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Making Sense and Giving Sense:

an exploratory case study of line managers' and employees' sensemaking, sensegiving and attributions of a digital assessment tool

Master Thesis

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of digital technologies is a complex process, involving many uncertainties and different actors. Ongoing research has been trying to understand digitalization and the effect these different actors have on the successful implementation of new technologies. However, the front-line manager's role during digitalization is currently still under studied, even though these managers are the last link between organizational management and the workforce. Therefore, this study utilized the concepts of sensemaking and sensegiving to further understand the critical role of line managers during digital change, and their effect on the workforce. Additionally, aspects of attribution theory were used as a complement to gain deeper insights on how line managers and employees form causal explanations and how these attributions impact their behavior/attitudes. More specifically, the study aimed to discover how sensemaking and sensegiving efforts by front-line managers influence employees' attributions, attitudes and behavior towards digitalization. Through a single case study in an organization implementing a digital assessment tool, the sensemaking, sensegiving, and attributions within four operational teams were analyzed.

Since, this implementation of a digital assessment tool was considered a semi-digitalization, the findings of the research have been used to generate propositions. These propositions include how and why line managers' and employees' form attributions, make sense, and give sense of more advanced digital technologies, and the effect sensegiving can have on other's sensemaking process during digitalization. In brief, the study proposes that line managers can positively or negatively impact the reactions, attitudes, and behaviors of employees depending on how clearly they communicated the added value of the technology, how the technology works, and why the change is happening. Furthermore, the case study also demonstrated that sensemaking and sensegiving is negatively impacted by a digital tool which is not easy to use or customized for the target audience. Therefore, organizations should aim to inform front-line managers about the added value and functionality of a technology. Then these managers can appropriately give sense to the employees. Ultimately, This will increase the positive reactions and reduce the resistance to the digital change, which could minimize time and money investments required for a successful implementation.

Keywords: *Sensemaking, Sensegiving, Attributions, Line Manager, Digitalization, Implementation, HRM*

2

TABLE OF CONTENT

INTRODUCTION

Digitalization is one of the major trends which is changing society and business. In short, digitalization can be defined as the use of digital technologies, which are electronic tools, systems, devices and resources that generate, store or process data (Gray & Rumpe, 2015). This adoption of digital technologies in the organizational or operational environment requires companies to change (Parviainen et al., 2017). Digitalization leads to new products and services and enables several new forms of cooperation between different companies as well as new relationships between businesses and customers. Additionally, digitalization pressurizes organizations to reflect on their strategy and explore new business opportunities (Rachinger et al., 2019). Therefore, resulting in the initiation of strategic change which influences many business activities and business models. These changes do not only affect an organization's resources and operational processes, but also heavily influence the practices and ways of working of stakeholders (Henriette et al., 2015). However, the way in which organizations are affected by digitalization is dependent on the implementation of the digital technologies. Implementation is as a dynamic process, involving the interaction among multiple actors, starting with the adoption of a new practice and ending with its routinization (Trullen et al., 2020). Accordingly, the same digital technology can have different outcomes depending on the way it is implemented. Despite the growing body of work on the subject of digitalization, there are still a lot of uncertainties regarding the implementation of digital technologies.

To understand the distinctive characteristics of strategic change, many researchers have used the emerging concepts of Sensemaking and Sensegiving (e.g. Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Sensemaking turns uncertain circumstances into situations that are comprehended explicitly in words and serve as a springboard into action (Weick et al., 2005). The shift towards digital technologies often comes with a high degree of uncertainty concerning the implementation or the added value of that technology (Rachinger et al., 2019; Griffith, 1999). Therefore, individuals use sensemaking to better understand these ambiguous aspects of digitalization and translate them into words, which then makes it easier to take the right actions. In short, sensemaking is an integrated part to the process of taking action. Hence, sensemaking is crucial for businesses to make sense of new technologies, products, and services. Another important process during the implementation of digitalization is the process of sensegiving. Sensegiving aims to (re-)frame the sensemaking process allowing it to be shared (Will & Pies, 2018). The sensemaking process during the process of digitalization can trigger the following questions for

top management: why should we implement this technology? How does digitalizing add value to our business? Or what are the costs associated with digitalization? After sensemaking, the CEO or top management team communicate their 'sense' to the other stakeholders in the organization, the so called 'sensegiving' process. The way in which sense about digitalization is communicated is crucial for a successful adoption. For example, when management introduces a new technology as a threat rather than an opportunity, employees are expected to be hesitant or resistant to change. Consequently, the way in which digitalization is communicated to employees influences their sensemaking and attitudes of the value of digitalization.

As part of the sensemaking process during digitalization, individuals will try to make sense of why the change is happening. This aspect of sensemaking can be supported by another theory called attribution theory. Attribution theory focusses more specifically on how social perceivers gather and use information to arrive at causal explanations for events (Heider, 1958; Jones et al., 1972; Weiner, 1974; Weiner, 1986; Fiske & Taylor, 1991). For instance, attribution theory suggests that when people interpret a change as something negative, their reactions will also be negative. Accordingly, if managers communicate digitalization as something negative (sensegiving), employees will interpret it as something negative (sensemaking), resulting in negative employee attributions and consequently avoidance of use or poor adaption/performance. Were sensegiving and sensemaking explain more broadly how people experience and communicate the process of digitalization, attribution theory can explain in more detail how individuals form causal explanations and accordingly explain why individuals react and behave in a certain way. Therefore, attribution theory can be used as a complement to sensemaking and sensegiving theory in explaining different behaviors and attitudes towards digitalization. There are many explanations for companies to digitalize, such as to reduce costs, improve quality, improve employee wellbeing, or a combination of these reasons (Johnson, 1992; Sminia & Van Nistelrooij, 2006). Depending on the information an individual gathers, people can arrive at different causal explanations for the same digital change. Consequently, these formed attributions can affect how stakeholders accept or disapprove the implementation of a digital technology. For instance, employees might disapprove of digitalization if these changes are attributed to reduce costs. On the other hand, the attribution that digitalization will increase quality, likely results in acceptance of the digitalization (Nishii et al, 2008).

Despite the wide-ranging line of research on the concepts of sensemaking and sensegiving, it has barely been used to really grasp the different aspects of digitalization. Terri

L. Griffith is one of the academics that studied how users initially make sense of technology (Griffith, 1999). However, Griffith's only suggests that core technological features are most likely to trigger sensemaking, overlooking the influence of sensegiving/communication. Consequently, there are still many uncertainties regarding the topic of digitalization, and questions like: How do we best communicate digitalization to our employees? or how do we best implement a new digital technology? remain unanswered. Additionally, the current framework of sensemaking and sensegiving literature often overlooks important stakeholders. For example, Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991), found that the CEO's (and TMT) main role during strategic change can be best understood in the concepts of sensemaking and sensegiving. Gioia and Chittipeddi also looked at sensemaking and sensegiving efforts by the stakeholders, however the researchers did not distinguish between different types of stakeholders (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Balogun and Johnson (2004) did distinguish between stakeholders by specifically examining the middle manager's role in the process of change. Nevertheless, there is barely any research done on the sensemaking and sensegiving of first line managers or the work floor employees. Even though, these front line managers are often the last link between organizational management and the work floor employees. Therefore, these line managers are responsible for introducing organizational changes, such as the implementation of digitalization, to the workforce (McElroy, 1996). Additionally, since line managers often work in close relation to the workforce and higher management, their sensemaking process and sensegiving efforts might be influenced by their position between these two hierarchal layers. So, because each type of stakeholder fulfills a different role during (digital) change, this study carefully distinguishes between different stakeholders and their sensegiving/sensemaking efforts. Especially focusing on first-line managers and employees as these important stakeholders are often overlooked. However, only focusing on sensemaking and sensegiving is might not be enough. As mentioned before, sensemaking and sensegiving are used to explain how individuals experience and communicate ambiguous scenarios. Attribution theory can be used as a complement in order to more deeply explain how these stakeholders form explanations and how attributions affect an individual's attitude and behavior. Therefore, this study complements sensemaking and sensegiving with attribution theory to understand how the attributions, reactions, and attitudes regarding a digital change are formed.

This paper conducts a single case study in an organization that is going through the implementation of a digital tool. By exploring and analyzing the sensemaking and sensegiving process in a variety of teams, the study aims to better understand how the process of

digitalization is attributed and reacted to. In doing so, the stakeholders' differences in sensemaking and sensegiving efforts during digitalization are brought to light. This research builds on an extensive theoretical framework consisting of sensemaking and sensegiving theory as well as aspects of attribution theory. By doing so, this paper ultimately aims to answer the following research question: *How do sensemaking and sensegiving efforts by front-line managers influence employees' attributions, attitudes and behavior towards digitalization?*

By answering the research question this paper adds practical and academic value in the following ways. First of all, this paper adds practical value for businesses by highlighting how communication regarding digitalization can influence employees' attributions and attitudes towards digitalization. Hereby, enabling organizational implementation of digitalization as well as employee reactions to these changes. Ultimately, by effectively communicating digital strategic change, businesses can maximize the benefits and minimize the costs associated with digitalizing. Moreover, value is added to the academic field(s) by applying sensemaking, sensegiving, attribution theory aspects to digitalization. In doing so this paper adds to the digitalization literature by further analyzing how people understand and react to the implementation of a digital tool. Moreover, by focusing on the sensemaking/sensegiving efforts of line managers and their effect on employees, the importance of these managers during the process of digitalization are highlighted. Finally, by complementing sensemaking with attribution theory this paper demonstrates that both concepts can help each other in explaining interpretations and reactions to digitalization.

The thesis is organized as followed. First, the theoretical framework is brought to light, this framework covers all the relevant concepts for this research. Based on the theoretical framework a research model is derived. Afterwards, the methodology of the research is discussed. This section goes over the general design of the empirical research. Next, the results of the study are presented. Finally, the thesis will be concluded with a discussion summarizing the key findings and discussing the limitations and implications for practice and future research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Digitalization

Brennen and Kreiss (2016), define digitalization as the way many domains of social life are restructured around digital communication and media infrastructures. Gray and Rumpe (2015, p. 1319) on the other hand, use a more business-oriented approach and define digitalization as "the use of digital technologies to change a business model and provide new revenue and value-producing opportunities; or the process of moving to a digital business". These digital technologies can consist of electronic tools, systems, devices and resources that generate, store or process data. This business-oriented definition by Gray and Rumpe is most relevant to the aims of this thesis as the research deals with the implementation of a digital tool that is going on inside of a company. According to their definition, digitalization can include the implementation of any digital technology which has some kind of impact on business operations. Additionally, the ability to turn existing tangible products or services into digital variants is also part of digitalization (Gassmann et al., 2014; Henriette et al., 2015). Based on the previously mentioned definitions of digitalization, Parviainen and his colleagues (2017), developed the following all compassing definition of digital transformation: "Changes in ways of working, roles, and business offering caused by adoption of digital technologies in an organization, or in the operation environment of the organization. This refers to changes at the process level, organizational level, business domain level, and the society level" (Parviainen et al., 2017, p. 64).

