

**The Impact of Company Culture on Technological Start-up to Scale-up Organizations**

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<b>Degree programme</b>	
Business Information Technology	
<b>Report/thesis title</b>	<b>Number of pages and appendix pages</b>
The impact of company culture on technological start-ups to scale-up organizations	<b>31 + 3</b>
<p>Company culture is an abstract, intangible concept that's shaping the digital tech scene. Through undertaking a series of discussions in the Helsinki tech' sector, the best practices of company culture have been identified.</p> <p>An understanding of the impact company culture has on start-up to scale-up organizations has generated insights into how it is being and can be used to drive business goals alongside growth in the digital ecosphere. The identification of key processes and their break-points creates risk prevention, whilst allowing for proactive measures to be put in place to help nurture best practices.</p> <p>All primary research has been conducted in person through a series of semi-structured interviews. These interviews were kept anonymous to allow for raw opinions on a sensitive subject; leading to actionable, informative data from multiple sources.</p> <p>The conclusions drawn from the research identify the core concepts of company culture: highlighting specific areas whilst providing action points and processes for start-up to scale-up organizations to best measure impact, and to aid their growth in the future.</p>	
<b>Keywords</b>	
Company culture, start-up, scale-up, onboarding, feedback, automation	

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

Through the age's companies have survived and thrived for differing reasons, as times change so do the techniques and trends of the day. Company culture is not a new phenomenon and has been affecting organizations as far back as the 17th century (Carlos, A. M. and Nicholas, S 1996) to benefit the inner workings of a business. All organizations have a culture, no matter their practices. Each contains differing behaviors and beliefs which in turn lead to varied working methods, acceptances and overall environments. However, since the 17<sup>th</sup> century company culture has become a whole different entity that can be utilized to not only benefit a start-up organization but help it to transition to a scale-up.

A reflection of a company's culture can be found within the management style. Traditionally, a more structured hierarchy has been in place due to the cultural trends at the time. This is also still true of the modern day, as their organizational culture doesn't have a right or wrong answer, different companies and industries require different internal entrainments. For example, the financial industry heavily relies on security, therefore, the culture is reflected by the need of the organization.

However, as the technology sector has evolved, so have the culture of the companies within it. Within this report I will not only highlight how technical organizations rely on culture due to a changing, complex generation that make the workforce of today, but show how unique processes can positively influence the direction and progression of a technically focused organization.

Start-up to scale-up organizations were chosen specifically due to their size and motivations. Start-up companies have the benefit of flexibility, however, with growth and development the issue of company culture is never more prevalent. This is the ideal time to create procedures and processes which can benefit an already existing organizational culture, before expansion occurs and the organization becomes too large.

A comprehensive analysis of existing company cultures will be undertaken through primary and secondary research. Initial secondary research will theorize how techniques

have been used in the past and present, before primary research will be undertaken to discover how culture is being used within digital companies in the Helsinki tech sector.

I will then look more specifically at start-ups to scale-up businesses in the technology sector and how they can use company culture in their infancy to drive growth. During this section, I will hold discussions with relevant parties to explore their opinions and expertise, as well as identifying how the company culture is currently and could be used.

The gathered insights will be turned into actionable data through analyzing the reasons for success and how these can support business needs. The research will provide the opportunity to lay frameworks of cultural processes within a start-up and provide practical advice that can be used to attain business values and growth through operating on an Agile, cultural foundation.

## **1.2 Objectives**

Through identifying the impact of culture on organizations, specific internal processes of technological organizations will be highlighted. This will allow start-up to scale-up organizations to focus on the right areas of their culture, and naturally evolve in their own, internal ecosystem. From the results of the research, suggestions for digital processes and tools will be provided with the purpose of aiding the cultural framework of start-up and scale-up organizations. By speaking directly with active companies in the tech sector, an overall perspective of cultural development will be attained, allowing for organizations to compare and utilize differing methods.

A core objective is to answer the specific research questions: How do start-up to scale-up organizations rely on company culture and how it can be used to attain practical business value.

## **1.3 Target Audience**

Naturally, start-ups will be the main target audience for the research. The provided results will benefit the direction of the organizations, but also provide educational material for their development. Every aspect of the business is affected by culture, as the culture is constructed and influenced by the people within the organization. Therefore, the target audience will extend to all employees of a start-up, and not just the founders and entrepreneurs.

Another benefactor will be companies operating in Helsinki tech sector. As the research contains direct research from technological companies with established cultures, all companies can have an interest in the findings.

An unforeseen target audience is those who work in human resources. The research contains numerous insights into processes that directly affect the day to day operations of HR teams.

Ultimately, any individual employee or company within the Helsinki tech sector will benefit from the results of the research, be it to compare their existing cultures, or to learn how to evolve for the future.

#### **1.4 Research Scope**

While company culture is a broad topic that applies to all organizations' globally, the scope of this research will be limited to the Helsinki tech sector. As the technology sector in Helsinki is large, the discussions will focus on companies actively practicing in software and digital development. This will allow for qualitative, live discussions to be undertaken with companies and the maintenance of a manageable schedule, leading to results aimed directly at the target audience.

Within the scope of company culture, an emphasis will be placed on the impact upon an organization. This includes the potential for future growth, with a focus on how a company's' culture can be used as a framework for positive expansion and innovation (Neumeier, M 2009).

Large organizations', start-ups and scale-ups were all chosen for the research in order to establish the overall picture of company culture within the Helsinki tech sector. The benefit of this scope allows for lessons to be learnt from those who have already established a healthy company culture, helping start-ups to avoid potential risks in their own development, whilst benefitting from successful stories. The focus then shifts to solely to the impact that company culture has upon a start-up to scale-up organization.

## **1.5 Research Methods**

The research methods fall solely on primary and secondary research. The second of which is only be used for theorising company culture and establishing the past uses and how it has been integral in the evolution of digital ecosphere.

Primary research has been utilised to gather direct information from companies currently operating in the Helsinki tech sector. A qualitative approach was taken due to the topic at hand. Company culture is not tangible and differs between each company. Therefore, open questions in a semi-structured interview format (See Appendix 2) are a necessity. The ability to learn from each individual interviewed is essential, whilst having the opportunity to ask intuitive questions based on specific answers.

Initially, the first interview was recorded. However, after conducting the interview the results suffered from the recording being active during the conversation. The atmosphere of the discussion was negatively impacted, and as soon as the device was switched off, the interview took a positive turn. Due to the negative side effects, the recording of interviews was then dropped in order to create a free flowing, less pressured interview environment, however, a third party took brief notes. It was quickly understood how abstract and open the topic at hand was, therefore; the direction of the research switched to semi-structured interviews. Anonymity was agreed with all parties due to discussing specific internal processes within their organizations. Discussing the experiences and current uses of company culture brought numerous insights, helping to define the importance of culture whilst explaining the practical value.

