden, except from business unit 4. The other three business units follow the same pattern compared to Swedish statistics on economic growth (see appendix 6). We would argue that IT consultants, in this case, are clearly affected by the business cycle when it comes to the rise in sick leave. However, the business cycle cannot answer the issue with sick leave by itself, it can just give a clear indication that the theory has a point, that it affects the rise in sick leave. This is something we can see from the statistics in this case as well. Nossen (2009) argues that employees might feel some sort of responsibility during times of recession. This means that they are less prone to go on sick leave since it put a heavy economic burden on the company. Marklund et al (2004) however argues that people who are prone to go on sick leave get rehired during times of economic boom which leads to rises in sick leave in a company.

This study confirms these arguments, that the discipline hypothesis influences employees. However, we cannot give clear answers on this just looking at the statistics. In this case, we also must take the qualitative interviews into consideration. Several of the interviewees talked

about the issues with "growing pains" in the company as it keeps on growing. This is, since it is a competitive market among the consultants' company and might be a reason for the growth of sick leave among IT consultants. Nossen (2009) argues that the composition hypothesis influences the rise on sick leave on the labour market as the people who got laid off during recession gets rehired again during times of economic boom. Several of the IT managers explained that they do not take earlier sick leave in consideration when they hire new people to the company. In some cases, they might need some extra coaching to help them to stay away from falling into a long-term sick leave again. We believe this might be a factor in the rise in sick leave among IT consultants as it is hard to find the right competence during times of economic boom.

We argue that there is more to have in mind that just these factors mentioned above; stress is one matter that goes up during a period with high employment. It is fair to say that the economic conditions in relation to health consequences of high or increasing activity might play a big part in sick leave rises as well (Ibid.) The business cycle is not a factor that the company can control. However, they can control the amount of pressure they put on their employees during these times. Nossen (2009) argues that higher pace, more customer contact, more overtime and less break from work tasks, leads to a damage of the wellbeing in the long-term for employees. As we also can see from the qualitative results, there are indications from higher pace, more overtime and less time to refresh your energy. These are of course matters than in long-term can cause issues for both the IT consultants as well for the company, as both parties lose income due less revenue from the client. At the same time, the consultants' health is also in danger due to this, with the risk of going on sick leave. The statistical results also showed that sick leave was at the lowest for the consultants between the years of 2011 and 2012. These levels of low percentage on sick leave might be because of the disciplinary effect that (Marklund et al. 2004; Nossen 2009) argues exist during a period of bad times. This means that people are more careful to be on sick leave during times of economic downturn as they fear that they might lose their job. To conclude this part, the business cycle cannot answer why people are on sick leave. However, it can give indicators that sick leave rises during economic growth, which we argue that we have shown from comparing statistic from the company database and from the BNP-gap (see appendix 6).

8. Conclusion and main limitations

8.1 Limitations

We acknowledge that there are several limitations with this study as it has concluded. One limitation is the amount of time we had to spend on gathering data for the study, this was mainly because of the choice of a mixed method. The second limitations are that one of the researchers in this study was an employee in the case study company, which means that some of the data could have been biased and not as critical towards the company as an external researcher would be. We also need to bear in mind that prejudgement may also play a part because of the relationship between one of the researchers and the company. Having these kinds of prejudgments is common among researchers due to findings around the subject as well from previous work experience, theory and previous research (Bryman, 2011). Another limitation is also the number of business units included in the study, this is due to both time and access. Finally, the researchers are aware that some misunderstandings or misinterpretation could have occurred due to some interviews were translated from Swedish to English.

8.2 Conclusion

This thesis has focused on analysing how the business cycle and work environmental factors can affect sick leave among consultants in the IT-field. Sick leave in Sweden has varied over time and was at historically low levels between 2009 and 2010. However, since then, it has been growing, especially in connection to psychiatric disorders (Forte, 2015). Our results show the same indications, even though we cannot analyse the numbers from 2009 and 2010. We can still see the growth of sick leave while looking at the sick leave percentage from the company (see *figure 6.1.3* p.30). The economic growth for companies is of course highly important as this can be one of the factors that decide if they should acquire more staff during times of economic boom. As the results have shown in this study, this company has been growing rapidly the last couple of years in staff. This is during some years of economic growth (see appendix 6) and is still growing in both financial numbers as well in staff.

