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Challenges Faced by Belgian Companies Wanting To export or Establish in Sweden Regarding Swedish Working Culture With a Focus on Business Communication and How These Can Be Mitigated.

THIS THESIS IS PRESENTED IN ORDER TO FULFILL THE ACADEMIC REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INTERNATIONAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP.

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Academic Year: 2019-2020

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Preface

The realization of this Bachelor Thesis stems from my interest in cultural differences concerning the work environment as well as the influence it has on doing business abroad.

This work is a culmination of three years of Business Management International Entrepreneurship and would not have been possible without the following people.

First, I would like to thank my mother and father for supporting my decision in going abroad and the trust they have given me for living on my own in Sweden while completing an internship. Also, I would like to thank them for their support while making this thesis by motivating and providing me with advice.

Furthermore, I would like to thank my internship and thesis coach, Johan Peeters for his help and coaching during my internship as well as for answering my questions in both aspects of this internship abroad and my thesis. This work would not have been possible without him.

Lastly, I would like to thank Flanders Investment and Trade, the office in Stockholm and its manager -Max Lundgren- in particular. They provided me with a great experience; a great deal of advice for now as well as later on in life, and lots of help with completing my internship as well as my thesis.

Executive Summary

Companies that want to export or possibly establish themselves in Sweden often overlook one aspect: the difference in culture. While in many aspects, Belgium and Sweden are comparable, Sweden has a strong and prevalent working culture and is, for example, a leader in work-life balance or horizontal corporate culture (The Local Client studio, 2017). With both countries working together, there are bound to be some cultural differences that inhibit the efficiency of doing business.

Since business communication takes on a significant role in working society, this will be the concentration inside the working culture environment, tackling the fundamental difficulties for organizations needing to export and in the long run establish in Sweden. The purpose of the qualitative research is to identify the challenges faced by Belgian companies wanting to export or establish in Sweden regarding Swedish working culture with a focus on business communication and how these challenges can be mitigated.

For desk research, secondary data will be used that is available online next to off-line sources, such as articles and newspapers. On top of this, databases within FIT containing information on different Swedish companies established in Belgium will be used. In addition to the theoretical content of the thesis, in-depth interviews will be conducted. To obtain information regarding working culture and communication, interviews with people having gone through the adaption process regarding the Swedish working environment and culture will be conducted.

The main challenges identified by the analysis done through desk research as well as the qualitative in-depth interviews are the following: the horizontal corporate structure; the cultural values such as autonomy, responsibility, and transparency; the Swedish habits and concepts, such as work-life balance, Lagom, and Fika; and the decision-making process. Inhibitions such as informal communication, conflict avoidance, and distance in verbal communication are the biggest; followed up by non-verbal and written communication. HR plays a role in the adaptation of Belgian culture to Swedish culture by guiding in the adaptation process.

Recommendations for Belgian companies are that adaptation to the Swedish culture is recommended to facilitate business relationships. It is easier for a Belgian business culture to adapt to the Swedish business culture than the other way around. Organizations are recommended to follow up on the practicalities on communication to establish the first contact. Secondly, it is recommended to implement the casual atmosphere in the company as well as to respect the consensus-culture resulting from the decision-making process.

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Process evaluation in correlation with Covid-19 pandemic

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic at the beginning of the semester, changes in the process of making this bachelor's thesis was unavoidable. This situation prompted a lot of adjustments to the process. A process evaluation will be provided below to give an insight into the adjustments that needed to be made as well as the external influences on the process to reach the evaluation criteria of this thesis on cultural challenges that Belgium may experience in exporting to or establishing in Sweden.

The spread of the Covid-19 virus and the matching callback from school and the federal government was the cause of my early return to Belgium. As I was studying and researching the cultural aspects of doing business between both countries, events, and trade fairs during my internship experience were a crucial aspect of experiencing the Swedish business culture myself. This was changed because of that. The factors that influenced my way of working is my surroundings while completing my thesis, the change in communication to an all on-line way of working, and the early stop of my internship distorting the originally made-up planning in the plan of action provided at the beginning of the process. This made that I made up new personal planning with set hours to work on the thesis, having to abandon the original plan. I was able to follow-up on that and I was able to finish the accompanying research in time.

This influenced my field research, wanting to conduct personal in-depth interviews. As I continued in scenario one, as agreed with my coach and mentor, keeping all aspects of primary and secondary research, it was not easy contacting Belgian expats and having personal interviews regarding their experiences. I did take action for this finding as many interviewees as possible to support my already existing secondary research. On top of that, I agreed with my coach to continue the set dates as normal, so the accompanying tasks were completed as they should be. Communication with my coach continued as normal and I had a lot of guidance regarding the changing situation. Some difficulties in communication regarding the return to Belgium as well as the follow-up process for the thesis arose, but after I took initiative in proposing a long-distance internship, working from Belgium, I was able to continue. My coach was able to navigate the situation and my internship mentor took a great understanding of the situation, wanting to continue the internship as well.

Personally, I experienced the time of uncertainty about the continuation of the internship as well as the completion of the bachelor's thesis as a stressful time. But I was able to continue and complete the internship after a full nine weeks and continue my thesis in scenario one, keeping all standards set as they would normally be.

The Covid-19 pandemic and accompanying measures that were taken provided an environment that caused a need for adaptation from both Artevelde University College as well as its students, but this situation also provided opportunities for using new methods of communication and cooperation.

Introduction

Introduction to the company

Flanders Investment and Trade is a self-governing and external Flemish organization that was established by the Flemish government in 2005 by integrating “*Export Flanders*” and “*Service of Investment in Flanders*” (Flanders Investment and Trade, 2020). At this moment, FIT is under the guidance of Claire Tillekaerts as managing director and has 96 offices: five in Flanders, one in Brussels, and 90 offices abroad (Flanders Investment and Trade, 2020). Its headquarters are located in Brussels, Belgium.



Figure 1: Logo Flanders Investment & Trade (Flanders Investment and Trade, 2020)

Flanders Investment and Trade’s objective consists of three main operations. First, the organization provides advice and guidance to companies to invest and set up a business in Flanders. This mainly consists of supplying a foreign company with information on different markets, sectors, and business environments (Flanders Investment & Trade, 2020). Secondly, FIT provides an environment that facilitates contact and exchange of information between foreign buyers or suppliers and Flemish producers (Flanders Investment & Trade, 2020). The main purpose of this task is to take a proactive approach in this field of facilitating contact. Lastly, the organization supports Flemish companies and organizations with plans of exporting (Flanders Investment & Trade, 2020). This is done by providing an export guide, grants and events or actions, as well as general contact and individual counseling for companies wanting to export or companies wanting to invest in Flanders.

These main functions of Flanders Investment and Trade are reflected the dual mission of the organization: “*To provide support to Flemish exporting countries all over the world and attracting foreign investments to Flanders*” (Corda Campus, 2018).

One of these offices is located in Stockholm, Sweden, in the building of the Belgian embassy under the supervision of manager Max Lundgren. The office offers various services such as address-lists and information about potential business partners located in Sweden, macro and socio-economic statistics; import as well as export figures about the relationship between Flanders and Sweden; and general or individualized information on specific situations and potential trade barriers (Flanders Investment and Trade, 2020).

Problem analysis

With advising companies as one of the main functions of Flanders Investment and Trade, a collaboration between companies located in different countries is a focal point. Sweden has a strong and prevalent working culture and is a leader in the work-life balance principle (The Local Client studio, 2017). With the Swedish Flanders Investment and Trade office collaborating with Belgian companies as well as the Belgian offices of its organization, there are bound to be some cultural differences that inhibit the efficiency of doing business with each other. A consequence is that often, visions and final goals between companies are not communicated well and different expectations are set.

While seeing in my own experience that these differences in working culture inhibit collaboration, it can be theorized that it also has its consequences regarding the reputation of the company as well as the effect on the companies in collaboration with Flanders Investment and Trade. With my mentor giving me the freedom of finding my subject and thus research question for this bachelor's thesis, this is an obstacle I would love to solve by providing the right information. Because business communication plays a considerable role in working culture, this will be the focus within the working culture for solving the main challenges for companies wanting to export and eventually establish themselves in Sweden. To be able to understand these differences, preliminary research regarding the two economies of Belgium and Sweden will be done, to further understand the differences in business culture with that focus on communication.

The research question

The objective of this Bachelor's thesis is to provide a tangible and comprehensive guide for Flanders Investment and Trade Sweden on communication with Swedish companies as well as the surrounding working culture, this will also include the role of HR in that corporate culture environment, having a focus on the regulations. Commenting on this would steer away from the working culture and the focus on communication. A second delineation is that this thesis will be focusing on Belgium and not on Flanders specifically. The management process, as well as corporate structures, have minimal differences between Flanders and Wallonia when comparing them to different national cultures such as Sweden (Passport to Trade 2.0, 2019). The Hofstede Model focusses on national culture (Hofstede Insights , 2020). Because of these two reasons, Belgian companies will be discussed rather than specific Flemish companies. Important to keep in mind is that criticism on the 6D-model has occurred. It is better to use this for specific comparisons rather than generalize the population because differences within that national culture may occur.

The reason for this research is that a comprehensive guide like that does not yet exist for the company, and they would benefit from it as the company can use it for its employees as well as to distribute it to the companies collaborating with Flanders Investment and Trade.

Despite some already existing research, specific pointers for people exporting on a first level, and eventually establishing an office in another country - in this case, Sweden - is often overlooked. My motivation is to be able to help these businesses as well as the Swedish office of Flanders Investment and Trade in their goal of guiding the process of exporting and maybe even establishing in Sweden.

This thesis will consist of three parts. First, desk research of which the goal is to study the working conditions of Swedish society (universal welfare state) and how this culture can influence the process of companies wishing to establish themselves Sweden will be researched. The study starts from a comparison of the Swedish and Belgian/Flemish working environments from different domains, such as politics, economy, social environment, etc. using a PESTEL-analysis. Secondly, there will be field research, where questions regarding the experiences of companies and people that have gone through this experience from adapting to a Swedish corporate culture coming from Belgium, will be asked. This information will be extracted to a bigger scale where that information will be able to be used. All the research will ultimately amount to the main objective of the thesis, being to find out whether the Swedish work model, culture, and corresponding communication is an obstacle or an advantage for Swedish companies. To conclude, guides will be added.

To have a clear delineation of the theme, the specific research question will be the following.

“Challenges faced by Belgian companies wanting to export or establish in Sweden regarding Swedish working culture with a focus on business communication and how these can be mitigated.”

With the support of the company, the subject can be justified by proving that consequences for FIT and the companies concerned are real and can inhibit international business relationships.

1. The research method

1.1. The different methods

In researching the comparison of Belgium and Sweden as well as their respective working culture, the basis will be set by desk research. For the comparison of both countries, all aspects and elements of a PESTEL-analysis will be used to analyze both countries. Regarding desk research, secondary sources available online as well as different off-line sources, such as articles, newspapers, etc. will be used. On top of this, databases with information on different Swedish companies established in Belgium within FIT will be used. The sources will be referenced using the APA – format.

In addition to the theoretical content of the thesis, in-depth interviews will be conducted. Because these differences in working culture are often regarding soft skills and communication, qualitative research will give more clear answers than a questionnaire will. The complementary information will be done through accompanying secondary research, as well as in-depth interviews.

To obtain information regarding working culture and communication, interviews with people having gone through the adaption process in the Swedish working environment will be conducted. Two groups will be interviewed: the first one being Belgian expats working in originally Swedish companies and the second being Belgian expats staying withing the same multinational but changing countries. This to test the concept of glocalization (cf. Chapter 4. HR involvement; HR analysis) and to which extent an international company or a company that wants to establish themselves in Sweden needs to conform to Swedish corporate culture (Blatter, Glocalization, 2013).

From the people interviewed, a general idea of the challenges and problems they have faced in communicating and doing business with Belgian people will be the outcome.

The general outcome of these interviews consists of their expectations in the differences of working culture with a focus on communication. The interviews will be held via Skype due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the separation of respondents in Sweden and the interviewer in Belgium. These interviews will be recorded after having the interviewee's permission and will take a little over half an hour.

The list of contacted people in search for the interviewees can be found in appendix 9.13. The transcriptions can be found in appendix 9.3. until 9.11.

1.2. The respondents

1. Paul van Doninck

Paul van Doninck is a husband works in Stockholm, Sweden. He moved together with his family on his initiative after working for SAS Belgium, quite some time ago. A main driver at the time was the new management culture just emerging. After having worked for SAS in Sweden, he accepted a job offer for Jernhüsen - a government company - as a strategist and business developer for stations around the country. He has been working there for over six years now after switching from a Belgian company to a Swedish one (Van Doninck, 2020).

2. Dieter Van De Walle

Dieter Van De Walle is a man with a team under his wings, recruited by Spotify while working as a software developer in Belgium. He moved to Sweden on his own after working in a Belgian company and started as a software engineer at the Spotify headquarters. He also gives tours regarding the company culture of Spotify. He has been in that function for three years at the moment and has been living in Stockholm for around the same time. He speaks basic Swedish and English with his colleagues. (Van De Walle, 2020).

3. Maarten Beckers

Maarten Beckers has moved to Sweden in 2016 with his partner to accept a job offer at Skansken. Right now, he works for the Swedish construction giant as a production manager for larger-scale projects around Stockholm after having worked up in the company. In his own words, he has led a considerable amount of people. He has been working as a production manager for over 4.5 years. He speaks Swedish fluently (Beckers, 2020).

4. Jean-Charles Van Nuijs

Jean-Charles Van Nuijs is a man working and living in Stockholm, Sweden with his four-year-old son. After having worked in France and Belgium for a considerable amount of years, he moved to Sweden to continue his function as a global marketing manager in one of the headquarters of the Absolute company in Sweden. He is in control of global marketing strategies for every country where the company is present, except for the United States. He has been active within the company for over 12 years, of which five years have been spent in Sweden. He communicates with his subordinates and colleagues in English (Van Nuijs, 2020).

5. Valerie

(Valerie would prefer to stay anonymous, therefore her name and surname are changed)

Valerie had been working for H&M in Brussels before accepting a job offer in the headquarters in Sweden as a Merchandising expert. After moving to Sweden with her family (husband and kids), she has been working there for two years right now. She has been living in Stockholm for the same amount of time. She communicates in English with her colleagues (Valerie, 2020).

6. Stijn Vets

Stijn Vets is a 35-year-old man that has recently returned from Sweden an expat experience for Coca-Cola. He has moved there alone and had been working for two years as an RGM pricing & trade senior manager. He spoke English and some basic Swedish phrases with his colleagues. He had been active in Sweden for two years after working for over 12 years within the Coca-Cola company (Vets, 2020).

7. Tom Vandecasteele

Tom Vandecasteele was a Belgian expat in Sweden, now recently returned to Belgium. He moved to Stockholm, Sweden alone to set up a new division of the company he was working for at the time, headhunting office Michael Page. In Sweden, he worked as a manager with a considerable number of subordinates. He has been active in Sweden for one year and a half and has had many contacts with clients and partners in Sweden. His main language of communication within the company was English (Vandecasteele, 2020).

8. Norbert Van De Velde

Norbert Van De Velde is a man that currently works in Stockholm, Sweden as a veterinary pathologist. He moved there in 2019 with his wife after having the job offer and has been working there for six months. He speaks Swedish and is in the middle of the adaptation process. He had never lived in Sweden before (Van De Velde, 2020).

9. Andreas

(Andreas would prefer to stay anonymous, therefore only his first name will be mentioned)

Andreas was working for another European institution in Belgium and Luxembourg before accepting the job offer in Sweden. He has moved there with his wife and has been working at the European Commission of Disease Control ever since. He has been working at the organization for seven years and has grown to be an IT Senior Project Manager and Contract Manager. He speaks French, English, and basic Swedish with his colleagues and has a considerable amount of people under him (Andreas, 2020).

1.3 The interview questions

1. Can you briefly describe the company culture present in your current company and job?

Company rules

- Give a brief description of the most important company rules regarding communication and working culture. (some examples)
- How were the company rules implemented and communicated to you?
- What are the big differences compared to Belgium companies?

Company habits

- Give a brief description of the most important company habits regarding working culture. (some examples)
- How were the company habits implemented and communicated to you?
- What are the big differences compared to Belgium companies?

Company behavior

- Give a brief description of the most prominent company behavior internally and externally regarding the working culture. (some examples)
- How was the company behavior implemented and communicated to you?
- What are the big differences compared to Belgium companies?

2. In what is the company culture promoted by HR? how did they support this adaption to the new company culture and how did you experience this? For example, visuals, guides, websites, teambuilding, etc.
3. In general, how did you experience the company culture compared to your past experiences working in Belgium?
4. Did you seek external help when coming to Sweden or did you inform yourself of this change?
5. Were you briefed on the new company culture or did you research yourself (if yes, how)? did you wish you had any briefing beforehand?
6. Did you experience the move to Sweden as positive or negative?
7. What effect did the new business culture have on your arrival and new function?
8. What was the most difficult aspect of the new company culture to deal with and how did you cope with it?

9. Communication plays a big role in any company culture. Could you describe briefly the most prominent differences between your current company and previous experiences in Belgium?
10. What are the big differences in the style of verbal communication between Sweden and Belgium except for the language?
11. What are the big differences in the style of non-verbal communication between Sweden and Belgium except for the language? (think of meetings, presentation, body language, social habits, etc.)
12. What are the big differences in the style of written communication between Sweden and Belgium except for the language? (think of reports, e-mails, style of writing, level of professionalism, etc.) Are there any noticeable differences in website communication?
13. Which one of these subdivisions on communication was hardest to adapt to in your new function? And what was a positive change regarding communication?
14. If you knew all positive and negative elements of adapting to new company culture in advance, would the change have gone by smoother? Did this change to the new culture meet your expectations or did you have another idea of the new organizational culture?
15. Would upfront information from HR, a guide, website, or support agencies have helped you or the company in this transition?
16. Do you have anything to add to the interview regarding company culture and business communication in Sweden as well as adapting to it?

2. A country comparison: Sweden & Belgium

To be able to understand the working culture in both Sweden and Belgium, a comparison of both countries is necessary. This to further understand factors such as politics, culture, and socio-economic tendencies, influencing the working culture and HR- environment. This analysis will be done through the use of elements coming from the PESTEL-analysis and will follow the contents necessary for a country, sourced from info.nu (Robin990, 2015).

2.1. Country identification: Sweden

Political

The political climate in Sweden is generally stable and calm and is ruled by the principle of parliamentary democracy. On a federal level, the government consists of a prime minister and 22 ministers as well as a parliament (Riksdag) with 349 proportionally represented members. The parliament holds legislative power and the government holds executive power over proposed laws by Riksdag. The current parliament consists of eight parties led by the social democratic party. Next elections will take place in 2022 and will elect the Riksdag, which in turn will elect the prime minister (Sweden, 2020).

Sweden and its public sector have a low level of corruption. According to Transparency International, Sweden scores 85 out of 100 on the level of non-corruption and ranks fourth in the 2019 CPI index (Transparency International, 2019). Transparency and freedom of speech are included in the constitution and are thus important values in Swedish society. The country has the Freedom of Press Act in place. This principle places emphasis on public access to official documents and the work of public agencies as well as the Riksdag (Government of Sweden, 2020).

The Swedish government regulates business with an open mind. The country welcomes innovation and has an innovation strategy for 2020 to back this up. This innovation strategy can be found in the paper "*Innovation strategy of Sweden*", published in collaboration by the government of Sweden and the EU. R&D is supported as well, as the country invests more than three percent of the GDP in R&D (Sweden, 2020).

Economy

The Swedish economy is a well-developed and export-oriented economy. The main export industries consist of timber, hydropower, and iron. The main industries in Sweden consist of transport manufacturing, telecommunications, forestry, pharmaceuticals, and industrial machinery. The GDP of Sweden stands at 556 billion USD and the GDP/capita stands at 54.608 USD (Flanders Investment and Trade, 2018). A slight growth in the GDP rate of Sweden in the first quarter of 2020 indicates a rise in possible spending and a good general economy (Trading economics, 2020).

After a long period of expansion growth, the Swedish economy is slowing down. Since 2019, investment in business and export has not increased. Unemployment is rising but at a weak pace. Any outlook regarding the future of the Swedish economy is positive nor negative. Because of weak global demand for capital and intermediate goods and global uncertainty, export and business investments are rather weak. With uncertainty surrounding the rise in unemployment, as well as moderate wage growth, spending will not rise, and households will remain cautious in spending (OECD, 2019). With a strong fiscal position, Sweden’s economy has a strong potential for expansion but will need certainty from the global market to be able to do so (OECD, 2019).

Sociological

Currently, there are 10 million people, dispersed over the more populated area in the South. Of the whole population, 8.9 million people live in urban areas. In Sweden, life expectancy is 83.3 years and the median age in Sweden is 41.1 years old (World O Meter, 2020). The age and sex pyramid of 2019 can be consulted in Appendix 9.14. Table 10: Age and Sex Pyramid Sweden (Theodora, 2020). People are cautious with spending, despite having one of the highest GDP/capita in Europe (OECD, 2019). An average salary in Sweden is SEK 514,155 (EUR 48.396,99), or SEK 351,737 (EUR 33.108,72) in take-home earnings (averagesalarysurvey, 2020). Sweden was ranked sixth place for education worldwide in 2019 and offers free education for EU-citizens (Master and more, 2019). Working and studying hard is important, but the work-life balance is even more prevalent. Openness and equality are also very important in personal and business life.

Technological

Sweden has been investing more than three percent of the national GNP in research and development in a diverse range of sectors (Sweden, 2020). The country wants to be a fore front runner regarding development in the technical and scientific sectors. Several companies have headquarters in Sweden, the biggest being Volvo, SAAB-Scania, ASEA, Electrolux, Ericsson, and SKF, these companies account for more than 20 percent of manufactured exports (Nations encyclopedia, 2020). Above, the most important technological fields for R&D can be seen and measured in the degree of receiving a budget to introduce innovation to the market (Statistics Sweden, 2019).

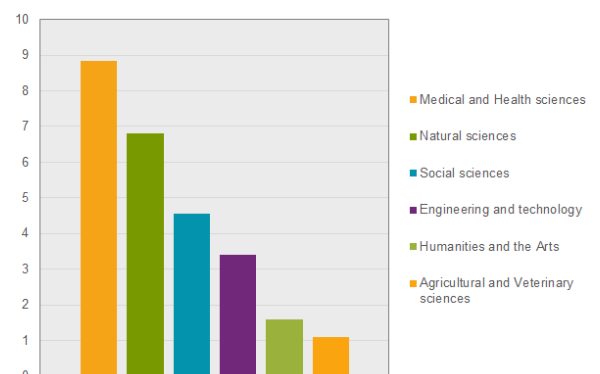


Table 1: Allocation budgets to sectors (SCB, 2019)

The Swedish government has allocated SEK 37 billion of the state budget for R&D. This research is mostly done by academical centers, such as government centers or university labs (Statistics Sweden, 2019). The most important centers for the allocation of the R&D budget as well as their division can be seen in table 2: allocation of R&D budgets (SCB, 2019). (Statistics Sweden, 2019).

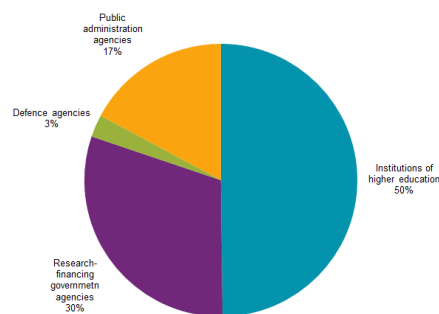


Table 2: Allocation of R&D budgets (SCB, 2019)

Ecological

Ecology, environment, and energy are prevalent aspects of the Swedish economy and business life. Eighty percent of Sweden's electricity comes from natural sources such as wind power, hydroelectric power, as well as a nuclear power. In 2020, 54 % of the total energy usage in Sweden is coming from renewable sources. The country surpassed the 2020 goal of having 50% in 2012 (World nuclear Organization, 2019).

Several government initiatives have been taken to promote the usage of renewable energy as well as provide an ecological mindset in business. Carbon taxation has been implemented in 1991 and currently stands at SEK 1,190 (EUR 119) per ton of fossil carbon dioxide emitted (Government offices of Sweden, 2020). A green electricity certification is given out by the Swedish government to companies that generate electricity coming from a renewable source. Following up on long-term sustainability goals for the country is the Swedish energy agency, connected to the Ministry of infrastructure, their task is to lead the energy transition in Sweden (Swedish Energy Agency, 2017).

The long-term goals for Sweden are having a zero-carbon economy by 2045, achieving the target of using a hundred percent renewable energy sources for the generation of its electricity, and reducing the emissions in the transport sector by 75% between 2010 and 2030 (Ministry of the Environment and Energy, 2018).

Legal/Juridical

Sweden is a civil law country, a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary form of government. The constitution now in place was adopted in 1974 and is made up of four different fundamental texts; the Instrument of Government, the Freedom of the Press Act, the Act of Succession, and the Fundamental Law on Freedom of Expression (Government offices of Sweden, 2020). Part of the court system is two separate systems: the general courts responsible for criminal or civil cases and general administrative courts responsible for cases between private persons and the government (Government offices of Sweden, 2020). All Swedish citizens are subjected to European law. These laws can be imposed through regulations, directives, or opinions (Belgium.be, 2020).

2.2. Country identification: Belgium

Political

The political climate in Belgium is considered calm and stable and is ruled by the principle of parliamentary democracy. Belgium is divided into Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels; each having their governments. A federal government is also installed. A chamber of representatives with 155 people holds legislative power while the government holds executive power. Elections happen every five years on a European, federal, and Flemish level and municipal and provincial elections happen every six years (Flanders, 2020).

Belgium has a low level of corruption according to Transparency International and ranks 17th out of 180 on the CPI index, holding a score of 75 out of 100 (Transparency International, 2019). However, trust in the government is low, and perceived corruption by the people is high. Freedom of speech is included in the Human rights signed by the country (Transparency International, 2019).

Economical

The Belgian economy can be defined as a small, open economy. The country has a well-developed transport network and a central location in Europe which makes it crucial for international business within the EU. Belgium's share of exports from the EU to its member states totals 8.2%, the share of exports to countries outside of the EU amounts to 5.7%. The main partners for Belgium are Germany, The Netherlands, and France. Despite this, the trade balance for Belgium in 2019 was negative. The leading sectors for export are the chemical industry, transport manufacturing, and industrial machinery and the main sectors within Belgium are transport, manufacturing, and high tech industries (FOD Economy, 2019).

The GDP of Belgium in 2018 was 532,268 billion USD and the GDP/capita stands at 46,696 USD. The annual growth rate for Belgium is 1.7 percent per year and a positive conjuncture can be seen (Country economics, 2019).

Important to note is that Belgium maintains a high level of competitiveness. It is placed 26th of the 63 most competitive countries, according to Institute for Management Development (IMD World Competitiveness 2018 results), and takes place 20 of 137 according to the World Economic Forum (FOD Economy, 2019). Despite openness and competitiveness, Belgium has some limiting obstacles, being tax rates, excessively labor laws, and tax legislation (FOD Economy, 2019).

Sociological

Belgian population consists of 11.589.623 people. Life expectancy for both sexes is 82.2 years old and the median age is 41.86 years old. The age and sex pyramid of the country can be found in appendix 9.14. table 11: Age and Sex Pyramid Belgium (Theodora, 2020). With the country split up in a French part and a Flemish part, the French-speaking people and Dutch-speaking people are often restricted to their areas with a French majority in Brussels. The Flemish community has a majority with six million inhabitants (World population review, 2020). The next big ethnicity is the Walloon group of inhabitants. Thirdly, there is a small minority of German-speaking residents with roughly one million inhabitants. The largest group of immigrants is from Morocco with 500.000 inhabitants (World population review, 2020). The official languages of Belgium are Dutch, French, and German. Most Belgian inhabitants speak English fluently (World population review, 2020).

Regarding education, Belgium scores high. According to the OECD, Belgium ranks third among the OECD countries regarding pre-school participation and quality (Portier, 2016). Belgium is ranked 28th in the Quality of life index, below Sweden in place 11.

Technological

Belgium is seen as an innovative country regarding technology and science. Some of the major sectors where Belgium is a fore front runner in the fashion sector in Antwerp, as well as the diamond sector. Regarding the Medical and pharmaceutical industry, Belgium shines regarding R&D. In Flanders, five academic hospitals are internationally renowned for their research regarding science and technology. Research centers VITO and VIB are also important regarding medical research. The University of Antwerp is an important player regarding cancer treatments. (de la kethulle de Ryhove, 2020).

Belgium has a highly educated population with a lot of skills. it ranks ninth in the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI). This compared to second place for Sweden, just after Finland. (European Commission, 2019)

An important organization in the technological field is The Brussels Institute for Research and Innovation, Innoviris. The goal of this organization is to allocate budgets to companies and research centers in the region. These often support technology transfer. Proposals are received and evaluated by juries. Followed up by financial monitoring if the grant is allocated (European commission, 2020)

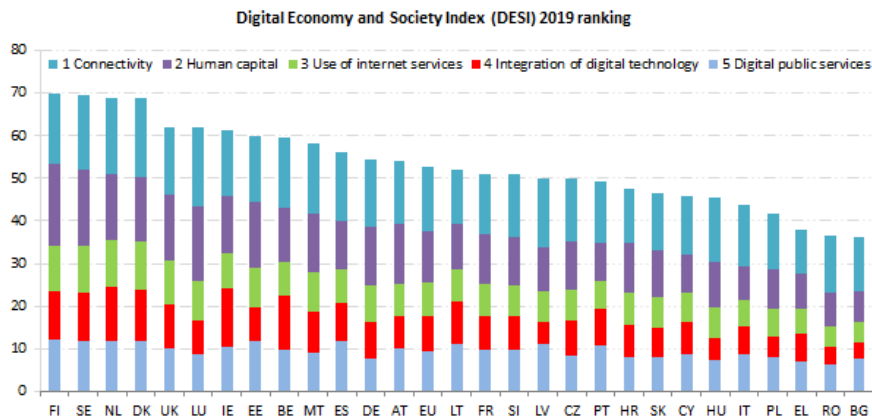


Table 3: DESI Ranking (European Commission, 2020)

Ecological

Belgium has proposed an energy and climate plan for the next ten years that entails a target of 18.3 % of renewable energy by 2030. The share of renewable energy will be implemented in different sectors. 40.4% in electricity, 20.6% in transport, and 12.7% in heating and cooling. Offshore wind power will be vital for future implementation, and that has already started with an off-shore park in front of Zeebrugge (European commission, 2020).

