



# Strategy Sensemaking with Visual and Multimodal Communication

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Heli Naski  
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### Objective of the study

The objective of this study was to analyze the purpose of internal strategy communication in the strategy sensemaking process, including the role of visual and multimodal communication in internal strategy communication. Previous research did not sufficiently explore the role of internal strategy communication in the strategy sensemaking process, nor did it review practical knowledge about the use and role of visual and multimodal communication in internal strategy communication. This research project thus examined the hypothesis that a successful strategy communication process increases the level of strategy sensemaking in an organization. Another hypothesis of the study was that internal strategy communication benefits from the use of visual and multimodal communication and promotes strategy sensemaking by increasing interest in and encouraging employees' motivation toward achieving strategic goals.

### Research methods

This study was a qualitative research project deployed as a multi-method case study. Two sets of research data were collected for this study: interview data and internal strategy communication materials. Semi-structured individual and group interviews were completed during fall 2016. The internal strategy communication materials comprised a set of PowerPoint slides offered for the case study by the case company. Visual analysis was conducted on these materials, while the interviews were analyzed narratively. The results of the empirical study were reviewed through the lens of a theoretical framework consisting of theories of strategy work, change communication, and visual and multimodal communication.

### Findings of the study

The results of the study demonstrate that a strategy must be transformed into daily actions and operations to be effective; moreover, the strategy must make sense. Internal strategy communication plays an essential role in ensuring that the strategy is transformed into daily tasks and actions. Likewise, successful internal strategy communication is critical to strategy sensemaking. This study also confirms that internal strategy communication benefits from the use of visual and multimodal communication techniques, such as PowerPoint, because they increase interest toward the topics, clarify the strategic message, and heighten understanding. Visual and multimodal forms of internal strategy communication consequently increase strategy sensemaking in an organization, and are therefore highly recommended.

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**Keywords** strategy, strategy communication, sensemaking, change communication, visual and multimodal communication, PowerPoint, semiotic study, internal strategy communication

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### **Tutkimuksen tavoite**

Tutkimuksen tavoitteena oli tarkastella yrityksen sisäisen strategiaviestinnän roolia strategian muuntamisessa käytännön tekemiseksi. Tutkimuksen toisena tavoitteena oli tarkastella visuaalisen ja multimodaalisen viestinnän merkitystä sisäisessä strategiaviestinnässä. Aiempi tutkimus ei ole riittävästi huomioinut sisäisen strategiaviestinnän merkitystä strategian jalkautumisessa päivittäiseksi tekemiseksi. Edelleen, visuaalisen ja multimodaalisen viestinnän roolia muutosviestinnän työkaluna ei ole tutkittu riittävästi. Tutkimus pyrki osoittamaan, että sisäisellä strategiaviestinnällä voidaan edistää strategian muuttumista päivittäisiksi tehtäviksi ja operaatioiksi. Lisäksi haluttiin tutkia, voidaanko visuaalisen ja multimodaalisen viestinnän keinoin edistää sisäistä strategiaviestintää ja strategian kehittymistä käytännön tekemiseksi.

### **Tutkimusmenetelmä**

Tutkimus toteutettiin laadullisena tapaustutkimuksena. Tutkimusta varten toteutettiin ryhmä- ja yksilöhaastatteluja tutkimusyriyksessä syksyn 2016 aikana. Tutkimusaineistona toimi haastatteluaineisto, sekä tutkimusyriyksen sisäinen strategiaviestintämateriaali. Strategiaviestintämateriaalin tulkintaan käytettiin analyysiä, joka pohjautui visuaalisen ja multimodaalisen viestinnän teorioihin sekä PowerPoint-tutkimukseen. Haastatteluja tulkittiin narratiivien analyysin avulla. Tutkimustuloksia tarkasteltiin vasten viitekehystä, joka muodostui strategiateoriasta, muutosviestinnästä sekä visuaalisesta ja multimodaalisesta viestinnästä.

### **Tutkimustulokset**

Tutkimus osoitti, että strategiaviestinnän tärkein tehtävä on edistää strategian muutosta organisaation toiminnaksi ja tavoitteiksi. Tutkimus osoitti myös, että visuaalisen ja multimodaalisen viestinnän avulla voidaan edistää sisäistä strategiaviestintää. Visuaalisen ja multimodaalisen viestinnän käyttö sisäisessä strategiaviestinnässä helpottaa strategian ymmärtämistä, nopeuttaa viestintää, lisää kiinnostusta aiheesta kohtaan sekä edistää strategian itseopiskelua.

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**Avainsanat** strategia, strategiaviestintä, sisäinen strategiaviestintä, visuaalinen ja multimodaalinen viestintä, PowerPoint, muutosviestintä, muutoksen johtaminen

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## Table of Contents

List of Figures.....	2
1. INTRODUCTION.....	3
Research Questions.....	6
Structure of the Thesis.....	6
2. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	8
Strategy Communication Theory.....	8
Visual and Multimodal Communication Theory.....	13
PowerPoint Theory.....	21
Theoretical Framework for the Study.....	25
3. METHODOLOGY.....	26
Choice of Research Methodology.....	26
Data Collection.....	27
Analysis of the Data.....	30
Trustworthiness of the Study.....	31
4. FINDINGS.....	33
Purpose of Internal Strategy Communication and Strategy Sensemaking.....	33
Visual and Multimodal Communication in Internal Strategy Communication.....	50
5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS.....	62
Research Summary.....	62
Practical Implications.....	65
Limitations of the Study.....	66
Suggestions for Further Research.....	66
REFERENCES.....	68
APPENDICES.....	71
Interview questions.....	71

## List of Figures

Figure 1: Transition curve by Balogun, p. 9

Figure 2: Summary of how narratives influence change implementation, p. 12

Figure 3: A model of composition, p.16

Figure 4: The dimensions of visual space, p. 18

Figure 5: Framework of strategy sensemaking with visual and multimodal communication, p. 25

Figure 6: Build value on data. p. 52

Figure 7: Targets and must-win battles, p. 53

Figure 8: Megatrends on the market, p. 54

Figure 9: Needs-driven digital services, p. 55

Figure 10: xxx subsidiary strategy, p. 56

Figure 11: Daily management practices, p. 57

Figure 12: Build value on data, p. 60

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Strategy work and strategy communication lay at the heart of key operations that almost all companies have to organize in one way or another in today's business world. The purpose of this study is to examine internal strategy communication and the role of visual and multimodal communication in the internal strategy communication process. A case study will be used to achieve this end, drawing from theories of strategy sensemaking, communication in change situations, and visual and multimodal communication. This thesis argues that theories of strategy sensemaking, communication in change situations, and visual and multimodal communication are interconnected. They are drawn together to form a framework for sensemaking in the internal strategy communication process. I will analyze whether internal strategy communication benefits from using visual and multimodal communication to increase strategy sensemaking, and if so, how it should be used.

Strategy has been widely studied in academia. Strategy sensemaking theory draws from psychology, management studies, and communication. Sensemaking is usually conceptualized as a social process of constructing and reconstructing meanings through which managers create a sense of understanding about changes in the organizational environment (Balogun, Jacobs, Jarzabkowski, Mantere, and Vaara, 2014; Balogun and Johnson, 2004). Theories of strategy sensemaking and change communication serve as solid foundations for this study. Strategy sensemaking enables and encourages commitment and motivation in a company (Balogun, 2001; Balogun et al., 2014; Järventie-Thesleff, Moisander, and Villi, 2014). Sensemaking is supported by participation and understanding (Järventie-Thesleff et al., 2014). Communication supports sensemaking via sensegiving (Balogun, 2001), processes in which the management of a company plays an important role. Management operates as a link between top management and company employees. In this role, it shares information about the goals, operations, and future of the company as set by senior management (Balogun, 2001; Balogun et al., 2014), and employees are expected to commit to the strategy with participation and understanding (Balogun, 2001; Balogun et al., 2014). The role of communication involves narratives; communication increases an employee's potential for understanding and enables participation in strategic

conversation both in and around the organization. For this reason, communication plays an essential role in the sensemaking process.

According to Joep Cornelissen (2014), change is a constant element in many contemporary business organizations, and thus organizations need to communicate about change. Cornelissen (2014) argues that the need to communicate about change involves providing a sense of continuity to employees, who will consequently feel secure in their field and position within the organization. Company leaders must be able to frame and emphasize this sense of continuity. Communication is essential in strategy sensemaking because it is a social process of interpreting and coping with change (Balogun et al., 2014). Sensemaking studies in an academic context view strategy development and change as emphasizing the role of organizational discussion around strategic change (Balogun et al., 2014; Fenton and Langley, 2011). Such studies state that participants in an organizational discussion enact a social process in which they need to have feelings of participation. Communication enables the process of sensemaking by offering feelings of continuity, certainty, and participation in situations of continuous change (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Balogun et al., 2014; Cornelissen, 2014; Fenton and Langley, 2011).

Visual and multimodal communication has been studied by several researchers, but one of the most interesting theories - and probably the most well-known - is offered by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2006), who presented ways by which to interpret images and other visual presentations. Their research described narratives in visual communication as tools for designing social actions and conceptualizing representations. They also presented a framework for interpreting visual communication in which visual and multimodal communication consists of four structures: color, perspective, framing, and composition. Simply put, this grammar of visual communication comprises the framework (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). This study argues that strategic communication in change situations and strategy sensemaking may both draw and benefit from using this framework.

Another interesting approach related to the theory of visual and multimodal communication is using PowerPoint in the strategy work. Van Leeuwen, Djonov, and

O'Halloran (2013) and Djonov and Van Leeuwen (2013) both saw the underlying appearance of PowerPoint as a language for sensemaking, understanding, and meaning making. According to Van Leeuwen, Djonov, and O'Halloran (2013), PowerPoint is a technology that offers language tools for meaning making, such as layout, font, color, texture, and animations, for its users. Zhao, Djonov, and Van Leeuwen (2014) highlighted the composition of PowerPoint slideshows and asserted that the use of semiotic technologies like PowerPoint presented a new type of writing. In a wider context, it can be seen as a language for meaning making, sensemaking, and change communication. The concept of *composition* draws on visual communication theories presented by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) in which the concept refers to the information value, salience, and framing of images. These same principles apply to the effective design of PowerPoint presentations.

Visual and multimodal communication, including the use of PowerPoint, is widely used in strategy communication and other types of change communication. As a presentation tool, PowerPoint, according to, for example, Van Leeuwen, Djonov, and O'Halloran (2013), offers a visual language for communicating complex issues. PowerPoint's language is suitable not only for presenting existing truths or statements, but also for making meanings; in this way, it delivers messages in a more personal, motivating manner (Van Leeuwen, Djonov and O'Halloran, 2013). As a motivation tool, PowerPoint increases interest toward a subject while offering new avenues for understanding, motivation, and commitment. In fact, when visual or multimodal communication is both interesting and successful, these strategies may not just be told, but also sold.

In this study, my emphasis is on theories of strategy meaning making, visual and multimodal communication, and internal strategy communication. Theories are reviewed through the lens of a strategy sensemaking framework. I have also conducted empirical research with managers and other professionals working in the chosen case company.

In this research, I argue that strategy sensemaking plays a key role in committing professionals to their strategic goals. I will examine the purpose of internal strategy



communication in the strategy sensemaking process. Finally, I argue that strategy sensemaking benefits from the use of visual and multimodal communication in internal strategy communication.

## **Research Questions**

Strategy and change communication, strategy sensemaking, and visual and multimodal communication have been widely researched in the academic literature. However, a gap exists in the academic research on the field of internal strategy communication. I wish to analyze in more detail the main goals and role of internal strategy communication in strategy sensemaking. Further, I am interested in examining how visual and multimodal communication is used in strategy work as well as how they affect strategy sensemaking.

This study seeks answers to two research questions:

- What is the purpose of internal strategy communication in strategy sensemaking?
- What is the role of visual and multimodal communication in internal strategy communication?

The first question addresses the research gap in the internal strategy communication literature and reports the findings from the point of view of strategy communication, change communication, and strategy sensemaking. The second research question involves the role of visual and multimodal communication in internal strategy communication. The basis for the second question is more about what visual and multimodal communication have to offer strategy communication than the phenomena of visual and multimodal communication themselves.

## **Structure of the Thesis**

This thesis begins by introducing the research problem. The research questions and structure of the thesis are presented in the first chapter to reflect the purpose and organization of the research project.

The key theories addressed by the research problem are strategy and change communication, strategy sensemaking, and visual and multimodal communication. These theories are described and organized into a theoretical framework in the literature review (Chapter 2). The chosen research methods for the study are reported in the methodology chapter (Chapter 3). The findings from both the theoretical and empirical study are presented in Chapter 4, while Chapter 5 summarizes the findings and reflects on previous research. This chapter also offers some suggestions for future studies.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Strategy Communication Theory

Theories of strategy communication and change communication have been widely researched in the academic literature and are strongly related to communication theory. In contemporary organizations, change is a constant. As Cornelissen (2014) put it, change is a permanent state of affairs, and the management of organizations needs to find new ways to communicate about change in order to promote, authorize, and rationalize it. A change in strategy requires a change in communication (Balogun et al., 2014; Fenton and Langley, 2011). In changing situations, strategy communication ensures the adoption of new goals and working practices (Fenton and Langley, 2011) and helps employees adapt to new roles and responsibilities (Cornelissen, 2014).