The interviews were conducted with companies of all sizes. Initially, the research focused on larger companies in order to experience the end goal of a culture and how it can be maintained with progressive growth. The spotlight then switched to growing start-up to scale-ups, resulting in the finding of insights into scalability, best practices and how company culture aids success.

## **2 Company Culture Research Background**

### **2.1 Company Culture a Brief History**

Company culture has always been prevalent, changing with the times. Although each organization has its own individual culture, there are trends that exist in the ecosystem. For



decades command and control has been the favoured method of management, and it's proven to be successful in its own rights. This style of management leads to a more systematic, controlled culture. The drawbacks of command and control have become apparent as society and technology rapidly changes. The expectation of people performing like machines is long past (Wheatley, 1997).

An emphasis on strict processes and supervision feels out of touch with modern practices, and ultimately invests power in the wrong places. A traditional hierarchical model promotes regulation via statistics, essentially restricting the freedom of employees, which is reflected in employee motivation and quality of work.

It is important to understand what exactly culture is. Culture is the infrastructure that binds people and processes together in order to generate results (Atkinson, 2019). Through this definition it is clear to see why command and control doesn't work as a management style for every organisational culture. The transition from top-down hierarchies has been challenging. Ed Catmull, president of Pixar Animation and Disney Animation, describes how the shift from using a square to a round table helped to change from a formal, exclusive meeting to a more rounded, inclusive discussion (Wallace, 2014). Although the change seems small, the symbolism is reflected in the shape of the table. Once rounded, every becomes equal, voices are heard and all face inward. This is a prime example of how company cultures began to shift away from traditional methods, embracing more modern techniques.

A prime example of how this affected the tech sector lays in Zappos. In 2003, the organisation was looking to hire customer service representatives. An option was outsourcing to another country. However, they followed the rule of never outsourcing your core competency, and instead decided to implement a culture first strategy and moved their headquarters to Las Vegas in order to reap the rewards of a more customer focused candidate pool (Hsieh, 2010).

The above highlights the importance of organizational culture, but also brings light to the fact that each organisation has a different one. Edgar Schein argues that culture is the most difficult element with an organisation to change (Cacciattolo, 2014). Organisational culture isn't visible and is fundamentally attached to beliefs and unwritten rules within a company (Cacciattolo, 2014). Deep rooted understandings are not consciously acknowledged and tend to become behavioural habits rather than defined processes (Cacciattolo,

2014). The importance of this cannot be stressed enough as once established organisational culture is difficult to shift; emphasising the importance of culture within start-ups.

The evolution of the tech industry and the arrival of start-ups once again transformed the conception of a company culture. A start-up is defined as “a human institution designed to create new products and services under conditions of extreme uncertainty” (Ries, 2011, p. 8). This new breed of organisation brought with it a new form of culture, one that’s rapidly evolved but is still underutilised. With the rise of software start-ups came the demand for a lean structure to drive innovation (Ries, 2011). This new forward-thinking approach incorporated user centric strategies, which further pushes the importance of an individual culture.

## **2.2 Values and ‘The Why’**

The structure in which organizations hold themselves accountable for user facing interactions and internal decisions lays within the values and ‘The Why’. Like a mission statement, ‘The Why’ is a coined term to represent the purpose of an organization. Purpose is the key to any culture; without having reasoning or a framework of reference, direction and scope are quickly forgotten. This begs the question of how it can be achieved and implemented across the entire organization. The beginning to an answer lies within concise descriptions and keywords defined by all employees that best represent the vision of the company and those within. Misalignment between behavior and values is an all too common mistake. Through action and creation, values can be used to hold decisions accountable, leading to the end product of culture, which in-turn trumps any strategy that’s implemented (Rhoades and Shepherdson, 2011). Organizational values are essentially the guiding principles that develop into a decision-making framework. They help to set the tone for the company culture and create an identity through unity.

What is ‘The Why’. Commonly known as a mission statement, ‘The Why’ reflects not only communicates what organizations do but helps to compete for the public’s attention (Wallace, 2004) through giving purpose. Each organization has a reason for its existence; however, not all have defined this within a concise statement. The formulation of a succinct phrase provides direction and the ability to plan. It sounds simple and almost obvious, but the impact of this clarity is commonly underestimated. By simply putting thoughts to paper, coherency is formed for multiple audiences. Not only will employees understand

what the company cares about, but customers' initial questions and concerns can be addressed before even connecting with the organization. Importantly, unique qualities are identified and promoted, airing what is individual about the business as a whole: and this is what should be revered.

### **2.3 Decision-Making Structure**

A reflection of a company's culture can be found within its decision-making structure. Traditionally, a hierarchical model heavily influenced by the business sector the organization resides in is implemented. However, modern trends are leaning toward a flat, open structure that promotes autonomy and responsibility.

Companies within the tech' sector reap the benefits of an open structure. Shared ownership creates drive, which leads to initiative and independence, resulting in the ability to make decisions across the workforce. This can be further broken down into specific teams, allowing for multiple iterations and sprints to be run in conjunction, creating a cross-functional, self-driving unit. An anchor such as a team lead is in place if needed, but operates as a support for others, aiming to make every team member working life easier.

However, traditional methods differ. Hierarchical decision making varies depending on the employee. Not everyone works well with autonomy, and organization hierarchies emerge as some employees are better equipped than others (Murmman, 2018). The addition of management structure generally occurs with growth in order to avoid the loss of organizational goals and to combat frustrated employees who struggle to access decision makers (Gulati and DeSantola, 2019). Open structures are not always the right choice. Larger companies cannot afford the same autonomy, especially in the financial industry. Security becomes an important factor, which results in an organic formation of a hierarchical culture. It's important to understand that there isn't a correct option. Decision-making structures are inherently affected by the culture they operate within, therefore, there isn't a pre-defined answer or practice that will be best solution for any culture. Instead, these structures occur naturally within the culture or the organization.

### **2.4 Motivations**

Through the inclusion of all within important parts of creation and new styles of decision-making, motivations are naturally affected. The general response is a positive one, and this leads to an increased commitment. However, one of the key focuses lays in avoiding

demotivational management (Hiam, 2003). There are three main causes of demotivation: administrative, operating and personal (Halushchak and Halushchak, 2016). Administrative demotivation's entail a lack of systematic approach, combined with a lack of managerial knowledge and a bad support system for psychological need (Halushchak and Halushchak, 2016). Personal demotivation's are linked to unrealistic expectations and lack of ownership, whilst operating factors revolve around communications, limited resources and a lack of processes (Halushchak and Halushchak, 2016).

