



## **Master Thesis**

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# **The Impact of Internal Communication on Employee Engagement in Small Family Companies: Case study of a Dutch and a Swiss wood trading companies**

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## **Executive summary English**

Today's work environment faces the challenges of globalization, digitalization and their consequences on the employees. While deregulation, joint ventures and crises give the economic context tempo, employees are demanded with more creativity, flexibility and engagement. Yet their trust in the organizations tends to drop. New opportunities to reach and engage these employees are offered through digitalization. Ambassadors of the employer brand, advocates of the company in case of crisis or authentic spokespersons to enrich customer relationship, the possibilities are as numerous as the risks. Social media era asks organizations for greater transparency and information sharing towards their employees if they do not want their reputation affected. Employees today also look for greater meaning at work. Internal communication discipline developed in this exact hectic economic context and employee engagement gained more and more popularity the moment organizations realize an engaged employee is also more efficient and profitable. Although the research is scarce, the positive influence of internal communication on employee engagement is asserted by researchers and six main factors appear through literature: quality of information, reliability of information, superior-openness, superior-subordinate communication, opportunities for upward communication and the team-climate. These elements have not been studied in small family company structures although this type of organization has a significant economic weight in Europe.

We thus propose to study how internal communication impacts the employee engagement in small family structures through the examples of a Dutch and a Swiss trading wood companies. The elements of internal communication allowing employee engagement are assessed, the alteration of the family structure on their functioning is examined and the role of the CEO's influence, underlined in previous research, is also studied. A qualitative approach is chosen to understand these mechanisms: 23 in-depth interviews of an average length of 47 minutes are run among which 11 take place at DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT in the Netherlands and 12 are held at ALLAMAN in Switzerland.

The results show that all 'classic' internal communication elements are not present in both companies with specific difficulties concerning the quality of strategic and financial information shared, the superior openness as well as opportunities for upward communication. The Dutch company presented a less complete range of factors than the Swiss company. This internal communication weaknesses in structure and information are characteristic of family companies. Nevertheless, the engagement of the employees of both companies is observed as, by their own reflex, employees ensure the circulation and the quality of information, especially when the team climate is positive like in the Swiss company. The strong influence

of the CEO on the culture of the company, as demonstrated in previous research findings on family businesses, also compensates the lack of structure of internal communication: the goal and the values of the CEO are instilled throughout the companies and most of the employees know them and identify to them. Further research crossing different disciplines such as communication, management, sociology and psychology along with works on the national culture's influence in family companies could give more explanation and insights on the fascinating functioning of family firms.

## Executive summary French

De nos jours, l'environnement du travail se confronte aux défis de la globalisation, de la digitalisation et à leurs conséquences sur les employés. Alors que déréglementation, fusions d'entreprises et crises rythment le contexte économique, plus de créativité, de flexibilité et d'engagement est exigé des employés. Pourtant leur confiance envers les organisations a chuté. De nouvelles opportunités d'embarquer ces employés sont offertes par la digitalisation. Comme ambassadeurs de la marque employeur, défenseurs de l'entreprise en cas de crise ou encore légitimes interlocuteurs pour de meilleures relations clients, les possibilités sont aussi nombreuses que les risques. L'ère des médias sociaux exige des organisations une plus grande transparence et un meilleur partage de l'information avec leurs employés si elles ne veulent pas voir leur réputation entachée. Les employés recherchent aussi aujourd'hui plus de sens dans leur travail. La communication interne s'est justement développée en tant que discipline dans ce contexte chaotique et le succès du thème de l'engagement des employés n'a fait que croître depuis que les organisations ont réalisé qu'un employé engagé est aussi plus performant et rentable. Si les recherches demeurent rares, l'impact positif de la communication interne sur l'engagement des employés est démontré par les chercheurs et six éléments moteur apparaissent : la qualité de l'information, la fiabilité de l'information, l'ouverture et l'honnêteté dans l'échange d'informations entre le manager et son employé, le soutien, l'écoute et la justice caractérisant la relation manager-employé, les opportunités d'expression et d'action des employés envers la Direction et le climat d'équipe. Ces éléments n'ont pas été vérifiés dans une entreprise à structure familiale alors que ce type d'entreprise représente un poids non négligeable dans l'économie européenne.

Nous proposons donc d'étudier de quelle manière la communication interne impacte l'engagement des employés dans des petites entreprises familiales à travers les exemples de deux négoces de bois, le premier aux Pays-Bas et le second en Suisse. Les éléments de la communication interne permettant l'engagement des employés sont évalués, l'impact de la structure familiale sur leur fonctionnement est examiné et le rôle de l'influence du dirigeant, mis en valeur dans de précédentes recherches, est également étudié. Une approche qualitative a été choisie pour comprendre ces mécanismes : 23 entretiens compréhensifs d'une durée moyenne de 47 minutes ont été menés : 11 chez DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT aux Pays-Bas et 12 chez ALLAMAN en Suisse.

Nos résultats montrent que tous les éléments "classiques" de la communication interne ne sont pas présents dans les deux entreprises avec des difficultés particulières concernant la qualité de l'information stratégique et financière, l'ouverture et l'honnêteté de cette information partagée par la Direction ainsi que les opportunités d'expression et d'action des employés.

L'entreprise néerlandaise présentait un panel de facteurs moins complet que celui de son homologue suisse. Ces faiblesses structurelles et informationnelles de la communication interne sont caractéristiques des petites entreprises familiales. Cependant, l'engagement des employés dans les deux entreprises est observé puisque, par réflexe, les employés assurent la circulation et la qualité de l'information, surtout lorsque le climat d'équipe est favorable comme dans l'entreprise suisse. La forte influence du dirigeant sur la culture de l'entreprise, comme démontrée dans de précédentes recherches sur les compagnies familiales, équilibre aussi le manque de structure de la communication interne. En effet, le but et les valeurs que le dirigeant souhaite pour l'entreprise sont diffusés dans l'entreprise et la plupart des employés les connaissent et s'y reconnaissent. De futures recherches croisant les domaines de la communication, du management, de la sociologie et de la psychologie ainsi que des travaux sur l'influence de la culture nationale sur le fonctionnement des entreprises familiales pourraient apporter de plus amples explications et regards sur le système fascinant de l'entreprise familiale.

## Table of contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ENGLISH .....	1
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY FRENCH .....	3
PART I – INTRODUCTION .....	7
1.1 GLOBALIZATION’S IMPACT ON THE WORK ENVIRONMENT .....	7
1.2 DIGITALIZATION INFLUENCE: OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS .....	8
1.3 WORK APPROACH .....	9
1.4 QUESTIONS AND STUDY PROPOSAL.....	9
PART II – STATE OF THE ART .....	11
2.1 INTERNAL COMMUNICATION .....	11
2.1.1 INTERNAL COMMUNICATION: A BALANCE BETWEEN INFORMATION AND RELATIONS .....	11
2.1.2 LACKS IDENTIFIED IN THE RESEARCH .....	11
2.2 EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT.....	12
2.2.1 THE HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT .....	12
2.2.2 THE DEFINITION .....	13
2.3 CONNECTION BETWEEN THE TWO CONCEPTS .....	14
2.3.1 A POSITIVE LINK BETWEEN INTERNAL COMMUNICATION AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT .....	14
2.3.2 SIX MAIN FACTORS OF INTERNAL COMMUNICATION IDENTIFIED .....	15
2.4 THE SPECIFICITY OF FAMILY COMPANIES.....	16
2.4.1 THE DEFINITION.....	16
2.4.2 THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A FAMILY COMPANY .....	17
2.4.3 THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF FAMILY COMPANIES .....	17
PART III – PROBLEMATIC AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS .....	19
3.1 PROBLEMATIC .....	19
3.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS .....	19
3.3 DEVELOPMENT OF THE REFLEXION .....	19
PART IV – METHODOLOGY .....	20
4.1 CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FIELD RESEARCH .....	20
4.2 A QUALITATIVE STUDY .....	21
4.3 THE INTERVIEWS’ BUILDING .....	21
4.4 THE ANALYSIS METHOD .....	22
PART V – ANALYSIS AND RESULTS .....	24
5.1 INFORMATION .....	24
5.1.1 INTERNAL COMMUNICATION: A CONTENT IN NEED OF IMPROVEMENT .....	24
5.1.2 A GENERAL INFORMAL STRUCTURE OF INTERNAL COMMUNICATION .....	27
5.2 RELATIONS.....	33
5.2.1 GENERAL CLIMATE BETWEEN COLLEAGUES .....	33

5.2.2 EMPLOYEE-MANAGER RELATIONS .....	38
<b>5.3 ENGAGEMENT .....</b>	<b>43</b>
5.3.1 AN ASSESSMENT OF INTERNAL COMMUNICATION THEORETICALLY FAVORING THE SWISS COMPANY'S EMPLOYEES' ENGAGEMENT AND CONDEMNING THE DUTCH COMPANY'S EMPLOYEES' .....	43
5.3.2 ENGAGEMENT SIGNS IN BOTH COMPANIES ALTHOUGH THEORETICALLY UNEXPECTED AT DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT .....	44
5.3.3 THE DIFFERENT INFLUENCE OF THE FAMILY STRUCTURE .....	48
<b>PART VI – CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>6.1 RESULTS.....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>6.2 DISCUSSION .....</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>57</b>

## PART I – INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Globalization's impact on the work environment

In the last decade, the globalization and deregulation of organizations along with the multiple crises shaking the economy have resulted into deep and fast transformations of the functioning of companies. Consequently, the way of managing employees has also changed significantly. In a world of joint ventures, outsourcing and partnering, employees have difficulties to understand where they belong and what their role is (Quirke, 2008). For the companies and their employees, the uncertainty grows stronger and the competition fiercer while they need to become more flexible and reactive (Fouquier & Cannamela Cannel, 2010). "The employees of the company thus carried away in a maelstrom of changes become disloyal, distant, disengaged"<sup>1</sup>.

It is in such hectic economic context that internal communication was born in the 1990s in the United States before developing in Europe. The discipline has developed fast within this world of globalization, deregulation and the multiplication of economic crises (Vercic et al., 2012). Organizations' reputation and trustworthiness are dropping, especially as employers. The change asked and promoted in the speeches are not implemented in reality which results in employees loosing trust in organizations. Consequently, employees tend to behave more individually, to preserve their own interest: they are skeptical towards the organizations, take less initiatives and do not engage in the company's project (Ely, 2015). In parallel, employees also have higher expectations toward the company: they wish for more power of action and meaning in their work (Vercic et al., 2012; Argenti, 1998). This is why internal communication appears as such a precious tool to restore this trust in a context in which so much more is demanded from employees than before: creativity, flexibility and motivation (Fouquier & Cannamela Cannel, 2010; Quirke, 2008). Internal communication can appear as the force helping organizations fighting external sources of disruptions turning the internal chaos into an internal dynamic (Fouquier & Cannamela Cannel, 2010).

In a purely profit oriented reflexion, engaged employees have been proven to be more productive to organizations. They show better performance and competitiveness, increase customer satisfaction and participate in the organization's good reputation and in managerial self-efficacy (Gupta & Sharma, 2016). Engaged employees also tend to stay in the company that treat them well, a significant strategic advantage in a world where companies are constantly chasing talents (Balakrishnan & Masthan, 2013). Such advantages are even more

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<sup>1</sup> « Les salariés de l'entreprise ainsi emportés dans un maelström de changements deviennent infidèles, distants, désimpliqués. » Fouquier, E., & Cannamela Camel, E. (2010). La communication interne, nouveau "soft power". *L'Expansion Management Review*. 4(139), 116



interesting for companies considering that less than half of all mergers and acquisitions, so significant of today's work environment dynamic, actually bring the benefits anticipated by deal makers and less than one-third of companies who has been downsized see their profits or stock prices raise in the three years following the downsizing (Cartwright, 2006).

Small size companies and family companies' survival is peculiarly difficult in such context as they need to compete with giant companies. However, their importance is far from being anecdotal. Small and medium enterprises - companies counting less 250 employees - represent 99% of all the enterprises in Europe, what gives them a significant economic weight. In terms of employment, SMEs account for two-thirds of total employment and concentrate 57% of value added in the EU (Airaksinen et al., 2015). European Commission also recognized that family businesses have a substantial weight and role to play in European economy although research and studies are lacking to prove it. They represent 60% of all companies in Europe. European Commission is taking actions such as COSME funding program, Small Business Act emphasizing SMEs key role in European economy as well as studies and reports to share the knowledge about these specific structures.

## **1.2 Digitalization influence: opportunities and risks**

The development of new technologies has allowed employees to both inform themselves better and communicate more with each other and outside of the company (Quirke, 2008). Employee's voice power has significantly increased especially given that an employee appears as a more credible and trustworthy spokesperson than a CEO to opinion leaders (Miles & Mangold, 2014; Quirke, 2008). This new power represents as much an opportunity as a risk for companies. Dell company specialized in information technologies and devise is an example of a successful engagement of employees in the company's reputation management on the social media. They decided to train a thousand employees in social media corporate use and had, as results, a thirty per cent decrease of negative comments and remarks of the company on the web (Civelière, 2016). Employees can be engaged at different levels and through various strategies according to the field of work and the culture of the company. In a bank, a cautious management of how employees use social media is adopted with rules, themes and schedule to follow. In a food company, interactive dialogue between employees and customers is implemented with an emotional emphasis still structured by some rules set by the company or, in a New Media Consulting Agency, complete trust and initiative are left to employees considered as the most legitimate ambassadors with still a strong digital presence of the CEO (Rokka et al., 2014). As ambassadors of the employer brand of their company, advocates of

the company in case of crisis or as authentic company representatives in customer relationship, employees and their voice crystalize a new strategic leverage. “Organizations that understand the opportunity to be gleaned by managing the new voice mechanisms and can harness and guide the power of employee voice have a clear advantage in realizing and sustaining a competitive advantage” (Miles & Mangold, 2014, p.402). Nevertheless, reaching such collaboration with the employees is not easy. If companies, through effective internal communication, do not allow employees to express themselves, for the good and the bad, they will find other ways such as social media and their viral potential to air their grievances (Miles & Gold, 2014).

### **1.3 Work approach**

*“Man’s search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life” Viktor E. Frankl (1946)*

People have nowadays a different approach to work: they have higher expectations, they want to play a bigger role in the company through decision making, be heard and recognized by their peers and managers (Argenti, 1998). Among all these requirements, the most demanding need of employees today is the meaning they want to find in their work. As new generations of workers tend to be more educated than the previous ones, they also tend to criticize more the nature and the meaning of their work (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006; Argenti, 1998). Away from consumerist, materialistic and individualistic motivations, to consider a job as a good one, individuals put more and more on the same level elements such as the interest represented by the job and the friendliness and helpfulness of colleagues than the salary and the safety of the job. A greater sense of meaning and purpose is searched by people in their lives (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006). This search of meaning in work is also stronger than before because with increasing life expectancy, working lives also extend. Spending more time at work, people look for meaning, stability and a sense of community and identity in the workplace while other social structures in developed countries such as neighborhoods, churches or extended families tend to erode (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006).

### **1.4 Questions and study proposal**

Given the unprecedented economic and social importance of employee engagement observed in the work environment as well as the increasing strategic role of internal communication for companies willing to survive fast-paced and constantly changing context, a study of the connection between these two notions is proposed. **How does internal**

**communication impact employee engagement in small family firms?** We will try to identify the elements of internal communication allowing employee engagement. It is also interesting to study the extent to which the family structure of both companies alter the functioning of those elements is also examined. Given the small size of each company and the importance of manager's influence in family structure, the role of the CEO will also be examined. Such study allows to fill the study gap, to a humble extent, of internal communication in small and medium enterprises as well as in family structures where organizational, sociological or psychological fields usually dominate. A qualitative method has been adopted to do this research through the running of 23 in-depth interviews with employees of two small family companies both specialized in the wood trade. One company is situated in the suburbs of Amsterdam in the Netherlands and the other is situated in the suburbs of Geneva in Switzerland. The exact names and locations of the two companies are not specified to protect the participants' confidentiality.

