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Co-Creating Magic: Bridging the Strategy-Execution Gap by Focusing on Employee Experience

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Globalization has turned the pace of competition up to eleven by dissolving local markets and making resources accessible worldwide. The firms that succeed in this turmoil are rapid change implementers capable of adapting to the current competitive environment, characterized by immense technology advancements and a shift from goods to services and ultimately experiences. This explicates the need for tech-savvy employees with the will and the ways to deliver a positive customer experience.

In this thesis, the novel concept of employee experience was examined as a general management approach for solving the challenge of adaptability by studying its relation to the success of significant change. As to date, focusing on the employee experience has already been proposed as a means of creating positive customers experiences as well as aiding firms both in employee recruitment as well as retention.

The study was conducted utilizing a qualitative single case study research strategy. The aim was to assess the role of employee experience regarding the success of implementing significant change by studying its relation to three influential factors: change characteristics, change enablers and change methods. The empirical study mapped the implementational efforts taken by the case company, which is midst implementing a new corporate strategy, to assess their relation to the theory on employee experience. The findings were synthesized by comparing the results of the empirical study to the existing body of knowledge concerning organizational change and strategy implementation.

The study found a bidirectional impact between employee experience and implementation success of significant change. The findings suggest that radical change implemented iteratively affects the employee experience. On the contrary, employee experience offers change readiness and its constituting elements guiding principles for relieving the turmoil of change. Further, change management was found to offer a balancing role regarding setting the pace of change.

**Keywords** Employee Experience, Organizational Change, Strategy Implementation, Adaptability
Globaliseringen har märkbart ökat konkurrensens takt genom att upplösa lokala marknader och göra resurser tillgängliga över hela världen. I kaoset lyckas de företag som snabbt kan implementera förändringar och därmed anpassa sig till konkurrensmiljön, som karakteriseras av enorma framsteg inom teknologi och ett skift från produkter till tjänster och upplevelser. Detta understryker behovet av tekniskt kunna arbetsstagare, med såväl vilja som kunskap att leverera en positiv kundupplevelse.

I denna studie undersöks det nya konceptet medarbetarupplevelsen som en generell ledarskapsmetod för att tackla anpassningsutmaningen genom att studera dess relation till framgången av märkbar förändring. Till dags dato har medarbetarupplevelsen föreslagits som hjälpmedel för att skapa positiva kundupplevelser samt ge bistånd till såväl rekrytering som bibeärande av arbetskraft.


Studien fann ett dubbelriktat samband mellan medarbetarupplevelsen och framgången vid implementeringen av märkbar förändring. Fynden antyder att radikala förändringar som implementeras iterativt påverkar medarbetarupplevelsen. Och andra sidan fann studien att medarbetarupplevelsen bidrar till förändringsförmågan samt att dess grundprinciper kan användas för att minska på det upplevda kaoset förändringen bär med sig. ytterligare fann studien att förändringsledning erbjuder en balanserande roll angående förändringens takt.

Nyckelord Medarbetarupplevelsen, Organisationsförändring, Strategiimplementering, Anpassningsförmåga
PREFACE

This thesis marks the end of six amazing years of studies. Six years of personal and professional growth both at Aalto University, but equally important at Teknologföreningen. Now, as Otaniemi is changing almost beyond recognition, I take it as a hint to go and find new challenges elsewhere.

I would like to express my gratitude to the case company of this study, Fira, for the kind opportunity to write my thesis in a collegial and captivating atmosphere. I would particularly like to thank my advisor Henri Hietala for providing me with an interesting topic and offering guidance whenever needed. My supervisor, Professor Paul Lilrank, is acknowledged for his valuable comments and notions during this thesis process. To my family, friends, colleagues and everybody else who have supported me during my studies and while working on this thesis – thank you!

Most importantly, Fanny – thank you for your enormous support, you are the best.

Sebastian Sigfrids
Helsinki, August 2018
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TERMINOLOGY AND CONCEPTS

Experience
Throughout this thesis the word experience is used in the sense of a person’s individualistic conscious experience, not to be confused with experience in the sense of knowledge, mastery or level of skill possessed by a person.

Employee
Merriam-Webster defines an employee as “one employed by another usually for wages or salary and in a position below the executive level” (Merriam-Webster, 2018). In the case company context of this thesis this includes all members of middle management as well as non-management.

Employee Experience
For the purposes of this thesis, Employee Experience (EX) is regarded as the entirety of an employee’s individualistic perceptions of working for an organization, derived from responses of all interactions as an employee of said organization, as no generally accepted definition yet exists. An exhaustive rationale behind this conceptualization is found in the literature review section of this thesis.

Organizational Change
All organizational change efforts aim to adapt a firm’s operations with some change in its competitive environment (Al-Haddad & Kotnour, 2015). Further, Smith (2002b) proposes that organizational change always comprises a strategic re-positioning of the company in relation to its competitors.

Examples of organizational change types include strategy deployment, restructuring and downsizing, technology change, mixed
collection of change efforts, TQM-driven change, mergers and acquisitions, re-engineering and process design, software development and installation, business expansion and culture change (Smith, 2002b)

In this thesis, organizational change is reviewed on a general level with a deep dive on strategy deployment due to its relevancy for the case company context of this thesis. Strategy deployment is hereafter referred to as strategy implementation.

**Strategy-Execution Gap**

The strategy-execution gap represents the discrepancy between the intended impact of a formulated strategy and its actual effect on an organization. In order to produce value for an organization, the formulated strategy needs to be implemented (Heide, Grønhaug, & Johannessen, 2002), the action and term of which bridging the strategy-execution gap is referred to throughout this thesis.
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1 INTRODUCTION

Two decades ago, Pine & Gilmore (1998) welcomed the world to what they aptly coined “the experience economy”. They argued that the evolution of economic offerings had taken its third leap from services to experiences. This fourth type of offering, deemed distinct from services, had emerged from the customers’ – both consumers’ and companies’ – desire of memorable experiences rather than intangible services. At this point, the development was characterized by customer-centricity and companies focused on how to shift from charging for its services and goods to getting paid for the experiences they staged. (Pine & Gilmore, 1998)

Subsequently, customer experience (CX) received considerable amounts of research attention. In the literature, there seems to be general agreement that customer experience supports a company’s value creation and differentiation efforts resulting in sustainable competitive advantage through customer satisfaction and loyalty (Carbone & Haeckel, 1994; Gentile, Spiller, & Noci, 2007; Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Shaw & Ivens, 2002; Verhoef et al., 2009) (as cited in Jain, Aagia, & Bagdare, 2017). This development is also observable among practitioners as the appointment of ‘customer experience managers’ is ever more frequent (Jain et al., 2017).

Recently, researchers have become increasingly interested in the other part of the customer experience co-creation process – the employee or “stager”, as defined by Pine & Gilmore (1998). As customer-employee interaction plays a significant role to the customer experience (Jain et al., 2017), it is generally agreed that positive experiences are more consistently delivered by satisfied and engaged employees (Mosley, 2007). This principle was skillfully formulated by Maylett & Wride (2017) as “the law of congruent experience”, which states that “employees will deliver a customer experience that matches their own experience in the organization”. Similarly, this principle can also be deemed adopted by professionals, as thought leaders such as Sir Richard Branson have publicly proposed that putting employees before customers will ultimately lead to superior customer satisfaction.
Employee experience is the conceptualization of this logic. Noticeably, research on the employee’s experience of everyday work or the organization is nothing new (Cassell, Symon, Buehring, & Johnson, 2006). However, considering the holistic employee experience as an analogy to customer experience is a novel approach that has emerged rapidly in the past few years. Large consultancies were some of the first to adopt the concept of employee experience. For instance, Deloitte has considered employee experience for three consecutive years in their yearly Global Human Capital Trends report (Deloitte, 2016, 2017, 2018). Furthermore, progressive companies are opting for chief employee experience officers (CEEO) and other formal appointments regarding EX instead of more traditional HR roles.

Currently, the focal point is moving to some extent beyond the role of employee experience in delivering an exceptional customer experience. The levels of employee engagement and satisfaction a positive employee experience is suggested to generate are perceived as beneficial for the firm broadly speaking as well. This is the case regarding employee recruitment, productivity and retention, among others – all of which are critical success factors in the current competitive environment.

Globalization has turned the pace of competition up to eleven by dissolving local markets and making resources accessible world-wide. The firms that succeed in this turmoil are rapid change implementers capable of adapting to the current competitive environment, characterized by immense technology advancements and a shift from goods to services and ultimately experiences. This explicates the need for tech-savvy employees, with the will and the ways to participate in co-creation activities with the customer. Coupled with the notion that the majority of change resistance is linked to personal and organizational-stemmed perceptions of the employee (Rosenberg & Mosca, 2011), greater adaptability is expected to be a trait of employee-centric organizations.

This thesis recognizes employee experience (EX) as a possible relief for the challenge of adaptability. For the purposes of this thesis, employee experience is regarded as the entirety of an employee’s individualistic perceptions of working for an organization, derived from responses of all interactions as an employee of said organization, as no generally accepted definition yet exists. Put simply: employee experience is the measure of how you feel about working for your employer. Despite the novelty, its effect on the engagement and satisfaction needed to deliver exceptional customer experiences, as well
as retention and recruitment of the necessary talent, has been widely projected. However, its effect on initiating the adaptability efforts to strive in the current competitive environment by overcoming the barriers of change is still largely overlooked. The urgency of resolving this matter is obvious, as it is rather a rule than an exception that change efforts of organizations fail (Kotter & Whitehead, 2010; Maurer, 2010).

The objective of this study is to gain understanding about the relationship between employee experience and change implementation success in organizations subject to significant change. This is addressed with the following main research question; *How does employee experience affect implementation success of significant change?* An empirical study is performed in aspiration to answer this question. The study is conducted as an exploratory qualitative single case study. The case company of this study, Fira, is currently midst implementation of a fundamentally renewed corporate strategy as well as re-structuring its organization to fit the new strategy. As the intention is to gain understanding, the study seeks to build novel theory as well as propose avenues for future research. Due to the novelty of employee experience, a conceptualization and summary of proposed underlying elements of EX is suggested based on the literature review.

1.1 RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Competition is the driving force of commercial firms attempting to outperform one another. It causes them to constantly develop their offerings – be it goods, services or experiences – in pursuance of competitive advantage. Competitiveness is then derived from for instance one of Porter’s (1985) three generic strategies for competitive advantage – cost leadership, differentiation or segmentation. However, according to the renowned resource-based view (RBV), *sustained* competitive advantage can only be achieved by the possession of resources – tangible or intangible – that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (Barney, 1991).

Due to globalization, the pace and intensity of the competitive environment has increased substantially, as formerly isolated markets are absorbed or eradicated by the global markets accessible to all firms. Simultaneously, the availability of needed resources is no longer regionally bound. This has led to the new business imperatives being speed, flexibility and continuous self-renewal (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 2002). Put simply: firms need the ability to adapt (Reeves & Deimler, 2011).
Adaptability is the capability of changing rapidly and appropriately in order to preserve relevancy in comparison to one’s competitors. As ample evidence of the positive impact of adaptability exist, considerable research attention has been devoted to the development of models supporting change implementation and management. However, as the majority of change initiatives still fail (Kotter & Whitehead, 2010; Maurer, 2010), the situation seems to be as predicted by Rosenberg & Mosca (2011), who state that “[c]learly, the problem is not a dearth of models; rather, it is important to recognize that some firms are better designed for implementing change”.

There are three reasons for assuming that currently these proposedly better designed firms are inherently employee-centric. Firstly, a clear majority of change resistance is linked to personal and organizational-stemmed perceptions of the employee (Rosenberg & Mosca, 2011). This stresses the need for employee buy-in regarding any change effort. Secondly, employees need the proper skills to tackle the vast technology development, which characterizes the competitive environment firms are currently adapting to. This, on the other hand, explicates the importance of both recruitment and retention of suitable, business critical talent. Thirdly, as the offerings of most firms shift from goods to services and ultimately experiences, the role of employees grow as a result of the customer-employee interaction present in the co-creation processes (e.g. Jain, Aagja, & Bagdare, 2017). The resource offering sustained competitive advantage through adaptability is hence, as per the RBV, engaged employees equipped with the appropriate skillset and motivation to tackle the changing competitive environment.

