

# **Finnish event organisers and strategic responses to COVID-19 crisis**

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<p>The event industry has been facing major negative impact because of the COVID-19 crisis. It has shown the real meaning of responsibility and forced the event organisers to come up with strategies to deal with the crisis in order to keep the business alive.</p> <p>This thesis will shed a light on the impacts of COVID-19 crisis on event organisers in Finland and their strategies to deal with the crisis. The aim is to formulate guidelines on how event organisers such as, Events by Haaga-Helia could increase their preparedness for crises like COVID-19 in the future. It illustrates the concepts of risk-, and crisis management and suggest how they should be applied to achieve a successful outcome.</p> <p>This research is done in order to get an overview of the impact of COVID-19 on event organisers and examine their response strategies. It will help Events by Haaga-Helia to benchmark the best practises to deal with crises and minimise the negative impacts.</p> <p>The main objective of this thesis is to provide strategies to deal with a crises as an event organiser. In addition, to understand the importance risk-, and crisis management as a part of event organisers duty and responsibility. The research is conducted by using content analysis as a research method.</p> <p>The commissioner of this thesis is Events by Haaga-Helia. As a result of this research the event organisers of Haaga-Helia will be provided with strategies and guidelines to increase their preparedness of dealing with crises.</p>	
<b>Keywords</b> COVID-19, Crisis management, Communication, Event organiser, Haaga-Helia, Risk management, Strategy	

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# 1. Introduction

“Risk management is one of the primary responsibilities of event organisers, yet so often ignored or misunderstood” (Silvers, 2008, 3). As an event organiser it is important to understand that managing the risks and preparing for possible crisis is less expensive than dealing with the crisis once it occurs. That is why it is highly crucial to understand how the event organisers can identify the risks, eliminate and strategically manage them in case of a crisis occurs. (Silvers, 2008, 80.)

In December 2019, cases of pneumonia were diagnosed in China, and the previously unknown coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 has been identified as the cause (WHO, 2020). Since then, Coronavirus (COVID-19) has spread around the world, and has been declared a global pandemic by WHO in March 2020. The impact of COVID-19 crisis towards event industry has been crucial, leading it into huge negative consequences. Therefore, the event organisers has been forced to come up with new strategies to deal with the crisis in order to survive. (THL, 2020 & WHO, 2020)

Due the current situation with COVID-19 all the events with over 500 people were denied in Finland starting 12.3.2020 and everyone were advised to stay home by the government. Soon after the government limited the number of people gathering to 10, and most of the events got cancelled leading the industry in its biggest financial losses in years. Survey conducted by Lyyti, with 497 respondents from event industry in Finland showed the percentage of postponed events between March-May were 53% and percentage of cancelled events were 40% from the total amount of planned events which is 4973. (Lyyti & Finnish Government, 2020)

Tyra Hilliard (MPI North Florida Chapter) an expert on meeting risk management issues, rises the importance of having a crisis plan in place. “Not many organisations have such plans, all too often they don’t specifically pertain to meetings”(MPI, 2020). The crisis with COVID-19 has shown how serious the damages without proper plans and strategies can be. Nothing can completely erase the fallout, but a wise approach to contracts, insurance coverage, crisis plans and relying on trusted information sources can minimise the consequences and help us prepare for the future. This research is done in order to provide strategies to minimise consequences and deal with crises through examining the Finnish event organisers responses to COVID-19 crisis. (MPI, 2020)

This thesis is commissioned by Haaga-Helia Porvoo Event organisers, Events by Haaga-Helia. As a results of this research the event organisers of Haaga-Helia will be provided with strategies and guidelines to increase their preparedness of dealing with crises.

## **1.1 Thesis objective and research questions**

The main objective of this thesis is to provide strategies and guidelines to deal with crises as an event organiser. The strategies and guidelines will be scouted based on a literature research and content analysis of four event organisations in Finland. The findings will help the event organisers of Haaga-Helia to benchmark the best strategies for successful risk-, and crisis management in order to be prepared for future crises and pursue the responsible brand image of Events by Haaga-Helia.

The main research question is:

- What kind of strategies should event organisers adopt to deal with crises?

The sub-questions are:

- How can an event organiser eliminate or reduce the impact of a crisis?
- How to communicate in case of a crisis?

At the end of this research event organisers in Haaga-Helia will have overall picture of COVID-19 impacts on event industry, and strategies to deal with crises, as well as understanding why risk-, and crisis management concepts are highly important.

## **1.2 The demand of the research**

The need and importance of this research is very high and can be seen from the current situation with the coronavirus (COVID-19). Since this research is conducted during the crisis it is highly valid. As said earlier, the event industry has been facing huge negative impact because of the COVID-19 crisis. The restrictions and denied gatherings had an instant impact to the event industry, where no one was able to keep the business running. We have never seen a situation like this before, and that is why it is extremely important to research the impacts of the crisis and strategies to deal with it in order to be prepared for the future and possibly to a new macro level unpredictable risk. (WHO, 2020)

Because of COVID-10 Businesses are going into bankruptcy, freelancers have no income, employees are being laid off or in worst cases fired. The affect is not only seen in the event organisations, but also in all the event stakeholders and partners, who are relying on these events economically. Not many organisations have crisis plans, an often they don't specifically pertain to meetings and events, which is why this research will help to understand the cause-effect relationship of poorly crafted risk-, and crisis management plans, and see them as a norm, rather than as an exception. (MPI, Evento & WHO, 2020.)

Tyra Hilliard from Meeting Professional International states: "Being proactive rather than reactive is the best strategy for managing any crisis, health-related or otherwise"(MPI, 2020). To prevent the great losses like this and be prepared for the next possible crisis, it

is vital to monitor and analyse the impacts and actions during this situation. It is important for the future event organisers to have the data of what has been done and how the crisis were overcome, what developments and innovations were built. (MPI, 2020.)

We might not be able to prevent the future crises, but by providing clear, efficient and up-to-date guidelines for “all situations”, and acting together with all the event industry stakeholders as one is how will get through these crises in the future. (Reljić, 2020.)

### **1.3 Thesis commissioner**

The commissioner of this thesis is Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences, more specifically Events by Haaga-Helia. They provide events services from students studying the field on event management in Haaga-Helia Porvoo Campus. Most of them will be working in the event industry in the future. Haaga-Helia Porvoo Campus started their first Degree Programme in tourism and event management in 2017 and since then the brand image of Events by Haaga-Helia has been growing.

Events by Haaga-Helia organises and produces their own events, and collaborates with other event organisers domestically and internationally doing volunteer work and customer service. This thesis is done specifically for Haaga-Helia event organisers. Since they will be working in field in the future, it is important for them to understand what kind of strategies should be applied to deal with crises, and why.

We often think how we can make the event successful and memorable, and forget to pay enough attention to what if something goes wrong. That is why it is important to highlight the importance of risk-, and crisis management processes in the early stage of career, to make sure that the event organisers are aware of the strategies and guidelines. As said before this is a unique and never seen situation before, which makes the findings of this research highly valuable for the students. As a results of this research the event organisers of Haaga-Helia will be provided with strategies and guidelines to increase their preparedness of dealing with crises.

## **2. Event organiser's duty and responsibilities**

Julia Rutherford Silvers (2008, 3) states, that "risk management is one of the primary responsibilities of event organisers, yet so often ignored or misunderstood". It is coming to the forefront of meetings and events industry, where it plays a key role of responsibilities associated with the planning and producing events. Events are a big part of the social fabric of our lives and part of it is law and order. Event organisers have a legal, ethical and financial responsibility to make sure that the event and its operations are at the highest standards of safety as possible. (Silvers, 2008, 1-3, 55.)

Many of these laws are affecting the ways the event may be held, when and what activities can be included, how the event site must be laid out, and how many safeguards must be in place to ensure the safety of the attendees. Applying licenses is one of the most important part of event production, and it comes with a great responsibility. It is necessary upon the event organisers to ensure compliance with these laws, and the best practise is to go through these in the very beginning of designing the event. It is important to remember that some laws may or may not be pertinent to your event or the jurisdiction in which your event is held, always find out the practicalities in your event area. (Huhtaniska, 2019 & Silvers, 2008, 55.)

The legal obligations with event management includes negotiation and execution of the contracts and other legal documents associated with the event project, oversight of lawful design and implementation of policies, procedures, and practises of the event organisation and its representatives. It is critical to understand the nature of legal liability and consider the event organiser duties with accepting and controlling the event liabilities. It is important to assign the liability for those duties and activities that the event organiser does not have control over, which means that each party should be responsible for their own acts. This is done through the contractual process, ensuring that those providing goods and services take responsibility for their actions, suitability and safety of their products or offerings. (Silvers, 2008, 56-58)

The risk manager must do the research needed to determine what will be applicable to the event. The primary responsibility of the risk manager is to provide health and safety of every audience member, provider, participant and paid or volunteer work. He/she should seek the advice and counsel of the appropriate safety and security authorities determining types, levels, and deployment of security, and the most effective communications strategies and protocols, based on the type, purpose, scope, site, activities and audience of the event (Silvers, 2008, 120). The risk manager is usually brought into the event management process after some decision have been made already, and that makes his/her job harder to notice potential negative outcomes and risks. The risks related to the events are easily understood only during the event takes its place, but also the project itself involves

many risks with its every section of production. Risk management is leading the project systemically and proactively. The more risk manager knows about the process and the event itself to be managed, the more likely she/he is able minimise unfavourable consequences. (Huhtaniska, 2019 & Silvers, 2008, 59-60.)

