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VOLVO INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Are the important messages getting through to the employees?

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Abstract

Titel   VOLVO INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Are the important messages getting through to the employees?

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Aim   To study the internal communication at Volvo IT.

Method &

material   Quantitative analysis of a web-survey.

Main result Our results show that a great portion of the employees are not satisfied with the current communication forms, particularly the managers and the intranet.

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Executive summary

This study was made on behalf of the internal communication department at Volvo IT. Volvo IT suspects that its most vital messages are not reaching out to the employees. Our assignment was therefore to examine if this suspicion is correct, and if so why. The communication barriers we have chosen to study are the various communication channels at Volvo IT, the corporate language, the strategy in itself, and the possible existence of an information overload or meaning underload.

The study was executed through a web-survey sent out to 1800 employees at Volvo IT. The employees were located all over the world, as the report aims to be a global one. The questions were simple grade-scale questions, with a few exceptions of some open-answer questions.

Our main results show that a large portion of the employees are unhappy with the managers as communicators. They are not getting enough useful information from this source and would like more face-to-face communication.

The employees are also not pleased with the complexity of the intranet. They find it difficult and time-consuming to find important information, and some even claim the information is not there to be found.

Almost half the employees feel there is an information overload at the company, and a third feel they are not getting enough important company information.

Our recommendations to Volvo IT are therefore to educate the managers in communication skills, but also to simplify the intranet to make it more accessible to all employees. Furthermore, they should be careful with the information they are sending out and keep a sparse approach. The information sent out should also be of higher quality and more relevant to the employees.

1. The communication problem at Volvo IT

Volvo IT is a multinational corporation employing about 7000 people including external contractors. The employees are spread all around the world and this presents a problem when trying to implement strategy and reach out with vital information concerning the company. The larger and the more decentralized the company is, the more important it is with an effective and working structure and coordination within the company. This could easily be applied to Volvo IT since it is a global corporation operating across markets, nations and cultures.[1]

The department of information at Volvo IT wants the internal communication to help employees understand the organisation's vision, values, culture and most importantly its strategies. Volvo IT has expressed concerns as to whether this information effectively reaches all its members. The management also feels that employees do not fully value information regarding strategy and it is therefore not prioritized in relation to other information. Volvo IT's ambition is also to find out what to do in order to get the employees interested in what they regard as vital information.

1.2 Communication noise

The increasing flow of information in our society, not to mention in the modern workplace, can constitute a constant "noise" that complicates the situation for those who work with communicating messages.[2] This noise is one of the concerns Volvo IT has regarding the difficulties in reaching out to the employees. We will further discuss this problem later in the report.
There is a wide spectrum of what can be perceived as communication noise. In this report it is important for us to understand what Volvo IT perceives as communication disturbance. The department of information at Volvo IT has listed the following:

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[1] J. Skyman, *Internal Communication – the key to success when creating a common driving force in a multinational organization?* (Gothenburg, 2004), 27.
[2] J. Falkheimer, *Strategisk kommunikation : en bok om organisationers relationer*, (Lund, 2007), 44.

- ➢ Private information.
- ➢ Information from other communities.
- ➢ Information the consultant gets externally, which does not concern Volvo IT.
- ➢ Information regarding other Volvo groups.
- ➢ Adverts or other papers within the industry.
- ➢ Email.
- ➢ The office landscape.

1.3 White-collar workers

A significant aspect of the communication situation at Volvo IT is that there are no blue-collar workers within the corporation. This means that all the employees have access to at least one computer at all times. Computers constitute, thus, the foundation at the Volvo IT work place. It may seem that this would set a favourable groundwork for successful communication between the management and the workers. However, computer access also leads to an increased influx of other types of information, as well as enabling the employees to look for the information themselves. Therefore, in the end, a seemingly ideal situation for effective communication can actually become an obstacle in trying to reach out with important information.

1.4 The recipient perspective

When faced with communication problems within the company, often the first thing management look to is the various communication channels. Strid claims, however, that it is just as important to examine the employees, what information they want and why.[3] From a strict recipient perspective these two factors are exactly what you research – what the recipients want and why. You may say that the angle we have taken in this report is leaning towards the recipient perspective, but we have also chosen to examine the communication channels as well as the sender. Therefore we do not want to call it strictly a recipient orientated report, but that is definitely the angle we are taking.

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[3] J. Strid, *Internkommunikation inom organisationer, företag och myndigheter*, (Lund, 1999), 41.

2. Volvo IT

In this chapter we will take a closer look at Volvo IT as a large corporation, both in a general sense and from a communication angle.

Furthermore, we have outlined four of the major communication channels that exist within the company and, finally, we will sort out what is actually regarded as vital information at Volvo IT.

2.1 What is Volvo IT?

Volvo Information Technology AB is an expanding global corporation and is a part of the Volvo Group. Volvo IT is wholly-owned and is a subsidiary of AB Volvo, one of the largest industrial groups in the Nordic region. Volvo IT is what you call a support-based corporation, which means that they do not produce hardware but work as a supporting unit.

Volvo IT was created in January 1998 when it replaced its predecessor Volvo Data. The company offers solutions for all areas of the industrial process. This includes solutions for product development, manufacturing and after-market, as well as sales and administration.[4]

Because Volvo IT is such a large corporation the organisation structure is complex. Volvo IT splits their companies up in *Business Areas* or *Units.* The company is furthermore divided into regions with offices all over the world. The company has, at this time, five thousand employees but employ up to seven thousand including consultant posts and project managers. Because of the complexity of the organisational structure, we have chosen not to show the structure map here, but as an attachment in the end of the report.

2.2 Why is the internal communication important at Volvo IT?

Volvo explains:

Internal communications primarily aim at promoting common values and business understanding through an ongoing dialogue. Motivating employees to proactively participate in this dialogue,

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[4] Volvo IT oral presentation.

management should improve information utilisation and feedback to achieve common goals and objectives.[5]

The larger the organisation is, the larger the need for a working internal communication. Thomas, J. Lee's fundamental purpose of communication in an organisation is to enable and energize employees to carry out its strategic intent.[6]

While many global companies choose to create subsidiaries around the world to avoid the problems that come along with a strongly decentralized company, Volvo IT has remained one corporate entity. There are several Volvo IT offices all around the globe that together must work as a functioning whole.

The department of information at Volvo IT wants the internal communication to help employees understand the organization's vision, values, culture, and most importantly its strategies. The internal communication should work as glue that binds all the different parts together. This is a particularly difficult and important task in such a large company.

2.3 Communication channels at Volvo IT

There are several communication channels being practised within Volvo IT. In the attempt to limit the extent of this report we have in this report (in consultation with our contact person at Volvo IT) outlined four of the main communication channels that are used to spread information to the employees: Intranet, email, managers, and the in-house magazine. We will in chapter 4 have a closer look at how Volvo IT uses these channels and also discuss some previous studies regarding them.

2.4 Levels of management at Volvo IT

Managers on different levels in the organisation have different communication responsibilities.

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[5] Communications in the Volvo group, 8.
[6] J. Skyman, *Internal Communication – the key to success when creating a common driving force in a multinational organization?* (Gothenburg, 2004), 22.

There are mainly three management levels that are handling the internal communication: Senior management, middle management and front-line supervisors.[7] These three levels also exist at Volvo IT as the EMT (Elite Management Team), Directors/General Managers, and First Line Managers. According to Holtz, the leaders of an organisation are responsible for painting the big picture to the employees, while the middle managers should work as a conduit of information.[8] In other words, the middle managers break down the corporate messages into what it means to the particular business unit or area to the front-line supervisors. This is a very important task but still, it is often here the information freezes. Lastly, it is the front-line supervisors' role to further break down the information into something that is relevant to the employees. "How do those vital corporate messages affect the employees in their everyday work?" This is something Volvo IT really has taken to heart, and the company tries hard to ensure that every employee can interpret the corporate strategy on a personal level and understand how to integrate the strategy in their daily work.

2.5 What are important messages?

To be able to find out if the important messages are getting through to the employees we first need to define what Volvo IT considers to be important messages. The first definition Volvo IT provided us with was basically everything included in the company's strategy. We could here see a potential problem. Considering that Volvo IT has included a very large amount of information in the strategy, we sense that this much information could be hard for the employees to absorb. In addition to the strategy, there is also more information Volvo IT wants its employees to take part of. Other essential information that needs to reach the employees is information concerning competitors within the field, and the "internal life" within Volvo and the Volvo way. We found this to be too wide and unspecific. The limited and more specific definition we decided on is the following:

1   Information relating to individual needs (for example personal development, competence development and career planning).

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[7]   S. Holtz, *Corporate conversations, (New York, 2004)*, 70.
[8]   S. Holtz, *Corporate conversations, (New York, 2004)*, 74.

2   Information relating to jobs (for example work instructions, performance feedback and follow-up).

3   Information relating to the company's situation (for example information about new customers, contracts, products, performance, financial results, etc.).

4   Information relating to objectives and values (for example mission and vision, business objectives, strategies and plans, team goals and individual goals).

5   Information relating to the world in which the company is operating (for example market trends, competitive situation, political decisions that affect business, etc.).

3. Aim and research questions

The aim of our study is to examine if the employees are receiving the vital corporate information, such as strategy (see chapter *What are important messages?*) that is being sent out from the management at Volvo IT. In order to fulfil our aim we have outlined a number of questions that need to be answered. These questions will hopefully supply us with the information we need to analyze the problems at hand, and from that also draw useful conclusions.

How do the employees want to receive corporate information?
Through which communication channels do the employees receive corporate information, and through which channels would they prefer to receive this information?   Can background factors like length of employment have an impact on the employees' attitude?