Employee experience has already been widely projected to offer relief to the two last-mentioned assumed success factors regarding adaptability in the current competitive environment. Firm’s offering an exceptional employee experience are suggested to boast an engaged and satisfied staff motivated to deliver an exceptional customer experience. Further, they are proposed to prevail over their competitors when it comes to recruitment and retention. Coupled with the notion that knowledge-based work is getting increasingly complicated while offered to a declining population of the developed countries due to decreasing birthrates, EX is consequently projected to aid firm’s battling what is often referred to as ‘the war for talent’.

In this thesis, the novel concept of employee experience is examined as a general management approach for achieving adaptability by studying its relation to the third
assumed success factor – the issue of change implementation. As stated earlier, a clear majority of change resistance is linked to personal and organizational stemmed perceptions of the employee (Rosenberg & Mosca, 2011), while employee experience tackles the individualistic perception an employee has of its employing organization. Therefore, employee experience is expected to be linked to the success of organizational change implementation efforts.

In general, the success of organizational change efforts have been linked to addressing the needs of employees (Smith, 2002a) and taking them into consideration regarding the organizational changes (Galpin, 1996). Further, Grönroos (1985) argues that successful strategy implementation is carried out through attaining employee buy-in prior to customer exposure. However, there is limited research investigating the impact of employees on strategy implementation success – the main type of organizational change examined in this study (Li, Guohui, & Eppler, 2010).

Employee experience considers the individual’s experience of being in the role of an employee of a specific organization. It borrows from the logic of customer experience and design thinking and views employment as a journey rather than the momentary occupation. Further, it relies on employees to be treated individually, which necessitates human resources to move beyond its traditionally transactional approach. (Plaskoff, 2017). The wanted outcome is still an engaged and satisfied workforce, which desirability is generally acknowledged due to its known effect delivering exceptional customer experiences (Mosley, 2007) and performance (e.g. Böckerman & Ilmakunnas, 2012). However, old tricks such as extrinsic motivators and fun workspaces, need to be replaced by co-created experiences that showcase the firm’s genuine care for its employees (Plaskoff, 2017).

Employee experience has not yet fully caught on in academic research, though some signs of its emergence in the scholarly world are already present. Larivière et al. (2017) acknowledges its potential as a source of employee knowledge and calls for its conceptualization in addition to its means of measurement, while Plaskoff (2017) explicates it as “the new human resource management approach”. It is generally agreed that academic and practitioner time lines differ with the first-mentioned often being significantly longer (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014). Thus, research on employee experience
is expected to get a foothold among academics in the near future as management research is usually eager to tackle problems stemming from practitioner needs.

1.2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

Considerable attention, albeit mostly non-academic, has been paid to the impact of employee experience on employee engagement, satisfaction, retention and recruitment in the current competitive environment. The aim seems to be on providing firms with the right means to prevail over their competitors in ‘the war for talent’. However, the effect of employee experience on the implementation success of organizational changes essentially involuntarily leading firms to take part of the ‘the war for talent’ have been largely overlooked. The objective of this thesis is thus to gain understanding about the relationship between employee experience and change implementation success in organizations subject to significant change. As the objective is stated as to gain understanding, this thesis aims to build novel theory as well as propose avenues for future research.

The research objective is addressed with the following main research question:

*RQ: How does employee experience affect implementation success of significant change?*

For the purpose of this study, significant change is regarded identical to major organizational change, defined by Smith (2002b) as “any intentional change in the way the organization does business that affects the strategic position of the organization vis-à-vis its competition”.

The main research question is then further divided into three research sub-questions, which this study seeks to answer:

*RSQ1: What is the relation between change characteristics and employee experience?*

*RSQ2: What is the relation between change enablers and employee experience?*

*RSQ3: What is the relation between change methods and employee experience?*
The generally acknowledged procedures of successful change implementation are determined based on a literature review on change implementation, with a deep-dive on factors predicting successful strategy implementation. While narrowing the scope of what can be regarded favorable for organizational change in general, focusing on strategy implementation allows for better understanding of the case company situation.

The characteristics of the change and the change implementation efforts undertaken to date by the case company and their impact on the organization are mapped in an empirical study. The study utilizes both thematic, semi-structured interviews of the top-level management, as well as qualitative data from previous employee questionnaires as means of data collection. These serve as the basis for all analyses of this thesis.

Employee experience is conceptualized and a framework of its driving elements proposed based on the literature review. Findings from the literature review and empirical study are then compared to the constructed framework. The aim is to examine whether characteristics, enablers and methods of change implementation are linked to employee experience to such an extent that employee experience may be considered a relief to the challenge of adaptability.

1.3 CONTENTS AND STRUCTURE
In this introductory section of the thesis the research background and objectives are presented. The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows; Section 2 provides an overview of the existing literature regarding change implementation and employee experience. Further, the analytical framework utilized in the empirical study is presented. Section 3 is dedicated to the methodology of this thesis and considers the research approach and choice of methodologies, the case company, collection of empirical data, as well as the applied methods of data analysis. The results of the empirical study are presented in the findings section. Last, the discussion and conclusions section provide interpretation of the findings in comparison to the existing body of knowledge. Managerial and theoretical implications are further presented based on the conclusions of this thesis.
2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review section is divided into two distinct parts. Firstly, the extensively researched subject of organizational change and its implementation is reviewed with a deep-dive on successful strategy implementation. Secondly, an in-depth overview of the concept of employee experience is presented. Further, due to the novelty of the concept of employee experience and for the purpose of this thesis, employee experience is conceptualized and driving elements recognized based on the recently emerged, mostly non-academic, literature regarding the subject. Lastly, a framework for categorizing employee experience constituents is constructed based on the proposed conceptualization and recognized driving elements.

2.1 ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

According to Al-Haddad & Kotnour (2015), the organizational change literature may be divided into four distinct elements all individually and conjunctively influencing change success. These elements include the type of change, change enablers, change methods and change outcomes. A framework illustrating the elements and their proposed underlying factors are shown in Figure 1. This framework is utilized throughout this thesis to structure both the literature review as well as analysis of the data.

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Figure 1. The four main elements of organizational change based on change literature taxonomy (modified from Al-Haddad & Kotnour, 2015)
2.1.1 Organizational Change Characteristics

In this thesis, organizational change characteristics are regarded as the types of organizational change and the expected outcomes of organizational change. The common denominator of any major organizational changes is the intended strategic re-positioning of the company in relation to its competitors pursued through the changes in its way to do business (Smith, 2002b). Further, organizational change is always a response to a change in the firm’s competitive environment (Al-Haddad & Kotnour, 2015).

The type of organizational change may be defined using several different parameters. Al-Haddad & Kotnour (2015) suggest organizational change to be defined by change scale – small versus large, and change duration – short versus long. Goes et al. (2000) add that in addition to change scale, defined as both organization versus industry scale change and continuous versus discontinuous change, organizational change may be categorized based on level of voluntariness.

On the contrary, Smith (2002b) categorizes organizational change based on practical examples; strategy deployment, restructuring and downsizing, technology change, mixed collection of change efforts, TQM-driven change, mergers and acquisitions, re-engineering and process design, software development and installation, business expansion and culture change. However, the boundaries are often not as clear as organizational changes may in practical terms include several of the aforementioned types of change.

A number of scholars have pointed out the impact of the type of organizational change on the success rate of change. For instance short-term change has been predicted more successful in comparison to long-term organizational change by Shields (1999) and Ulrich (1998) (as cited in Al-Haddad & Kotnour, 2015). Furthermore, Smith (2002b) found the median success rate to span from 19% to 58% depending on the type of change being undertaken. In general, long-term and large-scale change require noticeably stronger leadership as well as collaboration and involvement of the people subject to the change for successful implementation (Al-Haddad & Kotnour, 2015).

Al-Haddad & Kotnour (2015) propose two viable outcomes for successful organizational change. Firstly, the set objectives for the change effort need to be met. The change project must keep to the allocated budget, the agreed schedule must be followed and deliverables
meet the set requirements. Secondly, the end results need to meet or better the expectations of all main stakeholders of the change effort. These may include the team appointed to carry out the change, the employees of the organization or the sponsors of the organizational change efforts.

The projected outcomes also play a role in the implementational successfulness of organizational change. If the change is ill-conceived or relevancy of the outcomes are not grasped, the outcomes act as a source of resistance to the change effort (Rosenberg & Mosca, 2011). Further, the importance of appropriate measuring of the outcomes for successful organizational change is stressed by Sink & Tuttle (1989).

2.1.2 Enabling Organizational Change

Numerous scholars have identified factors enabling successful implementation of organizational change. Change enablers refer to factors increasing the likelihood of change implementation accomplishment regardless of organizational change type. Al-Haddad & Kotronur (2015) summarize the main enablers of organizational change under three distinct themes – knowledge and skills, resources, as well as commitment. These themes are individually reviewed below.

Knowledge and skills

Vollmann (1996) proposes that firms ought to view the needed knowledge and skills to succeed in implementing change as competencies and learning. Competencies concerns defining and acquiring the specific knowledge and skills needed due to the change. Competencies may be grouped into four distinct categories:

“1. Technical or functional: Associated with the technical or functional expertise required to perform the specific role.
2. Managerial: Knowledge, attitude and skills required to plan, organize and mobilize various resources.
3. Human: Knowledge, attitude and skills required to motivate, utilize and develop human resources.
4. Conceptual: The ability to visualize the invisible and think at abstract levels.” (Naqvi, 2009)
Learning, on the other hand, is seen as necessary since change is not a one-off activity, instead the organization will need to develop a capacity of learning to speed up the implementation process as it prolongs. (Vollmann, 1996)

**Resources**

Several studies stress the importance of sufficient resource availability as well as proper resource allocation and alignment for successful change implementation. Smith (2002a) found the appointment of sufficient capital and human resources to predict the success of change efforts. Kotnour et al. (1998) add that change success is enabled by the alignment of available resources, both human resources and equipment, based on the needs of the change initiative. This notion is supported by Vollmann (1996), who finds deploying human resources systematically to aid the change effort (as cited in Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999)

**Commitment**

Weiner (2009) defines that on an organizational level, readiness for change is dependent on commitment to the change and the change efficacy. Rafferty et al. (2013) propose that commitment to change and a positive attitude towards the change effort indicate change readiness on an individual level as well. Change readiness comprises both the willingness and the ability to change, that is “a state of being both psychologically and behaviorally prepared to take action” (Weiner, 2009).

Herscovitch & Meyer (2002) define commitment to organizational change as the “force (mind-set) that binds an individual to a course of action deemed necessary for the successful implementation of a change initiative”. Further, they argue that commitment to change is three-faceted, comprising

1. Affective commitment to change: Desire based commitment to the change due to belief in the benefits of the change
2. Continuance commitment to change: Awareness of the expenditures associated with an unsuccessful change effort
3. Normative commitment to change: Commitment based on perceived obligation towards the change effort (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002)
Further, Madsen, Miller & John (2005) and Vakola & Nikolau (2005) found change readiness to be dependent on organizational commitment in general. According to Cook & Wall (1980), general organizational commitment is based on three elements: identification, involvement and loyalty. Organizational commitment is then present where employees feel connected to and proud of their organization, where employees feel that they are able to contribute as well as put in extra hours past personal gain and where employees have little intention to leave the organization (as cited in Madsen et al., 2005).