Sonenshein and Dholakia (2012) presented a vision of strategy communication from the viewpoint of strategic change. They state that a change of strategy is changes of organization, and those strategy (and change) communications are essential in ensuring a successful change process (Sonenshein and Dholakia, 2012). In change situations, strategy communication works as a change facilitator, and its main role is to increase understanding and acceptance of the necessity for strategic change; in other words, it is expected to enhance sensemaking of the strategic change as well as to communicate the changed situation (Sonenshein and Dholakia, 2012).

Sonenshein and Dholakia (2012) argued that change is not always resisted by employees, but is often not explained sufficiently by their organization. To create commitment to both the strategy and the change, individuals working in a particular organization need to be capable of generating an explanation for the change by making attributions and assumptions about it (Park and Folkman, 1997). They also need to connect the change (and the strategy) to real-life situations and values (Davis et al., 1998; Park, 2005) or at least attempt to understand it (Martin et al., 2005). Furthermore, Sonenshein and Dholakia (2012) argued that it is essential for individuals working in an organization to recognize more benefits than drawbacks in the changed situation (Park and Folkman, 1997; Sonenshein and Dholakia, 2012). Reasoning, understanding, and the process of weighing the benefits and drawbacks of strategic change are part of the

process of meaning making with respect to the change. When the management of an organization communicates about the strategy and the change, employees obtain a wider understanding of the change process; that is, how and why the change is happening (Barry and Elmes, 1997; Sonenshein and Dholakia, 2012). Communication has a tremendous impact on the reasoning process toward the changed situation. The meaning making process, which is also known as a sensemaking process, plays an essential role in employee motivation and commitment.

Julia Balogun (2001) described the role and behavior of individuals in strategic change situations. She stated that since change is a permanent condition of organizations operating in the contemporary business world, such organizations should continuously seek out opportunities to adapt themselves to change, rather than trying to deny or resist it in an attempt to cling to the past. Balogun (2001) presented the process by which individuals adapt to strategic change, describing it via the concept of the *transition curve*. The curve is presented in Figure 1:

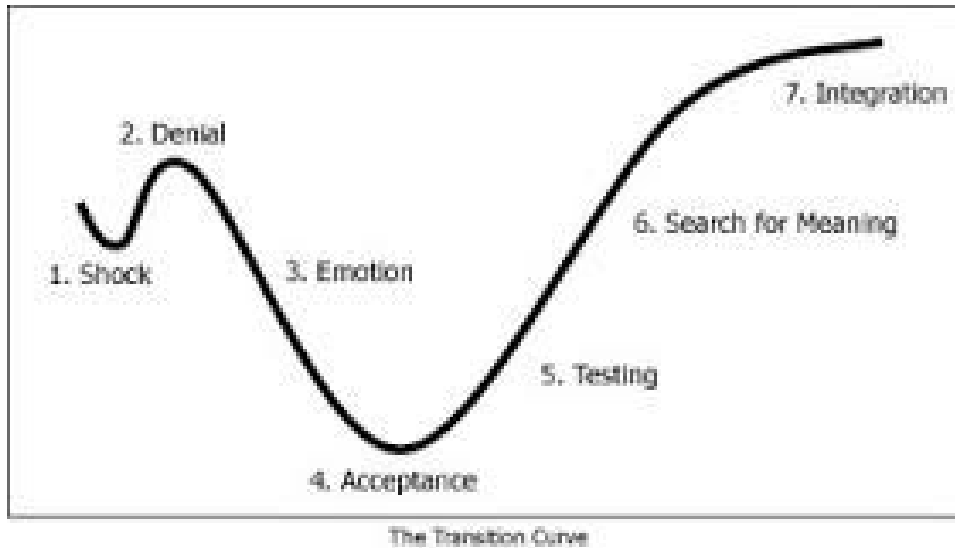


Figure 1: Transition curve by Balogun (source: Balogun, 2001).

Balogun's transition curve is based on the bereavement process, a classical behavior theory originally created in 1970 by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. Kubler-Ross's work discusses the stages of the adaptation process in grief; however, it has been used more recently in organizational psychology due to the compatibility of several of its themes.

Balogun first presents the transition curve, and then adapts it to the strategic change process. As an organization changes, its employees must be able to adapt; and, in most situations, the adaptation process follows the transition curve (Balogun, 2001).

Individual employees pass through several stages during this process. Their first reaction is often shock, which is followed by denial and strong emotions. In the fourth stage, acceptance, individuals start to accept the change and test and reflect on it via existing procedures. Afterward, they will typically strive to know the meaning of the change. Finally, when the change is proven to be more beneficial than detrimental, they will accept it and integrate it as part of their everyday operations (Balogun, 2001).

The management of a company has an important role in the change process. During the change, management should support employees in the adaptation process by encouraging them to let go of past ways of working, helping them to navigate the change, and continuously supporting them in their work in the changed atmosphere. The tools used to accomplish these goals include management support, training, the reinforcement of new work practices, and coaching in the new situation (Balogun, 2001).

Change is ultimately about changing people, not organizations (Balogun, 2001). Therefore, the change procedures should be designed to support behavioral changes among the individuals working in the company. In strategic change situations communication plays a key role in supporting the change, and managers and employees achieve new ways of working after the change has occurred. Strategy communication is a change facilitator, supporting the sensemaking process of change in organizations (Balogun, 2001).

Continuous change in contemporary business was discussed by Järventie-Thesleff, Moisander, and Villi (2014). They argued that communication should be an inseparable part of the strategic change process, in which an organization should seek collaboration and a common understanding of the reasons and benefits of the change (Järventie-Thesleff et al., 2014). Change should be a visible process in an organization, and management's main role should be to operate as change agents who enable adaptation and provide the necessary tools for understanding and carrying out the change.

According to Järventie-Thesleff, Moisander, and Villi (2014), the change process is actually a sensemaking process in which all members of an organization seek to make sense of the change together. Collective and collaborative sensemaking about change is achieved on the organizational level and should seek collective understanding instead of concentrating solely on transmitting information. Further, it should not be a top-down message transmitted by the senior management of a company (Järventie-Thesleff et al., 2014).

Change communication in an organization is a two-way process. According to Järventie-Thesleff, Moisander, and Villi (2014), its main objective is to create collective understanding of and engagement with the change in order to promote and support organizational sensemaking. In their study, the two-way approach refers to how management communicates about the change at various levels and how employees receive the communicative message.

Top management, middle managers, and employees have different roles in adapting to organizational change. In terms of strategic change, communication plays a key role in making sense of the change (Järventie-Thesleff et al., 2014). Middle management's role in strategy communication is becoming increasingly important (Balogun and Johnson, 2004). Top management, typically the CEO of the company, sets up the strategy (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991) while the remainder of the organization fulfills it. Middle managers have an important role as change agents in this process, as they communicate about the change to the rest of the organization, especially to its employees (Balogun and Johnson, 2004). Top management therefore acts as change actors, middle managers as change agents, and employees as change recipients (Balogun and Johnson, 2004).

According to Balogun and Johnson (2004), managers of an organization act both as sensegivers and sensemakers. This is because they are both change agents who communicate about the change and change recipients who make sense of the change on their own terms. Employees of the organization, who are change recipients as they receive communication, act as sensemakers. Together, the organization makes sense of the change by going through the processes of change communication and sensemaking.

Sonenshein (2010) studied the narratives used in strategy communication and change implementation from the perspectives of both management and employees. His approach to the subject is presented in Figure 2 below, which summarizes how narratives influence change implementation.

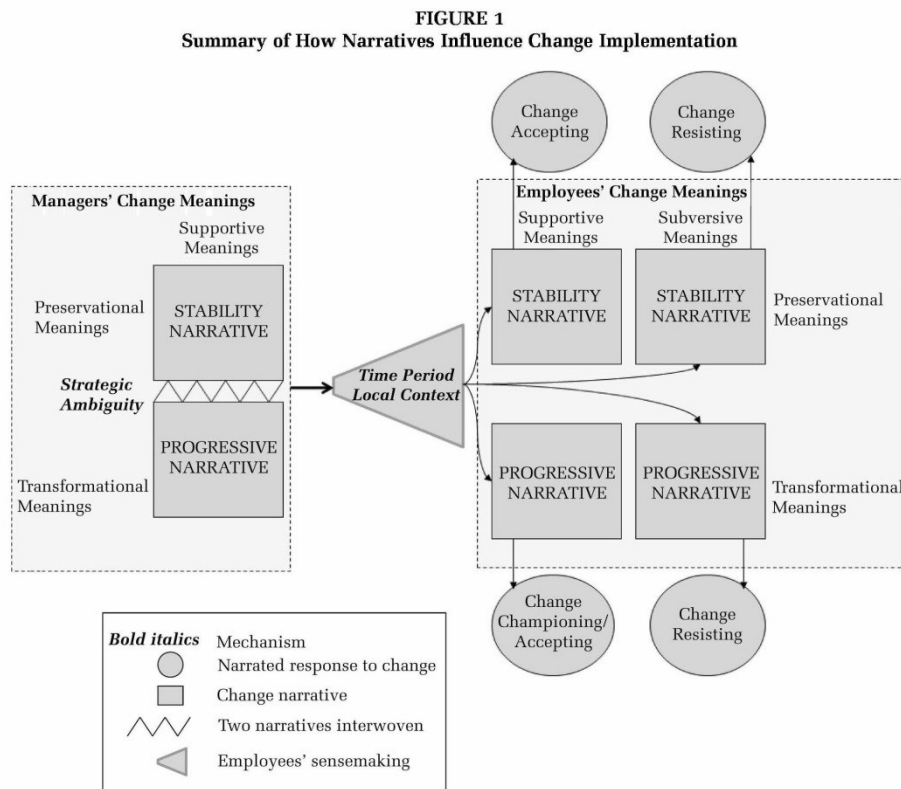


Figure 2: Summary of how narratives influence change implementation. Sonenshein, 2010, p.500

Above, Sonenshein (2010) reports that implementing change is a multi-oriented process that takes several forms. Strategic (or any other organizational) change is rarely a straightforward matter, but rather a challenge to the management communicating about the change. Management experiences at least two types of challenges when adapting to the change and communicating about it to the rest of the organization: They may struggle to bridge the old and new working practices in the company, which usually leads to uncertainty and indefinite communication. They may also have an inadequate understanding of the change while simultaneously believing that everyone involved has a common understanding. This causes unbalanced communication about the change as

well as uncertainty in the organization (Sonenshein, 2010). When operating as change agents, management should have a common understanding of both the change itself and the beneficial ways in which it operates alongside older practices. More importantly, Sonenshein stated that the managerial message during the strategic change process is neither a strategic change narrative about the change nor a stabilizing factor maintaining certainty; rather, it is a combination of both factors (Sonenshein, 2010).

## **Visual and Multimodal Communication Theory**

Semiotics is the study of sensemaking and the search for meanings from communication. Semiotics often refers to finding meanings from signs, images, symbols, and other non-verbal elements. In this study, I concentrate on semiotics from the viewpoint of visual and multimodal communication in order to determine how visual communication can create sensemaking in the strategy communication process.

The study of visual and multimodal communication involves a semiotic approach. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), there are several ways visual communication can be interpreted. First, I will discuss the division of images into representational and interactional images. Next, I will present the framework of visual communication, which states that individual images may be interpreted in terms of color, perspective, framing, and the composition of the image.

### **Representational and interactional images**

Images and their components have either a representational or interactional role (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). These roles indicate where participants of the picture are located as well as their position relative to the viewer. Representational and interactional pictures deliver different messages. In representational images, the participant is representing him/herself; whereas in interactional images, the participant plays a more interactive role and seeks to communicate with the viewer (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006).

Images in general involve two types of participants: represented participants, who are usually people, places, or other things depicted in the pictures; and interactive participants, who communicate with other people. The content of images has three types



of relations: those between the participants present, those between interactive and represented participants, and those between the interactive participants of the given image. Interaction occurs between the producer and the viewer of the image (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006).

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) presented the framework for interpreting visual and multimodal communication. The framework states that visual and multimodal communication can be studied in terms of four structures: color, perspective, framing, and composition. Next, I will present the structures and their role in the framework.

### *Color*

The color of an image influences its level of multimodality (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). Color saturation, differentiation, and modulation all have an effect on the message the given image delivers. Color saturation occurs on a scale from full-color saturation to the total absence of color; usually, this refers to transition from black to white. Color differentiation varies widely, on a scale from the maximum amount of diversified color to absolute monochrome. Lastly, color modulation ranges on a scale from a very modulated and multi-toned color to a plain, pure, and unmodulated color (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006).

Other factors also affect the level of modality in a given image. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) listed the most important ones, including contextualization, level of representation, depth, and brightness. Each of these, but especially the last two, are useful for interpreting photographic images. Contextualization describes the level of background presence in the image. On the one end of the scale, the background has no content; while on the other, the background is filled with detail. At the level of representation, the scale measures the axis where, on one end, there is the maximum level of abstract illustration and, on the other, there is the maximum amount of representational and detailed picturing. The next scale is depth, which runs from the absolute absence of depth to a deep and rich perspective. The final scale is brightness, which measures the amount of light and brightness in the given image. This scale runs from a large number of different degrees of brightness to only two degrees, which

indicates pure, non-brightened colors like pure black and white (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006).