Which information and communication channels are the most effective?
Here we are interested in finding out where the employees get specific information from. Which

channels do they use to receive what information?

What can constitute possibilities and obstacles for the employees in receiving corporate messages? Here we intend to research different communication barriers. Can we find these barriers at Volvo IT? Is the official corporate language English a barrier for employees to whom English is not their first language?

4. Communicating important messages

An increasing number of companies today are faced with challenges that occur when operating across nations and markets. The ever-changing environment of many of today's expanding global corporations is creating a need for a highly developed internal communication plan. Creating a common driving force can be difficult in itself and even harder in a global company. One might say that internal communication is the key to success when setting up a driving force in a multinational organisation.[9]

Intranet, email, managers, and in-house magazines are some of the primary tools that Volvo IT uses for their internal communication. In other words, they have a wide range of aids to assist them in the spreading of information. Most organisations today recognise the importance of internal communication but are not certain of how to go about it.

4.1 The academic and social contribution

Since we live in the era of globalisation, all the more companies will have to adjust to the reality of becoming multinational, and ultimately face the same problems that Volvo IT is up against now. In an academic and social sense it is interesting to examine which of the communication channels proves to be the most efficient. Further research also needs to be conducted about why the information does not properly reach the employees. These are gaps of knowledge that could

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[9] J. Skyman, *Internal Communication – the key to success when creating a common driving force in a multinational organization?* (Gothenburg, 2004), 20.

possibly contribute to how organisations shape their internal communication in the future. The field of internal communication studies is one that is rapidly expanding. The majority of companies today realise the importance of a working internal communication strategy. It is however crucial to remember that internal communication is still a new discipline and it will take more research to grasp the complexity of the subject. We are therefore confident that our study will contribute to, and help, lead this particular subject field forward.

Another important issue is that the majority of the existing research has been done from a financial and marketing perspective. There are not many studies conducted from a strictly communication perspective. We therefore believe that our study will help bring this particular research area forward, something that is much needed now, but even more so in the future.

4.2 Possibilities - communication channels

In this study we are interested in pointing out certain elements that can possibly cause the corporate messages to fail in reaching their goal - the employees. When this happens the first thing corporations normally look to is the communication channels.

To ensure that the messages you send out actually make their way through to the employees and are perceived in the intended way, you have to choose the right channel for that specific message. There is no channel that works for all messages and a good communication strategy understands the strengths and weaknesses of each channel and uses it appropriately thereafter.[10] As stated earlier, the communication channels at Volvo IT that we intend to examine are intranet, email, managers, and the in-house magazine.

4.2.1 The intranet and email

The employees gain access to the company's strategies in different ways and through different channels. One of these channels is the Volvo IT intranet, *Violin*. Here, the employees can access

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[10]   L. Smith, *Effective internal communication (Sterling, 2005),* 74.

the different areas or parts of the strategy through various links on the first page.

The intranet and email are often grouped together because of their online function. One should, however, keep in mind that there is a vital difference between these two tools – while email hands the information straight to the employees; the intranet requires them to actively look for the information themselves. Many studies link the two together and talk about them as part of the online communication tool.

At Volvo IT they realise that you need to use the intranet and email in different ways and for different purposes.

One problem that they have discovered is that email and the intranet compete for the employees' time. Both of these channels are used to send out a lot of important and specific information. The problem that the intranet encounters is that it forces the employees to look for the information themselves. Volvo IT admits that this could possibly give the intranet a disadvantage. Ultimately, Volvo IT wants to encourage the employees to use the intranet more. Management is therefore trying to use email sparsely but effectively.

One problem that instantly presents itself concerning the intranet is that the employees often find it hard to come up with the time necessary to perform these searches. This is why the intranet needs to be effectively designed so that lack of time will not be an issue.

Bark et al talks about the importance of not letting the intranet solely function as an electronic bill board containing general information, but to use it as a tool to help the employees in their everyday work.[11] At Volvo IT the intranet is perceived as an archive, with the possibility for the employees to gain more in-depth knowledge about any part of the company. There is overall information about Volvo IT, strategies and news. There are, however, great opportunities for the employees to find out more about their own working situation, employment rules, and information regarding the own group.

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[11] M. Heide, *Intranät - en ny arena för kommunikation och lärande, (Lund, 2002),* 15.

Managers within organisations often have difficulties acknowledging the benefits an intranet can give the employees.[12] This leads to problems for the people responsible for the intranet, since they are not being provided with the knowledge and resources they need to turn the intranet into a useful tool in the work process.

What is especially important for decentralised organisations like Volvo IT is that the managers are visible and active on the web, so that they can exercise leadership across the distances. Volvo IT is presenting a text book example here by making their CEO available on the intranet to answer any questions the employees may have.

4.2.2 Managers

Bark claims that it is only in the face-to-face meeting that true dialogue can exist.[13] The meeting allows for a two-way communication that is hard to create through other channels. The meeting is the most valued form of communication among staff members across all sectors.[14] One reason for this is obviously that face-to-face communication offers the employee an opportunity to respond and ask questions. It is, however, just as important for the managers as they, in this way, can receive instant feedback. Smith claims that because of this feedback, face-to-face communication is "an excellent way of checking understanding and absorption", and that the messages should therefore be kept simple and repeated only if necessary.[15] Repeating a message over and over again can result in an indifferent attitude among the staff.

One issue regarding the face-to-face communication is that it is often aimed one-way from the management to the employees. The communication leading back from the management is considerably less developed and often happens through management-controlled studies such as surveys, which gives little chance for the employees to express adequate feedback.[16] Such surveys are sent out quite regularly by the communication department at Volvo IT. What opportunities for dialogue do the employees in Volvo IT have and can the absence of a working dialogue be a part of

[12] M. Heide, *Intranät - en ny arena för kommunikation och lärande, (Lund, 2002),* 33-34.
[13] M. Bark, *Intranätboken: från elektronisk anslagstavla till dagligt arbetsverktyg*, (Stockholm, 2002), 38.
[14] L. Smith, *Effective internal communication (Sterling, 2005),* 74.
[15] L. Smith, *Effective internal communication (Sterling, 2005),* 75.
[16] M. Heide, C. Johansson, C. Simonsson, *Kommunikation & organisation,* (Malmö, 2005), 127.

the problem of not reaching the employees?

These days, in many organizations, the face-to-face communication has fallen into disuse. Holtz argues that this is due to the growth of the online communication tools.[17] He points to the ease of sending an email and its non-confrontational form. Volvo IT does not, however, believe in this theory but points instead to the increase of outsourcing and employees working closer with clients outside of the work area. Another problem for Volvo IT is its global character, which makes it harder for face-to-face communication on a regular basis. Irrespective of the cause, the problems remain and it will be a challenging task for all companies to replace the value of meetings.

Johansson brings up the concept of how different members of a company interpret strategy and messages.[18] In order to create a common meaning people have to talk about them. Meetings are therefore fundamental for creating meaning. In a study by Johansson it was determined that the goals that were discussed most frequently during meetings, were those who were interpreted most alike.[19] It is important to keep in mind that when a strategy is communicated top-down, between different levels of management, it does not necessarily mean that messages transfer correctly from level to level.

Johansson further discusses communication of goals and strategies. According to her it has become increasingly important with managing out values, goals and strategies. In today's organisations, leadership is not about managing through govern and surveillance, but more about communicating the organisation's goals.[20] This communication is extremely important in order for the managers and the employees to reach a mutual understanding. This type of management is also what Volvo IT thrives for and trying to fully integrate.

Johansson also addresses the importance of especially managers being rhetoric when communicating important messages such as strategies. Managers who do not use the right rhetoric can contribute to the company's important messages not reaching the employees, and not having

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[17] S. Holtz, *Corporate conversations, (New York, 2004)*, 68.
[18] M. Heide, C. Johansson, C. Simonsson, *Kommunikation & organisation,* (Malmö, 2005), 127.
[19] M. Heide, C. Johansson, C. Simonsson, *Kommunikation & organisation,* (Malmö, 2005), 128.
[20] M. Heide, C. Johansson, C. Simonsson, *Kommunikation & organisation,* (Malmö, 2005), 117.

the intended effect or meaning to them. According to her studies, managers are often surprised over how little of what is communicated actually goes through and how much is lost.[21] In other words, sufficient communication skills are of the essence.

4.2.3 The in-house magazine

Read IT is the in-house magazine at Volvo IT. It is published eight times a year and is not sent out to the employees, but is available to pick up at the Volvo IT offices. It is also available online on the intranet.

The use of an in-house magazine as a source of news largely ceased altogether when organisations were introduced to the faster and more up-to-date online communication channels such as the intranet and email.[22] This does not mean, however, that the printed magazine is not an important channel for companies to use. In-house magazines can effectively be used to create feelings of belonging and solidarity towards the organisation and enhance the values and visions within the company.[23]

Holtz has outlined a few contents that are favourable to put in an in-house magazine:[24]

Image. A magazine is an excellent place to reinforce a company's image and help paint the big picture of where the company is heading and why.
Length. Since it is easier on the eye to read a paper magazine than off a computer screen the magazine is good for publishing longer texts. People also normally have more time to read a magazine, because they often carry it with them and read it when appropriate.
Detail. A magazine should contain details.
Context. A magazine can offer the employees context in the world they are operating in.

[21] M. Heide, C. Johansson, C. Simonsson, *Kommunikation & organisation,* (Malmö, 2005), 128.
[22] S. Holtz, *Corporate conversations, (New York, 2004)*, 76-84.
[23] M. Bark, *Intranätboken: från elektronisk anslagstavla till dagligt arbetsverktyg*, (Stockholm, 2002), 38.
[24] S. Holtz, *Corporate conversations, (New York, 2004)*, 76-86.