2.1.3 Organizational Change Methods

No matter how sophisticated the plan for a change effort might be, its exposure to the complex reality of organizations is not as straightforward as often desired. This notion is supported by numerous studies presenting a success rate for organizational change of only around one third of the efforts (e.g. Hammer & Champy, 1993; Kotter & Whitehead, 2010; Maurer, 2010; Smith, 2002b). As the plan itself is not a viable outcome of a change effort and the changes will not happen according to plan by chance, firms need to undertake a series of systematic and managerial actions to aid the successful implementation of organizational change. These two sub-groups – systematic change methods and change management methods – are jointly referred to as change methods (Al-Haddad & Kotnour, 2015).

**Systematic change**

In short, all changes include decisions regarding continuing as before, expanding or discontinuing an effort (Zook, 2007). Systematic change methods are proposed to aid the decision-making by introducing structure to the process in addition to useful tools. The methods generally include steps such as “scouting and diagnosing the current situation, planning and communicating change and finally implementing and instilling the new changes” (Al-Haddad & Kotnour, 2015). Traditional systematic change methods involve mainly ad hoc changes and incremental improvements planned and directed by managers. More recent methods stress the cyclical or iterative nature of change implementation and consider wide-ranging organizational changes. (Al-Haddad & Kotnour, 2015)

**Change management**

The fast-paced competitive environment has made managing change one of the core activities of any manager. The organizational change literature suggests that in comparison to systematic change methods, change management involves more holistic
activities aiming at aligning the organizational change efforts with the companies mission statement and involving employees in the change initiatives (Al-Haddad & Kotnour, 2015). Moran & Brightman (2000) argue that managing change ultimately involves managing people, and that it may be deemed successful when it aligns the change efforts with what employees find purposeful, perceive as relevant and achievable skills-wise.

2.1.4 Strategy Implementation

Porter (1996) argues that strategy is based on three principles: market positioning, making necessary trade-offs and creating a ‘fit’ between company activities. It is hence a statement of how a company relates to its competitive environment. While operational effectiveness aids the firm in producing its offerings faster or at a lower cost until competition catches on, strategy concerns the positioning of the firm for long-term competitive advantage.

The principles of strategy act as the basis for the discipline of strategic management. It involves understanding the firm’s strategic positioning, making strategic choices for future strategy development and acting upon the formulated strategy. Strategic management then comprises efforts regarding strategy formation, formulation as well as implementation. (Johnson, Scholes, & Whittington, 2007).

A formulated strategy is of value to an organization only when properly implemented (Heide et al., 2002). Turning the strategy into actions includes activities such as re-structuring the organization to aid the strategy, enabling the strategy through specific resources and managing the changes related to the strategy. (Johnson et al., 2007). Further, strategy implementation may be viewed as a process, a behavior or a mixture of these two perspectives. Both the process perspective and the behavior perspective consider strategy implementation as a multitude of specific actions. However, they differ in the degree of structure, by being meticulously planned sequences of steps versus loosely coordinated parallel actions, respectively. (Li et al., 2010)

Both the organizational change literature and the strategy literature suggest similar actions and efforts to aid successful implementation. Therefore, the same enablers and methods critical for organizational change success in general, as presented in Figure 1, are expected to widely affect the success of strategy implementation efforts as well.
Heide et al. (2002) argue that in addition to strategy awareness, strategy implementation success is dependent on the employee’s knowledge and skills. They go on to propose learning as the key element in acquiring the needed knowledge and skills. As for organizational change in general, Anand & Merrifield (1982) point out the importance of budgets, both capital and operational, for the success of strategy implementation, while Olsen et al. (1992) add that the financial resources allocation in turn steers the human resources allocation (as cited in Heide et al., 2002).

Regarding commitment to the strategy, Noble & Mokwa (1999) found strategic outcome to be linked to three levels of commitment: organizational commitment (as for organizational change in general), strategy commitment and role commitment. Strategy commitment involves understanding and supporting the strategy (Noble & Mokwa, 1999), thus falling somewhere in between the affective commitment to change and the continuance commitment to change, as defined by Herscovitch & Meyer (2002). Role commitment, on the other hand, comprises efforts made towards strategy implementation regardless of perception of the change (Noble & Mokwa, 1999). Role commitment then shares corresponds largely to the normative commitment to change (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002).

Furthermore, systematic change methods and the process perspective (Li et al., 2010) to strategy implementation both aim at creating structure to the change effort. Last, of the ‘silent killers’ of strategy implementation proposed by Beer & Eisenstat (2000), four out of six aspects were directly linked to the actions of managers, stressing the role of proper change management for successful strategy implementation.

In this thesis, strategy implementation is then viewed as a specific type of organizational change, however, often intertwined with other types of organizational change (Smith, 2002a). This generalization is based on strategy implementation being regarded as a type of organizational change by Smith (2002b) and the wide-ranging similarities in implementation success factors, as confirmed by the brief review of the strategy implementation literature above. Further, both changes in strategy and organizational change in general include an intended re-positioning of the firm in relation to its competitors (Porter, 1996; Smith, 2002b)
2.1.5 Implications of the Speed Imperative

The ability to change in order to adapt to the ever-shifting competitive environment is critical for any organization. Firms need to accept constant alignment of their operations in response to external changes as the new normal. As mentioned earlier, all significant organizational change efforts are characterized by an intended strategic re-positioning of the company in relation to its competitors pursued through the changes in its way to do business (Smith, 2002b). Further, organizational change is always a response to a change in the firm’s competitive environment (Al-Haddad & Kotnour, 2015). Organizational change in all its forms then enables the adaptability of the firm.

However, solely focusing on doing the right things in response to the changes in the competitive environment is insufficient. The pace set by globalization creates a parallel imperative of speed (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 2002; Reeves & Deimler, 2011). The increased volatility of the new competitive environment is quantitatively observable as the variation in operating margins has risen noticeably since 1980 after being nearly static for 30 years. Further, market leadership is not held for nearly as long as earlier and it no longer predicts high profitability in the way it used to. (Reeves & Deimler, 2011; Satell, 2014)

The imperative of speed is in many ways observable in the most recent developments of the strategy implementation literature. In the rapidly changing competitive environment, a processual plan-then-act type linear approach will not do. Instead, planning the change and its implementation happen simultaneously and the actions are tweaked as understanding grows through learning and reacting to the environment, while following the direction and vision of the company (Mankins, 2017; Satell, 2014; Sull, 2007; Sull, Homkes, & Sull, 2015).

Following a visionary direction rather than a budget or roadmap makes the projected outcomes more intangible as firms go by a direction instead of a plan, as they used to before (Mankins, 2017). Aaltonen & Ikävalko (2002) argue that the main barriers of strategy implementation are no longer a lacking top management sponsorship or an unsuitable organizational structure (as cited in Atkinson, 2006). Instead, firms struggle to exploit the far end of the behavior perspective to strategy implementation (Li et al., 2010) due to incapability to solve challenges regarding behavior and culture in favor of the strategy (Atkinson, 2006). Consequently, middle managers become vital links concerning strategy communication (Aaltonen & Ikävalko, 2002), whose role need to be increasingly
2.2 WHY EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE MATTERS

The underlying logic of employee experience lies in the role of employees in the pursuit of exceptional customer experiences. The business criticality of customer experience stems from the pervasive shift from commodities and goods to the consumption of services and ultimately experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). The experiential perspective to value creation needs to be incorporated in the value proposition to offer differentiation and delivered to the customer as an seamless experience (Carbone & Haeckel, 1994). This is supported by Grönroos (2006), who states that “customer value is not created by one element alone, but by the total experience of all elements”. The process of creating memorable customer experiences involves impeccable combination of value creation by interaction, co-creation and personalization both pre-, in- and post-use (Jain et al., 2017). In cases where the interaction, co-creation and personalization happens jointly with employees of the provider, engagement and satisfaction is critical, as it is generally regarded to increase the likelihood of delivering positive experiences (Mosley, 2007).

Thus, this explains why the initial aspect of employee experience was identifying and boosting the root causes of engagement and satisfaction among frontline workers to indirectly induce positive customer experiences. Subsequently, however, focusing on the employee experience has been suggested beneficent in tackling several other challenges present in the current competitive environment. In addition to offering the means to provide exceptional customer experiences (Mazor, Zucker, Sivak, Coombes, & Van Durme, 2017; Yohn, 2016), employee experience has been suggested to support recruitment and retention (Liley, Feliciano, & Laurs, 2017; Morgan, 2017), increase productivity and performance (Hamerman & Schooley, 2017; IBM & Globoforce, 2016; Liley et al., 2017), innovativeness (Dery & Sebastian, 2017), profitability (Dery & Sebastian, 2017), as well as build employee engagement in general (Hamerman & Schooley, 2017; Liley et al., 2017). Despite these dissimilarities in projected outcomes of a positive employee experience, unanimity exists regarding its criticality due to the business imperatives of the current competitive environment.
2.2.1 Defining the Employee Experience

As employee experience is still an emerging topic both in academic and non-academic literature, no universal definition has yet been established. Table 1 contains a non-exhaustive list of proposed definitions of employee experience. To support the empirical part of this thesis, employee experience is conceptualized based on the main themes of these suggested definitions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Definition of Employee Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Plaskoff, 2017)</td>
<td>“[T]he employee’s holistic perceptions of the relationship with his/her employing organization derived from all the encounters at touchpoints along the employee’s journey”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Larivière et al., 2017)</td>
<td>“[T]he totality of cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial and social responses that result from interactions with other parties (e.g., customers, and technology)”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Oracle, 2014)</td>
<td>“Employee experience is the sum of all experiences an employee has with an employer, over the duration of their relationship with that employer” (Derived from the definition of customer experience on Wikipedia; <a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Customer_experience">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Customer_experience</a>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Dery &amp; Sebastian, 2017)</td>
<td>“[T]he work complexity and behavioral norms that influence employees’ ability to create value”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Maylett &amp; Wride, 2017)</td>
<td>“The Employee Experience is the sum of perceptions employees have about their interactions with the organization in which they work”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(IBM &amp; Globoforce, 2016)</td>
<td>“A set of perceptions that employees have about their experiences at work in response to their interactions with the organization”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Definitions of employee experience.

*Individualistic*

Nearly all definitions stress the individualistic perceptions of the employee as the foundation of employee experience. Employees respond independently to the interactions with their employing organization, thus affecting the individual employee’s experience differently. However, as demonstrated in the next section, some common drivers and themes of employee experience have still been proposed.
Context
The employee experience is formed by interactions where an individual is in the role of an employee of a specific organization. Thus, the employee experience is also organization specific. There is a clear analogy to customer experience, which concerns the experiences of an individual when in the role of a customer of a particular firm.

Holisticness
The holisticness claim stems from employee experience being regarded as a “sum of perceptions” (Maylett & Wride, 2017), or “sum of all experiences” (Oracle, 2014), or “the totality of [...] responses” (Larivières et al., 2017). Attempts on defining the contents of the proposed holistic views have been made by e.g. Larivières et al. (2017) – “cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial and social responses that result from interactions with other parties”, and Dery & Sebastian (2017) – “work complexity and behavioral norms”. Furthermore, Morgan (2017) suggests that employee experience is a sum of the employees interaction with three specific environments – culture, technology and physical space.

Duration
The last logic common to most of the definitions is the time frame during which the employee experience is formed. This is closely related to the holisticness view and considers employee experience to be shaped starting from the recruitment and onboarding to ultimately end in retirement or leaving the company. Again, borrowing from customer experience, this is generally regarded as the employee journey, as an analogy to the customer journey.

Considering the reasonings common to the previously listed proposed definitions, for the purposes of this study employee experience is regarded as:

The entirety of an employee’s individualistic perceptions of working for an organization, derived from responses of all interactions as an employee of said organization.

This conceptualization considers the individualistic view, the context-specificity, the holisticness and the whole employee journey.
2.2.2 The Constituents of Employee Experience

As stated in the previous section, employee experience is a subjective perception of the employee. However, attempts on recognizing common elements that constitute the employee experience have been made. In this section, selected theories regarding the universal drivers of employee experience are presented.

