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IMPROVING OPERATIVE COMMUNICATION OF NORMET INTERNATIONAL

COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PURCHASING DEPARTMENT AND SUPPLIERS

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THESIS
Abstract

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Abstract

This thesis aims to improve the communication between the operative purchasing team, of Normet International, and the suppliers. More specifically, the improvement is attempted to be made on the communication that is done by operative purchasing team to the suppliers, rather than trying to directly influence the communication of the suppliers. This thesis is practice-based, and in the introduction two tasks are set out to be completed, as the ways of improving communication.

The theoretical framework of this thesis gives a look at communication differences in capital and consumer goods market, and recent-, and possible future changes in communication. The theoretical framework also gives more details on the subjects relating to the topic of this thesis, considering buyer-supplier communication, language, corporate language, and effective email communication.

Two questionnaires, and feedback discussions, were done as part of this thesis process. This thesis details the research process done to complete the specified tasks, introduces the results of the research process and reflects the results on the theoretical framework. The conclusion gives comments on the process, and suggestions for the future.

Keywords
communication, buyer-supplier communication, corporate

CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Thesis objective

For any organization, good communication is essential for the efficiency of its operations. For a manufacturing company, both internal-, and external communication should be efficient as it enables coordinating a smooth inflow, and outflow of materials.

The objective of this thesis is to improve the communication between operative purchasing team of Normet International, and its most important stakeholder group, the suppliers. Rather than inherently attempting to influence the communication patterns of the suppliers, this thesis aims to improve the communication done by the operative purchasing team.

The focus of this thesis was narrowed down to the communication between the operative purchasing team and the suppliers. In addition to the internal communication, majority of the daily communication in the operative purchasing department, is happening between the purchaser and the suppliers. This thesis is implemented as action-based research and the methods of gathering data used were observation, questionnaires, and feedback discussions. In addition to these methods of gathering data, the authors own experience in working as part of the operative purchasing team is helpful when identifying the possible need for improvement in specific areas.

Nature of this thesis is practice-based, with the aim being on completing two tasks for the operative purchasing team, that were requested by the client company, Normet International. Normet International is subsidiary of the Normet Group, and the operative purchasing team of Normet International is responsible for purchasing spare parts.

The first task is to do research on the e-mail templates that the operative purchasing team currently has in use, re-write the templates that could be improved, create new ones if needed, and delete the templates that are not being used. The second task is to create a supplier folder, which is a baseline of topics, that an operative purchaser could use as a reference when preparing material for meetings with the suppliers. The finalization of the end-product for the supplier folder is left outside the scope of this report, and this report presents the research done and the results gained, prior to the authors suggestion as to what the baseline of topics should be.

This report begins with a brief introduction to the client company, continuing with introducing the theoretical framework and research method. After presenting the research method, chapters 4 and 5, present the two tasks that were requested by the client company, the research conducted for the tasks, and results and reflection of the research. The final chapter, conclusion, touches upon topics that arose during the research process, and gives development ideas for the future.

1.2 Company introduction

Normet Group Oy is a technology company, that manufactures equipment, provides services, and construction technologies for underground mining and tunneling. Normet is operating globally in over 50 locations and 28 countries worldwide. Normet has equipment manufacturing facilities in Chile, Sweden, and Finland; with the main manufacturing facility located in Iisalmi, Finland. (Normet Group, 2020.)[i]

FIGURE 1: Normet globally (Normet Group, 2020)[ii]

Normet offers wide variety of equipment for mining and tunneling, and has expertise in processes such as concrete spraying, charging, scaling, lifting & installation, and underground logistics, as an example. Normet was founded in 1962, employs over 1200 people, and has delivered over 12000 underground machines. (Normet Group, 2020.)

Normet's values are securing a safe and sustainable future, innovating for performance, and partnering for lifetime value. With these values Normet puts safety as the number one priority, and aims for resource efficiency, optimizing processes to reduce the carbon footprint of tunneling and mining projects. Normet commits to innovation and customers' goals, building new solutions in dialogue with the customer and creating long-term partnerships. (Normet Group, 2020.)[iii]

2 COMMUNICATION

Communication is a basic function that creates the working conditions in different organizations, such as in companies, public communities, associations, and networks. Communication is happening in all areas where members of an organization are working, either being physically present in a workplace, or in a virtual environment. The basic functions of communication are the same, regardless of the type of organization; in all organizations planned daily messaging, exchanging information, and building the sense of community is needed. Communication belongs to the core of the activities of an organization; it has been described as the bloodstream of any organization, as without communication, the organization might cease to exist. (Kortetjärvi-Nurmi, Murtola, 2016.)[iv]

The purchasing process of capital (industrial) goods takes a longer time than in consumer goods, it might also involve piloting or pre-assessment periods. In capital goods, also the marketing communications are more multifaceted and information- heavy. The marketing communication is focused on carefully identified potential customers, and the customer attention is primarily attempted to be gained through announcements and search-engine advertising. In the capital goods market, trust in the supplier of the product is highlighted, and in technical products, the ability to supply products long term, and to offer support and maintenance services for the product. In capital goods market, a relationship is built with the company, in contrast to the consumer market, where the product could be bought randomly just a single time by the customer (Pohjola, 2019, 27.)[v]

Communication supports the business activities of a company; proficient business executive will plan communication simultaneously to planning business activities. When the company communication is planned accordingly, the need for management, giving instructions or informing does not come as a surprise. When there is a head of communication as part of the management team, the company not only focuses on the development of new products or possible new partnerships, but also how and when will the company communicate about these business activities to its clients, personnel and other stakeholder groups. (Lohtaja-Ahonen, Kaihovirta-Rapo, 2012, 88.)[vi]

During the last two decades, the environment for organizational communication has changed drastically. Firstly, the internet becoming an everyday thing, and after that the breakthrough of social media has been forcing organizations to change means and style of their communication. The digital age has increased the amount- and form of public texts. It has also created new text types such as tweets or blogs as an example. Before, companies would gain publicity through media, now they can use the company's homepage as an arena to invite communities and stakeholders into having a dialogue, or to introduce the company's operations to the public. Digital communications have become modern day tools, that have shifted the organizational communication to be more volatile, demanding, and hectic. Business activities have shifted to be more public and transparent and every employee, needs interaction skills more so, than before the digital age. (Kortetjärvi-Nurmi, Murtola, 2016.)[vii]

Reputation of an organization is present in the media, seminars, headlines, and speeches. Research is done by organizations about their reputation and good reputation is highly sought after. For a company, a good reputation brings many benefits, as it can attract customers, employees, potential business partners and investors. A good reputation is something that needs to be built, maintained, and protected from conflicts between an organization and its stakeholder groups. Internet and social media have increased the need for organizations and companies to maintain a good reputation. Due to the internet, good and bad news spread quickly, and organizations do not want to be connected to parties that are operating unethically or irresponsibly; so the public expects an organization or a company to make responsible decisions, and to be transparent in their business activities. A good reputation cannot be built unless the organization knows how to communicate about the good actions they have done, and the reputation of an organization should be considered, when making strategic or operative communication plans. (Kortetjärvi-Nurmi, Murtola, 2016). [viii]According to the current megatrends, the importance of organizations being transparent, responsible, and ethical will increase in the future. (ProCom 2020.)[ix]