Important perspective, particularly to the success and sustainability of events and their hosts and hosting organisations, is to put this practice of risk management in context of the health and safety of those who come together to create, operate, participate in, and attend these public and private gatherings. When people are injured or killed and property is lost, damaged or destroyed, the result is usually blaming and the seeking of compensation. With that said, the financial assets of the event organisation are protected when the potential losses are prevented or controlled. On the other hand, a good and assessed risk can lead to something great at the end. It is important to understand that as an event professional it is significantly less expensive to manage risk of the event than deal with the crisis after it has happened. (Huhtaniska, 2019, Silvers, 2008 & Tarlow, 2002.)

Goals and objectives must be specified and prioritised so that the decisions will maintain the integrity of the event purpose when alternatives are examined to provide a less risky option (Silvers, 2008, 20). The commitment of risk management is a must - it includes formally designating a risk manager and sufficient resources must be allocated. The bigger the event and event organisation is, the more typical it is that responsibilities are shared between more people, which is why everyone from event hosting organisation to the suppliers and volunteers must be aware and understood by the risks surrounding and committed to a safe working environment and safe work practises with a commitment to on-the-job safety. Everyone is responsible for identifying the health and safety hazards. (Huhtaniska, 2019 & Silvers, 2008.)

“Responsibility is the number one feature as an event organiser” (Huhtaniska, 2019), states Suvi Kallio the managing director, partner and Co-founder of Flow Festival Finland. The future risk managers will need to list and think through multiple factors that can go wrong separately or together, and think interaction between hazards. They also need to act as a “psychological caregivers” in a society where the number of people having access to information is increasing and therefore risks becomes harder to hide from public. Event risk managers have to be aware of the fact that they are not a part of marketing team, since event risk management will become a marketing tool to assure those doing site selections that their meeting location offers a hassle-free environment. Most importantly risk managers will become a part of overall event planning. (Huhtaniska, 2019 & Tarlow, 2002, 209-210.)



### 3. Risk Management

According to Silvers (2004, 4) "Risk is any condition or occurrence that might affect the outcome of an event or event activity and might expose an event organisation to loss measured in terms of probability and consequences". Management can be explained as a planning, organising, directing, and controlling of resources and activities to achieve goals and objectives. Therefore, risk management can be explained as "purposeful recognition of and reaction to uncertainties with the explicit objective to minimise liabilities and maximise opportunities using a structured approach and common sense, rather than avoiding the issue" (Silvers, 2004, 4).

The history of risk management goes back to World War II, when Snider (1956) realised that there were no books of risk management or courses offered at universities about the subject. Risk management has been long associated with the market insurance protecting individuals and companies from losses associated with accidents. New forms of pure risk management emerged during 1950-1960s, where contingency planning activities were developed, and multiple risk prevention and self-insurance instruments against losses were implemented. After 1970s it developed fast, and in the 1980s companies began to consider financial risk management, and at the same time the international regulation of risk also started. However, all these regulations, rules, and methods did not prevent the financial crisis in 2007. Nowadays the environment we live in, offers much more risks than ever before, not only financially. The historical patterns shows that even with various tools and methods of risk management we will face these crises, but the real question is how we are prepared to handle them. (Dionne, 2013, 2-3.)

Effective risk management requires a thoughtful procedures that examines and analyses each possibility, then takes necessary steps and allocates the proper resources to control risks (Silvers, 2008, 24). All the risks are not equal or readily apparent, the variety of possible outcomes, as well as implications and factors affecting to those outcomes needs to be considered in a way that plans can be made to ensure readiness to address the consequences whether the situation occur or not. The role of risk management in this thesis context is to prevent and reduce the consequences of the crisis. (Silvers, 2008, 24.)

Security is the key component is loss prevention. It relates both the protection of people and property. Loss prevention encompasses prevention, detection, control, contingency planning, recovery and it must be financed with appropriate resources, including insurance coverage and carefully drafted contract as a risk response strategy. When preparing a security plan it is vital to ask following questions; who, what, where, when and why. According to rescue law 379/2011 the event organiser must make a safety and a rescue plan, if there is more than 200 attendees, and it should be conducted by a professional. (Finlex, 2011, Huhtaniska, 2019 & Silvers, 2008, 123.)

Risk management is often perceived as a function that is carried out once an event has been conceived, designed and organised (Silvers, 2008, 3). However, it should be embedded thoroughly in the event design and its development and production to ensure the risks are managed effectively. Risk management in events highlights such skills as; leading, anticipating, communication, education and efficiency. Risks related to events industry may come in many forms and shapes and can be divided into three main categories: operative risks, financial risks and damage or injury risks. Some of these risks may be potential violence, health and safety concerns, or unexpected weather event. (Huhtaniska, 2019, Silvers, 2008 & Tarlow 2002.)

The goals of risk management includes:

- the protection of assets
- To minimise legal and financial liabilities
- To control potential loss
- Properly manage growth
- Operate responsibly

(Silvers, 2008, 4.)

### **3.1. The risk management process**

Risk management for meetings and events is defined as a process, that must be planned and consistently applied to it to be effective. It is not a one time job, it must be an on-going activity because of the emerging risks surrounding events and meetings that are constantly growing, subsiding, changing and fluctuating. The events risk manager must manage the risks by determining the processes and procedures. (Silvers, 2008, 4.)

APMC (assessing, planning, managing and controlling), provides the critical steps in conducting an event. These four steps are essential to ensure that you have gone through each possible risk factor associated with you event. To accomplish these steps we must decide what data we need and what the risks are. Risk manager may have a lot of facts, but which of them are important you need to develop theories and scenarios. (Tarlow, 2002, 30-31.)

Based on ISO (International Organisation for Standardisation) the risk management process is following (presented in below, figure 1). The risk management process should be an integral part of management and decision-making and integrated into the structure, operations and processes of the organisation (ISO 31000:2018).



Figure 1. The risk management process (ISO 31000:2018.) This figure is modified by author.

The risks associated with the event need to be identified and analysed. The status of the risks must be monitored to ensure the options for risk-handling are effective and the risks themselves are controlled. Documenting and reporting is highly important for the future events and meetings. (Silvers, 2008, 25.)

### **3.1.1 Risk planning**

Risk planning is the development and maintenance of a systematic and continuous approach for identifying, evaluating, handling, tracking, documenting and communicating risks (Silvers, 2008, 25-26). This strategy must be established specifying the activities, how efforts are organised, required resources handled, and the context, conditions or assumptions that affect to the decisions taken into consideration. (Silvers, 2008, 25-26.)

The purpose of the risk planning is to provide the structure for making decisions based on realistic assumptions and accepted methods, incorporating best practises and the lessons learned from previous endeavours to achieve maximum benefits. The outcome of the risk

planning is the risk management plan, which is the framework for dealing with uncertainties and shows the requirements, roles and responsibilities for implementation. (Sivers, 2008, 26.)

### 3.1.2 Risk assessment

Risk assessment is the process of identifying and analysing event elements and processes to increase the probability of success and reduce the impact of potential losses (Sivers, 2008, 27). Much of it is asking the right questions and getting the right answers, which is why this stage is a critical component of risk management. The scope of the risk assessment is the collecting pertinent data through different methods to identify potential hazards or vulnerabilities associated with the event itself. (Sivers, 2008, 27 & Tarlow, 2002, 29.)

The methods to gather data can be reviewing historical records, conducting interviews with stakeholders, meetings with the staff, suppliers and appropriate authorities. These discoveries are examined and analysed to determine their risk characteristics and their likelihood of happening (see table 1.), the impact in case of occur, and the possible responses based of priorities and resources. (Sivers, 2008, 28.)

Table 1. Risk Matrix (Sidorenko, 2019.) The table is modified by author.

	Negligible	Minor	Moderate	Significant	Severe
Very likely	Low Med	Medium	Med high	High	High
Likely	Low	Low Med	Medium	Med high	High
Possible	Low	Low Med	Medium	Med high	Med high
Unlikely	Low	Low Med	Low Med	Medium	Med high
Very unlikely	Low	Low	Low Med	Medium	Medium

One of the standard ways of characterising risks is to use risk matrices, which categorise risks by impact and likelihood of occurrence. As seen in the table 1 above, these matrices provides risk ranking in different categories such as high, medium high, medium, low medium and low and can be coloured with green, yellow, orange and red. The vertical arrow illustrates the likelihood, (also known as probability) that a risk will occur. The horizontal line illustrates the impact (also known as consequence) meaning the severity of the risk should it occur. Rankings like this are usually used to prioritise and allocate resources to manage risks, and are widely used in project management. (Kailash, 2009.)

Highly uncertain events can be difficult to quantify, and therefore issue when analysing events with severe consequences. In cases like this, using a combination of techniques provides a better insight. Risk analysis helps to understand whether risk needs to be treated and how, and what is the most appropriate risk treatment strategy. (ISO 31000:2018.)

