

# Who is the Guardian Angel of Social Entrepreneurship?

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A qualitative study on sustainable incubators' effect on social entrepreneurs' work engagement

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# Abstract

One of the many solutions needed to transition our society into a sustainable one, is social entrepreneurs, working with commercial business models and tools to come about positive societal change. Today, there are various external support systems for social entrepreneurs in Sweden, including incubator programs specifically designed for social entrepreneurs and businesses with a sustainability mission.

This thesis aims to investigate how these specialized incubators affect the work engagement of the social entrepreneurs incubated, using the Job Demands-Resource model (JD-R model). The study was conducted as a cross-sectional study, through qualitative methods. Empirical material was collected through semi-structured interviews both with social entrepreneurs in sustainable and general incubators.

The findings show that social entrepreneurs incubated in sustainable incubators experienced an increase in the prerequisites for work engagement, based on JD-R theory. More specifically, findings show that social entrepreneurs experience an increase in job resources, as an effect of being incubated at sustainable incubators. However, this increase in job resources also applies to social entrepreneurs partaking in general incubators.

Moreover, the social entrepreneurs partaking in the general incubators, experience an increase in job demands, due to the increase in workload stemming from partaking in an incubator, which is viewed as a burden. The increase in workload for the social entrepreneurs partaking in sustainable incubators is not viewed negatively and is therefore not seen to cause an increase in job demands.

Finally, this study finds that job crafting and increased task significance occur uniquely as effects for social entrepreneurs participating in sustainable incubators, causing the social entrepreneurs' ambitions to grow and enhancing their focus on sustainability.

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**Keywords:** Incubator, Social Entrepreneur, JD-R Theory, Work Engagement, Sustainability

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Table 1: Definitions of Key Concepts

Word	Definition
General Incubator	Incubators accepting all types of entrepreneurs as incubatees.
Incubatee	A firm or entrepreneur participating in an incubator.
Incubator	“Property-based organizations with identifiable administrative centers focused on the mission of business acceleration through knowledge agglomeration and resource sharing” (Phan, Mian, & Lamine, 2016).
Social Entrepreneur	“Any activity conducted in the public interest, organized with an entrepreneurial strategy” (Noya & Clarence, 2007).
Sustainable Incubator	Incubators requiring a sustainability orientation in participants.

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# 1 Introduction

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## 1.1 Background

As the world is changing and growing more complex, new challenges arise. The world is facing pressing sustainability challenges that must be solved through joint efforts of nations, people and non-state actors. Society must change in order to ensure a sustainable future. The urgency of mitigating global challenges is manifested in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Agenda 2030 (United nations sustainable development goals, 2019).

In the face of global challenges, it has become evident that sustainability cannot only be a matter for governments, but that all parts of society need to adapt. Businesses play an important role in transitioning our society into a sustainable one. In 2016, the IOE released a report on the implementation of the SDGs, stating that the global challenges are opportunities to open new markets, recognizing that *“Only successful and sustainable businesses can contribute to the development and prosperity of nations and the global community.”* (International Organisation of Employers, 2016). There is also an increase in social enterprises across Europe (Huysentruyt, 2015) and internationally, manifested for examples in efforts such as the Global Innovation Challenge, asking entrepreneurs to engage in accelerating the progress on the SDGs (UNOPS, 2020). However, balancing sustainability with profitability can be difficult (De Clercq & Voronov, 2009).

In Sweden, 150 million SEK were invested in social entrepreneurship during 2018-2020, with the aim to achieve a more sustainable and inclusive society (Tillväxtverket, 2020). The Swedish government's strategy for social enterprises states they are an important resource for combating societal challenges. The goal of this strategy is to strengthen the development of social entrepreneurs, so these can better contribute to solving challenges in society. Furthermore, the strategy states that many social entrepreneurs are in need of an increased competence in business and one part of the strategy is devoted to increase and make the support for social entrepreneurs more specific (Näringsdepartementet & Regeringskansliet, 2018).

As the number of social entrepreneurs is growing, there has been a rise of incubators focused on supporting social entrepreneurs and companies working for a social good. By gathering social entrepreneurs, such incubators help growing businesses in finding innovative solutions to the world's problems and help create a balance between profit and sustainability. These incubators

are further providing entrepreneurs with a context where social enterprises are the prime focus, thereby differing from general incubators (de San José & Admetlla, 2016). This makes these incubators, only accepting sustainability-oriented participants (henceforth: sustainable incubators), an interesting topic for research.

As there is an increasing need for companies dedicated to sustainable practices, and an interest in understanding what variables help these companies succeed, it has also become necessary to understand how sustainable incubators affect social entrepreneurs. This research will, therefore, focus on how the participation in a sustainable incubator affects social entrepreneurs and if this experience differs from being incubated in a incubator that accept all kinds of entrepreneurs (henceforth: general incubator).

## 1.2 Research Gap

Both social entrepreneurship and incubators are topics previously researched by scholars (Aliaga-Isla & Huybrechts, 2018; Rice, 2002). There is, for example, research on what motivates people to become social entrepreneurs (Ruskin, Seymour, & Webster, 2016), and research showing that counseling from incubators, the incubator's external network, and readiness of the entrepreneur, are factors affecting the impact of the incubation (Rice, 2002).

However, as sustainable incubators are a rather new phenomenon, there is limited research examining how these affect social entrepreneurs, thereby leaving a research gap. The authors have not found any research examining if sustainable incubators affect participating entrepreneurs' performance in ways that differ from general incubators. As social entrepreneurs have the potential to help combat global challenges, it is of importance to understand how they are effectively aided in their journey, which is why this research gap is of interest.

Participation in incubators has shown to positively affect entrepreneurs' motivation (Hendratmi & Sukmaningrum, 2018), and research by Putra et al. (2017) suggest that extrinsic and intrinsic motivation enhance work engagement of employees. Work engagement has also shown to be related to successful business outcomes (Markos & Sridevi, 2010). Previous research thereby indicates that incubators are able to affect entrepreneurs' engagement and, in turn, work performance. Thus, this study will research sustainable incubators' effect on social entrepreneurs with work engagement as a theoretical lens.

### 1.3 Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the understanding of how social entrepreneurs experience their work engagement being affected by participating in incubators that only accept sustainability-oriented participants. The authors' aim is to investigate whether sustainable incubators affect work engagement of social entrepreneurs, and if the effects differ from incubators that accept all kinds of entrepreneurs as incubatees.

Through a qualitative research study, the intent of the study is to answer the question:

*How does the participation in a sustainable incubator affect the work engagement of social entrepreneurs?*

### 1.4 Delimitations

The study will focus on social entrepreneurs that are, or have been, participating in a sustainable incubator. In order to eliminate differences stemming from cultural-geographical differences, the study will only take Swedish entrepreneurs and incubators into consideration. Sweden is a country that is relatively progressive in sustainability issues and incubator programs, making it an alluring geographical area to study (Swedish Incubators & Science Parks, 2018).

There is an ongoing academic discussion on how to define "social entrepreneur" and there are several proposed definitions. Aliaga-Isla and Huybrechts (2018), state there are discussions regarding whether or not profit-driven or non-profit organizations are to be considered social entrepreneurs. However, this study will examine solely social entrepreneurs that fit the definition proposed by Noya and Clarence (2007) (Table 1), thereby drawing on the opinion of scholars who believe a social entrepreneur is an entrepreneur using commercial business models to achieve a societal goal. The study thus excludes social entrepreneurs who run their business non-profit. This limitation was made in order to focus solely on what makes sustainable business models, balancing profit and sustainability, succeed. Thus, including non-profit organizations, that do not have to balance the two, would not enrich this study.

Finally, this study will not measure the social entrepreneurs' performance, but rather look at whether incubators create work engagement, which is a prerequisite for work performance. As

there is little research on this topic, the authors' main goal is to examine if sustainable incubators affect social entrepreneurs, before quantifying a possible effect.

## 1.5 Expected Contribution

This study aims to contribute with knowledge about the effect of the growing phenomena of sustainable incubators on social entrepreneurs' work engagement. By shedding light on sustainable incubators' possible effects on social entrepreneurs, the aim is to create opportunities for further research on the topic. The study is timely, as social entrepreneurs could be vital in helping achieve the SDG's, and it is valuable for society to understand what contributes to their success and how sustainable business models are supported.

## 2 Literature Review

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### 2.1 Incubators

There is a wide range of research on business incubators. However, incubators used to be studied mostly within related fields of study, such as urban development, and have only recently become the primary focus of research. Hausberg and Korreck (2020) identified three major topics of research in which incubators are the primary focus: (1) definitions and typologies of incubators, (2) incubation process, and (3) performance and potential impacts. This study will focus on the latter. Within the field of performance and potential impacts of incubators, Husberg and Korreck (2020) explain that there are discussions regarding how to measure the impact of incubators, as well as different measurements within different studies. Examples of measurements of the impact that have been used are the growth of the incubatees, the increase in innovation, and startup survival.

There is no consensus in academia that incubators exclusively lead to positive results for the incubatees. Schwartz (2013) found no significantly higher probability of survival rates for incubated firms. However, Stokan et al. (2015) state that incubators have a positive impact on firm growth, the number of employees, and on firm job creation. They also state that incubated firms obtain considerably more business service than non-incubated peers. Chan and Lau (2005) described that the benefits required by tech-focused incubatees are varied and therefore the effect of the incubators depends on what stage of development the incubatees are in.

