

BI Norwegian Business School – Preliminary
Master Thesis Report

- The characteristics of repatriation
knowledge sharing processes -

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1.0 Introduction to the research topic

In today's globalized economy, business is no longer limited by national boundaries, many companies of various size are now performing a significant portion of their activities outside of their home countries (Bender & Fish, 2000). As internationalization processes in organizations are increasing, as a consequence the number of expatriations is increasing as well (Vidal, Valle, & Aragón, 2007). Along with the geographical scope of organizational concerns, the source of competitive advantage for organizations has shifted as well, from physical assets towards intellectual resources (Stewart, 1997).

Following this development, it becomes invaluable for organizations to manage knowledge and transfer existing skills and expertise within the organization, especially across national borders if they are to be successful (Bender & Fish, 2000). Knowledge is an important asset for organizations, and a utility that can provide sustainable competitive advantage. Move over, an organization's success is largely dependent on their ability to effectively and efficiently create and share knowledge (Wang & Noe, 2010). Developing, utilizing, and transferring knowledge across organizational units becomes critical for the success of multinational companies in worldwide markets (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000). International assignments can provide the means for substantial personal and professional development. Through expatriation, organizations are offered the opportunity to acquire knowledge abroad. The repatriation process creates the opportunity to transfer and apply this knowledge in the organization" (Kamoche, 1997). Expatriates can obtain knowledge about the rules of doing business internationally, characteristics of national markets, and knowledge about individuals, customers and suppliers (Lazarova & Tarique, 2005). As the competitive advantage of multinational companies largely depends upon global knowledge and experience, the retention of workers with these skills is an important concern (Vidal et al., 2007).

The knowledge and expertise can be seen as person-bound, as it is created and resides in the person's mind (Prusak, 1996). Expatriates are costly as employees, and multinational companies invest a lot in the success of these international assignments (Shaffer, Harrison, & Gilley, 1999). Because of this, a large amount of resources are wasted when this knowledge is not effectively and efficiently transferred back into the organization. Repatriation is a key moment of

the international assignment of employees, but contrary to its importance, many companies do not have sufficient policies and procedures to help with the integration of returning employees (Nery-Kjerfve & Mclean, 2012).

Multinational organizations face numerous problems and challenges in relation to the repatriation process, knowledge transfer and the retention of these employees. It is estimated that between 20 to 50 percent of expatriates abort their assignment or return prematurely, resulting in significant costs for the organization (Mendenhall, Dunbar, & Oddou, 1987). Many companies and organizations have very low retention rates of repatriates and characterize repatriation as a major human resource challenge (Black, Gregersen, & Mendenhall, 1992). Others are struggling with the utilization of the repatriates' knowledge, lacking sufficient policies and measures to transfer this person-bound knowledge and expertise back into the organization (Bender & Fish, 2000). Researchers have also looked at issues related to the detrimental effects of repatriates leaving, with the result being that companies lose their knowledge and newly developed skills and expertise (Lazorava & Tarique, 2005; Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2001)

1.1 Conceptual clarification

In this part we will clarify some concept that are used frequently used throughout this paper:

Knowledge: We apply an understanding of knowledge as information, ideas, and expertise relevant for tasks performed by individuals, teams, work units, and the organization as a whole (Bartol, 2002, p. 65). It consists of both an explicit side which is accessible through consciousness, and a tacit side, rooted in action, procedures, routines, commitments, ideals, values, and emotions (Nonaka, & von Krogh, 2009).

Expertise: Expertise is specialized, deep knowledge and understanding in a certain field, which is far above average (Bender & Fish, 2000, p. 126)

Tacit overseas knowledge: Another useful definition for this article is tacit overseas knowledge, which can be understood as “knowledge about overseas cultures, markets, products, customers, and other local market constituents that is

difficult to codify and transfer in a systematic way” (Subramaniam & Venkatraman, 2001, p. 361).

Knowledge sharing: Knowledge sharing can be defined as the act of making knowledge available to others within an organization (Ipe, 2003, p.341). It involves the exchange of tangible artifacts, as well as implicit coordination of expertise, and information about who knows what in a group (Cummings, 2004, p. 352).

Knowledge transfer: Knowledge transfer can be defined as “the process through which one unit is affected by the experience of another” (Argote, & Ingram, 2000, p. 151). The term is sometimes used interchangeably with knowledge sharing. However, knowledge transfer typically describes the movement of knowledge between different units rather than individuals (Wang & Noe, 2010). Because of this we find it useful to separate the two.