Many authors compared the impact of digitalization to that of the industrial revolution (e.g. Degryse, 2016; Schwab, 2015; Tihinen et al., 2016). If implemented correctly digitalization can yield a lot of benefits consisting of cost reductions or improved turnaround times. Moreover, digitalizing allows for automated data collection which can help to better understand cost drivers, process performance, and causes of risk. Digital implementations like dashboards and real-time reports enables organizations to tackle issues before they become critical (Markovitch & Willmott, 2014).

However, even though the benefits of digitalization have been well studied, businesses are still struggling to actually make a digital transformation or implement new digital technologies. This is due to the many obstacles that come with a digital transformation. For instance, digitalizing involves changes to business models that will impact organizations' resources, operational processes, internal and external users. These changes heavily influence

habits and ways of working within an organization, therefore affecting every stakeholder (Henriette et al., 2015). So, in order to properly implement a digital technology, it is important to consider how it affects stakeholders and their responses. Hence, this study investigates how digitalization is communicated and understood in an organization. The next sections will define the concepts that are relevant for answering the research question.

Sensemaking & Sensegiving of Digitalization

Sensemaking is a concept that was first introduced by Karl E. Weick and has seen a growing body of work in the last two or three decades. In the most simplistic terms Weick defines sensemaking as the making of sense (Weick, 1993; Weick, 1995). However a more specific definition is also given in Weick's book, *Sensemaking in Organisations (1995),* in this book sensemaking is defined as the process of collectively creating reality in one's everyday life, in organizations it is an ongoing accomplishment that involves assigning meaning to experiences and creating order out of events by making sense of them. Weick further explains that individual sensemaking is influenced by past experiences and changing circumstances (Weick, 1988; Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). Following Weick's fundamental work there have been a large number of academics that redefined or rephrased the meaning of sensegiving (e.g. Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Brown, 2000; Maitlis, 2005). In its essence all the different definitions describe sensemaking as a process through which individuals work to understand novel, unexpected, or confusing events. In 2005 Weick et al. further elaborated that the sensemaking goal is not only to make sense of uncertain events, but also turning these into situations that are comprehensive in words which function as a springboard into action.

Alongside sensemaking, the concept of 'Sensegiving' has emerged as a significant contribution to understand how sensemaking is accomplished (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Sensegiving has been defined as: "The process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality" (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442). In more simplistic terms, sensegiving aims to influence other people's sensemaking. Sensegiving can be seen as the management of sensemaking and consist of two change management activities. First of all, sensegiving includes the creation of narratives in order to explain what is going on in the times of strategic change. Second of all, it incorporates how the development of appropriate discourses to guide how employees form their expectations (Will & Pies, 2018). In short, sensegiving aims to (re-)frame the sensemaking process.

In Organizational studies, sensegiving is generally studied as a top-down process in which managers or organizational leaders strategically try to shape the sensemaking of other organizational stakeholders (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). However, this is not always the case, as employees can also actively resist efforts from managers to influence strategic change (Soneshein, 2010). Moreover, according to Maitlis and Lawrence (2007) actors at any hierarchical level of an organization, or outside its boundaries, may engage in sensegiving with others.

When it comes to digitalization, sensemaking and sensegiving are important processes because technology implementation is complex and often unpredictable (Griffith, 1999). When an organization implements a new technology, individuals first start to make sense of this digital change. Griffith (1999) suggests that sensemaking is initially triggered by concrete and core technology features. However, he also recognized that simply looking at technology features alone is not enough. Besides technology features, sensemaking can be influenced by sensegiving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Will & Pies, 2018). The way in which a digital change is introduced or communicated can impact the interpretations people make about this digitalization. While sensemaking and sensegiving can explain how individuals interpret digitalization, attribution theory can help to explain the reactions following these interpretations.

Line Manager and Employee Attributions of the "Why" of Digitalization

Attribution theory is the study of perceived causation. The main idea is that people interpret behavior or events in terms of its causes, and that these interpretations (attributions) play a large role in determining their reactions and attitudes to these events (Kelly & Michela, 1980). More specifically, attribution theory examines what information is gathered and used to form a causal judgement of why something is happening. The theory suggests that individuals can have different interpretations of the same scenarios, hereby also explaining different reactions and behaviors to the same situation. Similar to sensemaking, attribution theory requires individuals to make sense of a situation with some degree of uncertainty. The two concepts are therefore very similar. However, according to Weiner and his colleagues, an individual seeking to understand why something is happening undergoes a three-stage process before forming one or more attributions. First of all, the person has to perceive or observe the change. Then, the person must believe that the change was intentionally performed. Third and finally, the person must determine whether the change was forced by situational factors or willingly instigated by

another actor (Jones et al., 1972; Weiner, 1974; Weiner, 1986). Attribution theory is a well-known and much used concept in social psychology. However, in contrast to sensemaking, attribution theory has not received much attention in the organizational sciences. Even though attributional processes appear to affect most goal and reward oriented behavior in organizations (Martinko et al., 2010).

Nishii et al. (2008), highlighted the usefulness of attribution theory in business research. The researchers analyzed how employees interpreted the management reasons for implementing HR practices. The attributions made as to why an HR practice was designed consisted of: increasing quality, lowering costs, improving employee well-being, exploiting employees, and complying with union requirements (Nishii et al., 2008). The main results of their study showed that if the HR practice implementation was attributed as to increase quality and employee's well-being this positively impacts the workforce's attitudes, behavior, and performance. On the other hand, if HR practices were supposedly implemented to reduce costs and exploit employees this negatively impacts the workforce's attitudes, behavior, and performance (Nishii et al., 2008).

When it comes to implementing a new digital technology, or digitalizing any aspects of a business, employees and line managers could make the same attributions. In fact, any type of strategic change can be instigated for one of the following reasons: reducing the total cost of operations, increasing the product/service quality, improving the workforce's quality of life, maximizing employee performance, government/union rules and regulations (Johnson, 1992; Sminia & Van Nistelrooij, 2006). Additionally, organizations might also digitalize due to increasing pressure of competitors to keep up. Depending on the information line managers and employees gather and use, they can arrive at different causal explanations for a digital change. Accordingly, the behaviors, attitudes, and reactions of the line managers and employees is affected by how they attribute a digital change.

The Research Model

The theoretical framework has established that sensemaking is triggered by the implementation of digital technologies, and that the sensemaking and attributions about digitalization can also be influenced by sensegiving efforts from other stakeholders. Based on this knowledge a model can be created that visualizes how the final reactions, attitudes, and behaviors, of employees towards a digitalization are formed. The research model in figure 1 shows how employees

attitudes and reactions about digitalization are formed and influenced by their own sensemaking and formed attributions. However, the model also stresses that these attributions and individual sensemaking processes are influenced by sensegiving efforts of line managers and other stake holders. Front-line managers first have to make sense of digitalization and translate this into words, afterwards they communicate this to employees through sensegiving. Employees then use sensemaking to interpret the digitalization process which has been communicated to them by the line managers, this sensemaking process also includes the forming of attributions regarding the implementation of the digital tool. The model also highlights the external effect of communication from other stakeholders. Because attributions about digitalization can also be influenced by sensegiving from other stakeholder inside or outside the organizational boundaries (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007).
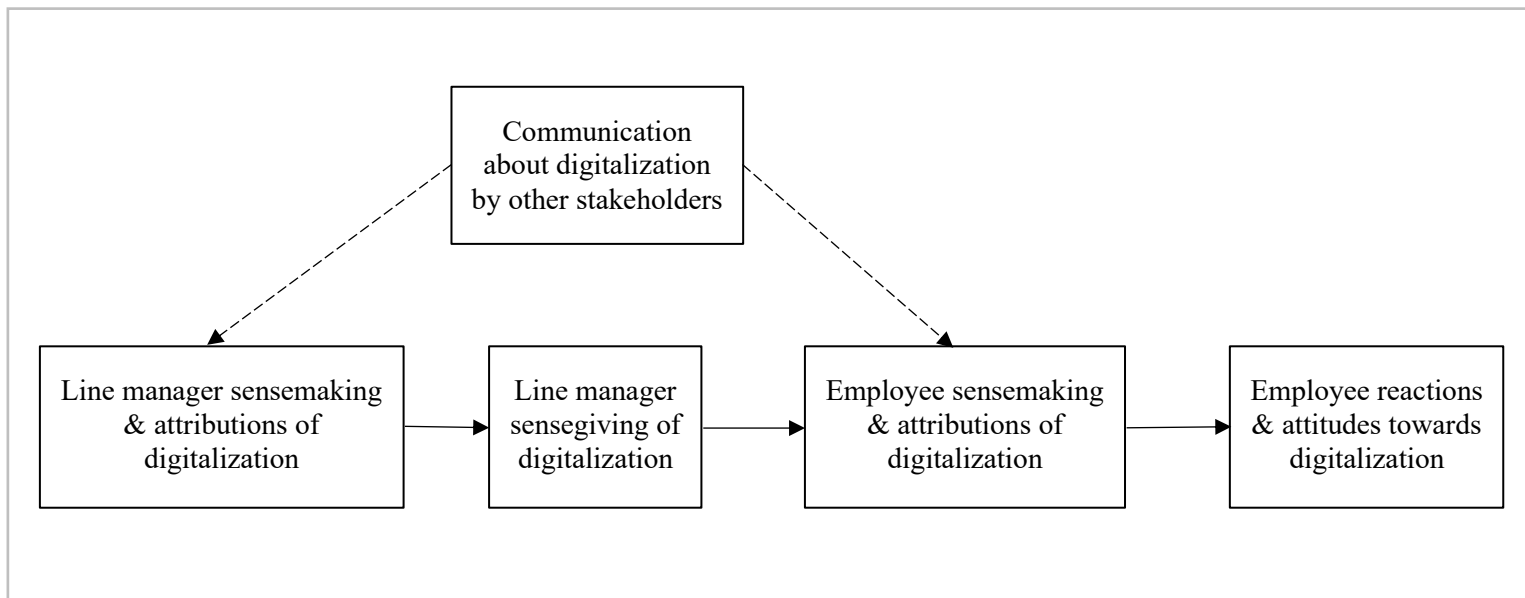
Figure 1: The Research Model

While this model is simply a representation of processes and relations that have been found and confirmed by the theoretical framework. The present study aims to explore more thoroughly the 'why' and 'how' of these relationships. The study achieves this by performing a qualitative research method to answer questions like: Why do line managers and employees have certain attitudes/attributions towards digital technologies? and how do line managers translate their sensemaking into sensegiving? and how are the sensemaking and attributions of line managers and employees affected by other stakeholders? The following section will discuss the research methods to explore these relations in more detail.