All the regions, as well as the federal level of Belgium, have contributed their plans starting from 2021 -2030 to contribute to the goals set in the NECP plan.

Legal/Juridical

The juridical system in Belgium follows the civil law system. Law is practiced on several levels and in different territories. The House of Justice is the lowest level jurisdiction. There are 28 houses of Justice in Belgium, placed in each judicial district within Belgium. These courts can appeal to the central administration in Belgium. (Belgium.be, 2020). Law courts in Belgium are with a number of five. These are in Brussels, Ghent, Antwerp Mons, and Liege. The five juridical areas are divided into districts with each their Court of First Instance, Labour Court and Commercial Court. A peace court is the smallest judicial division, with 187 locations (Belgium.be, 2020). A third level within the justice system is the Higher Courts. This court is called when a private person wants to appeal to the judge or a previous decision. Five appeal courts are located in Belgium: in Antwerp, Brussels, Ghent, Liege, and Mons. The last level of justice used in Belgium is the international bodies and courts. All Belgian citizens are subjected to European law. These laws can be imposed through regulations, directives, or opinions (Belgium.be, 2020).

2.3. A comparison

Several conclusions can be made from the country comparison regarding external factors.

The political climate in both countries is stable and consists of a similar political system with a parliamentary democracy as well as corresponding elections. Both Sweden and Belgium experience a low level of corruption. A comparison of these numbers can be found in appendix 9.14. table 9: CPI Index.

Sweden is a well-developed economy and has a focus on the export industry. Belgium also has an open economy with high levels of export and import, as it is considered a transit country. Belgium has a GDP of 532,268 billion USD and Sweden has a higher GDP of 556 billion USD. This means that an increase in the amount of production takes place in that specific economy, thus, the citizens have a higher income and can spend more. The Swedish economy is characterized by a slowdown in 2019 while the Belgian economy was at a standstill. The Belgian economy is characterized by a high degree of competitiveness.

There is a similar number of inhabitants as well as a population that has a larger group of older people than young people. Despite the similar number of inhabitants, Sweden has a much larger surface area and thus a larger distribution, but most people live in a densely populated area in the south.

In terms of technology and development, Sweden is further advanced than Belgium. Sweden ranks second in the DESI ranking of 2019 compared to Belgium in 9th place.

Ecology is much more important in Sweden than in Belgium, but both are subjected to the plans of the European Union. Regarding these plans, Sweden is much further ahead, for example, it already extracts 80% of its electricity from natural sources. There is also more space and capacity in Sweden to generate sustainable energy.

There is a well-developed legal system in place as well as a separation of law and state. Both countries are subject to European legislation.

Belgium and Sweden are similar in many respects concerning the elements of the PESTEL-analysis. Cultural analysis is therefore needed to help explain the differences in work culture. A Hofstede comparison is the best choice because its focus is on national culture (Hofstede Insights , 2020). The GLOBE studies can also be used for cultural comparisons, but because the Hofstede comparison is based on the research of companies, for example, IBM, this switch to explaining the differences and how they should be dealt with is less obvious.

2.4. A cultural comparison

Cultural comparison between two countries can be posed with the Hofstede comparison of countries. In the use of the dimensions of Hofstede, culture can be defined as “*the collective mental programming of the human mind which distinguishes one group of people from another*” (Hofstede Insights, 2020). The programming of the habits in culture influences the patterns of thinking which are reflected in the different meanings that the society links to the aspects of life (Hofstede Insights, 2020). An important criticism when using the five dimensions of Hofstede is that all norms and values of culture cannot be applied to all people in society at the same level. Considerable differences can be measured even within the boundaries of the concerning countries (Hofstede Insights, 2020). Despite this criticism, the scores on all six dimensions can be used to compare different countries. So, these numbers cannot be on their own as a comparison is necessary to give meaning to them. These values are to be considered relative (Hofstede Insights, 2020). Also, important to keep in mind is that the model of Hofstede is generalized. Differences in culture may occur in the same country or area.

The six dimensions explained

Power distance is “*the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally*” (Hofstede Insights, 2020).

A second dimension is Individualism, directly placed against the collectivism of a society. Individualism is defined as “*the degree of interdependence a society maintains among its members*” (Hofstede Insights, 2020).

Masculinity or femininity is the degree to which values are important in a society. These can be more of a traditional male role or these of more classic feminine values. The fundamental criterium in this choice is what motivates members of society in their actions; wanting to be the best or liking what you do (Hofstede Insights, 2020).

A fourth dimension focuses on “*the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations and have created beliefs and institutions that try to avoid these*” (Hofstede Insights, 2020). This is the level of uncertainty avoidance a society maintains regarding its actions.

A long-term vision in a society is a dimension that describes “*how every society has to maintain some links with its past while dealing with the challenges of the present and future*” (Hofstede Insights, 2020). Low scores on this dimension indicate a normative society that has a primordial focus on traditional values and norms. They view societal change with suspicion.

A sixth dimension of the 6D-model is Indulgence, placed against Restraint. Indulgence refers to “*the degree to which people control their impulses and desires based on the way they were raised*” (Hofstede Insights, 2020). An indulgent society refers to a relatively weak controlled society whereas restrained refers to a relatively strong controlled society.

Below, a comparison between both countries can be seen in all six dimensions. These similarities and differences are a general interpretation of the difference in a culture where the aspects of the differences and challenges in doing business will also come to the forefront.

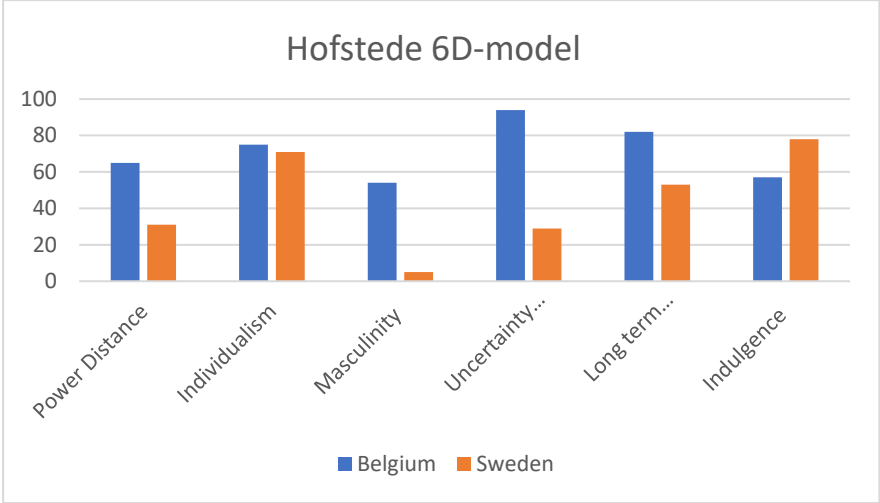


Table 4: Hofstede Model Belgium vs. Sweden (Hofstede Insights, 2020)

Similarity in Indulgence

A first dimension is the Indulgence-Indicator that indicates the degree of indulgence a society and culture tolerate. Belgium is marked as a moderate indulgent society, with a score of 57 (Hofstede Insights, 2020). Members of such society are willing to factuate their impulses and desires and tend to control them in a way that allows these members of society to enjoy life. A positive attitude and general optimism are the characters of these people. According to the Indulgence-indicator, people living in a high-scored society place a high degree of importance on hobbies and work-life balance (Hofstede Insights, 2020). According to qualitative research, there is a reason to specify this further in the explanation of Swedish business culture (Beckers, 2020). There is no inhibition to spend money and time as they wish and there is no social control on how a member of society should act.

Sweden, with a higher score of 78 still can be categorized as an indulgent society and has the same norms and values as Belgium (Hofstede Insights, 2020). In that respect, they are categorized similarly.

Similarity in Individualism

The most significant similarity in the Hofstede 6D-model is the focus on individualism. Belgium and Sweden are almost completely similar with respective scores of 75 and 71 which indicate a high level of individualism (Hofstede Insights, 2020). In this respect; both members of the Belgian and Swedish society value privacy and individual opinions. In the aspect of business and work environment, a high level of individualism indicates recognition of an individual’s work.

Values primarily focus on autonomy and self-management as well as privacy and a good work-life balance, also confirmed by field research (Beckers, 2020). People in the work environment are recognized as individuals with each their qualities and their according opinions are valued and appreciated to a certain extent, this is confirmed by four out of nine respondents or 44% specifically and by a hundred percent indirectly.

There are some significant differences in the application of the individualism in the work environment between Belgium and Sweden. Belgium, with a slightly higher score, contains a slight contradiction. Although Belgian culture is highly individualistic, employees need a hierarchical structure within the company (Hofstede Insights, 2020). Combined with a high score on Power Distance (65), this creates a specific contradiction, which makes the relationship between manager and subordinate rather difficult to manage. The manager will often establish a second communication channel, having personal contact with everybody in the structure, allowing to give the impression that every individual has a level of autonomy and respect in the organization, even though an overpowering vertical structure is present (Hofstede Insights, 2020).

This aspect of dual communication and the need for a hierarchical structure within the company is not applicable in Sweden. In a Swedish work environment, there is a preference for a loosely knit framework within the company where a flat or horizontal hierarchy is the norm (Van De Walle, 2020). In this work environment, according to Hofstede as well as qualitative research, a violation of set work procedures causes guilt and loss of self-esteem. People are given autonomy for the completion of their tasks, but quality in the completion of the work is expected (Hofstede Insights, 2020) & (Van De Walle, 2020).

In contrast to the high similarity in scores in the dimension of Individuality and Indulgence, there are also extreme differences to be found in the 6D-model of Hofstede. These occur in the dimensions of power distance, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance.

Difference in Power Distance

With a score of 65, Belgium scores high on the Power Distance Indicator scale. Distance in power is considered necessary and the fact that superiors are accepted to have privileges in material possessions as well as access to knowledge (Hofstede Insights, 2020). In a business environment, attitude towards superiors is formal and on a surname basis (Van Nuijs, 2020). This relates to the vertical structure present in the company, indicated by the score on power distance as well as the combination with the high score on individualism (Hofstede Insights, 2020). According to qualitative research analysis, the high score on the power distance dimension is a consequence and a cause of the vertical structure within the company. It is a consequence because it maintains and hinders the chain of open communication where this is the case in Sweden. On the other hand, it is a cause because as long as employees maintain the high distance in communication and cooperation, this vertical structure is also maintained, especially in the light of individualism.

The way the information is controlled is even associated with power. This means that information is often considered unevenly distributed and used as an advantage in the decision-making process. Control of work, despite the level of autonomy, is normal, and even expected; but is considered formal and not key to efficiency.

This is a contrast with Sweden, with only a score of 31 on the Power Distance dimension (Hofstede Insights, 2020). This accounts for both general Swedish culture as well as the Swedish working environment. The most prominent values for the work environment are autonomy, also connected to the high score on individualism; hierarchy only for the convenience of the company structure; equal rights, superiors that are easily accessible and easy to communicate with; and a coaching leader or manager (Hofstede Insights, 2020). Power in the Swedish work environment is decentralized. This means that any corporate structure such as the vertical or horizontal present at the company is not put into use and that management or higher-ups have the function of empowering and delegating rather than decision making. Employees are encouraged to participate in discussions and contribute to the strategic vision and goals of the company. Control as a means of showing power is discouraged and attitude towards a manager or director is casual and often informal (Beckers, 2020).

Difference in Masculinity

A second significant difference is the low level of masculinity in Sweden as opposed to the high score in Belgium. The country scores 54 on average, clocking in at an average score, this means that several contradicting aspects can be found within the dimension (Hofstede Insights, 2020). First of all, a win-lose situation is not the norm when negotiating, therefore the process can be slower than in a country where extremely male values are the norm and a win-lose situation is often the case (Kenneth & Kilmann, 2020). Light consensus culture is present because every possible scenario has to be gone over and viewed from a point of view. Belgians are more inclined to compromise and therefore win-win or lose-lose situations as this is more important than convincing a single person (Kenneth & Kilmann, 2020) & (Hofstede Insights, 2020).

Sweden scores very low on this dimension with five is thus a female Society. One of the main values in this type of society is the work-life (Beckers, 2020) & (Valerie, 2020). In the business world, Sweden is characterized as a world where an effective manager is supportive of his/her people, and decision making is achieved through involvement. The consensus culture is one of the most defining aspects here. Managers strive for consensus and people value equality, solidarity, and quality in their work (Hofstede Insights, 2020). Conflicts inside and outside the workplace are resolved through compromise and negotiation.

This is one of the most difficult aspects of Swedish culture to adapt to Belgian expats working and living in Sweden as indicated in field research. Incentives such as free time and flexible working hours and places are preferred.

Difference in Uncertainty Avoidance

A third difference where Sweden scores significantly lower than Belgium is uncertainty avoidance. With 94 on the Uncertainty Avoidance Index, Belgium has one of the highest possible scores (Hofstede Insights, 2020). Certainty is achieved through academic work and concepts, part of that is scientific dogma or a scientific thesis. For example, the worldview taught in schools and universities, which is why most people adhere to it. Lessons and training are more deductive. In the management structure, rules and certainty are welcome and in the absence of these, stress arises. That is why planning is preferred, a certain amount of expertise is welcome and the change in policy, on the other hand, is considered stressful (Hofstede Insights, 2020).

With a score of 29 on this dimension, Sweden has a very low score for avoiding uncertainty. Companies are more inclined to accept a deviation from the norms and principles and maintain a more relaxed attitude towards the Belgian tendency to have certainty (Hofstede Insights, 2020). In societies with low uncertainty avoidance, people's opinion is that there should not be more rules than necessary. Hard work is done when needed for the company, Schedules tend to be more flexible, and innovation is not seen as threatening and even encouraged (Beckers, 2020). Sweden, for example, makes three percent of its GDP available each year to support new projects and the government has an effective and feasible innovation strategy (Sweden - Science and technology, 2020).

Long-term orientation: no extremes

The Long-term orientation Index is an aspect of the 6D-model in comparing Belgium to Sweden which is neither extreme in difference nor similarity. Belgium indicates a rather high score of 83 and is indicated as a decidedly pragmatic society (Hofstede Insights, 2020). Members of a long-term oriented culture are inclined to contextualize truth in situation and time, values, and norms are put in the timeframe they were created in and are susceptible to change. The general focus of a long-term oriented society is the present and the future rather than keeping traditional values that stem from the past (Hofstede Insights, 2020).

Sweden, with a score of 53 is categorized as neither a long-term oriented culture nor a short-term oriented culture (Hofstede Insights, 2020). This means that members of society are easy to adapt traditions in the face of context, time, and situation but also like to keep the values and norms from the past and honor the traditions that have shown throughout the history of the country. With no clear preference, members of Swedish society are easy to adapt while interacting with different cultures that have either a short-term oriented culture or a long-term oriented culture. (Hofstede Insights, 2020)

3. Swedish company and business culture

According to the conducted qualitative research analysis, there are several aspects that Belgium companies or representatives of Belgium companies have to take into account when trading with Sweden or establishing an office in Sweden. The main structures that have come forwards are the horizontal company structure, the values in the Swedish business culture; several Swedish habits and concepts such as Fika, Lagom, and work-life balance. Furthermore, there is the decision-making process as well as the involvement of HR in the corporate culture. As a focus, business communication in verbal, non-verbal, and written communication is presented. To be able to get a better understanding of the different aspects of the Swedish business and company culture, a definition of both concepts needs to be delineated.

According to the Business Dictionary, business culture is defined as the following.

“Business culture is a model or style of business operations within a company. The business culture determines how different levels of staff communicate with one another as well as how employees deal with clients and customers” (Business Dictionary, 2020).

Business culture is an umbrella term for a sector or general business life in a country or region. Company culture focusses on one or several companies as well as the internal working and structure (Stepstone, 2020). According to several businesses and job guiding services, company culture is defined as the following.

“The corporate culture consists of the unwritten rules, habits, and behavior of all employees within a given company. These, in turn, are based on a set of shared values” (Stepstone, 2020).

A second way to define company culture is to derive the degree to how well and smooth the production processes, as well as the administrative processes, run. Company culture consists of three different aspects; the unwritten rules of the company on the social behavior, the habits that occur within the company regularly, and the behavior of the company and the employees within that company (Stepstone, 2020).

Company culture defines how employees are feeling and how productivity will rise or drop as a result of that. Interaction between the employees is the key factor defining productivity. A supportive corporate culture is a foundation for highly efficient teams and dedicated employees, according to recent research of the company Google (Stepstone, 2020).

Five or even sometimes six types of company culture can be defined, as researched by Google Inc. (Stepstone, 2020). These company cultures appeal to different aspects of the values and norms present at the company. The different types of corporate cultures can be found below.

1. The adhocracy culture

Adhocracy is a composition of the Latin Ad Hoc and democracy. The concept is based on the ability of the employees to adapt to changing conditions quickly. Some main characteristics are employee empowerment, flexibility and autonomy, and individual initiative (Rouse & Wigmore, adhocracy, 2014).

The hierarchy among employees exists but is not defined in a vertical structure and is not a means of showing power in a business environment. According to Margaret Rouse, the author on the website *What Is TechTarget*, adhocracy contrasts with bureaucracy, which is characterized by inflexibility and rigid adherence to rules (Rouse & Wigmore, adhocracy, 2014).

2. The clan culture

A clan company culture can be defined as an environment where employees are seen as a family that strives to reach a common goal and have common values to be able to reach these goals. Clan corporate culture is marked by collaboration and consensus. The decision-making process is a very important characteristic (Rouse & Wigmore, clan culture, 2014).

Clan culture is the most collaborative and least competitive of all corporate culture models and has the following main values, empowerment, engagement, and loyalty to the business. Loyalty to the business as well as employee commitment and high levels of productivity is expected (Rouse & Wigmore, clan culture, 2014).

3. The nomadic corporate culture

The nomadic working culture is a culture that is modeled after classic nomadic tribes. The main set-up of the company is the movement of workers, conceptualized and popularized recently through the working from home trend. Through the possibility of flexibility in modern working environments, people are able to work from home or other places as long as the work gets done in a qualitative matter (Pochepan, 2020).

For companies to be able to provide a nomadic corporate environment, flexibility in hours needs to be provided and different types of environments need to be present to stimulate employees. Lastly, a versatile work design will ensure that employees will stay involved with work and the company (Pochepan, 2020).

4. The elite culture

Elite company culture is defined by a central value where innovation and forward-thinking is the focus point. These innovator companies encourage these values in their employees and are often frontrunners in research regarding the field that they are active in, for example, Google Inc. and Facebook (Payton, 2016).

Funding for research is one of their main expenses. Often, an elite culture occurs in companies that are already well-established and often examples within the industry, in that aspect employees are encouraged to be trailblazers in their industry. Main values in an elite culture company are pushing the boundaries, employee engagement, innovation, and thinking outside the box (Payton, 2016).

5. Horizontal corporate culture

As the name indicates, a horizontal corporate structure is a culture in which everyone is present and collaboration is crucial (Payton, 2016). A most defining feature of horizontal company culture is that there are as few layers of management as possible involved in the general processes of the company and to be able to realize this, employees have a great deal of autonomy and a high degree of self-determination for employees. The company is flexible and encourages employees to use market research to refine their strategy (Payton, 2016)

Management as a practice that reflects authority is not in use and any layers in management are just used to have an oversight of the company. Management as a practice becomes a coaching strategy rather than a display of dominance (Redactie MT, 2019).

6. Vertical corporate culture

Opposed to the horizontal structure, the vertical corporate structure is centered around authority and result, and competition-driven work. The bottom line is a priority; as a consequence, the culture promoted risk-aversion and data-driven decisions (Forsey, 2020). The culture puts forward a clearly defined hierarchy, where authority is used as a means of managing the subordinates. On top of this, a set practice regarding company processes is often set in use for several years and is hard to change as the inclination towards setting in place new projects or processes, as well as general innovation, is rather small (Forsey, 2020).

Traditional values and norms are present in the company, focusing on tradition and keeping up the same practices in the future (Forsey, 2020). The goal of these organizations is to ensure consistency and results and follow corporate procedures (Forsey, 2020). Vertical structure in a company is often present in bureaucratic organizations, such as European and federal institutions in short-term oriented countries, as the 6D-model of Hofstede defines (Hofstede Insights, 2020). Important to keep in mind is that not all organizations are always 100% vertically organized. There are nuances to keep in mind, for example, new companies are often horizontally organized.

3.1. The type of company culture in Sweden

According to field research regarding the subject, Swedish business and their according companies can be classified as a horizontal corporate culture.

A hundred percent of the respondents involved in the qualitative research indicated that the horizontal structure of the company was one of the differences that influenced the way of working and doing business in Sweden. The same interviewees also confirmed that this contrasts with the vertical company structure present more often present in Belgium. This, however, is not always the case; often, new companies are modeled after a horizontally organizational structure, or, aspects of other models are integrated. The respondents defined a horizontal company structure as a structure where authority is not expressed and where accessibility to higher-ups is present.

In three of the nine companies with a horizontal company structure, the concept was also actively used to describe the company culture itself. This means that the concept of a flat structure is actively used to promote the company culture.

In one of the nine companies, the horizontal company structure was the most difficult aspect to adapt as an employee (Van De Walle, 2020). According to Dieter Van De Walle, the horizontal company structure has benefits but also disadvantages.

“With that flat structure, that decision always takes a bit longer because everyone is expected to give input. In Belgium, if you have a good manager, he or she will listen to everyone, but they still hold the power to just bite the bullet and take that decision.”

– Dieter Van De Walle, 2020.

Thirty-three percent of respondents expressed that the adaptation to the horizontal structure was easier coming from a predominantly vertically organized corporate structure.

The original definition of a horizontal organizational structure is “*a structure with no or few levels of management between the bottom layer of the company structure and the executives of the company*” (Meehan, 2019).

Differences occur between the vertical structure of an organization and the horizontal structure of an organization and are how many levels of management are present in the organization, and how many managers expressing authority are present in the structure (Meehan, 2019).

Middle management absence

A most extreme form of a flat organization is an organization with no middle managers at all. One reason for the absence of middle managers may be that very small companies do not have enough staff to justify hiring middle managers. However, some organizations remain in that horizontal corporate structure, while managing growth (Beckers, 2020) & (Van De Walle, 2020). This is also the case for several companies involved in the research for this project, for example, Skansken and Spotify (Beckers, 2020) & (Van De Walle, 2020). Titles are only there to indicate the official structure, but these are integrated into the team. Although a manager in self-managing teams determines the overall goal or objective of the team, the team is free to manage the methods by which that goal can be achieved (Valerie, 2020).

This can lead to conflicts with people whose career path expectations include a promotion that may not be available within the organization due to its flat structure. Companies or representatives coming to Sweden might have that conflict. However, alternatives such as developing greater expertise in a role or mastery of a trade, and/or receiving pay rises for loyalty are available in the company (Kohll, 2018).

The absence of middle management does not rule out the acceptance and holding of working procedures. If team members themselves are given considerable responsibilities, and they conclude that the procedures they follow are outdated or could be improved, the procedure is allowed to be changed without direct supervision and instructions (Fried, 2013). In some cases, such changes may require the approval of corporate management and/or clients. If management is not involved in the decision, this can be an example of consensus decision-making or workplace democracy at the level of a team (Fried, 2013).

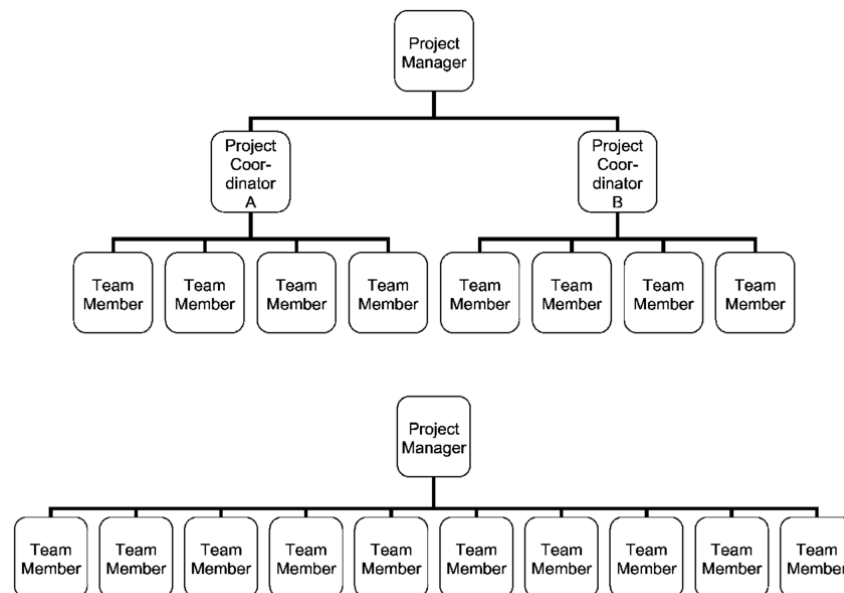


Figure 2: Organization structure according to Mintzberg (Mintzberg, 2020)

To be able to reach a horizontal organizational structure, companies such as Spotify, H&M, Skansken, and Jernhüsen can instill the structure when establishing the company. A second option of reaching a horizontal structure is a process known as delayering, where a highly, hierarchical organization or company removes layers of management through a reorganization (Webfinance.Inc, 2020). With Swedish companies, the structure is instilled with the establishment of the company, but for companies exporting or establishing in Sweden, the process of delayering needs to be started (Van De Walle, 2020) & (Beckers, 2020) & (Valerie, 2020) & (Van Doninck, 2020).

Characteristics of horizontal corporate culture

A horizontal structure within a company is characterized by a high degree of self-management and self-determination as well as responsibility and autonomy in work. Flexibility within the layers of the company is encouraged. According to all these characteristics, confirmed by the company values discussed in several interviews and the according characteristics researched by qualitative research, the Swedish business culture can be defined and categorized as a horizontal company culture with some characteristics occurring in other categories defined by the company Stepstone as well (Van De Walle, 2020) & (Beckers, 2020) & (Valerie, 2020) & (Van Doninck, 2020). The fact that horizontal structures in Swedish companies facilitate cooperation is an aspect that returns in the adhocracy culture (Rouse & Wigmore, adhocracy, 2014). Different levels within the company can contribute to the same project where their input and opinions are valued as much as the higher levels in the company.

Another aspect that promotes the combination of a horizontal corporate structure and the adhocracy corporate culture is the ability for quick market adaptation of Swedish companies. Because the Swedish government makes a large budget for research and development available to Swedish businesses each year, many Swedish companies incline towards innovative projects and ideas and are therefore open to cooperation (Sweden - Science and technology, 2020). This, together with the horizontal company structure, has led to the fact that it is very easy to reach companies and generate initial interest in possible further cooperation (Startup Overseas, n.d.).

Hofstede's 6D-model

The horizontal structure of a Swedish company can be linked to several dimensions of the 6D-model by Hofstede. This is one of the causes of the effectiveness of the horizontal corporate structure. Because there are no inhibitions for talking to superiors in the company, the effects, and benefits such as self-management and responsibility of the horizontal corporate structure can be put into use. With decentralized power, any company structure present is not put into use. Management is not seen as a figure of authority, but as a coaching leader that encourages people to collaborate and voice their opinions (Redactie MT, 2019). The high level of autonomy in the company can also be a consequence of the high score of individualism for Swedish employees, indicating that people are rather focused on themselves and that they do not need a significant amount of guidance to deliver quality work (Valerie, 2020).

3.1.1. The type of company culture in Belgium

As opposed to the horizontal corporate structure, confirmed by a hundred percent of the interviewees, the Belgium corporate culture can be classified by a predominantly vertical company structure (Hofstede Insights, 2020) & (Forsey, 2020). Vertical corporate culture is one of the six corporate cultures researched by Google Inc and recapitulated by the Stepstone company. The Belgian working culture according to Hofstede shows clear signs of recognition in these types. The Belgian business culture shows signs of masculinity and competition-driven work, as confirmed by the 6D-model of Hofstede (Hofstede Insights, 2020). The predominantly vertical structure also has a risk-aversion aspect and uses data-driven decisions, as mentioned in the characteristics of the corporate model (Forsey, 2020). unwilling to take risks or wanting to avoid risks as much as possible. With a clearly defined corporate hierarchy, the corporate culture is opposed to the Swedish corporate culture.

Masculinity

The competition-driven business model is explained by the masculinity dimension on the 6D-model of Hofstede. With a score of 54 on the dimension for Belgium, the country falls in between extremes but opposed to Swedish business culture - with an extremely low score - the masculine values in society can be recognized (Hofstede Insights, 2020). Competition is stronger and hard work is seen as the norm to reach something in a career. This vertical business structure is mainly reflected in the decision-making process and the length and negotiation involved (Forsey, 2020). These are much shorter in Belgium than in Sweden.

Power Distance

Power distance is also a Hofstede dimension that confirms the present vertical corporate structure regarding Belgian companies. Managers and executives are accepted in a position of power.

The two dimensions can be confirmed as a cause of the vertical corporate culture by the accompanying research. Seven out of nine interviews, meaning 77% confirm that the vertical structure was present in Belgium. Below, some short testimonials from the interviews can be found.