## **PART II – STATE OF THE ART**

### **2.1 Internal communication**

#### **2.1.1 Internal communication: a balance between information and relations**

First of all, research on internal communication field of research is not very much developed as it really started to interest practitioners in the 1990s and the scholars in the 2000s (Welch & Jackson, 2007) . First studies have emerged from experts in organizational communication and organizational psychology (Vercic et al., 2012). Internal communication interests scholars from different fields: human resources, management, marketing and corporate communication (Vercic et al., 2012). Hence a difficulty to define and to assess internal communication in organizations.

The answer of such problem relies on a multidisciplinary approach which does not constrain the researchers and practitioners (Ruck & Welch, 2012). Going through the wide range of definitions, two dimensions of internal communication always come out: the informational and relational characteristics. We will thus accept the definition of internal communication as “a component of a global organization system of information flows and interactions aimed at reaching an informational and relational balance”<sup>2</sup> (D’Almeida & Libaert, 2014). This idea of balance that internal communication seeks can also be found in the articulation of open information sharing, sense-making interactions, community building and shared responsibility (Juholin et al., 2014). Some researchers peculiarly focus on one of the two dimensions helping us understanding the depth of each perspective. Internal communication can be studied as strategic information processes specific to four type of sub-communications – business, management, corporate, organizational - allowing knowledge sharing (Kalla, 2005). Another approach can also emphasize on the relational aspect of internal communication. Welch and Jackson suggest a transactional focus in their stakeholder understanding of internal communication as “the strategic management of interactions and relationships between stakeholders at all levels within the organization” (2007, p.8).

#### **2.1.2 Lacks identified in the research**

Internal communication has been mostly considered as a process of information with a strong technical dimension, leaving aside the importance of the content of that information (Juholin et

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<sup>2</sup> “Composante d’un système globale d’organisation des flux d’information et des échanges visant un équilibre informationnel et relationnel<sup>3</sup> (D’Almeida & Libaert, 2014)

al., 2014; Ruck & Welch 2012). Furthermore, it is interesting to notice the overall absence of assessment of the informal information and relations happening within companies although scholars do recognize its existence. Indeed, the integrated approach chosen by Kalla does not limit internal communication to the actions done by the corporate communication professional. It comprehends “all formal and informal communication taking place in the organization” (2005, p.1). This type of communication is also noticed by Welch & Jackson when they explain that internal communication “includes informal chat on the “grapevine” as well as managed communication “(2007, p.1). Internal communication thus entails all the classic tools but also less tangible strategic attempt to connect people in order to facilitate spontaneous cooperation (Balakrishnan & Masthan, 2013). These informal elements should be included when studying small companies’ internal communication as they often do not always have a dedicated internal communication department or person.

## **2.2 Employee engagement**

### **2.2.1 The history of the concept**

Kahn is the first researcher to tackle the notion of employee engagement in 1990 bringing up meaningfulness, safety - having no fear of one’s acts’ consequences at work- and availability – possessing all the resources needed to accomplish work- as the three core elements to understand why a person would become engaged in his or her work. A decade later Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter contributed to employee engagement study presenting it as the antithesis of burnout, characterizing it as “a persistent positive affective state ... characterized by high levels of activation and pleasure” (Maslach et al., 2001, p.417). Such antithetic approach between burnout and work engagement is furthered by Bakker especially concerning the connection between the motivational state of work teams as a whole and each of its members, individually. Both works are fundamental in further research about the conceptualization of employee engagement (Shuck and Wollard, 2010).

In 2002, employee engagement is studied in a business approach by Harter, Schmidt and Hayes. For the first time, employee engagement is linked with business performance what will strongly stimulate interest about the topic. The person’s satisfaction at work is added to the current definition. This means employee engagement needs to be measured individually and not as a wide organization variable executive leaders can control, an individual view of engagement which the Gallup researchers will keep and strengthen in further researches. Because of the employee engagement and profit connection Harter and colleagues’ work revealed, the following studies tend to focus more on this business aspect than on the

conceptualization of the subject. This practitioner-centric body of work is completed by academic research in 2006 with Sacks's empirical work on drivers and consequences of employee engagement. His work confirmed previous findings about the cognitive, emotional and behavioral components of employee engagement although it was also the first to separate job engagement to organizational engagement.

In 2008, a study of Czarnowsky commissioned by the ASTD adopts a human resource perspective on employee engagement. In addition to confirming previous findings, the importance of a meaningful work environment, learning possibilities as well as a focus on employee experience are shown to help developing employee engagement. The same year, a conceptual significant piece of work by Macey and Schneider allowed to clarify employee engagement concept, separating it into three interdependent types of engagement: trait engagement, psychological state engagement and behavioral engagement (Macey & Schneider, 2008, p.5-6). This idea of employee engagement evolving through consecutive steps can also be studied from a different perspective. A first level of engagement consists in the employee focusing only the job he is hired to do. It can then be followed by a second level where the employee starts to also pay attention to the other employees surrounding him to eventually reach a third level of engagement where the employee's interest in the company and its objectives emerges and increases (Argenti, 1998).

### 2.2.2 The definition

Employee engagement concept is difficult to define as it can be associated to other concepts such as job involvement and satisfaction, work engagement, commitment or Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB) (Gupta & Sharma, 2016).

When it comes to defining employee engagement, two perspectives can be chosen: is engagement an individual decision from the employee or an organizational variable? Shuck & Wollard assert that the first one is the most relevant as "engagement in work is a personal experience inseparable from the individualistic nature of being human" (Shuck & Wollard, 2010, p.102). Nevertheless, the impact of the group on each individual or of the team on each of its members is an interesting approach to keep in mind as a connection between collective engagement or burnout of work teams and its members has been demonstrated (Bakker et al; 2006). Employee engagement has also been studied either as one general engagement (Czarnowsky, 2008; Harter et al., 2002; Maslach et al., 2001) or as the construct of different types of engagement : cognitive, emotional, behavioral (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Saks, 2006). The second approach, more specific and clear, allows a more efficient study and implementation of strategies to enhance employee engagement (Shuck & Wollard, 2010,

p.103). One element all scholars agree on is the behavioral manifestation of employee engagement as “an internal decision manifested outwardly (...) a positive or forward-moving emotive state” (Shuck & Wollard, 2010 p.103), although it can be measured by different consequences, one not excluding another: the employee's role performance, the employer's success and profit and the employee's discretionary effort. Another element creating consensus between scholars is that employee engagement is oriented to the achievement of the organization's objectives and is not to be confused with extra behaviors employees can have out of his or her work responsibilities (Shuck & Wollard, 2010 p.103).

In the light of such research, we will accept the following definition for this work: employee engagement is “an individual employee's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral state directed toward desired organizational outcomes” (Shuck & Wollard, 2010 p.103). To identify more clearly and practically the signs of employee engagement in our research, the elements of this definition are completed with the definition adopted by Balakrishnan and Masthan in their study of Delhi International Airport, inspired by the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale: *“Employee engagement describes employees' emotional and intellectual commitment to their organization and its success. Engaged employees experience a compelling purpose and meaning in their work and give their discrete effort to advance the organization's objectives”* (2013, p.2).

## **2.3 Connection between the two concepts**

### **2.3.1 A positive link between internal communication and employee engagement**

Researchers and practitioners have underlined the positive connection between internal communication and employee engagement. Employee engagement appears as the goal of internal communication, either the main one (Mishra et al., 2014) or the one resulting from a range of goals corresponding to the needed cognitive, emotional and behavioral states oriented towards the organization's objectives which an engaged employee has (Shuck and Wollard, 2010). These sub-goals are “contributing to internal relationships characterized by employee commitment, promoting a positive sense of belonging in employees, developing their awareness of environmental change and developing their understanding of the need of the organization to evolve its aims in response to, or in anticipation of environmental change” (Welch & Jackson, 2007, p.13). The organization can rely on certain job characteristics on a physical, psychological, social or organization levels to allow employee engagement. These ‘resources’ confirm the internal communication elements already identified as linked to employee engagement as they are related to the achievement of work goals, the well-being of the worker as well as his or her personal learning (Farndale & Murrer, 2014). At each moment

of the employee's development or career within the company as developed earlier, there is an opportunity to create engagement thanks to effective strategic communication (Argenti, 1998).

The informal interactions between colleagues overlooked by most of the researchers in internal communication can nevertheless be related to the team climate identified by Bakker, Schaufeli, Demerouti and Eeuwema as a key element of employee engagement. They define it as how the team members "construe themselves as interrelated to others rather than as independent and unique" (2006, p.240). Elements such as empathy towards colleagues as well as frequent interactions where team members share and confront their views participate in employee engagement (Bakker et al, 2006). It makes sense to bring this organizational and psychological notion to internal communication because some authors do recognize its role of contributing to a positive atmosphere within the company cultivating team values such as solidarity or respect (Ely, 2015; Fouquier & Cannemela Camel, 2010; Argenti, 1998).

### 2.3.2 Six main factors of internal communication identified

Internal communication has both relational and informational dimensions. Nevertheless the five categories of communication allowing employee engagement found by Balakrishnan and Masthan in their study of Delhi International airport bring an interesting clarity to the connection between internal communication and employee engagement. They were inspired from Dennis Communication Climate factors developed in 1971. Many parallels are also made with the conceptual model of internal communication resulting into employee engagement developed by Ruck and Welch<sup>3</sup>. We add a sixth factor to this model that appeared to be important: the team climate.

**Superior-subordinate communication** is the first factor. It relates to employees describing a positive communication with their managers as it includes "exchanges of encouragement, understanding, and fairness" (Balakrishnan & Masthan, 2013, p.4). The perceived organizational support is a significant antecedent of both organization and job engagement (Saks, 2006) with an emphasis on the key supportive role of the front-line supervisor (Ruck & Welch, 2012; Welch & Jackson, 2007; Saks, 2006). Feedback is a key element of superior-subordinate communication, particularly about the employee's performance (Farndale & Murrer, 2014).

**Quality of information** is the second factor. This factor concerns the satisfaction of employees of the way the management communicates about the company's activities, goals and job

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<sup>3</sup> See the model in Appendix A



requirements. It is about the clarity and transparency of the information. 'Role' and 'Strategy, goals and values' elements of Ruck and Welch theoretical models express the same need of understanding. Clear and consistent sharing of information by the managers to the employees has shown to engage employees and make them better understand the goals of the organization (Welch & Jackson, 2007; Saks, 2006, Guzley, 1992). "Enlightened managers know that the more information they provide to employees, the more likely these employees are to be highly motivated to do a better job, to advance in their positions, and to further the goals of the organization itself" (Argenti, 1998, p.200)

**Superior openness** is related to how managers provide information to the employees: how honest and open this sharing is according to the employees. We can draw a parallel with the fact that employees prefer face-to-face communication (Welch & Jackson, 2007, p.13).

**Opportunities for upward communication** correspond to the possibility for employees for their ideas and remarks to be heard and taken into account by the organization. Employee's voice expression and impact are one of the fundamental elements to engage the staff members (Ruck & Welch, 2012). Participation in the decision-making is also a job resource allowing employee engagement.

**Reliability of information** is the fifth factor. It is about how reliable and trustworthy the information shared by the management and the colleagues is according to the employees.

**Team climate** is the last factor and relies only relations between colleagues. It is about the empathy, the respect and the general positive understanding of mutual relations going on between all employees.

## **2.4 The specificity of family companies**

### **2.4.1 The definition**

The European Commission definition of a family business gathers the following four criteria. First, the majority of decision-making rights are in the possession of the natural person(s) who established the firm, or in the possession of the natural person(s) who has/have acquired the share capital of the firm, or in the possession of their spouses, parents, child, or children's direct heirs. Secondly, the majority of decision-making rights are indirect or direct. Thirdly, at least one representative of the family or kin is formally involved in the governance of the firm. Fourthly and lastly, listed companies meet the definition of family enterprise if the

person who established or acquired the firm (share capital) or their families or descendants possess 25 per cent of the decision-making rights mandated by their share capital.

#### 2.4.2 The characteristics of a family company

What makes a family business different from a non-family one? Researchers and practitioners agree that a family business has specific and complex interconnections between its business and its environment (Donckels & Fröhlich, 1991). A conceptual model<sup>4</sup> developed by Donckels & Fröhlich in the light of previous literature presents four intertwined areas –family, management, equity, business- entailing variable opportunities and risks for the family firm.

Confronting such model to 1 132 European companies among which 60% were family businesses, 5 characteristics inherent to family businesses appear. First, the business, management and equity subsystems are less important than the family one. Secondly, a family business manager tend to behave more like an all-rounder or an organizer than as a pioneer. This entails that risk aversion is stronger in family businesses as the priority is often not given to innovation or growth. Thirdly characteristic is a logic consequence of the second: socioeconomic networks are less developed in family firms than non-family ones. Fourth characteristic regards the consideration of employees. If family businesses are more likely to pay higher wages and care more about their employees' satisfaction than non-family ones, they will nevertheless be less receptive to *“other more progressive personnel issues such as participation by employees in decision-making and ownership; profit sharing, good working conditions, and self-fulfillment of employees; providing information on the manager's policy; and expenditures for further education of employees”* (Donckels & Fröhlich, 1991, p. 159). Interestingly, the entrepreneur-employee relationship is compared to a parent-child relationship. Fifth and last characteristic sums up the previous ones in a general conservative attitude inherent to family businesses. Non-family businesses hence then to be more progressive and dynamic than family ones who bet on stability instead of growth and profit.

#### 2.4.3 The different types of family companies

Family firms also present the particular characteristic of needing a strong company culture to survive a chaotic economic context (Dyer, 1988). A typology of family firms has been established by Dyer thanks to the study of more than forty family companies to help us identify the different cultures inherent to family firms and how they are related to their continuity. Four

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<sup>4</sup> See the model in Appendix B

cultures emerged from the study: paternalistic, laissez-faire, participative and professional<sup>5</sup>. Each are based on the variance of seven cultural assumptions as *“the core of any culture is this pattern of interlocking assumptions that creates a unique belief system”* (1988, p.38): “the Nature of relationships”, “the Human nature”, “the Nature of Truth”, “the Environment”, “Universalism/Particularism”, “the Nature of Human Activity”, and “Time”. The paternalistic culture was the most commonly found among the forty companies studied and was mainly associated to first generation family companies. It is characterized by hierarchical relations where family members concentrate authority, power and decision-making and employees are considered as subordinates obediently doing what they are told. Paternalistic family firms mostly innovate in terms of products and market orientations although some prefer to specialize in niche markets. The following three cultures are more specific to second or third generation family firms showing that paternalistic culture does not appear to be flexible enough to adapt changing and competitive environments. The laissez-faire culture presents similar characteristics to the previous one concerning hierarchy and market innovation. Yet, employees are not considered the same way: they have responsibility, can make decisions and benefit from the trust of the owners. Even if the ultimate decisions are still in the owners’ hands, they still have freedom to reach the organizations’ goals according to their discretion. The participative culture, very rare in family companies, strongly differs from the previous cultures. While the family’s status and power is lightened, employees are not only given authority and trustworthiness but they have to achieve personal growth and self-fulfillment through their work on not only think of the organization’s goals. There is group-oriented logic where everyone attitude and behavior participates in the general engagement and tolerance of its members. The professional culture is the last type identified by Dyer: it entails that the family delegates the management of the company to non-family, professional managers. Such culture is then characterized by individualistic mentality where employees are supposed to think of their own career achievements while they are still evaluated according to the profit they generate for the company. While the competition and impersonal management invade the company the involvement of the family in the business management decreases.

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<sup>5</sup> A table listing the cultural assumptions specific to each culture can be looked up in Appendix C.

## **PART III – PROBLEMATIC AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

### **3.1 Problematic**

Internal communication presents a lack of study concerning its relational aspect with a peculiar need of further investigation concerning all the informal exchanges happening within companies. Employee engagement is a subject which has gained popularity given the economic performance and loyalty associated to engaged employees. Nevertheless both subjects seem not to have been examined in the context of small family firms while these latter still represent a significant economic weight in European economy. We can consequently wonder if the connections currently established between internal communication and employee engagement are still relevant in a different type of structure. This is why we propose the following problematic to guide this research work: **How does internal communication impact employee engagement in small family firms?**

### **3.2 Research questions**

In order to answer such problematic, in the light of previous findings concerning how internal communication and employee engagement can be intertwined, we will try to identify the 'classic' elements of internal communication allowing employee engagement in both companies. To bring further insights on how the type of structure can influence the functioning of internal communication on employee engagement, it is also interesting to study the possible alteration of the family structure in each company on this interconnection. Eventually, according to the findings about family structure's characteristics, we decide to also examine the importance of the CEO's role on the internal communication mechanisms allowing employee engagement.