According to Kress and Van Leeuwen, the more intense the colors used in the given image are, the stronger message it will send. Colors may highlight or hide the contents of the image. If the colors in a given picture seem flat to the viewer, then the image or its contents will receive a low level of modality and, therefore, a low level of information value as well. Furthermore, the colors themselves may have multimodal value. As some color tones, such as red, yellow, and orange, are seen by many viewers as energetic and warm, use of these colors may increase the level of warmth, energy, and acceptance afforded to the message. Similarly, the use of blue and green tones may increase levels of calmness, comfort, and peacefulness, as these colors are often associated with such feelings. Neutrals, such as white, black, and grey, do not convey strong messages when used in visual communication. Probably for this reason, these colors are more often used in official and professional visual messages, such as in technical charts and diagrams, because doing so will not affect the multimodality of the message.

### *Perspective*

The narrative of an image is usually different depending on whether it is subjective or objective (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). This division, into subjective and objective images, is based on their presentability and is used especially in photography.

Subjective images communicate from the viewpoint of the presenter (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). The subject matter may be representational or it may involve a private or subjective topic. Objective images, on the other hand, are most often representative of scientific or technical topics. In objective images, the viewer can see everything there is to be seen in a particular picture (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). The contents of an objective image may include charts, diagrams, and maps.

According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), the perspective of a given image can assume at least three different forms: frontal, top-down, or cross-functional. The frontal perspective refers simply to the front side of an image, while the top-down perspective

reviews the image from top to bottom. In the cross-sectional perspective, the image is reviewed from various and/or diagonal standpoints. On official visual documents such as PowerPoint, the frontal perspective is most commonly used.

### Composition of the images

Whereas the previous description of the possible structures used in images describes relations between persons and topics, composition tends to explain how the components of a given image combine into a meaningful whole (Ventola, 2016). Composition has three dimensions: information value, salience, and framing. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), images may communicate visually through these dimensions.

Below in Figure 3, a model of composition is presented.

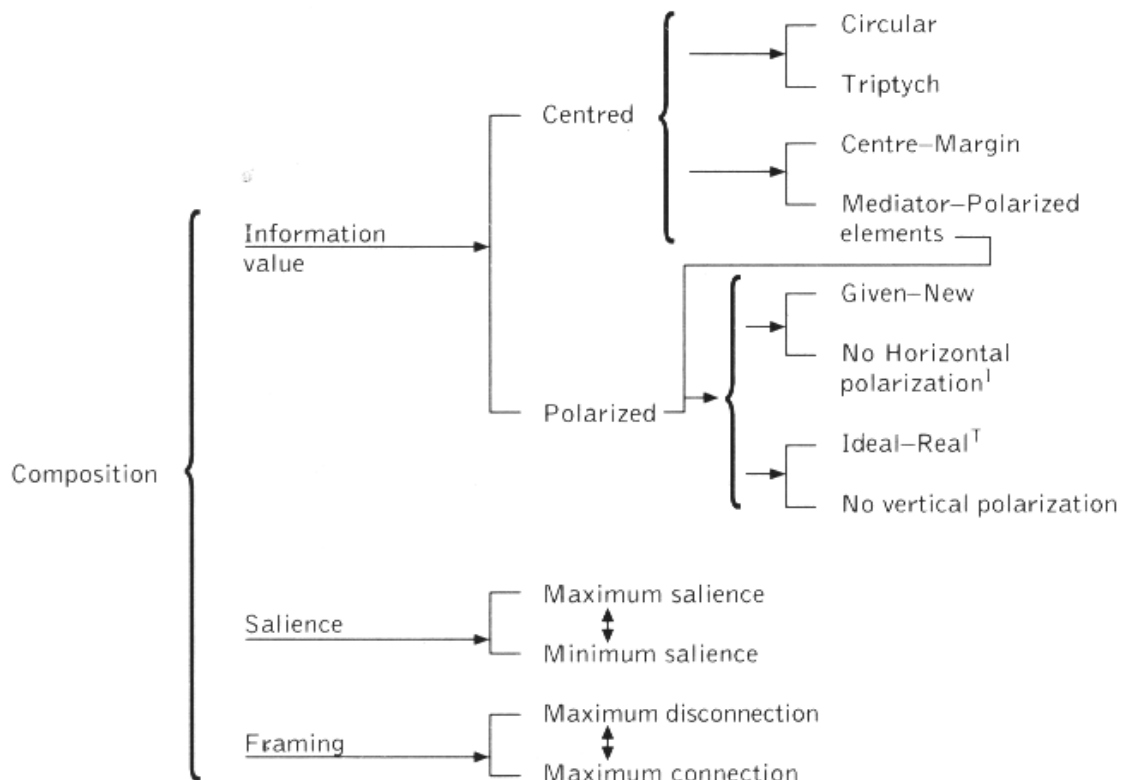


Figure 3: A model of composition. Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006, p.210).

### *Information value*

The information value of an image is affected by the placement of its constituent objects. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) described several dimensions by which the information value of an image can be studied. These dimensions include the information value of the left and right direction, the *given* and the *new*, center and margin, ideal and real, and top and bottom placement.

### *Information value of the left and right direction*

Object placement to the left and/or to the right of a particular image affects its information value. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) argued that the information value of the left or right position depends on the culture the image is studied in. In Western societies, left alignment usually dominates because of the cultural tendency to write from left to right. In most Asian cultures, right alignment is more dominant. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), in Western cultures, objects on the left side of the image are seen first because Western readers study the image from its left side. Therefore, what is placed on the left side of the image will have stronger information value than what is presented on the right. Likewise, in cultures where reading begins from the right side, information value assumes an opposite order due to differences in the appearance of the readable images (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006).

Djonov and Van Leeuwen (2013) applied the information value of left and right alignment to PowerPoint, claiming that objects placed on the left side of a PowerPoint slide are seen as more important than those placed on the right side. The writers continued by arguing that left or right placement also refers to the concepts of the *given* and *new*, which will be discussed in more detail below. According to Djonov and Van Leeuwen (2013), objects on the left side often adopt the position of *given*, while objects on the right side adopt the position of the *new*.

### *The given and the new*

The dimensions of left and right alignment are associated with the perspective of the *given* and the *new*, which also indicate the information value of the image. This approach suggests that the *given* is seen as the present state of issues, while the *new* is

the potential or upcoming state of order. The concepts of the *given* and the *new* can be found in both textual and visual communication, such as newspapers and magazines, photographs, and even the TV and film industries. These examples, however, are not the focus of this thesis and are therefore discussed no further.

In Figure 3 below, the dimensions of visual space, from the perspectives of the information value of left and right, *given* and *new*, and the center and margin, are presented by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006).

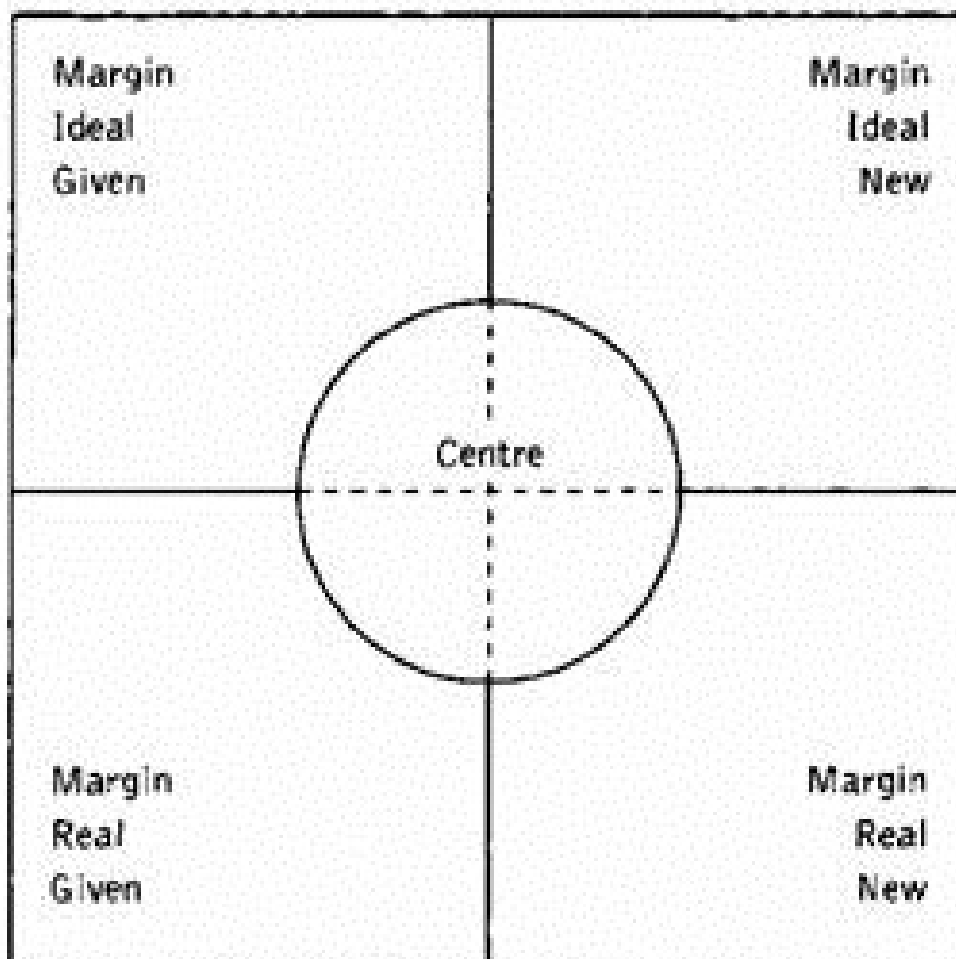


Figure 4: The dimensions of visual space (Kress and Van Leeuwen. Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design. Routledge, 2006, p.197).

### *Top and bottom placement*

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) also discussed the information value of top and bottom placement. As in the case of the left and right alignment of the contents of an image, the information value of top and bottom placement depends of the culture the image is interpreted by. In Western societies, scanning the image starts from the top and works its way downward. For this reason, the information value of the top level tends to be greater in Western societies. In cultures where reading takes place from the bottom to the top, the information value of the bottom placement is greater. Likewise, in terms of the information value of left and right, in Western societies, the contents of the image that have been placed on top will have greater information value than the contents on the bottom and are therefore seen as more important.

### *Ideal and real*

The contexts of the ideal and real result from object placement at the top and/or bottom of an image. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) explained that the information value of the top and bottom can actually be summarized with respect to the concepts of *ideal* and *real*. If an image is visually interpreted and a certain amount of content is placed on the top of the image, this material will assume the position of *ideal*. Ideal means that the content is presented as a norm, or as an idealistic or generalized state of preference. It is, in other words, an idealistic way of looking at things. Real, on the other hand, refers to a more detailed approach; it is a more grounded and realistic picture of how things actually are; such contents are found at the bottom of the image.

### *Center and margin*

The third dimension by which an image may be interpreted is the information value of center and margin. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) stated that the visual composition of a given image refers to the placement of the contents to the center or to the margin. The authors continued by claiming that since ancient times, artists and painters have placed the most important things in a given image in the middle (center). They also argued that placing the most important things in the middle of an image seems to be encoded in our genes; for instance, when asked to draw a picture, small children typically place their

main message(s) in the center of the image. Placement at the center or on the margin may be associated with the concepts of the *given* and the *new* or the *ideal* and the *real*. It is interesting that as we have seen, the information values of top and bottom and left and right are strongly culture-specific. However, when it comes to the information value of center and margin, the effect of culture seems to be even stronger. For instance, in Asian countries, centric positioning takes on a stronger form, while contents on the margins are often seen as less important and play only a slight role, if they are presented at all.

### *Saliency*

The second key element of composition is saliency. As discussed in the previous chapter, the information value of a composition consists of the various placements of objects in the image. Saliency is more of an abstract concept, comprising objects such as hues, weights, and feelings based on the overall composition of an image. The concept refers to the balance of objects and their rates by order of appearance (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). Kress and Van Leeuwen asserted that “when composition is the integration mode, saliency is judged on the basis of visual clues” (2006, p. 202). Saliency is not objectively measured but is rather subject to a viewer’s subjective views, and involves contrasts and interactions between the constituent elements (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). These elements include size, the sharpness of the objects, colors, and tonal contrasts; the placement of objects in the imaginal field; the perspective from which the elements are presented; and even some cultural factors, such as the presentation of human figures or cultural signs (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). Overall, we may state that the saliency factor refers to an image’s ability to highlight issues; objects with high saliency in a given image are those that stand out and therefore possess higher weight and meaning than those in the background.

### *Framing*

The third key element of a composition is framing. In visual communication, framing refers to the separation of contents in a given image. Lines, frames, and spaces divide the particles of an image, and their arrangement weighs its contents. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) argued that, similar to saliency, framing is about the rhythm and pauses

inside the image and between its contents. The absence of frames expresses group identity and belonging, while strong frames highlight individuality and differentiation. Generally, framing offers tools for making distributions (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006).

## **PowerPoint Theory**

PowerPoint can be defined as semiotic presentation software developed by Microsoft Corporation. Today, it is widely used in all parts of the world. PowerPoint presentations combine text, pictures, charts, and animations into a meaningful whole.

Van Leeuwen, Djonov, and O'Halloran (2013) presented the various ways in which PowerPoint is used as a tool in semiotic communication. Semiotic studies in general search for meaning making with signs and objects. In this study, PowerPoint is examined in terms of its use as a tool for sensemaking in strategy communication. The sensemaking process relies on a range of semiotic resources, including layout, font, color, texture, and animation (Van Leeuwen et al, 2013).