The threat of withholding recourses, opportunities combined with micro-management can leave a workforce, especially in a smaller setting such as a start-up, completely demotivated. The key is to have a clear, compelling purpose whilst providing a manageable task: and then providing the freedom to complete the objective (Hiam, 2003).

The environment in which people operate is known as the climate (Rao and Weintraub, 2013), if motivations are not properly cared for there's a danger enthusiasm and innovation is lost. The ability to foster learning and encourage independent thinking is paramount in a start-up, especially one experiencing growth. Therefore, the traditional methods of managing motivations through tracking metrics, as used in command and control, simply cannot bring the autonomous intuition a successful start-up needs. Micro-management is a deterrent to employee engagement, and over-managing diminishes the chance to cultivate an engaging environment.

## **2.5 Onboarding**

As the cultural environment is the result of all within an organisation, the addition of employees will have an impact on the current status. In large corporations the effect isn't as obvious: set procedures and processes overwhelm the individual impact of a single new hire. However, in smaller start-up to scale-up businesses new starters heavily influence the culture they enter.

Previously, this hasn't always been recognised. Pioneers in the field started to change the way they hire in order to incorporate the culture into the process. To keep culture strong corporations started to hire people who would be suitable to spend time with outside of the office (Hsieh, 2011). This concept further developed to incorporate the entire team into recruitment processes, making sure each member recognised the potential for culture fit in new hires.

Once hired, most organisations have some type of onboarding to help socialize new employees (Ahjua and Galvin, 2003). However, the specific activities undertaken are the most important aspects of an introduction. In the modern world a fast-paced environment doesn't grant the fortitude of time; meaning you simply can't let new hires work things out independently (Ferri-Reed, 2013).

The first 30 days are of vital importance and engaging new employees immediately is key to actualizing their longevity within an organization. Expectations need to be met, with the necessary equipment provided from day one: especially in a world of instant access. The onboarding is the ultimate first impression, and in a competitive tech industry it needs to best reflect the positive sides of a company's culture, whilst allowing new workers to easily become a part of it (Five Strategies for Onboarding the "Always-On" Millennial Generation, n.d.).

## **2.6 Feedback**

A strong feedback culture fosters growth for organizations as a whole and each individual operating within it. Value is placed on opinions of all instead of the few resulting in the advancement of talent rather than the hindrance. As previously mentioned, culture nor the people that operate inside it are static; therefore, opinions need to have outlets in order to maintain and develop a strong, unified organization.

People are the priority; they make the culture and each organization has the privilege and the ability to cultivate and champion their own by giving a voice to every individual. The trust developed during the inclusion of all in the decision-making structure and onboarding sections of a company's culture is rewarded through feedback. Employees who trust the organization they work for and have their ideas acknowledged offer insightful, honest feedback as they are motivated to do so. This not only supports wellbeing and productivity but creates inter-connected motivations that result in the collective progression of the company. However, cultures tend to use feedback as a means of coping with ignorance (M. Horowitz, 1963). The focus on negative feedback is detrimental for progression and hold potential dangers for the motivations of employees. Dismissing, ignoring or not giving the opportunity to provide feedback is in essence refusing communication.

Feedback can cultivate positivity, especially when recognized as a cornerstone of a culture. An emphasis on learning, progression and open communication leads to informed self-assessment and reflection in action. By having an emphasis on feedback, the culture can focus on learning solutions and engaging in the value of feedback conversations (Kraut, Yarris and Sargeant, 2015).

## **2.7 Change Resistance**

Change is inevitable in any field, business or area: culture is no different. Traditionally, leadership has implemented change, and it's often met with internal resistance. The better a culture is at recognising the problem the more options there are to deal with objections and embrace change (Hunt, n.d.).

The key is to make the reason for change clear, therefore anyone affected by said change understands the motives behind it. This not only demonstrates proper reasoning but helps to quell dissatisfaction by providing legitimacy to an unwanted outcome (Palmer, 2004).

However, change resistance isn't always that smooth. In the event of a more resolute stance diplomatic and political approaches need to be applied in order to move forward. Counterarguments, coercion, reasoning, and coalitions are all viable forms of advancement (Anderson, 2011). The key is to have values within your culture from the beginning, therefore, decisions can be held accountable against shared opinions.

Once change begins to occur, realignment of infrastructure needs to anchor that change within the culture. This can mean a change in a system, environment or even training. The final product can only be fully realized if the changes are aligned and integrated with the pre-existing culture, saving the creation of an anomaly within an already defined environment (Palmer, 2004).

## **3 Results of Semi-Structured Interviews in the Helsinki Tech Sector**

The following results were all gathered through direct, semi-structured interviews with representatives from the Helsinki tech sector. The organizations all operated with software, having experience with creating and using digital processes. This was specifically targeted in order to gain an understanding of how company culture can differ between different sized organizations in the same market. In total 16 different companies were interviewed, ranging in size with a heavy focus on start-up to scale-up organizations.

The journey was educational, providing countless insights into the positive implications of a culture within an organization. The impact upon start-up to scale-up organizations has never been of greater importance, particularly the findings relating to the breakpoints of scalability.

### **3.1 Organizations Involved in Semi-Structured Interviews**

The defined sizes for small, medium and large companies involved in the process are as follows: 0-15 is small, 16-100 is medium and 100+ is large. The decision was made to keep the companies and participants secret in order to uphold anonymity whilst discussing internal topics. However, I can give a brief introduction and overview for each organization involved:

- Company A is a start-up agency offering physical and virtual office rental spaces.
- Company B is the global leading scale-up digital product organization.
- Company C is an international digital consultancy.
- Company D is a start-up offering digital assistance to the elderly in Helsinki.
- Company E is a technical recruitment start-up company specifically places software developers.
- Company F is a subsidiary of the largest software consultancy company in Finland.
- Company G is an international Finnish digital agency.
- Company H is a start-up capital investment agency.
- Company I is a start-up digital agency.
- Company J is a start-up digital agency.
- Company K is a scale-up international, digital consultancy.
- Company L is a digital educational and community connecting start-up.
- Company M is a scale-up international, digital product company.
- Company N is a start-up digital venture capitalist.
- Company O is a scale-up product company.
- Company P is an international digital product start-up.

The order was not chosen specifically, due to time constraints and references from previous discussions. With hindsight; an organized structure would allow for the semi-structured interviews to benefit from experience, as they are open, qualitative discussions.