METHOD

Research Design

To determine how sensemaking and sensegiving efforts by front-line managers influence employees' attributions, attitudes and behavior towards digitalization, a wide range of qualitative data has been collected and analyzed. Qualitative research is most appropriate for answering the research question because the aim is to gather contextual real-world knowledge about communication, attitudes and behaviors of a specific group of people (Maxwell, 2008). Additionally, qualitative research provides more flexibility which can be helpful for measuring the underlying processes of sensemaking and sensegiving (Le & Schmid, 2020). A single case study was conducted as this research strategy was the most suitable option for answering the research question. Since, a case study involves an in-depth examination of a particular situation (Gerring, 2004). Within the scope of this research, a case study allowed for a thorough examination of line managers and employees in different operational teams, by for example interviews or observation. Therefore, a case study has the ability to frame the thought processes of and the communication between these stakeholders. Besides the in-depth examination a case study offered, there were several more benefits to this research strategy. For instance, single case studies are known for their strong internal validity or legitimacy, suggesting trustworthy outcomes as well as eliminating alternative explanations for a finding. Accordingly, this contributed to the generalizability of the research results in other settings (Lobo et al., 2017)

The following sections will further elaborate on the methodological approach. First, the research context is presented. Here the organization of the case study is introduced and the selection criteria and characteristics are discussed. Besides the organizations, the digitalization is also introduced. Finally, the procedures regarding the data collection and data analyses are spelled out.

Research Context

In order to answer the research question: How do sensemaking and sensegiving efforts by front-line managers influence employees' attributions, attitudes and behavior towards digitalization? First an appropriate organization for the case study had to be selected. This organization had to meet several selection criteria and characteristics in order to be suitable for this specific research. Most importantly, the selected company had to be going through the implementation of a digital technology or recently have introduced a digital technology. Additionally, the

organization had to be large enough for it to have multiple teams with different front-line managers. Finally, the organization and its employees must have been willing to be part of a case study.

An organization that was willing to participate to the case study and met all the requirements was IDNIT, or more specifically IDNIT's site in the Netherlands. IDNIT is a multinational technology company with approximately 15.000 employees worldwide. The company is headquartered in France and earned €2.2 billion in revenues in the year 2020. The organization is specialized in among other things biometric identification and security, as well as secure payments. The company provides its technologies, products and services to the public sector or governments, as well as private companies. When it comes to IDNIT in The Netherlands, the site is responsible for the manufacturing and distribution of all passports and other identity documents in the Netherlands. The next subsection will go more in depth about the digitalization at IDNIT.

The Semi-Digitalization

In order to investigate how sensemaking and sensegiving efforts by line managers affect employees attributions, attitudes, and reactions towards digitalization within IDNIT, it is important that the company recently underwent a digital transformation. For IDNIT in Haarlem they recently implemented a digital technology or tool to the workforce. This digitalization had to do with their annual performance review and objective setting. Previously, employees' performance was evaluated and discussed in person with conversations between line-manager and employee, these conversations were then documented on paper and stored. However, last year IDNIT made a transition to a fully digital system for this performance review. This implementation concerned the entire organization, including the machine operators and manufacturers.

This new online tool for the annual performance review also included a new component which was an objective setting for the next year. This new online tool for the objective and performance review could be accessed online through IDNIT's own intranet. Employees who worked in the office or in a managerial role already had a corporate account to access this intranet. However, work floor operators or employees previously did not require access to the intranet, and therefore were given new accounts to fill in the objective and performance review. The implementation of this digital assessment tool has been going on for several years. The line managers, their superiors, and all white collar employees have been using the digital assessment

tool for three years now. However, the blue collar workers have only been introduced to this digital change last year. This company wide implementation of the online assessment tool has raised a lot of different reactions within IDNIT. Especially the decision to include all blue collar workers has raised many concerns among the line managers and workforce. Therefore, this case study was used to analyze these reactions and the origin of them. The next two sections will discuss how the data was collected and analyzed.

While, technically any use of a digital technology can be classified as a digitalization (Gray & Rumpe, 2015; Gassmann et al., 2014; Henriette et al., 2015), the impact of the digital assessment tool on IDNIT's business model is minimal. Therefore, the implementation of the digital assessment tool has been classified as a semi-digitalization. Despite the low impact this digital technology has on the organizational environment of IDNIT, the case study was still able to provide insights into how and why line managers and employees make and give sense during the implementation of such a digital technology.

Data Collection

In order to investigate how employee's reactions to the digital technology were influenced by sensemaking and sensegiving efforts by line managers, this research utilized two data collection methods: semi-structured interviews and document analysis.

The data on line managers' and employees' sensemaking, sensegiving and attributions, was collected through semi-structured interviews. First, an HR manager and two HR senior business partners were interviewed. The data from these interviews provided more insights into the type of digitalization used and the implementation of digitalization and was a useful basis for composing the interview questions for the line managers and employees. Afterwards, 4 operational teams were selected, and from each team the front-line manager and two employees were interviewed, resulting in interviews with 4 different line managers and 8 different employees for a total of 15 interviews. Semi-structured interviews were performed as they are very well suited for examining sensemaking/sensegiving processes due to their high flexibility and standardization potential. This ensured a good interpretability of answers and allowed the interviewers to receive the maximum information from the line managers and employees (Wilson, 2012). The semi-structured interviews consisted of mainly open-ended questions. These type of questions ensured that the respondents could provide all the possible information necessary to reach the most detailed answer (King et al., 2018). Afterwards, specific follow-up

questions have been formulated to gain more detailed knowledge about certain topics (Roulston, 2018).

To get insights into the sensemaking process of the line managers and employees they were asked questions along these lines: What was your first thought or reaction when you heard about this digital technology? what are the pros and cons of this digital tool? what is your opinion about this digitalization? These type of questions all provide insights into the sensemaking cues the respondents encountered that affected their sensemaking. Next, in order to analyze the attributions about the digital tool each respondent was also asked: why do you think this digitalization is happening? This question forced the respondents to think more deeply about the digital tool and its intended purpose. Following, to gain insights into the sensegiving process of the line managers, they were asked questions along the following lines. How did you introduce this digitalization process within your team? in what way did you inform the employees about the added value of this digitalization? how did you respond to the different reactions of your employees? These open questions intended to capture the way in which the line managers translated their sensemaking process towards the workforce. Additionally, extra input from the interviews with employees was utilized, as they also provided insights into how the line-managers gave sense. The questions along with all the other interview questions and criteria can be found in Appendix A.

In addition to these semi-structured interviews, the research also utilized existing data from documents related to the digital technology. Document analysis is defined as "a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents, both printed and electronic material" (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). In contrast to the primary data collected during the semi-structured interviews, documents are secondary data consisting of text and images that have been recorded without research intervention (Bowen, 2009). By combining primary data from interviews and secondary data from document analysis, findings across these data sets are validated. Consequently, by using two different data collection methods, the impact of potential biases that can exist in a single study are reduced (Bowen, 2009; Patton, 1990). The secondary data that was used for this research consisted of a user guide which explained how the digital objective and performance review could be accessed and used. This document provided the initial instructions to the line managers and employees, hereby triggering the sensemaking process. Therefore this user manual was also analyzed. By combining this document analysis with the semi-structured interviews, this research aimed to get complete insights into the sensemaking, sensegiving, and attributions of the sample.

Data Analysis

Before the collected data could be used to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge on sensemaking, attributions and sensegiving during digitalization, the data first had to be examined and interpreted (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). To do so the conducted interviews were transcribed. Afterwards, thematic analysis was used to identify and analyze patterns of meaning in these transcripts (Braun & Clark, 2006). More specifically, thematic analysis in the form of inductive coding was utilized. In contrast to deductive coding, inductive coding does not start with a predefined set of codes. Instead, inductive coding allows the data to determine the themes. Accordingly, codes were defined based on the interview transcripts and patterns were identified based on these codes (Nowell et al., 2017; Locke et al., 2020). Inductive coding was utilized because it is more flexible than deductive coding, making it easier to discover patterns and underlying themes. Moreover, inductive coding allowed the data to be used for theory development, which could lead to promising future research (Nowell et al., 2017; Roulston, 2018).

The interview transcripts were coded using the software program Atlas.ti. First open codes were generated based on the interview transcripts. Following the initial coding process, the open codes were then grouped into categories. Afterwards, main themes, or selective codes, were created out of these categories. The inductive coding process led to a total of 171 open codes that were grouped into a total of 13 categories. These categories where then allocated into four overall themes or selective codes. These final themes were in line with the research framework and consisted of: Sensemaking, Sensegiving, Attributions, Digitalization, and Organizational Aspects. The sensemaking theme included all codes concerning the positive and negative reactions towards digitalization, initial/other reactions toward digitalization, and other factors that influence sensemaking. The sensegiving theme included all codes regarding the communication or support around the digitalization. Next, the attribution theme contained all answers relating to the reason for the implementation. The digital implementation theme included all codes that dealt with the characteristics of the ongoing digitalization as well as the problems of it. Finally, the organizational aspect theme included all workforce and organizational characteristics. These themes, categories, and codes were used as evidence in answering the research question and can be found in Appendix B and C. Despite using an inductive coding approach, the study aimed to stay as close as possible to the theoretical

constructs of sensemaking, sensegiving, and attribution theory. By doing so the content and construct validity of the coding process were ensured (O'Kane et al., 2019).

The following section will go over the findings of this research that resulted from the above mentioned coding process. Naturally, these findings were utilized to answer the research question of this study. Throughout this section abbreviations were used for the different line managers and employees. Since, interviews were held with four different line managers from and eight employees from four different operational teams, each abbreviation included a number representing this team. For instance Lmng1 and Lmng2 are the abbreviations used for the line managers of operational teams 1 and 2 respectively, and Empl3.1 and Empl3.2 are the two different employees from operational team 3. Since the interviews were conducted in Dutch, all the quotes and codes in the findings were first translated to English.

