

**Employee Communication During Mergers:
*Sensegiving Communication by Middle Managers Aiding
Employees' Sensemaking of a Merger***

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Abstract

Purpose – The human factor of mergers has often been neglected, despite its significant influence on merger outcomes. Therefore, this study set out to illuminate the perspective of lower-level employees by evaluating sensegiving practices that they recognized and appreciated in their middle managers' communication in relation to their own sensemaking of a merger.

Method – The present study is based on twelve in-depth, semi-structured interviews with employees who experienced the merger of two car-sharing companies in 2019. Alongside sensemaking and sensegiving, the leader-member exchange theory (LMX) is employed to highlight the social aspect of sensemaking and -giving. For the interview process, the critical incident technique and the visual interview technique, more specifically, a timeline interview approach, are chosen to extract relevant merger-related incidents regarding employees' sensemaking of the merger and managerial sensegiving.

Findings – To rationalize the merger and overcome uncertainties caused by the merger, the interviewees were reliant on receiving information, knowing their role in the new organization, and having the possibility to contribute to the merger's outcome. All interview participants engaged in sensemaking and all but one recognized and appreciated their middle managers' communication as sensegiving. However, employees' sensemaking as well as their perception and appreciation of their middle managers' sensegiving was dependent on the relationship and trust between them. In this regard, a good relationship between employees and their middle managers has shown to facilitate employees' sensemaking process, whereas a more complicated relationship led to higher senseseeking activities among the research participants.

Conclusion – This research shows that by fulfilling their role as mediators and implementing a good structure as well as a caring atmosphere in their teams, middle managers can set the tone for sensegiving valued by their employees. Furthermore, the middle managers' bridging function between their teams and the rest of the company, especially the top management; framing the merger, among other things, as a valuable learning opportunity for their subordinates; and comforting their employees throughout the process were recognized and appreciated as valuable modes of sensegiving by this research's respondents. This shows that middle managers can influence employees' sensemaking of a merger through sensegiving communication and consequently cater to the human factor in mergers.

Keywords employees' sensemaking, middle managers' sensegiving, merger success, leader-member exchange theory (LMX), critical incident technique (CIT), visual interview technique, timeline approach, M&A research

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1. Introduction

Mergers tend to fail. Yet, they are a common strategic decision made by companies' top management or shareholders, to enter new markets, accelerate growth, and stay relevant (Karim & Capron, 2016). While in 1985, 2.676 mergers and acquisitions were registered around the world, that number skyrocketed to 44.926 in 2020 (Kroon & Reif, 2021). However, a significant number of mergers do not meet the expectations initiators and stakeholders place in them (Khan et al., 2020; van Vuuren, 2012), partly because human integration during mergers is often being neglected (Cartwright & Cooper, 1990). While neither middle managers nor employees have a significant say in the decision-making processes of mergers, both groups play a meaningful role in mergers' successes or failures (Kroon & Reif, 2021). Merger failures manifest through "lowered productivity, labor unrest, higher absenteeism, and loss of shareholder value. In some cases, it means well-publicized dissolution of the combination" (Nguyen & Kleiner, 2003).

Clearly, implementing strategic change is crucial for any organization's survival (Sonenshein & Dholakia, 2012). "Strategic change involves an attempt to change current modes of cognition and action to enable the organization to take advantage of important opportunities or to cope with consequential environmental threats" (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 433). While this rationalizes companies' urge to engage in mergers, good employee communication is vital in managing and realizing fundamental organizational change, which requires management to pay attention to the human side before starting the merger process (Barrett, 2002). Previous research demonstrates that insufficient change management provided by leadership (Kang et al., 2020) can increase employees' dissatisfaction and uncertainty (Covin et al., 1997). Uncertainty and ambiguity have been shown to trigger sensemaking (Weick, 1995), which makes employees' sensemaking approaches during mergers a relevant research topic. With communication being "a central component of sensemaking and organizing" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 413), research suggests that middle managers should create an environment within their teams where the merger and its implications can be discussed openly. Additionally, a regular flow of merger-related information should be ensured (Kroon & Reif, 2021). The way employees perceive this managerial communication impacts their emotional states, productivity, and turnover intentions during mergers (Zagelmeyer et al., 2018).

Employee satisfaction is considered an important constituent of successful mergers (Birkinshaw et al., 2000). In the merger literature, employees are frequently portrayed as hesitant and unreceptive of the change (Sonenshein & Dholakia, 2012). To ensure an organization's productivity, this is often given as a reason for withholding information from employees (Nguyen & Kleiner, 2003). However, Sonenshein and Dholakia (2012) studied

employees' meaning-making during strategic change processes, focusing on how to include them in such organizational transformations rather than viewing them as potential change resisters. It is important to understand why employees appear resistant to change. As "major organizational changes typically involve many different types and levels of personal loss for the people in the organization" (Lorenzi & Riley, 2000, p. 120), such as letting go of old routines and identifications with their organization, it is not surprising that a lack of attention on an organization's workforce can lead to opposing attitudes (Lorenzi & Riley, 2000).

Research on employee management during mergers is still scarce, leaving many unanswered questions about effective strategies that help build employees' acceptance of the situation (Khan et al., 2020). Kroon and Reif (2021) focused on middle managers, yet, stressed the importance of also paying attention to employees' receiving role of sensegiving attempts. Additionally, Kraft et al. (2018) studied leader sensegiving during organizational change in general and proposed researchers to employ a narrower lens on specific change processes. Interestingly, Zagelmeyer et al. (2018) found that in merger situations, managers did not feel adequately informed by their immediate supervisors but assessed the communication with their own staff as being appropriate. In this study, however, I asked lower-level employees how they perceived and made sense of their middle managers' sensegiving practices, instead of leaving this assessment to the sensegivers themselves. With employees being "among the most important stakeholders of any organization" (Zwijze-Koning et al., 2015, p. 46), conducting research about their experiences and needs during mergers and contributing to the slowly increasing body of research about employee responses during mergers is crucial (Cartwright & Schoenberg, 2006). Consequently, my research aimed at understanding how employees make sense of a merger and how their middle management can support them through tailored sensegiving approaches. Inspired by van Dam et al.'s (2021) research, the leader-member exchange theory (hereinafter LMX) provided the lens to examine middle managers' roles in offering meaning, portraying and earning trust, as well as managing employee uncertainty.

This research was based on a qualitative, retrospective, single case study of the merger between car2go and DriveNow, which led to SHARE NOW's founding in 2019. After having experienced the pre-merger phase at car2go, I redirected my academic focus on merger communication and ultimately returned to SHARE NOW for eight months to gain insights for this study at hand and to approach the interview participants. With limited research about employees' sensemaking during mergers available and my experiences during the pre-merger phase at car2go, I decided to assess the entire merger process instead of solely focusing on the post-merger integration phase (hereinafter PMI), as commonly done in merger research (Al Hosani et al., 2020; Durand, 2016; Kroon & Reif, 2021). For the interviews, the critical incident and visual interview techniques were employed. This allowed the interviewees

to decide which events were most relevant to them and freely define the timeframe they accounted for the merger process.

2. Theoretical Framework

During merger processes, employees commonly express higher levels of uncertainty, stress, and anxiety (Zagelmeyer et al., 2018), for which middle managers should find “appropriate interventions” (Bhal et al., 2009, p. 605). This shows that middle managers are confronted with a challenging task, as they are often not yet informed about specific merger-related decisions and implications themselves or are legally prohibited from disclosing information to their teams (Thach & Nyman, 2001). This creates a dilemma for middle managers, as they are reliant on dedicated employees but risk exactly that commitment when unable to provide information (Nikolaou et al., 2011).

2.1. Employees’ Sensemaking During Mergers

Generally, employees are highly affected by organizational change processes, which can be a motivational factor for them to contribute to it or result in resistance. This depends on whether they are able to make sense of the situation (Rheinhardt & Gioia, 2021). “Sensemaking is the process by which a shared sense of meaning and action is negotiated” (Gephart et al., 2010, as cited in Rheinhardt & Gioia, 2021, p. 80) and has been found to be a fitting theoretical lens when investigating organizational members’ handling of a merger (Routila, 2022). According to Ancona (2012), sensemaking in the business context

can mean learning about shifting markets, customer migration, or new technologies. It can mean learning about the culture, politics, and structure of a new venture or about a problem that you haven’t seen before. It can mean figuring out why a previously successful business model is no longer working. Sensemaking often involves moving from the simple to the complex and back again (p. 4).

Sensemaking is also retrospective and draws on plausibility instead of accuracy. Employees rely on cues and frames of reference which are based on said plausibility. These are constantly revisited by employees throughout their sensemaking of the organizational change and utilized as guidance for their future actions (Weick, 1995). Overall, “sensemaking is about action: If the first question of sensemaking is “what’s going on here?,” the second, equally important question is “what do I do next?” This second question is directly about action” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 412). To make sense of these questions, research shows that, among other things, employees expect to be updated about their respective roles and responsibilities during and after the change process (Balogun, 2003). To investigate the research participants’ sensemaking, I followed Kroon and Reif’s (2021) division into the “two main types of sense-

making: 'Senseseeking' and 'rationalizing'" (p. 14). This differentiation allows for a more in-depth observation of the different phases that employees go through in their sensemaking of a merger.

2.1.1. Senseseeking

"Sensemaking starts with chaos" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 411). Consequently, when first confronted with organizational change, employees commonly engage in senseseeking, hoping to gather sufficient information to eventually make sense of it (Bhal et al., 2009). In previous research, the earlier stages of mergers were found to be characterized by confusion, questions, and identity searches (Kroon & Reif, 2021). Hereby, Weick (1995) understands sensemaking as being "less about discovery than ... about invention" (p. 13), requiring employees to engage in inventing their new reality (Balogun, 2003). At that stage, emerging uncertainties can decrease employee "satisfaction, commitment, loyalty, and the perception of the organization's trustworthiness, honesty, and caring" (Nguyen & Kleiner, 2003, p. 448), if not properly addressed by leadership. Hence, the information deficit that commonly accompanies mergers heightens employees' desire for leadership communication (Bhal et al., 2009), and managerial sensegiving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). As time passes, employees' acceptance of the merger and all its implications tends to increase (Brousseau, 1989), allowing them to start rationalizing the circumstances and embracing the potential possibilities ahead of them.

However, when employees' senseseeking is not sufficiently satisfied through communication from their leadership, rumours tend to spread within the organization and can go hand-in-hand with negative emotions (Zagelmeyer et al., 2018). "Rumours fly thick and fast during mergers" (Brousseau, 1989, p. 76), given that the uncertainty usually cannot be eased in the early stages of a merger (Brousseau, 1989). This calls for efficient employee communication as rumours can cause a decrease in productivity (Barrett, 2002). Additionally, once rumours arise, they are often hard to stop from evolving as "objectivity goes out the window" (Brousseau, 1989, p. 73).

2.1.2. Rationalizing

With sensemaking being an ongoing process (Weick, 1993), transitioning from senseseeking to rationalizing is not a one-way street. However, the more information employees receive, the more their acceptance of a merger grows, allowing them to better evaluate and interpret the occurrences (Bhal et al., 2009). Additionally, at this stage, employees get the chance to become active and think about ways to contribute to the change (Weick et al., 2005). Research shows that employees who regularly receive significant

information from their supervisors have more opportunities to actively participate in the change process. This in turn can significantly improve their attitudes towards the merger (van Dam et al., 2021), implying that in their sensemaking, employees tend to develop ambitions to proactively work towards a successful post-merger organization after the initial shock of a merger announcement. In their study about middle managers' rationalizing, Kroon and Reif's (2021) found that compared to the emotionally charged senseseeking, the middle managers "rationalized the integration process and emphasized a pragmatic approach" (p. 19) once they overcame the senseseeking state. So far, this has not been evaluated regarding employees' sensemaking of a merger. Sensemaking is "a fundamentally social process: organization members interpret their environment in and through interactions with others, constructing accounts that allow them to comprehend the world and act collectively" (Maitlis, 2005, p. 21). Hence, whether employees can rationalize and ultimately make sense of a merger, heavily relies on the exchange with other organizational members, especially their middle management (Bhal et al., 2009).

2.2. The Role of Middle Managers and Their Sensegiving Practices

During mergers, middle managers act as change intermediaries (Balogun, 2003). They are required to implement the changes (Huy, 2002), while also protecting the organization's operative stability during the unsteadiness of a merger (Balogun, 2003). In their position, they inherit a bridging function between the top-level management and their employees (Neumann et al., 2019). Hence, their active contribution is an important factor in mergers' successes (Papadakis, 2007). However, during mergers, middle managers also experience high uncertainties, drastic changes (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008), as well as significant losses. Among other things, middle management loses "personal and organizational significance" (Lorenzi & Riley, 2000, p. 120) because major strategic decisions are generally made by the top management and out of middle managers' control (Lorenzi & Riley, 2000). Consequently, while they are required to provide sensegiving to their employees, they must engage in their own sensemaking and are reliant on receiving sensegiving from their management, too (Appelt, 2016).

Sensegiving is considered "a crucial leadership activity during organizational change" (Kraft et al., 2018, p. 71) and is traditionally 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). That said, this present study follows Kihlberg and Lindberg's (2021) more participatory approach to managerial sensegiving, the so-called reflexive sensegiving. The authors define it as "a multivocal process aiming to influence *how* the sensemaking and construction of meaning evolves" (Kihlberg & Lindberg, 2021, p. 485), facilitating "employees' creation of their own definitions of reality" (Kihlberg &

Lindberg, 2021, p. 483). Middle managers are in direct contact with their staff and consequently are the “most immediate representative of the organization” (Bhal et al., 2009, p. 609) to lower-level employees. Hence, middle managers are supposed to be aware of their subordinates’ tasks and needs and thus inherit an important function as sensegivers during major organizational change. This enables them to cater to those specific contexts and frame the change as meaningful for each employee’s individual situations (Appelt, 2016).