### **3.2 Basis of the Semi-Structured Interviews**

The questions (See Appendix 2) were used as anchors for the conversation. This lent to a semi-structured process. This method proved beneficial, as discussions could be left open without a specific structure, allowing for expansive, open answers.

An example of this in practice was the opening question: 'What's your definition of company culture?'. This breaches the topic yet doesn't imply any bias to the answer. By asking directly at the start, a structure in essence was created. However, the potential for different answers, so much so it wasn't the same in any of the discussions, leads to varied outlets of conversation.

By having open questions such as the above, unwritten questions and open discussion can occur based on the response. This meant the majority of the questions during the discussions were not recorded, but the results benefitted from a wider array of conversation. Notes were taken by a second party during the discussions in order to record findings and the below findings are based on the notes from the semi-structured interviews.

### **3.3 Company Culture Overview in the Helsinki Tech Sector**

Initially, the interviews focused on how company culture is perceived. Although semi-structured, the first question was constant and directly asked for an untainted, raw view of company culture.

Company culture is an abstract, intangible element that defines the personality of a company by influencing the environment in which it works. Each company is different, and each is made of differing individuals. Company culture is the metaphorical glue that provides a common framework for values, ethics, expectations and goals whilst providing the basis to make decisions to further them. It works differently for every organization, and therefore, has multiple ways in which it can be implemented and practically used, meaning there isn't a set right or wrong path.

The definition above derives from a collective impression of company culture by those interviewed. This initial perception was touched on at the start of the interviews with the hope of gauging how company culture is viewed in its raw form before specifics affect the overall picture. This provided interesting insights into how company culture is perceived,



and most importantly, highlighted the significance of implementing best practices at the earliest possible stage due to the impact on all aspects of an organization.

### **3.4 Impact of Values and 'The Why'**

These practices are the basis of company culture, and the first step toward the inclusion of all within the process of creating the culture. 'The Why' doesn't have to be a mission statement, just an honest reflection of the company's core objective. However, there is not a defined method of production or a set process which is best used to achieve this. Organizations have different reasons for existence, and this should be celebrated through 'The Why', be it a personal story or a specific inspiration for a company's existence. The critical factor is to understand that this is the foundations of the company culture but will adapt with time (Company D, personal communication, April 17, 2019). Motivations change, organizations evolve and reasonings adapt with growth. 'The Why' will always reflect the underlying character of an organization, and therefore must be understood, created and acknowledged by all within as well as being open to change.

However, everyone carries their own values, so, how does a company successfully establish a core set everyone can agree upon? Founders' values form the DNA of a company and set the baseline of the culture, but the people complete it. Transitioning from founder to team values is essential (Company G, personal communication, April 24, 2019). The key is honesty, and to include everyone in the process. Values represent a personal outlook, and an organization is essentially an organism made up of individuals who have their own respective opinions (Company M, personal communication, May 22, 2019).

Including everyone within the creation process results in all voices being heard, and through applying an abstract approach, honest, personal findings are found, which is exactly what is needed. The results can then be defined as a team and tangible rules applied, ending in a core set of values that represent the company as a whole.

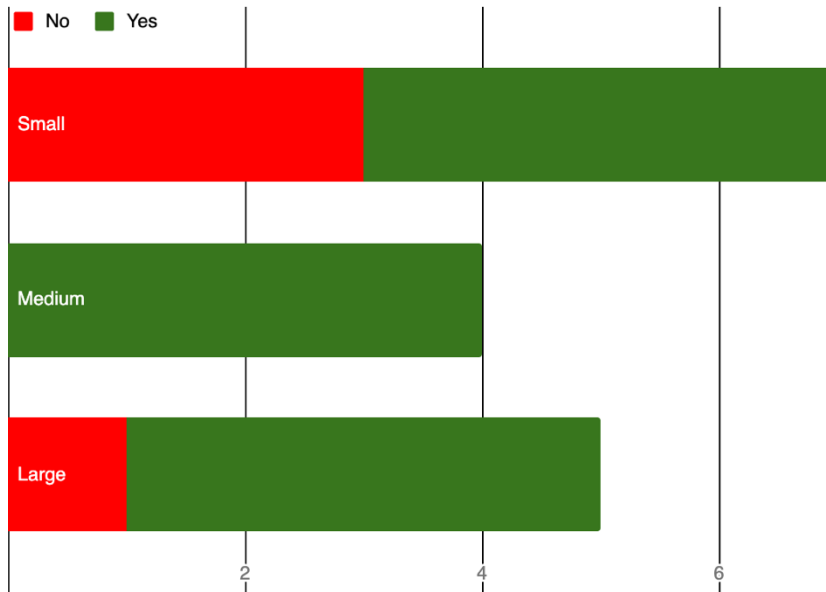


Figure 1 - Chart representing the creation of values by a team of those interviewed

Noteworthy, all companies who have shifted from start-up to scale-up have recognized the importance of creating values as a team.

### 3.5 Values vs. ‘The Why’

After and during conduction of the interviews it became clear there were approaches to actualizing the environmental culture and creating practical impact within start-up to scale-up organizations: values and ‘The Why’.

Having a phrase to stand by provides purpose, accountability and a path for all to follow (Company H, personal communication, April 17, 2019). On the other hand, customized values represent the organization as one entity while creating cohesion and laying the framework for decisions (Company G, personal communication, April 24, 2019). As discovered during the discussion with Company G: “passion drives individuals, but purpose drives all.” (Company G, personal communication, April 24, 2019). That begs the question: which is better method? The answer: neither.

The decision should not rest with which approach to take, but which method is best suited to an organization as each culture is different. Applying both methods is not incorrect, in fact, they both boast unique advantages that blend with one another. The objective is to establish these concepts early so the results are woven into the infrastructure of the com-

pany, and in-turn, become part of the organizational culture. For this reason, it's also important to include each and every one in any related activity or future adjustments. Taking unique perspectives and combining them into a consensus harmonizes the workforce, not only adding accountability and responsibility to those who partook in the production but providing a reference point for any subsequent decisions.

However, the practical advantages of creating values and answering 'the why' doesn't end with the formation of organizational alignment; there is a need to communicate these findings to new hires as they will provide an anchor during the onboarding process. The expansion of these processes holds potential for further iterations with the creation of a culture handbook, which provides further benefits such as employer branding (Company C, personal communication, April 23, 2019).

Ultimately, the creation of alignment fuels the progress of a company's core mission: and this unity is reflected in answering 'The Why' and identifying shared reflective values within the organization; providing direction for the future, and the ability to make effective decisions along the way.