FINDINGS

To discover how sensegiving efforts by front-line managers influence employees' attributions, attitudes and behaviors towards digitalization, the findings are structured as follows. First of all, the sensemaking process and attributions of the line managers regarding the digitalization are brought to light. Second, the findings continue by describing the line managers' sensegiving efforts within their teams. Afterwards, the sensemaking process of the work floor employees leading to their final reactions and attributions are discussed. Finally, based on these findings the study results give insight into whether and how employees reactions and attributions are influenced by their line managers. Throughout these findings, the external effect of other stakeholder's on the sensemaking process of line managers and employees is carefully considered.

Line Manager Sensemaking

When it came to the manager's first reactions to the digital implementation they provided some insightful answers. The attitudes of the four line managers following their sensemaking process could be described as rather negative, or skeptical. Accordingly, negativity and skepticism were two categories that were assigned to multiple codes and quotes throughout the line manager interview transcripts. However, when further analyzing what they were negative or skeptical about, there were three answers that reoccurred in the interviews. Interestingly, the most

mentioned aspect the line managers were negative about had nothing to do with the digital technology. Instead, many of the line managers were negative about the new performance evaluation. More specifically, the managers disliked the new goal setting aspect of the tool and the fact that employees had to fill in the evaluation separately. Accordingly, many line managers said they preferred the old method of evaluating. Second of all, some line managers were skeptical about the implementation of the tool, and were afraid that this implementation would not go well. Finally, one line managers was actually negative about the digital aspect of the new evaluation, and mentioned that he disliked digital communication. Nevertheless, most of the negative and skeptical reactions were not directly related to the digital aspects of the tool. Below are three examples of what the line managers were negative or skeptical about. Afterwards, several reasons or causes for these reactions are presented.

Negative about new evaluation: *"I preferred the old method of evaluating." (Lmng2)*

Skeptical about implementation: *"I was not convinced the implementation would go smoothly." (Lmng2)*

Negative about digital communication: "*Digital communication has never been my preferred way of communicating and it still is not. Moreover, I am not very proficient when it comes to digital technologies, older people like me tend to struggle a bit more when it comes to digitalization, because it creates a distance which we are not used to." (Lmng1)*

These answers from the interviews are evidence for the negative and skeptical responses towards the digital tool.

When further asked about these reactions, it became more clear why the line managers responded in such a negative or skeptical manner. For instance, the reactions of the line managers could be explained by several concerns they had during the implementation process. Most of these concerns had to do with the added value, user friendliness, and the personal touch of the digital tool. More specifically, the lack of added value for the production department, the poor user friendliness, and loss of personal touch were codes that were very common among the sample of line managers. First of all, the line managers believed that the new digital evaluation added no value for them or the employees because the tool was not customized for a production department. This became clear by the line managers' comments regarding the

content of the evaluation. For example, many of the line managers mentioned that the evaluation tool's question regarding goal setting were not applicable to the operators on the production site. As a result, the managers felt as if the tool was not made for them, which made them dislike this new method of evaluating. Two quotes from line managers that expressed this feeling are presented below.

No added value: *"It is not simple, and there is no added value for a production floor. Because it concerns topics that are not applicable to the operators." (Lmng4)*

Not applicable for production department: *"There are a lot of questions regarding education/training, but the operators in the production department have already finished their education and just want to do their job." (Lmng3)*

Second of all, there were a lot of technical and usability issues which further influenced the line managers sensemaking. These issues consisted of, employees not being able to access the system, or not understanding the tool. Due to these issues, the line managers perceived the tool as not user friendly, which is confirmed by the following quotes:

Operators no access issue: *"The operators don't have access to all the systems, at home 80 percent ran into a firewall blockade" (Lmng2)*

Not user friendly: *"The tool is definitely not user friendly." (Lmng3)*

Moreover, since the previous evaluation was done face to face, and the new digital tool required the employees and line managers to fill in the form separately, some of the line managers perceived the tool as not personal, which is established by one line manager who said the following:

Not personal: *"You have to keep it personal and this does not look personal, I am not just a number." (Lmng3)*

These aspects of the digitalization are part of the reason why the sample of line managers were negative about the digital tool or the content of the evaluation.

However, there are additional factors that could have caused the negative or skeptical reactions regarding the implementation. First of all, some of the line managers were skeptical about the successful implementation of the tool due to their perceptions of the IT department. For instance, one line manager mentioned that the IT support at IDNIT was lacking and therefore doubted in their capability to implement such a companywide digital tool. This concern about the IT capabilities could explain some of the skeptical reactions and becomes evident from the following quote:

"I thought it was very ambitious and challenging to implement such a digitalization because our IT group and support is not great." (Lmng2).

Finally, besides the previously mentioned concerns and aspects during the implementation of the digital tool, communication by other stakeholders, as visualized in the research model, could also have influenced the line managers sensemaking process. For example, some of the line managers experienced the implementation process as if it was pushed by HR. This feeling was the result of HR not including the line managers during the implementation process and not informing them about why the digital tool was being implemented. As a result the line managers felt as if they were forced to use the tool. The following quotes by one HR business partner and one line manager confirm that the line managers were not included and how this influenced the line managers sensemaking.

HR not including line managers: *"During the process we could have included the line managers more and informed them better with regards to why we want to implement this."(HRSBP1)*

HR pushed digital tool: *"HR kind of pushed it. I understand that the core wants to implement it, but they did in a very nonchalant way. It felt like they just said: here line managers here you have it, now implement it in your teams. And that is not how it works in my world." (Lmng2)*

Since management did not provide reasons for the usage, the line managers formed negative senses of the digitalization. As a result management had to force usage and penalize those who did not use the digital tool. Consequently, to avoid this punishment the line managers created

"workarounds", such as printing the document and filling it in on paper together with the employees instead of separately.

Overall, there were a lot of factors during the implementation process that resulted in the negative and skeptical senses of the line managers. The next section will go more in depth on the attributions the line managers formed as a consequence of the sensemaking cues mentioned above.

Line Manager Attributions

When asking about the reason for the digital implementation, the line managers' answers varied. Since HR did not provide the line managers with clear reasons for the digitalization, the managers had to form their own attributions. As a result, most of the line managers were unsure as to why the digital transformation was happening. However, when asked to think of a possible reason the respondents actually were able to come up with a large amount possible attributions. First of all, most of the line managers believed that the digitalization was happening because of the administrative benefits it provides for corporate and HR. Some of these administrative benefits that were mentioned were that the tool helps HR with archiving and reporting. Additionally, some line managers also added that the digital tool was implemented for the monitoring of the staff. As a result, archiving, administration, and monitoring benefits were codes frequently found under the attributions theme. Some examples from the interviews that confirm these attributions among the line mangers are presented below.

Archiving and reporting benefit: *"I do believe the main advantage lies in the archiving and reporting for HR." (Lmng2)*

Archiving benefits: *"I think to makes it easier to look into the data, because previously everything was stored in physical files and this online tool makes it easier to relocate documents." (Lmng4)*

Monitoring and archiving benefits: *"I also think that when something is wrong, they can easily look back at the evaluation and see what that person's evaluation is like."(Lmng3)*

Monitoring benefits: *"I think it is simply for administrative purposes, it provides corporate and HR with insight into the staff." (Lmng3)*

All these reasons mentioned above, demonstrate that these line managers attributed the digital change as an initiative from HR. Next to these administrative benefits, one line manager mentioned that society basically forces digitalization to happen and that this might have been the reason for the digital transformation. In contrast to the previously mentioned administrative attributions, this line manager attributed the digital change to the situation.

> Society forces digitalization: *"I was hoping you could tell me why. Maybe it is because everything is getting more digital and society is pushing us in this direction."* (Lmng1).

What became evident from these interviews with line managers, is that none of them believed that the digital change was implemented for the development of them and the employees, or to improve the quality of their work or the wellbeing of the employees. Instead, the attributions that the managers formed had to do with control for HR. In line with Nishii et al (2008), these attributions formed by the line manager could explain the negative reactions to the digital change.

The next section will go over the sensegiving efforts of the line mangers and explain how they translated their sensemaking and attributions towards their employees.

Line Manager Sensegiving

Now that the sensemaking processes of the line managers has been explored the findings continue with their sensegiving efforts or communication to the employees.

When asked about their communication regarding the digitalization, the line managers applied a range of different sensegiving strategies. These sensegiving strategies have been divided into three different types or codes. First of all, one way of communication involved the separation the line manager's own sensemaking and his sensegiving. Since, the line managers were not very enthusiastic about the digitalization, some tried to hide their opinion from their employees. They did this because they were afraid to negatively influence their employees with their own opinion. Instead, line managers that applied this type of sensegiving tried to stimulate their employees to use the digital tool, even though they did not like it themselves. However, one line manager mentioned that it is very difficult to stimulate someone to use a digital tool that has no clear benefits for the employee.

"I might not be enthusiastic about this change, but I try not to show this when communicating to my team. I try to stimulate my employees to use the digitalization and I point out the benefits. However, This can be quite difficult, especially when I am not sure about the benefits myself." (Lmng1)

As a result, most of the line mangers applied a different sensegiving approach. Since, the line managers could not inform the employees on the added value of the digital tool, they instead focused on the usability of the tool. This sensegiving strategy is described as practical or functional sensegiving. This approach entails the explanation of the practical aspects of the digitalization in a more direct way, for instance by demonstrating how to use the tool. Line managers that applied this sensegiving style focused only on the usability of the tool, without disclosing any value the digitalization adds. The reason that many of the line manager choose this practical approach has to do with their own sensemaking. Since, the line managers themselves did not see any added value in the digital tool, they choose to focus on the practicality of the tool. More specifically, since HR did not emphasize the digital tool's added value, the line managers did not see any value in the digitalization. Accordingly, the line managers formed negative senses which affected the sensegiving of the managers, as they did not provide any value and decided to focus on the usability. This again confirms that other stakeholders impact the sensemaking and sensegiving of the line manager. This practical/direct strategy of sensegiving was very common among the line managers which is confirmed by the evidence below.

"I started by explaining why we do it. Afterwards I walked them through the entire system and showed them how to use it and how to interpret it. I do not think that I have to mention the pros and cons to them. I don't have to inform them that it provides HR with more insights, that would be madness." (Lmng2)

"I propose that you all fill in the annual review and send it back to me, then I will add to it and send it back to you. Afterwards, we will have a personal discussion about it." (Lmng3)

Finally, some of the quotes within the sensegiving theme showed that line managers avoided a direct introduction of the digitalization. More specifically, one line manager tried to exclude the employees from the digitalization entirely. When asked why he/she choose to exclude the

operators from the digitalization, two main reasons were provided. First of which had to do with the accessibility of the tool. Since many of the operators did not have direct access to a computer or an account to the company's intra net, they would have to go through several additional steps to access the digital tool. Furthermore, most employees did not want to access the tool and fill in the evaluation at home. Consequently, the employees had to use the line manager's computer. However, one line manager mentioned that there was no time for all the employees to use his/her computer. Therefore, this further increased the accessibility problem of the tool. These accessibility issues are confirmed by the quotes below.