### **3.3 Development of the reflexion**

To develop our reflexion, we decide to draw a parallel between the two companies throughout the work to identify similarities and differences between the firms initially very similar in terms of size, business field and structure. We will start examining the informational aspects of internal communication and their impact on employee engagement. In a second time, we will examine the relational aspects to eventually, in a third part, analyze thoroughly the articulation between internal communication elements identified previously on employee engagement. It is in this third part that the possible alteration of family structure and the role of the CEO's on our subject is questioned.

## PART IV – METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Characteristics of the field research

[NB : the names of the companies, of participants and locations have been changed to protect strategic and private information as agreed before running the study with both CEOs.]

The field research extended from 8<sup>th</sup> of March to 14<sup>th</sup> of March 2017. The first range of interviews were led in DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT company in the Netherlands, first in the company's headquarters close to Amsterdam the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 9<sup>th</sup> and then in a city in the north of the Netherlands where the second part of the company is located on the 10<sup>th</sup>. The second range of interviews took place in ALLAMAN company located close to Geneva in Switzerland the 13<sup>th</sup> and the 14<sup>th</sup>. Both firms are small family companies specialized in wood trade. Each has a workforce ranging from thirty to forty people and exists since at least fifty years.

The 23 interviews, 11 with DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT's collaborators and 12 with ALLAMAN's collaborators, were led with the most diverse range of jobs possible so that the sample could be as representative as possible of the reality of the workplace<sup>6</sup>. They have an average length of 49 minutes at DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT and 44 minutes at ALLAMAN. The similarity of the two companies in nature - both answer the European Commission's definition of family business firm – business field and size makes their comparison more relevant.

Given the difficulty of reaching employees of companies, even more to run qualitative in-depth interviews with them, two different short videos were shot and provided to each CEO. Indeed, when offered the project, the CEO of the Dutch company specified that even though he was willing to accept the research project he had to ask his employees' approval to participate beforehand. The video was thus used and shared to the employees by the CEO of the Dutch company. Employees were therefore aware of the interviews about to happen on the 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of March 2017. On the contrary, even though a video was also shot for the employees of the Swiss company, the CEO did not share it with them. Consequently, the CEO presented the interviewer to the totality of the employees the very morning of the day interviews had to start and gave complete freedom to the interviewer to select the interviewees but he did not think necessary to ask beforehand if the employees agreed to participate in the project.

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<sup>6</sup> See in Appendix D the table detailing the composition of the sample – names, jobs, years of experience...

## **4.2 A qualitative study**

A qualitative approach based on in-depth interviews was chosen. Qualitative approach is preferred when the research is about understanding and/or comparing a phenomena rather than measuring it (Kaufmann, 2014). Furthermore, employee engagement involving cognitive, emotional and behavioral dimensions, qualitative interviews appeared as the most appropriate as they can disclose emotional dimensions of social experience not easy to observe in behavior and open the window into people's "imagined meanings of their activities, their self-concepts, their fantasies about themselves (and about others) [that] are also significant" (Lamont & Swidler, 2014, p.7). Although what the interviewees say can sometimes not be perfectly accurate, interviews can reveal features of reality not visible in everyday and more complete than the direct observation of an ethnographer who has no access to the context of the situation he or she observes.

Instead of semi-directed interviews, the 'understanding interview' developed by Kaufmann was adopted. Indeed the semi-directed interviews which are supposed to provide more objective and comparable data presented too many flaws. Recently researchers have underlined the need of contextualizing the interviews allowing the subjectivity of each encounters to have room and meaning in the collection and analysis of the data (Alvesson, 2003). Furthermore, the neutrality and restraint interviewers are advised to adopt conducting semi-directed interviews do not encourage the interviewee to engage in the interview and tend to let his or her answers remain superficial and impersonal (Kaufmann, 2014, p.18). This is why the 'understanding' style of interviewing was chosen so that the interviewer adapts to the interviewee with empathy more than the reverse and do not impose order where there is none (Lamont & Swidler, 2014, p.11). This 'understanding' method is also appropriate for the exploratory perspective we take. It is about letting the field 'talk' and embracing the complexity and singularity of it (Kaufmann, 2014).

## **4.3 The interviews' building**

Kauffman 'understanding' interview method was chosen to favor an authentic and in-depth information. Nevertheless, to ensure a path to the discussion and still collect relevant information, three themes of conversation were created: information, relations and engagement. Each thematic category contains open questions to come back to in case the interviewee did not spontaneously mention them. This themes and questions were inspired

from both a theoretical model<sup>7</sup> of assessment of internal communication allowing employee engagement developed by Ruck and Welch (2012) and a case study exploring the impact of internal communication on employee engagement at Delhi International Airport (Balakrishnan & Masthan, 2013). These two sources appeared as solid bases to build the interviews' themes and questions for the following reasons. The theoretical model offers an employee-centric approach of internal communication and employee engagement that has been lacking in the previous studies (Juholin et al., 2014; Ruck & Welch, 2012). It comes as the result of thorough literature review on internal communication and invites to an assessment more based on dialogue, content and communities than process and volumes. It is such perspective that we seek to adopt in this work. The Delhi International Airport case study is also a methodological gold mine as the survey built crosses seminal internal communication and employee engagement surveys such as an adapted version of Dennis' Communication Climate survey and a fusion of Mowday, Steers and Porter's Organizational Commitment Questionnaire and Spreitzer's Empowerment Scale. The survey has also been reviewed by twenty experts after the pilot phase what increases its reliability (Ruck & Welch, 2012, p.4). The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale was also used for additional light on how engagement is evaluated. These questions guide the conversation towards the key elements of internal communication allowing employee engagement that were mentioned in the state-of-the-art. Both English and French versions of the interview guide and the questions can be consulted in the Appendix E<sup>8</sup>.

#### **4.4 The analysis method**

To analyze the data collected through the 23 interviews ran at DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT company and ALLAMAN company, an analysis grid has been created on Excel<sup>9</sup>. It has been decided to separate the analysis of each company on two different sheets. Nevertheless, the categories of analysis are the same for both companies. A purely thematic analysis was adopted. Indeed, given the fact that interviews at Dutch company were led in English that is to say not the mother tongue of the interviewees, a semantic analysis did not appear relevant for such data. The thematic categories chosen are inspired by elements of internal communication allowing employee engagement identified in the state-of-the-art. Main categories are: Information, Relations and Participation. Under each main category appear respective subcategories: Content, Process and Circulation for Information category, Understanding, Openness and Trust for Relations category and Feedback, Suggestions, Voice

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<sup>7</sup> See the model in Appendix A

<sup>8</sup> See the interview guides and questions at Appendix E

<sup>9</sup> See extracts of the analysis grid at Appendix F

for Participation. Two subcategories linked to employee engagement elements were added under the Participation category: Interest in the company's state and Interest in the job. A separate category was also created for the Manager's role. Throughout the analysis, other categories emerged from the interviews either totally unexpected such as Comparison with previous experiences or CEO's mentality or nuances to take into account in some subcategories. For example, the Understanding subcategory ended up including: understanding colleagues' role, empathy for colleagues, empathy for the CEO, behaviors resulting from such understanding like solidarity, tolerance, adaptation to others' ways of working or feeling of isolation.



## PART V – ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

### 5.1 Information

#### 5.1.1 Internal communication: a content in need of improvement

Job-related information mainly based on employees' experience

In both companies, a majority of the interviewees have initially a lot and enough knowledge to handle most of their tasks on their own. This can be explained by an average length of experience per person of 13.6 years in DE VRIES HOUT IMPORT and 9.2 years in ALLAMAN although the Swiss company has been recently hiring a lot of new warehouse workers. Lars, representative of DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT for South Holland thus explains: *"[I get the information] From out of my head (points his head with his finger). The types of wood, the white wood euh the cedar, the red wood... I think I know a lot of the woods so I can tell them, the people, what they can use or not what to use. The measurements I don't know all out my head so we work with NAF, NAF is a system we work with so I can see what we have at the stock."* Similarly, Sébastien, Planed Wood Salesman at ALLAMAN describes the connection of his knowledge with experience: *"It is a lot of, it is habit eventually, it is about how much you know about this or that provider and that's it, it works out"*<sup>10</sup>

To get further information, employees from DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT company will either look in the NAF system which gathers business information such as prices list, clients' history as well as an online agenda informing about the presence of each colleague or they will ask for the opinions or advice of colleagues directly face-to-face if possible or by phone. In the same way, employees from ALLAMAN company rely on their internal intranet concentrating analogous information as well as on the knowledge of their colleagues. In the Swiss company, colleagues happen to be a source more mentioned in the interviews because a lot of employees have just been recruited and thus need further accompanying by their peers. The quality or the reliability of the information was never questioned and colleagues most of the time appear in the interviews as trustworthy and skilled professionals. Gert Jan, North Holland Representative, talking about the "Northern" team at DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT company describes : *"But the group I work with are very competitive, they are... they have a lot of knowledge. Thomas will ask me sometimes for information but I will ask him more time for information, so the people are very competitive to themselves and to the customer."* Comparable speech is shared by Sébastien, Planing Wood Salesman, at ALLAMAN company when he takes one colleague as an example: *"I will ask to, I think to Christophe down there*

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<sup>10</sup> « C'est beaucoup de, c'est l'habitude quoi finalement, c'est les connaissances de tel ou tel fabricant et puis voilà puis après ça roule quoi. »

*who has a lot of knowledge in solid wood. Yeah if I have a few questions to ask him I do not hesitate. He is very skilled in that field”<sup>11</sup>*

The fact that employees can count on the information they are given to do their job through colleagues or other media contributes to their engagement according to the ‘reliability of information’ factor (Balakrishnan & Masthan, 2013).

#### Very little shared strategic information

Strategic information concerns topics such as company’s objectives, market insights as well as the financial results of the company. This information is not much communicated to employees in general except to the Commercial Director at DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT and to the representatives in both companies because it is directly linked to their job. The sales teams receive such information in meetings, irregular at DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT and regular at ALLAMAN, but it appears not to be enough according to the interviewees. In DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT, this lack of strategic and market information is regretted while at ALLAMAN, either employees do not mind or will look for it and build their knowledge on their initiative through colleagues, personal network, magazines... Nevertheless this difference can be a bias linked to the sample of interviewees given that nine out of the eleven Dutch employees interviewed work in Sales where market information is critical. Mattheis, Special Wood Salesman in the headquarters of DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT company shows a deep interest for strategic information saying: *“that’s very interesting and our level of knowledge will increase but that kind of information is spread very restricted, very low, I think that’s a point of improvement, to spread more general market information.”* His speech is supported by a colleague from the “Northern” team, David, Logistics Manager and temporary Salesman at *“No I think our director can give us more information.- Ok. Information...- Personal but again when we talk about marketing, strategy, we’re missing that here.”* Sébastien, Solid Wood worker at ALLAMAN also minds about this type of information although his work at the warehouse is not often in direct contact with the clients or the market: *“I always try to do my best and to get some information about eum what is going well what is going wrong and in general about the company’s state, to know if it is working correctly or not (...) I often ask Laurent the daily turnover and then I often ask Timothée if he has prepared a lot of orders or yeah.”<sup>12</sup>*

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<sup>11</sup> « Je vais demander à, j’pense à Christophe en bas qu’a beaucoup de connaissances dans le bois massif. Voilà si j’ai deux trois infos à lui demander voilà j’hésite pas quoi. Il est très compétent dans ce domaine-là.”

<sup>12</sup>« j’essaye toujours de faire au mieux et de me renseigner sur euh sur ce qui va ce qui va pas et en général la santé de l’entreprise, savoir si elle fonctionne correctement ou pas.” (...) “Bah j’demande

This lack of information concerning the strategy of the company including market insights and the objectives can negatively impact the engagement of the employees (Balakrishnan & Masthan, 2013; Ruck and Welch, 2012). We can suppose that employees from DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT could also build, similarly to ALLAMAN BOUQUIN's employees, their own knowledge of such information but they explain that they are so busy that they cannot implement any new initiatives.

A peculiar interest about the results of the company has been revealed through half of the interviews in the Swiss company while the interest was more intense about mainly strategic information at the Dutch company. At the Swiss company, results are not known from employees or only partially as Timothée, Solid Wood Salesman at ALLAMAN says: *"Well one thing is certain, everything about balance sheets and this kind of things that's something we never have accessed to it. That's family's, we never have access to it"*<sup>13</sup>. The interest is linked to a will to understand and situate how well the company is doing as well as to a need of being reassured on the state of the company. Salem, Forklift Driver and Worker at ALLAMAN explains how knowing results can motivate the teams *"because somehow yeah we are proud of ourselves when we have prepared when on this month we have prepared I don't know I'd say 20 cube meters while we only prepare the next month 10 yeah fore sure the previous month we are much more satisfied"*<sup>14</sup>. An explanation for such secret about results was mentioned by two interviewees saying that it was not the culture in Switzerland to talk about money.

#### Human Resources information: a first contrast between the two companies

Human resources information designates employee-related information such as departures or arrivals of employees, promotions, new ways of working and so on.

At the Dutch company, this information is not known easily although the interest of the employees is present. They consider that knowing this type of information participates in the teambuilding, an element linked to the importance of the team climate that we will further develop in the following section. Thomas, Special Wood Sales Manager gives the example of a recent departure of a colleague: *"Yeah I... there's one guy that left the company a few weeks ago, Pete. (...) So we hear he is going to stop. Pete, we know him not really well but we spoke*

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souvent à Laurent le chiffre d'affaires d'une journée après j'demande souvent à Timothée si il a préparé beaucoup de commandes ou voilà. »

<sup>13</sup> « "Alors déjà une chose est sûre, tout ce qui est bilan tout ça c'est un truc on y a jamais accès. Là c'est famille, on y a jamais accès. »

<sup>14</sup> « parce qu'après voilà mine de rien on est content de nous quand on a préparé quand ce mois-ci on a préparé j'sais pas moi j'dirais 20m cube de bois tandis que le mois d'après on en a préparé que 10 ouais c'est sûr que le mois d'avant on est beaucoup plus satisfait. »

*to him, we saw him at the last party we had, the end of year party, we cooked together I saw him, yeah he's a friendly guy. So but then he left the company but he left and we heard nothing about it."*

On the contrary, at the Swiss company, information about people's arrival, departure, retirement are easily known. There are special events or rituals organized by the Direction according to each event: tour of the warehouse and the office for newcomers by the CEO who present the new person to everyone, retirement small parties, the croissants ritual entailing that at his or her birthday, the employee should bring croissants for his or her team. These events are highly appreciated by all employees who see them as an occasion to meet altogether in retirement small parties or as an easy first contact in the CEO'S personalized presentation of new employees. Laurent, IT Manager and Logistics and Administration Assistant testifies *"We always organize a small drinks party when someone leaves organized by the bosses"*<sup>15</sup>.

John, Truck Driver promotes the CEO's personalized tour: *"Oh it's the boss he comes with the person, he presents him he says what he is going to do in the company... yeah he presents eum that's it, well what he is going to do at his job and it is a first contact, to break the ice [laughs]"*<sup>16</sup>

This type of information appears as a potential factor of employee engagement when it is faithful to the reality but also by its quality according to the 'quality of information' factor (Balakrishnan & Masthan, 2013). If the Swiss company succeeds in such communication, transparency and updating on Human Resources matters are missing at the Dutch company what should negatively impact the engagement of its employees (Welch & Jackson, 2007; Saks, 2006, Guzley, 1992).