Expatriation/expatriates: The expatriation process refers to the process of carrying out international assignments for employees. Following the term expatriates refers to the employees sent to conduct these assignments, living in another country than their country of citizenship, often temporarily (Investopedia: Expatriate, 2016)

Repatriation/repatriates: Repatriation is the process of returning employees from their international assignments. This process includes the HRM processes of implementing them back into their original location, providing them with tasks, responsibilities and utilizing their knowledge. Following, repatriates refer to the employees that are returning or have returned from assignments abroad (Investopedia: Repatriation, 2016)

2.0 Research questions and objectives of the thesis

As we identified, several problems and challenges can occur in relation to the expatriation and repatriation process, causing huge costs for organizations (Shaffer et al., 1999). Due to these problems, an expatriate career may also appear as increasingly unattractive and risky from the individual’s point of view (Selmer, 1998). Three specific problems are presented: Expatriates return from their assignment prematurely, organizations experience low retention rates for

repatriates, and finally organizations struggle with utilizing the different types of knowledge that repatriates have acquired abroad. All of these problems represent wasted resources, and have negative implications for the organizational knowledge creation process and organizational learning. Arguably, expatriates returning prematurely may not have time to acquire valuable knowledge through their international assignment. When failing to retain repatriates, the international knowledge and experience acquired through the foreign assignment is not only lost, but may also be placed in the hands of a competitor (Crowne, 2009). Under-utilization of repatriates' knowledge represents a wasted opportunity for gaining knowledge, which in addition can cause frustrations and turnover-intentions (Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2001).

While there has been a significant amount of research on knowledge processes within expatriation (e.g. Bonache & Brewster, 2001; Bender & Fish, 2006; Bird, Mendenhall, Stevens, & Oddou, 2009; Bonache & Brewster, 2001; Welch & Steen, 2013), repatriation have received much less attention (Huang, Chiu, & Lu, 2013). Among the previous research on repatriation within the knowledge perspective, knowledge transfer has been examined to some extent (Lazarova & Tarique, 2005; Crowne, 2009, Nery-Kjerfve & McLean, 2012; Burmeister & Deller, 2016). These articles focus on either type of knowledge gained, or variables that hinder or facilitates knowledge successful knowledge transfer, while the characteristics of this process is examined by Burmeister, Deller, Osland, Szkudlarek, Oddou, & Blakeney (2015). From our literature search it appears knowledge sharing among repatriates is only addressed by Mäkelä & Brewster (2009), which focuses on interaction contexts and the role of social capital. We wish to focus on the characteristics of the knowledge sharing process of repatriates. This leads us to some potential research questions:

“What are the characteristics of repatriate knowledge sharing practices?”

“How is knowledge from repatriates applied and utilized in the organization?”

“(What are the benefits of repatriation knowledge sharing practices?)”

3.0 Theoretical framework

3.1 Knowledge

Knowledge is one of the cornerstones of human existence, allowing us to define, shape, and learn to solve a task or problem (von Krogh, Ichijo, & Nonaka, 2000). Knowledge represents a mix of experiences, values and conceptual information, providing people with the framework and ability to evaluate and incorporate new information (Davenport & Prusak, 1998). And represents a dynamic human process where a flow of messages interacts with others' beliefs and ideas (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

The dominant classification of knowledge divides it into two types, namely explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge (Nonaka, 1994). The idea of understanding knowledge as either explicit or tacit goes all the way back to the work of Michael Polanyi (1966). He argued that explicit knowledge represents the forms of knowledge that we are able to easily express, capture, store and reuse (Polanyi, 1966). Explicit knowledge is something systematic and universal (Polanyi, 1966), the academic form of knowledge (Smith, 2001) and something that can be easily codified stored and transferred across both time and space independent of any individuals (Lam, 2000). Tacit knowledge on the other hand, represents the other end of the spectrum, knowledge that cannot be articulated or easily codified (Polanyi, 1966). Much of our knowledge are not formally taught to us, making it more complex, and difficult to fully express in words (Polanyi, 1966). Tacit knowledge is both non-linguistic and non-numerical making it very personal and ingrained in people's individual experiences, ideas and emotions (Nonaka, 1991). Tacit knowledge is based on practice rather than theory, characterized by its action-oriented form acquired through human experiences (Smith, 2001).

