

Physical or digital meeting?

A study of the choice between having physical or digital meetings

Modern multinational corporations of today all face challenges associated with the phenomenon of globalisation and geographical dispersion. As a result, network forms of organisations have developed and with them a greater need to efficiently meet and communicate across vast distances has arisen. Recent technological advancements have facilitated the meeting and communication transformation from physical business meetings, to digital meetings through the use of information communication technology. The research devoted to the factors influencing the decision of having physical or digital meetings is limited. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the literary academic field by analysing existing theory and conducting a qualitative case study complemented by a quantitative importance rating of each factor. The research approach employed is therefore a case study design with one focal case, in the consumer goods industry, and complemented by four reference cases in different industries. The findings explain why employees in MNCs have internal physical meetings and how the decision between physical or digital meetings is made. The theoretical framework includes theories on meetings and communication in dispersed networks, business relationships as well as existing research on factors influencing meeting format. The study then describes empirical findings related to the research question from both the main case company and the four reference cases in order to compare and contrast them against the literature review as well as one another. The study allows for some main conclusions to be drawn from the material, including the importance rating of influencing factors that shows the purpose of the meeting as the most influential factor. The study also identified an additional factor influencing the meeting format; the number of participants in a meeting. Another significant finding is the realisation that the most important factors are the situational ones that organisations cannot easily manipulate, whereas the contextual factors that can be altered more easily are considered less important. All in all the factors need to be considered together and in relation to each other as they all form one complex web of influences for the decision to conduct a physical or digital meeting.

Key words: Business Meeting, Digital Meeting, Physical Meeting, Information Communication Technology, Business Travel

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1. Introduction

This introductory section gives a brief background to the thesis subject – internal business meeting management in multinational corporations. First, the root to geographical dispersion is laid out, explaining the importance and complications of dispersed business meetings and relationships. Thereafter, the problem formulation, research question, demarcation and expected theoretical contribution is presented along with the purpose of the study.

1.1. Background

Globalisation has been an ongoing process for decades, and with technological advancements it is now even more widespread and occurring even faster than ever (Castells 2001). With this, trade and flow of capital are increasing, the dissemination of information is easier and the workforce is more mobile. This has led to increased business travel to meet in person as well as opportunities to utilise technological tools to facilitate digital meetings (Arnfolk & Kogg 2003).

As part of the globalisation phenomenon and by extension the geographic dispersion of international organisations, the organisations are forced to put an effort into new, efficient ways of coordinating dispersed work. One way organisations adapt to a faster changing environment is by evolving from vertical hierarchies to network organisations (Jones et al. 1998; Black & Edwards 2000; Daboub 2002). In many cases this means that companies set up subsidiaries in other countries to be closer to their customers, suppliers or other stakeholders and thereby increase the size and dispersion of their networks (Black & Edwards 2000). The development of network organisations has created a greater need for meeting and communication across distances as global dispersion expands dramatically (Castells 2001). This poses tremendous challenges for management in the organisations of today, particularly in MNCs (Multinational Corporations) as the larger and more geographically dispersed the organisation is, the greater is the challenge to keep the organisation together. One important way organisations handle this challenge is by employing various forms of well-functioning communication methods and meetings (Arnfolk & Kogg 2003; Davis & Weinstein 2005). Communication can be seen as an essential part of any

organisation and often takes place in meetings of some format. It occurs both between various actors within the company as well as outside to external stakeholders (Miles and Snow 1992; Cravens et al. 1994; Dess et al. 1995).

1.1.1 Why we have meetings

Many professionals claim to spend a great deal of their office hours in meetings (Arnfolk & Kogg 2003). One element of being part of a vast network implies that most organisations are heavily dependent on their capacity to communicate efficiently internally as well as externally (Ford et al. 2006). Important to note here is that internal communication fulfils an important role not only coming from the top of the organisation to the bottom, but also bringing vital information from every corner of the organisation to the top (Simpson 1959). Making this mechanism work can be crucial for large, geographically dispersed organisations to organise and coordinate their work (Simpson 1959). Partly, this two way communication is done through arranging meetings as this allows for something more than simply one way information being transferred from the top downwards. Furthermore, there are several reasons for arranging business meetings; to present, inform, collaborate, discuss, negotiate, sell, strategize etc. Commonly, a business meeting has multiple purposes but no matter the reasons for a particular meeting, the ultimate reason will be the to communicate a message of some sort (Arnfolk & Kogg 2003). In the face of economic downturns organisations have also become more conscious about how employees spend resources and hence, ICT has received extensive attention from many MNCs as a viable means to communicate in their growing, dispersed and economically challenged networks (Arnfolk & Kogg 2003; Davis & Weinstein 2005).

1.2. Problem formulation

Having meetings is essential for a large organisation and network to function efficiently (Arnfolk & Kogg 2003). However, with the advancement of technology, meetings do not have to take place in person. There are several other tools that can replace physical meetings and still satisfy the need to have a dialogue. Taking video conferencing as an example, which simulates an environment where the meeting participants feel like they are sitting across from each other in the same room, just like in a physical meeting. This development of ICT should presumably

alter the balance between conducting physical meetings and arranging digital ones, particularly for internal meetings. Considering that organisations now have access to technological tools that facilitate a more efficient use of resources related to internal meetings and communication, it is a bit of a mystery that organisations still spend millions of euros on internal business travel to meet physically.

Traditionally physical meetings have been the most common way of communicating (Faulconbridge et al. 2009). And even today it is the preferred meeting format (Faulconbridge et al. 2009). But why is this still the case when for example recessions and environmental concerns are making organisations more conscious about how they use their resources (Stephenson & Bender 1996). Is it simply because professionals are used to that way of communicating? On the other hand personal relations are considered to be an important factor in networking and relationship building, which may be hampered without the physical interaction. Does this mean that the differences in trust and relationship building are vast enough even internally to motivate the continued high frequency of physical meetings? Professionals spend hour after hour travelling to and from physical meetings when they should not have to, considering the technological tools available (Davis & Weinstein 2005). Why then do professionals in an organisation still travel for meetings, even when there are tools that can satisfy the need to meet with someone by distance? Knowing that ICT has made it possible to meet without having to travel and being physically collocated, the natural thing for professionals would be to choose ICT and never to travel for an internal meeting.

Considering these aspects from a strictly rational point of view, business travel for internal purposes should be significantly decreased or even eliminated as there are other options that are considered as more efficient ways of using the organisations' resources. Still, large MNCs have sizable budgets for people travelling for internal meetings (Interview Vice President Industrial Relations, The Consumer Goods company 03-06-2014). If ICT tools are efficient and allow employees to have well-functioning digital meetings, why then do employees still

travel to have physical meetings? The fact that physical meetings and business travel is still preferred, suggests that there are other factors that govern the decision of whether to travel for a physical meeting or to use tools such as ICT (Faulconbridge et al. 2009).

1.3. Research question

Given the background and the problem formulation it is of interest to study what factors influences the decision to travel for a physical meeting or to have a digital meeting. Reasonably, geographically dispersed colleagues within the same organisation should be able to conduct meetings digitally instead of physically considering the highly developed technological tools available.

Hence the research question posed for this thesis is:

Why do employees in MNCs have internal physical meetings?

- *How is the decision to have physical or digital meetings made?*

1.4. Demarcation

In order to provide reliable and valid results from the study, certain delimitations have been necessary. Meetings are either internal or external to the company in question and these two types of meetings differ significantly in both characteristics and content (Interview Vice President Industrial Relations, The Consumer Goods company 03-06-2014). Thus, there are also differences in how internal and external meetings are prioritised when it comes to whether one should have a physical or a digital meeting. External meetings are often prioritised and are believed to be more important to be held face-to-face as they often involve customer or supplier relations (Interview Vice President Industrial Relations, The Consumer Goods company 03-06-2014). Studies have also shown that the substitution effect of digital communication tools is greater in internal meetings than in external ones as external meetings mostly use digital meeting tools as a complement rather than as a substitute to physical meetings (Arnfolk & Kogg 2003; Denstadli 2004). Internal meetings however give more room for substitution, and thus this study exclusively investigates digital and physical internal meetings. Thereby external meetings are excluded from this study.

Furthermore the decision to study MNCs was taken because these organisations are expected to have the greatest need to travel abroad to their local subsidiaries for internal purposes and because the likelihood of geographically dispersed teams is higher than in smaller companies (Arnfolk & Kogg 2003).

1.5. Definitions and clarifications

In order to answer the research question in a well-formulated and consistent manner, some choices with regards to particular definitions of expressions were made. The clarifications and definitions of these terms are found in Table 1 to give a comprehensive understanding of expressions used repeatedly throughout this thesis.

Term	Definitions and clarifications
Meeting format	The format in which a meeting is conducted. The format is either digital or physical.
Digital meeting	Internal meeting conducted through the use of any ICT-mediated tool.
Physical meeting	Internal meeting conducted in person that also requires the participants to travel across vast geographical distances, domestically or internationally.
Factor	Elements affecting the decision of meeting format.
ICT	Information Communication Technology - the technological tools used for digital meetings such as audioconferencing, video conferencing or web-meetings (Arnfolk & Kogg 2003).

Table 1: Definitions and clarifications

1.6. Expected theoretical contribution

With regards to the recent technological development, the majority of companies are still developing their digital strategies and are yet not certain about how relationships are affected when physical interaction is replaced by the use of ICT (Faulconbridge et al. 2009). Relationships with various stakeholders, even internal ones, are different and require varying commitment in the form of time and money to name a few. Moreover, relatively few studies have been made on the topic of meeting management and ICT in internal interactions, and is

therefore highly relevant to explore as there can be significant benefits for organisations (Faulconbridge et al. 2009).

Studies on individual factors affecting the choice between using ICT or travelling for physical meetings are limited as a literature review only provided a few studies made on restricted sub-categories, sometimes only briefly relating to the factors described in this study. Thus, what this study aims to add to the body of literature is a more comprehensive view of the elements influencing the meeting format, based on the (sometimes scarce) existing theory on each factor. More specifically, there are no studies that have illuminated the importance of the elements influencing the decision of arranging an internal business trip or using ICT. In this aspect, the study at hand also takes the existing research one step further than simply discussing the influencing elements, especially in the wake of more advanced and cheaper technology. It does so by incorporating an analysis on the relative importance of the elements affecting the decision and comparing and contrasting them against one another.

What also makes this study highly relevant is the currently rapid advancement of technology and specifically ICT. Researching the choice between ICT and physical mobilisation will naturally be affected by the development of ICT. And since the technological development is racing, further research on a more regular basis will be required to keep up with the development and monitoring its effects in the theoretical field.

1.7. Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to study why geographically dispersed organisations still have physical meetings despite the high quality of technological tools available today. Considering what tools are available, digital meetings should plausibly be substituting internal physical meetings to a greater extent. In addition to the expected theoretical contribution, the study brings knowledge of a more general character on what importance physical meetings actually have and what intangible aspects they contribute with to the organisation in terms of well-functioning meetings that coordinate and organise the organisation. On a more practical note, organisations that have set the goal of decreasing business

travel for any reason will find this study useful as it will shed light on how employees and executives make these decisions and what factors matter to them when making these decisions.

2. Literature review

The literature review section describes the existing academic literature on the subject in two blocks. First, existing theory on the characteristics of meeting and communication in networks and business relationships will be described with an emphasis on internal meetings and digital meeting channels. The second block compiles and reviews existing theory on factors that affect the choice of meeting format (divided into situational- and contextual factors).

2.1. Meetings and communication in networks and business relationships

In any network, whether it is internal or external to the organisation, conducting meetings is one of the key actions that keep the network together (Simpson 1959). The meetings can be done either physically by meeting face-to-face, or electronically by using technological tools. However, all meetings do have one thing in common; the need to communicate (Arnfolk & Kogg 2003). Hence, communication is an essential dimension of any meeting. Communicational occurrences cannot be separated from relational matters as relationships are a significant and substantial share of understanding, structuring and evaluating messages in interpersonal settings (Duck 1998; Olkkonen et al. 2000). Thus, business relationships and networks develop through interpersonal communication processes in meetings between various interactants, emphasising the difficulties in dispersed business networks (Goldkuhl 1997, Olkkonen et al. 2000).

Relationship building as well as the processing and exchange of information in for example meetings is both costly and extensive within most business networks. Therefore, attempts to improve the efficiency of the information processing have been made by the establishment of common administrative meeting routines and rules. Organisations often develop information systems that are common within their networks in order to meet the communicational needs (Håkansson & Snehota 1995).