According to Van Leeuwen, Djonov, and O'Halloran (2013), artists create new meanings with PowerPoint slideshows. The authors examined the potential reasons behind the use of different kinds of expressions, such as colors or lines, as well as the potential methods for combining different art genres and exploring the borders between the genres of art and popular culture. Such methods are believed to help in the process of meaning making. Van Leeuwen, Djonov, and O'Halloran (2013) claimed that semiotics is a social practice and has three closely related dimensions: collecting and documenting semiotic resources, including their history; investigating the use of these resources in historical, cultural, and institutional contexts and how people exploit them; and finally, contributing to the detection and development of new semiotic resources and novel uses of existing ones (Van Leeuwen et al, 2013). According to Van Leeuwen, Djonov and O'Halloran (2013), the study of semiotics seeks to understand how it can guide and evaluate art's contribution to semiotics, how art may identify and provide a background for semiotic study, and how to compare academic and artistic contributions to semiotics (Van Leeuwen et al, 2013).



PowerPoint offers a set of options for delivering a message. The desired message is given to the recipients, who are principally limited in their interpretations (Van Leeuwen et al, 2013). PowerPoint can be seen as a language that provides a variety of options and means for combining objects with a range of different communicative purposes. PowerPoint users learn to use a set of parameters, processes, and features offered by the program and unite them within a single presentation (Van Leeuwen et al, 2013). The objects of the presentation, be they text, images, charts, or diagrams, become the “emotional means of information and communication” (Van Leeuwen et al, 2013, p.416).

#### *Semiotic meaning of arrows*

Arrows are commonly used objects in PowerPoint presentations and have a wide range of meanings. They often present processes (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996, 2006; Van Leeuwen et al, 2013) and connect participants, including people, text, charts, or diagrams, with each other. Also, they may depict movement or transformation as well as the relations between elements (Van Leeuwen et al, 2013).

#### *Layout of slideshows*

Layout refers to background material and the exterior of a given PowerPoint presentation. Layout is a substantive part of PowerPoint presentations and a primary resource for meaning making (Djonov and Van Leeuwen, 2013). In PowerPoint, the layout is chosen at the beginning of the creation process of a presentation. Djonov and Van Leeuwen (2013) presented two principles for layout design and analysis: the grid and the composition.

#### *Grids*

A grid is a structure of patterns that guides the placement of the elements of a design in an image (Ambrose and Harris, 2008; Djonov and Van Leeuwen, 2013). It is a set of lines that organizes an image’s visual composition by considering how its objects share the available space. Grids are used to balance artistic and pragmatic visions in order to achieve consistency, efficiency, and clarity (Djonov and Van Leeuwen, 2013).

### *Composition*

Composition refers to the placement of the objects in a given image. Djonov and Van Leeuwen (2013) argued that since a grid is concerned with the distribution of space between objects, the focus of the composition should refer to their relative positioning.

### *Templates*

Templates refer to designs chosen for a PowerPoint presentation to achieve a uniform layout. Templates contain several features related to grids and layouts, such as coloring, background images, text styles, font, and the distance between objects (Djonov and Van Leeuwen, 2013). In PowerPoint, users may choose a readily made template or they can design their own. The most used elements in templates are color-coding, repeated use of a company logo, and coherence within the slides (Djonov and Van Leeuwen, 2013).

Zhao, Djonov, and Van Leeuwen (2014) suggested a three-step model for studying PowerPoint as a semiotic practice: the design of the software, the multimodal composition of the slideshows, and the presentation of the slideshows (Zhao, Djonov, and Van Leeuwen, 2014).

### *Software design*

According to Zhao, Djonov, and Van Leeuwen (2014), software design is concerned with selecting from among various, unlimited meaning-making resources, such as languages, images, colors, layouts, and textures, in order to create a meaningful whole. Software design thus makes the selected resources available to users through the software's interface.

### *Composition of slideshows*

Zhao, Djonov, and Van Leeuwen (2014) stated that the composition of PowerPoint slideshows presents a new type of writing. This new writing style is composed of visual resources and multimodal interactions with the recipient in order to establish coherence (Van Leeuwen, 2008; Zhao, Djonov, and Van Leeuwen, 2014). When composing a PowerPoint presentation, users select from among the objects available in the software, such as font types, textures, layouts, animations, and sound effects, and combine them

with the semiotic modes and artifacts the software offers; they then combine these to form the final slideshow (Zhao, Djonov, and Van Leeuwen, 2014).

### *Presenter of the slideshows*

According to Zhao, Djonov, and Van Leeuwen (2014), the third dimension of PowerPoint is the presenter. This person may or may not be the author of the slideshow. The writers stated that the presenter nearly always ends up in the role of an author regardless of whether or not he or she designed the PowerPoint presentation alone (Goffman, 1981; Zhao, Djonov, and Van Leeuwen, 2014). However, it is often difficult to determine the representational participant of an image. Most people have no personal relationship to the images or the PowerPoint slides they are looking at, and they therefore lack a personal stake in the matter. The participants, presenters, and viewers act as the readers and writers of the image (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006).

### **Sensemaking with PowerPoint**

The purpose of this study was to research internal strategy communication in a selected company and the role of visual and multimodal communication in this process. Toward this end, I have examined the features of the semiotic technology software, PowerPoint. PowerPoint is widely used in the strategy communication process of the case company. For this reason, the theory of PowerPoint was evaluated in this chapter.

PowerPoint is graphic presentation software that can communicate many complex issues in a way that is easier to make sense of and comprehend. PowerPoint includes several dimensions, such as grids, compositions, and layouts, which can be modified to support the delivered message in the best possible way. The use of various colors, graphics, and fonts assists the message recipient in understanding, and the message sender in delivering, the message correctly. By combining these details holistically, PowerPoint facilitates the delivery of strategy messages.

## Theoretical Framework for the Study

The theories of strategy and change communication, strategy sensemaking, and visual and multimodal communication constitute the theoretical framework of this study. The framework was constructed by combining the most useful elements from the literature reviewed above. This framework, as presented in Figure 5, was established and is suitable for this analysis only.

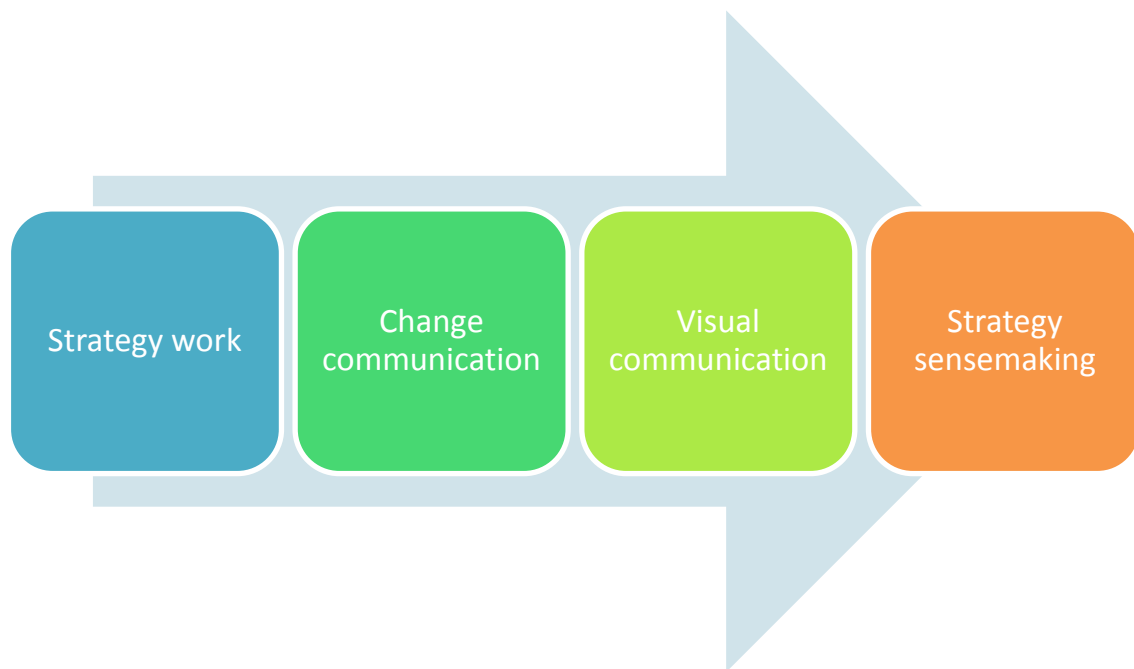


Figure 5: Framework of strategy sensemaking with visual and multimodal communication.

The theoretical framework above illustrates how strategy work, change communication, and visual communication come together to create strategy sensemaking in an organization. Strategy work forms the foundation for the strategic actions of a company. Strategy always involves change, and in order to ensure successful change implementation due to a change in strategy, companies must communicate about that change. Change communication is strongly assisted by the use of visual communication tools such as PowerPoint in strategy work because such software facilitates understanding by illustrating the meanings caused by a change more easily. Together, these processes enable a greater level of strategy sensemaking in an organization.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **Choice of Research Methodology**

The choice between qualitative and quantitative research methods depends on the purpose of the research and, at some level, the preferences of the researcher (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008; Hirsjärvi, Remes, and Sajavaara, 1997). The difference between these two main research methods is often described as follows: Quantitative methods concentrate on numerical data only, whereas qualitative methods offer more discursive and interpretive approaches. However, the boundary between these two methods is not clear. Instead, both methods should be seen complementary rather than substitutive (Hirsjärvi, Remes, and Sajavaara, 1997).

A qualitative approach was chosen for this study because, as Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) claimed, qualitative research better enables focusing on the research problem in its particular context. According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008), qualitative research methods are commonly used in business studies, and they are especially useful in situations where the researcher wishes to gain information about something that is as yet unknown and undefined. Qualitative research methods seek to answer questions such as what, how, and why (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008), and their approaches are more descriptive and interpretive than they are exact (Hirsjärvi, Remes, and Sajavaara, 1997). As the purpose of this study was to investigate relatively abstract phenomena, a qualitative method was chosen.

According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008), interviews can be categorized into structured, semi-structured, and unstructured types. Structured interviews are standardized; they follow a prescheduled script and permit little flexibility in their wording or ordering of questions (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). Semi-structured interviews contain a structured set of questions, but changes can be made, which is sometimes desirable during the interview process (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). Semi-structured interviews are a common research method in qualitative research (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). The third type of interview is the unstructured interview, where the interviewer asks questions relating to the research topic, yet there

is no structured set of questions of any kind and the interview proceeds more like a conversation. As a result, the conversation may follow any path and the researcher is free to ask any question related to the subject (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). Moreover, interviews can be conducted individually or with a group. For this study, both options - individual and group interviews - were chosen. This choice was made because the value of the research data was greater when I had the opportunity to interview several managers and employees via group interviews. Resultant findings and challenges were then further clarified in individual interviews. I believe that this choice better ensured the acquisition of versatile research data.

This research was accomplished via a multi-method qualitative case study. The case company operates in the Information Technology business field, employing 4500 people in Finland and abroad. The choice to conduct the research project as a case study was based on my belief that the relevant practices and processes would be best understood if they were researched in detail in the context of a single company. Also, I believed that an interview study combined with a study of naturally occurring materials would offer deeper insight into the subject.

## **Data Collection**

The empirical research data collected for this study consist of two types of data: semi-structured group interviews and the set of internal strategy communication materials provided by the case company. Both sets of research data were collected by me. Interview data were gathered from both group and individual interviews, which I organized at the case company during fall 2016. I wanted to obtain information about how the case company representatives, both change agents (managers) and change recipients (employees), viewed internal strategy communication practices and processes. I felt that interviews would be the most relevant way of gaining this information.

The set of strategy communication materials consists of naturally occurring documentary material offered to me by the case company. This material was researched because it is actually used by the case company in its strategy communication process.

Also, I wanted to analyze how the case company has used visual and multimodal communication in their internal strategy communications. Further, I wanted to reach conclusions about how the findings from the internal strategy communication material applied to and reflected on the findings from the interviews.

In this chapter, I will briefly describe the data collection process for both data sets. First, I will describe the interviews, which were conducted in groups and with individuals. Second, I will explain the set of internal strategy communication materials offered by the case company.

### **Interviews**

The first set of data for my study comprised a series of interviews conducted at the case company. The data set can be divided into two types of interviews: group interviews and individual interviews.

According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008), group study is suitable in several situations in qualitative studies. It may be used as a stand-alone method or as part of a multi-method study (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). In this research project, the second option applied. Groups usually consist of 2–10 participants, and the interviewer, who works as a facilitator. The group discusses the object of interest and the interviewer facilitates the discussion. The discussion itself may follow the path of a structured or semi-structured interview, or it may flow freely, as facilitated by the interviewer (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). In this research project, two separate groups were interviewed: Group 1 consisted of eight senior managers working for the case company. Group 2 consisted of eight professionals working in teams and supervised by those in Group 1 (managers). I operated as the facilitator of the group interviews.

Both group interviews were conducted as semi-structured interviews. A set of questions was used to guide the discussion, but extra questions were asked and time for further discussion was permitted to allow for a deeper understanding of the subject (for the list of interview questions, please see the appendices). This choice was made for several reasons. Semi-structured interviews help to keep the interview session balanced and on schedule; they also make the comparison of the results easier, which was important for

this study since my expectation was that the senior managers and employees would comment on issues somewhat differently. The duration of the interviews for each group was 90 minutes.

In addition to group interviews, individual interviews were also conducted at the case company in order to deepen the knowledge gained in the group interviews. These interviews took place with three senior managers. The first individual interview was with a senior manager who operates as the head of strategy communication in the corporate communication team. The manager also participates actively in the strategy-making process in the case company. The second individual interview was conducted with the human resource development manager of the case company. She was chosen for the interview because of HR's remarkable role in both strategy development and the communication processes. The third individual interview took place with a senior manager operating as head of customer operations who had insight into both the internal communication processes and customer preferences.