In capital goods market, the reputation of the supplier of the product and for example building thought leadership are talked about. Importance of responsibility to a company's reputation continues to increase, and even though this is also the case in consumer goods, it is further highlighted in capital goods market. The relationship to the company that is manufacturing the product is rather distant in the consumer goods market. In the capital goods market, unethical choices of a company can negatively affect even the reputation of its customers. Recent developments in communication have highlighted authenticity and transparency, as negative publicity spreads fast; it might take years to build a reputation, but the reputation might be lost within a day (Pohjola, 2019, 28, 33.)[x]

In trainings about public and organizational communications, the factors affecting the corporate image are often described as actions, communication, and image. This offers an understandable foundation for leading a corporate image; more broadly managing visual and design aspects are often referred with the term design management. Design management field usually includes communication, product, environment, and the way of working; these definitions cover most of a corporations or organizations functions. Design management -thinking, is based on controlling the combination of the product, communication, environment, and actions. Design management -thinking is usually focused on consumer products. In this extremely brand-oriented design management -thinking, the customer experience acts as the baseline for improvement. (Pohjola, 2019, 21.)[xi]

Client-centered approach and customer experience management is highlighted in today's operational environment. Planning and managing customer experience are defined differently in different contexts. They are often included in service, and service experience, where the company's employee's role in producing the customer experience is crucial. Customer experience is subjective, and it includes customers experiences with the company's products and services, so by definition it includes considering the needs of the customer. Broadly speaking, customer experience includes all encounters that the customer has with the company, and today those encounters are happening more through digital channels. (Pohjola, 2019, 24.)[xii]

Organizational communication is building and maintaining relationships between the stakeholder groups and the organization. Sharing information, the need for having a dialogue and interactivity between the organization are emphasized. Successful communication builds a sense of community and promotes wellbeing at workplace. Communication drives the organization towards its objectives and is strategic by nature. (ProCom 2020.) [xiii]

Considering current, and future trends of communication, megatrends that are expected to shape the landscape of communication during the upcoming decade are the following:

FIGURE 2: Megatrends influencing communication (ProCom, 2020)

In accordance with these megatrends, the demand for corporate communication, and professionals understanding organizations and communication increase. Climate change and globalization impacts societies and organizations, which can result in political instability and an increase in cultural diversity; as the communities become more fractured, the forms of communication become more diverse. Communication continues to play a vital role in organizational performance, and the value of communicational skills will increase in every job, especially those in leadership or expert position. Simultaneously the challenges of corporate communication increase as well, changing technologies such as development of artificial intelligence can be an opportunity, but also a challenge. Information warfare and hybrid forms of influencing can pose a threat to an organization, and the importance of fact-checking is emphasized. (ProCom, 2020.)[xiv]

In their report of Principles of corporate communication 2020, ProCom has also outlined the prerequisites for corporate operation as the following

1. "The chief of communication is a part of the executive team to enable strategic partnership, as all decision making will require communication expertise"
2. "Context and organizational type shape how communication is organized"
3. "Communication needs the resources necessary to reach its targets"
4. "Communication professionals need the opportunity to continually improve and develop both their own and their organizations' communication competence"

Through digital channels and future technological developments, we are finally achieving real customization and targeting of messages to customers; however, customization and targeting are still currently limited by lack of information and the resources needed for customization. In the future, the developments in artificial intelligence and automatization will most likely lead to more precise pinpointing of customer decisions, and the factors affecting customer decision. Technologies currently in use enable the utilization of different variables, usage of automated control processes, and creating a user profile for the recipient of a message based on the actions of that user. Generally, technology reaches only the points of contact where there is data available, in digital format, about the actions and behavior of the recipient. (Pohjola, 2019, 24.)[xv]

2.1 Buyer supplier communication

Purchasers need to communicate with suppliers to coordinate the flow of products from the supplier to the buyer. Prices, delivery schedules and possible technical adaptations in the products need to be discussed and agreed upon. Thus, the communication processes between the buyer and the supplier have a crucial role in determining whether the cooperation between the two companies is successful. (Oosterhuis, 2009, 10.)[xvi]

Oosterhuis's thesis interview on the communication context (Communication in buyer-supplier relationships: the value of shared perceptions, 2009, 14) concluded that in buyer-supplier relationships with low environmental uncertainty, cost and efficiency being key factors, frequent communication was not deemed necessary as the demand for the product was predictable and technical aspects of the product were fixed.

In buyer-supplier relationships where the environmental uncertainty was high, with main goal being innovation, demand for the product was unpredictable and frequent technological changes were needed for the product, frequent communication was deemed essential. In these cases where the environmental uncertainty is high, the respondents also placed higher importance on face-to-face meetings. (Oosterhuis, 2009, 15.)[xvii]

It is worth noting, that an increase in operational communications can be associated with misunderstandings and conflicts. Contrary to strategic collaborative studies recommendations, both suppliers and buyers should acknowledge that contacting the other party over minor concerns or uncertainties can be viewed as an annoyance and could end up harming the relationship. While increasing collaborative strategic communications has positive effects, it should be carefully reviewed before being extended to the operational communications. (Oosterhuis, 2009, 90.)[xviii]

Research by Ambrose, Marshall, Fynes and Lynch, 2008 (Communication media selection in buyer-supplier relationships, IJOPM, 28, 4, 372) also refers to the environmental uncertainty and clarifying ambiguity in a buyer-supplier relationship. The research suggests that if the level of uncertainty increases, email is the primary tool of communication used. In highly uncertain situations email is used due to the increased need for control of the relationship, by both the supplier and the buyer; cellphone is often used in conjunction with email to minimize misinterpretations arising from the emails or other activities.[xix]

Email is often also used in buyer-supplier relationships with low level of uncertainty, but for a different reason. In a buyer-supplier relationship with low level of uncertainty and low social content, the email is used because of its convenience, it is easy to use and fast. (Ambrose, Marshall, Fynes and Lynch, 2008, 372.)[xx]

The choice of communication media tends to change as the buyer-supplier relationship develops. In new relationships face-to-face meetings are preferred to develop a more personal relationship to reduce uncertainty. As the relationship develops and the level of uncertainty lowers, depending on the needs of the parties involved, the primary tool of communication is usually cellphone or email. However, in conflict situations more informal media choices such as cellphone or face-to-face meetings resulted in a better outcome. (Ambrose, Marshall, Fynes and Lynch, 2008, 374, 375.) [xxi]These results support the conclusions of the thesis interview by Oosterhuis, 2009.

Operational communications are more frequently involved in conflict when there is a disagreement between the buyer and supplier in importance of quality, delivery, or innovation. Conflict could be avoided if both parties place similar value on the delivery reliability, innovation, and importance of quality. This should be taken into consideration before the formal start of a business relationship, as these performance objectives are often discussed between managers, strategic buyers, and sales personnel. As successful cooperation requires coordination at various levels, both parties should ensure, that the goals are clear also to the people involved in the day-to-day logistical communications. (Oosterhuis, 2009, 90.)[xxii]

2.2 Language

Creating a baseline of topics for the operative purchasers to discuss during supplier meetings, is indirectly influencing the communication between the purchaser and the supplier. Linguistic and stylistic choices for communication are not to be considered when creating this baseline as the supplier meetings are usually done as face-to-face meetings. When writing the e-mail templates however, the stylistic and linguistic choices must be considered.