Today, knowledge is not only an important economic resource for any organization (Barney 1991). The creation and utilization of knowledge continues play an increasingly important role for the overall competitive advantage of organizations (Argote, 2013). In today's world, the transfer of inter-organizational knowledge spanning national borders has been become increasingly important (Argote, 2013). And one of the main ways for organizations to secure this flow of knowledge is to send their employees on international assignments (Crowne, 2009). The knowledge that these assignees acquire is much more than just knowledge regarding local facts and customs. Fink & Meierwert (2005) defines what they

believe to be the four main types of expatriate knowledge, market-specific knowledge, personal skills, job-related skills and network-related skills. Expatriates obtain a variety of different knowledge during their international assignments and this also includes a series of tacit elements such as network knowledge, improvement of personal competencies and shifts of perspective (Stahl, Chua, Caligiuri, Cerdin & Taniguchi, 2009). Subramaniam & Venkatraman (2001) argues that this tacit overseas knowledge covers the different knowledge regarding overseas cultures, markets and customs that cannot be systematically codified and transferred. And this form of tacit overseas knowledge is arguably the most valuable, due the personal and non-linguistic nature of the knowledge itself. Which again should place the transfer, sharing and harvest of this knowledge at the forefront of the research and organizational agenda, but as the literature has shown us, this is definitely not always the case (Burmeister, Deller, Osland, Szkudlarek, Oddou & Blakeney, 2015).

3.2 Knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer

Knowledge transfer/knowledge sharing upon repatriation has been another important topic in the research literature.

Knowledge sharing is the process where knowledge held by an individual is converted into a form so that others can understand and make use of the knowledge (Ipe, 2003). Sharing in this case implies that the knowledge is presented so that others can understand combined with the fact the sharing itself is a result of a voluntary and conscious act by the individual possessing the knowledge (Davenport, 1997; Ipe, 2003). Knowledge sharing have the potential to contribute to both individual and organizational learning (Andrews & Delahaye, 2000), giving employees an opportunity to contribute to the overall knowledge application and innovation of an organization (Jackson, Chuang, Harden, Jiang, & Joseph, 2006). Organizations are dependent on the ability to properly create and share knowledge effectively (Abrams et al, 2003) and knowledge sharing therefore represents a tool for gaining a competitive advantage (Jackson et al., 2006). Knowledge is arguably the most important strategic resource of any organization, but this knowledge cannot be fully capitalized if we don't understand how the knowledge is created, shared and used within organization (Ipe, 2003). And knowledge sharing is therefore still regarded as critical to organizational success in today's world (Grant, 1996).

Knowledge transfer on the other hand is the transfer of knowledge within an organization meaning that one department or division is affected by the experiences of another (Argote & Ingram, 2000). A successful transfer of knowledge results will then result in changes in behavior, performance or overall knowledge of the unit receiving the information (Argote & Ingram, 2000). Researchers are increasingly emphasizing the importance of organizational knowledge, and knowledge transfer continues to be an important tool for acquiring this form of knowledge (Argote & Ingram, 2000).

Research suggests that international assignments provide a unique opportunity for personal, professional, and organizational development. Recent studies argue that expatriates and repatriates can play a significant role for knowledge transfer and organizational learning (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007). Repatriates can be viewed as tools of knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer, given that multinational companies are able to keep repatriates within the company upon return and fully utilize the benefits of the international assignments (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007). Repatriates' new knowledge can enable multinational companies to learn from their globalization efforts, enhancing the intellectual capital of the company. Despite this, repatriate knowledge is often not viewed as a valuable resource for competitive advantage by the organization (Oddou, Osland, & Blakeney, 2009). The utilization of the knowledge upon repatriation is far from automatic and the full utilization of this knowledge has shown to be very challenging. Not only is the repatriation knowledge difficult to fully capture, the individuals and organizations are also not necessarily on the same page in regards to how to transfer/share this new knowledge, but also in relation to how this knowledge should be utilized by the organization in the future (Lazarova & Tarique, 2005 & Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007). Organizations therefore need to consider a number of issues when they design the process for capturing, retaining, sharing and transferring the knowledge gained by their repatriates (Lazarova & Tarique, 2005).