2.1.1. Internal meetings and communication

Palmer & Hardy (2000) shows that the significance of networks and relationships within organisations has increased in modern businesses as they realise the importance of creating meeting platforms in order to raise the efficiency of the organisation. The increasingly rapid change that characterises many contemporary organisations' environments brings great upheavals in how businesses organise themselves (Palmer & Hardy 2000). Furthermore, increased production, less slack, time efficiency, staff rationalisation etc. are all common elements in how organisational theorists such as Palmer & Hardy (2000) suggest modern organisations should organise. Organisations are expected to be flexible, effective, adapt and evolve through new communication tools in order to facilitate both intraorganisational and interorganisational cooperation (Palmer & Hardy 2000).

2.1.2. Meeting channels

The palette of meeting channels available for organisations today is fairly extensive and constantly developing. The meeting format used when communicating can have a major impact on the outcome of a transferred message (Daft & Lengel 1984; Daft & Lengel 1986). When looking at what digital meeting channels are available to employees today and their effect on internal communication, it is of interest to take a closer look at IT and digital meeting channels in general.

2.1.2.1. IT and digital meeting channels

Simonsson (2002) identified a change in the attitudes and strategies of many organisations after the implementation of modern IT systems had been made. The changes were toward a greater openness and positive belief in the information conveyed. Furthermore, considering the constant and rapid development of technological advancements within the ICT field, organisations have been enabled to use new digital meeting channels and tools both internally and externally (Hanson 2000). There are four digital channels that are considered to give a comprehensive reflection of the various real time digital meeting tools available today:

1. E-mail
2. Telephony and IP-telephony
3. Electronic meeting systems
4. Real time collaboration tools

The reason E-mail is included as a digital meeting channel is its characteristics of being real-time and providing opportunities to conduct extensive conversations with several other meeting participants simultaneously. Other than that, the first two digital meeting channels are fairly well known and hence do not require further explanation. However electronic meeting systems and real time collaboration tools will be described more in detail below.

Electronic Meeting Systems

Electronic Meeting Systems (EMS) are software that enable video- and telephone services over the Internet without physical collocation of the participating actors (Nunamaker 1991).

Real Time Collaboration Tools

Real Time Collaboration (RTC) tools are digital instruments that enable collaboration in real time between geographically remote locations (Turban et al. 2006). RTC tools are digital documents that can be edited and altered by several actors simultaneously as synchronisation is made instantaneously. Examples include interactive whiteboards, screen-sharing programs and instant messaging chat programs that allow for communication in real time over the Internet (Turban et al. 2006).

2.2. Factors influencing the meeting format

The existing body of theoretical literature concerning factors affecting the choice between physical meetings and the usage of ICT is fairly limited and needs further research before it can be considered complete (Faulconbridge et al. 2009). However, some research on the topic has been conducted and the main findings for each factor are presented here.

The factors found in existing research can be clustered in two categories; Situational factors and Contextual factors (Arnfolk & Kogg 2003). Situational

factors are specific to each individual situation, whereas contextual factors have either a direct or indirect interest in the meeting behaviour of the organisations (Arnfolk & Kogg 2003). The two clusters will be further described below.

2.2.1. Situational factors influencing the meeting format

The situational factors affecting the meeting behaviour in firms are specific and change for every meeting, hence the reference to them being dependent on the particular situation. The situation-specific factors found in academic literature are based on Arnfolk & Kogg’s (2003) compilation of factors, and complemented by the additional factors of Cost (Bender & Stephenson 1996; Denstadli 2004; Walter & Suzuki 2002) and Environment (Toffel & Horvath 2004; Denstadli et al. 2012) and are presented in Table 2:

Time
Location
Relationship & Trust
Purpose of the meeting
Message characteristics
Cost
Environment

Table 2: Situational factors

What characterises these situational factors is that they are difficult and sometimes even inappropriate to manipulate with the intention of changing meeting behaviour. As an example, it would be highly questionable to manipulate the purpose of the meeting simply to adapt it to an ICT-mediated meeting channel (Arnfolk & Kogg 2003).

All of the above factors play an important role when choosing between ICT and physcial meetings. Studies have also found that while the situational factors influence what meeting channel to use, they do not tell the whole story. It is important to remember that meetings are not isolated events, they all take place in a particular context which highlights the significance of contextual factors,

presented in section 2.2.2. Contextual factors influencing the meeting format (Arnfolk & Kogg 2003).

2.2.1.1. Time

The first situational factor, the Time factor, is mainly concerned with the time of travelling for a physical meeting in relation to the length of the meeting. Several studies have found that Time is one of the most influential factors affecting the use frequency of video conferencing (Arnfolk & Kogg 2003; Denstadli 2004; Shires & de Jong, 2009; Denstadli et al. 2012). A Norwegian study by Denstadli et al. (2012) found that time is the leading motive for implementing videoconference ICT as 90% of the respondents said it was important.

The Time factor is also closely related to efficiency gains associated with using ICT tools (Denstadli 2004). Savings in time can be made not only in reduced time spent travelling, but also through more effective meetings and decision-making (Arnfolk & Kogg 2003; Davis & Wienstein 2005). One of the reasons why companies implement digital meeting channels is to increase the speed and efficiency of the decision-making (Denstadli 2004; Davis & Weinstein 2005; Denstadli et al. 2012).

Furthermore, having physical meetings that require travel usually also entail significantly earlier time planning as flights or other means of transportation have to be booked well in advance. ICT-mediated channels usually do not require that much foresight and can be booked with much shorter planning time. Most physical meetings that require travelling are planned and booked more than a month before the date of the meeting, whereas most ICT-mediated meetings are planned and booked three to seven days before the meeting commences, allowing for more ad hoc meetings (Denstadli et al. 2012).

2.2.1.2. Location

Location of the meeting participants and the location for the physical meeting is a factor closely related to the previously mentioned Time factor. The distance to the meeting location will directly impact the amount of time the trip would take for joining participants (Walter & Suzuki 2002). In that way, business travellers

are more prone to attend physical meetings that are located relatively close to where they are, unless the meeting is extensive or important enough to justify the long trip. Usually, if long haul travelling is involved, a feeling of the meeting being a waste of time is more likely (Walter & Suzuki 2002; Arnfalk & Kogg, 2003). The use of ICT is often spurred by a dispersed organisational structure and lack of time for travelling, thus organisational time and space constraints greatly affect the use of ICT (Denstadli et al. 2012).

2.2.1.3. Relationship & Trust

For network organisations, relationships are paramount for employees in their work (Chidambaram 1996). The use of ICT changes how relationships are built compared to when employees meet in person (Chidambaram 1996). In the early stage of a relationship, it is more likely that a physical meeting will be preferred to be able to exchange more information and social cues to increase the relational intimacy and trust (Chidambaram 1996). In more developed relationships, the use of ICT will increase as the partners already have experience of working with each other and the need for non task related information is smaller (Chidambaram 1996).

One of the most important characteristics of a relationship is trust. It has been proven that trust in relationships significantly affects performance in the sense that better trust leads to greater performance (Klimoski & Karol 1976; Hughes et al. 1983; Handy 1995; Kanawattanachai & Yoo 2002; Alge 2003). However, virtual interaction poses difficulties in building trust in the same way as in person interaction (Chidambaram 1996). Additionally, business relationships go through the stages of Build-up, Maturity and Decline over a relationship life cycle and throughout this cycle trust is developed (Uлага 2003; Eggert et al. 2006). Knowing that there are difficulties in building trust in virtual relationships and that trust is based on the stage of the relationship life cycle, the meeting format is believed to be dependent on the stage of the relationship (Chidambaram 1996). Especially as lower personal interaction in digital meetings makes relationship building slower than in physical meetings in the initial stage (Chidambaram 1996). This is because digital meetings are more often focused on

task completion in the given time and therefore information of personal and social character is not exchanged to the same extent as in physical meetings (Walther et al. 1994; Chidambaram 1996; Denstadli et al. 2012).

2.2.1.4. Purpose of the meeting

The purposes of meetings, whether they are ICT-mediated or physical, vary widely throughout organisations. Studies have shown that the main purpose in physical as well as in ICT-mediated meetings is project work of some kind (53% and 30% respectively) (Denstadli et al. 2012). Thus, there is no major difference between the main purpose of physical and virtual meetings. However, when considering the other common purposes for each communication method, there are significant differences to be underlined. The second and third most frequent purpose for having a digital meeting is information exchange (21%) and management/board meeting (10%) respectively (Denstadli et al. 2012). The corresponding second and third most frequent purposes for physical meetings are conferences/seminars (17%) and education/course (13%) respectively. In more general terms, the physical meetings have a wider range of purposes, whereas ICT cannot be used for all the purposes that physical meetings can, for example service meetings (Denstadli et al. 2012).

2.2.1.5. Message characteristics

The Message characteristics as a determining factor for choosing meeting channel has been thoroughly discussed and resulted in the main theory of Media Richness (Daft & Lengel 1984, Daft & Lengel 1986; Daft et al. 1987; Russ et al. 1990). The media richness theory states that the meeting format should be based on the character of the message that is to be exchanged.

According to the media richness theory, it is possible to rate the richness of a meeting channel according to what Huber & Daft (1987) call density. The density of a meeting channel is an indication of its potential to convey complex and equivocal information based on certain criteria. Considered criteria are the channel's potential to provide continuous feedback, ability to send and receive multi-signals (for example tone of voice, body language etc.), possibility to customise the message according to the specific characteristics of the situation

and the receivers, and its potential for language variation. In other words, the channels that facilitate the exchange of a wide range of cues are regarded as rich mediums, whereas channels that allow for only a restricted range of such cues are considered to be lean mediums (Short et al. 1976).

Another term introduced in the media richness theory is the bandwidth of a meeting channel (Arnfolk & Kogg 2003). The bandwidth is the amount of information per unit of time that can be transferred through the specific meeting channel. In order for communication to be efficient, the bandwidth and the density of the medium should correspond with the character of the message that is to be transferred. In other words, media richness theory argues that a message with a high degree of ambiguity and complexity should be conveyed through a dense medium with a wide bandwidth. In the same way, a low density medium with a lower bandwidth should be used when simple and clear messages are to be transferred in order to avoid redundancy and overworking information (Arnfolk & Kogg 2003).

Communication media continuum

Daft & Lengel (1986) also built a model with regards to the richness of media channels. Two reasons for organisations to process information are given: uncertainty reduction and equivocality resolution. Uncertainty reduction is concerned with eliminating the gaps in information and equivocality resolution refers to reducing the ambiguity in a message. The two sides are placed in a continuum as depicted in Figure 1, which has been adapted by Chidambaram & Jones (1993) from the original Daft & Lengel (1986). The figure describes how meeting channels differ in their abilities to resolve equivocality and reduce uncertainty. Mediums that are strong in uncertainty reduction are weak in equivocality resolution. Uncertainty reduction is best achieved by using lean channels, whereas equivocality resolution requires rich media. As an example E-mail is located to the left of video conferencing, indicating that E-mail does not allow immediate feedback and body language etc. in the way a videoconference does. In that way, E-mail is less appropriate for equivocality resolution, but more

appropriate for uncertainty reduction than video conferencing is (Chidambaram & Jones 1993).

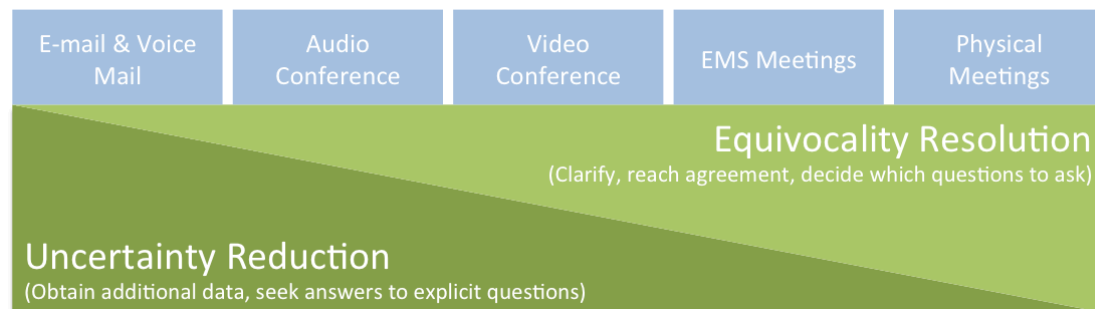


Figure 1: Communication media continuum. (Adapted from Chidambaram & Jones 1993).