### 5.1.2 A general informal structure of internal communication

#### Face-to-face communication as the most widely used media

Given the small size, in terms of number of employees as well as the physical space of each company, most of the internal interactions are face-to-face. It is the mean of communication preferred in both companies either because it is efficient or because it is simply more pleasant. Irene, White Wood Purchaser and Saleswoman at DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT asserts that *"Best is always face to face. For me it's more, how do you say it, it works better."* The practical aspect of such way of communicating is underlined by Auke Jan, Logistics Manager at the

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<sup>15</sup> « on fait toujours un pot quand quelqu'un part qui est organisé par les patrons. »

<sup>16</sup> « Oh c'est le patron il vient avec la personne il la présente il dit qu'est-ce qu'elle va faire dans l'entreprise et... ouais il présente euh c'est ça, 'fin ce qu'elle va faire son poste et puis une première approche, briser la glace [rit]. »

headquarters location, for DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT: *“Yeah 9 of 10 times I walk in there yeah. Yeah because a lot of the time they are on the phone already so then I come and I have to look to see if they are free and I walk in and I just wait until they are free if I want to know something and it's done right away so...”*. At the Swiss company, the Secretary Suzanne, shares similar information: *“No no everything is done face-to-face he comes to me he gives me... or sometimes I find an offer in the morning when I arrive when he has written it the day... the day before. But otherwise he gives me the work directly.”*<sup>17</sup>

The other media used in both companies are phone and email mainly with representatives who works on the road or between the two sites of DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT at the headquarters, where most of the employees are, and in the Northern location. Phone is rather used to get a quick information and mail as a confirmation or a report on action done. A preference is given to phone in the Northern location for contacting the colleagues at the headquarters: it can be assumed that this second media, more direct than email, compensates the physical distance between the colleagues of the two sites. Thomas, Special Wood Salesman at the Northern location at DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT details: *“I'd rather use email to confirm than to ask people what to do and I'm not always doing that, I of course also send emails and asking people something to do but normally in, when it's important, when it matters, I call first. And in email it's ok, but sometimes, I think email is very bad when you lose contact to customers and you lose there's no discussion there's no in a normal conversation, in a telephone conversation, you get to know more details, you get to more specific details, you feel if it's something, there's more emotion there (...)”*. At ALLAMAN, the Solid Wood Worker, Sébastien reaches employees not often present at the warehouse through phone: *“Sometimes it happens the representatives I call them to get some information about the order so that it can help me do it”*<sup>18</sup>

A lack of structure of the internal database compensated differently in each company

Both companies also have an internal database, NAF system at DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT and ERC system at ALLAMAN, containing information such as prices list, customers' history and stock follow up. These systems appear in both companies to be lacking of structure and relevance for the business. Consequently, a new system is being implemented at DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT according to employees' suggestions as interviewees hope. Gert Jan, North

<sup>17</sup> « Non non c'est tout en direct il vient me voir il me donne les... ou des fois je trouve une offre le matin quand j'arrive quand il l'a fait le lend... le jour avant. Mais autrement il me donne directement le travail. »

<sup>18</sup> « Des fois ça arrive les représentants j'appelle les représentants pour avoir des renseignements sur la commande pour que ça puisse m'aider à la faire quoi. »

Holland Representative for DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT explains: *“But maybe with[in] 1 or 2 or 3 months, NAF is starting in June this year, let's say maybe it will be better and I get that information maybe in August or maybe earlier I am not sure. But I am waiting. Still it is March now and I don't have any information, nothing. - Have you told that to the people who are launching the new version of...? - I spoke to Jasper with it, he's my manager and I think I have to ask him and not Thomas or anything else – Ok - Yeah. And he will explain he said "Yes it's NAF it's a new system and blabla" yeah. Ok I'll wait“*

At the Swiss company, employees tend to develop their own database to do their job. *“Well then I also know that I take notes of a lot of things eum I mean I have a file with all my personal notes or I don't know, we are going to have a problem for example of bleaching in oak wood, I'll create myself a technical sheet I will keep it with me because I know that the day I have a problem I can answer right away to the salesmen's or clients' question”<sup>19</sup>* (Timothée, Solid Wood Salesman, ALLAMAN ).

#### Different perceptions of such informal internal communication

Organized moments of information sharing, mostly strategic and market information, in both companies are meetings with the sales teams. They are irregular at DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT and usually gather sales team members from both locations. They are regular at ALLAMAN and gather every Friday the CEO and the representatives.

At the Dutch company, the meetings are considered not to be frequent enough. Irene, the White Wood Purchaser and Saleswoman asserts: *““Yeah we have meetings also but it's not so often. And I think its eum... yeah four times per year maybe now. Then we have the meeting in the evening so a big meeting and then we talk about the figures of course, also market information”*. Furthermore, there is some regret that these meetings only concern the sales team members and that nothing is shared with other employees. *“I asked Peter when I started working here that they have sales meetings if there would be interesting for me too, I ask him if I could be there so I could learn more about the company but... never so. I don't know anything about sales or whatever company strategy or...”* (Auke Jan, Logistics Manager). This means that the CEO and managers' openness and honesty in sharing information is negatively impacted which does not contribute to employees' engagement (Balakrishnan & Masthan, 2013; Ruck & Welch, 2012). This feeling of a need of more structured and frequent sharing of

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<sup>19</sup> « Après c'est pareil moi je sais que je note beaucoup de choses euh 'fin j'ai un classeur avec toutes mes notes perso ou j'en sais rien, on va avoir un problème par exemple de discoloration dans du chêne, je vais m'mettre une fiche technique j'avais la garder avec moi parce que je sais que le jour où j'ai un problème je peux tout de suite répondre là-dessus aux commerciaux, aux clients. »

information also concern sales team members. There is a wish to follow what every department is doing to coordinate everyone's actions. Gert Jan, the North Holland Representative suggests: *"It should be better when we have an email group, "DE VRIES info", just inside email information so if somebody have some information we can share it on one email address for example (...) then everybody can see it and read it and do with what you think you have to do."*

His South Holland counterpart Lars adds another idea: *"Yeah a summary of what I discussed with the customer. And I am the only one who he is doing that. (...) And it's valuable for everybody, so everybody can see "Hey, when did Lars go to Utrecht to that customer" then can look it up and they can see what I have discussed with them."*

Human resources information also often come as first examples of what is missing. Erik, Red Wood Salesman gives the following example: *"Steven, Peter's son, he is now visiting Finland and he will come to our sales team during the summer but that was not officially, the information was not officially in a meeting... That was for example in the corridor and I think it should be better when we were all together and it was told so".* More sensitive examples of Human resources information in need of better structure are also given such as the leaving of one colleague already mentioned by Thomas earlier but this time developed by Auke Jan, the Logistics Manager in the headquarters' location: *"I think it would be normal, if you have something like that, that someone from the Direction tell it to everybody, email, in a meeting or whatever it doesn't matter. But it's weird to find out that a colleague is leaving the day that he's coming to say goodbye. And this is with my colleagues outside also they didn't know either. And there always something on normally we we we all put in five euros and buy something as a goodbye present because he's a good colleague for a lot of years and we don't have a chance now because we only heard the day he was leaving."*

It is interesting to notice that the responsibility of a good circulation of information is not only assigned to managers but to both colleagues and managers. This importance of colleagues' collaboration will be developed in the RELATIONS sections because it is also a key factor of employee engagement (Bakker et al, 2006). . Despite this overall responsibility expressed by the interviewees, the CEO of the company does consider that a distribution of the information per sales division – White Wood, Red Wood, Special Wood – is relevant and that an informal communication of strategic and market information is inherent to the emergency of its communication. *"So that's what I mean there is always a lack of time and most of the communication is, as I believe it in each company I have seen, is always in-between. You are sitting here, I am sitting there, I am passing by and I go get some coffee "Oh Marie before I forget it have you done this or that or do you know what has happened yesterday and so on". I think that's how it goes in most of the companies. (....) I think business information cannot*

*wait, business information should be exchanged everytime of the day” (Peter, CEO). Informal internal communication appears as quicker and more flexible. This goes against the wishes of the employees. The CEO also assumes that Human Resources information is shared in a more structured way given the sensitivity of the subjects but it is the opposite that was revealed in the interviews. “If you mention new employees or changements, changes in the way of working for instance, then we make more or less, then you make an appointment or you plan something anyway. “Do you have time tomorrow because there are some things I want to discuss with you”( Peter, CEO).*

This overall informal internal communication at DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT impacts the relations between colleagues and between employees and the Commercial Director and the CEO. This will be further developed in the second part of this work. Interestingly, at the Swiss company, the internal communication also works on a mostly informal level but it does not create the same frustrations and tensions than in the Dutch company.

At ALLAMAN, half of the interviewees consider that holding meetings only for representatives is normal. Suzanne, the Secretary asserts: *“No what he tells us is enough for me. – Ok, but you do you still think it is a good thing that he talks about it [company’s results] anyway? –Oh yes of course, yes yes for sure but at last I am a secretary not an analyst, yes to be honest I am not very interested in that let’s say. But of course when he... As I told you what he tells us is enough for me if he tells us it’s going like this and like that and it has been going like this eum but the numbers I don’t know if I have access to it”<sup>20</sup>. Most of the strategic or results information are given through an end of year general meeting, more similar to a drinks party than a general assembly, where the state of the company is given without much details and contextualization. Human resources information are spread through small events as explained earlier. Most of the interviewees consider that the general informal way of communicating is satisfactory and logic in a family company. *“Well, it is a human scale firm it is a family company so eum... Yeah in general it goes like... Well we are not even 40, if there is a new face we’ll always run into him eum, we’re not going to hold a meeting to say “Here is the new comer” I don’t think that’s necessary. We are big enough afterwards and let’s say well educated enough to go shake hands and say well “My name is this and I take care of this and that... my functions are...”<sup>21</sup> ( Christophe, Solid Wood Purchaser).**

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<sup>20</sup> « Non ça me suffit ce qu'il nous communique. (...) - D'accord, vous trouvez ça bien qu'il en parle quand même?- Ah oui bien sûr, oui oui ça c'est sûr mais oui j'suis secrétaire finalement, je suis pas analyste, oui franchement ça m'intéresse pas énormément disons. Mais bien sûr quand il nous... comme je vous ai dit ça me suffit s'il nous dit ça se passe comme ça comme ça ça s'est passé comme ça donc euh mais oui les chiffres je sais pas si j'ai accès à ça."

<sup>21</sup> « Bah c'est une société à taille humaine c'est une boîte familiale donc euh ... Ouais généralement ça se fait un peu... Voilà on est à peine 40, si y a une nouvelle tête on le croise toujours euh, on va pas faire une réunion pour dire "Voilà c'est le nouvel arrivant" j'trouve pas qu'il y ait un besoin. Après on est



Half of the other interviewees wished for more meetings and more structured information sharing to help them situate their activity within the company. These meetings would concern internal sales team on one hand and warehouse team on the other hand. Timothée, Solid Wood Salesman thus suggests that *“one of the solutions would be to have a few meetings from time to time to really settle things and say “Ok now everyone stops what he or she is doing, we do that, we all agree” we all get the information and then you do whatever you want with it if some don’t keep it they don’t but at least everyone got the information”*<sup>22</sup>. Thinking about what his colleagues working at the warehouse live and could wish, Laurent, the IT Manager and Logistics and Administration Assistant also shares an idea to better structure the information sharing: *“So maybe not every week but once a month or something like that, they [the Direction] take (...) people from the warehouse, they say “Here you go this month it went well we did I don’t know 10 mistakes instead of 20 the previous month” or something like that. I think that type of communication could be a little bit more interesting to eum, to motivate people, but it needs to include figures. I mean that you can’t say “Well we did a lot of mistakes”, a lot doesn’t mean anything. It needs to be “Ok we did half less than the previous month” or “We did 40% more” or whatever”*<sup>23</sup>

It is thus interesting to observe that although both companies present mostly an informal way of communicating information, the employees do not accept or react to it in the same way in each company although employees from both companies always have suggestions for improvement. At DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT, employees put the responsibility on colleagues or the managers. At ALLAMAN, employees either accept the way things go or adapt their search of information. The splitting of DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT between two locations does participate in the difficulties linked to an informal way of communicating but it seems that other elements, developed in the next part, prevent the internal communication of working efficiently.

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suffisamment grand et on va dire bien élevé pour aller serrer la main puis dire bah voilà "j'm'appelle duchmok et je m'occupe de tel ou tel... voilà mes fonctions »

<sup>22</sup> "une des solutions ça serait d'avoir un peu des réunions de temps en temps pour vraiment poser les choses et dire "Ouais maintenant tout le monde arrête son boulot, on fait ça, on est tous d'accord" on a eu l'information on en fait ce qu'on en fait hein si y en a qui retiennent pas ils retiennent pas mais au moins on l'a tous eu quoi."

<sup>23</sup> " Alors peut-être pas toutes les semaines mais une fois par mois ou des choses comme ça qu'ils prennent (...) des gens du chantier ils disent "Bah voilà ce mois-ci ça s'est bien passé on a fait que j'en sais rien 10 erreurs contre 20 le mois passé" ou des choses comme ça. Je pense que ce genre de communication-là pourrait être un peu plus intéressante pour euh, pour motiver les gens, mais il faut que ce soit chiffré. c'est-à-dire qu'on peut pas dire euh "Voilà on a fait beaucoup d'erreurs", beaucoup ça veut rien dire. Faut que ce soit "Voilà on a fait moitié moins que le mois passé" ou "On en a fait 40% de plus" ou peu importe. »

## 5.2 Relations

### 5.2.1 General Climate between colleagues

#### Two opposite atmospheres

In both companies, interviewees admitted the skills and the reliability of the majority of their colleagues. Understanding roles participate in employee engagement as Ruck and Welch formulate it in one of the six elements of their reviewed theoretical model “I know what my job responsibilities are and how they contribute to the team and organization” (2012, p.7). Nevertheless, the relations between colleagues are not described and felt the same way at all in each company.

At DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT, when asked about the general atmosphere in the company and the relations with colleagues and managers mixed, most of the interviewees describe either a negative atmosphere or an atmosphere that could be improved. Two main reasons come out. The intensity of work puts the employees under stress and pressure, degrading the interactions as Irene, the White Wood Saleswoman from the headquarters team expresses it: *“And I don’t know one of the reasons might be that at the part of DE VRIES company the sales there they are lacking one person and they are very busy and sometimes it’s too much so then they get a bit annoyed”*. This busy and stressful atmosphere is also mentioned by the Commercial Director, Jasper, as something to be *“Improved in a way that maybe sometimes it’s quite stressful and hectic and so on and everybody... nobody has time to focus maybe or to talk about other things cause everybody’s focused to get their job finished for the day and that’s not always easy.”*

As a consequence of this intense and tense work environment, employees tend to play individual to make sure they will manage to get their tasks done. Surprisingly, a couple of interviewees use the same ‘islands’ metaphor to describe the situation, the Commercial Director included. *“Maybe you hear that more today I think. Since we feel like sometimes we are bit like islands.”*(Irene, White Wood Saleswoman). The solidarity and the feeling of a team are missing according to the employees. *“Aargh I think you have groups here and everybody wants to to sweep his own desk clean and make sure that his or her thing is okay and it’s not working as a team here. (...) Well that’s what you get eventually because everybody is afraid that he is doing something wrong so everybody is trying to protect its own piece and make*

*sure that my piece of work is ok and about the rest well ... it's their problem.”(Auke Jan, Logistics Manager).*

It is interesting to notice that the General Manager himself uses ‘the islands’ metaphor to explain what he does not want to observe in his teams and what teambuilding means to him. *“To understand each other’s problems or reasons why we do something. It can also be discussions about pricing about ideas about ...it’s also important that we are all colleagues, what I don’t want is three little islands.”*

This tendency to play individual does not favor collective work towards the realization of the organization’s goal and consequently in employees’ engagement (Farndale & Murrer, 2014; Bakker et al., 2006). In his philosophical approach, Frédéric Ely emphasizes how internal communication aims at giving meaning to one’s work, facilitating its appropriation as well as giving it soul in order to encourage cohesion and invite each employee to better communicate and work together (2015, p.198).