Visual image of a brand is everything that is observable from a company or its products just by looking at it. Visual image of a brand can be built with communicating standardized visual elements, such as logo, color, shape, material, and layout. From the viewpoint of planning communication, this means incorporating visual elements that help in creating the desired mental image of the brand into changing communicative contexts such as operative communication. This also creates challenges for planning a communication strategy for the brand. When creating a singular message, the strategy for communicating the brand should be considered, however the guidelines of communicating the brand should also be functional from the viewpoint of creating a singular message. The visual image of a brand is often considered only to be a part of the marketing communication of the brand. However, to help in defining the visual image of a brand, all the ways that the brand meets its customers, should be analyzed. All interactions with a customer are important, the role of visuality is highlighted in the earlier stages of a relationship between a brand and it's customer; because at this point, the customer has no prior experiences or information about the company (Pohjola, 2019, 17, 18.)[xxiii]

In text-based computer-mediated communication, the nonverbal communication such as the tone of voice, gestures, body language and the facial expressions are nonexistent. These nonverbal signals are often emulated in text-based communication through usage of emoticons, unconventional spelling, or other symbols. While these might work well in informal situations, the meaning of symbols and expressions are not standardized; this makes it hard for the reader to decipher what exactly is meant and how should the message be interpreted. In general, these should be avoided in a professional setting. (Darics, 2015, 26.)[xxiv]

Accessibility directive was imposed by European union & council on 22.12.2016. The directive calls for public institutions of EU-member states to make their internet services and mobile applications accessible for everyone. Accessible communication enables equality in gaining information and in the usage of municipal services. Accessibility of communication promotes the possibility for the people to operate equally in a community that is moving towards digitalization. Basic elements of an accessible internet service are the languages used, and the understandability of them. The language used in the municipal internet services should be easily understandable, so that it will serve all citizens equally; usage of plain language is encouraged, so the text is easy to perceive and follow. (Tamminen & Alinikula, 2017.)[xxv]

Language is one of the most important aspects of communication. It is a fundamental part for both internal and external communication in a business or organization, however the importance of language is often overlooked because it is an inherent part of our everyday lives. (Darics 2015, 13.) [xxvi]The importance of the language used is highlighted in a multinational environment where the recipients of a message can have different cultural backgrounds, and varying degrees of proficiency in the English language.

There is a strong relationship between the language and the context in which the language is used in. Linguistic choices done by the writer of the message, albeit often unconscious, tend to reflect the underlying objectives the writer wishes to accomplish with the message. In turn the stylistic choices of the message, more specifically the level of formality, can serve as contextualization cue for the reader to interpret how the received message was intended. (Darics 2015, 58.)[xxvii]

Corporate language, meaning the language that the company uses to communicate with their internal, or external audiences. Companies which seek to control their brand identity, encourage the usage of style or tone, that will communicate what the brand stands for; the corporate language's objective is to communicate a brand. Corporate, or branded language often possesses several of the following characteristics: might be centrally controlled by a department of the company, often has guidelines and/or house style standards applied, usually corporate language does not control spoken language. Guidelines on the style of corporate language that should be used, often range from vague suggestions to guidance on selecting content and recommendations for specific linguistic approaches. In addition, companies often have distinct house style rules that might for example apply to date formatting, capitalization, preferred spelling, and how to address people. (Delin, 2017.)[xxviii]

Researching corporate language and design, the variety of texts that might be considered corporate, is wide-ranging. Researchers planning to investigate corporate language or corporate communication should take note, that it might be helpful to narrow the focus of the research into specific types of texts, situations, or purposes. Studies of this subject tend to use a looser notion of genre to specify the text type for the study. The focus of studies around corporate communication could also be narrowed down by the intention of the communication; the difficulty with this is that the researcher is responsible for deciding the intended purpose of such documents. Potentially beneficial area of research could be documents about communication about the same subject, intended for different audiences. A deeper insight into the processes and products of corporate communication is gained through, not only the participation of the audience, but also the producers of the communication. *"A team approach to understanding how, and why, corporate communications work (or don't work) can be an enlightening experience for everyone involved*". (Delin, 2017.)[xxix]

2.3 Email

Before the normalization of computer-mediated forms of communication, there was a clear distinction between written and oral communication. With written forms of communication, it took a longer time for the message to reach the respondent; instant communication would happen communicating orally, via face-to-face meetings or cellphone. E-mail is written communication, however, due to handheld devices with internet connection such as smartphones becoming common, the response to an email can be instant. The previously absent ability to quote all previous emails in an email conversation, has shifted email conversation towards having characteristics of oral communication. This has led to where following and entire email thread, might feel like reading a transcript of a dialog, giving email conversations further characteristics of oral communication. Thus, email should not be viewed as exclusively written by nature, as it also has characteristics of oral communication. (Beer, 2017.)[xxx]

Email has multiple benefits over sending a letter, the classical type of written message. According to Beer, 2017, email is the most economical way of transferring messages. In principle email is an inconspicuous medium of communication, as it allows the recipient of the message to process the mail at their own pace and discretion. As opposed to phone calls, the email does not require for both participants to be available simultaneously. Emails are considered by some, to be supposedly more spontaneous and informal in nature; thus, arguments have been made that email could encourage more creative thinking, which could prove to be beneficial for the company. When communicating via email, ideas and suggestions can be distributed across the organization/company quickly, which enables a larger audience to think about these ideas, and to provide their own input about the matter. Benefits of email are highlighted in big international companies, as large audience can be reached effortlessly, without having to take different time zones into account. (Beer, 2017.) [xxxi]

The level of formality is an important stylistic aspect of writing an email, the writing style can be heavily influenced based on the original purpose of the email. The stylistic choices for an email is not only influenced by the intention of the communication, but also on who the recipient of the email is; the right level of formality might be hard for people who lack knowledge of rules and norms of the community they are operating in. Greater attention should be payed to the level of formality when addressing the recipient of the email for the first time, or when writing to a figure of authority. Linguistic choices contribute to the perceived level of formality of an email, messages tend to be perceived as formal if they contain: Complex, grammatically correct sentences, forms of address, sign -offs, signatures, vocabulary choices typical to written language, use of indirect requests, attention to politeness, and the lack of nonverbal features such as smileys or abbreviations.(Darics, 2015, 57-59.) [xxxii]

Linguistically weak, and poorly written emails will, in most cases, reflect badly on the sender of the email and potentially even have negative impact on the business activities. This is because the sender of the poorly written email might be viewed as unprofessional or unreliable by the receiver of the email. In a study conducted by Alexander Beer, 2004, Beer concluded that *"In fact, almost 75% of the respondents stated that careless email communication might actually impact their decision on whether or not to do business with such companies."* However, Beer further notes that the relevance of poorly written emails declines the further the business relationship develops, as customers become more forgiving to such mistakes. (Beer, 2017.)[xxxiii]

Email often moves across national borders, which is why it is easy to forget that when communicating via email, that it could be cross-cultural communication. When writing an email, it should be noted that the respondent's country might have different cultural norms in place. Successful way to account for cultural differences, and possible disparities between language skills between the sender and the receiver, is to write emails in a way that: uses common words and short declarative sentences, phrases everything as straightforwardly as possible, and avoids passive nouns and favors active ones.(Canavor, 2016, 131.)[xxxiv]

When writing an email, the negativity effect is something that is worth keeping in mind. The negativity effect refers to a fact, that when using computer-mediated digital messaging as the communication medium, the receiver of the message will interpret the message to be more negative than the sender intended. This is due to the lack of emotional and physical cues in text-based messages. Research on negativity effect suggests, that even the slightest negative aspect of a message, will likely cause the reader to read the intention behind the message to be negative. (Darics, 2015, 26-27.)[xxxv]