4.3 Barriers of internal communication

A part from communication channels there are several other aspects that can hinder the internal communication from functioning properly. Volvo IT is a global company and this leads to the need of intercultural communication, which is not always easy to master. The strategy can also prove to be a barrier, since it is more than often regarded as nothing more than a meaningless piece of paper. Lastly, there are the possible problems of throwing too much information at the employees (information overload), and/or giving the messages too little meaning (meaning underload).

4.3.1 Intercultural organization communication

Volvo IT is a corporation with offices all over the world. This is the reality in which the company works and must function in today. How do you get the important strategies across? This is a question of importance for any multinational company, Volvo IT defiantly fitting the description.

Volvo IT needs to act as one unified company even if the offices are situated in different areas of the world. The employees therefore need guidelines and they need to be in tune with where the company is going. Cultural differences and internal communication in an intercultural organization need to be taken into account when studying why important messages are or are not reaching the employees.

In the book *Intercultural Organizational Communication*, Lisbeth Clausen discusses the theory of how an organization being intercultural can provide communication barriers.[25] She addresses the challenges that intercultural communication can create, also internally.
A global company is an arena for leading, decision-making, problem solving, and exchanging information. It is crucial for managers and employees from one culture to be able to communicate successfully with colleagues from other cultures.[26] To be able to compete in internationally competitive markets, companies have to create global strategies. These strategies are then adapted locally.[27]

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[25] L. Clausen, Intercultural organizational communication, (Copenhagen, 2006), 30.
[26] L. Clausen, Intercultural organizational communication, (Copenhagen, 2006), 43.
[27] L. Clausen, Intercultural organizational communication, (Copenhagen, 2006), 51.

Clausen brings up the classic transmission model and believes that cultural issues such as language and context can be included in what is referred to as "noise".[28] She explains that a manager is often the source and the message may be a strategy (company's performance, sales and financial results, market trends, competitive situation etc.). The strategy is turned into a message, a channel is chosen for communication (email, intranet, meeting etc.), and the recipient, perhaps being an employee, decodes the message.

Volvo IT has addressed the issue of being an intercultural company. Their guiding principle for communication in a multicultural company is to communicate in different ways because of specific company culture, nationality, gender, etc.

To bridge these differences, we have to be open and effective in our cross-cultural communications.[29] (From the Volvo IT communication policy)

To make it easier to communicate with different units within a company, a majority of today's international organisations have implemented English as the company language.[30] The question is what effect a common language has on the internal communication. This can constitute a communication barrier, making it harder for messages to get through to all employees.[31] According to the department of internal communication at Volvo IT there actually have been comments regarding difficulties in understanding messages, primarily from France and Japan.

4.3.2 Information overload…

The term information overload is often described as a situation where a person's environment is cluttered with so much information that it becomes impossible for him/her to handle it. In such a situation it is hard for the individual person to sort out important information from the less important.[32]

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[28] L. Clausen, Intercultural organizational communication, (Copenhagen, 2006), 53.
[29] Volvo IT's communication policy.
[30] S. Jashari och H. Pålsson, *Kommunikation och engelska som koncernspråk,* (Lund, 2006).
[31] S. Holtz, *Corporate conversations, (New York, 2004)*, 74.
[32] M. Heide, *Intranät - en ny arena för kommunikation och lärande, (Lund, 2002),* 79-80.

To get a picture of information overload in today's companies we take a look at a study conducted annually by the Institute for the Future.[33] According to this study the average knowledge or white-collar worker (as opposed to a blue-collar worker) in the United States, manages more than two hundred messages a day (it seems fair to assume that this includes all types of messages, not just email or phone calls). On average, 39 per cent of knowledge workers are interrupted by a message six times or more per hour. 27 per cent are distracted by the volume of messages with which they must deal, while 19 per cent say they are overwhelmed by messages. Among high-tech workers, the numbers get even higher. Since Volvo IT consists of only high-tech workers it seems likely that an information overload is greater here than in an average company. There is simply too much information and even for the most competent people it is hard to sort out this information.

These issues have led to what is referred to as a "message meltdown". The causes for this meltdown are many and varied. Holtz mentions the following as being some of these issues:[34]

1 The individual nature of messaging. Companies cannot mandate the tools employees will use for messaging. It is a highly individualised decision.

2 The additive nature of messaging tools. Each new messaging technology is added to the mix. When email was installed, fax machines were not simultaneously removed. There are at least sixteen different messaging processes available to workers today, ranging from regular postal mail, to pagers, to instant messaging.

3 Expanding work responsibilities. Employees today have more intense work days and are involved in different projects every week, all which acquire interactivity.

4 Increased mobility. Telecommuting and other non-traditional work arrangements have led to an increased need to stay in touch and access information.

5 The state of the organisation. The larger the organisation is, the greater the likelihood that

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[33] S. Holtz, *Corporate conversations, (New York, 2004)*, 179-180.
[34] ibid

multiple messaging systems will spring up. In large corporations in the year 2000, for instance, the average worker coped with fifty daily email messages compared with only eighteen in small companies.

While the expansion of messaging systems is problematic, email alone has created a problem worth addressing. A 2002 study conducted by Rogen & Goldhaber Research Associates, analysing responses from 1,500 executives, demonstrates how companies are losing money due to irrelevant messaging.[35] According to this study, one third of all emails received by the employees are irrelevant to the job being performed. Holtz means that this ultimately results in substantial economic loss. For example, a work force of one hundred people means that 15,000 hours are spent dealing with irrelevant emails, leading to a company loss of $420,000 a year. This suggests that companies with five thousand workers are looking at 750,000 lost hours worth $21 million in productivity. With a work force of five thousand and up to two thousand project managers at Volvo IT, a message- or information overload can constitute a significant problem.

Jeff Zwier, manager of global communication argues that messages without a clear business goal simply add to the noise.[36] He addresses the problem of messages not being heard as being a combination of noise, communication channel and the messaging traffic. Large organizations like Volvo IT are noisy places. In these organizations new communication channels are competing for the employees' attention, and it is therefore hard for messages to be heard.

4.3.3 ...or meaning underload?

According to Bill Quirke, a specialist in internal communication, the answer to why messages are not getting through can be not only an information overload, but also what he refers to as a "meaning underload".[37] He believes that to be able to achieve effective communication you need to decrease the quantity of messages and at the same time increase their quality.

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[35] ibid

[36] J. Zwier, *Information overload,* http://www.melcrum.com/pdf/Journals/SCM116.pdf, 2007.

[37] B. Quirke, *Information overload*, http://www.melcrum.com/pdf/Journals/SCM116.pdf, 2007.

An array of channels now at our disposal means that never has so much been communicated to so many, so often and had so little meaning.[38]

The problem also contributes in making it harder for employees to sort out what is important company information. It is easy for managers to send out mass emails containing a considerable amount of information. It is, however, difficult to estimate exactly how much is actually being taken in by the employees.

According to Quirke, employees do not only complain about the amount of information that they receive but of its poor quality. He explains the poor quality as being a combination of factors. Among these are:

> ➢ Emails that are too long and where the main point often is concealed.
> ➢ The circulation of management language.
> ➢ Power Points without explanation.
> ➢ Dull briefing documents that are forwarded.

In the briefing documents, not-thought-out messages are pumped forward with the belief that eager employees will pay attention to them, internalize them, and translate them into meaning. In reality, much of the information is ignored or just quickly read through and thrown away. Quirke claims that this an inevitable result of a "pumping station" approach to communication.   Messages that are relevant to the sender, but lacking meaning to the recipient, are sent out. Due to the limitations of employees' time and attention, Quirke argues that companies must select the key things they want their employees to know and understand. He believes in tailoring the information to the user. Communicators, such as managers, should be handling the problem at its source. This can be done by raising the quality of communication that is produced.

Senior management should first be encouraged to think about what it is that needs to be communicated. A very few key messages should be distilled because there can be a temptation to

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[38] ibid

swamp the internal public with far too many ideas all at once.[39]

Another communication professional, Darren Briggs, has his own theory. According to him:

...an ever-increasing array of methods for communication important information from the top in today's workplace allows freedom of choice, but can also leave employees feeling overwhelmed, ultimately hindering rather than helping.[40]

Volvo IT definitely has an array of communication channels at their disposal. The question is if these channels make messaging faster and more efficient, or if they contribute to employees not making use of the information in the messages. Briggs does not believe that the problem lie in the amount of information, and claims employees seldom complain there being too much information, but instead that the information is not relevant.

Those who do complain about information overload tend to cite an organisations' over-reliance on, or poor use of, email as the root cause - mailboxes filled with "cover you back" copied messages, corporate junk mail or unintelligible corporate announcements.[41]

At Volvo IT the employees are encouraged to find and search information independently. According to Briggs, people are indeed adaptable to managing and processing vast quantities of information, but despite this ability to self–manage, internal communicators must help messages to cut through the noise that exist within the company.[42]

4.4 Strategy – a communication barrier or a possibility?

Volvo IT does not want their strategies to be viewed as pretty words in a brochure, but instead they want the employees to integrate them in their daily work. When talking about a company's strategy it is often referred to as being too generic and formulated in a strategy document.