*IBM & Globoforces’s Employee Experience Index*

As a result of an extensive study including over 23,000 employees from 45 countries, IBM’s Smarter Workforce Institute and Globoforce’s WorkHuman® Research Institute (IBM & Globoforce, 2016) have proposed a framework of the drivers of employee experience, shown in Figure 2. Employee experience is projected to be formed around five key factors: Belonging, Purpose, Achievement, Happiness and Vigor. Thus, according to this framework, a positive employee experience is driven by the sense of being part of any grouping at work, feeling achievement of work that is done and understanding its purpose, having a sense of happiness as well as being energetic, enthusiastic and excited related to work.

IBM & Globoforce (2016) propose that leadership and management related behaviors and actions, especially regarding the future direction of the firm, set the stage for the human workplace practices ultimately affecting the employee experience. For positive employee experiences to emerge, the work environment needs to contain organizational trust and supportive relationships between colleagues, while the work itself needs to utilize skills and talents of the employee. Further, the employee needs to be recognized for performance and given feedback as well as the opportunity for professional growth. Lastly, positive employee experience is expected to stem from feeling empowered and being offered chances to be heard as well as having a sound work-life balance.

Figure 2. IBM and Globoforce’s framework of employee experience drivers (modified from IBM & Globoforce, 2016)
The MAGIC framework

Similar to the key factors characterizing employee experience in IBM & Globoforce’s (2016) ‘employee experience index’, Maylett & Wride (2017) have developed their own framework, including the following elements: Meaning, Autonomy, Growth, Impact and Connection. They then argue that positive employee experience is distinguished by employees perceiving that their work serves a higher purpose than profitability, they may work as suits them the best, they are challenged to make progress, their work has relevant outcomes and they belong to a larger community.

Reason for Being and the three environments of employee experience

Morgan (2017) argues that companies need a compelling ‘reason for being’, answering the question of ‘[w]hat impact does the organization have on the world and on the community around it?’ in order to enable creation of positive employee experience. The ‘reason for being’ acts as a base for the three environments, in which the employee experience is ultimately formed – the physical, technological and cultural environments. The physical environment covers the space were the actual work is being performed, while the technological environment contains the technological tools needed to get the work done. Last, the cultural environment is self-explanatory as it considers the organizational culture of the firm. (Morgan, 2017)

The Expectation Gap and the Role of Employees

Both Morgan (2017) and Maylett & Wride (2017) consider what the latter call ‘The Expectation Gap’ to play a considerable part in the formation of the employee experience. Morgan (2017) recognizes that employee experience is formed were the actual expectations of employees meet the organizations designed expectations of the employees. Maylett & Wride (2017), on the other, hand argue that meeting employee expectations only creates satisfaction – they have to be exceeded in order for delight and loyalty to emerge. They add that aligning expectations is based on six factors:

1. Fairness in treating and rewarding employees
2. Clarity regarding expected outcomes of both employee and employer
3. Empathy in valuing others’ viewpoints
4. Predictability of both employee and employer actions
5. Transparency of decisions
6. Accountability concerning all made promises (Maylett & Wride, 2017)
As alignment of expectations is critical for achieving positive employee experience, the organization needs to put a lot of effort into understanding the expectations of its employees as individuals. Morgan (2017) stresses the role of employees in bringing forth these expectations proactively in different forums. Just as the customer experience is co-created by both the customer and the employees of the service providing company, employee experience is co-created between the organization and the employee.

The Three Contracts
Maylett & Wride (2017) argue that the relationship between employer and employee, which is the basis of employee experience per definition, comprises three different contracts: the brand contract, the transactional contract and the psychological contract. The brand contract is the primary one all employees connect through and plays a large role in attracting potential employees. It spans outside the organization itself and considers all promises that the organization’s brand makes to whom are exposed to the brand. The transactional contract on the other hand is made up between the employee and employer as a mutual document of what is expected from the employee in return for a certain compensation. Last, the psychological contract involves “the unwritten, implicit set of expectations and obligations that define the terms of exchange” (Maylett & Wride, 2017) of the employee-employer relationship. This contract is formed, understood, analyzed and acted upon within the mind of the employee and driven by expectations. It is also the contract that takes over in the absence of a distinct brand contract and exhaustive transactional contract.

Moments of Truth and Moments That Matter
In marketing, the term ‘moment of truth’ is referred to as all touchpoints between the customer and the provider, where the customer has the “opportunity to assess, re-assess, or verify a previously held perception of their relationship with the service provider” (Menon & O’Connor, 2007). Consequently, Morgan (2017) and Maylett & Wride (2017) use the terms moments that matter and moments of truth respectively to explicate touchpoints during the employee journey that influence the employee experience. Maylett & Wride (2017) consider all moments of truth to either reinforce, violate or alternate the contracts mentioned earlier in this section. Further, moments of truth are divided into those who are planned for and happens at specific times during the employee journey and those that are reactions to unpredictable events. The first-mentioned are handled by processes, while the other ones showcase the culture and values of the organization.
Morgan’s (2017) division of moments, on the other hand, is based on their occurrence, time-span and origin. Specific moments happen seldom, ongoing moments are not time-wise clearly definable and created moments stem from intended actions of the organization.

2.2.3 A Framework Illustrating the Elements of Employee Experience

In this section of the thesis, the earlier presented definition of employee experience and its projected constituents are synthesized into a unified framework. The aim is to capture and illustrate the currently proposed characteristics of the emerging concept of employee experience in a visual and easily approachable manner. The framework is presented in Figure 3 and the rationale behind it explicated in the following paragraphs of this section.

The main part of the framework is constructed around the interplay of the organizational context and employee perceptions, as per the definition of employee experience. As suggested by Morgan (2017) and Maylett & Wride (2017), these are separated by ‘the expectation gap’ present between any organization and the individual employee. The organizational context containing human workplace practices (IBM & Globoforce, 2016) and the three employee experience environments (Morgan, 2017) is affected by leadership and management as well as the organization’s ‘reason for being’. IBM & Globoforce (2016) found that leadership and management acts as the basis for positive employee experience when it offers “clarity around future direction and why employees matter in successfully moving the organization forward”.

The employee perceptions section of the framework is combined from Maylett & Wride’s (2017) MAGIC-framework and IBM & Globoforce’s (2016) employee experience index. These elements, that characterizes positive employee experience, are the ones ultimately perceivable by the individual employee. The perceptions of the employee regarding these factors are driven by the organizational context through moments of truth but distorted by expectations.
The three employee experience contracts (Maylett & Wride, 2017) are added to showcase their span in relation to the other elements. The brand contract spans over the whole framework and, in reality, beyond its boundaries. The transactional contract is explicitly stated and concerns the relationship between the employee and the employing organization. Last, the psychological contract as stated before, is formed within the mind of the employee and driven by expectations.

One limitation of this framework is that it does not account for the dimension of positive and negative experiences. However, this adds to the generalizability of the framework as the responses, both positive and negative, are always linked individualistically to the employee. Also, some overlap exist as employee professional growth and sense of meaningful work are regarded both favorable traits of an organization (IBM & Globoforce, 2016) as well as positive elements perceivable by employees as individuals (Maylett & Wride, 2017).

Figure 3. A framework illustrating the elements of employee experience.

### 2.2.4 Towards a Holistic Approach

In this section employee experience is compared to and explained through some adjacent theories including: customer experience, employee engagement, Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs, and the hierarchy of human capabilities (Hamel, 2007). The aim is to clarify why employee experience should be regarded as moving towards a holistic means for organizations to tend to their employees. Bersin (2017) argues that the need for a holistic approach, such as employee experience, is evident as it reflects how employees perceive their employment – not as separate events or actions, but deeply integrated into their daily lives.
The first evidence of the holisticness of employee experience stems from its relation to the concept of customer experience, which holistic characteristic is shared by scholars (Carbone & Haeckel, 1994; Gentile et al., 2007; Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Shaw & Ivens, 2002; Verhoef et al., 2009, as cited in Jain et al., 2017). Jain et al. (2017) define customer experience as “the aggregate of feelings, perceptions and attitudes formed during the entire process of decision making and consumption chain involving an integrated series of interaction with people, objects, processes and environment, leading to cognitive, emotional, sensorial and behavioral responses”. Customer experience then shares the same elements in its definition as employee experience per the definition synthesized for this study – both are individualistic, context-specific, holistic through aggregated perceptions and consider a similar time-span.

The two concepts not only share similar definitions but are proposed to benefit from utilizing same principles and tools – most importantly, design thinking, journey mapping and segmentation. Designing the employee experience with the employee as the center of the design allows for addressing the needs of the employee (Mazor et al., 2017), just as customer experience addresses the needs of the customer. Since the employee experience considers the whole employee life cycle, employee journey mapping has been proposed useful for enhancing employee experience (Yohn, 2016). The employee journey map allows for planning critical interactions between the organization and the employee. Additionally, Yohn (2016) proposes employees to be segmented in groups based on desires and requests to ease the design of appropriate measures to create a positive employee experience. As employees will not react uniformly to changes in the organizational context and individualistic profiling might be a mere impossibility, segmentation offers a ‘best guess’ of employee experience drivers. Regarding change, Yohn (2016) suggests “groupings of skeptics, participants, and champions” as an example of segmentation strategies. Last, in the spirit of the service-profit chain (Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser, & Schlesinger, 1994), which relates employee satisfaction to customer loyalty, positive employee experience is proposed to generate positive customer experience. Maylett & Wride (2017) defines this as “the law of congruent experience”.

Authors on employee experience are not unanimous regarding its relation to the prior and similar concept of employee engagement. Morgan (2017) argues that the employee engagement approach was the first to introduce the idea of paying attention to the values and interests of employees, something that also characterizes employee experience.
However, Morgan (2017) continues that success of the employee engagement approach has been rather poor. He argues that the reason for this is that engagement measures the result and not the root-cause, which in turn makes engagement boosting actions reactive in nature. Both Morgan (2017) and Maylett & Wride (2017) instead propose employee experience as the cause of employee engagement due to its holisticness and proactivity in tending to the employees needs and wants. IBM & Globoforce (2016), on the other hand, consider positive employee experience and employee engagement as two distinct phenomena, both possibly present regardless of the other. They argue that a concurrent high employee engagement turns the effect of positive employee experience from contentment to passion.

It bears to acknowledge the relation between employee experience and Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs and the hierarchy of human capabilities (Hamel, 2007). When comparing these concepts, it is evident that employee experience, although holistic on several measures, is still dependent on some fundamentals not present in the definition of the concept of employee experience. This is explicated through only the top-order needs and capabilities being directly linked to the concept of employee experience. In the case of Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs; belonging, esteem and self-actualization. On the other hand, in the case of the hierarchy of human capabilities (Hamel, 2007) – employee experience does not boost obedience, diligence and intellect. However, as proposed by IBM & Globoforce (2016), a positive employee experience is needed for employees to be passionate about their work.
3 METHODOLOGY

This section explicates the methodology of this thesis. First, the objective of this thesis is revisited, the research approach explained thoroughly and methodological choices justified for. Second, the case company, Fira, and its appropriation for this study is presented. Third, the data collection procedures of this thesis are described. Last, the applied data analysis methods are specified.

The objective of this thesis is to gain understanding about the effect of employee experience on change implementation success in organizations subject to significant change. Better understanding of which factors play a role in the success of change implementation is business critical due to the substantial adaptability requirement present in the current competitive environment. The research objective is addressed with the following main research question:

*RQ: How does employee experience affect implementation success of significant change?*

For the purpose of this study, significant change is regarded identical to major organizational change, defined by Smith (2002b) as “any intentional change in the way the organization does business that affects the strategic position of the organization vis-à-vis its competition”.

The process of this study was initiated by conducting an extensive analysis of available literature. The most suitable research design was then established based on the literature review and the objective of the study. Preliminary research questions were set up based on analysis of available literature. However, no hypothesis was formulated at this point.