When drafting a message, the two most important things to keep in mind are the objective of the text, and the target audience. The structuring of the message should be logical, so the text is easy to follow for the reader. The main point of the message should be summarized in the headline; abbreviations, exact numbers and punctuation marks should be avoided in the headline. New information should not be attempted to be compressed into a single sentence, and it should not be the first thing introduced in the text either. Shorter sentences are easier to understand than longer ones. Especially in texts where there are instructions, the writing style should be as simple as possible, so that the objective of the message is clearly relayed to the reader; so that nothing is left unclear. In texts with instructions, usage of adjectives in the text should be avoided as they create more room for interpretation of the message (Lohtaja-Ahonen & Kaihovirta-Rapo, 2012, 77-78.) [xxxvi]

3 RESEARCH

3.1 Action based research

Action-based research is participatory research method that, through working together, strives to solve a practical challenge and produce change. The research finds solutions to solve practical issues that can be technical, ethical, or professional. The goal of action-based research is to solve a practical issue appearing within an organization, whilst creating new information and understanding of the phenomenon. Action-based research is heavily dependent on practicality, as it is not only used to describe how things are currently but aims to change the current situation. Typical traits of action-based research are problem-centered approach, focus group and the researcher having an active role in making the changes, and co-operation between the focus group and the researcher. (Ojasalo & Moilanen & Ritakoski, 2015, 58-59.) [xxxvii]

In action-based research, defining the research question does not always begin from the questions the research wants to answer, but from specifying the goal of the research. It is characteristic for action-based research to research information that can be applied and utilized practically to develop conventions. Rather than answering the question: *"How things are?"*, action-based research answers the question *"How things should be?"*. As a follow up for this question, action-based research aims to also answer how the desired outcome can be achieved, and what information is needed to support the development towards that goal. (Valli & Aarnos, 2018.)[xxxviii]

Participatory development offers the researcher and developer many advantages. Developing new solutions for problems together, usually yields better results than ideas coming from outside the focus group. This is due to the members of the focus group knowing the challenges of their work better than others. In action-based research, it is good to remember that the planned change may, or may not happen; you need to also be prepared that the change can be completely different than initially described as the desired objective in the beginning of the process. One of the challenges of action-based research it that it is circumstantial, which makes it challenging to utilize previous studies. (Ojasalo & Moilanen & Ritakoski, 2015, 59.)[xxxix]

In action-based research, the author/researcher is included in the community that is being researched. The author does not attempt to observe action as it is, without his/her presence, but can start motions him/herself and influences in the target community. The researcher interfering to create change during the research, is called change intervention. The intervention can sometimes bring hidden social mechanisms or power relations that would have been left unnoticed without the inter vention. Because the author/research is not only an observer, a subject as well, the information gained through action-based research cannot be purely objective. Communality of processes has also been described as one of the defining aspects of action-based research. (Valli & Aarnos, 2018.)[xl]

Action-based research is well suited for developing working practices, or working methods, because it strives for creating new operational models, and understanding and developing the work. Action-based research can be used to provide a new perspective of the working environment, improving the communication between the researcher and the focus group and give opportunity to new ways of solving problems. (Ojasalo & Moilanen & Ritakoski, 2015, 59-60.)[xli]

Action-based research progresses in a cycle of planning, observing, and evaluating, where every step of the research is implemented and relativized to each other systematically and critically. First, the objectives are set, or the areas of development defined, and then the aim of the work is defined. The actual research begins with defining the means and different possibilities of reaching the goal. The research process is alternating between phases of planning, action, and reflection. The role of the researcher is different in action-based research, as the researcher also acts as active member of the focus group. (Ojasalo & Moilanen & Ritakoski, 2015, 61.)[xlii]

Action-based research is often represented visually by a spiral model, consisting of cycle of planning and action, followed by observing, reflection and re-planning, looping over again continuously as suggested also above from Ojasalo & Moilanen & Ritakoski. However, this spiral model has been said to restrict the authors of action-based research, because the phases of planning, action and reflection cannot always be clearly distinguished. The referenced spiral model has been described by the author (Kemmins 1994,42), as a tip for beginners. Reality is, that phases of action-based research overlap each other. (Valli & Aarnos 2018). [xliii]

Additional weakness of the spiral model is that it gives a progressive, forward moving, and developing picture of the action. Reality is, that in the activities of a work community there are so many ongoing processes, that they cannot be compressed into a simple spiral. Sometimes during the process, a small problem, or a supplementary question can evolve into a significant new direction of research. (Valli & Aarnos, 2018.)[xliv]

Action-based research is normally seen as qualitative research, but it can also include quantitative research methods. When deciding upon the methods of the research, it should be remembered that action-based research is participatory research, so the methods of the research must be participatory as well. Material for the research can be gained through questionnaires, group discussions, workshops, interviews or by observing. Discussion continues throughout the development process, so that the previous discussion creates the baseline for the next one. Factors influencing the selection of research method: the size of the organization, scope of the development, research personnel and its role, and the focus group. (Ojasalo & Moilanen & Ritakoski, 2015, 62.)[xlv]

3.2 Focus group, emphasis

There are multiple reasons, as to why I chose action-based research as the research method for this thesis. The research began from setting concrete work to be produced, and objectives to be achieved. The goal to be achieved was revising the email templates that the operative purchasing team had in use and creating a baseline of topics for the operative purchasing team to use for supplier meetings. The objective of the work was to improve the communication between the operative purchasing team, and the suppliers. This made the nature of this thesis heavily practice oriented.

Primary target group of this thesis is the operative purchasing team of Normet International, as the objective of the work is aimed to improve their communication. The sourcing department of Normet could be characterized as the secondary target group, since they have a shared interest with primary target group towards the communication happening between Normet and its suppliers.

Creating a baseline of topics or general instructions for supplier meetings, for an operative purchasing team of a company, is circumstantial, and dependent on the company it is being created for, to the extent where action-based research was necessary. The supplier meetings are often arranged in cooperation with the sourcing department at Normet, therefore, the input from not only the operative purchasing-, but also the sourcing department was seen important.

The email templates that are available for use are the same for everyone in the operative purchasing team, which created the need for participatory research. Aspects such as language, ease of use or effectiveness of email templates should be evaluated before revising or deleting them. Another cause for the need of participatory research was, that me, as the researcher, did not have practical experience on certain issues that some of the email templates were designed to help in solving. A lot of the knowledge surrounding the communication between a purchasing department and a supplier, is also highly circumstantial, and company dependent, which are factors that further encourage the usage of participatory approach.

3.3 Structure

The primary method of gathering data, was through two questionnaires distributed and answered via email. For revising the email templates, a questionnaire was sent to the operative purchasing team. The questionnaire was chosen to map out which email templates were used, and by how many people, and which were not. The idea for this thesis, started many months prior to the actual implementation process. Operative purchasing team was informed that the email templates will be revised in the process of this thesis; the operative purchasing team submitted ideas and suggestions considering the email templates throughout these months. The ideas and suggestions arose through observation during the daily work.

The questionnaire for the sourcing department was done to gain input about the expectations towards operative purchasing team. The questionnaire helped in mapping out the general opinions on the topics of the questions and was a neutral way of gaining information. Questionnaire that each person answers individually, as opposed to a group discussion, gives a fair estimate on the consensus of ideas, as it minimizes the effects of peer pressure. However, the questionnaire leaves room for interpretation of the questions, which might cause challenges.