“I think that the willingness for consensus is a big difference. In Belgium, the boss has the responsibility for the decision, and you are not involved as much as we are, here in Sweden people really come together to make a decision.” – Jean-Charles van Nuijs, 2020

“There is no hierarchy as I witnessed in Belgium. There is much more an incline to work in teams rather than to have a manager for example that takes all the decisions.” – Valerie, 2020

“For me, the biggest difference in the company culture when I got there was the horizontal company structure. There is hardly any hierarchy, even though in other offices of the company where I had worked, there was a clear vertical structure.” – Tom Vandecasteele, 2020

3.1.2. Consequences for a business

For a traditional, Belgian company establishing communication with a horizontally organized organization in Sweden, differences may occur.

One of the main differences that may pose problems is that in a vertical corporate culture, upper-level management issues orders and takes decisions regarding collaboration without getting input or possible objection, whereas it is a horizontally organized company, input is expected from several levels of the company (Quain, 2019) & (Forsey, 2020). This has the consequence that for a Belgian company, looking to collaborate, the time that it takes to set up that collaboration may take longer than expected. When collaborating with Sweden, it is wise to highlight this fact or even on a second level start the delayering process.

A second consequence for a Belgian business is that communication in the horizontally organized company may be coming by smoother than a vertically organized business. The layers in management can prevent smooth communication. If a CEO takes a decision, it may take a week per layer of management for this decision to be communicated before it reaches all payers of the company and all feedback can be communicated back to the original sender of the message (Van Nuijs, 2020). At this point, the feedback received may inhibit the decision-making process, or promises already made regarding collaboration may have to be pulled back.

This may inhibit the collaboration with a horizontal corporate culture, where time needs to be taken to collect input, but information may flow freely between several self-managing teams and boosts productivity and collaboration as a consequence (Quain, 2019). A decision is made after a longer amount of time but will be substantiated by the different points of view and opinions within the company (Quain, 2019).

Thirdly, a company with a horizontal corporate structure is by consequence very transparent because information needs to be able to flow freely (Vets, 2020) & (Van De Walle, 2020). An organization or company will exercise this principle to internal and external stakeholders. A consequence of this transparency that is linked to the horizontal corporate culture is that organizations or businesses are easier to approach, as different levels of management are often published either on the website or executives and CEOs are accessible through the company phone number. This is less the case with a vertically organized company, where different levels need to be run through before the information or person can be accessed.

Companies or representatives coming to Sweden might have conflict regarding reward for effort. Due to the original vertical structure, Belgian companies tend to reward employees with masculine viewed aspects, such as pay raises. In a flat or horizontal corporate culture however, alternatives such as developing greater expertise in a role or mastery of a trade, and/or receiving pay rises for loyalty are expected (Kohll, 2018). When exporting to Sweden or hiring Swedish employees, it is wise to adapt to the concept.

3.2. Cultural values in the company

3.2.1. Cultural values

The Swedish welfare state and the Swedish companies and offices pride themselves on having the following values present in their production processes as well as in the image it carries out. In the research, the following values were specifically mentioned in the interviews.

- Competence
- Transparency
- The “Lagom” concept
- Open communication
- Coaching instead of leadership
- Flexibility
- Innovation
- Sustainability
- Equality
- Autonomy & responsibility

In table 5: Number of mentions in qualitative research, a chart can be found displaying the number of times a value was mentioned in an interview, showing how often it was present.



Table 5: Number of mentions in qualitative research (Haegheman, 2020)

“I think if you want it in one word its authority. The spread of authority as well as the spread of responsibility.”

– Dieter Van De Walle, 2020

Seven out of nine interviews that were done specifically mentioned the word value and associated the concepts found in the graphic with this word. Open communication and transparency are mentioned specifically in all seven interviews, this might reflect the importance of the values. Equality and autonomy were mentioned specifically as a value three and four times out of seven and therefore might give off moderate importance in the field research. Autonomy and equality are considered by the interviewees to be basic characteristics of the horizontal corporate culture. these two aspects are linked and mentioned in all seven interviews.

Autonomy

Because autonomy and transparency were specifically mentioned in a hundred percent of the interviews associated with the values within a Swedish company, they will be in the focus. Autonomy is defined as *“the ability to make your own decisions without being controlled by anyone else”* (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020). Characteristics of autonomy in the workplace are shown in the following business habit. Self-managing teams are given the authority to make their own decisions that can change the outcome of the project (Valerie, 2020). Because of the link with the horizontal corporate culture as well as the adhocracy corporate culture, it shows that employees have a right to manage their work as well as their career in the long-term. According to qualitative research, this change to an autonomous working style is an easy and positive change to adapt to (Vets, 2020). The value of autonomy also leads to other values being easier applied in the working processes. It leads to transparency because the autonomous and self-managing teams have to be in open communication with each other. According to Jean-Charles van Nuijs, people working in Swedish business and corporate culture have a greater sense of responsibility and autonomy in making everyday decisions, because these values are engrained in the vision and the mission of the general Swedish company (Van Nuijs, 2020). A consequence of these two values being present is that people are more transparent with each other.

“I think that people have a greater sense of responsibility and greater autonomy in making everyday decisions and that makes people more transparent.” – Jean Charles Van Nuijs, 2020

Transparency

Transparency, also mentioned in a hundred percent of the associated interviews, is a part of business ethics and is an attribute of each corporate culture in a more or less degree of importance. It is revealed by the behavior of employees and their superiors as well as other internal and external stakeholders of an organization. Practical situations where transparency can be seen is in meetings, events, and interactions leads to advantages in other areas (Lampton, 2019). Transparency in Swedish companies can be seen in their often full disclosure of financial statements and openness about the monthly wages and salaries with other workers as well as to external stakeholders (Lampton, 2019). These strong and open relationships facilitate cooperation in a horizontal working environment and can be the cause of open communication. Open communication within the organization between employees and their managers entails honesty, regular feedback, respect, admitting mistakes, and offering praise. Transparency present in the company evokes a feeling of trust among the employees, as confirmed by Dieter Van De Walle and Valerie. An example of trust can be provided by Valerie, working as a merchandising expert in the Swedish clothing company H&M.

“When I get a project to do, I only get told what the result needs to look like and they do not give any feedback on how you actually did the project, as long as it is done in an honest way of course. They trust the people a lot and let them do their own thing and will only give feedback if you ask for it or at the end of the project.” – Valerie, 2020

3.2.2. The Covid-19 epidemic in Sweden

An example of the presence of these values in Swedish society can be found in the current Covid-19 pandemic. Sweden is currently the only country in Europe that has not taken any measures regarding the Covid-19 pandemic. While countries with a comparably sized population such as Belgium are in complete lockdown, Sweden encourages people to go out and getting fresh air and has not established any closure rules regarding retail shops and schools for example (Ghysens, 2020). Only big events have been canceled. The main rule that has been communicated is that social distancing needs to be followed up as much as possible. The main cause of the lack of rules regarding the pandemic and the situation in Sweden is that people have trust in their government. Because of governmental transparency, people follow-up on the decisions made and rules imposed (Ghysens, 2020). In Swedish culture, a great sense of responsibility is instilled from a young age, not only in business culture but also in general culture, for example in school. For this situation, the government puts its trust in the people of the country, giving them the autonomy mentioned before deciding on what they want to do regarding the rules imposed by them (Ghysens, 2020).

On top of this, Swedes are considered to be distant people. In contrast to southern climates, people tend to not only keep distance in communication but also in physical presence, confirmed by the journal 'Het Laatste Nieuws' (Herman, 2020) and the 6D model of Hofstede, indicating a high level of individuality and indulgence (Herman, 2020) & (Hofstede Insights, 2020). regarding the high level of individuality, people tend to only care for themselves and their immediate family, already keeping a distance of further relatives and friends. Indulgence indicates that people are aware of how far they can go in the risk of going outside and/or getting infected in this situation. With a score of 78, the country scores high (Hofstede Insights, 2020).

This also goes for business in Sweden, carrying the same values and norms.

According to Cédric van Branteghem, president of the Memorial Van Damme, the Swedish government trusts its citizens and plays into the responsibility value of the people that are already present (Herman, 2020). According to him, the Swedish strategy would not work in Belgium because of the tendency for Belgian citizens to find loopholes and break the rules, because of the lack of trust in the government (Herman, 2020). A second cause of the effectiveness of the Swedish model is the distance people keep from each other.

According to him Swedes barely give hands or kiss when they meet (Herman, 2020).

“You either give a kiss on the cheek when you meet someone, but this is only with good friends, in a business context, you either wave or shake hands. This would never happen in Belgium, wherein a company colleagues shake hands or kiss each other, in Belgium, that is an established process already and hard to change”

– Cédric Van Branteghem, Het Laatste Nieuws, 2020

3.2.3. Consequences for a business

These values have consequences for the trade with partners abroad or if a company wants to establish themselves in Sweden. They may pose challenges when working together with Swedish employees due to the differences in corporate culture as well as the differences in the numerical values of the 6D-model of Hofstede (Hofstede Insights, 2020).

Belgian companies wanting to build relations regarding trade or establish themselves in Sweden need to value the concept of autonomy. Due to the vertical corporate culture in Belgium, the principle of managing your subordinates is always used. Employees in Belgium tend to receive less autonomy and are often told during regular updates what something should look like, for example in the making of a report or a presentation (Forsey, 2020). This in contrast to the employees in Sweden. If asking something from a Swedish company, a Belgian company should keep in mind to not ask too often how the project is coming along, as this is often perceived as controlling by the self-managing teams in the Swedish company (Van Nuijs, 2020).

Open communication and transparency are something that is expected when working together with a Swedish distributor for example. According to the field research analysis, open communication is not a value that is put on top of the chart regarding business in Belgium. However, being transparent with a Swedish organization or company will improve the relationship between them and that shared information will be handled with due diligence. A lot of information will be asked before the decision is taken, as to have all perspectives as well as possibilities before the company takes a decision and reaches back to the Belgian company, due to the prolonged decision process, this may take some time (Coorda, 2015).

With autonomy and equality both being basic characteristics of the horizontal corporate structure, these are highly valued (Payton, 2016). A Belgian company should keep these values and their practical examples in mind. For example, when first meeting for doing business, Belgian representative should not consider age as a determining factor of who is in charge, as in Belgium, the years present at the company often define the status in the vertical corporate structure (Vets, 2020)

3.3. Swedish habits and concepts

3.3.1. Fika and coffee

Fika is a Swedish business concept that is described as a time to socialize with your colleagues and catch up on all the new company information. Fika breaks occur daily in the morning and the afternoon, at 10:30 in the morning and around three in the afternoon. Typically, Fika breaks last around half an hour. In Sweden, Fika is not seen as just a coffee break to relax with colleagues, but as an opportunity to converse with them and network. The use of the Fika break is confirmed by a hundred percent of the interviewees, although slight differences may occur per organization. (Kwintessential, n.d.).

“The Fika, for example, is truly a sacred principle. The Fika is used within Spotify as a moment to share information with other departments, so it has an important function. You can see that in a more casual setting people actually share fairly important information with each other.”

- Dieter Van De Walle, 2020

Sharing of company information happens in casual settings caused by the horizontal corporate culture. A longer break for the Swedes occurs in the middle of June until the middle of August, where no important decisions are made in business (Lundgren, 2020). This is a consequence of the short summer. This has a consequence for the business in the fact that the Fika needs to be respected, the company should take time out of their day to put these breaks in place as well as respect the longer break time during the summer.

3.3.2. Lagom

The whole Swedish business culture is based on Lagom, which means not too much, not too little. Lagom ensures that everyone has enough and that nobody goes without (Pena, 2018). Lagom is enforced in society by "Jante Law" which has to keep people "in their place" at all times (Harvey, 2020). It is a fictitious law and a Scandinavian concept that advises people not to brag or try to elevate themselves above others. The full explanation regarding Jante's Law can be found in appendix 9.12. Lagom appears in the business world for both internal and external stakeholders. Internal stakeholders will receive incentives such as free time and flexible working hours and places, these are preferred. Lagom is a concept that especially occurs in the Swedish decision-making process. Decision-making works on a consensus arrangement. This is also one of the reasons why making decisions takes a longer time. They will try to find the solution that is suitable for everybody and chase a win-win situation, suited with their feminine values according to the 6D-model of Hofstede (Hofstede Insights, 2020). The concept of Lagom used in a decision-making process can be confirmed by the field research. Direct relation to the concept of Lagom occurs in 33% of the conducted research, while indirect relations to the concept of Lagom, involving incentives such as flexibility and the collaboration in teams as well as projects needed to be done is mentioned in a hundred percent of the interviews.

3.3.3. Work-life balance

Confirmed by research according to this project, work-life balance is one important aspect of corporate culture in Sweden. In short, work-life balance is defined as keeping a balance between private and business lives. Today, work-life balance has been an evolving concept of which the definition is not always set (Kohll, 2018). However, what is confirmed is that work-life balance is an important aspect of a healthy work environment.

Delineation of the concept

This balance has the advantages of reducing stress and burnout, as chronic stress is one of the most prominent health issues in the workplace (Kohll, 2018). Because there is no set definition of the concept, the work-life balance can differ from company to company. Whereas bonuses used to be the main perk in a work environment, millennials entering the workforce are now more interested in finding a career path that will support their lifestyle (Kohll, 2018). Next to this, other determining factors for a job that are also connected to the work-life balance are pay, job location, and others (Kohll, 2018). According to research done by Bank of America and quoted in the 2017 Workplace benefits report, 59% of millennials are concerned about finding a career that will coordinate their lifestyle (Kohll, 2018).

Matching flexibility

To promote work-life balance, work environments such as the environments in Sweden create flexibility as well as general workplace happiness. Flexibility in hours is one of the best ways to promote and satisfy work-life balance needs (Kohll, 2018). Flexibility as a concept and value was mentioned specifically by one out of seven interviews. A flexible work environment decreases stress, boosts job satisfaction, and helps maintain healthier habits. An example of the flexibility and the according responsibility for the work that needs to be done in the workplace can be found by Maarten Beckers (Beckers, 2020)

What I do like as a difference with Belgium is that the employees get a great deal of responsibility. If you, for example, have an appointment at 10 o'clock, it is easily possible to work from home for two hours and then have your appointment, come back and work at the office in the afternoon. Leaving an hour early or arriving an hour later is no problem as long the work gets done. In Belgium I think the problem is that there is almost no flexibility in hours, you arrive on time and stay longer or until the boss leaves the office, for example, that is not the case in Sweden.

- Maarten Beckers, 2020

For Swedes, making and taking time to spend with the family is crucial. This is confirmed by the qualitative research analysis done with this thesis, where examples of flexibility in hours is mentioned by three out of nine interviews explicitly and by six out of nine interviews inexplicitly, due to the horizontal corporate culture. They will stop working when the working hours are done to go home and spend time with the family. Working overtime is not seen as dedication and will not result in appraisal or recognition, the opposite is even more true. Working overtime is seen as poor planning and poor time management (Passport to Trade 2.0, 2019).

Work-life balance in Belgium

Belgians honor the work-life balance principle and are individually oriented, this is also confirmed by the Individualism - Indicator on the 6D-model of Hofstede (Hofstede Insights, 2020). Regarding work, a general week consists of 38 hours (Jobat, 2019). They are strict with this regulation and do not appreciate working overtime or starting earlier. They do not want to take the problems of work home with them, so it is wise not to disturb them or call them after working hours as well as giving new assignments 10 minutes before they can leave work unless an emergency calls for it (Van Nuijs, 2020) & (Beckers, 2020) & (Expertise in Labour Mobility, 2016). Flexible hours and working from home are becoming more and more popular but is only common in multinationals and companies in the main cities such as Ghent and Brussels, generally to avoid rush hour.

3.3.4. Consequences for a business

The Fika needs to be respected, the company should take time out of their day to put these breaks in place as well as respect the longer break in time during the summer. It is not a wise move to reach out for contact during the long period where no decisions are made in summer since the decision process will be slowed down and no definitive decisions will be made regarding that collaboration.

Lagom is a concept present when Belgian companies start hiring Swedish employees. They will not try to impress the company or manager by staying longer than is needed, due to that concept but also due to the work-life balance. Due to the masculine values of Belgian society, competition is more important than what the job entails as well as the happiness on the work floor, linked to the Swedish feminine values.

Work-life balance will have to be respected; qualitative research showed some practical examples for Belgian companies to set in place. In Sweden, no mails are sent after six o'clock in the evening, to further the family time of the employees. According to Stijn Vets, this is something that needs adaptation, especially when first arriving in Sweden. On top of this, flexibility in hours is expected as well as the choice of employees on what task to complete.

3.4. The decision-making process

According to the University of Dartmouth, a decision-making process can be defined as a process consisting of three separate steps: identifying the decision, gathering information, and assessing alternative resolutions (UMass Dartmouth, 2020). A more comprehensive view of the decision-making process can be found in appendix 9.14. Figure 4: the decision-making process (Lumenlearning, 2020).

The decision-making culture was confirmed to be a consensus culture by a hundred percent of the qualitative interview respondents. A consensus culture was defined by the respondents as a culture where everyone is involved in a decision that affects the company or part of the company (Andreas, 2020) (Beckers, 2020) (Vets, 2020) (Valerie, 2020) (Van De Velde, 2020) (Van De Walle, 2020) (Van Doninck, 2020) (Van Nuijs, 2020) (Vandecasteele, 2020). The Swedish consensus culture is defined as the process where an organization, due to a horizontal corporate structure, has an urge of every employee to be involved and get along in all situations (Coorda, 2015). Another meaning of the same concept is that the process is a way of reaching an agreement between all members of a group with a commitment to finding solutions that everyone supports or accepts even when they do not fully agree with the decision (Coorda, 2015).

Causal relation to consensus culture

A cause of this urge for consensus culture is the general tendency towards conflict avoidance behavior, confirmed by 66% of respondents by the specific concept and a hundred percent through the indirect mentioning of the concept. For Swedish corporate-level managers, this signifies that problems are resolved by self-managing teams under the value of autonomy by reaching consensus on the specific decision that needs to be taken (KSA Integration, 2015)

Two categories that can be made in the decisions taken can be taken in a consensus culture. Direct challenges that have well-defined solutions around which general agreement can be reached. And secondly, non-regular occurring matters at the highest levels of large organizations. If properly addressed, these problems are complex and often need adapted solutions, where one opinion can weigh more heavily than another. At this level, consensus-based organizational behavior breaks down and indeed causes much damage (KSA Integration, 2015).

Consensus culture as a problem

A criticism that came forward in qualitative research is that the consensus-based decision making in Sweden hampers change processes. The decision process can take too long, especially compared to the vertical corporate structure in Belgium, where decisions are often made by the manager without the insight of their subordinates. Employees accept that distance in power and show no interest in giving opinions (Beckers, 2020) & (Vets, 2020). People resistant to the change, will not express this immediately, because of the conflict avoidance tendency, but will hamper and slow down the decision if the employee believes he or she is right (Vets, 2020). Their priority lies with minimizing conflict in contrast to critically appraising all alternatives. Some advantages of the decision-making process is that it ensures high-quality input, a greater commitment of involved parties, and higher follow-through rate.

The greatest impediment comes when a change resolution is called into discussion. In consensus-based companies, there can be a reluctance to change, with some people relying on the decision-making process to stall new ideas and maintain the standstill. According to an SSON report, this consensual culture discourages decision-making that opens doors to new potential. In an article published by Forbes, the consensus was even named as the silent killer of team building. Consensus should not be used to block progress, especially at this time where companies face global competitiveness and intense cost pressures (Coorda, 2015)

A paradox in the consensus culture

A paradox in the Swedish consensus culture can be detected. An individual worker in Sweden tends to be modest, but when deciding collectively there is a tendency to adopt a more radical attitude (Lindvall, 2017). Right now, the consensus culture can function smoothly when employees will compromise and come to a new common understanding. In the business market, people get along and opt for compromise rather than confronting fellow people. This, however, has as a consequence that diversity of opinions in Sweden has been rather weak (Lindvall, 2017).

Two major changes can be seen changing the classic consensus and compromising culture in the future. First, globalization has shown that Sweden is not a middle-way country, but rather a relatively extreme country in that aspect (Lindvall, 2017). Secondly, there is no longer a homogeneous culture present. Sweden is changing to a multi-ethnic society. This may compromise the future of the consensus culture (Lindvall, 2017).

An example of the difficulty of the consensus culture and the according adaptation to it can be found in several statements given during the qualitative research. Below, a statement of Paul Van Doninck (Van Doninck, 2020).

“What I would say is the process of involving everyone in the decision process. I explained before, I was so used to making decisions on my own because people are not very interested in being involved in the decision-making process. They see it as the job of the manager to make that decision. That process was something I really needed to adapt to, but now that I am used to it, I really like it.” - Paul Van Doninck, 2020

3.4.1. Consequences for a business

The consequences of a consensus culture and a longer decision-making process can be big for a company coming to or collaborating with Swedish organizations.

The company should take into account the length of the decision-making process, especially because of the vertical corporate structure, Belgian businesses are sometimes inclined to make quick decisions that follow short discussions with a limited number of people. This in contrast with Sweden. This can be a shock for the employer, having to abandon the vertical corporate culture, which is often the cause of the quick decisions, but also for the employee, suddenly expected to make contributions in cases that they would never expect to be involved in.

When interacting with a Swedish company, the partner should take into account that it may take longer to receive an answer. The Swedish company will accept an initial contact but will then need time to decide on the subject, this takes longer than in Belgian corporate culture, because of the consensus culture and the fact that a lot of valued opinions need to be taken into consideration.

A Belgian company should take into consideration a horizontal structure of the company and the adoption of the decision-making process if it intends to set up an intense collaboration within Sweden.

3.5. Communication in business

Communication can be defined as the “act of transferring information from one place, person or group to another.” Different actors involving communication are the sender, the message, and the receiver” (Skills you need, 2020). The goal of the process of communication is a mutual understanding of the message. A message is encoded by the sender according to their own communication bias, containing their cultural norms and values, as well as concepts in language. That message is sent through a communication channel, where different environmental actors can disturb the transmission of the message. These disturbances are called noise. A focus within the working culture and the research in this thesis will be cultural noise. This concept can be defined as the barrier to successful communication between two actors of different cultures (Mariska, 2017). The message is then decoded by the receiver. The recipient also does this according to their cultural values and norms and can, therefore, receive a different nuance of the message than the original intention of the sender (EBA, n.d.).

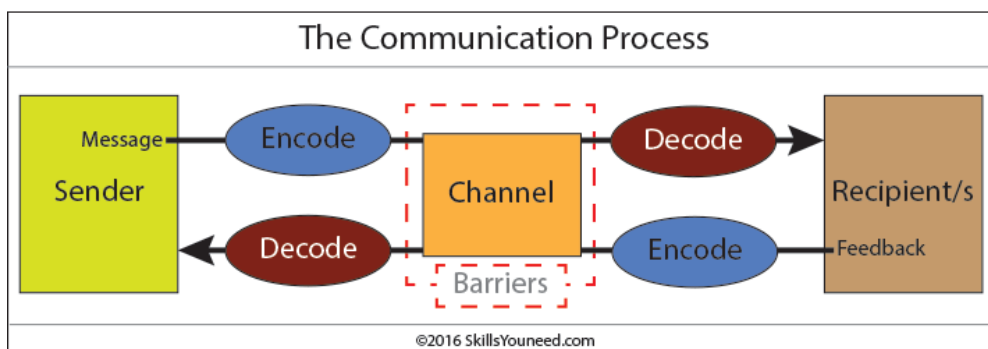


Figure 3: The communication process (Skills you need, 2020)

An initial meeting for a company is crucial and often needs to be good before establishing a further relationship. According to Forbes magazine, within the first seven seconds of meeting someone, the brain decides on the kind of impression someone has of that person (Gibbons, n.d.).

Meeting someone in person is heavily influenced by non-verbal communication. Fifty-five percent of first impressions are made by visual means of communication (Rakers, 2016). Thirty-eight percent of a first impression is made through vocal communication, and seven percent is actual verbal communication (Rakers, 2016). Consequently, it can be shown that 93% of a first impression consists of non-verbal channels of communication (Rakers, 2016). This is an important means for a company or person representing a company in Sweden to know because often on one of those first impressions a decision is made about possible cooperation. To help avoid intercultural noise in the encoding and decoding system of communication, all three channels of communication need to be used (Rakers, 2016).

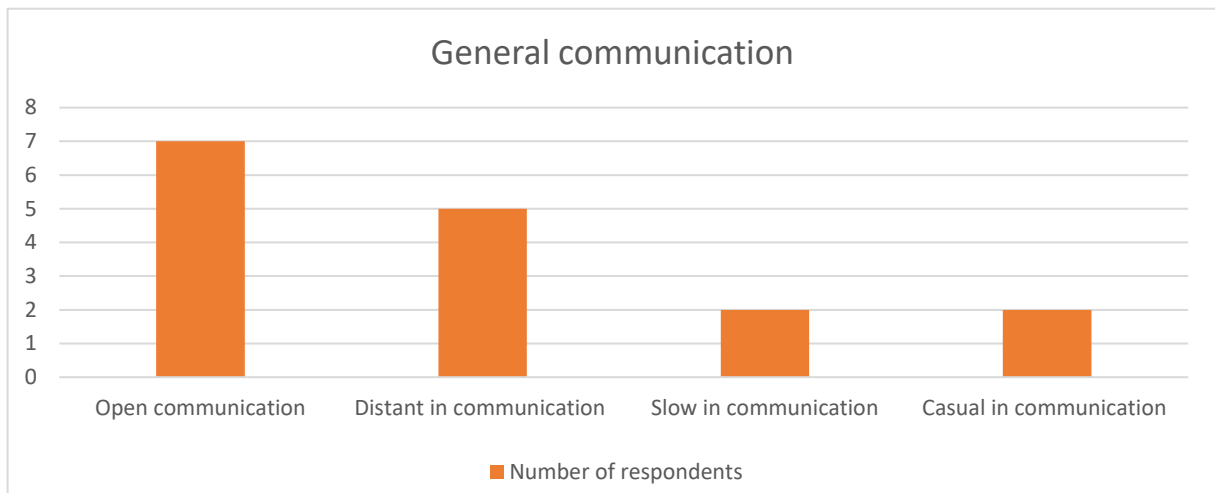


Table 6: General communication (Haegheman, 2020)

In table 6: General communication, an oversight of the results concerning the differences with Belgium in the area of general communication can be found. Nine respondents in qualitative research represent a hundred percent. The themes below were specifically mentioned in the research.

Open communication

Of all interviewees, several themes regarding general differences in communication are put forward. These are the following. Open communication was mentioned by 77% of the respondents, having a score of seven out of nine with the respondents being Paul van Doninck, Dieter Van De Walle, Maarten Beckers, Jean-Charles Van Nuijs, Valerie, Stijn Vets, and Tom Vandecasteele. Open communication as a consequence of the consensus culture that was prominent was mentioned by 66% of the respondents, having a score of six out of nine.

This means that the correlation between open communication and consensus culture is very prominent in Swedish business, the communication being a consequence of that consensus culture. A 100% of these respondents also indicated the difference with the Belgian vertical corporate culture, where open communication as a consequence of the consensus culture is not the norm. This is due to the Power-Distance Indicator of the 6D-model of Hofstede where communication is defined by the superior and consensus is not used as a characteristic of the corporate culture.

Open communication is a concept that has been defined in the qualitative research as communication where the distance between manager and subordinate is small and the barrier to giving an opinion is small. Open communication is in a mutual relationship with the consensus culture present in Swedish companies because asking for opinions is a standard characteristic and promotes open communication and that open communication promotes a consensus culture. Open communication is also seen as a consequence of the horizontal company structure, where the small threshold between the different departments as well as the manager and employee can be explained.

Distance

Fifty-five percent of respondents also identified distance as an overarching difference in communication between Swedish and Belgian work culture. These were the following respondents, Dieter Van De Walle, Stijn Vets, Tom Vandecasteele, Norbert Van De Velde, and Andreas. The distance was defined by the respondents as a friendly but detached way of communicating, not only verbally, but also non-verbally and in writing. Contrast with open communication can be found here. Distance in communication is here one consequence of the work-life balance that is used. The personal life of an employee is never involved. This can be substantiated by three out of five respondents in the qualitative study using examples. A cause in the distance of communication is not only the strong work-life balance that is present but also the culture of individualism that prevails in Sweden. confirmed by Hofstede's 6D model with a score of 71 on the dimension of individualism, it can be said that it promotes the work-life balance in Sweden (Hofstede Insights, 2020). Below, an example is given by Valerie, demonstrating the distance in communication as a consequence of the strong work-life balance in that business culture (Valerie, 2020).

“It wasn’t until a year in at the Christmas party that I got to know that some of my colleagues had children for example. There is no need for the people to participate in small-talk and rather just keep to the surface and talk business.”

- Valerie, 2020

A difference with Belgium was also indicated by Maarten Beckers stating that personal relationships are more prominent on the work floor, having closer communication as a consequence (Beckers, 2020).

Slower communication process

A third prominent theme in general communication differences is that communication is slower. Slower communication in this research was defined by the respondents by various examples, for example, taking longer to provide an answer or taking longer because of taking procedures literally (Van Nuijs, 2020). This was specifically mentioned by 22% of the respondents but indirectly mentioned by the other 78% of the respondents as well in connection to other subjects in the interviews.

The respondents that directly mentioned the subject are Paul Van Doninck and Andreas, providing examples in both professional as well as personal relationships. Swedes are fairly reluctant and careful in relationships (Van Doninck, 2020). This in contrast to Belgium, where contact with a company already means that there is an interest and that the deal can go ahead (Van Nuijs, 2020). Slower communication connected to the exporting or establishing a company does not mean there is no interest but rather the fact that the Swedish company wants to consider all conditions of the deal so that the deal is stable when communicated back, in contrast to the Belgian way of working (Van Nuijs, 2020). There it can fall apart quite quickly because conditions were not communicated right (Van Doninck, 2020).

Casual/informal communication

A fourth theme that came forward regarding the general differences in communication is that communication is more casual. Confirmed as a general difference in communication by one of the nine respondents and confirmed indirectly with the specification of verbal communication by eight out of nine respondents, casual communication confirms itself as an important theme. The respondents confirming the casual communication specifically in their interviews are Dieter Van De Walle and Jean-Charles Van Nuijs. According to Dieter Van De Walle, software engineer with Spotify, communication, in general, is more casual than the corporate communication in Belgium (Van De Walle, 2020).