### **3.1.3 Risk monitoring and reporting**

Risk monitoring is the systematic tracking of the status of risks and the performance of risk control actions and developing further risk-handling options and actions as needed (Silvers, 2008, 31). This is on-going and iterative process that collects and analyses information so that conditions and status may be observed with corrective tactics in a timely manner. Risk control responses must be based on the actual conditions, meaning; not implementing a thousand euros solution to a one euro problem. (Silvers, 2008, 31.)

As said earlier risk documentation and reporting is important part for the future events, it includes recording, reporting, maintaining and archiving of assessments, analyses, response plan, monitoring and control results and other documents. Creating such document should be a part of the “deliverable” of the event project - and acknowledged by the event management as a due diligence responsibility. It supports analyses and mechanism for authorisation and accountability, and the “paper trail” if needed to validate actions and verify outcomes. (Silvers, 2008, 34.)

### **3.1.4 Risk communication**

Risk communication includes both information transfer and consultation. It requires a two-way capability for giving and getting messages from the event itself and its risk management activities, actions and outcomes. The decriminalisation should include the whole event team, so that everyone feels obligated to communicate the risk messages. (Silvers, 2008, 33.)

Communication procedures and methods should be planned and implemented to the event project throughout from inception to the evaluation, ensuring the right information gets to the target audience and is received from the right people at the right time. It is important to establish the relationships with the key stakeholders, so that not only the event team is aware of the risk management processes. Meetings are exceptionally valuable during the risk assessment phase, bringing together all those who are involved in the event's implementation. This teamwork and communication becomes extremely important even the project goes into production. (Silvers, 2008, 33-34.)

### 3.2 Risk management tools

There is a variety of tools and techniques to ensure an effective, comprehensive and proactive approach to the risk management process. Choosing with technique to use at any given phase depends on the type, scope and magnitude of the meeting or event. Using different tools in combination will provide the most efficient results. It all begins with with a project plan where you define the goals and objectives of the event, as well as type and activities included. (Silvers, 2008, 35.)

Risk assessment meeting is highly effective method for identification of risks. All the participants should be required to complete any necessary pre-work, such as compiling risk list or reports. In meetings like this Brainstorming is used often. It is as a group technique to stimulate creative ideas and identifying risks. It is important to remember that it is idea generation exercise, where no evaluation or possibility should take place. (Silver, 2008, 37.)

Hazard mapping examines the event environment including site, surroundings, structure or systems for areas of concern. This is useful tool identifying health and safety hazards, it points out areas or activities that foster risk factors or root causes for risks. This exercise should include the people actually working in those environments (e.g, staff and volunteers). (Silver, 2008, 37.)

In scenario exercises the participants are provided with a scenario or description of an event incident or situation and asked to discuss and examine the causes, effects, and other implications. Questions that might come up are for example; what might go wrong or What is missing?. It encourages participants to go beyond “obvious” and make them really understand the risks, their roots and potential outcomes. (Silver, 2008, 37.)

SWOT analysis is an analytical tool that examines the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (see figure 2).

<b>Strengths</b>  Internal Advantages Maximise	<b>Weaknesses</b>  Internal Disadvantages Minimize
<b>Opportunities</b>  External Chance benefit Exploit	<b>Threats</b>  External Potential risks Mitigate

Figure 2. SWOT analysis (Silvers, 2008.) The figure is modified by author.

It identifies or predicts the advantages and disadvantages associated with the event. All the strengths and opportunities should be capitalised and used as an advantage and all the weaknesses and threats should be carefully analysed, addressed and monitored. (Silvers, 2008, 37-38.)

One of the most important components of event operations is consultation with all the departments, key stakeholders, and others involved. Interviewing different subject matter experts can be useful. These can be conducted through face-to-face interviews or within a group setting. These operations are used to determine all kinds of concerns, risk factors, and establishing plans that should be done depending on resources available that are required to deal with them. (Silvers, 2008, 37.)

A typical tool in project management is WBS meaning work breakdown structure review. It is a list of activities, tasks, or work packages required in order to accomplish the event project. It provides a realistic and comprehensive overview of the scope of the event and the resources that are necessary to complete it. WBS should be examined within a certain timeline or schedule showing deadlines for actions to reveal potential conflicts. (Silvers, 2008, 38.)

In case a risk can be identified, it is important to choose the right risk response option. Decision tree analysis describes a decision under consideration and examines the implications of selecting one risk response option over another. Each of the options has different costs, benefits, and secondary risks. These options must be analysed based on the feasibility, cost, and schedule implications. (Silvers, 2008, 39.)

Fault tree analysis examines the cause-effect outcomes. The difference is that, it begins with a conclusion, and then attempts to determine the specific causes of this outcome. It provides graphical presentation of the failure combinations and/or errors, as well as the most common causes that result in a case of risk occurrence. In addition, it identifies the risk drivers, meaning choices, causes, or conditions that have the most impact on the risk. (Silvers, 2008, 40.)

Once risks are identified it is vital to monitor them through specified systems, activities or processes. Monitoring systems should supply data for feedback, review, and evaluation activities for future risk management plans. Typical monitoring systems can be, for example: budgets, checklists, deadlines, meetings, reviews, status reports, or walk-throughs. (Silvers, 2008, 40-41)

## **4. Crisis management**

W. Timothy Coombs from the University of Central Florida defines a crisis as following: “A crisis is the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organisation’s performance and generate negative outcomes”(Coombs, 2020, 1). A crisis is unpredictable but it is not unexpected. Wise organisations know that crises will befall them, they just don’t know when. Tarlow (2002, 212) describes crisis management as a “managerial technique that comes from failing to institute proper risk management”. Meaning that risk management is about preparing for future and crisis management is about the present. Crisis management is reflecting the need to solve a problem once it has occurred. (Coombs, 2012,1 & Tarlow, 2002, 212.)

Coombs states (Coombs, 2012,1) “the bottom line is, that all the organisations should learn as much as they can about crisis management”. Many people think that crisis management means having a crisis management plan or responding when the crisis hits you, which is a very limited and reactive approach to crisis management. Crisis management is not developing a plan and executing it during crisis, it is viewed more of an ongoing process. It should be a part of people’s full-time job in organisations, and not just a part-time vacancy. The crisis management process varies and requires the integration of knowledge from multiple areas like: decision making, media relations, environmental scanning, risk assessment, crisis communication, crisis plan development, evaluation methods, and reputation management. (Coombs, 2012, 1.)

### **4.1 Staged approaches to crisis management**

There are three influential approaches to crisis management. Fink’s (1986) four stage model is the earliest. His approach is one of the first to call crisis as an extended event. One of his beliefs was that warning signs precede the trigger the crisis event. The job of crisis manager becomes more proactive when they know and read the signs. Well prepared crisis managers don’t just create the CMP when the crisis hits, he/she identifies and resolves situations that could occur and lead to a crisis. Fink divided the crisis into three stages by beginning with a trigger event (acute phase), moves to extended efforts to deal with the crisis (chronic phase), and concludes with a clear ending (resolution). (Coombs, 2012, 7-10).

The second influential approach is from crisis writer and expert Ian Mitroff (1994). He divided crisis management into five phases: signal detection, probing and prevention, damage containment, recovery and learning. New crisis warning signs should be identified to prevent crisis, organisation members should search crisis risk factors and work to reduce their potential for harming. When a crisis hits the organisation should try to prevent the damage from spreading, that being done the organisation will return to their normal opera-



tions as soon as possible. After the crisis the organisation should review and critique their efforts during crisis, and thereby adding to the organisations memory. (Coombs, 2012, 8.)

The similarities between the Fink (1986) and Mitroff (1994) approaches are strong. The difference can be seen where Mitroff's (1994) model emphasises the detection and prevention. Fink's (1986) model outlines that crises can be prevented, where Mitroff's (1994) model identifies them actively seeking to prevent them. Both damage containment and crisis breakout focus on the trigger event - meaning when the crisis hits. However Mitroff's (1994) model highlights limiting the effect of the crisis spreading to healthy parts of organisation. Both learning and resolution stages signal the end of the crisis. Fink's (1986) model simply notes that resolution stage occurs when the crisis is over, whereas Mitroff's (1994) model emphasises the communication and follow up with stakeholders as part of the learning phase. (Coombs, 2012, 8-9.)

The essential difference between these two models, is that Mitroff's model is active and stresses what the crisis manager should be doing in each phase, whereas Fink's model is more descriptive and stresses the characteristics of each phase. Fink is more concerned with mapping out how the crises progress, while Mitroff is concerned how the crisis managers efforts progress. (Coombs, 2012, 9.)

The third and the combined modern model is the basic three stage model, which is used in chapter 4.2 to illustrate the crisis management process. This model has ability to support the approaches of Fink and Mitroff. Both of their models fit naturally within this general approach and therefore gives a valid and reliable base for the crisis management process. (Coombs, 2012, 10.)

## **4.2 Crisis management process**

The ideal crisis management model would combine all of various models plus insights from crisis management experts. It has ability to subsume the other staged approaches in crisis management. Still, it is vital to remember that these tactics and protocols should be emulated in your own plans and capabilities keeping the core elements as stated. (Coombs, 2020, 10.)