We can also make a logic connection between the formation of these ‘islands’ and the sharing of information per sales division that the CEO considers more efficient. *“If we have three sales departments, in these 3 sales divisions they have their own products, their own group products, their own markets sometimes the customers can be the same but it's not necessary. So if we want to change some products then it's the question is it concerning the whole company or is it just concerning one of the divisions. And in the last example then we have talks only with that sales division” (Peter, CEO).* This need of information sharing to strengthen the team spirit is admitted by the CEO himself but the contradiction remains between what is said and what is being done. *“And trade means purchasing and selling and I think that the sales people should have some information about the purchasing and the other way around and therefore I think that it's very good that we have an open communication and good information to each other. And if one of the sales divisions is acting more independent than another one, then it's a company inside of the company and I don't like that.” (Peter, CEO).*

At ALLAMAN, the general atmosphere is positively described. Some key ideas such as solidarity and tolerance appeared throughout the interviews to qualify the relations between colleagues. *“Yeah I have seen different things in other companies but here I really feel like, we help each other and even if we are in a bad mood the day after, we are friends again”<sup>24</sup>.* Employees also show empathy for each other in their work, especially when they have been doing that job in earlier times themselves like the Site Foreman, Paul, describing the Purchaser job, *“Purchaser job it is not an easy one. Because you can get kicked out of the saw*

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<sup>24</sup> « Ouais j'ai vu autre chose dans des autres entreprises mais ici j'ai vraiment l'impression, on s'aide mutuellement et même si on est en mauvaise humeur le lendemain on, on est amis de nouveau »

*mills you can... it is quite a difficult job*<sup>25</sup> or Christophe, the Solid Wood Purchaser, imagining how representatives of Plane Wood, a field facing a lot of competition, must feel receiving negative feedback from the CEO *"I put myself in the shoes of the guy working nine hours a day, five days a week and who's been 15 years in the company and then telling himself "What I am doing is no profit at all", it must be hard to accept, and to motivate himself and do better"*<sup>26</sup>. Such elements attest of the positive team climate at the Swiss company and participate in its employees' engagement (Farndale & Murrer, 2014; Bakker et al, 2006).

Divisions between fields of work or locations are not handled identically

At DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT, although employees admit understanding others' roles, some expressed the feeling that their job and activity was not being well understood by their colleagues or their managers, especially the members of Northern team. *"But I get the feeling that they are not, they do not really know what we are doing here. In a big, in general, they know but in specific things there is very... there is not enough knowledge of what is happening here. And that's a shame."*(Thomas, Special Wood Salesman in the Northern team). The problem is that employees lack time and opportunities to mention this impression and discuss about ways to improve the situation. The employees of the Northern team wish for more interactions with their colleagues of the headquarters' team as David, Logistics Manager and temporary Special Wood Salesman from the Northern team, explains it: *"But by difficult things it's fine to take and spoke with our director or other people by [headquarters location]. When you come in a problem or what's difficult... It's going better but it's not enough"*. These interactions are wished to be face-to-face as well as Thomas, Special Wood Salesman at the Northern location suggests *"It would be nice of Mattheis and Erik to come here to look what we're doing and how it goes... Maybe one day."* but the lack of 'signals' as he calls them of willingness to make an effort from people of the headquarters' team discourages him and others to speak out. On the other hand, the CEO works on improving the time efficiency of communication but has not mentioned any relational matter to work on concerning his employees at the Northern location: *"we are working on communication by screen so that we can more easily like skypeing or something like that. Because so far they have to come to here if we have to discuss new things or new items and then they have to travel 2 hours and go*

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<sup>25</sup> « c'est pas facile le métier d'acheteur. Parce qu'on peut se faire foutre dehors des scieries, on peut... c'est un métier qui est assez difficile. »

<sup>26</sup> "Bah soutenir bah oui parce que j'ai été commercial, pas ici mais avant "(...) ". Moi j'me mets à la place du type qui bosse neuf heures par jour, cinq jours sur sept et puis depuis 15 ans à la boîte et puis dire "Ouais ce qu'j'fais ça gagne rien", ça doit être dur à accepter quoi, et à se motiver et faire mieux. "

*back in the evening another 2 hours in the car and so we try to improve that kind of skype communication. Yeah I hope it will be operating within a couple of weeks and that we will be also for them more pleasant.”(Peter, CEO).*

At the Swiss company, a separation is also visible in interviewees’ speeches between the office people and the warehouse people. Apart from the physical division linked to the two different buildings in which each function is operating, the difference made between the two groups exists on different levels: cultural in terms of how a person consider one’s job according to self-fulfillment or money, educational in terms of having enough skills or not to do something else as well as discipline or obedience. The future owner of the company, the CEO’s daughter Laurène explains *“I mean down there they are well some have chosen this job so they are doing for the love of the job, and then you have others who are doing that job because they didn’t find anything else, and consequently these people haven’t found something else for diverse reasons. Either because they are not motivated or because they don’t have the intellectual ability to do something else”*<sup>27</sup>. Colleagues from the office confirms such speech describing some warehouse people only driven by money and not too heavy schedules. None of the five interviewees working in the warehouse mentioned such separation. Nevertheless, the Solid Wood Salesman Timothée, being an intermediary between the warehouse and the office, reveals a tension between warehouse people and the representatives in particular: *“Except that those who are at the warehouse, well, the representatives are coming, some every two weeks, so then don’t know each other that well eventually. So they see each other and well inevitably there are always some of them who imagine stuff and fantasize “Ha well can you see that, that dude with his little suit and all he must be such a slacker (...) And equally, the representatives, some of them are really nice but some have totally forgotten what is it like to prepare an order and they always behave like they are masters of the world and that’s it.”*<sup>28</sup> Interviewees always specify that only some of warehouse people exclude themselves voluntarily or not from the overall team. Furthermore, some good will is shown to improve that separation as Mathias, Plane wood purchaser, asserts. He spent 5 years working at the warehouse before joining the office and sees significant efforts on both sides in mixing the two

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<sup>27</sup> « j'veux dire en bas ils sont 'fin y en a qu'ont choisi ce métier donc y en qui le font par amour du métier, puis y en a d'autres qui font ce métier là parce qu'ils ont rien trouvé d'autre, et du coup ces gens-là ils ont rien trouvé pour diverses raisons. Soit c'est parce que ils sont pas motivés soit parce qu'ils ont pas les capacités intellectuelles de faire autre chose »

<sup>28</sup> « Sauf que ceux qui sont sur l'chantier ben y a les commerciaux qui viennent, certains tous les 15 jours, donc ils se connaissent assez mal au final. Donc ils se voient machin forcément y a toujours un peu des, y en a qui s'imaginent des trucs qui s'font des films "Ah ouais bah tu vois, le gars il est avec son p'tit costard machin ça doit quand même être un sacré branleur » (...) Et puis pareil, les commerciaux, y en a qui sont super sympas mais y en a ils ont complètement oublié ce que c'est que d'préparer des commandes et ils sont toujours en train de se prendre pour les maîtres du monde et voilà. »

groups *"No but you know when planning to go out or things like that because often, at the end of the year there is the little drinks party, the little drinks party here, after we have a little meal all together and those from the warehouse, they have a cash box in which clients can leave some tips, well they invite us to join them. And also us, when we organize something on our own, we offer them to come"*<sup>29</sup>. According to the interviewees, this division can be diminished with more contacts between the two groups as well as mutual respect and humility.

Such divisions are logical because of physical distance or field difference but they can be overcome by mutual understanding and contacts from both groups. It seems that at DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT, the problem and the will to solve it only appears on the Northern team's side when the wish for a comprehensive team spirit is mainly shared on both sides at the Swiss Company.

#### The importance of non-business related interactions

Employees from both companies associate non-business related interactions with their colleagues as beneficial to the team spirit and good atmosphere within the company.

At the Dutch company, the wish for more interactions of this type are strongly expressed. *"Sometimes we talk about coming here on Friday and drink something in a bar in the evening and then they go back on Saturday for instance. Just to get to know each other and to have some real stories and some good stories and to get to the bottom of some things. It's always good I think to have this euh... partly it could go about business and the other part would be fun, that's always good combination."* (Thomas, Special Wood Salesman in the Northern location). People from the headquarters' team also express that need of off-time *"and we are missing some communication, business information, also missing some personal information communication. For instance we don't eat together or walk together, everybody's eating by themselves or..."* (Mattheis, Red Wood Salesman, headquarters' location).

At the Swiss company, this type of interactions happen more easily given the little events that the Direction organizes or settles for the employees: punctual ones such as the retirement party or more regular ones such as the daily coffee break at 9.15am. This dynamic is continued by some employees who even see their colleagues outside of work and consider them as friends like Mathias and Sébastien, the Planned Wood Salesman: *"But I don't have any problems I mean because we spend, I mean, three and even four week-ends per month*

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<sup>29</sup> "Non mais voilà pour faire des sorties des choses comme ça parce que souvent à la fin de l'année quand on fait un p'tit apéro, y a le p'tit apéro ici, après on s'fait un p'tit repas entre nous et autant ceux du chantier, ils ont une caisse les clients qui laissent un pourboire, bah ils nous invitent à venir avec eux. Et autant nous quand on fait quelque chose entre nous bah on leur propose aussi d'y aller."

*together, I mean in addition to the time at work so it means that we get along quite well right I mean. It is not every week-end but almost*<sup>30</sup>. (Mathias, Planed Wood Purchaser).

The team climate, as an important factor of employee engagement, appears as negative at DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT and characterized by individualistic mentality and feeling of isolation. At ALLAMAN, solidarity, tolerance and empathy qualify a team climate that therefore participates in employee engagement (Bakker et al., 2006).

### 5.2.2 Employee-Manager relations

Two different relations are examined in this section: the relation between the employee and his line manager, that is to say his or her direct referent and the relation between the employee and the CEO of the company. Indeed, given the small size of the company, interactions between the CEO and his team are more frequent than in bigger companies.

#### Relations with line managers

At DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT, the line manager mentioned the most is the Commercial Director as a majority of employees interviewed work in Sales. Except for the Accountant and the Logistics managers, all interviewees share that the Commercial Director do not think of giving them feedback about their work. Constructive feedback on performance appears as one of the internal communication elements allowing employee engagement (Ruck & Welch, 2012; Balakrishnan & Masthan, 2013). Irene, White Wood Saleswoman describes this general impression: *"I think that we all have the feeling that we need some more feedback from our 'directeur commercial'".* Some employees with longer experience and not, according to them, in need of regular feedback still express this same impression for their colleagues like the Red Wood Salesman Erik: *"I know that Mattheis needs more feedback from Jasper, that's a good example yeah. (,,)I know that Mattheis sometimes need more support and more communication from Jasper."* When the feedback is given, it appears to be given only in a negative approach as explains Thomas, Special Wood Salesman at [Northern team location]: *"what they do now is just, after a month, they say "Well the turnover wasn't good". So tell me why! And that's the feedback we get. "This order is too low". Why is this? Explain! So he picks out, instead of really 90% of the orders go very very well, sometimes exceptionally well, with a good margin, but we never hear about them".*

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<sup>30</sup> « Mais j'ai pas de souci j'veux dire parce qu'on passe j'veux dire, trois peut-être voire quatre week-ends par mois ensemble, j'veux dire en plus du boulot donc ça veut dire qu'on s'entend bien quand même hein j'veux dire. C'est pas tous les week-ends mais c'est presque hein quand même »

At ALLAMAN , the line managers vary a lot because we managed to access a more diverse range of functions. Three principal ones were identified: the site foreman, Paul, who is responsible of the warehouse activity, the accounting and administration responsible, Jacques-Henri, who manages the administration team and the transportation responsible, Walter, who organizes the truck loading and unloading. The rest of the team are salesmen and women and representatives and they report directly to Henri, the CEO. We will develop the relations to the CEO in the next section.

The three of them are described as people to whom employees can turn to in case of problem. John, the Truck Driver explains *«Walter, it's him who prepares all the trucks' loading. All goods before leaving the company go through him as he is the one organizing transportation. So if there is a problem, you work it out with him (...) Yes yes he's easy [laughs] (...) No it's fine I don't have any problems about that with him. Because the goal is to find an arrangement for the client (...) So you work accordingly, you need to think of the clients not of us! [laughs]»<sup>31</sup>*. Similarly, the new Accounting Assistant Elisa describes how confident she feels learning her new job: *"For me, personally, it is not a problem to ask a question or eum even sometimes when I did a mistake you know sometimes I go to Jacques-Henri and I say "Jacques-Henri, I think I've done a mistake [laughs]" and that's it, it is through mistakes that you learn anyway it's only people who do nothing that never do»<sup>32</sup>*. Although not mentioned by the employees he manages directly, the site foreman management style is described as ambiguous, as a curious mix between protection and care of his employees and aggressive authority and severity. The Solid Wood Purchaser Christophe: *"I don't know, me, when I need to ask someone to do something, I don't yell at that person, it's useless, you get his back up it's... in the best case scenario you scare him but you don't get anything out of it (...) I have never seen such a contentious relationship with the team, I've never seen that. But yeah it is his way of doing, a despotic way then why and how I don't know. But in my opinion he is not at the right function»<sup>33</sup>*. Laurène, daughter of the CEO and future owner of the company underlines the

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<sup>31</sup> "Walter, c'est lui qui prépare les charges pour tous les camions. Chaque marchandise avant qu'elle parte de l'entreprise ça passe par lui vu que c'est lui qui organise les transports. Du coup dès qu'y a un problème faut le regarder avec lui. (...)Oui oui il est facile [rit]. (...)Non ça va j'ai pas de problème pour ça avec lui. Parce que le but c'est de trouver un arrangement pour le client (...) Du coup faut faire en fonction, faut penser au client pas à nous ! [rit]".

<sup>32</sup> « moi personnellement c'est pas un problème pour moi d'poser une question ou euh ou même des fois quand j'ai fait une bêtise hein des fois je vais vers Jacques-Henri j'fais "Jaques-Henri j'crois qu'j'ai fait une bêtise [rit]" et voilà, c'est avec les erreurs de toute manière qu'on apprend euh y a que ceux qui font rien qui en font pas. »

<sup>33</sup> « J'sais pas moi quand j'ai besoin d'demander quelque chose à quelqu'un, je lui hurle pas dessus, ça sert à rien, c'est braqué c'est... au mieux vous lui faites peur mais vous obtenez rien quoi. (...) "J'ai jamais vu une relation aussi conflictuelle avec l'équipe, j'ai jamais vu ça. Mais bon voilà c'est sa façon de faire, une façon despotique après euh pourquoi comment je sais pas. Mais à mon avis c'est juste parce qu'il est pas à sa place. »



ambiguity of the Site Foreman's attitude *"You have the feeling that he both wants to protect them [his employees] and also to keep the power to himself"*<sup>34</sup>.

Given the importance of support showed by the front-line supervisor to engage employees (Ruck & Welch, 2012; Welch & Jackson, 2007; Saks, 2006), especially through feedback on their performance (Farndale & Murrer, 2014), a new element differentiates the two companies. At DE VRIES Houtimport, the line manager seems not to fulfill this supportive role although he admitted the importance of it himself during his interview: *"Give them the feeling that if there is something wrong they always can ask me. I think that's the priority task for me. If everybody is happy, if you are happy you can handle everything but if you are let's say if your water is around this level (raises his hand horizontally up to his face) then only small thing can...yeah you will drown in everything. And then that's not ok of course."* (Jasper, Commercial Director). At ALLAMAN, line managers show tolerance and support to their employees although an exception has to be made with the site foreman behavior. Paul seems to be totally aware of his special management but style but asserts: *"Me, I am very harsh to employees you can ask me about that, but I am fair!"*<sup>35</sup>.

The superior-subordinate communication including support, listening and fairness from the line manager towards the employees can be observed at ALLAMAN but is lacking at DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT, theoretically impacting employees' engagement differently.

### Relations with the CEO

In both companies, employees' voice is welcome but hardly heard. It is the responsibility of each employee to talk 'loud' enough or to implement their initiatives themselves. The difference between the two companies is that at DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT, the initiatives rarely reach the implementation.

At DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT, the company appears as an environment favorable to employees' expression as long as the employees take the initiatives themselves to go talk to the CEO. The CEO emphasized in his interview the importance of such freedom for his employees to facilitate the communication of their good ideas. *"I think the value is that if I look to my colleagues as I always call them that there is always room for initiatives. So I give people, in my idea, I give them a lot of freedom and if somebody has a good idea then he is eum he*

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<sup>34</sup> "T'as l'impression qui veut à la fois les protéger et à la fois avoir lui le pouvoir."