In this qualitative research, casual communication is defined as *“informal communication between coworkers in the workplace, being unofficial in nature and based in the informal, social relationships that are formed in a workplace outside of the normal hierarchy of business structure”* (BambooHR, 2020). This has consequently that communication between different departments and between different levels of management is possible. Casual communication is a characteristic of a horizontal corporate culture. It is also a consequence of the low score of Sweden on the Power-Distance Index, correlating with the open communication in the company, mentioned by other respondents.

This is different from Belgian vertical corporate culture, where power distance and a lack of open communication, as well as consensus culture, cause formal communication to be the norm. Formal communication can be defined as *“the sharing of official information about the workplace. It is dictated by the established hierarchical organization of the business”* (BambooHR, 2020). The difference between formal and informal communication is based on whether the communication in the business is defined by the corporate culture being vertical or horizontal and whether the according communication is formal or casual (BambooHR, 2020).

Some examples that explain the casual communication in business according to Dieter Van De Walle is that employees address their superiors by their first name, this also being the case with clients and new people that are in contact with the company (Van De Walle, 2020). There are no structures in mails or written means of communication and also in this channel, people are addressed by their first name. Non-verbal communication is more relaxed, people sitting informally for example, and keeping a casual posture (Van De Walle, 2020). An important side note according to Dieter Van De Walle is that despite the communication being casual, there is still a level of distance, as mentioned before and people still communicate respectfully with either a subordinate or with a superior (Van De Walle, 2020).

An example of the correlation between open communication and the informal aspect of the communication can be found in a testimonial of Jean-Charles Van Nuijs. Also, respect is an important aspect of casual communication. Not every subject is accepted willingly, as communication is also more distant (Van Nuijs, 2020).

I consider the communication here to be very open and transparent. I do not know if communication can be considered more casual. I think so, I think it is partly because the communication is more open than in other countries. It is more casual but also you still need to be respectful.

- Jean-Charles Van Nuijs, 2020

3.5.1. Verbal communication

Swedish business communication is largely comprised of verbal communication. Important is face-to-face communication and first impressions. Verbal communication is defined as “any communication that uses words to share information with others” (Skills you need, 2020). This includes both spoken and written words. Verbal communication is not only face-to-face communication but can also cover telephone, radio, television, and other media (Skills you need, 2020). A more specified definition is provided by Your Dictionary.com, defining it as “the use of sounds and words to express yourself, especially in contrast to using gestures or mannerisms (non-verbal communication). (Your Dictionary, n.d.)”

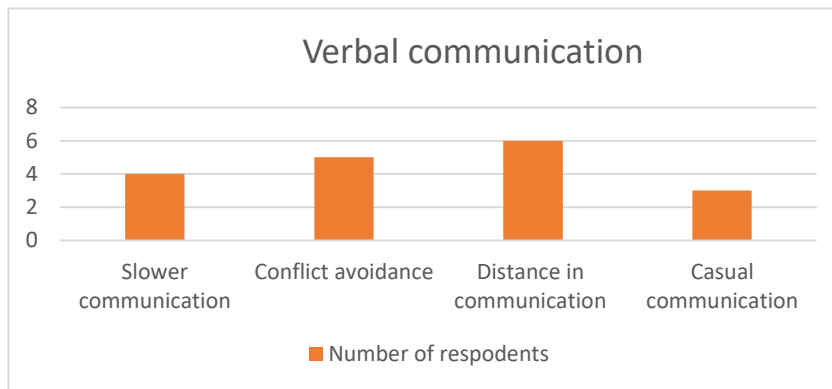


Table 7: Verbal communication (Haegheman, 2020)

The main themes that came out of the research conducted with this thesis can be found in table 7: Verbal communication.

Distance in verbal communication

A first theme that came forward that shows significant differences with business communication is the distance in verbal communication, confirmed and specifically mentioned 66% of respondents. This shows that verbal communication is the category where distance in communication is the biggest factor. Distance in verbal communication is defined as a distance on a personal level, caused by the work-life balance principle but also by the high degree of individualism of the 6D-model (Hofstede Insights, 2020). This category also occurs on the general differences in communication, so it can be found on all levels. The respondents that indicated the distance in verbal communication specifically are Maarten Beckers, Valerie, Stijn Vets, Tom Vandecasteele, Norbert Van De Velde, and Andreas. A practical example of the distance in communication is the fact that people often wait for deciding. An example is given by Andreas, IT director at OECE (Andreas, 2020).

“ People are very distant in their communication, although that people are more casual when they approach you and in their language, it is hard to get a hard truth out of them, they often dance around the subject, especially when a decision needs to be made on the spot.”

- Andreas, 2020

Informal verbal communication

The second theme that shows a significant difference is casual communication. Defined in chapter 3.5. Communication in business, casual/informal communication; informal, or casual communication is both confirmed in the general use of communication in business in Sweden as well as in the verbal communication subsection. Communication is vital to the performance of any organization (Ephlux, 2009). One must be wary of when one must be formal and when one must be casual while interacting with superiors, peers, and subordinates. On top of this, people should also keep in mind that certain standards must be met in the functioning of the organization, professionally. According to Ephlux, respect is the key to maintaining a successful working relationship at any level, anywhere in the world (Ephlux, 2009).

Casual verbal communication was specifically mentioned by 33% of respondents and with the general category added, over half of respondents mentioned informal communication specifically. The interviewees were Maarten Beckers, Valerie, Tom Vandecasteele, Dieter Van De Walle, and Jean-Charles Van Nuijs. Employees can opt for casual/semi-formal way of interacting with each other, but it is appropriate when they are at a certain level of understanding, otherwise, problems of misunderstanding and wrong behavior can arise (Passport to Trade 2.0, 2019). The country is known for having an egalitarian business culture and an informal atmosphere as this reflects in the way that businesspersons are addressed. People are addressed by their first name, regardless of status or title in the company, this is one of the prime examples of the horizontal corporate structure (Vandecasteele, 2020).

Introductions differ from Belgian business communication. It is optimal to be introduced by a third party. When introducing yourself, shaking hands is often the norm, however, this is often the tradition in initial meetings and can be adjusted in the following encounter or meeting (Passport to Trade 2.0, 2019). Small talk is not the norm; Swedes often only speak when something important needs to be said and avoid unnecessary conversations that do not contribute to the goal of the meeting. This is a consequence of the strict barriers between work and personal lives that Swedes tend to keep in mind. People are addressed by their first name, regardless of the function or status in the business. This is not an informality, nor a sign of familiarity; as respect for the work-relationship will always need to be present (Passport to Trade 2.0, 2019). This in contrast with Belgian business communication, where small talk regarding family and/or personal lives is expected (Vandecasteele, 2020).

Conflict avoidance

Thirdly, conflict avoidance is present with a percentage of 66% through a specific mention of the concept and present with a hundred percent through indirect mentioning. Conflict avoidance is defined as “*a method of reacting to conflict, which attempts to avoid directly confronting the issue at hand*” (Work911, n.d.). Different methods of conflict avoidance can be detected in the Swedish business environment such as changing of the subject or putting off the decision to be made later, the wait-and-see attitude is a concept that facilitates that method of conflict avoidance.

Conflict avoidance can also be used as a means of disposing of a difficult subject (Work911, n.d.). Lastly, conflict avoidance can take the form of withdrawing from the relationship. Conflict avoidance scenarios are typically categorized as a lose-lose situation, according to the Thomas-Kilmann grid, but they are possibly a win-lose, lose-lose, or even win-win, if terminating the relationship is the best method of solving the problem (Ian, 2012).

The respondents specifically confirming the conflict avoidance are the following: Paul Van Doninck, Dieter Van De Walle, Maarten Beckers, Jean-Charles Van Nuijs, and Valerie. Conflict avoidance is seen as a part of the consensus culture present in the company. Conflict avoidance is seen as an aspect that makes that consensus hard to reach.

For example, Maarten Beckers experiences it as a negative aspect of the Swedish business culture. This is the case for a lot of Belgian expats or companies coming to Sweden or establishing relationships with Swedish companies (Beckers, 2020). Sixty-six percent of respondents indicated that the delay in decision making and the matching conflict avoidance was the most difficult aspect of adapting to the Swedish business culture. This is something to consider when communicating with other businesses and clients, according to Paul Van Doninck (Van Doninck, 2020).

“I think that horizontal corporate culture plays a big role in communication. Which also makes sure that talking was more casual. For example, it was no problem to be involved in meetings that you did not have that big of a role in. But as I mentioned before, it can create problems as well, because they have to involve everyone and that drags out the process.”

- Maarten Beckers, 2020

A wait-and-see attitude

Lastly, a wait-and-see attitude can be detected in the verbal communication process. Confirmed by 44% of respondents (Paul Van Doninck, Dieter Van De Walle, Norbert Van De Velde, and Andreas), the attitude stands with the consensus culture present in the company as well as the conflict-avoidance process. A wait-and-see-attitude is described in qualitative research as a slower communication process. A practical example can be given by Paul Van Doninck (Van Doninck, 2020).

You cannot make a hard sale in Sweden and you must wait for longer until the customer has made a decision. Especially if they are companies you do not know yet. For example, discussing and deciding something with the other party over a lunch or a heavy dinner to speed up the process, you do not do that at all. This is more about the fact that you must respect the fact that the decision takes more time.

- Paul Van Doninck, 2020

This is not the case in Belgium, where these kinds of actions are used to speed up the decision process in a business environment. The high score on the Power-Distance Indicator also shows that decisions are made by management, without the consensus culture present (Hofstede Insights, 2020). The lack of this concept speeds up the decision time, as not all opinions are needed.

An important aspect of verbal communication to keep in mind is that Swedes are considered good English speakers, so establishing initial contact is easy. According to Jean-Charles van Nuijs, it is considered polite to learn the basics in Swedish when planning to cooperate with a Swedish company (Van Nuijs, 2020). In Sweden, English education is introduced between the age of seven and nine. So English is the standard language when doing business abroad. Even though English is really common, it is recommended for expats or companies trading with Sweden, to know some common phrases and words, for example, greetings and specific business terms, as it will help establish a personal relationship with the Swedish business partner. Important to keep in mind is that once a person or company is established as English speaking, business will be conducted in that language (Passport to Trade 2.0, 2019)

3.5.2. Non-verbal communication

Non-verbal consists of *“the transmission of messages or signals through a nonverbal platform such as eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, posture, and the distance between two individuals”* (Mccornack, 2019). According to researcher Ray Birdwhistell, nonverbal communication accounts for 60% to 70% of human communication (Fontenot, 2018)

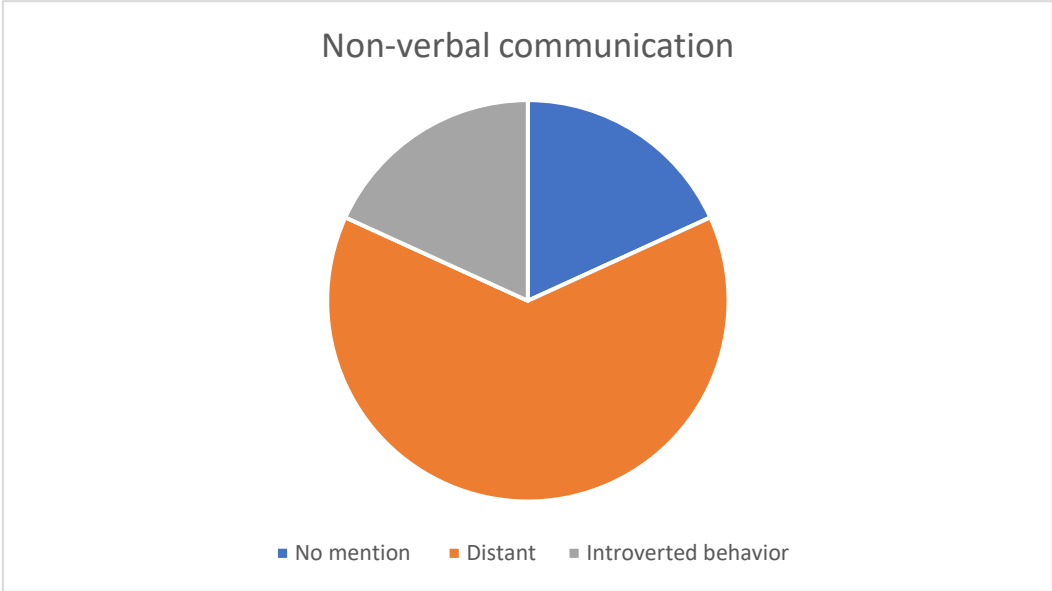


Table 8: Non-verbal communication (Haegheman, 2020)

Research analysis

Qualitative research confirmed that 88% of respondents of qualitative research remarked the distance in non-verbal communication, which manifests primarily in the distance while meeting for the first time, as well as keeping a physical distance while talking. Twenty-two percent remarked that there are no real differences in non-verbal behavior, confirming that verbal behavior is the most vital aspect of the categories in communication. The results can be found in the pie chart above. Respondents that confirmed the use of distance in non-verbal behavior were the following: Paul Van Doninck, Dieter Van de Walle, Maarten Beckers, Jean-Charles Van Nuijs, Valerie, Tom Vandecasteele, Norbert Van De Velde, and Andreas.

Distance in non-verbal behavior can be demonstrated by different practicalities. According to Andreas for example, Swedes are very neutral in the non-verbal language expression (Andreas, 2020). They will not use their hands or a lot of facial expressions if they want to express emotions. In business settings particularly, they prefer to maintain some personal space in their interactions to be sure to leave enough distance. As a guest or new client, people will keep distance and will wait to be introduced. Shaking hands with everyone individually in any group both when being introduced and when departing is a usual ritual (Passport to Trade 2.0, 2019).

Causal relation to distance

The cause for the distance in non-verbal behavior can be found in the values the culture carries, having freedom, trust, and individuality high on the agenda (Ghysens, 2020). This can be found in the current situation regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, discussed in chapter 3.2.2. The Covid-19 epidemic in Sweden. This can also circle back to the 6D-model of Hofstede, giving individuality a high rating (Hofstede Insights, 2020). Finally, the distance in non-verbal communication is an extension of the introversion in verbal communication (Beckers, 2020).

In contrast to Sweden, Belgium business and personal life are more intertwined, as mentioned before, so distance on either verbal or non-verbal behavior is accepted. This is mentioned specifically by Norbert Van De Velde (Van De Velde, 2020).

“I can say however regarding meetings that people keep their distance more easily and are not that inclined to kiss each other on the cheek as more familiar people in Belgium maybe would.”

– Norbert Van De Velde, 2020

3.5.3. Written communication

Written communication is defined as “*the sending of messages, orders or instructions in writing through letters, circulars, manuals, reports, telegrams, office memos, bulletins, etc.*” (Sharma, 2020). Written communication is characterized as a formal method of communication and is less flexible than any form of verbal communication. It is permanent and can be used as a record for future use (Sharma, 2020). Some of the most prominent advantages are that it is suitable for use in the future and it is suitable for long-distance business relations. Many persons can be reached at the same time and uniformity in a work procedure can be maintained. It is also easier to send unpleasant or bad news through written communication. An important factor and advantage of written communication is that it gives the receiver sufficient time to think, act, and react (Sharma, 2020).

Written communication is ideal to establish contact with a Swedish corporation, as it gives the company time to reflect and go through the long decision-making process at the company, before reacting with a suitable proposition (Van Nuijs, 2020). This may take up to six weeks, as Jean-Charles Van Nuijs can confirm by the following statement. The statement shows that people should not chase an answer as the consensus culture and the according decision-making process needs more time. This can be related to the 6D-model of Hofstede, showing a low score on the Power Distance Indicator (Hofstede Insights, 2020).

“I once presented some information on the Swedish market and the new marketing program to go with that. I felt that everyone was on board with my new program, but it was more because everyone was polite and tried to avoid confrontation that everyone was agreeing with what I was saying. After six weeks, I had not heard from them and I went out of my way to ask them what they thought of the program, turns out that they were not on board. I really had difficulty understanding why they did not say anything during the meeting, because I was so used to hearing opinions without care. The fact that people are not that direct, and you don’t really know them, that may give a problem when interacting with clients or partners for the first time.”

- Jean-Charles Van Nuijs, 2020

Regarding website communication, zero percent of the respondents reported any serious changes. Because of the English speaking and reading abilities, no specific changes regarding website communication was given. They did suggest the possibility of setting the language in Swedish to promote the traffic of non-English speakers. Often, any press communication, as well as articles in which the company was mentioned, are also on the website, to promote transparency.

“With the company I work for now, the website is in Swedish, also all communication regarding press, for example articles, are communicated on it.”

- Paul van Doninck, 2020

3.5.4. Consequences for a business

According to qualitative research, communication and the matching horizontal corporate structure is indicated as the most prominent differences as well as the differences that are most difficult to adapt to. Communication should be adapted to the Swedish working culture as to be able to understand the process. The distance in communication and work relationships should be respected and no small talk should be made as this is not the norm. Casual language is accepted, but clients or partners should be addressed with respect, this in spoken and written communication.

English is an accepted business language in Sweden, as Swedes speak the language fluently. However, it is a good idea to have a basic knowledge of the language if a prolonged partnership is the intention of the company.

No changes in website communication are necessary if the site is available in English, however, the option to choose for a Swedish translation is favorable. Transparency is a prominent aspect of website communication. It is common for all employees with according contact details to be on the website.

People are to take into account the fact that the establishment of a partnership can be a long process, as the written communication takes longer due to the consensus culture present in Sweden.

4. HR involvement

The role of HR in corporate culture has become more important during the last years, mostly due to the high turnover rate from employees to be able to find the right cultural fit as well as the right benefits that suit their work-life balance. HR plays a pivotal role in the setting of the tone of the corporate culture as well as the initial meeting between new (Swedish) employees and the company, the department of the company aims to shape and reinforce how employees see the corporate culture (Zhumagulov, 2020). Because the adaptation process, the focus of the role of HR will be focused on the corporate culture alone, and although the different aspects of the department such as pay, vacations and other aspects contribute to the setting of the corporate culture, this is outside of the delimitation of the qualitative research included.

Further research into these aspects would exceed the delineation of the thesis. Therefore, more information on specifics on HR-related and social security aspects of working or establishing in Sweden can be found with external organizations such as Flanders Investment and Trade or at the official governmental websites.

Different functions of HR can be detected in the role of establishing corporate culture as well as the way HR is intertwined with it. The most relevant ones will be discussed below.

Providing feedback

A first function that influences the corporate culture and is done differently is providing feedback (Zhumagulov, 2020). Feedback by HR boosts employee engagement as well as productivity. Clear feedback tools provide HR with opportunities to improve management styles as well as the personal development of employees (Zhumagulov, 2020). An example of the difference in the conducting of HR feedback can be found in the witness of Valerie, an employee at H&M (Valerie, 2020).

Another difficult aspect is that getting feedback is hard. Because these people dance around the subject and are not easy in saying that something is just bad, you never really know if you are doing good at the company. They will always just focus on the positive aspects of your work and not as much on the negative and if something needs to change, they will say it really nicely, you almost do not notice that they are actually giving criticism.

– Valerie, 2020

Diversity in the workplace

The second function of HR in the face of corporate culture is the addressing of diversity in the workplace (Zhumagulov, 2020). Along with values such as equality and competence, diversity is part of the evaluation of the department of HR to provide positive leadership as a result. Mentorship is one of the ways HR can incorporate diversity in the adaptation process of people working together with Swedish companies as well as expats having to work in Sweden for a Belgian company collaborating (Zhumagulov, 2020).

Being a change agent

A third aspect is the support of the HR department in being a change agent. Technological innovation, globalization, and information access are examples of the trends set due to globalization and can have significant effects on the workplace. Companies with the support of the HR department that are able to adapt to these changes quickly are better poised to become leaders in their sector. HR's responsibility in this process of change is to ensure that such changes do not negatively impact workplace culture. (Zhumagulov, 2020)

HR-analysis

Forty-four percent of respondents indicated that corporate culture was specifically mentioned when they first started in Sweden, 56% of respondents indicated that there was no specific mention of the corporate culture while adapting and working in Sweden. Also, a result that came forward due to the research is the concept of glocalization. According to Roland Robertson, glocalization is defined as “*the simultaneous occurrence of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies in contemporary social, political, and economic systems.*” (Blatter, Glocalization, 2013). The term is a linguistic hybrid of globalization and localization. Applied to the differences from the corporate culture from the perspective of HR, this means that the general rules of the company might be the same, but there are clear specifics according to the different cultures and countries present in the same company. Below, a witness of Stijn Vets, a manager at Coca-Cola (Vets, 2020).

The company culture is seriously different from the Belgian culture, even within the company. The culture in itself is not because it was still Coca-Cola. Just the Swedish mentality was completely different from the Belgian one.

17. Stijn Vets, 2020

Of the 44% that confirmed the emphasis on corporate culture, 100 % confirmed that there was an incremental change, in which the rules were communicated first and in which the behavior within the company as well as the habits were later communicated by colleagues (Beckers, 2020) & (Van De Walle, 2020) & (Vets, 2020) & (Valerie, 2020). One cause of this incremental change may be the distance in initial communication, as well as the conflict-avoiding tendencies that occur in the Swedish corporate culture.

Hundred percent of the respondents confirmed that help of the company was offered in going to Sweden and that that is the reason that they did not seek help from external sources, otherwise, this would have been the case. The main complaint of these respondents was that the company did help them in practical issues, such as housing and the effective moving, but they did not offer equal help in the case of the cultural adaptation. Seventy-seven percent of respondents searched for cultural information as well as the specific information on corporate culture on their own initiative. Hundred percent of the respondents did confirm that a guide on the corporate culture and the consequences it has for Belgian companies or representatives of these companies could help in initial contact as well as further cooperation.

5. The Swedish market for export

Sweden is a welcoming country for foreign investors wanting to export to - or collaborate with Sweden. Information is readily available, and companies already established are transparent and open. Information on both the market as well as the government procedures is often available in both Swedish and English. Often business procedures are smooth and efficient. Local advisors and business partners are often the most prized aspect of starting up a business or collaboration in Sweden.

Collaborations happen most often in technology as well as research and development. With the investments in R&D mentioned earlier, Swedish companies are often very open to partnerships (Sweden - Science and technology, 2020). Something to keep in mind is that regarding science and technology, competition may be fierce in the Swedish business field.

When it comes to collaboration, innovation is encouraged, and expanding your business is a good idea, either in collaboration with a Swedish company in the B2B field or in the B2C sector, aiming directly at the Swedish customer market. With the majority of the population, being 85%, living in the southern part of the country, it is wise to establish the company in that area (Startup Overseas, n.d.). Stockholm, Gothenburg, Malmö, or Uppsala are the four major cities. With some universities in the vicinity, such as Stockholm University and Uppsala University, it is a great idea to attract young talent as well as to have access to research in the field of your company.

On top of this, Sweden, with its geographical location is a great place to start expanding to the greater Scandinavian region. With a well-established distribution network, the Norwegian, Danish, and Finnish markets are easily available. The market in Sweden is made up of about 90% of the industrial output, of which the engineer and technical sector account for over 50% in output and exports (Startup Overseas, n.d.). Collaborations are often supported by the government.

Collaborations, trade, or expansion of your company within the EU are facilitated.

6. Conclusion

The cultural aspects of doing business abroad are often overlooked. That is why identifying the challenges of doing business in Sweden for Belgian companies wanting to export or establish in Sweden as well as how to mitigate these possible challenges is primordial.

A comparative study through the use of a PESTEL-analysis of both countries revealed that on external influencing factors, Belgium and Sweden are similar. However, the main differences between both countries are explained through the 6D-model of Hofstede. On the Indicators of Power Distance and Masculinity, as well as Uncertainty Avoidance and Long-term orientation, Belgium attains a higher score on the model. In contrast, there are similarities in the categories indicated by Individualism and Indulgence.

The fundamental challenges distinguished by the analysis done through field research as well as the qualitative in-depth research. These are the following: horizontally organized corporate structure and the social and business values including autonomy, responsibility, and transparency. Secondly, there are the Swedish habits and concepts; work-life balance, Fika, the decision-making process and its interaction with the according consensus culture. Hindrances such as casual communication, conflict evasion, and separation in the verbal correspondence are the greatest, followed up by non-verbal and written correspondence. HR assumes a job in the adjustment of Belgian culture to Swedish culture by giving direction in the adjustment procedure.

These aspects have consequences for trade with partners abroad. They may pose challenges when working together with Swedish employees due to the differences in corporate culture as well as the differences in the numerical values of the 6D-model of Hofstede.

Research analysis confirmed that the Swedish horizontal corporate culture was the most defining feature and challenge according to qualitative research analysis. This is the main cause of the consensus culture that also defines as a challenge for Belgian companies. The longer decision process associated with the culture was one of the hardest challenges according to expats working and living in Sweden. This in contrast with the predominantly vertical corporate structure in Belgium, which accords with the relatively high Power Distance-indicator as well as the shorter decision-making process.

Communication on all three levels - verbal, non-verbal, and written – show differences from the business communication process in business in Belgium. The main differences can be identified as a distance in verbal and non-verbal communication. This can be identified as a consequence of the strict work-life balance in Sweden, as well as their neutrality in expression. Another difference that struck Belgian representatives and expats in Sweden was the informality of the communication process. Due to the horizontal corporate structure and value of open communication, casual communication is used in all levels of an organization.

HR plays a role in the help of adaption and the setting up of a new corporate culture with three aspects the department may face that are able to change the corporate culture; providing feedback, addressing diversity in the workplace, and being a change agent.

7. Recommendations

Belgian companies are recommended to follow through on the adaptation to the Swedish culture is as to facilitate business relationships. It is easier for a Belgian business culture to adapt to the Swedish business culture than the other way around. Organizations are recommended to follow up on the practicalities of communication to establish first contact as well as adapt to the casual atmosphere in the company. Also, the consensus-culture resulting from the decision-making process takes longer than the vertically organized process in Belgium.

For a Belgian company looking to collaborate, the time it takes to set up that collaboration may take longer than expected due to the horizontal corporate structure. Communication in the horizontally organized company may be clearer than the vertically organized business where layers in management can prevent smooth communication. Transparency is less the case with a vertically organized company, where different levels need to be run through before the information or person can be accessed.

A Belgian company should keep in mind to not ask too often how the project is coming along, as this is often perceived as controlling by the self-managing teams in the Swedish company due to their values. In contrast, a Belgian company is not inclined to share too much information when working together with another company. However, being transparent with a Swedish organization or company will improve the relationship between them and that shared information will be handled with due diligence. Regarding the values of autonomy and transparency, a Belgian company should keep these values and their practical examples in mind. For example, when first meeting for doing business, Belgian representative should not consider age as a determining factor of who is in charge, as in Belgium, the years present at the company often define the status in the vertical corporate structure.

Certain habits and concepts in Sweden need to be respected, the company should take sufficient time to put these breaks in place as well as respect the longer break in time during the summer. It is also recommended to not set up a contact in the delineated summertime, where no business is conducted. Secondly, Lagom is a concept that will be primordial when Belgian companies start hiring Swedish employees. They will not try to impress the company or manager by staying longer than is needed, due to Lagom but also due to the work-life balance.

The company should take into account the length of the decision-making process. This can be a shock for the employer, having to abandon the vertical corporate culture, which is often the cause of the quick decisions.

When interacting with a Swedish company, the partner should take into account that it may take longer to receive an answer. The Swedish company will accept an initial contact but will then need time to make a decision regarding the subject, this takes longer than in Belgian corporate culture, because of the consensus culture and the fact that a lot of valued opinions need to be taken into consideration.

According to qualitative research, communication and the causality of the horizontal corporate structure is indicated as the most prominent difference as well as the differences that are most difficult to adapt to. Communication should be adapted to the Swedish working culture as to be able to understand the process. The distance in communication and work relationships should be respected and no small talk should be made as this is not the norm. Casual language is accepted, but clients or partners should be addressed with respect, this in spoken and written communication. People are to take into account the fact that the establishment of a partnership can be a long process, as the written communication takes longer due to the consensus culture present in Sweden.

It is recommended to be introduced by a third party for an initial meeting. When introducing yourself, shaking hands is often the norm, however, this is often the tradition in initial meetings and can be adjusted in the following encounter or meeting. Small talk is not the norm, Swedes often only speak when something important needs to be said and avoid unnecessary conversations that do not contribute to the goal of the meeting. This is a consequence of the strict barriers between work and personal lives that Swedes tend to keep in mind. People are addressed by their first name, regardless of the function or status in the business.

In Swedish business culture, people tend not to participate in a hard-sales process. Swedes are more inclined to have a more wait-and-see attitude. Making a quick and hard sale in Sweden is difficult and often you must wait until the customer has made a decision. Especially if there were no prior contacts. For example, discussing and deciding something with the other party over lunch or heavy dinner, is not the tradition as it is in Belgium.

Important to note is that the challenges described in this research can also be seen as opportunities when establishing a company in Sweden or exporting to Sweden. Adopting the way of working that works best for the company, that maybe the Swedish way of working. This also factors into the cooperation with Swedish companies; the cooperation will be improving because engagement is shown.

For specific information and guidance in doing business in Sweden, two guides that summarize the information discussed in the research can be found in appendix 9.15., as well as the infographics summarizing the cultural differences in Sweden and the focus on communication.

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9. Appendix

9.1. List of definitions and abbreviations

Autonomy

The ability to make your own decisions without being controlled by anyone else (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020).

Business culture

Business culture is a model or style of business operations within a company. The business culture determines how different levels of staff communicate with one another as well as how employees deal with clients and customers (Business Dictionary, 2020).

Casual/ informal communication

Informal communication between coworkers in the workplace, being unofficial in nature and based in the informal, social relationships that are formed in a workplace outside of the normal hierarchy of business structure (BambooHR, 2020).

Communication

The act of transferring information from one place, person, or group to another (Skills you need, 2020).

