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# Setting goals for autonomous motivation using Objectives and Key Results

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<p>Goal-setting has been a part of organizational management for decades as a way to increase organizational performance. Traditional ways of setting goals in organizations can't keep up with the ever-quicken pace of development, while Objectives and Key Results (OKRs), a goal-setting framework, has been eyed by many as a way to set goals in a way that is compatible with the new ways of working. Meanwhile, employee well-being is a serious consideration and autonomous motivation has been linked with increased well-being. This thesis studies whether OKRs could be used to set goals to drive autonomous motivation and employee well-being while meeting modern management needs.</p> <p>The research is a qualitative, explorative case study into a transformative business unit in a large Finnish corporation in the middle of their own OKR experiment. The data was gathered through 11 semi-structured themed interviews with two distinct groups: goal-attainers participating in the OKR experiment and goal-setters, who are in charge of setting goals traditionally in the case organization.</p> <p>The results indicate a discrepancy between what goal-attainers and goal-setters use goals for. This leads to difficulties in communicating and internalizing traditional organizational goals. This is unfortunate, as the results also indicate that this means that organizations are missing out on autonomous motivation benefits that goals can indeed provide.</p> <p>The OKR experiment indicates that setting goals with OKRs provides increased opportunities for autonomous motivation to be generated than through traditional goal-setting methods. This is thanks to its bottom-up approach to goal-setting and aligning, faster goal cycles and feelings of progress and achievement through tracking.</p> <p>The research contributes towards the theoretical background of OKRs and bridges two theories in the managerial space: the Self-Determination Theory and Goal-Setting Theory. The practical implications of the research relate to using OKRs for employee autonomous motivation rather than performance and how even traditional goal-setting ways could improve the organization members' autonomous motivation.</p>		
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<p>Tavoitteenasetanta on vuosikymmenten ajan ollut osa organisaatioiden johtamista ja niiden tehokkuuden parantamista. Perinteiset tavat asettaa tavoitteita organisaatioissa eivät kuitenkaan pysy nopeutuvan kehityksen mukana. Objectives and Key Results (OKR) on tavoitteenasetantatyökalu, joka voisi auttaa asettamaan nykyisten työtapojen kanssa yhteensopivia tavoitteita. Työtapojen ohella on otettava huomioon työntekijöiden hyvinvointi modernissa työympäristössä. Autonomisella motivaatiolla on todettu positiivinen vaikutus hyvinvointiin. Täten tämä tutkimus tarkastelee mahdollisuuksia vaikuttaa autonomiseen motivaatioon ja työntekijöiden hyvinvointiin käyttämällä OKR-tavoitteita, jotka vastaavat sekä johdon että työntekijöiden tarpeisiin.</p> <p>Tutkimus itsessään on kvalitatiivinen tapaustutkimus suureen suomalaiseen yrityksestä, joka on tällä hetkellä käymässä läpi omaa transformaatiotaan ja on juuri aloittanut oman OKR-kokeilunsa. Data kerättiin 11 teemahaastattelun avulla. Haastateltavat jaettiin kahteen ryhmään: tavoitteita saavuttaviin eli saavuttajiin ja tavoitteita asettaviin eli asettajiin. Saavuttajat ovat yrityksen OKR-kokeilun osallistujia ja asettajat ovat vastuussa yrityksen perinteisten tavoitteiden asettamisesta.</p> <p>Tulokset viittaavat siihen, ettei tavoitteiden käyttötarkoitus saavuttajilla ja asettajilla ole sama, mikä johtaa kommunikaatiovaikeuksiin ja hankaluuksiin sisäistää organisaation tavoitteita. Tämän seurauksena vaikuttaa siltä, etteivät organisaatiot onnistu täysmittaisesti hyödyntämään tavoitteiden vaikutuksia autonomiseen motivaatioon.</p> <p>Yrityksen OKR-kokeilu implikoi OKR-työkalun tarjoavan enemmän mahdollisuuksia vaikuttaa autonomiseen motivaatioon kuin perinteiset tavoiteasetannan työkalut. Tämä johtuu OKR:ien tavasta asettaa, yhtenäistää ja seurata tavoitteita alhaalta ylöspäin, sekä työkalun nopeampien tavoitesyökalien synnyttämistä etenemisen ja onnistumisen tunteista.</p> <p>Tämä tutkimus pyrkii osallistumaan OKR:ien teoreettisen pohjan luontiin ja rakentamaan siltää kahden johtajuuskirjallisuuden teorian – itseohjautuvuuden teorian ja tavoiteasetantateorian – välille. Tutkimuksen tulokset antavat ymmärtää, että OKR:iä voidaan käyttää autonomisen motivaation edistäjinä. Tutkimus pohtii myös, miten vastaavia hyötyjä voitaisiin saavuttaa perinteisin tavoiteasetannan keinoin.</p>			
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# 1 Introduction

As the organizational world continues to pick up pace, new methods of optimizing performance and organizational effectiveness arise. Since Peter Drucker introduced his Management by Objectives (MBO) in 1954, organizations all around the world have been trying to increase performance and realize their strategies by setting goals, often on an annual cycle. Unfortunately, the traditional, once-a-year way of setting goals is not compatible with modern organizations that use short cycle, agile methodologies to achieve competitive advantage. To meet the pace and needs of modern organizations, the goal-setting method generated in the 1970s at Intel, Objectives and Key Results (OKRs), have been proposed as a solution. (Sull & Sull, 2018)

While setting goals has traditionally been a way for managers to increase performance, management theorists have long been saying that goals are also a way to affect organizational member motivation (Latham & Locke, 1979). In Goal-Setting Theory (GST) the premise of goals as a practice is that goals motivate through self-satisfaction with performance (Locke & Latham, 2012). However, Martela et al. (2019) state that not all goals are “created equal” in the eyes of human motivation, and that it is important to generate a specific type of motivation: autonomous motivation. In addition to not meeting the needs of modern organizations, it is important to ask whether traditional ways of setting goals meet the needs of their members or not.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a theory on human motivation traditionally divides motivation into two different types: intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. However, more recently the internalization of external regulation – the act of extrinsically motivating – has been recognized as a factor for intrinsic motivation. This combination of intrinsic motivation and internalized external regulation is called autonomous motivation (Deci, Olafsen & Ryan, 2017). Autonomous motivation leads to both well-being and enhanced performance (Deci & Ryan, 2008a). Martela et al., (2019) state that some goals increase well-being more effectively than others, namely those types of goals that increase

autonomous motivation. Goal-setting theorists agree that performance is at its highest when goal-attainers are highly motivated and committed to the task (Locke & Latham, 2012), and intrinsic motivation (a key part of autonomous motivation) is “nearly six times more effective than external incentives in motivating people to complete complex tasks that require creativity” (Sull & Sull, 2018).

Especially in knowledge worker organizations, it would then make sense to use a way to set goals and choose a goal-setting method that motivates members autonomously to increase (1) member well-being and (2) performance. What this thesis examines is how autonomous motivation works in the context of goals and especially how the old way of setting goals and the up-and-coming way of setting goals with the OKR method compare in affecting it.

OKRs as a method to set goals differs from traditional goal-setting in both the speed of its cycle, but also by its bottom-up nature. Traditionally the way of setting goals goes top-down (Sull & Sull, 2018), where people high in the organization set the goals and then impose them on lower members of the organization to be attained. This thesis will examine and compare these two different perspectives to goal-setting: the perspective of the goal-setter and the perspective of the goal-attainer.

The traditional way of setting SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound) goals has been put into question in favour of FAST (frequently discussed, ambitious, specific, and transparent) goals in the recent years (Sull & Sull, 2018). OKRs present an opportunity for the people who set goals to be the same people who try to attain them. It will be interesting to see how the goals that individuals set for themselves differ from those that are set for – and sometimes imposed on – them and whether setting goals for themselves increases autonomous motivation or not. The difference between goals set for self and for organization is one of the motivating themes that this thesis is going to examine. Self-Determination theorists have done some studies on goals and their effect on autonomous motivation, but not in the context of organizational goals (selfdeterminationtheory.org, 2020). OKRs are also a method born out of practice, and



relatively little academic research can be found around the subject. These circumstances present a gap in the research that could be beneficial for both theorists and practitioners.

The bottom-up approach presents an interesting opportunity for better internalization of external regulation, which is key in turning extrinsic motivation into autonomous motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008a). When external regulation – like organizational goals – are internalized to the degree of integration, it can turn into an intrinsic motivator for the internalizer. However, external regulation can also be interjected, leaving the regulation to be an extrinsic motivator for the subject. Extrinsic motivation has been linked to lowered well-being and increased chance of burnout (Deci & Ryan, 2008a; Martela et al., 2019).

This thesis studies the different goal-setting practices and their effect on autonomous motivation in the context of Posti Group Ltd (Posti), the largest logistics and mail company in Finland and specifically one of its business area organizations, Parcel and Commerce (PeC). Posti started their first experimentation with the OKR method in PeC in conjunction with their larger agile workstream efforts in the Fall of 2019. The interest in a method to set goals used by large, successful players like Google is high for an organization that is both large and in the middle of a fundamental disruption to the logistics industry, leading to the experiment having a strong mandate from the PeC leadership. Unfortunately, due to a large strike affecting the whole of Posti forced PeC into a defensive development mode, the OKR experiment was largely forgotten. In the Spring of 2020, a new experiment was launched in PeC's design team, where the writer of this thesis also is employed, giving birth to the idea of a thesis to be written around the subject.

In this chapter, the key concepts have been introduced: goals and their purpose as drivers for performance. Next, this chapter goes through the structure of the thesis before delving deeper into the background of the study itself.

## 1.1 Thesis structure

The structure of the thesis is divided into seven chapters. In Chapter 1 chapter, the motivation and an overview of the thesis' purpose have been given.

Chapter 2 delves into the key concepts and the relevant theoretical background to understand and conduct the empirical study. The central theories, Goal-Setting Theory and self-determination theory are introduced. In addition, Objectives and Key Results as a method to set goals are introduced in greater detail.

Chapter 3 introduces the scope and the research questions of this thesis. The motivation and assumptions behind the research questions are explained.

Chapter 4 presents the methods, methodology, and the design of the empirical research. This chapter explains the chosen approach and the arguments for choosing it. This Chapter also fully introduces the case organization and the OKR experiment that lays the foundation for the empirical study.

Chapter 5 shows the results of the empirical study. The structure of this chapter reflects the research questions for easy digestion.

Chapter 6 answers the three research questions of the study. The chapter brings the theoretical background from Chapter 2 and the results of the study from Chapter 5 together.

Chapter 7 discusses the theoretical contribution and the practical implications of the study. This chapter is of interest to those who wish to understand what this thesis means for future studies and goal-setting practices in organizations. This chapter also goes through the limitations of the study and its findings, including its ethics.

# 2 Background

This chapter explains the theoretical background of the thesis and lays the foundation for the research questions to be presented in Chapter 3.