2.2.1.6. Cost

Cost is another factor that clearly influences the meeting format (Denstadli 2004). Denstadli (2004) found that cost saving is one of the top reasons for investing in videoconference facilities as it reduces the cost of travelling. The Cost factor is further strengthened by the fact that the costs for travelling is increasing in relation to the cost of using ICT, which is decreasing. One of the main reasons why business travelling has decreased until now is because many companies feel the pressure to reduce costs (Bender & Stephenson 1996). It can also be viewed from the perspective of location. When deciding the location of the meeting, Cost is an important factor that determines where the meeting will be held (Walter & Suzuki 2002).

2.2.1.7. Environment

It is a commonly known fact that the environment is more burdened by travel than by the use of digital tools. In fact, studies show that a business trip that is 1000 km long requires 500 times more energy than a videoconference (Toffel & Horvath 2004). Furthermore, a flight between Stockholm and Gothenburg (Sweden) needs five times more the energy compared to using ICT instead (Toffel & Horvath 2004). Denstadli et al. (2012) found in their study that the majority of travellers believe that using ICT, or videoconferences more specifically, saves the environment in comparison to travelling. A study found

that employees feel environment is an important issue, however it is not of major consideration when deciding on meeting channel (Arnfolk & Kogg 2003).

2.2.2. Contextual factors influencing the meeting format

When deciding on the most appropriate communication form, participants are likely to consider many different objectives and weighing many different alternatives from the meeting context against each other. Table 3 shows the contextual factors compiled by Arnfolk & Kogg (2003):

Organisational factors
Personal & Family
External meeting participants

Table 3: Contextual factors

These factors are included as contextual factors because they all have a direct or indirect interest in the meeting behaviour of the organisation and the majority of the employees. This also means that they could either consciously or subconsciously influence the meeting behaviour in one way or another. However, for the purpose of this thesis, travel service providers and external meeting participants have been excluded as the research focuses on internal meetings.

Considering that the meeting behaviour is ultimately up to the individual, Arnfolk & Kogg (2003) also argue that the only factors that can influence the meeting behaviour directly are the employees and the external meeting participants. The remaining factors can influence indirectly by enabling various ways of communicating as well as influencing the choices of the employees and external meeting participants (Arnfolk & Kogg 2003). As opposed to the situational factors, the contextual factors can be manipulated by the firm for the purpose of promoting a particular meeting channel. By altering factors within the company, the employees' values, skills and preferences can be affected and changed (Arnfolk & Kogg 2003).

2.2.2.1. Organisational factors

The Organisational factors are features such as the prevailing meeting infrastructure, travel policy and other policies, organisational culture and structure, human resource management and management control systems (Arnfolk and Kogg 2003; Douglas & Lubbe 2009). This factor is about the management creating the best circumstances to promote the preferred mode of meeting. If the employees do not have access to the right communication tools, training and incentive systems etc. the choice of meeting format will be affected (Arnfolk & Kogg 2003; Douglas & Lubbe 2009).

2.2.2.2. Personal & Family

The employee itself has values, skills, attitudes and preferences that will directly affect the decision to use ICT or to conduct physical meetings. He or she might be influenced by a private frequent flier membership, have a passion for IT solutions or a desire to see as many new places in the world as possible. This will affect the decision of whether a meeting is preferred to be physical or digital, since the physical meeting requires travel (Arnfolk & Kogg 2003; Douglas & Lubbe 2010). It has also been found that digital meetings have a tendency to be viewed as less significant or a form of second-class meetings, encouraging increased use of physical meetings (Arnfolk & Kogg 2003).

In the same way as employees' personal preferences regarding travel might affect their decision to have physical or digital meetings, their personal preferences regarding ICT usage can also be an important factor. Jiang et al. (2000) describes potential personal resistance to ICT usage as interaction related barriers. The interaction related barriers refer to how employees perceive the change of the social content of their work. A system that is well designed can still be rejected by employees if they believe the change will result in less power and social structure in the organisation. Thus, the loss of positive social relations such as the employee losing touch with former colleagues can be a source of resistance (Jiang et al. 2000).

The employee's family is yet another part of the contextual factors that affects the decision to have physical or digital meetings (Arnfolk & Kogg 2003). Studies show that the family can be a source of stress when it comes to business travel and is hence a factor that employees take into consideration (DeFrank et al. 2000). Business travel usually means that there will be less time spent at home with the family (Casinowsky 2013). Arnfolk & Kogg (2003) also found that employees with young children had a preference for digital meetings since it allowed for more time at home with their family.

3. Methodology

This section illustrates the choices made in this study with regards to the research approach and methodological fit. The process used for conducting the study as well as choices made when it comes to design, case and sample selections as well as data collection. The section also addresses the method used for data analysis and quality considerations.

3.1. Research approach and methodological fit

The research approach has been chosen in order to fit with the relatively confined state of current research and our selected research question of why we have internal physical meetings and how the choice of having physical or digital meetings are made. Therefore, a qualitative case study method with one focal case organisation and four complementary reference case organisations has been used. The data collected is based on semi-structured interviews and constitutes the foundation for the empirical findings of this study. In order to answer the posed question it is necessary to understand how the employees and managers in the case organisations think, act and prioritise with regards to meeting management and travel policies. This entails firstly collecting data on the focal organisations and analysing it in order to understand its content. In order to understand how employees prioritise between the elements found to be influencing their decision between physical or digital meetings, a complementary survey was used to quantify that specific aspect.

As a result of the research approach it is useful to look at the research process in five different stages presented in Figure 2:



Figure 2: Research methodology process

The first stage was selecting the main case company and the reference case companies with suitable characteristics and settings. The second phase included a pre-study of secondary data as preparation for the survey and the interviews,

which constituted the main data source. As a third stage, a survey was conducted to gain an overall insight into how the employees thought with regards to the research question and how they prioritised between different factors. The survey gave important insights to build upon for the fourth stage, the semi-structured interviews. Finally, stage five involved the final data analysis to find the resulting conclusions of the study. Simultaneously with the data collection and analysis phases, the data was constantly interpreted and processes were re-iterated back and forth in order to cross-check findings along the way.

3.2. Research design

To investigate the research question, a case study with complementing reference cases was chosen. A case study allows for rich data from many sources to be collected on selected focal organisations and allows for exploring a specific phenomenon (Yin 2009). As the intention of the study is to extend theory with empirical evidence from the five case companies, including the four reference cases in the study is considered appropriate to test the results in other organisational settings and thereby make the analyses more general (Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007). Furthermore, in order to answer the question of *how* the employees choose between physical or digital meetings, a case study is further justified by Ghauri & Grønhaug (2005) as it is considered appropriate to answer research questions formulated around a *how*, giving detailed insights into how the phenomenon works.

The relatively modest and confined state of the current theory on the topic supports the qualitative approach taken (Edmonson & McManus 2007). This approach is appropriate since the purpose of the study is to discover, gain insights and find explanations to the research question posed (Ghauri & Grønhaug 2005). The qualitative approach suited the purpose of this study well as the study aims to gain insight into the ways employees handle their decision of whether to have a physical or a digital meeting and by doing so constructing explanations to how they choose between the two. In order to carry out the five step study approach it has been necessary to collect rich data, which the qualitative approach allows for. Furthermore, this approach allowed for different

ways of collecting data in a way that suited the purpose of the study. Thus, it was possible to gather both rich data through semi-structured in-depth interviews as well as more structured data through the use of the survey.

With regards to the research design, an abductive research approach has been applied. This is an approach that allows for interchangeable and iterative processes throughout the period of researching as opposed to the more static inductive and deductive research approaches (Jacobsen 2002; Bryman & Bell 2007). As the process for this study is built on iterative processes where data is collected and interpreted in several stages an abductive approach has been applied in order to first explore the field and its prioritisation through the survey, and then identify the thought processes of employees through the in-depth interviews. In that way, parts of the analysis had to be done in order to be able to move on to the next phase of data collection.

3.3. Case selection

By using several cases, a robust framework for data collection is allowed and the cases become a foundation for subsequent generalisations about the *why* and *how* questions asked in the research question (Remenyi et al. 1998). In terms of case selection, one main case organisation and four additional reference case organisations were identified based on mainly three individual criteria: industry, size and location. In order to stay true to the aim of more generalizable results, the case organisations would have to be in different industries in order for analytical conclusions to be drawn across industries. Secondly, the sizes of the organisations were considered and the main idea was to investigate organisations that are large in terms of employees, but not necessarily the same size. In other words, the point was to cover a range of large organisations. The criteria of size is also naturally related to the third criteria of location. The case organisations had to be exposed to vast geographical dispersion in order to fit with the research question and problem formulation. Therefore, MNCs were chosen across the board of case organisations to secure the presence of the issues to be researched. Based on these criteria five organisations were selected as presented in Table 4:

The Consumer Goods company
The Vehicle company
The Insurance company
The Industrial company
The Retail company

Table 4: Case organisations

The Consumer Goods company was selected as the main case organisation as a consequence of accessibility to desired number of employees at various levels and positions of the organisation as the main case company was required to participate to a further extent than the reference cases.

3.4. Data collection process

The data collection process consists of three main components; the pre-study, the survey and the semi-structured interviews. Each of these are described below.

3.4.1. Pre study

Conducting a pre-study was essential in order to gain initial insights into the chosen organisations, their respective backgrounds and contexts. The pre-study was based on initial interviews and meetings with travel management and secondary data provided by the organisations such policies, presentations, internal studies and reports. Moreover, the pre-study worked as an initial guide to set up a structure for the main source of empirical data; the survey and the in-depth semi-structured interviews.

3.4.2. Survey

A survey was used to get an overview of the theoretical factors for physical meetings and to gain additional numerical insights into how the choice of having a physical or digital meeting is made. This allowed for approaching employees in the same way and asking the same questions without risking internal validity by affecting the respondents to become biased in one way or the other (Kelley et al. 2003). The purpose of the survey was to in a time efficient way find out how employees prioritize when making their decision on physical or digital meetings,

while gaining important insights for the interview sessions. The survey was thus a short questionnaire (see 9.2. Appendix 2).

In order to ensure the survey was ready to fly on its own, a trial of ten respondents was used to validate the questions as understandable and logical to the respondents. The limited number of questions asked resulted in the high response rate of 59% and a total of 352 respondents to the survey. The survey was distributed to Consumer Goods company employees via the company email in order to encourage a high response rate. The selection of respondents was based on their frequency of travel as well as their country of employment. Based on these criteria, the contact person at the Consumer Goods Company extracted a list of employees that were high-, medium-, and low frequency travellers for internal meetings. The travel frequency was defined as the individual employee's number of internal business trips during a year (2013) in relation to the travel frequency of the organisation in general. This resulted in respondents being from three different levels of travel frequency as well as various hierarchical levels and business areas to ensure the findings were not specific to any one area of the organisation.

3.4.3. Semi-structured interviews

The use of in-depth, semi-structured interviews were considered the most suitable method to understand the main research question. Therefore, the interviews conducted constitute the main data collected. This method is particularly appropriate for the type of study conducted as it is a qualitative study aiming to explore questions formulated around a *why* and *how* (Miles & Huberman 1994; Edmonson & McManus 2007; Saunders et al. 2009). The method allows for deep insights into the issue through posing open-ended questions for the interviewees to answer (Saunders et al. 2009).

The interviews were based around an interview protocol (see 9.1. Appendix 1) constructed partly from the initial pre-study, the theoretical research conducted and from the survey results. The interview protocol was used as a guide for the interviews, supporting the interviewer in a natural conversation around the

topics of interest for the study. In other words, the specific questions varied between the interviews, but were all based around the same topics in order to allow a flexible conversation while still getting answers to the desired issues. Spontaneous answers and elaborations triggered follow-up questions from the interviewers that contributed to a richer and more insightful conversation. In that way, the chosen approach allowed for continuous assessment of the data collected while in the interview setting and steered into other relevant areas that might have helped answer the research question (Yin 2009; Saunders et al. 2009).

3.4.3.1. Interview sample

For the purpose of this study, a total of 26 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with interviewees from all five case organisations. The interviewee participation rate was 87%, which ensures a broad sampling to make sure variations and all important aspects of the research question are captured in the sample (Elliot & Timulak 2005). Every interview lasted for approximately one hour. Since the Consumer Goods company has been the main case organisation for this study, a significant share of the interviewees are from that company. The entire global travel management team consisting of three people was interviewed. Furthermore, seventeen employees at the Consumer Goods company were selected and interviewed, whereof seven were employed in Sweden and ten were employed in Germany. The countries of Sweden and Germany were chosen based partly on accessibility, partly on the fact that The Consumer Goods company has their largest offices in these countries and partly to investigate whether any differences were to be found between the countries. Those types of differences were not discovered and hence, the study has considered Swedish and German interviewees as part of the same cluster.