Corporate culture

The corporate culture consists of the unwritten rules, habits, and behavior of all employees within a given company. These, in turn, are based on a set of shared values (Stepstone, 2020).

A second way to define company culture is to derive the degree to how well and smooth the production processes, as well as the administrative processes, run. Company culture consists of three different aspects, the unwritten rules of the company on social behavior of the employees, the habits that occur within the company reoccurring regularly, and the behavior of the company and of the employees within the company (Stepstone, 2020).

Conflict avoidance

A method of reacting to conflict, which attempts to avoid directly confronting the issue at hand (Work911, n.d.).

CPI

Corruption Perception Index (Transparency International, 2019).

Cultural noise

This concept can be defined as the barrier to a successful communication between two actors of different cultures (Mariska, 2017).

Culture

The collective mental programming of the human mind which distinguishes one group of people from another (Hofstede Insights, 2020).

Decision-making process

A decision-making process can be defined as a process consisting of three separate steps: identifying the decision, gathering information, and assessing alternative resolutions (UMass Dartmouth, 2020).

Delaying

Transforming a highly hierarchical organization into a flat or horizontal organization (Webfinance.Inc, 2020).

DESI

Digital Economy and Society Index (European Commission, 2019).

Femininity

Collective name for the values that motivates the members of society in their actions; liking what you do (Hofstede Insights, 2020).

Fika

Fika is a Swedish business concept that is described as a time to socialize with your colleagues and catch up on all the new company information. Fika breaks occur daily in the morning and the afternoon, at 10:30 in the morning and around three in the afternoon (Kwintessential, n.d.).

FIT

Flanders Investment and Trade (Flanders Investment & Trade, 2020).

Formal communication

The sharing of official information about the workplace. It is dictated by the established hierarchical organization of the business (BambooHR, 2020).

GNP

Gross National Product (Sweden, 2020).

Hofstede 6D-model

Cultural model invented by Geert Hofstede, which explains six basic issues that society needs to come to term with in order to organize itself. These are called dimensions of culture. Each of them has been expressed on a scale that runs roughly from 0 to 100 (Hofstede Insights, 2020).

Horizontal corporate culture

A structure with no or few levels of management between the bottom layer of the company structure and the executives of the company (Payton, 2016).

Individualism

A dimension of the 6D-model that describes the degree of interdependence a society maintains among its members (Hofstede Insights, 2020).

Indulgence

A sixth dimension of the 6D-model is indulgence, placed against restraint. Indulgence refers to the degree to which people control their impulses and desires based on the way they were raised (Hofstede Insights, 2020).

Lagom

A Swedish concept which means not too much, not too little (Pena, 2018).

Long term orientation

A dimension of the 6D-model that describes how every society has to maintain some links with its own past while dealing with the challenges of the present and future (Hofstede Insights, 2020).

Masculinity

Collective name for the values that motivates the members of society in their actions, wanting to be the best (Hofstede Insights, 2020).

Masculinity vs femininity Indicator

A dimension of the 6D-model that describes the degree to which values are important in a society. These can be more of a traditional male role or these of more classic feminine values (Hofstede Insights, 2020).

NECP

National Energy and Climate Plan (European commission, 2020).

Non-verbal communication

The transmission of messages or signals through a nonverbal platform such as eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, posture, and the distance between two individuals (Mccornack, 2019).

Power distance

A dimension of the 6D-model that describes the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally (Hofstede Insights, 2020).

R&D

Research and development (Sweden, 2020).

RGM Pricing

Revenue Growth Management Pricing (Haegheman, 2020).

Risk aversion

Unwilling to take risks or wanting to avoid risks as much as possible (Forsey, 2020).

SSON

Shared Services & Outsourcing Network (Coorda, 2015).

Swedish consensus culture

A process where there is a way of reaching an agreement between all members of a group with a commitment to finding solutions that everyone supports or accepts even when they do not fully agree with the decision (Coorda, 2015).

Uncertainty avoidance

The extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations and have created beliefs and institutions that try to avoid these (Hofstede Insights, 2020).

Verbal communication

Any communication that uses words to share information with others (Skills you need, 2020).

A more specified definition is the following: The use of sounds and words to express yourself, especially in contrast to using gestures or mannerisms (non-verbal communication) (Your Dictionary, n.d.).

VITO

Vlaamse Instelling voor Technologisch Onderzoek (de la kethulle de Ryhove, 2020).

VIB

Vlaams Instituut voor Biotechnologie (de la kethulle de Ryhove, 2020).

Work-life balance

In short, work-life balance is defined as keeping a balance between private and business lives. Today, work-life balance has been an evolving concept of which the definition is not always set. However, what is confirmed is that work-life balance is an important aspect of a healthy work environment (Kohll, 2018).

Written communication

The sending of messages, orders, or instructions in writing through letters, circulars, manuals, reports, telegrams, office memos, bulletins, etc. (Sharma, 2020).

9.2. Interview guide

Hello, I am Daphne Haegheman and I am a Business management International Entrepreneurship student from Belgium. Thank you for taking your time. As a part of my Bachelor thesis and under the supervision of Flanders Investment and Trade Stockholm, we want to conduct an interview regarding the difference in company culture and business communication for a company or person representing a company coming to Sweden for trade or the establishing of a company. As you are working or have worked in a Swedish working culture and know the process of adapting to it, I will ask you questions about you in this process. The interview will take about 15-30 minutes and will be recorded if conducted via an online communication tool.

Introduction + Demographics

What is your name?	
Age?	
Family situation? Alone or with family?	
What company do you work for?	
In what language do you communicate with your subordinates?	
What is your function? Description of what you do. (How many people do you manage?)	
How long have you been in Sweden?	

Questions

1. Can you briefly describe the company culture present in your current company and job?

Company rules

- Give a brief description of the most important company rules in regard to communication and working culture. (some examples)
- How were the company rules implemented and communicated to you?
- What are the big differences compared to Belgium companies?

Company habits

- Give a brief description of the most important company habits in regard to working culture. (some examples)
- How were the company habits implemented and communicated to you?
- What are the big differences compared to Belgium companies?

- Company behavior

- Give a brief description of the most prominent company behavior internally and externally in regard to working culture. (some examples)
- How was the company behavior implemented and communicated to you?
- What are the big differences compared to Belgium companies?

2. In what is the company culture promoted by HR? How did they support this adaption to the new company culture and how did you experience this? For example, visuals, guide, websites, teambuilding, etc.
3. In general, how did you experience the company culture in compared to your past experiences working in Belgium?
4. Did you seek external help when coming to Sweden or did you inform yourself on this change?
5. Were you briefed on the new company culture or did you research yourself (if yes, how?)? Did you wish you had any briefing beforehand?
6. Did you experience it as positive or negative?
7. What effect did it have on your arrival and new function?
8. What was the most difficult aspect of the new company culture to deal with and how did you cope with it?
9. Communication plays a big role in any company culture. Could you describe briefly the most prominent differences between your current company and previous experiences in Belgium?
10. What are the big differences in style of verbal communication between Sweden and Belgium except from the language?
11. What are the big differences in style of non-verbal communication between Sweden and Belgium except from the language? (think of meetings, presentation, body language, social habits, etc.)

12. What are the big differences in style of written communication between Sweden and Belgium except from the language? (Think of reports, e-mails, style of writing, level of professionalism, etc.) Are there any noticeable differences in website communication?
13. Which one of these subdivisions on communication was the hardest to adapt to in your new function? And what was a positive change regarding communication?
14. If you knew all positive and negative elements of adapting to a new company culture in advance, would the change have gone by smoother? Did this change to the new culture meet your expectations or did you have another idea of the new organizational culture?
15. Would upfront information from HR, a guide, website, or support agencies have helped you or the company in this transition?
16. Do you have anything to add to the interview regarding company culture and business communication in Sweden as well as adapting to it?

This was the last question. Thank you so much for your time!

Daphne Haegheman

9.3. Paul van Doninck

What is your name?	Paul Van Doninck
Family situation? Alone or with family?	With family
What company do you work for?	SAS/ Jernhüsen
In what language do you communicate with your subordinates?	Swedish & English
What is your function? Description of what you do. (How many people do you manage?)	Strategist / Business Developer, Stations Company Name: Jernhüsen Duration of employment: six years five months
How long have you been in Sweden?	five + years
Duration of the interview	40 minutes

Hello, I will first explain what this interview will be used for. I am Daphne Haegheman and I am a Business Management International Entrepreneurship student from Ghent. I am currently doing an internship for Flanders Investment and Trade and as part of my bachelor thesis and under the supervision of Flanders Investment and Trade Stockholm, I would like to talk to you about the difference in corporate culture and corporate communication for a company or person who represents a company that is coming to Sweden for trade or the establishment of a company. Since you work or have worked in a Swedish work culture and you are familiar with the process of adapting to the Swedish work culture, I will briefly ask you some questions if that is okay with you.

Can you tell me a little bit more about yourself? Such as your position in the company, family situation and how you got in this situation? And so on?

My wife and I ended up here a while ago anyway. At that time, I worked for SAS the aviation company in Brussels and then got the chance to study Swedish in evening school. That was part of the management culture that was applied in Sweden and at SAS. Kouzon, who was then the CEO and wrote that famous book '*Moment of truth*', where the philosophy was to give people in the frontline a lot of mandates and responsibility and thus win over the customers. That was a very strong corporate culture and one of the reasons was that the big boss, in our case a Swede, had a development dialogue every year and that was still unheard of in our case. This was actually a development dialogue with every employee to be a little bit of where are we going. In my case, it was the fact that I wanted to follow management courses in Scandinavia but that was only the case for Swedes, I was not allowed. So, the intention was to turn me into a Swede. I was recruited for the management trainee program of SAS and my family and I ended up here in Stockholm. After a couple of years in

management I left and started at Jernhüsen. That is the real estate company of the Swedish state that manages the buildings around the railways.

Can you briefly describe the company culture present in your company and job? This in the respect of company rules, so rules established by the company needed to be followed by everyone, company habits and company behavior. Company habits exist of habits that everyone follows in the company, for example the Fika break or regular outings with colleagues. Company behavior is the way that the company behaves itself to their internal and external stakeholders such as clients and employees.

The rules of the company are not anything else than the normal rules I was given in Belgium. But what is important is that there is a lot more flexibility in the rules. For example, flexibility in hours or flexibility in the choice of who you want to work with and what projects you want to take on.

Of course, because we are a typical Swedish company the typical Swedish habits are also present. Fika is done twice a day, in the morning and the afternoon. Other than that, there are no specific habits that I can think of, maybe except for the fact that meetings for a specific project are planned at the same time every week and that people always greet each other in the mornings, they just say hi, they don't give a hand or kiss on the cheek.

I would describe the Swedish work culture and corporate culture of the company I used to work for, but also for today's company as much less hierarchical, that is the main value. There is a much flatter organization and also a culture that is built much more on competence than on the employee as a person. For example; whether you are a man or a woman, or you are young or old; it does not matter. This struck me as one of the main values within the company. That is also how I think the company wants to position itself towards the outside world, especially since it is a public company. I know that transparency is also important to them, to employees, and the population.

How were the company rules, habits and company behavior communicated to you?

I think that rules are of course specifically communicated by you at the beginning of the work time, together with your contract. Also, the main values that the company stands for are not specifically communicated but it is expected that you know them by searching them on the company or corporate website before you go in for your interview, as they will ask you if you fit these values. The behavior I feel like is a matter of adapting while you are working there. They are not specifically communicated from higher up, but My colleagues mostly mentioned the Fika, as that is something, they are proud of.

What are the big differences compared to Belgium companies?

Personally, what strikes me most is that there is a very strong difference between the countries in terms of the subtle signals that are present in the Swedish corporate culture at our company but also in other companies.

In Belgium, they call a cat a cat and are very clear in describing what needs to be done. They already shout at each other and in Sweden, this is not the case at all, although of course there is also quarrel. People are more likely to avoid confrontation, especially if they disagree with each other, this is addressed very subtly instead. In Belgium, for example, it can be said that a proposal needs to be reviewed, but if this were said in Sweden it would already mean that this proposal would have to be made all over again and it would be nothing at all. There are many subtle things to take into account in this point of view. For example, that horizontal structure is infiltrated with loyalty to which school you studied at, people often recruit people with the same school background.

In what way is the company culture promoted by HR? how did they support this adaption to the new company culture and how did you experience this? For example, visuals, guide, websites, teambuilding, etc.

HR did ensure that the company culture that already prevailed was well-framed; for example, drill the habit of Fika and the possibility of the flexibility of hours they did give a framework. But it is not that HR has determined what the company will look like, values like transparency and “Lagom” are more taken for granted in Swedish culture in general, so of course, the company takes this on board.

In general, how did you experience the company culture in compared to your past experiences working in Belgium?

I experienced it as a positive change. I feel like a business in Belgium is more closed off and you feel more alone if you are working on a managerial level. For example, the fact that a consensus is so important means that working together in a team is a regular thing in the company because as a manager you need to inform everyone involved in the decision. You need different perspectives. That is something that I like over here and experience as a positive change in the company culture. In France for example, if you are a manger it can feel very lonely because the people are genuinely not interested in the background of your decision and often the consequences that it has, so you have to decide on your own.

Did you seek external help when coming to Sweden or did you inform yourself on this change?

I informed myself of the opportunity that there was to go to Sweden, as I explained in my introduction. I saw that there was a chance to learn that new management style and I took it upon myself to ask for that opportunity. Of course, I informed myself of this change before I asked it by researching the Swedish culture and how different the business culture was.

Were you briefed on the new company culture or did you research yourself (if yes, how)? did you wish you had any briefing beforehand? Did you experience it as positive or negative? What effect did it have on your arrival and new function?

Concerning that, I had a great deal of help from the company before coming to Sweden. There were some classes on the culture of Sweden in general, on what the processes were for expats coming to the county, and what are some things that you need to take into account. Also, the planning of my expat experience and the process of adapting to it, the different stages. Also, what I liked is that there were also briefings for the family coming with me to Sweden. This is important because they were coming with me in the function of my job, so they had classes regarding the general culture in Sweden, schools, and how to look for jobs.

What was the most difficult aspect of the new company culture to deal with and how did you cope with it?

Well, it is difficult to say what was the difficult aspect of adapting to the new culture, because you have no choice adapting to the rules and habits of the company. What I would say is the process of involving everyone in the decision process. I explained before, I was so used to making decisions on my own because people are not very interested in being involved in the decision-making process. They see it as the job of the manager to make that decision. That process was something I needed to adapt to, but now that I am used to it, I like it.

Communication plays a big role in any company culture. Could you describe briefly the most prominent differences between your current company and previous experiences in Belgium?

People are very open in contact, there is certainly an openness to listen in terms of initial contact and communication. But that must not always mean that people are going to buy it. Rather, it is a process that one could become interested in that contact. But even in communication, they are reluctant. This is completely different from Belgium where contact already means that there is interest and that the deal can go ahead with the right conditions.

This does not mean that they are slow, but often they just want to make an informed decision. The road to a deal is sometimes long and very twisty, but when you get over the line, the deal is very stable, unlike other cultures where the opposite is true. There it can fall apart quite quickly; I sometimes have that feeling in Belgium as well.

What are the big differences in style of verbal communication between Sweden and Belgium except from the language?

In the process of spoken contact, there is a kind of aversion to a hard sale. People have a more wait-and-see attitude. You cannot make a hard sale in Sweden and you must wait for more until the customer has made a decision. Especially if they are companies you do not know yet. For example, discussing and deciding something with the other party over lunch or heavy dinner, you do not do that at all. This is more about the fact that you have to respect the fact that the decision takes more time.

You can see that in spoken communication in the fact that they dance around the subject as long as they are not sure of the deal.

What are the big differences in style of non-verbal communication between Sweden and Belgium except from the language? For example, in meetings, presentations, body language, social habits and more.

With non-verbal communication, there is not really any clear signs of a difference with Belgium. But I can say that meeting with clients for example can be very different.

There is certainly an openness to listen in terms of initial contact and communication. But it is important that that does not always mean that people are going to buy. Rather, it is a process that one could become interested by that contact. But even in communication they are reluctant. This is completely different from Belgium where contact already means that there is interest and that the deal can go ahead with the right conditions.

This does not mean that they are slow, but often they just want to make an informed decision. The road to a deal is sometimes long and very twisty, but when you get over the line, the deal is very stable, unlike other cultures where it is completely the other way around. There it can fall apart quite quickly, that is the feeling I had sometimes in Belgium.

What are the big differences in style of written communication between Sweden and Belgium except from the language? (think of reports, e-mails, style of writing, level of professionalism, etc.)

I think that the language in the company can be considered as more casual toned. Contrary to Belgium we use first name, even if you have never met the person before. But other than that, I do not feel like there are any noticeable differences in that communication process. Reports are quite the same as well as communication via e-mail.

Are there any noticeable differences in website communication?

Not really, when I worked for SAS, the only difference on the website was maybe the language, but because it was a very multinational company, they had a pretty uniform website. With the company I work for now, the website is in Swedish as well as all communication regarding press, for example articles, are communicated on it.

Which one of these subdivisions on communication was the hardest to adapt to in your new function? And what was a positive change regarding communication?

I think that spoken communication is the most difficult aspect to adapt to. Discussing difficult matters is one of the main differences because the people are so introverted and reserved. Also, one thing that I want to add is that communication with new clients as well as building up that relationship is completely different than in Belgium. For example, companies in Belgium often invite clients to dinners and sports games for example. But in Sweden, you cannot make people happy with that. Swedish people do not want that favor because they really value honesty. They shun that practice, while in Belgium this is almost a given. I think

that this is something to really keep in mind when laying down and solidifying contact with new clients.

If you knew all positive and negative elements of adapting to a new company culture in advance, would the change have gone by smoother? Did this change to the new culture meet your expectations or did you have another idea of the new organizational culture?

If I knew everything I needed to adapt to, I would do it again. But I feel like I was already well informed on the changes I would need to make. I was also already aware of the challenges that I might face in the new division and eventually new company. Working in Sweden has met my expectations, I really like it here, and it is easy to adapt to the new culture. I feel like it would be more difficult to adapt to the Belgian business culture if I would ever return. I would have never done that change if I did not know what the culture would look like. I would want to be as prepared as I can possibly be.

Would upfront information from HR, a guide, website, or support agencies have helped you or the company in this transition?

In my opinion, it definitely helped, I got a lot of information before I left, and I feel like being prepared for that change of culture is a crucial part of being an expat. If the company did not give any guidance, it would have sought it somewhere else, I would like it if there is a document with all information that is collected for that departure.

9.4. Dieter Van De Walle

What is your name?	Dieter Van De Walle
Family situation? Alone or with family?	Alone
What company do you work for?	Spotify
In what language do you communicate with your subordinates?	Swedish & English
What is your function? Description of what you do. (How many people do you manage?)	Software engineer Company name: Spotify AB Duration of employment: three years
How long have you been in Sweden?	three years
Duration of the interview	30 minutes

Hello, I will first explain what this interview will be used for. I am Daphne Haegheman and I am a Business Management International Entrepreneurship student from Ghent. I am currently doing an internship for Flanders Investment and Trade and as part of my bachelor thesis and under the supervision of Flanders Investment and Trade Stockholm, I would like to talk to you about the difference in corporate culture and corporate communication for a company or person who represents a company that is coming to Sweden for trade or the establishment of a company. Since you work or have worked in a Swedish work culture and you are familiar with the process of adapting to the Swedish work culture, I will briefly ask you some questions if that is okay with you.

Can you tell me a little bit more about yourself? Such as your position in the company, family situation and how you got in this situation? And so on?

I am Dieter Van de Walle. I am currently working at Spotify at the head office in Stockholm and before that I worked in Belgium. I was at work but looking for a new job. Then I received an email from Spotify itself to apply for the position of software engineer. It has been three years now. I did not have many expectations myself, but I signed up anyway. Eventually I was allowed to come to Stockholm for an interview with the person in charge within the company and was finally allowed to start. I then moved to Sweden and took up the position. I have been working in a team of software engineers for three years now. I am not really a manager, but because there is a very horizontal structure the difference between manager and employee is very small. I speak a basic level of Swedish but mostly converse in English with my colleagues. Because there are a lot of different nationalities within the company, English is the main language.

Can you briefly describe the company culture present in your company and job? This in the respect of company rules, so rules established by the company needed to be followed by everyone, company habits and company behavior. Company habits exist of habits that everyone follows in the company, for example the Fika break or regular outings with colleagues. Company behavior is the way that the company behaves itself to their internal and external stakeholders such as clients and employees.

Spotify puts a lot of emphasis on culture and on young people. They are actively looking for people who fit into that specific and famous corporate culture. The greatest values that define the corporate culture are transparency and a very flat structure. The company wants as much clarity as possible in the processes that it does. To the employees but also to the external shareholders. They place the emphasis on being constructive. A mistake made in the company is not seen as a mistake on a personal level but is seen as something that the group did wrong and is tackled in that way that the company can learn from it. The development of employees is very important to the company. Secondly, there is of course the very flat hierarchy. Not only in the structure of the company but also in the communication. There are very few barriers between the employees and his or her boss. For example, it is also no problem to talk to the boss's boss. This open communication is certainly one of our pillars and is really encouraged. Also important at Spotify is that the manager has more of a supporting function than a decisive and managerial function about the employee. Their job is more about making sure you can do your job well and that barriers are not raised. I think with these values, the company wants to place and behave itself as an innovative company.

The typical Swedish customs and values are applied here, the Fika, for example, is truly a sacred principle. The Fika is actually used within Spotify as a moment to share information with other departments, so it actually has an important function. You can see that in a more casual setting people actually share fairly important information with each other.

The custom of using "Lagom" is also applied here in the company.

About the rules applied in the company. Of course, there are rules, but they are very flexible as long as the work is done. About the rules applied in the company. Of course, there are rules, but they are very flexible as long as the work is done. For example, the flexibility in organizing meetings and then the flexibility in terms of hours is very important. It does not matter if one hour less is worked, as long as the work is done well, and the meetings run efficiently. Here you are not tied to a fixed office, but you can work in different places and lounges. The only rules that we did strictly adhere to where the rules regarding feedback and correcting mistakes.

How were the company rules, habits and company behavior communicated to you?

Spotify is already famous about the company culture or is very well known for it by several employees. That is why it was not really necessary to communicate a lot of new aspects with me. However, the rules of the company are communicated from HR at the start of your job. Of course, it has an important role in that, and information from the company also comes to

how the company wants to behave towards external stakeholders. You have to bear that in mind as well. Communication with the company was sometimes via an internal platform, and via documents accompanying the contract. But as far as Spotify's habits are concerned, there are no real rules. This makes you feel more comfortable once you start working there, for example, there are no rules on how the Fika should be done, yet everyone is aware of it. We did have a "Spotify handbook" where a lot of the procedures were explained and that was accessible for everyone.

What are the big differences compared to Belgium companies?

I think a big difference in the company culture is certainly the horizontal structure, I think this is the case in a lot of companies in Sweden. There is no barrier between employee and boss and open conversation and giving opinions is even encouraged here. For example, during the Fika an opinion is often asked from me while I have nothing to do with the project. I do not think this would be present in Belgium, or at least much less. The position as manager is less strict in a sense. I think if you want it in one word its authority. The spread of authority as well as the spread of responsibility. But you also have to be careful, Spotify is a big company and also very well known. They have the first choice in hiring people. That is why it is easy to have people adapt to the company culture. So, if, for example, you applied this system to a company that does not have one, it would be completely different.

Also, open communication is something that connects to the horizontal company structure.

In what is the company culture promoted by HR? how did they support this adaption to the new company culture and how did you experience this? For example, visuals, guide, websites, teambuilding, etc.

HR is a good help in the beginning of your adaptation process, because of the more casual and open company culture in the company, they organize a lot of events and drinks, so that you are able to get to know the other employees. Because making friends in Sweden is pretty hard. In general, Sweden are more introverted and more closed off, so getting to know someone on a personal level is pretty hard. Also, because they honor the work-life balance, it is not the custom to ask a lot about personal life. For example, with a lot of my co-workers, I do not even know if they have children or not. But other than the events that are being organized and the rules that are communicated there was no help from HR. Honestly, I got a lot of help surrounding that company culture from my colleagues, for example the way Fika works was explained by them in the first few days. But for the big company habits, I was already aware of them because I had done research before coming to Sweden.

In general, how did you experience the company culture in compared to your past experiences working in Belgium?

In general, I really experienced it as a positive change. I like the openness of the culture and all the aspects of the Swedish business culture. The thing that bothered me the most in the beginning, the consensus process and the long procedures regarding decision making are something that I got used to. I like the amount of responsibility I get in comparison to Belgium. The trust that the company gives you is a nice touch and nice for the professional development.

Did you seek external help when coming to Sweden or did you inform yourself on this change?

I was contacted by Spotify, so I mostly got help from them. But that was mostly for practical matters and not for business culture. The Spotify handbook helped when I arrived there to get to know all the practicalities.

Were you briefed on the new company culture or did you research yourself (if yes, how)? did you wish you had any briefing beforehand? Did you experience it as positive or negative? What effect did it have on your arrival and new function?

Yeah, I think Spotify helped a lot with that. I think it was more on the spot than beforehand about that corporate culture. The company wants to distinguish as little as possible between Sweden and non-Sweden, they think that is very important, that is why they organize a lot of mixers. They really help you getting out of that social isolation because Sweden are not only introverted in business, but also in personal life. But besides the practical matters, there was not a lot of information about the company culture beforehand. But I think they also assume that Spotify is doing some research in that aspect. In advance, it was mainly about the practical matters, such as the moving companies, housing and so on. It would have been nice to have a look at some information about business culture in Sweden beforehand, but because I did my own research, I do not feel like I was hindered in the adapting process in Spotify.

What was the most difficult aspect of the new company culture to deal with and how did you cope with it?

That is a difficult question. I think it would be the horizontal and flat company structure. In that context it is difficult as a person or an expat, it is hard to get through sometimes, not with what you say, but how you say it. The way something is communicated is completely different here. As a person or an expat, it is hard to get through sometimes, not what you say, but how you say it. The way something is communicated is completely different here. For example, when urgent matters need to be discussed, it is sometimes difficult to stress how urgent this is and that there is not much time to make that decision. with that flat structure, that decision always takes a bit longer because everyone is expected to give input. In

Belgium, if you have a good manager, he or she will listen to everyone, but they still hold the power to just bite the bullet and take that decision.

Communication plays a big role in any company culture. Could you describe briefly the most prominent differences between your current company and previous experiences in Belgium?

I think there a lot of different little aspects that make sure that communication is different. In my opinion, language and communication is way more casual than in Belgium. People address people that they do not really know by their first name. But important to keep in mind is that it is still very respectful. People keep their distance and seem to be a little bit more introverted. This is not necessarily the case in Spotify, but I know that that is something typically Swedish. Also, I mentioned before that it is difficult to make a personal connection with people. They keep their distance. It is not necessarily as in America, where all people are your friend immediately. They are more of a wait-and-see attitude and it can sometimes take years to build a personal relationship.

The one main difference that I experienced is the consensus culture and the difficulty to decide. Because people always need input and different opinions, they are often scared to just make the decision on their own. One small situation or problem that would be solved easily in Belgium, can drag on for weeks, and that can be frustrating if you are not used to that.

What are the big differences in style of verbal communication between Sweden and Belgium except from the language?

The biggest difference in verbal communication that struck me was conflict avoidance. This was very clear and a big difference from when I was still working in Belgium. People do not really dare to give an opinion when it is a bad opinion and we are in a group. They will always remain extremely polite. I think that is also related to the consensus culture that exists. Every opinion must be heard, but they do not want to be the one who ruins the project as it were. In any case, giving negative feedback is more polite than in Belgium, but it can be more prominent if the people talk on their own. Then there is more room for that.

Generally, in Spotify, confrontation and negativity is really something that is avoided. That emphasis is really put on constructive cooperation. Also, the fact that people are a bit more hesitant is an important difference when you start a conversation. people will never immediately decide if you suggest something during a conversation or a meeting. By the way, I think that is one of the things that made it difficult for me to adapt when I look back at the previous question.

What are the big differences in style of non-verbal communication between Sweden and Belgium except from the language? For example, in meetings, presentations, body language, social habits and more.

I did not really notice any big differences in non-verbal communication. I feel like the aspects where the differences were the most obvious when meeting other employees or companies were in the conversations. Maybe that they are also a little bit more distant in their non-verbal communication, like they are in their verbal communication.

What are the big differences in style of written communication between Sweden and Belgium except from the language? (think of reports, e-mails, style of writing, level of professionalism, etc.)

I feel like the casual tone from the conversations within the company also seeps through in the e-mails. Using first names is something the Swedes always do. Even when first contacting a client. But other than that, I do not think there were any big differences; reports for example, the ones I have seen, are the same as the ones I have seen in Belgium. Maybe only difference I can notice is that these reports are a little bit more to the point.

Are there any noticeable differences in website communication?

The website of Spotify itself is of course no different, in the app we sometimes promote local artists and that can differ from country to country. But because Spotify is global, the messages are the same, but the language can be different, like you can choose between English and other languages. We also collect the messages in the press about the company and messages that the company wants to communicate with its customers. We also have a corporate website. But there are no specific differences for Sweden in my feeling.

Which one of these subdivisions on communication was the hardest to adapt to in your new function? And what was a positive change regarding communication?

I think the hardest aspect of communication to adapt to is the verbal communication. The Swedish custom of avoiding any conflict at all is something that I really had to get used to. People dance around the subject and will never take a decision on the spot. I liked that in Belgium you could give an idea and two days later you would know what to do. Here in Sweden, there are countless meetings and discussions to be able to get a decision. And on top of that, if there is something, they do not like about the idea that you proposed, then it will be difficult to know, as they would never explicitly say so.

If you knew all positive and negative elements of adapting to a new company culture in advance, would the change have gone by smoother? Did this change to the new culture meet your expectations or did you have another idea of the new organizational culture?

I would do it again, even with all the info I have now. It was a positive adjustment for me, and the company has helped me a lot in my professional development. If there is one thing, it is that I am sorry I did not do it sooner. In terms of business, Sweden is a very good market for expatriates and for companies because that transparency and open communication is one of the aspects that attracted me.