Within the field of sustainability and incubators, Bank and Kanada (2016) investigated the recruitment process and support offered by sustainability-oriented incubators. They found that the support offered by the sustainability-oriented incubators is similar to that of general incubators, but that there are more networks and competence available regarding specific sustainability ideas in the sustainability-oriented incubators.

Fonseca and Chiappetta Jabbour (2012) have created a framework for evaluating the business incubators' environmental performance. They found that there are evolutionary stages of greening within business incubators, ranging from environmental omission to environmental leadership.

Furthermore, there are studies examining incubators' effect on entrepreneurs' motivation. Hendratmi and Sukmaningrum (2018) found a relationship between incubators and

entrepreneurial motivation, as well as a linear relationship between entrepreneurial motivation and success behavior.

## 2.2 Motivation and Work Engagement

Even though motivation and work engagement might be interchangeable in an everyday context, in the academic field this is not the case. Putra et al. (2017) state that within academia, results on the effects of motivation on work engagement are not consistent and thereby not agreed upon. However, their study found that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation had significant impact on work engagement and stimulated employees' vigor, dedication and absorption, implying that employees with higher extrinsic and intrinsic motivation are more engaged in their jobs.

Van Beek et al. (2012) found that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation were independently positively associated with work engagement. They also found that high levels of intrinsic motivation were mainly associated with high levels of work engagement, while burnout is associated with low levels of intrinsic motivation.

Further, one of the first scholars to study the concept of work engagement was Kahn. He conceptualized it as harnessing of employees' selves in the work role. When engaged, people express themselves physically, cognitively and emotionally in their performance (Kahn, 1990). He meant that engaged employees put a lot of effort into their work, due to their identification with it (Bakker, Demerouti, & Sanz-Vergel, 2014).

Since Kahn, other scholars have developed the concept of work engagement. Work engagement, which refers to the relationship between the employee and their work (Bakker & Leiter, 2010), is by Bakker et al. defined as "*active, positive work-related state that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption*" (Bakker, Demerouti, & ten Brummelhuis, 2012). Work engagement can be seen as a positive and fulfilling state of work-related wellbeing, thereby as the contrary to job burnout (Bakker, Leiter 2010). The understanding of work engagement as the positive antithesis of burnout, is tied to the work activity, rather than to the work role.

According to Bakker and Leiter's (2010) handbook on work engagement, most scholars agree that engagement consists of both an energy dimension and an identification dimension, which leads to engagement being characterized by high levels of vigor and work identification.

One of the many theories used in the field of engagement is the Job Demands-Resources theory (henceforth: JD-R theory). The theory has been used in research of different settings to understand and predict work engagement, exhaustion and its relation to performance. The JD-R theory assumes that even though there might be specific work characteristics connected to burnout and work engagement, it is possible to categorize these characteristics in two categories: job demands and job resources. Having job demands cause burnout and having job resources cause work engagement (Bakker et al., 2014).

Bakker and Demerouti (2007) explained that job resources have the potential to create motivation and produce work engagement, low cynicism and excellent performance. Job resources can increase intrinsic or extrinsic motivation, either through fostering growth, learning and development or as being important in order to achieve work goals. The JD-R model further assumes that job demands and resources create job strain and motivation (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

## 2.3 Effects of Work Engagement

Work engagement has been found to be positively related to task performance, contextual performance, and active learning, especially when the employees were high in conscientiousness (Bakker et al., 2012). Engaged employees have also been shown to be enthusiastically involved in their work and have high levels of energy (Bakker, Schaufeli et al. 2008). Moreover, Gagné (2014), concludes that work engagement have in previous studies, been found to be positively associated to personal initiative, and so has vigor.

Engagement is an important topic due to its impact on business outcomes. Markos and Sridevi (2010) describe that engagement is highly intertwined with business outcomes. Employee retention, productivity, profitability, customer loyalty, and safety are some outcomes that have shown to have a positive relationship with engagement. Furthermore, studies have also presented that the higher the engagement, the higher is the likelihood of revenue growth beyond industry average (Markos & Sridevi, 2010).

Rama Devi (2009) argues that engaged employees contribute to company success by putting effort into the work and engaging on a level higher than required. Engaged employees work together with colleagues to improve the performance, due to their understanding of the business context.

## 3 Theoretical Framework

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### 3.1 Usage of Theory

As mentioned, there are a variety of ways to research the effects of incubators and no consensus on what is the best method (Piet Hausberg & Korreck, 2020). Several theoretical areas could thereby be interesting for this type of research.

However, research show that incubators increase motivation, which is intertwined with work engagement. As work engagement has shown to be positively related to positive work performance, this is an interesting field of research for this study (Figure 1). Incubators are organizations aiming to support firms. What kind of support they offer varies, but newer definitions often focus on the existence of counseling and support services (Piet Hausberg & Korreck, 2020). Counseling and support is something that, according to JD-R model, should positively affect work engagement (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008). This study will therefore examine the chosen phenomena from a JD-R perspective.



*Figure 1. Illustration of the theoretical framework*

The JD-R theory has been chosen as it specifies different forms of support that could be expected to be provided by incubators, to positively affect work engagement. Bakker and Leiter (2010) state that work engagement can make a true difference for employees, as well as create competitive advantages. How a firm fosters work engagement is thereby a relevant aspect to investigate, in order to get an understanding of business outcomes. However, the JD-R theory also specifies aspects that may diminish work engagement, thereby contributing to the opposite of work engagement: strain (Bakker & Heuven, 2006). The JD-R theory is thus an appropriate theoretical focus, as it can give clear indications on how aspects of sustainable incubators affect work engagement, both positively and negatively, and how work engagement is affected by third parties. However, the authors acknowledge that this also gives a rather fixed framework for analysis and that the theory does not include all possible aspects of work engagement.

The level of analysis will be centered around the support from the incubator for the individual. The study will investigate if the incubator creates work engagement for the entrepreneurs, and how the incubators are perceived by the entrepreneurs. The JD-R model will be used to analyze

the possible effects sustainable incubators can have on social entrepreneurs' work engagement and strain.

## 3.2 JD-R Theory

The JD-R theory explains the relationship between work engagement, strain and performance in terms of job resources, job demands, job crafting, and personal resources (Bakker et al., 2014). Job demands are related to strain, including lack of energy and development of health problems, while job resources are related to engagement. When both demands and resources are high, employees are expected to develop both strain and engagement. When demands are high and resources low, they develop high strain and low engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The JD-R model has been used to predict health outcomes using quantitative methods, but also to identify job resources and demands, using qualitative methods, for example by Heckenberg et al. (2018).

The model is flexible and can be used to predict how engagement and exhaustion affect work performance. The flexibility lies in the ease of classifying different work aspects into categories of job demands and job resources (Bakker et al., 2014). The model can thereby be adapted to different organizations and situations (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014) and is thus suitable for this study.

### 3.2.1 Job Demands

Job demands are:

“Physical, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and psychological costs”. (Demerouti, Nachreiner, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2001, p. 501)

Job demands are factors that can predict exhaustion, such as physical workload, time pressure, recipient contact, physical environment and shift work (Demerouti, Nachreiner, Baker, & Schaufeli, 2001). Bakker (2014) has shown that the job demands that have the most significant impact on exhaustion is role ambiguity, role conflict, role stress, stressful events, workload and work pressure. Employees that are exposed to high job demands during long time periods can become chronically exhausted and thereby distance themselves from their work. A study by

Dijkhuizen et al. (2016) found that entrepreneurs are specifically experiencing certain job demands, such as time pressure, uncertainty and risk & responsibility.

### 3.2.2 Job Resources

Job resources are:

“Physical, psychological, social or organizational aspects of the job that may do any of the following: (a) be functional in achieving work goals; (b) reduce job demands at the associated physiological and psychological costs; (c) stimulate personal growth and development.” (Demerouti et al., 2001, p.501).

Early research focused on job resources such as feedback, rewards, job control, participation, job security, and supervisor support (Demerouti et al., 2001). However, more recent research has shown that the job resources that best predicted work engagement are task variety, task significance, autonomy, feedback, social support from colleagues, quality relationships with supervisors and transformational leadership (Bakker et al., 2014). Job resources can play a role both in regard to extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. The intrinsic role fosters learning and development, while the extrinsic role functions as tools to achieve goals (Bakker, 2011). Job resources can be divided into external resources (organizational and social) and internal resources (cognitive features and action patterns).

### 3.2.3 The Model Dynamics

The model proposes that job demands are the main reasons for exhaustion. This is due to the fact that they are energy-demanding and costly processes for employees. Furthermore, the model proposes that job resources are the main reasons for work engagement and motivation (Figure 2). This has to do with the fact that job resources, and their intrinsic motivational role, fulfill employees' basic psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness and competence. Lack of job resources are also an explanation for disengagement from work (Bakker, 2011; Bakker et al., 2014).

However, job demands and resources also have joint effects that may affect work performance. There are mainly two joint effects. Firstly, a high presence of job resources can help to mitigate the risks and negative effects of high job demands, by making it easier for employees to cope with their demands, and thereby reduce effects such as exhaustion and burnout. Secondly, the

presence of job demands can also increase the positive effects of job resources on engagement and motivation. Research has shown that when the job demands are salient and demanding, job resources become more valuable to the employee and thereby create an increased positive effect on work engagement (Bakker et al., 2014).