By fulfilling their role as “emotion managers” (Kroon & Reif, 2021, p. 3), leaders can prepare their subordinates for the changes ahead and significantly influence their responses to mergers (Bhal et al., 2009). They are responsible for a regular flow of communication as well as information through which they can influence their staff’s sensemaking of a merger (Kroon & Reif, 2021). Hereby, “effective employee communication is the glue that holds an organization together, and during major change, that glue becomes even more critical” (Barrett, 2002, p. 231). To reach all elements of employees’ sensemaking process, middle managers should provide sensegiving in all forms of direct as well as indirect communication, and use different formal and informal routes to reach their subordinates (Appelt, 2016). Furthermore, leadership should be “receptive (i.e. addressing concerns), participative (i.e. interpreting organizational change), and compensating (i.e. balancing positive and negative aspects)” (Kihlberg & Lindberg, 2021, p. 483) in their sensegiving.

Additionally, as sensemaking is “grounded in identity construction” (Weick, 1995, p. 17), it is part of middle managers’ responsibility to facilitate their employees’ identification with the new organization (Routila, 2022) and to proactively prevent cultural clashes (Marks & Mirvis, 2011). While a strong identification with the pre-merger culture (in-group) can cause a strong disparagement of the merging partner’s culture (out-group) (van Vuuren, 2012), it increases the likelihood of employees engaging in communication practices in the pre-merger phase, which in turn can improve their acceptance of the merger itself (Thach & Nyman, 2001). Research shows that employees’ identification with and commitment to the new company increases when they are kept up-to-date about the merger and feel sufficiently informed by their management (Zagelmeyer et al., 2018). Here, middle managers must not over- or under-promise the merger’s implications. Otherwise, they risk the authenticity employees ascribe to their organization based on the promises made by the middle management and what the company ultimately delivers (Cording et al., 2014).

2.3. The Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX)

Middle managers are likely those organizational members most aware of lower-level employees’ emotional needs (Huy, 2002). This increases the likelihood of their employees appreciating their sensegiving, given that middle managers must be aware of their staff’s sensemaking backgrounds in order to offer appropriate sensegiving (Appelt, 2016). This way,

immediate supervisors can support their subordinates' attempt to find answers to the questions "what's going on here?" and "what do I do next?" pointed out by Weick et al. (2005, p. 412). Unlike Weick's focus on individuals may suggest, sensemaking and -giving have been shown to take place in various social contexts (Appelt, 2016), which further highlights the importance of taking into account the relationships that underly the sensemaking and -giving dynamic between employees and their middle management.

Generally, for middle managers' sensegiving attempts to be fruitful, employees need to be able to understand the messaging, trust their supervisors, and be open to their support and guidance. Hereby, employees' trust in leadership is heavily built on the relationship they have with them (van Dam et al., 2021) and how knowledgeable they perceive their middle management (Nikolaou et al., 2011). This is especially important during mergers, as "trust to supervisor displayed its most significant effect on employee satisfaction, emphasizing the important job of first-line supervisor in retaining high employee morale and satisfaction during organizational change" (Nikolaou et al., 2011, p. 735f.). According to LMX, "truly effective leadership – the type of leadership in which leaders are able to exert considerable incremental influence with their people and they with their leader – occurs when leaders develop mature leadership relationships with their followers" (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1991, p. 29). A high-quality LMX relationship between subordinates and their leadership has been shown to significantly impact employees' responses to mergers (Bhal et al., 2009) and increase change information as well as employees' change participation (van Dam et al., 2021). Furthermore, there are "three change process characteristics (i.e. information, participation, and trust in management)" (van Dam et al., 2008, p. 313) that can be enhanced through a high-quality LMX relationship and ultimately mediate employees' acceptance of a merger (van Dam et al., 2008).

Mergers usually not only transform an organization's positioning within the market but lead to fundamental changes in the workforce. Research shows that mergers increase turnover intention. Furthermore, while employees often remain in their pre-merger positions, managers tend to be appointed to new teams (Smeets et al., 2016), which leads to changes in the composition of the workforce. This reveals one of the great dilemmas mergers bring along, as the turbulences of it enhance the need for strong LMX relationships between employees and their middle managers but are often also the reason for an organization's structure to change drastically (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008).

2.4. Research Gap

Scholars agree that many mergers do not live up to the expectation their decision-makers have of them. Yet, although research emphasizes the importance committed employees play in mergers' successes, the state-of-the-art literature about sensemaking and sense-

giving during mergers has mostly been focused on top and middle managers. Consequently, the present study contributes to the body of research about employee responses during mergers, by examining which modes of sensegiving by their middle managers employees recognize and appreciate concerning their own sensemaking of a merger. Given that mergers are viewed as “one of the most enduring and impactful radical changes shaping organizations” (Teerikangas, 2020, p. 266), conducting research about employees’ experiences and needs regarding managerial sensegiving during mergers is crucial. Additionally, more recent approaches to sensegiving suggest the importance of viewing sensemaking and sensegiving as a social activity that occurs in various social contexts and thus relies on relationships rather than mechanical top-down transmissions of meaning. Hereby, LMX can provide the lens to further investigate the relationship underlying the sensemaking and -giving dynamic between employees and their middle managers.

While Kang et al. (2020) rightfully point out that there is no “one-size-fits-all” (p. 58) integration approach, the following research question was formulated to determine practices that provide orientation for middle managers on how they can assist their employees’ sensemaking of a merger: **In their sensemaking of a merger, which sensegiving practices do employees recognize and appreciate in middle manager's communication?**

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

For this study, I chose a qualitative research design, given its focus on employees’ subjective perception of their middle managers’ sensegiving approaches during the SHARE NOW merger. Qualitative research is suitable “to discover the meaning that people award to their social worlds and to understand the meaning of their social behaviour” (Boeije, 2010, p. 35). Employees have been found to react with a variety of emotions towards mergers, ranging from excitement to heightened stress and confusion (Kroon & Reif, 2021). This demonstrates the complexity of such major organizational change. Furthermore, it raises the question of which sensemaking efforts employees employ and what kind of communication by their middle management they recognize and appreciate as sensegiving in dealing with the various emotions that accompany a merger. Through a retrospective, single case study, the sense-making techniques of former car2go and DriveNow employees concerning the SHARE NOW merger were explored. Given that “sensemaking is understood as a process that is... retrospective” (Weick, 1995) and many merger-related outcomes do not become evident until around two years after a merger (Kroon & Noorderhaven, 2018), the retrospective design of the study seemed suitable.

Semi-structured one-on-one interviews were chosen so that the individual interviewees could freely express their thoughts and experiences concerning the merger. Besides, the interview guideline allowed for standardization to a certain extent and ensured that the research topic was touched on by all participants. As qualitative research is highly case-dependent (Boeije, 2010), this study does not allow for statistical generalizability but offers analytical induction (Starman, 2013).

3.2. Research Setting

My study is based on the sensemaking process of SHARE NOW employees' who experienced the merger between car2go and DriveNow. Here, sensegiving practices by their middle managers they appreciated as helpful were investigated. I experienced the initial phase of the SHARE NOW merger as an intern at car2go Iberia S.L.U. in Madrid, which initiated my interest in this research topic. To further examine the merger from a scientific perspective, I returned to SHARE NOW for eight months in February 2022. I joined the organization's global communications team in Berlin as a working student, with a focus on internal communications. This way, I was able to immerse myself in the company and understand the dynamics of the post-merger firm and its development since the merger took place. For this research, I only had permission to conduct interviews with SHARE NOW employees and therefore, did not include specific secondary sources in my research findings. However, thanks to my position, I had access to internal and external communication that was published during the merger process. In addition, during my employment at SHARE NOW, I engaged in several informal conversations about the merger with employees from various organizational levels. Consequently, I was able to develop extensive knowledge, which helped me to formulate interview questions and comprehend as well as fact-check the interviewees' responses. Due to my own positive experiences with the pre-merger phase and the fact that only employees who 'survived' the merger were included in this research, this present study likely represents a slightly one-sided perspective. However, including organizational members who were able and willing to remain in the post-merger firm provided a suitable sample for this study, with its focus on middle managers' sensegiving that was appreciated as helpful by employees regarding their sensemaking of the merger.

Resulting of the merger between car2go and DriveNow, SHARE NOW was founded as one of five mobility services under a joint venture of the BMW Group and Daimler AG on February 22nd, 2019. Once car2go and DriveNow had merged, their customers could then access the joint fleet consisting of various vehicle models through the fully integrated app (SHARE NOW, 2019). The SHARE NOW merger can be classified as a "full integration", because a new company was formed by merging the two organizations, including all their operative areas (Zagelmeyer et al., 2018). After the merger, SHARE NOW operated its free-

floating fleets in 30 cities with 20.000 vehicles, counting four million customers (SHARE NOW, 2019).

Car2go, which was first founded in 2007 in Ulm, offered over 14.000 cars in 26 European, North American, and Chinese locations. The company pioneered free-floating car-sharing. Since 2010, car2go was owned by Mercedes-Benz Mobility AG. DriveNow, on the other hand, was founded as a joint venture in 2011 in Munich and was wholly owned by BMW Group since 2018. In the end, DriveNow operated in 12 European cities with more than 6.500 vehicles. Due to the merger, the previous headquarters in Stuttgart (car2go) and Munich (DriveNow) were relocated to one joint headquarter in Berlin (SHARE NOW, 2022). Like many organizations post-merger (Smeets et al., 2016), SHARE NOW experienced voluntary and involuntary turnover, among other reasons, caused by the relocation of the headquarters. Of those SHARE NOW employees who had experienced the merger and were still part of the organization when this present study was conducted, most were previously employed by car2go. While car2go and DriveNow were structured differently, the way the two companies operated and the customers they targeted were similar. By having been the two major car-sharing providers that pioneered the free-floating sector, the two firms shared similar visions prior to the merger. Given that the cultural fit between pre-merger firms is a “make-or-break factor” (Appelbaum et al., 2007, p. 192) for a merger’s success, this is expected to have facilitated the merger outcome for SHARE NOW.

That said, at the time the data for this research was gathered, SHARE NOW was undergoing an acquisition by Free2move, which was announced in July 2022. Consequently, my interview participants were dealing with uncertainties regarding the current acquisition at the time I conducted the interviews. These uncertainties were heightened by an official announcement concerning the acquisition by Free2Move that was communicated to the whole company after the sixth interview was completed. Hence, it is to be expected that the situation influenced the interviewees' responses to some extent. Due to the heightened workload and stress levels among the workforce, two SHARE NOW employees cancelled the scheduled interview. Additionally, of those who participated, some had to be reminded to focus on the merger between car2go and DriveNow rather than on the acquisition. However, the occurrences related to the acquisition by Free2Move seemed to have encouraged SHARE NOW employees to reflect on their experiences with the previous merger outside of my interviews. This likely enhanced the details my interviewees included in their timelines, the richness of their recollections, and consequently my interview findings.

3.3. Data Collection

3.3.1. Participants

A total of twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2022 between August and September. As stated, originally, two additional responses were aimed for, but ultimately, rich data could still be collected and at the end of the interview process, no new data, themes, and codings were generated (Guest et al., 2006). Due to my employment at the company of interest, I could easily access potential interview partners. The population the sample was drawn from consisted of SHARE NOW employees who had been employed at one of the pre-merger firms since no later than December 2018. Furthermore, only participants were included who did not officially report directly to the board of management but to a middle manager at the time the interviews took place. This way, I hoped to prevent a potential bias between their own role as middle managers during the ongoing acquisition by Free2Move and their past merger-related experiences as a lower-level employee. However, it is important to note that due to the flat hierarchies at SHARE NOW, some employees nevertheless worked closely with various top managers.

After identifying all suitable candidates, around ten per cent of eligible employees were selected through theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 2017a) and contacted via their company emails. This way, a diverse selection of employees from different departments and backgrounds could be included in the study. Around 50% of those contacted agreed to participate in the study. With most SHARE NOW employees who experienced the merger having a background at car2go, a majority of former car2go employees were chosen for this research. In total, ten participants were former car2go employees (ID-1-2; ID-5-12) and only two respondents were previously employed by DriveNow (ID-3-4) (see table 1), which, at the time the interviews were conducted, roughly represented the actual distribution of the two groups in the company. With the SHARE NOW headquarters located in Berlin, most interviewees were based in the German capital. Some, however, worked in other SHARE NOW locations. Seven of the participants were male and five female. All interviewees reported that their work was affected by the merger but only four stated their actual position or job description changed because of it (see table 1).

Table 1*General Information About the Interview Participants.*

ID	Position after merger	Pre-merger firm	Middle manager post-merger	Relationship w/ middle manager	Mixed team?
ID-1	Changed	car2go	Stayed the same	Mostly good	Yes
ID-2	Stayed the same	car2go	Stayed the same	Mostly good	Yes
ID-3	Stayed the same	DriveNow	New	Good	No
ID-4	Changed	DriveNow	New + <i>unclear/interim</i>	Difficult	Not in the period covered by their timeline
ID-5	Stayed the same	car2go	New + <i>unclear/interim</i>	Good	Yes
ID-6	Changed	car2go	New + <i>unclear/interim</i>	1 st MM difficult, 2 nd MM good	Yes
ID-7	Stayed the same	car2go	Stayed the same	Very good	No
ID-8	Stayed the same	car2go	Stayed the same	Good	No
ID-9	Changed	car2go	New	Very good	No
ID-10	Stayed the same	car2go	Stayed the same	Good	No
ID-11	Stayed the same	car2go	Stayed the same	Superficial	Barely
ID-12	Stayed the same	car2go	Stayed the same + <i>unclear/interim</i>	Very good	Barely

Note: ‘Position changed’ refers to an official change in the interviewees’ job description that happened because of the merger. ‘Unclear/interim’ refers to a period where the remainder or replacement of the respective middle manager was unclear. ‘Mixed team?’ refers to the team consisting of both former car2go and DriveNow employees.