Would upfront information from HR, a guide, website, or support agencies have helped you or the company in this transition?

I think that a handbook on the rules of the company or business culture would be very handy. We had that handbook, but it would be nice to get that while I was still in Belgium. So, I knew exactly to expect. Of course, a lot of people already know in bigger lines what to expect when going to Sweden, but it would be good to know how to communicate with them, because these aspects surprised me the most. People often do not realize what the consequences are of that flat hierarchal structure and that open communication and transparency.

9.5. Maarten Beckers

What is your name?	Maarten Beckers
Family situation? Alone or with family?	With partner
What company do you work for?	Skansken
In what language do you communicate with your subordinates?	Swedish
What is your function? Description of what you do. (How many people do you manage?)	Manager (large amount of people under) Company name: Skansken Duration of employment: four years and a half
How long have you been in Sweden?	Four + years
Duration	40 minutes

Hello, I will first explain what this interview will be used for. I am Daphne Haegheman and I am a Business Management International Entrepreneurship student from Ghent. I am currently doing an internship for Flanders Investment and Trade and as part of my bachelor thesis and under the supervision of Flanders Investment and Trade Stockholm, I would like to talk to you about the difference in corporate culture and corporate communication for a company or person who represents a company that is coming to Sweden for trade or the establishment of a company. Since you work or have worked in a Swedish work culture and you are familiar with the process of adapting to the Swedish work culture, I will briefly ask you some questions if that is okay with you.

Can you tell me a little bit more about yourself? Such as your position in the company, family situation and how you got in this situation? And so on?

My name is Maarten, I am from Belgium and I studied Civil Engineering at KU Leuven. After that I worked for the company Jan De Nul, also abroad. I spent a lot of time abroad. After four years I returned to Belgium. I wanted to see how the business world works there. After working there, I quickly realized that I wanted to go abroad again anyway. I went to study Swedish in evening school on the Ugent. Within that year in Belgium I applied for a job at Skansken, a global construction company. I knew a Belgian expat who worked for the company in the HR department and thanks to her it went reasonably smoothly, and I was able to apply and have an interview, in Swedish though. Also, now I am communicating in Swedish with my colleagues and subordinates. In that interview, I could opt for structure or housing. That was the deciding factor for me to move to Sweden and work in Stockholm, together with my wife.

I had also lost my heart to Sweden because of my previous travels and do balance between city and nature. This certainly played a part. I have been working for Skanska for four and a half years now and I have become Production Manager for large projects around Stockholm. I now also have a considerably large amount of people under my watch.

Can you briefly describe the company culture present in your company and job? This in the respect of company rules, so rules established by the company needed to be followed by everyone, company habits and company behavior. Company habits exist of habits that everyone follows in the company, for example the Fika break or regular outings with colleagues. Company behavior is the way that the company behaves itself to their internal and external stakeholders such as clients and employees.

The culture in the company is certainly an open culture. I think that is also the aspect that Sweden is very well known for. This can be the case for all three aspects of corporate culture. In general, we as employees are given a lot of responsibilities so we do not look at how the person handles the project step by step. As far as rules are concerned, these are given, but everyone takes their responsibility to follow them and so they are not closely monitored as to whether they are being followed. For example, hours are given, but they are very flexible if the work is done in a good and efficient way. Everyone gets a great deal of responsibility, but this can sometimes be abused, but in the end, these are more exceptions. In that respect, Sweden is a bit braver than Belgians as they are less inclined to violate those rules.

But with the coronavirus, for example, the government really trusts the population and that they abide by the rules to prevent the spread of the virus, and this is also the case in the Swedish business world. The company trusts the people and those employees comply with them. But of course, exceptions cannot be avoided. The company habits are of course amplified with the typical Fika break. That is something that is implemented in almost every Swedish company. Also, the casual addressing of people is a habit that I feel Belgian people would have to get used to.

The company as lasts really wants to position itself as a transparent company. Transparency in communication and in production processes are one of the most important and recognized aspects in Sweden. This is also to their internal and external stakeholders as you mentioned. With some big contracts already done all over the world, it surely wants to position itself as a leader in the industry.

How were the company rules, habits and company behavior communicated to you?

When it comes to communicating company rules such as hours and so on, these were introduced steadily, blocks of information were given when needed. But communication in general within Swedish companies is not very good. Swedes are rather introverted and do not always dare to say what they think. They are very cautious in the way they approach something. They always try to deal with conflicts very cautiously. They are less direct than Belgians for example. But sometimes it is appreciated that a decision can be made quickly, and that people do not shy away from conflict, I noticed that before. In terms of

communication of regulation, this was done in a document added to the contract when I first arrived. But habits and behavior are something I had to get used to in the first few weeks of working there and is not really something that was explicitly communicated to me. We did get a buddy to guide us through the process of adaptation, but also it was difficult to ask questions because of their introverted nature and the fact that they were more quiet, especially if you are not really adapted to their way of working yet.

What are the big differences compared to Belgium companies?

In my opinion of course Swedes are too cautious in doing business with each other or with international partners. Belgians are a bit better at that. They tend to make decisions more quickly. The rooting is the consensus culture that prevails, especially in meetings. It often happens that people think “oh no, what if someone doesn't agree with what we want to do or decide?” Every opinion must be given, and this makes it difficult to make a decision. It all takes a bit longer; this results in a lot more meetings that could have been avoided. Topics return very often without any real decision being made and then quickly move on to the next item on the agenda. That can be really frustrating, especially if you are from Belgium, and you are used to use meetings as a way to cut through the information and leave with a decision in hand so that you are able to continue and you know what to do. The bottom line is that, despite this horizontal structure, employees are still afraid to decide if not everyone is on board. What I do like as a difference with Belgium is that the employees get a great deal of responsibility. If you for example have an appointment at 10 o'clock, it is easily possible to work from home for two hours and then have your appointment, come back and work at the office in the afternoon. Leaving an hour early or arriving an hour later is no problem as long the work gets done. In Belgium I think the problem is that there is almost no flexibility in hours, you arrive on time and stay longer or until the boss leaves the office for example, that is not the case in Sweden.

In what way is the company culture promoted by HR? how did they support this adaption to the new company culture and how did you experience this? For example, visuals, guide, websites, teambuilding, etc.

Before I came to Sweden, there was a brief document given with all necessary regulation and information about the company, but a specific document about company culture from HR was not given. I think it was more my colleagues that introduced me to the company culture of Skanska. I do not think that this is something HR can really teach you; they can only explain what the culture is, but you must experience it and bring it outwards. Regarding information, there is already a lot on the company website of course, so that is a good starting point. What I did get from HR is a buddy within the company, to whom I could ask any question, but I did not really use this, because these people tend to be reserved.

In general, how did you experience the company culture in compared to your past experiences working in Belgium?

I experienced the change as a positive one. I feel like the flexibility in hours and the way that I can set my own schedule. Also important to mention and that might be interesting is that for example I just recently had a child, so my wife could take a lot of maternity leave, in Sweden, this is almost a year, and you have to take it. So, there is a flexibility in that but there is something to keep in mind and that is that there is no childcare where you can drop off your child until the age of one. So, there is a lot of flexibility but also not really because you have no other choice to do so. But the company culture and all the accommodating features such as the flat hierarchy and the fact that there is not really any inhibition to talk to superiors and bosses really helps. I like that much better than in Belgium.

Did you seek external help when coming to Sweden or did you inform yourself on this change?

I was already pretty set on the idea of Sweden. I also worked in Australia and Brazil, and although I also liked the atmosphere, I like Sweden more. I did not really inform myself in Sweden exactly, but I already had a good basic understanding of the language because of the classes and I already had a taste of the atmosphere in Stockholm, so I knew what it was like. I mostly informed myself on this, but I also knew someone in the company that already worked there so I had some information on what it was like and how I should go about applying to Skanska. But no, I did not get any information of the company before I was actually hired, it was only after I arrived there and I was sure of the date that I would be starting that I had a good idea of what the company culture was like. Also, a lot of my colleagues thought me a lot in the first few weeks.

Were you briefed on the new company culture or did you research yourself (if yes, how)? did you wish you had any briefing beforehand? Did you experience it as positive or negative? What effect did it have on your arrival and new function?

There was no guidance from the previous company because I applied independently at Skanska. I submitted my resignation to be able to apply at the company and do my job interview. So, there was no guidance from the previous company. From Skanska itself, once it was clear that I could start at that indicated time, there was guidance on the possibility to learn the Swedish language. The company would provide classes once a week as they thought it is important for the integration and adaptation for anyone coming from abroad. But I did not really get any information about the culture of the company from Skanska beforehand. However, I was aware of the most important characteristics such as the horizontal company culture and this proved to be true. I feel like the detailed company culture is something that I more experienced myself when I was already working there, in the first few weeks.

What was the most difficult aspect of the new company culture to deal with and how did you cope with it?

Mainly the Swedish communication and decision process was the aspect of working in Sweden that I had the most difficulty with.

The problem with Swedish communication is that a consensus is needed and that many factors play a role, for which this sometimes becomes unclear. The problem with Swedish communication is that a consensus is needed and that many factors play a role, for which this sometimes leads to a lack of clarity. This prolongs the decision-making process even further, which can lead to delays. People revolve so much around the subject that it is no longer clear what the original intention was. I think that also relates back to the fact that they are very introverted. For example, the buddy you get when you are first hired can make or break the integration process, because it could be the case that they do not talk that much and do not take that much initiative. So, you really must ask a lot of questions to be able to get the information that you want. That is sometimes difficult as well if you need important info in a specific amount of time.

Communication plays a big role in any company culture. Could you describe briefly the most prominent differences between your current company and previous experiences in Belgium?

The biggest adjustment was certainly the difference in communication. I also worked in Australia and there the communication was completely different. There was less distance between work and personal life, so you got to know your colleagues better on a personal level. I think that is also the case in Belgium. Also, I think that the flat hierarchy plays a big role in the communication in Sweden. Which also makes sure that talking was more casual. For example, it was no problem to be involved in meetings that you did not have that big of a role in. But as I mentioned before, it can create problems as well, because they must involve everyone and that drags out the process. When I was working in Belgium, if my superior or boss had to decide, they just did that. They did not always ask for my opinion and such. I think that is the only negative aspect of the communication in Sweden. The fact that they are so introverted and keep more of a distance is sometimes difficult. For example, if you have contact with a company, that does not necessarily mean that

What are the big differences in style of verbal communication between Sweden and Belgium except from the language?

Answered in the previous and following questions.

What are the big differences in style of non-verbal communication between Sweden and Belgium except from the language? For example, in meetings, presentations, body language, social habits and more.

I do not think here are any significant differences in non-verbal behavior, the only thing that I would be able to mention is the personal distance from each other, but I think that also relates back to the introversion that I mentioned earlier. I cannot think of anything else.

What are the big differences in style of written communication between Sweden and Belgium except from the language? (think of reports, e-mails, style of writing, level of professionalism, etc.)

In written communication, I think that the same principle can be applied, it takes a bit longer, especially working with clients, to receive an answer. Also, the language is a bit more casual, you can use a first name for example. I think that those are the most important ones.

Are there any noticeable differences in website communication?

Not really, because Skanska has a global company website as well as adapted websites per country. I think it would be appreciated though if the company website also provides the language, next to English. People in the company always appreciate that.

Which one of these subdivisions on communication was the hardest to adapt to in your new function? And what was a positive change regarding communication?

The spoken communication, also communication with clients. It is not because you are in contact and have arranged meetings that the client agrees with the plans of your company. They are happy to hear you out but also often retract their willingness to work with you after that. In worksites often plans that need to be decided quickly to get delayed because everyone's opinion is needed. That is why I think that my speed in decision making is appreciated by them.

If you knew all positive and negative elements of adapting to a new company culture in advance, would the change have gone by smoother? Did this change to the new culture meet your expectations or did you have another idea of the new organizational culture?

I think that it met my expectations, I already was quite aware of what it would look like to work there because it would not be the first time to go to Sweden and all the expectations that I had seemed to be correct, like the casual atmosphere and the efficiency of the company and by extension in Sweden, for example the public transportation system is great and efficient, unlike Belgium in my opinion.

Would upfront information from HR, a guide, website, or support agencies have helped you or the company in this transition?

I think it would be handy to have that all in one place and I would read it. But because I was already quite aware of the Swedish culture, I did not have any big surprises, expect for the level of introversion that occurs, as I mentioned before, and also the horizontal level of hierarchy was something that was true.

9.6. Jean-Charles Van Nuijs

What is your name?	Jean-Charles Van Nuijs
Family situation? Alone or with family?	With son
What company do you work for?	The Absolute company
In what language do you communicate with your subordinates?	English
What is your function? Description of what you do. (How many people do you manage?)	Global Marketing Manager Company name: The Absolute Company Duration of employment: 12 years
How long have you been in Sweden?	6 years
Duration of the interview	50 minutes

Hello, I will first explain what this interview will be used for. I am Daphne Haegheman and I am a Business Management International Entrepreneurship student from Ghent. I am currently doing an internship for Flanders Investment and Trade and as part of my bachelor thesis and under the supervision of Flanders Investment and Trade Stockholm, I would like to talk to you about the difference in corporate culture and corporate communication for a company or person who represents a company that is coming to Sweden for trade or the establishment of a company. Since you work or have worked in a Swedish work culture and you are familiar with the process of adapting to the Swedish work culture, I will briefly ask you some questions if that is okay with you.

Can you tell me a little bit more about yourself? Such as your position in the company, family situation and how you got in this situation? And so on?

I am Jean-Charles Van Nuijs, I am 35 years old and I currently live in Stockholm with my 4-year-old son.

I now work for The Absolute Company, now based in Stockholm and that is a company that is part of Pernod Ricard. That is the parent company. Pernod Ricard is French and is headquartered in Paris. For The Absolute Company, the production is all Swedish and it was also an all Swedish company before it was bought by Pernod Ricard. I used to have two people reporting to me, but now I work more for myself, but still in a management position. Because Pernod Ricard is very decentralized, we speak much more English than Swedish and communication with other departments is also in English. For example, we have departments in Scotland and England. Also, all the distribution networks in the different countries communicate in English because we are a very global team in Stockholm. My position is

Global Marketing Manager for the whole company, which means all countries except the United States, which is a market in itself of course. I mostly set up marketing strategies with other global marketing teams from all over the world. I have been in Sweden for six years now and before that I worked in France, England, and Belgium.

So, in total I have been working for the company for 12 years. You can see Stockholm as my base and the many trips start from there.

Can you briefly describe the company culture present in your company and job? This in the respect of company rules, so rules established by the company needed to be followed by everyone, company habits and company behavior. Company habits exist of habits that everyone follows in the company, for example the Fika break or regular outings with colleagues. Company behavior is the way that the company behaves itself to their internal and external stakeholders such as clients and employees.

The company culture at The Absolute Company is a mix of French and more Scandinavian work culture. here in Sweden it naturally tends to lean more towards the Scandinavian side. The company used to be a state-owned company, so the Swedish culture still dominates here. What does specify that culture is the flat hierarchy, that openness in communication and transparency in those business processes. The very typical aspects that are present everywhere. What is also strongly emphasized is the ecological aspect of the company.

The thing with very specific rules is that there is a lot of flexibility around in Sweden. For example, for hours it does not really matter whether you arrive a little later or decide to work from home.

I think the most obvious differences are in terms of habits. You already mentioned Fika there, that is certainly a habit that is strongly applied. We do a Fika in the morning and in the afternoon, especially to network and take a little break. Really specific habits other than that are not there, I think the culture more shows in stuff like that flat or horizontal hierarchy and that transparency, the values the Swedish business culture stands for.

The company is very global and wants to behave and position itself as a transparent company that is with current times and innovative. Also, the green and ecological aspects of the company was already there, we were already being greener than we actually should with the rules of the government, but it is only in recent years that we really wanted the show that aspect of our production and distribution process, mostly because other companies in Sweden were doing it more and more. We could not stay behind. That was one of my tasks as well since I have been here.

How were the company rules, habits and company behavior communicated to you?

I feel like when I got hired, I did have some sort of class or information on what the main values of the company were and what its positioning is towards the market it operates in. I got some of the rules of the company with me when I first signed my contract but I do feel

like the social rules and the unwritten rules regarding communication are something that I had to learn by myself by working there and interacting with other people in the office. The values of the company clearly respond with the general values the Swedish company culture has, so I was already aware of the main differences that were going to occur as for example the need for consensus decision-making and the flat hierarchy. But the main values were so communicated by the company to me, but I am not sure if this is something that happens regularly in Sweden. I think that this is something that is more specific to the company that I work in.

What are the big differences compared to Belgium companies?

Everyone jokes about it but when I was part of the French group or the Belgian group, decisions are made without your involvement. So, when you do this in Sweden, people sometimes become frustrated and then you realize that you should have involved all parties. You really must get used to being involved, and that is a good thing. If you do not involve all parties in the making of a decision, you might sense some frustration and in Sweden is it very important to maintain a healthy team. You know, I do not have the reports right now, but in Sweden there is a very flat hierarchy, the company is organized in a horizontal way. It is good in a sense that in a French or Belgian company, you could never talk to your bosses. Here, people all talk with each other and it is not with the purpose to shortcut anybody. People see each other more as equals and human being in the company. Here you take everyone into account and that is more natural than asking opinions in another culture.

Next to communication, I think that the willingness for consensus is a big difference. In Belgium, the boss has the responsibility for the decision, and you are not involved as much as where here in Sweden people really come together to decide. Of course, I am only talking from my own experience, but I feel like this is something typical from the Swedish culture. It is nice to be involved, even if your opinion does not really matter that much. It is certainly a habit that you must touch as a manager, to ask everyone's opinion. As a Belgian, this can sometimes go a bit too far. For example, when I just arrived here, I was dragged into a meeting on where everyone wants to sit in the office. This is something that I would not really care about in Belgium, I feel like for Belgian people, the Swedish can seem a bit extreme in that.

Also, even in business, sustainability is something that is important, as opposed to Belgium I feel like. It is high on the agenda, but I feel like Sweden has always had a spot for this, it is part of the DNA. They really put an emphasis on this. For example, our company already had a carbon neutral factory and was already focused on sustainability within the production process. It is a very transparent one and it is completely circular and in other countries that is exceptional. Now we use that in our communication and branding as where a few years ago, we did not. So, I think that is part of the Swedish culture as well, respect for the environment and nature. Maybe it is not that comparable with Belgium, but Swedish companies are really focused on that during product development and eventually communication and marketing of the product. In Sweden, no matter the product, whether it is champagne, or a bottle or

something else, they always provide a sustainable option. It is not always the best option for the short term, but long term, it really is. You really must keep that in mind because it is really embedded in their culture. Also, sustainability is almost always part of the image it carries towards the customers as well as its positioning in the market. But ahead of that, it really is part of their culture. I think that also added to that sustainability is the fact that Sweden is a progressive country with values such as gender balance, equality and so on. I think that more than in Belgium companies are more sensitive towards these matters.

In what is the company culture promoted by HR? how did they support this adaption to the new company culture and how did you experience this? For example, visuals, guide, websites, teambuilding, etc.

We do have an internal team for that. Just recently, we have done an exercise regarding the positioning of the company. The shortened name for our company is TAC, so we connected our values to that and used the values, team, audacious and committed. So of course, team stands for the cooperation within the company and with its partners. Audacious is for the need for entrepreneurship and autonomy. I feel like that is something that really returns in the Swedish culture, that autonomy. Lastly, committed stands for committed to the business but also committed to the environment, especially here in Sweden. We are very aware for whom we need to position ourselves, having many different brands and types of drinks such as champagne but also whisky. We have people working on the values and the image of the company a lot, not only in HR but also in marketing. It is not only fluff, but it is a very efficient system that is put to our advantage. So of course, it is very defined and use, these values, and that company behavior, it is very closely monitored. We look at this from the bottom up, what values need to be addressed and promoted. But as I said, the values are carried here, for example the fact that everyone can chip in with their opinion.

Sometimes when you forget what TAC stands for, everyone in the company knows and applies it, so you can just consult someone on it and not only HR.

In general, how did you experience the company culture in compared to your past experiences working in Belgium?

When I first moved to Sweden, I was still working for the same company, but it really struck me how much of a difference there really was. It is a global company, so when I did make the move, I got some training in cultural differences between France, where I came from and Sweden, but also just in general information about the Swedish way of doing business and how to interact with clients. I like the change, but sometimes in Sweden it takes a lot of time to talk openly. In Swedish behavior, people tend to avoid confrontation. In Belgium or in France, the debate can sometimes really get heated, especially if a big contract is involved. In Paris or Marseille for example I was often the witness to a fight in the middle of a meeting because people were disagreeing so much. You will have a deal, but after, a disagreement can occur easily, and the deal can be off. In Sweden, it takes a bit longer, but when the deal stands, the deal stands, and a disagreement rarely occurs. It may take that long because these people are so non-confrontational. This might be better for the relationship with other people or companies. So, that is something that I really had to get used to. For me necessarily, there is not really a right or a wrong, there is no exclusive positive or negative change when I came to Sweden. Every country that I have worked in had a lot of positives but also some negatives

or points that I really had to get used to. If you are aware of these things, I am sure that a company coming here or a person coming here to make deals will experience it as a positive.

We talk about personality traits for example, there is no right or wrong in being an extrovert or an introvert. I think it is more about knowing the profiles and knowing how to interact with them profiles and not as much about what the profile is. I feel like when you are aware of that, it will be easier to adapt to any culture of doing business, no matter what country.

Did you seek external help when coming to Sweden or did you inform yourself on this change?

Of course, because of the global aspect of the company and having worked with many different countries as a global marketing manager. I was already quite aware of how to adapt to a new culture and what specific business culture was present in Sweden, so I knew some of the big aspects of it, like the sustainability aspect, the transparency, and the flat hierarchy. I got the class about the new aspects of the company culture, as I mentioned before and other aspects, I became aware of while interacting with other people at the company. So, I did not seek any external help if you mean with external help the help of other companies or expats already working there.

Were you briefed on the new company culture or did you research yourself (if yes, how)? did you wish you had any briefing beforehand? Did you experience it as positive or negative? What effect did it have on your arrival and new function?

Yes, I was briefed shortly before I went there and when I arrived, I was paired up with another colleague at the office. So, when I had some questions about the company or even living in Sweden itself, this was very handy. It is also nice, because you immediately contact one other person at the company when you arrive there, it makes you feel less alone.

It is a positive to have some information of the company when you first arrive, because it is also a sign that the company cares about the well-being and the adaptation of its expats.

What was the most difficult aspect of the new company culture to deal with and how did you cope with it?

No, in general I do not think that I had a lot of difficulties adapting to the culture in Sweden. I do remember one case. I once presented some information on the Swedish market and the new marketing program to go with that. I felt that everyone was on board with my new program, but it was more because everyone was polite and tried to avoid confrontation that everyone was agreeing with what I was saying. After six weeks, I had not heard from them and I went out of my way to ask them what they thought of the program, turns out that they were not on board. I really had difficulty understanding why they did not say anything during the meeting, because I was so used to hearing opinions without care. The fact that people are not that direct, and you do not really know them, that may give a problem when interacting with clients or partners for the first time.

Right now, at my work, I try to really understand the way of working and communicating for the first time. I am a little bit more cautious in my way of approaching new people and companies and wait a little bit longer before I reach out myself. You really must take that into account.

Communication plays a big role in any company culture. Could you describe briefly the most prominent differences between your current company and previous experiences in Belgium?

I realize that with countries around the world, in some countries you would never go and talk to the marketing director, you would only go and talk to your marketing manager for example. It is easier to communicate with these people; I consider the communication here to be very open and transparent. I do not know if communication can be considered more as casual. I think so, I think it is partly because the communication is more open than in other countries. It is more casual but also you still need to be respectful. Also, I think it is because of the willingness to create consensus and involvement from everybody. And I think that in other, more traditional, and hierarchical countries, this is not done. I think even in Belgium there is a difference. I feel like in Flanders there is a slight hint of the Scandinavian way of working as opposed to the Walloon side of Belgium. In my opinion, that side leans more towards the Latin type of business where there are a lot more rules to consider. But yeah, for my feeling people are more open and as a result people are more at ease to speak their minds and communicate. It is part of the Scandinavian way as well. for example, transparency is very important. I think that people have a greater sense of responsibility and a greater autonomy in making everyday decisions and that makes people more transparent.

What are the big differences in style of verbal communication between Sweden and Belgium except from the language?

The cautiousness in communication is something that really struck me when I first arrived there, apart from all the other differences I have told you before. People and companies are keen on avoiding conflict of any sort. Like with the example of my meeting, they will not interrupt someone to say that they do not agree with something. I feel like the biggest differences in general occur in verbal communication. In general, regarding language, Swedish people are really good English speakers, but they do appreciate it when a new client speaks a few words of Swedish and they form an easier connection I feel like when someone new speaks Swedish. They also give Swedish lessons to everyone coming to the country to work and live there. So, they really want you to integrate as quickly as possible because a lot of the daily aspects of life are only available in Swedish and not in English.

What are the big differences in style of non-verbal communication between Sweden and Belgium except from the language? For example, in meetings, presentations, body language, social habits and more.

I do not feel like there are a lot of differences regarding non-verbal communication. The only thing that I feel like is truly visible is that Swedish people are a lot more distant than other cultures, not only in daily life but also in the business world I feel like. They are more distant in every aspect of communication.

What are the big differences in style of written communication between Sweden and Belgium except from the language? (think of reports, e-mails, style of writing, level of professionalism, etc.)

In written communication regarding reports or something like that there is not much of a difference. However, I do feel like the writing style in e-mails is more casual than it would be in Belgium. People address each other with their first name and do not always adhere strictly to the business e-mail form that a lot of schools and companies in Belgium want you to use.

But other than that, there is not much of a difference. It is mostly in communication within the company and with the clients that communication is more casual. But you must keep in mind that because it is written in a more casual way that it does not mean that there is no professionalism present. People still expect your work to be done correctly and professionally.

Are there any noticeable differences in website communication?

Because we have a global website and lots of different, smaller websites per brand that we carry, it is difficult adapting every site to the country that we work with. That is why we chose to have a global site in English. Sweden ranks very high on the knowledge of the English language so that is no problem. I think it may be handy and useful to have a translation of the website in Swedish, as it is seen as a token of appreciation.

Which one of these subdivisions on communication was the hardest to adapt to in your new function? And what was a positive change regarding communication?

I feel like verbal communication was to most difficult one to adapt to, because it is the most prominent one. It occurs everywhere. In meetings and in in the everyday way of doing business.

If you knew all positive and negative elements of adapting to a new company culture in advance, would the change have gone by smoother? Did this change to the new culture meet your expectations or did you have another idea of the new organizational culture?

I feel like I was informed pretty well. I would do it again if I knew all the ups and downs for sure. As I told you before, you will never go abroad and find everything a positive or a negative change, you know? There are always good and bad aspects. I feel like the change would not necessarily have gone by smoother, it would be nice however to get a bit more guidance before making my decision in going abroad. That way, I would not have to inform

myself and look up all that information myself when I wanted to make that decision. I consider myself lucky to have that new experience and to be able to work abroad so much.

I did have some ideas on the new business culture. But they mostly deemed to be true, however I did not expect the systems set in place to be so intricate, there is a lot more detail to it than you would imagine.

Would upfront information from HR, a guide, website, or support agencies have helped you or the company in this transition?

I feel like it would help people or companies going abroad to Sweden on their own. It is difficult to say for me because I had a lot of guidance from the company. But I do feel like being informed in something that is necessary, even in in a country where on first sight, the culture is not that different from Belgium or other European countries even.

9.7. Valerie

What is your name?	Valerie
Family situation? Alone or with family?	With Family
What company do you work for?	H&M
In what language do you communicate with your subordinates?	English
What is your function? Description of what you do. (How many people do you manage?)	Merchandising expert Company name: H&M Duration of employment: two years
How long have you been in Sweden?	two years
Duration of the interview	30 minutes

Hello, I will first explain what this interview will be used for. I am Daphne Haegheman and I am a Business Management International Entrepreneurship student from Ghent. I am currently doing an internship for Flanders Investment and Trade and as part of my bachelor thesis and under the supervision of Flanders Investment and Trade Stockholm, I would like to talk to you about the difference in corporate culture and corporate communication for a company or person who represents a company that is coming to Sweden for trade or the establishment of a company. Since you work or have worked in a Swedish work culture and you are familiar with the process of adapting to the Swedish work culture, I will briefly ask you some questions if that is okay with you.

Can you tell me a little bit more about yourself? Such as your position in the company, family situation and how you got in this situation? And so on?

My name is Valerie, I now work for H&M at the head office in Stockholm as a Merchandising expert. I have been doing this for about two years. How did I end up here? Well, I used to work for H&M at the head office in Brussels where I was a production manager, I saw an internal job opening at the head office here in Stockholm.

I applied for it, and after coming here for a personal interview I could start. That is when the procedure started and that is how the whole process started. That was in 2018, then I moved here with my husband and children and I have been living here for two years now. The work that I do here is on a managerial level, but it is different than Belgium in that sense that it is not obvious that I work at a managerial level. I have the feeling that although I work at that level, it is not the most important aspect of my job, everyone is more chill about functions and titles, I have no people under me, I work in a team. I communicate in English, but I am taking lessons in Swedish, so I have a basic understanding.

Can you briefly describe the company culture present in your company and job? This in the respect of company rules, so rules established by the company needed to be followed by everyone, company habits and company behavior. Company habits exist of habits that everyone follows in the company, for example the Fika break or regular outings with colleagues. Company behavior is the way that the company behaves itself to their internal and external stakeholders such as clients and employees.

I think that the rules in the company were easy to figure out, because H&M is already a Swedish company, it was easier to adapt to the culture present at the company. Most of the unwritten rules were regarding communication, there were a lot of details to take into consideration, but I see you have some questions about that later, I will tell you then. Also, one of the unwritten rules that I feel like are not always practiced as much as in Belgium is that people are very transparent in their way of working and talking with other, they do not really keep secrets from each other. The common rules such as time and working conditions were written in the contract, but are really flexible, if for example I need to leave work earlier that is no problem, as long as I get my work done.