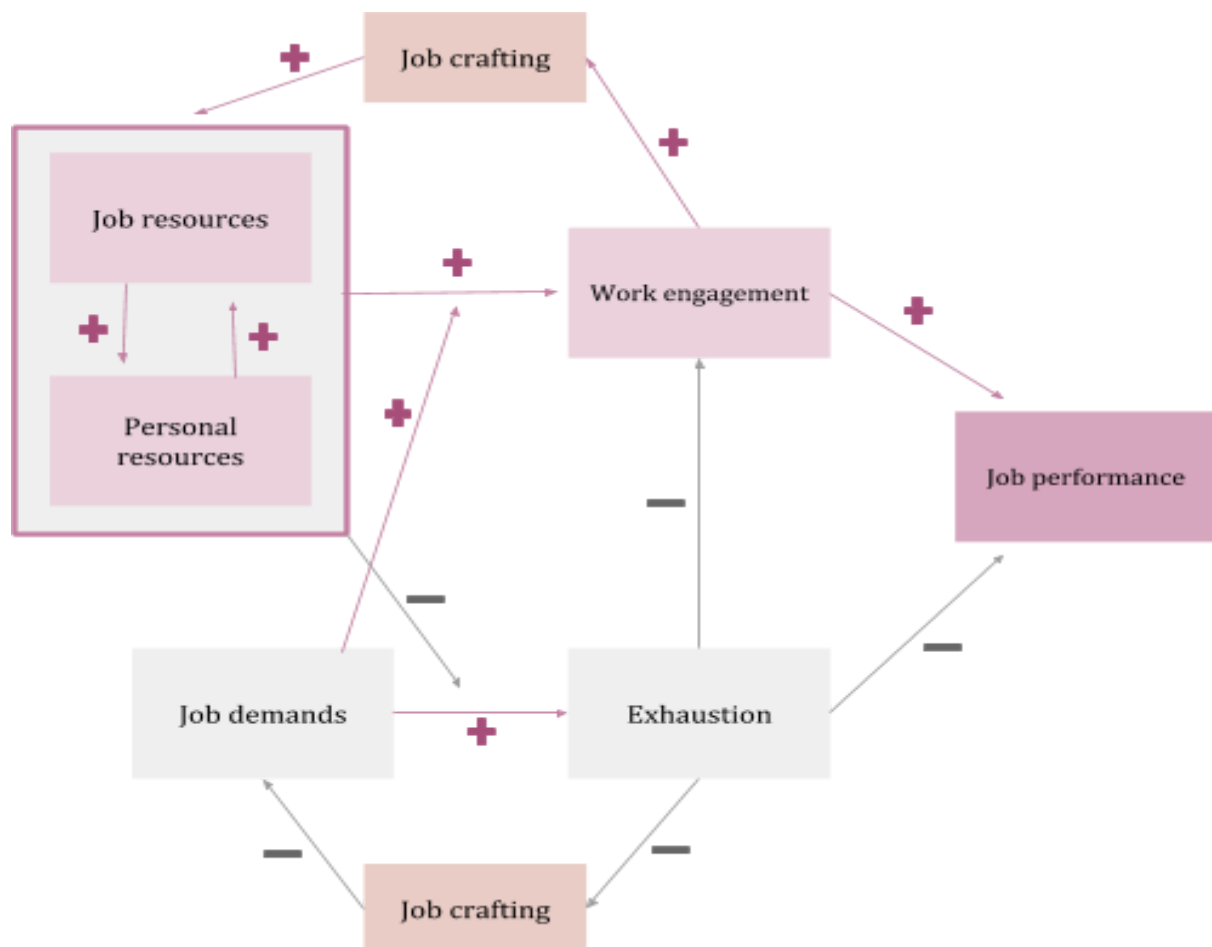


Figure 2. Illustration of the JD-R Model (Bakker et al., 2014)

### 3.2.4 Personal Resources

After the initial publication of the JD-R theory, it was complemented with personal resources. Personal resources are positive self-evaluations, mainly focusing on how people evaluate their own ability to affect their surroundings (Bakker et al., 2014). People with high personal resources are expected to have higher goal self-concordance, something which in turn is expected to create high work performance and satisfaction (Judge, Bono, Erez, & Locke, 2005).

A study showed that personal resources cannot change the relationship between job demands and exhaustion. But the same study also showed that job resources can foster personal resources which relates to satisfaction (Bakker et al., 2014).

### 3.2.5 Job Crafting

One implication of the model is that changing the work environment can help improve engagement and reduce the risk of exhaustion. Job crafting is defined as the “*physical and cognitive changes individuals make in their task or relational boundaries*” (Bakker et al., 2014, p.401). Physical changes are related to changes in the form, the scope or the number of work tasks. Cognitive changes are related to the employee changing the way they perceive the job (Bakker et al., 2014). Tims et al. (2012) also suggests a third kind of change: relational. In this case, employees moderate their relationship to colleagues, customers and others by changing the frequency and the intensity of the interaction.

The changes are self-initiated and are made in order to align the work with the employee’s own characteristics. It is thereby not a negotiation process with managers in order to change the role to better fit personal values. Job crafting is also a proactive process, which can be linked to performance outcomes such as organizational effectiveness (Tims et al., 2012).

In relation to the JD-R theory, Tims et al. (2012) found that people engage in four kinds of job crafting: increasing structural job resources, increasing social job resources, increasing challenging job demands, and decreasing hindrance job demands. Factors increasing structural job resources are, for example resource variety, development and autonomy. Hence, an increase in these structural job resources can have a big impact on the job design. Examples of factors increasing social job resources are social support, coaching and feedback and an increase in these factors have a high impact on the social and interactive environment.

## 4 Method

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### 4.1 Research Design

#### 4.1.1 Philosophical Position

The research rests on the ontological position constructionism, acknowledging that the interviewees' and authors' experiences and views are socially constructed and constantly changing (Bryman, Bell, & Harley, 2019). Given the ontological position, the epistemological position is interpretivism. As the authors understand the world as socially constructed, the aim is to interpret it and gain knowledge through interpretivism. This study will examine social interactions, namely the interaction between sustainable incubators and social entrepreneurs, and capture subjective assessments of the relationship.

The research paradigm this research falls under is interpretative. The authors assume that the function of the research is to describe what goes on in organizations without judgement and do not claim to know how to best conduct an incubator program. The fact that work engagement is a subjective concept, different for each individual and triggered differently for each individual, paved the way for the interpretative standpoint.

#### 4.1.2 An Abductive Qualitative Study

Since research on sustainable incubators' effects is limited, there is no theory used most intensely and it is not obvious which theory is most appropriate. The study was therefore conducted through an abductive approach, which allowed empirical material and theory to form each other and the authors to explore the relevance of different theories while gathering empirical material. The authors noticed an interesting phenomenon of sustainable incubators and made early examinations of theories that could provide insights into the possible effects of these incubators. Throughout the collection of empirics, theory was re-examined, and the empirical material finally led the authors to the JD-R theory as one that could explain the effects of sustainable incubators. The decision to use the JD-R theory was based both on patterns found in the empirical material, and on previous research on social entrepreneurship and incubators.

As the authors had an interpretivist standpoint, expressed experiences were more highly valued than quantifications. The authors wanted to understand the social entrepreneurs' experiences

of the incubator's effect, and therefore deemed a qualitative research method appropriate, in order to understand the participants' way of viewing the incubation.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted. The experienced effect of partaking in an incubator is unique, which is why it was assessed that the optimal way to capture each participants' experience, was to ask open questions and let the interview flow in the direction of what the interviewees expressed as important. This way, the authors could understand, by the topics brought up, which aspects of the incubation the interviewees deemed important, allowing the authors to find patterns which could have been missed if conducting structured interviews. The authors modified the questions during the interviews and were flexible in order to get the best understanding possible. This approach may reduce comparability, however, it was assessed to give a truer understanding of the incubatees' experience, which, in turn, was deemed essential to answer the research question.

Lastly, the study was conducted as a cross-sectional study, studying social entrepreneurs in both sustainable and general incubators, to understand if the effects for social entrepreneurs stemmed from merely being part of an incubator or from being part of a sustainable incubator.

## 4.2 Data Selection

### 4.2.1 Incubators

Social entrepreneurs from different incubators were included in this study. There is no universal definition of an incubator (Piet Hausberg & Korreck, 2020). The authors chose one of the wider definitions of an incubator, since the aim of the study is to understand how social entrepreneurs can be best supported. External support is thus of interest and the authors thereby did not want to make the definition too narrow. For the purpose of this study, an incubator will be defined as:

“Property-based organizations with identifiable administrative centers focused on the mission of business acceleration through knowledge agglomeration and resource sharing” (Phan, Mian, & Lamine, 2016), p.248-249).