3.3.2. Operationalization

For the in-depth, semi-structured interviews, I followed Zwijze-Koning et al.’s (2015) interview procedure, utilizing the critical incident technique (hereinafter CIT).

By an incident is meant any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act. To be critical, an incident must occur in a situation where the purpose or intent of the act seems fairly clear to the observer and where its consequences are sufficiently definite to leave little doubt concerning its effects (Flanagan, 1954, p. 327).

The CIT already proved itself in the context of merger research to elaborate on employees’ experiences with the change process (Durand, 2016). Hence, implementing the CIT in this study seemed sensible and promising. The reason the technique can be widely used lies in its flexible set of principles that can be altered depending on the field of research (Flanagan, 1954). Thanks to the qualitative approach, “rich meanings and interpretations may be derived from CIT data” (Zwijze-Koning et al., 2015, p. 49). Through a predefined series of questions, the researcher can ensure that the interview participants elaborate in detail about the occurrences as well as the consequences of each incident (Zwijze-Koning et al., 2015). In line with Zwijze-Koning et al. (2015), I aimed for the interviews for this present study to last

between 45 and 120 minutes. Ultimately, the duration ranged from 45 to 80 minutes, with an average length of 59 minutes.

However, unlike Zwijze-Koning et al. (2015), I combined the CIT approach with the visual interview technique, more specifically, a timeline approach. In past research, the visual timeline approach enabled scholars to gather rich data through telephone interviews (Pell et al., 2020). Therefore, I expected the technique to also be applicable to the online meeting format I chose for most of my interviews. By using visual techniques during interviews, participants are required to look at a topic through an additional lens. This allows for a more complex recollection of experience and can consequently enhance interview findings (Bagnoli, 2009). Timelines are one way of employing the visual interview technique and allow respondents to visualize specific events, arrange them in chronological order, appoint meanings or emotions to them (Berends, 2011), and speak freely about their experiences (Bagnoli, 2009). Furthermore, interviewees can think about sensitive topics before the interview and lean onto their timelines for support during the unfamiliar interview situation, by using them as a memory aid (Bagnoli, 2009). This can give interviewees a sense of ownership regarding the insights they grant the interviewer (Pell et al., 2020).

By asking all participants to fill out a timeline with at least five relevant incidents prior to the interviews, I combined the CIT with the visual interview technique. Consequently, all respondents had thoroughly thought about their most critical incidents during the merger beforehand. I added a second dimension to the timeline as the participants were instructed to rate each incident on a scale ranging from positive to negative (see appendix B.). This way, I encouraged the interviewees to elaborate on sensitive topics and their emotions. The beginning and end of the merger and consequently the span of the timeline depended entirely on the respondents' perceptions. On average, 5,6 incidents were included in the timelines.

In past research, Zagelmeyer et al. (2018) effectively combined a 'temperature curve' method with the CIT concerning managerial communication during mergers. Given that a similar approach was examined before, the intention of employing the CIT and visual interview technique in the present study was not to thoroughly test these two techniques in the merger context, but rather facilitate the extraction of rich findings from the interviews.

3.3.3. Interview Guide and Procedure

The interview language was mostly German because ten participants were native German speakers. All relevant quotes from these interviews were then translated into English. Despite the project language being English, I decided to carry out the conversations in German, expecting the interviewees and myself to feel more comfortable with it. Research shows that even in multinational organizations like SHARE NOW, where English is the primary language, interviewing people in a language other than their native language poses risks to

the accuracy of the findings (Welch & Piekkari, 2006). Two interviews, however, were conducted in English as I did not speak the interviewees' primary language fluently. Nevertheless, since I aimed for a diverse sample, this risk was accepted. To ensure the participants' anonymity, I do not share the IDs of the two non-German speakers. All interviews but one were conducted using Google Meet which is the company's primary tool for online meetings. Ideally, the interviews would have taken place in a real-life setting, but unfortunately, this was not possible because most SHARE NOW employees continued to work from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, not all respondents were located in Berlin. Hence, online meetings appeared to be the best alternative and allowed for higher comparability between the interview data. Due to one participant's circumstance, their interview was conducted via telephone. Prior to the interviews, the participants were informed about the nature of the study and signed an informed consent form which was approved by the University of Twente's ethics committee (see appendix A.). Additionally, all interviewees were educated that they could ask questions before, during, and after the interviews. Furthermore, they knew of their right to withdraw from the interview at any moment. To take into account the aforementioned official communication that took place after the sixth interview and its implications for my interviewees, I gave room to talk about the occurrences related to the ongoing acquisition after each interview. Of course, none of that information was included in the recordings nor this study's findings.

To ensure the participants' anonymity, no information regarding their specific positions or departments is shared. In line with these measures, interviewees are identified by numbers to avoid recognition while allowing for the greatest possible transparency. Moreover, I refer to interviewees without disclosing their gender to further increase confidentiality. I attained authorization from SHARE NOW to conduct the interviews and to use the data as the basis for this research. In return, I agreed to grant the company access to the research report before its publishing.

An interview guideline was developed for all semi-structured interviews, granting some structure while allowing the participants to speak freely. First, I obtained consent from all participants to record the interviews. The respondents were then asked to state their pre-merger firm, former as well as current position, and whether their team and/or middle management had reformed. When interviewees mentioned having undergone any of said changes, I encouraged them to specify whether they thought it happened because of the merger or due to unrelated circumstances. This way, I could get a first feel of the participants' sentiments regarding the merger, while still utilizing an easy-to-answer question. These first questions were helpful to "break the ice" (Adams, 2015, p. 498) and allowed the interviewees to warm up to the unfamiliar situation.

Following Flanagan's (1954) recommendations concerning appropriate interview techniques for the CIT, the interview participants were then asked to present their timelines and elaborate on the incidents that they perceived as particularly relevant during the entirety of the merger process. Like Zwijze-Koning et al. (2015), I interrogated follow-up questions after each incident mentioned by the respondents. Besides some comprehensive questions, I mostly requested specifications on how the respective incident made the interviewee feel; if they had needed and/or received support from their middle manager, and if so, how that looked like; how they and/or their team dealt with this incident; and why they positioned it as positive/neutral/negative on their timeline. Depending on the information already shared by the participants, I asked them to state which communication settings or meeting formats with their middle managers they perceived as particularly helpful during the merger, as well as their overall sentiment towards the process. This last part ultimately allowed the participants to discuss the entire merger after having been encouraged to focus on those very specific incidents.

While this interview guide stayed more or less the same throughout the study, I implemented slight changes along the way. To pilot test this interview guide, I discussed the interview questions with a fellow SHARE NOW colleague who fit the criteria for the final respondents (Adams, 2015). Firstly, I presented the timeline to them and asked if they found anything to be unclear. Afterwards, I asked them the initial questions regarding their position, manager, as well as pre- and post-merger teams. We then discussed one relevant incident they experienced during the merger and finally talked about their sentiment towards the merger as a whole and their preferred contact moments with their middle manager. While the pre-test did not lead to any major changes in the interview guide, it disclosed areas where I as a researcher had to pay attention to remain in a more neutral position and ask questions in a less nudging manner. Given that interview guides "should ... be considered a work in progress" (Adams, 2015), I constantly revisited my interview guide, especially after conducting the first few interviews.

3.4. Data Analysis

The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and then thoroughly studied to get a first impression of reoccurring themes in the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For the subsequent processing of the interviews, qualitative analysis was employed. As defined by Boeije (2010)

qualitative analysis is the segmenting of data into relevant categories and the naming of these categories with codes while simultaneously generating the categories from the data. In the reassembling phase the categories are related to one another to

generate theoretical understanding of the social phenomenon under study in terms of the research question (p. 76).

A coding scheme was established, examined, and adjusted through axial coding. "Coding refers to the identification of topics, issues, similarities, and differences that are revealed through the participants' narratives and interpreted by the researcher. This process enables the researcher to begin to understand the world from each participant's perspective" (Sutton & Austin, 2015). The codebook (see appendix C.) was mainly developed based on open coding, including some in-vivo codes. However, certain codes were derived from theoretical concepts (Glaser & Strauss, 2017b). The extensive literature analysis of state-of-the-art research I had executed before conducting interviews equipped me with existing theoretical models. Some of them acted as the basis for codes such as '*sensemaking*' and '*sensegiving*'. Other codes were equally influenced by the data and theoretical concepts, such as the code '*relationship with middle manager*'. While many interview participants mentioned the relationship with their supervisor, this code also draws on the LMX theory.

Originally, I had planned to strictly distinguish between employees' senseseeking and sensemaking. However, I realized that the whole sensemaking process cannot clearly be divided because the transition is fluid. Therefore, I decided to consider employees' sensemaking as one process and distinguished it into senseseeking and rationalizing, following Kroon and Reif's (2021) classification. This way, the differentiation is less rigid but senseseeking is still considered the initial step of sensemaking, followed by the subsequent step of employees being able to rationalize the changes in the second phase. Consequently, I renamed the category from '*employees' senseseeking and -making*' to '*employees' sensemaking*' and changed the codes that were previously grouped as '*sensemaking*' into '*↑knowledge, ↓uncertainty – rationalizing*' and '*contributing to merger – rationalizing*'. I coded uncertainty and questions expressed by my interviewees as '*uncertainty*' which I then accounted to 'senseseeking' in the codebook. Together, '*senseseeking*' and '*rationalizing*' make up the concept of sensemaking. The various ways in which the interviewees felt supported by their middle management were classified as '*sensegiving*' and the absence of this support as '*lack of sensegiving*'.

The transcripts were divided into text fragments and then coded with the program ATLAS.ti 22 for qualitative analysis, resulting in first-order codes. Along the way, codes were merged, changed, deleted, or adapted to the topics touched on by the interviewees, leading to first-order categories. This process can be exemplified by the category '*lengthiness of the merger process*'. During the coding procedure, three separate in-vivo codes were created based on the data: 1. '*merger took years*'; 2. '*company stuck in waiting position*'; and 3. '*cartel office*'. When looking at the first two codes, I realized that both concerned the lengthiness of the merger process. Consequently, I grouped these codes and named the group accordingly.

When I examined other codes, I recognized that all text fragments assigned to the ‘*cartel office*’ code addressed the limbo phase between the merger’s announcement and waiting for the cartel office’s approval. It became clear that the company being stuck in a waiting position referred to the same problem. Therefore, I merged the ‘*cartel office*’ code into ‘*company stuck in waiting position*’. The remaining two codes within that category were kept separately because the merger taking years to complete referred to the whole process, whereas the second code only accounts for a specific moment before the PMI phase (see table 2). By following this procedure with all codes, I managed to slim down the codebook and ended up with relevant codes that are precise without being too specific.

Table 2

Text Fragments Coded Within the Category ‘Lengthiness of the Merger’.

Merger Took Years	Company Stuck in Waiting Position
<i>“[A merger is] not a sprint, it’s a very long run, it’s a marathon, it’s not 100 meters.” (ID-7)</i>	<i>“We heard about rumours regarding this this merger and that was not nice because we saw the company stuck in a waiting position without developing things but waiting for that kind of merger.” (ID-6)</i>
<i>“They say a merger is very stressful and you’re not going to get rid of everything 100%. If you say in a year you’re going to go through the merger, and it’s all done. No, it isn’t.” (ID-9)</i>	<i>“But you weren’t allowed to talk about anything yet. So, it was more or less, it was more or less a year of speculation. Many consultants and so on were with us and we were always told that we were not allowed to talk, we were only allowed to talk once the cartel office agreed.” (ID-12)</i>

To increase reliability, one of the interviews was randomly selected and coded by a second coder who used the same codebook and program as me. Around 70% of the codes were consistent across both coders. Based on the inconsistencies, I revised the codebook and merged some codes, such as specific cost-saving measures, into more general codes. Once I had checked and altered them within my codebook, I sorted all text fragments according to their assigned codes. Constant comparison (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) helped to further develop the coding process. This not only allowed for the segmenting and reassembly of the data (Boeije, 2010) but “making comparisons [also] assists the researcher in guarding against bias, for he or she is then challenging concepts with fresh data” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 9). Through the reassembly of the data, systematic patterns, parallels, and differences between the twelve interviews became apparent. This acted as the basis for “theming” (Sutton & Austin, 2015, p. 229) the codes into second-order themes (*Relationships & Trust; Sensemaking & sensegiving; Openness towards the merger & understanding*) which were then utilized to answer this study’s research question.

3.5. Qualitative Criteria

Lincoln and Guba (1986) formulated strategies to enrich a study's trustworthiness. Several of their suggested methods were implemented in this study to increase its credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Regarding credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1986), the data gathered through the interviews was cross-checked by an in-depth literature analysis of existing studies. Additionally, I could rely on my own experiences with the merger and at the post-merger firm to validate participants' statements. Given the risk of bias (Yadav, 2022), I discussed my findings with colleagues and fellow university students. Due to my employment in SHARE NOW's communications department, I established a "prolonged engagement" (Yadav, 2022, p. 686) with other departments and SHARE NOW employees over the course of several months. Consequently, I was able to spend "adequate time observing various aspects of a setting, speaking with a range of people, and developing relationships and rapport with members of the culture" (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006), which has been shown to enhance the "understanding and co-construction of meaning between researcher and members of a setting" (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

In terms of transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1986), a distinct sample of former car2go and DriveNow employees from a variety of departments was selected to maximize variation. Additionally, the interview participants were of different age groups. With seven male and five female respondents, the distribution of gender was quite even. Furthermore, the thick description of the research environment describes the context of the study. Additionally, with mergers being a common strategic decision in the automotive (Warter & Warter, 2017) as well as the car-sharing industry – for example with the recent acquisition of Volkswagen's WeShare by Miles Mobility (Mortsiefer, 2022) – the findings are expected to be relevant and applicable to other contexts, especially in this particular sector (Sutton & Austin, 2015). However, the limited number of research participants calls for caution concerning the findings' transferability.