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[39]   Smith Lyn *Effective internal communication 2005 page 74.*
[40]   D. Briggs, *Information overload*, http://www.melcrum.com/pdf/Journals/SCM116.pdf, 2007.
[41]   ibid
[42]   ibid

The whole concept of formulating a strategy that contains goals and visions is to get the companies' employees to know, understand and act according to it. Ideally, the strategy becomes a living document, something that is conformed into practice, in each and every decision that is made.[43] In many organizations the strategy is used in a perfunctory way, separated from everyday activities. As a result, the strategy does not get real consequences, but remain rhetoric and not leading to actual action. According to Johansson, in order for the strategy process to be successful and to function in the way the management wants it to, the strategy must be understandable and meaningful to the employees.[44]

Strategies are often created by senior managers and have the purpose to help employees identify with the company. Strategy documents are often characterized, by the managers, as being resourceful and optimistic. Volvo IT wants the strategy to not only remain just words, but instead to be implemented in the employees' everyday work. This forces the question if Volvo IT's strategies are related to the employees' daily social, economic and administrative work and decisions in the company, or if they are separated. By introducing PBP, Personal business plan, Volvo IT hopes to do just that, to make an overall strategy personal. Generally formulated goals are often seen as meaningless and insignificant and therefore not relevant. Through a personal business plan, management brakes down the strategy on an individual level. Here the overall strategy is individualised to personal goals that support the company's strategy.

There are different theories of what affects a company's employees to actively integrate strategy in their daily work. Position, confidence in managers, working-unit commitment, and the information climate has proven to be important factors.[45] Companies like Volvo IT often put up big and expensive campaigns surrounding their mission and values, but may not fully understand the communication needs the employees have. Often managers or other key personnel do not get the communication training necessary when it comes to the crucial dialogue needed to keep the strategy from becoming something other than just empty words.[46]

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[43] M. Heide, C. Johansson, C. Simonsson, *Kommunikation & organisation,* (Malmö, 2005), 123.
[44] M. Heide, C. Johansson, C. Simonsson, *Kommunikation & organisation,* (Malmö, 2005), 124.
[45] M. Heide, C. Johansson, C. Simonsson, *Kommunikation & organisation,* (Malmö, 2005), 125.
[46] M. Heide, C. Johansson, C. Simonsson, *Kommunikation & organisation,* (Malmö, 2005), 126.

It becomes a form of a mass communication when trying to integrate a strategy in a large corporation. According to Johansson, again, the rhetoric of managers is generally abstract; the employees should actively create an understanding of a strategy. Employees are expected to work towards the company's vision. Instead, the employees show a lack of interest for messages containing strategy. This lack of interest often becomes more evident the further down in the company you get. It appears that employees have difficulties actively integrating an abstract strategy. Johansson repeatedly expresses her belief of that the strategy must be a "living breathing document" in order to be successful.[47]

5. Research method

We chose the quantitative method due to the simple fact that Volvo IT employs about 7000 people. Since the examined population is spread out all over the world, the physical distances would have made it too difficult to conduct effective qualitative interviews. Ideally we would have also wanted to deepen our research by conducting in-depth interviews, but there was just not enough time or resources for this.

We decided to execute the method through a web-survey, which was sent out to a chosen selection of the Volvo IT workers. We talk more thoroughly about the questionnaire in chapter 5.3.

5.1 Selection of respondents

When examining a large population it is important to make a selection which will allow you to generalise your results. To be able to do this you need a large enough part of the population to participate. The best solution, and the easiest, is to simply examine the entire population, to make a total selection.[48] However, this is not always possible due to factors such as time and costs. In our

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[47] M. Heide, C. Johansson, C. Simonsson, *Kommunikation & organisation,* (Malmö, 2005), 126-129.
[48] P. Esaiasson, M. Gilljam, H. Oscarsson och L. Wängnerud, *Metodpraktikan*, (Vällingby, 2007), 195.

case we wanted to get a representative selection not just for the whole population, but also for the different units and countries. Therefore, initially, our plan was to send out the web-survey to all employees. This was, however, not accepted by Volvo IT, as they calculated the work hours lost in answering the survey would be too many.

The complicated structure of the company and its different units left us thinking that a random selection would be too hard for us ourselves to come up with. We therefore asked Volvo IT/Volvo Opinion to come up with a satisfactory selection for our survey. Unfortunately the selection they proposed seemed far too difficult for us to be able to analyse, so after going back and forth we finally agreed on a satisfactory solution (see figure 5.1)

Furthermore, the random selection was used because it has the almost magic ability to result in a miniature copy of the whole population.[49] In reality, this means that we can safely assume that what goes for the examined population also goes for the whole population.

The problems we encountered in the selection process consisted of the fact that the various units and countries contained different amounts of employees (ranging from 4 employees to 1700). We therefore had to use a stratified selection, which means you base the selection proportionally to how many employees work in the different countries/units.[50] We could simply not choose a percentage selection of all units and countries. E.g. 30 per cent may be representative for a unit of a thousand employees, but it will hardly be enough for a unit of 15. After a lot of discussing back and forth with Volvo IT, we reached this selection:

Countries and units with 1-99 employees: 100 per cent
Countries and units with 100-299 employees: 40 per cent
Countries and units with 300- employees: 30 per cent

On the advice of Volvo IT, we excluded some of the offices in certain parts of the world because of language barriers and various difficulties in establishing contact. However, as many of these offices are newly-established and the staff is not experienced within the company, our contact person at Volvo IT came to the conclusion that these offices may not have been able to help us in this study anyway.

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[49] P. Esaiasson, M. Gilljam, H. Oscarsson och L. Wängnerud, *Metodpraktikan*, (Vällingby, 2007), 195.
[50] P. Esaiasson, M. Gilljam, H. Oscarsson och L. Wängnerud, *Metodpraktikan*, (Vällingby, 2007), 203.

5.2 The questionnaire

Volvo IT provided us with a number of questions they wanted us to include in the survey. We therefore already had a template to start from. The questions were taken from previous surveys conducted by Volvo IT, and would help them make comparisons between our results and their previous results. As we came further along in learning about the subject, we realised that several of Volvo IT's questions would not be relevant in our study. The ones we did not want we then just simply replaced with questions of our own. Our first questionnaire draft was much too extensive and general. We realized that the amount of data we would get back would be too great, and therefore we needed to cut questions. This proved to be a much harder task than what we initially foresaw.

In deciding what types of questions to use, we had the initial thought to use a majority of nominal scale questions and then add a few open answer questions where we felt we needed the employees to elaborate further. After discussions with both our supervisor and Volvo Opinion we concluded that the fewer open questions we use the better. We still ended up with a few open questions, but not as many as in our first drafts. The problem is to get the employees to actually participate, and for that to be a reality we needed to make the survey as simple as possible.

The hardest part in creating the questionnaire was to narrow the questions down to as few as possible. We feel that in hindsight we should have made the questionnaire a lot smaller. We had a hard time interpreting the results and narrow it down to our study due to the size of the questionnaire.

5.3 Volvo Opinion

At the Volvo Group there is a separate department called Volvo Opinion. Their main task is to handle enquiries regarding various surveys within the Volvo Group. They also design the surveys and help with the analyzing process. Their clients can be any department within the Volvo Group. Currently, Volvo Opinion handles approximately 40-50 surveys each year.

5.4 Reliability

In research studies reliability is a measurement of how well the empirical study is performed. Poor reliability means that there might be errors in the execution of gathering the data.[51] Obviously this is not a good groundwork for a credible report, which is why a high reliability is important in empirical studies.

We consider the reliability in this report to be satisfactory, if not high. We have handled the data carefully and with the utter most concentration, since the amount of data we had to handle was very extensive. Volvo Opinion sent us the data (the replies from the survey) in an Excel-document, which we quite easily copied into an SPSS-file.

The only problem we were faced with was how to weigh the data properly, since the employees are spread out all over the world and the number of employees in the various countries and units vary from 2 to 1700. This was very important to us since we were comparing the different countries and units to each other, and therefore each voice has to weigh as much as the next. This was done for us by our supervisor, but because of the complicated selection, it proved a lot more difficult than we would have wished.

5.5 Validity

Good validity means that the data you have gathered is relevant for the subject you are examining.[52] We believe the validity in this study is satisfactory, since the theories we have discussed in chapter 4 is most relevant to the empirical data we have gathered. Most of the questions in our survey are also relevant to our study, but admittedly we were somewhat displeased with the questionnaire. This because we felt obliged by Volvo IT to include some of their own questions, questions that we felt were not relevant to our specific study. Therefore our questionnaire became much too extensive than we would have wanted it to be. Also, since the study proved to be much broader than we actually had time for, we were rushed to complete the

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[51] Mälardalens Högskola, http://www.eki.mdh.se/Kurshemsidor/foretagsekonomi/robhan/reliabilitet.htm.
[52] Mälardalens Högskola, http://www.eki.mdh.se/Kurshemsidor/foretagsekonomi/robhan/reliabilitet.htm.

questionnaire. A few questions that we, in retrospect, would have wanted to include were therefore not included in the questionnaire.

In the matter of being able to generalize our results, we believe there are good grounds for being able to apply our study to other studies made in this subject. Our result support, to an extent, previous studies that have been made within this field. Also, the number of employees who participated in the survey was quite high, which makes us think that it is applicable to the company Volvo IT as a whole. The answering frequency was a little over 50 per cent, which is almost a thousand people (the survey was sent out to 1822 employees). It has been said that the having a selection of more than a thousand units only increase the level generalization remotely, and therefore we were quite satisfied with our numbers.

6. Results and analyze

In this chapter we will present our findings and results. We present the result and analysis of one research question at a time. The results of each question will be discussed with the help of the theories we presented in chapter 4.

## 6.1 How do the employees want to receive corporate information?

We started by putting two relating questions from the questionnaire up against each other:

How do the employees obtain company information?

Vs.