"They were able to log in once on my personal computer. However, they cannot use it when they are here because I am using my pc, and I am not going to let everyone use my computer." (Lmng4)

"The idea was that they had to log in themselves, but they do not have a personal computer here, and they refuse to do it at home." (Lmng4)

"The operators do not have access to the system, and at home 80 percent ran into a firewall blockade. That just does not work." (Lmng2)

"Everything has to go through a second computer on site, and the workers do not have e-mail addresses which makes it dramatic." (Lmng3)

Besides these accesibility issues, a second reason for not introducing the digitalization was the lack of added value for the employees. Since the digital tool did not provide the employees with any sort of benefits, one line manager believed that the employees would not use the tool. This conccern is demonstrated by the following quote from the interviews.

"The operators have to make time to use this tool and most of them are not willing to do so. If there was any added value in it for them they might use it, but there is no value for them in general." (Lmng4).

As a result of this poor accesability and the lack of added value for the operators, some of the line managers decided to avoid sensegiving of the digitalization and instead resorted to other

workarounds. These workarounds consisted of printing out the evaluations forms and filling them in together with the employees. Afterwards, the line manager then converted these forms into the digital tool. Herby, excluding the operators from using the digital tool. One example of this workaround is presented by the quote below.

> *"I just print out the forms and discuss them with my employees, they cannot provide input in the digital tool." (Lmng4)*

Overall, there were a lot of different aspects that influenced the sensegiving efforts of the line managers. Especially the negative sensemaking cues seemed to have impacted the line managers sensegiving style. The next sections will go more in depth on the reactions and attributions of the final employees.

Employee Sensemaking

When it comes to the work floor employees, the interviews provided some interesting results. These employees were first introduced to the digitalization by their direct line manager. However, each employee has formed his own opinion about the digital tool. Accordingly, when analyzing the reactions, attributions, and sensemaking of these employees, the results varied.

After analyzing the sensemaking processes of the line managers, it was expected that the employees shared similar thoughts. However, this was not entirely the case. For instance, when the line managers were mostly negative, there were some positive reactions among employees. Overall the employee's sensemaking and reaction could be divided into three categories: positive, negative, and unaware. The quotes below provide some examples for the positive sensemaking among the employees.

> Easy to use: "*It was very easy you just read what it says and fill it in. Therefore it can save us a lot of time, so we as production department can spend more time on producing."* (Empl.2.1)

> Positive: *"People who are not really good with technology are pushed to use it which is a good thing, and I don't really see any negative aspects." (Empl2.1)*

When further analyzing the interview transcript of these employees that were positive, several potential reasons for their positive reactions were found. First of all, the employees that responded positively happened to have access to an account and computer at work. Therefore, the digital tool could be easily accessed and potential issues were avoided. Another factor that might be related to the positive senses of the employees is age. Because the positive reactions among the sample were given by the younger employees. Furthermore, one of these younger employees mentioned that his older colleagues struggled with digitalization. This suggest that age might have an impact on the sensemaking during digital change. Finally, what becomes evident from the quotes mentioned above is that the employees that were positive mentioned the usability aspects of the digital tool. Accordingly, the practical explanation given by some of the line managers may have positively influenced the employees perceptions regarding the tool's ease of use.

Despite these few optimistic reactions about the digital implementation, they were not common within the sample of employees. Most employees responded in a more negative manner which is reflected by the following statements from the interviews.

Negative: *"The only positive thing I see is that you don't waste any unnecessary paper, but other than that I don't like it." (Empl3.2)*

Prefer personal: *"I prefer to have my evaluation face to face rather than with a digital tool." (Empl1.1)*

When asking the employees why they disliked the digitalization, a lot of different reasons were mentioned. Some employees mentioned their preference for a personal evaluation approach, and said that the digital tool did not feel personal. Other sensemaking cues that may have caused the negative reactions had to do with the accessibility and usability of the tool. As mentioned before, most of the employees did not have direct access to a computer or account. While these employees received credentials to access the system, they had to change their passwords frequently for security reasons. Since the employees did not access the system often, many of them forgot their passwords and could then no longer access the digital tool. All of these issues reduced the accessibility of the digitalization which then negatively impacted the employees sensemaking. Besides these accessibility problems, many employees said that the tool was complicated to understand or not user-friendly. The quotes below present several examples of

these accessibility and usability issues the employees encountered during the implementation process.

No access to PC: *"We do not have access to computers on our site, so we also cannot access the digital systems"* (Empl4.2)

Accessibility issue: *"When you are at home and cannot get into the system you would have to call someone for a new code. Who do I call? and will they just give me a passport? I don't have an email address to show them I work here, and they won't just give me a new code."* (Empl3.1)

Too complicated: *"I think it is too complicated, when trying it at home it is hard to figure out. When it comes to us work floor employees, the system could be more user-friendly."* (Empl3.2)

The user guide was supposed to improve the usability by providing the employees with instructions on how to use and access the tool. However after analyzing this user manual and the employees reactions, it became clear that the guide may have actually re-enforced the negative sensemaking cues. The main issue with the user guide that negatively affected the employees sensemaking had to do with the language of the document. Since the user manual was written completely in English and most of the employees were not proficient in English the user guide did not provide any support. Many employees confirmed to struggle with these English documents which could have further impacted their negative senses. An example of such a language issue is presented below.

Language issue: *"You have to take into account that many employees are low-skilled and often don't speak English, that is where you hit a wall. Everything has to be done in Dutch, if necessary even through google translate, as long as it is understandable for us."* (Empl4.2)

As was the case with the line managers sensemaking, the sensemaking process of the employees could also have been affected by other stakeholders. Similarly to the line managers several employees felt that the digitalization was pushed by top management. Additionally, many

employees also experienced a lack of support. As a consequence, the users formed negative senses regarding the digital tool. The following quote demonstrates this feeling of no support and the tool being pushed from above.

"They keep pushing from above that it has to happen, while there are no support layers in between. That can make it quite messy sometimes." (Empl4.2)

Finally, there were a lot of comments on the added value and customizability of the digital tool. More specifically, almost all of the employees from the sample believed that the tool was not made for them or was not applicable to the production department. When it came to the content of the evaluation tool, the employees felt as if it was too standardized or focused on white collar workers. For instance, the evaluation included questions regarding customer contact or career opportunities while many of the production workers do not have any customer contact or are already at the end of their career. Accordingly, many of the operators raised the issue of the tool not being customized for them. Moreover, many employees believed that the digitalization provided no added value for them. Especially those employees that were already at the end of their career believed that the evaluation changed nothing for them. This sensemaking cue may have been further re-enforced by the line managers who also believed there were no potential benefits to the digitalization. These issue of customizability and value played a large role in determining the final reactions of the employees regarding the tool. Some examples of these issues that were raised by the employees are presented below.

Too standardized: *"They want a centralized system for all locations and departments worldwide. But we are not white-collar workers and white-collars are not blue-collar workers, and there is a big difference between the two." (Empl4.2)*

Not applicable to production: *"They ask whether you have career plans or ambitions. Personally I feel like those are more white collar orientated questions, and they are not applicable to the work floor employees." (Empl4.1)*

Not customized: *"In the evaluation they ask questions like: which education do you want to follow? what are your career goals? how do you deal with customers? Those questions are not applicable to us. I do not have an answer to those questions, so it is not customized for us."(Empl3.1)*

No added value: *"Nobody on the work floor feels that it is useful. In terms of personal benefits there is nothing in it for us. We use it because corporate wants us to, and if you don't it sends a negative signal."* (Empl4.1)

No personal benefits: *"The chances of you making promotion or gettinig a raise based on the evaluation are non existing."* (Empl4.1)

Overall, there were a lot of reasons that added up to form the final negative senses among the employees.

In addition to these few positive and many negative senses, several employees did not really notice the digitalization or would not call it a digitalization. An example of this unawareness or not recognizing of the digitalization is given below.

Not really a digitalization: *"It looks similar to the previous evaluation. They print it out and I fill it in, the only difference is that they have to fill in the digital tool as well. So I think it is not really a digitalization."* (Empl2.1)

This feeling of the change not being a digitalization could have been caused the fact that some of the employees were unable to acces the online tool. As a workaround the line managers just printed out the forms and performed the evaluation face to face with the employees. By doing so these employees did not get to use the online tool and therefore did not experience a digitalization. Additionally, some of the line managers avoided communication about the digital tool which could have further increased this feeling of there not being a digitalization. Nevertheless, whether the employees described the change as a digitalization or not, everyone had formed their opnions and reactions.

The next section will cover the attributions the employees formed as to why the digitalization was happening, and how these attributions contributed to forming their final reactions.

Employee Attributions

As was the case with the line managers, the employees' attributions or reasons for the digital implementation varied. Several employees were not sure why the digital transformation was happening, which can be confirmed by the interview statements below

"I really don't know, perhaps it makes it easier?" (Empl1.1)

"I don't know exactly, but I think that eventually everything will be digital. So maybe this is a test?" (Empl2.2)

"The goal behind it is not clear to me, maybe to reduce the amount of paper used so for the environment? But other than that I cannot think of any reasons." (Empl3.2)

Other employees were able to name some more concrete attributions, most of which were administrative/monitoring benefits for corporate, such as archiving, easy access to data, reporting, or the monitoring off staff. These attributions mentioned by the employees were very similar to those of the line managers. Moreover, as was the case with the line managers none of the employees seemed to be completely sure about these attributions. The quotes beneath demonstrate some of the attributions formed by employees while also showing their uncertainty.

Archiving: *"I think IDNIT wants to implement this system worldwide, because it makes it way easier to have everything in one place." (Empl3.1)*

Monitoring staff/access to data: *"It probably makes it easier for the headquarters. They now only have to type in a name and they can see all the performances." (Empl4.1)*

Overall, many of the employees believed the digitalization originated from IDNIT's headquarters in France and provided HQ or higher management with administration and monitoring benefits. However, none of the employees out of the sample was confident in their answer as to why the digitalization was happening. This is in line with the line managers sensemaking and sensegiving. Since, most of the line managers were not sure about the reasons themselves or did not communicate these attributions, employees formed their own ideas that were rather based on imagination. Nevertheless, there were still a lot of similarities between the attributions mentioned by the line managers and those mentioned by the employees. This suggests that the line managers sensemaking/sensegiving is at least partially portrayed on the employees.