In the same way as in the sample selection for the survey, the interviewees were chosen based on the three levels of travel frequency previously described in section 3.4.2. Survey. This resulted in five interviews being conducted with high frequency travellers (most frequent third of the business travellers), six interviews with medium frequency travellers (middle third of the total business

travellers), and six interviews made with low frequency travellers (lower third of the total business travellers). The interviewees were again from varying hierarchical levels and business areas in the consumer goods company to ensure the findings were not specific to any one area of the organisation.

Regarding the reference case organisations, the four interviewees were in charge of the meeting or travel management at the respective organisation. As the purpose of the reference case organisations were to validate or reject the findings made in the Consumer Goods company, the chosen individuals were considered to have the required overview and knowledge of the organisation as a whole. These managers are in charge of the prevailing policies and ways of working in each organisation, and thus they have the best insight into how the respective organisations function with regards to business meetings and business travel management.

3.4.3.2. Interview setting

All the interviews took place between March 18 and July 10 2014. Twelve were held face-to-face, eleven were held using videoconference facilities at the respective organisation and three were conducted through a regular phone interview. The channel used for a particular interview was mainly determined by the availability and geographical location of the interviewee. In order to avoid different interpretations of the interview content and personal bias, both researchers behind this study participated in all the interviews (Eisenhardt 1989; Voss et al. 2002). Interviews were held in either Swedish or English depending on the interviewees' preferences.

All the interviews started with a brief introduction of the study at hand, emphasizing the anonymity of individual interviewees as well as the participating organisations. Secondly, the interviewee was asked to describe themselves and their role in the case organisation in an attempt to help them relax and get comfortable in the interview setting. This was followed by the main block consisting of the guiding interview protocol. Finally, the interview was recapped by the interviewers to ensure the main findings were understood

correctly and any misunderstandings or missing pieces of information could be rectified.

3.5. Data analysis

The foundation of the data analysis made in this study is based on the pattern-matching method of Yin (2003) where empirical and theoretical patterns are compared and contrasted. Nine theoretical themes were identified based on the literature review (see Table 5). In addition, empirical patterns were identified from the interview transcripts through the use of a colour-coding system based on the content of the answers given. The colour-coded answers were compiled into separate matrices depending on their respective theme. While many of the empirical patterns were matched by the theoretical themes identified, some patterns were not. Those that were not, were clustered to form an additional empirical theme; Number of participants. These ten themes have been used consequently to form a consistent structure throughout the study, from the literature review and empirical findings to the analysis.

Theme	Source
Purpose of the meeting	Theoretical
Message characteristics	Theoretical
Relationship & Trust	Theoretical
Time	Theoretical
Cost	Theoretical
Location	Theoretical
Organisational factors	Theoretical
Environment	Theoretical
Personal & Family	Theoretical
Number of participants	Empirical

Table 5: Theoretical and empirical themes

3.6. Limitations

While being informed by theoretical recommendations, the choices made with regards to the method of the research design poses limitations to this study. The

study has been limited to researching the topic at hand in one main case organisation, complemented with four reference organisations to either verify or to reject the findings made with regards to the main case organisation. This is a consequence resulting from the scope and time frame of the study. Conducting equally deep investigations into all five organisations would not have been feasible given the time and scope of this masters thesis. In order to be able to say something more than how just one specific organisation deals with physical and digital meetings and still conduct the study within the scope of a masters thesis, a trade-off had to be made. Therefore, the interviewees at the reference case organisations were chosen based on their insight in how the organisation's employees think and act with regards to meeting and travel management. This was in most cases the travel manager (or equivalent) at each respective company. Consequently, an imbalance in the quantity of data gathered from the reference case organisations in relation to the main case organisation is expected. However, the information gathered from the reference case organisations was by a vast majority consistent with the data collected from the main case organisation, emphasising the similarity in how they meet the research question.

While anonymity of all people and organisations involved in the study was offered and kept, it is important to highlight that complete uncensored honesty cannot be guaranteed in interviews and survey results. For this reason it was emphasised for interviewees and respondents that they would remain anonymous and that no information about individual responses would be given to their employer or any other actor. Another important aspect was to ensure the interviewees and respondents that there is no judgement or right or wrong answers to any questions asked. This was important since organisations often look for opportunities to rationalise travelling, which can easily make respondents and interviewees think that they are supposed to answer the questions in a certain way.

The native language of the interviewers is Swedish and thus the interviews made in Sweden were also done in the interviewers' and the interviewees' native

tongue. However, the German interviewees were interviewed in English which was not considered a problem to any of the interviewees nor to the interviewers. Nevertheless, despite good knowledge of the English language there might be risks of not picking up on every single detail as people are generally more comfortable expressing themselves in their native language.

3.7. Quality considerations

Looking at the reliability and validity of the study, it is important to mention that these aspects of the quality assessment of the research is just as important in a qualitative study like this one, as it is in a quantitative study. However, the ways to ensure these elements differ between the two approaches (Bryman & Bell 2007).

3.7.1. Reliability

Reliability encompasses the notion of replicability of the study and its findings with regards to the quality of measurement (LeCompte & Goetz 1982; Trochim & Donnelly 2008). In other words, the reliability assesses whether the results of the findings are independent of the researchers' own interpretation and would thus reach the same conclusions regardless of who the researcher is (Ryan et al. 2002; Silverman 2013). Complete independence from personal interpretation is impossible to guarantee in a qualitative study, and thus efforts have been made to increase the reliability of the findings presented in this study.

One way in which the reliability was increased was by taking advantage of being two researchers working jointly. One of the reasons behind making sure that both researchers were present in all interviews conducted, was that personal interpretations could be decreased. Throughout the interview process one of the researchers was designated to conduct the verbal interview, whereas the other one was designated to observe the non-verbal communication such as body language, pauses in speech and tone of voice while taking notes. This dual method allowed for collecting non-verbal data that is often hard to record when focusing on the verbal conversation in an interview (Silverman 2013). The researcher who was not designated to conduct the verbal interview, would be the one who wrote the transcript. Afterwards both researchers would go

through and code the transcripts individually, discussing any parts of the transcripts that had been understood differently. After the individual coding, the patterns found were consolidated and if any differences in coding were discovered, they would be discussed and clarified too (Bazeley 2013).

By using the pattern-matching and constant comparative method (see 3.7.2.1. Internal validity) in this way, the reliability in terms of replicability could be strengthened. The constant comparative method is a continuous and ongoing method or procedure where all newly collected data is compared and contrasted with previous data through for example coding. This allows for an iterative process where theories are constructed, improved, confirmed or even rejected as a consequence of the newly collected data that emerges from the study (Silverman 2013). However, it is acknowledged that a certain bias is unavoidable as it is part of the qualitative process (Elliott & Timulak 2005).

3.7.2. Validity

The concept of validity refers to how true the researchers are to the data collected and its generalizability. Consequently, validity is a concept that poses a threat particularly to case studies. However, by using reference case organisations this threat has been decreased.

3.7.2.1. Internal validity

When looking at the internal validity, focus is on whether the study reflects reality. In other words to what degree the findings of the study reflects a critical investigation of all data rather than only a few examples that might portray a different story than the truth (Silverman 2013). Based on the methodology and the context of the research, the study at hand has aimed at increasing the internal validity. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that there are aspects that reduces the internal validity of a study of this kind. To increase the internal validity, several sources of data such as secondary documentation, interviews and surveys were used and thus contributed to a higher degree of internal validity. Furthermore, a wide sample of interviewees and respondents was used, consisting of employees with various backgrounds with different experiences and from different business areas. However, a slight degree of

dependency on the data does exist as it was not possible to interview all employees. Additionally, by coding the data collected individually and in a coherent way in addition to non-verbal observations, an increased validity could be achieved (Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007). Moreover, pattern matching and the constant comparative method allowed the researchers to constantly ensure all relevant data was included (Silverman 2010; Bazeley 2013).

Another limitation to the internal validity is that interviewees can never be guaranteed to have understood the questions and concepts introduced for them in the exact way they were intended to be understood by the interviewees. This is another aspect where the presence of two interviewers in every interview was helpful in order to keep the level of internal validity at a satisfactory level. The interviewees were also probed to ask clarifying questions if anything was unclear and the opportunity to add, subtract or correct any misunderstandings was given at the end of every interview. Finally, the time aspect is important to note. As this study was conducted at a certain point in time the results can only apply for this period of time, especially considering the fast development of technology it is important to highlight the fact that further research has to be made continuously in order to monitor the development and stay relevant.

3.7.2.2. External validity

The external validity refers to the study's generalizability to the general population and its transparency with regards to how theory and data is used (Bryman & Bell 2007; Yin 2009). The approach used is complemented by four additional organisations to verify or reject the findings made in the main case organisation. In this way, the generalizability is increased in comparison to a simple single case study. The data from the different organisations also showed that the findings made in the main case organisation were to a great extent transferrable across the organisations, industries and their contexts. The organisations included in the study were also chosen based on specified criteria (see 3.3. Case selection) in order to increase the validity of the study. When considering the survey conducted, the relatively high number of respondents (352) and response rate (59%) also contributes to an increased external validity.

4. Physical and digital meetings - empirical findings

The empirics section consists of two major blocks correlating with the research cases: meeting management at the Consumer Goods company and meeting management at the complementary MNCs. In turn, each block consists of two sub-sections: first, a description of the organisational background picturing the context of the organisations. Second, empirical data on the situational and contextual factors found.

4.1. Meeting management at the Consumer Goods company

The first block of empirical data will present the findings related to the main case company, the Consumer Goods company. The data presented focuses specifically on the areas of the organisation's context and factors influencing the meeting format.

4.1.1. The Consumer Goods company's background and context

In order to fully understand the employees' situation when making the decision to travel for a meeting or not, it is important to acknowledge that it is not made in a vacuum. Therefore, this section is designed to give an understanding of the environment and the context in which the decision is made within the Consumer Goods company.

4.1.1.1. Global Meeting and Travel Policy at the Consumer Goods company

The Global Meeting and Travel Policy is aimed at giving the highest possible security and cost efficiency in meeting- and travel management in accordance with the sustainability targets. Thus, the main focus of the policy is on security, cost savings and sustainability. The Global Travel Policy was changed into a Global Meeting and Travel Policy, emphasising the importance of digital meetings. The main focus however, is to decrease the 63.5 million euros travel budget by utilising digital meeting channels more extensively.

It is mandatory for all employees to follow the policy for all business travel and it clearly states that ICT should always be the default choice, thus travel should be avoided if other meeting alternatives can replace it. The policy also gives the individual employee extensive responsibility by stating that cost effectiveness

and sustainability of business trips is the responsibility of each employee and should always be in focus when evaluating alternatives.

4.1.1.2. Tools available at the Consumer Goods company

The mix of tools available to the Consumer Goods company employees is important as it determines the modes of communication they can choose between and need to adapt to depending on who their meeting counterpart is. Following is a brief description of the available tools:

Fixed videoconference room

The fixed videoconference room is a system where a link between two or more different rooms in geographically dispersed Consumer Goods company-locations are connected digitally. There are 131 videoconference rooms available in the Consumer Goods company globally. High definition cameras are used and both video and audio is sent to the respective videoconference rooms instantly

Teleconference

Teleconference is mainly used for phone meetings which is a tool that can be used by anyone who has access to a phone, including external actors. When booking a teleconference, a conference ID number is generated and later used by the participants to connect to the conference call by phone from any location in the world at the pre-decided time of the meeting.

Lync

Lync is a communication tool provided by Microsoft for personal computers. It is connected to the Consumer Goods company contact list and thus it is possible to contact any person within the Consumer Goods company via Lync. The software uses the Internet to support its different add-ons to the Lync offer presented in table 6:

Lync add-on	Description
Chat	Instant messaging between the Consumer Goods company employees which enables quick answers and solutions to simple problems.
Audio	Making voice calls by using Lync enables the employees to verbally talk to each other without relying on any phone lines

	as Lync uses the Internet to transfer the data.
Video	The communicating participants can also connect via video to see each other while having contact. This requires the personal computers to be equipped with cameras.
Screen sharing	Enables users to share their screens and desktops with the other meeting participants, facilitating presentations and technical support.

Table 6: Lync add-ons

4.1.2. Factors influencing meeting format at the Consumer Goods company

In this section the factors that are taken into consideration when making the decision between having a physical meeting or using ICT will be described. The empirical data consists of both the survey and the qualitative interviews conducted on Consumer Goods company employees in Sweden and in Germany.