How do the employees prefer to obtain company information?

In answering the questions, the employees had to grade the different communication channels (intranet, managers, email, and in-house magazine) to what extent they obtain/prefer to obtain company information. In doing this we could easily compare the channels to each other. We found there to be differences in where the employees actually obtain their company information from and where they would prefer to obtain it from. This is shown in *Figure 6.1.*
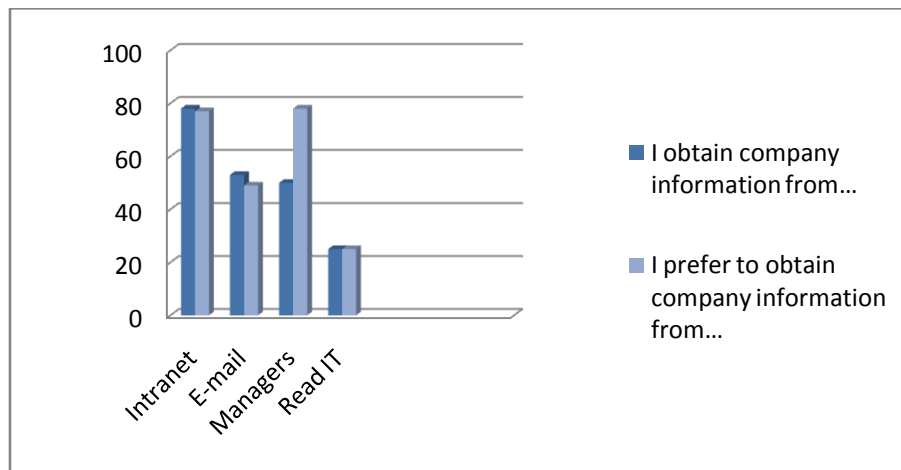
Figure 6.1.

The most significant difference lies with the managers. While 80 percent of the employees would prefer to obtain their company information from their managers, only 50 percent say that this is where they actually obtain the information from. To enhance this result further, only 3 percent would not prefer to obtain information from the managers, while 17 percent say that they actually do not obtain much information from their managers.

Bosses should work more down (with employees) and not so much up (with other management).
– Employee at Volvo IT

Obviously, the conclusion of these results is that a fair number of the employees are not satisfied with the managers as information carriers. We regard this as a very important result, as Volvo IT has stated at numerous occasions that they consider their managers to be their most important information carrier.

As stated earlier in the chapter *Managers* a lot of employees value the dialogue that can only exist in face-to-face communication.[53] Communicating with the managers is the only way at Volvo IT where this communication can happen. That is probably why such a large portion of the employees want an increase of this type of information. It allows them to ask questions and get/give feedback instantly. The lack of face-to-face communication also opens the door to misinterpretations and misunderstandings, which is an element of displeasure for many employees as well as managers. Since there are also several different levels of managers within Volvo IT the risk of information getting lost is substantial.

Regarding the intranet, email and the in-house magazine, the employees seem content with the information that is being generated through these mediums. The results show that there is no significant difference in where the employees obtain their information and where they would prefer to obtain it.

6.1.1 Could length of employment constitute a factor?

After having looked at all of the employees as a whole, we wanted to examine if we would find different attitudes between various groups among the employees. Something that seemed very natural to examine was the length of employment in the company. We also had an idea of trying to find differences between different age groups, but we were unfortunately missing this information, as age was not asked for in the questionnaire.

Firstly, we divided the employees into two groups:

Group A – Employed for less than 1 year
Group B – Employed for 6 years or more

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[53] M. Heide, *Intranät - en ny arena för kommunikation och lärande, (Lund, 2002),* 38.

If we start by examining the attitude toward the intranet, a large portion of both groups (80 percent) say they would prefer to obtain information from the intranet. However, within group A only 50 percent say that is where they get their information from today. This means that almost a third of the newly-employed would like to get more of the information from the intranet. Within group B, however, there is no difference between where the employees obtain and prefer to obtain the information (both 80 percent).

It seems self-evident that newly-employed workers would have a more difficult time to find relevant information on the intranet than people who have been with the company longer. These results are therefore nor particularly surprising. Newly-employed workers might also find it more difficult to find the time necessary to use a, to them, new online tool at a new company to find important information.

It also seems that newly-employed workers are more inclined to be of a younger age than the long-term employees. As younger people today are more in tune with online communication tools, they might be unhappy to a greater extent with the information available online.

As we stated earlier in this chapter, in studying the results concerning the managers, we immediately found a great distinction between the information the employees would like to obtain from the managers and the information they actually do obtain. The difference between the two groups is, however, negligible.

It seems fair to state that regarding communication from the managers to the employees the results would not differ between the different groups. Newly-employed workers ought to feel the need of face-to-face communication just as much as others. Therefore these results are not too surprising to us.

60 percent of group A say that they obtain their information from email and just as many say that is where they would prefer to get it from. There is consequently no difference between the two statements within this group. The same goes for group B, with the variation that only 50 percent of this group obtain /would like to obtain information from email. To conclude, there is no difference within the two groups, but small differences between the two groups.

Every result that concludes that there are no differences within the group is a positive result for Volvo IT, as it means that the employees are content with the amount of information they are getting through that medium. The difference between the two different groups is also not large enough to draw any specific conclusions of why this is. But one might say that a reason for why fewer employees from group B want information from email is that they have more information coming via email already. A long-term employment is likely to have lead to more clients and projects. They are therefore more likely to have more information coming through email than the newly-employed.

A relatively low percentage (20 percent) of the employees from both groups uses the in-house magazine to obtain company information. When asked if they would prefer to obtain information through this medium a third of the employees answered positively. There was, however, no difference between the two groups.

That such a low percentage of all employees want important information from the magazine does not surprise us, since the magazine has to be considered the least valued form of communication tool. It does not get updated as often as the other channels, and is not filled with information specific to the individual employee. Why more people still want more information through this channel might be because it is an excellent way of creating a good working moral, a sense of belonging, and solidarity towards the company. This is very important for the employees, especially when working in a decentralized, global company like Volvo IT.

6.2 Which information and communication channels are the most effective for the strategy?

We need competence in which channels we find what information. Today I get company information via email, intranet, Teamplace, managers, WEBCAST, a number of internal papers, group meetings etc.   - Employee at Volvo IT

Here we are interested in finding out where the employees receive important information from. Which channels do they use to receive what information? When we talk about important

information we mean different specific parts of the strategy (see different parts of the strategy on page 7). We examine through which channels the employees receive which part of the strategy to get a picture of how the strategy reaches the employees. Do the employees receive parts of the strategy from channels that are not effective for that specific message? In other words, are the various channels being used for the right communications purpose? The different parts of the strategy that we examined are; *personal development and career planning, work instructions, the company's performance and financial results, mission and vision and strategies and plans, market trends and competitive situation, Volvo IT news, and employee benefits.*

6.2.1 The intranet

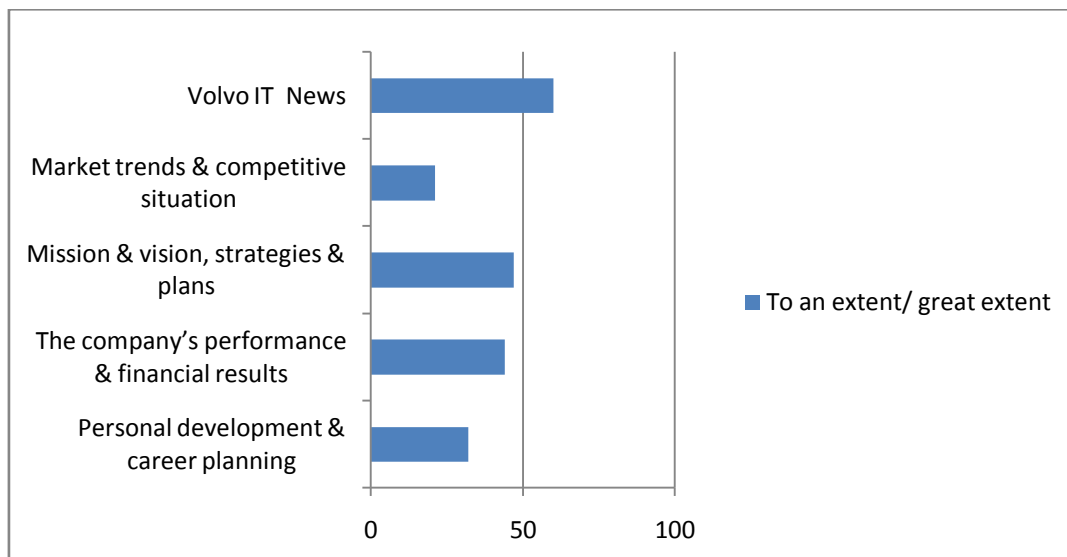*Figure 6.2* shows the percentage of employees that are getting the different parts of the strategy from the Intranet.

Figure 6.2.

The employees get large parts of the whole strategy from the intranet:
  ➢ Volvo IT news - 60 percent.
  ➢ Mission and vision and strategies and plans - 47 percent.
  ➢ The company's performance and financial results - 44 percent.

Compared to the other communication channels, quite a lot of the different parts of the strategy reach the employees through the intranet. Even though employees get a large part of the strategy from the intranet; the 50-60 percent turnout is not a high percentage considering that it could be 100 percent. Volvo IT uses the intranet mainly as a tool for communication between different employees and managers, as well as a forum for Volvo IT news. However, mission and vision and strategies and plans should also constitute a large part. Even though it may be hard to get a high outcome on this question, we think the results are not positive for Volvo IT. Only 20 percent say they receive markets trends from the intranet which is a very low number.