First this chapter will introduce the two key theories that ponder the theoretical contexts of goal-setting and autonomous motivation: Goal-Setting Theory and Self-Determination Theory respectively.

## 2.1 Goal-Setting Theory

Theory states that goals are a way for organizations to make their strategy become a reality (Sull & Sull, 2018). Goal-setting is the practice of setting goals that an organization has adopted. Goal-setting theory (GST) then is, as its name implies, a theoretical examination of the effectiveness of goals and how to set goals to gain optimal organizational performance. Throughout its evolution, the theory has been strengthened with empirical evidence and this thesis can rely on the theory for what kind of goals help organizations in their goal-setting practices.

GST explains that goals boost organizational performance because of four key mechanisms. Firstly, goals help steer effort and focus towards relevant activities. Secondly, goals have been shown to have an energizing effect – especially high difficulty goals. Thirdly, they have a positive effect on persistence. Goals help keep up work efforts. Fourth, goals have been proven to help in the discovery and use of new (task-relevant) knowledge and strategies. (Locke & Latham, 2002; 2012)

According to GST, what great goals have in common is that they are specific and difficult to attain. When the goal is specific, its success criteria are reachable with less variety, therefore bringing performance variance down and therefore while the specificity does not contribute towards higher performance, it ensures that everyone understands the target

of the goal in the same way (Locke & Latham, 2012). Interestingly it seems that expectancy and goal difficulty are inversely proportional on how they affect performance (Locke & Latham, 2002). Expectancy is the perceived effort required to reach the target that yields a reward. So, if the goal difficulty is high and there is a reward involved, the effort required should be low for the goal to yield performance gains. Inversely if the goal difficulty is low and a reward is involved, the effort required should be high.

While GST speaks heavily in favour of difficult goals, it reminds that there are important factors to consider when setting goals. Firstly, whether the goal attainer sees a high-difficulty goal as a challenge or a threat is imperative to their goal performance. Second, when setting goals for teams, it was important that the team member's individual goals align with the team's goals (Locke & Latham, 2012). If there are incompatibilities between individual and team goals, it leads to decreased team performance.

Next a key concept in GST, self-efficacy is introduced. Self-efficacy is especially interesting to this thesis because of its similarities to some aspects of autonomous motivation. Autonomous motivation is explained in chapter 2.2.

### **2.1.1 Self-efficacy**

A key concept used in GST is that of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is task-specific confidence, so the amount of confidence the goal-setter has in the task their goal revolves around (Locke & Latham, 2002). Self-efficacy is especially important when goals are self-set: people with high self-efficacy also set their goals higher and vice versa. High self-efficacy also increases commitment to goals and overall performance through task strategies and feedback responsiveness (Locke & Latham, 2002). Interestingly both self-efficacy and autonomous motivation have a feeling of competence as a positive contributor (Garrin, 2014). Self-efficacy also lists mastery as one of its main elements, something that Martela et al. (2019) proved to be a personal goal that is intrinsically motivated.

The relationship between goals and enhanced performance is the strongest when commitment to the goals is strong. Commitment is strong when self-efficacy is high and the goals themselves are important to people, or in the words of motivation studies, when people have either internalized or have intrinsic motivation towards the goals (Locke & Latham, 2002; 2012). According to GST, ways to help people internalize the goals are inspiring visions and supportive behaviour from leaders, which is consistent with Self-Determination Theory's (SDT) view of generating autonomous motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008b).

As opposed to SDT, Locke & Latham (2002) write in favour of monetary incentives, although cautiously. In their view, monetary incentives can be used to increase commitment to goals – at least initially. If at some point a goal that has monetary incentives attached to it starts to seem unattainable, the motivation to work for that goal drops. Locke & Latham (2002) suggest the use of monetary incentives for goals that pays based on performance instead of only upon attaining the goal. However monetary incentives in combination with traditional, annual goal-setting methods has been linked to negative effects on companies being able to execute their strategy because of goals being set lower than they could because of fear of losing the incentive (Sull & Sull, 2018).

### **2.1.2 Goal orientation**

In order to set effective goals, it is important to be aware of different goal orientations, sometimes called achievement goal patterns (Lee et al., 2003; Harackiewicz & Elliot, 1993). These mean that different types of goals motivate different types of people. Locke & Latham (2002) divide goals and people into two categories: People that are motivated by performance goals (PGs) and people that are motivated by learning goals (LGs). Performance goal orientation is comparable to control orientation, while learning goal orientation is also called autonomy orientation (Lee et al., 2003). Lee et al (2003) also take note of a third goal pattern, the amotivated orientation, which does not respond well to goals at all. Pairing the goal type with the orientation leads to better results in motivation and interest (Locke & Latham, 2002; 2012).

Sometimes difficult goals do not always lead to the best performance, but instead can lead to goal-attainers only focusing on reaching that specific goal instead of trying to learn skills that could help them reach that goal, and in such cases it is important to set the goal with a learning orientation in mind instead of a performance goal (Locke & Latham, 2012).

People with learning orientation tend to focus on activities that develop their skills, while performance goal-oriented people tend to choose easy goals that help them look good. Highest performance is achieved when a learning orientation is paired with a learning goal in a complex task (Locke & Latham, 2012).

### **2.1.3 Setting goals for performance**

What GST teaches is that pairing a goal orientation with the goal type leads to a higher motivation, but also that the highest performance is reached in complex tasks that are paired with a learning goal and learning orientated goal-attainers. High performance through goals also requires high commitment to the goals, which is achieved through high self-efficacy (Locke & Latham, 2002). Goal-attainers who have been subconsciously primed to the goal also perform better on high-difficulty goals, especially when they are required to do their best, not necessarily reach a hard target (Locke & Latham, 2012). Subconscious priming means that a goal-attainer has accepted and understood the goal.

Therefore, goals that lead to high performance have the following traits (Locke & Latham, 2012):

1. Support self-efficacy
2. Have been understood and accepted by the goal-attainer
3. Difficulty and expectancy are balanced
4. Goal type is paired with goal orientation
5. Complex tasks favour learning goals

As discussed in the thesis introduction (Chapter 1), increased performance has been the traditional desired outcome of goals for organizations. However, what this thesis seeks to

establish is that there is another desired outcome for goals: organizational member motivation. First, we must examine the theoretical background for human motivation.

## 2.2 Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is a widely accepted and used theory of motivation. SDT discusses the different types and sources of motivation and it has been applied to multiple contexts throughout its existence (Deci & Ryan, 2008b). One of the key points of SDT is that it differentiates between different types of motivation, and argues that instead of trying to achieve a maximum amount of motivation, it is more beneficial to achieve a certain type of motivation: autonomous motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008a; Deci & Ryan, 2008b).

Next this thesis will go through the key concepts of self-determination theory: autonomous motivation and extrinsic motivation. First, intrinsic motivation and its role in human motivation as a whole is explained. Second, extrinsic motivation and how it can be internalized is introduced. Then these concepts are brought together when autonomous motivation is finally explained.

### 2.2.1 Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation is the kind of motivation that has its source in internal goals and desires and aspirations of the individual and therefore the activity that intrinsically motivates is in itself interesting and satisfying.

The other type of motivation is that of extrinsic motivation, which is often a result of tangible rewards such as money or to not get punished – like not reaching a target and missing out on bonuses. Many theories determine that intrinsic and extrinsic motivations summed is the maximum amount of motivation discussed earlier, but Deci and Ryan (2008a) argue that it is not so and in fact, extrinsic rewards have been researched and proven to decrease intrinsic motivation. In other words, extrinsic rewards such as money

seem to lessen the recipient's interest in the rewarded activity if they are dependent on or tied to achieving a standard or completing that specific activity. In this light, SDT argues that the two types of motivation are in fact not additive.

Therefore, to leverage autonomous motivation in order to perform better and have their employees act more creatively, organizations and companies should aim to have the employees internalize the value of the activities that the organization or company deems to be important.

SDT assumes that human beings are naturally motivated and eager to succeed, as success itself is satisfying and rewarding (Deci & Ryan, 2008a). Intrinsic motivation and psychological well-being are generated through the satisfaction of basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2008b).

### **Feeling of autonomy**

Autonomy is satisfied when the experiencer feels they have choices and freedom, when their decisions at work reflect what they actually want, when they are able to express themselves in their choices and when they are able to do what really interests them in their jobs. Autonomy is frustrated when the experiencer feels that they are forced or pressured to do something, when most of their work feels like it is just something they have to do or a chain of obligations. In other words, feelings of autonomy are hindered by controlling environments and extrinsically motivated activities that the value of is not internalized. (Chen et al., 2015; Schultz, Ryan, Niemiec, Legate, & William, 2014)

### **Feeling of competence**

The need for competence is satisfied when the experiencer feels capable and confident in their jobs, their goals and when they feel that they can successfully complete difficult tasks. Things that frustrate competence are doubts or insecurities about one's own abilities, being disappointed in one's own performance or feeling like a failure because of a mistake. (Chen et al., 2015; Schultz, Ryan, Niemiec, Legate, & William, 2014)



### **Feeling of relatedness**

Relatedness is satisfied when the experiencer feels cared for by people that they themselves care for, being connected and close to those people, and when experiencing a warm feeling with people they work with. Relatedness is frustrated when the experiencer feels excluded from their group, that their relationships are only superficial, or when they dislike them or are cold and distant. (Chen et al., 2015; Schultz, Ryan, Niemiec, Legate, & William, 2014)

In addition to the three basic psychological needs listed here that contribute towards intrinsic motivation, autonomous motivation includes internalized external regulation (Deci & Ryan, 2008a). How internalization works and affects autonomous motivation is examined next.

### **2.2.2 Internalization of External Regulation**

Self-determination theory divides motivation into intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation can be transformed into intrinsic motivation through the process of internalization (Deci et al., 1994). The internalization process divides extrinsic motivation into four different types: external regulation and three different levels of internalized external regulation, where regulation is the action of motivating (Deci & Ryan, 2008a).

The three different levels of internalized external regulation are: interjected, identified and integrated external regulation. When external regulation is integrated, the effects of the regulation transform into motivation and are as beneficial for performance as if the subject of motivation was intrinsically motivated, making integration the strongest level of internalization (Deci et al., 1994; Deci & Ryan, 2008a). The second strongest level of internalization of external regulation is integration, where the individual accepts responsibility for whatever the extrinsically regulated activity may be and therefore does

not feel controlled by it. When an extrinsically regulated activity is identified, it has no negative effect on intrinsic motivation, but neither does it enhance it. Not having an effect might sound bad, but there is a worse outcome. The last level of internalization is introjection, and it has a negative effect on intrinsic motivation as no real internalization and therefore transformation to motivation happens, but instead the subject of regulation will feel controlled (Deci et al., 1994).