Due to the novelty of employee experience as a research field, this study is conducted as an exploratory qualitative single case study, utilizing an abductive approach to theory development. An abductive research approach is appropriate when the research aims at discovering novel things and concepts (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Suddaby, 2006). Additionally, as abduction relies on iterations of original ideas as new empirical or theoretical insights emerge during the research process, novel discoveries emerge “through a mixture of established theoretical models and new concepts derived from the confrontation with reality” (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). In the study at hands, the established
theoretical models are represented by the enormous amount of research regarding organizational change, change implementation, and strategy implementation available.

The utilization of qualitative research methods in business and management research has established a well-proven track record during its extensive history. The array of applications is vast, ranging from organizational analysis to finance and accounting, both traditionally regarded as quantitative areas. It is generally agreed that qualitative methods in business and management research may offer rich insights into the field of interest to both researchers and practitioners alike. An immense advantage of qualitative research methods concerning the present study is that it enables illustration of subjective experiences originated from the organization itself. (Cassell et al., 2006)

Case study is widely regarded as a favorable strategy for exploratory studies aiming at theory development (e.g. Eisenhardt, 1989; Meredith, 1993; Yin, 2014). The high degree of novelty related to the concept of employee experience is no obstacle, as case studies do not depend on prior literature or empirical findings (Eisenhardt, 1989). Case studies are regularly used when studying high-complexity social experiences and allows for examination of realistic events while not distorting “the holistic and meaningful characteristics” (Yin, 1989). Theory is then developed by in-depth understanding of the observable dynamics within the single case setting. Furthermore, in support of the iterative nature of abduction as an approach to theory development, case studies are also inherently iterative by nature (Eisenhardt, 1989).

The pre-formulated research questions guided the conduction of this study. However, the final research questions were established based on both the literature review and the themes emerging from the empirical data. This enabled reformulation of research questions based on emerging knowledge as well as unbiasedness and un-predetermined views when conducting the data analysis. This is considered advantageous regarding case study conduction in order ensure an iterative and open-minded approach. (Eisenhardt, 1989)
The generalizability of theories stemming from case studies has not yet reached unanimity among scholars. Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that the non-generalizability assumption is a common misconception and that single case studies can be valuable for theory development – nonetheless as a demonstrative example, which is often undervalued by scholars in the pursuit of formal generalization. Yin (2014) supports the notion, and adds that a single case study should not be viewed as a study with an excessively too small sample of only one. Instead, it should be viewed as a one of experiment. The aim is thus to achieve analytic generalization through theory expansion, not statistical generalization through frequency of specific observations.

3.1 CASE COMPANY DESCRIPTION

The case company and unit of analysis of this thesis, Fira, is a mid-sized Finnish construction company based in Vantaa and currently operating mainly in the Helsinki metropolitan area. Fira’s approach to transforming the construction industry is based on continuously questioning prevailing practices. Fira believes in value co-creation between all stakeholders of construction projects. Thus, Fira only develops projects jointly with private and public actors, never owning the property or land itself. This logic further helps keep the balance sheet light in comparison to competitors. Since its establishment in 2002, the revenue and headcount of Fira has grown significantly, especially in the latter part of the company’s history. Fira’s growth is dividable into three separate phases with distinct business focus characteristics. The phases of development as well as growth in revenue and headcount are illustrated in Figure 4.

Phase 1 of Fira’s history spans from the establishment of Fira Oy in 2002 to the year 2009. This phase is best described as ‘traditional construction’. Due to the expertise and knowledge of the founders, Fira’s competitiveness was based on thorough construction planning and effective execution of construction activities, with the main type of construction project undertaken being concrete parking facilities.

In 2009, Fira entered phase 2 – ‘service construction’, which resulted in significant growth during the extent of this phase. The approach implemented was strongly customer-centric and somewhat uncommon compared to other firms of the Finnish construction industry. The cornerstone of customer-centricity was the ‘Verstas’ project development concept, created to gain understanding of the actual customer needs concerning any construction project.
2015 marked the shift to the ‘people-centric’ phase 3, characterized by engagement with all stakeholders, both internal and external, of construction projects. In conjunction to ‘people-centricity’ regarding business focus characteristics, Fira is also currently midst implementation of a new corporate strategy. Formation of the strategy was commenced around the shift to the third phase and it was officially formulated in the spring of 2017. Fira aims at extending its offerings from general contracting to include services and digital solutions for a large audience of stakeholders – from residents to construction industry professionals. Thus, in the future, Fira is still going to operate within the construction industry – however, to a greater extent as the enabler of project success and end user value creation, rather than as the project contractor. Both ‘people-centricity’, as well as the new strategy, showcase Fira’s expectations of value in co-creating solutions together with all stakeholders of construction projects – constantly questioning prevailing practices of the construction industry.

Fira’s organizational structure encompasses group functions and two business unit like entities – construction and smart services. The construction unit and the smart services unit handle general contractor services and development of new services and digital solutions, respectively. In addition, the structure comprehends subsidiaries stemming from Fira’s ‘Starters’-startup program begun in 2016. For the purposes of this study, Fira Group and all current subsidiaries are regarded as one entity, ‘Fira’.
3.2 DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

Data were collected cross-sectionally at three distinct occasions, utilizing survey and semi-structured interview techniques as means of collection. The interviews were conducted amidst literature review development in May-June 2018. The utilized survey data had been previously collected as part of the company’s quarterly employee experience surveys in Q1 and Q2 of 2018. In the findings section, these surveys are referred to as Survey I and Survey II, and the number of respondents were N=236 and N=217, respectively.

Thematic, semi-structured interviews are suitable for the study of ‘what’ as well as ‘how’ questions (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008), both of which are represented in the study at hands. This interviewing technique excels in providing and organized and comprehensive way of data collection, while not formalizing the discussions during the interview (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). This was expected to foster conversational interviews, while still following the themes important for the research itself.

All interviews were recorded for later transcription and they lasted between 30-67 minutes. All interviewees were briefed on the aims of the study and a summary of the interview agenda was sent to all prior to the interview. Employee experience, as conceptualized in this study and a brief background of the concept, was introduced in the beginning of every interview session. The interviews were conducted individually during a single session at Fira’s headquarters. The language used was Finnish, as it is the native language of all interviewees and was therefore expected to induce better flow.

The thematic, semi-structured interviews followed themes that had emerged from the research objective and literature review development. The themes were largely based on the framework of general elements of organizational change by Al-Haddad & Kotnour (2015) presented in Figure 1 of the literature review section of this thesis. All interviewees represented the company’s top-level management. The rationale was based on enabling comparison of the views of managers skilled in change management with the voice of an organization undergoing significant change captured by the employee surveys. Top-level managers were also expected to have a holistic view of the change efforts of the case company. An exhaustive list of all conducted interviews including dates and durations is presented in Table 2. The general, loose agenda and pre-determined themes for the thematic, semi-structured interviews was constructed as follows:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interviewee background</strong></td>
<td>Warm up discussion about the interviewee’s present and possible previous roles at Fira as well as current main responsibilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fira’s new strategy</strong></td>
<td>Aiming at clarifying the change status and characteristics of the case company by mapping the interviewee’s overall view on Fira’s new strategy and all the changes it comprises.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge and skills</strong></td>
<td>Interviewee viewpoint on the role of knowledge and skills regarding implementation of the case company’s new strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resources</strong></td>
<td>Interviewee description of how the strategy implementation of the case company has been resourced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Commitment</strong></td>
<td>Interviewee description of how employee commitment regarding strategy implementation has been established in the case company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Systematic change</strong></td>
<td>Interviewee description of utilized decision-making policies regarding strategy implementation in the case company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Change management</strong></td>
<td>Interviewee viewpoint on change management practices present in the case company regarding the strategy implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employee experience</strong></td>
<td>Open discussion concerning employee experience as a concept, its role now and in the future as well as the effect of being midst significant change on employee experience. This theme was left to the end of the interview to not lead on the interviewees.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Each top-level theme included some pre-established sub-topics for interviewer support and as conversation starters. The exhaustive interview agenda including the pre-established questions is found in the appendices of this thesis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Title</th>
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<th>Date</th>
<th>Duration</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Group</td>
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<td>0:43:29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2</td>
<td>Director &amp; Team Lead, SiteDrive</td>
<td>Smart Services</td>
<td>28.5.2018</td>
<td>0:30:34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Group</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Group</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Head of Project Development</td>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>30.5.2018</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>H9</td>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Construction</td>
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<td>0:49:16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H10</td>
<td>Executive Vice President</td>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>5.6.2018</td>
<td>0:52:29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. List and details of the conducted interviews.

The survey data were anonymously collected at two different occasions. The qualitative data from the quarterly employee experience surveys in Q1 and Q2 of 2018 were collected as part of the employee net promoter score (eNPS) measurement. The eNPS is measured as a response to the question; ‘how likely are you to recommend the case company to a friend or relative?’ This is identical to the net promoter score (NPS) introduced by Reichheld (2003), only that it targets on organizations employees, not its customers. The qualitative data utilized in this study was collected by a follow-up question asking the respondent to specify why he or she had chosen to rate the company a certain way by the eNPS. No quantitative data were analyzed from any of the surveys.

In addition to offering insights into the perspectives of both top-level management and the employees of the case company, the duality of data sources and data collection techniques is expected to enhance the robustness of this study. Data triangulation is regularly utilized to enhance the quality and credibility of qualitative research (Patton, 1999). In this case both method triangulation and triangulation of sources are present.
3.3 DATA ANALYSIS

In order to assure scholarly rigor of this thesis, the data analysis followed the abductive approach of systematic combining. Systematic combining is a case research data analysis process where the “theoretical framework, empirical fieldwork, and case analysis evolve simultaneously” (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). The process of systematic combining involves constant interplay between theory and reality. Furthermore, the researcher is expected to direct and redirect the course of the case study as it evolves. The appropriation of this approach concerning the study at hands is evident as the systematic combining process is regarded particularly beneficial in case studies aiming at novel theory development. (Dubois & Gadde, 2002) The process of systematic combining is illustrated in Figure 5.

![Diagram of systematic combining process](image)

Figure 5. The process of systematic combining. (Dubois & Gadde, 2002)

Following the systematic combining process as proposed by Dubois & Gadde (1999), the analytical framework was established prior to any data collection. The utilized framework was the elements of organizational change by Al-Haddad & Kotnour (2015), presented in Figure 1 of the literature review section of this thesis. This was expected to result in a structured review of the all factors influencing change success. These factors could then be compared to the elements of employee experience, illustrated in Figure 3, to map its relation to the success of change implementation.

Interplay between theory and the empirical world was accomplished by data collection and analysis midst literature review development. Initial data analysis also guided formulation of the final research questions. Conduction of data analysis was initiated near the completion of the literature review development to still enable incorporating emerging
themes. The first step included fully transcribing all the recordings of the thematic, semi-structured interviews. Both the transcribed interviews as well as the survey data was then imported to the qualitative research methods data analysis software ATLAS.ti, version 8 (Scientific Software Development GmbH), which was utilized for all analyses of this thesis.

The technique of thematic analysis was applied for analyzing both interview and survey data. Thematic analysis was expected to provide a flexible means of analysis as it is regarded appropriate when the researcher is aiming at finding patterns overlapping several interviews (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). The data analysis mostly followed the phases proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006) (as cited in Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013), with the most noticeable exception of categorization by pre-determined themes based on the research questions and theory. This was considered as an effort of matching theory to the empirical world, which characterizes the process of systematic combining (Dubois & Gadde, 1999). Further, the directed analysis approach was expected to be more supportive of the abductive nature of this thesis in comparison to a purely inductive approach to data analysis based on open-coding alone. Inclusion criteria of data originated from the surveys were strictly limited to the pre-determined themes, as their primary function had not been asking employees about the ongoing strategy implementation efforts of the case company per se.