4.1.2.1. Factor importance rating

Looking at the results from the conducted survey to start with, the following empirical findings will consider all respondents as one group of employees as the results do not show any significant differences between Sweden and Germany, nor for the frequency of travel, gender or any other general characteristics. The complete list of average importance for each factor is found in Table 7. The list of how the respondents rate and prioritise between various factors reveals that respondents consider the Purpose of the meeting to be the most important factor when deciding to have a meeting physically or digitally (6.07 out of 7).

Factor	Average importance
	1=not important 7=very important
Purpose of meeting	6.07
Message characteristics	5.53
Relationship & Trust	5.49
Time	5.45
Cost	5.43
Location	4.97
Organisational factors	4.96
Environment	3.49
Personal & Family	3.40

Table 7. Average importance survey results

The difference between the Purpose of the meeting and the second most important factor Message characteristics (5.53) is significant (difference: 0.54) and it is evident that the Purpose of the meeting is by far the most important factor as the gap between the other factors are not as large. Following the Purpose of the meeting in the importance ranking is the Message characteristics, Relationship & Trust (5.49), Time (5.45) and Cost (5.43). All these four factors are on a fairly similar average importance of 5.53-5.43 out of 7. The bottom four factors of Location (4.97), Organisational factors (4.96), Environment (3.49) and Personal & Family (3.40), are less important according to the ranking. Each and every one of these factors will be further described and elaborated on in more qualitative terms in the following section.

4.1.2.2. Purpose of the meeting

The most important factor according to the Consumer Goods company's employees is the Purpose of the meeting as it scored 6.07 out of 7 on the importance rating). The qualitative interviews conducted in the Consumer Goods company revealed several purposes that are believed to encourage meetings to take place in a physical format. The most common reason for travelling for an internal meeting is to manage new relations or projects. It is likely that employees prefer physical meetings more for newly started projects, partly to manage the project in a good way.

Often the purpose of physical meetings is closely connected to one or a few specific tasks. Examples of these tasks that are mentioned by the interviewees are to align interests, coordinate work, agree and make decisions about something to solve specific problems. Many purposes for physical meetings are of a more strategic character, involving strategic work such as planning ahead, budget discussions and other strategic work. But there are also other purposes affecting the decision that are of a more social character, involving elaborate and deep discussions between two or more people. These purposes can be assignments such as recruitment, coaching or conducting various group

workshops. In addition, when there are many topics to cover, a physical meeting is preferred.

“If it’s a complex issue that we don’t really know much about and that requires deeper discussions, then it’s better to meet physically. Also, if we have 10 000 issues to discuss, then it’s better to go physically”

Employee 7 the Consumer Goods company

Simply showing yourself to other employees is also a commonly mentioned purpose for travelling internally. It is believed to be important to show your presence physically at the factories and to employees in other offices to ensure that they see that the manager is engaged and interested in all their markets. In this way, the employees try to avoid isolation from other offices and of themselves while also getting a better understanding of the challenges facing factories and other internal actors.

“My team works from different countries around Europe, and I need to go visit them from time to time just to make sure that they see me and see that I am engaged in their work even if my own office is in another country”

Employee 1, the Consumer Goods company

There are also quite a few purposes mentioned that involve tasks that are carried out on a more regular basis. For example, employees travel for update meetings, follow-up meetings as well as to gather information and communicate changes in the business community. However, at the same time there are employees who strongly believe that those types of meetings should be carried out digitally.

4.1.2.3. Message characteristics

The factor with the second highest importance rating (5.53 out of 7) in the survey is the Message characteristics that is to be conveyed during the meeting. It is clear that the type of message the employees are meeting to discuss play an

important role in whether the meeting is held physically or digitally. If the meeting participants meet to talk about something simple that is easy to grasp for all of them, then they prefer to use digital meeting channels. But if the message is multidimensional or difficult to grasp and thus requires extensive elaboration and frequent follow-up questions, then the employees would prefer to sit down in the same room to carry out the dialogue. As examples of what these messages could be, employees at the Consumer Goods company mentioned meetings where they needed to convince other people of something, when the content of the message is sensitive such as when resigning or firing someone. Other typical message characteristics that encourage physical collocation are when controversial topics are to be discussed.

4.1.2.4. Relationship & Trust

The stage of the relationship between the meeting participants is the third most important factor for the Consumer Goods company employees, scoring 5.49 out of 7 on the importance scale. Most of the interviewees mentioned that if the relationship to the counterpart is at an early stage it is preferred to meet in person. This is believed to be because it is easier to read and get to know the other persons if one meets them physically. Following initial physical meetings, it becomes considerably easier to work with them using ICT, as you already have an established physical relationship with them. Meeting in person also gives room for more informal small talk that is not related to the meeting itself, which makes it easier to get to know someone and thereby build trust.

“When it’s just the beginning of something, the major difference is the relationship building. You need to meet and bond, have a beer or private chat just to build a relationship”

Employee 7, the Consumer Goods company

Interviewees said that it is especially difficult to initially trust someone when you just talk by using ICT mediated tools and do not see each other. Although, it was also mentioned, that after some time, even if the employees never meet or see each other, trust can still be built when both parties have proved that they can

deliver and thus rely on each other. Furthermore meeting physically permits more spontaneous elaborations when discussing relevant topics than it would in an ICT mediated meeting, where participants tend to adhere more strictly to the agenda.

4.1.2.5. Time

The time it takes to travel to a meeting in relation to the length of the meeting has the fourth highest average importance in the Consumer Goods company. The Time factor received an average importance just slightly lower than the Relationship & Trust factor, scoring 5.45 out of 7. The interviewees stated with regards to the Time factor that they would not travel for a meeting if it was short, unless the Purpose of the meeting was very important.

“I wouldn’t travel for a meeting that is only two or three hours long unless it’s a very burning subject that really has to be discussed in person”

Employee 3, the Consumer Goods company.

In addition, there are also efficiency gains with both ICT and physical meetings that are taken into consideration. Using ICT makes a meeting more efficient because everyone discusses the topics on the agenda and not much else that is not related to the meeting. In that sense, when something needs to be discussed urgently, people would prefer ICT mediated meetings.

Included in the Time factor, there is also the element of planning ahead of the meeting. If an employee is travelling for a meeting, ideally he or she should plan at least 14 days ahead to be able to buy the tickets at a recommended price, as stated in the Meeting and travel policy. While some preparation for ICT mediated meetings is required, it is not as long and ICT-meetings can generally be planned on a fairly short notice. However, it is also apparent that if the meeting is a videoconference meeting, more planning is required due to a scarcity of videoconference rooms at the Consumer goods company. When conducting videoconferences, a videoconference room needs to be available in all

participating offices, adding to the pressure on videoconference room availability.

4.1.2.6. Cost

Costs are often referred to when talking about using ICT instead of physical meetings. However, to the employees of the Consumer Goods company, the Cost factor is only the fifth most important factor to consider. Cost received 5.43 out of 7 on the importance scale and even though most employees do consider costs when setting up a meeting, Cost is not the most important factor. With that said, an incredibly expensive trip will make the employees think twice before booking it and thus make them re-evaluate to assess whether the meeting can be conducted digitally instead. The determining component here is whether the value added by having a physical meeting surpasses the cost of the trip. This is a trade-off that is difficult to evaluate beforehand, but the experienced employees claim to have a good sense of what value they can expect to get out of a particular meeting.

4.1.2.7. Location

Location of the meeting ranked sixth with an importance of 4.97 out of 7. Interviewees mentioned that in many cases the physical meetings are planned in a way that the least number of people will need to travel. In other words, the location is chosen to be as close to as many meeting participants as possible. Another possible solution related to Location is that the Consumer Goods company employees place meetings in larger hubs, ensuring that people flying in from various locations have an easy route, saving them both energy, time and costs. In other instances, if the location of the meeting is considered to be too far from the interviewee's country in relation to other factors such as the Purpose of the meeting, interviewees said that they would be more hesitant to travel for a physical meeting.

4.1.2.8. Organisational factors

The organisational factor including for example availability of videoconference rooms and stable Internet connection ranked number seven on the importance scale with 4.96 points out of 7. According to the employees there is a good mix of

tools available, and this is necessary in order to accommodate different types of meetings. Some frustration is caused by the inconsistency in tools used across the Consumer Goods company corporation as some employees for example cannot access video conferencing and others do not have audio installed on their Lync etc. This implies that the communicating counterpart will have to adapt by being flexible with what tools they are using.

The interviewees of the Consumer Goods company mentioned that if the organisational factors were insufficient, then they would decide on having a physical meeting instead of a digital one. It is also clear that employees are facing difficulties related to the organisational factor at the Consumer Goods company, as some of the local offices are not yet equipped with videoconference facilities.

“I work with some Consumer Goods company offices that are not yet equipped with video conferencing rooms so I don’t even have that option when I need to speak with them.”

Employee 11, the Consumer Goods company.

In those cases, the employees’ choice of meeting formats are limited to either meeting physically or using other ICT tools that might be less appropriate for the meeting at hand. However, when it comes to video conferencing it is clear that it is a less frequently used ICT tool at the Consumer goods Company. The scarcity of fixed videoconference facilities in more remote offices are considered an issue. Although there are some employees that are frequent users of the fixed videoconference facilities (once or twice a week), most employees describe their use of videoconferencing with the words *“Rarely”*, *“Almost never”*, *“Not so much”* and *“Never”*.

4.1.2.9. Environment

The Environment factor obtained a low score on the importance scale, receiving only 3.48 out of 7. When looking at the qualitative data from the interviews, the Environment factor was never spontaneously mentioned as a factor taken into consideration either. This shows that the Environment factor, including highly

profiled topics of debate such as carbon emissions are not as important in reality as one might think. When asked specifically about what they think of the Environment factor in regards to having physical meetings through business travel or using ICT, the interviewees mentioned that it is of course important, but it is not important enough to overrule the other factors mentioned.

“We should probably consider the environment more than we do because it’s obviously really important in the long run if we want to keep living on this planet. But unfortunately the environment isn’t often the highest priority since the purpose of the meeting often requires you to travel or not”

Employee 9, the Consumer Goods company

4.1.2.10. Personal & Family

The Personal & Family factor received the lowest importance of all factors in the survey, 3.40 out of 7. Most interviewees also stated that these factors are usually not taken into consideration at all. There is wide consensus regarding the usefulness of the digital meeting tools available at the Consumer Goods company. They are stated to facilitate and speed up the employees’ work significantly:

“They are fantastic tools that make my every-day easy and very effective”

Employee 6, the Consumer Goods company.

The work performance is improved particularly due to the more efficient meetings and when the employees can stay seated in their office or by their desk and connect to the ICT tool from there as it saves them the hassle of booking rooms, links and physically mobilising.

It is also clear that loss of social relations is an issue. Networking, informal small talk and spontaneous elaborations outside of the agenda is considered to add value to the employees’ wellbeing as well as improving their work performance by adding value to the company. These types of informal interaction are highly

valued by the employees as a part of their Swedish organisational culture, and therefore it might be a barrier to further increase the ratio of ICT usage to physical meetings.

4.1.2.11. Number of participants

One additional factor that emerged from the interviews is the Number of participants in a meeting. This factor is therefore added to the ones found and presented in the literature review. The number of participants in a meeting affects the decision in the sense that if there are too many participants in an ICT meeting it can become inefficient as everyone might not get the chance to speak or everyone cannot be seen in a videoconference etc. On the other hand, having many participants can also mean that it becomes collectively too demanding to have a physical meeting due to all the physical mobilisation. In relation to the Number of participants in a meeting, interviewees also said that they could have a video or audioconference with up to seven or ten people before it became too difficult to conduct a digital meeting due to the Number of participants.

4.2. Meeting management at the four complementary MNCs

The second block of empirical data presents the findings related to the complementary MNCs, following the same structure as in the main case of the Consumer Goods company above. Hence, the data presented focuses specifically on the organisations' contexts and the factors influencing meeting format.

4.2.1. The complementary MNCs' backgrounds and contexts

In this section, a more general approach will be taken to the context and environment in which the decision to travel or using ICT for meetings is made in the four complementary MNCs researched; the Vehicle company, the Retail company, the Industrial company and the Insurance company.

4.2.1.1. The Vehicle company - background and context

The Vehicle company has approximately 115 000 employees worldwide, distributed over 19 production countries and 190 markets globally. The travel management team is in charge of the 162 million euro budget for business travel (2013) and approximately 50% is for internal travel. The strategic purchasing manager in charge of travel management highlights the necessity of

technological tools today and that it is important that the Vehicle company has a relatively standardised approach to business travel globally. It is also stressed that there is not one fit that suits all countries, implying that local adjustment must be considered.