A part from Volvo IT news, employees do not, to a great extent, receive the various parts of the strategy from the intranet (less than half of the employees). Volvo IT would like this number to be higher, since according to the internal communication department, they put a lot of effort in the intranet. Looking to previous studies made regarding the intranet, one difficulty that instantly presents itself concerning the intranet is that the employees often find it hard to find the time necessary to perform these searches. Bark also talks about the importance of not letting the intranet solely function as an electronic bill board containing general information, but to use it as a tool to help the employees in their everyday work.[54] As shown by the table, general information, like Volvo IT news, is the information that reaches the employees to the greatest extent among the specific information. Should Volvo IT make the intranet less generic?

At Volvo IT (according to the head of internal communications) the intranet is perceived as an archive, with the possibility for the employees to gain more in-depth knowledge about any part of the company. There is overall information about Volvo IT, strategies and news. There are great opportunities for the employees to find out more about their own working situation, employment rules, and information regarding their own group. This may be true but according to our study the intranet need improvements. When asked what information the employees might be missing a lot of the answers were about the intranet not having a working search function. The employees want a better search function for in-depth information and information about new products. According to our survey many employees today use Wikipedia to contrive this information.

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[54] M. Heide, *Intranät - en ny arena för kommunikation och lärande, (Lund, 2002),* 34-35.

The search tool is not good enough. I search for the information on Google or yahoo or other excellent search tools. - Employee at Volvo IT

Improve the Violin: search function (easy to find) and keep the information up-to-date. - Employee at Volvo IT)

We need better structure to the info on the intranet. Info is not kept up-to-date. This makes it hard to find the important thing difficult. Employee toolbox should be better organized. - Employee at Volvo IT

We also get the feeling that many employees are not content with the intranet and many complaints were made in the survey. According to Heide, managers often have difficulties acknowledging the benefits an intranet can give the employees.[55] This leads to problems for the people responsible for the intranet, such as the people working with internal communication, since they are not being provided with the knowledge and resources they need to turn the intranet into a useful tool. Could this be the case at Volvo IT?

6.2.2 Managers

Figure 6.3 shows the percentage of employees that are getting the different parts of the strategy from managers.

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[55] M. Heide, *Intranät - en ny arena för kommunikation och lärande, (Lund, 2002),* 33-34.
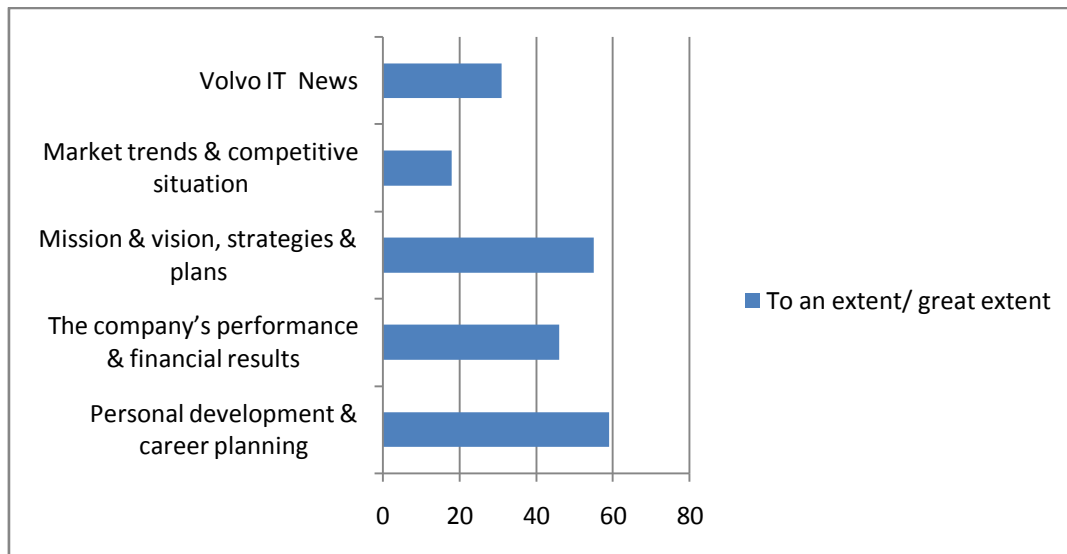
Figure 6.3.

Employees get large parts of the strategy from the managers:

> ➢ Personal development and career planning - 59 percent.
>
> ➢ Mission and vision and strategies and plans - 55 percent.
>
> ➢ The company's performance and financial results - 46 percent.

Out of the communication channels available it is through the intranet and the managers that the employees receive the majority of the strategy. About half the employees get the information regarding mission and vision and strategies and plans from managers and intranet. Even though this is a high number compared with other channels, the remaining 50 percent of the employees say they do not receive this information through these channels. As mentioned earlier Volvo IT perceives the managers as their most important communication channel for the strategy. 80 percent of the employees prefer to obtain important information from managers, and a majority of the employees also receive different parts of the strategy from the managers. At the same time a substantial part of the employees views managers of all levels as inefficient communicators. Only 29 percent of the employees think that the managers handle two-way communication, only 17 percent think they explain complex ideas so that employees understand, and only 25 percent perceive the strategy as an important part of their daily work.

According to Johansson the rhetoric of managers is generally abstract; the managers should actively create an understanding of the strategy. Since strategies are often formulated and created by senior managers they often have a clearer view of them than the employees.[56] This could be the case for Volvo IT.

Bark claims that it is only in the face-to-face meeting that true dialogue can exist.[57] This puts a lot of responsibility on the managers. The meeting allows for a two-way communication that is hard to create through other channels. According to Johansson it was determined that the goals that were discussed most frequently during meetings were also those who were interpreted most similarly.[58] As the results tell us here, the employees are not with the communication skills of the managers and this could thus constitute a problem for Volvo IT.

A suggestion for how to improve communication in our organization: We should only appoint individuals as managers who can communicate effectively. - Employee at Volvo IT

6.2.3 Email

Figure 6.4 shows the percentage of employees that are getting the different parts of the strategy from email.

[56] M. Heide, C. Johansson, C. Simonsson, *Kommunikation & organisation,* (Malmö, 2005), 129.
[57] M. Heide, *Intranät - en ny arena för kommunikation och lärande, (Lund, 2002),* 38.
[58] M. Heide, C. Johansson, C. Simonsson, *Kommunikation & organisation,* (Malmö, 2005), 128.
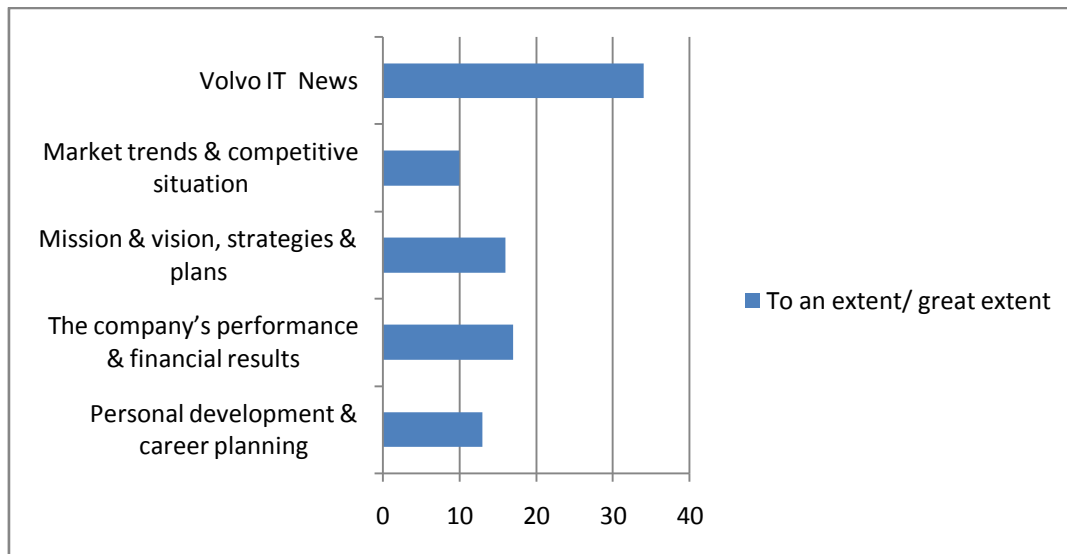
Figure 6.4.

Employees receive a relatively small part of the strategy through email.

➢ Volvo IT news - 60 percent.

➢ Work instructions - 24 percent.

➢ Work benefits - 19 percent.

According to the results the employees receive a considerably small part of the strategy through email. This forces the question of what information they actually do receive from email, since we have already established that they indeed are getting a lot of information via email. Are a majority of these messages not strategic messages? Is the information of a character not concerning Volvo IT? Email is perhaps a channel that is used by employees as a communication channel for messages of different sort, possibly social and "informal" messages. We learned that employees' mail boxes are often full, which is quite interesting when analysing the results of email as a communication channel for the strategy. The conclusion here is thus that although the employees are getting a lot of information via email, it is not the type of information intended.