The three-stage approach for crisis management (seen below, table 2.), has the appropriate macro-level generality for the comprehensive framework. Within each stage there are separate substages, which provides unified system for organising and utilising the varied insights that the crisis manager needs. (Coombs, 2012, 11 & Silvers, 2008, 129.)

Table 2. Crisis management model (Coombs, 2012.) The table is modified by author.

Precrisis	Crisis	Postcrisis
Signal detection	Crisis recognition	Evaluating crisis management
Prevention	crisis containment	Learning
Crisis preparation		Follow-up communication
		Continued monitoring

**Precrisis stage** involves three substages: signal detection, prevention and crisis preparation. These stages entails actions to be performed before the crisis occurs. Still, not all the crises can be prevented, which means that the organisations should be prepared for the possible crises. Crisis managers must identify sources for warning signs, collect information related to those signs, and analyse the information gathered. She/he must also develop a system for detecting possible crises and responding to them. Once potential is recognised, it requires actions to prevent the crises. First step is to prevent the problem maturing into a crisis, second one eliminate or lower the risk levels and the third step is to resolve problems with stakeholder-organisation relationships to prevent the organisation from reputation damage. Preparation seeks to identifying crisis vulnerabilities, creating crisis teams, selecting spokespersons, drafting CMP (crisis management plan), and structuring crisis communication system. (Coombs, 2012, 11-12.)

**Crisis event stage** begins with a trigger event which marks the beginning of the crisis. During crisis, the crisis manager needs to realise that the organisation is in the crisis situation. Communication with the stakeholders is the key role in this stage. Crisis recognition includes an understanding of how the events get accepted as crises and the importance of collecting crisis-related information. Crisis containment focuses on the response behalf of the organisation, including the content of the initial response and communication relationship to reputation with follow-up concerns. This stage ends when the crisis is considered to be resolved. (Coombs, 2012, 12.)

**Postcrisis stage** occurs when the crisis is resolved and over. Organisations needs to think what happens next. The actions taken helps the organisations prepare for the possible crisis next time by continuous monitoring, making sure that stakeholders are left with positive impact of the organisation, and checking that the crises is definitely over. (Coombs, 2012, 12.)

### **4.3 Importance of crisis management**

Today's environment seems to be in a higher need of crisis management. Organisations have more loss today than before, and variety of developments has made organisations more vulnerable to crises. The developments that needs effective crisis management are increased value of organisation's reputation, stakeholder's activism through communication technologies, failure of proper plan, and broader view of crises. (Coombs, 2012, 13.)

There is a strong consensus that a reputation is a very valuable intangible of organisations resource. Good reputation has been linked to attracting customers, generating investments, increasing job satisfaction, more motivative workers, more positive media coverage and more positive comments to financial aspect. Consumers, stakeholders, employees, community groups, and activists are becoming more vocal when dealing with organisations, especially when using the internet to voice those concerns. Internet channels where the activists creates the content are called social media. Social media has the potential to create a crisis. Activist groups are using the internet to organise and pressure organisations to change their behaviour. It has the potential to increase the power of activists, and therefore making them meaningful for managers and organisations agenda. (Coombs, 2012.)

Organisations are now broadened their view of crisis management by increasing their security and emergency preparedness. Organisations can be found legally liable if they have not taken enough precautions to prevent potential crises or were not prepared to respond. Crisis management is becoming more of a legally binding action than friendly suggestion. (Coombs, 2012, 13-17.)

### **4.4 Crisis communication**

Communication is a vital component of crisis management process and needs to be planned well before the event. It is used to warn, inform, connect with and advise various publics. The internet is important evolutionary step in crisis communication, but it has also changes the way how the information is collected and processed. Crisis managers still face the same needs to identify warning signs, confront the same communication demands, utilise the same concepts, and conduct effective strategic responses. The change is in what constitutes "quick" and how the initial response is delivered. (Coombs, 2012, 20, Silvers, 2008, 184.)

The goals of crisis communication are make sure everyone's safety, convey the information of all special arrangements, share the truthful picture of possible crisis to everyone working or attending to the event and anticipate the crisis before happening. The crisis message should include following information: what has happened, why it has happened,

how meaningful it is, where is information based on, what are the consequences, how and when this will be taken care of. (Huhtaniska, 2019.)

Crisis management plans (CMP's) and crisis managers are the heart of crisis management efforts. One of the key elements in crisis action plan is the collection, protection and dissemination of vital information. Communications plan needs to include the strategies and protocols for informing the internal and external publics regarding the status of crisis. It should happen through certain spokesperson and specific media plan. A crisis communications system needs to address and enable the notifications of emergency responders regarding the existence of the crisis or and inform the effected publics like, attendees, staff, participants and providers about the actions that needs to be taken. A specific who-to-contact protocol should be implemented, which identifies the hierarchy of notification and the individuals charged notifying emergency respond personnel. (MPI, 2020 & Silvers, 2012.)

The damage of poorly crafted communications plan can be very serious and cause dangerous vulnerabilities due to people being uninformed or unconvinced about the consequences. What we say and how say it are very important during the crisis. (Silvers, 2008, 139 & MPI, 2020.)

According to Meeting Professionals International (MPI), the best 9 crisis communication practises includes:

- Communicate across multiple platforms
- Be clear and consistent
- Share updates early, regularly
- Explain changes to norms
- Tell the truth
- Have compassion
- Explain contingency plans
- Be available to answer questions
- Provide resources

(MPI, 2020.)

Social media is responsible for the growing link between crisis communication/management and the online world. Online communities in social media can be a collection of stakeholders or customers that are important for the organisation. The comments an actions of these communities can have a major impact on organisations. This impact is what makes social media so important to crisis communication/management, meaning that now we have more information to handle risks and prevent crises, but the consequences of failure can be more devastating than ever before. (Coombs, 2012, 21& Tarlow, 2002, 6.)

The Crisis curve (also known as a news curve) plots the time elapsing against the intensity of the crisis - effectively mapping its lifeline (see Figure 3) (Curtin, 2005). Crisis curve can be used to predict and prepare for possible crisis scenarios, but it can also be used to cope with ongoing crisis by recognising the various stages of crisis and the possible emotional responses to cope with the trauma. Professionals and analysts are using these in crisis communication to explain the possible lifeline of the crisis and its development. (Harris, 2020 & Curtin, 2005.)

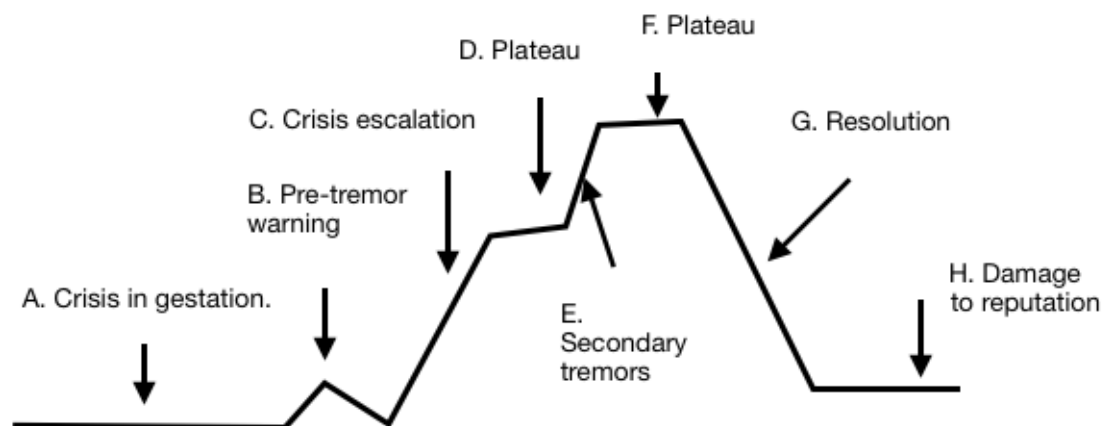


Figure 3. The evolution of crisis: crisis curve (Curtin, 2005). The figure is modified by author.

**Stage A** is the first stage and illustrates the crisis in gestation, meaning that the crisis is not near to any people of the case studies conducted, and therefore it has no affect on them.

**Stage B** is the Pre-tremor warning stage, which can be seen with an increase in the intensity of the crisis.

**Stage C** illustrates the escalation of the crisis, when there is no point of return. The crisis touches and affect on everyone.

**Stage D** illustrates the idea of adapting to the situation, as seen from the flattening curve in the figure.

**Stage E** is the secondary tremors. The intensity of crisis is rising again when the people are facing new and bigger issues.

**Stage F** shows more adapting but also innovations. Developing new ideas and ways to cope with the crisis by co-operating.

**Stage G** means resolution, where the crisis is behind, people starts repair the damages that the crisis caused, (e.g. damage to reputation) like at **stage H**.

(Curtin, 2005.)

## **5. Research methodology and data collection**

In this chapter, the research process and implementation is explained. It introduces the research method and the objectives, data collection process, case companies and the implementation. The target group of this thesis are event organisers. The main objective is to answer the research questions based on literature and the content analysis. In this thesis a content analysis based method is used to support the theoretical framework. The data will be gathered through the content in social media, from four different event organiser in Finland. The companies are Tapaus, Lataamo, Evento and Messukeskus. The results will go to use for Events by Haaga-helia.

