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Change Management Communication: The Concealment of Information and its Effects

MASTER THESIS

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Abstract: Change management literature recommends two conflicting communication approaches. One the one hand, change agents are advised to be fully transparent, while on the other hand they are advised to conceal certain information. A majority of scholars seems to be in favour of transparency, but change agents continue to conceal information. It is not well understood why, and what effects this has on change recipients. This paper tries to fill this gap in the literature by answering the question: How does the perceived concealment of information affect change buy-in among change recipients and why do change agents conceal information?”. To answer this question, 11 semi-structured interviews with change agents and change recipients were conducted. This study finds that perceived concealment can have negative cognitive, behavioural, and emotional effects, and finds eight reasons why change agents conceal information. The paper is concluded by providing theoretical and practical implications and proposing directions for future research.

Keywords: Change Management, Communication, Concealment, Change Buy-in

1. Introduction

Companies engage in change management for a variety of reasons, such as meeting legal requirements or an internal desire to improve (Eketu & Nwuche, 2019; Kotter, 1995). However, change projects are consistently reported to have high failure rates (Antony et al., 2019; Hughes, 2011; Strebel, 1996). Consequently, to increase the odds of success, companies make use of change models such as Kotter’s 8-step change model, McKinsey’s 7-S model, Hiatt’s ADKAR model, as well as a myriad of other models to guide them through the change process (Bekmukhambetova, 2021; Galli, 2018; Hardaker & Ahmed, 1995). Although each model highlights different aspects of the change process, communication between change agents (i.e. the people responsible for organizing and executing the change project (Lunberg, 2010) and change recipients (i.e. the people affected by the change) plays a key role in all of them as a tool for announcing, explaining, and preparing people for change as well as the positive and negative outcomes that come with change (Galli, 2018; Spiker & Lesser, 1995).

Indeed, by communicating with change recipients in a timely, accurate, and credible fashion, change agents can create change buy-in and reduce anxiety and resistance to change amongst change recipients, which ultimately contributes to achieving change project success

(Kitchen & Daly, 2002; Oreg et al., 2011). Creating buy-in to change is especially important as willing participation is always preferable over forced compliance and buy-in helps to sustain change efforts over time (French-Bravo & Crow, 2015).

However, despite the central role communication has in achieving buy-in to change, there is a limited amount of research available about effective communication strategies in the field of change management. Indeed, although a preliminary literature review resulted in ample information about what information should be communicated by change agents, there is a dearth of information about how the communication efforts of change agents are perceived by change recipients, as research on this topic is mostly limited to the perspective of (all-powerful) managers and change agents (Ford et al., 2008; Frahm & Brown, 2007; Shulga, 2021; Stewart & Kringas, 2003). Some researchers did try to include the perspective of change recipients (e.g., Kleiwe et al., 2013), but the information from change recipients in these papers is usually based on questionnaires or mixed with information from change agents and fails to provide an in-depth description of the interaction between change agents and change recipients. This is a problem as people rather than processes are seen as the key to any successful and sustainable change management approach (Kliewe et al., 2013; Kitchen & Daly, 2002).

Furthermore, the change management literature indicates the existence of two conflicting communication approaches (Difonzo & Bordia, 1998). On the one hand, change agents are recommended to reveal all of the available information regarding the status and (potential) outcomes of change projects. By providing information as soon as it is available, change agents can ensure that all information comes from a credible source and prevent informal networks and grapevine from altering and distorting information (Spiker & Lesser, 1995). Research argues that a lack of adequate information during the change process leads employees to search for their own answers to resolve the uncertainty they are experiencing, causing them to devise scenarios that are often worse than reality and lose trust in management (Difonzo & Bordia, 1998). On the other hand, change agents are advised to adopt a concealing approach and limit communications to a minimum to avoid inconsistencies, and to prevent unrealistic expectations as they may lead to resistance (Aladwani, 2001; Burke, 2008; Gill, 2002; Klein, 1996) as part of a strategy to under-promise and over-deliver (Topaloglu & Fleming, 2017). The rationale behind this strategy comes from promise-keeping theory, which indicates that failing to keep promises has significant negative effects, while exceeding promises only has minor positive effects (Gneezy & Epley, 2014). Thus, by keeping expectations low, it is assumed that change recipients will more easily be satisfied and show less resistance.

It must be noted that adopting a concealing approach does not mean change agents do not communicate at all. Instead, concealment is related to the degree of openness in conveying information (Ball, 2009). Change agents adopting the concealing approach remain ambiguous about, for example, the timeline or possible (negative) outcomes of the change project (Berggren & Bernshteyn, 2007; Difonzo & Bordia, 1998). This ambiguity allows change recipients to interpret the change and impact in a way that is applicable to them, and it gets people to focus on the more abstract concepts on which they agree instead of specific points upon which they disagree (Eisenberg, 1984), and can be particularly useful for facilitating organizational change (Paul & Strbiak, 1997).

Difonzo and Borida (1998), as well as other research (Wehmeier & Raaz, 2012), express their preference for the revealing approach over the concealing approach. Even so, some research seems to indicate that some practitioners continue to conceal information in their communication strategy (Petrou et al., 2018). It is assumed that this means concealing information has some benefits which make it preferable over full transparency. However, it is unclear what these benefits are, as, with the exception of a couple of papers such as the one of Hong Telvin Goh and Hooper (2009), there are very few articles that provide a rationale for concealing information, and there seems to have been no attempt at comparing the revealing and concealing approaches since the article of Difonzo and Borida (1998). Hence, this paper tries to give a better understanding of why practitioners still choose to conceal information in change projects, and what effects this concealment has on change recipients by answering the following research question:

"How does the perceived concealment of information affect change buy-in among change recipients and why do change agents conceal information?"

To answer this research question, a case study involving a total of 11 interviews with change agents and change recipients was conducted. It was decided to focus on the perceived concealment of information, instead of the actual (intentional) concealment by change agents, in order to be able to capture the perspective of change recipients. The choice to focus on change buy-in was made as it is known to be an indicator of change success, and previous literature has already suggested a relation between change buy-in and timely, accurate, and credible communication (French-Bravo & Crow, 2015).

This research has two main goals. First, it aims to expand upon previous literature by explaining how change recipients perceive the concealment of information, and by investigating the reasons why change agents conceal information. Especially the inclusion of interviews with change recipients is what sets this research apart from previous literature that either excluded the perspective of change recipients or only included questionnaires resulting in mainly quantitative data.

Second, it aims to improve the success rate of change projects by raising awareness amongst practitioners about the possible negative consequences of concealing information during change projects, and by providing both change agents and change recipients with practical tips as to how (perceived) concealment can be avoided.

This research paper is organized as follows. First, in the theoretical framework a more detailed explanation of change management, change communication, change buy-in, and the information shared during change projects is given. Next, the research method and organizational setting are described. This is followed by a results section in which the main findings of the interviews are described. Finally, the results are discussed and theoretical and practical implications as well as recommendations for future research are given.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Change Management

Change management is defined as the process of continuously renewing an organization's direction, structure, and capabilities to serve the ever-changing needs of external and internal customers (Moran & Brightman, 2000). These needs could be improved performance, adhering to legal requirements, or addressing other key issues, and requires employees to change their way of working (Tang, 2019). Managing such change is no simple feat. Change agents have to engage in a variety of project management activities including informing employees about the upcoming change, organizing training sessions, managing resistance, coaching employees, and setting up a sponsorship network (Karambelkar & Bhattacharya, 2017). Communication plays a key role in all these activities (Galli, 2018) and is important as it can reduce or increase the difficulties associated with change (Richardson & Denton, 1996).

2.2 Change Communication

While no phenomenon is more familiar to people than communication, it means something different to everyone (Stevens, 1950). In this paper, the relatively broad but simple definition given by Velentzas and Broni (2014, p. 117) is adopted, namely: "Communication is the act of conveying information for the purpose of creating a shared understanding". This definition highlights that communication involves both a sender and receiver of information, and that effective communication only takes place if both parties have the same understanding of the message that is being conveyed. In the context of change management, communication is mainly focused on the ideas, facts, opinions and feelings change agents and recipients have about the change project and its outcomes (Radovic Markovic & Salamzadeh, 2018).