The last question in the questionnaire, sent to the sourcing department, was *"any additional comments/suggestions for the operative purchasing considering supplier meetings?"* and the process of revising the email templates included two group discussions with operative purchasing. The open-ended question, and group discussions, were done to leave room for suggestions, ideas and development ideas touching upon the subject of communication.

4 EMAIL TEMPLATES

The email templates that the operative purchasing team had in use, were found to be insufficient in some cases, as they were not relaying information as wanted or they were poorly written. It was then decided by the operative purchasing team, that all the email templates that are in use, should be reviewed and revised, or deleted, depending on if the template was in active use or not, and new email templates should be created.

The email templates are used to handle issues such as non-conformance deliveries. Non-conformance delivery means, that the delivery has not been delivered as requested. Examples of non-conformance deliveries: too high, or too low amount of items have been delivered, item numbers have not been marked on the packing list, or the packing list has been completely missing from the shipment, or simply the items delivered have been wrong. The email templates are also used to send reminders or requests, such as item data requests or reminders for missing order confirmations.

The process of gathering the necessary information for rewriting the e-mail templates that the operative purchasing team currently has in use, was through continuous observation among the daily work, a questionnaire, and two feedback meetings. As the operative purchasing team had known for roughly about 3 months, that the e-mail templates would be looked through, rewritten if needed and new templates would be created, they had sent suggestions for email templates that would be good to have, in order to speed up the communication about recurring subjects. A questionnaire was sent to all five members of the operative purchasing team. The answers to the questionnaire were analyzed, the email templates were then re-written and distributed to the operative purchasing team. After this, two feedback meetings were held with the operative purchasing team, to finalize the email templates into the desired form together.

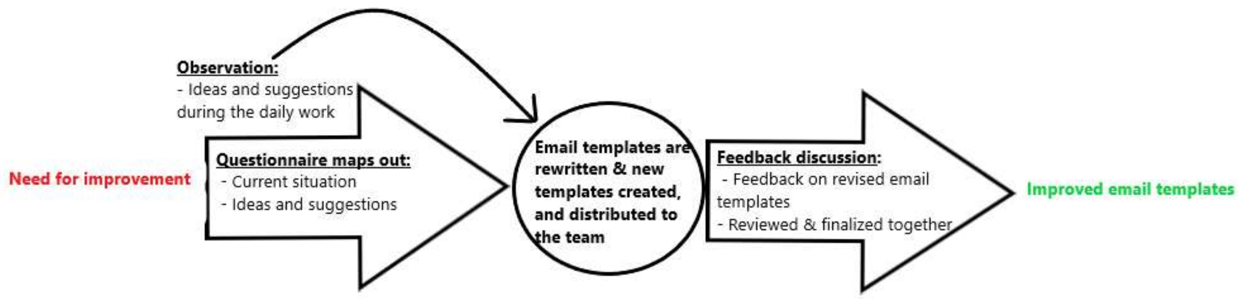

FIGURE 3: Process of email templates.

Before the questionnaire, 19 email templates were available for use, some of which were not used at all. Of these 19 templates: six consisted of templates related to non-conformance deliveries, three templates were the same as the accompanying letter that is sent automatically by the system that sends purchase orders, rest were requests and reminders for things such as expediting delivery, item data and lead time.

4.1 Questionnaire

A simple questionnaire was distributed to each member of operative purchasing team. The questionnaire consisted of four different types of questions. The purchasers were asked to answer the following two questions about each of the 19 different email templates that were "in use":

"Do you use this e-mail template?"

"If yes, would you change anything? / If no, why not?"

These questions were asked in order to map out the templates that were actually being used and if there was possibly a need for change for even the templates that were being used, or if they were fine left as the way they were. The last part of the second question *"If no, why not?"* was asked to find out, if some templates that were not in use, could have been used if revised.

The last two questions in the questionnaire were the following open-ended questions.

"Do you have any suggestions for new e-mail templates that do not exist, but would be useful to have?"

"Please specify the main goal of the new e-mail template, what information do we need from the supplier?"

These last two questions were asked so that the operative purchasing team could bring forth their own suggestions for email templates, and to help in writing the new suggested template, to specify the information we wish to receive or the goal to achieve when using the new template. Prior to distributing the questionnaire to the whole operative purchasing team, it was filled by one operative purchaser, to find out possible flaws on the questionnaire, and to get comments and improvement suggestions.

When the questionnaire was sent to the operative purchasing team, the respondents were instructed in the following way:

"If are using an e-mail template and answer yes, if you wish you can comment about the linguistic aspects of the e-mail template as well."

*"If you are **not** using an e-mail template, please make it clear in your answer if the template should be deleted, or if you would use it in case it was revised"*

4.2 Results of the questionnaire

All five members of the operative purchasing team answered the questionnaire. One of the respondents is handling only internal purchase orders (Normet Oy to Normet International), and purchase orders to the Normet service center; majority of this respondents communication is done in Finnish language, which leaves most of the email templates unused by her.

Recurring answer as to why email templates were not being used, was the reason that the templates were reminding the supplier about a previously sent request. This means that the respondents found it more convenient to just reply to the previous e-mail chain, and type the request to check the previous email, rather than to use a template to remind the supplier. Similar reason for a template not being in use, was that the information that needed to be relayed to the supplier was received via email, and it was easier to copy most parts of that email and send it to the supplier. Some of the templates were not being used, because the occurrence the email templates were written for, was happening so rarely that respondents forgot about the existence of such template.

Three of the email templates appeared to be almost identical and all three were poorly written, so none of the three templates were in regular use by any of the respondents. When answering "no", some of the respondents specified that they had not actually introduced themselves to all the templates and therefore had not used them. Three of the email templates were the same as the accompanying letter, and its variations, that Normet's system sends automatically with a purchase order.

The suggested corrections considering the templates that were being used, mostly related to the clarity of the templates. The respondents found that sometimes the supplier did not fill in all the requested information, and the template could be clarified so that this problem would not be recurring in the future. Some of the email templates ask the supplier to respond within a certain period of time; a respondent suggested that if this is required from the supplier, it would be useful to highlight the requested response time in the email template.

In the last open-ended question, a respondent remarked that because the suppliers have varying language skills in the English language, the email templates should be written as clearly as possible. It was also noted by a respondent that some of the email templates had a negative tone to them and came off as rude. The email template suggestions, for the last question, consisted of two email templates to use when communicating with the suppliers, however four templates were suggested that could be used when communicating with Normet's order management team, and one suggestion that would communicate with Normet Oy's purchasing. This suggests that the recurring subjects and the need for email templates, are not only present in external communication with the suppliers, but also in internal communication.

4.3 Implementation

All the answers were analyzed and based on the answers the email templates were revised, suggested to be deleted, or new email templates written. All of the email templates had changes, some very minor, changing only a few words if the template had no major linguistic flaws and was functioning as intended (all of the information received from supplier when using the template). In total 9 templates were suggested to be deleted, and 8 new templates were written, based on the suggestions, for the operative purchasing team to review and give feedback on. The objective for the new email templates was to be simple, clearly written, and polite.

Examples of revised email templates:

Example template 1:

19. Later than expected

Hello,

What is normal lead time for item XXX XXX?

Now it´s coming later than expected.

Kind Regards,

Revised example template 1:

Dear,

Thank you for your order confirmation.

Could you kindly inform the normal lead time for item XXX?

We have a normal lead time of x days in our system, is this information still valid?