Lazarova & Tarique (2005) argues that effective knowledge transfer can only occur when there is a certain fit between individual readiness and organizational receptivity. Further, they argue that motivating and promoting repatriates to be these agents of knowledge and competence transfer can achieve this. For multinational companies, developing and transferring knowledge across their organizational units have always been crucial for their success (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000). Traditional research focused mainly on how expatriates could

serve as knowledge senders, but more recent research has expanded the horizon, illustrating that expatriates play a crucial part in acquiring new knowledge and transfer and share this new knowledge upon repatriation (Welch, 2003).

3.3 Focus areas within expatriation and repatriation research

Earlier research focused primarily on operational issues and the early stages of the expatriate experience, mainly looking at selection of candidates and support during their transition abroad (Lazorava & Cerdin, 2007). The key issues of the process before the assignment referred to understanding the organizational rationale for using expatriates, and the difficulties involved in their recruitment (Bonache, Brewster, & Suutari, 2007). Edstrom & Galbraith (1977) found that expatriates were used as a tool for coordination, and a strategy to exercise control based on socialization, in which could not be properly performed by local employees. However, many problems occurred in recruitment of these employees due to many barriers to international mobility, such as dual career concerns, hardship, or repatriation considerations (Bonache et al., 2007). As expatriate failure was found to be a problem for many organizations, it became the main focus of the literature (Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991).

Past repatriation research has attempted to understand the dismal repatriate retention rates and two plausible scenarios are presented. During their time abroad, expatriates' have often enjoyed good salaries, status, and learning opportunities. Back at the headquarters, they often experience problems such as loss of income and status, and lack of recognition of their international experience (Bonache et al., 2007). The more traditional approach suggests that repatriates leave because of the lack of organizational support and appreciation. Many repatriates feel that the organization ignore their new knowledge and lack the ability to utilize the expertise they have developed during expatriation (Lazorava & Cerdin, 2007). Another common experience among repatriates is what Gullahorn & Gullahorn (1963) describes as a "reverse culture shock", which is a result of unrealistic expectations and overall dissatisfaction with the lack of change upon return (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Forster, 1994). Numerous studies show that many repatriates report dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the process of repatriation (Tung, 1998; Tsang, 1999). Repatriates' primary concern is often what they believe to be a clear under-utilization of their new knowledge and skills (Forster, 1994; Lazorava & Cerdin, 2007). This has led researchers to conclude that organizations and their

lackluster attention and support to returning expatriates are to blame for most repatriation issues (Lazorava & Cerdin, 2007). Caligiuri & Lazarova (2001) argues that organizations need to develop a variety of support programs for repatriates, to increase the retention rate of these repatriates.

We are also starting to see the emergence of a new approach to the issue, focusing on the proactivity of repatriates rather than the frustration. This perspective suggests that the repatriates' initiative and career goals takes precedence over the support efforts of the organization (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007. Stahl, Miller & Tung (2002) found that the majority of expatriates view international assignment as an opportunity for career advancement. However, a large percentage of expatriates report feeling that their international assignment has had a negative effect on their careers (Hammer, Hart, & Rogan, 1998). Tung (1998) argues that many repatriates see these international assignments as a possibility to further their own careers, illustrating that repatriates quitting their company is likely more than just a reflection of poor organizational support and practices (Tung, 1998). Through this approach, it becomes expedient to examine how repatriates behave towards accomplishing their personal career goals if one wish to understand repatriate retention, rather than focusing on lack or organizational support and effort alone (Lazorava & Cerdin, 2007).

More recent research has taken a more strategic approach, focusing on the value of the knowledge and expertise gained as a result of these global assignments. Increased attention has been paid to the importance of retaining returning expatriates and utilizing the untapped elements of organizational capability and new knowledge (Peltonen, 1993; Tsang, 1999). The utilization of repatriates' newly developed skills is a topic that deserves further attention (Bonache et al., 2007)