The main focus of this research is to examine the Finnish event organiser's strategies to deal with the COVID-19 crisis. The findings will provide valuable insights for the event management students in order to be prepared for future, and strengthen the brand image of Events by Haaga-Helia as a responsible partner. At the end of this research the event organisers of Haaga-Helia will be provided with sufficient amount of strategies and guidelines to increase their preparedness of dealing with crises.

### **5.1 Content analysis as a research method**

Content analysis is a research method that is widely used nowadays. Current applications of content analysis show three distinct approaches: conventional, directed, or summative. All three approaches are used to interpret meaning from the content of text data and, hence, adhere to the naturalistic paradigm (Hsieh, E.Shannon, 2005). A summative content analysis involves counting and comparisons, usually of keywords or content, followed by the interpretation of the underlying context, which will be used in this research. The major differences within these approaches are coding schemes, origins of codes, and threats to trustworthiness. (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005.)

The specific type of content analysis approach chosen by a researcher varies with the theoretical and substantive interests of the researcher and the problem being studied (Hsieh, E.Shannon, 2005). This flexibility has made content analysis useful for a variety of researchers, the lack of a firm definition and procedures has potentially limited the application of content analysis (Hsieh, E.Shannon, 2005). The goal of content analysis is to "provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005.)

## **5.2 Justification of research method**

Choosing the most appropriate research method is highly important to gain the best possible outcome (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This research method was chosen because of the ongoing situation with coronavirus (COVID-19). Starting from March the Finnish Government and Finnish institute for health and welfare have been given instructions for everyone to stay home, avoid social places or contact with anyone else. Therefore, the communication and working has shifted into online, which gives a solid base for conducting the research through content analysis. People are being even more active in social media than before, by providing information and knowledge of their strategies and actions taken during this crisis. (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005 & THL, 2020.)

Content analysis has a long history in research, back to the 19th century in Scandinavia. Qualitative content analysis is one of the numerous research methods used to analyse text data. Research using qualitative content analysis focuses on the characteristics of language as communication with attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text (Hsieh, E.Shannon, 2005). As said, this flexibility has made content analysis useful for a variety of researchers, the history behind content analysis shows that it is reliable, it can be very beneficial and it fits to this research. (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005.)

Still, there are arguments of focusing on putting yourself and your pre-understanding in a holding pattern while you approach your data with an openness and expectation on finding new approaches can be difficult. Another considerable matter is that it is content research only, based on online information. There is no face-to-face interviews, where expressions can be seen or following questions asked, which means that you can not be absolutely sure about the real meaning behind the text. (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005.)

## **5.3 Data collection process**

Content analysis, as in all qualitative analysis is a reflective process (Brysiewicz, Erlingsson. 2017). There is no “step 1,2,3, ready!” linear progression in this type of analysis. It means that identifying and condensing meaning units, coding, and categorising are not one-time work. It is a continuous process of coding and categorising the raw data to reflect on your initial analysis as seen below in figure 4. (Brysiewicz & Erlingsson, 2017.)

It is vital to ask yourself questions, and typically fair amount of adjusting is needed. As earlier said, it is a flexible analysis and process of working. Once the work is done and meaning units are coded, it is easier to get a bigger picture and see patterns in your codes and organise them in categories. (Brysiewicz & Erlingsson. 2017.)

<b>1.</b>	Selecting the text to be examined
<b>2.</b>	Specifying the unit of analysis
<b>3.</b>	Determining the Category Scheme
<b>4.</b>	Selecting of final categories
<b>5.</b>	Analysing the interpreting findings

Figure 4. Content analysis process (Avunduk & Nasir, researchgate, 2011.) The figure is modified by author.

An important initial phase in the data analysis process is to read and re-read while keeping your aim in focus. What is the text talking about? What stands out? How did you react while reading the text? What message did the text leave you with? With this in mind, it is easier to gain a sense of the text as a whole (Brysiewicz & Erlingsson. 2017.)

During analysis, you need to break down the whole text into smaller parts. Returning to your notes with your initial impressions will help to see if your “parts” analysis is matching up with your first impressions of the “whole” text. (Brysiewicz & Erlingsson. 2017.)

The next step is to develop codes that are descriptive labels for the condensed meaning unit and are tools to help reflect on the data in new ways. Codes make it easier to identify connections between meaning units. At this stage of analysis it is important to still keep close eye to your data with very limited interpretation of content. Adjusting re-do, re-think and re-code until to the point where you are satisfied that your choices are reasonable. (Brysiewicz & Erlingsson. 2017.)

Once you are satisfied with the codes, you can sort them into categories that answer the questions who, what, when or where? Comparing codes and appraising them to determine which codes seem to belong together, thereby forming a category. Using intuition and taking notes from your gut reactions are the key asset of levelling the categories to the highest level of abstraction in content analysis, themes. (Brysiewicz & Erlingsson. 2017.)



## 5.4 Case studies and implementation

I have chosen four different cases (Tapaus, Lataamo, Evento and Messukeskus) to examine. It gives a valid and large picture of Finnish event organisers crisis management and communication procedures and strategies. The reason why I chose these companies is because they are one of the biggest players in the event industry in Finland, and the affect of ongoing crisis with COVID-19 has been major for them.

The research and data collection is based on their online content in the biggest social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn and their own websites. The crisis process will be analysed with the crisis curve by Tom Curtin (2005), which plots the time elapsing against the intensity of the crisis by mapping its lifeline. The lifeline will be analysed from January till the end of April, in order to explore the different stages of the crisis management and communication.

**Tapaus** was founded in 2012 by the managing director Timo Aalto and Joonas Patama. Tapaus is the leading event marketing agency in the Nordics, with close to 90 professionals from diverse backgrounds. At Tapaus they encourages people to speak their mind, be authentic and boldly come up with new ideas an innovations, that is why their cornerstone of everything is reliability. They are organising big variety of different types of events such as corporate events, influencer and media events, exhibitions, consumer events and personnel events. (Tapaus, 2020.)

**Lataamo** is the winning company of organising events in 2019 and 2020. Lataamo states themselves as a company of actions. Lataamo provides marketing concepts and campaigns design and production. At lataamo they believe in authentic meetings of people as an impressive way to communicate, and that is why the meaning of events are extremely important. They have over 18 years of experience organising personnel events, exhibitions, consumer events and corporate events. (lataamo, 2020.)

**Evento** is the professional magazine of events and event organising companies. Evento was founded in 2011. Evento brings the event industry together with their annual event called Evento Awards. Evento has been a part of many other events as a partner and co-producer. They also provide their own training programs for other event organisers. (Evento, 2020.)

**Messukeskus** organises early about 50 professional and consumer exhibitions and thousand meetings and congresses. They are the biggest event organiser house, and forerunner in sustainability in the event industry in Finland. (messukeskus, 2020.)

The content analysis was implemented in April 2020. The first week was about finding and gathering the texts to analyse. In the second week I defined the units and rules for coding. The last two weeks I spent for coding, analysing and developing with the final categories and drawing conclusions.

The implementation of the case studies follows the content analysis procedure like explained in the chapter 5.3 (Figure 3). The first step “selecting the texts to examined” were based on 1) The medium and genre 2) the criteria for inclusion 3) the parameters. To get answers for my research questions presented in chapter 1.1 I chose to analyse news articles and opinion pieces presented by the four companies I have chosen. The data were collected from their social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram and Websites) between 1.1.2020 - 30.4.2020.

After the texts were chosen I defined the units to analyse (step 2). The units of meaning that were coded were based on the frequency of individual words and phrases. I copied all the text I examined in to one document and started to highlight all the same words and phrases that were used in different text. Then I determined the set of categories (step 3), which were more conceptual (e.g. finance, safety, innovation.)

The next step was “setting rules for coding. Meaning organising the units into previously defined categories. This was important part to ensure that all text was coded consistently. Especially when coding the text by yourself like I did, recording the rules makes the method more transparent and reliable. Then I started to code the text by combining the different words with the mutual meaning (e.g. innovation, solution, adaption) under the same categories.

After coding the text I developed with the final categories (step 4) which are presented in the results in chapter 6. When analysing the texts in deeper level I found patterns and correlations between the texts and the theory, which led me into the final categories . The final categories are divided by their similarity in themes found from the content. I compared the findings and the literature to draw conclusions (step 5) which helped me to answer my research questions and provide strategies to deal with crises.

## **6. Results and findings**

This chapter illustrates the main findings and results of the content analysis conducted by examining the case companies. It also compares the findings to the theory presented and argues about the quality of the research, ending with the summary of the results.

These findings are an overview to the impacts of COVID-19 crisis towards the event industry and the case companies strategies to deal with it, highlighting the importance of risk-, and crisis management strategies in the future. The findings are opened-up and explained in the main findings (chapter 6.1) in order to support the suggestions provided in the chapter 7.2.

### **6.1 The main findings**

Based on the research and the content analysis process conducted (see chapter 5.4), the findings can be categorised with the following themes: safety and responsibility, economy, innovations and co-operation, and the crisis communication. These categories are opened-up and explained in the following subchapters.