<sup>35</sup> "Moi je suis très dur avec les employés hein ça vous pouvez me poser des questions, mais je suis droit ! »

*can convince me that it is a good idea then there is always room to develop that. And therefore I always enjoy the, what we call the team work that...* Nevertheless, this openness that the CEO promotes relies on everyone's responsibility to come to him and express their ideas and/or problems. *"Everybody who's working here they know that if my door is open in my room, everybody can come in. If my door is closed, not, but if my door is open everybody can come in. Doesn't matter who or when. - And they're all aware of this? They know this symbol of the door? - They should yeah because that has always been the case yeah."*

This same mentality is described at the Swiss company funded on a balance between the CEO's availability and the responsibility of employees to act themselves for what they want. Laurène, daughter of the CEO, advocates such system when she was asked if she thinks employees of the company feel at the right place: *"Well I hope they do, now if they don't know, I'll be a bit harsh but my father's door is always open. So it's them who don't make the effort to go ask the question and who don't want to talk. My father, you can show up any time and tell him "Well I have a problem" or "I have a question", he will always take the time, maybe not right away but then he will say "Come by tomorrow morning" or "Come again at half past five and we'll talk about it". So I think that those who, who mention such problem, honestly it's not because it is my father, but it's because it is a lack of willing from the person"*<sup>36</sup>.

Nevertheless, such approach can be counterproductive to the initial good will of the CEOs. This responsibility can be difficult to take for some employees because they might not dare to "talk to the boss". Such fear is expressed in both companies with nevertheless a different degree. The Logistics Manager of DE VRIES Houtimport in [headquarters location] explains that not all of his colleagues have the audacity to speak to the CEO: *"Yeah I talk about everything, if I don't like something then he [the CEO] knows I will go and tell him the truth. (...) When something is bothering me then I go up and I tell him right away. But the difficult thing is, when I'm the only one, who is complaining about something and everybody else is keeping his mouth shut because "I am afraid of the boss" and I don't get the results anymore. so..."*. A certain fear is also mentioned by Laurène, the daughter of the CEO when she explains that some employees will rather talk to her to get their ideas or problems heard than to her father. Yet she compares this fear to the anxiety a child can feel towards his or her father *"Yeah but a fear like you are scared of your father! I mean as you can fear the authority of your father if you did something stupid I mean... You are not terrorized by your father but if he tells you « Do*

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<sup>36</sup> "Alors j'espère que oui maintenant s'ils le savent pas, j'avais être un p'tit peu dure mais ça la porte de mon père elle est toujours ouverte. Donc c'est eux qui ne font pas l'effort d'aller poser la question et qui ne veulent pas discuter. Mon père tu peux débarquer tout le temps lui dire "Ouais j'ai un problème" ou "J'ai une question" il va toujours prendre du temps, ce sera peut-être pas maintenant mais il va dire "Passer demain matin" ou "Repasser à cinq heures et demie et on en discute". Donc ça j pense que celui qui, qui invoque ce problème-là, honnêtement c'est pas parce que c'est mon père, mais c'est parce que c'est d'la mauvaise volonté de la part de la personne."

*this or do not do that" you'll still tell yourself "Well ok..." I mean you are not gonna treat him like a buddy. And here I think it is exactly this, they don't treat him like a buddy and from times to times it's not that easy to go to see him"*<sup>37</sup>. This fear mentioned by the Logistics manager and the daughter of the CEO is an obstacle to effective internal communication as "employees must feel secure enough in their positions to ask questions and offer advice without fear of reprisals from top management" (Argenti, 1998, p.202).

In addition to this obstacle, in the description of how a manager should behave towards his employees, their proactivity in asking about how their employees feel and what they think is also mentioned or at least, the feeling of safe two-way communication is at the responsibility of the manager. Irene, White Wood Saleswoman shares: *"Yeah I think he [the manager] should approach me, but maybe I am wrong, but I think he should approach me to say "Hey Irene I want to discuss eum how you think it's going or tell me I have been doing something wrong and I don't know".*" This necessary dimension of trust between an employee and his manager is also explained by the Secretary at the Swiss company *"As long as there is a worry or something else being able to talk to p... being able to go and communicate with the person would it be a problem or whatever the situation is and vice versa. That myself, I feel comfortable to go talk with the person"*<sup>38</sup> (Suzanne).

At DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT, it seems also that, despite the good will of the CEO, the ideas of some employees are not taken into account. However, employees' feeling that they are being heard and that their ideas are actually impacting the functioning of the organization participates in their engagement (Ruck & Welsh, 2013; Balakrishnan & Masthan, 2012). *"I have the feeling that if I'm sitting along with him [CEO] and I have been telling him things about the organization and so on I don't have the feeling that he will, that it will change at that moment."* (Thomas, Special Wood Salesman at [Northern team location]). At ALLAMAN, some employee also mention the difficulty to be heard by the CEO because of his very busy schedule. *"The moment he is here that's it he is at 300%, he is closed to any discussion yeah he is not accessible. Me, I arrive at work at 6am before everyone, he is then still available but the moment people arrive that's it, yeah he gets in the train and he dives in head first."*<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> "Ouais mais une crainte comme t'as peur d'ton père ! 'fin comme t'as peur de l'autorité d'ton père si tu fais une connerie 'fin... t'es pas terrorisée par ton père et pourtant si ton père il t'dit "Fais ci ou fais pas ça" tu vas quand même te dire "Ah ok..." 'fin tu vas pas le traiter comme un copain. Et là j'pense que c'est exactement ça, ils le traitent pas comme un copain et de temps en temps c'est pas très facile d'aller chez lui.

<sup>38</sup> "Tant quand y a un souci ou autre savoir parler aux g... être capable d'aller communiquer à la personne qu'ce soit un problème ou autre, quelle que soit la situation et inversement. Que moi-même je me sente en confiance d'aller discuter euh avec la personne."

<sup>39</sup> Dès qu'il est ici voilà il est à 300%, il est fermé à toute discussion voilà il est pas accessible. Moi j'arrive au bureau à 6h avant tout le monde, il est encore disponible, dès qu'y a du monde ça y est c'est... voilà il monte dans le train et c'est bille en tête quoi.

(*Christophe, Solid Wood Purchaser*). Consequently, some of them take initiatives which are usually validated and valued afterwards by the CEO.

The opportunities for upward communication are thus mitigated in both companies. At the Dutch and the Swiss companies, CEOs are willing to hear their employees' voice but put the responsibility of expression on them. Obstacles such as fear of authority or busy schedules prevent some employees to speak out. At DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT, even being heard some employees feel their voice are not taken into account when, at ALLAMAN, some employees decide to implement things such as invoices checking without formal validation of the CEO beforehand.

### 5.3 Engagement

#### 5.3.1 An assessment of internal communication theoretically favoring the Swiss company's employees' engagement and condemning the Dutch company's employees'

Going back to the reviewed Balakrishnan and Masthan's six factors of internal communication allowing employee engagement, the summary of the respective situations at DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT and ALLAMAN reveal different results.

At DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT, a mitigated **quality of information** is shown. Indeed, all employees show a good understanding of the company's functioning and people's roles as well as an overall **reliable information** shared by colleagues and managers. Nevertheless the sharing and structure of information needs improvement with peculiar emphases on job related information from colleagues and Human resources information from the CEO. **Superior openness** also needs improvements as well as employees complain about the bad circulation of strategic and human resources information. . The **superior-subordinate communication** is lacking the sense of encouragement, understanding and fairness necessary to employee engagement. The **upward communication** faces obstacles. Either employees do not dare to talk or they do but feel that they are not heard while the managers think they allow upward communication. Lastly, **the team climate** is characterized by employees feeling more like individuals than team members. This summary should result in employees mostly disengaged.

At ALLAMAN, the summary appears more positive although still needing some improvements. The **quality of information** and **reliability of information** characteristics present the same good practices seen in the Dutch company but the similar lack of sharing of structured strategic information - human resources information do not appear as missing - is compensated by a good exchange of information between colleagues among which some just simply decide to

develop their own database. **Superior's openness** is not too much criticized except concerning financial results. **Superior-subordinate communication**, except concerning the site foreman, includes the necessary support and listening allowing employee engagement. **Upward communication** also presents some difficulties. Either some fear of the CEOs authority is felt, just like in the Dutch company, or the CEO is too busy to be available. Yet, **the team climate** appears as ideal to employee engagement as solidarity, tolerance and empathy were used by the interviewees to qualify their relations with their colleagues. In conclusion, according to our six factors of internal communication necessary to create and enhance employee engagement, employees of the Swiss company should be engaged.

### 5.3.2 Engagement signs in both companies although theoretically unexpected at DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT

Yet, following the three key engagement expressions or manifestations used by Balakrishnan and Masthan, inspired by the Utrecht Work Engagement scale<sup>40</sup>, employees at DE VRIES Houtimport are engaged. The interviews also show engagement of ALLAMAN employees.

#### Intellectual and emotional commitment

Intellectual and emotional commitment is the first 'ingredient' testifying of employee engagement. Throughout the interviews, such commitment was expressed in both companies.

At DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT, Irene, White Wood Salewoman at [headquarters location] explains what she likes about her job *"And I like it when it's a combination of buying and selling because then you have to overview. And it's easy to negotiate prices, you know everything from the beginning 'til the end"* while Gert Jan describes the freedom he likes in how he can organize his day as well as the contact with the customers. This 'overview' mentioned by Irene reminds the importance of the quality of information concerning the company's activities: without them she could not benefit from such overview although we saw that she gets the information from meetings but also thanks to her own experience (Balakrishnan & Masthan, 2013; Ruck and Welch, 2012). Sometimes criticism appear but always in the perspective of improving the realization of the job *"We have to spend more time to communicate, not only to give orders but more yeah information that's for our department, department information, what is necessary to do our job better. I don't have to hear all the general information but only to do my job better."* Indeed, criticism or even opposition are not signs excluding engagement. According to the economist Albert O. Hirschman, the biggest risks for a company is not to face

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<sup>40</sup> See the scale on Appendix G

contestation or even departure of its employees but their indifference or apathy. Indeed, it is precisely in criticism that company can grow employees' loyalty, encouraging them to express themselves and participate, contribute to the company's functioning (Le Gall, 2016). *"Contestation goes together with participation. They both develop as the matters to discuss increase too. People explain themselves instead of constraining each other"*<sup>41</sup>. It is thus important for companies to allow this fruitful democratic debate, hence the key factors of upward communication and superior-subordinate communication. Resilience of employees in difficult times also shows emotional and intellectual commitment to their work, a characteristic peculiarly visible in interviewees from [Northern team location] *"But we do not, I think the difference is that we will not be sick at home very quickly, we first try to do our job and then do, then think about ourselves I think sometimes."* (Thomas, Special Wood Salesman).

At ALLAMAN, similar experiences are shared. The variety of tasks is mentioned as a source of interest but also the importance of colleagues which refers to the importance of the team climate (Bakker et al., 2006): *"Well I personally think that it's important and that's what makes working nicer. Because otherwise I'll tell you frankly I would maybe have less pleasure coming to work in the morning, except if... This, I'll admit it influences a lot my will to come to work. If you have good colleagues or if you have people you fear and that you don't want to see..."*(Mathias, Planed Wood Purchaser)<sup>42</sup>. The attachment to the job and the willingness to stay also appear throughout the interviews. Laurent, IT Manager and Logistics and Administration Assistant gives the following example: *"My brother has already asked me "But why don't you leave you could elsewhere you would earn more you would do something else?" I am fine, everything is going well, I am... I don't have too many constraints well there are always some of course but eum I feel good, I like the activities I'm doing, I am the one who chose them on the top of it so eum..."*<sup>43</sup>.

## Meaningfulness of the work

<sup>41</sup> « La contestation va de pair avec la participation. Elles se développent toutes les deux, car la matière à discussion grandit. On s'explique au lieu de se contraindre » François Bloch-Lainé, an activist commenting the firm reform in 1963 –Le Gall, J-M. (2016). Engagement, désengagement : une actualité paradoxale, *Les cahiers de la communication interne*, 39, p.29

<sup>42</sup> « Moi j'pense que c'est important puis c'est ce qui fait que c'est sympa à travailler. Parce que sinon j'te l'dis franchement j'aurais peut-être moins d'plaisir à venir le matin, moins de... Ça ça influence beaucoup quand même sur l'envie de venir au travail. Si t'as des bons collègues ou si t'as des gens que tu crains et que t'as pas envie de voir... »

<sup>43</sup> « Mon frère m'a déjà demandé "Mais pourquoi tu pars pas tu pourrais aller ailleurs tu gagnerais plus tu ferais d'autres trucs?" Je suis bien, tout se passe bien, je suis... j'ai pas trop de contraintes bon y en a toujours bien entendu hein mais euh je me sens bien, les activités que je fais me plaisent, c'est moi qui les ai choisies en plus donc euh... »

The second 'ingredient' consists in the meaning employees find in their work. Signs such as happiness at work, pride and challenge found in the work demonstrate such meaningfulness. Asked frankly about the meaning he could find in his work, Erik, Red Wood Salesman at [headquarters location] asserts *"Yeah it does definitely. And sometimes when in private when there is a birthday or something in the family and my wife always says "Don't talk about wood because he won't stop!" [laughs]. Yeah so yes I feel at the right spot here, at the right place"*. A sense of duty is also found in some interviews *"Yeah I am individual but... other people come to me with their wishes so there's, I have a bit of freedom of what I do but I always have to keep the days for sales and I try to do my best for the trucking company if he wants to pick up something then I try to get it ready in time.. So we have to do it together."*(Auke Jan, Logistics Manager at [headquarters location]). Even when language was sometimes an obstacle to expression resulting in the confusion between the question asked "What is the goal of the company for you" and the question understood, interesting feedback emerged *"Wat is de reden oim hier te werken [what is the reason I work here]? Uitdaging [challenge], kennis [knowledge], ervaring [experience], boiend [fascinating]"* (David, Logistics Manager and temporary Special Wood Salesman at Grambsergen).

At the Swiss company, some pride and sense of challenge can be felt with some interviewees when they describe their job. *"You need to know the stock a little bit by heart and then really have a technical approach because it changes all the time, the wood has some specificities. (...) It is not always easy but then that's what I find interesting, that's exactly that it is never the same thing."* (Timothée, Solid Wood Salesman)<sup>44</sup>. Happiness and fulfillment are even mentioned. *"Yeah yeah it makes me... This job is really made more for me. That's who I am eventually [laughs]. (...) What I am doing now it's varied, it's not every day the same thing it is really like this, but if you had asked me when I was in the last or the one before the last company I would have answered completely differently"* (Suzanne, Secretary)<sup>45</sup>.

## Discretionary effort

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<sup>44</sup> « Donc faut connaître un peu le stock sur le bout de ses doigts et puis vraiment avoir une approche technique parce que ça change tout le temps, y a des particularités dans le bois. » (...) »C'est pas toujours évident après c'est ce que je trouve intéressant c'est qu'justement c'est jamais la même chose »

<sup>45</sup> « Oui, oui ça me... Ce poste est vraiment fait pour moi. C'est ce que je suis finalement [rit]. (,,,) "ce que je fais maintenant c'est varié, c'est pas tous les jours la même chose c'est vraiment comme ça, mais si vous m'aviez peut-être demandé dans la dernière ou avant-dernière entreprise j'aurais répondu complètement différent »

The discretionary effort is the effort the employee does not have to give in his job but chooses to give anyway. It is the third and last ingredient of engagement according to Balakrishnan and Masthan. This element coincides with the behavioral state of engagement of our definition of employee engagement (Shuck and Wollard, 2010). Such discretionary efforts are seen at DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT company through extra hours not paid because they are not told to the CEO, especially in [Northern team location], but also through very short to non-existent lunch breaks due to how busy all employees are. Thomas, Special Wood Salesman at [Northern team location] explains “*Gert Jan also that he started at 6 this morning but he's not happy about that but he doesn't tell Peter.*” The North-Holland Representative confirms afterwards describing his daily routine “*And then I come back here 5 o'clock sometimes 6 o'clock in the evening and then have a dinner with my wife and in the evening I work also, yes, a lot of laptop things mill questions or things.. So when I am home I am not ready at the end of the day. Every evening I work yes, but I work 1 hour, 2 hours, 3 hours, depends on ...*” (Gert Jan). At [headquarters location] too, the Commercial Director witnesses this dedication “*That's what I see sometimes on my colleagues. Especially from the DE VRIES department, Mattheis and Erik they are.. sometimes they complain it's too much telephone, too much email and sitting behind their desk and eating their lunch and go on go on go on. I think it's good that you should take a break, once a day.*” Such effort nevertheless can easily lead to burn-out if the well-being of employees is not taken into account.