### **3.6 Impact of Motivations**

The common approach to tackle motivations within the workplace is to measure employee satisfaction and act based on the results (Company C, personal communication, April 24, 2019). Unfortunately, this reactionary method can miss vital information. A satisfied employee does not directly translate to an engaged and motivated member of the team. Motivation breeds betterment, and therefore by acknowledging individual motivations, business performance increases as a result of a more fulfilled workforce.

"My motivations are the people I work with. Friendship, companionships keep me at the company and provide my motivation. This is why the hiring processes is key to motivations within a company, and especially to me personally."

(Company F, personal communication, April 26, 2019).

Company culture is a contributing factor in shaping motivation and engagement. Everyone is motivated uniquely, and with the inclusion of all within the creation of the values, there's a likely chance the outcome will cover core motivations of the workforce. By recognizing

each individual and including them from the beginning; not only are personal drives identified, but reactionary measurements are avoided through determining unique objectives (Company O, personal communication, May 15, 2019).

The benefits are crucial. A concerning issue in a modern business environment is employee retention. Through encouraging the company culture to identify motivations and recognize concerns, retention rises (Company F, personal communication, April 26, 2019). Why? People feel appreciated and are encouraged by having their voice not only heard but welcomed.

### **3.7 Impact of the Decision-Making Structure**

One of the first actions to be taken in order to achieve a flat structure is the implementation of trust. A trust culture operates under the onus that trust breeds trust (Company N, personal communication, May 13, 2019). The organization itself needs to be the one who takes the first step, putting their trust in the employee from day one. Employees should be encouraged to try new things and decide their own workflow. Providing autonomy and moving away from micro-management increases the productivity and effectiveness of the overall team (Company L, personal communication, April 11, 2019). The elevation of responsibility cuts unnecessary layers in the workflow whilst adding accountability and speed: especially in relation to communications and decision making.

However, can unlimited autonomy have adverse consequences? There are notable, negative side effects of a completely flat structure. Unlimited autonomy can have adverse implications on employee motivation, especially if they are junior. Without the tracking of goals and objectives, an employee's direction and self-confidence can turn wayward. A lack of feedback creates an air of uneasiness, especially if there is no contact with team leads due to a busy or fully autonomous work environment (Company K, personal communication, April 26, 2019). This communication loss forms due to an overbearing arch of trust. Organizations need to recognize an employee's individual preferences and act upon them. Simple actions such as feedback, reviews or weekly meetings help to provide encouragement by reaffirming the trust in an employee, without abandoning the individual to unlimited autonomy. This is essential when tackling burnout, and a key hindrance to the symptoms.

Ultimately, soft skills are necessary to assess each situation in its own context, the import rests in the practice of communication, and having that outlet for concerns and feedback alongside the autonomy.

### **3.8 Impact of HR Processes**

Once an organization has established processes, it's important to constantly review and update internally. But, how does it work for smaller companies in the tech' sector? A common theme that presented itself followed an engineer first pattern, in which the workforce would eventually grow to the point where it needed to hire the first non-engineer. Practically, it makes complete sense as the tech' itself needs to be created: nevertheless, the importance of the culture shouldn't be diminished, especially when aiming to retain staff.

“When I first joined the onboarding didn't really exist. I was the first HR member and had to create the onboarding process myself. Now when new people join, they are introduced to our values, processes and tools. It helps to settle them into the company and the culture.”

(Company O, personal communication, May 15, 2019).

Reactionary thinking restrains the growth of company culture. Proactive measures allow for organic stems of culture to grow and avoid slow processes with punishing learning curves. Implementing early procedures relating to specific processes, whilst understanding the breakpoints of scalability, strengthen the culture and help to avoid the clutter inherited by the first HR focused employee.

#### **3.8.1 Impact of Onboarding**

The hiring process is an unseen catalyst for company culture. Applying predefined company values to the hiring process is essential. Although fundamental talent and strong skillsets are crucial factors in a potential new hire, the culture-fit needs to be correctly addressed (Company J, personal communication, May 22, 2019). Culture is never static, especially when bringing fresh elements into an enclosed environment. The importance of recognizing that culture changes with every new hire cannot be stressed enough. Therefore, every time the hiring process ends, and a new starter begins their journey within an organization they are bringing their own opinions, voice and motivations.

Blanket rules cannot be applied to the hiring process as they are contextual events that have definitive requirements (Company M, personal communication, May 22, 2019). Priority and value need to be assigned for what is needed at the time. However, an emphasis must be placed on specific elements in order to avoid negatively impacting company culture. As previously mentioned, culture-fit is essential. This can be evaluated by applying company values to the hiring process whilst humanizing the interview process. A tendency for technical tasks and interviews has taken priority, neglecting soft skills that are indispensable within smaller tech' companies.

Successful cultures contain an interesting constant in their hiring processes: recruitment by recommendation. Initially recruiting acquaintances or friends prioritizes the culture-fit whilst gaining the necessary skills needed.

The onboarding process is the next step significant step that is inherently affected by the environment the culture influences. By understanding the traditional view of first impressions, it becomes evident that the onboarding process helps to define the initial perception of an organization.

The onboarding process can be used as a tool to introduce new starters to a company's culture by putting a focus on interaction and communication. The importance of meeting differing units and associating faces with departments is underestimated (Company G, personal communication, April 24, 2019). Not only does it help to smoothly onboard a new starter, but it also sets the tone and expectations of the culture. By spending time with each department, meeting people and understanding each role, the onboarding process promotes the positive aspects of a culture.

Common practices include the creation of slide decks, informative documents, guides and playbooks (Company O, personal communication, May 15, 2019). These practices hold their own benefits and help to occupy a mind but lack the ability to scale due to leaning toward a manual creation process. Companies within the tech' sector have an opportunity to incorporate automation into the onboarding process (Company B, personal communication, May 6, 2019). Interaction and motion are becoming indispensable tools in the field, yet they are not being utilized in important internal processes. Combined with simple gamification, such as an achievement-based checklist, the onboarding can transition into a more motivating, fun experience that's fueled by organizations specific cultures; rather

than what's expected: a day of reading, a quick hello and a lot of questions that remain unanswered.

Social aspects of onboarding are just as necessary for practical and cultural reasons. The assignment of a mentor is a popular method to encourage acclimatization whilst providing a point of contact. However, mentors should also be available for social elements: having a lunch buddy is just as pivotal to an onboarding process.

An interesting element of onboarding lays with distributed teams and remote workers. It brings new challenges of how to successfully onboard a new starter into the company and the culture (Company A, personal communication, May 6, 2019). Face-to-face connections are achieved by using video conferencing to familiarize coworkers and provide the building blocks for relationships. Having that visible aspect provides both social and professional expectations whilst welcoming new employees.