The choice of sustainable incubators was made through a criterion sample, based on the above definition. As there is no official list of sustainable Swedish incubators, the authors compiled a

list. The list was then reduced to solely include incubators matching the following criteria: (1) the incubator only accepts participants with a sustainability focus, (2) the incubator provides services to aid participants in their business, and (3) the incubator has been active during the last two years. The time aspect of two years was chosen on basis of the Swedish government's investment in supporting social entrepreneurship, which started 2018. Out of the remaining incubators, the authors first chose incubators in Stockholm, in order to facilitate physical meetings. However, as there were few sustainable incubators in Stockholm, the authors chose to include one incubator outside of Stockholm, creating an initial sample of four incubators.

The first three interviews were conducted with social entrepreneurs in sustainable incubators. These interviews indicated that sustainable incubators did affect the participants' work engagement, which was confirmed by five additional interviews with social entrepreneurs in sustainable incubators. However, the authors also decided to interview social entrepreneurs participating in general incubators, in order to investigate if the identified effects were unique for sustainable incubators.

The selection of general incubators was based on a list of Swedish incubators, created by the authors, drawing on the list generated by Swedish Incubators & Science Parks (Swedish Incubators & Science Parks, 2020). The list was then reduced to include solely incubators matching the following criteria: (1) the incubator provides services to aid participants in their business, and (2) the incubator has been active during the last two years. The authors then chose four general incubators available in the Stockholm region, incubating social entrepreneurs.

#### 4.2.2 Social Entrepreneurs

Potential interviewees were elected based on the study's definition of a social entrepreneur and two samples were chosen – one with social entrepreneurs from sustainable incubators and one with social entrepreneurs from general incubators.

The authors assessed the chosen incubators current and former participants, and matched these against three criteria: (1) the participant is or have been a part of the chosen sustainable/general incubator program, (2) the company aims to make profit, and (3) the company is working to enhance sustainable public interest. All participants matching the criteria in each of the chosen incubators were contacted.

The founders of each company were contacted, as they are the ones who participated in the program and thereby could provide the best understanding of the experience and the incubators' effects. All interviewees were contacted by email ([Appendix 3](#)) and have been anonymized, for the purpose of the study ([Appendix 1](#)).

## 4.3 Data Collection

### 4.3.1 Interview Guide

Before the interviews, the authors made an initial analysis of engagement theories and created interview guides, ([Appendix 4](#), [Appendix 5](#)), including questions regarding job demands, job resources, job crafting, and other aspects of engagement. The interview guide consisted of open questions, in order to allow the interviewees to share stories of participating in the incubator. The questions were designed in a neutral manner, to avoid getting biased answers. Questions connected to job demands, assessed to be the most sensitive, were saved for last, in accordance with Bryman et al.'s (2019) recommendations.

One pilot interview with a social entrepreneur not matching all of the criteria, was conducted in order to allow for improvements to be made in the interview guide, before conducting the actual interviews. Small changes in the guide were then made, to include different theoretical themes.

### 4.3.2 Conducting Interviews

In total, 14 interviews were conducted, eight with social entrepreneurs from sustainable incubators and six with social entrepreneurs from general incubators. After 14 interviews, the authors deemed that empirical saturation had been reached, since the interviewees replicated answers from previous interviews and did not bring further understanding of the topic.

Interviews were conducted in Swedish since all entrepreneurs are proficient in the language. Four of the interviews were conducted physically, where location was chosen by the interviewee, in order to ensure they felt comfortable. The physical interviews allowed the authors to make observations before, during, and after the interview. They also followed an interview technique proposed by Bryman et al. (2019) where one of the interviewers took the lead and asked the questions, while the other was responsible for making observations, taking notes and asking follow-up questions. The goal of the distinct roles was to make the situation

clear. As all interviews were conducted in a quiet setting, the authors assess that surroundings was of little disturbance to the interviewees.

The authors strived to conduct all interviews physically, to more easily make observations regarding eg. body language and facial expressions, which risk getting lost when conducting online interviews. Nevertheless, ten of the interviews were conducted digitally, either due to the interviewee being abroad or because of the recommendations by authorities following the Covid-19 outbreak. In order to make the best of the situation, the interviewee was allowed to choose between conducting the interview over phone or by video, in order to ensure they felt comfortable. Six interviews were conducted over phone and four over video ([Appendix 2](#)).

In order to create a positive relationship between interviewer and interviewee, despite the digital format, the introductions in these interviews were longer than in the physical interviews. Thereby, interviewer and interviewee could create a safe environment before moving on to the interview questions. Since fewer observations could be made, the authors put extra focus on follow-up questions in these interviews to properly understand of the interviewee's experience.

The digital interviews were conducted by only one interviewer, in an effort to make the conversation as natural as possible, as well as avoiding confusion. To ensure that both authors got a proper understanding of these interviews, the author not conducting the interview transcribed it. Immediately after the transliteration the authors had a discussion about the interview.

## 4.4 Data Analysis

The interview material was transcribed immediately after conducting the interview and a thematic analysis followed. The process started with analyzing the text, looking for recurrent first order concepts and expressed effects of partaking in an incubator. The analysis was initiated at an early stage, so that the authors could get an understanding of the data early in the process, while also reducing the risk for the analysis process to be too heavy at the end (Bryman et al., 2019).

Due to the constructivist position, the first order coding was firstly conducted by each author alone, as the authors interpret the world in different ways. The identified themes were then compared. This led to a discussion about the authors' interpretations of the content, which enriched the analysis and observations claimed by only one author could be excluded.

The first codes were then related to job demands, -resources and -crafting in the second order coding, as the JD-R theory, at this stage, seemed to provide insights on the sustainable incubators' effects. The second order themes have been used to structure the empirical section of this report and interview quotes were used to present phenomena found. All quotes have been translated into English.

## 4.5 Ethical Considerations

Bryman et. al (2019) highlight ethical aspects to consider when conducting business research – harm, consent, privacy and deception. These have been considered when conducting the research.

All participants were introduced to the research with an introductory text ([Appendix 3](#)) that allowed the participants to form an understanding of the research purpose and the participants rights, before agreeing to participate. The text was, however, designed to not give the participant full understanding of the research, to avoid biased answers.

All interviews were held in a setting chosen by the interviewee and started with a repetition of the interviewees rights. The interviewees were allowed to cancel the interview or to not answer a question, without providing reasons why. Each participant was also ensured they would be anonymized, and case-fictitious names and company-names were created. Furthermore, interviewees were asked for permission to record the interview. Lastly, prior to the publishing of the report, all participants accepted the quotes used, in order to ensure accuracy, and to ensure the quote would not harm the participant or their position.

The introductory text allowed the participants to give informed consent and prevented deception. By ensuring consent, safe interview settings and approval of the used quotations, the harm made to the participant was minimized. Further, privacy was upheld by anonymization and asking permission of recording. As a result of these actions, the research can be assessed to fulfill Bryman et al.'s (2019) principles.

## 4.6 Method Discussion

Although a high degree of credibility has been aimed for, some parts of the method can be critically discussed. As social entrepreneurs from different kinds of incubators were

interviewed, it is possible the programs studied were too different to be compared in a way that provide general insights. Furthermore, the fact that interviews were conducted in different settings may have interfered with the interviewees answers, and the interviewers' conception of the interview. During the phone interviews, the interviewer was unable to make observations of the interviewees' body language, narrowing the interpretation of the interviews. Lastly, it can be discussed how more empirical material would have deepened the understanding and increased the transferability.

In qualitative research, transferability can be a problem, due to the uniqueness of the social world being studied (Bryman et al., 2019). In order to increase transferability, the authors have tried to give a clear description of the method, kept a research diary, in which crucial details were noted, and aimed to produce a thick description of the empirical material.

The dependability of the research is, however, assessed to be high. The research has constantly been reviewed by peers and supervisors, something which has brought new perspectives to the research. Moreover, complete records have been kept of all the phases of the research. The authors deem that this has contributed positively to dependability.

Lastly, the authors' interest in sustainability and entrepreneurship may have interfered with the analysis of the research. The authors are convinced that sustainable business models are important, and personal values may thereby have affected the research. The authors have throughout the process discussed personal thoughts, in order to become aware of these. To what extent these values have interfered is, however, difficult to assess.

## 5 Empirical Material

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### 5.1 Social Entrepreneurs in Sustainable Incubators

The empirics gathered from the interviews with the eight social entrepreneurs in sustainable incubator programs, will be presented below.

#### 5.1.1 Positive Effects

All interviewees had overall positive attitudes towards the incubators when describing their experience. All but one felt that their businesses had done well after the incubation. The positive performances were expressed differently, for example as a growth in number of employees, customers or access to new funds and markets.

“We have been doing well. We have become much more focused and simply found our way of working and we are not as much ‘all over the place’, as we were before.” – Christopher

Certain specific themes, regarding experienced positive effects of the incubation, reoccurred.

#### **Guidance**

All incubators had business coaches whose purpose was to advise the entrepreneurs. The interviewees all stated that they received individual guidance, adapted after their specific needs. Seven of the entrepreneurs found the specific guidance helpful.

“The feedback we got regarding refining our business model and to consider important questions we needed to take a stand on as a business, as well as getting practical questions resolved: regarding what it is to start a business, how to report, and what to think about. Just equity, you know all these parts that, if you have never dealt with them before, it is all new and you have to learn it. And to have someone to guide you, and provide you with contact to a good lawyer you can ask for advice, that was very valuable.” – Hanna

Bobby reflected on receiving guidance on how to scale up, how to reach his goals, and how the personalized feedback helped him develop specific business strategies. Anna found the advice

on how to think regarding sales, was one of the most rewarding aspects of the incubation. *"It is easier to get closer to the goal if you get some instructions in what direction to aim."* – Anna.