At the Swiss company, this discretionary effort are demonstrated in relations to employees voluntarily adding tasks to their initial job or helping colleagues in need of extra hands. Laurent, IT Manager and Logistics and Administration Assistant thus explains how he spontaneously widen the scope of his tasks: “at the beginning, it [initial job] took me all my time because of the time spend to understand the mechanisms of the company so yeah I spent 85 to 90% of the day only doing that, and then well I learnt to work better let's say well to organize my work and as rythm and reflexes came along then I decreased, for the same quantity of work it would take less time to do it so I could open myself to other things, completely voluntarily”<sup>46</sup>. In addition to this, initiatives are not only thought of or suggested but implemented by some employees. For instance, the Planed Wood Purchaser Mathias implemented meetings to check the invoices convinced that it could save some money to the company: “*Because the invoices for instance, there are also many times, now I have asked and we do a meeting at*

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<sup>46</sup> au début ça me prenait tout le temps parce que le temps de comprendre les mécanismes de l'entreprise voilà je passais 85 à 90% de la journée à faire que ça, puis après bah j'ai appris à mieux travailler si on peut dire 'fin voilà j'ai organisé mon travail et comme j'ai des rythmes et des réflexes qui sont venus bah du coup voilà j'ai baissé, pour la même quantité de travail je mets moins de temps donc j'ai pu m'ouvrir à d'autres choses.- D'accord.- Complètement volontairement



*least once every two months we see each other for a moment and we go through the invoices which have never been validated for delivery. And then try to understand why*<sup>47</sup>.

### 5.3.3 The different influence of the family structure

#### Characteristics of family structures identified in the companies

According to the family structure model of Donckels and Fröhlich<sup>48</sup>, different characteristics have been identified in both companies or specifically to each of them.

At ALLAMAN, the CEO and interestingly the future owner as well both behave like all-rounders and organizers of the company's management and activity. This aligns with the most common behavior found among family business managers (Donckels & Fröhlich, 1991). Indeed, through the interviews, the CEO appeared to work in collaboration with Christophe, the Solid Wood Purchaser (Christophe interview), to handle the recruitment of people (Laurène interview), travel to new potential customers (Mathias interview), develop new offers (Suzanne interview) and check the organization of deliveries with the site foreman (Paul & Christophe interviews). His daughter; future owner of the company, is also switching between different jobs according to the need and emergency. *"Now today let's say I am substitute, now I have taken over the job of Roxane because she left us. When Walter was not here I was at the transportation, when people are missing at accounting I go there. If you want I don't have regular tasks. I go where I am needed. Sometimes I find myself with three persons missing so I'm doing the work of the three"*<sup>49</sup>. On the contrary and in opposition to the usual behavior of family business managers, at DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT, the CEO appears as a pioneer. When he describes his job, his attention goes more to the development of new products, markets and the satisfaction of the clients than the inside activity of his company. *"What I always say I am not a manager I am an entrepreneur, that's something different and eum but if you are owner and you are responsible for your company and everything which happens here in this company that doesn't mean that I am not interested for instance in sales, or that I am not interested in... First of all I am interested in the product because the product is for me very important, that's the reason that I own this company because I like the product. And from that start point then you develop ideas*

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<sup>47</sup> « Parce que la facturation par exemple, y a aussi beaucoup de fois, maintenant moi j'ai demandé puis on fait une séance au moins une fois tous les deux mois on s'voit un p'tit moment puis on reprend tous les bulletins qu'ont jamais été validés pour livrer. Et puis essayer de comprendre pourquoi. »

<sup>48</sup> See the model in Appendix B

<sup>49</sup> « Là aujourd'hui je suis on va dire remplaçante, là j'ai repris le poste de Roxane parce qu'elle nous a quittés. Quand Walter était pas là j'étais aux transports, quand en comptabilité il manque du monde j'y vais. Si tu veux j'ai pas de, de tâches fixes. J'vais un peu là où il faut quoi. Des fois je me retrouve avec trois personnes absentes et j'fais le boulot des trois. »

*you develop strategies and you develop let's say euh ideas for the future and I think that is one of my tasks and that's maybe a little bit different than when you are the manager, when you have just to take care that everybody does his job.” (Peter, CEO).*

Another characteristic specific to the consideration of employees and visible in both companies is about the tendency of family businesses to provide less information concerning the manager's policy to employees than non-family ones. This could explain the light sharing of strategic and results information observed in both companies through the distribution only per sales division chosen by the CEO of the Dutch company or the absence of results information as well as a unique overall end-of-year summary of the company's activity observed in the Swiss company. This family structure characteristic is thus impacting the quality of information as well the superior openness factors of employee engagement. Furthermore, the difficulty of upward communication observed in both companies can be related to the tendency in family structure to be less receptive to employees' participation in decision-making processes or profit sharing (Donckels & Fröhlich, 1991).

A last characteristic still concerning the relations between managers and employees is the parallel made with the parent-child relationship (Donckels & Fröhlich, 1991). At the Swiss company, this comparison was spontaneously made by the daughter of the CEO when she explained that employees could fear to go talk to the CEO as a child would fear the authority of a father. Through her speech and interviewer's informal talks with the CEO preceding the interviews' running, a real care and empathy of the CEO towards his employees could be seen: *“No my father to his boys he is kind he is even too kind. I mean he thinks that everyone, he thinks that it's like before that people work for the love of their job that's it. And that people are honest but they are not anymore.”*<sup>50</sup> Mentioning which values could correspond to the company she adds *“I think we are generous and that even if our communication is a bit weird and special, I think we listen to the people. Let's not forget that we know everything that's going on in each person's family!”*<sup>51</sup> This affective proximity to his employees was also observed when the CEO gave a tour to the interviewer, explaining the family bonds of different workers and sometimes their family struggles that demanded tolerance and help from him.

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<sup>50</sup> « Nan mon père avec ses gars il est gentil hein il est même trop gentil. 'fin il pense que tout le monde, il pense que c'est comme avant que les gens bossent par amour du métier voilà. Puis que les gens sont honnêtes mais ils le sont plus ! »

<sup>51</sup> « Je pense qu'on est généreux et je pense que malgré tout notre communication est un peu bizarre et spéciale je pense qu'on est à l'écoute. On sait quand même tout ce qui s passe dans la famille de l'autre quoi ! »

## Different types of influence of the family structure on the employee engagement in each company

In both companies, most of the interviewees come up with the same goal and values for their company. Nevertheless, in the Swiss company these goal and values are almost systematically associated to the family of the CEO and the CEO himself when, in the Dutch company, employees' ideas and the CEO's coincide without the CEO's name or family being mentioned.

At DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT, the goal of the company is most of the time thought of in an economic perspective linked to an image of the company as a specialist in its field to be kept. This importance and pride of the knowledge, the expertise of the company is strongly expressed throughout the interviews when asked about the goal or the values embodied by the company, both difficult questions to answer for the employees. Mattheis, Red Wood Salesman in [headquarters location] explains the company's strengths, *"A lot of knowledge, experience, good advice so that's our success model: experienced employees with good advice"*, on which the company needs to bet to keep being profitable as *"it's needed that we also point that we have the good woods at our stock but at the end, we need the money for the next generation. (...) For Houten DE VRIES"* (Lars, South Holland Representative), *"to make our company stable"* (David, Logistics Manager and temporary Salesman at [Northern team location]). This goal of stability is a characteristic of family companies (Donckels & Fröhlich, 1991). It is interesting to notice how employees' speeches match with the will of the CEO for his company. Far away from philosophical or social explanations, the CEO explains his company's goal in a very economic-oriented pragmatism: *"Yeah I have done this many many times not only for my company but also for a lot of other functions I had a lot of organizations "what is your mission? what is your goal? what is your vision?" eum... it's all words Marie it's all words. There is nothing new. We have some points that our companies will have to follow. . One of them is that I will only deal with legal wood, sustainable produced wood (...) But most of all I think that we try to keep it as a trading company (...) we have to bring something from A to B and A is the land of origin and B is the final customer."* (Peter, CEO). The influence of the CEO thus seems to be peculiarly strong on the company's culture, an observation aligned with Dyer's research findings on the critical role of family leaders on their company's culture (1987, p46-47).

At the Swiss company, interviews almost always associate the goal of the ALLAMAN firm to the family itself as well as to its CEO. The economic goal is also mentioned as well as this same idea of durability of the company but always in association with the fact that it allows employees to earn a living on a long term basis. Sébastien, Panels Salesman and Purchaser

spontaneously thought of the CEO's wishes for the company when he was asked about what the goal of the company was according to him *"eum he would like to perpetuate the enterprise, he would like it to continue. Then he would like Laurène to succeed him so yeah we should keep a certain revenue, a revenue that holds water and that's it. He would like it to carry on."*<sup>52</sup> This vision was confirmed by the CEO's daughter who described the goal as *"generating money and to be able to make forty collaborators live out of it"*<sup>53</sup> but also by Christophe, the Solid Wood Purchaser who explained that *"Well there is the vision let's say philosophical, there a tool of work and we are here for the company's durability and then well that it keeps going. (...) It is let's say... an endless continuity. But everyone has to gain from it"*<sup>54</sup>. An interesting element to be linked with the personality of the CEO, developed earlier about the parent-child relationship specific to family companies, is the good atmosphere spontaneously associated with the fact that the company is owned and run by a family. "And even about the relations internally, it's also yeah eum, yeah it is a family company so easily we... yeah there is a little feeling of, like a cocoon"<sup>55</sup> (Timothée, Solid Wood Salesman). Sébastien, the Solid Wood Worker confirms explaining: « But after it still remains generally a family company and everyone I'd say knows each other and everything goes pretty well »<sup>56</sup>.

ALLAMAN company can be mainly associated to the 'laissez-faire' culture model developed by Dyer. This type entailed hierarchical relations but more freedom and trust given to the employees in the way they want to reach the organization's goal. Such liberty has been observed with for instance the invoicing meetings or the adaptation of one's work to the surrounding needs. Furthermore, in the Levi Strauss company case Dyer takes as an illustrative example of the 'laissez-faire' culture, a care for employees and support given to them in case of troubles can be found, similarly to the ALLAMAN's CEO's concerns and actions developed earlier: "The Strauss family and their descendants have also been known for their willingness to take care of their employees during times of trouble. For example, the family paid the doctor bills of one employee who became ill with diphtheria". Such behavior can only favor the superior-subordinate communication factor given the dedication of the CEO

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<sup>52</sup> « euh il aimerait pérenniser l'entreprise, il aimerait que ça continue. Puis il aimerait que ça soit Isabelle qui lui succède donc voilà faudrait rester à un certain chiffre, un chiffre qui tienne la route et puis voilà quoi. Il aimerait bien qu'ça tienne le coup »

<sup>53</sup> « Ben de générer de l'argent et de pouvoir en faire vivre 40 collaborateurs. Ça c'est son but. »

<sup>54</sup> « Bah y a la vision on pourrait dire philosophique, voilà y a un outil de travail et puis on est là pour la pérennité de l'entreprise et puis bah ma foi qu'ça continue quoi. (...) C'est.. on va dire c'est un déroulement sans fin quoi. Mais faut que tout le monde y gagne »

<sup>55</sup> « Puis même au niveau des relations en interne, c'est quand même aussi euh, ouais c'est quand même une entreprise familiale donc très vite on se... ouais y a un petit côté, un petit cocon quoi. »

<sup>56</sup> « Mais après ça reste dans l'ensemble une boîte familiale et tout le monde j'dirais se connaît et tout se passe plutôt bien. »

to his employees' well-being. DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT company does not correspond to any of the models developed by Dyer.

## **PART VI – CONCLUSION**

### **6.1 Results**

Studying the informational elements of internal communication that allow employee engagement, similar patterns are found in DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT and ALLAMAN companies. Both present a mitigated quality of information factor. The quality of information represents how employees perceive the way the management shares information related to the company's activities, goals and requirements. Both companies do not actively share strategic and financial information, a bad practice that is compensated by employees sharing their knowledge and experience of the field. The reliability of information factor is verified in both companies as most of the information employees receive come from their colleagues who always appear as trustworthy professionals. The Swiss company presented the advantage of communicating in a more frequent and structured way human resources information. This participates for ALLAMAN in the Superior Openness factor which relates to how openly and honestly the managers communicate with their employees. The Dutch company suffers from a perceived lack of transparency concerning the information related to employees. The overall way of communicating information lacks of structure and is informal. This can become a problem when the employees' network itself lacks of cohesion as it becomes the alternative structure for internal communication. The relational aspect thus appears critical to the good functioning of internal communication and, consequently, to employee engagement.

Internal communication entails a relational aspect which is shown to be fundamental in our two companies. Indeed, a strong difference is observed between them concerning the team climate factor which relates to the essential positive atmosphere between colleagues in which empathy, respect and mutual understanding are key. The team climate at DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT is qualified by individualism and stress when at ALLAMAN, it is characterized by solidarity, respect and empathy. Concerning the Superior-subordinate Communication factor recommending support, fairness and listening in the way managers interact with their employees, another difference in favor of the Swiss company's employees' engagement appears. Eventually, both companies present difficulties to offer opportunities for upward communication to their employees. A certain 'fear of the boss' is seen in both companies to which is added a feeling of not being heard anyway in the Dutch company and a CEO too busy to be available in the Swiss company.

In the light of such portraits, according to the six enhanced factors of internal communication allowing employee engagement, DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT employees should not appear very much engaged and ALLAMAN employees should be engaged. Yet, when analyzing the three

signs of employee engagement – Emotional and Intellectual Commitment to work, Meaningfulness of the Work, Discretionary effort – in both companies, the Dutch employees show as much engagement as the Swiss ones although in different ways. In the Dutch company, employees appreciate the freedom and the autonomy they have in their work and criticize the Direction practices only in the objective to improve their own performance with the tools and resources that they feel they are lacking: more and more structured strategic and human resources information as well as more interactions with their colleagues. At the Swiss company, employees appear happy with their job thanks to the variety of their tasks but also thanks to the good atmosphere in the company between all colleagues. About the meaningfulness of their work, employees from both companies mention the notions of challenge and pride they can find in their work. Eventually, the discretionary effort sign is shown through extra hours and intense immersion in their work at DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT and through initiatives' implementation and additional tasks spontaneously undertaken by the employees.

Answering our first research question about the elements of internal communication allowing employee engagement in family structures is thus challenging. We can admit that the reunion of the six elements identified - Quality of information, Reliability of information, Superior Openness, Superior-subordinate Communication, Upward Communication and Team Climate – can enhance employee engagement. Indeed, although engaged, the employees of DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT underline themselves the lack of some internal communication elements. Furthermore, their discretionary efforts are dangerously close to burn-out signs. This is why we can even argue that, in small family structures, the team climate factor might be a priority element of internal communication to focus on to allow sustainable or long-term engagement.

A second way to answer such results is linked to our second research question: how does the family structure of both companies can alter the functioning of internal communication on employee engagement? First, the quality of information can be impacted by the tendency of family business leaders to be all-rounders or organizers like in ALLAMAN company: being too busy, the CEO does not take or have the time to structure the sharing of strategic information. The CEO might also lack time to listen to his employees and act accordingly to their feedback which impact the Upward Communication factor. The CEO of DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT did not correspond to the usual behavior of family business leaders as he appears as a pioneer, as an 'entrepreneur' as he describes himself. Nevertheless, the same remarks can be done than for the Swiss company's CEO: entrepreneurship demands time and energy that cannot be put into internal communication strategy. Yet, the CEO's personality and choices for his company considerably impact the culture of the company. Remembering that the employees

knowing and identifying to the company's goals and values is critical to their engagement (Ruck and Welch, 2012; Welch & Jackson, 2007; Saks, 2006, Guzley, 1992), our results are showing that employees from both companies respectively are aligned to the CEO's wishes for his company and even advocates of it. This confirms the core role of the founder and/or owner the company on the business, management and culture of the organization (Donckels & Fröhlich, 1991; Dyer, 1988). We can then assume that the CEO's influence compensates the lacks of internal communication elements to engage the employees in their work and in the company's project.

We can therefore conclude that internal communication impacts less employee engagement in small family structure. The size of the structure does not allow enough resources to implement a proper and structured strategy of internal communication. This results in the enhanced importance of internal communication that can be ensured by the employees: quality and reliability of information but most of all the team climate. Nevertheless, the family structure through the influence of the CEO can balance the lacks of internal communication instilling their vision and values throughout the company and its employees.