Communication can take place over many channels, such as in-person conversations or via e-mail, and can either be formal or informal (Johnson et al., 1994). While it is known that communication efforts are perceived differently based on the source and which communication channel is used (Bawden & Robinson, 2009), the differences between these channels go beyond the scope of this paper. What is important, however, is the effect communication has on achieving change buy-in, which is described by the change buy-in continuum of Mathews and Croker (Mathews & Crocker, 2016).

2.3 Change Buy-in Continuum

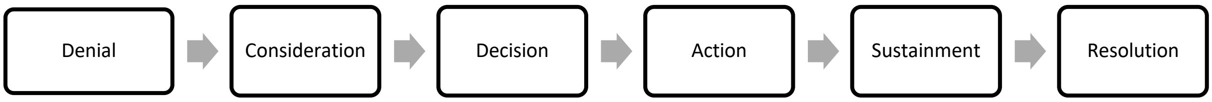
Change buy-in has been identified as important and critical for successful organizational change (Mathews & Crocker, 2016). It is very similar to other terms used in literature such as employee commitment to change (Elias, 2009), change supportive behaviour (Kim et al., 2011), and readiness to change (Armenakis et al., 1993) and is defined as "an individual cognitive and behavioural activity related to an employee's commitment to a specific change effort that exists on a continuum from denial to resolution" (Mathews & Croker, 2016, p.85).

The six-stage change buy-in continuum model from Mathews and Croker (2016) is particularly interesting for this paper as it focusses on buy-in among individual change, unlike most papers in the field of change management which focus on change agents and the organizational level (Oreg et al., 2011). The distinct phases of the model also allow for a more in-depth exploration of the topic than the classic dichotomous variable of buy-in either being present or not. The change buy-in continuum (Figure 1) as described by Mathews and Croker (2016) is a linear model with six distinct stages through which individuals can progress and regress. Individuals progress through the stages of the model as their (mainly intrinsic) motivation to support the change increases, and regress when they lose their motivation (Mathews & Croker, 2016).

The first stage is denial, in which a change recipient either believes the change is unnecessary or disagrees with the scope of the change (Mathews & Croker, 2016). This stage is characterized by the absence of the desire to change or a lack of understanding of the benefits of the change. The second stage, consideration begins when a change recipient is no longer disagreeing with or avoiding the change (Mathews & Croker, 2016). During this phase, change recipients start to consider whether they will support the change or not based on the benefits they perceive for themselves and the organization.

Figure 1

The Six Phases of the Change Buy-in Continuum.



Note. Adapted from Mathews and Croker (2016, p. 88)

In the third stage, the decision is made to support the change. Change recipients acknowledge that the status quo is less desirable than the imagined future state after the change (Mathews & Croker, 2016). Change agents in this stage start thinking about how they can contribute to the change, although no action has been undertaken yet (Mathews & Croker, 2016).

During the fourth stage, action, change recipients engage in required and requested change activities (Mathews & Croker, 2016). They will complete tasks using the new method and, excited by the benefits of the change, positively promote the change project (Mathews & Croker, 2016). If the change indeed has the intended positive impact, little to no intervention is still needed from change agents to motivate change recipients (Mathews & Croker, 2016).

The fifth stage, sustainment, marks the point in time where the change has largely been internalized (Mathews & Croker, 2016). Change recipients continue to overtly support the change through task completion and positive promotion. At this stage, change recipients have become firmly attached to the change and are unlikely to regress without a catastrophic occurrence (Mathews & Croker, 2016).

The sixth and final stage of the model is resolution. It is the cognitive moment when the change is no longer an effort as is has been so ingrained in the way of working that it is the new status quo (Mathews & Croker, 2016). Change recipients have accepted the change as the new way of doing thing their work (Mathews & Croker, 2016) and, as soon as every change recipient is in this final stage, the change project has successfully been completed.

Like every other change management model, the change buy-in continuum has several limitations. First, the change buy-in continuum is a linear model. This means it cannot account for all of the complexities and often cyclical nature of change processes (Clemente et al., 2016). Second, the model focuses on the cognitive and behavioural aspects of buy-in, while other models such as Küblre-Ross' change curve also hint at the importance of the emotions experienced during processes of change (Alaimo, 2022). However, despite these limitations, the change buy-in continuum still manages to explain the process of how change recipients go from rejecting a change to accepting and actively supporting the change. It also gives a good indication of the reactions change recipients might give when asked about their opinion on the communication strategy used by change agents, which is why it is included in this study.

2.4 Achieving Buy-in by Providing Information

Mathews and Crocker (2016) claim that change recipients progress and regress through the different stages of the change buy-in continuum based on their motivation to support the change, but fail to explain how change agents can influence this motivation. Other research delves deeper into this topic, suggesting that one of the main antecedents of change buy-in is the information that change recipients receive (Oreg et al., 2011). While several papers were found to describe what information change agents should share, two of these papers were of particular interest. These are Armenakis and Harris' (2002) five key change messages and Hiatt's (2006) ADKAR change model. What makes these papers noteworthy is that they describe communication from the perspective of change recipients, focusing on the information change recipients need to accept and support a specific change project.

According to Armenakis and Harris (2002), good change communication contains five key messages that combined allow for the creation of a shared understanding: discrepancy, appropriateness, personal valence, efficacy, and principal support. The first message, discrepancy, addresses the sentiment regarding whether change is needed (Armenakis & Harris, 2002). It is important that employees have a clear understanding of how the current state of affairs are different from some desired end-state (Katz & Kahn, 1978). They must believe the current situation can be improved, and change is necessary. The second message, appropriateness, pertains to the belief that the specific change being proposed is indeed the best option (Armenakis & Harris, 2002). Change recipients must believe that the proposed change is better than any alternative they can come up with themselves. The third message, personal valance, is related to an individual's believe whether a change will be beneficial for them and is closely related to the question "what's in it for me?" (Babin & Ghorashy, 2019). The fourth message, efficacy, addresses whether or not an individual feels capable of being successful after the change (Armenakis & Harris, 2002) and addresses the fear of personal failure. Lastly, principal support addresses if an individual has the perception that an organization is committed to the change and has made enough resources available to make it successful (Armenakis & Harris, 2002).

The five key messages of change communication of Armenakis and Harris (2002) can be seen back in the ADKAR change management model from Jeff Hiatt (2006). The ADKAR model is an acronym for the five phases of the model: Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, and Reinforcement, which stand for the five topics that recipients should be informed about. Hiatt (2006) believes that change agents should give information about the change project in that particular order if it is to be successful (Hiatt, 2006).

The purpose of the first phase of the ADKAR model is to raise awareness about the vision of the organization (Karambelkar & Bhattacharya, 2017). In this phase, change recipients should be informed about the upcoming change, why the change is necessary, why the change is happening now, and what the risks are if the change does not happen (Hiatt, 2006). During this phase, it is important that change recipients have easy access to information. While some managers assume employees do not need to know the reason behind every change and should simply do as is asked of them, in workplace environments where managers have little control over the work of employees this does not work (Hiatt, 2006). In those circumstances, employees take ownership of both their work and associated procedures. Forcing these employees to do their job in a specific way while neglecting to provide convincing arguments could then lead to increased resistance against the change (Hiatt, 2006).

A common misconception of change agents is that if they have built awareness of the need for change, they have also created desire (Hiatt, 2006). Humans naturally fear the unknown and prefer to be in an environment they control, therefore the aim of the second phase of the ADKAR model, desire, is to make the change desirable by reducing anxiety and increasing motivation (Karambelkar & Bhattacharya, 2017). Central to this phase is the question: What's in it for me? Change agents have to explain how the change will impact the way change recipients will work, and how this change is beneficial for them by highlighting opportunities and support.

After a change recipient is aware of the need for change and has the desire to participate in the change, change recipients need knowledge about how to change and how to perform well after the change has been implemented (Hiatt, 2006). The third phase of the ADKAR model, knowledge, is aimed at providing change recipients with this knowledge. This phase continues to reduce anxiety of change recipients by given them the confidence that the change project will succeed (Karambelkar & Bhattacharya, 2017). Key to this phase are sufficient time, resources and feedback, and the necessary knowledge can be provided through various channels, such as trainings, coaching, and manuals.