3.4 Repatriation knowledge sharing and the potential of repatriation knowledge

We are starting to see a growing number of research examining the different dimensions of international assignment success (Chen, Kirkman, Kim, Farh, & Tangirala, 2010; Kraimer and Wayne, 2004; Takeuchi, 2010). Even though researchers are starting to acknowledge the importance of including the repatriation phase when addressing international assignments (Yan, Zhu, & Hall, 2002), the repatriation phase has still received much less attention compared to that of expatriation (Kraimer, Shaffer, & Bolino, 2009; Reiche, 2012). As previously mentioned, early repatriation research focused mainly on the different issues

associated with the repatriation process, such as the role HR practices (Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001) and repatriate expectations (Stroh, Gregersen, & Black, 2000). One of the things that these earlier studies had in common, was the fact that they seemed to consider the repatriation process as a success as long as the repatriates remained in the organization, thereby ignoring not only the potential positive outcomes for both individual and organization but also failing to address how these benefits could be best achieved (Lazarova and Cerdin, 2007; Reiche, 2012). And even though MNCs and researchers are paying more attention to the role of international assignees as knowledge agents, (Reiche, Harzing & Kraimer, 2009; Hocking, Brown & Harzing, 2007) the continuous knowledge sharing process upon repatriation has not received the same research and organizational attention (Reiche, 2012). And we still know relatively little about both the variables affecting the transfer and sharing of repatriation knowledge and also how the repatriation knowledge process occur (Oddou et al. 2009).

Recent research however is starting to acknowledge the potential of repatriates knowledge sharing and repatriate knowledge.

Repatriates plays what is in many ways an irreplaceable part in organizational learning, given their ability to accelerate the process of sharing knowledge between host countries and headquarters (Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001). Not only does the repatriates possess valuable first-hand knowledge, they also understand how the company is perceived in other parts of the world (Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001). This is also reflected in the literature where researchers suggest that the knowledge that international assignees acquire while being abroad is highly relevant for the organization (Berthoin Antal, 2000; Oddou et al., 2013; Bender and Fish, 2000; Fink and Meierewert, 2005). And as we have previously mentioned, this process is challenging and researchers argues that it is partly dependent on the actor's' personal motivation (Lazarova and Tarique, 2005; Oddou et al., 2009). Oddou et al. (2009) argues that perceived support from the company/organization plays an important role for increasing repatriates motivation to engage in the process of knowledge sharing. While Kraimer et al. (2009) points to importance of career support due to repatriates natural concern about future career opportunity within the company.

However, the repatriation knowledge sharing/transfer process still remains a largely ignored area, especially among companies/organizations. The strong value of repatriation knowledge should in theory entail that companies/organizations paid

a lot of attention to the repatriate knowledge sharing/transfer process which makes the lackluster integration of repatriate knowledge somewhat surprising (Bender and Fish, 2000; Oddou, et al., 2009; Burmeister et al., 2015). In their review of the existing research on repatriation knowledge sharing/transfer, Burmeister et al. (2015) found that almost all of them focused on the different variables that could potentially hinder or facilitate repatriation knowledge transfer success, while a few addressed the effect of repatriation knowledge transfer on organizational learning. They furthermore argue that none of these studies are able to explain the complexity of the repatriation knowledge transfer process and how the process unfolds (Burmeister et al, 2015). They go on to address this issue in their paper, taking a process perspective in an attempt to better understand how the transfer process unfolds (Burmeister et al. 2015). They looked at both the role of repatriates and recipients during the different stages of the repatriation knowledge transfer process and found that the different processes during repatriation knowledge transfer were contingent upon the ability and motivation of actors as well as their opportunity to interact (Burmeister et al., 2015). Which also coincided with previous research done by Oddou et al (2013) and Reiche (2012). However, even though Burmeister and colleagues were able to provide what they believe to be a more nuanced view on the repatriation knowledge transfer process, there are still a lot of questions that needs to be answered before we can understand all the different characteristics and variables of the repatriation knowledge transfer process/knowledge sharing practices.

4.0 Research design

For the purpose of investigating this topic, we apply a qualitative research method with focus on individual interviews. Our selected area of study is a complex one, in which we consider it to be best studied without the limitations of a selected few variables. As social elements, play an important role, the qualitative method provides a more suitable platform as it provides more closeness (Silverman, 2013). We find this desirable as we wish to gain a more genuine understanding the world through the eyes of the participants, attempting to understand their experiences, attitudes, and meaning of action (Bryman & Bell, 2011). We believe this approach are the best way to explore our selected research area, allowing us to go in-depth with the goal of expanding our understanding of the complexity of the potential issues and challenges by providing thick descriptions (Bryman & Bell, 2011). By