To increase the study's dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1986), detailed descriptions of methods, procedures, and decisions are to be presented. Consequently, the methodology of this study is described in detail and the coding scheme is presented. To ensure consistent and repeatable findings (Sutton & Austin, 2015), the second coder who coded parts of the interview transcripts had "no stake in the research" (Yadav, 2022, p. 686).

Lastly, regarding confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1986), quotes from the qualitative interviews are included in this report. Additionally, the interview guideline was constructed in a way that allowed the interviewees to speak freely, with minimal interventions from me as the interviewer. Hence, the data is following the respondents' perspectives to a great extent. Engaging an uninvolved second coder is also expected to have helped to reduce potential research bias (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

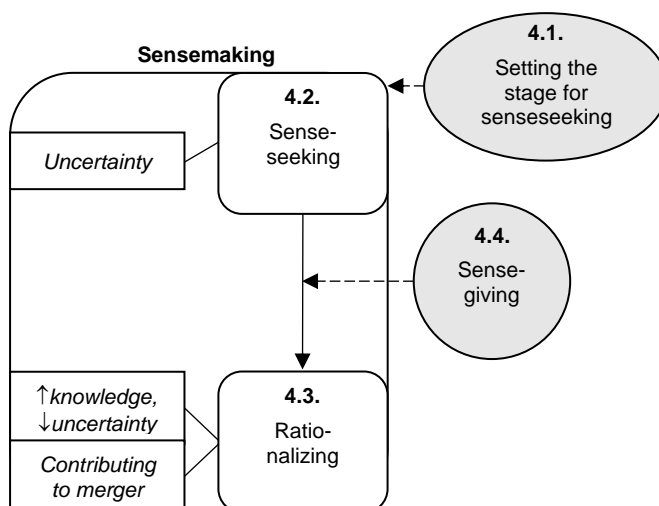
4. Findings

The data analysis revealed different aspects of the interviewees' sensemaking of the merger as well as sensegiving by their middle management that they appreciated during the process. Thanks to the CIT and visual interview technique, rich data could be collected, as the interview participants were well able to recollect their experiences with the SHARE NOW merger and elaborated in detail on the most relevant incidents regarding their individual sensemaking approaches.

In the following chapter, firstly, preconditions for employees' senseseeking are explored. Afterwards, I explicate employees' sensemaking by elaborating on the interviewees' senseseeking and rationalizing approaches. Lastly, I explain sensegiving attempts by middle managers that were appreciated as such by their subordinates (see figure 1). Overall, the merger caused employees to feel many emotions such as stress, anxiety, uncertainty, and sentimentality of having to let go of their pre-merger firm, their "*baby*" (ID-1, ID-4). Yet, the process of making sense of it, with the support of their middle management's sensegiving, seemed to have empowered many employees and changed their perspective to the merger being worth the challenges: *"You also learned a lot of things and so on. It all made sense then and this sense-making was very, very necessary for me and that's what probably got me through this time"* (ID-12).

Figure 1

The Sensemaking and -Giving Dynamic.



4.1. Setting the Stage for Senseseeking

This theme is relevant to grasp the study participants' sensemaking approaches and to understand what type of sensegiving they perceived as helpful or had wished for. When

looking at the data it became clear that all interviewees' circumstances differed both on a personal as well as professional level. In this study, only those employees were included who 'survived' the merger and still worked for SHARE NOW when the interviews were conducted. This implies that they were sufficiently open to the change to make it through the turbulences of the process. The data further supported this as only one interviewee seemed to have experienced the merger as primarily negative. Though, over time, even this employee got used to the idea of joining forces: *"What's new, you first repel. But over time, my God, you get used to it In the end it did work out"* (ID-3). Consequently, the data is based on employees' recollection of the merger who were open-minded towards the change and able to engage in constructive senseseeking.

The findings demonstrated that the situation imposed several challenges on employees. Once confronted with the merger – either through rumours or official internal communication – many questions and uncertainties arose among my interviewees, triggering their senseseeking. Thus, the employees' senseseeking was particularly present during the early stages of the merger, as they were not yet aware of the implications it would have on their jobs, their teams, middle management, and the future of the company. At this stage, middle managers were able to support their employees' rationalizing by employing different sensegiving approaches. Additionally, the interview data showed that employees' perception and appreciation of their middle managers' sensegiving was highly dependent on the relationship and trust between them.

4.1.1. Background Information and Openness to the Merger

Many interviewees talked about voluntary turnover within their teams when the former car2go and DriveNow headquarters were moved to Berlin. Furthermore, several former car2go employees stated that various processes were adapted from car2go, creating the impression that *"for the DriveNow colleagues it was always more a feeling of a takeover than a merger"* (ID-2), which may have been *"the reason why a lot of people left"* (ID-2). According to those interviewees, many DriveNow colleagues decided to leave the company as a result.

- *You simply have to say that SHARE NOW is mostly car2go. So, a few, in [redacted] [other department] there are relatively many from DriveNow. But otherwise, if you look around, ... you have somehow always thought, okay, actually, the poor DriveNow people. You're actually completely car2go and a few DriveNow-Hansels had to fit in* (ID-11).
- *And I think too much attention was paid to ... the fact that we are all SHARE NOW now, so to speak, instead of saying, okay, let's face it, f***, it's not cool, it's more of an acquisition of DriveNow than somehow a merger of car2go and DriveNow. The new*

thing is SHARE NOW, it's rebranded from car2go, the employees from DriveNow are now at car2go (ID-12).

While most interviewees were very open and even excited about the merger: *"I mean, joining goals and and effort to to focus them in the same direction, it was very exciting, the atmosphere was thrilling"* (ID-7), that does not mean that they did not feel challenged or overwhelmed at times:

So, the merger itself: rollercoaster. Just when you think, okay, it's working, I can finally breathe again, it starts again and takes your breath away. So, you never know what's around the corner It was just a tackle on daily business. You must learn to prioritize, without prioritizing you break yourself ... and that was a learning (ID-9).

Furthermore, employees being open to the merger does not automatically imply that they agreed with all decisions made by their middle management, top management, or shareholders:

So, the strategic idea made sense to me. ... Yes, of course, details like that can always be done differently, but overall, that's the status now. Is that the structure I would have liked to have? No, it never was. But nevertheless, that's just a decision that has been made and now, I'm just an employee, I also have to live with it (ID-5).

Indeed, one fundamental change of strategy initiated by the shareholders was perceived as a very relevant and upsetting part of the merger and was mentioned by nine out of the twelve interviewees. In this regard, however, it is important to first learn about the Day One party in Berlin that was organized for all former car2go and DriveNow employees from all European and North American locations. At the event, everyone was presented with the new company name and the vision for the newly created YOUR NOW joint venture that was envisioned to become a *"mobility powerhouse"* (ID-8) and to *"conquer the world"* (ID-8). The interview data showed that this event had a great impact on the SHARE NOW employees, given that all but one of the participants talked about it. Furthermore, the interviews revealed that the party was highly motivational for the employees, creating high hopes for the future of SHARE NOW among the workforce: *"Then with this event has, it has actually led to us being like, 'okay, it's sad that the old is over, but cool, now comes the new, that will be something great, we are up for it'"* (ID-1). However, shortly after, budget cuts were implemented, and SHARE NOW closed all North American as well as some European locations. Daimler and BMW explained:

While we had remained hopeful that we would be able to come to a solution — especially these last few months — we are ultimately not in a position to commit to the level of investment necessary to make the North American market successful both in the near and long term (as cited in Hawkins, 2019).

This left many of the interviewees upset and feeling like the merger had gotten an “*aftertaste*” (ID-1). *“I mean, we are talking about the party that cost [redacted] [a lot]. So, you, if you want to cut the budget [redacted], you don’t organize that stuff”* (ID-1). The budget cuts were perceived as lowlights by most interviewees:

Then came one, the only real low point. Not for me personally, but for the company, I must say. New board members or CEOs came in [at BMW and Daimler], And the two successors were also not so keen on this idea of sharing cars (ID-5).

This change of direction also becomes apparent in this quote by Daimler CEO Ola Källenius: “If we return to luxury as our core, we are on the right track” (as cited in Hubik & Murphy, 2020). To limit the exposure of internal information, I decided to use official sources in this section instead of in-depth information extracted from the interviews. I believe they are important to understand employees’ sensemaking, yet these brief statements published in newspapers essentially convey the interviewees’ responses and should be sufficient background information for the reader.

4.1.2. Relationship Between Employees and Their Middle Management

The crucial role middle managers play during organizational change becomes clear in the following quote by interviewee 12 who was wondering whether a new supervisor would be appointed to their team: *“Well, who will be our new daddy or mommy now?”*. Although this quote conveys a hint of irony, the parent reference nevertheless illustrates the protective and guiding function middle managers inherited. This demonstrates the complexity of the employee and middle manager dynamic, as, on the one hand, interviewees expected their supervisors to keep them safe from extreme merger-related turbulences: *“But I think it [contact with middle manager] just gave me more, more security. In that sense, all these insecurities, which you are ultimately also afraid of”* (ID-1). On the other hand, given the interviewees’ willingness to engage in senseseeking and contributing to the merger, they were demanding guidance during that process from their middle managers and highly appreciated when they did receive it: *“The support we received was outstanding. There was such a big collaboration in making those things work. ...We knew where the goal was and that the journey might have been hard. But yet, we reached the goal”* (ID-7). By putting in the effort to build a strong relationship with their employees, middle managers were able to act as sensegivers during the merger.

The relationships between employees and their middle management were rather complex according to the interview data. For example, some interviewees had long-lasting relationships with their middle managers but did not report the same level of trust and guidance as others whose middle management was newly appointed during the merger process. For example, interviewee 6 had known their initial middle manager for a while but, at that time,

found more support in the relationship with their direct colleagues: *“It depends, also, of course, from the, from the relationship that you have with your direct manager. The, the feeling that you have with him or her. So basically, I found the support more with through my, my colleagues”*. On the other hand, some interviewees had not yet known their middle managers for a long time but still expressed a high-quality relationship with them. For example, interviewee 3: *“So, the former supervisors ... all left to [redacted] [other company] and [redacted] [middle manager] was really, I don’t have anything bad to say, actually rather better”* and *“during this merger, I have to say, [redacted] [middle manager] was the only one, let’s say, the only direct supervisor in my career, who ... supported us this well in the end”*. Similarly, interviewee 9 had a very good relationship with their newly appointed middle manager that implied great sensegiving potential: *“I think it helped the team a lot that there was also a [redacted] [middle manager] there, trying to help with interpretations ... you can try to motivate people as much as you can and that’s what he actually did”*. These interviewees did not think that a strong relationship with a middle manager they had known for longer would have facilitated their sensemaking of the merger. However, those interview participants who had had a high quality and long-lasting relationship with their middle manager did think adapting to a new middle manager would have been hard on them: *“The cooperation was actually characterized by friendly behaviour that was transparent and based on trust, and I think for us it would have been bad indeed in that situation if the team lead at the time had said: ‘I’m leaving’”* (ID-1). Similarly, the seventh interviewee was convinced that the middle manager and team staying the same throughout the merger made it easier for them:

[It] let us focus on the most relevant things, without having to take care of new relationships with new colleagues or learning how to work with a new managers or new ways of, of conceiving the, the job, understanding how to get along well. Honestly, yes, having had the chance to stay the very same and to focus on the most relevant thing of the merger has been a really big thing for us, what was extremely helpful.

4.1.3. Trust Between Employees and Their Middle Management

The idea of a good relationship being beneficial for both the employees and the middle managers also became apparent regarding trust: *“This common trust was, was the key of working”* (ID-7). Mostly, interviewees talked about their direct managers placing trust in them: *“I receive a lot of trust [from my middle manager] and get to work independently a lot of the times”* (ID-10), but some also mentioned how trusting they were of their immediate supervisors. As demonstrated by the following statement, mutual trust was voiced as a crucial aspect for both employees’ and middle managers’ ability to deal with the tasks and challenges imposed by the merger:

So, it's always a mutual, let's say, basis of trust or working relationship. [Middle manager] knows that if he says something, it will be implemented, and if I have something, I know that [middle manager] will do something about it. So, we both have no problems. That's a relationship of trust, I'd say. He knows that everything is running smoothly, and that also means that you as a supervisor have less work. (ID-3)

Additionally, the interviewees appeared to be quite trusting of the process and excited to build a new company: *"It was kind of beautiful to see that somehow everyone could help to a certain extent and somehow contribute"* (ID-4). While many interviewees reported feeling disappointed due to some of the strategy changes, the data generated through this study also showed how understanding and trusting employees were of the situation: *"I think many [of these] promises could not be kept either. I don't think it was even the fault of individual people. It was simply a decision that was made at levels that we could not influence"* (ID-1). In fact, most interviewees seemed very well able to differentiate between this frustration about certain decisions made on higher levels and working towards merging car2go and DriveNow to become a strong car-sharing company. This was also reflected in the interviewees' understanding that specific information could not be shared at certain points in time: *"Like I said, I'm not in their shoes, it probably made sense that they couldn't confirm that or so"* (ID-10). Furthermore, the respondents were convinced that many decisions were simply not in their middle managers' hands and some information unavailable to them, too: *"My team lead couldn't have done anything there. If Daimler and BMW say ..., then that's the way it is. My team lead could turn upside-down, there won't be falling much more off this ... tree"* (ID-1) and *"they lack of information, also, the same. So, I mean, they were lost, too"* (ID-6).