Company habits I think are mostly centered around contact. The Fika for example is something that is holy here in Sweden and something that we practice every day. We do it in the morning and in the evening and it takes about a half an hour. It is not just for relaxation, but we really discuss work problems and other things. The only thing that we do not really talk about at work is personal life.

Regarding the company behavior, there is not much of a difference, because H&M is a global company, we do adapt to each area and country. For example, in Sweden values such as sustainability, autonomy, responsibility and transparency are important. You can see that in the business culture but also in the general culture. People and the government are very transparent, you can see that with the corona virus as well nowadays, the government trusts the people to do everything they can and that is why they do not close the shops here. Behavior of people in the company is more casual but also more distant. Casual because of the horizontal structure, there is no inhibition to talk to anyone and also just in communication in general they are more casual, but they do not share a lot, the work-life balance is really important here and you will rarely here about someone's personal life.

How were the company rules, habits and company behavior communicated to you?

I got most of the information from HR in the beginning of my job. Other than that, I feel like that my colleagues are the ones that provided me with information about how I should behave and what the habits are in the company. I got some information on the business culture from Sweden before I went there, So I had the theories, my colleagues and friend just helped me put it into practice.

What are the big differences compared to Belgium companies?

I feel like one of the biggest differences is the horizontal structure in the company. There is no hierarchy as I witnessed in Belgium. There is much more an incline to work in teams rather than to have a manager for example that takes all the decisions. I feel like that is also a big part of communication in the company, everyone is really easy to talk to and you do not feel nervous to talk to your manager, it is not looked at as a disturbance. This was definitely a big difference.

Also, just communication in general is way more casual than you would expect people to be in Sweden, especially when you come from Belgium. People are addressed by their first name, regardless of the function that they have. But it is difficult because it is not because the conversation is casual, that you will know more than you would in a strict conversation, because these people are so distant, they like to dance around the subject as to not really tell you directly what they mean. So, you are never sure what the purpose of the conversation is, or what the feedback is like.

The way of dressing is also something that I really noticed. In Belgium, you really dress up for your job and the men for example walk around in suits and fancy clothes, especially in a higher function. Women are dressed in skirts and stuff like that, especially in the fashion sector. But in Sweden, your credibility or knowledge is not determined on the fact whether you are dressed nice or not. The dress code in the company is mostly casual and informal, even in meeting with clients and partners.

The work-life balance is something that really struck me. It was not until a year in at the Christmas party that I got to know that some of my colleagues had children for example. There is no need for the people to participate in small-talk and rather just keep to the surface and talk business. You do not contact your colleagues after working hours and you do not send any mails when they are on vacation. That is also why it is difficult to make friends at work, in Belgium for example the family life is something that people tend to share really quickly, so it is easier to make a connection. In Sweden, there is just way less pressure to share that.

In what way is the company culture promoted by HR? how did they support this adaption to the new company culture and how did you experience this? For example, visuals, guide, websites, teambuilding, etc.

There are a lot of different activities within the company that try to bring the employees closer together, for example, when I first got there, I got assigned a person to whom I could ask questions about Sweden or about the company, although I did not really use that, it was nice to know that there was a safety net. There are team outings and Christmas parties for example, but it is hard to really get to know colleagues, because of the distance that they have.

In general, how did you experience the company culture in compared to your past experiences working in Belgium?

It did experience it as an improvement. It is easy to adapt to, despite the differences, I think it will be harder coming back to Belgium. I really like that the atmosphere is more casual but that you are still judged on your knowledge and skills. If you do not have to worry about housing and stuff, it is nice to have some time in the company and really focus on contacting your colleagues.

Did you seek external help when coming to Sweden or did you inform yourself on this change?

I mostly informed myself on this change because I found the position on my own as well as I did do the interview alone. I informed myself on Sweden first and then made the decision to go there.

Were you briefed on the new company culture or did you research yourself (if yes, how)? did you wish you had any briefing beforehand? Did you experience it as positive or negative? What effect did it have on your arrival and new function?

I did do research myself, but I also got some guidance from the company, however, that guidance is mostly for practical things and not as much for the adaptation process in the new company culture. Everything regarding culture I had to research on my own, I just researched the most important stuff like the horizontal structure on the internet as well as the structure of the headquarters and everything.

What was the most difficult aspect of the new company culture to deal with and how did you cope with it?

I think the hardest thing to adapt to be that decision-making process. Because in Belgium, decisions need to be made quickly and the manager has the power to just take that decision. Here in Sweden, you really have to wait until everyone has chipped in and has given their opinion, but that can take a while because the people are not easy to just say what they like and don't like, they are more distant in communication and will always say that something looks good, however they feel like it is not.

Another difficult aspect is that getting feedback is really hard, Because these people dance around the subject and are not easy in saying that something is just bad, you never really know if you are doing good at the company. They will always just focus on the positive aspects of your work and not as much on the negative and if something really needs to change, they will say it really nicely, you almost do not notice that they are actually giving critics. When I first started for example, I was never sure if the people liked my work or if they did not. Therefore, it is easy to feel insecure. You really must ask for specific feedback as well as keep in mind that you cannot expect an answer right back.

People will need time to think about how they will phrase any negative feedback, the same goes for a company. They will always show initial interest, but in Belgium showing interest means that you are interested and want to continue the process. In Sweden, the company will always listen to the client, but they will wait several weeks to give you an answer. When I get a project to do, I only get told what the end result needs to look like and they do not give any feedback on how you actually did the project, as long as it is done in an honest way of course. They trust the people a lot and let them do their own thing and will only give feedback if you ask for it or at the end of the project.

Communication plays a big role in any company culture. Could you describe briefly the most prominent differences between your current company and previous experiences in Belgium?

Communication I feel like is the biggest difference you can have regarding the differences between Belgium and Sweden. There are a lot of details to consider. A first difference is that people really want input of everyone, they really want to reach consensus. Because the organization is that flat, everyone gets to have a say in the decision that needs to be made, everyone waits their turn in a meeting and gets to give their opinion. Meeting can take very long because of it, that is also because people are less direct in addressing people.

What are the big differences in style of verbal communication between Sweden and Belgium except from the language?

See previous question in differences with Belgium.

What are the big differences in style of non-verbal communication between Sweden and Belgium except from the language? For example, in meetings, presentations, body language, social habits and more.

People tend to be a bit more stand-offish. For example, in Belgium if you know your colleague very well, you give them three kisses and you greet them as you would a friend, but in Sweden, people are more reserved. They tend to keep distance, for example when they are waiting for the bus or train.

What are the big differences in style of written communication between Sweden and Belgium except from the language? (think of reports, e-mails, style of writing, level of professionalism, etc.)

There are not really any differences in the written communication within the company. The only thing is that also in mails, people also address their colleagues in a casual matter. For example, in Belgium you would keep up with the traditional business mail structure as well as the addressing the people you send it to with the right title. That is not really the case in Sweden. You can just address people by their first name and just write the message in a casual manner, without having to worry too much about the structure it has.

Are there any noticeable differences in website communication?

There are no real differences in website communication towards the client, expect for the fact that the website is available in Swedish and that the prices are adapted to the Swedish Crown. Sometimes we adapt the collections to the Swedish taste of fashion, often that is stamped as simple and classy, so that are collections that we focus on.

Which one of these subdivisions on communication was the hardest to adapt to in your new function? And what was a positive change regarding communication?

I think that the hardest subdivision to adapt to is not really any specific subdivision, but there are some details in every category that you need to adapt to.

If you knew all positive and negative elements of adapting to a new company culture in advance, would the change have gone by smoother? Did this change to the new culture meet your expectations or did you have another idea of the new organizational culture?

I would do it again with the knowledge that I have now. Sweden is a very interesting country to work in and to move to, I really like the culture in the company. However, I am happy that I moved here with my husband and my kids, because it is hard to make friends in Sweden, so it is nice to already have that company.

Would upfront information from HR, a guide, website, or support agencies have helped you or the company in this transition?

I had good guidance from my company, but I feel like that a guide regarding general business culture would be good.

9.8. Stijn Vets

What is your name?	Stijn Vets
Family situation? Alone or with family?	Alone
What company do you work for?	Coca-Cola at the time
In what language do you communicate with your subordinates?	English & basic Swedish
What is your function? Description of what you do. (How many people do you manage?)	Sr Manager RGM pricing & trade Coca-Cola European Partners Duration of employment: two years
How long have you been in Sweden?	two years
Duration of the interview	30 minutes

Hello, I will first explain what this interview will be used for. I am Daphne Haegheman and I am a Business Management International Entrepreneurship student from Ghent. I am currently doing an internship for Flanders Investment and Trade and as part of my bachelor thesis and under the supervision of Flanders Investment and Trade Stockholm, I would like to talk to you about the difference in corporate culture and corporate communication for a company or person who represents a company that is coming to Sweden for trade or the establishment of a company. Since you work or have worked in a Swedish work culture and you are familiar with the process of adapting to the Swedish work culture, I will briefly ask you some questions if that is okay with you.

Can you tell me a little bit more about yourself? Such as your position in the company, family situation and how you got in this situation? And so on?

I am Stijn Vets and I worked in Sweden for a couple of years, but I just got back to Belgium. I was working at Coca-Cola at the time. I ended up there because Coca-Cola Enterprise, had bought a number of countries and so all those Scandinavian countries such as Sweden and Norway joined the group and because those countries actually had to follow the way of working and so of the more historic countries being France, Belgium, the Netherlands and the UK, they thought it was a good idea to send some people to those countries as well to apply that way of working there. And because you are from a high level within finance, then you also had responsibility for those different countries and that's a good thing of course that you have market knowledge of more than one country, so it is good that you go there to gain that market experience and that way of working there actually learn a little bit. I left in 2015 and stayed there for two years. It was a short but intensive period. In the meantime, I am working back in Belgium. The work I did there was at managerial level, I had some people there among me. I was on manager level, but I did not have anyone reporting to me.

Can you briefly describe the company culture present in your company and job? This in the respect of company rules, so rules established by the company needed to be followed by everyone, company habits and company behavior. Company habits exist of habits that everyone follows in the company, for example the Fika break or regular outings with colleagues. Company behavior is the way that the company behaves itself to their internal and external stakeholders such as clients and employees.

The company culture is seriously different from the Belgian culture, even within the company. The culture is not because it was still Coca-Cola. Just the Swedish mentality was completely different from the Belgian one. This is mainly expressed in the work-life balance of that culture. That value was great in the company. There were, of course, the classic values such as that horizontal structure and that equality that were present there that made that way of working completely different.

As far as rules were concerned, there were always a few small rules in addition to the normal ones, of course, that I had to adapt to and that only existed in Sweden. For example, the fact that after a certain hour no mails could be sent, or no meetings could be organized on Wednesdays. That was completely different.

In terms of behavior there wasn't really the difference because Coca-Cola is a large global company and it wants to bring out the same amount of money everywhere, the value of transparency and equality and so on are values that the company wants to bring out anyway so I'm not sure if this is actually specific to Sweden.

How were the company rules, habits and company behavior communicated to you?

All the information was given to me at the beginning when I had the job. The first few days I received a lot of information from HR and from my colleagues in Sweden. The rules, for example, were then communicated. But in terms of culture and behavior towards stakeholders, I already knew about it because I worked for Coca-Cola before I moved to Sweden.

What are the big differences compared to Belgium companies?

The work-life balance is much more important in Sweden than in Belgium. That was also the biggest difference I had to adapt to when I was back in Belgium. In Sweden, family comes first, then friends and only then comes work. But work really comes a long way below that. They really work to live and certainly not the other way around and that is very clear. You can see that in very concrete things, for example, if a child is sick, they just stay at home and that is no problem for the company. They do not try to find all kinds of solutions to take children to the grandparents or to the childcare as they do in Belgium. They even sometimes take children to work. That was also the first time I saw that. Meetings where children attended, for example.

Another big difference is that Sweden likes to be involved in everything before a decision is made. While in Belgium the highest in rank just decides and not all people even need to be involved in that decision. This does not mean that they think that their opinion should be implemented and that they therefore want to have a real impact, but at least they want to be heard and appreciated before a decision is made. After all, that is an important part of the consensus culture that prevails there.

Another thing that I found a big difference is that Sweden is much calmer in doing business, people do not open their mouths quickly but when they say something then it is to the point and very clear. Contrary to the Netherlands or England who always give their opinion and in Belgium 80% is not necessary and 20% is too much added value.

In a meeting, for example, they do not give their opinion quickly but when a question is asked, an opinion is given with added value. It is important that you really must ask them if you want to know what they think. That is a big difference with Belgium but even more so in other cultures. Sweden is an extreme at it.

In what way is the company culture promoted by HR? how did they support this adaption to the new company culture and how did you experience this? For example, visuals, guide, websites, teambuilding, etc.

HR did not really promote the company culture in the time I was there. They did however brief me on it before I went to Sweden but that was focused more on the way of doing business rather than the culture that was there.

In general, how did you experience the company culture in compared to your past experiences working in Belgium?

I experienced it as a positive. I think that because I was open to the Swedish working culture and my personality was more aligned with it; it was easier to adapt to the culture. I had more difficulties coming back from Sweden than I had going there. Sweden is very open to business and people coming from abroad, so you will feel welcome. They are open for opportunities and are easy to make initial contact with. However, it is hard to reach a decision, but once that is done, you feel welcome and they offer a lot of help.

Did you seek external help when coming to Sweden or did you inform yourself on this change?

I had looked up some information myself and I had been in contact with companies and people in Sweden before, so I already knew the most important aspects. On top of that, I had a briefing from the company, so external companies were not really involved. But I can say that it is nice to know the information but also you never really know what to expect until you are there. The difference is still very big.

Were you briefed on the new company culture or did you research yourself (if yes, how)? did you wish you had any briefing beforehand? Did you experience it as positive or negative? What effect did it have on your arrival and new function?

I got help from the company itself. They provided me with a two-day training program on the process on going abroad. There were classes that focused on the specific process and documentation that you had to get, like the Swedish personal number and how to get an apartment. So really focused on the practical side of things. On the other hand, I had classes that focused on the cultural side of things, especially Swedish working culture and culture in general. It was a voluntary class, but I still attended because I wanted as much information as possible before I moved to another country.

What was the most difficult aspect of the new company culture to deal with and how did you cope with it?

It all went very smoothly to adapt to the Swedish culture. I had more trouble adapting to Belgian culture when I came back than when I went to Sweden. I did not really have a point that bothered me, especially because my personality was more in line with the Swedish way of doing business than the Belgian way of doing business. In addition to the cultural adaptation, there was more adaptation that I had to get used to the fact that there was no open space to work in. You did not have that much contact with the people and that made it even more difficult to make contact. There were certain rules that I had to adapt to. For example, after six o'clock and in the weekends no mails could be sent and on Wednesdays no meetings were allowed.

These little rules were more difficult to adapt to because you are used to working and deciding much faster in Belgium. Adapting to this new way of work-life balance was quite an adjustment. As an expat you do not always have a lot to do, but this work-life balance does force you to adapt to it. These are just a few small dots but in general it went very smoothly.

Communication plays a big role in any company culture. Could you describe briefly the most prominent differences between your current company and previous experiences in Belgium?

I didn't really notice the differences myself because I used to have to work with international clients all the time, so those people were often a bit more open in contact than the average Swede, if I may put it that way. I did have the feeling that Sweden closed itself off a bit more than Belgium, for example.

I see that in all areas of contact, for example, they do not like it when a decision must be made very directly, they always want to hear the opinion of others. They are a bit more distant in talking and often avoid conflicts, the problem is that so often things do not become clear and the process to decide can suddenly take much longer.

In Belgium, a manager can make a quick decision without any or much less input. This is less the case in Sweden.

Also, on physical contact people are much more distant, people keep their distance when they are waiting in the queue for something or they meet people for the first time.

What are the big differences in style of verbal communication between Sweden and Belgium except from the language?

It is really clear when you come to Sweden that people are more distant in communicating while doing business, they hardly say anything on their own but when they give an opinion, they do mean it. That is why it is important to ask questions and take the initiative yourself. In Belgium this is much less the case.

What are the big differences in style of non-verbal communication between Sweden and Belgium except from the language? For example, in meetings, presentations, body language, social habits and more.

Answered in the previous question.

What are the big differences in style of written communication between Sweden and Belgium except from the language? (think of reports, e-mails, style of writing, level of professionalism, etc.)

I think people are more casual in their conversation, but I feel like that is more because people are easier to approach with the horizontal hierarchy that is present in the office and in every other company in Sweden.

I think that the horizontal structure in the company is the cause of many differences because it makes communication easier between manager and subordinate. People are not afraid to send or ask questions.

Are there any noticeable differences in website communication?

Because Coca-Cola enterprises has a global website, it is not much of a difference, everything is in English but other than that there are no differences. I think that just in general, people in Sweden prefer a simple and clear website without any flashing colors or difficult pattern.

Which one of these subdivisions on communication was the hardest to adapt to in your new function? And what was a positive change regarding communication?

I think that there are not really any subdivisions that are easier to adapt to than others, I feel like there are a lot of different details that you need to take into account in every part of communication.

If you knew all positive and negative elements of adapting to a new company culture in advance, would the change have gone by smoother? Did this change to the new culture meet your expectations or did you have another idea of the new organizational culture?

I would have done it again; I feel like I was well prepared because I had done research on my own and I had the two-day training from my company. The move to Sweden met my expectations and I miss it. It was easy to adapt to the business culture and the way of living.

Would upfront information from HR, a guide, website, or support agencies have helped you or the company in this transition?

I feel like I did not really need it, but I can imagine that it would be handy for other people who are coming on their own or companies that want to establish here.

9.9. Tom Vandecasteele

What is your name?	Tom Vandecasteele
Family situation? Alone or with family?	Alone
What company do you work for?	Michael Page (at the time)
In what language do you communicate with your subordinates?	English
What is your function? Description of what you do. (How many people do you manage?)	Manager Company name: Michael Page Duration of employment: one year and a half
How long have you been in Sweden?	> one year
Duration of the interview	35 minutes

Hello, I will first explain what this interview will be used for. I am Daphne Haegheman and I am a Business Management International Entrepreneurship student from Ghent. I am currently doing an internship for Flanders Investment and Trade and as part of my bachelor thesis and under the supervision of Flanders Investment and Trade Stockholm, I would like to talk to you about the difference in corporate culture and corporate communication for a company or person who represents a company that is coming to Sweden for trade or the establishment of a company. Since you work or have worked in a Swedish work culture and you are familiar with the process of adapting to the Swedish work culture, I will briefly ask you some questions if that is okay with you.

Can you tell me a little bit more about yourself? Such as your position in the company, family situation and how you got in this situation? And so on?

My name is Tom Vandecasteele, I worked in a famous headhunting office, a British company in Belgium and they wanted to expand the business in the Nordics and I actually went there to direct the company to start that process and start a new division there in Sweden. It is not like I had to set up a whole new entity to complete the work. It was more of an extension. This was within an existing office; my employer was Michael page in Stockholm. I worked there for a couple of years and then I just returned to Belgium, that's one year ago now. In that situation I was still a bachelor and had no family to go with. I also had the position of manager there and had a few people under me. I communicated with them in English.

Can you briefly describe the company culture present in your company and job? This in the respect of company rules, so rules established by the company needed to be followed by everyone, company habits and company behavior. Company habits exist of habits that everyone follows in the company, for example the Fika break or regular outings with colleagues. Company behavior is the way that the company behaves itself to their internal and external stakeholders such as clients and employees.

The rules were quite the same as other companies. They mainly existed out of the rules regarding working hours and presence at the office, pay and all that sort of stuff. Also, who your boss is and who you will be reporting to and specific procedures that are set in stone, but that is it.

Regarding habits, I did not really notice any specific habits at the office. The Fika for example was present but not always as important as they say. But what really struck me was the tobacco bags they put under the upper lip, even in meetings this was done. This is not the specific Swedish culture I think but it was a heavy habit that I found shocking. This was also the case in meetings with clients, so it was the toughest.

The company behavior was not specific to the office in Sweden as they wanted to portray the same image all over the world. The behavior of the company to external and internal stakeholders were approximately the same.

How were the company rules, habits and company behavior communicated to you?

The rules and the behavior of the company were communicated in the beginning of my time here by HR, you can compare it to additional documents with your contract. But there was not really any specific communication behavior or something like that. Habits and behavior were something that became present when you started working or when doing projects for the first time. When you made a mistake or something like that, it got corrected and that way, you knew what the habits or the behavior was like.

What are the big differences compared to Belgium companies?

For me, the biggest difference in the company culture when I got there was the horizontal company structure. There is hardly any hierarchy, even though in other offices of the company where I had worked, there was a clear vertical structure. I also had the strong feeling that this vertical hierarchy was not accepted in the Swedish office. A CEO who hits the table and says that his decisions must be followed does not work at all and could never be grounded in the company. I think that is really the biggest difference, especially since it is not present in other Michael Page offices, it is really a Swedish or Scandinavian principle. I really noticed that everyone had their say and those opinions that were given in daily life and in meetings.

In what way is the company culture promoted by HR? how did they support this adaption to the new company culture and how did you experience this? For example, visuals, guide, websites, teambuilding, etc.

HR was not really involved in the getting to know process of the company. They brought me up to date with the rules of the company of course and the behavior the company had with its clients and the image it portrayed. But the habits were not really explained that much, I got this information from clients close to me.

In general, how did you experience the company culture in compared to your past experiences working in Belgium?

I experienced it neither a positive nor a negative one. There were many positive points about the new corporate culture and, by extension, the Swedish business culture, but not everything was so positive. I think that Belgium also has many positive points, for example regarding the decision process. I had the choice between Mexico and Sweden and would have preferred Mexico anyway.

Did you seek external help when coming to Sweden or did you inform yourself on this change?

Michael Page sent me there, so I came from the same company. I was under a Swedish employment contract though. But I did not seek any external help, because me moving was encouraged by the company and I stayed within that company, What I did think was that I wouldn't be that different, but the culture was actually really something to take into account.

Were you briefed on the new company culture or did you research yourself (if yes, how)? did you wish you had any briefing beforehand? Did you experience it as positive or negative? What effect did it have on your arrival and new function?

In terms of adapting to the company culture, if I had arrived there, there would have been no help from the company. Indeed, I would have had to explore more myself to get to know that culture and habits. What the company did offer were Swedish lessons once a day a week to help with communication. But for the rest there was not much else on offer. there was not much information about guidance on adapting culture. But I did not ask for that either, the expectations were not there with me.

I did not get any guidance from the company because they were more concerned with me staying within the same company, but not that I would end up in an adjusted work culture. They did help with the practical things like moving and other things, but there was no information about social integration within the company or what I should consider when doing business with Swedish customers or companies.

What was the most difficult aspect of the new company culture to deal with and how did you cope with it?

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What struck me in Sweden and the Swedish culture within the company is that they are open to working together but that the stunt factor is not that high. By that I mean that there is no tendency to take risks. People prefer to wait and are very calculated to do business. I think that is why everyone's different opinions are so important.

In Belgium people take more risks in business and are inclined to take decisions right away. It was difficult dealing with the indecisiveness and long decision process because sometimes I just wanted something done and I had to wait for other to approve and consent to the decision.

Communication plays a big role in any company culture. Could you describe briefly the most prominent differences between your current company and previous experiences in Belgium?

In terms of meetings and communication Sweden was a bit more distant and informal, but the behavior and language were a bit more informal than you would be used to in Belgium for example. Immediately use a first name, within the company but also in contact with customers. I think that also relates to the hierarchical aspect of the office there. the threshold to talk to the boss is much less than in Belgium. In business they are also very transparent and open, this really struck me. On websites of potential clients, for example, there are all the contact details of the employees, where this would be much more difficult in Belgium. When it comes to gaining access to new customers, it sometimes seems as if contact is very easy and transparent. They are friendly and very polite, there are certainly no problems in that respect, despite the aloofness that sometimes occurs. Meetings, for example, are set up fairly quickly, so that as a manager or company you sometimes have a false feeling that you are doing well but it is often the case that they let you come out of politeness, but that doesn't mean that they have any interest in what you offer.

What are the big differences in style of verbal communication between Sweden and Belgium except from the language?

The language in the company was more casual then a Belgian. People could address each other with their first name, even if you wanted to contact your bosses' boss, you could simply address them by their first name. Just in general, people were more casual. But this did not mean that they spoke a lot. People are very protective of personal life. So, you should not expect to make close friends at the company in your first few weeks for example.

What are the big differences in style of non-verbal communication between Sweden and Belgium except from the language? For example, in meetings, presentations, body language, social habits and more.

You could see that because Swedes are more introverted that they are also more distant when you first meet them, like when you meet with clients for the first time. They really value

personal space so they will not give kisses on the cheek with colleagues or something like that, but other than that, there are no significant differences that I particularly noticed.

What are the big differences in style of written communication between Sweden and Belgium except from the language? (think of reports, e-mails, style of writing, level of professionalism, etc.)

I did not notice any specific and clear differences while communicating on paper. Only that maybe it took a bit longer to get an answer, but that relates back to the fact that the decision-making process is long in Sweden, so it normal that the mails take longer. But other than that, not really.

Are there any noticeable differences in website communication?

Not really, for the client it still is the same. That is important because we only have one website for all the countries, we are present in, so the Swedes do not really bother that much, I think. What I would recommend is to have a translation of the website in Swedish, I feel like Swedish employees always appreciate it when new people or expats speak the language, so I feel like they would appreciate it if there is a Swedish option for the new website as well.

Which one of these subdivisions on communication was the hardest to adapt to in your new function? And what was a positive change regarding communication?

I think that verbal communication was the most significant change. Especially that consensus culture and the long decision-making process. Also, the fact that people avoid conflict and do not give their opinion straight away. A positive change in communication was the fact that these people were nice and kind. They are not the most approachable people, but they never hesitate to offer help and they will help you until they cannot anymore.

If you knew all positive and negative elements of adapting to a new company culture in advance, would the change have gone by smoother? Did this change to the new culture meet your expectations or did you have another idea of the new organizational culture?

I would Definity go through the process again. It met my expectations and I think that this is something that everyone needs to do when they are young to be able to further their career.

Would upfront information from HR, a guide, website, or support agencies have helped you or the company in this transition?

I think that it would be nice. It is not such a good idea to just pack up and leave to move to a different country. Even if you know the main differences in culture, I think you should read up on it or talk to people who have already been through that process. A guide would be handy, but I do not think I would use a guide from a random website, it would have to be a respectable source.

9.10. Norbert van de Velde

What is your name?	Norbert van de Velde
Family situation? Alone or with family?	With partner
What company do you work for?	Sveriges Veterinärmedicinska Anstalt (SVA)
In what language do you communicate with your subordinates?	Swedish
What is your function? Description of what you do. (How many people do you manage?)	Veterinary pathologist. Company name: SVA Duration of employment: one year
How long have you been in Sweden?	> One year
Duration of the interview	30 minutes

Hello, I will first explain what this interview will be used for. I am Daphne Haegheman and I am a Business Management International Entrepreneurship student from Ghent. I am currently doing an internship for Flanders Investment and Trade and as part of my bachelor thesis and under the supervision of Flanders Investment and Trade Stockholm, I would like to talk to you about the difference in corporate culture and corporate communication for a company or person who represents a company that is coming to Sweden for trade or the establishment of a company. Since you work or have worked in a Swedish work culture and you are familiar with the process of adapting to the Swedish work culture, I will briefly ask you some questions if that is okay with you.

Can you tell me a little bit more about yourself? Such as your position in the company, family situation and how you got in this situation? And so on?

My name is Norbert van de Velde and I am currently 30 years old. I work for *Sveriges Veterinärmedicinska Anstalt (SVA)* as a Veterinary pathologist. I mainly do diagnostic work that consists of two parts. On one hand I do post-mortem examination on both production and companion animals to establish a cause of death. On the other hand, I examine biopsies of live animals to diagnose a certain disease. I have been in Sweden for half a year since October last year (2019) and I have been living together with my girlfriend since I arrived in Sweden. So, I am legally living together. I mainly communicate in Swedish with my colleagues, but of course I speak Dutch with my family.

Can you briefly describe the company culture present in your company and job? This in the respect of company rules, so rules established by the company needed to be followed by everyone, company habits and company behavior. Company habits exist of

habits that everyone follows in the company, for example the Fika break or regular outings with colleagues. Company behavior is the way that the company behaves itself to their internal and external stakeholders such as clients and employees.

For company rules, the only thing that comes to mind is the lack of rules regarding communication. I do not have the idea that at my company there are certain rules one needs to follow, apart from common decency of course. One's privacy is much respected, and people are aware not to cross those boundaries between work and private life if one does not feel like it. For example, there are colleagues with whom I can easily share my salary and financial situation with and others from which I barely know what their private life looks like.

The most obvious company habit is of course the Fika as you mentioned. Fika is a big part of the working day. Both at 9:30 and 14:30 there's Fika (basically drinking coffee, sometimes with something sweet) where I and my colleagues talk mostly about non-work-related stuff. It is regarded as asocial to never show up at Fika. Also, there is a tendency to include everybody in the decision-making process. This is done through meetings, which are held regularly.

For company behavior, the company I work in mainly tries to express a professional and responsible attitude towards the outer world. We are a governmental organization, which is not aimed at making profit, but aimed at executing our duties. Internally, it is regarded that everyone is member of the same team although we have a stronger binding with the specific department, we work in.

How were the company rules, habits and company behavior communicated to you?

For the company rules, they were given to me together with my contract. I was given a document by HR, which explained the main rules (e.g. working hours, holidays, other benefits such as fitness and well-being). Company habits are not specifically mentioned, but often, they were explained to me during my first days at work as part of my introduction. Company behavior was not specifically communicated to me, but this is something that the employee notices and experiences while working there.

What are the big differences compared to Belgium companies?