First, the material was thoroughly read and re-read for familiarization. Thereafter, the data were categorized under the following three pre-determined top-level themes:

**I Change characteristics**

The impact of change type and expected outcome of change present in the case company

**II Change enablers**

How the change enablers – knowledge & skills, resources and commitment – have been strengthened at the case company

**III Change methods**

The effect of the implementational logics and change management efforts and policies present in the case company
Third, all data were analyzed by coding features of interest separately across all the pre-determined themes. The codes were collated into sub-themes individually for all the pre-determined themes. The emerged sub-themes were then compared to the framework illustrating the elements of employee experience. Last, the findings of the empirical study were compared to the findings of the literature review and the combined results presented and interpreted. The aim was to identify any relationship between employee experience and change characteristics, enablers and methods regardless of direction of the impact.
4 FINDINGS

In this section, the findings of this thesis – based on synthesis of the results from the empirical study and the literature review – are presented. The structure of this section follows the four main findings of this thesis, ending in an illustrative summary. The consequences of iterative, radical scale change on employee experience are first demonstrated. The second and third section concern the change enabling effect of employee experience as well as its turmoil relieving function midst change. The suggested balancing role of change management is introduced in the end.

4.1 THE CONSEQUENCES OF LARGE SCALE CHANGE AND AN ITERATIVE APPROACH

Fira expects the construction industry to follow the trend of disrupting digitalization that has already affected for instance the manufacturing industry. The change facing Fira is, hence, not only large scale in its own context but part of a discontinuous, industry-wide change.

“Market shares will be re-divided, and it’s going to happen in a relatively short time-frame.” (H7)

Fira’s answer to this change in the competitive environment was found to rely on three distinct efforts of strategic re-positioning: servitization of best practices, transformation of business model and scalability through digitalization.

“The central premise is that we have to create new business that is different from construction and it changes [our strategy] the most. This is because usually when construction companies change their strategy or do something new, they look at it through the changes in the construction business. We want to build concepts that may be scalable anywhere – regardless if it is our own construction project or not.” (H2)

The two first-mentioned efforts are closely linked together. Fira is expanding its offerings from general contractor services to services replicating the best practices found helpful in carrying out its own projects. This is also a significant change in the business model, as
Fira is shifting ever more from an executing role to be an enabler of other construction companies – ultimately on a global scale.

"We want to offer digital services globally, within the construction industry framework. The steps for this are to build locally in the [Helsinki] metropolitan area, offer services primarily in Finland and when our platforms are developed, seek for global breakthrough." (H7)

The last distinct effort is the successive step of the two aforementioned. The new service offerings will be constructed in a manner that enables scalability through digital, data based solutions.

"The starting point is that we seek to develop scalable business [...] that is why we need to use new technology and digitalization." (H5)

Data do not suggest any doubt regarding the relevancy of substance regarding the change in Fira’s strategy. It is rather viewed as a natural next step in the company’s evolvement, as well as the right response to the changing competitive environment, by the interviewees. Furthermore, it was found inspiring by the survey respondents set positively to the change. However, in terms of employee experience the radical change scale is decreasing clarity and predictability, which according to theory are needed for aligning expectations (Maylett & Wride, 2017).

"It was the first time we mentioned that we will operate within other businesses besides construction, which value in the future will match or exceed the value of our current construction business. Maybe that is what raises the question – are we going to build in the future as well? It creates insecurity and uncertainty to some employees. Do I possess the right skills? Is this the right company for me? (H3)

"The company has grown so fast that pain points emerge when trying to figure who we are – are we builders or are we those who sell services globally [...] People get a sense of uncertainty – am I going to perform well enough, and is all I have done previously meaningless now?" (H1)
“When talking about strategy, the importance of differentiation is often mentioned, but at the same time it contains many unacceptable aspects. There is a lot of people not accepting our differentiation, but would accept us if we would be as everybody else, despite the importance of differentiation. It creates a paradox – you talk about differentiation, but accepting it might still be difficult.” (H5)

In short, all changes made by firms include decisions regarding continuing as before, expanding or discontinuing an effort (Zook, 2007). The systematic change methods proposed to aid decision-making generally include steps such as “scouting and diagnosing the current situation, planning and communicating change and finally implementing and instilling the new changes” (Al-Haddad & Kotnour, 2015).

Recently, however, the most successful strategy implementers seem to move beyond this logic. In a rapidly changing business environment plan then act type linear approach will not do. Instead, planning the change and its implementation happen simultaneously and the direction is tweaked as understanding grows through learning and observing the environment, while following the vision of the company (Mankins, 2017; Sull, 2007; Sull et al., 2015). The data shows that Fira has clearly adopted this latter implementational logic.

"We are at all times trying to learn and explore the markets, partners, employees and the breakthroughs might happen now or later. In order to learn you have to make mistakes too." (H6)

"[On the iterative implementational logic]I believe that we succeed when the vision and values are in place and we work towards a long term goal, even though we would diverge from the roadmap.” (H9)

This iterative approach, despite its suggested superiority, was found to entail the same expectation alignment hindering qualities as for the large scale of change. The re-allocation of resources is a concrete example of the effect on employee experience of an iterative approach to change implementation.
Both the organizational change literature in general and the strategy implementation literature consider the proper availability and allocation of resources to be one of the most critical factors enabling successful implementation. Heide et al. (2002) propose that without the needed resources, strategy implementation might even not be possible at all. Further, they argue that allocation primarily concerns capital, which then guides the allocation of human resources.

On the contrary, most of the interviewees regarded allocation of resources to primarily include allocation of human resources. This was deemed to correspond to Fira’s construction business logic of keeping a light balance sheet by offering general contracting as a service, which underlines the importance of the company’s employees.

“In the service business everything is created within our minds. The construction projects share also come from managing people.” (H6)

As noted by interviewees H5 and H9, the chosen iterative nature of change implementation means that resource allocation is closely linked to the learning capacity.

"The ability to do the right things is always dependent on learning. Today you generally know more than you knew yesterday. Today you might realize that you have to invest in something you did not notice yesterday” (H5)

“Resource allocation could always be improved. The development of new businesses has been largely learning. We have assumed that certain people and roles are needed and when time has passed we have noticed that we need to make change. You must trust that you are going in the right direction – resource allocation always lags in comparison to the strategy and the vision. (H9)

Therefore, as resources concern mainly human resources in the case company context, and constant re-allocation of resources is a characteristic of the chosen implementation logic, it results in a tumultuous environment for the employees. Even to an extent where they perceive it as hindering recommending the company as an employer.
"[When responding to why he/she would recommend Fira as an employer] I cannot recommend Fira due to the constant changes in the organization. I would not be able to promise the person that he/she would have the same tasks as were discussed during the interviewing phase.” (Anonymous respondent, Survey II)

"[When responding to why he/she would recommend Fira as an employer] Several things are a little unclear and the constant radical change and instability of things makes it difficult to give a clear picture of Fira. You would fear that you would have given the wrong picture and created too high expectations of Fira.” (Anonymous respondent, Survey I)

4.2 COMPETENCE AND COMMITMENT

There is a clear unanimity among the interviewees, that in order to implement the planned change the company needs to acquire knowledge and skills currently not possessed, as well as strengthening its core competencies. This is due to that success of the strategy is seen to rely on producing scalable services based on solutions stemming and tested in Fira’s own production. One of the interviewees sees that understanding the dynamics of service production is the key to transform them into scalable data-based solutions:

"The big thing is if we are able to realize servitization in a manner that makes it possible to construct data based business on top of it – do we understand it the right way. The dynamics are different, so the same old ones cannot be used.” (H4)

Although Fira has a history in service provision, acquiring skills in services development is seen as crucial as well as in-house software development capabilities.

"We need software development knowledge, service designers - - the spectrum is wide, but extensively beyond the field of construction engineering” (H9)

In addition to specialist knowledge, two interviewees mention that Fira need people with a background in service business and knowledge on service productization.
"When we start offering data based and service solutions our business model shifts to products from the projects inherent in the construction business. This type of productization is not familiar to us."

(II3)

"Probably service business experts, who have created new services [...] not just service design, but people with previous service business ownership."

(II8)

The chosen implementational logic is inherently based around the learning capacity of the organization in acquiring needed knowledge and skills. From an employee experience perspective, competency acquisition by learning was found to go hand-in-hand with growth and impact.

"We have been offering young people different job tasks quite unbiasedly."

(II5)

"The most skillful employees have been moved to manage development project, which has put pressure on the construction sites. We have effectively taken our own people and moved them to enable them to take bigger steps – in other words increased their influence."

(II7)

Further, the iterative nature explicates the change readiness boosting effect of being able to reactively recruit new people possessing emerging technical and functional competency needs. Regarding recruitment, half of the interviewees mentioned Fira’s story or forerunner reputation as a dominant reason for joining the company. In other words, the data suggests that employee experience is linked to acquiring the right talent through the brand contract (Maylett & Wride, 2017) and the companies reason for being (Morgan, 2017).

"[On the factors that affect attractiveness of Fira as an employer] Our story – who would not want to be a part of building a better society – for real?"

(II3)
"[When responding to why he/she would recommend Fira as an employer] my experience is that Fira is genuinely aiming at developing construction.” (Anonymous respondent, Survey I)

"[When responding to why he/she would recommend Fira as an employer] [Fira is] an unconventional construction company in which you get to take part in transforming the whole industry.” (Anonymous respondent, Survey I)

Interviewees H7 and H10 mention the recommendations of Fira’s current employees as a critical recruitment channel.

"When recruiting, the spirit of the firm, and how our employees lure their friends and previous colleagues to join the Fira team have proven to be valuable factors. It has been the best and most effective recruitment channel for a long time now – Fira’s employees recommending the firm to others.” (H7)

"[Describing how Fira is acquiring the needed knowledge and skill] It starts by key person recruitments. A manager position for example, then usually there are followers and it starts to unravel that way.” (H10)

As interviewees H7 and H8 explicate, the importance of keeping the promises made when recruiting is underlined – closing the expectation gap in terms of employee experience.

"[Describing a recently recruited employee] He was positively impressed and surprised with our operations and how far along we are with things. He then perceived that we had kept the given promises. That is why he was able to tell about it to his colleague, who also wanted to join the Fira family.” (H7)

"Because our people also talk about how it is like [to work at Fira] – is it innovative, are we forward-looking, do we get things done – keeping the promises make us attract the right people” (H8)
In addition to acquisition of knowledge and skills, employee experience was found to affect the change enabling employee commitment. The literature suggests commitment on two levels to be of importance regarding enabling the implementation of organizational change: organizational commitment and commitment to change. The findings propose that aligning the expectations through increased clarity and predictability is what make employees commit in general, and to the change in particular. On an individual level, interaction between managers and employees as well as communicating the change have been utilized to create the needed awareness.

"The points of encounter, interaction, discussion and testing [is what creates commitment]." (H5)

"The goals have been gone through with the teams of the different businesses [...] again it is the interaction that is certainly one of the most important ways to create commitment." (H6)

"[The change] has been discussed and communicated [...] and gone through team-wise. [...] When talking about commitment, it needs to be understood what it means to me and what I get out of it – you should increase the perception of how it alters my everyday work." (H8)

Further, Fira is widely owned by its employees, and the ownership element has also been used to create awareness and commitment, as described by interviewee H6.

"[Describing factors utilized for achieving commitment to change] One element has been the possibility of becoming an owner and the goals are stated in the shareholder’s agreement” (H6)

In addition to the clarity and predictability created by change awareness, commitment is suggested to stem from perceived possibilities of growth and impact, as described by interviewee H5.

"[Describing factors affecting commitment] People often view things from their own perspective and their own possibility to impact something. Thus,
it is about the personal goals [...] do they see themselves in a specific role with these and those possibilities in the future. (H5)

4.3 RELIEVING THE TURMOIL

Given the tumultuous environment associated with an iterative change implementation logic, elements of employee experience were found to relieve the turmoil of change. The findings suggest that elements of the employee experience may be utilized as guiding principles in coordinating development of new businesses. Several of the interviewees refer to the new businesses stemming from the startup-program as concrete and successful embodiments of the new strategy. Undoubtedly, these employees have enjoyed noteworthy autonomy and their work has had a great impact – which both are characteristics of positive employee experience. Interviewee H2 describes the reason for their success as follows:

“[Replying to if the success of the startups has been based on availability of resources] No, it is more about a core team, which has been 100 percent focused on it. That has been the most important factor – they have in no way had much people.” (H2)

The startups have benefited from the clarity and predictability of allowing them full focus. A similar logic of increasing clarity and predictability has also lead to stability in the construction business unit, according to interviewee H8.