#### **6.1.1 Safety and responsibility**

12.3.2020 the government of Finland cancelled all the events with over 500 attendees. At the same time Gastro fair was held in Messukeskus. Right after the announcement from the government, Messukeskus closed their doors and shut down the fair. This decision was based on the government's recommendation in order to guarantee the safety of everyone. On the same day Evento announced that the Evento Awards in cancelled, which was supposed to be on 26th of March. According to the survey conducted by Lyyti with 497 event industry respondents who had planned all together 497 events organised between March-May, the percentage of postponed events were 53% and the cancelled events 40%. This shows the ability to make fast decisions based on recommendations from a reliable source and highlights the safety and health of the people as the main priority. It also implicates that the event organisers were not prepared for this kind of situation with an alternative solution of any kind. (Evento & Lyyti, 2020)

Kalle Tuomi from Futurice and Tero Vanhanen from Fira, highlights the importance of anticipation and back-up plan. The essential matter is what the contract says about cancellation policy. Sampo Silvennoinen, the partner of Printix oy states: "the crisis has shown us the meaning of responsibility concretely" (evento, 2020). Responsibility has been in the center of multiple events in the recent years, but COVID-19 crisis added a whole new dimension to it. "Acting responsibly in the future some of the event industry jobs might keep its place even after crisis" Silvennoinen adds. This crisis teaches us a lot of about the cause-effect relationship and its importance. (Evento, 2020)

### **6.1.2 Economy**

Event industry has a major influence to the Finnish business and its economy. The coronavirus has taken most of the work from event industry workers, with forcing people to lay off or even remain unemployed. The corona crisis hits bad especially to the fairs. There is early over a hundred fairs organised in Finland and about 500 people working full-time with fairs, in addition the industry employs thousands of part-time workers. In the year 2018 the income effect for Finnish business was 458 million euros, and the impact of employment was 6000 person a year. Events are extremely significant social actor, employer and developer of Finnish business. The chairman of fair and event organisers ry Juha Rahko states, "the industry needs the direct support from the government, to be able to get up from the plight" (Evento,2020). The money is needed especially to the fixed costs such as rents.

During the crisis with COVID-19 the event industry has been working hard together to guarantee the survival in the future, by preparing for it today. The marketing manager of Bright and the member of the Avita board Juho Hiidenmaa started to act fast with the CEO of Tapaus Timo Aalto. In the community they have created together had already 102 company on board on 24.3.2020. Besides the event organisations, most of the event industry entrepreneurs, freelancers and small companies are in deep trouble. Events are never done without multiple partners and subcontractors. Most of them are smaller companies or freelancer, and their income is depending on events especially during the summer time. There has been great amount of work done in order to revive the workers of event industry. The progress can be already seen, since the government granted the right to the unemployment security for freelancers and entrepreneurs working alone, to get through this difficult times. Next up is the model where the government would support organising the events.

### **6.1.3 Innovation and co-operation**

Innovation and co-operation has been one of the key aspect during these difficult times in event industry. As stated earlier, the event industry is working closely together to secure the future of the industry. New communities has been put together, tips shared and innovations created. The global community of the event industry believes to the ability to get through the crisis when working all together for the common goal. (Evento, 2020)

"The situation has created a great amount of understanding and support between each others" (Evento, 2020), states Sanni Kaikkonen from Sunnyone Promotion. The force we can great together gets us moving, innovate something new and continuous ideation, might be the best thing that event happened to the firm, she adds. The career coach and builder of happy working life Riikka Pajunen states, "crises are heavy but also the biggest teachers of our careers". (Evento, 2020). Right now and right here we learn something

new, to grow as a persons. Crises can be turned into something useful if you just are strong enough to face them. (Evento, 2020)

As stated earlier, the events consists of multiple stakeholders and partners. The power of working together is the salt of this industry, and that is why the co-operation and teamwork is so important. In addition, to helping industry workers through these difficult time one of the targets in the lobbying has been creating the recognition of the impact of this industry on our society and awareness of the industry professionals, says Juho Hiidenmaa. (Evento, 2020)

“The world is changing, partly for good. We are not going back to the same after the crisis” (Evento, 2020), states Jussi Tapio from the Ghost Company. It is important to think that these tools and platforms taken into use are not only a substitute of a crisis period, they are here to stay, he adds. During this time the virtual events have become a trend, but also a new normal for the future. These virtual events can also be seen as an alternative solution or as a back-up plan for your event. Lataamo organised a virtual event called hack the crisis Finland in 20-22.3.2020. The event had three categories which were: save lives, save communities and save businesses. The idea was to innovate and help businesses/communities/individuals through this crisis. Tapaus created a virtual event called the event is re-created in 2.4.2020. These events had common goals such as bringing people together even from homes, communicate and network with each others and most of all share thoughts and experiences, same as in f2f events. In addition, introducing the positive sides of virtual events, like attending from anywhere and anytime in the world, creating imaginary environment to the events by using AI and AR that is not possible with physical events. (Instagram & Evento, 2020)

There has been great amount of arguments of the future of virtual events stated by the event industry professionals. Timo Kiuru, writer, speaker and creative leader in event industry believes that companies should be focusing on postponing the events rather than cancelling them or going virtual. Jussi Tapio from Ghost Company on the other hand believes that the virtual events will be the new normal in the future. Petri Hollmen from Lyyti believes that virtual events are only temporary substitute, and that the physical events will come back stronger than ever. Helena Wallo, the event industry entrepreneur, instructor and Evento Awards judge, trusts that digitalisation will stay as a part of normal and she does the courage to question the aptitude of physical events. The appreciation for the physical events will get deeper and “no show” will decrease, she adds. Osnat Mangs, Event architect and partner at Sister Inc. states: “online events and different hybrids will become more common, nevertheless it’s important to remember that an online event will never fully replace physical events” (Lyyti, 2020). In addition she believes that social responsibility and green values will be a big theme. (Lyyti, 2020)

#### **6.1.4 Crisis communication**

As said earlier, this crisis has brought people together, and it can be seen clearly in social media. While there are limitations and restrictions on gathering on the outside world the communication and sharing has shifted all the way to the social media. The companies examined in this thesis have used this uncommon time for bringing people together beyond the screens from homes, by creating virtual events and sharing pictures from employees home offices working together towards common goals. (Instagram, 2020)

Among the event industry there are plenty of hashtags used in social media as a supportive communication action towards each others and it shows that we are all in this together. Lataamo has been using #yhdeksäparempi, Messukeskus has lighted up their building with blue collar to support and respect people working in health care, and challenged other colleagues to do the same. (Instagram, 2020) This unusual time has been used also to collect information and knowledge (e.g. doing surveys and gathering feedback) to analyse the ongoing situation, its development and to understand what the future of this industry could look like. (LinkedIn, 2020)

The decisions and actions taken by event organisers are based on recommendations from the Finnish government and the Finnish institute for health and welfare organisations, which can be concluded as a valid and reliable sources. The communication has been clear and consistent in the social media and they have kept the audience updated whenever there has been some changes to the norms and the responses have been fast. The event organisers have been open for any questions and prepared to answer for them. (Instagram & Messukeskus, 2020)

#### **6.2. The crisis curve**

As seen in the figure 4 the different stages of the crisis as explained in the chapter 4.4 are used here as modified to illustrate the lifeline of the ongoing crisis with COVID-19 in comparison to each case company's crisis management processes based on the content analysis.

The crisis curve is implemented with the time elapsing between January-April, which can be seen from the horizontal line and the vertical line shows the intensity of the crisis. The stages are marked with letters (A-G). This curve illustrates the crisis in Finland.

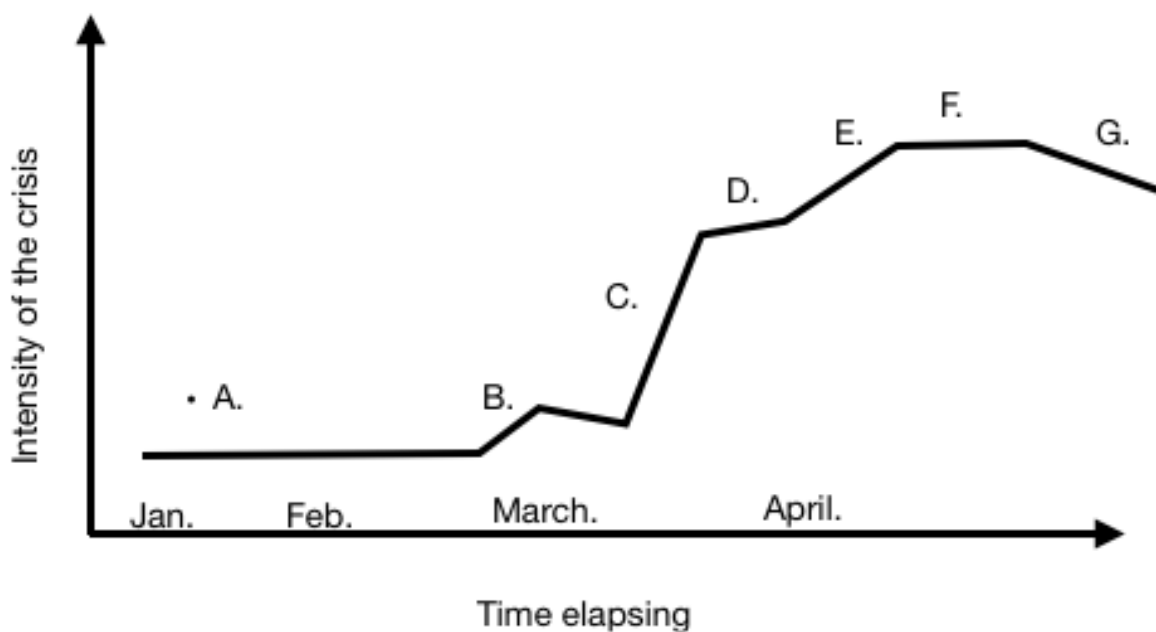


Figure 4. The evolution of crisis: Crisis curve (Curtin, 2005) The figure is modified by author.