I feel like there is more transparency in the decisions made. In Belgium I had the feeling decision were made above my head and I was not always aware of the consequences that the decision had for me. Secondly, Social time was regarded at the place I worked at in Belgium as something which only benefits the employees and not the company. Meetings were not held at the place I worked at in Belgium, only at occasions that something went wrong and needed immediate fixing.

A big difference was that although the company I worked for in Belgium was also a governmental organization (university), there was less emphasis on the responsibilities we had towards the society.

Also, the horizontal structure is something that I had to get used to, for my organization being a governmental organization, there was way less of a hierarchy than there was in Belgium.

In what is the company culture promoted by HR? how did they support this adaption to the new company culture and how did you experience this? For example, visuals, guide, websites, teambuilding, etc.

That is a difficult point because I have the feeling that the company culture in my company is mainly developed by the people who work there instead of being set out by HR. HR does organize a yearly teambuilding day and each individual department is responsible for the binding among the colleagues.

In general, how did you experience the company culture in compared to your past experiences working in Belgium?

In general, I prefer the Swedish way of doing things (at least based on my experiences). People are more willing to speak out their minds and there is generally less gossip. I do have made some good relationships with some former colleagues with who I am still in contact with. I hope I will be able to establish similar relationships here in Sweden.

Did you seek external help when coming to Sweden or did you inform yourself on this change?

I did not seek external help on this. I had certain expectations about working in Sweden for example the transparency in communication, the flat hierarchy, and the informality and casual atmosphere, which mostly turned out to be true. I did not take any courses on the culture or anything. The fact that I already learned Swedish helped a lot with the integration in the company I feel. Swedish people are good in speaking English, but they appreciated the fact that I wanted to learn their language.

Were you briefed on the new company culture or did you research yourself (if yes, how)? did you wish you had any briefing beforehand? Did you experience it as positive or negative? What effect did it have on your arrival and new function?

I was not briefed specifically about this as far as I can remember. I mostly had some preconceptions about the culture in the company, like the flat hierarchy and the reservation of Swedish people, which mostly turned out to be true. The only thing I can think of is that they asked me during my job interview if I was able to deal with working in a flat hierarchy. The briefing was more integrated in the first days, where my colleagues gave me the information, I needed to be able to do something. I feel that I smoothly integrated into the

company and its culture. I did not have the need of knowing something beforehand because I already had a pretty good idea of how the company works and what it will be like.

What was the most difficult aspect of the new company culture to deal with and how did you cope with it?

Obviously, the language creates a certain barrier in the beginning days of the company, even if you know the basics of it. Although I can easily communicate in Swedish with my co-workers, I still have the feeling that I sometimes miss out on details of things that are talked about during Fika, and during other informal conversations. When with other Swedish people, they tend to continue speaking their language, because they assume you can understand. This is only about the details and the nuances of the conversation though; I never had a problem understanding the core concepts of the conversation. Next to that, people are reserved, so small talk is not that easy, people keep their personal life and professional life strictly separated, so it is hard to make good friends in the beginning.

Communication plays a big role in any company culture. Could you describe briefly the most prominent differences between your current company and previous experiences in Belgium?

In general, there is much more communication between colleagues regarding decision-making and managing of the workload. The idea is that all coworkers should be involved in the process so that they feel responsible for the solution. The consensus is clear in meetings and if a decision needs to be made. This slows the process down because every single person needs to agree.

What are the big differences in style of verbal communication between Sweden and Belgium except from the language?

In one way, swedes tend to be a bit more drawn-back and introvert as is stereotypical for the Scandinavian attitude. They have more of a wait-and-see attitude in contrast to the Belgians who want to take more immediate action and can make an immediate decision without the opinion of all the different people. On the other hand, I feel that Swedish people speak out their minds more than the Belgians do and will not steer away from a confrontation when they think it is valid and they are right.

What are the big differences in style of non-verbal communication between Sweden and Belgium except from the language? For example, in meetings, presentations, body language, social habits and more.

Personally, I think there is not that much difference regarding non-verbal communication. I can say however regarding meetings that people keep their distance more easily and are not that inclined to kiss each other on the cheek as more familiar people in Belgium maybe would. I think it relates back towards to more introvert attitude of the people and that they want to keep their work and personal like more separated.

What are the big differences in style of written communication between Sweden and Belgium except from the language? (think of reports, e-mails, style of writing, level of professionalism, etc.)

Among colleagues and within the company, the use of emoticons is well accepted here in Sweden, also among people with different 'ranks', for example a head of department in communication with experts or with administrative workers. Also, the professional language is slightly more informal without being too casual. A good example of that is the use of the first name in communication within the company. In mails or when you meet each other you can just use the first name. I think that is much less the case in Belgium. The first time you use the last name and then the person gives permission to use the first name. Even in communication with customers.

Are there any noticeable differences in website communication?

My former department in Belgium did not have a website with active communication, so I cannot compare the two.

Which one of these subdivisions on communication was the hardest to adapt to in your new function? And what was a positive change regarding communication?

It is a bit of a challenge to find out where the boundaries between politeness and formality lie and to find a good balance between the two. For example, it is considered polite to hold the door for someone, but do not overdo it and it is not regarded positive to hold the door for a woman just because she is a woman. I think that is because the company wants to emphasize equality. A positive change from the communication in Belgium was the open communication and lack of competition between colleagues. It is no problem to communicate one's shortcomings or drawbacks and you do not have to be afraid that they will use that information to report differently on you. I feel like in Belgium, in bigger companies, the competition is way bigger, and people will get that information out of you.

If you knew all positive and negative elements of adapting to a new company culture in advance, would the change have gone by smoother? Did this change to the new culture meet your expectations or did you have another idea of the new organizational culture?

In general, I think the whole adaptation went very smoothly. I was received in a way I would receive someone myself. The main idea was to make someone feel at home at their workplace and that is exactly what my colleagues tried to do.

Would upfront information from HR, a guide, website, or support agencies have helped you or the company in this transition?

As I did not experience so many struggles regarding differences in communications, customs, and culture, I do not think this would be necessary for you.

9.11. Andreas

What is your name?	Andreas
Family situation? Alone or with family?	With wife
What company do you work for?	European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC)
In what language do you communicate with your subordinates?	English
What is your function? Description of what you do. (How many people do you manage?)	IT Senior Project Manager and Contract Manager Company name: European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) Duration of employment: five+ years
How long have you been in Sweden?	five+ years
Duration of the interview	35 minutes

Hello, I will first explain what this interview will be used for. I am Daphne Haegheman and I am a Business Management International Entrepreneurship student from Ghent. I am currently doing an internship for Flanders Investment and Trade and as part of my bachelor thesis and under the supervision of Flanders Investment and Trade Stockholm, I would like to talk to you about the difference in corporate culture and corporate communication for a company or person who represents a company that is coming to Sweden for trade or the establishment of a company. Since you work or have worked in a Swedish work culture and you are familiar with the process of adapting to the Swedish work culture, I will briefly ask you some questions if that is okay with you.

Can you tell me a little bit more about yourself? Such as your position in the company, family situation and how you got in this situation? And so on?

So, my name is Andreas and I am currently working and living in Stockholm Sweden with my wife. Now how did I get here? I first joined ECDC of the European commission in 2012. I was working in Luxembourg and Belgium for another European institution and I had a temporary contract. So, when my contract was almost over, I realized I had to go and find another job. There was a job opening for IT project manager here at ECDC in Stockholm and I applied. This year, I will have been here for seven years already. I have grown throughout the years and I have landed the job that I am doing now.

Can you briefly describe the company culture present in your company and job? This in the respect of company rules, so rules established by the company needed to be followed by everyone, company habits and company behavior. Company habits exist of habits that everyone follows in the company, for example the Fika break or regular outings with colleagues. Company behavior is the way that the company behaves itself to their internal and external stakeholders such as clients and employees.

In the European Center for Disease control, I feel like there is not really a traditional Swedish atmosphere. There are a lot of nationalities working at the center and a mix of cultures is always present. We do have however some of the traditional company rules because we are in Sweden, for example working hours and pay, but other than that, there are not really any rules that stand out to me. Regarding company habits, we do take over some Swedish habits in the working place, for example the Fika, I am sure you have heard about it. We do use those, but they are not that strict to follow, I mean that not everyone always attends, and it is not always every day and at the same hour. I know that in Swedish companies for example, they do it every day at ten o'clock in the morning and three o'clock in the afternoon, but with us it depends on the situation, if we are busy or not for example. Mostly the Fika is set in place by the Swedish people working at the ECDC, they are about 30% of the total staff. We are 300 people in total. So that is not that much, but I interact with them often. Company behavior for the European Center for Disease control is mostly based on the general image it wants to portray, but there are some Swedish values in there, for example transparency and autonomy. But other than that, it is mostly part of the image that the other European constitutions carry, we must be the same as them.

How were the company rules, habits and company behavior communicated to you?

I think they were first communicated to me when I first started there, we had a briefing of how the company or organization looks like and how it carries itself to their stakeholders. Rules were explained in the contract that I got from HR of course.

What are the big differences compared to Belgium companies?

I think that the biggest difference in Sweden versus Belgium or Luxembourg is the sentence "Lagom", which means not too little and not too much. Sometimes I can see this in business as well as in everyday life that it is another tempo of working. My Swedish friends, people are very neutral, they do not get excited or angry. People are very careful in their expression of emotions. For example, if they are angry with you, they will almost never show it, they will be angry, but they will not display their emotions with you. The same is if people are super excited. This is something that I really had to get used to when I first arrived here. That is a big difference with for example the Spanish way or the Italian way of expressing emotions. They have a more relaxed and calmer attitude. They are a lot more controlled. That is different in Belgium, the tempo there is much higher.

In what way is the company culture promoted by HR? how did they support this adaption to the new company culture and how did you experience this? For example, visuals, guide, websites, teambuilding, etc.

HR does not really promote the company culture. There is a defined image that we want to show the people because we are a European institution, so we just must be as neutral as possible. The most information that I got about the company culture was at the beginning of my employment.

In general, how did you experience the company culture in compared to your past experiences working in Belgium?

I did experience it as a positive, I like the kindness of the people here. Even though people are more distant, they do not hesitate to help you to the extent that they are able to. I like that very much. It is hard to make friends; however, it takes a lot of time. But other than that, I did certainly experience it as a good move.

Did you seek external help when coming to Sweden or did you inform yourself on this change?

I did research a lot of information on my own, other than practical things such as living there. I went to Brussels, where tourist office for Sweden is located. I went there to find some extra information about the culture and there was also a small part about company culture there. Mostly it was information about the country as well as Stockholm, there was a lot of information about the habits of the people. So, it was also personal research before coming to Sweden and to work in this country.

Were you briefed on the new company culture or did you research yourself (if yes, how)? did you wish you had any briefing beforehand? Did you experience it as positive or negative? What effect did it have on your arrival and new function?

Yes, so right before joining the ECDC, with HR, they were very helpful with information on how to find accommodation, giving information on the prices for the rents and the areas where to stay; Also they give me a lot of information on cost of living and the general culture in Sweden, the different areas and so on. This is all information that I really wanted to know beforehand. Company culture and the way of doing business was not really discussed, but that became clearer later and also, had already worked in a lot of European Institutions so I was already quite aware of the inner workings of the company. I did experience the information given beforehand as a real positive. I would not have wanted to leave without knowing where to stay and knowing all these practical things. It made my transition into living in Sweden a lot easier.

What was the most difficult aspect of the new company culture to deal with and how did you cope with it?

Basically, the way of living was the most difficult aspect of adapting to. You always must wait for something. Things do not happen very quickly. If you are requesting something for example, they will say two or three days because it is a rule. But then they will also wait two or three days. When I had to set up an account at the bank for example, it had to be done really quickly, but because procedure gave them a few days, they used up all the time they can get; I have also heard that in business you always have to wait for a long time when you need to decide something. If you need to speed up things, and you give a valid reason, they will not speed it up especially for you, they will stick to procedure. They play by the book, sometimes a bit too much.

Communication plays a big role in any company culture. Could you describe briefly the most prominent differences between your current company and previous experiences in Belgium?

I think that the biggest difference in communication is that there are two ways in communication. People that you do not know, they will try to help you, they are very helpful, up until the point that they are able. I find them very kind and polite, in both general living and in business. They really understand the situation. The other one is that to get a real friend, it will take many years. There is no more than a superficial level of communication, but the level is hard to reach. You really need to know the person and then they will do everything that they possibly can for you. So that in general is something that is different in Belgium. People are easier to approach and to befriend. In Sweden it is way harder to reach people.

What are the big differences in style of verbal communication between Sweden and Belgium except from the language?

People are very distant in their communication, although that people are more casual when they approach you, it is hard to get a hard truth out of them. They often dance around the subject, especially when a decision needs to be made on the spot. They will not say for example when someone wants to go out and eat, they first choose without consulting any other people.

What are the big differences in style of non-verbal communication between Sweden and Belgium except from the language? For example, in meetings, presentations, body language, social habits and more.

I think it relates back to the being neutral, they will not use their hands or a lot of facial expressions if they want to express emotions. I think that this is the biggest difference in non-verbal language. Other than that, I can say that just in general people keep more of a distance, for example when they must make a queue.

What are the big differences in style of written communication between Sweden and Belgium except from the language? (think of reports, e-mails, style of writing, level of professionalism, etc.)

I think that people are more casual in their writing, same as the spoken communication. They address people they have never met with their first name. We would never do something like that in Belgium.

Are there any noticeable differences in website communication?

No, not for ECDC.

Which one of these subdivisions on communication was the hardest to adapt to in your new function? And what was a positive change regarding communication?

I think that communication is the hardest one to adapt to, because there are lot of little nuances to it. But the verbal communication I think is the hardest one to adapt to. Especially because they are very much on their own, so initial contact is difficult.

If you knew all positive and negative elements of adapting to a new company culture in advance, would the change have gone by smoother? Did this change to the new culture meet your expectations or did you have another idea of the new organizational culture?

I think I would do it again, but the business environment is not something that is a deciding factor in that. I think the only thing why I would not come again is the weather. It takes a lot to have such a long winter and a short summer, it takes a toll on people.

Would upfront information from HR, a guide, website, or support agencies have helped you or the company in this transition?

I think that I had a lot of help with the information at the bureau in Brussels about Sweden. It would be nice if there was some type of collected information that contained that information, so that I do not have to go all the way to Brussels on my own to do so.

9.12. Jante's law

“Jante’s Law describes a set of cultural norms common in Nordic countries emphasizing collective well-being and group accomplishments, and disapproval of touting individual victories.

The concept of the Law of Jante, while it is simply a part of the cultural oxygen that everyone here breathes, was laid out in stark terms in a 1933 book called “A Fugitive Crosses His Tracks” written by Danish-Norwegian author Axel Sandemose. (Harvey, 2020)

Here is the list of the fictional Law of Jante as devised by Sandemose:

The Ten Rules of Jante

- 1. Do not think you are anything special.*
- 2. Do not think you are as good as we are.*
- 3. Do not think you are smarter than we are.*
- 4. Do not convince yourself that you are better than we are.*
- 5. Do not think you know more than we do.*
- 6. Do not think you are more important than we are.*
- 7. Do not think you are good at anything.*
- 8. Do not laugh at us.*
- 9. Do not think anyone cares about you.*
- 10. Do not think you can teach us anything. (Harvey, 2020)*

9.13. List of people contact regarding qualitative research

Stijn Desbuyscher

- Company: St Sverige AB
- Title: FP&A Lead and Controller: Supply + Refinery business
- Duration of employment: six years

Noel Cramer

- Company: Crex AB
- Title: director
- Duration of employment: three years

Andreas (No last name due to anonymity.)

- Company name: European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC)
- Title: IT Senior Project Manager and Contract Manager
- Duration of employment: five+ years

Elvira Solowianiuk

- Company name: Embassy of Belgium
- Title: Trade and Invest commissioner
- Duration of employment: five+ years

Maarten Beckers

- Company name: Skansken
- Manager
- Duration of employment: four years and a half

Veerle Schrovens

- Company name: Takvandring Sverige AB
- Title: Office / HR / Operative Manager
- Duration of employment: five+ years

Stijn Vets

- Company name: Coca-Cola European Partners
- Title: Sr Manager RGM pricing & trade
- Duration of employment: two years

Frida Simons

- Company name: HBO Europe
- Title: Senior Vice president Operations
- Duration of employment: four years

Lynn Brusselairs

- Company name: Decathlon Sverige
- Title: Financial manager
- Duration of employment: two years

Sarah Vanoverschelde

- Company name: Klarna
- Title: Org & Development specialist
- Duration of employment: two years

Pieter-Jan Cuvelier

- Company name: Rebtel
- Title: Procurement manager & carrier solutions
- Duration of employment: two years

Colja Van Haaren

- Company name: Karün
- Title: Sales and Marketing Europe
- Duration of employment: four years

Sofie Van Den Broucke

- Company name: Karolinska Institutet
- Title: Researcher
- Duration of employment: six months

Jean-Charles Van Nuijs

- Company Name: The Absolute company
- Title: Global marketing manager
- Duration of employment: five+ years

Sarah Arnst

- Company name: Snow Software
- Title: International Communications Manager
- Duration of employment: 1.5 years

Maarten Uyttendaele

- Company name: Tele2
- Title: Strategic Sourcing Manager IT & Indirect services
- Duration of employment: five+ years

Valerie (No last name due to anonymity.)

- Company name: H&M
- Title: Merchandising expert
- Duration of employment: two years

Griet Staelens

- Company name: Electrolux
- Title: VP Human Resources & Communications CXO
- Duration of employment: five+ years

Ismail Boussaid

- Company name: RIA Financial
- Title: Field support specialist
- Duration of employment: 1.5 years

Tom Vervust

- Company name: Scandinavian SAP Centre of Excellence at Capgemini
- Title: Senior Project Manager
- Duration of employment: one year

Norbert Van De Velde

- Company name: SVA
- Title: Veterinary pathologist.
- Duration of employment: one year

Mathieu Verdugt

- Company name: Atlas Copco
- Title: SAP BPC – operations engineer
- Duration of employment: four years

James Leten

- Company name: Stockholm International Water Institute
- Title: Senior Programme manager
- Duration of employment: five+ years

Dieter Van De Walle

- Company name: Spotify AB
- Title: Software engineer
- Duration of employment: three years

Paul Van Doninck

- Company Name: Jernhüsen
- Title: Strategist / Business Developer, Stations
- Duration of employment: six years and five months

Tom Vandecasteele

- Company name: Michael Page
- Title: Manager
- Duration of employment: one year and a half

9.14. Tables and figures used in the research

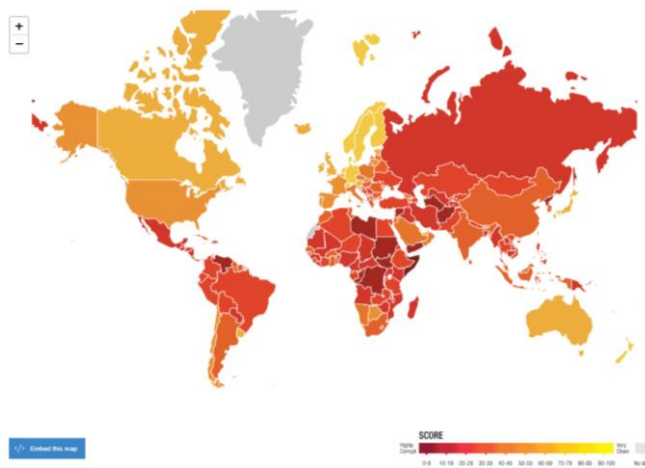


Table 9: CPI Index (Transparency International, 2019)

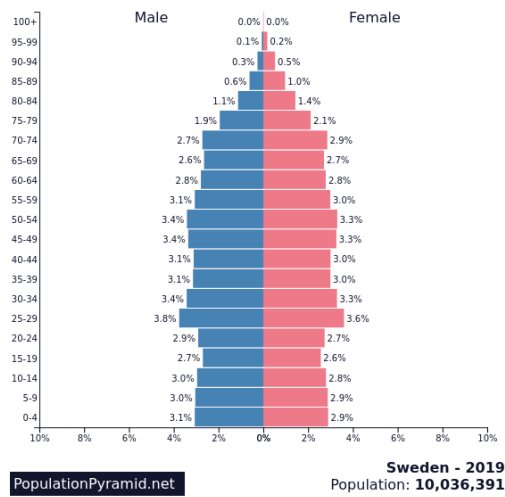


Table 10: Age and Sex Pyramid Sweden (Population Pyramid, 2019)

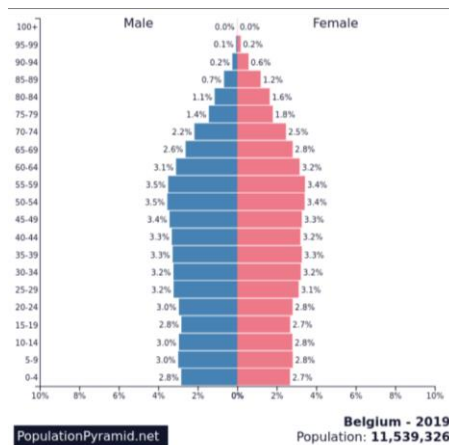


Table 11: Age and Sex Pyramid Belgium (Population Pyramid, 2019)

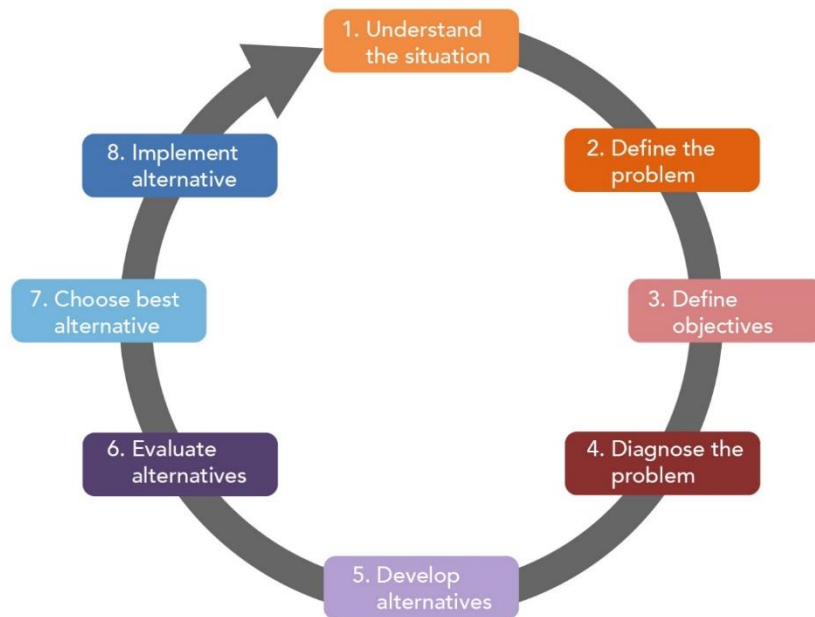


Figure 4: The decision-making process (Lumenlearning, 2020)

Model of the Rational Decision-making process based on the circle of Korthagen.

9.15. Output Flanders Investment and Trade

Flanders Investment and Trade: Culture in Sweden

https://studentarteveldehsbe-my.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/personal/daphhaeg_student_arteveldehs_be/EaYh3c3-JPdEs-V9eS1tLoUBHBaSOVHLZHnehjn1Aw40QA?e=Lqt62p

Shareable link to the infographic

https://www.canva.com/design/DAD8De27bds/SMfqSgcEBPgaID37yXbigw/view?utm_content=DAD8De27bds&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link&utm_source=homepage_design_menu

Flanders Investment and Trade: Communication

https://studentarteveldehsbe-my.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/personal/daphhaeg_student_arteveldehs_be/EU0PV8wWcr9Cj0-vEUvPHCwBfB1ILyThZYBLxxt7YOFfzg?e=q7imm1

Shareable link to the infographic

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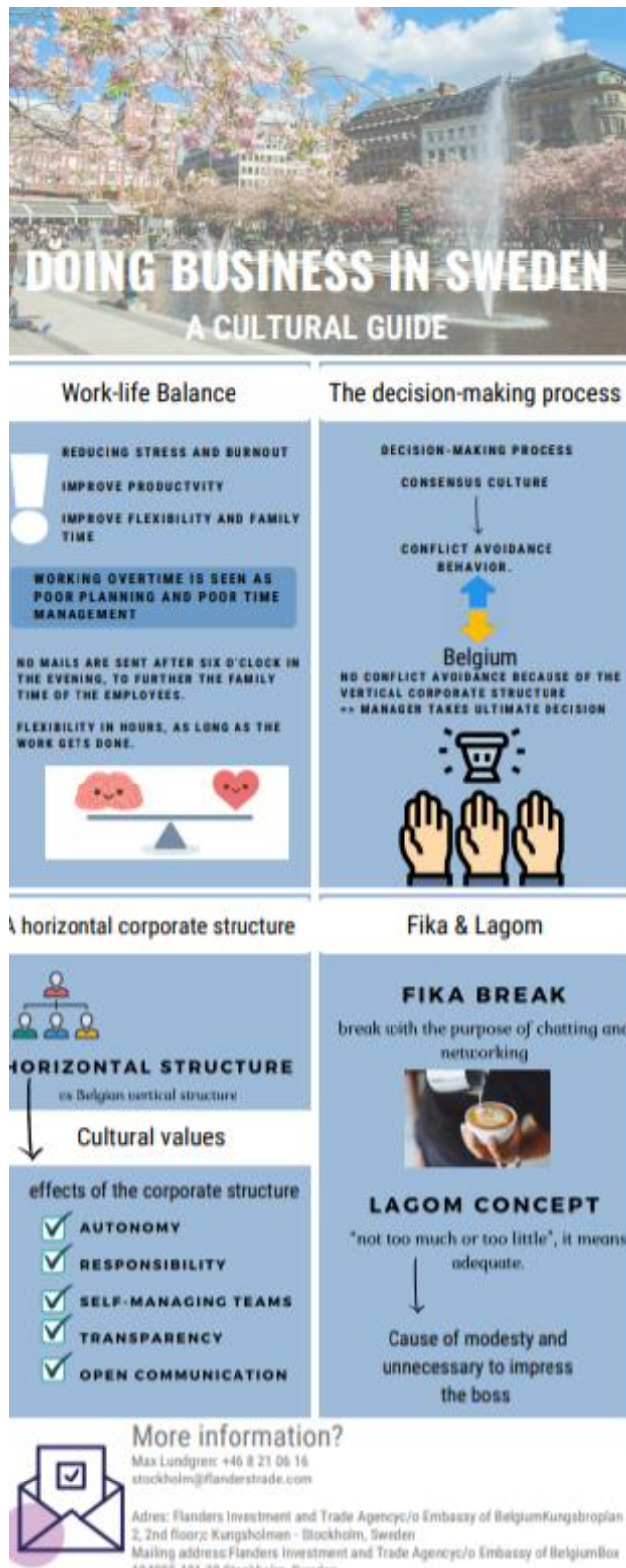
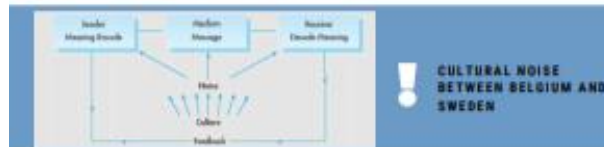


Figure 5: Infographic Swedish culture (Haegheman, 2020)

Figure 5. Infographic Swedish culture. Adapted [reprinted] from “Challenges faced by Belgian companies wanting to export or establish in Sweden regarding Swedish working culture with a focus on business communication and how these can be mitigated.” by D. Haegheman, 2020.



The communication process



An Initial meeting

- INTRODUCED BY A THIRD PARTY
- SHAKING HANDS (NO KISSING - DISTANCE IN NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION)
- SMALL TALK IS NOT THE NORM -> AVOID UNNECESSARY CONVERSATIONS
- ADDRESS BY FIRST NAME - BUT REMAIN RESPECTFUL
- WORK-LIFE BALANCE NEEDS TO STAY INTACT

SWEDEN

- KISSING ON THE CHEEK WHEN FAMILIAR
- FORMAL MEETINGS - ADDRESSING BY FIRST NAME
- SMALL TALK IS MORE ACCEPTABLE
- INTERTWINING OF PERSONAL AND WORK LIFE -> SMALL TALK

Casual communication

A horizontal corporate structure

- CAUSE OF OPEN COMMUNICATION
- TRANSPARENCY
- ASKING FOR OPINIONS AND ADVICE

CONSENSUS CULTURE

Distance in communication

VERBAL	NON-VERBAL	WRITTEN
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LONGER COMMUNICATION PROCESS DUE TO THE CONSENSUS CULTURE • NO SMALL TALK • NO PERSONAL QUESTIONS • HIGH LEVEL OF INDIVIDUALISM 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NEUTRAL EXPRESSIONS AS WELL AS NO HAND GESTURES • POLITE AND KEEPING OF PHYSICAL DISTANCE (SEE SITUATION IN COVID-19) • WANT TO BE INTRODUCED AND KEEP DISTANCE UNTIL THEN -> DON'T FORCE INTRODUCTION 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CASUAL MANNER OF WRITING BUT KEEP THE RESPECT! • BEST WAY TO REACH OUT AS TO GIVE SPACE FOR CONSULTATION (CONSENSUS CULTURE) • CATEGORY WITH LEAST DISTANCE PRESENT

Conflict avoidance

HORIZONTAL CORPORATE STRUCTURE
=> CONSENSUS CULTURE

BELGIUM -> VERTICAL STRUCTURE
EASIER IN TAKING DECISIONS AND IMPOSING THEM

- EFFECT ON FEEDBACK PROCESS
- EFFECT ON DISCUSSIONS IN MEETINGS

More information?
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Figure 6: infographic Swedish communication process (Haegheman, 2020)

Figure 6. Infographic Swedish communication process. Adapted [reprinted] from “Challenges faced by Belgian companies wanting to export or establish in Sweden regarding Swedish working culture with a focus on business communication and how these can be mitigated.” by D. Haegheman, 2020.