All individual interviews were conducted as semi-structured interviews. The interviewed managers each had extensive experience and had been with the company for several years. The individual interviews were conducted because I wanted to gain a better understanding of the case company's strategy communication processes as well as the reasons and challenges behind these processes. I was convinced that interviewing the HR specialist and a member of the strategy development team would offer more inside knowledge of the issues raised in the group interviews. The interview with the senior manager of operations was informative since some issues raised in the group interviews were clarified. Furthermore, the interview offered valuable background information on the history of the strategy communication processes of the case company.

### **Internal strategy communication materials**

The second set of research data for my case study was the internal strategy communication material of the case company, which the company provided via email. The internal communication material is designed and renewed every time the company's strategy changes (also annually). The internal communication material



consists of a set of PowerPoint slides. Sets of PowerPoints were developed for each of the business units of the case company, targeted to their respective strategy outcomes. The material is used as a tool for internal strategy communication, usually by presenting it to employees in team meetings. Later on, it is stored in the case company's Intranet system for further, often independent, study. The case company agreed to the internal strategy communication materials being researched and used for this thesis with guarantees of full confidentiality. As a researcher, I wanted to respect this agreement, and therefore the case company's internal strategy communication materials are presented in this study without names, company logos, or any other details that could reveal the identity of the case company.

### **Analysis of the Data**

According to Hirsjärvi, Remes, and Sajavaara (1997), the common nature of qualitative studies is to gain comprehensive knowledge of the issue of interest with methods that support the research in real-life situations. Other aspects of qualitative studies include valuing people over surveys in the data-collection process, using inductive analysis tools to review the research data in a complex and detailed way, and using qualitative research methods in the data-collection process (Hirsjärvi, Remes, and Sajavaara, 1997). Keynote is to support methods that allow the voices of examinees as well as their perspectives to be heard (Hirsjärvi, Remes, and Sajavaara, 1997); in other words, to gain an understanding of the as-yet unknown.

Analysis of the research data from this study was two-sided. The interview analysis focused on narratives, while the visual analysis concentrated on the naturally occurring research data. Further, the interview data were divided into comments concerning the communication process, implementation of the strategy, comprehensibility, and the use of visual and multimodal communication in the strategy communication process of the case company. These were then analyzed. The findings are presented in the next chapter of this thesis.

## Trustworthiness of the Study

According to Kovalainen and Eriksson (2008), the trustworthiness of a study depends on its reliability, validity, and generalizability. Reliability refers to the extent to which a measure, procedure, or instrument results in the same findings in repeated research (Kovalainen and Eriksson, 2008). Validity refers to how well the results provide an accurate answer or explanation of the research problem (Kovalainen and Eriksson, 2008). Generalizability concerns whether the research results can be extended to a wider context, such as another case study (Kovalainen and Eriksson, 2008).

Kovalainen and Eriksson (2008) also reported on a fourth element of trustworthiness studied by Lincoln and Guba (1985). This element is dependability, which is concerned with the researcher's responsibility to provide information to the reader and to ensure that the research process is logical, traceable, and well documented (Kovalainen and Eriksson, 2008; Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

The thesis research was conducted as a case study of a single company. Therefore, the results could likely only be repeated at this company. However, it is possible that the results could be quite similar if the research were to be repeated at a company operating in a similar business field. Reliability is, for this reason, considered to be on average level.

Generalizability is also considered to be on an average level for the same reason. The results are expected to be only generalizable inside the same company and/or companies operating in the same business area.

The purpose of the study was to research internal strategy communication and the use of visual communication as part of it. The research problems are complex and disembodied, containing a variety of tacit knowledge. Qualitative research methods are thus the best options for research problems of this type (Hirsjärvi, Remes, and Sajavaara 1997; Kovalainen and Eriksson, 2008), and so the choice of research methodology was made based on this observation. Based on this assumption, the validity of the research method is considered to be high in this study.

I consider dependability to be on a medium level in this study. Interview data for this study was gained with semi-structured interviews. The interview questions are reported in the appendices and the results are reported in the next chapter. However, as the case study was conducted with a company that is not mentioned by name, the reader must decide whether the same level of dependability would apply to the results of another company. Even so, the results of this study were obtained, reported, and documented as comprehensively as possible in accordance with the agreement with the case company managers, who were concerned that the strategy would not interest their teams enough. Team members often have other things on their agendas, and managers often feel that strategy communication would fall on deaf ears despite their willingness to communicate about the subject.

## 4. FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present the findings of my empirical study. The chapter is divided as follows. The first section presents the findings regarding research question 1, which concerns the purpose of internal strategy communication in strategy sensemaking. The next section presents the findings for the second research question, which focuses on the role of visual and multimodal communication in internal strategy communication. In both sections, the findings are first reported in detail; then, a summary of the findings is provided.

### **Purpose of Internal Strategy Communication and Strategy Sensemaking**

The findings concerning the first research question are presented in this section, which is categorized into six sub-sections: the communication process of the case company, strategy implementation, participation, interest, understandability, and time share challenge. The section concludes with a summary of the findings based on each of these categories as well as the challenges recognized in the case company's internal strategy communication process.

#### **Communication process**

This section presents the notions associated with the strategy communication process of the case company. All interview participants discussed this area, but Group 1 (managers) commented on it the most emphatically. Members of this group were concerned with finding time for strategy communication, determining ways to motivate people with respect to strategic issues, making strategy communication interesting, and helping people to participate in the strategy communication process.

In the case company, strategy communication is an organization-wide process. Strategy communication materials are designed for the whole organization and are discussed team by team throughout the company. Every team leader has a role in concluding the strategy communication; they have a communication agenda, but the discussion takes place in team meetings and the supervisor has the option to vary the communication agenda in regard to the team's preferences. Managers stated that it is every team

leader's responsibility to design strategy communication in a way that communicates best with the team in question:

*strategiaviestintä on jokaisen tiiminvetäjän omalla vastuulla. (Every team leader is responsible for communicating the strategy) (manager)*

*(quotes from the interviews are presented as italics)*

Group 2 (employees) also commented actively about issues concerning the strategy communication process. Strategy communication is active and systematic in the case company; both managers and employees noted this, stating that the repetition of the strategy message is essential. Many members of the organization commented that strategy communication was regular and active:

*on nähty tosi useita kertoja (we have seen this many times) (employee)*

Both managers and employees explained that the case company offers several events in which the strategy is discussed, including meetings, kick offs, strategy-training workshops, and other events:

*syksyllä on ollut paljon tilaisuuksia (there have been several events during the fall) (employee)*

It is important that a sufficient number of events in which the strategy is discussed are held, as doing so enables enough time for repetition and understanding. Some members of the organization noted that, sometimes, the strategy communication practiced by the case company would feel repetitive. However, this was seen as beneficial and new points were included in the communication materials:

*osin vanhan kertausta, mukana päivitettyäkin kamaa (partly repeating the old, but some new things were included also) (employee)*

Acknowledging the receiving group is important when delivering the strategy message. The change recipients want to hear a strategy message that applies to their own work. For this reason, the case company designs strategy communication materials specific to

each of its business units. Especially, the managers of the case company noted that this was important and should be continued:

*kaikille yksiköille oma esitys, että tässä on meidän juttu (we need a slideshow for each of the business units, about one thing for each unit) (manager)*

Each year, the company releases newly designed internal strategy communication materials to support the strategy communication process after the strategy has been designed. This set of materials is discussed in more detail later on in this chapter. The interviewees stated that the strategy communication materials are principally high-quality materials. They also noted that it is essential that the strategy communication materials are good, but that good materials alone are not enough. It is necessary to cut the information into smaller pieces. This is done in team meetings and in other discussions in the case company.

*(materiaalit) yksin ei sano paljon mitään, ennen kuin puretaan palasiksi (materials alone won't say much; they must be cut into smaller pieces first) (manager)*

Also, good materials were seen as a benefit because high-quality internal strategy communication materials offer the possibility for independent study. Especially, the managers pointed out in the interviews that, often, there is less time for strategy communication and more time for other things, so it is necessary to continue strategy training on an individual basis:

*paljon asioita juostaan läpi, voidaan kuitenkin palata myöhemmin (many things to go through, but it is good to be able to go back) (manager)*

Strategy communication is seen as a challenging process. One manager stated that strategy communication is a continuous process and that the right way of doing it depends on various factors; but most importantly, it is about the team and team leader. The team leader must know his or her team and be able to adapt the strategy communication according to team preferences. Even after this, success in strategy communication is seen as a combination of vision, process, and luck. The managers

noted that, after all, strategy communication was the best vision for the current situation:

*onko toisaalta olemassa oikeaa vastausta? vai onko kyseessä paras suhteellinen näkemys mitä se on? (does the right answer really exist? Or is it the best relative vision anyway?) (manager)*

Some managers gave suggestions on how the strategy communication process could be improved and questioned; for example, by including more options for individual choices inside the teams:

*ehkä voisi tuoda jotain omaa nicheä enemmän näkyväksi, kehitysideoita? (maybe there could be some amount of one's own niche, and improvement ideas?) (manager)*

### **Strategy implementation**

In this study (and in general), strategy implementation is the process of turning strategy into action. The issue of converting strategy into daily operations and practices was continuously raised by interviewees, especially those in Group 1: the managers of the case company. They stated that the strategy is often seen as complex and abstract, and that determining the actual tasks required reaching the strategic goals was challenging. However, finding and understanding such challenges is essential for reaching strategic goals.

In the interviews, the managers discussed how to communicate the strategy in a way easily transferable to daily tasks and activities. Communicating about the change and the strategy alone is not enough; the strategy must be transformed into concrete actions:

*strategia pitää nähdä laajemmin, ei pelkästään se miten viestitään vaan miten se muuttuu käytännön tekemiseksi. (we must see strategy from the wider angle, not just how we communicate about it but how to turn it into daily activities) (manager)*

*strategian tarkoitus on muuttua käytännön tekemiseksi, tiimin tekemiseksi ja maaleiksi (the purpose of the strategy is to turn it into daily tasks, team activities, and goals) (manager)*

Daily tasks and goals lay at the heart of the strategy discussion. The managers raised the issue several times, but they were not alone in their concern. Employees also discussed the subject of transforming strategy into real actions. Their concern was mainly about how to see the required actions behind the strategy, as well as how to interpret the strategy message so that the goals set by the strategy are clear. This discussion occurred several times in the interviews: What does the strategy mean with respect to one's daily activities? This question was raised by the employees as follows.

*mitä tämä tarkoittaa omassa tekemisessä? (What does this mean in one's own work?) (employee)*

Managers of the company stated that all members should understand their role in achieving the strategy goals:

*jokaisen pitäisi ymmärtää oman työn merkitys strategian toteutumiselle (everyone should understand the meaning of their own doings in the company) (manager)*

Strategy implementation faces several challenges. The managers stated in the interviews that technical specialists in particular tend to carry on in their own role regardless of the strategy. Having several tasks to accomplish, they tend to conduct their duties and pass on any additional information. This should be recognized and ways should be determined that ensure that strategy communication is accomplished with the receiving group in mind:

*tekninen asiantuntija tekee työtään riippumatta siitä, mikä strategia on. He vievät omaa osaamistaan. voitaisiin viestiä paremmin asiantuntijalle mikä on oma rooli strategian toteuttamisessa (technical specialists will do their own thing despite what the strategy is. They will utilize their own knowledge; we could communicate better on their own role in strategy implementation) (manager)*



Managers noted that, sometimes, implementing strategy is difficult. Internal strategy communication processes and practices are systematically improved. However, the process is still complicated and the strategy discussion faces challenges. The managers of the case company raised this in the interviews and questioned why strategy communication is such a complex issue to accomplish:

*käytännön tasolle vieminen on edelleen ajoittain hyvin hankalaa. miksi?  
(taking the strategy to the practice level is still sometimes very difficult,  
why?) (manager)*

The answer seems to lie somewhere between better communications, better targeting of the strategy message, and more precise division of the information into smaller pieces. The strategy communication materials of the case company are designed for the whole organization. Targeting them to all teams requires a more detailed message; this will remain a duty for team leaders and result in more work for the team manager. This is, naturally, a part of their managerial duties. However, the strategy goals must be set for the whole organization:

*strategiasta on pakko tehdä ylätason asiaa, välitaso vaatisi aika ison  
työstön jotta sen voisi palastella jokaisen asiantuntijan tekemiseksi  
(strategy has to be made top-level stuff; mid-level understanding requires  
quite a lot of work in order to turn it into tasks for each specialist)  
(manager)*

In the case company, the strategy implementation process faces two potential challenges that were recognized in this study. First, the strategy should guide all activities; but, according to the manager interviews, there might be other goals that do not follow the strategy. According to the interviewed managers, this type of situation may occur, and if so, would be dangerous:

*vaarallista on, jos jossain tiimissä on tavoitteita jotka ei tule strategiasta  
(it is dangerous if, in some teams, there are goals that do not match the  
strategy) (manager)*

Essentially, this all boils down to daily activities and goals; if the strategy does not guide actions and goals, it might quickly result in situations where established goals are not commensurate with the strategy.