6.2.4 The in-house magazine

Figure 6.5 shows the percentage of employees that are getting the different parts of the strategy from the in-house magazine.
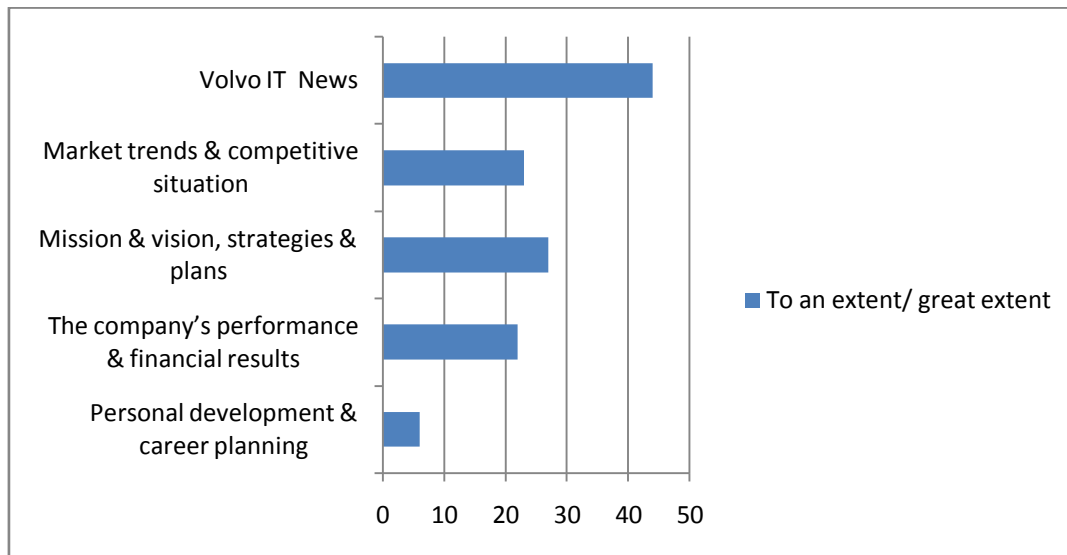

Figure 6.5

➢ Volvo IT news - 44 percent.

➢ Mission and vision and strategies and plans - 27 percent.

➢ Market trends and competitive situation - 23 percent.

Even though the in-house magazine is only published eight times a year, it is an important part of Volvo IT, and the strategy is encoded in the magazine. The in-house magazine is also important to create feelings of belonging and solidarity towards Volvo IT and to enhance the values and visions within the company. The table shows us that information of different parts of the strategy could improve greatly, especially market trends and competitive situation, and mission and vision.

6.2.5 What information are the employees missing the most?

Figure 6.6 shows us to what extent the employees receive information about *Market trends and competitive situation* from different communication channels.
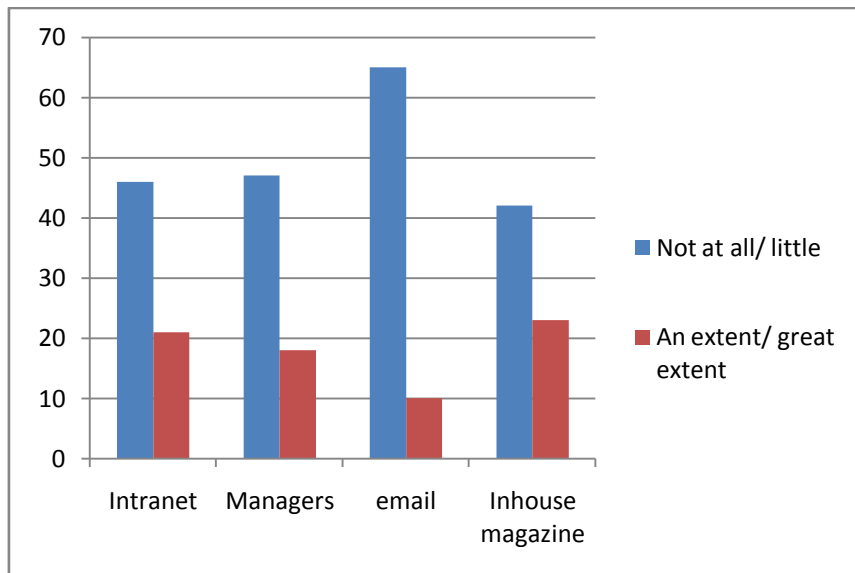
Figure 6.6.

As demonstrated by the table we can see that the results pretty much speak for themselves. A part of the strategy that distinguishes itself by not reaching the employees through any communication channel is information concerning market trends and competitive situation. Information about competitors includes information relating to the company's situation, e.g. information about new customers, contracts, products, performance, financial results etc.

The IT business is very competitive and Volvo IT is exposed to competition by other IT companies. To be able to survive in this competitive industry is it important for Volvo IT employees to be up to date with what is happening in the IT business. Volvo IT has expressed a concern in this area and feels that it is vital for the employees to get this strategic information. When we asked the employees to evaluate the company's effective communication of competitors the results were very unsatisfactory. According to our survey half of all employees do not think Volvo IT communicates effectively about competitors and only 13 percent think this communication is efficient. When asked what information the employees might be missing it is exactly this kind of information they are missing and would like more of.

How are we doing in comparison with our competitors? - Employee at Volvo IT

I miss news and information about competitors in different markets (IT, soft products).

We never have info on IT competitive environment… looks like Volvo IT doesn't exist as a company. – Employee at Volvo IT

Is information concerning competitors a part of the strategy that Volvo IT has failed to communicate, or is the information available but not easily accessible? Either way, the employees are either not getting this information or they do not know where to find it. From what we gather, Volvo IT is focused on the company performance and getting employees to live and breathe the "Volvo way" and lifestyle. Perhaps information about competitors is an overlooked part of the strategy and therefore not prioritized?

A question we asked ourselves is also: Volvo IT's meetings are often held by managers and should be considered as managers "giving" information and the employees "receiving" the information. Only 18 percent of the employees say they receive information about market trends through managers. Does this mean that meetings regarding information and discussions about market trends and competitive situation are not held at Volvo IT?

6.3 What can constitute possibilities and obstacles for the employees in receiving corporate messages?

The barriers and obstacles we have chosen to address in this report, and that we will in this chapter discuss in relation to Volvo IT, are the following:

- ➢ Information overload
- ➢ Meaning underload
- ➢ Intercultural barriers – language
- ➢ The strategy

6.3.1 Information overload

Since all employees at Volvo IT are white-collar workers with their own computers and phones, our predisposition was that there would in all likeliness exist an information overload at the company. To what extent though we were not sure. The result showed that almost 40 per cent of the employees experienced an information overload at the company. Around 35 per cent put themselves in the middle, without a clear yes or no answer. When adding up the numbers this means that only 25 per cent of the employees do not experience there to be an information overload at the company.

As the theory suggests there could be a numerous reasons why information overloads arise within a company. As Holtz mentioned, there are constantly new information tools that are being added to the mix.[59] Sometimes when new technology pops up, the old technology has to step aside, but just as often the old technology continues to be used by the companies. The likeliness is that the more tools you have for communicating, the more messages you will send out thus eventually creating an information overload. One employee agreed:

We don't need more channels, more the opposite.

Nowadays, employees are also more likely to be involved in more projects. This goes for most large corporations, but our contact person at Volvo IT specifically told us that this was the reigning development among the employees at the company. Obviously the involvement in more projects will lead to an influx of information.

Some positive results for Volvo IT, though, is that even if 40 per cent claim to be getting too much information, only 20 per cent of the employees find it hard to sort out the important information. Half of the employees do not see this as a problem, which means that even though there is an information overload at the company, most of the important messages are still getting through. We think that an important reason for this result is that Volvo IT only has white-collar workers, which means that they are used to handling large amounts of information.

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[59] S. Holtz, *Corporate conversations, (New York, 2004)*, 179-180.

6.3.2 Meaning underload

We made the connection that if there was an information overload at the company, in all likeliness there would also exist meaning underload among this information. Obviously the more messages you send out, the higher is the risk that some of them contain information that is irrelevant to certain employees. As Quirke stated earlier, to achieve effective communication you need to both decrease the quantity of messages and increase their quality.[60]

Our survey show that one third of the employees feel they are not getting enough important company information. Obviously, this could mean that they are not getting enough information at all, but since such a large portion of the employees felt the problem of an information overload, we will assume that that is not the case here. Instead it seems likely that the information that is being communicated at Volvo IT, to an extent, suffers from meaning underload.

6.3.3 Language

The most basic part when trying to incorporate the company strategy, obviously, must be to make sure that the employees actually understand the messages that are being communicated to them. We have earlier talked about interpreting the messages in the right way, but here we bring up the very fundamentals – to actually understand what is being said; literally speaking the same language. We had an idea that this could constitute a problem at Volvo IT since it is a multinational company and therefore is, more or less, forced to use the same official corporate language throughout the entire company. We, therefore, divided the countries into two groups: English-speaking countries and non-English-speaking countries. We compared the two groups to each other in the questions regarding understanding of the messages.

The results showed, however, that there are no noticeable differences between the groups. The understanding of the messages seems to be the same regardless of where in the world they work and what their mother-tongue is. Even though this is a bit surprising to us (we were at least expecting a small difference) it can easily be explained by the type of workers that Volvo IT

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[60] B. Quirke, *Information overload*, http://www.melcrum.com/pdf/Journals/SCM116.pdf, 2007.

employs. These are mostly well-educated, skilled people with a good knowledge of the English language. The comments given in the questionnaire show another side of the coin though.

I think that the communication would be easier to understand if it also could be in Swedish. The problem is that you don't understand everything and there is so much information that you can't separate what's important for yourself and your work.

- Employee at Volvo IT

[I want] more [information] in local language.   - Employee at Volvo IT

Therefore, we still see the language as a barrier. As we talked about in the chapter *Intercultural organizational communication,* having to constantly work in a second language can be perceived as communication noise.[61] Even though the employees literally understand what is being communicated, it still takes time and effort to translate and understand messages that are given to them in a different language, and that makes it into a barrier.