The above are just examples of how things can be done differently to the norm. Onboarding is not a generic experience, and this must be taken into account when considering changes. Just like with values and 'the why', each organization will have its own take on how it should be done. The important factor is to reflect the values during the onboarding, and to remember that it doesn't end with the first week.

### **3.8.2 Impact of Feedback**

There are numerous forms of feedback that influence a company's culture. Communication is an essential characteristic of any organizational culture, and different methods can adversely affect the environment of a company. Face to face feedback is a common mechanism used by organizations of all sizes. Having an opportunity to speak 1 on 1 with a colleague, team lead or CEO improves communication skills and provides greater alignment within the company (Company A, personal communication, April 16, 2019). Although valuable, this method can struggle to keep up with the growth of a company and fail to catch the wellbeing of all employees. However, the key flaw is the lack of anonymity.

Anonymous outlets are indispensable as they provide a safe platform to raise or report grievances. They also offer feedback that cannot be sourced elsewhere, no matter how open and transparent the culture is. Intriguingly, sources for anonymous feedback can be actualized with relative ease. Having an open, easily accessible form will allow specific

concerns to be addressed (Company P, personal communication, April 26, 2019). An intriguing implementation is to have these anonymized suggestions discussed in the team meetings: giving viability to the concept and enabling ideas to be heard.

Surveys provide continuous improvement at the same time as tracking employee wellbeing. They are a vital part of the feedback as they reduce the expenditure of time by automating the process whilst providing clear and actionable data. The balance of frequency needs to be found for each organization. Larger businesses can benefit from a weekly or biweekly survey, whereas smaller businesses need only send the survey once a month. If surveys are exclusively conducted quarterly or biannual the end results are ineffective. Culture is not stagnant and needs to be frequently developed to maintain continuous growth.

Weekly meetings help to reinforce feedback as part of company culture. It's a practice that businesses of all sizes undertake, for good reason. Consistency creates a habitual nature to feedback, providing increased opportunities for identifying pain points and correcting courses. Equipping the workforce with the ability to adapt and learn is a crucial asset for any organization. A specific advantage weekly meeting provides companies in the tech' sector, especially consultants, is an opportunity for the team to gather on-site (Company E, personal communication, April 23, 2019).. As distributed teams work on client premises the benefit of a weekly meet allows all to gather at the office, giving all an outlet to discuss feedback, as well as seeing the entire team.

However, a concern arising around feedback is what exactly to do with it. How do you take action and avoid the stream of information becoming arbitrary? (Company I, personal communication, May 22, 2019). Act on concerns and most importantly use feedback to continuously improve the processes in place. By updating manual processes, time is gained, allowing for tweaks and improvements to be made consistently. Insightful data can be found by analyzing the fulfilment of feedback: for example, determining which teams are exchanging the most feedback can correlate directly to the teams' satisfaction and wellbeing. Frequently gathering feedback will provide abundant streams of actionable data, resulting in the continued progression of an organization's culture.



### **3.9 Impact of Company Activities**

During the discussions it became evident that company activities were a key cultural ingredient within organizations. Everyone loves company activities. They are not just a chance to bond, develop rapport and trust with colleagues but an opportunity to celebrate the company culture. Company activities display the core values of an organization, whilst celebrating the success (Company J, personal communication, May 22, 2019). Routine stagnates creativity: having an outlet to refresh the atmosphere and provide interaction between one another is a great source for recharging.

There are numerous forms of company activities; from annual trips abroad to a simple beverage after work. Like everything else attached to company culture, the best suggestions are found within the organization itself. Communicating with the workforce and having the participation and ideas from all in the creation of events will provide activities favored by the majority, and therefore change the atmosphere from disgruntled forced attendees to willing contributors (Company J, personal communication, April 23, 2019).

### **3.10 Negative Impacts of a Toxic Company Culture**

Interestingly, negative impacts were also highlighted in the interviews. When the culture is healthy and organizations are experiencing positive growth, company culture flourishes. When situations change and challenges occur, the real test of a company's culture is revealed.

“When all is well, everything is alright. When all goes to shit, it measures the strength of the culture and the organization. If the culture can't take the heat, then everything that it resembles no longer works.”

(Company H, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

Firstly, understanding how culture can turn negative is essential. A number of occurrences can cause a culture to turn toxic, but there are some more prominent than others.

Core values, when aligned, drive businesses forward; however, when they do not serve as a basis for organizational functions or decision making, they are easily forgotten and become almost non-existent. Avoiding values from turning into words learned during an onboarding process is key to keeping a culture staying active and fresh (Company D, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

Feedback maintains growth whilst averting stagnant culture. If employee suggestions are discarded or the environment fails to encourage honest feedback, the culture becomes tainted. Employee retention, accountability and motivations fall. Blaming and punishment rise, which leads to micro-management and the removal of autonomy. This can have adverse effects for companies which offer remote work as an option, leading to a rise in absenteeism in the office as synergy in culture is key to maintaining its strength (Company D, personal communication, April 5, 2019).

A lack of recognition can become a strain on interactions (Company I, personal communication, May 22, 2019). Acknowledgement of work and effort is key. Employees' dedication and efforts need to be celebrated in the culture of the company, instead of overworking becoming a badge of honor. A tense environment leads to little or strained interactions, and without communication, a culture fails to serve its purpose.

Soft skills are of vital importance to combating negative slides in company culture. They also provide warning signals for future problems. A lack of empathy, increased gossip and a slump in team spirit are all signs of unfavorable drops in culture. Bad culture costs communications and internal struggles are directly reflected when external communications are brought into the equation, affecting the end customer.

Personalities, experiences and leadership styles are all potential culprits for the formation of negative company culture. The key to the preservation of a rigorous culture doesn't lay in a particular area, but the environment as a whole. The one inter-connecting backbone is communications. Be it from team leads, designers, developers, HR or the CEO, all need to communicate effectively. Soft skills transcend differences on paper. Implementing habitual processes that encourage internal communication proactively combats future challenges whilst averting reactionary responses.

### **3.11 Breakpoints of Scalability**

Through conducting the interviews practical learnings have been found via analyzing experiences of all as a collective. Culture is affected by the size of the company, and specific needs arise as growth occurs. Scalability becomes an issue and processes need to be constructed in order to help combat challenges.

For instance, companies who have around 10 employees or below are afforded the resource of time. Whilst they generally do not contain a specific member of the team for HR needs, 1 on 1 feedback is still afforded. Onboardings are smooth as they are uncommon, and responsibility is easily allocated.