Having knowledge alone is often not enough for change recipients to change as it takes time to learn new tools and procedures (Hiatt, 2006). The fourth phase of the ADKAR model, ability, is aimed at helping change recipients develop the capabilities to do their job properly by applying the knowledge gained in the previous phase (Karambelkar & Bhattacharya, 2017). Just like in the previous phase, it is the responsibility of change agents to support the employees in this process by providing coaching, mentoring and training.

The final phase of the ADKAR model, reinforcement, is aimed at sustaining the change. Change recipients need to know if what they are doing is resulting in the desired outcomes (Jaaron et al., 2022). In this phase, it is important to prevent change recipients from falling back into old habits. This can be done in several ways such as providing rewards for showing desired behaviour, organizing celebratory events for success, and providing feedback (Karambelkar & Bhattacharya, 2017).

While Hiatt (2006) and Armenakis and Harris (2002) use different terms to describe the information that change recipients need, the topics they address show many similarities. Comparing both papers results in a total of six distinct messages which have to be communicated by change agents during a change project, which are depicted in Table 1 below.

Table 1.

Elements of Good Change Communication

Armenakis and Harris (2002)	Hiatt (2006)	Associated question
Discrepancy	Awareness	What will change?
Appropriateness		Why this change?

Personal valence	Desire	What's in it for me?
	Knowledge	How can I change?
Efficacy	Ability	Can I change?
Principal Support	Reinforcement	Is the change supported?

In summary, change recipients must be aware of how the desired future state will be different from the current state. Change recipients must be convinced that the specific change project is a good way to get to the desired future state in comparison to alternatives, and that this future state is an improvement to the current state of affairs. Then, change recipients must be supported in acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary to change and perform their job after the change. Lastly, it is important that change recipients are convinced that change agents are supporting the change and are committed to make the change project succeed. When the communication strategy succeeds in all of these tasks, it is assumed to result in change buy-in (Armenakis & Harris, 2002; Hiatt, 2006). Contrarily, if the concealment of information causes one or multiple of these messages to be insufficiently clear to change recipients, it will result in diminished buy-in to change. This research investigates whether or not these assumptions are plausible.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

To answer the research question, a qualitative research design was seen as most appropriate as it offers space for a deep, colourful, contextual world of interpretations (Cypress, 2015). Qualitative data also allows for rich theoretical descriptions of the contexts within which organizational phenomena occur (Gioia et al., 2013) which, in this study, could have an influence on the phenomena that was observed. Similarly, it was decided to do a case study so that different perspectives on the same change project could be heard, further increasing the depth of the study.

Furthermore, an abductive approach was used for this research, in which the objective is to generate plausible explanations and new discoveries, instead of confirming existing theory (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). The abductive approach is considered to be especially useful for empirical research on topics that current management and organization theories neither adequately predict nor explain (Bamberger, 2018), as is the case when it comes to the concealment of information in change management. While inductive reasoning, which emphasis is on deriving general conclusions through specific observations (Zalaghi & Khazaei, 2016), was also considered, the explorative nature of this research would make it difficult to generate the strong, probabilistic, knowledge claims that form the essence of inductive reasoning (Hayes et al., 2010). On top of this, the purposive sample that was used to find an organization makes it hard to predict to what extent the findings of this research are generalizable, while generalizability plays an important role in inductive research (Bamberger, 2018). Therefore, abductive reasoning was seen as more appropriate.

3.2 Data Collection

3.2.1 Selection of the Organization

Convenience sampling was used to find an organization that 1) was working on a change project involving over 30 employees, 2) made use of the ADKAR model, and 3) attempted to control the information that was shared about the change project.

The choice for an organization working on a change project involving over 30 employees was made in an attempt to ensure data saturation could be reached with the interviews, even in the event of a relatively low participation rate. While there are no set guidelines of how many interviews are necessary to reach data saturation, Guest et al. (2006) found that six to twelve interviews can be enough. It was desirable use a single case study, as it allows for a more in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of the context in which the change project took place (Starman, 2013).

The choice for an organization adopting the ADKAR model was made as this change management model addresses the interaction between change agents and change recipients by focusing on what information change agents (should) share with change recipients. It was thought that change agents making use of the ADKAR model would be more aware of their specific communication choices than change agents opting to use other change management models. This was expected to result in a more comprehensive discussion of the topic of this research.

Lastly, in order to be able to describe why change agents make use of the concealing approach and how this concealing approach is perceived by change recipients, an organization had to be found which was not fully transparent about the change project. As concealing information is something that is often frowned upon, a broad definition of concealment was adopted to avoid making this criterion overly restricting. It was assumed that if there were any indications of ambiguity in the communication with change recipients, further research would likely result in the discovery of more, possibly unintentional, concealment. It was also assumed that if change agents have a clear strategy detailing what information to share at what time, they made deliberate choices about what information not to share (immediately).

To find an organization, the researcher went to a career fair and spoke to representatives of several companies until finding a suitable organization willing to participate in this research. This approach was seen as ideal as it allowed the researcher to approach a large number of companies in a short time and, as the career fair was aimed at creating connections between students and businesses, these companies were more likely to be willing to participate in scientific research.

3.2.2 The Organization

Data was collection in a single Dutch organization with approximately 2.500 employees. This organization was part of a larger multinational that is active in over 60 countries with more than 50.000 employees. The organization is active in several high-tech sectors such as security and transport systems. As the organization works with a lot of highly confidential data, an organizational culture exists in which management usually only shared information on a need-to-know basis to prevent data leaks. Until now, the organization did not have a set procedure for conducting change projects and there was a desire to improve this. To do so, the organization hired an external consultancy firm and started with implementing the ADKAR model to develop a change management and communication strategy which could be used in future change projects too. To learn more about possible improvements to their current way of managing change, the organization gave the researcher permission to gather data about one of their current change projects.

3.2.3 The Change Project

The change project revolved around creating a new, separate, digital environment for non-sensitive data which would allow the organization to install certain industry standard software (e.g., Microsoft Teams) whilst keeping all classified information secure. By doing so, the organization hoped to improve collaboration within the organization, as well as with external stakeholders. However, as the organization would continue handling sensitive information, the old digital environment would remain in use simultaneously. Some programs would only be available in the old environment, whilst others would only be available in the new environment. On top of this, change recipients had to classify all of their data and explicitly decide in which environment to store it, as exchanging information between the two digital environments was made difficult to prevent data leaks. All in all, significant effort was required from change recipients to learn how to make optimal use of the new digital environment. The role of change agents was to prepare change recipients for this change, and to assess if this change was beneficial for change recipients and the organization.

This research was conducted during the early phases of this change project, at a time when the new digital environment was not completely finished yet. While the change would eventually affect the daily work of over 1000 employees, the change agents decided to start with a pilot with approximately 50 employees (i.e., change recipients) from varying functions and departments to test the functionalities of the new digital environment and to gain early feedback on the change outcomes and communication strategy. Participants for this research were chosen from employees involved in this initial pilot, either as change agents or change recipients.

3.2.4 The Change Agents

To ensure the success of the project, four different teams were created to manage the change. Every member of these teams was considered to be a change agent. First, a change management team was appointed to initiate and manage the change process. This team consisted of four members with different functions within the IT department and was the driving force behind the change project. This team was responsible for the both the project outcomes as well as the communication about the project. Second, an external consultancy firm was hired. This consultancy firm allocated two consultants to give advice on the change management process and progress. In the planning stages of the change project, these consultants had weekly contact with the change management team to provide feedback and suggestions. Third, an advisory group consisting of eight members was established. The advisory group consisted mainly of members of the IT department and provided the change management team with feedback on several occasions during the change project. This advice was not binding and was merely meant to inform the change management team and to provide a place for discussion. Fourth, a product team was established that was tasked with the design of the software and hardware necessary to make the change project succeed. This team focused on the technical aspect of the change, and was also tasked with requesting and incorporating the feedback of change recipients.

3.2.5 The Change Recipients

In total, 48 employees with different functions and levels of responsibility voluntarily took part in the pilot as change recipients. These employees were selected by the organization through a combination of convenience sampling and partly through purposive sampling by the change agents. The sample was chosen such that it was representative of the entire organization, however only people who had prior contact with the change agents were asked to participate. At the time of conducting the interviews, July-August 2022, 26 of these employees had officially been onboarded (i.e., received a laptop with access to the new digital environment) in the pilot.