**Stage A:** The companies did not show any or very little interest on the crisis during January-February based on their online content. During January and February the crisis had spread to the middle Europe, but in Finland there were only few cases and the situation was in control.

**Stage B** During February-March the number of people affected with the virus were doubled in certain middle European countries and governments made restrictions traveling to other countries. Some of the biggest conventions in Europe were cancelled. By that time the number of affected people in Finland had also increased and the media started to follow the situation daily and update to the news. The situation seemed to be in control in Finland and no crisis had occurred yet. The companies were following the situation but had not done any changes.

**Stage C** The crisis occurred in Finland. The International health institute claimed COVID-19 as a global pandemic, and the government of Finland cancelled all the events over 500 participants, and limited the amount of people in gatherings for 10 people. Thousand of different size of events got cancelled immediately. The number of infections in Finland started to increase dramatically, and the hysteria appeared. Responses to the impact were fast by informing all the possible audience about the cancellation or postponing the events, and promised to share more information and updates as soon as possible.

**Stage D** the biggest hysteria seemed to be over. Based on online content analysed, the companies started to share their feelings and thoughts about the situation. They also started to gather information from others how to cope with the situation. Content included

tips how to work remotely and have meetings online. They also highlighted the importance of finding something good from the situation such as having more time with the family.

**Stage E** Shows the real fear of losing jobs and companies going into bankruptcy. The consequences of cancelling all the events were rising. The situation shows a major economical impact on events industry. Without events there is no income, which means huge financial losses to companies and entrepreneurs in the field.

**Stage F** shows again more adapting but also innovations. Based on analysis the companies share more and more information and tips how to cope, but they are also looking for new ideas and innovations how to manage the crisis and get back on business. These innovations are for example virtual events, online stores providing gift cards for later use, and online concerts. People are adapting to the situation with a calmer scene and understanding that something needs to be changed in order to survive from it.

**Stage G** shows that the intensity of the crisis had decreased. The analysis shows adaptation to the situation, without dramatic changes. Companies are aware of that the situation, and the new informations about the virus we get all the time are calming everyone down. Companies are showing more interest to the future in terms of what will happen, what will change and what we have learned for the future. The number of infected or in need of hospital care are slowly decreasing, still the government is extending the limitations for everyone's safety, to avoid stronger infection wave from previous experience with other diseases such as SARS and the analyses conducted by health professionals. However, extending the limitations makes it harder to keep businesses alive, and therefore the event industry is in the need of direct support from the government.

## **6.6 connection with the literature**

This chapter is about comparing the findings to the theory presented. There is fair amount of correlation between theory and findings from the research. The common themes found included topics of crisis communication procedures, legal obligations, responsibility and safety, financial issues, and the importance of documentation.

Since this research is conducted during the crisis with COVID-19 it was expected that the recognition of crisis management processes were high. In the literature MPI (meeting professional international) stated, that the best crisis communication practises includes: Communication across multiple platforms, be clear and consistent, share updates early and regularly, explain changes to norms and provide resources. These practises were seen in all of the case companies crisis communication actions, and therefore are presented in the suggestions in the chapter 7.2. All of the case companies communicated through multiple platforms ( e.g. Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Website) and posted updates and changes regularly. The posts and updates have been clear and explained



what has happened, why it has happened, how meaningful it is, where is information based on, what are the consequences, how and when this will be taken care of, like it was advised by Huhtaniska in the literature. These actions and changes are explained to base on reliable sources such as the institute of Finnish health and welfare organisation and the ministry of Finland.

In literature Silvers highlights the importance of understanding the nature of legal liability. Each party of the event should be responsible for their own acts, and this is done through contractual processes. Loss prevention must be financed with appropriate resources including insurance coverage and carefully drafted contracts as risk response strategy. What we can see from the content analysis is that insurance coverage and contractual processes have not been in place when considering the financial aspect of event industry. Entrepreneurs, freelancers and other small companies in event industry are in deep trouble and in a risk of going bankruptcy when there is no any income. Bigger organisations such as Messukeskus are also in a need of governmental finance in order to survive. In the content analysed Kalle Tuomi from Futurice and Tero Vanhanen from Fira, highlights the importance of anticipation and back-up plan. The essential matter is what the contract says about cancellation policy. The editor in chief of Events Heli Koivuniemi stated, “preparedness in responsibility”. In correlation to this MPI states that, Nothing can completely erase the fallout, but a wise approach to contracts, insurance coverage, crisis plans and relying on trusted information sources can minimise the consequences and help us to prepare for the future.

In the literature Suvi Kallio the managing director, Partner and Co-Founder of Flow Festival Finland states, “responsibility is the number one feature as an event organiser”. (Huhtaniska, 2019). According to Silvers, Event organisers have a legal, ethical and financial responsibility to make sure that the event and its operations are at the highest standards of safety as possible. The primary responsibility of the risk manager is to provide health and safety of every audience member, provider, participant and paid or volunteer work. From the content analysis we can conclude that the primary responsibility of the event organisers during this crisis has been the health and safety of everyone. The survey conducted by Lyyti with 497 event industry respondents who had planned all together 497 events organised between March-May, the percentage of postponed events were 53% and the cancelled events 40%.

The literature highlights the importance of risk documentation and reporting for the future. Creating such document should be a part of the “deliverable” of the event project - and acknowledged by the event management as a due diligence responsibility. It supports analyses and mechanism for authorisation and accountability, and the “paper trail” if needed to validate actions and verify outcomes. From the crisis curve findings we can see that the companies did surveys to gather information and data of the situation in order to

have some documentation for the future. Government decided to extend the limitations for everyone's safety, to avoid stronger infection wave from previous experience and documentation found with other diseases such as SARS. These actions are partly based on documentation from previous cases and crises, meaning these documentations are highly important.

As stated in the literature, Tyra Hilliard (MPI North Florida Chapter) an expert on meeting risk management issues, rises the importance of having a crisis plan in place. "Not many organisations have such plans, all too often they don't specifically pertain to meetings". The assessment of risk, establishing plans to mitigate and address risks and communicating effectively under certain circumstances is a norm now rather than an exception. As the research shows, the current situation with the coronavirus (COVID-19) event industry is facing the biggest impacts and financial losses in years. The coronavirus has taken most of the work from event industry workers, with forcing people to lay off or even remain unemployed. The corona crisis hits bad especially to the fairs, which means great amount of losses for the whole business in Finland. The chairman of fair and event organisers ry Juha Rahko states, "the industry needs the direct support from the government, to be able to get up from the plight". The consequences of poorly crafted risk-, and crisis management plans can be devastating as it is seen here.

## **6.7 Quality of the research**

Because of the ongoing crisis with COVID-19 the social gatherings are being limited (like explained in chapter 1), the communicating and information sharing has shifted to online. This gives a valid base for content analysis based research.

Analysing the content from four influential event industry companies in Finland gives reliable and solid base for this research. In addition, that these event industry companies can be seen from different perspectives, meaning Lataamo and Tapaus are event production companies, Evento is professional magazine and media for event industry professionals and Messukeskus is leading event organiser house in Finland. Therefore, the content analysis conducted by these companies provides a large perspective to the research.

Content analysis can be seen as a complex and time worth method, since there are multiple approaches that varies with the theoretical and substantive interest of the research and the problem being studied. Getting a deep understanding of content demands time and strategic planning to analyse which I has been given to this research. The steps of the content based analysis were followed accordingly, and are explained in the implementation process in the chapter 5.4.

The content argues between different industry professionals showing multiple angles of the situation providing a large and informative picture. The qualitative research is stated

as a trustworthy, if she/he is able to put pre-understanding in a hold while approaching to the data, which is why I wrote down the rules of codes before analysing, to make the method more transparent and reliable. The sources used in this research are reliable and up-to-date. The names and titles of the industry professionals were given.

As Hsieh and Shannon states, "Content analysis can be very beneficial if it fits to this research". Since the research is conducted during the crisis with COVID-19 it gives highly new and up to date information, providing reliable and valid base for the research, and therefore can be beneficial. The goal of content analysis is to "provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This research provides an overview of the affect and impact that the crisis has had to event industry, and presents the strategies they have used to cope with the crisis. It also highlights the importance and need for proper risk-, and crisis management implementation for future event industry. The results of this research answers to the aim and research questions presented. Therefore, the research can be concluded as a successful.