### **2.2.3 Autonomous motivation and controlled motivation**

Autonomous motivation consists of intrinsic motivation and the internalization of external regulation (Deci & Ryan, 2008a), or in more detail:

- satisfaction of autonomy
- satisfaction of competence
- satisfaction of relatedness
- integrated external regulation

Autonomous motivation makes individuals feel self-endorsement and a feeling that they themselves are in charge of their decisions and actions. Multiple studies have proven that autonomous motivation leads to more effective performance and greater mental health (Deci & Ryan, 2008b). In addition to the three basic psychological needs of SDT, individuals also have intrinsic aspirations and life goals: affiliation, generativity and personal development (Martela et al., 2019).

Catering to these aspirations has been linked with better performance, well-being and health. The boost in performance is especially linked to tasks that require processing of complex information or creativity, one of the key concepts this thesis earlier introduced as a driver of innovation (Deci & Ryan, 2008a). Detrimental to these desirable traits is controlled motivation, the counterpart of autonomous motivation. Controlled motivation consists of extrinsic motivation and introjected regulation and should be avoided (Deci et al., 1994).

## 2.2.4 Setting goals for autonomous motivation

Setting goals for autonomous motivation begins with the content of the goals (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006).

Studies around setting goals for autonomous motivation emphasize the framing of the goals to be intrinsic and autonomy supportive. This means that instead of using words like “should”, the goals are set using words such as “could” and make room for autonomy. Previously intrinsic goals have been linked to better mental health and well-being, but there is also evidence that intrinsic goals are related to achievement and persistence (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). It has to be said that extrinsic goals also provide some benefits for performance over no goals at all, but substantially less than intrinsic goals.

Extrinsic rewards have been proven to be effective at controlling behaviour. However, controlling behaviour results in a loss of intrinsic motivation for the subjects of the control (Deci & Ryan, 1999; Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). In other words, while providing extrinsic rewards for key activities might help an organization to align its employees’ activities to its own strategy, the employees are less motivated to do so because of a loss in intrinsic motivation and therefore autonomous motivation. Indeed, it seems that setting and reaching goals is a source of well-being, but not all goals contribute equally towards good, motivated people (Martela et al., 2019). Overall it is important that any goals are set in a way that supports autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2008a).

Intrinsic goals satisfy the psychological needs of relatedness, competence and autonomy as presented in SDT (Martela et al., 2019). Satisfying these needs promotes autonomous motivation, high performance and wellness (Deci, Olafsen & Ryan, 2017).

Facilitation of internalization of external regulation is providing a reason for why a certain uninteresting or extrinsically motivated activity is important (Deci & Ryan, 2008a). In other words, it is important to make sure that whenever a goal is set, the question “Why is this important?” is asked and answered. When given a purpose and rationale, a performance goal has the strongest positive effect on intrinsic motivation (Locke &

Latham, 2002). This is consistent with the generation of autonomous motivation and especially the internalization of external regulation of SDT. Interestingly though, when the purpose and rationale are removed, learning goals become more effective for the sake of intrinsic motivation. Learning goals seem to affect directly towards intrinsic motivation, whereas performance goals that have a rationale or purpose contribute towards intrinsic motivation through the process of internalization.

Beneficial for setting goals is understanding aspirations that contribute towards intrinsic goals and motivation through fulfilling basic psychological needs. For example, those aspiring to mastery have feelings of competence as well as autonomy, both being sources of intrinsic motivation (Martela et al., 2019). Other proven intrinsic goals provided that can be of interest to goal-setting are: self-expression, contribution and affiliation and self-development (Deci, Olafsen & Ryan, 2017; Martela et al., 2019). These aspirations drive self-determination and therefore could be of interest to examine in organizational goal-setting context.

Goal-setting theory states that great goals are specific, difficult to attain, and have a purpose and a rationale. Motivation studies argue that great goals either contribute directly to intrinsic aspirations and motivation or aim for internalization of external regulation to the point of identification, hopefully even integration. Both theories acknowledge that individuals respond to different types of goals, be it because of personal goal-orientation or intrinsic aspirations that are unique to everyone. This introduces a whole new dimension of difficulty to setting goals for autonomous motivation.

As we can see, setting goals for autonomous motivation is not as far in the literature as setting goals for performance, and the guidelines are not as straightforward. However, better motivation leads to better performance (Locke & Latham, 2002; Deci & Ryan, 2008a; Deci, Olafsen & Ryan, 2017), giving reason to think that setting goals for performance can also partly mean setting goals for autonomous motivation.

We have now established the two desired outcomes for setting goals in organizations: setting goals for performance and setting goals for autonomous motivation and that these two are in fact, not in strict contradiction with one another. Next, we will look at the up-and-coming (comparatively) way of setting goals, the OKRs.

## 2.4 Objectives and Key Results

Objectives and Key Results (OKRs) is both a goal-setting methodology and a performance management tool (Niven & Lamorte, 2017) that combines qualitative and quantitative methods, with the objectives representing the qualitative and correspondingly the key results representing the quantitative. OKRs have been made famous by large successful global organizations like Google (Wodtke, 2016).

The methodology is heavily based on Management By Objectives (MBOs), which originally aimed to “foster cross-functional cooperation, spur individual innovation, and ensure all employees had a line of sight to overall goals” and first style of management where managers set objectives for their teams and then trusted the team to follow through instead of micromanaging (Wodtke, 2016; Niven & Lamorte, 2017).

OKRs were first introduced at Intel in the 1970s in the form of two questions (Niven & Lamorte, 2017):

1. Where do I want to go?
2. How will I pace myself to see if I am getting there?

These two questions would later become the objective and the key results respectively. Modern OKRs also draw upon other widely used goal-setting practices, including SMART, which states that goals should be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Results-focused and Time-bound (Wodtke, 2016). OKRs make good use of the framework, naturally setting goals that are results-focused and time-bound.

However, Sull & Sull (2018) argue that the time for setting SMART goals is in the past, and now it is more important to set FAST goals. FAST stands for frequently discussed, ambitious, specific, and transparent and is based on the use of OKRs in successful companies like Google.

Next we will introduce objectives and how the framework sees and uses them in more detail.

## 2.4.1 Objectives

In essence, objectives should answer the question first used at Intel in the 1970s: “Where do I want to go?”. Despite the singular wording, OKRs are not used only for individual goals, and indeed often objectives are set for teams or even small organizations. A good objective is inspirational, so that it captures the vision and attention of the whole team (Wodtke, 2016). In addition, a good objective is succinct, qualitative and time-bound (Niven & Lamorte, 2017) and is meant to be actionable and engaging (Castro et al., 2018).

Just like with goal-setting theory, objectives are meant to be hard but not unachievable. That means selecting an objective that relies on input from people outside those who set the objective and that is doable within the given timeframe (Wodtke, 2016). The timeframe is decided when the objective is set and can be anything from a week or a sprint to a whole year. Usually OKRs are set on a quarterly basis (Castro et al., 2018).

Sometimes objective-setters have a hard time setting an objective rather than a key result, as traditional goal-setting has often communicated quantitative measures as goals and objectives are meant to be strictly qualitative (Wodtke, 2016).

## 2.4.2 Key Results

As opposed to the objectives, which are qualitative, key results are always quantitative. For each objective, 2-5 key results are set (Castro et al., 2018), often three. Those key results measure whether that objective has been met or not (Niven & Lamorte, 2017). Often a key result is very similar to a key performance indicator, except with a specific target value in mind.

Key results and the timeframe of the goal is what determines the difficulty of the goal, given that the objective is achievable. OKRs are meant to always stretch goals, and should be difficult, but not impossible to attain. Effective key results are quantitative, aspirational and specific (Wodtke, 2016). It is important that any key result in a given OKR is owned by the attainers. This means that the goal-attainers have themselves created the key result and have ownership of it, instead of it being set by a corporate mandate. In addition, any key result should bring a sense of progress to the attainers of that goal. This means that the key result should demonstrate progress during the process of attaining the goal and that the target should be far enough from the starting point that it also represents progress (Nivel & Lamorte, 2017). Goal progress was also noted by Locke & Latham (2012) to be a source of well-being and feelings of success.

When key results are set, they are given scorings. Scorings are given between 0 and 1.0, where 1.0 means that the key result has been fully achieved. As key results are meant to stretch the goal, this is supposed to be something that requires a lot of work and makes the goal-setter uncomfortable (Nivel & Lamorte, 2017). We will talk more about reaching OKRs below.

## 2.4.3 Using OKRs

One of the key differences that OKRs have to traditional goal-setting methods is that they are mainly set bottom-up (Castro et al., 2018). As discussed in section 2.1.1, when goals are self-set, self-efficacy is especially important. While the concept of self-efficacy included in GST supports the use of OKRs as a goal-setting methodology, GST speaks

in favor of monetary incentives, while OKRs specifically discourage the use of rewards in conjunction with OKRs (Locke & Latham, 2002; 2012; Wodtke, 2016; Nivel & Lamorte, 2017; Sull & Sull, 2018).

Another difference with the method is that it combines qualitative and quantitative statements to create a single goal. The difficulty with setting OKRs is converting an inspiring objective to actionable key results (Wodtke, 2016; Nivel & Lamorte, 2017). This means having to put a measurable, numerical value to descriptive words like “best” and “smooth”. It is also difficult to know which results are key results instead of just listing everything that might result from working towards the objective.

Another challenge with OKRs is the amount of alignment and they demand as a framework. Every OKR should be aligned both horizontally between team members and teams, but also vertically in the organization (Nivel & Lamorte, 2017).

Reaching OKRs is fundamentally different from reaching traditional goals, where the targets are either reached or they are not. Whenever an OKRs timeframe expires, the OKR is scored. If a goal attainer reaches a score of 1.0 consistently with their OKRs, it means that the goal has not been ambitious enough (Castro, 2018). When OKRs have been set to the level that the framework seeks, most of the time OKRs reach the score of 0.7 (Nivel & Lamorte, 2017; Castro, 2018). This is to make sure that the OKRs consistently stay difficult enough, something that GST also agreed to be one of the qualities of a great goal (Locke & Latham, 2012). However, the scoring has been criticized to be extremely confusing because of its subjectivity (Castro, 2018).

Starting to use OKRs in an organization should solve a business problem, and not be adopted just because Google or Intel succeeded while using them. The process is so different from traditional models that it requires change that is not easily implemented without a good reason and backing from the organization (Nivel & Lamorte, 2017).



## 2.5 Summary

**Goal-setting theory**, in which it is assumed that goals are set for organizations to increase performance and realize their strategy states that great goals are those that (Locke & Latham, 2002; 2012):

- Support self-efficacy
- Have been understood and accepted by the goal-attainer
- Difficulty and expectancy are balanced
- Goal type is paired with goal orientation
- Complex tasks favour learning goals

**Autonomous motivation** has been linked to increased well-being and performance, and it consists of intrinsic motivation and internalized extrinsic regulation, or (Deci & Ryan, 2008a):

- The satisfaction of autonomy
- The satisfaction of competence
- The satisfaction of relatedness
- integrated external regulation

**OKRs** are a goal-setting method born out of practice and made famous by successful companies like Google. The key ways that OKRs are different from traditional goal-setting methods are (Wodtke, 2016; Castro, 2018):

- OKRs combine qualitative and quantitative measures into single goals
- OKRs are set and aligned bottom-up
- Goal-attainers and goal-setters are the same
- OKRs are set in faster cycles
- OKRs are always stretch goals

This Chapter explained the two key theories that detail the theoretical framework of this thesis. In addition, the way of setting goals that was born out of practice, the OKRs, and their use were introduced. The theories and OKRs contribute to the research questions and through them to the choice of methodologies for the study, which are introduced in Chapter 4. The contents of this chapter also help structure the results (Chapter 5) and interpret them in Chapter 6. In addition, the way this thesis contributes to both theories and OKRs is discussed in Chapter 7. Next we will move on to Chapter 3, which introduces the research questions and the scope of this thesis.