3.2.6 The Research Participants

In this study, research participants refer to everyone who accepted to participate in an interview, including both change agents and recipients. Change recipients were selected solely from the 26 employees that had already been onboarded in the pilot. This choice was made because these people had the longest time to experience the communication of the change agents. After excluding change recipients who were either out of office or who's manager was part of one of the change management teams, a total of 13 employees remained. These employees were individually approached by the researcher with the request to participate in this study through a message on an internal communication tool used by all employees in the organization. Out of these 13 employees, 8 agreed to participate in an interview, 3 people did not respond to the invitation, and 1 person refused an interview because of other pressing deadlines.

To gather data of change agents, 3 members of the change management were invited in person for an interview. These three members were chosen deliberately as they were involved in the communication to the change recipients and thus knew the most about the communication strategy and intentions behind specific decisions. All three agreed to participate in an interview. Hence, a total of 11 participants were interviewed for this research. The most important demographics can be seen in Table 2 below.

Table 2.

Demographics of research participants

	Male	Female	Average age
Change recipients	6	2	43
Change agents	1	2	39

3.2.7 Validity and Reliability

Several precautions were taken to guarantee the validity and reliability of the data. The validity of qualitative interviews mainly relies on how accurately the information provided by research participants describes the events that are researched (Drews et al., 1993). There are several forms of bias which could have an influence on the validity of the findings, of which some of the most common ones as well as the ways in which they were dealt with are described.

One of the most common sources of bias affecting the validity of data is social desirability bias (Nederhof, 1985). Social desirability bias reflects the tendency of research participants to say things which place the speaker in a favourable light as they want to give of a positive impression (Nederhof, 1985). Social desirability bias most commonly occurs in studies that cover sensitive topics such as alcohol consumption and income (Nederhof, 1985). While this study did not cover any sensitive topics, it cannot be ruled out that research participants could have had a bias towards "proving" the change project was successful or that the communication was done well.

Although it is impossible to prevent social desirability bias completely, there are several ways of reducing the prevalence of this bias (Nederhof, 1985). For this study, the start of each interview was used to establish report before asking more difficult questions. Research participants were also assured that there would be no demerits to being honest. Lastly, effort was made to ensure that the questions that were asked were neutral.

A second type of bias is interviewer bias. Interviewer bias is the tendency of the interviewer to obtain answers that support preconceived notions and can happen when trying to clarify questions or emphasizing certain words during the interviews (Tripepi et al., 2008). To limit interviewer bias, the researcher tried to adhere as much as possible to the interview protocol.

The last type of bias that was considered is recall bias. Recall bias refers to the phenomenon in which the outcomes of a change project may influence which events research participants remember, and how they are remembered (Pannucci & Wilkins, 2010). In the case of this study, it could be that research participants satisfied with the outcomes of the change project would explain the change communication and process more positively than those dissatisfied with the change. To limit the effect of recall bias, the researcher requested access to the e-mails that were sent to change recipients to compare the answers given by research participants with the communication that had actually taken place.

Reliability indicates that something can be measured consistently so that future researchers can expect similar results when conducting the same kind of study (Fitzner, 2007). Whilst there are several types of reliability, avoiding coding errors was seen as most critical for this study to be reliable. As this study was conducted by a single researcher, no intercoder reliability could be established (Crittenden & Hill, 1971). Therefore, to avoid coding errors, the coding process was made as transparent and methodologically as possible, and the author made notes detailing what was done during each step of the data analysis.

3.2.8 Ethical Considerations and Approval

Participation in the pilot of the change project, as well as this study were both completely voluntary. The organization had given permission to the researcher to gather data in any way deemed fit for this research. In addition to this, research participants were fully informed about the study and asked for consent before being interviews. In case the interview was done in person, this was done by signing a consent form. In cases where the interview was conducted online, this was done in the form of verbal consent. Participants were made aware that they could withdraw from the study at any moment. Additionally, change recipients who reported directly to any one of the change agents were excluded from this study to ensure participation in this study would in no way lead to any repercussions. Lastly, ethical approval to conduct this study was received from the ethics committee of the University of Twente.

3.3 Research Instruments

Semi-structured interviews with change agents and change recipients formed the main source of information for this study. All interviews were conducted in Dutch with the exception of one interview that was conducted in English, as one research participant was not a native Dutch speaker. The interviews were all voice recorded and transcribed afterwards. A semi-structured approach was chosen to allow research participants to cover the topics they found important while simultaneously giving the researcher the autonomy to ensure that answers remained in line with the research question (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). The semi-structured approach was also chosen because it creates reciprocity between the interviewer and research participants, as it enables the interviewer to improvise follow-up questions based on participant’s responses (Kallio et al., 2016).

3.3.1 Interviews with change recipients

In total, 8 interviews with change recipients (6 male, 2 female, average age: 43) were conducted. The interviews took approximately 30 minutes. At the start of each interview, the interviewer explained the purpose of the study as well as asked for consent to record and transcribe the interviews to use in this report. The research participants were then asked some introductory questions such as how long they had been working at the company and what their function was. After this introduction, research participants were asked to recall when they first heard about the change project and why they decided to participate. Next, the participants were asked to recall any other event they found important in relation to the change project.

Research participants were asked to explain what information they received during each event, what information they perceived to be concealed or missing, and what effect this had on them. The researcher asked follow-up questions where necessary to be able to link the answers of the research participants to clarify the links between the communication and their buy-in to the change. After a couple of interviews, the researcher started to form an understanding of what information remained unknown amongst change recipients. Reflecting on these interviews, the researcher created a list of topics of which change recipients felt like they were not fully informed. In later interviews, the researcher made sure to specifically ask change recipients about these topics if they were not brought up by the change recipients themselves to gain a better understanding of how this missing information had an influence on the change recipient.

After the interviews with change recipients, the researcher transcribed all of the interviews and made a list of the questions change recipients still had for change agents caused by missing or concealed information. Questions that were asked by multiple change recipients were then used as topics during the interviews with change agents as a way to find out why change agents did not provide change recipients with the information necessary to answer those questions.

3.3.2 Interviews with change agents

Next, three semi-structured interviews were conducted with change agents (1 male, 2 female, average age: 39). The interviews started in the same way as the interviews with change recipients, with an explanation of the study, a request for consent, and some introductory questions. After this, the change agents were asked to explain about how they worked together as a team, what their personal role within the team was, and about their general strategy to communication during this project. After this, the change agents were asked if they intentionally concealed any information from change recipients, and, if so, why. Next, the researcher asked the change agents about the information which was perceived to be concealed by change recipients to find out if this information was intentionally concealed, or why these questions remained among change recipients. In cases where the change agents did not know the answer to a question, follow up questions were asked about why that was the case and how they thought the absence of an answer would impact change recipients.

3.4 Data analysis

A thematic analysis was chosen to analyse the data given its theoretical flexibility and its compatibility with the constructionist epistemology of the researcher, which examines the ways in which events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis was conducted in six phases as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). In the first phase, familiarization with the data, the recordings of the interview were transcribed. All written texts were then read and re-read several times while writing down notes of initial ideas in order to gain a good understanding of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the second phase, generating initial codes, preliminary codes were given to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These preliminary codes are the same as the first order concepts as mentioned by Gioia et al. (2013) and closely follow the phrasing used by the research participants. A clear separation was made between data gathered from change agents and change recipients to be able to compare the themes generated from both groups later. In the third phase, searching for themes, codes were combined into potential themes, similar to second order concepts in Gioia et al. (2013), and all data relevant to each potential theme was gathered (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the fourth phase, reviewing themes, the themes and codes were reviewed to see if there was a strong relation between the two, and to see if the themes were able to give an accurate representation of the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this phase, the themes from the data from change agents and change recipients was compared and where possible combined. In the fifth phase, defining and naming themes, the themes were refined further, and each theme was given a clear name and definition as implied by the name of this phase (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the final phase, producing the report, all codes and themes were reviewed one final time. During this final phase, quotes were extracted from the data to produce a vivid and compelling report of the analysis, providing answers to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The findings of this analysis can be found in the next section of the paper.