As we have mentioned earlier, offices in France and Japan have expressed a concern in the difficulties of understanding the corporate language (English), so therefore these problems should obviously be taken seriously. But at the same time, as our results show, the problems may not be as extensive as first perceived.

6.3.4 Strategy as a barrier

Concerning the questions regarding the strategy and how it is used and perceived by the employees, we got some mixed positive and negative results.

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[61] L. Clausen, Intercultural organizational communication, (Copenhagen, 2006), 30.

Approximately half of the employees do not consider the strategy important to their daily work. This may seem perfectly normal to some companies who do not use the company's strategy in the daily work of the employees (the strategy is used differently depending on who you ask). To Volvo IT, however, this is a very poor result since the management has emphasized time and time again how they want the strategy to be implemented in the daily work of the employees. Volvo IT wants the strategy to be a living, breathing document, as stated by Johansson.[62] As discussed earlier in the chapter *Strategy – barrier or possibility?,* this is also when the strategy is proven to be most effective. Obviously the strategy is not valued in the intended way at Volvo IT.

The results we perceive as positive to Volvo IT are that only 10 per cent of the employees said that they do not understand the important aspects of the strategy. We see this as an indication that there is nothing little with how the strategy is formulated in itself, or even how it is communicated. On the other hand, it seems that the employees want and need to get a better understanding of how to use the strategy in practice.

I'm missing information regarding goals and strategies. Not from a high level, those are easy to find, but what they mean in practice, for my department and in the end my daily work.

- Employee at Volvo IT

This is, however, an aspect that Volvo IT is well aware of, as they have instated something called PBP, Personal Business Plan, a way to help the employees understand how to use the strategy in their daily work (more about this in the chapter *Strategy – a communication barrier or possibility?*).

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[62] M. Heide, C. Johansson, C. Simonsson, *Kommunikation & organisation, (Malmö, 2005),* 126-129.

7. Final discussion

Since our survey was so extensive, we gathered a lot of useful information from the answers. We therefore believe we have managed to create a well-rounded and useful analysis of the current internal communication situation at Volvo IT. As we mentioned in the *Method* chapter it would have been interesting to complement the study with a more qualitative part in the form of interviewing the employees. However, we feel that we managed to add the qualitative angle to the study anyway through the open questions in the questionnaire. We are aware that one cannot draw conclusions regarding the whole company with this fairly limited number of open answers, but we still got the feeling that they express the real situation at the company.

We found that the results of our study, to a great extent, support the previous studies made in this field, as one can compare our study to the theories presented in our theory chapter. This obviously increases our ability to generalise our results to a larger scale.

The results we got were, however, not particularly surprising to us. The nature of a large global and decentralised corporation make for certain preconceived conclusions to be drawn. This in addition to Volvo IT's suspicions of the reasons to their communication problems made us create a view of what actually was the problems we were examining. But since Volvo IT did not have an outlined map of the situation, we believe that this study will help them continue and improve their internal communication.

The biggest surprise to Volvo IT may be the view the employees have of the managers as poor communicators. Volvo IT puts a lot of effort into their internal communication and regards this as necessary to remain a successful company. The picture that was painted to us in the beginning of this assignment was, however, that they were very proud of their managers as communicators, and regarded them as most important in the spreading of information. Perhaps this study will show them that they need to put even more effort into educating the managers in communicating skills.

The other substantial part of our results was that the employees are not happy with the intranet and its complex nature. Many employees have expressed displeasure with the content on the intranet and the difficulties in finding useful information. This may also be somewhat surprising to Volvo IT, as they seemed proud also of the intranet and its layout when we talked to them.

As this proved to be a large examination of the internal communication situation at Volvo IT, we see many options for further research. It would be very interesting to be able to investigate the different parts of our study closer and more thoroughly. We have the feeling that we have only touched the surface of the communication problems at Volvo IT. We are, however, happy with the results and we feel that we have outlined and identified the main issues at hand.

7.1 Advice to Volvo IT

In our advice to the management at Volvo IT, we will start with some concrete advice expressed by the employees themselves. We will then use this advice and integrate them in our own advice made on the basis of our study.

These are some comments made by the employees on some alternative communication channels:

Wikis, blogs and communities.

Video conference is one great way of communication with low costs for distance unit.

A wiki forum.

RSS feeds- wikis- content management systems.

Blogs.

Encourage Upper management to begin using blogs to communicate.

Social networks, tools like blogs.

More movies, Web casts, more process related information e- learing new employees and managers, more role adapted information.

Video, TV digital signal.

One big problem in the internal communication at Volvo IT is the managers and the Intranet. These are our suggestions for a better functioning internal communication:

- ➢ Communicate which channel carries what information.
- ➢ Training for managers to become better communicators.
- ➢ Improve the structure of the intranet, many employees are dissatisfied with its current form.
- ➢ Improve the search function on the intranet.
- ➢ Communicate better and more about competitors, trends and financial results.
- ➢ Communicate more success stories to the employees. They want/need to know when the company is doing well.
- ➢ Consider making the intranet more accessible for the employees.
- ➢ Consider using blogs as a forum for communication.
- ➢ PBP seems to be working quite well for braking down strategy to an individual level, but managers do not not seem to be able to communicate/ describe complex strategies and ideas so that the employees understand. To simplify strategy from the top level could be an idea.
- ➢ According to our survey the employees like to read *Read IT,* therefore our suggestion is to incorporate more strategic messages in the magazine while keeping it "light and fun" and interesting to read.
- ➢ Be sparse with sending out messages to the employees. Keep the messages clear and as short as possible. Aim for quality rather than quantity.

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Questionnaire

Internal communication at Volvo IT

1. Nationality?
American Australian Belgian
Brazilian British Canadian
Chinese French Indian
Japanese Korean Malaysian
Mexican Polish Russian
South African Swedish Thai
Turkish Other

2. Sex
Male Female

3. In what unit/region do you work?
Application & Techniques Commercial Solutions Industrial Solutions
Global Infrastructure & Operations Global Marketing & Sales Global SAP
Region Europe Region APAC/International Region North America
Region Sweden Staff functions at headquarters

4. In what country do you work?
Austalia Belgium Brazil
Canada China France
Great Britain India Japan
Korea Malaysia Mexico
Poland Russia South Africa
Sweden Thailand Turkey
United States Other

5. How long have you been working in the company
Less than 1 year
1-5 years
6-10 years
More than 10 years

6. Communication environment
To what extent do you agree with the following statements:

I look for company information myself.
I find it easy to find useful company information.
I feel there is an information overload at my company.
I sometimes find it difficult to sort out important company information.
I sometimes feel I am not getting enough important company
information.

If you agree, what information are you missing?*(A text response is limited to 255 characters.)*

7. I obtain my company information from:

the intranet

email
managers
Read IT
town hall meetings
group meetings
collegues
other (please specify) *(A text response is limited to 255 characters.)*

8. I prefer to obtain my company information from:
the intranet
email
managers
Read IT
town hall meetings
group meetings
collegues
other (please specify) *(A text response is limited to 255 characters.)*

9. I know where to get the information I need, when I need it.
Strongly agree
Agree
Mixed
Disagree
Strongly disagree

10. I read Read IT:
Never
Seldom
From time To time
Every issue
Don't know/unable to answer

11. I have access to Read IT:
Digital version
In printed form
Both
Neither

12. I prefer to read Read IT:
Digital version
In printed form
Both
Neither

13. Is there anything you would like to read more about in Read IT? *(A text response is limited to 255 characters.)*

14. In my company, messages are consistent across sources (e.g., from direct supervisor to senior leadership)
1 Strongly agree
2 Agree
3 Mixed
4 Disagree
5 Strongly disagree

15. Content
Please evaluate the extent to which your company communicates effectively (high quality, useful, compelling) about each of the following:

The role I play in helping my company reach its goals.
Customers (e.g., satisfaction with products/services)
Competitors

16. Leaders as communicators
Senior leadership includes the most senior executives at the
top of your company (e.g., CEO, COO, CFO, etc.).
Evaluate these statements.

My manager provides me with most company information.
In my company, senior leadership both talks and listens - creating an
environment of two-way communication
My company's senior leadership has communicated a clear vision for
our long-term success.
My direct supervisor is good at explaining complex concepts/ideas in
plain language that I can understand
My direct supervisor is effective in helping me to understand how my
role contributes to the overall success of the company

17. Understanding and alignment
I understand...

The messages I receive about how my company is performing.
The role I am expected to play to help my company reach our goals and
objectives.
Where Volvo IT is heading and trying to achieve?

18. Overall
I find this information vital to my work...

Personal development and career planning
Work instructions
The company's performance and financial results
Mission and vision, strategies and plans
Market trends and competitive situation
Volvo IT news
Employee benefits

19. To what extent do you receive company information from the intranet (Violin)? Regarding:
Personal development and career planning
Work instructions
The company's performance and financial results
Mission and vision, strategies and plans
Market trends and competitive situation
Volvo IT news
Employee benefits

20. To what extent do you receive company information from your manager?
Personal development and career planning
Work instructions
The company's performance and financial results
Mission and vision, strategies and plans
Market trends and competitive situation
Volvo IT news
Employee benefits

21. To what extent do you receive company information from email?
Personal development and career planning

Work instructions
The company's performance and financial results
Mission and vision, strategies and plans
Market trends and competitive situation
Volvo IT news
Employee benefits

22. To what extent do you receive company information from Read IT?
Personal development and career planning
Work instructions
The company's performance and financial results
Mission and vision, strategies and plans
Market trends and competitive situation
Volvo IT news
Employee benefits

23. My company is effective in communicating the value of what I receive (compensation, health benefits, retirement benefits, career development) for the work I do.