# 3 Research Questions and scope of the study

Based on the preceding literature review, this thesis assumes the three following things:

1. Autonomous motivation increases well-being and performance
2. Organizations want their members to be and perform well
3. If possible, setting goals to increase autonomous motivation is beneficial to organizations

As described in chapter 1, according to literature traditional goal-setting methods are not meeting the needs of organizations, but it is interesting to pose the question: are the goal-setting methods meeting the needs of organizational members, especially those who are working to make those goals a reality?

Especially interesting are the two separate roles and perspectives of goal-setters and goal-attainers. In contrast to traditional goal-setting methods, when setting goals using OKRs the goal-setter and the goal-attainer are often one and the same. Instead of comparing the goals per se, the thesis seeks to find answers by asking what the problems to be solved with goal-setting are for each role.

Based on the above assumptions and the prime motivation for this study, a research question was constructed:

## Research Question

*How does the OKR method affect goal-attainers' autonomous motivation in organizations?*

However, to understand the underlying phenomena why this is not the existing practice, we must ask why goals are being set in the first place and how – if at all – can goals affect autonomous motivation. Therefore, two sub-questions are needed:

### **Sub-question 1**

*What problems do goal-setters and goal-attainers try to solve by using goals?*

Through this lens the thesis seeks to understand whether there are discrepancies between the two perspectives and give insight to how OKRs, where the attainers set the goals themselves, are seemingly better at generating autonomous motivation (Sull & Sull, 2018).

### **Sub-question 2**

*How does goal-setting affect autonomous motivation in organizations?*

While goal-setting theory claims goals' positive impact on organization members' motivation, it does not recognize what self-determination theory claims to be a more desirable form of motivation: autonomous motivation. It is therefore important to study through what mechanisms autonomous motivation can be generated and exploited in the context of goal-setting.

When these two sub-questions have been answered and we understand why goals are set and how autonomous motivation works in the context of goals, the primary research question in this study can be answered.

Therefore, the research question and its sub-questions for this thesis are:

*1 How does the OKR method affect goal-attainers' autonomous motivation in organizations?*

*1a What problems do goal-setters and goal-attainers try to solve by using goals?*

*1b How does goal-setting affect autonomous motivation in organizations?*

These questions are answered in chapter 6. First, the two sub-questions 1a and 1b are answered in sub-chapters 6.1 and 6.2 respectively to then conclude to the answer to the primary research question in sub-chapter 6.3.

Next, the thesis will go through the empirical study and explain how the methods and methodologies were chosen, what was the designed research, what data it yielded and how it was analyzed.

# 4 Methods and Methodology

In this chapter, the methods used to gather and analyze the empirical data for this thesis are introduced and described. The process of selecting the appropriate approach and methods is described, after which the design of the research will be described and justified.

## 4.1 Research Approach

The primary research question and its sub-questions presented in Chapter 3 seek to answer questions about human behaviour, effects of goals as actors or entities in an organization and therefore it is better answered by qualitative means. Qualitative research is much more suitable for research of this kind than quantitative research, as it enables the researchers to get into topics that are as subjective as the one this research digs at. The areas of motivation and human behaviour are particularly subject to the phenomenology of perception (Moran, 2002).

The chosen methodology for this research is case study because of the explorative nature of the research. Case study allows for a heuristic and descriptive examination and explanation of the studied phenomenon (Flyvbjerg, 2011). In addition, through qualitative research we can find and discover the causes of possible effects in autonomous motivation that goal-setting might have, as opposed to testing existing hypotheses like with quantitative methods. (Silverman, 2017) In addition, it must be accounted that the researcher is far more familiar with qualitative research than with quantitative research, which resulted in a personal preference to choose qualitative methods. According to Silverman (2017) personal preference is a valid reasoning to choose a certain method of research.

Qualitative methods entail a multitude of different methodologies and it is up to the researcher to determine and choose the most fitting methodology for their research

(Silverman, 2017). When trying to understand motivation, it is important to understand that motivation is a subjective experience and therefore it makes most sense to use interviews as a method of data collection. Interviews allow the researcher to understand experience as presented by the interviewees and deliver insights on their motivation and motivators and especially how they perceive goals and goal-setting, and their effects.

As noted by Merleau-Ponty in the mid-20th century, all that is perceived is never completely objective and is tied to the context of perception and the experiencer (Moran, 2002). Therefore, through interviews it is only possible to understand how the interviewees perceive and experience the subject matter at hand, but it is not possible to find objective truths. In addition, Merleau-Ponty claimed that cause-and-effect explanations used in natural sciences are not applicable in the context of psychology, and that such studies should aim to find the reasons behind behaviour, not causes (Moran, 2002).

The case study looks at two different goal-setting methods at play in the case organization. The organization is described in more detail in the next section. Case studies look at a single case with specified boundaries and delve deep within those boundaries, which should result in a rich and deep analysis of the case. A case study is not a strict methodology, and indeed a case can be described as 'being alive' while it is in progress, as it is a study of real-life contexts (Patton & Appelbaum, 2003). What this means, is that the case can evolve and adapt throughout the case as it requires in order to generate concrete, context-dependent yet nuanced knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Case studies are especially useful in organizational science, where many of the issues relate to human interaction and organization structures (Patton & Appelbaum, 2003).

Case studies have been criticized for having a bias toward confirming the researchers pre-existing notions, but Flyvbjerg (2011) argues that a case study's bias is more likely to be towards falsifying those notions. Through falsification, the context-dependent knowledge generated by case studies can be generalized and therefore can help in theory building. Often used for the generation of hypotheses, case studies are also able to test hypotheses

(Patton & Appelbaum, 2003; Flyvbjerg, 2011). However, a case study often does not produce the richest information, but the richness is highly dependent on the case chosen (Flyvbjerg, 2011).

Because of the apparent lack of scientific research on OKRs as a goal-setting method, this thesis aims to set up questions and hypotheses surrounding the method and then compare it to existing theory instead of proving or falsifying its validity. Therefore, the understanding and depth that a case study can provide to the process and the ways that OKRs affect autonomous motivation (Flyvbjerg, 2011) made the methodology of a case study an easy choice. Originally the methodology was to expand to become an action research and to include a two-phase study, but unfortunately the COVID-19 pandemic of Spring 2020 interfered with those plans, and the study focused on a single phase. Any resulting problems that the results might have with generalizability or other limitations will be discussed in chapter 7.

## 4.2 Case description

The case organization of this thesis is the Parcel & eCommerce (PeC) business group organization within Posti Group, Finland's largest logistics company. This thesis focuses on the knowledge worker organization of PeC, which includes a total of 200 employees, including the writer of this thesis.

By comparison, Posti Group has a little over 15 000 employees, most of whom work in production of the logistics. Posti Group has a history of 400 years, but PeC organization has been a formalized organization within it since the beginning of 2019. The business group represents the growing businesses of Posti Group, including digital channels and services towards both consumers and corporate customers, the handling and management of parcel logistics operations and partnerships with eCommerce in Finland. Combined these businesses bring in over 50% of the company's revenue. (Posti, 2020)



The significance of the business group for Posti's business can be seen in the company's communication. In his appointment acceptance, the new CEO stated that:

*“We are seeking growth especially in Parcel and eCommerce and logistics, where we see great potential for Posti in the future.”* (Posti, 2020)

Over the year of its existence, PeC has represented a transformative business area for Posti Group, and even itself has evolved quite significantly. Previously only used in the Digital Commerce unit, PeC has implemented design thinking, agile methodologies and other ways of working more widely. Recently it has begun to experiment with Objects and Key Results (OKRs) as a method for goal-setting and intrapreneurial accelerators, with the first one having launched in early 2020, giving purpose for this study to be conducted as well.

#### **4.2.1 Goal-setting process in the organization**

At the beginning of the year 2020, when this study was started, goal-setting at the case organization worked as follows:

1. The parent group board of directors (BoD) sets key metrics for the calendar year
2. PeC leadership modifies the metrics into goals and adds some of their own to fit their business area
3. The goals are presented back to the parent group's BoD for confirmation
4. Once confirmed, the goals are distributed using a “trickle down” communication strategy

The trickle-down strategy is managed by the human resources department and relies heavily on middle managers. Each employee has some choice in which goals to take on as their own for the following year based on their business areas and business units, of which there are 4 within PeC. For example, for the Digital Commerce business unit, there was a pool of 12 goals from which each employee can choose up to three goals for themselves. These goals are bound to the annual monetary bonuses.

At the beginning of each year, a reward committee evaluates the performance on the goals and decides on how much bonuses are paid out. What the study is interested in, is how the leadership responsible for setting these goals each year thinks are the organizational needs that these goal-setting practices are supposed to meet, and how well are they meeting them.

### 4.2.2 The OKR Experiment

During Autumn 2019, the efforts to promote and use agile methods in Posti's development started properly with the introduction of a Large Scale Agile (LSA) workstream. The purpose was to use the agile work methods that had been proven to work in the Digital Commerce business unit and scale them to work on a workstream that encompasses more stakeholders. One of the ways that the work on the workstream was to be arranged, prioritized and monitored was through the experimentation of OKRs as a goal-setting framework.

During Autumn 2019, Posti Group experienced a large-scale strike by the workers in logistics production, which resulted in huge damage to the business and the reputation of the company and some re-prioritization and organizing of work in all workstreams, including LSA. As a result of the crisis-like situation, the OKR experimentation was all but discarded in favor of damage control and less experimental project management frameworks. With the business in jeopardy, there was no room for OKRs to be tested in a flagship workstream.

Come 2020, the design team situated within the PeC organization and who the researcher is a part of decided to utilize OKRs as a part of their ways of working for the year. As the first workshops to familiarize the design team of 10 people with the goal-setting method and to set the goals for the first quarter and half of the year, so did the data collection for this study begin.

For the past year and a half, the writer of this thesis has worked as a part of the team in which the OKR Experiment was conducted and took part in the goal-setting rituals and set goals for himself using the OKR method.

### **4.2.3 Goal-setters and goal-attainers**

As this study divides between the two perspectives of goal-setters and goal-attainers, it is good to make a clear distinction on who represents who in this study. Goal-setters as discussed in the following chapters include PeC leadership plus the team leader of the design team, who is in charge of the OKR experiment. The design team members taking part in the OKR experiment represent goal-attainers.