4. Results

This aim of this research was to answer the question "How does the perceived concealment of information affect change buy-in among change recipients and why do change agents conceal information?" The first part of this question, how the perceived concealment of information effects change buy-in amongst change recipients, was answered during the interviews with change recipients. During the interviews, change recipients described what information they received, what information they perceived to be concealed, and how this affected their change buy-in (Table 3). This is described in the first part of this result section. The second part of the research question, why change agents conceal information, was answered during the interviews with change agents. The change agents explained their communication strategy, as well as their reasons for not communicating all the information they had as soon as possible. This is explained in the second part of the result section. Lastly, the third part of this result section describes some general findings related to both the interviews with change agents and change recipients.

It must be noted that some of the information discussed during the interviews was classified (e.g., names of software, employees, projects, products). This information was not excluded from this research, however some of the preliminary codes shown in tables in this chapter have been generalized slightly to protect the privacy of the organization and participants.

4.1 Interviews with change recipients

During the interviews, change recipients talked about what information they had received, what information they felt was concealed, and how this concealment affected them. A full list of the topics that were discussed can be found in Table 3 below.

Table 3

How Change Recipients Perceive Concealment

Preliminary Codes	Sub-Theme	Theme
What will change Existence of the pilot	Awareness	Received Information
Promises for further improvements Purpose of the change Importance of the change Benefit of the change	Desire	
How to use the new laptop Roadmap of the change process	Knowledge and ability	

How to switch between environments How to use the smartcard		
Change agents Colleagues Function Personal discoveries	Information sources	
Why was I invited Why does everything take so long Why wasn’t I told all the downsides before agreeing to join the pilot What is happening behind the scenes	Change process	Perceived Concealment
What is the goal Why are we doing a pilot Who will be impacted by the change Is it only about Teams	Unclear Change goals	
What are the next steps How long will this still take Are we going back to the old method Why are we doing this change now	Future Vision	
What has come out of the pilot What is happening to my feedback Who else is in the pilot How do others experience the pilot	Sense of togetherness	
Why don’t these programs work Why is a second e-mail address necessary Is this program still needed	Technical questions	
Enthusiastic Sceptic Satisfaction Fear Worries Frustrations Regret	Emotions	Change Buy-in
Promoting the change to others Staying in the pilot Concealing negative outcomes	Behaviour	
Curiosity Assumptions Belief in success Opinion on communication Imagined future state Considering alternatives	Cognitive	

4.1.1 Received Information

Change recipients described receiving several types of information. Most of this information was about awareness of why this pilot was happening and about the knowledge and ability they needed to be a part of this change. Change recipients also indicated to be informed that the goal of the pilot was granting them the ability to use Microsoft Teams, and although some people believed there was more to change than this, this promised benefit was what caused most change recipients to want to join the pilot.

Change recipients also mentioned that not all of the information they received came from change agents. Some explained they had information about what was happening behind the scenes because of their own jobs, while others explained they learned new things from talking to colleagues or experimenting with the new digital environment. Even though change recipients were not asked from whom they received their information, some felt it was important to mention their information source as a way to express that their view on the communication strategy might be different than that of other change recipients.

"Actually, I learned another working method from a colleague yesterday [. . .] which works faster. But I didn't hear that from the change agents, but from a colleague, who had discovered it himself."

4.1.2 Perceived Concealment and change buy-in

According to the stories of change recipients, they received at least some information about all of the stages covered by the ADKAR model, excluding the reinforcement stage. This was not too surprising as the change project had not finished at the time of the interviews. At the same time, however, change recipients indicated that they still felt left in the dark about many aspects of the change process and its outcomes. After analysing the interviews, the information that change recipients perceived to be concealed could be divided into five topics: (initial) change process, unclear change goals, future vision, sense of togetherness, and technical questions. This perceived concealment had emotional, behavioural, and cognitive effects on the change recipients. As the perceived concealment and its effects seemed to be closely related, they are reported simultaneously below.

(Initial) Change process. One of the questions change recipients wondered about the most was why they were invited to participate in the pilot. Some people knew they were included in the pilot because they asked about the possibility to use Microsoft Teams in advance, while others asked to be included in the pilot after hearing stories from others. However, several people indicated an e-mail invitation was the first time they heard of the pilot.

"I work a lot with subcontractors who use Teams, and I think that's how I ended up in this pilot. But I'm still not sure about that. Everyone is acting a bit secretive about how you ended up in the pilot, who is in the pilot, and how they were approached. [. . .] I received an e-mail which said either my manager recommended me for this pilot, or IT deemed it important or necessary for me to participate in this pilot. While my manager is very kind, he's not somebody to do things like that. So yeah, that left me wondering why I was selected for this pilot. Upon further inquiry, there was nobody that had an actual reason. I have no clue where they got my name from."

This initial e-mail invitation was then followed by a long period of silence before the actual pilot began during which change recipients received little to no information about the status of the project.

"I was put on a list. Then I didn't hear anything for ages, so I sent a couple of e-mails afterwards. "Yes, yes, yes. We're still working on it". Then, at a certain moment, I received an e-mail saying that they were still working on it and I would be notified soon. A week passed. A month passed. No message. So I sent another email asking what was going on. "Yes, yes, yes. We're working on it". And then much later, I finally received more information. I think it was February that I received a message it would be soon, but that became summer."

As a result, change recipients got worried, thinking they had been forgotten. Some tried reaching out to change agents to gather more information, while others started believing that they were a too difficult person to be included in the pilot, their e-mail address wasn't working properly, or that they got replaced by someone else.

"I thought they had forgotten me or something. Or something else happened, I don't know. I found it very strange. You are invited to participate. I asked questions as well. They wanted to start in April or May if I recall correctly, but that turned into July. In the meantime, I heard nothing. I thought: whatever. Maybe they found me too difficult, or they found replacement, or… I don't know because it was silent."

Change recipients clearly expressed that they expected more and more consistent updates about the process and what had been done so far.

"What it boils down to is that you should make clear promises with customers, be it internal or external, and that you keep those promises. That sounds very logical, banal even. But that's

where it often goes wrong. People who don't keep their promises, and then customers are waiting and waiting and waiting and then… Everything gets delayed and it is very frustrating."

Unclear change goals. There was also some confusion about the goal of the project. When asked to explain the goal of the change project, some change recipients believed this change project to be solely about making Microsoft Teams available. Others believed there was more behind this change. Some thought it had to do with data security, whilst others believed it had something to do with reducing the load on the current IT systems.

"Because I have worked at the IT department myself, I know what the ideas are behind this change, also from a security perspective. I know a bit more about it than the rest of the business, the non-IT side. [. . .] Namely about the access to data. We want to get to a situation where all data is classified properly to ensure only the right people have access to it. This change is a method to ensure that you classify all your of data so that you can check who is allowed to access it. Of course, we're not there yet, but this a step in the right direction. But I think most people don't know. Like why we would want this change. It's more like: this allows you to use Teams."

The existence of additional goals was mainly brought up by change recipients who had previously worked at the IT department or by those who had a privileged relationship with the IT department, while change recipients who had less (informal) contact with the IT department indicated they were unaware of any goals besides the usage of Microsoft Teams. The change recipients who mentioned these additional objectives thought positive of them, leaving them wondering why only the usage of Microsoft Teams was being pushed.

As a result, people only aware of the goal to make Teams available started doubting whether this change was worth the effort as there were already some alternatives to be able to make use of Microsoft Teams. They started comparing the difficulties they had with using Teams before the change with the difficulties that came with the pilot.

Future vision. All change recipients were wondering what was going to happen next. The change recipients were unaware until when the pilot would last, what the change agents were doing with their feedback, and what would happen after the pilot.

"It would be interesting to know what is the purpose of the pilot? When will they invite more people? When should everyone make use of this new digital environment? [. . .] I'm still unsure for which people will end up making use of this change."

The absence of a vision for the future caused some change recipients to make assumptions about what would happen next, which they started to believe in as if it was set in stone. Others change recipients felt like they were put in a difficult position when talking about the change project with their colleagues who were not invited for the pilot. These colleagues, jealous because they were unable to use Microsoft Teams, asked questions about when they would finally be able to use Teams, which could not be answered by the change recipients.