The Effect of Line Manager Sensegiving on Employees Sensemaking

Based on the findings discussed above, one could describe the relationship between line manager sensemaking/communication and the reactions of the employees. In the case of this research, the interviewed line managers all received sensemaking cues that resulted in them being negative or skeptical towards the new evaluation, the implementation, or the digital aspects of the tool. Specifically, the lack of customizability, usability, and personal touch is what caused the negative senses of the respondents. Additionally, since the line managers were not informed about the reasons for implementation by HR, they each had to form their own attributions about why the digital tool was being implemented. The attributions that were formed by the line managers consisted of various archiving, reporting, or monitoring benefits for HR. More particularly, the line managers did not perceive the digital tool as a personal development opportunity for them and the employees. Instead, they believed that the tool's intention was to provide higher management with control and reporting benefits. These attributions also did not include any improvements of quality or employee-wellbeing, and could therefore have re-enforced the negative senses (Nishii et al, 2008). As a result of these formed attributions and negative sensemaking cues, the line managers formed negative opinions and were skeptical about the digital implementation. This sensemaking process of the line manager then also influenced their sensegiving efforts to the employees, which then influenced their sensegiving.

Since, the line managers were negative they were restricted in terms of their enthusiastic communication. As mentioned some line managers tried to separate their sensemaking from their sensegiving, but this was difficult since they did not have much positive things to say about the digitalization. As a result most of the managers focused only on the usability and practical aspects of the tool without any provision of value the tool added. They opted for this approached because following their own sensemaking, they did not believe that the tool was very useful. However, they tried to encourage/force the employees to use the tool by concentrating on the usability and communicating this. Finally, because the added value of the tool was not perceived, some line managers choose to avoid sensegiving entirely by using workarounds. The main issue was that the line managers were not able to communicate why the employees should use the tool, as they did not see any benefits. As a result they had to force the employee's usage. Accordingly, this sensegiving of the line managers affected the sensemaking of the employee and their final reactions to digitalization.

Because the line managers were unable to communicate any added value or positive aspects about the digitalization, the employees also struggled to see any value in the tool. Furthermore, as the line managers just printed out the documents and used other workarounds, the employees were partially excluded from the digitalization. This influenced the employees opinions regarding the digital change, as many operators did not really experience the digital aspect of the change. Lastly, it seems as if sensegiving/sensemaking by the line managers also impact the attributions of the employees. When analyzing the attributions of the employees they were very similar to those of the line mangers. Therefore, it appears that the line managers sensemaking is also portrayed onto the employees when it comes to the attributions of a digital implementation.

Overall, the how and why of the relations as visualized in the research model were all explained by the findings of this case study. Therefore, it became evident how and why the sensemaking process of line managers was influenced during this implementation of the digital tool. Furthermore, it became clear how other stakeholders can influence the sensemaking of line managers and employees, and how line managers sensemaking influenced their sensegiving and finally the employees' sensemaking process.

DISCUSSION

The current study has been initiated after discovering an opportunity in the sensemaking and sensegiving literature when it comes to further understanding strategic change, or more specifically digitalization. Previous theories regarding these topics often overlooked important stakeholders. Especially the sensemaking process and sensegiving efforts of the front-line manager and work floor employees has been overlooked in the past. Even though these managers are responsible for introducing organizational changes to the workforce, and these employees are the core of an organization (McElroy, 1996). Therefore, this research analyzed the sensemaking and sensegiving activities of four operational teams within a large organization. Aspects of attribution theory were also used to complement sensemaking and to more deeply understand how interpretations formed the reactions and attitudes of the respondents. By doing so, the research question: How do sensemaking and sensegiving efforts by front-line managers influence employees' attributions, attitudes and behavior towards digitalization? was answered. The following sections will discuss the implications for theory,

practice, and the limitations of the present study. During the discussing various opportunities for future research are presented.

Theoretical Implications

The results presented in this paper have highlighted some remarkable implications for theory regarding the sensemaking of a digital assessment tool. First of all, this study can be used to reinforce the existing sensemaking and sensegiving theory. The findings confirm the theory that the way in which a digital change is introduced or communicated (sensegiving) can impact the interpretations people make about this digitalization (sensemaking) (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Will & Pies, 2018). Especially, in the case of this study, the avoidance of sensegiving about the added value of the digital tool affected the attitudes of the workforce in a negative way. Additionally, the importance of the front-line manager during organization change as mentioned by McElroy (1996), also becomes evident from the findings. Since, the entire workforce is affected by the sensegiving efforts of the line managers. Consequently, line managers are crucial during the implementation of digital tools. However, besides this re-enforcing of theory the study results also provide some new contributions for theory. Since the current study applied a qualitative research method, the study was able to discover several promising insights on why and how sensegiving efforts of line managers can influence the sensemaking process of employees during the implementation of a digital assessment tool.

First and foremost, it became evident that the degree to which the digital assessment tool was interpreted as value adding and customized for the right audience severely impacted the sensemaking and sensegiving process of the line managers and employees. The managers and employees from the operational teams all had similar sensemaking processes and felt that the digital tool was not customized for a production department and therefore did not add any value to their work. Interestingly, the reason for this perceived uselessness had nothing to do with the digital aspects of the tool, but originated from the content of the performance assessment. As a result of this perceived usefulness the respondents formed negative senses and created workarounds to avoid appropriate usage of the digital tool. This is in line with the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) by Davis (1989), which found that perceived usefulness is the dominant predictor of technology acceptance. However, the current research suggests that the degree to which someone perceives a digital tool as useful can be influenced by sensegiving efforts. For example, since most of the line managers' sensegiving efforts did not include any

provision of value, the employees perceived the digital tool as not useful. Even though, the digital assessment tool was classified as a semi-digitalization, this implication could also be used to form the following propositions when it comes to more advanced digitalization's:

Proposition1: *When line managers' sensegiving efforts do not include the added value of a digital technology, the chances are lower that employees will perceive the digitalization as useful.*

Proposition2: *When line managers' sensegiving efforts do explicitly include the added value of a digital technology, the chances are higher that employees will perceive the digitalization as useful.*

However, as the research model and the findings demonstrated, sensegiving by other stakeholders such as HR can also influence how managers/employees perceive the usefulness of a digital tool. In this case HR employees did not inform the line managers about the value of the digital tool, herby negatively impacting the perceptions and sensegiving of the line managers.

Second of all, another implication for theory became evident by the perceived accessibility of the digital tool. This was another factor that impacted the sensemaking and sensegiving of the employees and line managers. Again, this effect can be partially explained by the TAM model, which confirmed that the perceived ease of use of a technology is positively related to the acceptance of the technology (Davis, 1989). In the context of this case study, there were a lot of sensemaking cues that negatively influenced the respondents perceptions regarding the ease of use of the digital tool. However, the case study did highlight that line managers can improve how employees perceive the ease of use of a technology. For instance, several line managers utilized a very practical sensegiving approach and carefully demonstrated how the digital tool functioned. As a result of this practical sensegiving style, some of the employees actually perceived the technology as easy to use. This suggests that line managers can improve the acceptance of a technology in an organization through sensegiving. Nevertheless, as Davis study from 1989 also found, a technology that is perceived as ease to use might still not be accepted/used when the perceived usefulness is low. Accordingly, the following proposition can be formed regarding line managers sensegiving efforts and the technology acceptance of the workforce.

Proposition 3: *Line manager's sensegiving effort that focus on the usability of a digital technology can improve how employees perceive the ease of use of this technology. This improved ease of use can further increase the technology acceptance when the technology is also perceived as useful.*

Finally, by complimenting sensemaking with attribution theory to further understand the line managers' and employees' reactions to the digitalization this research also contributes to the existing attribution theory. For example research by Nishii et al (2008), already highlighted how different attributions about HR practice implementations impacted the workforce's attitudes and behavior. The researchers found that the workforce responded positively when a HR practice implementation was attributed to increase quality or employee's well-being, and the workforce responds negatively when HR practices are attributed to reduce cost or exploit employees (Nishii et al, 2008). The current research analyzed the attributions of employees during a digital implementation, which provided the following implications. From the findings it seems that when a digital implementation is attributed to improve the archiving, reporting, or monitoring abilities for HR or higher management, the attitudes and behaviors of employees and front-line managers attitudes are negatively affected. Accordingly, more propositions can be generated regarding the type of attributions that will positively and negatively affect these attitudes an behaviors. Similar to Nishii´s findings regarding the attributions surrounding HR practice implementations, the following propositions are composed concerning the attributions of a digital implementation:

Proposition 4:*When the implementation of a digital technology is attributed to improve quality or employee's well-being the workforce's attitudes and behaviors towards this digitalization are positively affected.*

Proposition 5: *When the implementation of a digital technology is attributed to increase control/reporting abilities of higher management the workforce's attitudes and behaviors towards this digitalization are negatively affected.*

These propositions that have been composed throughout the theoretical implications can function as a starting point for future studies. Researchers that have the opportunity to study

more advanced digitalization's than the digital assessment tool of the present study, can either confirm or deny the propositions that have been formed.

Practical Implications

Besides these theoretical implications, the results of this thesis also contribute to practice. More specifically, organizations that are implementing some sort of digitalization or strategic change should take the research findings into consideration. When implementing a digital tool, organizations should pay strong attention to the front-line managers. These managers are responsible for introducing organizational changes to the workforce, and should therefore be appropriately informed to ensure a smooth implementation. More specifically, line managers and employees should be aware of the added value of such digital changes. Because, the results of this study show that when line manager and employee are unsure about the added value of a digital change, they respond negatively too such changes and avoid usage. Therefore, when giving sense to the workforce, line managers should emphasize the added value or benefits of the digital implementation for the workforce. However, in order for employees to see the value of a digital tool, this tool has to be customized in a way that makes it applicable for the target group.

Next to the usefulness, sensegiving efforts should also aim to improve the perceived ease of use of a digitalization. The findings suggest that when a line manager's sensegiving efforts include an explanation of the functionality and usability of a digital implementation, this could improve the employees perceptions regarding the ease of use of a digitalization. Accordingly, line managers themselves should be properly informed about the functionality of a digital tool before introducing it to the workforce. A user guide, as analyzed in this research, could also complement the sensegiving factors in increasing the perceived ease of use. However, this user manual should not be too complex and should be comprehensible by the entire workforce. Otherwise the user guide will function as a negative sensemaking cue and reduce employees' perceived ease of use of the tool.