This item appears to be arriving later than expected at this time.

Thank you in advance.
Best regards,

In the first example above, revision was made to the example template 1, because the original was worded bluntly, and furthermore, sometimes the receiver of the email did not know the reasoning behind the question. As in the revised version, the receiver is given the information that Normet has listed the normal lead times of items, to have an estimate when the item is expected to arrive.

Example template 2:

Non-conformance Incomplete papers

Hello,

*We've received the shipment of **PO XXX**.*

Now we notice there is no Normet item number on the packing list.
This is causing issues on our inbound and is critical.

Corrective action request

Normet is requesting vendor to describe following details concerning the deviation:

1. *Root cause of the deviation.*
2. *Corrective actions.*
3. *Corrections to process*

Revised example template 2:

Dear,

We have received your shipment for the following purchase order(s): **11-XXX**.

The packing list was missing from the shipment, or Normet item numbers were not marked as requested on the packing list.

Receiving shipments with incorrect documentation is causing issues in our inbound.

We kindly request you to:

- Inform the cause of this issue
- Send corrected packing list(s) with Normet item numbers included.
- Relay this information to the department responsible for packing and generating the packing list, so that this does not become a recurring issue.

In the example template 2, the email template is used for incomplete papers non-conformance delivery. The original email template only states that there are no Normet's item numbers marked on the packing list. However, the term incomplete papers as it is used, also refers to the possibility that the packing list might be missing completely from the shipment received, and the revised template also takes this into account. The example template 2, also requests the supplier to describe the cause of this issue, corrective actions, and future development to avoid this problem in the future. The procedures requested are described in a vague manner in the example template 2, but as the objective in revising the email templates was to write clear and understandable emails, the procedures Normet expects in this case from the supplier, are described in the revised example template 2, in greater detail.

4.4 Feedback and improvement

Once the email templates had been revised, they were sent to each member of the operative purchasing team. The operative purchasing team was then instructed to go through the new suggested email templates. Two feedback meetings were arranged, so that everyone can give feedback and suggestions considering the revised email templates or any new ideas that had come up. The operative purchasing team was also requested to go through the suggestions for deleting the unused email templates and give their opinion, whether the completely unused templates should be deleted.

The operative purchasing team was also asked to specify the goals of few email templates that were suggested prior to the questionnaire. During revising the email templates, a question arose, about the usage of plural forms in the email templates. Many of the old email templates were written in a singular form, or in a plural form, and it was asked from the operative purchasing team if they prefer both forms to be written, so that they can delete the "wrong option" before sending the email, or should just one form be used.

The operative purchasing team was requested to give comments on certain ease of use- aspects of the email templates. As an example, some of the email templates have tables that need information to be filled in. From the authors experience, the information that is required is often easier to copy from an excel-file, than to fill the table one-by-one; so one of the questions for the operative purchasing team was: "should these tables be removed from the email templates?"

The two feedback meetings held included operative purchasing team giving feedback, and improvement suggestions, on the revised templates. Improvements were made during the meeting on the email templates, as they were agreed upon together. As an example, it was suggested by a respondent in questionnaire, that if there is a time frame for answering specified, for the supplier, in the email template, that the time frame in which we expect the supplier to answer should be highlighted with a color. This suggestion was discussed during the meeting, and it was unanimously agreed upon that highlighting text could be seen, as too aggressive, and using bolded text for the time frame was chosen instead.

During the feedback meetings stylistic choices such as greetings, and closing words, were decided upon together. The email templates were reviewed and finalized, one by one together with the operative purchasing team. During the meetings, it was also decided which templates should be deleted, and which ones should remain in use. In the end, seven templates were decided to be deleted. Eight new templates were created, seven of these templates were suggested by the operative purchasing team, and one by the author. This brings the total new amount of available email templates to 20. Majority of the new email template suggestions were for internal communication.

4.5 Reflection

As Lohtaja-Ahonen and Kaihovirta-Rapo, suggest in their book Tehoa Työelämän viestintään, (2012), that shorter sentences are easier to understand, and in texts that include instructions, the writing style should be as simple as possible. This something that was touched upon within an answer given to the questionnaire about email templates, as a respondent remarked the varying degrees of English skills found among the suppliers, and the need for simplistic writing. The need to shorten sentences came up also during the feedback meetings, as the operative purchasing team notified that some of the revised email templates had sentences that were too long.

Darics writes in her book Writing Online: A Guide to Effective Digital Communication at Work, (2015), about the negativity effect. The negativity effect suggests that, when using digital messaging, the receiver of the message to be more negative than the sender intended, and furthermore suggests that even the slightest negative aspect of a message will cause the reader to interpret intentions of the sender to be negative. This effect was seen in an answer to the email template questionnaire, as the respondent remarked that the old email templates are negative and rude, although the email templates did not have inherently negative expressions used.

According to Beer, (2017), linguistically weak and poorly written emails will reflect badly on the sender, as these might cause the sender to be viewed as unprofessional or unreliable, by the receiver. Weak linguistic choices of the email templates, and poor writing, could be another reason the respondent found the old email templates to be rude and negative.

As referenced in chapter 2.2, Darics, (2015), suggests that the message is perceived to be more formal if it contains complex, grammatically correct sentences. However, Canavor, (2016), suggests that to successfully account for cultural differences and possible disparities in language skills between the sender and the receiver, is to write email messages in a way that uses short declarative sentences, and phrases everything as straightforwardly as possible. This contradiction was discussed during the feedback meetings. The operative purchasing team suggested, on some revised email templates, that some sentences should be shortened, and simplified, even at the expense of lowering the perceived level of formality of the email template. So, it could be concluded that the operative purchasing team values the understandability and simplicity, of an email message, more than the perceived level of formality.

Beer, (2017), writes about email messaging obtaining characteristics of oral communication, due to the previously absent ability of quoting all previous emails in an email conversation. This was apparent in the answers to the email template questionnaire. As a respondent remarked this in an answer considering an email template, that was purposed to remind the supplier about a previously sent request. Respondent answered that it is easier to send the reminder message, by continuing the email chain from the previous request and remind the supplier "to check the request below".

Darics, (2015), writes about digital messaging, and suggests that non-standardized expressions should generally be avoided in a professional setting. This is something that had to be taken in consideration during revising the email templates, as Normet has multitude of abbreviations that are used only in internal communication.

As referenced in chapter 2.3, Delin, (2017), describes the characteristics of corporate language as often having centralized control, guidelines and/or house style standards that might apply to for example date formatting, capitalization, preferred spelling, or instructions on addressing people. Normet has a communication plan in place, however the communication plan does not include instructions or guidelines regarding daily communication such as, the usage or formatting of email templates.

5 SUPPLIER FOLDER

The main goal of creating a supplier folder, was to create a baseline of topics, for the operative purchasing department to have for supplier meetings; this would help the current and especially new operative purchasers in preparing for the supplier meetings. The operative purchaser would then, based on the essential topics to be discussed, know what material to prepare and have ready for the meetings with the supplier.