"I know so many people want to use Teams, and the pressure is very high. I can't imagine we will go back. But there is no clarity as to until when this pilot will last. Then we will invite more people. These are the feedback moments. Just a clearer picture with something like a vision. I don't know if this vision… I'm sure this vision exist, but why not share it?"

The absence of future plans also made change recipients question whether it was good to have started the pilot already, or if it would have been better to wait until the idea was more mature and some of the technical problems had been solved already.

"It all has to do with that this is a pilot. I believe that. I accept that. But it (the issues) should be finite and it would be nice if someone would say: at this date it will be fixed. There are no such promises, and they might not be able to make such promises. But then we might have started too soon with this pilot. That's a possibility too."

Sense of togetherness. Change recipients voluntarily took part in the pilot. Some of them simply wanted the benefit of being able to use Microsoft Teams, while others hoped their participation would somehow benefit other users in the future. Many change recipients had given feedback to the change agents about the troubles they were experiencing and wanted to know what had been done with this feedback. As they had not noticed any actual improvements, some started to feel like their efforts in this pilot were wasted.

"We are participating in a pilot. And then you think: if this is a pilot, you should be able to give feedback. And then you expect people to do something with that, so that when this digital environment is available for more people, the issues we run into now are fixed and you don't have to feeling: Oh, nice observation, but it is what it is! And then everyone will run into that issue. That is something I'm still missing."

Several change recipients also wanted to know who else was in the pilot and how they were doing. The new digital environment brought several issues with it, and they wanted to know if they were the cause of the problem or if others had the same problems. To the surprise of some, there was never any event in which they got to meet the other people participating in the pilot.

"You want to be involved in the process. I don't know how large the group of pilot users is. We have a Teams chat which I can use to estimate the number, and we had this kind of... It was called a walk-in session but it was more of like a session where you could call to give feedback. If it was a real walk-in session, I might have met other people who had the same or similar experiences, which you could learn a lot from. But because it was online, everyone joined at a different moment and you didn't meet each other".

Technical questions. The new digital environment came with functions unavailable in the old environment, but there were also many programs which did not work properly anymore. Change recipients were not aware of all these downsides before signing up for the pilot. Although they would have liked to know these downsides in advance, most recipients did not blame the change agents for the lack of prior information on this topic.

"I don't believe change agents hid any information about the downsides of the change. I think they just weren't aware. Or maybe they didn't know how much we would miss the features that don't work anymore. But intentionally? I don't believe it. I think everyone here has the best intentions."

Despite the belief that change agents did not intentionally hide any information about the downsides of the change, these unforeseen downsides had a strong negative impact on the experience of change recipients. Several change recipients stated that they would have not participated in the pilot if they had the information they have now at the start of the pilot.

"If I had known what I know now, I would have immediately recommended a colleague who has some more time to test things, who is a bit newer, who is open minded. And then I would have just continued using Teams on my phone."

Although simply communicating more would not improve the situation, these downsides made it difficult for the change recipients to actively support and promote the change.

"I try to keep the negative aspects quiet as much as possible, because there's no point in making negative advertisement for something that is bound to happen and which we will all make use of [. . .] and I try to tell them the positive sides and don't tell them that it's not all running smoothly yet. I keep the goal in mind and I understand that there will still be improvements in the future."

4.2 Interviews with change agents

During the interviews, change agents described their communication strategy and their reasoning for concealing information. An overview of the findings of the interviews with change agents can be seen in Table 4 below.

Table 4.

Why Change Agents Conceal Information

Preliminary Codes	Sub-Themes	Themes
We have been transparent	Change agents' openness	Communication Strategy
We answered every question		
We didn't hide anything on purpose		
We want to make it easy	Intention of change agents	
We want them to understand		
We want to support them		
We've done a good job	Change agents' opinion on their communication	
I think it's going well		
There's a lot we can improve upon		
We need to do better		
E-mail	Communication channel	
Phone call		
Service Desk		
Microsoft Teams		
Knowledge base		
That communication goes through someone else	Team dynamics	Reasons for Concealment
I assumed it was communicated		
I'm sadly not involved in everything		
I do not agree with other members		
I'm still discovering what my role is		
We don't want to communicate before we are sure	Retaining trust	
We don't tell things we don't know		
I don't want to say something that isn't true		
There's a risk of losing the trust of people		
It's about not giving them false hope	Managing expectations	
We don't want to give a bad impression of the product		
You don't want to keep people waiting		
To avoid panic	Preventing anxiety	
You give anxiety		
People might forget what is in their e-mail	Retention	
People don't remember everything forever		
They'll come back if they have questions	Proactivity	
We offer people the opportunity to ask questions		
If there is a demand they come to us		

Do they expect us to take the initiative	
People don’t read or listen	Because it has been communicated
I feel like people don’t want to accept the answer	
They know	
We explained that clearly in advance	
If they don’t like it, they can go back	Necessity
People don’t have to be aware	
They don’t need to know	

4.2.1 Communication Strategy

Change agents denied that they intentionally concealed any information when asked explicitly at the start of the interview. They indicated that they tried their best to explain how everything worked, what the differences were between the old and the new environment as well as the advantages and disadvantages, with the aim to make the change process as pleasant as possible for the change recipients. They believed that, at least in this change project, concealing information would not benefit them.

“You run a pilot, so you want... You want to have real results. I mean, you don't want to oversell or... Yeah, I don't think it's of any benefit.”

The members in the change management team had varying opinions about how successful their approach was. While the change agents were mostly positive about their communication, believing they had done a good job. They mentioned how they were communication through multiple channels and how this had helped them in answering questions of change recipients quicker. At the same time, however, change agents also acknowledged that there was still room for improvement.

“They didn’t know much about the plans. So for me, it’s a sign that we could or should have worked way better on that part and communicate really what it is about and the vision.”

4.2.2 Reasons for Concealment

While change agents claimed to be fully transparent, further questioning revealed that this was not actually the case. Some of the questions change recipients had could have been answered or could have been answered sooner. In total, change agents give eight reasons why they had not been fully transparent.

Team dynamics. Each member of the change management team had his or her own role in the project. For example, one person was responsible for communicating with the end users, while another one was responsible for the technical design of the new digital environment. While the team used to meet regularly at the start of the project, this was no longer the case at the time of the interviews. As a result, not every member of the team was equally well informed about the project. For example, one member of the change management team indicated being unaware of any additional goal besides making Microsoft Teams available, while another could clearly explain that this change was also meant to make people classify their data.

"No. I have never heard that. No. I don't know if it's true or not. I can't give an answer to that, but I haven't heard that rumour before."

The division of tasks combined with only limited communication between the members of the change management team also caused change agents to be unsure of what had, and what had not been communicated. Sometimes, it was thought that other change agents had already sent information to change recipients, while this was not always the case.

"The pilot was initially supposed to last until September first. That was eventually extended to October, and I recently heard that it will be extended a bit further. But we indeed haven't shared… That communication doesn't come from us, and I assume that other people in the change management team have communicated about that to change recipients. (. . .) I don't know if change recipients are aware because that isn't important for us as support. That comes from someone else, we just help with the execution."

Retaining trust. Change agents were afraid that giving information about their plans could cause them to lose the trust of change recipients if they decided to change those plans later.

"If we communicate information and that we keep communicating one or two months after: Okay, this has changed and then after: Okay this has changed. For me, the risk is to lose the trust that the people have in us by us changing constantly to the information we are giving them."

This meant that change agents wanted to be very certain about what they were saying before saying anything it all. As a result, sometimes it took change agents one or several weeks before informing the change recipients about changes to the planning of the project and its outcomes.

"I could have made a plan saying: okay, this is the plan and we plan to roll out these departments at that time. And then... But in fact, we don't know. So it's a risk to communicate

something also and then change it completely. I've been in the business since 20 years. I know that projects never really go the way they are supposed at the beginning, and this is how much you tell to the people and that you know that there is 90% this information will change, then maybe you don't communicate."

Managing expectations. Change agents also believed that giving information about the change project, its goals, and planning could give change recipients false hope if plans were to change at a later date. Likewise, they were afraid informing change recipients too early would cause frustration, as change recipients would still have to wait for the change to happen. For this reason, change agents did not communicate about the existence of the pilot to every employee at the company, and did not inform people within the pilot about upcoming features until after they had been finished.