4.2. Senseseeking

To begin with, all interviewees reported sensemaking activities. Especially the respondents' senseseeking was very prevalent in the interview data. The findings demonstrated that the merger imposed several challenges on employees. Once confronted with the merger – either through rumours or official internal communication – many questions and uncertainties arose among my interviewees, triggering their senseseeking. Thus, the employees' senseseeking was particularly present during the early stages of the merger, as they were not yet aware of the implications it would have on their jobs, their teams, middle management, and the future of the company. The interviews revealed three main occurrences that triggered this first phase in employees' sensemaking: the rumour phase and/or finding out about the merger; the lengthiness of the merger process; and cost-saving measures. However, the data showed differences in how the interviewees were affected by these events.

Firstly, the rumours about a potential merger between car2go and DriveNow that were spread by the newspaper 'Manager Magazin' were mentioned by most of the research participants as a cause for uncertainty. At the time, the plans of merging the two car-sharing competitors were held under disclosure, so neither car2go's nor DriveNow's management could comment on these rumours. Consequently, the employees were left wondering whether the rumours were true:

Of course, you know that there's probably something to it [the rumours] and you think about it. And I'll put it this way, a manager magazine is not the BILD newspaper. So, if they write something like that, then of course they have sources somewhere who know something. Yes, well, of course you can never judge at what stage it is and whether it will really come about. But you know that something is being cooked and is coming your way (ID-2).

While this particular interviewee was not overly concerned about a potential merger, some employees worried immensely. Those who asked their middle managers or the top management about the rumours distributed by the 'Manager Magazin' reported having received a no-comment, no matter their position. This led to frustration since it kept interviewees from executing their jobs to their aspired standard, as exemplified by the following quote:

That was always a certain, well, in a certain way unsatisfactory little game, because one had already suspected that other people could not, were not allowed to or did not want to say something that they actually knew, and which would somehow be necessary for one's own work. ..., that's just unfortunate when you don't have the full information about what might happen in half a year (ID-5).

Overall, all but one interviewee placed the way they found out about the merger in their timelines as one of the most relevant incidents of the whole merger. That said, not all interview participants learned about the merger through rumours. How they were informed about the merger and how they perceived it varied profoundly (see table 3). While some thought of it very negatively, others were thrilled about the possibility of joining forces with their company's main competitor. Some interviewees had mixed emotions.

Table 3*Examples From Interview Timelines: Learning About the Merger.*

Interviewee	Quote from Timeline	Rating of the Incident
ID-1*	<i>“Official confirmation that the merger will happen → Change to be expected in so many areas, unsecurity on the future, many questions”</i>	Rather positive
ID-2	<i>“Announcement merger: relevant as this sure would have an effect on my work”</i>	Rather positive
ID-4	<i>“The moment I found out about the merger. During my vacation, through the media. Internal communication came later than public communication: uncertainty, fear, many questions/emotions”</i>	Very negative
ID-11	<i>“First announcement of merger: excited for new tasks and challenges, excited that Berlin might be new office location ..., uncertainty (I like when things are not completely predictable)”</i>	Very positive
ID-12	<i>“It was really weird that it [rumours about merger in Manager Magazin] lead to a no-comment, or rather a denial. ... I have always called the year 2017 the ‘grim year of denial’”</i>	Negative

Note: *see Appendix B.

As stated, most participants experienced high uncertainties raised by the lengthy period before the cartel office’s approval and/or SHARE NOW’s Day One:

On the one hand, the phase before, everything that happened before that, was insanely characterized by speculation, which of course also fuelled uncertainty. For me, that was also relevant, because of course with this official confirmation ..., of course also came a lot of uncertainty, so many questions, Many uncertainties, many questions, especially about things that are actually very important for [redacted] [their department] and our business. So that means the strategy, be it what happens with colleagues with double positions? What happens to the brands? So, there were a lot of fundamental questions that were simply unanswered, that we couldn't answer, and that's why this was the most important event for me, especially at the beginning (ID-1).

In total, nine interviewees pointed out that the merger taking several years posed many challenges and demanded a lot of perseverance from the workforce. The interviews showed that the lengthiness of the process was perceived as one of the biggest hurdles for their sensemaking. The importance placed on the lengthiness of the merger by the interview

participants highlights that the employees' sensemaking was hindered due to the waiting position they and the whole company were in.

Furthermore, the aforementioned cost-saving measures and the shareholders' change of strategy were mentioned by ten interviewees as highly relevant to their merger experience. Hereby, among other things, participants referred to the closure of all North American locations. This took place in the post-merger phase and resulted in various senseseeking patterns. It is noticeable that the more knowledgeable interviewees were about specific figures and the company's strategy, the less upset and uncertain they reacted to the announcement.

That is, often, we simply knew in advance what was coming. ... We always have a very good overview Therefore, that helps, of course. I think for others, if you don't know exactly how the numbers are, then it can come as a big shock. You somehow come out of this euphoria from the beginning and then you learn, oh God, ... now all of a sudden, cities are closing. I don't think that was such a surprise for us (ID-11).

Those interviewees who were already aware of specific background information before the announcement of the withdrawal from the US market did not necessarily feel the need to seek sense. On the other hand, those employees whose positions did not grant them access to specific figures were more reliant on reaching out, for example to their middle managers, to receive information to then be able to make sense of certain occurrences. The following quote demonstrates one employee's need to engage in senseseeking and their longing for comprehensibility:

I think what is always helpful is comprehensibility. Of course, not all of us are, and I'm not someone who is so deeply involved in the financial figures, but if you make it comprehensible, for example, okay, we had to close North America because Then I think it's always easier to understand when you have concrete figures like that, at least for me, than when you just say, okay, it's not going well and we're closing it now, just like this But of course, that's also something that can't always be communicated to everyone in the same way, obviously that also depends on the position if people have more or less insight (ID-8).

Moreover, the data implied that those who had previously experienced major organizational change did not feel the need to engage in senseseeking as much as those interviewees who had not experienced anything like a merger before. For example, interviewee 2 had been through similar situations in their career. Consequently, “[the merger announcement] didn't challenge me as much, and I would say that if you have 10 years of professional experience, then of course you also know these situations. It's not like this is the first time I've done this”. On the other hand, among others, interviewee 4 had less experience with organizational change and faced a lot more uncertainty: “You don't know what's going to

happen next and what exactly that means. I had never been through anything like this before. And that's why it was all very new and you kind of have a lot of questions”.

The data further supported that employees' senseseeing is closely related to the relationship with their middle management as well as the quality of their middle managers' sensegiving. Based on the generated interview data, interviewees 4 and 6 have shown the most senseseeing activities. Interestingly, those were also two out of three interviewees who, compared to other respondents, perceived the relationships with their middle managers as more distanced. Among other things, these two participants stated unclear divisions of tasks, and an unclear future of their middle managers' as well as their own positions. Furthermore, interviewees 4 and 6 described a lack of sensegiving from their middle managers when they had needed it.

Overall, all interviewees required guidance from their middle managers, even those who were used to working rather independently. While their senseseeing and consequently their desire for managerial sensegiving varied, all interview respondents reported increased sensemaking activities during the merger. The vast majority of them turned to their middle managers for support.

4.3. Rationalizing

The interview data showed that employees' rationalizing of the merger mainly occurred in two steps. Firstly, by gaining more and more knowledge about the merger, employees could reduce their uncertainty and ultimately move on from the senseseeing to rationalizing:

Then we got together in small groups from both sides and just looked, okay, how are they organized? How are we organized? And then we picked out the best for SHARE NOW, to get to know each other, you saw, okay, it's not at all the case that maybe only the, well, because of course we at DriveNow were always somehow a bit afraid, so, yes, now car2go is coming and we have to do everything like they do it at car2go and only the employees will be taken over and we'll all have to go, and then you slowly realized, it's not like that at all, but actually a new company is being founded (ID-4).

Many stressed how the merger forced them to grow and made them “more independent..., more courageous” (ID-1), “learn many different things” (ID-12), and “learn from each other what made each one of us great. And do it together” (ID-7). Consequently, the many challenges the merger produced, offered employees a learning opportunity and encouraged a solution-oriented mindset.

Once employees gathered sufficient knowledge, they could then translate it into action and actively contribute to making the merger work. Furthermore, this study's interview participants emphasized that it was crucial for them to feel needed and equipped to contribute to the merger:

It is the most positive event [in their timeline] because you actually do something. So, you work on it yourself, so that it goes forward, so that the vision can come to life, so that we can solve problems and grow, right, and as efficiently as possible. And if you can contribute to that, then it's cool. So that's very motivating. Exactly, because then of course, the insecurity that may have built up before, disappears. You don't have time for that anymore. Instead, you work on specific topics, and that's how you realize, okay, what I'm doing makes sense and you're needed (ID-10).

This especially appeared in the post-merger phase when the employees had overcome the initial uncertainty of the merger announcement and knew what steps they and their teams were required to take to positively impact the merger's outcome. The interview data showed that a *"thrilling atmosphere"* (ID-7) was created when the teams and/or the entire organization worked towards the collective goal of a successful merger: *"And that's what we're missing quite often now, that the whole company, in 2019, had the goal... to get this merger between car2go and DriveNow done, in 2019. And everyone was sort of working towards it"* (ID-12).

After employees had received information, among other things through suitable communication from their middle management, they were able to rationalize the occurrences and conclude their sensemaking. That said, throughout the merger, new challenges and uncertainties arose, demanding employees to continuously seek sense and rationalize the organizational changes.

4.4. Middle Managers' Sensegiving

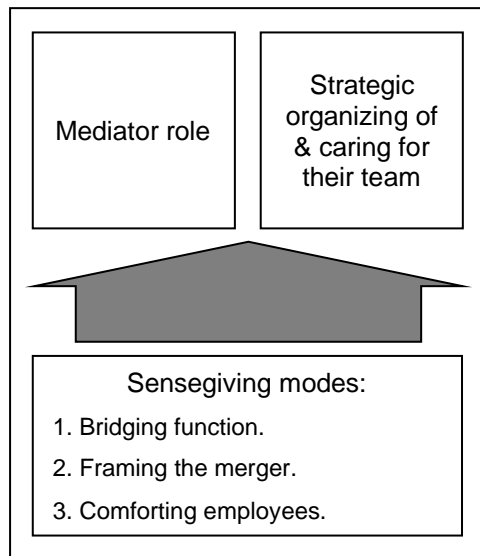
The following quote demonstrates the individuality of employees' backgrounds, their level of informedness, and the implications for middle managers' sensegiving approaches:

Not everyone, I would say, has the same level of knowledge about the status quo ... may not even be able to assess it yet, because the information is withheld from them. Maybe that's the right thing to do. But I think you have to proceed individually. So, you actually have to meet the people at their level of knowledge and, yes, probably quite individually. So, there are also those who are familiar with certain numbers, topics, for example, and others are not (ID-5).

All but one interviewee reported having appreciated helpful sensegiving practices from their middle management. Besides the individual needs of each employee, I found common patterns in the interview data (see figure 2).

Figure 2

Sensegiving Dimensions.



4.4.1. Middle Managers' Mediator Role and Strategic Organizing

Firstly, middle managers inherited a **mediator role**. According to the interview data, they needed to cater to various organizational members and constantly juggle their different responsibilities. On the one hand, middle managers were informed about and worked towards the top management's plan, while also being involved in their employees' specific tasks. That said, the employees who took part in this study valued their middle managers' mediator role and found that it enabled them to provide their employees with meaning regarding the merger. Additionally, interviewees talked about the duality of their middle managers' task of being highly skilled professionals in their field while also managing a team. The interview data indicated that the middle managers' workload increased dramatically during the merger. While in some cases this duality led to respondents feeling left alone, in many instances it had a sensegiving effect on my interviewees. By showing that they were working hard towards a successful merger and wanting to prove their teams' relevance, middle managers reassured their employees that the merger was worth the stress. Knowing what exactly their middle managers were working on also heightened the employees' understanding when they were unable to immediately respond to their problems.

However, the interview data demonstrated that the middle managers' responsibilities regarding their managing function increased, too, given that their employees required more guidance during the merger. The interview participants expected their middle management to demonstrate that managing their teams was at least as important to them as their more practical tasks: *"Of course, they were busy with it [appointments] and probably didn't have much time. But I think that in this phase, you simply have to take the time for employees to*

somehow clarify things and simply be there for questions” (ID-4). Experiencing their supervisors’ support while being aware of their middle managers’ heavy workload made employees feel seen:

You couldn’t have done it better than he [middle manager] did.... He was busy for a week just to, I’d say, [redacted] and to take care of [redacted] [his employees]. And then he himself has not done ... his work and has also the pressure that he must convey the numbers and must implement this and that. So, from that point of view, you have to say hats off that he did that (ID-3).

Secondly, this study’s findings suggested that during mergers, middle managers’ responsibility of **organizing their teams strategically** as well as **caring for their team members’** needs and uncertainties becomes especially important. The interviewees emphasized that their routines and chores changed immensely during the merger, requiring a new division of tasks within their teams. Based on my interview data, having a clearly defined assignment within the turbulences of the merger was helpful to employees and reduced their uncertainties. In line with this, interviewees also found it to be sensegiving, concerning their sensemaking of the merger, when their middle managers mapped out the road ahead of them. Especially those employees who had not experienced a merger before valued being informed in detail of what they could expect along the way. Regarding the effective organizing of their teams and getting an impression of their employees’ needs, three particularly useful meeting formats were repeatedly mentioned by my interview participants. Generally, some respondents stressed the overall importance of real-life encounters. In their experience, it made it easier to get to know each other and facilitated the detection of the team members’ different emotions. Furthermore, some had the impression that unforeseen events could be better handled when physically working side by side.