"In a certain way the construction business has been stabilized in the way that they are not steered from wherever inside the [Fira] Group.” (H8)

Further, as the following employee responses suggest, there are some evidence that the tumultuous environment is somewhat relieved by a sense of connection to the other employees of the organization.

"[When responding to why he/she would recommend Fira as an employer] The atmosphere is good, but there is plenty of mess here.” (Anonymous respondent, Survey I)

"[When responding to why he/she would recommend Fira as an employer]
Everybody is constantly busy. It is no effectivization to do the same things, only faster [...] The good part is all the wonderful and very smart people!”
(Anonymous respondent, Survey II)

4.4 THE BALANCING ROLE OF CHANGE MANAGEMENT

The organizational change literature suggests that in comparison to systematic change methods, change management involves more holistic activities. They aim at aligning the organizational change efforts with the companies mission statement and involving employees in the change initiatives (Al-Haddad & Kotnour, 2015).

According to theory, leadership and management act as the basis for positive employee experience (IBM & Globoforce, 2016) and the empirical study of this thesis suggests that change management is no exception. The turmoil facing the employee’s midst change was found to be manageable so that it does not decrease the employee experience by proper change management.

”[On how being midst change affects the employee experience] It is largely dependent on the success of the change management. It may be for the good or for the worse, but it definitely creates challenges regarding change management.” (H2)

”[On creating positive employee experience midst change] If the change is well managed and you get buy-in, then why not. But when there are several simultaneous changes and they are not prepared or managed well, it will decrease morale. Not the change itself, but the way it is implemented is reflected in the employee experience – either positively or negatively.” (H8)

The findings propose that the role of change management is balancing the bidirectional impact between employee experience and change implementation success. Regarding the radicality of change, interviewee H3 suggests that the pace of change needs to be balanced by limiting the number of parallel development projects.

“It seems to be the Fira way to quickly put something together and then go talk to a customer or see if it works. And in a way, I like the fast pace and the fixing of what does not work. However, the amount of initiative cannot
be out of hands. When we were changing the strategy, we noticed that there were 70 simultaneous development projects. Quite many got discontinued at that point." (H3)

Interviewee H2 describes that radicality also poses challenges in managing both old and new businesses within the same organization.

"[Describing the challenge of developing new business in conjunction with the current operations] It is challenging for change management – the organization contains two different worlds in between which you have to balance.” (H2)

“The opinion is sometimes that we should talk more about construction – finding the right balance is challenging.” (H5)

However, radicality of the change has given Fira its reputation as forerunner in the industry, which has proven to be advantageous for example regarding recruitment. Interviewee H9 even suggest that without change, the effect on employee experience is opposite for some employees.

"I believe that for the younger generations it is a prerequisite – a stagnant environment would lower the employee experience.” (H9)

At the same time, the large gap between old and new needs to be balanced to align expectations in terms of employee experience theory. This then poses challenges on change management – the goals need to be ambitious, but no too far away from current reality.

"The forerunner reputation and other good ‘buzz’ is not perceivable within production. Everyday work at the construction sites is the same type of struggle for survival as it is in other construction companies.” (Anonymous respondent, Survey I)

In addition, to reduce the recoil of change efforts, the findings suggest a similar kind of individualistic change management approach as needed for positive employee experience
creation. First, managers need to consider the individualistic background of the employees.

"In change management you have to separate two things – we have experienced employees in the organization, whose ways of working we need to be able to re-direct. And then the other half of people who for the first time are learning to work according to realistic or Fira’s ways of doing things. These two groups of employees are quite different, but both need to be influenced and their ways of working steered in the same direction.” (H7)

Second, considering the individualistic resilience of employees may be utilized to gradually involve people in the change efforts, as proposed by interviewee H9.

“Those who want stability must be included when the decision about the content of change has been done, not when there still are seven alternative ways to go – they should not be burdened with that. At that point, the ones enjoying change need to be scanning for the solution. When the direction is chosen, the others need to be incorporated to define how it should be implemented. The point in time where said employee is exposed with it is maybe the most important.” (H9)

Last, the practices based on employee experience elements proposed to offer relief in the turmoil of change may not be overemphasized. The amount of impact and autonomy needs to be balanced as part of the individualistic change management efforts.

"In my experience, Fira offers a broad array of tasks of which to choose from, as well as interesting development projects. I would just hope that the changes would be better managed and that the ones involved would have sufficient amount of time and resources for change and growth. A too big workload or too much responsibility is not that tempting, even though ideologically or according to the strategy, growth and development is encouraged.” (Anonymous respondent, Survey 1)
4.5 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Employee experience was found to aid implementation of organizational change both by boosting change readiness and as a relieving countermeasure to the turmoil of iterative change systematicity. A positive employee experience aids firms with reactive recruitment, as well as gaining employee commitment – both regarding the change effort and the organization in general. Further, elements of the employee experience - mainly autonomy, impact and connection – were found to predict change success by offering relief in the fast-paced iterative change environment.

The iterative change systematicity, on the other hand, perceived as superior and necessary for success by the literature and the interviewees of the case company respectively, was found to involve several possible employee experience weakening elements – mainly due to its inherently turbulent nature. The radicality of change scale was also deemed linked to employee experience weakening factors. The relationship between employee experience and organizational change success is hence bidirectional.

Last, change management was found to balance both ways of the bidirectional impact. Ultimately, employee experience could thus be utilized for optimizing the pace of change at all possible for the organization. The usage of employee experience as a feedback loop for change management efforts is further elaborated in the following section of this thesis. An illustration of the summary of findings is found in Figure 6.

Figure 6. Illustration of summary of findings.
5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Three prominent megatrends of the current competitive environment are shaping the way firms’ need to consider their employees. Firstly, the shift in offerings from products to services and ultimately experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 1998) explicates the role of customer-employee interaction, which is critical for achieving a positive customer experience (Jain et al., 2017). Comparatively, positive experiences are delivered more consistently by satisfied and engaged employees (Mosley, 2007). Secondly, employees need the proper skills to tackle the vast technology development currently present. This, on the other hand, explicates the importance of both recruitment and retention of suitable – tech-savvy and business critical – talent, and as birthrates in developed countries are dropping, firms find themselves battling what is often referred to as ‘the war for talent’. Lastly, as globalization has turned the pace of change in the competitive environment up to eleven and resistance to said change is often linked to personal and organizational stemmed perceptions of the employee (Rosenberg & Mosca, 2011), the firms who come out at top are expected to be inherently employee-centric.

In this thesis, the novel concept of employee experience is examined as a possible general management approach for solving the challenge of adaptability by studying its link to the successful implementation of significant organizational change. The single-case study approach aims to map this relation by studying a specific type of organizational change – strategy implementation. As to date, focusing on the employee experience has already been proposed as a means of creating a positive customer experience as well as aiding firms to strive in the war for talent.

In order to gain understanding on the role of employee experience regarding successful change implementation, the main research question of this study was formulated as follows:

*RQ: How does employee experience affect implementation success of significant change?*

The main research question was attempted to be answered by means of three research sub-questions collectively spanning all components of organizational change, as proposed by Al-Haddad & Kotnour (2015). Thus, the first research sub-question was formulated:

*RSQ1: What is the relation between change characteristics and employee experience?*
The question was tackled by comparing the results of the empirical study with the theories of organizational change type and outcomes. Concerning change type, the findings suggest no relation between employee experience and the specific change type of strategy implementation. However, the radicality of the scale of change poses a possible negative impact on employee experience.

Regarding the outcomes of change efforts, the findings suggest somewhat differing expectations of the employees and what is generally seen as satisfying outcomes for the change effort. Employees do expect the changes to succeed on the markets, but they also want to see its effect on their everyday work and know what is in it for them for instance career-wise. This explicates the importance of anchoring the change efforts in the reality of the organization midst change to achieve positive employee experience.

The second research sub-question considered universally valuable enablers of any type of change effort and was consequently formulated:

**RSQ2: What is the relation between change enablers and employee experience?**

As proposed by the literature, employee experience was found to aid reactive recruitment of technical and functional skills. Further, as both concepts share several common underlying factors, the literature on employee experience and the findings of this thesis suggest that a positive employee experience predicts commitment to both the organization, as well as the change itself. The last enabler, resources, was found to explicate the tumultuous environment as perceived by the employee due to utilization of an iterative approach to change implementation.

Last, the third research sub-question tackled the relation between employee experience and systematic change methods as well as change management methods and thus formulated as follows:

**RSQ3: What is the relation between change methods and employee experience?**
As iterative approaches to change implementation are deemed superior by the strategy implementation literature, the plan-then-act logic present in previous systematic change methods is no longer viable. Instead, firm’s need to stay on their toes at all times and make sure they learn as much as possible during the extent of the change effort, while they plan and implement the change simultaneously. However, this new systematicity does not come without its flaws. As explicated by the resource allocation example in this thesis, this type of approach was found to weaken the employee experience due to its tumultuous nature. The role of proper change management, on the other hand, was found to be ever more critical as systematicity shifts towards an iterative approach. Change management is needed for achieving balance - it sets the optimal pace of change and enables the creation of positive employee experience during this turmoil.

This study then confirms that employee experience widely affects the implementation success of significant change. However, the impact is bidirectional, with the change effort itself taking its toll on the employee experience. At a higher level of abstraction, it may be concluded that employee experience and significant organizational change both boost and dilute one another – explicating the importance of change management.

In many ways employee experience may be regarded as a glue binding together the different dimensions of change. It creates readiness for change by aiding recruitment as well as commitment and its elements provide guidelines for effective practices to relieve the turmoil of change. On the contrary, not doubting its relevancy, the nature of iterative change takes its toll on the employee experience. Managers need to listen to the employees and provide the conditions for creation of positive employee experience. However, they simultaneously need to be ambitious regarding change scale and keeping the pace of change high enough to strive in the current competitive environment and keep up the company’s reputation as a forerunner. It bears to remember that a positive employee experience is not the measure of a successful change effort – it is only an important prerequisite.
5.1 MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The main managerial implication of this thesis is that it adds to the notion of employee experience business criticality in the current competitive environment, as projected by the consultancies that can be regarded pioneers on the subject. Further, as shown in this thesis, the impact regarding employee experience and change implementation is bidirectional. This amplifies the role of appropriate change management and highlights the importance of balancing measures midst change.

Recent management literature and the findings of this thesis suggest that there is no time like the present for organizations to start focusing on creating positive employee experiences. Currently, successful organizations are exceedingly adaptive and several aspects suggest it to be widely dependent on employee-centricity. During these times of rapid technology development and offerings shifting from products to services and ultimately experiences, there is high demand for engaged and satisfied, tech-savvy employees with the will and the ways to create positive customer experiences. Organizations able to create positive employee experience are proposed to excel in both recruitment and retention of business-critical talent and customer experience creation. As the findings of this thesis suggest that a positive employee experience aids the implementation of organizational change, this novel concept thus boasts characteristics for solving the adaptability challenge in the current fast-paced and volatile competitive environment.

Contrarily, the highly iterative implementational logics currently deemed favorable by the strategy implementation literature were found to include employee experience weakening characteristics. As planning the change and its implementation happens simultaneously, regularly occurring re-allocation of resources for example is easily perceived as tumultuous. Further, a pace of change perceived overwhelming or communicating plans depicting a future state to far from the current reality, were found to take their toll on the employee experience. As does no change at all—the key is balance.

The findings of this thesis call for a genuine care for any employee subject to significant change efforts. The perceived balancing role of change management is not possible without observing the voice of the organization that is midst change and designing managerial actions upon it. The role of management is then seemingly shifting from planning and controlling change to guiding the change in the desired direction by tending
to the needs of the employees implementing the change in the last hand. Employee experience offers a means of balancing the pace of the change considering said employees. Its holistic nature and bidirectional impact concerning change implementation success makes it optimal for capturing and analyzing the voice of the organization midst change. However, it bears to remember that employee experience does not offer indicators regarding the progress of the change effort – change success is measured by other characteristics.