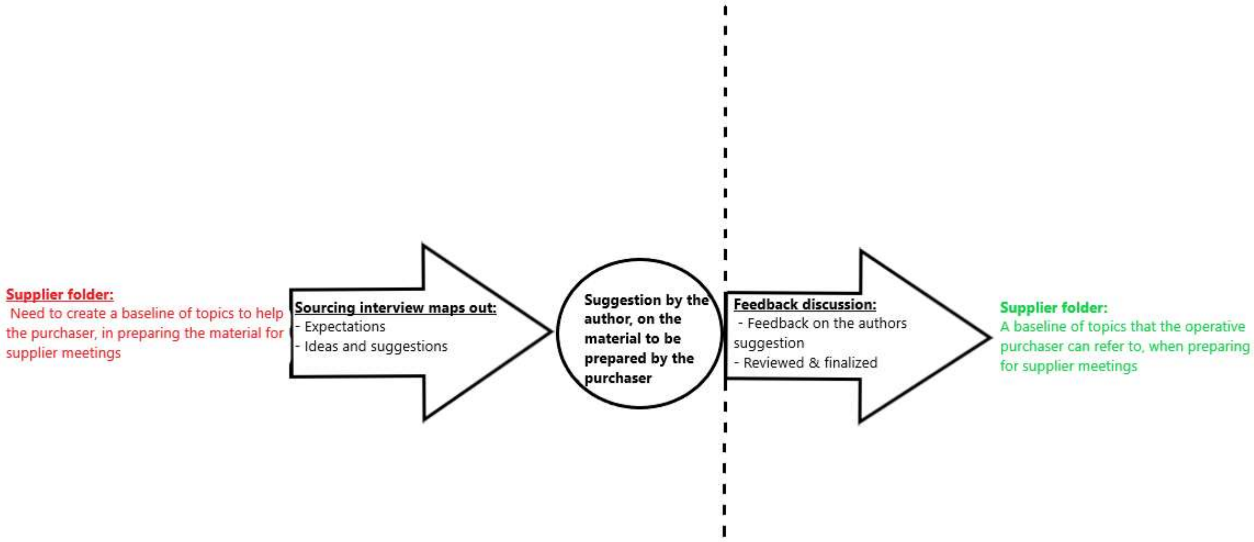

FIGURE 4: Process of supplier folder.

Based on the results of the sourcing questionnaire, the author will present a suggestion of the baseline of topics for the operative purchasing team. Feedback discussion will be held similarly to the process of revising the email templates, together with the operative purchasing team, prior to creating the supplier folder.

5.1 Sourcing questionnaire

A questionnaire was distributed to the sourcing department of Normet, to help in compiling the information for creating the baseline of topics for supplier meetings. Prior to being distributed to the whole sourcing department, the questionnaire was sent to one test subject to fill out and give comments and suggestions about the initial questionnaire which consisted of five different questions. After the initial comments, one question was added to the questionnaire, and one question reworded. The initial questionnaire did not include question #1, which asks the sourcing managers about the preparation and planning required prior to arranging a supplier meeting. Total of six sourcing managers were asked to fill the questionnaire; all six of the sourcing managers responded to the questionnaire.

The final questionnaire consisted of six open questions, and the goal was to map out the expectations that the supplier department has towards the operative purchasing department considering supplier meetings.

Question #1: *"When planning a supplier meeting, what should be done by the operative purchasing (arrangements etc.)?"*

Question #2: *"During meetings with the supplier, what are the topics that should be covered and discussed by the operative purchasing?"*

Question #2.2: "*Regarding the topics listed above, what material should the operative purchasing have prepared? (Statistics etc.)*

Question #3: "*What material depending on if the supplier is a new, or an already established supplier should operative purchasing have prepared for supplier meetings"*

Question #4: "*What supplier specific material should operative purchasing have prepared for supplier meetings?"*

Question #5: "Any additional comments/suggestions for the operative purchasing regarding supplier meetings?"

5.2 Results of the sourcing questionnaire

The first question of the questionnaire brought up multiple remarks considering the planning and arrangements that should be done prior to a supplier meeting. A respondent noted however, that if the operative purchaser is arranging the meeting, but wishes for the attendance of other personnel from Normet, the availability and willingness of the additional personnel required for the meeting should be checked, and the meeting date agreed upon with said personnel. However, another respondent noted that the operative purchasing department could arrange meetings without additional representatives of Normet, in the case that the topics that should be discussed in the meeting are purely operative. Staying on the practical side of things, reserving a meeting room including the service such as coffee etc. should be booked in advance, and it should be made clear to the attendees of the meeting when, and where the meeting takes place.

Multiple respondents brought up that the importance of the supplier meeting should be considered and evaluated prior to arranging one; respondents suggested that the meeting should have a goal. Answers specified that if there is not a clear objective, or an issue at hand that creates extra work on daily basis that could cause troubles in the flow of materials, arranging a meeting is not necessarily needed. In the same sense, preparing an agenda for the meeting, and distributing it to the attendees was deemed important, and was a recurring answer to the first question. In addition to preparing an agenda, multiple respondents suggested that if there are multiple representatives of Normet attending the supplier meeting, it should be agreed beforehand which representative will lead the discussion about topics specified in the agenda.

The responses to the second, and the follow up question #2.2, about the topics that should be discussed, and the material to be prepared by the operative purchasing during supplier meetings, were unanimous in certain aspects. All the respondents listed that the operative purchasing discuss the delivery accuracy/performance, and quality performance of the supplier. Overwhelming majority of the respondents also listed claims, non-conformance deliveries, status of currently open (urgent) orders, and possible other ongoing issues as topics that should be covered by operative purchasing. Accordingly, the reports and statistics that are available for the topics listed above were expected to be prepared for the meetings, however it was noted by a respondent that the statistics should be reviewed, and possible faults excluded before presenting the data to the supplier.

In addition to discussing current issues with the supplier, few respondents agreed that, matters about future should be brought up during meetings as well. These future things included possible organizational changes, changes in demand, and possible development ideas. Sharing personal opinions about the functionality of the relationship and being proactive during meetings with the supplier was encouraged; multiple respondents also encouraged giving positive feedback to the supplier in areas of success.

Third question asked the respondents about the material that operative purchasing should have prepared for supplier meetings depending on the maturity of the relationship; differences between a new supplier or an already established one. Majority of respondents agreed that a company introduction and introducing the practical customs that Normet has in place was necessary for new suppliers. Multiple respondents specified that the company introduction should give the new supplier an overview to Normet's organization, so that the supplier will understand the difference between responsibilities of each department. It was suggested that the introduction to practical customs, should familiarize the supplier on the following processes: ordering, confirmation of orders, invoicing, packing, delivery practices and quality feedback. As examples provided by the respondents, introduction on practicalities could include presenting the supplier how Normet measures delivery accuracy, and other key performance indicators or informing the supplier about possible sanctions if the agreements considering deliveries or quality are breached.

The fourth question about supplier specific material did not yield as much new information from the respondents, as it was seen that the body of questions from 2# to 4# were overlapping each other in multiple aspects; similarly much of the answers were in the style of *"see answers above"*, referring to previous answers of the respondents. Another factor contributing to this fact, was that the statistics about ongoing issues, delivery performance, and other things relating to the daily workflow are mostly supplier specific. However, a respondent noted that it is helpful if the purchaser has a basic understanding of the products, within the supplier's scope of supply, prior to arranging a meeting.

The last question in the questionnaire asked for additional comments and suggestions, from the sourcing department, for the operative purchasing department considering supplier meetings. Majority of the respondents chose to give additional comments for the last question. Recurring theme, that some respondents had already touched upon, in the answers to previous questions (2 and 2.2), was the aim to be active and highly co-operative. A respondent summed up that the purchaser should aim to steer away from the "us and them" -type of thinking. Multiple respondents emphasized that one should act professionally during supplier meetings, and things such as arguing with a colleague, or criticizing the company you are representing were deemed unprofessional. Acting professional was specified, by a respondent, as setting aside one's personal opinions on personality traits of representatives attending the meeting that he/she might find unpleasant.