Daniel did not find specific advice to be the most valuable aspect of the guidance, but stated:

"It is rather the process of having to write down your strategies, trying to understand what they are, what different choices we can make and the preparatory work, as well as presenting them and discussing them, that is the real value creation, rather than there being an all-knowing yoda providing advice." – Daniel

### **Helpful Networks**

Another finding was that, during the incubation, the entrepreneurs could network with other social entrepreneurs in the incubator, something seven of the eight entrepreneurs expressed as helpful. Overall, the positive experience concerned having others in the same position as one self to learn from. *"It was absolutely amazing to get to work with other people trying to solve social issues using entrepreneurship."* – Bobby. Anna mentioned how receiving input from peers was of great value:

"You could get completely new eyes on your product, or someone who said 'No, but I feel like this' and that was from someone from a completely different industry who could look at it with fresh eyes." – Anna

Two entrepreneurs met other entrepreneurs in the incubator that they later collaborated and conducted business with.

### **Validation**

Six entrepreneurs revealed that being accepted to the incubator caused internal validation. They expressed feeling good and boosted from being accepted. *"I was very happy about being accepted, since they only accepted people who could present their idea, and it was a rather exhaustive application process."* – Bobby.

Five entrepreneurs articulated getting external validation from partaking in the incubator. They described receiving respect from external actors when stating they were part of the incubator,

which made recruitments, funding, and overall contact with external entities easier and more accessible.

“It is difficult to sell yourself. But through going into the [Incubator 2] umbrella, you get the certificate of quality stating this is social enterprise that is helping change the world. And it is always much stronger when someone else is saying it, rather than when you are stating it yourself. So it has definitely helped us.” – Eric

Daniel described how they got both internal and external validation from being part of their incubator.

“It is perhaps for us internally, very important to get confirmation we do things that... I believe that, but that is more for us as entrepreneurs. But for [Company D], it is rather the fact that we are associated with [Incubator 2], that is what is important, for recruitments and so on.” – Daniel

### **Improved Ways of Working**

Five of the eight entrepreneurs mentioned their ways of working had become more structured after the incubation. *“During these meetings, I took notes about what we talked about, which became like checklists and bullet points I now go over and work after”* – Anna.

Furthermore, the entrepreneurs expressed how partaking in an incubator helped them prioritize their work. Christopher expressed that his mentor helped him become more focused, set up goals, and focus on one task at a time. *“I think we learned to set up boundaries and goals that take us forward”* – Christopher.

The three entrepreneurs who expressed the incubation had not improved their ways of working, were senior entrepreneurs, and expressed they were knowledgeable in business.

### **Measuring the Impact**

All eight entrepreneurs emphasized the importance of measuring their impact. Three entrepreneurs discussed how they had previously worked with measuring their sustainable impact, while five expressed learning how to do this during the incubation. This impact was defined differently by each entrepreneur, as they operate in different markets. However, they all

described it as something other than financial status, such as for example the amount of people who received help from their projects or their reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. When asked about the most valuable part of the incubation, Bobby answered:

“If I am to choose only one thing, it is probably the understanding of the importance of actually measuring the development you are creating, and how you can clearly convey that to those around you and to the segment you are focusing on” – Bobby

### **Effect on Sustainability**

Six out of eight entrepreneurs stated that joining the incubator had affected their view on sustainability.

“The more you learn, and read and understand, the more interested you become. And I believe that, at least me as an individual, but also the entire [Company D] as a business, have also undergone that, so today, sustainability is a central aspect, a very important issue. But at the very beginning, it was perhaps not central.” – Daniel

Moreover, the entrepreneurs expressed that the network of social entrepreneurs and constantly being surrounded by people focused on sustainability increased their understanding and passion for sustainability issues. *“And when you get in and get to listen to others who are just as passionate, but within other areas, you understand just how wide the issue of sustainability is”* – Felicia.

The two entrepreneurs who did not express their focus on sustainability had increased, had previously worked within the field of sustainability, and expressed they had a full understanding of the challenges from previous work.

### **Growth of Ambitions**

Seven entrepreneurs expressed their ambitions grew during their incubation. This growth of ambitions was mostly connected to the sustainability aspect of the businesses. The entrepreneurs explained how, throughout the incubation, their goals grew from being more focused on the business aspect, to include coming about a bigger change in society. *“My ambitions grew a lot. It is not just about making [the product] sustainable, but about making*

*consumption sustainable.” – Bobby. When asked about the most valuable part of the incubation, Eric stated: “Well, the absolute biggest effect they [Incubator 2] have had, is that they have contributed to our joint ambition”.*

Anna expressed that her ambitions regarding the growth of her company was affected by attending a lecture about scaling up.

“I have always had a goal that [Company A] could be really big. But at the same time, when you work every day, it is so easy to get stuck in ‘Well, here I am, in this small [town], how am I to grow?’. So, he [the lecturer] challenged the thought, about scaling up” – Anna

### 5.1.2 Negative Effects

Overall, there were few negative effects of the incubation mentioned. Even when asked directly if there were any negative aspects of being incubated, very little was brought forward. However, Daniel mentioned there were additional reports to be turned in, as an effect of the incubation. Moreover, he mentioned he gets invited to events that might not be of value to him, but which he might agree to, in order to care for the relationship with the incubator. Still, Daniel expressed that overall, the positive effects far outweighed the negative ones.

When asked if Bobby had experienced anything negative from partaking in the incubator, he answered: *“No, I mean I think the incubator gives more than it takes”*. This was an opinion also expressed by Greg.

### 5.1.3 Timing

Finally, all the entrepreneurs discussed the importance of joining the incubator at the right time. Five of the eight entrepreneurs stated that, even though they thought it was valuable to be part of the incubator, they felt they had come too far in their development when joining.

“I think that if you have a clear picture of what you want to do and perhaps have started that process, it [the incubation] is amazing. In that case, you get help with everything. We were kind of... we were perhaps too done.” – Christopher

However, Anna stated that the incubation was perfectly timed for her.

“I think the timing was right for me. I have received these kinds of offers previously but declined, because I have felt perhaps it was not the right focus, either because of the lectures or it was not the right time for the company or so on. But everything clicked this time. And I have also been pretty clear with what I wanted to get out of it. And I feel I have received that” – Anna

## 5.2 Social Entrepreneurs in General Incubators

Empirics gathered from interviews with the six social entrepreneurs in general incubators, will be presented below.

### 5.2.1 Positive Effects

All six entrepreneurs stated their companies had done well and grown after the incubation. Among the positive aspects brought forward with regard to the incubations, some themes reoccurred. What was expressed as most valuable, varied.

#### **Guidance**

All six entrepreneurs could access business coaches who provided guidance in various areas. Five entrepreneurs expressed having recurring meetings with coaches, with whom they could brainstorm ideas and get help from. Many also mentioned they could contact these coaches whenever needed. The general perception of the guidance was that the quality was high. *“The reason why it went so well, was because the guidance was so damn good.”* – Kevin. The interviewees foremost described this guidance as purely related to business development. However, one interviewee had also received help regarding the sustainability aspect of their company.

#### **Helpful Networks**

Five of six entrepreneurs expressed getting access to a network of other entrepreneurs in the incubator. Three entrepreneurs described receiving help from other entrepreneurs and sharing experiences were valuable. Moreover, three entrepreneurs mentioned that the social aspect of the network was motivating.

“It's a lot of networking and you talk to entrepreneurs: ‘Have you done this before?’ or ‘Have you been through this, that is happening to us?’ for example. Which, yeah, the environment is more fun than if you had been sitting in a small basement office. So yes, that has surely affected our attitude, as we think it is more fun to work in an incubator than in an office. [...] And then it is nice to have other companies to brainstorm these things with and learn lessons from others, how they have handled it.” – Michael

The importance of the network increased for Isabelle, when her expectations on the incubator were not met.

“[...] when we got in, I think we believed that the goal of being in this program was to get a lot of tips and advice, and that they would push us forward. But we soon noticed that it's perhaps not why you should be there. So, we changed our view on why we are in the program. And then we realized that it is more rewarding to be in the program just for the community with other participating projects, and that you can help each other.” – Isabelle

## **Validation**

Three entrepreneurs discussed that being accepted by, and being part of an incubator, showed that someone believed in the company, which was perceived as valuable.

“[...] and also the fact that someone else believed in the idea. That it wasn't just me who believed in the idea but also someone who had experience in running businesses. [...] That meant a lot.” – Kevin

That the incubators believed in the company and wanted to devote resources to it, made some of the entrepreneurs dare to commit fully to their enterprises. However, the incubation did not only cause internal validation. Four of the six entrepreneurs expressed that being part of the incubator was beneficial when interacting with externals.

“The best thing is to be backed by [Incubator 4]. Because when emailing customers and others, we write [Company H], [Incubator 4] and that... the brand of [Incubator 4], to be able to use that, tears down walls to access

customers and stakeholders you want to reach. So that is definitely the most valuable.” – John

### **Improved Ways of Working**

The incubators helped improve the entrepreneurs’ ways of working. All six entrepreneurs discussed how the expertise of the coaches ensured they learned a lot about how to run a business. Three entrepreneurs discussed in more detail how the coaches helped them formulate goals and plans and structure their work.