Finally, another implication for practitioners became evident from the attributions that were formed by the different managers and employees. Since, no one provided a reason for the digital implementation, the line managers and employees had to form their own attributions through sensemaking. This individual sensemaking could have been influenced by for instance, past experiences with digitalization or changing circumstances (Weick, 1988; Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). As a result, people might form attributions that are untrue which negatively

affect the acceptance of a technology. To avoid negative attributions, line managers should be informed about the actual reasons for implementation, and these reasons should include aspects of improving employee-wellbeing or improving quality. Correspondingly, line managers can then communicate these reasons to the employees, hereby minimizing the negative influence past experiences and other factors have on the individual sensemaking processes.

Ultimately, by taking line managers into consideration during the implementation process, and informing them about the added value and functionality of a digital tool, they can appropriately give sense to the employees. This will result in more positive reactions and less resistance to the digital change, which could reduce the time and money investments required for a successful implementation.

Limitations

Despite these promising results for theory and practitioners, there are several limitations which might have impacted the outcomes of this study. Therefore, these limitations should be carefully considered for future research.

First of all and perhaps the largest limitations of the present study has to do with the digital technology that was implemented at IDNIT. The research goal of this thesis was to describe how line managers sensemaking and sensegiving efforts influence employees sensemaking towards digitalization. However, the semi-digitalization at IDNIT was not an advanced digital technology but simply a digital transformation from a physical objective and performance review towards an online tool, this could have affected the outcomes of this study. More specifically, due to this limitation the study was unable to examine the effect between line manager' and employee' sensemaking, sensegiving, and attributions during the implementation of a more advanced digitalization. Correspondingly, a more advanced digital change might have resulted in different outcomes. Especially the sensemaking process of the individuals may have been more complex during more advanced digital transformations, because sensemaking literature shows that during complex dynamic times, there are more sensemaking triggers/cues to take in (Weick, 1988; Weick, 1995; Griffith, 1999; Weick et al, 2005). Nevertheless, the study was able to discover how and why people made and give sense of this digital tool, and propositions have been generated for these relations and processes during more advanced digital changes. Therefore, Future research into the reactions and understanding of digitalization should explore different types of more advanced digitalization's

and potentially analyze the effect the complexity of a digital change has on the individual sensemaking process.

Second of all, the time in which this case study was conducted might also pose as a limitation. Since, this study was engaged during the COVID-19 pandemic the outcomes may have been influenced by this uncertain time period. According to Christianson and Barton (2021), the pandemic has created an environment that is dynamically uncertain in which normal interactions are disrupted and routines are upended. Lockdowns and restrictions have significantly reduced the occasions to interact with others, tasks, and the environment thereby diminishing the opportunities to generate sensemaking cues. Furthermore, greater distances and reduced information channels limit the richness and consistency of information flow (Christianson & Barton, 2021). Hence, the pandemic could have reduced the quality and amount of communication between the different stakeholders. Therefore, the outcomes of this study might not be generalizable outside of the COVID-19 pandemic. To enable generalizability of these study results, future research could perform a similar study after the pandemic restrictions have lifted. When such future research find comparable results, generalizability could be assumed.

Finally, because the current study applied a qualitative research method to describe how line managers influenced employees and why individuals reacted in specific ways, the findings do not show how much different factors weigh in determining these effect and responses. However, this was not the goal of the present study and therefore is not necessary a limitation. Nevertheless, this could be seen as an opportunity for future research. For instance, future research could apply a quantitative study method, like survey's or questionnaires with weights, to determine how large the effect of different sensegiving styles on the sensemaking process of individuals is, or how much different attributions contribute to this sensemaking process.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Questions and Criteria

Number of interviews:

- 3 HR/IT/Operations managers
- 4/5 line managers
- 2 employees per line manager

= a total of 15-18 interviews

Interview Criteria:

- Worked at least at IDNIT 1 year before introduction of the technology **October 1st 2020.** (preferably longer)
- Variety in tenure/ages some relative young/new employees/managers and some older employees/managers
- Variety in gender

Interview Questions HR

Doel: Achtergrond informatie verkrijgen over de digitalisatie binnen IDNIT

- Is de hele IDNIT talent tool nieuw of alleen het objective en performance review gedeelte?
- Wanneer en door wie is er besloten om de IDNIT talents objective & performance review te gebruiken?
- Wat was uw eerste gedachte bij het horen over deze nieuwe digitalisering?
- Wat is de reden / het doel geweest voor het implementeren van deze tool?
  - Waarom was het volgens u nodig om deze nieuwe tool te implementeren?
- Op welke manier werden de prestaties en doelen van medewerkers voorheen geëvalueerd?
- Hoe loopt de implementatie van de tool of hoe is deze verlopen?
  - Wat zijn/waren uitdagingen met de implementatie
  - Op welke manier moesten jullie bijsturen en/of aanpassen
- Welke rol speelt u in de communicatie van de tool naar de lijn/teammanagers?
  - Op welke manier ondersteund/begeleid u de lijnmanagers in de implementatie van de tool?
- Wat is uw persoonlijke mening over de waarde van deze nieuwe online IDNIT talents objective en performance review?
- Kunt u wat vertellen over de reacties binnen IDNIT m.b.t. deze nieuwe tool?

Interview Questions Line-managers

Doel: Sensemakig en Sensegiving m.b.t. digitalisatie van lijnmanagers in kaart brengen

Introductie

- Kunt u zichzelf voorstellen?
    - o Hoelang bent u al werkzaam bij IDNIT?
    - o Wat is uw functie bij IDNIT?
- Onderzoek introduceren
    - o De overgang van een fysieke evaluatie naar een digitale tool en de reacties, attributies, communicatie rondom deze digitalisering

Sensemaking & Sensegiving

- Zou u kort even iets kunnen vertellen over de objective & performance review, of in het Nederlands de doelstelling en beoordeling of evaluatie.
    - o Hoe gebeurde deze evaluatie voordat deze digitaal in IDNIT Talents plaatsvond?
- Wanneer en door wie werd u voor het eerst op de hoogte gebracht van de overgang naar de digitale versie van de evaluatie?
- Wat was uw eerste gedachte nadat u hoorde dat deze evaluatie nu digitaal zou gaan gebeuren?
- Waarom denkt u dat IDNIT deze evaluatie graag wilde digitaliseren?
    - o Wat denkt u dat het doel was achter deze digitalisatie?
    - o Wat is volgens u het nut / de toegevoegde waarde van deze digitalisering?
- Wanneer is de digitale versie van de objective & performance review voor het eerst in gebruik gegaan?
    - o Voor u en voor de operators/medewerkers in uw team?
- Hoe heeft u deze online tool destijds geïntroduceerd aan de medewerkers in uw team?
    - o Op welke manier heeft u de medewerkers op de hoogte gebracht van het doel/nut van de digitale transformatie?
- Hoe waren de reacties binnen uw team m.b.t. de overgang van een fysieke naar digitale beoordeling/evaluatie?
    - o Hoe reageerde u vervolgens op deze positieve/negatieve reacties van de medewerkers?
- Wat is uw huidige mening over deze digitalisering?
- Als u een nieuwe medewerker/operator nu zou moeten informeren over de waarde van de online doelstelling/evaluatie, hoe zou u dat nu doen?

Interview Questions Employees

Doel: Sensemaking en attributies/percepties m.b.t. digitalisatie van de medewerkers in kaart brengen

Introductie

- Kunt u zichzelf voorstellen?
    - Hoelang bent u al werkzaam bij IDNIT
    - Wat is uw functie bij IDNIT
- Onderzoek introduceren
    - De overgang van een fysieke evaluatie naar een digitale tool en de reacties, attributies, communicatie rondom deze digitalisering.

Sensemaking & Attributies

- Wanneer en van wie hoorde u voor het eerst over de overgang naar een digitale versie van de doelstelling, beoordeling of evaluatie?
- Wat was uw eerste gedachte nadat u hoorde dat de evaluatie voortaan online zou gebeuren via IDNIT Talents?
    - Hoe gebeurde deze evaluatie voorheen?
    - Wat was de reactie van uw collega's op de desbetreffende digitalisatie?
- Wanneer werd de online evaluatie in IDNIT Talents daadwerkelijk geïmplementeerd?
    - Dus vanaf welk moment bent u de online tool ook gaan gebruiken?
- Hoe liep de implementatie van de tool OF hoe heeft u de implementatie (het proces) ervaren?
    - Wat ging goed tijdens de implementatie?
    - Wat waren uitdagingen of ging minder goed?
    - Waar was u bang voor? Waarom?
    - Waar was u enthousiast over? Waarom?
- Waarom denkt u dat IDNIT deze evaluatie graag wilde digitaliseren?
    - Wat denkt u dat het doel was achter deze digitalisatie?
- Wat is uw huidige mening over het nut/de bijdrage van de online evaluatie tool in IDNIT talents t.o.v. de voorgaande fysieke evaluatie
    - is deze mening verandert ten opzichte van uw eerste reactie?
- Als u een nieuwe collega zou moeten informeren over de digitale beoordeling in IDNIT talents, hoe zou u de tool dan introduceren?