The business travel philosophy of the Vehicle company is to avoid travelling for meetings if they can. The employees at the Vehicle company have access to both phone and web meetings, instant messaging, screen sharing and video conferencing. The videoconferencing is done via 150 fixed videoconference rooms located in offices around the world, and thus they can practically reach anyone within the company, worldwide.

4.2.1.2. The Retail company - background and context

The Retail company exists in 53 countries and has approximately 104 000 employees. Their business model is based on global expansion and growth, which is closely related to travelling, as expansion into new markets requires experienced staff to mobilise. Therefore, travelling is a necessity for the Retail company, and no goal to decrease travelling has been expressed. The company has a growth requirement of 10-15% annually which is constantly weighed against another core value; sustainability. The ICT tools available at the Retail company are standard teleconferencing, audio- and videoconferencing as well as instant messaging.

4.2.1.3. The Industrial company - background and context

The Industrial company has operations in 32 countries around the world and employs around 46 000 people. The company is involved in heavy industry and is a frequent user of ICT. Of all the travelling that is done 35-40% is internal travel. The Industrial company actively tries to minimise travelling as much as possible by providing the tools and information needed to avoid travelling. In 2007 the Industrial company made a large investment in fixed videoconference rooms, giving them access to 120 rooms around the globe. Except for informing about ICT tools, targeted cost-cutting statements by the well-trusted CEO are used to dramatically decrease business travel for internal purposes.

The ICT tools available at the Industrial company are instant messaging, Teleconferencing, web conferences and fixed videoconference rooms. A new system allowing for videoconferences from every employee's laptop is also under implementation and will soon be in place.

4.2.1.4. The Insurance company - background and context

The Insurance company has approximately 7 000 employees distributed over 7 countries in Europe. As much as 90% of the travelling is done for internal purposes. The company has been very successful in their meeting and travel management and has been rewarded for decreasing their business travel by 50% since 2007.

The ICT tools available at the Insurance company are around 90 fixed videoconference rooms spread out in their offices around Europe. Moreover, the employees have access to teleconferencing and instant messaging through Lync and Office Communicator.

4.2.2. The complementary MNCs' factors influencing the meeting format

In this section, the factors found to be affecting the meeting format in the MNCs will be presented using the same structure as in the main case of the Consumer Goods company. The section looks specifically at how the complementary MNCs relate to the different factors presented.

4.2.2.1. Purpose of the meeting

The representatives for the four complementary MNCs stated that the Purpose of the meeting is a factor that most of their employees take into consideration when deciding for physical or digital meetings. The purposes mentioned for travelling to physical meetings are many. One of the most common purposes is to meet with the project team every once in a while, which is deemed as important by interviewees in all the companies since they consider it important to have occasional physical interaction with the team in addition to their daily digital contact.

The strategic purchasing manager at the Vehicle company also said that when the meeting is about strategizing or analysing it is preferred to meet physically and when it is simply about updating each other on the progress, the meeting can be done digitally. The Industrial company has a broader definition for when the purpose encourages employees to travel.

“It’s most important to meet in person when you need to see other people’s reactions properly and when you have to convey something difficult”

Global travel manager, the Industrial company

Furthermore, travelling also occurs for education and training purposes as these occasions are considered to be better executed and result in better results if done when physically collocated. Another common purpose for physical meetings is product development when employees at a certain office in the world has particular expertise in specific areas. This makes employees at both the Vehicle and the Retail company travel to conduct physical meetings in order to fully leverage the knowledge of the other offices.

4.2.2.2. Message characteristics

The second factor examined is the Message characteristics and it is clear that even within the four complementary MNCs the nature of the topics discussed in a meeting affects whether the meeting is preferred to be physical or digital. All the interviewed company representatives mentioned that if the message is sensitive or controversial, a physical meeting is more appropriate and thus preferred. Moreover, the meetings are preferred to be in person when there is a significant element of creativity needed in the meeting, such as in a workshop. Conducting workshops and other creative sessions is considered close to impossible over digital channels as the personal chemistry and group dynamics are essential for the workshop to be efficient and productive.

“We would never be able to carry out a creative workshop through digital channels. It would simply get too messy when people are forming groups and changing constellations and so on”

Business meeting manager, the Insurance company

4.2.2.3. Relationship & Trust

When it comes to the Relationship & Trust factor, representatives for the Vehicle-, Industrial- and Insurance companies all indicated that building relationships is an element that is often taken into consideration when deciding to set up a physical or a digital meeting. All the three companies' representatives say that when the relationship to the counterpart is new it is important to meet face-to-face at least once before ICT can be used efficiently.

“Physical meetings give more when it comes to relation building so it's important to have a physical meeting in the beginning of a project. It might also mean that the meeting is not as efficient and all the things on the agenda might not be discussed, which is easier to do through a telephone conference”

Global Travel Manager, the Industrial company

Considering the quote above, the global travel manager at the Industrial company explains that the first meetings with a new partner, if physical, might not be the most efficient meetings in terms of getting the bullet points on the agenda checked off. But on the other hand, it can contribute to their future work by establishing a significantly better foundation for a lasting relationship than a digital meeting would be able to. In that way an initial physical meeting will be more efficient in the long run than an initial digital meeting would be.

4.2.2.4. Time

The representatives for the Vehicle-, Retail- and Insurance companies all mentioned the length of the meeting in relation to the travel time is a factor that is taken into consideration when deciding on a physical or a digital meeting. The strategic purchasing manager at the Vehicle company stated that the time spent

travelling for a meeting is usually unproductive time, which employees should consider when taking the decision.

The employees at the Vehicle company are also encouraged to consider that their private time will be invaded, it is not expected from the employee to spend their spare time travelling. A rule of thumb in the Vehicle company is that, having considered the Purpose of the meeting and the Relationship & Trust factors, if a meeting is less than three to four hours long one should strongly consider using ICT instead of travelling.

Furthermore, representatives from both the Retail company and the Insurance company mentioned that the Time factor is indeed considered by their employees as well. A clear example of this is described by the business meeting manager at the Insurance company where the employees are probed to think along the lines of:

“Do I want overtime, or time over (spare time)?”

Business meeting manager, the Insurance company.

4.2.2.5. Cost

With regards to costs, the representatives for all four companies stated that employees consider the estimated expenses when making the decision between travelling or using ICT for a meeting. If it turns out that a meeting seems to become too costly, then many employees in all the researched companies do consider having a digital meeting instead.

It is also highlighted by the interviewees that no matter how important it is to cut unnecessary travelling expenses, it should never reach a level when the focus of cost savings affects the business negatively due to lack of productive meetings. It is thus important to find the balance between what meetings are unnecessary and which ones are necessary.

“Of course cost is always factored in, but its important that a cost focus doesn’t infringe on the possibilities of having important physical meetings”

Travel department manager, the Retail company

4.2.2.6. Location

The Location is considered in the fairly natural sense that if the location of the meeting is too far away, then the employees will consider having a digital meeting through the use of ICT instead. However, what is considered as too far away varies. This is usually considered in relation to other factors such as the Purpose of the meeting. If the purpose is important enough, then the location of the meeting will not matter as much

“Of course if it’s a very long trip, it makes you think twice if it is really worth it. But if you come to the conclusion that it is worth it, then the location and distance won’t matter particularly much”

Global travel manager, the Industrial company

4.2.2.7. Organisational factors

The representatives for all the researched companies in this study view the development of ICT as incredibly important for the future of business meeting management and they are all investing increasingly in it. This also has an effect on the companies’ emphasis on ICT usage in their respective travel policies. The policies clearly states that digital meetings and ICT usage should always be considered ahead of travelling for physical meeting.

“The policy is that using digital meeting tools is the default choice when arranging a meeting. The physical meeting that requires travelling should be the exception”

Strategic purchasing manager, the Vehicle company

Moreover, in all the researched companies the use of ICT has increased over the last few years and they are trying to increase it even further as they all see potential for more cost savings and efficiencies in internal meeting management as a consequence of increased ICT usage. An excellent example of how the companies work with mitigating the constraints that the Organisational factors pose, is the Industrial company. The Industrial company are currently installing videoconference tools and hardware in all the employees' laptops. This will enable every employee of the Industrial company to conduct video meetings from wherever they are as long as they have access to their laptop and an internet connection.

4.2.2.8. Environment

The representatives from all the four complementary companies researched mention that employees consider the Environment factor when deciding to either have a physical meeting or to use ICT. The environment also has a separate focus in all of their travel policies. The Retail company for example has an embedded CSR mentality in their business model which consequently means that the Environment factor is always meant to be considered. As a way of demonstrating this, the Insurance company provides their employees with a tool called the carbon dioxide calculator. By using this tool, the employees can easily calculate the amount of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases released by travelling to a specific meeting. The emissions and costs resulting from a physical meeting is then compared to the emissions and costs of having a digital meeting. By making such a comparison the employees clearly see the difference in environmental impact their choice between ICT and a trip has.

4.2.2.9. Personal & Family

If employees for any reason do not want to travel somewhere, they are never asked or forced to do so anyway. The ICT tools available are believed to be good enough as a substitute, and in the cases of necessary physical meetings, colleagues will be able to participate in their place. Another element worth noticing is that the interviewees agreed that the employees' personal preferences and interests in using the ICT tools do have an effect on how easy the transition into digital meetings will be. The higher the personal interest in

using ICT is, the better are the chances of the tools actually being used to their full potential.

It was also mentioned that loss of social relations might be a negative effect from the use of ICT. If the employees were to only use ICT, the networks would soon cease to exist which would impede the business performance of any MNC significantly.

“As human beings we need to feel, smell and touch. It is in our nature, that’s how we work”

Strategic purchasing manager, the Vehicle company.

However, the problem will never reach the point where ICT will completely replace travelling and human interaction and therefore this poses a minor threat to future development.

4.2.2.10. Number of participants

All the researched company representatives mentioned that the number of participants does affect the choice of meeting format. The interviewees stated that while the physical meetings are costly due to many people’s travel expenses, the digital meetings cannot have too many participants either. Digital meetings are believed to have a tendency of becoming inefficient and consuming too much energy as more participants are taking part of the meeting. As an example, a telephone conference easily becomes noisy when many people are on the same call.

“The number one most important thing to remember when having phone conferences with many people, is to mute your own phone when you’re not talking. That way you can avoid causing the other participants head aches due to a noisy conference call”

Travel department manager, the Retail company

In a similar way to the case of the Consumer Good company it is believed that there needs to be a balance between finding the appropriate number of people for each meeting format.

5. Analysis

A thorough empirical analysis of each factor found to be influencing the meeting format compared to existing research is presented in this section. The factor importance analysis, specifically looking at the relative importance of each factor, is followed by analyses of each individual factor.

5.1. Factor importance analysis

Existing theory does not mention the relative importance of the factors but this study has found the importance of each factor in the decision-making. Table 8 is showing the average importance rating that each factor received from the employees at the Consumer Goods company.

Factor	Average importance
	1=not important 7=very important
Purpose of meeting	6.07
Message characteristics	5.53
Relationship & Trust	5.49
Time	5.45
Cost	5.43
Location	4.97
Organisational factors	4.96
Environment	3.49
Personal & Family	3.40

Table 8: Average importance survey results

As can be seen in Table 8, the Purpose of the meeting received the highest importance. As was also mentioned, the Purpose of the meeting can override the other factors by making them weigh lower if the Purpose of the meeting is important enough.

The subsequent four factors; Message characteristics, Relationship & Trust, Time and Cost, all receive similar importance with the difference between the first and the fourth only being 0.10. What is common for these factors are that they are all situational factors, meaning that they vary for every meeting and situation. Interestingly, Cost received the lowest importance out of these four factors despite pressure to reduce costs. This could be related to the fact that the Consumer Goods company is an MNC, which means that there has to be a certain amount of travelling for the business to go on and expand. The retail company,

for example, has the philosophy that they have to travel in order to expand their business so they are aware that cost cannot always be crucial or kept low because that would hamper their business model.

Location and Organisational factors also received similar importance and are in the center of the importance list. The reason for these factors being in the mid section could be that the organisational factors are fixed for the employees so they do not feel that they need to think through them every time and therefore it becomes sort of a subconscious factor. Whereas the Location might be less important than the top five ones because only the really long distance location might be of more concern, so when the meeting location is close by the other factors become more important.

The Environment factor is leaning towards the less important end of the spectrum. The reason that it received some importance at all can be because the companies communicate the importance of CSR and sustainability. For example, all the travel policies have an aspect of environment in them. In this way the employees should know that they are to think about it, but then the other factors are still more important that they trump the Environment factor.