## **4.3 Data and data collection**

### **4.3.1 Research design**

For the empirical data, the chosen collection method was thematic semi-structured interviews. Initially the interviews were to be simply semi-structured interviews, but the nature of the source material for the interviews themselves found on the official Self-Determination Theory website quickly made it clear that the way SDT is researched is by dividing the questions into three themes that correspond with the three basic psychological needs argued by SDT: autonomy, competence and relatedness (selfdeterminationtheory.org, 2020).

In addition to SDT's three basic psychological needs, autonomous motivation contains internalized external regulation. To fill this gap, questions were formed. Questions regarding organizational and individual needs for goal-setting and the use of OKRs were needed as well. In the end the interview structure was divided into five themes:

1. goal-setting in the organization
2. autonomy & internalization
3. competence,
4. relatedness
5. the OKR experiment.

Semi-structured interviews are an interpretative interview method aiming to ask open-ended questions that get the interviewee to share their experiences (Emans, 2004) and can be used as a stand-alone method (Longhurst, 2003), as interviews generate very detailed information about the substance matter (Green et al., 2007). Semi-structured interviews give rich and complex data, making them ideal for case studies aiming to generate rich and complex insights through follow-up questions and conversation (Longhurst, 2003). Interpretative interviews can also expect to have to modify their research questions throughout the research (Magnusson et al., 2015).

Over the course of three weeks of interviewing, the interview questions evolved to respond to the emergent patterns visible throughout the interviews and as the researcher became more immersed with the data. It is important to note that despite changes in the question structure, the themes remained the same. This allowed the research to use grounded theory, meaning that the research could generate theory and do research simultaneously and therefore modify the questions based on the emergent patterns (Corbin & Strauss, 1994).

### **4.3.2 Collected data**

In total, 11 people were interviewed, and they consisted of two groups: 7 Goal-attainers and 4 Goal-setters. The goal-attainers represented members of the design team that had just completed their first round of setting OKRs in the experiment. The four goal-setters represented people in middle and top management of the PeC organization who had been a part of both the first attempt of the OKR experiment conducted within the Large Scale Agile initiative and that have also had experience in setting annual goals for the

organization in the past. This distribution was done so that both a bottom-up view and a top-down view of the goal-setting process could be observed.

The length of the interviews varied from 45 minutes to 59 minutes. The interviews conducted with the goal-setters tended to last a shorter time and those held with the goal-attainers typically lasted 50 minutes or longer. This was probably due to the additional questions related to the questions related to OKRs specifically asked from the goal-attainers. In total, the 11 interviews yielded 530 minutes of interview audio, therefore the average length of the interview being just over 48 minutes. These 530 minutes were then to be transcribed for the analysis. Unfortunately, one of the goal-attainer interviews audio files quality ended up so poor that transcribing it was impossible, resulting there only being 10 transcriptions for the analysis. The subsequent 10 transcriptions totaled to 152 pages of not verbatim, but quite detailed interview text to be analyzed.

### **4.3.3 Data analysis**

The research made use of the grounded theory methodology, as the analysis and resulting theories evolved throughout the data collection and analysis process. The analysis of the interviews was done in rounds, as recommended by Silverman (2017). This allows for creating a code base that is suitable for the research and the data and switching between immersion, coding, category creation and identifying themes (Green et al., 2007) and building the analysis through iterative rounds as demanded by the grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1994).

The first round of coding was done in two distinct phases: an explorative, inductive phase and a mostly deductive phase, described as thematic analysis by Federay & Muir-Cochrane (2006). However, based on the themes of the interviews, some codes were generated based on the literature that were also the themes of the interviews, describing increases and decreases in the different basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, relatedness and internalization.

In the first phase of coding, half of the interviews were coded, and it produced almost 300 different codes. After duplicates and overlapping codes were merged into single codes, there were still just over 200 codes left.

The 200 codes then had to go through a process of radical exclusion and combination in order to make the amount of codes more manageable. Many codes were excluded making use of the research questions and the codes' relevance to answering those questions and if the code did not have any recurrence. While interesting, some patterns that emerged from the data were simply not relevant to this research. Radical combining of codes required the writer to understand some larger themes or connections between the codes in order to reach a manageable amount of codes. After the exclusions and combination of codes, the first pass of coding produced 43 different codes. Most of the coded quotations were placed under 10 larger themes. The other 33 codes were identifications of:

- a mechanism of autonomous motivation at play, and whether the mechanism affected autonomous motivation positively or negatively
- an interviewee emphasizing or downplaying the importance of an aspect of goal-setting

These 33 codes did not have the occurrence of the 10 larger themes but helped the writer to understand what the respondents feel is important and to identify the different places where autonomous motivation could be affected. Therefore, even in lower occurrences, the writer felt that as the process went forward for the second phase of coding, the 'testing the fit' phase (Green et al., 2007), it was important to keep paying attention to them.

During the second phase, the coding process was mostly deductive, meaning that the analysis was mostly looking to strengthen the patterns that were found during the first phase, although it was still important to be aware of any emergent patterns that might prove useful for answering the research questions. During the second phase, the code library grew to a total of 47 codes, meaning that 4 new codes had been generated during the phase. Of these four, only one represented a larger theme, bringing the number of

larger themes to 11 and the amount of different identifications of mechanisms or emphasizing factors to 36. It was clear that this number would have to be made more manageable for effective communication to take place.

These 36 codes were pruned down by another process of liberal combination into the larger themes where applicable and by combining negative and positive effects into single codes that simply described an effect regardless of its 'charge'. At this stage, the amount of non-themed codes was down to 26, which were then placed under the five themes of the interview. Sometimes a single code being inside multiple themes, but regardless effectively reducing the amount of codes to 11 themes and 5 themed code groups, for a total of 16. With this amount, the themes and recurrences were strong enough for the writer to have confidence in their analysis.

During the analysis of the interviews the patterns that emerged formed 11 distinct themes. Some of these themes are directly related to the research questions and will be discussed in the subchapters dedicated to them. The patterns can be seen in list 4.1 on the next page.

In summary, the analysis made use of the following methodologies and techniques:

- Grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1994)
- Coding in rounds (Silverman, 2017)
- Thematic analysis (Federay & Muir-Cochrane, 2006)
- Testing the fit (Green et al., 2007)

## Pattern

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The state of goal-setting in the organization

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How organization goals are communicated

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The purpose of goals for goal-setters

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The purpose of goals for goal-attainers

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Differences in goals on individual, team and organizational levels

---

Goals should be related to daily work

---

Internalization of goals

---

Individual goal orientations

---

How difficult should goals be to attain

---

How to deal with goals that seem unattainable

---

OKRs as a goal-setting method

### List 4.1, Emerged patterns

In addition to the patterns, the 5 themed code groups that presented increases or decreases in the psychological basic needs and the codes where an interviewee emphasized or downplayed the importance of a certain aspect of goal-setting, which are presented in table 4.1 on the next page.



Code	Theme
(+/-)alignment	Relatedness
(+)alignment importance	Purpose and Use of Goal-setting, Relatedness
(+/-)communication	Purpose and Use of Goal-setting, Relatedness
(+)communication importance	Purpose and Use of Goal-setting, Relatedness
(+)feeling of achievement	Competence
(+/-)feeling of autonomy	Autonomy, Internalization,
(+/-)feeling of competence	Competence
(+)impact importance	Competence
(+)learning	Competence
(+/-)learning importance	Competence
(+)measuring importance	Purpose and Use of Goal-setting, OKRs
(+/-)relatedness	Relatedness
(+)risk of failure in goal difficulty	Competence
(+)storytelling importance	Purpose and Use of Goal-setting, Internalization, Relatedness
(+/-)tracking goal progress	Purpose and Use of Goal-setting, OKRs
(+)tracking importance	Purpose and Use of Goal-setting OKRs
(+/-)transparency	Purpose and Use of Goal-setting, Internalization
(+)transparency importance	Purpose and Use of Goal-setting, Internalization

Table 4.1, Themed Code Groups

These larger themes, themed code groups and the resulting analysis are examined in detail in the next chapter.

# 5 Results

In this chapter the results of the empirical study are presented. It is divided into three subchapters: first the larger themes and the themed code groups are presented and their affiliation to the research questions examined. Afterwards, both research questions have their own dedicated subchapters and how the findings from the larger themes answer them.

The results are presented so that the interviewees remain anonymous, but themes and patterns can be specified to have come up mostly within a certain interviewee groups by using the subjects 'attainers' and 'setters' for goal-attainers and goal-setters respectively. If a phenomenon was brought up by both groups, the subject is simply 'interviewee'.

## 5.1 Goal-setting in the case organization

The current, traditional goal-setting process at the case organization is very top-steered, felt by both the goal-attainers and told as much by the goal-setters who are involved in the goal-setting process. The process was described as "very formal", "top-steered" and "business-centric". It involves people from the organization's leadership team all the way up to the case organization's parent organization's board, who have the final say on what the annual organization goals are. The goal-setters argued that it is so because of the monetary incentives tied to the organization goals and the need for transparency and fairness. One goal-setter contemplated and emphasized that having a very formal process and measurable business-centric goals makes the system fair for all who fall under the bonus program tied to the annual organization goals, something also acknowledged by an attainer. Despite wanting a wider perspective to goal-setting, attainers acknowledged the merit of business-centric goals as logical for an organization who is trying to generate profit. One goal-setter implied profit generation being one of the key reasons for goals' existence:

*“In the end, whatever you do – be it goal-setting or otherwise – should always have an impact on the firm’s profits.” - Goal-setter*

Goal-setters implied that management tries to keep the process of annual short-term goal setting as transparent as possible, but most of the attainers didn’t seem to know how the process works. All setters agreed that the communication of goals is not the organization’s strong suite. During the interviews, one goal-setter contemplated that perhaps the way the goals are trickled down in the organization is not as effective as they would like. Another goal-setter wondered if the communication could be improved through linking the goals to the organization more strongly:

*“It is worth thinking if we should have a separate training for the organization’s middle-managers where we specifically create a link between this year’s strategy and goals. In a way create a story around the goals.” -Goal-setter*

Perhaps because of this weakness in communication, throughout the interviews many of the attainers especially kept implying that the goals made by the organization are not very well thought out, using phrases such as “the organization sets some goals” and questioning whether they have been validated at all.

*“There is always someone who is in control of the money and therefore gets to decide what we work on.” - Goal-attainer*

That seemed to be especially frustrating because more often than not, goals set for a project were not so much goals as they were feature descriptions or action plans, and when these specific feature descriptions were combined with weak validation, goal-attainers sometimes felt uncomfortable working towards those “project goals”. Sometimes attainers felt that the goals hadn’t been validated within the organization itself, as evidenced by suddenly changing priorities and therefore project goals being very much alive. An attainer even said that they hadn’t completed a single goal because of them always changing before the goal was reached.

Some attainers were happy to get very specific and measurable goals, as not to have to “worry about what the organization is trying to achieve” and just focus on the job and see its results. Other attainers enjoyed the ambiguity, as it gives the attainers a chance to evaluate how they could work towards the goal in their own way.