"We of course have a planning. And yes, when something doesn't go as planned, it's totally fine, because we haven't given people false hope. That's what is important."

While change agents tried to prevent desire for the change among people outside of the pilot, they also wanted to prevent negative expectations. Change recipients were free to talk about the project with their colleagues, but when change agents noticed certain change recipients speaking negatively about the project, they approached them with the request to stop their negative promotion as they feared this would make it more difficult to convince others to accept the change later.

"At the end, also, users don't have the same experience even with the exact same products. If you come being told, okay, it's great, and then okay, it's crap, it's going to take you time to change your mind. Even if the product is exactly the same. Just what you heard is going to impact your ideas about the product and your experience."

Preventing anxiety. While not applicable to this change project in particular, one change agent told a story about a previous change project in which it was deemed necessary to conceal information to avoid change recipients from panicking. In that change project, change agents wanted to have an answer to every question change recipients were expected to ask in advance to be able to clearly explain the impact of the change at the time of announcing the change.

"If you tell them you will be sold in three months and people ask you: okay, but what will happen? Will I get the same salary? Will I be fired? And you're not able to answer, then you are giving more anxiety to the people"

Retention. Change agents were afraid that change recipients would forget certain elements of the communication efforts if they provided too much information or informed change recipients too far in advance of the change. Therefore, change agents tried to avoid sending long communication e-mails and carefully planned when they would inform change recipients, and what topics they would send information about.

"We purposely don't want to send e-mails too soon, because it can happen that people forgot what's in the e-mail, but also not too late of course."

Proactivity. Change agents expected that change recipients would be proactive in asking questions and giving feedback about the change project. They did everything in their power to make this process as easy as possible for change recipients by making sure they were available through many channels such as e-mails and a Microsoft Teams channel. However, not every change recipient made use of this opportunity. On the contrary, some change recipients were waiting for change agents to proactively provide them with more information and updates. As a result, change agents were not fully aware of the desire for information of change recipients. For example, change agents were unaware of any questions related to the sense of togetherness.

"So what I understand from you is that they have the desire to see each other in person? And they want us to take the initiative? [. . .] That's good to know at least."

Because it has been communicated. When it comes to technical questions, the change management team believed they had informed every change recipient properly. Change agents were faced with a series of legal and financial reasons as to why they could not give change recipients every feature that was desired by them, and why giving these features took a considerable amount of time. According to them, the reason why change recipients still had questions about this topic was not because of a lack of communication, but because they either didn't listen to the answer or did not like the answer they received.

"We have shared as much as possible with the customer to ensure they would not get grumpy about those topics. Because people that are grumpy radiate negativity. It's not like that hasn't

happened, but it's just that people didn't listen. Sounds arrogant, but that's kind of what happened."

Necessity. Change agents did not inform change recipients about everything that was happening behind the scenes because they believed change recipients would not need that information. They did not see how understanding the technicalities behind the change could benefit the change recipients. In similar fashion, not every change agent was equally driven to convince change recipients of importance and benefits of the change. As participation in the pilot was voluntarily, they did not feel the need to go out of their way to convince change recipients to stay in the pilot, as it was no big deal if change recipients wanted to leave the pilot if they did not like it.

"At the moment they really don't want to participate anymore, when they think the new digital environment is nothing for them, they instantly go back the old setting. We won't try to convince them to please stay."

4.3 Comparing the Perspectives of Change Agents and Recipients

All of the reasons for concealment given by change agents are related to either the assumed consequences of providing too much information too early, or to the assumption that the information was communicated properly or unnecessary for the change recipients. While change agents seemed to understand what impact giving information can have on change recipients, they seemed to forget about the consequences (e.g., fear and uncertainty) of not giving this information.

"Why would you inform people ages in advance about something? That can possibly be frustrating for them. Then they think it is taking too long, for example. That is what happens, that's what people will think. And if they are not aware of it, then there is no strong desire for it. Sometimes, you just accept the things as they are."

Change agents thought that not providing information, or waiting with providing information, would not have a severe negative impact on the change recipients. Change agents assumed that not communicating about a topic meant that change recipients would not think about that topic. In reality, however, change recipients became frustrated about a lack of updates on issues in the back of their minds and expressed their desire to receive information sooner. They believed the exact same information could have been perceived in a more positive light had it been communicated earlier.

"Either we sit here for a month, frustrated that nothing is happening. And then when they come with an update, we're like: Finally they are doing something, it should have been done way earlier! But if they had just told us at the start it was something they were working on, we could see that they haven't forgotten about it and be excited when it eventually happens."

Lastly, the role of organizational factors must be acknowledged. Both change agents and change recipients compared this change project with previous change projects at the organization, and used this comparison to formulate why they thought the communication was good or bad. As a result, the emotional buy-in of change recipients did not solely rely on the quality of the communication strategy. Some change recipients expressed they were happy with the amount of information they received, simply because it was an improvement in comparison to the past.

"The old bunch at the IT department were a bit more grumpy when helping you and did not care to explain why certain things were being done. Now, you are being greeted with good morning and good afternoon. It has become more approachable!"

5. Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this study was to find out how change buy-in amongst change recipients is affected by perceived concealment, and why change agents conceal information. This study found perceived concealment to have negative cognitive, behavioural and emotional effects on change recipients and eight reasons as to why change agents conceal information. In this chapter, the theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed. After this, some limitations and suggestions for future research are given.

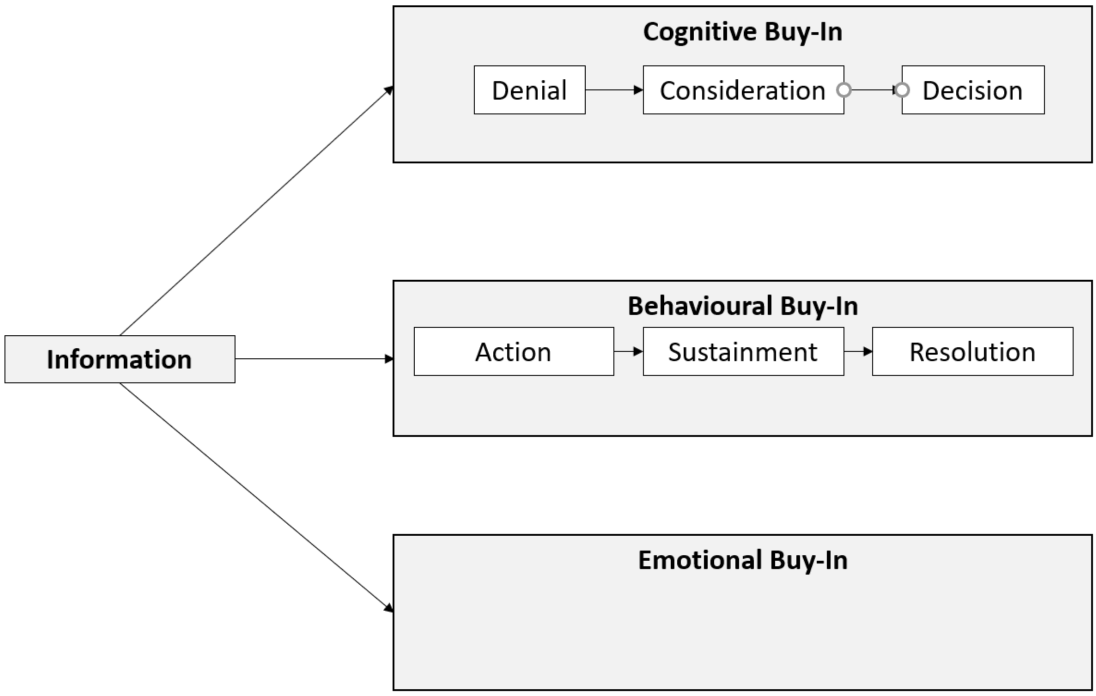
5.1 Theoretical Implications

The results of this study suggest that the concealment of information has cognitive, behavioural and emotional effects. This is in line with earlier change management research such as the paper of Oreg et al. (2011), who found similar effects of communication on change buy-in. However, when looking at the Change Buy-in Continuum (Mathews & Crocker, 2016) that was used in this study, the emotional aspect as shown in other models seems to be missing. This is a problem as emotions do seem to have an influence on the extent to which change recipients support change efforts.