The final factor, Personal & Family, has received notably less importance than the other factors. This could be because employees want to seem like good employees for the company and that they consider other things that are not related to the company less than those factors that directly affect the company.

When looking at the factors individually as above, it is important to note that the individual factors do not tell the complete story of how the choice between digital and physical meetings is made. The factors are all interconnected in a complex web that can reinforce or weaken other factors. Thus, it is important to understand that even though looking at each factor individually tells us a lot about how the choice is made, there is an additional layer of complexity added once these factors are combined.

5.2. Factors influencing the meeting format

This section addresses each factor affecting the meeting format in one way or another with an individual analysis, following the same structure as the empirical data previously presented.

5.2.1. Purpose of the meeting

In general terms, Denstadli's (2012) research on the Purposes of physical meetings as opposed to digital ones are confirmed by the empirical evidence in this study, with a few interesting additions presented below.

The study shows that Purpose is the main factor determining whether a meeting should be held physically or digitally. Other factors also play important roles, but they are all contingent on the essential Purpose of the meeting. A simple example could be that the Cost of a business trip is considered an important factor deterring an employee from travelling, but if the purpose of the meeting in question is important enough, the Cost factor will no longer matter significantly. In that sense, the Purpose trumps all the other factors. However, that does not imply that the other factors are irrelevant, as they do play important roles in determining the meeting format when the purpose of a meeting is less significant.

The conducted interviews and survey also confirm that project work is the main purpose for all meetings whether they are physical or digital. However, project work can vary significantly in its character, and from the empirical evidence it is clear that particular types of project work is preferred in physical meetings as opposed to digital meetings and vice versa. Empirics from both the Consumer Goods company and the complementary four MNCs show that project work related to specific tasks, strategic work or social interaction, are all preferred to be done physically. These meetings are believed to be those that require a higher degree of creativity and elements of discussion such as brainstorming, alignment of interests and significant decision-making. By using ICT through some kind of digital meeting channel the participants are forced into a more structured setting with an often strict agenda that they are expected to adhere to. In these settings,

employees often feel limited in their ability to express themselves clearly as only video conferencing allows for cues such as body language for example.

5.2.2. Message characteristics

The study shows that the Message characteristics is another important factor affecting the decision to have a physical meeting or to have an ICT mediated meeting. The Consumer Goods company employees are in agreement that when the message that is to be transferred in a meeting involves some sort of convincing or is complex, sensitive, unclear, controversial or similar in its nature, the preferred meeting format is through having a physical meeting. Just like Huber & Daft (1987) and Chidambaram & Jones (1993) state. In those cases, the employees want to see the reactions of the other meeting participants, their body language, facial expressions and other cues and thus they require a medium as rich as possible, i.e. a physical meeting. On the other hand, if the message is considered to be rather basic or for the purpose of reducing uncertainty, the interviewed employees preferred to use a leaner medium of the ICT palette.

5.2.3. Relationship & Trust

As the literature review shows, physical meetings are often preferred when meeting someone new and starting a relationship (Chidambaram 1996). Projects that are newly started and involve new relations often trigger business trips for the purpose of establishing a solid relationship and building trust. As project groups work together over time, the need to meet in person decreases as it is not necessary to see each other to maintain the relationship.

Another related tendency identified was going on a business trip for the sole reason of showing yourself and maintaining relationships by being visible in the organisation. This clearly shows that many employees agree with the literature review in believing that building relationships and trust is easier and faster when meeting physically as you do not have to adhere to a setting which is driven by task-completion and focused on a predetermined agenda (Chidambaram 1996).

When looking at the relationship life cycle model, this study also found that as the relationship evolves and passes through the first, Build-up stage, the use of ICT is likely to increase. This also supports the idea that once the relationship is established, the need for physical meetings is decreased. Thus, maintaining an already established relationship requires less physical interaction than establishing a new one does.

It is clear that there is something in relationship building that many feel does warrant physical meetings. And there is a concern over the fact that not having physical meetings, especially in the beginning of a relationship, will affect the trust and nature of relationship.

5.2.4. Time

There are different aspects within the Time factor. The main aspect is the duration of the meeting in relation to the time it takes to travel to it. Employees tend to avoid physical meetings under three to four hours if they require travelling and instead use ICT, unless the purpose of the trip overrides the Time factor. Time spent travelling is considered unproductive time which is very costly for any company as time is money in the world of business.

As the means of personal transportation develops it naturally affects the time it takes to travel to a distant location. The quicker a trip to a physical meeting is, the more physical travel is likely to take place, and by extension that would imply more physical meetings. At the same time as the means of transportation develop, so does the means of conducting digital meetings. The technological development in ICT is racing, bringing further opportunities for increasing digital meetings. All in all, the Time factor is not a static or constant factor that will remain the same through time. The development of transportation as well as digital meeting channels both affect the likelihood of conducting digital meetings throughout time in different ways.

Another aspect of the Time factor is the efficiency gains the choice of meeting channel is believed to give. ICT is generally considered to be more efficient time

spent than physical meetings as the ICT meeting channels have a tendency to make the employees adhere to the predetermined agenda (Davis & Weinstein 2005). By avoiding spontaneous elaborations and small talk, the meeting is conducted in a more efficient manner, focusing on task-completion. This also strains the employees' mental capability to focus throughout a digital meeting. The digital meeting channels are often perceived as significantly more mentally exhausting than conducting a physical meeting as using ICT tools require some or all of your senses to work harder in order to grasp the meeting situation.

5.2.5. Cost

Many companies today are under intense pressure to reduce costs, and travel costs are one of the targeted expenditures that are believed to have potential for significant cuts (Davis & Weinstein 2005). The researched MNCs are no exceptions. Employees and travel managers at all researched companies state that they consider costs when they decide whether to have a physical or ICT mediated meeting, as they believe using ICT is a good way of decreasing travel expenditures for internal meetings.

Employees state that they will be more prone to consider ICT if a physical meeting would be too costly. The limit of what is too costly is stated by interviewees in the Consumer Goods company to be a trade-off between the costs associated with the meeting and the value the meeting would add to the firm. However, this is not something that the Consumer Goods company gives any directions for from the top down, as it is left to the individual employee to determine. The employees in turn resort to their intuitive feeling of whether the value added outweighs the costs of travelling. The advantage of giving this type of freedom is of course that individuals can assess each potential physical meeting given a certain situation. It also prevents the management to become too controlling in employees everyday work, allowing for autonomy. Furthermore from the company's side it is difficult, if not impossible, to assess the value added of all meetings and set specific limits for when travelling for internal meetings should be allowed. The downside of allowing this autonomy on the other hand is

that the management has to rely on their employees always making the right judgment. However, it gives more room for opportunistic behaviour.

The costs of travelling to meetings are of great concern for the travel managers at the MNCs, which is clearly noticeable in the travel policies and statements made by chief executives. The companies have different policies targeting the costs of travel specifically, including certain approval procedures for long-haul trips and cost ceilings providing a maximum cost for trips. However it is also important to mention that the MNCs do not consider the Cost factor to override other factors such as the Purpose or Message characteristics.

5.2.6. Location

It is evident that employees in MNCs think twice before they go for a meeting located far away from the individual's own location. Instead, they prefer using ICT as it saves them the time and effort associated with long haul travelling. The fact that the employees do take this into consideration emphasises the risk of distant meetings being a waste of time is increased on long haul trips and that this is something employees want to avoid. In addition, the employees are more likely to feel like the meetings are a waste of their time the longer the trip to the physical meeting is. The expectations on meetings that require long-haul travelling are higher and the employees are more likely to be disappointed by the outcome of the meeting. On the other hand, the higher expectations might give rise to the need to make extensive preparations to ensure that the meeting goes as well as possible given the circumstances. In digital meetings however, the possibility of having another meeting again tomorrow can make the meeting participants less likely to prepare their digital meetings thoroughly.

5.2.7. Organisational factors

The Consumer Goods company's travel policy states that ICT should be the default choice, however there are instances where employees would rather travel because of limited access to the communication tool that they want to use. Hence, when an employee cannot book a videoconference room because all are already booked in any one participating location, other channels must be used, such as travelling for physical meetings. In addition, the lack of consistency in the

availability of the same tools across all Consumer Goods company offices globally also pushes employees towards physical meetings and travel.

Another aspect of this factor is that interviewees felt that if the choice was theirs, a physical meeting is always preferred. However, since this is not possible because of lack of time and funds etc., the closest substitute is to have videoconference meetings. However, most Consumer Goods company employees stated that they either never or very rarely have videoconference meetings. Hence, there is an inconsistency here, between what most people prefer and what they do. There must be some reasons why employees do not use videoconference facilities even if it is a preferred mode of meeting. It could be the simple fact that there are too few videoconference rooms. It can also be the somewhat complicated booking process, where the employee has to take the extra step of contacting the office administration to book the room that deters employees from using the rooms. This shows that the organisational factors must support the overall meeting management goal if it is to increase the ICT usage.

These evidences suggest that it is more important for the organisation to provide the right and sufficient organisational factors that facilitate the promoted meeting format than for the employees themselves. The organisation has more to lose than the employee from not having the best circumstances to carry out the preferred mode of meeting.

5.2.8. Environment

It is true that companies and employees are aware of the environmental impacts that travel and thus physical meetings have. This is the reason why companies have environment as a major aspect of their travel policies and why all the travel managers interviewed said that employees consider the Environment as a factor. However, none of the Consumer Goods company interviewees confirmed that they consider the environment when deciding. Only in the ranking list of the survey, where the factors were given, did Environment receive marginal importance. Clearly, there is a discrepancy between the companies' standpoints

and the employees' actions. A reason for this could be that it is easy for an organisation to simply add the aspect into a policy to make it look good without actually emphasising it in any other way to really influence employees decision-making in this regard.

This also suggests that sustainability and environmental responsibility is something that comes from the top down and not necessarily from employees themselves. If employees cannot be expected to take environmental issues into consideration then it has to be woven into company structures, policies and culture. Giving the same amount of freedom when it comes to environment as for costs might not be a feasible solution, as employees clearly feel easier to disregard this factor, possibly because it is not measured.

5.2.9. Personal & Family

The empirics from this study shows that employees do not consider the Personal & Family factor to the same extent as the other factors when deciding upon the meeting format. This could either suggest that the case companies already take personal and family matters into consideration formally, leading to that employees do not feel the need to consider them themselves. On the other hand, it could also suggest that employees actually allow some of the company values and standards to override the personal preferences. There can also be other reasons explaining the empirical data such as employees being hesitant towards expressing the fact that this factor affects the decision when it actually does.

The decreasing human interaction as a consequence of increased use of ICT is slightly worrying to the interviewed individuals. The loss of networking opportunities and social aspects of work is believed to have a negative effect on the work performance of the employees and in turn the value added to the firm. However, this issue is not believed to be of immense importance as ICT will most likely never completely replace physical interaction and the challenge is thus to find the right balance between social interaction and ICT efficiency.

5.2.10. Number of participants

This is a factor that was not found when reviewing existing research, but was seen as a rather important factor in the empirical findings. The number of participants affects in the sense that when there are many meeting participants, it becomes ineffective to use ICT. This is because everyone does not get a chance to speak or there are some technical limitations that prevent many participants to connect simultaneously. It can also become too chaotic when several participants speak at the same time making the meeting inefficient. All in all it puts more pressure on each individual to be more respectful and disciplined in order to avoid disrupting the flow of the meeting. On the other hand, when there are many participants it can also become too expensive, time consuming and environmentally strenuous etc. if everyone has to travel for the meeting. Hence, there is a dilemma of what type of meeting to have when there are many participants. This study found that there is a tendency towards preferring physical meetings when there are many participants.

The attempt to find the optimal number of participants for each meeting channels was never attempted in this study, however, it became apparent that the optimal number varies for the different channels and that this number is also affected by other factors such as the Purpose of the meeting. The user's knowledge of the tool seemed to have an impact of how many participants was thought of being reasonable in a video- or audioconference. A more advanced user seems to believe that it is possible to have more participants than someone who is not as comfortable navigating the ICT tools.

6. Discussion

The discussion in this section centers around the deviations of empirical findings in comparison to the existing theory presented in the literature review. Firstly, the addition of the factor importance rating will be presented, followed by the specific factors differing from the literature review, including the newly found factor Number of participants.

6.1. Factor importance rating

An addition to the existing theoretical body of literature is the relative importance of each factor. Earlier studies made by for example Arnfalk & Kogg (2003), Denstadli (2004), Walter & Suzuki (2002), Bender & Stephenson (1996) Denstadli et al. (2012) and Toffel & Horvath (2004) have only focused on some of the factors influencing the choice but not how much they influence the decision to have physical or digital meetings. For policy makers in an organisation it is important to know what influences employees' decision, but not knowing how much each factor influences the meeting format can make it difficult to actually impact the choices made. Therefore, having this type of importance rating adds significant value to the existing theory.