“We may not work much more, [than before the incubation], but I think we work a bit smarter. We don’t shoot blindly in certain issues, but we check in with the coaches so that they can tell us ‘Ignore that’, ‘That, you don’t have to worry about’ or ‘This, you should not do yourself, you should outsource that, pay someone to do that’.” – Noah

### **5.2.2 Additional Benefits**

When asked if the entrepreneurs believed they would have had a different experience if incubated in a sustainable incubator, four of the six interviewees argued they might have gotten additional benefits. They focused on two main aspects: (1) they would get to work with social entrepreneurs who have encountered even more similar difficulties as them, than the general entrepreneurs now in their network, and (2) that the external validation would be even greater.

“I think in some way, how well you succeed as a startup is partly a function of your surroundings and if you are in an environment where many think the work you are doing is important, then that may improve your odds of succeeding. And there are surely many knowledgeable sustainability experts who can give valuable feedback in that kind of environment.” – Lucas

To encounter more people with similar experiences was a reason for Isabelle to change incubator to one described as: *“That accelerator is much more adapted for us. [...] They have a lot of people there with experiences in helping with areas in which we need help.”* – Isabelle. Company J was also looking into applying to a sustainable incubator, in the hope of getting good marketing and accessing a more desirable network.

The two entrepreneurs who did not think they would get additional benefits from a sustainable incubator, had profound knowledge of sustainability. When asked if the sustainable incubator would affect them differently than a general, Kevin answered:

“No, I don’t think so, because I know those [sustainability] issues. That, I know well enough. What I needed was someone who said ‘This is how to think when doing business.’” – Kevin

### 5.2.3 Negative Effects

The entrepreneurs expressed some negative aspects of the incubation. These mainly related to the general nature of the programs. Four entrepreneurs emphasized the fact that the incubators were too general.

“We were there for a couple of months, but then we started to distance ourselves because we realized rather quickly it [the incubation] was rather general when a university runs the incubator. So, all incubatees, maybe ten, received the same treatment, even though everyone developed at different speed.” – Isabelle

The inability to adapt the incubation after the social entrepreneur’s specific needs, was also expressed by three entrepreneurs as resulting in time-consuming and unnecessary activities.

“The negative, if I am to say something, of being part of an incubator or accelerator is, from my perspective, that it can be time-consuming. There are many workshops, brainstorming, meetings and different events that you should prepare for. And all of these commitments are not relevant. So you have to be good at prioritizing and saying no” – Michael

### 5.2.4 Timing

Four entrepreneurs mentioned that what stage of development they were in when joining the incubator affected why they experienced positive or negative effects from the incubation.

“If I had been, I don’t know, in another situation, I might not have been susceptible [...]. But now, the combination of these factors that I was ready,

that I started to feel ready for a new challenge, that she [the contact from the incubator] believed in the idea, that I got economic support and that I got a business coach who was really really good. That combination of factors was what made this [company] possible” – Kevin

Due to the general nature of the program, the entrepreneurs experienced the incubation as inflexible, which increased the importance of joining the incubation when in the “right” stage of development. John discussed that their work had progressed since the incubation, though slower than they had hoped, in part due to the incubation showing little possibility to adapt to the individual process of the entrepreneurs. As a negative effect of the inflexibility of the program, John experienced that they did not receive useful support during the first part of the incubation, but only later, when the incubation program started covering things they needed help with.

## 6 Analysis

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### 6.1 Job Resources

The empirics show that participants in sustainable and general incubators experienced mainly four positive effects from their incubation: *guidance*, *helpful networks*, *validation*, and *improved ways of working*. These can be categorized as job resources, defined as:

“Physical, psychological, social or organizational aspects of the job that may do any of the following: (a) be functional in achieving work goals; (b) reduce job demands at the associated physiological and psychological costs; (c) stimulate personal growth and development” (Demerouti et al., 2001, p.501).

*Guidance* helped the social entrepreneurs achieve their work goals, through establishing more specific goals and plans to achieve these. Guidance also stimulated personal growth, as the incubators’ coaching educated the social entrepreneurs in various ways. *Networks* facilitated the possibility to brainstorm with, and learn from other entrepreneurs, avoiding mistakes, which further aided the social entrepreneurs in achieving their goals. The social support from other entrepreneurs was also expressed to be extra useful to keep motivation in times of business difficulties, thereby reducing job demands. *Validation* was useful to the social entrepreneurs, as the incubator’s reputation was helpful in recruitments, funding, and partnerships. Being accepted to an incubator also provided an internal boost of confidence, which both reduced job demands and motivated the entrepreneurs. Lastly, *improved ways of working*, as exemplified, was useful in achieving work goals. Thus, all four can be argued to be job resources.

This study indicates that incubators increase work engagement for social entrepreneurs, through increasing job resources. The job resources found, resemble job resources categorized in previous literature, defined as: job control, feedback from peers and supervisors, social support, and participation (Bakker et al., 2014; Demerouti et al., 2001).

However, the experienced increase in job resources was not unique to social entrepreneurs in sustainable incubators, but was also found for social entrepreneurs in general incubators. This relates to Bank and Kanda’s research (2016), which indicates that the support given by general and sustainable incubators is similar. As the intent of incubators is to support its incubatees, it is understandable that they operate in comparable ways, providing similar resources.

Yet, incubatees in general incubators expressed they believed they could get additional benefits from partaking in sustainable incubators, due to a more specific and specialized network. This is interesting, as *helpful networks* was a positive effect found from both types of incubators. If both networks were valued equally, the entrepreneurs would be indifferent between the two. This study thereby indicates that the networks in sustainable incubators are differing and more valuable. The main difference appears to be that sustainable incubators provide a more specialized network, producing both a more socially interesting environment and increased learning opportunities for participants. The fact that the social entrepreneurs in sustainable incubators further emphasised the network provided as something very positive, enhancing the understanding of sustainability and the motivation to work for sustainability, further stresses this conclusion. This study thereby converges with Bank and Kanda's research (2016) showing that sustainable incubators provide a more specific network.

Further, Bakker et al.'s (2014) found that the job resources that best predict work engagement are task variety, task significance, autonomy, feedback, social support from colleagues, quality relationships with supervisors as well as transformational leadership. This study's best predictor for work engagement can be said to be *helpful networks*, as these consist of both feedback, social support from colleagues, and quality relationships with supervisors. Thereby, helpful networks are closely related to work engagement, which could explain why this is something social entrepreneurs are attracted to.

This research thereby indicate that, even though general and sustainable incubators might create the same amount of job resources, there appear to be differences in quality of these job resources. As sustainable incubators have managed to create helpful networks experienced as superior, sustainable incubators appear to create more valuable job resources than general incubators.

### **Sub conclusion (1)**

Sustainable incubators increase four types of job resources for the participating social entrepreneurs: *guidance*, *helpful networks*, *validation* and *improved ways of working*, which increase work engagement according to the JD-R model. This increase in job resources is not an unique effect of sustainable incubators, but can be provided by general incubators as well. However, as sustainable incubators outperform in building helpful networks, which include some of the best predictors of work engagement, their positive effect on work engagement may be larger than that of general incubators.

## 6.2 Job Demands

The empirics gathered indicate that general incubators create job demands, defined as:

“Physical, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and psychological costs” (Demerouti et al., 2001, p.501).

The incubatees in the general incubators expressed the incubation caused extra workload, which classifies as a job demand. This is not a job demand that increases the impact of job resources, but rather reduces the effect of job resources, thereby reducing work engagement. This is understood since the social entrepreneurs in general incubators described the additional workload as something negative.

Additional workload was, however, not described as negative by social entrepreneurs in sustainable incubators. When asked, they confirmed that being incubated meant an increased workload. Nevertheless, they considered that the gains of participating in the incubator outweighed the additional workload.

The extra work, that came from being incubated, was thus viewed differently by participants in sustainable and general incubators. This could stem from the sustainable incubator programs being described as individually adapted, whereas general incubators were not described to be individually adapted to the same extent. The individually adapted nature of the sustainable incubators might have been a factor that reduced the risk of creating job demands, as the incubators could address each participant's specific needs. The generalized structure of the general incubator programs could not adapt as easily to each entrepreneur's needs, thereby being less in control of how they caused job demands.

### **Sub conclusion (2)**

The study does not find that sustainable incubators increase job demand for the incubated social entrepreneurs, even if they generate additional work. General incubators, however, were found to create job demands for the incubated social entrepreneurs. The individually adapted programs of the sustainable incubators can be a factor that kept job demands from increasing, as they can individually adapt the program to each participant's needs.

### 6.3 Timing

Moreover, the timing of when the social entrepreneurs entered the incubator affected the entrepreneurs' perceptions of the incubation. Joining the incubator when in a stage of development requiring help provided by the incubator, gave positive effects and the job resources became even more valuable. However, joining at a time when the social entrepreneur requires help that is not provided by the incubator, the incubation can become time-consuming and less valuable, thereby increasing job demands. No entrepreneur stated they entered the incubation prematurely, but several stated they had come too far in the process to benefit fully from the incubator program.