To begin with, regular team meetings with the purpose to organize each day or week from a more practical standpoint were perceived as helpful. This draws back to everyone knowing what their task was and which merger-related issues needed to be addressed at the time. Compared to the following two meeting formats, these team meetings were not implemented because of the merger but already took place beforehand and continued to be scheduled afterwards. Hence, the participants reported of them as being a format that was adjusted to the emerging topics throughout the merger process.

Additionally, Q&A sessions seemed to have helped employees in their sensemaking, as they gave them space to ask all their questions and worries in a safe and dedicated environment: *“Although everyone knew that there ... are no answers for many things. But at least one could ask one’s questions. I think that also helped [redacted] [middle manager] a lot, basically to get a feeling for what’s on people’s minds” (ID-12).* This quote indicates that Q&A

sessions were also an important tool for middle managers, as they granted them to immediately learn about and react to rumours. This is relevant because rumours relating to the SHARE NOW merger were not solely distributed by the 'Manager Magazin' but also by employees: *"I would also say that [within our team] many rumours arose that, in retrospect, were not at all true. A lot was interpreted into something that, in retrospect, was not at all correct or did not occur at all"* (ID-4). It should be noted though that one employee felt like the Q&A format was employed too frequently during a time when many answers were not yet available. Others valued such meetings for that exact reason. Knowing that nothing had happened reassured them that they had not missed any new developments. During the interviews it became apparent that Q&A sessions were held in various settings ranging from a small number of team members to an entire department to the whole company, depending on available information and topics discussed.

Moreover, one-on-one meetings between middle management and employees played an important role in most of the interviews. Several respondents considered them the most important format during mergers out of the three. According to the interview data, these meetings with their informal nature allowed for a more personal setting that was tailored to each employee's individual needs. This enabled the supervisors to either address their subordinates' worries or choose a more rational approach: *"Of course, [redacted] [middle manager] knew that I was very interested in details, and he took the time to discuss these things with me. Which you don't necessarily do in the big team meeting"* (ID-12).

4.4.2. Sensegiving Modes

The interview data disclosed sensegiving modes that were perceived as helpful by the interviewees in various contact moments with their middle managers. According to the interview data, the **1. bridging function** middle managers inherited became especially apparent regarding their mediator role, in which they acted as intermediaries between the top management and their teams. While this complex position posed challenges, knowing that their middle managers inherited a bridging function between their teams and other departments as well as the top management gave my interview participants peace of mind: *"Obviously, [middle manager] has a certain influence and that was a very direct way. So, if you needed a decision, he took care of it quickly and unbureaucratically. That was very lean. That was good"* (ID-5). In line with this, the interviewees appreciated that their team's priorities, problems, and needs were not only seen by their middle management but also communicated to the rest of the company by their supervisors. Additionally, the middle management's bridging function ensured that the teams' achievements were communicated to other organizational members, which made them proud to have contributed to the merger: *"For the*

████ [department] I can say, and that is also where I contributed the most, we have done this really well” (ID-10).

Additionally, based on my findings, employees appreciated when their middle managers directly addressed their subordinates' senseseeking by **2. framing the merger** as a sensible decision. Sensegiving was enabled by offering interpretations regarding the reasons behind the shareholders' decision to merge as well as the merger's implications on the employees' individual and the organizational level. This facilitated middle managers' sensegiving, even for factors that were out of their control. Hereby, simply sharing their personal interpretations of certain issues with their staff and showing how their employees could contribute to the merger was perceived as helpful by several interview participants. While most interviewees had the impression that their middle managers were not sufficiently informed to frame the merger in every detail for them, they still valued when their supervisors were transparent, clear, and honest with what they could or could not share.

Moreover, many interviewees noticed and appreciated sensegiving when their middle managers framed the merger as a learning opportunity. This helped my interview participants to realize that they were granted new possibilities and that the merger offered room for personal and professional growth. The immense potential of it is shown in interviewee 9's description of their middle managers' behaviour of framing the merger as a learning opportunity after the announcement of cost-saving measures:

... people from our team also had to leave. He [middle manager] was still transparent. He informed the whole team what the targets were. But he kept giving us space The first thing was: 'Okay, let's talk about the elephant in the room', 'how do you feel emotionally?', 'what can I do?', 'I know it's an uncertain time but unfortunately, I don't have any info and I can And that was, but he didn't portray himself as Superman, but also shared his worries It is the way it is; we are human beings and everyone has their own personal story behind it He didn't hold it back from us, he also gave us space for the emotions, but he also made sure, and then also motivated us, in a positive sense: 'Use the tools we have. Where you think you don't have knowledge yet, use the █████ and learn and get the experience, it's good for your CV'. So, he motivated everyone and also always pushed us: 'Where there is still lack of knowledge, invest in it. Whether you are the one to leave or not, it doesn't matter, but make the most of it while you are here'.

Additionally, middle managers trusting their teams to solve problems – even if it took longer than doing it themselves – while signalling that they were there to support their employees, had an immense sensegiving effect on this study's interviewees: *“I handled many purely technical things myself and was also very well supported. So that's actually always the case*

with us, that there's a lot of trust. But if something goes wrong, we can always let them [middle manager] know" (ID-10).

Lastly, **3. Comforting their employees** throughout the process was perceived as a crucial mode of managerial sensegiving by the interview participants. Drawing on the importance of the relationship between employees and their middle management, the data suggested that for middle managers to be able to effectively comfort their staff, they must be approachable for both practical and emotional issues. Some interviewees needed it more than others but at some point, all of them had wished for and/or valued their middle managers being there for them and encouraging an open-door policy. All interview participants experienced forms of stress and uncertainty during the merger. Even teams that worked together well and had great support from their middle management faced major issues and setbacks. The respondents thought highly of middle managers who gave room to all emotions felt by their employees while supporting them in dealing with negative emotions. Yet, the data gathered through the interviews with SHARE NOW employees suggested that when middle managers had a generally positive outlook on the merger, their employees felt encouraged and reassured that the merger made sense: *"He also gave us space for emotions, but he also checked in, and then also motivated us, in a positive sense"* (ID-9). To be able to comfort employees, my interviewees stressed the importance of middle managers knowing their subordinates well. Hereby, the interview data showed that this was also possible without a long-term relationship in place.

5. Discussion

The interview findings showed the relationship and trust between employees and their middle management to enhance their sensemaking and -giving dynamic, hence, being an important factor in employees' perception of managerial sensegiving. The interview participants observed their middle managers as mediators and responsible for strategically organizing their teams and equipping them for the merger-specific requirements. According to the interview findings, this included caring for their employees' needs to decrease resistance towards the merger and helping their staff to overcome initial uncertainties. The main modes of sensegiving extracted from this research were the middle management's bridging function during a merger, their task of framing the merger for their employees, and comforting them throughout the process.

5.1. Relationship and Trust

In a time where middle managers have to make sense of the corporate change themselves (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), and may not have built long-lasting relationships with

their team members yet, giving sense to their employees clearly is a challenging task. However, the interview data demonstrated the potential that lies in the employee and middle manager relationship regarding employees' sensemaking of a merger. Similar to previous studies, it became apparent that relationship-based leadership could positively affect change processes during the merger due to "mutual support, trust, and loyalty" (van Dam et al., 2021, p. 435). In a study conducted by Zagelmeyer et al. (2018), interviewees who had a good relationship with their leaders experienced higher information flow, which is in line with my findings.

However, my data suggested that a long-lasting relationship between employees and their middle managers is not necessarily beneficial for managerial sensegiving. According to LMX theory, high LMX relationships evolve over time and are to be judged based on a series of events (Park et al., 2015). This has proven true for those interviewees who had a high-quality relationship with their middle manager for months or years prior to the merger. Thus, ideally, skilled middle managers should be appointed to teams long before a merger, because employees could indeed benefit from a long-lasting, high-quality relationship with their middle managers. Nevertheless, for those employees who did not have a strong relationship with their middle managers to begin with, the factor time did not seem to increase the confidence in their middle managers' ability to guide them through the merger. My findings demonstrated that several interviewees who had new middle managers appointed to them during the merger, experienced high-quality LMX relationships. These middle managers executed helpful sensegiving strategies and regularly offered clear, honest, and transparent communication. Van Dam et al. (2021) stress that "it is of crucial importance that middle managers are competent for change management" (p. 445). Consequently, appointing well-equipped middle managers to each team should be prioritized over ensuring long-lasting relationships between employees and their middle management during mergers.

In my study, most employees reported both having trusted their middle managers and having been trusted by their middle managers. Kroon and Reif (2021) describe such reciprocal support as a "give and take game" (p. 22), which also became clear in my interviews as several participants stressed the importance of mutual trust within the employee and middle management dynamic. Additionally, according to my interviewees, being aware of their middle managers' trust and support to independently solve merger-related problems reinforced said mutual trust. Similarly, previous research shows that giving employees the possibility to participate in change processes can increase the trust they place in their leaders (Appelt, 2016). The mostly transparent, clear, and honest communication by SHARE NOW middle managers, as reported by my respondents, increased their trust in their supervisors. This is in line with Zagelmeyer et al.'s (2018) observation that employees tend to distrust their management when they feel that information is being withheld from them.

5.2. Sensemaking

The uncertainties of the merger prompted my interview participants to seek sense regarding its implications for themselves, their teammates, middle managers, and the future of the company. This strengthens previous research stating that mergers heighten employees' urge to predict the implications it has on their jobs (Zagelmeyer et al., 2018). Like Weick et al. (2005), I observed my interviewees wondering "what's going on here?" and "what do I do next?" (p. 412). This was especially prevalent regarding the three main occurrences that caused senseseeking activities among my study's respondents (the rumour phase and/or finding out about the merger; the lengthiness of the merger process; and cost-saving measures). Overall, all interviewees dealt with several "merger stressors" (Cartwright & Cooper, 1990, p. 71). According to my interview data, most of these stressors were caused by uncertainty, mostly in the early stages of the merger, when a lack of information and clear communication was prevalent. This relates to previous research pointing out that employees often experience higher levels of uncertainty, stress, and anxiety during mergers (Zagelmeyer et al., 2018), especially in the early stages of change processes (Kraft et al., 2018), which can then trigger senseseeking activities (Kroon & Reif, 2021).

My study participants were mostly open to the change and showed dedication and motivation to contribute to the merger's success. This is in line with Durand's (2016) findings, who observed "motivated and committed" (p. 97) organizational members and consequently counterargued the common conception of a demotivated and resisting workforce during mergers (Sonenshein & Dholakia, 2012). Research shows that major change can also trigger positive emotions such as "hope, relief, and even joy" (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010, p. 568) among employees. While my interview data certainly pointed out factors that discouraged employees, several respondents reported that particular challenges elicited immense potential. My findings revealed that certain occurrences and practical issues heightened interviewees' motivation to put in a lot of effort and time to contribute to the SHARE NOW merger. Likewise, previous research shows that negative emotions can positively influence merger outcomes (Kroon & Reif, 2021). Additionally, Durand (2016) found that "conflict or difficulties due to the changes entailed by the merger... are perceived as challenging, but in a positive way. The challenges due to the merger are perceived as a driver to satisfaction, motivation, and success" (p. 96).

Once the cartel office had approved the merger between car2go and DriveNow, the interview participants reported increasingly positive emotions, since they were finally able to rationalize the merger and contribute to it. My research findings clearly demonstrated that to do so, employees required knowledge, allowing them to overcome the senseseeking stage and gain an understanding of how they could participate in the process. Hence, they needed to receive information to be able to rationalize the merger and consequently be equipped to

make sense of it, which supports previous research (Ager, 2011; Bordia et al., 2004). Rationalizing the organizational change, working towards a collective goal, and being proud of what they were able to achieve took away employees' attention to the unknown and let them focus on the tasks at hand. This is supported by van Dam et al.'s (2021) observations that employees who can contribute to mergers feel more in control of the process. Nelissen and van Selm's (2008) concluded that the organizational change subject to their study "seemed to be a necessary 'evil' for survivors, with some advantages on the collective organizational level and hardly any benefits on the individual level" (p. 314). On the contrary, my research showed that employees can see personal learning opportunities in a merger. Hence, my study's findings imply that when employees are able to rationalize a merger, they can then be dedicated to its success and accepting of the turbulences the process entails.

Those employees who participated in my study all 'survived' the merger. Nevertheless, several interviewees reported voluntary turnover, especially on the DriveNow side, which is a common side-effect of mergers (Appelbaum et al., 2007). Furthermore, the interview data and my own experiences in the company showed that SHARE NOW adapted many of the former car2go structures and processes. Consequently, most former car2go employees did not experience a significant amount of crossover with colleagues from the opposite pre-merger firm in their daily work, nor had to adapt to a completely different way of working. Hence, cultural integration was barely mentioned as a cause for employees' sensemaking during the SHARE NOW merger. This contrasts previous research that identified cultural clashes as a relevant factor in merger failures (Marks & Mirvis, 2011; Nguyen & Kleiner, 2003). The fact that the offered services of car2go and DriveNow were fairly similar to begin with and more car2go than DriveNow employees remained at SHARE NOW could be an explanation for why the merging of the culture seemed to have run relatively smoothly. Additionally, it likely meant that, unlike commonly observed in merger processes, my interview participants did not have to construct a vastly different social identity at the post-merger firm (van Vuuren, 2012).

5.3. Middle Managers' Sensegiving

In line with the definition of reflexive sensegiving utilized in this present study, the findings did not lead to a specific set of sensegiving practices only applicable during mergers but rather disclosed sensegiving dimensions that were especially important in employees' sensemaking of a merger. This supports Kihlberg and Lindberg's (2021) conception of reflexive sensegiving being characterized by its "open-endedness, low control over cues given, multiple sources of cues, and the encouragement of complexity and ambiguity" (p. 485). Overall, past research as well as this present study demonstrate that there is not a one-size-fits-all solution due to a variety of factors playing into employees' ability to make sense of a merger (Kang et al., 2020). Hence, middle managers cannot simply apply one communication

strategy to all team members. Instead, they must listen to their employees' needs to then be able to understand their thought patterns, actions (Nelissen & van Selm, 2008), and sensemaking backgrounds (Appelt, 2016).