## **6.8 Summary of the results**

The results of this research are wide and valid, giving a solid base for the suggestions of crisis management and communication strategies, created for Events by Haaga-Helia. The results of the research were categorised as following: safety and responsibility, economy, innovations and co-operation and crisis communication. The main findings within these themes were opened-up and explained in order to support the suggestions of crisis management and communication strategies to deal with crises. Based on the results crises has both negative and positive impacts. The financial issues are strong, but at the same time it creates opportunities to grow and learn something new together.

The content analysis based research was a good fit for understanding the crisis management and -,communication procedures and strategies within event industry professionals, since it was conducted during the crisis and its development was easy to follow. The research correlates various statements from the literature, and therefore has a strong connection between literature and the research content. The companies performs in different ways in event industry by their activities, knowledge and professionalism, but still there were similar themes found and therefore can be concluded as a reliable data.

The research presents the consequences in the event industry caused by the COVID-19 crisis and the strategies to deal with it, which implicates the lack of crisis management procedures and implementation in practise. The sensitivity on this topic makes it hard to study, and since it is ongoing situation the whole development of the crisis and its affects can not be provided here. However, this subject is highly relevant and important in these days, therefore it gives a great value for the future event organisers and Events by Haaga-Helia.

## 7. Conclusion

The final chapter of this thesis presents the answers to the research questions and ties together the theoretical framework and the research results into a conclusion. The conclusion evaluates the success of the research process and learning outcomes as a whole as well as is the summary of all the findings.

### 7.1 Answer to the research questions

The main objective of this research was to examine event organisers strategic responses to COVID-19 crisis. In addition, to understand how event organiser could eliminate or reduce the impact of crisis and how to communicate in crisis, which were followed by the sub questions.

The main research question of this thesis:

- What kind of strategies should event organisers adopt to deal with crises?

The sub questions of this thesis:

- How can an event organiser eliminate or reduce the impact of crises?
- How to communicate in case of a crisis?

When the theoretical framework and research results presented, the research questions are possible to answer. The theoretical framework introduces the concepts and procedures of risk-, and crisis management as well as crisis communication. The Chapter 3 introduces the phenomena of risk management as a whole, but also explains why its importance as an event organiser and as a preventative crisis management. It introduces multiple tools for identifying possible risks associated to events, in order to eliminate and reduce them or their impact if crisis occurs. The research correlated the theoretical framework with similar topics, and highlighted the importance of preparation. The chapter 4 introduces the concept and processes of crisis management and communication, as well as their importance. It illustrates the crisis management models, and explains how it should be modified in order to achieve the best possible outcome. The crisis communication strategies are explained and multiple steps are provided.

Conducting the research during the COVID-19 crisis, the data showed how to manage and communicate in case of a crisis in practise. The same concepts and actions were presented in the theoretical framework from MPI and Huhtaniska, which gave reliable base for suggesting these actions for Events by Haaga-Helia. The importance of anticipation and preparation was highlighted both in the literature and the research, which also plays a big role in answering to the question: how can event organisers eliminate or reduce the impact of crises.

Since all the research questions can be answered, the research can be concluded successful. The research in both (literature and content analysis based research) were implemented accordingly, and provided wide enough results in order to scout the answers in this thesis. The literature and the content analysis both provided valuable insights and good base for suggesting strategies how to deal with crises as an event organiser, which was the main objective of this research process.

## **7.2 Suggestions to the commissioner**

The crisis management is much more than just a developing a crisis plan as a one time job, it should be acknowledged as an ongoing process. It varies and requires the integration of knowledge from multiple areas, and it should be studied more.

As explained earlier, the literature and the content analysis provided wide and valid strategies to deal and communicate with crises, as well as reduce their impact. The suggestions for Events by Haaga-Helia can be divided into three categories which are:

1. Contracts and Legal issues to anticipate unpredictable crises
2. Communication strategies under crisis
3. Revenue management and alternative strategies to stay in the game

The first strategy is a part of risk management and anticipation which should be adopted before the crisis occurs in order to minimise the consequences of crisis. It is critical to understand the nature of legal liability. The legal obligations with event management includes negotiation and execution of the contracts and other legal documents. When people are injured or killed and property is lost, damaged or destroyed, the result is usually blaming and the seeking of compensation, which is why it is highly important to pay attention when writing a contract with a partner.

In a situations like COVID-19 where all the events got cancelled the first thing you start looking is what does the cancellation policy in your contract say. If the cancellation policy doesn't clearly say how to deal with situation like that, it is highly possible that you are going to need a lawyer to figure it out with you, and a lot of time which both costs a lot of money. In worst cases you are obligated to pay all the costs once the window for cancellation is closed, because the cancellation policy did not indicate otherwise. That is why it is highly important to anticipate and make sure that you have considered all the situations.

Another important liability is having an insurance in place. Too often, event organisers do not consider insuring for their events, because the costs are high and the possibility for needing them are lower. Still, if a crisis would occur the insurance can save you from huge

financial damages. As said earlier we might not be able to eliminate the crises, but with these actions we can reduce their negative economical impact.

The second suggestion provides insights and strategies on how to communicate in a crisis. Communication is a vital component of crisis management process and needs to be planned well. The goals of crisis communication are make sure everyone's safety, convey the information of all special arrangements, share the truthful picture of possible crisis to everyone. The crisis message should include following information: what has happened, why it has happened, how meaningful it is, where is information based on, what are the consequences, how and when this will be taken care of.

If a crisis occurs, the first priority is to inform your stakeholders and partners about the situation. Being open and honest helps you to gain their trust and possibly stay with you after the crisis is over. The second one is to inform your audience about the situation, and the best way to do so is communicate through multiple platforms in order to reach everyone. The communication should be clear and consistent by sharing updated and changes to norms whenever needed. Always base your decisions and actions on reliable sources and reveal them to your audience. It gives a good and responsible image of your brand and shows that you are trustworthy. It is also important to be available for the possible questions, showing compassion and caring for your audience.

The communication inside your team is as much important as communication to your audience. The bigger your team is the more typical it is that responsibilities are shared between more people, which is why a proper communication plan is highly important especially in crisis situation. Everyone from events hosting organisation to the suppliers and volunteers must be aware and understood what are their tasks, who is responsible of what and how to proceed.

Sometimes the preparedness and anticipation does not cover all the damages of the crisis, and you need to develop alternative solutions to cope with crisis, which is the third suggestion provided. These strategies could be for example designing an alternative solution to your event (e.g. virtual event), creating an online store where you can sell tickets and products in advance to get revenue, build up a community where you can co-innovate together for possible solutions to cope with crisis, or develop a platform where people can donate money to support your business. These actions can help you to keep your business alive and running during the crisis, and possibly can benefit you also in the future.

This research brought up a lot of important insights, which will be useful for the event organisers skillset. When these strategies are put in place and practised, it can also help the students to get a work placement or permanent job from the field, which can again boost the brand image of Event by Haaga-Helia, and the entire Haaga-Helia UAS as a whole.

### 7.3 Learning outcomes

The variety of learning outcomes from the past months are wide. This thesis process was not as long as normally it would be, instead it took me two months in total. The working with this thesis has been challenging and progressed rapidly due its correlation to the COVID-19 crisis. This thesis was a combination of a need and interest, for both to me and to other event organisers, including the commissioner of this thesis. Looking back all the things I have learned and put into this paper, I am pleased to produce a thesis what I know that matters and will be important.

Even though my schedule was tight and the working phases were moving fast forward, I think I did well. I planned my steps well ahead and clearly staged what needs to be ready and when. During the time I was working on my thesis, I was able to focus to writing full-time, which was a great decision and made it possible to finalise it on time.

The things that challenged me the most was the concept of content analysis as a research method. I was not familiar with the concept before conducting it in this thesis, and it took me while to understand how the work with. The content analysis has a large variety of ways to proceed, and even though it is widely used it takes a lot of time of going back and forth and comparing in order to get a reliable data. I read about content analysis from multiple sources and platforms which provided examples of how it can be implemented. After all I am happy that I did the research this way, and not by conducting interviews, because the topic is obviously very sensitive and could have been hard to get the interviews done.

The best outcome of this thesis is the amount of knowledge I have on this topic and understanding the big phenomena of risk-, and crisis management. The ability to consider each possible outcome and being prepared for all situations is the meaning of great responsibility. I think it will be my strong card in the future in terms of working in events industry. This topic will be on the loop in the future, and will possibly develop into a marketing strategy to differ from other competitors. As I followed the development of the COVID-19 crisis I learned that the consequences of crises can be very crucial, but it can also create new opportunities.

If I could add something to this thesis, I would allow more time for the research, to be able to follow the development of the COVID-19 crisis and implement in to my research results. Overall I am satisfied with this thesis. I was able to answer to my research questions and present the importance of risk-, and crisis management from a large and comprehensive perspective. The findings are important for every event organiser, including the commissioner of this thesis, Events by Haaga-Helia. Making this research was a teaching process for myself, and made me certain that my future is in the field of event management.

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