The case organization has proven to be very careful with their goal-setting, even to the point that the goals are not very ambitious. Some attainers even mourned that the organization does take advantage of the full potential of goal-setting:

*“They (goals) are something we keep track of every now and then, but I don’t think it’s something we actually use to get ahead.” - Goal-attainer*

Many interviewees pointed to the organization’s goals being very business-centric, traditional and tactical, but not at all visionary. It must be said that at the point of the interviewing process, none of the attainers had heard of the new organization goals and when exposed to the new goals, they were positively surprised by some of the goals, especially the ones aiming to create new business concepts. Throughout the interview process it was clear that the interviewees want ambitious goals and some attainers described that the current goals do not convey strong leadership. In the past the organization has had ambitious projects that have not ended well, and some interviewees speculated that the failures still haunt the organization.

Some interviewees hoped for a wider perspective and more human-centric and progressive goals from the organization. Goals that are centered around organization development or the organization itself, bringing up options such as employee satisfaction and organizational culture change and as put by a setter, something that would push the organization out of its comfort zone. However, interviewees felt that during the time they have worked in the organization, the goal-setting had gotten better. Setters and attainers alike felt that goals centered around monetary metrics aren’t exactly inspiring, especially without a well-communicated connection between daily work and the metrics. Interviewees agreed that there should be other types of goals beside monetary ones but

were not certain how they could be implemented to a system that requires rigorous metrics and measurability. Setters were aware of some long-term goals that the attainers were not, and the idea of communicating long-term goals and attaching the annual goals to them seemed intriguing, albeit not something they had thought about strongly before.

There was a clear division between goal-setters and goal-achievers when it came to tying incentives to goals. Setters were very happy with tying incentives to the organizational goals annually and expected that it would motivate employees. Some setters were wary of incentives tied to goals, especially monetary ones, but agreed that it is some of the fairest ways to reward its employees based on the overall performance of the company, which is easy to measure. An attainer however reported that they felt pressured to work towards some goals just because there is an incentive tied to it, instead of believing in what the goal is about and another said that they would rather get paid incentives based on individual performance instead of collaborative performance. Setters also contemplated more on the demotivating factor of not reaching incentivized goals than the motivating factor of actually reaching them. Tying incentives to organizational goals was seen as adding a difficulty factor to goal-setting by the setters, as the goals had to be difficult enough for the organization to meet them as not to demotivate workers when their bonuses wouldn't be paid.

*“As these (organizational goals) are written here, they have no meaning.”* - Goal-setter

Overall, setters and attainers agreed that the biggest issues with the goals were in their communication. Firstly, there seems to be a lack of a single definition for what is considered a goal: project goals, annual organizational metrics which are the basis of a bonus system and team goals all get mixed up in conversations. Secondly, there were problems with the sheer amount of goals: the actual amount of different goals was over double to what a goal-setter deemed to be “optimal”. Thirdly, the “trickle down” communication strategy of organizational goals was something that all setters agreed wasn't working as planned. The lack of a strong story and link to daily work or strategy make the goals hard to remember for attainers, dampening the effects of what could

otherwise be an effective goal-setting practice. A setter even stated that when working with expert knowledge workers, sometimes the organizational goals are just something that are in the background and then the experts set goals for themselves.

### **5.1.1 Goal-setters' reasons for using goals and goal-setting**

Goal-setters reported that they use goal-setting to help them in four different areas:

- Organization alignment
- Vision and transparency
- Activity steering
- Incentives and equality

The short paragraphs below will report these areas in more detail.

#### **Alignment**

According to goal-setters, the goals are there to give constraints to employees' work, but also encourage certain behaviours in order to align the different teams' work to go towards a certain point, or a goal. When communicated and enforced properly, a goal is an aligning factor for the organization. Goal-setters recognized that in order for this to happen, it is important for employees on each level of the organization to understand through what activities they contribute towards a given goal.

#### **Vision and transparency**

Goal-setters stated goals to be a way for the organization to communicate what it wants to achieve during a given time-period. In the case organization, this can also mean the realignment of focus to meet a rising trend in the industry or a new source competitive advantage for the organization, such as introducing the measurement of customer satisfaction on an organization level. In such cases goals can have a large transformative purpose behind them. As one of the goal-attainer put it, without a vision people don't know where the boat is headed. Another attainer stated that the goals seem to be a way for the organization to brag about what they achieve during a year. One goal-setter

believed that organizational goals lead to a feeling of shared achievement and emphasized the importance of sharing whenever a goal was reached. Goal-setters were very fast in tying goal-setting with transparency, mostly seeing them as communicative tools to the organization about what is important and on what basis decisions are being made.

### **Activity steering**

For the organization, goals and setting them is a communication tool to help with alignment of activities. In the case organization, the organization goals are set by the board based on a suggestion made by the organization's leadership team. Business-centric goals are meant to steer activities towards monetary targets by tying annual monetary incentives to those targets. As one goal-setter put it, every large organization has a system like this. However, the organization also imposes some more detailed goals on projects, teams and so forth, of which goal-attainers had mixed feelings.

### **Incentives and equality**

Goal-setters were big believers in monetary incentives that were tied to the annual goals. Goal-setters believed that tying everyone's incentive to the goal was a way to be equal and one setter even stated that if goals were set on individual basis, the measurability might suffer and leading incentives to be rewarded based on internal politics and social relationships instead of performance.

## **5.1.2 Goal-attainers' reasons for using goals and goal-setting**

The reasons that goal-attainers used goals for can also be categorized into four different areas:

- Help me with my job
- Push and challenge myself
- Commitment, focus and prioritization
- Track progress and the feelings of achievement and meaning

As before, the short paragraphs below will report these areas in more detail.

### **Help me with my job**

When goal-attainers were given goals by the organization, they perceived that they were mostly only helpful to them when they chewed them either within teams or individually to tie them into their daily work. However, once the connection was made, goal-attainers felt that the goals did help them in their jobs, mostly due to better understanding what was expected of them. Some goal-attainers pointed out that the chewing process could be easier, as most of the goals given to them by the organization lead were difficult to understand.

### **Push and challenge myself**

Many goal-attainers tried to not become complacent and even push themselves out of their comfort zone by setting difficult goals for themselves. Interestingly, multiple goal-attainers reported that they demand more from themselves than from others, and therefore set high goals for themselves. Some goal-attainers said that goals even drive their actions, and many reported enjoying a challenge and seeing difficult goals as a way to challenge themselves and to grow. Goal-attainers made sure to point out that challenging themselves is their trait and using goals to challenge oneself doesn't necessarily work for everyone.

### **Commitment, focus and prioritization**

Some interviewees emphasized that goals help them focus their efforts in their daily work, and often it even helps them make decisions on what they and their team should work on and not work on. As a goal-setter put it, people need and use goals to frame their work. Specific goals give much desired boundaries to knowledge workers and help them prioritize tasks on daily, sprint and quarterly levels. Goal-attainers saw setting a goal as a commitment to themselves and to the organization. One goal-attainer even stated that without goals they would feel lost.

### **Track progress and the feelings of achievement and meaning**

Tracking the progress of goals and the organization was seen as a key activity for organizational goals. Without tracking progress, much of what the organization is doing



would either remain completely unseen, or the effect of activities would remain buried. For goal-attainers, meeting targets was an indication that something is happening. The need for improvement and a way to track it was one of the top purposes that goal-attainers gave for goal-setting. One of the biggest reasons for tracking progress for goal-attainers was to know when they have completed something in order to get a feeling of achievement and meaning. Feelings of meaningful work seemed to be tightly connected to reaching goals and being able to see improvement.

### **5.1.3 The different perspectives in the current system**

Goal-setters did not see the goal-setting system as a way to organize, focus or streamline work in the way that attainers did. Goal-attainers hoped for guidance and a north star from the organization goals, but with the current style of communication, they receive almost none.

So, while the current goal-setting system seemingly delivers on purpose for the goal-setters that represent the organization, it does not for the goal-attainers. For the system to deliver for the goal-attainers as well, attainers hoped for clearer communication, stronger meanings, more active tracking of progress and celebration of success and a way for the goal-attainers to understand the goals through their own role in the organization. Goal-setters suggested a deeper conversation embedded with a rich connection to strategy with middle-managers and supervisors to improve the trickle-down communication strategy.

## 5.2 Autonomous motivation mechanisms in goal-setting

### 5.2.1 Intrinsic Motivation

#### Feeling of autonomy

Goal-attainers reported many situations where their basic need of autonomy was either satisfied or frustrated in the context of goal-setting as it was defined in chapter 2.2.1.

Almost all goal-attainers felt that they can affect their own goals in some way. In organization goals, goal-attainers get to choose three goals for themselves out of the twelve options, allowing a degree of autonomy even in the organization goals. Additionally, goal-attainers felt that they could indirectly affect the project goals given by the organization through an advisory role, although they felt that it is still somewhat difficult. On the team level however, goal-attainers felt that they could strongly affect their goals, satisfying their need for autonomy well. One goal-setter said that it is possible to affect the goals given to an goal-attainer more strongly, but the increased effort of doing that often means that goal-attainers and their supervisors opt to go with the given options.

Most of the goal-attainers reported that they do not feel pressured or obligated to reach any of the organizational goals and are not afraid of consequences in the case of the organization not reaching a goal. Some speculated that not reaching goals often means bad performance for the company, which could ultimately lead to layoffs, but they did not fear for their own jobs. In team goals there was no fear over failing to reach goals, either. Goal-attainers felt that they could discuss and reassess the goals in their team and often adjust their work in order to reach goals that seem unattainable. The largest obstacle to feelings of autonomy was reported to be goals that the goal-attainers felt their work did not affect. Other reported obstacles were hierarchy and the sheer number of ongoing

projects. Some goal-attainers mentioned that there is no way they would feel like they can affect the organization goals, when they don't even know what they are.

Based on what was reported during the interviews, there are two mechanisms that satisfy autonomy in the context of goal-setting:

- Choosing and/or affecting one's own goals
- Deciding on how to work towards one's goals

Some interviewees even considered goals as a prerequisite for autonomous work. However, any autonomy satisfaction that goal-setting practices might give are very much dependent on the communication of those goals.

### **Feeling of competence**

*"I guess when you obtain your goals, you have the feeling of achievement and that things are possible and that your work has paid off. And of course, you feel motivated and rewarded, that you have been able to set your sights on something and make it happen."*

- Goal-attainer

Almost all goal-attainers attached feelings of achievement, learning, improvement and progress to goals. What was imperative for these feelings to emerge was measuring and tracking those goals, as for the goal-attainers to know when they have succeeded or had an impact. Some goal-attainers even reported that they use reaching goals as mileposts to measure their personal growth and competence itself. Granted, almost all goal-attainers reported to enjoy challenges and somewhat goal-oriented, which is something that they were quick to note that is not the case for everyone. Goals also helped goal-attainers to focus in their work and experience feelings of competence through task completions. Most goal-attainers also reported that they like to use ambitious goals to challenge themselves, meaning that if they reach that goal, it would be the equivalent of completing a difficult task, one of the ways that competence is satisfied.