Chan and Lau (2005) found that tech-focused incubatees experience different benefits from the incubation, depending on the incubatees' stage of development. In analyzing the main findings from this study, the same conclusion can be drawn for social entrepreneurs.

However, participants in sustainable incubators, who expressed they joined the incubator too late did not describe the negative effects of poor timing as negatively as participants in general incubators. Due to sustainable incubators being described as more individually adapted, the participants could more easily find value in the incubation, despite being "too developed", than participants in general incubators could. To enter a general incubator when in the right phase of development was expressed as more crucial, as these incubator programs are not as individually adapted, as the sustainable incubators appear to be. Thereby, timing reinforces job demands to a greater extent in general incubators.

#### **Sub conclusion (3)**

Joining a sustainable incubator, when in the right stage of development, can enhance the use of, and make the job resources provided more valuable. Furthermore, joining a sustainable incubator, even if "too developed", will still generate job resources. Joining a general incubator at the right time is more crucial, as the general nature of these incubators makes it difficult to benefit from the program if being too developed.

### 6.4 Job Crafting

Another difference between the social entrepreneurs in sustainable and general incubators is that six of the eight social entrepreneurs in sustainable incubators described that their ambitions, in terms of business and sustainability, grew during the incubation. This was not brought up by any general incubator participant.

This is an example of cognitive job crafting, where the social entrepreneurs change the way they view their job. They start to view their job as more essential and themselves as an increasingly important player in the sustainability field. Thereby, they see increased possibilities for their company's future causing their ambitions to grow. This job crafting further creates job resources, as described possible by Bakker et al. (2014). When incubatees change the view of their work, their task significance, a job resource, increases, positively affecting work engagement.

Why sustainable incubators create job crafting, in a way that differs from general incubators, cannot be explained by the theoretical framework. Schaufeli and Taris' (2014) expressed that the JD-R model is weak in explaining why certain job aspects lead to different psychological states. However, as incubatees in sustainable incubators expressed appreciation of an environment consisting of individuals also passionate about sustainability, when describing the growth of their ambition, it is possible that the incubator environment triggers this effect. Being around solely social entrepreneurs, with a common mission to do good, was expressed as inspirational. The narrow focus, and the homogenous group in sustainable incubators, could thereby be a reason to why the social entrepreneurs become inspired to increase their sustainable effort.

Moreover, as general incubators are not as homogenous, but rather have only entrepreneurship as the common denominator between participants, it is possible that the participants do not get inspired by a common goal to the same extent. This could help explain why job crafting was not found in general incubators.

#### **Sub conclusion (4)**

The sustainable incubators initiate cognitive job crafting, increasing the social entrepreneurs' ambitions regarding sustainable impact and causing task significance to increase. This effect was not found in general incubators.

## 7 Discussion and Conclusion

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### 7.1 Answer to Research Question

The JD-R theory presents job resources, job demands, job crafting, and personal resources as aspects contributing to work engagement, which in turn increase job performance (Bakker et al., 2014). This research has examined how sustainable incubators affect the work engagement of social entrepreneurs, using the JD-R theory. The study looked at how the work engagement of social entrepreneurs partaking in general incubators was affected by the incubation, in order to establish which effects were unique for the sustainable incubation and which stemmed merely from any incubation. The purpose was to answer the following research question:

*How does the participation in a sustainable incubator affect the work engagement of social entrepreneurs?*

The answer, based on the empirical material gathered, is that sustainable incubators contribute to work engagement of social entrepreneurs by increasing mainly four job resources: *guidance, helpful networks, validation* and *improved ways of working*. These effects are not unique for sustainable incubators, but can also be found from participating in general incubators. However, the experienced value of the *helpful networks* in sustainable incubators is greater than the *helpful networks* of general incubators, thereby making the value of the created job resources higher in sustainable incubators.

Furthermore, the adaptability of the sustainable incubator programs, ensure that the possible increase in workload, due to the incubation, does not result in experienced job demands. This is because the adaptability of the program address each participant's specific needs. Moreover, the adaptability of the sustainable incubators also reduce the negative effects of joining the incubator at the wrong stage of development, since the entrepreneurs expressed they could still benefit from the incubation.

Lastly, the sustainable incubators create cognitive job crafting for the social entrepreneurs, which increases task significance and the perception of the importance of their work. The social entrepreneurs partaking in sustainable incubator programs, expressed a growth of ambitions, both in terms of possibilities for their businesses and in terms of the effect they could have on sustainability and societal change.

In conclusion, based on the JD-R model, sustainable incubators contribute positively to the work engagement of social entrepreneurs, by creating additional job resources and initiating job crafting. This differs from how general incubators affect work engagement.

## 7.2 Contributions and Practical Implications

The results of this study provides insights into the importance of sustainable incubators for social entrepreneurs through positively affecting work engagement. Increased work engagement is important from a business point of view due to its connection to increased work performance, as, for example, found by Bakker et al. (2014). The interviewees also provided an overall positive assessment of their performance after their incubation, thereby giving a first indication that work performance could be positively affected by the incubation. Work performance is, however, not quantified in any manner in this study.

Through comparison with general incubators, this study also indicates that sustainable incubators are more effective in creating work engagement for social entrepreneurs. However, the study also converges with Bank and Kanda's (2016) findings that there are many similarities between general and sustainable incubators. Nevertheless, as this study specifies some aspects, setting the different incubators apart, this study sheds light on what aspects of the incubator programs are most valuable to social entrepreneurs. Thereby, this study creates opportunities for incubators and other forms of external support to be more aware of how to structure an incubator programs to more efficiently aid social entrepreneurs in creating sustainable business models combating global challenges. To provide individually adjusted support and to create an environment where the participants can draw from each other's experiences seem to be important factors.

The study also indicates that the incubation environment and focus on sustainability affect the participants. Bakker et al. (2014) described how job crafting can create additional job resources. In the analysis of this study, it has been found that job crafting increased solely in sustainable incubators. As the difference between general and sustainable incubators is whether social entrepreneurship and sustainability is the prime focus or not, this focus has been found to be the main reason why job crafting occurs in sustainable incubators. The empirics thereby indicate that a focus on social entrepreneurship in the incubator environment is important in creating cognitive job crafting, causing increased task significance. Based on these findings, external support given to social entrepreneurs has larger positive experienced effects when the

support is specific, and it thus appears to be advantageous for social entrepreneurs to seek environments with a focus that align with theirs.

### 7.3 Limitations and Future Research

As a result of the limited number of interviews included in this study, the results cannot be considered entirely transferable, something which limits the implications of the study. With the current empirics, the authors cannot ensure that the themes brought forward would also be the most recurring themes in a broader sample. With greater amounts of empirics, the transferability of the conclusions would have increased. However, the authors still claim that the findings are of interest and can provide a first insight into the effects sustainable incubators have on social entrepreneurs.

Moreover, the effects on performance of the social entrepreneurs, resulting from the incubation, has not been measured, other than through subjective assessments. Therefore, the study cannot ensure that the experienced increase in work engagement actually has improved the participants' performance. The reason why measurements have not been made is because of the fact that there is little research on the topic, and the foremost goal has been to investigate whether sustainable incubators affect work engagement at all.

Furthermore, the increase in work engagement has not been quantitatively measured. This fact weakens the conclusion that sustainable incubators contribute more to job resources than general incubators, as an effect of their superiority in creating helpful networks. Furthermore, the study cannot fully conclude that the narrow focus and the homogenous groups of sustainable incubators are what initiate job crafting, as this is a discussion made outside of the theoretical focus.

As the study has been conducted with a constructivist viewpoint, the authors' own perceptions and attitudes towards the subject may have affected the patterns found.

The study and empirics gathered, do provide results which can be researched further. A more comprehensive study could quantify the way the participants' performance has improved in order to find causality between the prerequisites found, work engagement and performance. A broader sample would create more transferability which could be of interest. Another interesting study would be to further investigate why job crafting takes place in sustainable incubators, examining if the homogenous context is a contributing reason for this. This could,

for example, be done using Social Identity Theory as a theoretical focus. As sustainability is an essential topic of our time, this kind of study would be truly valuable in order to create an understanding of how best to aid social entrepreneurs to succeed with their sustainability mission, thereby giving them and society the best possible tools to combat the global challenges of our time.

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## 9 Appendix

### 9.1 Appendix 1: Anonymized Presentation of Interviewees

<b>Entrepreneur, Code name</b>	<b>Company code</b>	<b>Incubator code</b>	<b>Type</b>
Anna	Company A	Incubator 1	Sustainable
Bobby	Company B	Incubator 1	Sustainable
Christopher	Company C	Incubator 1	Sustainable
Daniel	Company D	Incubator 2	Sustainable
Eric	Company E	Incubator 2	Sustainable
Felicia	Company F	Incubator 3	Sustainable
Greg	Company G	Incubator 3	Sustainable
Hanna	Company H	Incubator 4	Sustainable
Isabelle	Company I	Incubator 5	General
John	Company J	Incubator 5	General
Kevin	Company K	Incubator 6	General
Lucas & Liam	Company L	Incubator 7	General
Michael	Company M	Incubator 8	General
Noah	Company N	Incubator 8	General

## 9.2 Appendix 2: Description of Interview Settings

<b>Entrepreneur Code name</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Place</b>
Anna	04-03-2020	42:59	Telephone	--
Bobby	10-03-2020	58:02	Telephone	--
Christopher	28-02-2020	30:07	Physical	A café
Daniel	20-02-2020	42:51	Physical	Interviewee's office
Eric	01-04-2020	30:41	Telephone	--
Felicia	01-04-2020	39:15	Telephone	--
Greg	31-03-2020	56:10	Video	--
Hanna	03-04-2020	33:31	Telephone	--
Isabelle	14-03-2020	30:47	Physical	Interviewee's office
John	10-03-2020	31:27	Physical	Interviewee's office
Kevin	20-03-2020	42:09	Video	--
Lucas & Liam	20-03-2020	38:07	Telephone	--
Michael	17-03-2020	36:11	Video	--
Noah	20-03-2020	32:45	Video	--

### 9.3 Appendix 3: Email Sent to Participants

Hej XXX,

Hoppas allt är superbra med dig!