A second challenge is that the reward system should support the activities based on the strategy. Rewarding systems guide the actions of individual employees in a very effective way; but if suspicious actions are rewarded, then the strategy goals might no longer exist. The interviews showed that this was sometimes the case in the case company. Several comments were made by the managers that the reward system might not support strategy-based activities but sales in other areas:

*ei välttämättä strategia ja palkitsemisjärjestelmät kohtaa mitenkään  
(strategy and the reward system might not be in line in any way)  
(manager)*

My study shows that strategy implementation is a key challenge. Interviewees stated that the company's strategy guides their actions. Therefore, it is essential that the strategy is understood correctly; and in this process, strategy communication plays a remarkable role. This was reported by both the managers and the employees.

*strategiasta riippuu meidän tekeminen (what we do depends on the  
strategy) (employee)*

However, the company seeks ways to communicate about the strategy in a manner that allows all members of the organization to implement the strategy in their own work. Interviewees stated that this is a continuous process in which the company seeks ways to improve the strategy communication process as well as strategy implementation:

*halutaan että jotkut asiat muuttuu. oikeesti muuttuu (we want some things  
to change, like, really change) (HR manager)*

### **Participation and interest**

The second theme in the area of the strategy communication process of the case company was the participation and interest of the change recipients. Participation is a tool for increasing interest toward the strategy. However, getting people involved in the

strategy communication process is complicated, as there are various other tasks to accomplish. Although participation is recognized to be important, the managers of the case company reported the level of participation to be low:

*osallistuttaminen jää jollain lailla vajaaksi (participation is too low)  
(manager)*

Besides increasing interest toward the strategy, participation was seen as a way of motivating people. Internal strategy communication is a process of marketing the strategy inside the organization. The case company managers noted that, too often, strategy communication becomes an internal marketing operation. Strategy should steer and lead daily operations. Strategy communication clarifies the strategic goals in a way that ensures that strategy is transformed into daily activities and tasks:

*keskitytään liikaa markkinointiin vaikka oikeesti pitäisi keskittyä osallistuttamiseen ja siihen, miten se menee oikeaksi tekemiseksi (we concentrate too much on marketing (the strategy), although we should concentrate on participating and how the strategy turns into real actions and daily tasks) (manager)*

Participation is important but requires time. Doing strategy-related exercises is seen as a way of motivating people and increasing their interest toward the topic. Various other tasks the teams must accomplish easily override the strategy communication. For this reason, the managers of the case company stated that time should be reserved for strategy communication:

*konkreettinen osallistuttaminen vaatii keskitetysti varattua aikaa, esim. tiimipalavereista. jää helposti muuten arjen jalkoihin. (concrete participation takes time from team meetings; otherwise, it's easily run over by other things) (manager)*

Making strategy communication interesting is a continuous challenge in the case company. Several managers reported sensing resistance toward the annual strategy communication sessions when the strategy changed and the new communication process started:

*peruslähtökohta on että huokailua kuuluu heti kun strategiakalvot näyttää  
(I hear sighs right away when I present the strategy communication slides)  
(manager)*

Managers questioned the routine strategy communication and discussed the ways in which interest toward the strategy could be generated:

*miten tästä saisi mielenkiintoisen? (How can I make this interesting?)  
(manager)*

The interviewees reported ways for increasing participation and making the strategy communication more interesting include participation via exercises, group meetings, and the use of visual communication, such as animated videos. We will return to these later in this chapter.

The strategy communication process is systematic in the case company, and all interviewees reported that there were enough chances to hear about the strategy. Repetition of change communication ensures the possibility of participating in strategic conversation. Repetition was seen as positive because it increases the amount of time given to think and hear about the strategy; conversely, it was seen as negative because the message was actually heard so many times that its meaning started to fade.

*yleissivistävää monologia (generally educating monologue) (employee)*

Participation in the strategic conversation was not appreciated, especially within Group 2 (employees). Several comments were made stating that despite the case company's attempts to communicate about the strategy equally to all members of the organization; employees often felt that strategy communication was a top-down activity:

*tulee annettuna (comes as given) (employee)*

They also reported that there were no chances to influence the strategy or the ways the company communicated about it:

*vaikutusmahdollisuuksia ei kyllä juuri ole (not really much chance to  
influence anything) (employee)*

The strategy was communicated systematically throughout the case company. Change communication around the strategy was based on the strategy communication materials, which caused the communication process to be the same throughout the organization. This was seen as both a benefit and a possible drawback, as the message was given in the same way to all recipients. However, the managers viewed the uniform strategy communication process as altogether beneficial. They argued that the company should continue this approach to ensure enough time for the strategy communication:

*kaikki käyvät läpi samalla tavalla kaikissa tiimeissä, pitäisi monipuolistaa ja varata aikaa (everyone should do it in all teams in the same way. We should make this more versatile and take more time for the strategy communication) (manager)*

### **Understandability**

One of the most common challenges in strategy communication is how to make the strategy message understandable for all change recipients. Strategy was discussed in the teams, but occasionally the managers (change agents) faced challenges in the strategy communication process. The managers sought ways to communicate through examples and stories. They noted that doing so was essential for making the strategy communication easy to follow for all team members:

*rautalangasta vääntäminen kansankielelle on avainasemassa (it is so essential to make this easy enough for everyone) (manager)*

It is crucial for the strategy implementation of change to be understood throughout the organization. Findings from the interviews indicate that the prerequisites for understanding are supported by good strategy communication materials, a systematic strategy communication process, and the support of management. Common opinion was that the strategy communication materials used by the case company were of a good quality; in other words, they were clear and easy to follow:

*selkeät materiaalit, helppo tulkita (clear materials, easy to interpret) (employee)*

*tosi selkeä (really clear) (employee)*

*selkeetä pässinlihaa, erityisesti myyntisetti (piece of cake, especially the material for the sales people) (employee)*

However, strategy communication materials were not always so easy to understand. Employees stated that interpreting the strategy communication materials and the strategy message contained within them consumed time and energy:

*täytyy hetkeksi pysähtyä että ymmärtää (must stop for a moment to get it right) (employee)*

In the process of understanding the strategy, the employees valued coaching from their supervisor. This was seen as an important source of help in the strategy implementation process. Although the coaching practices of the case company are the focus of this study, employees specifically mentioned the development conversations organized twice a year between employees and their supervisors. In these sessions, the strategy was discussed on a one-to-one basis. Several employees reported that they appreciated the coaching as it helped them to understand the goals set by the strategy:

*esimies koutsaa takessa enemmän (supervisor coaches more on development meetings) (employee)*

*koutsi tarvitaan tuuppaamaan oikeaan suuntaan (the coach is needed to guide us in the right direction) (employee)*

However, the professionals noted that the responsibility of understanding the strategy always lay with the individuals themselves. Although the strategy communication process helps and coaching is a valuable tool, every member of the organization is individually responsible for understanding the strategy:

*jokaisella on vastuu ymmärtää itse strategiaa (everyone is responsible of their own understanding) (manager)*

*vastuu on itsellä (one is individually responsible) (employee)*

Group 2 (employees) members suggested that the strategy should be discussed more between the teams. The teams' goals are somewhat different. Discussion about the strategic goals together with the other teams could offer different insights and increase understanding of the strategy:

*ryhmien yhteisellä läpikäynnillä tulisi erilaista näkökulmaa (if teams went these through together, there would probably be different perspectives)  
(employee)*

### **Time share challenge**

The third challenging area when considering the strategy communication process of the case company was finding time to communicate the strategy. Systematic strategy communication is practiced in the case company, and this requires time and energy. In the case company, the strategy is communicated several times in team meetings. In addition, several strategy information sessions are organized by boards other than those of the team leaders, usually HR. According to the managers, it is difficult to find a balance between strategy communication and other tasks. Strategy communication always competes for time with other duties the team must attend to. Although the strategy is communicated in many ways, it is quite often seen as secondary to other tasks. The managers felt that the employees prioritized other things before the strategy sessions and in general just had many things on their agendas. Consequently, the strategy communication did not always reach the change recipients:

*on tosi paljon erilaista esitystä mutta jotenkin se ei kosketa. ihmiset kokevat että on jotain paljon tärkeämpää tekemistä (there are so many different presentations, but somehow it does not reach people. They feel like there is always something more important to do) (manager)*

Finding time for strategy communication was seen as a continuous challenge, especially by the managers. The challenge is two-sided. On the one hand, the managers felt that the recipients of the strategy message were too busy to participate in the strategic conversation. And, on the other hand, the managers were very busy themselves. Finding time to discuss the strategy and, especially, to seek different ways to review the strategic

conversation while having the teams' preferences in mind was seen as challenging. The specialists had so many other tasks to accomplish that internal training in things like strategy competed for their time. Particularly when everyone was busy, the strategy was easily viewed as an extra task requiring time. Internal strategy communication also risks coming off like a monologue, especially when it is hastily given:

*tiimipalaverissa monologi tulee annettuna, yleensä on kiire (in team meetings it usually comes as given, and usually everyone's busy)  
(employee)*

### **Summary of findings regarding the purpose of internal strategy communication**

This chapter summarizes the findings and provides an answer to the first research question: What is the purpose and role of internal strategy communication in strategy sensemaking?

My study shows that the main purpose of internal strategy communication is to transform the strategy into daily goals, operations, and tasks. This was indicated by the managers in the interview studies several times. The strategy sets the goals for the organization. In order for the strategy to make sense, the change must be converted into daily activities and tasks. Change actors (managers) noted that the change in the strategy required new ways of working. The goal of the strategy communication process in the case company was to communicate these new ways of working to the change recipients (employees). Reaching strategy goals requires each employee to understand his or her role in fulfilling the strategy. To achieve this, the companies need internal strategy communication.

This study shows that the strategy communication process was carefully designed in the case company, which used change communication variations and tools, such as repetition, description, and reasoning, in its internal strategy communication process. Strategic change was discussed throughout the organization; all teams were exposed to the change communication agenda, including the mutual strategy communication material provided by the company.



The managers and employees of the case company were satisfied with the internal strategy communication process. They were especially pleased by the systematic process, high-quality strategy communication materials, and continuous strategy work. Good-quality materials were appreciated and increased interest toward the strategy.

Change communication enables strategy sensemaking by conveying information and the reasoning for the change. The managers and employees of the case company had different preferences regarding these processes, yet their goals were similar. In the change communication process, the managers operated as change agents and the employees as change recipients. The research showed that the managers' preference in strategy communication was to ensure that the strategy was implemented in their teams. The managers' followed the strategy communication principles and practices established by their organization. Also, they wished to adjust the strategy communication for their teams. On the other hand, the employees' preferences considered strategy communication from the point of view of understandability. They desired for management to support the internal strategy communication process with additional individual conversations. Also, they wished that their supervisors (change actors) would highlight their goals, tasks, and roles in the fulfillment of the strategy.

Besides offering guidelines for the organization, the strategy must make sense. The strategy communication process of the case company strived for better strategy sensemaking. Strategy work, change communication, and visual communication together enable a better level of strategy sensemaking. The literature review in this thesis reported that the goals of change communication includes providing a rationale for the change and convincing the change recipients (employees) of its benefits. My findings show that the case company followed these principles in their strategy and change communication process.

Time share was recognized as a challenge in the case company's internal strategy communication. Several managers reported that it was often difficult to find enough time for internal strategy communication, and that strategy communication always competes for time with other tasks. Based on the interviews, I believe that the reason for this is change resistance. The managers reported that the professionals had several

projects to accomplish simultaneously, and were thus especially busy; consequently, they tended to prioritize other things. Also, the challenge involved with getting the change recipients to participate in the strategy discussion is another example of change resistance. Finding the time to discuss the strategy was challenging. However, both the managers and employees of the company reported that time for strategy discussion should be provided. My study shows that the time needed for strategy discussion can be reduced by using good-quality strategy information materials and encouraging employees to engage in independent strategy studies. Good-quality strategy communication materials could also support independent study. Time is always a limited resource, and thus sharing time between strategy communication and other tasks involves finding the right balance; this should not be a matter of choice, but rather of seeking synergistic benefits.

### **Challenges of the case company's internal strategy communication**

My study revealed a few challenges concerning the strategy communication of the case company. These challenges are reported below.

The first challenge was that the change actors (managers) reported that the reward systems of the case company were currently not supportive of their strategy goals. I see this as a challenge because the managers reported that reward systems guide the employees towards goals that are not led from the strategy.

#### *Too much strategy communication*

The second challenging area was considered to be the repetition of strategy communication. In other words, the case company representatives debated whether the strategy was actually discussed too much. In the case company, the strategy was discussed throughout the organization so often that some professionals stated that if there was a person working for the company who was unaware of the strategy, he or she must have either been absent or concentrating on other things. The managers noted that the strategy was discussed so widely that, sometimes, everyone felt there was too much information about it. Some managers reported difficulties motivating themselves to annually repeat the strategy communication process.

### *False timing and time share*

Some participants questioned the timing of the strategy communication process. In the case company, the strategy is renewed annually. Each year, the new strategy is first presented to the board and CEO of the company. The CEO then introduces the strategy to company supervisors; prior to this, none of the supervisors can start the strategy communication process. The CEO usually gives his strategy presentation in June. Soon after, the summer holiday season begins. The internal strategy communication process begins to decline after the holiday season is over. By then, all members of the organization are busy, with new projects starting and the season taking off. Engaging in internal strategy communication simultaneous with this season was seen as both difficult and time-consuming.

### *Lack of dialogue*

According to the empirical study, there is a lack of dialogue in the case company's internal strategy communication. Interviewees claimed that the significance and understandability of the strategy could be improved by increasing the level of internal strategy dialogue and participation. This issue is closely related with the level of participation discussed earlier in this thesis. However, managers of the case company suggested that the employees' participation in the strategic dialogue should be increased.