### **3.11.1 First Breakpoint of Scalability**

The first breakpoint of scalability occurs at 10+ employees. Feedback becomes a priority as the culture changes with the growth. The key is to maintain that culture, whilst adding the benefits of the new members of the team. The need for progression becomes apparent, whilst the time to undertake the required actions disappears. Feedback techniques such as '1 on 1s' become less frequent, prompting the increase in face-to-face, spontaneous feedback. This is when processes are waiting to be utilized. However, they are generally created using manual methods, which fail to tackle the restrictions in time. Automated surveys provide the answer. They not only save time but allow the tracking of employee wellbeing and provide an anonymous outlet for staff to use. In combination with weekly meetings, surveys can be constantly updated and improved, whilst using the collected data as discussion points.

### **3.11.2 Second Breakpoint of Scalability**

The second breakpoint of scalability occurs at 30+ employees. Further growth brings new challenges. Feedback processes tackle the challenges of culture and organizational growth, but, the increase in new staff strains the onboarding process.

Manual methods are stored in a drive, which can quickly become a minefield of information. Onboardings tend to become ad hoc inventions, each of which differs and none of which fully covers everything required.

Automation once again reveals itself as a defining factor in progression. With a digitalized checklist a new starter has an underlying impression of what's expected when they first join a company. Combined with the use of an intranet, or a form of landing page, information relating to specifics can be provided directly to new hires. Company information, differences in departmental work, the introduction of processes and personal touches such as welcome messages from colleagues and CEO can all be collated in one location. By developing the processes digitally, feedback can be gathered with relative ease, allowing the onboarding to mature organically with growth.

### 3.11.3 Will Current Processes Scale

Interestingly only companies who have experienced large-scale growth believe they have the processes in place to manage scalability. Meaning the impact on start-up to scale-up organizations can be fatal.

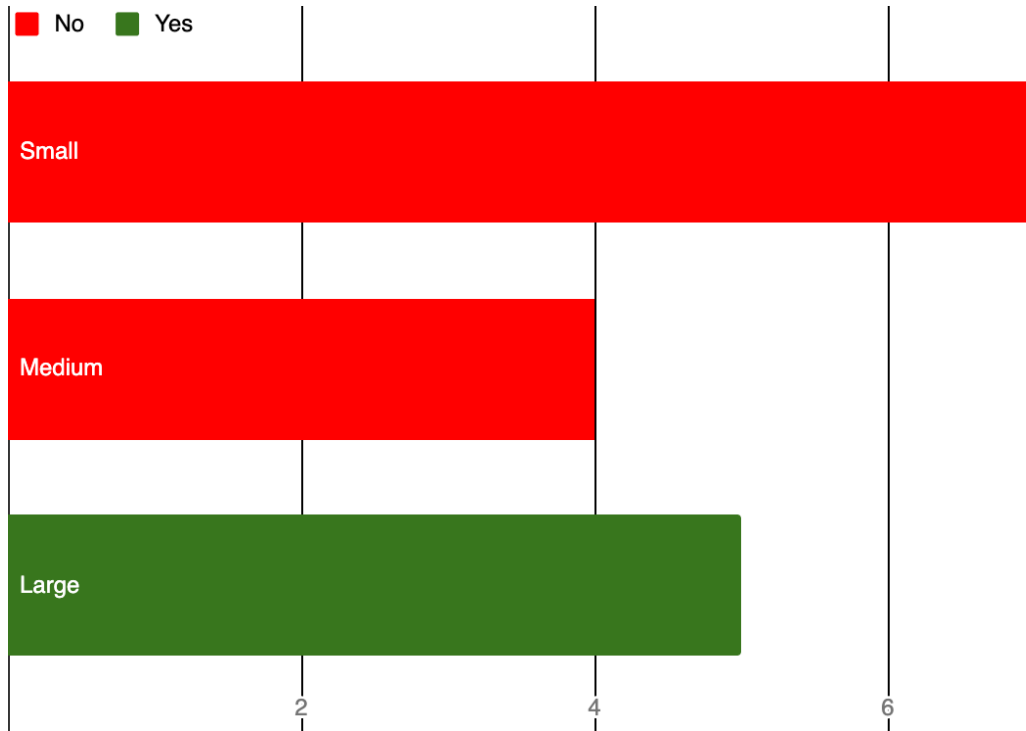


Figure 2 - Chart representing organizations interviewed who believe current processes will scale with growth.

Once the foundations of the processes are in place, the culture grows with the organization. However, they need to be developed and maintained to cope with future scale. Naturally, the processes improve themselves through communicating with the workforce and assessing the data gathered by the tools used.

### 3.12 First Day Syndrome

An interesting insight relates to the first day. If a new starter arrives at a prepared desk with a welcoming/onboarding kit awaiting them, the overall processes is likely to be improved. The kit is a way to effectively communicate the tone for the working relationship. A combination of values, information, technology and 'swag' helps to provide direction, answer questions and acclimatize new hires quickly and succinctly.

## **4 Discussion**

Viewed differently by all, company culture still carries several characteristics that provide beneficial transformations to a company's framework.

### **4.1 Transparency**

Companies are inherently closed and have been for generations. Operations occur behind closed doors, and information is traditionally limited to senior management. Culture conscious companies are revolutionizing infrastructure by implementing transparency and avoiding negative connotations associated with a closed environment. Transparency aids a trust culture, opening communication barriers and allowing the full utilization of a flat hierarchy.

Making data available helps to remove insecurities and concerns from staff members. When information is available, people tend to not access it regularly: but because they are trusted to do so, motivation and loyalty forms. Transparency also fosters ideas and encourages creativity as it works both ways, allowing for an organization to identify progressive, positive initiatives and suggestions from within the company.

But should all organizations change to complete transparency?

Transparency can have positive implications, but like other cultural aspects of a company, it isn't a rule that works for everyone. Being closed creates an air of uncertainty, whilst being fully transparent can push focus onto the wrong areas and cause unnecessary panic, especially in smaller consultancy companies when work is paid by the hour. Fiscal information can be hard to interpret, and therefore raises alarms and worries due to misunderstandings. Transparency is best practiced when used to drive a business forward through understanding the limitations of the organization. Not everyone is ready to be fully open, and that is not a negative aspect. However, in order to create an autonomous culture, the data needed to make decisions needs to be available for all to see.

Conclusively, when an organization's culture is transparent it naturally reassures employees by removing fear and changing communication flows. Without the unease of constant questioning regarding decisions being made, collaboration and innovation replaces interference and micro-management.

## **4.2 Trust and Autonomy**

As discussed previously, company culture rewards organizations who promote trust and autonomy via their processes and structure. However, the integral benefit is the empowerment of employees. Given the freedom to ideate and experiment employees gain emotional investment in their work. This in turn generates responsibility whilst reaffirming the backing of the staff, leading to a safe working environment.