This has come with some side-effects, as higher pressure on the staff, partly due to a higher demand for competent personnel within the IT-field. At the same time, there is a lack of professionals in this field, meaning more pressure is put on the existing staff to perform quality

work in a high pace. Working in this type of high pace over time can cause problems to the consultant's health (Wallgren & Hanse, 2010). We identified in our results that high pace and high demand clearly have a large impact on the health of the consultants. This is due to shorter deadlines, more pressure from clients and a lack of support among IT managers. This means that the social support that the consultants get from the IT managers, from the consultant company, plays a large role here. Giving the right amount of support for the consultants and communicating with them gives a sense of trust, feeling that they are valued as an employee of the company.

We argue the importance for IT managers and other staff to put time and effort into building relationships with these employees. Even though the complexity of them working from other premises makes it a challenge. Working with the relationships can also have the benefit that it helps create some more "sense of belonging" to the consultant company. This seems to be a key issue among some of the respondents in this study. The sense of belonging was also one of those patterns that seem to have an underlying effect on the employees' health. We understand the complexity of being a consultant, as the relationship with the client grows over time and decreases with the consultant company. Inalhan and Finch (2004) point out that the sense of belonging is quite undermined today and employees must be linked psychologically through different phases in order to create a sense of belonging towards the company. This also falls back to having the right structure in the company which builds the foundation to work with these types of issues that clearly exist within the company. We argue that having clear joint processes and strategies for all the business units will help to reduce some of the issues that comes with the "growth pains" that some of the IT managers in this study explained. Ashe-Edmunds (2019) argues that the danger with a lacking structure could lead to the risk of miscommunication or misinterpretation of important facts, also leading to an unhealthy working environment.

This research has shown that there are multiple factors to have in mind when analysing the reasons behind sick leave. Some patterns are influenced or affected by each other. It is therefore hard to point out one main cause for the sick leave among IT consultants. However, what can be concluded is that there are several factors that play a large part of the sick leave. Some example of this is high pace and demand, sense of belonging, work environment, lack of support and stress. Some of these patterns are related to each other but are still valid to be

analysed separately. This is also strengthened with the business cycle theory, in connection to the statistical data that was gathered from the case studied company. These results show clear correlations as earlier researchers have argued; sick leave rises during the economic boom, which we also can see from the results in this study. Our contribution to the research field lies in that we strengthen earlier research done in this field (Wallgren & Hanse, 2010). Our results show similar results as their research did when it comes to high amount of workload, high pace and shorter deadlines, leading into a high amount of stress. We also used the demand and control model in the study as a framework to identify patterns from the qualitative interviews and not to build on theory itself. However, as mentioned above, we can see that the IT consultants cannot really be put into one of these job categories. We argue that our research shows that the consultants are in between some of these categories, depending which client they are working for. Society and jobs have changed since this model was made. This means that it might lack the input of today's digitalised society. We also added more knowledge in how the sense of belonging can lead to sick leave within the IT field. This is something that Karasek and Theorell (1990) don not mention in their theory. The sense of belonging has not been discussed to a large extent in correlation to sick leave before either. Our research proves that the sense of belonging affects sick leave within companies nowadays.

9. Suggestion and contribution for further research

The results have shown that the sense of belonging is one of the main patterns regarding sick leave. Therefore, the researchers have the idea that a design to implement or enhance that sense of belonging could be something to be later developed. This would improve the work environment and therefore, helping to decrease the sick-leave in the company. Nevertheless, it was clear that there were failed attempts to create that sense of belonging (something that could be generalised to more consultancy companies). Which would be of interest then, is finding out the formula, if possible, to create or at least enhance the sense of belonging. This would improve the work environment in order to prevent for possible factors that could lead to sick leave in the long term. It has been demonstrated then, that the work environment at the client's place is hard to be controlled or supervised by an IT consultancy. It would be of interest, how that could be possible in how to align consultancy and client when it comes to working environment and culture, something that nowadays is difficult to merge.