### *Fast-moving business area*

The final issue concerning the internal strategy communication process in the case company is that the company represents a fast-moving and hectic business area. This creates challenges for the systematic communication processes practiced in the company. The company is aware of the massive information flow, but it should be noted that because of the immense and continuous flow of incoming information, there is a reasonable risk of the internal strategy communication being drowned out in the process.

Overall, my case study confirms the results from a previous study by Sonenshein and Dholakia (2012), who argued that the strategy must make sense and be understood in

order to be accepted. It must also be capable of being implemented into actions and tasks. My empirical study also confirms the previous results of Fenton and Langley (2011) and Balogun et al. (2014), who claimed that internal strategy communication is needed to ensure that an organization successfully adapts to a change. Additionally, this study demonstrates that the case company was following the principles of strategy communication and strategy sensemaking proposed by previous researchers, such as Sonenshein and Dholakia (2012), Fenton and Langley (2011), Balogun et al. (2014), and Cornelissen (2014).

## Visual and Multimodal Communication in Internal Strategy Communication

The second part of the findings concerns the use of visual and multimodal communication in the case company's internal strategy communication process. The findings of this section include those from both the case study interviews and the internal strategy communication materials.

Group 1 (managers) members reported that in their opinion, the use of visual communication helps in strategy communication. In the case company, the strategy communication materials were widely visualized. However, the materials alone were not enough. Conversation about the strategy in light of the materials was needed. Several managers stated that animations were useful for this:

*materiaalit on visualisoitu ja yksinkertaistettu mahdollisimman pitkälle. ei nämä yksinään riitä, tarvitaan myös muita tapoja joilla näitä avataan henkilöstölle, tilaisuuksia, säännönmukaistettua tekemistä esim. taket(tavoitekehityskeskustelut), osavuosisikatsaukset yms. jokaisella on myös jonkin verran omia käytäntöjä esim. animaatiot, yleensä monimuotoisuutta tarvitaan tässä (materials are simplified as much as possible, but alone they are not enough. We need other ways to open these up to the personnel: events, activities such as development discussions, interim reports, etc.; also, all units have some own practices, such as animations. We need more diversity here).*

Comments made by Group 2 (employees) were more focused on the existing materials, which were evidently clear. Employees noted that visuals help in interpretation and increase interest:

*materiaalit on hyviä, ei ole liian täynnä (materials are good, they are not too full) (employee)*

*vastaavaa kun laittaisi pelkkänä tekstinä kukaan ei jaksaisi lukea (if you put this in straight text only, nobody would manage to read it) (employee)*

*tosi hienoja (really nice) (employee)*

Visual and multimodal communication increased the clarity of the materials:

*visuaalisuus tukee ja tekee ymmärrettävämmäksi (visual communication supports the message and makes it easier to understand) (employee)*

As a tool, visual and multimodal communications enable the strategy communication to reach its goals more effectively. In the case company, this was done by using PowerPoint slideshows. Also, some managers reported that a video had been used in the strategy communication and that its use had been widely approved of. The video was short, less than two minutes, but it presented the key points of the strategy communication in an interesting way. Both managers and employees reported that the video was a useful tool in internal strategy communication.

*animaatio on oikeasti hyvä ja konkreettinen, myös kun se tulee annettuna (for example, animation is really good and concrete; also, when it comes as given) (employee)*

I researched the case company internal strategy communication materials for this study. Their overall image was clear and colorful, and they were full of pictures, colors, and graphs. The language used within them seemed clear and easy to follow. Information value, salience, and framing were used throughout them as well, with their information value being fairly large: The PowerPoint slides were full of information in textual form. Framing was also frequently used to highlight important issues.

Salience was used in the design of the strategy communication material of the case company. Salience delivers feelings and hues and increases the level of strategy sensemaking.

Below, some examples of the strategy communication materials are examined in more detail.



## The strategy focus is intact



7

Figure 6: Build value on data. Case company internal communication strategy materials, Slide 7.

In this image, framing and grouping are clearly used. The image contains only three blue arrows pointing in the same direction, left to right, which, according to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), expresses the way to proceed: the old and minor situation is presented on the left, while the new and better strategy goals are presented on the right. The composition of the image is very clear: The image contains nothing except the arrows. The three arrows and their salience represent the importance of the three selected key points, and the direction of the arrows reflects the selected path of the strategy message.

In the interviews conducted for this study, the senior managers of the case company remarked that this image has been used for many years in their strategy communication. Only the strategic goals vary. I believe the use of this image to be reasonable; the image is high on the levels of composition and representation and is, therefore, very informative. In the 2016 strategy material researched for this study, one of the strategy goals had been highlighted: a red-colored mark pointed to the arrow in the middle to highlight the importance of this new goal.

## We have set ourselves clear targets as our must-win battles

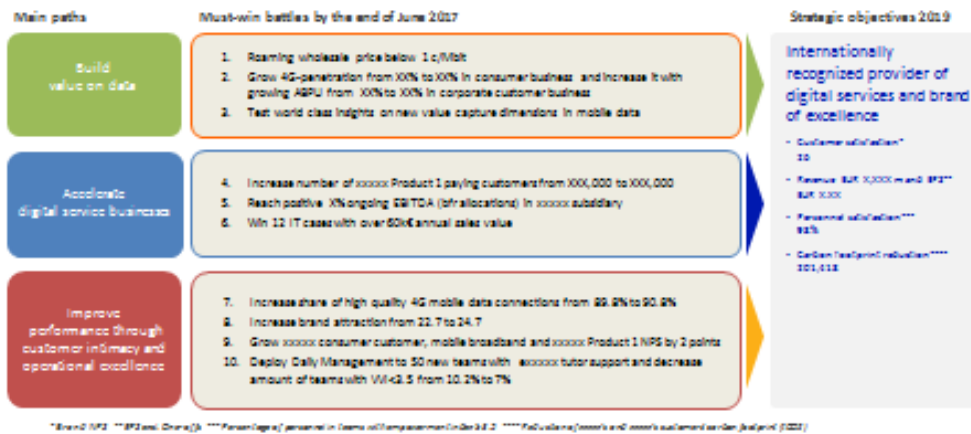


Figure 7: Targets and must-win battles. Case company internal strategy communication materials, Slide 8.

Figure 7 is representational. The company selected three must-win battles corresponding to the targets that the strategy set for the company. The information value (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006) was increased by presenting the must-win battles in a tripartite way: First, the battles; then, a more detailed explanation of the goal and the tasks required; and, finally, the results. Again, the information value increased with the placement of the objects in the same way as Figure 6 previously; the arrow-like presentation represents the increasing value of the objects, increasing from left to right and from top to bottom. Arrows are also used repeatedly in this image, leading the way. Also, the use of different colors highlights the message. The overall illustration is clear and informative, representing the most important must-win battles in a simple, yet explicit, way.



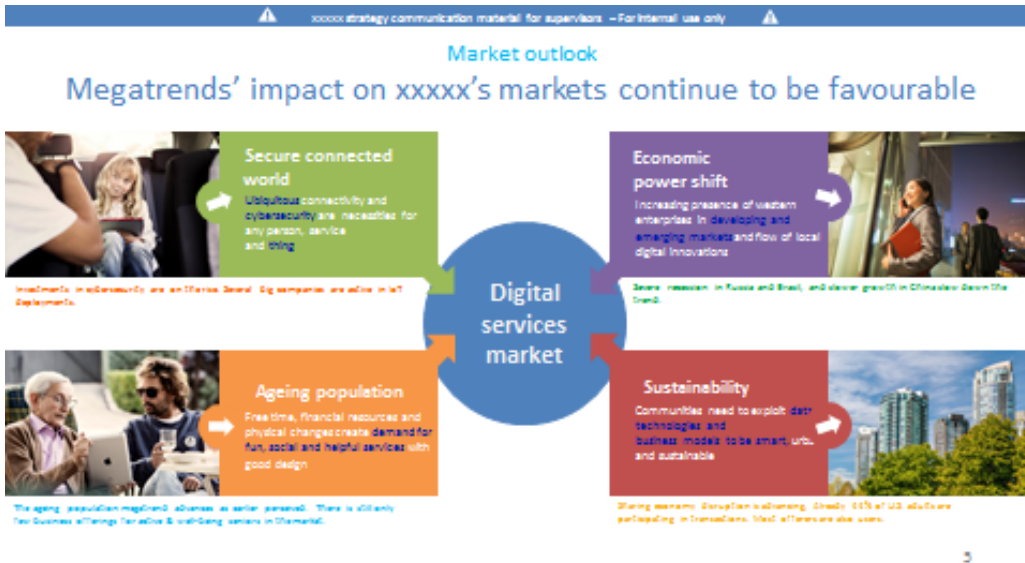


Figure 8: Megatrends on the market. Case company internal communication strategy materials, Slide 5.

In the image in Figure 8, the tripartite arrow representation is no longer used. Instead, the company represents the main global trends affecting the company's business field. These four trends are divided into the corners of the image. Arrows are again used, but this time they point to the center, highlighting the linkage between the trends and the market. The image is again representational. Bright colors are used to separate issues and highlight the variation between trends. Representational images are used for better understandability; they clarify the message, and their use in depicting the trends increases interest toward the image. In the center, the arrows highlight the company's business environment and its dependability on global business trends.



Figure 9: Needs-driven digital services. Case company internal communication strategy materials, Slide 15.

In Figure 9, the company communicates about its products and the next steps in their marketing. The image is again representational, taking advantage of object placement, arrows, and the use of bright colors. The object placement is very similar to the previous images in which the arrows were used widely. First, the strategic service area is announced, after which an explanation of the present situation follows. Next, the arrow highlights the move in the desired direction, right, after which the next steps defined by the strategy are described. The placement of the objects follows the principle of increasing importance when moving from left to the right (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). The presentation of the strategic goals is clear in this image. The setup of the image is horizontally and vertically three-dimensional, which represents the composition and highlights the importance of the issues. The colors used differentiate the issues, which increases their level of representation and salience.



## xxxxx subsidiary strategy



30

Figure 10: xxx subsidiary strategy. Case company internal communication strategy materials, Slide 30.

Figure 10 communicates the strategy of a particular business unit of the case company. This image is noticeably simpler and emptier than previous images. Also, the partition in this image is four-dimensional, which differs from the other reviewed images in this study. The representation is fairly clear. The image presents the four strategy-based path recommendations for future actions, which are listed from the top down, highlighting the order of strategic preference. An arrow design is used on the right side of the image. On the right side of the arrow, the strategic objects for the upcoming strategy year are listed. Again, the placement of the objects in the images highlights their importance; a placement order from left to right and from top to bottom are used, both of which highlight the preference order. The image is graphical, and for this reason, very representational.



Figure 11: Daily management practices. Case company internal communication strategy materials, Slide 36.

The final image in the internal strategy communication materials reviewed in this text is presented in Figure 11, which shows the strategic preferences of the case company’s daily management operations. The practices are represented in a triangular shape, starting from the bottom of the triangle and ending at the top. The placement is representational; the most important factor is presented at the top. The triangular shape is used together with arrows and vibrant colors, which increases the level of clarity. On the right side of the triangle, more arrows are used for listing the explanations. Again, this image is very representational and informative.

**Visual communication in strategy materials**

The findings from the visual and multimodal communication used in the case company’s strategy communication are summarized in this section. First, I present a summary of the findings from the internal strategy communication materials. Second, I review the findings regarding how visual communication has been used in the internal strategy communication of the case company.

## **Summary of the materials**

The internal strategy communication material of the case company assumes a representational role. In the material, there are no people present; mostly, the strategy communication slides contain pictures, texts, and other objects. Moreover, there are no examples of using interactive participants; therefore, the strategy communication material of the case company is representational.

A variety of PowerPoint tools has been used in the case company's strategy communication materials. However, the choice of tools used remains uniform throughout the material: The PowerPoint layout is the same; for the most part, the colors remain the same (blue, orange, red, and green are equally used); the fonts remain the same; and the overall image of the slideshows is informative yet uniform all the way through the material. Also, the same designs, such as arrows and, especially, the tripartite way of representing the issues, are repeatedly used through the materials.

The identity of the presenter is unclear in the case company's strategy communication material. The material systematically uses the pronoun "we" as it communicates the strategy and constituent tasks needed to reach the strategic goals. Who, then, is this person or organization speaking? In the case of the case company, I assume that the presenter is the organization. Due to the interviews conducted for this study, I know that the strategy communication material is made in-house at the case company, but the person in charge of the strategy communication material only designs it. He or she is not alone in making decisions about the strategy; the strategy-making process of the case company is a group activity that involves dozens of people in the case company annually.

The use of visuals makes the internal strategy communication process more interesting, easier to understand, and adaptable to the strategic goals comprising part of the daily operations of the company. All of the managers interviewed for this study stated that one of their main tasks was to support the process of converting strategic goals into the daily tasks of the professionals. Both the supervisors and the employees shared this opinion.

## **Findings from the interviews**

Strategy is a complex issue. One of the most common challenges in the internal strategy communication process is that professionals experience difficulties understanding the strategy and transforming it into daily tasks. Therefore, the main goal of the strategy communication process should be converting the strategy from a top-level plan into actual, daily tasks. My research project shows that the case company understands this and strives for better strategy sensemaking via systematic strategy communication. Both the individual interviews and group interviews demonstrated that the use of visuals makes the strategy easier to communicate to the change actors (managers) and easier to understand by the change recipients (employees). The analytical framework of this study suggests that strategy work, change communication, and the use of visual and multimodal communication contribute to strategy sensemaking in the organization. My study shows that this is happening in the case company. The company systematically aspires for better strategy sensemaking with its change communication process. Visual and multimodal communication helps to convey the strategic goals.