A respondent remarked that the operative purchasing, and sourcing department each work from a slightly different perspective with suppliers. Therefore, evaluating the performance of a supplier, and agreeing upon the topics and agenda to be discussed during a supplier meeting, with the sourcing department creates a better representation of Normet. Working closely in co-operation with sourcing was encouraged. Practical advice given by a respondent, was that if the purchaser requires improvement from the supplier, he/she should have material that *"opens the challenge"*, so that it is easier for the supplier to understand and improve upon the issue.

A respondent suggested that changing the meeting frame, for supplier meetings, should be considered. The respondent remarked that currently during supplier meetings, the representatives of Normet are mostly responsible for presenting, while the suppliers arrive to such meetings with minimum preparation. The suggested meeting frame would place emphasis on the supplier presenting the data for key performance indicators, and Normet's representatives giving comments if the data presented by the supplier, conflicts with the data Normet has.

5.3 Reflection

Generally, the answers overall reflected that the sourcing department highly encourages arranging meetings with suppliers, highly encourages proactivity during the meetings, and furthermore bringing forth personal opinions from a more operative perspective, and possible development ideas for the future. A well representative of this was an answer to question #5 by a respondent: *"A buyer can never communicate too much with a supplier, and email is not communication but an announcement"*

The answers given by the sourcing department for the questionnaire, support findings of Oosterhuis's thesis interview study (2008) and reflect upon the theories by Pohjola (2019), Kortetjärvi-Nurmi and Murtola (2016). Oosterhuis (2008) suggests in his thesis interview study that in buyer-supplier relationships where the environmental uncertainty is high, frequent communication was deemed essential and higher importance was placed on face-to-face meetings. As in the environment that Normet is operating in, there is a high level of uncertainty due to the constant need for technological changes for products, the sourcing department places high importance on arranging face-to-face meetings, which reflects in the answers to the questionnaire.

Pohjola in his book Brändin Ilmeen Johtaminen (2019), touches upon the buyer-supplier relationship differences in consumer and capital goods market. Pohjola writes, that in capital goods market the trust in the supplier of the product is highlighted, and a relationship is built between the buyer and the supplier of the product. Normet is operating in the capital/industrial goods market. The answers reflect upon the relationship-building aspect of capital goods market presented by Pohjola. The respondents encouraged a highly co-operative attitude and working together towards goals rather than only making demands from the supplier, as a respondent suggested: an operative purchaser should know his/her "counterpart" by face.

As referenced in chapter 2.1, Oosterhuis suggests that if buyers and suppliers place similar value on key performance indicators, less conflict will appear overall in the buyer-supplier relationship. The suggested changes into the supplier meeting frame, and suppliers filling out the file on key performance indicators prior to the supplier meetings, would act as a constant reminder for the suppliers on the performance indicators, that Normet places high value on. Changing the meeting frame in this way could then possibly promote a shared perception of values.

Although not necessarily directly applicable to the answers of the Sourcing interview, some common themes can be found from the answers, as to what was presented Kortetjärvi-Nurmi and Murtola, in Areena: yritysviestinnän käsikirja (2016), considering a reputation of an organization. As Kortetjärvi-Nurmi and Murtola (2016) suggest that good reputation needs to be built, maintained, and protected from conflicts between an organization and its stakeholder groups. Although Kortetjärvi-Nurmi and Murtola (2016) are writing more from the perspective of the public opinion, the need for maintaining a good reputation is found in the Sourcing interview answers as well. The respondents suggested a highly professional approach to supplier meetings, which can be interpreted as part of building and maintaining a good reputation in the buyer-supplier relationship.

The sourcing questionnaire helped in creating an extensive baseline of topics to be discussed during the development of the supplier folder and possibly expanded upon the material that the supplier folder should include. Even though the implementation process of the end-product, was left outside of the scope of this thesis, it is worth noting that during the time period of writing this thesis, testing the supplier folder in practice would have been difficult compared to normal, as there is a global pandemic. As a result of this pandemic significant amount of the supplier meetings have been cancelled or moved, though some of the meetings are being held remotely.

6 CONCLUSION

It is clear, that as the topic of this thesis is improving communication between the operative purchasing and the suppliers, that the suppliers could have been a focus group. However due to the resources available, in addition to the large pool of suppliers, the more practical approach was to improve upon the communication operative purchasing does, as opposed to trying to directly influence communication patterns of the suppliers. However, changes in the communication that the operative purchasing does, can influence the communication patterns of the suppliers.

It is worth noting, that this thesis is focused on the communication of the operative purchasing team, of Normet international; the communication could be vastly different from the operative purchasing team of Normet Oy, which is responsible for purchasing materials for manufacturing. The results of the questionnaires have very limited application outside of this thesis, as the sample size is very small, and all the respondents are representatives of the same company. Furthermore, the questionnaires were designed to help with a specific goal in mind. However, if in the future, Normet implements a communication strategy that has implications for operative communications, this thesis could be referred to.

If further projects were to be done to improve the communication between operative purchasing and the suppliers, they could be done in co-operation with the suppliers. Working in co-operation with the suppliers could prove useful because it would help to paint a more complete picture, on how to develop the communication in a buyer-supplier relationship to be more effective. If future improvement projects were to be done together with the suppliers, the scope of suppliers should be heavily narrowed down either, by the importance of the supplier from the viewpoint of Normet, or by the suppliers which have the most room for improvement in the area of communication.

The initial idea behind compiling the supplier folder, was to have a baseline of topics that could be then checked by the operative purchaser prior to the supplier meetings, to make sure they have all necessary data prepared. However, based on the answers received in the questionnaire for the sourcing department, the supplier folder will most likely turn out to be more extensive than initially planned. As the answers to the sourcing questionnaire vary from practical advice on things that should be done prior to the meeting, to behavioral advice during the meetings.

The changes to the meeting frame that were suggested by a respondent in the sourcing questionnaire, should be taken into consideration, as it would increase the supplier’s preparation for the supplier meetings, and supplier’s participation during the meetings. Long term the proposed meeting frame could also promote shared understanding of supplier performance, as the data from both buyer and the supplier, would be reviewed together during meetings with the supplier. Some challenges could arise if the proposed frame for the meetings would be implemented, such as, getting the already established suppliers committed, to the proposed meeting frame.

The email templates were finalized together with the operative purchasing team during the two feedback meetings held. The action-based research method, in most cases, includes testing the changes done also in practice. The new email templates in their current form, have not been tested in practice at large. However, many of the new email templates, specifically the suggestions for new templates and suggested changes to existing templates, were done based on findings done through observation of the daily work and what was found to be effective in practice. Testing the email templates in practice should be done in the future as continuation of this research; the new email templates, and their overall effectiveness, should be observed, reflected upon, and re-planned (as referenced in chapter 3.1). This would then continue the cycle, keeping the email templates updated, meeting the needs of the users.

Another possible area of development in the future could be internal communication of Normet. As seen in the answers to the email template questionnaire, a lot of the email template suggestions were designated to be used when communicating between the operative purchasing, and the order management team. It could be investigated if there are recurring topics or issues that arise during the daily work between operative purchasing team and the order management team. Then the objective could be to find out the root cause of the recurring topics or issues and find out if these can be communicated more effectively, or eliminated altogether, through training, for example.

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