Vi är två studenter från Handelshögskolan i Stockholm som under våren skriver vår kandidatuppsats inom management, med fokus på sociala entreprenörer som är en del av ett inkubatorprogram.

Hållbarhet och socialt entreprenörskap blir allt viktigare och nya affärsmodeller kommer krävas för att vi ska kunna nå Agenda 2030. Därför tycker vi att det hade varit superspännande att få en tydligare bild av hur sociala entreprenörer i inkubatorer arbetar och hur sammanhanget dessa företag får av en inkubator hjälper dem i deras arbete. Vi hoppas studien kommer kunna bidra med insikter kring engagemang hos sociala entreprenörer som är del av ett inkubatorprogram.

Vi har förstått att FÖRETAGET är en del av INKUBATORNS inkubatorprogram och vi undrar därför om du har möjlighet att delta i en kort intervju och bidra till vår studie? Vi förstår att du har ett fullt schema, men vi är självklart flexibla och kan genomföra intervjun på en tid och plats som passar dig.

Konversationen kommer vara en möjlighet till reflektion och till fördjupad förståelse kring er process och kring vad som bidragit till er framgång. Om ni önskar delar vi också jättegärna med oss av slutprodukten samt förståelsen vi fått under resans gång.

Du och ditt företag får självklart vara anonyma om ni önskar.

Vi vore otroligt tacksamma om ni har möjlighet att bidra till studien och hjälpa oss bidra till fler insikter kring socialt entreprenörskap!

Har ni några som helst frågor så går det bra att kontakta oss via mail eller telefon!

Önskar dig en fortsatt fin dag!

Med vänliga hälsningar,

Ebba Hardenstedt Ståhl, 0730751050

Filippa Högling, 0737552185

## 9.4 Appendix 4: Interview Guide: Social Entrepreneurs in Sustainable Incubators

### Innan intervju:

1. Berätta om vår studie  
Detta är vår kandidatuppsats som vi skriver i Management på Handelshögskolan i Stockholm. Vi vill undersöka hur sociala entreprenörer påverkas av att vara med i en inkubator och intervjuar därför olika entreprenörer som är med i olika inkubatorer.
2. Berätta att det är frivilligt deltagande
3. Berätta att de när som helst får välja att inte svara på en fråga eller avsluta intervjun utan motivering
4. Berätta att det är anonymt och att de kommer få läsa igenom sina citat
5. Fråga om vi får tillåtelse att spela in för att kunna transkribera intervjun

### Inledning

- Berätta lite om företag XXX
- Hur kommer det sig att ni gick med i inkubator XXX?
  - Vad lockade er mest att gå med?
- Hur länge har ni varit med i inkubatorn?

### Job Resources

- Vad var dina förväntningar innan inkubatorprogrammet började?
  - Känner du att de förväntningarna uppfylldes? På vilket sätt?
- Hur tycker du att din tid på inkubatorn har varit?
- Upplevde du att inkubatorn hade ett tydligt fokus?
  - Hur har du påverkats av det fokuset?
- Upplever du att ni får/fått ut någonting positivt av att delta i inkubatorn?
  - Om ja, i så fall vad?
  - Om ja, vad tycker ni har varit mest värdefullt i ert utbyte med inkubatorn?
- Har du upplevt någon skillnad i sättet ni arbetar på nu om du jämför innan ni blev en del av inkubatorn?
- Upplever du att du eller dina anställda har en annan inställning till arbetet efter att ni blev en del av inkubatorn?
- Upplever du att du har fått ut något särskilt av att vara del av en inkubator som endast tar in sociala entreprenörer, som du inte hade fått i en vanlig inkubator?

### **Job Crafting**

- Vad är det som motiverar dig i ditt arbete?
  - Har inkubatorn hjälpt dig med detta på något sätt?
- Har sättet du arbetar på förändrats sedan ni gick med i inkubatorn?
- Har din inställning till ditt jobb förändrats sedan ni blev en del av inkubatorn?
  - Varför tror du det är så?
- Har du tagit initiativ till att förändra något i förhållandet till inkubatorn?

### **Job Demands**

- Har deltagandet i inkubatorn inneburit något som du inte hade räknat med/inte var beredd på?
  - Om ja, hur har du påverkats av det?
- Upplever du att deltagandet i inkubatorn har ställt några krav på dig?
  - Om ja, vilka?
- Finns det någonting som du önskar att du hade fått från inkubatorn som du inte har fått?
- Upplever du att ni får ut någonting negativt av att delta i inkubatorn?
  - Om ja, i så fall vad?
- Tror du något är extra svårt med att vara del av en inkubator som bara tar in sociala entreprenörer, jämför med en vanlig inkubator?

### **Avslutning**

- Om du själv fick bedöma, hur tycker du det har gått för företag XX sedan ni blev en del av inkubatorn?
- Vad skulle du säga är den största skillnaden sedan ni gick med?
- Hur tycker du det är att jobba med Företag X?

Har du något som du själv vill tillägga?

Om vi kommer på något som vi glömde fråga dig, är det okej om vi mailar dig och frågar?

## 9.5 Appendix 5: Interview Guide: Social Entrepreneurs in General Incubators

### Innan intervju:

1. Berätta om vår studie  
Detta är vår kandidatuppsats som vi skriver i Management på Handelshögskolan i Stockholm. Vi vill undersöka hur sociala entreprenörer påverkas av att vara med i en inkubator och intervjuar därför olika entreprenörer som är med i olika inkubatorer.
2. Berätta att det är frivilligt deltagande
3. Berätta att de när som helst får välja att inte svara på en fråga eller avsluta intervjun utan motivering
4. Berätta att det är anonymt och att de kommer få läsa igenom sina citat
5. Fråga om vi får tillåtelse att spela in för att kunna transkribera intervjun

### Inledning

- Berätta lite om företag AAA
- Hur kommer det sig att ni gick med i inkubator XXX?
  - Vad lockade er mest att gå med?
- Hur länge har ni varit med i inkubatorn?

### Job Resources

- Vad var dina förväntningar innan inkubatorprogrammet började?
  - Känner du att de förväntningarna uppfylldes?
- Hur tycker du att din tid på inkubatorn har varit?
- Upplevde du att inkubatorn hade ett tydligt fokus?
  - Hur har du påverkats av det fokuset?
- Upplever du att ni får ut någonting positivt av att delta i inkubatorn?
  - Om ja, i så fall vad?
  - Om ja, vad tycker ni har varit mest värdefullt i ert utbyte med inkubatorn?
- Har du upplevt någon skillnad i sättet ni arbetar på nu om du jämför innan ni blev en del av inkubatorn?
- Upplever du att du eller dina anställda har en annan inställning till arbetet efter att ni blev en del av inkubatorn?
- Upplever du att du får det stöd som du behöver av inkubatorn i de sociala aspekterna av ert arbete?

### **Job Crafting**

- Vad är det som motiverar dig i ditt arbete?
  - Har inkubatorn hjälpt dig med detta på något sätt?
- Har sättet du arbetar på förändrats sedan ni gick med i inkubatorn?
- Har din inställning till ditt jobb förändrats sedan ni blev en del av inkubatorn?
  - Varför tror du det är så?
- Har du tagit initiativ till att förändra något i förhållandet till inkubatorn?

### **Job Demands**

- Har deltagandet i inkubatorn inneburit något som du inte hade räknat med/inte var beredd på?
  - Om ja, hur har du påverkats av det?
- Upplever du att deltagandet i inkubatorn har ställt några krav på dig?
  - Om ja, vilka?
- Finns det någonting som du önskar att du hade fått från inkubatorn som du inte har fått?
- Upplever du att ni får ut någonting negativt av att delta i inkubatorn?
  - Om ja, i så fall vad?
- Har ni någon gång funderat på att söka er till en inkubator som endast tar in sociala entreprenörer?
- Tror du att du hade fått ut något av att istället vara en del av en inkubator som endast tar in sociala entreprenörer, som du inte fått ut av denna inkubatorn?

### **Avslutning**

- Om du själv fick bedöma, hur tycker du det har gått för företag XX sedan ni blev en del av inkubatorn?
- Vad skulle du säga är den största skillnaden sedan ni gick med?
- Hur tycker du det är att jobba med Företag X?

Har du något som du själv vill tillägga?

Om vi kommer på något som vi glömde fråga dig, är det okej om vi mailar dig och frågar?