Goal-attainers were very aware of the competence frustrating effect that goals might have if they are too difficult. A goal-attainer had felt insecure about reaching their goals in the past and being disappointed in their own performance. All interviewers thought that after a failure in goal-setting, it is hard to dare to set new challenging goals for oneself that might remedy the frustrated competence through feelings of achievement.

Based on the interviews, aiming for feelings of competence through goal-setting is possible through two mechanisms:

- Succeeding in difficult goals
- Seeing progress and the impact of one's actions

### **Feeling of relatedness**

*"I feel like I also need to have others who want to believe in the same goals."* - Goal-attainer

Goal-attainers and goal-setters both reported that organizational goals and team goals increase their sense of togetherness within their workplace. The mechanisms were at work at points of communication, whether it was an announcement on the organization goals or when forming or discussing goals with a team. The alignment sought by organizational goals is something that goal-attainers experienced as working towards a common goal, which increased their experience of being connected to the people they work with. Organizational goals could also unite people with a common vision, something that goal-attainers unfortunately felt was lacking in the current goals. When others succeeded in their goals and communicated it, it also created a sense of pride for others about being a part of the organization. Goal-attainers also saw team goals as an agreement with the ones sharing that goal, which points to goals creating a stronger connection between team members with shared goals. A goal-setter mentioned that the organization has used team goals as a way to strengthen a sense of community in the past.

Goal-attainers reported that if they did not believe in what the goal was, they felt that they were there “just for the ride”, meaning that the effect of relatedness satisfaction was negated. More alarmingly, goal-attainers said that having no shared goals made them feel isolated, which strongly frustrates feelings of relatedness.

## 5.2.4 Internalization of Goals

Goal-attainers reported that when setting their own goals, they subconsciously work towards those goals, even when not explicitly thinking about them when planning their activities. This hints that the goals that the goal-attainers have set for themselves are automatically integrated and work as a source of intrinsic motivation. Goal-attainers also reported that when they set goals for themselves, they are always tied to their own work and “have meaning”. This is in stark contrast to the state of the organization goals, where multiple interviewees mentioned that the current organizational goals have no meaning and therefore unable to motivate.

As presented previously, the unclarity in the communication of organizational goals made some goal-attainers feeling as if the goals were something that “just are there” or “something that we have to work towards”, hinting at interjection of the external regulation. In the defense of the organization, a goal-setter recognized that for an organization as large as this, it is extremely difficult to have everyone agree on everything, and sometimes you just have to work on stuff that you don’t agree on. This means that the organization accepts that not everyone will internalize the external regulation from the annual goals. However, from the point of view of the theory, this is only fine as long as the external regulation is not interjected, but merely identified, which has no negative or positive effect on autonomous motivation. As a way to avoid the interjection of goals, goal-setters proposed open discussion about the facts of why and how the goals have been set, something that interviewees reported the organization doesn’t currently do.

As a way to help people understand the meaning of the organizational goals and therefore the integration of those goals, goal-setters suggested creating a better story and a link to

strategy around the goals, and making sure that those stories are a part of the trickle-down communication strategy of goals. It was not discussed during the interviews how the story would help goal-attainers tie the goals to their daily work. All interviewees however did recognize the importance of understanding the link between one's responsibilities and them having an effect on the goals one has. A goal-setter suggested that supervisors should be trained to facilitate the goal-attainer's creation of a connection between their work and organizational goals and goal-attainers repeatedly reported that there is a correlation between how close a goal is to their daily work and how good they think the goal is. One goal-attainer said: "Because then you feel like it's your goal too", which is an indication of integrated external regulation.

Therefore, if the organization wishes to make sure that employees internalize the external regulations of organizational goals to the point of integration, it needs to make sure that two things are happening:

- The goal-attainer has a clear connection between their own work and the goal
- The goal-attainer understand the why of the goal and agrees with it

If the organization does not seek integration, it can avoid interjection by making sure that:

- The goal-attainer has some connection between their own work and the goal
- The goal-attainer understands the why of the goal

A somewhat common theme in the interviews was individual goal orientation, which could prove to be a great obstacle for the internalization of external regulation. Goal-oriented people are probably more likely to internalize external regulation in the form of goals and might have the skill to create the connections between their work and the organizational goals by themselves. However, people who are not goal-oriented at all might outright interject all external regulation that is made in the form of goals. Individual goal-orientation makes predicting the degree of internalization of external regulation through goal-setting more difficult.

## 5.3 The OKR Experiment

The goal-setting process during the experiment used the following structure:

1. Each goal-attainer was asked to use an OKR sheet specifically built for this experiment in order to draft their OKRs
2. The team lead reviewed the individual OKRs and based on them, formed team goals
3. A workshop was held where the individual goals were revised and aligned to each other and to the team goals

Goal-attainers who had taken part in the OKR experimentation were very happy with the experience for setting their own goals. In addition to creating your own goals (Objectives), deciding on how to work towards those Objectives is inherent in the framework when choosing your Key Results. Interviewees felt that OKRs are better for focusing work and enabling autonomous work both individually and in teams compared to traditional organizational goals.

Goal-attainers reported feeling having high self-efficacy for the goals they had set for themselves during the OKR experiment. It makes sense that when setting goals for yourself, you would set goals that you are capable of reaching, and goal-attainers reported as much. Not only because of the increased chance of reaching a goal that you have set yourself, but also because the lack of external incentives tied to the goal.

Goal-attainers and goal-setters alike were excited about the notion that OKRs present a way to set and track goals on a faster cycle. With the experiment and for future cycles as well, the experiment was going to include bi-weekly check-ups on the progress of the OKRs and the chosen Key Results. Many goal-attainers reported tracking progress to be one of the most important factors as to why they would like to use goals, to be able to see their impact and feel like they are improving something. The faster cycle of the OKRs compared to organizational goals also creates more reached (or failed) goals, enhancing the effect that goal-setting could have on feelings of competence.

*“There are other ways to strengthen group spirit, but I think this (OKRs) is one of the best ways.”* - Goal-setter

A goal-setter saw especially the process of setting team OKRs as an activity that strengthens the relationship within a group. Communicating and understanding what everyone else is doing and how it relates to a common goal was one of the best ways the goal-setter knew to feel connected to the people you work with. In the OKR experimentation, goals were set both for individuals, but also for the experimentation group as a whole.

Most of the goal-attainers in the experiment group represented different value streams in working, meaning that they might not be working towards the same products or services, but through the team-wide goals set for them all, the experiment might have capitalized on the possible benefits of satisfying relatedness in OKRs. Based on the reports of interviewees, most of the satisfaction of relatedness happened either when team-wide goals were set or when the success of a goal was shared. Interestingly, it did not seem to matter whether the goal-attainer was part of working towards the goal, but rather being included in the sharing of the success itself. Unfortunately, the study took place before the experimental OKRs had been reached or failed and did not get to confirm or report on those effects.

During the experimentation, the goal-setting process had different steps, where the goals were discussed and modified so that the interests of the individual, the team and the organization met. This was done over multiple sessions, giving the goal-attainers time to think about their goals and understand what the connection between their work and the organization's interests was. In addition, goal-attainers reported that it is hard to not understand the why of a goal that you have set for yourself and agree with it. When the process starts bottom-up, where goal-attainers build their own goals as they understand what they have to and would like to accomplish. After the individual goals are set, they are through the different steps made so that they align with the team's and the



organization's interests. Goal-attainers reported that especially this goal-setting process was beneficial for them to commit and understand their own goals.

# 6 Conclusions

In this chapter the thesis will answer the primary research question and its sub-questions. First, the sub-questions are answered to give foundation to the primary research question. The implications of the results are discussed in the following chapter.

## 6.1 The problems that goal-setters and goal-attainers try to solve through goal-setting practices

The first research question as presented in Chapter 3 was: “*What problems do goal-setters and goal-attainers try to solve by using goals?*”. Based on the data collected, the problems that each party uses goals to solve are:

- Goal-setters use goals to align and steer activities, to be transparent and communicate the company vision, and to make sure that incentives remain equal
- Goal-attainers use goals to help them with their jobs, prioritization and focus, to challenge them and to give a sense of progress and achievement

The goal-setter’s perspective and opinion of goals reflect what goal-setting theory tells us about goals: that it is about increasing performance through alignment and incentives. However, the communication of where the organization is headed was acknowledged to not work properly even among goal-setters. Alignment and steering of activities is a way for the organization to perform better because of increased collective input towards those goals.

Goal-setters thought that large organizations cannot use goals to push or challenge its employees in the way that employees themselves can because of variance in ambition, skill and work tasks. The “trickle down” communication strategy seemed to water down any

message that goal-setters wanted to give through the goals as they progressed through the organization.

Tying incentives to goals seemed natural to goal-setters and believed in their energizing effect, similarly to what Locke & Latham (2012) present in GST. However, the goals were admitted to not be as effective as they could be. During the interviews, goal-attainers' demonstrated that the organizational goals require a lot of interpretation as they are currently communicated.

Unfortunately, goal-attainers found the current goals confusing and forgettable. Goal-attainers have to work hard to understand the connection between their daily work and the goals. Progress or achievements are not systematically communicated, making it hard for goal-attainers to remember or follow the goals throughout the year.

## 6.2 The mechanisms through which goal-setting affect autonomous motivation in organizations

The second research question was: “*How does goal-setting affect autonomous motivation in organizations?*”. According to the study, goal-setting affects autonomous motivation in organizations in four ways:

- Feelings of autonomy are satisfied through being able to choose how to attain a goal
- Feelings of competence can be satisfied through goal-attainment and goal progression
- Feelings of relatedness are satisfied by having shared goals and working towards them together
- If integrated, even an organizational goal can autonomously motivate organization members

Goals can affect feelings of autonomy in both the moment of their setting or selection, but also in everyday work. As goal-attainers strive to work towards goals, they felt that because the goals were only guidelines to what their work should achieve, they were able to choose how to work towards those goals and subsequently feel more autonomous about their work.

Competence can be satisfied through goal-attainment and goal progression, as predicted by GST (Locke & Latham, 2012). Using goal-setting to try and satisfy the basic need for competence can however be risky. The need for competence can easily be frustrated if goals are not reached. Failing to reach goals can lead to unnecessary caution with goal difficulty in the future, making it harder for competence satisfying moments to happen. The benefits for the feeling of competence are not reached either if those successes are left unnoticed because of a lack of goal tracking or a lack of celebrating successes.

Interviewees communicated a strong link between feelings of relatedness and goals. All respondents felt that goals were a way to team up and communicate a common vision. Goal-attainers knew that most of the organization worked towards those goals as well, giving them a sense of belonging and for some, meaning for their work. Team-wide goals seemed to be the most popular form of goals within the interviewees, as there the sharing of the goal was most apparent.