Furthermore, from this factor importance rating a significant trend can be discerned. All the top six prioritised factors are situational factors. And with the exception of the Environment, the bottom two factors are contextual factors. This shows that the employees do not consider the contextual factors as important, whereas the situational factors are believed to be more important in the decision to use ICT or to have a physical meeting.

As described in the literature review, the characteristics of the situational factors include that they are given by the situation and therefore change for every meeting (Arnfalk & Kogg 2003). This means that it becomes difficult for management to change or affect them. On the other hand, Arnfalk & Kogg (2003) state that the contextual factors are easier to manipulate, but as seen in this study, the employees do not consider the contextual factors to the same extent as the situational factors. Hence, a problem for the managers who want to influence employees' decisions to either use ICT or to have physical meetings arise. The challenge is that the factors that management can more easily affect are less

important to the employees, while the factors that the company has less control over have more weight in the employees' decision-making.

6.2. Factors deviating from prior research

Broadly speaking, all factors that are found in existing literature and described in the literature review are also found within the researched companies. This finding on its own is noteworthy since there have been many advancements and changes in technology and in the business environment over the past decades. Limited research on this topic has been done and therefore it could be expected that changes might have occurred to the factors and how they affect the choice between digital and physical meetings. For example one could argue that with the advanced technology that is now readily available, employees would not have to travel anywhere to meet in person since there are tools that can achieve similar results. Yet travelling for physical meetings still occurs and the factors that influence this choice is still fundamentally the same. And on a general level the same factors have been found in this study as in the previous ones, however when looking at the factors on a more detailed level there are some differences found in this study compared to earlier research.

In general terms, what Denstadli et al. (2012) found when it comes to how the Purpose of the meeting affects the decision of having a physical or digital meeting were also found to be true in this study, with a few interesting deviations and additions. Like Denstadli et al. (2012), this study found that physical meetings are common when it comes to conferences and education purposes. However the discrepancies arise when it comes to board meetings and information exchanges. Denstadli et al. (2012) state that information exchange and board meetings are the second and third most common purposes for having digital meetings. The empirical data however shows that these purposes are also common in many physical meetings. This implies that these purposes are not only popular for digital meetings despite the fact that they are believed to be the more appropriate purposes for digital meeting channels.

According to Denstadli et al. (2012) planning is required to a greater extent when deciding to have physical meetings as it requires participants to book transportation well in advance. Therefore ICT tools such as videoconference should be more appropriate for ad hoc meetings that do not require planning. However, in the empirics of this study it was found that this effect is decreased if not eliminated if the MNC in question does not have an abundance of videoconference facilities, which employees at the Consumer Goods company experience. This counteracts one of the benefits of ICT and videoconferences in particular. If the MNC does not have enough videoconference facilities available for ad hoc meetings, the employees will still have to plan well in advance to use the ICT tool and thus the advantage of having ad hoc videoconferences without planning ahead is eliminated. The effect is further spurred by the fact that videoconference facilities need to be available in two or more specified locations at the same time. This issue is addressed in some organisations, for example the Industrial company, as they are installing systems on each employee's laptop allowing them to have videoconferences without being limited by the availability of dedicated rooms.

6.2.1. Number of participants

In addition to the differences within some of the factors found in this study compared to earlier research, a new factor was also found that influences the decision to have a digital or physical meeting, which is the Number of participants in the meeting. One of the reasons why this factor has not been discovered, or included as a factor before, could be that these tools have become increasingly integrated in employees' daily work and more people have continuous access to them. This means that the number of people that can participate in a digital meeting has increased, making it a concern for employees. Now they can have a telephone conference with more than 20 people simultaneously, which is reported bring complications. In any case, it is still an important factor to consider but it needs further and more detailed research to determine the extent of its influence.

7. Conclusion

The following section summarises and concludes the main findings from this study. A presentation of what factors are more important for the decision to use ICT or conducting physical meetings is provided, along with the connections between and consequences of the analyses and discussions.

The questions this study aims to answer are:

Why do employees in MNCs have internal physical meetings?

- *How is the decision to have physical or digital meetings made?*

It can be concluded that the reason employees in MNCs have physical meetings is dependent on ten factors: Purpose of the meeting, Message characteristics, Relationship & Trust, Time, Cost, Location, Organisational factors, Environment, Personal & Family and Number of participants. The last factor is an addition to existing research in the field of digital versus physical meetings, which is one of the main contributions of this study. The Number of participants influence in the sense that when there are many participants in a meeting it can become expensive to have physical meetings that requires many people to travel. But it can also result in disordered and frustrating digital meetings due to for example lack of air time or video visibility.

The way the decision between a physical or digital meeting is made is through evaluating the above-mentioned factors. They all have an impact on the decision, but to varying degrees. This study found how important each of these factors are, with the exception of Number of participants, and how employees in MNCs value them. This has not been attempted in earlier research and is therefore a significant contribution of this study as it can be of use for policymakers in MNCs who want to affect the meeting behaviour or steer employees towards physical or digital meetings. Out of the ten factors presented, the top three most important ones are the Purpose of the meeting, the Message characteristics and Relationship & Trust, where the Purpose of the meeting received the highest importance ranking of all factors. Empirical evidence also indicates that the Purpose of the message is so important that it in many cases can override any

other factor, if it is important enough for the particular meeting. Hence, if the Purpose of the meeting requires a physical meeting, employees will travel for the meeting.

The significance given to each factor through the importance analysis also reveals that contextual factors are less important than the situational factors. This is especially noteworthy for organisations that are trying to influence the behaviour of their employees as the important situational factors are harder to manipulate.

However, it is important to note that the factors that influence the decision between having a digital or physical internal meeting are not isolated factors. These factors are all intertwined and connected in a complex dynamic that together form the influence for the decision. Therefore, looking at the factors individually does not give the whole answer and it is only when all the mentioned factors are combined and observed as a whole that one can fully understand how the decision is influenced.

It is also clear that employees have physical meetings because there are factors that encourage physical meetings more than others such as for example Relationship and Trust. Furthermore, some factors such as Purpose of the meeting and Message characteristics vary in what meeting format they encourage depending on the particular situation. Therefore what factors encourage physical meetings varies, but sometimes the more influential factors speak for physical meetings and then an in person meeting is decided upon.

It can be asked whether it will be possible to completely replace physical meetings with digital ones as it seems like there are certain elements that the digital technology is not able to completely simulate yet. Nevertheless ICT tools have become prevalent over recent years and in the future the factors specified in this study might change or be complemented with additional factors, which underlines the significance of continuous and future research in this field.

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8.2. Interviews

8.2.1. Consumer Goods company employees

Person	Country	Date	Channel
Employee 1	Sweden	2014-06-02	Physical meeting
Employee 2	Sweden	2014-06-02	Physical meeting
Employee 3	Sweden	2014-06-02	Physical meeting
Employee 4	Sweden	2014-06-03	Physical meeting
Employee 5	Sweden	2014-06-03	Physical meeting
Employee 6	Germany	2014-06-04	Phone
Employee 7	Germany	2014-06-04	Fixed videoconference
Employee 8	Germany	2014-06-09	Fixed videoconference
Employee 9	Germany	2014-06-10	Fixed videoconference
Employee 10	Germany	2014-06-10	Fixed videoconference
Employee 11	Germany	2014-06-10	Fixed videoconference
Employee 12	Sweden	2014-06-11	Phone
Employee 13	Germany	2014-06-12	Fixed videoconference
Employee 14	Germany	2014-06-13	Fixed videoconference
Employee 15	Sweden	2014-06-16	Fixed videoconference

Employee 16	Germany	2014-06-17	Fixed videoconference
Employee 17	Germany	2014-06-18	Fixed videoconference

8.2.2. Travel Managers

Organisation	Person	Date
The Consumer Goods Company	Travel Management Administrator	2014-03-18
The Consumer Goods Company	Travel Management Administrator	2014-06-13
The Consumer Goods Company	Vice President Industrial Relations	2014-06-02
The Consumer Goods Company	Global Travel Sourcing Manager	2014-06-03
The Consumer Goods Company	Global Travel Sourcing Manager	2014-07-10
The Vehicle Company	Strategic Purchasing Manager	2014-06-18
The Retail Company	Travel Department Manager	2014-06-23
The Industrial Company	Global Travel Manager	2014-06-30
The Insurance Company	Business Meeting Manager	2014-07-03

9. Appendix

9.1. Appendix 1: Interview protocol

The following interview questions were followed as a general guideline through the interviews and were dependent on supplementary questions specific to each individual case and thus cannot be presented here. The survey questions were used as a complement to the deeper interview sessions and consists of a block of default questions investigating the characteristics of the respondent before asking about the factors influencing business travel.

9.1.1. The Consumer Goods company employees

The following questions were used as the basis for the interviews with the Consumer Goods company employees.

- Tell us a little bit about yourself, what role within the company you have, previous experiences etc.
- How often do you travel internally in your job?
- Where do you often travel for internal meetings?
- Why do you travel? For what purpose?
- When do you think it is important to travel for internal meetings?
- What do you feel is the best way to communicate with colleagues located outside of your own office?
- Who decides if you should travel for a meeting or not?
- What factors do you consider when you decide whether to travel or not? Why?
- What does the mental process look like when taking the decision to travel or not?
- How do you plan and book a trip?
- Do you wish to increase or decrease your travelling – how and why?

- How would you describe the company's attitude towards employees travelling for internal meetings?
- How would you describe the corporate culture's attitude towards travelling for internal meetings?
- How often do you have meetings through digital communications channels?
- What do you think is the difference between physical meetings and digital meetings?
- Do you consider the digital communications tools to be useful or not? Why (not)?
- How demanding or easy do you feel it is to learn how to use the digital communications tools?

9.1.2. Travel managers at the Consumer Goods company and complementing MNCs

The following questions were used as the basis for the interviews with the travel managers at all researched companies.

- Tell us a little bit about yourself, what role within the company you have, previous experiences etc.
- Tell us a little bit about your organisation and its business travel management.
- How much does your organisation travel for internal meetings?
- Where do the trips go most frequently?
- For what purpose does one travel internally in your organisation?
- What does the mental and organisational process look like for determining if someone will travel or not?
- When is it important to travel for an internal meeting?
- What factors determine if one chooses to travel for an internal meeting or not?

- What is the difference, in your opinion, between having physical meetings and digital meetings?
- How does one plan and book a business trip in your organisation?
- How would you describe the organisation's stance on travelling for internal purposes?
- How would you describe the corporate culture's stance on travelling for internal purposes?
- Does your organisation consider itself to be good at utilising digital communication channels?
- What technological communication tools does one have access to in your organisation?
- To what extent are meetings held digitally compared to physically in your organisation?
- Have you actively worked on decreasing the level of physical travelling for internal purposes in your organisation? How?

9.2. Appendix 2: Questionnaire for Consumer Goods company employees

The questionnaire for the Consumer Goods company employees was divided into three parts; an introductory message, a block of default questions to gather data on respondents' characteristics, and finally questions aiming to gather more substantial numerical data on the factors considered when travelling internally and their relative importance. The page break was used to ensure no predefined factors were visible to the respondents before their own, free answer had been given.

9.2.1 Questionnaire

Thank you for taking your time to complete this survey. Please keep in mind that the survey will only ask questions about internal travel, i.e. meetings with other Consumer Goods company colleagues. All responses are anonymous.

- Location of your Consumer Goods company office
- Organisation within the Consumer Goods company
- Gender

- Age
- Number of years employed by the Consumer Goods company
- On average how many trips per year do you make for internal purposes?
(Round trips including other locations, if combining trips)
- For internal purposes, what do you take into consideration when deciding
between a physical or digital meeting?

Page break

- Please rate each of the following factors depending on their importance
for your decision to travel for an internal meeting (1-7, 1=not important,
7= very important):
 - Time – Length of meeting compared to travel time
 - Location – Distance and effort to travel
 - Cost – Tickets, hotels etc.
 - Relationship & Trust – How developed the relationship and trust is
to the counterpart
 - Purpose of meeting – e.g. presentation, brainstorming, follow-up
etc.
 - Characteristics of message – e.g. complex or ambiguous etc.
 - Organisational factors – e.g. policy, availability of other
communication alternatives
 - Personal & Family – own preferences, attitudes, values about ICT
and travelling, and your family consideration with regards to
travelling.