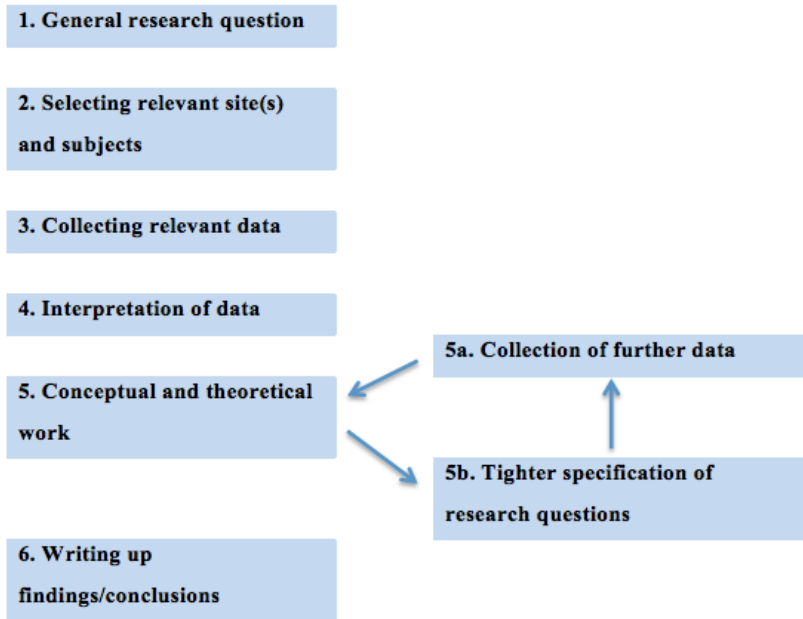
applying this approach to data-collection we are able to go into the research with a more open approach, or a broad outline of a concept, which can be revised and narrowed during the course of data collection (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This can better enable us to understand participant's attitudes, thoughts, and experiences (Silverman, 2013). Hence we see the utility in moving beyond the specificity of answers from a quantitative questionnaire. Arguably, such an approach can be more likely to lead to interesting research, in terms of standing out in some way from other studies and changing the way we think about the social world (Bryman & Bell, 2011). To ensure that our research is of high quality, we will continuously evaluate the research process by the criteria of *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *confirmability* (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

4.1 Sample

Our sample consists of employees in a division of a large multinational technology company with their main office in Norway. We believe our research method will provide us with the opportunity to explore this topic in depth, and in relation to the real challenges this MNC are facing. In other words, we will use semi-structured interviews of a selected smaller sample from the selected firm as our research method. The plan is to interview a selection primarily consisting of employees that have returned from international assignments and thus have experienced both the expatriation and repatriation process. We will also interview a few of the employees responsible for the repatriation process (such as HR personnel). We aim at conducting approximately 8-12 individual interviews.

5.0 Thesis progress plan

For the general process of the study we refer to the one outlined by Bryman & Bell (2011) as depicted. As for the activities planned and the plan for progress we have outlined an activity plan.



Plan for the process during 2017:

Time	Activity
January	The first coordination meeting with our contact person within the selected firm, the Director for Business Support will be held in week 3 or 4. In the meeting we will agree upon the process forward regarding the selection of interviewees, and the timeline for conducting the interviews
February	During February we will focus on developing an interview guide in consultation with our supervisor, Cathrine Filstad. During this time we will also establish contact with the selected employees to be interviewed in order to set the dates and time for conducting interviews. We will also send the application to NSD for conducting the research
Mars	The initial plan is to start conducting the interviews during Mars 2017, and hopefully completing them all.
April	The exam period starts, and a little more focus will necessarily be devoted to other courses. However, if there are remaining interviews we will conduct them during April, and start transcribing. We will then revisit our research questions, resulting in tighter specified research questions (Bryman & Bell, 2011)
May	Hopefully we have finished transcribing the interviews and finalized the research questions before May 2017. During this time we will interpret the data, conduct additional theoretical work, and write out our findings and conclusions. We have set an internal deadline for finishing a draft by June 1 st so our supervisor have plenty of time to consider it before giving feedback
June	The plan is to await feedback during June, therefore no activities is planned for June 2017. However, time is spared in case the first draft is not entirely finished
July - August	We await feedback from our supervisor during this period. We imagine a couple of weeks with hard work to hone our final product after feedback on the draft, and submitting the thesis September 1 st

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