5.2 CONTRIBUTIONS TO THEORY

This thesis adds to theory on both the concept of employee experience in general, as well as its link to organizational change implementation success, especially regarding strategy implementation. Further, it considers the role of employees in the success of strategy implementation, albeit mediated by the concept of employee experience.

The literature review regarding employee experience is synthesized into a unique definition of the concept as well as a novel framework, which showcases the elements of employee experience as proposed by selected authors and reports on the subject. The definition anchors the study to the existing literature, while the framework contributes to the theory by comparing and combining the theories and illustrating their mutual relationships.

The main empirical study of this thesis extends the applicability of employee experience enhancing efforts for companies seeking to strive in the current competitive environment. Companies offering an exceptional employee experience are suggested to boast an engaged and satisfied staff motivated to deliver an exceptional customer experience. Further, they are proposed to prevail over their competitors when it comes to recruitment and retention. This study explicates the relationship between employee experience and successful change – the missing link in considering employee experience as a general management approach for solving the challenge of adaptability.

Though the effect of employees on strategy implementation is often stated, Li et al. (2010) argue that no research explicitly “analyze the different ways in which employees enable or interfere with strategy implementation and why”. This thesis adds to the scarcely research subject of employee impact regarding strategy implementation success, although viewed through the lens of the concept of employee experience.
5.3 LIMITATIONS AND AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has a few limitations, which need to be considered regarding the generalizability and reliability of the results. The main limitations are based on the case study research strategy, the main concept not being based on academic research and the researcher of this study.

Both generalizability and reliability of the finding in this thesis might be compromised due to the single case study research strategy utilized. Although it acts as an illustrative example, the case company situation is still inherently unique. The uniqueness stems from both strategy substance as well as implementational factors. Additionally, the timing of the cross-sectional study midst implementation may alter the results. Retrospectively studied, the findings could be either more accurate or memories grown sweeter with time.

The second issue regarding reliability of this thesis stems from the novelty of its main concept. Employee experience is only starting to emerge as a concept within academic research, which limits the reliability of this thesis as its theoretical basis may be flawed. For example, the constituents of employee experience utilized for constructing the framework of employee experience elements stem from non-peer reviewed publications and literature.

Last, the reliability of this study is weakened by the single researcher approach of this thesis. The probability of reliability issues is further enlarged as the researcher was lacking proficiency in conducting non-leading interviews to the extent of this thesis prior to commencing the study. Also, the researcher is strongly affiliated with the case company by being an employee of said company both prior and during the conduction of this study, which might act as a source of personal bias.

Based on the knowledge gained from conducting this study and in conjunction with previous studies, the following avenues for future research are proposed:

Further conceptualization of the employee experience
As previously mentioned, employee experience has not yet caught on in the academic research, though its emergence is slowly starting to show. The importance of the topic is noted, as it has been appointed both “the new human resource management approach” (Plaskoff, 2017) and that its conceptualization could considerably enhance knowledge of
employees (Larivière et al., 2017). Therefore, further conceptualization of employee experience is proposed as the first avenue for future research.

*Indicators and measures of employee experience*

Larivière et al. (2017) argue, that in addition to the conceptualization of employee experience, specific measures would further aid improvements regarding knowledge of employees. IBM & Globoforce’s (2016) ‘Employee Experience Index’ is an important onset to this subject. Measuring the employee experience could also act as a feedback loop, or KPI for management. Thus, the second proposed avenue for future research concerns the development of indicators and measures of the employee experience.

Currently, in lack of universal indicators and measures of employee experience, the findings of this study could be tested quantitatively by comparing change effort success with results from employee engagement, employee satisfaction or eNPS surveys taken along the progression of change. This is due to their similarities in characteristics. When established, the indicators and measures of employee experience could be used for example as part of a design science methodology utilizing study, where employee experience is used as a KPI for a change effort. In other words, employee experience would be coupled directly to the change effort and applied as a means of change management. As the majority of organizational changes fail (Kotter & Whitehead, 2010; Maurer, 2010), the linkage of employee experience and a change efforts could be designed around previously failed changes to be re-implemented under monitoring and managerial actions mainly upon signals stemming from employee experience.

*Employee participation willingness*

Although employee experience is formed around the responses of employees to interactions with their employing organization, Morgan (2017) stresses the importance of employee proactivity in aiding the organization to create positive employee experience. The forums for this being surveys, participating in focus groups and discussions with managers or generally speaking up. Therefore, research on employee participation willingness in assisting the organization to create positive employee experience is proposed as the third avenue for future research.
Employee experience return on investment

Several authors suggest an array of positive effects on companies focusing on the employee experience. However, it still goes up against every other performance enhancing activity available and, therefore, its return on investment needs to observable and competitive. Morgan (2017) further argues that the actual activities aiding creation of positive employee experience are fairly low. On the contrary, designing an organization with the ability to implement these activities might not be. The last proposed avenue for future research is, hence, the return on investment on employee experience enhancing activities.
REFERENCES


Morgan, J. (2017). The Employee Experience Advantage: How to Win the War for Talent by Giving Employees the Workspaces They Want, the Tools They Need, and a Culture They Can Celebrate. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.


APPENDIX 1 - ORIGINAL INTERVIEW AGENDA (FI)

Haastateltavan tausta

Nykyinen ja mahdolliset entiset roolit Firalla
Tärkeimmät vastuut ja tehtävät Firalla
Muutosjohtamisen kokemus

Firan uusi strategia

Kerro Firan uudesta strategiasta kokonaisuutena

- Muihin rakennusliikkeisiin verrattuna, suomalaisiin ja ulkomaisiin
- Muihin yrityksiin verrattuna, suomalaisiin ja ulkomaisiin

Kerro uuden strategian merkittävimmistä muutoksista Firan liiketoimintaan

- Tärkeimmät kilpailutekijät
- Liiketoimintamallit

Kerro uuden strategian merkittävimmistä muutoksista Firan organisoitumiseen ja ohjaukseen

- Eri liiketoimintojen keskinäiset suhteet ja riippuvuudet
- Tavoitteet ja mittarit

Mitkä asiat pitää toteutua, jotta strategian mukainen tavoitettu voidaan pitää saavutettuna?

Tieto ja osaaminen

Kerro millaista tietoa ja osaamista koet Firan uuden strategian implementointi vaativan

- Miten saadaan oikea tieto ja osaaminen?
- Millaisia onnistumisia tiedon ja osaamisen varmistamiseen on jo tullut, jotka ovat vieneet Firaa lähemmäs strategian implementointia?
- Mitä oppeja Firalla on saatu tai olet itse saanut tiedon ja osaamisen hankintaan liittyen?
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<th>Resurssit</th>
<th>Kerro miten Firan uuden strategian implementointia on resursoitu</th>
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<td>▪ Mihin osaan uuden strategian implementointia on mielestäsi panostettu eniten?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>▪ Mihin osaan uuden strategian implementointia ei mielestäsi ole vielä panostettu tarpeeksi?</td>
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<td>▪ Missä resursointi on mielestäsi onnistunut ja sen seurauksena Fira on lähempänä strategian implementointia?</td>
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<td>▪ Mitä oppeja Firalla on saatu tai olet itse saanut strategian implementoinnin resursointiin liittyen?</td>
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<th>Muutokseen sitoutuneisuus</th>
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<td>▪ Mitkä tekijät vaikuttavat työpäälliköiden, tiiminvetäjien ja muun keskijohdon sitoutuneisuuteen uuteen strategiaan?</td>
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<td>▪ Millaisia onnistumisia henkilöstön ja keskijohdon sitouttamiseen uuteen strategiaan on tullut, jotka ovat vieneet Firaa lähemmäs strategian implementointia?</td>
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<td>▪ Mitä oppeja Firalla on saatu tai olet itse saanut muutokseen sitouttamiseen liittyen?</td>
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</table>
Muutosprosessi  Kerro millaisia päättöksenteon menetelmiä ja tukia on käytetty Firan uuden strategian implementoinnissa

- Millä perusteella on tehty päättökset aloituksesta, keskeytyksistä ja jatkoista?
- Missä muutokseen liittyvää päättöksenteko ja prosesssi on toiminut parhaiten?
- Mitä Firalla on opittu tai olet itse oppinut liittyen muutosprosessiin tai muutokseen liittyvään päättöksentekoon?

Muutosjohtaminen  Kerro miten Firalla on johdettu uuden strategian implementointia

- Miten vallitseva muutosjohtamiskäytäntö Firalla on tukenut uuden strategian implementointia?
- Mitä oppeja on saatu liittyen muutosjohtamiseen?

Kerro miten olet itse pyrkinyt johtamaan uuden strategian implementointia

- Missä olet erityisesti omistunut?
- Mitä olet oppinut Firan uuden strategian implementoinnin johtamisesta?

Työntekijäkokemus  Vapaata keskustelua työntekijäkokemuksesta

- Miten työntekijäkokemus käsitteenä koetaan Firalla ja miten koet sen itse?
- Mikä sen rooli on nyt ja mitä se tulee olemaan tulevaisuudessa?
- Miten muutoksen keskellä oleminen vaikuttaa työntekijöihin ja työntekijäkokemukseen?
APPENDIX 2 - TRANSLATED INTERVIEW AGENDA (EN)

Interviewee background
Current and possible previous roles at Fira
Main responsibilities and tasks at Fira
Change management proficiency

Fira's new strategy
Describe Fira’s new strategy as a whole
- Compared to other construction companies, Finnish and foreign
- Compared to other companies in general, Finnish and foreign
Describe the main changes in business characteristics
- Competitive advantages
- Business model(s)
Describe the main changes regarding organization and control mechanisms
- The connection and dependence between business units
- Objectives and measures
When might the new strategy be regarded successfully implemented?

Knowledge and skills
Describe what type of knowledge and skills are needed for successful strategy implementation
- How is the right knowledge and skills obtained?
- What type of successes concerning obtaining the right knowledge and skills have already taken Fira closer to implementation of the new strategy?
- What are the main lessons learnt regarding obtaining the right knowledge and skills for strategy implementations?
Resources
Describe the use of resources regarding the implementation of Fira’s new strategy

- What part of the new strategy has received the most resources?
- What part of the new strategy has in your opinion not been resourced enough?
- Where has the use of resources regarding implementation of Fira’s new strategy been the most successful in your opinion?
- What are the main lessons learnt regarding use of resources for successful strategy implementations?

Commitment to change
Describe how Fira has ensured its employees commitment to the implementation of the new strategy

- What factors affect the commitment of project managers, team leads and other members middle management to the implementation of the new strategy?
- What factors affect the commitment of non-management employees to the implementation of the new strategy?
- What are Fira’s employee’s expectations regarding the new strategy?
- What commitment boosting actions regarding implementation of Fira’s new strategy have been the most successful in your opinion?
- What are the main lessons learnt regarding gaining employee commitment for successful strategy implementation?
Systematic change

Describe the decision-making process and policies utilized regarding the implementation of Fira’s new strategy

- On what basis have decisions regarding start, stop and continuation been made?
- What decision-making actions have successfully aided the implementation of Fira’s new strategy?
- What are the main lessons learnt regarding decision-making for successful strategy implementations?

Change Management

Describe how the strategy implantation has been managed at Fira

- How have the present change management practices aided the implementation of Fira’s new strategy?
- What are the main lessons learnt regarding change management?

Describe how you personally have managed the implementation of Fira’s new strategy?

- Describe your main achievements regarding implementation of the new strategy
- What are your main lessons learnt?

Employee experience

Open discussion regarding employee experience

- How is employee experience as a concept regarded at Fira and what is your personal perception of the subject?
- What is the role of employee experience today and in the future?
- How does being midst significant change affect employees and the employee experience?