The participants reported that in their everyday work, the learning of the strategy is often made independently via the use of the internal strategy communication materials. These materials include either general strategy communication material or, on occasion, team-specific strategy communication material provided by supervisors.

Several channels are used in an individual's strategy learning process. Team supervisors send internal strategy communication material via email; the company's Intranet page features a strategy communication section; and each team's SharePoint page in most cases includes internal strategy communication materials. Individual study is sometimes supported by official strategy-training material, which can be found on the company's web-training system. Via this portal, strategy-related and other types of trainings can be conducted independently, remotely, at any time.

Findings from the individual interviews also showed that participants felt that the use of visual communication helped the process of embracing the strategy. Especially, the use of visual elements such as arrows, blocks, and framed groups visualized the message

and promoted the adaptation process. Visually communicated strategy messages helped the change recipients concentrate on the key points and clarify complex issues.

The case company has been using a tripartite key message for its strategy for several years, as shown in Figure 12:



Figure 12: Build value on data.

Interviewees reported that the case company has used this image for a long time. Many of them named this image as an example of visual strategy communication. The tripartite image highlights the company's strategic issues, whose content changes annually. Interview participants encouraged the use of these types of images in the future. In their opinion, highlighting the preference order of the strategic elements eases the implementation process of the strategy; it also helps to transform the strategy into daily tasks for all members of the organization.

**Recommendation: Use of a strategy communication video**

Case company representatives reported that the company had tried using a strategy communication video as a tool in the strategy communication process. The video was described by a member of Group 1 (managers), who noted that she had seen the video and that it had been used in strategy communication. However, the other managers were unaware of the video. I examined the video for this study. The duration of the video was

less than two minutes, but it successfully underlined the key points of the case company strategy in an interesting way.

The rest of the managers reported that a video would be a beneficial way of communicating about change, and stated that new ways for strategy communication are needed. I share their opinion. Video offers interesting possibilities for internal strategy communication.

Visual and multimodal communication offer new ways of communicating change. The analytical framework created for this study suggests that strategy work, change communication, and visual and multimodal communication together ease the process of strategy sensemaking. My research shows that visual and multimodal communication may help in this process; both change actors (managers) and change recipients (employees) reported about this in their interviews. The company already uses visual communication in its strategy communication, but multimodal communication is not widely used. The use of a strategy communication video, however, is a good example of the possibilities of multimodality. In this case, the video contained music, pictures, and textual arguments—all elements of multimodal communication. Video is also a new and interesting way of doing change communication that may increase interest toward the message being delivered. Multimodal solutions such as this may offer innovative new ways to communicate change. Aside from generating increased interest, they may also create feelings of excitement, participation, and commitment through their enthusiastic communicative modes.



## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

### Research Summary

This study was motivated by the lack of practical knowledge about the area of internal strategy communication and the use and role of visual and multimodal communication in its conveyance. The research project was conducted as a case study in which internal strategy communication processes and materials were examined. The empirical research was conducted with semi-structured group and individual interviews and the examination of the strategy communication materials provided by the case company. The research data were analyzed narratively and through visual analysis of the internal strategy communication materials.

The literature review conducted for this study dealt with the areas of strategy work, strategy sensemaking, change communication, and visual and multimodal communication. The results of the literature review were analyzed via the analytical framework for this study, which combined the areas listed above toward increasing the overall level of strategy sensemaking. However, former research in these fields revealed a research gap with respect to visual and multimodal communication's role in internal strategy communication. Especially, a gap exists around the question of how internal strategy communication, assisted by visual communication, can affect strategy sensemaking. Therefore, this thesis sought answers to two research questions:

- What is the purpose of internal strategy communication in strategy sensemaking?
- What is the role of visual and multimodal communication in internal strategy communication?

The key findings present the answers to these research questions.

The first question addressed the purpose of internal strategy communication in strategy sensemaking. My study showed that the strategy must be capable of transformation into daily actions and operations. Accordingly, my study confirms previous results by Sonenshein and Dholakia (2012), Fenton and Langley (2011), and Balogun et al. (2014). I found that communication plays an important role in strategy sensemaking

because it explains strategic change, convinces the change recipients of the need for the strategic change, and advises the change recipients about new ways of working in the changed atmosphere. Strategy must make sense (Sonenshein and Dholakia, 2012), and employees must be able to recognize more benefits than drawbacks in the changed situation (Park and Folkman, 1997; Sonenshein and Dholakia, 2012). Toward this end, organizations need change communication (Cornelissen, 2014; Sonenshein and Dholakia, 2012). My study demonstrated similar results.

My study showed that the change actors (managers) and change recipients (employees) had different preferences regarding internal strategy communication. Group 1 (managers) was mainly focused on commenting on issues around finding the time for strategy communication, ways of motivating people regarding strategic issues, making strategy communication interesting, and helping people to participate in the strategy communication process. Ways to ensure success in these pursuits included making enough time for strategy communication, making strategy communication interesting, using visual and multimodal communication to boost understanding, and transforming the strategy into daily tasks and activities. Comments made by Group 2 (employees) were centered around areas related to the communication process and the ability to understand both strategic goals and one's own role in fulfilling them. The strategy communication materials played an important role in this process. These results are similar to those reported by Balogun and Johnson (2004), who demonstrated that the managers of a company act as change agents while employees act as change recipients.

The second research question addressed the use of visual and multimodal communication in the internal strategy communication process. Understanding and motivation are key to employee interest in the strategy. Visual and multimodal communication serves an important role in internal strategy communication, as it can provide an interesting presentation and thus promote understanding of the strategy message and increase strategy sensemaking. Also, visual and multimodal communication clarifies and simplifies the strategy message. For this reason, the use of visual and multimodal communication in internal strategy communication is both important and recommended.

The final key finding was concerned with the surprising role of multimodal communication in the strategy communication of the case company. This study examined the visual PowerPoint materials the case company used in its internal strategy communication. However, I found that there was another option that may offer interesting possibilities in future internal strategy communication processes: a strategy communication video. Interviewees reported positive opinions about the use of the video. I watched the video, noting that it communicated the strategy in an interesting, encouraging, and positive way. It was also a very time-effective means of communicating the strategy; the video was less than two minutes long but managed to highlight the key points of the strategy. In the literature review, I found no evidence of the use of video in internal strategy communication. However, in this study, I found the use of the strategy communication video to be a very interesting method, so much so that I would suggest studying it in more detail in future studies.

Change was always present in the work of the case company's professionals and managers. Internal strategy communication played an important role in enabling this change: Managers communicated about it and the employees received the message; afterward, the employees started applying the goals and tasks dictated by the strategy to their daily activities. According to the interviews, the interest of the senior managers was mostly concerned with finding the time needed for strategy communication, determining ways by which to motivate people regarding strategic issues, making strategy communication interesting, and helping people to participate in the strategy communication process. In the case company, the importance of strategy communication was recognized, yet challenges occurred because the strategy communication process had to compete for the time devoted to other tasks and processes happening simultaneously in the case company. The strategy communication was systematic, and the time allocated for it was regularly arranged in various events. However, even during these events, strategy communication was seen as challenging because, very often, the participants preferred other tasks. Also, lack of interest was a problem, as event participants often did other things during the meetings or just showed indifference. Making strategy communication interesting is therefore essential. The case company has tried to achieve this in several ways. The interviewees reported

completing team assignments in groups, holding different events to discuss strategic issues, and dividing the goals established by the strategy into smaller pieces. The success of these ventures has been variable. All of these actions were connected to the theme raised by the managers: how to get people involved in the strategy communication process. If the actions listed above are implemented, the level of participation should be increased. However, it was very clearly raised by the managers that the case company still has work to do with this issue, because lack of interest in and problems with linking the strategy to one's own daily tasks were still regularly reported.

### **Practical Implications**

This research was conducted as a case study in a single organization, and therefore the results cannot be generalized to all organizations. However, there are some recommendations that can be regarded as universal. First, employees in the case company valued systematic internal strategy communication because it gave them a feeling of participation in the strategy process, enabled them to understand and thus feel motivated by the strategy, and committed them to it. Second, managers of the company, especially the supervisors, valued clear internal strategy communication processes because it helped them to plan the strategy communication and clarify the goals for the teams. Third, visual and multimodal communication as a part of internal strategy communication can in general help the strategy implementation process, especially in organizations where employees are expected to do parts of strategy training independently.

### **Recommendations for the case company**

Based on the results of this study, I recommend that the case company consider two changes to their internal strategy communication process. First, the internal strategy communication process in its present form is vulnerable. The process is systematic, but there is so much available information that the strategy communication risks being drowned out. I see this risk as very relevant and worthy of consideration, as the company operates in a business field that is both dependent on its professionals and extremely fast-moving.

Second, I recommend that the company consider the amount of internal strategy communication practiced in the company. A systematic strategy communication process ensures that the information reaches all personnel and increases the likelihood that the strategy is widely known, implicated, and understood throughout the organization. However, too much is too much, and strategy communication that is too pervasive (as well as an excess of information) may ultimately work against its intended purpose. My recommendation is to carefully choose which activities to concentrate on, and that these should entail increasing the amount of participation and organizational dialogue. Such actions can include team meetings, including strategy workshops and pair work. I especially recommend activities whereby the professionals of the company can implement the strategy in real-life situations.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This research was conducted as a multi-method study in a single organization, which means that the results ultimately demonstrate a single-company approach to the research questions. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to the wider context.

Another limitation is that there was some variation within the semi-structured interviews, as the group discussion took place during the interview session. I as an interviewer asked the questions differently between the groups, as the implications of internal strategy communication for each group were different and the interviewees viewed the research questions accordingly. This created minor challenges in the comparison of the interview results.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

At least three interesting directions for future research arose during this study. First, it would be interesting to conduct a further study on how semiotic technologies could support the narrative process of strategy communication in a wider context and outside of the knowledge area covered in this thesis. PowerPoint, as researched in this study, is only one example of semiotic technologies. There are several others, such as, for example, YouTube, as well as other semiotic presentation software, such as InDesign.

Second, as reported in the findings and research summary, I believe that the use of videos in internal strategy communication should be examined more in the future.

One final suggestion for further research is the area of social media. Countless forms of social media platforms are used for various purposes today, and the area of strategy communication both inside and outside of the viewpoint of the companies is no exception. Many companies actively use social media to generate interest, share information, and attract new internal and external shareholders. It would be interesting to conduct a future study of strategy communication in a wider context and determine the possible incorporation of social media in strategy implementation. I predict that the role of social media will only increase in the future, and will certainly not diminish, thus offering interesting possibilities for future strategy work.

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## APPENDICES

### Interview questions

All interviews were conducted in Finnish. Interview questions are presented here in English for readability and clarity.

#### Group 1 (managers) interview questions

- how long have you been working with the company?
- have you been working in other teams besides your present team? if yes, have this been with the Corporate Customers unit?
- please describe the internal strategy communication processes of the company?
- do you feel you have enough information about the company strategies through the internal strategy communication provided by the company? is the information understandable and clear?
- how do feel about the internal strategy communication materials, especially the PowerPoints used in the process? Are they helpful/clear/confusing, please describe in more detail?
- would you change something in the internal strategy communication processes of the company? if yes, what would that be and why?
- would you change something with the internal strategy communication materials used by the company, especially the PowerPoints?
- do you feel that you know the company strategy and your own role in implementing it?
- open comments. Is there anything you would like to add or comment on internal strategy communication processes, materials or other issues related to the subject?

## **Group 2 (employees) interview questions**

- how long have you been working with the company?
- how long have you been in managerial position?
- please describe the process of the internal strategy communication in your company?
- how is the internal strategy communication done in your team? are there company guidelines, if yes, please describe these guidelines?
- how do you see the role of internal strategy communication in the case company today?
- how do you see the internal strategy communication has changed during the last few years?
- has the change, if any change can be seen, been for a better or for a worse? please describe?
- how do you see the internal strategy communication materials offered by the company, especially the PowerPoints? do you feel that they are helpful in your strategy communication work?
- is there something you would change in the internal strategy communication materials? especially in PowerPoints?
- do you feel that something should be changed with the internal strategy communication materials? if yes, please describe?
- if you got to decide how to change the internal strategy communication processes in your company, what would you do?
- How do you see the role of visual and multimodal communication, especially PowerPoints, in your team's success? how about in company's success?
- how do you feel the internal strategy communication materials, especially PowerPoints, should be developed in the future?
- open comments. Is there anything you would like to add or comment on internal strategy communication processes, materials or other issues related to the subject?

## **Individual interview questions**

- please describe the processes of internal strategy communication in your company?
- how do you see the role of internal strategy communication in your company?
- how are PowerPoints used in the internal strategy communication processes in your company?
- please describe the making process of the internal strategy communication materials, especially the PowerPoints. Are they made in house or does your company use a partner with these materials?
- how do you see the role of visual and multimodal communication in the internal strategy communication?
- do you feel that the internal strategy communication processes have changed during the last few years in the company? If yes, please describe in more detail?
- how do you see the role of visual and multimodal communication, especially the use of PowerPoints, in the internal strategy communication in the future?
- do you feel that there is something the company could do differently with the internal strategy communication materials, especially with the PowerPoints?
- what kind of suggestions do you have for the future needs of the internal strategy communication as a communications professional?