APPENDIX B

Open Codes and Categories

return to old way of evaluation

dont want to do it at home

alternative solution

Digital implementation

Avoid digitalization

evaluation togeher with line-manager

dont want to do it at work

not used digital tool

not pressured into digitalization

line-manager support

Support

HR is understanding

asking colleagues for help

supporting operators

The objective and performance review before digitalization

objective and performance review has gotten worse

objective and performance review content

not really a digitalization

introduction date to digitalization

The Objective & Performance review

objective and performance review after digitalization

description of objective and performance review

Digital implementation

used digital tool

actual enrollment date

previous function

function operator

Responsible HR Manager

average age

age

Still learning

personal relations with employees

Line-manager

PID department responsibilities

nice colleagues

cap leader

Foreman

personal goal to become more digital

Quality coordinator

Workforce characteristics

Graphical background

function description

growth within organization

No room for error

hr businesspartner

Operation supervisor

pressure

Tenure

Team size

PID department

missed the introduction of digitalization

previous line-manager

supporting colleagues

Reactions to digitalization

- Don't know why digitalization is happening
- Getting used to digitalization
- different reactions
- digital implementation experience
- not user friendly
- feedback
- not really a digitalization
- digitalization takes time
- operator reactions
- colleagues reactions
- Sensemaking
- linemanager sensemaking
- everything goes digital
- first reaction to digitalization
- Digitalization is bound to happen
- opinion on digitalization
- can's avoid digitalization
- skeptical about digitalization

Positive reaction digitalization

- Sensemaking
- advantages of digitalization
- digitalization makes distance less important
- salary benefit
- Digitalization saves time
- positive reaction towards digitalization
- applicable for new employees
- no problems
- Time benefits
- paperless

Communicating digital implementation

- difficult to stimulate employees
- linemanager sensegiving
- Linemanager clear communication
- Received instructions on pape
- seperate personal opinion and communication
- introduced by mail
- communication to employees
- job to stimiluate employees
- explanation to employees
- introduced by higer manager
- stimulate employees to use digitalization
- introduced by line-manager
- communication hr
- miscommunication higher management
- linemanager communication
- use personal relationship to stimulate employees
- communicating value of digitalization

External factors influencing sensemaking

- COVID pushes digitalization
- access to account and computer
- Covid barrier
- content issue
- missed the introduction of digitalization
- no new goals
- not aware of digitalization
- too standardized
- not used digital tool
- No access to PC or Account
- not applicable for production department
- pressure
- technical issue
- don't know how evaluation happened before
- already at max
- Getting used to digitalization
- Wide access to PC's

Problems with digital implementation

- No access to PC or Account
- example content issue
- no personal benefits for digitalization
- no explanation
- No access to PC example
- not user friendly
- not applicable example
- not relevant for old employees
- other things to do
- unclarity
- Translated from english
- not applicable for operators
- Digital implementation
- technical issue
- example technical issue
- not applicable for production department
- too standardized
- lack of support
- lack of personal touch
- content issue
- poor implementation
- loss of content
- could not log in
- resistance to digitalization
- dont want to do it at home
- dont want to do it at work
- language issue

Organizational charecteristics

- Strict deadlines for government
- shift towards digital
- high risk high reward
- easy work
- difficult job
- PID department
- digital operations
- 2 shifts system
- No room for delays
- Lacking IT
- machine issues
- safety and security protocols

other things to do

skeptical about digitalization

time consuming

afraid of digitalization

no room for comments

dont want to do it at work

poor implementation

feedback

Preference for personal

requires more organization

too complicated

No incentive to use digitalization

no personal benefits example

no improvement

Negative reactions digitalization

more work for linemanager

objective and performance review has gotten worse

I do it only because i have to

Translated from english

loss of content

irritation

operators avoid digitalization

no real need to use digitalization

digitalization reduces personal touch

dislike digitalization

no response

prefer old system

disadvantage digitalization

evaluation still not digitalized

no opportunity

Older employees struggle with digitalization

Digitalization pushed by HR

Don't know why digitalization is happening

employees carreer path

administration benefits

transparancy benefits

digitalization because of fusion

insights into staff

monitoring benefits

Attributions

Society pushes digitalization

reason for implementation

Originated from France

Pay rise

documentation benefits
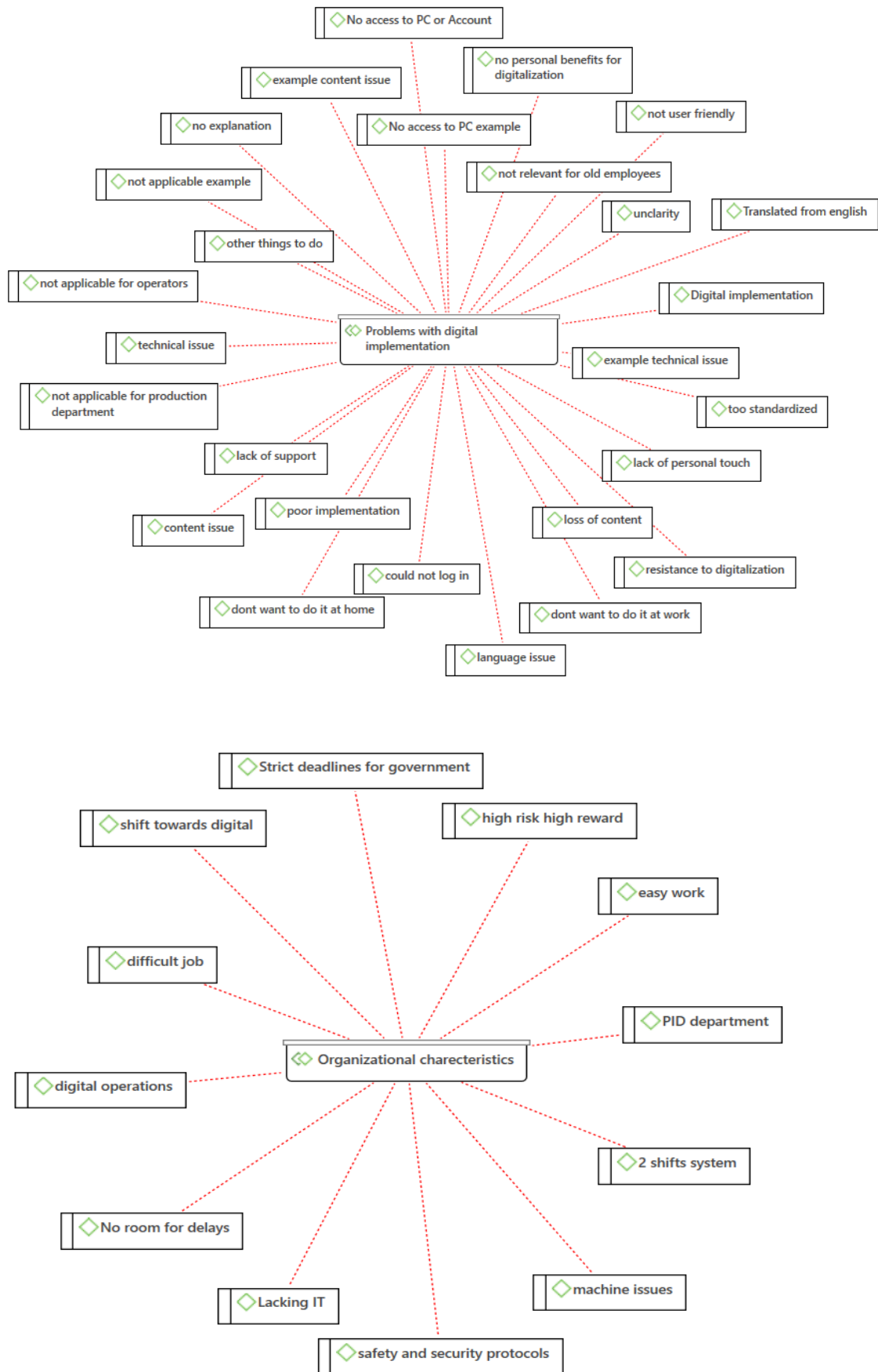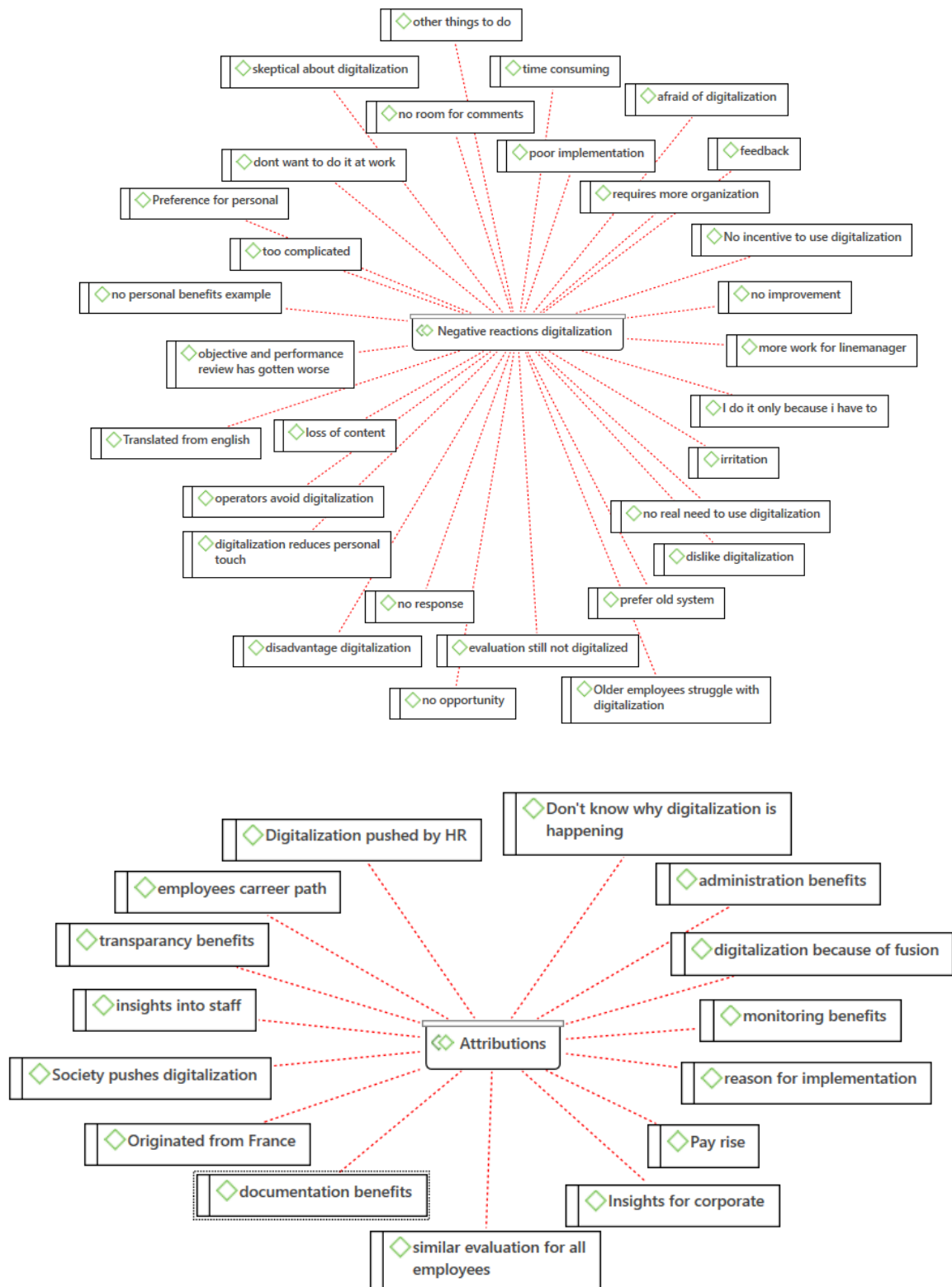
Insights for corporate

similar evaluation for all employees

APPENDIX C

Selective Codes (Themes and Categories)