## **6.2 Discussion**

Various elements of this research can limit the reliability of the results presented. The methodology includes some weaknesses. First, although the aim of the sample was to gather the most various types of job to represent the most accurately possible the whole company, the interviewees from DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT did not include at all the workers of the warehouse biasing our results. The bias was less important at ALLAMAN company although no representatives have been interviewed. Secondly, running the interviews in English at the Dutch company has resulted in the shortage of the sample explained earlier but also in difficulties and discomfort during two interviews that have impacted the quality of the results. Furthermore, not being the mother language of the interviewees a semantic analysis to complete the thematic analysis chosen was not possible. The field research could have also been lead differently to optimize to help the interviewees thinking critically of their experience at the company. The physical setting of the interviews might have biased the interviews. At DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT, the office in which the interviews were run was at the same floor than the CEO's office what can have suggested a difference of power or authority between the interviewee and the interviewer. At ALLAMAN, the interviews took place in the meeting room usually used by the managers and the salesteam which might have impressed some workers of the warehouse: the site foreman insisted in having the interview in the warehouse workers' break room. It would thus be better for researchers willing to run similar interviews in the future to choose a neutral space and not a room or a building of the company. In addition to avoid



bias it would probably help people to take distance on their experience in the company being interviewed in a space with no relations at all to their daily professional life. Such perspective was thought of after the interviewer saw interviewees often taking examples and comparing their current work to experiences lived in their previous company: it was easier to take critical distance on them than on the experience they were living in their current professional lives.

An important number of approaches could be studied to explain the results of this study. We encourage further researchers to cross the disciplines of communication, management, sociology and psychology to embrace as closely and accurately as possible the complexity of mechanisms happening in small family structures. The role of the culture also appears as a perspective to tap insights from. The culture has an influence on how employees identify more or less to certain type of values and/or management styles. The cultural dimensions identified by researchers such as Hofstede and Trompenaars or studies of the impact of national traditions on management practices in the idea of Phillippe d'Iribarne works are fascinating orientations for further research.

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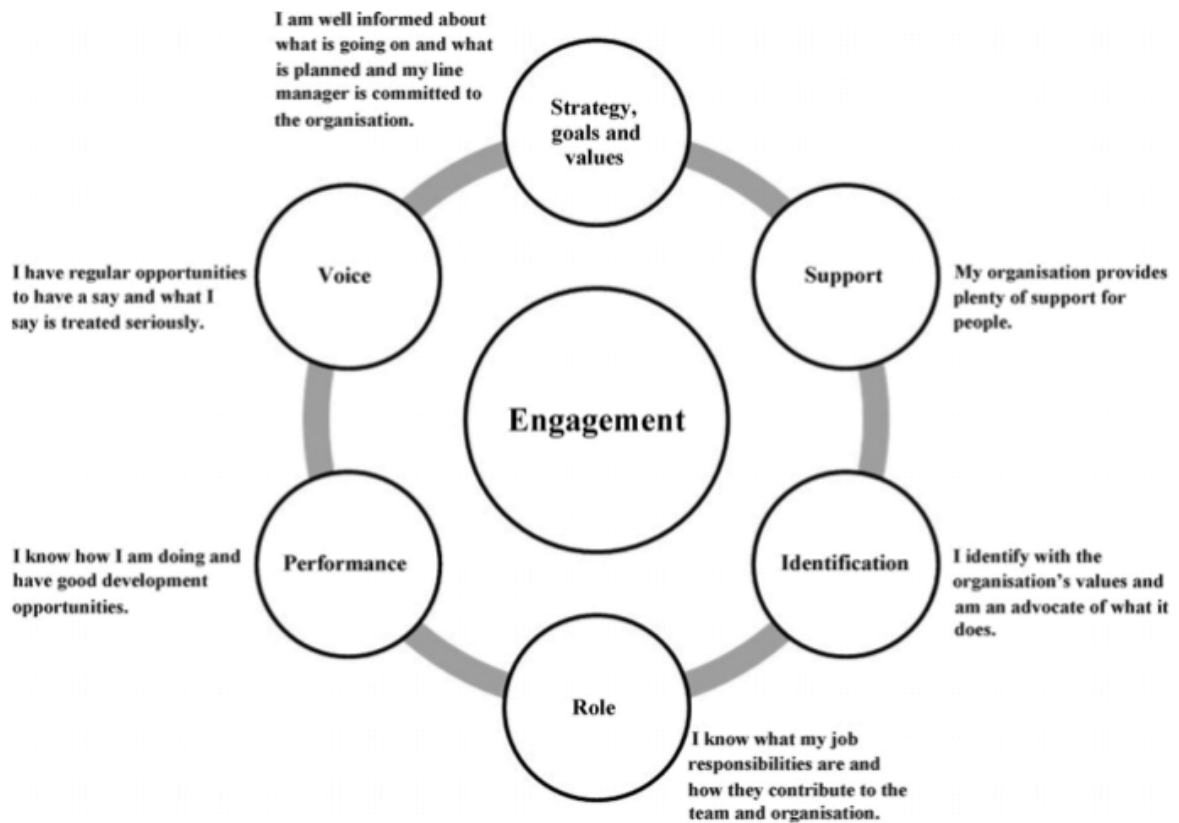
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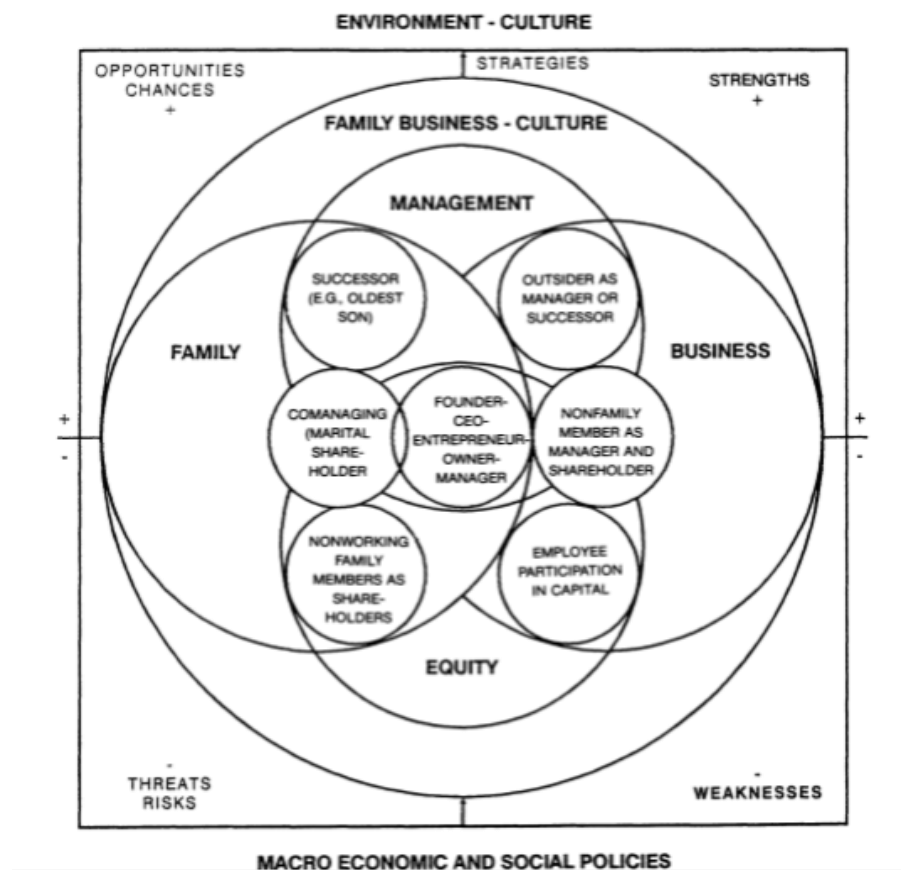
## List of appendix

- A) Ruck and Welch Conceptual model of Internal Communication allowing Employee Engagement
- B) Donckels and Fröhlich model of family structure
- C) Dyer's table listing the cultural assumptions related to each type of family culture
- D) Description of the interviewees sample per company
- E) Interview guides and questions
- F) Extracts of the analysis grid
- G) Transcriptions of all the interviews in chronological order

- A) Conceptual model of employee questions to be addressed through line manager and corporate internal communication, (Ruck and Welch, 2012, p.7)



B) A Holistic Model of Family Businesses and their Environment (Donckels & Fröhlich, 1991, p.150).



C) Cultural Patters of the Family Business (Dyer, 1988, p.4)

Figure 2. Cultural Patterns of the Family Business

	<i>Paternalistic</i>	<i>Laissez-Faire</i>	<i>Participative</i>	<i>Professional</i>
<i>Nature of relationships</i>	Lineal (hierarchical)	Lineal	Collateral (group orientation)	Individualistic
<i>Nature of human nature</i>	People are basically untrustworthy	People are good and trustworthy	People are good and trustworthy	People are neither good nor evil
<i>Nature of truth</i>	Truth resides in the founder family	Truth resides in the founder/family although outsiders are given autonomy	Truth is found in group decision making/participation	Truth is found in professional rules of conduct
<i>Orientation toward the environment</i>	Proactive stance	Harmonizing/proactive stance	Harmonizing/proactive stance	Reactive/proactive stance
<i>Universalism/particularism</i>	Particularistic	Particularistic	Universalistic	Universalistic
<i>Nature of human activity</i>	Doing orientation	Doing orientation	Being-in-becoming orientation	Doing orientation
<i>Time</i>	Present or past orientation	Present or past orientation	Present or future orientation	Present orientation

D) List of the interviewees of DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT and ALLAMAN

NB : the names of the companies, of participants and locations have been changed to protect strategic and private information as agreed before running the study with both CEOs.

DE VRIES HOUTIMPORT				
Name	Date	Duration	Job	Experience length in the company
Irene	08/03/2017	53.58 min	White Wood Saleswoman,	16 years
Erik	08/03/2017	47.09 min	Red Wood Salesman	16 years
Mattheis	08/03/2017	55.52 min	Red Wood Salesman	6 years
Lars	08/03/2017	45.02 min	South Holland Representative	2.5 years
Peter	09/03/2017	51.05 min	CEO	38 years
Jasper	09/03/2017	52.19 min	Commercial Director	20 years
Luuk	09/03/2017	35.16 min	Accountant	13 years
Auke Jan	09/03/2017	36.34 min	Logistics Manager	5 years
David	10/03/2017	45.41 min	Logistics Manager and temporary Special Wood Salesman ([Northern team location])	14 years
Thomas	10/03/2017	1 h 11.21 min	Special Wood Salesman ([Northern team location])	15 years
Gert Jan	10/03/2017	46.15 min	North Holland Representative ([Northern team location])	5 years



ALLAMAN				
Name	Date	Duration	Job	Experience length in the company
John	13/03/2017	37.41 min	Truck Driver	1.5 year
Elisa	13/03/2017	44.53 min	Accounting Assistant	3 months
Suzanne	13/03/2017	33.01 min	Secretary	5 years
Timothée	13/03/2017	54.08 min	Solid Wood Salesman	6 years
Paul	13/03/2017	44.59 min	Site Foreman	40 years
Laurent	13/03/2017	1 h 04,19 min	IT Manager & Logistics & Administration Assistant	11 years
Sébastien	14/03/2017	35.34 min	Solid Wood Worker	10 years
Salem	14/03/2017	35.02 min	Forklift Driver	10 months
Sébastien	14/03/2017	32.34 min	Panels Salesman and Purchaser	10 years
Christophe	14/03/2017	46.06 min	Solid Wood Purchaser	11 years
Mathias	14/03/2017	56 min	Planed Wood Purchaser	9 years
Laurène	14/03/2017	44.46 min	All-rounder employee, Future Owner, daughter of the CEO	6 years

## E) Interview guides, questions and topic check-list in English version

### Interview Guide & Questions

Hello, how are you doing? I am Marie and you must be Mr/Mrs. X right? Nice to meet you and thank you for meeting me today. This project is really important to me! Let me remind you why we are here today. I am a Master student in Communication and Media in France and this project is my Master thesis. I chose the subject of Internal Communication and Employee Engagement because it binds two things I am very interested in: People and Strategy. So more than an interview, this is going to be a discussion. Because of time management we will try to keep it around 45 minutes. I have a few questions to guide us but feel free to share with me anything that comes to your mind and that seems relevant to you within the subject. Sometimes you might not know what to answer and that is also completely ok. Let me also reminding you that this discussion is anonymous, I am only recording it in order not to miss any precious things you say. The transcript will appear in my final document but no one will be able to match the interview with the person who gave it Do you have any questions so far? Are you ready to start?

#### Breaking the ice

So just to know a little bit more about you Mr/Mrs X. How long have you been working here? What is your job in this company? What does it consist in?

#### INFORMATION

1. Can you describe me a typical day of work here or typical missions you have in your job?
2. How do you access the information you need to do your job?
3. How would you qualify this information? (*Useful? Interesting? Overwhelming?*)
4. How do you share information with the people you manage? *Through which means of communication? With what frequency?*
5. What kind of information? If you had to categorize this information? *For instance: work-related or practical information could be one category, another could be a news category about the wood industry market, another one more internal about someone obtaining a promotion...*

#### RELATIONS

1. According to you what is a manager's job in a general sense? What are the challenges of a manager?
2. Do you spend most of your time working in team or individually?
3. How many people, working in the company, do you work with/interact with in general, also including no face-to-face meetings (mails, calls, skype...)?
4. How would you describe the relations you have with your colleagues? I don't have a lot of professional experience myself yet, imagine you are explaining to me how professional relations work for you in your job?
5. Can you think of a difficult professional situation you had to face lately and describe me how you handled it?

#### PARTICIPATION/INVOLVEMENT

6. How would you define the company's goal or project?
7. How would you define your role in the company?
8. Do you think the employees you manage can define the company's goal and their role in it?
9. If you had to pick three values to apply to this company, what would they be? Do you identify to these values yourself?

## Conclusion

I think I have a lot of information already, thank you very much for discussing with me today!

## **Methodological tool for interviews Employees & Managers**

### **Themes**

#### **❖ Work Experience**

- Job's nature
- Job's daily expression
- History in the company

#### **❖ Information**

- Sources of the information and access to it, how easy, how frequent
- Nature of the information
- Interest
- Circulation
- Amount

#### **❖ Relations**

- Job requirements of interaction
- Type of situations when interaction happens with people within the company (face-to-face, mails, meetings...)
- Which format: Collective/Individual, frequency per week, regular/random
- Interactions' experience/atmosphere within the company
- Managerial interaction
- Manager's job definition, challenges
- Recent difficult situation and how it was handled

#### **❖ Participation/Involvement**

- Company's goal or project
- Role within the company
- Perception of others' understanding of the goal of the company, the role they have in it
- Values of the company, identification

E) Extracts of the analysis grid developed on Excel

P7	CEO HANDLES TOO MUCH AND HUMANLY BE GOOD AT EVERYTHING, LIKE MARKETING + HAS NOT MUCH TIME AVAILABLE! Mais ça fait aussi qu'y a certains domaines où il a moins de compétences et là on se retrouve ben, on salt pas comment gérer quoi. Typiquement tout ce qu'est communication avec les clients, avec l'extérieur tout ça, tout ce qu'est censé être la base du marketing tout ça c'est pas toujours évident. Forcément c'est un peu le revers de la médaille, (...). Mais c'est vrai que des fois on aimerait bien faire deux, trois améliorations et faut sortir les rames quoi. "MORE MEETINGS TO SHARE INFO" une des solutions ça serait d'avoir un peu des réunions de temps en temps pour vraiment poser les choses et dire "Ouais maintenant tout le monde arrête son boulot, on fait ça, on est tous d'accord" on a eu l'information on fait ce qu'on en fait hein si y en a qui retiennent pas ils retiennent pas mais au moins on l'a tous eu quoi." "INTERNAL SALES TEAM MEETINGS" Il faut au moins une réunion où y est Denis et puis tous les vendeurs en interne. Parce qu'en vente en interne c'est jamais coordonné quoi, c'est toujours euh tout le monde est toujours dans le jus. Alors les commerciaux ils font des																									
	1	Names	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X
	2	Duration																								
	3	Year																								
	Information													Suggestions										CEO's immediacy		
	Main-media													Feedback										Manager's CEO's immediacy		
	Process													Trust										Interest on interaction		
	Structure													Problems										Problems		
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