Like transparency, trust and autonomy remove micro-management. Micro-management can not only generate stress but cut productivity and increase employee turnover. Importantly, when implementing autonomy in a culture, an incremental approach averts the dangers of workplace freedom, resulting in a happy medium.

## **4.3 Employer Branding and Employee Retention**

Workplace culture drives attitude and behaviors which directly influence the external perspective of an organization. A positive culture benefits employer branding by engaging employees, encouraging authentic communication and creating a customer-centric drive by motivating staff. Designing a culture guide helps to raise awareness whilst attaching an image of the company culture. Definitively, the focus should rest on actualizing the culture in an organic form: and naturally, employer branding and employee retention will follow.

## **5 Final Conclusions**

There are several best practices and crucial areas which positively impact the culture. Participation in the creation process is a must. The views of the workforce are essential, providing data that cannot be found elsewhere. Including everyone in the cultural process from the beginning will ensure the culture is created organically and honestly, as a whole.

Values are the starting point around which the culture can be built. They ultimately provide a framework for all decisions to be made. Secondly, the hierarchy needs to be established early. By trusting the workforce and favoring autonomy over micro-management; culture will benefit those in the environment, rather than imposing and limiting employees.

The growth of the culture occurs by giving employees a voice through feedback. The data gathered helps to avoid communication losses whilst highlighting problem areas within the culture.

With the basics in place, cultures and organizations have the framework to grow. Onboarding becomes essential with this growth. By providing structure to the welcome processes the culture reaps the rewards of new opinions and voices. Company culture is continuous, ever evolving and anything but static; therefore, the inclusion of new people, and new ideas, needs to operate smoothly.

Automation provides the structure needed to cope with expansion whilst the created processes generate usable data while maintaining scalability for future growth.

Developing and maintaining an engaging company culture requires attention, intention and a budget. However, once established, the benefits are real. Although an abstract element, the culture provides visible, tangible results, not only increasing the resilience of an organization but advancing productivity, loyalty and cohesiveness. Company culture is built on interaction and is consequently unique to each individual organization. There are no right or wrongs, but the practical value has never been more palpable.

### **5.1 Reflections of My Own Learnings and Areas of Improvement**

During the thesis process I have managed to learn about myself in a number of different ways. I've managed to develop discipline, in scheduling of the interviews and overall time keeping. As I did the thesis alongside working full time, I needed to make sure I had the correct allocated time to undertake the research, theory and the documentation.

Undertaking the secondary research was at first challenging. I was unsure of sources, references and where exactly to find what I need. However, with persistence and learning I managed to utilise numerous scientific articles and books to find, exert and then use.

Conducting the interviews themselves provided plentiful opportunity for learning. As previously mentioned, not only did I adapt the structure and style based on previous interviews, but I managed to extract insightful information from open questions. This was an important factor in my development, as these insights were only obtainable through quick thinking and the ability to keep a discussion flowing.

The skills developed during the interviews cannot be of a higher importance. As I work as and wish to continue in the User Experience path, soft skills are of high importance. Having direct experience within the tech industry can only be beneficial.

If I were to conduct the research again, I would try to broaden the number of interviewees. The task of sourcing the interviews was difficult, as I had no previous network and had to cold source all the participants. With reflection, I would leverage further references during the interviews which would not only save sourcing time but help to expand my own personal network.

## **5.2 Recommended Next Steps and Final Thoughts**

Company culture effects every single organisation, therefore the pool of 16 that were involved in the research can be expanded. Although qualitative research was the best method for the initial purposes, I'd recommend a quantitative approach to gather actionable data for the next stage. This can be acquired through the use of surveys to clarify specific questions raised by the research, such as the break points of scalability. These breakpoints affect start-up to scale-up organisations operating in the Helsinki tech sector, therefore, the ability to have a greater understanding will enable the production of processes. These processes and procedures will in-turn aid the development of cultures within growing organizations. After which, the next stage of development would lay within the realms of software. As automation and the breakpoints of scalability were found to be crucial factors of a culture, these can be further explored through using a system to track through analysing metrics and direct internal feedback. I'd recommend the use of a pulse report to track wellbeing, and the implementation of a digital onboarding system to cope with the growth between start-up to scale-up. This data can then be used to actualise the theory behind company culture. However, these systems must be tailor-made, as cultures are not consistent and differ dramatically between different organisations (See Appendix 3).

Below are examples of what drives people who were involved in the research:

1. The ability to learn and develop.
2. The overall atmosphere and commitment combined with the ability to influence a company.
3. Interpersonal relationships.



4. Seeing the growth of people hired.
5. Heterogenous work environment.
6. Global leaders of the market.
7. Working on meaningful projects.

All the examples are directly connected to the culture of a company, highlighting the importance of personal motivations within the culture itself. All motivations must be nurtured as they help to form and drive the culture forward. Therefore, I'd recommend motivational research to be undertaken; allowing for start-up to scale-ups to identify what's important within their culture. This is crucial for moving forward positively as an organization.

Overall, the results yielding reliable, ethically sourced information. The interviews themselves agreed to the discussions and were contacted in good faith. However, it was agreed to keep specific statements anonymous by request of the interviews. In hindsight, I believe the attachment of identity would aid the research. Nevertheless, key insights were found, and the impact of company culture has been highlighted across multiple faces of an organisation.

I believe I have found significant factors that influence start-up to scale-up cultures, and in doing so have answered the research questions of how start-up to scale-up organizations rely on company culture and how it can be used to find practical business value. By finding common themes and identifying weak times in a cultures life span through identifying breakpoints of scalability, start-up to scale-up organizations in the Helsinki technology sector can use the research to not only avoid negative practices, but to nourish their own individual culture whilst having a larger understanding of the concept in general.

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## **Appendices**

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## Appendix 2. Semi-Structured Interview Questions

What's your definition of company culture?

Company Values or Rules?

Do you have any company values?

Company vision? Mission?

Does everyone know about them?

How were they made?

How was the onboarding process when you first joined?

What would you change about it?

Is it still the same now?

How do you go about hiring new people?

What would you say helps to keep you motivated at work?

Do you have company activities?

Free to work remotely?

What's your favourite part of the office?

How's the hierarchy structured?

Free to make your own decisions?

Amount of responsibility?

What's the longest chain of communication?

How are decisions made?

Who decides your workflow? (~~DaytoDay/WeektoWeek~~)

How are the work tools chosen?

Are you confident this approach will be scalable in the future?

How do you provide feedback?

How often?

Do you have a feedback cycle?

Can you think of anyone you know who'd be interested in speaking about the culture in your company?

# Appendix 3. Mindmap for Future Process Development