The business cycles also played a factor in the study. Since the researchers have partly based the research in the hypothesis of business cycles and its rise on sick leave (Nossen, 2009; Hägglund & Johansson, 2016) it could be interesting to follow up this pattern more in depth. Since this has been a case of study it is difficult to generalise, so, a composition of different case studies would give way more validity to our arguments. A replication of the study would be interesting, in the same company and others in the same field and country.

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Appendix 1. Interview guide English - employees

1. Tell us a little about yourself and what your background is?
2. Can you describe if you have experienced changes in the working environment during the last years?
3. What are your thoughts on the culture within the company ?
4. Can you tell us about your work life balance? how you cope with family, job and activities?

5. Can you tell us about the working climate as a consultant?

6. Do you have any sense of belonging. If not, does it affect you in some way?

7. What are your thoughts about the rising sick leave ?

8. How would you perceive the work burden to be?

9. Can you tell me about possible stress factors at work and how would you cope with them?

10. How do you perceive your efforts for the company?

11. Have you experienced any changes in your work tasks?

12. If so, can you tell us if that have had any effect on your working day and working hours?

13. Do you feel that you are valued as an employee at the company?

14. Does your company work with bonuses? If yes, how does it work?

15. How does the communication work within the company in regards to information flow? top to bottom? horizontal?

16. Is there any feedback from co-workers and managers and if so, how do you know it?

17. Is your sick leave related to personal or working factors ? (If you are on sick leave and just state if it is personal or professional that's all)

18. How do you report the sick-leave and how do you follow-up?

Appendix 2. Interview guide English - IT managers

1. Tell us a little about yourself and what your background is?

2. Can you describe if you have experienced changes in the working environment during the last years?

3. Do the consultant know where to reach out when they need help?

4. What are your thoughts about the rise in sick leave?

5. What do you think are the risk factors for sick leave? Thoughts, opinions.

6. In what way is sick leave a problem in your company?

7. What measures are being taken today to reclaim long-term sick employees who have been absent at least six months in business?

8. Does the company have procedures for how contact with those on sick leave should look like?

9. Are there routines for examining whether there is a need for rehabilitation of a sick person employee? If yes what are they?

10. Do you currently employ people with previous long-term sick leave?

11. What kind of benefits do the employees have in order to prevent a possible sick leave?

12. Can you tell us your about how the company works with preventing sick leave from your point of view?

13. Does the company work with any model to prevent high amount of sick leave?

14. Can you describe if you have experienced changes in the working environment in the last year (12 months)?

Appendix 3. Interview clarification

Interview Clarification

The purpose of the study

The aim of this study is to investigate the reasons that might be behind an increasing sick-leave ratio in the among consultants in the IT-sector. Sick leave has been continuously studied, but we have found a gap or lack of research when it comes to high paid jobs and moreover, since there is not much research in an expanding sector as it is IT and Information technology.

Regulations and participate information

The study is in form of a master of science (120p) with a major in Strategic human resource management and labour relations. The results will be public in the context of the university and can be used to demonstrate useful information for other interest if wanted. All information gathered from these interviews will be handled with confidentiality to protect the anonymity of the respondents. This interview is based on free will and you can at any point decide to cancel the interview. The results from the interview will only be used for the answer the purpose of this master thesis and nothing else.

Your participation and level of exposure is again on your free will. We appreciate your participation and the knowledge you will bring. If you have questions do not hesitate to ask us!

Henrik Svensson   Alberto Aguilar

Thank you for participating!

Appendix 4. BNP-GAP

Källa: Konjunkturinstitutet
Positiva värden indikerar att ekonomin befinner sig i högkonjunktur, negativa värden i lågkonjunktur. Prognos från mars 2019.

Hämtat: 2019-04-23 15:52