The internalization of external regulation was apparent in the conversations with the interviewees. It seemed that the level of internalization for monetary goals was almost always either identification or interjection. The level of internalization depended heavily on the interviewee's responsibility's closeness to money and understanding of business practices. Interjection was most apparent when the interviewees didn't agree with the goal or thought that the way the goal was measured did not accurately reflect the intended outcome. Interviewees indicated that integration of external regulation happens when the relationship between daily work and the goal is understood.

Now that the sub-questions have been answered and the foundation has been laid, we can answer the primary research question.

## 6.3 How the OKR method increases goal-attainers autonomous motivation in organizations

The OKR goal-setting method has a few built-in practices that helps them drive autonomy in a way that traditional organizational goals have a hard time to achieve:

- Setting goals for yourself increases self-efficacy, satisfies the need of autonomy and prevents frustration of competence. In addition, setting goals for yourself greatly diminishes the chance for interjection of external regulation.
- The goal-setting process includes a team alignment session, increasing self-efficacy and transparency, satisfying the need of relatedness and enhancing internalization.
- The faster cycles of goals and the measurement and tracking of OKRs allows for more sense of progress and achievement, satisfying the need for competence.
- Setting goals for smaller amounts of people allows for more vivid visions to be communicated in the goals, making them more memorable and expressive.

Most of the benefits seem to have risen from the bottom-up way of setting goals and the twofold nature of setting goals through the qualitative Objectives and the quantitative Key Results. The goals can be set with specific goal-attainers in mind, something that organizational goals are unable to do, which helps with their communication and the creation of a connection to daily work tremendously.

Both the goal-setters and goal-attainers had high hopes for the OKR experiment, but goal-setters were worried about how to scale the goal-setting system efficiently. While neither goal-attainers nor goal-setters were afraid of failing in goals, they acknowledged its demotivating effect in the organization. In OKRs, there is a built-in resilience for failure, as all progress is a success in the eyes of the framework. It is therefore important

that that built-in resilience is taught to all who use OKRs. Not only will the lessened fear of failure result in higher self-efficacy and less feelings of insecurity but also more challenging goals and through that a greater chance at satisfied competence.

# 7 Discussion

This chapter will go through the theoretical contributions and practical implications of the study. Suggestions on future studies are given. The theoretical contribution is aimed at those who are interested in autonomous motivation and its use in real-life contexts. Lastly, after the theoretical contributions and practical implications, the limitations of the study are pondered.

## 7.1 Theoretical contributions and future studies

Autonomous motivation has proven itself to be a part of goal-setting in university and sport contexts, but has relatively little show in the field of organizational goal-setting. This thesis has contributed to self-determination theory's library of empirical studies and argued that autonomous motivation can benefit whole organizations through effective and purposeful goal-setting practices.

Throughout the study, it was clear that goals do indeed influence autonomous motivation through all the basic psychological needs. The internalization of external regulation presents both the largest opportunity but also the largest failure in the current state of the organizational goals.

This thesis has also bridged a gap between two theories of interest in the managerial field: Goal-setting theory and self-determination theory. In particular, the conceptual similarities in self-efficacy and feelings of competence have been highlighted, and the importance of internalization of external regulation in organizational goal-setting has been argued.

Contributions have been made towards the theoretical background of Objectives and Key Results; a goal-setting method born of practice. An especially interesting notion is that through OKRs, the effects on autonomous motivation could be greater than through

traditional goal-setting methods, meaning that OKRs could also contribute to well-being at organizations.

Future studies could be ethnographic studies of such OKR experiments as presented in this study, especially ones that examine experiments and their effects for a longer period of time. Surely self-determination theorists are interested in strengthening their library of empirical studies further, be it through quantitative measures of the effects of goal-setting on autonomous motivation or even just the effect of goal-setting rituals on motivation.

## 7.2 Practical Implications

The practical implications are written with organizational goal-setters in mind and those who might take part in the goal-setting process, such as middle-managers who might feel that their current goal-setting practices are not doing their job.

**The process of setting goals is very important for any effective goal-setting practice.** As evidenced by the OKR experiment, the ritual of setting goals for yourself and then iterating them together with a team was very important for internalization, commitment and relatedness to occur. Discussing goals before sending people off to attain them makes them all the more powerful in the minds of the attainers. Goals made more sense for setters, the people who had participated in the ritual of setting goals, than for those who had not participated in the rituals. The ritual brings us to our second implication.

**If you use top-down organizational goal-setting, make sure that every attainer can make a connection between the goal and their daily work.** Otherwise the goal might even have a negative effect on performance because of the organization imposing something on its members that they don't fully understand how they can contribute towards. And if you decide to make a trickle-down communication strategy, make sure that as the process descends the levels of the organization, the purpose and message are so vivid that the goals do not water down. Help your employees internalize.



**When communicating your goals, always include “the why”.** Why is this a goal for the organization? Why should attainers work towards this goal? Why is it important? Without the rationale, attainers will have a hard time understanding why the goal exists in the first place, risking introjection.

**OKRs are an effective way of focusing and aligning activities.** Making the aspirations people have for their work in the near future explicit through OKRs is a powerful tool. Sharing, sparring and aligning goals with team members created a sense of a team even when each member of that team worked in their own value streams.

**Consult your organization members about how goals are meeting their needs.** Goal-setters were happy with setting goals with the traditional method and were especially positive towards tying monetary incentives to goals, whereas attainers mostly looked to goals for counsel. This difference of perspective towards goals is something that every manager should be aware about.

## 7.3 Limitations

The study conducted in this thesis has some limitations that in the spirit of science have to be acknowledged. The two subchapters discuss the internal and external validity of the study. Lastly, the ethics of the study are discussed.

### 7.3.1 Internal Validity

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic of spring 2020, the empirical study had to be adjusted and might not have been able to adjust to the new environment in a manner that would provide rich enough data. For a third of the six months spent on this thesis, the researcher also worked from half across the world, leaving little room for subsequent data collection rounds.

While the researcher has had plenty of experience of interviewing through their work, the interview process that the researcher has gotten accustomed to is not scientific in nature, and so could produce data that varies between interviews more than if a rigid scientific interview style had been adapted. However, because of the freedom given by the chosen method of thematic semi-structured interviews, that experience could also have contributed to being able to dig deep into the experiences of the interviewees.

The researcher has little experience from data analysis and has been working in the case organization for almost two years. This might result in a bias that is hard for the researcher them self to evaluate. In addition, the selection of interviewees was quite limited, as the OKR Experiment team and the PeC leadership teams are both small. Being familiar with most of the interviewees and the organization could be both beneficial and detrimental to the quality of the data collected: the interviewee might have assumed some things in the experiences that they shared, but also understand their problems in more depth.

The data collected was limited only to the start of the experiment being conducted. Because of time limitations and exceptional circumstances, the progression of the experiment halted and is therefore not easily generalizable. Further studies would have to examine similar situations in organizations tipping their toes into the OKR method.

### 7.3.2 External Validity

External validity is concerned with the generalizability of the study. Traditionally qualitative studies have been thought to be harder to generalize than quantitative ones, where generalizability is achieved through careful demographic selections. However, in qualitative studies it is not so. According to Morse (1999), for qualitative studies “*it is the fit of the topic or the comparability of the problem that is of concern. Recall it is the knowledge that is generalized.*”

As stated in the opening chapter, OKRs are rising in popularity as a goal-setting method in Finnish organizations. As described in subchapter 4.2, PeC represents a transformative

organization within Posti Group. Many large companies in the Finnish landscape have started their own large transformations in the recent years, which assumedly like Posti, have been using management “best practices”. This gives reasonable argument to the comparability of the research problem to organizations that have a set of adopted managerial best practices and that are in the midst of transforming and adopting new practices.

### **7.3.3 Ethics of the study**

Shaw (2003) has discussed the ethics of qualitative research and its evaluation. He divides the evaluation into two categories: the ethics of qualitative research and that of qualitative analysis and dissemination. In this subchapter, the ethics of the study are evaluated as proposed by Shaw. First, the ethics of the designed research are evaluated through the principles of informed consent, confidentiality and privacy, social justice and practitioner research. Second, the ethics of the analysis are evaluated through the ethics of narrative research, outcomes and justice and the utilization of research.

#### **Ethics of the designed research**

##### **Informed Consent**

The data collection was limited to the interview situation, from which the interviewees were communicated and given the chance to end the interview at any time. Interviewees were also informed of the purpose of the study and how the data collected would be used.

##### **Confidentiality and privacy**

All data was handled confidentially and anonymized upon collection. However, when the interviews were being set up, the interviewer set up the interviews in a group setting. Considering the fairly small number of interviewees, even when anonymized, some privacy was lost when setting up the interviews this way. However, no-one else except the interviewer was exposed to the collected data.

### **Social justice**

The designed research purposefully made a distinction between goal-setters and goal-attainers for the sake of comparison of perspectives. The interviewee planned for the interviews so that both parties could get their voice heard and for them to be able to argue their position without fear of consequences. For the sake of the research, each interview was conducted separately as to not include existing hierarchies to impede with the data. All interviewees were treated equally. This should satisfy the view of justice as fairness.

### **Practitioner research**

In practitioner research, voluntary participation might be more complicated because participants might fear consequences of refusal. When setting up interviews, the purpose of the interview was made clear, and there should be no doubt as to what the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee was during the interviews. However, the practicing researcher's advocacy was not properly addressed during the interviews. This was because the interviewer sought to remain neutral in the eyes of the interviewees. The interview questions were formulated in a way that should show no negative or positive bias towards any of the phenomena or experiences explained by the interviewees.

### **Ethics of the analysis**

#### **Narrative analysis**

When interviewees are encouraged to tell the stories of their experiences, the interviewers become characters in those stories. It can help with the narrative, but also changes the story and therefore the description of experience. In studies of motivation, experiences are in the heart of the analysis and as a result of them being shared in an interview situation, the stories of these experiences may have changed the stories. This was especially true because of the language that the interviewer might have used to discuss motivation on a more conceptual level that the interviewees do not usually convene in.

### **Outcomes and justice**

Shaw's ethics evaluation is concerned with outcome research, which means that it is most applicable to study outcomes of processes or services. In this research, the motivating factors of goals can also be thought of as outcomes to the goal-setting process. The justice of these outcomes is what Shaw is concerned about. The thesis explicitly stated in chapter 3 that it assumes aiming for autonomy and well-being through goals is beneficial for organizations. However, whether or not what is beneficial for organizations is just was not addressed. Often just actions are defined as those that satisfy or delight the greatest number of people possible. Through this definition of justice, the pursuit of increasing well-being for an organization's employees is a just endeavour.

### **Utilization of research**

How this research will be used is a fair question to ask. If the current way of setting goals requires action that is detrimental to either goal-setters or goal-attainers and more beneficial to the other party, the use may be considered unethical and a betrayal of the trust of that party that suffers as a result. While it seems that the results of this study may benefit all, the burden for changing the current ways seems to fall mostly on the goal-setters. The thesis is pushing more changes on the shoulders of decision-makers instead of advocating for a bottom-up change. This might be a result of the existing hierarchy and power-structure embedded in the organization which should be recognized.

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