Moreover, this research did not find clear buy-in stages as shown in the Change Buy-in Continuum. Instead, while all change recipients actively participated in the pilot, corresponding to stage four (action) of the change buy-in continuum, they varied in the cognitive stage they were in. Some change recipients doubted whether or not the change was really necessary (stage two, consideration), while others were firm believers in the success and necessity of the change (stage three). This suggests that behavioural buy-in to change is not necessarily a consequence of cognitive buy-in, contradicting the linearity of the Change Buy-In Continuum. Instead, this paper supports earlier research (e.g., Oreg et al., 2011) that cognitive, behavioural and emotional outcomes are at least partly the consequence of the information change recipients have. A phased model in which cognitive, behavioural, and emotional buy-in are represented parallel to each other might be more suitable to represent the real world. An example of such a model is given in Figure 2 below. While this example, cognitive and behavioural buy-in are based on the Change Buy-In Continuum (Mathews & Crocker, 2016), while further research would be necessary to find a model that explains emotional buy-in best. One could, for example, consider Kübler-Ross' 5 phases of grief model.

Figure 2.

Example of a Parallel Change Buy-In Model.



When analysing the information change recipients needed before buying in to the change, many similarities can be seen with the ADKAR model of Hiatt (2006) and the five key messages of change communication (Armenakis & Harris, 2002). For example, change recipients wanted to know what was going to change, why it was going to change, what the process would look like, and what outcomes they could expect. However, change recipients also indicated they wanted information about other change recipients and their own contribution to the success of the change project, as they missed a sense of togetherness in going through the change process. Change recipients also attached significant importance to a future vision. Knowing the goal or expected outcomes was not enough for them. They also wanted to know what the planning of change agents was, even if this planning was not set in stone. Adding "sense of togetherness" and "future vision" to the ADKAR model (Hiatt, 2006) or the five key messages of change communications (Armenakis & Harris, 2002) could complement these models and help them explain why buy-in is not always achieved, even if all topics currently included in those models are addressed properly. It could be that "sense of togetherness" and "future plans" are currently missing from these models as they perhaps are more closely related to the emotional side of change buy-in, while these models mainly explore the cognitive side of change buy-in.

5.2 Practical Implications

Change agents are not always as revealing as they believe they are. While the change agents in this study initially claimed they did not conceal any information, further questioning revealed that they had not shared all available information immediately for a variety of reasons. While concealing information can happen unintentionally or be done with the best intentions, change agents should be aware of the negative emotional, behavioural, and cognitive consequences of not sharing information in a timely manner with change recipients. Change agents in this study seemed to let their own perspective on what information should be revealed to change recipients determine their communication approach. Change agents should consider organizing group sessions with change recipients on the topic of information transparency, as it could grant them insights in what information needs to be revealed and possibly negate the negative consequences of concealing information.

For change recipients it is important to be aware that not all concealment is done intentionally. Sometimes, change agents are simply unaware of the desire for information or believe that the information is not relevant enough to share, as happened during this case study. When information in not concealed intentionally, the results of this study seem to suggest that proactively asking for explanations and answers could prevent unnecessary frustrations.

5.3 Limitations & Future Research

As all research, this study is not without limitations. It was conducted in a single organization and the findings are based on a total of 11 interviews. While for generalizability a larger and more diverse sampling would be preferable, the small scale of this study allowed for a more in-depth exploration of a single change project. The setting of this study was also unique in that it was conducted during a pilot for an upcoming change. Participation was voluntary, which meant that at the start of the pilot, change recipients had already decided to support the change. As a result, this study provides only limited information about the concealment of information during the initial stages of the change process when change recipients still have to be convinced of the necessity and value of the change. Also, findings of this study could have been different if change recipients who actively tried to resist the change were included in the sample. This means that further research in different settings and sectors is necessary before being able to generalize the findings of this study.

This study made use of retrospective interviews, that is, interviews following events that happened a long time ago (Tollefson et al., 2001). Some change recipients indicated that they could not remember all of the information they received during the change project, as the first time they heard about is was already over a year ago. While one of the advantages of retrospective interviews is that explanations from interviewees often include evaluations, explanations and theories regarding their experiences, it could be that what is recalled is not really what happened (Tollefson et al., 2001). One possible avenue for future research is to request change agents and recipients to participate in a similar study, asking them to keep track of the information they sent and received, and how they felt about this information during the entirety of a change project, for example, in a diary. This would reduce issues in recalling information and could provide more detailed insights into how change buy-in evolves over time.

Lastly, most of the information that was (perceived to be) concealed was not concealed intentionally. It would be interesting to conduct a similar study at an organization in which change agents purposely do not share specific information, although such an organization might prove to be difficult to find as concealing information is something that is frowned upon. By having a clear overview of which information was hidden and for what purpose it was hidden, it might be possible to establish a link between the cognitive, behavioural, and emotional effects of concealment on change recipients and the specific types of information that are concealed. Such information could, for example, help to explain why change recipients sometimes behave in a way supportive of changes whilst emotionally or cognitively denying the change.

5.4 Conclusion

This paper found that perceived concealment can have a negative impact on change buy-in amongst change recipients. Perceived concealment was found to have a negative influence on the cognitive (e.g., belief in success), behavioural (e.g., less active support), and emotional (e.g., scepticism and fear) aspects of change buy-in. However, this study also shows that perceived concealment is not always the result of the intent of change agents to conceal information. Although this paper discovered many reasons as to why change agents conceal information, change agents did not intend to withhold information important to change recipients. While trying to avoid the negative consequences of sharing too much information too early, change agents seemed to forget the negative consequences of sharing too little information too late. However, change agents can easily prevent this from happening by proactively asking for questions instead of waiting for them to be asked. By better understanding the information needs and desires of change recipients, change agents can improve their communication strategy and achieve higher levels of change buy-in, ultimately leading to more successful change projects.

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Appendix A: Interviews with change recipients

1. Introduction

- Introduce myself
- Explain purpose and procedure of study
- Ask for any questions regarding the purpose and procedure
- Ask for consent to participate in the study, audio recording the interview, and the usage of data for this thesis
- Ask participant for introduction (ask for age explicitly if not brought up by participant)

2. Main questions

- How did you get involved in this pilot?
  - Probe: When did you first hear about this change?
  - Probe: When did you first hear about the pilot?
  - Probe: Why did you want to participate?
- What kind of information did you receive about the change?
  - Probe: How were you informed about the change/pilot?
  - Probe: When did you receive this information?
- What do you think about the outcomes of the change project?
  - Probe: Did the outcomes match your expectations?
  - Probe: How do you feel about the outcomes?
  - Probe: What did you say to your colleagues about this change?
- Was there any information you were missing?
  - Probe: Why did you miss this information? Did you find this important to know?
  - Probe: How did this make you feel?
  - Probe: Why do you think this was not shared?

3. Closure

- Ask for final remarks
- Thank participant for participation
- Give contact information again for any questions

Appendix A: Interviews with change Agents

1. Introduction

- Introduce myself
- Explain purpose and procedure of study
- Ask for any questions regarding the purpose and procedure
- Ask for consent to participate in the study, audio recording the interview, and the usage of data for this thesis
- Ask participant for introduction (ask for age explicitly if not brought up by participant)

2. Main questions

- How does the change management team work?
  - Probe: What is your role?
  - Probe: What was your approach to communication?
  - Probe: How was the contact within the change management team?
- Did you intentionally conceal any information and, if so, why?
- What kind of information did you share with change recipients?
  - Probe: What information did you provide in communication e-mails?
  - Probe: What information did you provide when change recipients were at the service desk?
  - Probe: What was shared on Microsoft Teams?
  - Probe: Is there any other information that was shared?
- Based on the interviews with change recipients, I made a list of topics change recipients felt insufficiently informed about. There could have been many been many reasons for this. For example, some change recipients might have not paid full attention or did not ask you, so I do not want you to interpret this as if I am blaming you. I simply want to understand what has happened, what you knew about these topics, and what you shared.
  - Probes: Specific questions about perceived concealment from change recipients (Change process, goals, future plans, sense of togetherness, technical questions)

3. Closure

- Ask for final remarks
- Thank participant for participation
- Give contact information again for any questions