5.3.1. Sensegiving Dimensions

My study showed that managerial sensegiving by middle managers is crucial in facilitating employees' sensemaking of a merger. During mergers, employees demand a steady information flow and are eager to increase their knowledge (Bhal et al., 2009). This supports my findings of employees' longing for comprehensibility and feeling informed. My interview data revealed that even those employees who were used to working rather independently and did not require a lot of guidance, showed increased senseseeking activities and uncertainty, mostly during the pre-merger phase. This underlines the importance of middle managers recognizing this heightened demand for information and incorporating it into their sensegiving efforts (Kraft et al., 2018). Consequently, they are required to implement communication practices to manage "employee satisfaction, sense of control, and job satisfaction" (Bordia et al., 2004, p. 360f.). Comparable to Appelt's research (2016), my study suggests that direct supervisors should reframe the merger as something positive rather than daunting, explain why the organizational change was necessary, give an outlook on how the process will evolve, and offer their employees reasons to actively participate in the change. Hereby, "explaining involves convincing subordinates through rational cognitive reasoning" (Varma, 2012, p. 140).

Furthermore, my findings suggest the importance of the bridging function middle managers inherited. In their role as "change intermediaries" (Balogun, 2003, p. 75), middle managers can communicate their teams' problems as well as achievements to the upper levels of management, while also translating decisions made by the top management to their employees in an understandable way. In this regard, my interview data implied that employees' sensemaking does not require extensive familiarity with every merger-related decision made but is rather based on sufficient knowledge of what to expect from the process and how each team and employee can contribute to it. This is in line with Weick's (1995) conception that sensemaking "is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy" (p. 17). My data supported previous scholars' recommendations that in their mediator role, middle managers should provide their subordinates with "a workable interpretation" (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 443) and aid them in forming "appropriate cognitions" (Bhal et al., 2009, p. 608). According to my interview participants, their middle managers had to communicate bad news about decisions made by the top management regularly, such as cost-saving measures. Consequently, employees demanded explanations from their supervisors. This further demonstrated the diffi-

culty of middle managers' roles of having to act as "active sensegivers" (van Vuuren, 2012, p. 49) while being "seen as the sensebreakers in the first place" (van Vuuren, 2012, p. 49).

Additionally, framing the merger as a change process that offers great opportunities for the organization as well as the employees was acknowledged by the research participants. This is in line with Varma (2012) who, among others, identified the motivational frame in middle managers' sensegiving, that is aimed at energizing and the enactment of employees during major organizational change. That said, my findings imply that middle managers must not sugar-coat the merger and need to be transparent, clear, and honest with what they can or cannot share, as well as the reasons behind it. Similarly, previous research recommends that middle managers "pass down relevant, accurate and timely information about the change" (van Dam et al., 2021, p. 435) and communicate openly, honestly, and frequently with their staff. This has been shown to enhance employees' emotions during merger processes (Zagelmeyer et al., 2018).

Additionally, it became apparent in the interview data that the position middle managers inherit during mergers offers the opportunity to frame the merger as a unique learning opportunity for their employees and to encourage their development. Similarly, Kroon and Noorderhaven (2018) found that "if managers emphasize in their communication ... that the merger may even provide opportunities for further professional growth, this will help in gaining their willingness to cooperate" (p. 233). Moreover, previous research found that by allowing employees to employ a solution-oriented mindset and bringing their ideas to the table, middle managers can foster their staff's growth (Zhou et al., 2008; Thach & Nyman, 2001). Additionally, previous research states that it is change managers' responsibility to "create and communicate win-win potentials, ensuring that all parties involved understand that they are not asked to sacrifice their self-interest, instead they are invited to participate in a process of mutual betterment" (Will & Pies, 2018, p. 291). This is supported by my interviewees' appreciation of having received opportunities to solve problems independently and thus contribute to the merger's success while knowing that they can always reach out to their supervisors for support.

My research findings further demonstrated middle managers' responsibility of organizing their teams strategically and caring for their employees' needs and uncertainties. Concerning the practical side of setting up their teams for the merger process, my interview data suggested that one key sensegiving approach from middle managers should be the clear division of tasks within their teams. This way, every team member knew what they were supposed to work on and what their role was within the organization. My interview participants then felt empowered to contribute to the merger, which in turn increased their motivation and susceptibility to the change. This supports Bhal et al.'s (2009) findings that middle managers can support employees in shaping their roles. Additionally, many of my study participants

stressed that while the merger increased their workload, their middle managers' capacities were taken up even more, which is a common effect during merger processes (McCann et al., 2008). Ensuring their employees that they were working hard to achieve their team's targets and being transparent with their own workload helped to frame the merger as being worth the additional stress and consequently benefitted the managerial sensegiving. Furthermore, my interview participants felt reassured in their sensemaking when their middle managers mapped out the road ahead of them to equip them for what they could expect from the merger process. In line with this, Ancona (2012) states that "in an age where people are often anxious about their circumstances, mapmaking becomes an essential element of sensemaking and leadership" (p. 6). My data further supported the conception that by supporting employees' sense- or meaning-making, managers can create an environment in which their subordinates feel enabled to implement change (Sonenshein & Dholakia, 2012).

All these sensegiving dimensions have been shown to provide answers to the employees' questions that were in line with Weick et al.'s (2005): "what's going on here?" and "what do I do next?" (p. 412). However, unlike the previous research, my study highlights that middle managers' sensegiving during mergers, as recognized and appreciated by their employees, does not only require providing practical answers but also catering to their subordinates' uncertainties that these questions express. Consequently, in this present study, comforting employees by demonstrating that they were at their employees' sides throughout the process and conveying hope that they would get through the turbulences of the merger was extracted as a crucial mode of sensegiving. Additionally, my findings showed that middle managers should be aware that some of their employees view them as parent-like figures during the merger process. Many of this study's interview participants recalled having looked up to their middle managers for guidance, trusting that they had their best interests in mind. Previous research shows that middle managers "take on the role as parental actors who offer care, advice and protection" (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020, p. 144), which, according to my findings, is an effective sensegiving practice during mergers.

While my interviewees valued middle managers being open with their feelings and interpretations, my research's findings nonetheless demonstrated that middle managers who had a generally positive mindset regarding the merger had a sensegiving and motivational effect on their staff. This supports previous research stating that by displaying excitement about the change process, middle managers can affect their employees' outlook on it (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Barrett (2002) concluded that "managers must model the behavior they expect of their employees" (p. 221). However, for middle managers to create a positive atmosphere within the teams, my data implied that they need to implement ways to give room to all emotions felt by their employees. Hereby, they should assist their staff in dealing with them, instead of creating a culture that encourages employees to bottle up their negative feelings.

In line with this, Kroon and Reif (2021) stress that middle managers must be compassionate with employees' negative emotions during mergers.

5.3.2. Suitable Meeting Formats and Rumour Prevention

My interview participants stressed the importance of regular exchanges with their middle managers in different settings during the merger. Given the relevance the interviewees placed in several meeting formats and contact moments with their supervisors, my findings validated Barret's (2002) call for managers to engage in "interpersonal communication training, [and] meeting management" (p. 222). My interview participants recalled three main meeting formats as particularly relevant on the team level, namely one-on-one meetings, regular team meetings, and Q&A sessions. Overall, the results suggested the importance of real-life encounters between middle managers and their teams. My study's respondents noted that it was easier to get to know each other, detect different emotions within the team, and handle unforeseen events. This is in line with other research, stating that direct face-to-face communication should be prioritized over communication via different media (Barrett, 2002). According to Appelt (2016), leaders should create as many formal and informal settings for the sensemaking and -giving dynamic between their employees and themselves as possible. This supports my interviewees' appreciation of the three meeting formats of varying formality.

Regarding specific meeting formats, my study's participants found one-on-one meetings with their middle managers to be most effective in supporting their sensemaking activities. Hereby, the less formal set-up was said to allow for a more personal setting in which employees' individual needs could be catered for the best, be it emotional support or a more rational approach. Similarly, past research states that during organizational change, middle managers are supposed to assist their subordinates with their individual needs and responses (Huy, 2002; Kroon & Reif, 2021).

Secondly, regular team meetings were perceived as another helpful meeting format by the respondents. Many interviewees talked about them, yet they did not seem to be as emotionally charged as one-on-one meetings and Q&A sessions. Such meetings already took place before the merger and continued afterwards. Hence, they did not stand out as much as being merger related. While merger literature barely elaborates on general team meetings, the interview data suggested that regular team meetings still play a crucial role during mergers, as they seemed to have conveyed a sense of continuity to the interviewees. Furthermore, my interview participants described them as a helpful tool in organizing the day-to-day activities, which draws back to middle managers' responsibility of dividing tasks and 'mapmaking'. During mergers, informational meetings on the organizational level have proven useful in spreading consistent information throughout the company (Balle, 2008). My findings suggest that this effect can be translated to the team level, too.

Lastly, Q&A sessions supported the respondents' sensemaking process because this format offered dedicated time to voice their questions and worries. In line with this, Kraft et al. (2018) urge managers to "create an atmosphere of mutual trust that enables employees to share their feelings and act upon the change" (p. 82) for which they should "build a protected environment" (p. 82). Some interviewees mentioned that these formats allowed their middle managers to assess the overall mood within their team and to detect rumours that were circulating among the organizational members. Hence, Q&A sessions were a vital tool during the SHARE NOW merger, given that rumours caused major uncertainty and stress among my interview participants. In line with this, research shows that a portion of employees' sense-making takes place in informal settings with their colleagues. Consequently, leaders are required to find ways to learn about these aspects of their subordinates' sensemaking and adapt their sensegiving accordingly (Appelt, 2016).

In my interview data, two distinct versions of rumours appeared. Most interviewees talked about rumours spread by the 'Manager Magazin', in which articles about merger plans between car2go and DriveNow were repeatedly published, months before the official announcement. Previous research found that "employees expect a managerial reaction and explanation when worrisome media releases appear" (Zagelmeyer et al., 2018, p. 102). Similarly, my findings revealed car2go and DriveNow employees demanding a statement from the top management as well as their middle managers regarding these rumours. Zagelmeyer et al. (2018) found that if "rumours have already circulated in advance of the official announcement, employees feel tense or insecure and long for an official explanation" (p. 99). Hearing rumours prior to the official announcement caused frustration among the interview participants involved in this study. However, retrospectively, they were mostly understanding that, at the time, a lot could not be communicated to them. Even when no information could be disclosed, several interview participants still valued the Q&A sessions as they felt reassured that no new information was available and that they had not missed out on anything. Yet, some interviewees felt it took up time they could have used more efficiently and wished for Q&A sessions to only be scheduled when new information was available. This again demonstrated the individual needs of each employee and stresses the importance of finding ways to cater to them as best as possible, for example by implementing Q&A sessions in a non-obligatory format.

Additionally, as expected based on past research (Brousseau, 1989), some respondents reported that after the official announcement, rumours circulated about alleged upcoming changes and other merger-related assumptions among the workforce. Comparably, previous research found that insufficient top-down communication can lead to employees spreading rumours in an attempt to find answers and reduce uncertainty (Zagelmeyer et al., 2018). Q&A sessions with their middle management reassured my interviewees that no available and official information was being withheld from them, which further supports

scholars' call for efficient employee communication to contain the spread of rumours (Barrett, 2002). Furthermore, my findings suggested that by offering the space for employees to talk about their concerns, middle managers could decrease their staff's partaking in passing on rumours and consequently confine their spread within the organization.

5.4. Methodological Reflection

5.4.1. *The Investigation Period*

The nature of the incidents presented in this study supported my decision to consider the entire merger process. It is certainly sensible to thoroughly analyse a specific phase of mergers, such as the commonly studied PMI phase (Kroon & Noorderhaven, 2018; Kroon & Reif, 2021; Woehler et al., 2021). However, the scarcity of research on useful support for employees during mergers and even organizational change in general (Kraft et al., 2018), encouraged me to first understand how employees perceived the whole merger, without censoring certain parts of their experience. Additionally, by allowing the research participants to subjectively define the start and end of their merger timeline, this study provided additional insight into their entire sensemaking process of the merger. Regarding sensemaking, my interview participants heavily elaborated on their senseseeking – the first phase of sense-making. As discussed, this important aspect of sensemaking was mostly triggered during the pre-merger phase due to a lack of information available to the former car2go and DriveNow employees. Only considering the PMI phase consequently would have excluded these valuable insights into employees' senseseeking from my research. Furthermore, the lengthiness of the merger process caused a lot of uncertainty, which also supported my choice of including the whole SHARE NOW merger in this study.

5.4.2. *The Critical Incident Technique and Visual Interview Technique*

When employing the CIT, Zwijze-Koning et al. (2015) observed a “tendency to mention recurring events and even general situations disguised as events” (p. 59) among their research participants. In my study, however, the interviewees managed very well to focus on explicit incidents. I assume this was facilitated by the visual interview technique employed alongside the CIT. Similar to Pell et al.'s (Pell et al., 2020) research, the timeline approach allowed my interviewees “to take control over the direction of the interview, ownership of stories, and disclosure of rich, personal accounts” (p. 7). The detailed descriptions of their subjective views on the merger provided detailed insights into their sensemaking and their middle managers' sensegiving approaches. With the merger having taken place several years ago, this technique likely facilitated the flow of the interviews and increased the richness of information shared.

As expected, asking participants about relevant incidents during the merger led to many narrations of happenings that were very specific to the interviewees' tasks and positions compared to descriptions of their sentiments. Nonetheless, due to detailed explanations of each incident, the emotional component was accounted for in most statements, for example when interviewees mentioned feeling anxious or stressed during the implementation phase of a new technical feature. Talking about those task-related memories even seemed to have made it easier for the interview participants to recollect how they felt during the merger process. This is in line with Durand's (2016) findings, highlighting the usefulness of the CIT for employees to recall emotions they experienced during mergers. As SHARE NOW underwent the acquisition by Free2Move at the time the interviews took place, respondents understandably connected those past incidents to the current situation. These were, however, always clearly distinguishable from experiences made during the 2019 merger. Given that the interviewees were asked to prepare timelines regarding the SHARE NOW merger, the incidents included were all related to the research topic. Hence, when respondents lost track and got distracted by current happenings, I could easily refer them back to the merger-related incidents they had chosen for their timelines.

5.5. Limitations and Future Research

Besides my study's valuable contribution to the current merger literature on employees' sensemaking and their recognition and appreciation for their middle managers' sense-giving, it has limitations that should be accounted for in future research. To begin with, at the time I had planned to contact my interview respondents, I learned about Free2Move's plans of acquiring SHARE NOW. Consequently, many of my research participants were concerned about the upcoming change and worried about SHARE NOW's future. This may have affected their recollection of the merger of car2go and DriveNow positively or negatively, especially after the mentioned announcement that took place halfway through the interview process. However, many interviewees mentioned that the ongoing acquisition had already refreshed their memory of the SHARE NOW merger as they were comparing current happenings with the occurrences of 2019. Additionally, several participants mentioned that remembering that they and their teams had made it through the last merger gave them hope to once again be capable of getting through the ongoing M&A process. Therefore, the fact that the study coincided with a current acquisition is expected to have had negative as well as positive effects on this research.

Second, this research took place in an organization that was fairly similar to its pre-merger firms. This probably led to a rather accepting workforce regarding the merger. If the two pre-merger firms had operated in vastly different markets with very distinct customer

bases, the integration likely would have been harder on the employees and increased the demands on middle managers' sensegiving approaches. This study only included employees who 'survived' the merger and did not recall major senseseeking concerning their identity construction at the post-merger firm. Consequently, the responses were likely more positive than if employees had been included in the sample who chose to leave the company or lost their jobs. However, compared to my findings, middle managers' sensegiving techniques may not have become as clear in a study focused on an extremely disruptive merger situation with very unsettled employees. Hence, in a future study, it would be worthwhile investigating whether the sensegiving tools and techniques extracted in this research are also applicable in more extreme merger situations.

Another limitation may be the fact that in my daily work, I was in an inferior position to my research participants. While I did not necessarily feel inferior to my interviewees due to the flat hierarchies at SHARE NOW, these power dynamics between myself as a working student and higher-ranking SHARE NOW employees may have subconsciously influenced my demeanour as the interviewer. Yet, I believe that having worked with several of the interview participants in my daily work allowed for more trusting interviewees' than if I had approached them as an external researcher. This is supported by previous research stating that it is beneficial when the dynamic between the interviewee and interviewer is based on trust (Johnson, 2001). Additionally, my generally inferior position as a working student may have balanced out the typical "asymmetrical communication norms" (Johnson, 2001, p. 112) during the interviews.

Furthermore, in my study, it became clear that employees' sensemaking does not solely rely on middle managers' sensegiving. Sensemaking is a social activity (Appelt, 2016), which became apparent in interviewees' reports of the immense value that lay in the interaction with their teammates during the merger. Therefore, I recommend for future research to be focused on the sensemaking and -giving dynamics between team members and to employ focus groups alongside in-depth interviews.

5.6. Conclusion

Even today, merger outcomes tend to disappoint their initiators; despite the immense investments and attention they have received from scholars of various disciplines. Therefore, this study set out to illuminate the human factor that influences merger outcomes, more specifically the often-neglected perspective of lower-level employees. In the present study, I evaluated middle managers' sensegiving practices that former car2go and DriveNow employees recognized and appreciated in their supervisors' communication in relation to their own sensemaking of the SHARE NOW merger. By understanding how these employees made sense of the change process and how middle managers were best able to support them along

the way, this research contributes to the current merger literature and helps to better comprehend the human factor of mergers. The interview data disclosed that the merger caused high levels of uncertainty among employees, especially during the pre-merger phase. To rationalize the merger and overcome their uncertainties, the interviewees were reliant on receiving information, knowing their role in the new organization, and having the possibility to contribute to the merger's outcome. My research further revealed important implications for middle managers' sensegiving to support employees' sensemaking. In line with the reflexive sensegiving approach, the findings did not expose sensegiving techniques that seem only applicable to merger contexts. Yet, this research still revealed several sensegiving dimensions that were appreciated by the interview participants and influential regarding their ability to overcome their senseseeking and rationalize the merger. It showed that by fulfilling their role as mediators and implementing a good structure as well as a caring atmosphere in their teams, middle managers could provide a sensegiving environment for their subordinates. Here, executing their bridging function between their teams and the rest of the company, especially the top management; framing the merger, among other things, as a valuable learning opportunity; and comforting their employees throughout the process were extracted as valuable modes of sensegiving. So, rather than looking at the sensemaking in isolation, this present study demonstrates that it is a social process. Overall, this research shows that middle managers' sensegiving cannot be expected to control employees' sensemaking but is rather something that evolves in interaction with the employees' sensemaking. That said, it became clear that if the sensemaking and -giving dynamic between employees and their middle management is built on a good relationship and trust, managerial sensegiving can facilitate employees' sensemaking of a merger.

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UNIVERSITY OF TWENTE.



APPROVED BMS EC RESEARCH PROJECT REQUEST

Dear researcher,

This is a notification from the BMS Ethics Committee concerning the web application form for the ethical review of research projects.

Requestnr. : 221071

Title : Corporate Communicaton Between Middle Managers and Their Employees
During Mergers (working title)

Date of 2022-07-20

application :

Researcher : Eidmann, E.C.

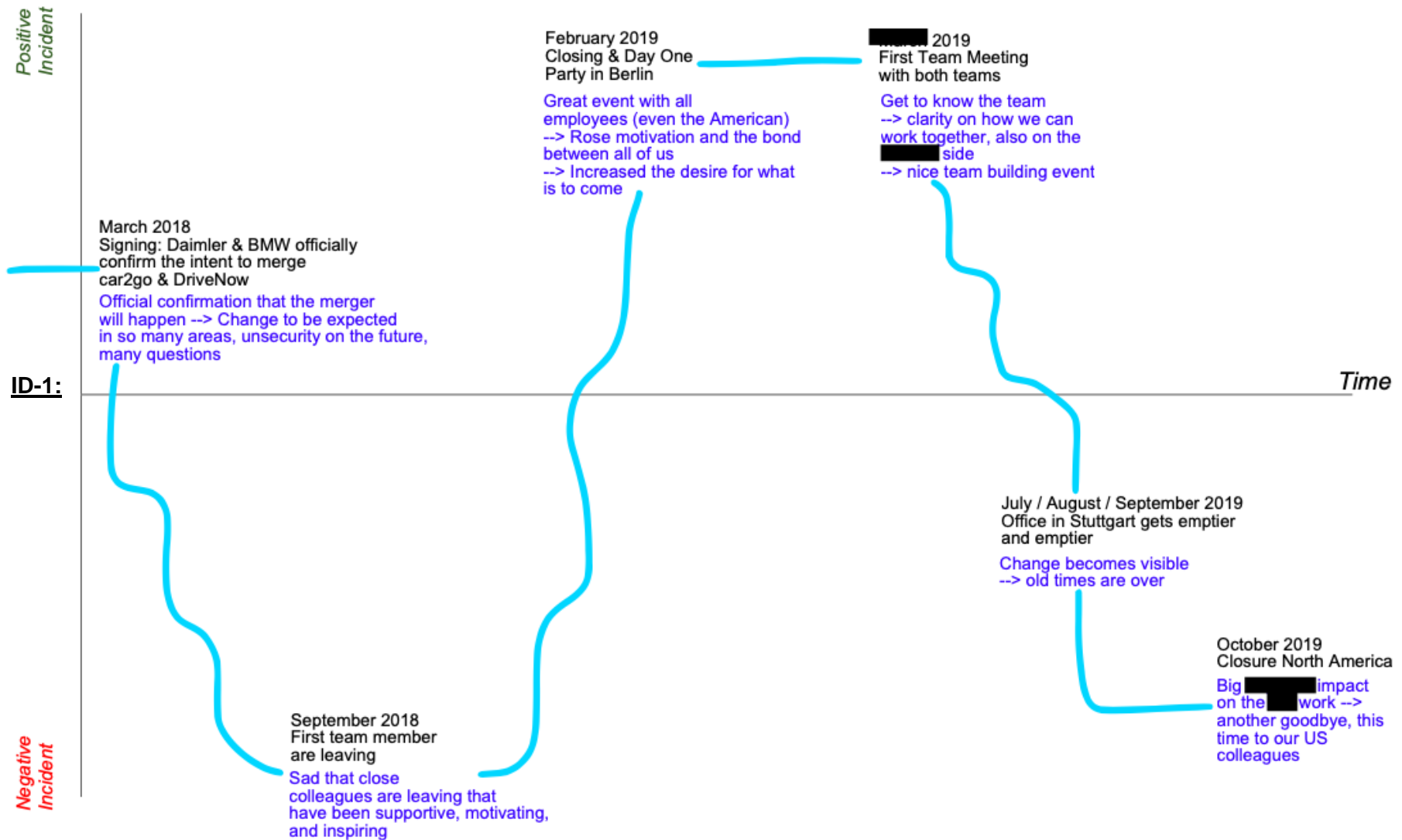
Supervisor : Vuuren, H.A. van

Commission : Henschke, A.

Usage of N

SONA :

Appendix B. Example Timeline



Appendix C. Codebook

Code	Frequency	IDs of respective respondents
SENSEMAKING		
employees' sensemaking		
employees' sensemaking: uncertainty, questions - senseseeeking	39	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12
employees' sensemaking: >knowledge <uncertainty - rationalizing	16	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12
employees' sensemaking: contributing to merger - rationalizing	16	2, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12
employees w/ individual needs	6	2, 5, 9
'forced' to grow	9	1, 7, 9, 12
importance of position, informedness	5	1, 3, 4, 5, 8
used to working independently	7	2, 3, 5, 8, 10, 11
Sensemaking trigger		
sensemaking trigger: job security	17	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11
sensemaking trigger: cost saving measures	14	1, 2, 4, 5, 8, 9
sensemaking trigger:: official merger announcement	7	1, 6, 10, 11, 12
sensemaking trigger: party - journey x	16	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12
outside of team: change of Daimler/BMW's strategy	28	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12
rumours		
rumours: Manager Magazin/press	11	2, 4, 5, 8, 10, 11, 12
rumours: spread of rumours	11	1, 4, 5, 6, 8, 12
SENSEGIVING		
sensegiving MM?*		
sensegiving MM?: sensegiving MM, giving direction	52	1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12
sensegiving MM?: lack of support/sensegiving from MM	18	1, 2, 4, 6, 11
transparency/clarity/truth MM	15	1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 9, 12
division of tasks/responsibilities	14	1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11

meeting formats

meeting formats: one-on-one meeting	9	1, 2, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12
meeting formats: team meeting	9	1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12
meeting formats: Q&A session, 'merger worries'	8	2, 4, 10, 11, 12

MM personal situation

MM personal situation: MM intense workload/tight timelines	9	1, 2, 9, 11
MM personal situation: sensemaking MM	10	1, 4, 6, 7, 10, 11

RELATIONSHIP & TRUST**MM after merger**

MM after merger: MM = new	9	3, 4, 5, 6, 9
MM after merger: MM stayed the same	11	1, 2, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12
MM after merger: unclear MM situation during merger	6	4, 5, 6, 12
relationship with MM	13	1, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 12
trust from MM	14	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12
trust in MM	5	1, 3, 4, 12
distrust	4	3
importance of real-life encounters	4	1, 6, 7

OPENNESS TO THE MERGER; BEING UNDERSTANDING**open to change?**

open to change?: open to change	21	2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11
open to change?: not open to change	9	1, 3, 4

merger makes sense?

merger makes sense?: learning opportunity	20	1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12
merger makes sense?: merger doesn't make sense	4	3
understanding not in MM's hands	14	1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 10
understanding some info can't be shared yet	17	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 12

competition

competition: "it was our baby"/nostalgia	7	1, 3, 4, 5
competition: superiority of car2go	9	1, 2, 9, 11, 12
competition: superiority of DriveNow	5	3, 4

CHALLENGES; LENGTHINESS OF THE PROCESS**lengthiness of the merger process**

lengthiness of the merger process: company stuck in waiting position	11	1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12
lengthiness of the merger process: merger took years	12	1, 2, 6, 7, 9, 10, 12
other challenges through merger	19	1, 2, 6, 7, 9, 11

BACKGROUND INFO**pre-merger firms**

pre-merger firms: former car2go employee	10	1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12
pre-merger firms: former DriveNow employee	2	3, 4

position after merger

position after merger: position changed due to merger	8	1, 4, 6, 9
position after merger: position didn't change due to merger	8	2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12

TEAM

employees/colleagues leaving company	12	1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9
team after merger	18	1, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11
getting to know 'other' company colleagues	11	1, 4, 8, 9, 11, 12
mood/atmosphere in team	17	2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12
lack of team cohesion	5	1, 2, 4
relationship with teammates	13	1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11
move to Berlin		1, 2, 4, 9, 11, 12

OTHER

outside of team

outside of team: Free2Move/Stelantis M&A	12	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11
outside of team: Town Hall/intranet	8	1, 4, 6, 9, 12

*MM = Middle manager.