WHO LEADS THE LEADER?

A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON MANAGERS' SUPPORT-SEEKING BEHAVIORS OUTSIDE OF THE ORGANIZATION

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Abstract

Modern leadership studies often focus on leading the followers. However, the leader does not always have the answer and thus has to seek support to handle difficulties. Research investigating where CEOs seek support, especially externally, has been scarce. Through a qualitative methodology with 14 interviews with Swedish CEOs, this thesis has studied how and why CEOs seek support outside the organization. The empirical data gave rise to Five External Sources of Support which included different networks, coaches, and individual initiatives to seek support that were used in different questions. For example, the CEOs used coaches in order to get support in managing relationships at the workplace and in taking on new roles or tasks. By analyzing the empirical data through a proactivity framework and identity perspective, it was found that a self-directed professional network and coaches are the most proactive. Also, CEOs' usage of supportive sources can stem from different human needs including friendship and belonging, prestige and mastery, or self-actualization and personal growth. Self-distance and identification can also affect support-seeking, where identifying with the CEO role could potentially lead to a willingness to independently excel and seek less support. The implications are individually and organizationally relevant as CEOs could adjust their support-seeking and proactively prepare for the challenges of today's dynamic corporate world, which would also be desired by organizations as it contributes to organizational success.

Keywords
Chief Executive Officer, Support-Seeking, External Network, Identity, Proactivity

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

As the subject of management is taught at universities around the world, a great focus is often on leading followers. But what happens when the leader does not have the answer? Where does the leader go? Where does he/she ask for help and support? There is no clear guide for handling uncertainties or difficult situations as a manager, and after all, no one knows it all. An aspect that has been covered extensively by management researchers is the relationship between leader and followers and how the leader should act in order to help the followers to reduce their uncertainty (Kramer 2007). Help-seeking behaviors among managers when they face uncertainties or difficult situations have however been poorly researched, but may be applied to all organizations, everything from large multinational corporations to smaller nonprofit organizations (Choudhury, Collins 2021).

The world around us is changing rapidly and managers and their organizations are facing an increasing amount of uncertainty. This places higher demands on CEOs in order to run their companies successfully. It becomes increasingly important for them to foresee and prepare for challenges, recognize opportunities and take adequate corresponding actions (Crant 2000a). In other words, it is thus essential for managers to actively prepare and act proactively to be able to maneuver the highly dynamic corporate landscape. However, different managers may differ in terms of how proactive they are when they seek support and help for the challenges they face. There are also many different factors that are important to consider that affect the managers' help- or support-seeking.

Researching the topic of help- and support-seeking, the aim was firstly to map the common external sources and behaviors CEOs use to lead without all the answers. Exploring this untouched area was initiated as an inductive process. Subsequently, frameworks were added on to discuss the empirical material in the light of for example proactivity and identity in order to find out how adequate the ways were in today's dynamic corporate world and what role the CEOs' unique identities played in their help- or support-seeking resulting in a rather abductive approach.

1.2 Aim and Research Question

The aim of this qualitative study is to fill the knowledge gap that exists and map out where and in what questions CEOs seek help and support outside the organization. The external focus is due to the acute knowledge gap that exists in this area as internal support seeking is a more researched subject. An interest also arose to analyze the usage of support sources and understand how and why these were used which was done in terms of proactivity and identity.

Our research question is, therefore:

How and why do CEOs seek support outside of the organization?

It is important to fill this research gap as this knowledge could be used by other CEOs in difficult or uncertain times. It is also important to find out how proactive the external support sources are as CEOs could then become more prepared for the challenges and demands of today's rapidly changing corporate world. Discussing the identity-building aspect of support-seeking might enlighten CEOs on their usage of the sources, and make them aware of their personal resistance to seeking support, which will lower the support-seeking barriers. In turn, this will make them more willing to work proactively with support outside of the organization.

1.3 Delimitations

The managers interviewed will be limited to CEOs since they do not have any leader above them in the organizational structure, which may make them more frequent urge for external support. A second delimitation includes that the study focuses on CEOs' external sources of support due to the interest in and shortage of research within this field. This excludes internal sources of support such as board members and other organizational members. Next, the research will be conducted in Sweden and the size of companies will be limited to 50 or more employees to make sure that the CEOs have experience from a larger organization. Many smaller business leaders and entrepreneurs tend to work fully on their own and totally with external sources (Brostrom 2011). In bigger multinational corporations, there is a lot of knowledge and resources in-house, which may lower the need for external support (Gupta, Govindarajan 2000). The goal of this research is to find the external sources used, while there still are internal sources filled with knowledge and competence.

Lastly, CEOs from different industries and sectors will be of interest and included in the study. Therefore, as you can see in Appendix 1, a list of the participants and their respective companies, we have not limited this research to one industry since we want to get a broad view of support-seeking. Limiting this research to only one industry would possibly result in more narrow and similar answers since there may be industry-specific networks and sources of help.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The CEO Position

The acronym CEO stands for *Chief Executive Officer* and is the company's highest-ranked executive and therefore the highest formal position in an organization. The CEO role often entails making strategic decisions and having responsibilities including managing the resources of the company (Glick 2011). Board members and shareholders are often the ones who select the CEO. Management experience is often of high importance to qualify for a CEO position. CEOs are thus oftentimes experienced managers with a lot of training in terms of leadership and management from other high-level roles in organizations (Hamori, Koyuncu 2015).

2.2 Definition of Help and Support

Due to help-seeking being a composition of help and seek, it can be defined as searching for assistance that provides remedy or relief. Help-seeking behaviors are thus linked to encountering problems or difficulties as without problems or difficulties there is no need for seeking help. An essential aspect of help-seeking is that it is interpersonal and thus involves several individuals, one that encounters the problem and searches for help and another one that provides the help or assistance (Lee 1997).

The support is described as assistance by giving acceptance, comfort, or encouragement. It is a more consistent form of assistance without a predefined goal. Support is most often not a solution to acute unmanageable situations and can occur continuously. This contrasts help which entails a specific problem in time and often requires an active intervention (Cambridge Dictionary 2022). Support is thus perceived as the broader definition of the two, henceforth, support-seeking will be covering both, see Table 1.

Table 1
Study definition of support

Word	Definition (in this study)
Support	Both help regarding a specific problem and the less specific support
Support-seeking	Both help-seeking regarding a specific problem and the less specific support-seeking

2.3 Support-Seeking and CEOs

Studies that cover the interpersonal aspect of support-seeking can contribute to the understanding of what support-seeking leads to in an organizational context. Firstly, the individual seeking support can learn from the skills and knowledge of the supporter and therefore develop new skills that proactively prepare the CEO for similar future problems or difficulties. Secondly, the act of support-seeking can build relationships, for example, networks where CEOs with different backgrounds start to engage in collaborations. Studies have also shown that support-seeking in an organizational setting can be linked to higher levels of learning, creativity, and performance (Lee 1997).

However, the act of support-seeking also entails certain social costs that can lead to abstaining from seeking support. By seeking assistance with a problem the support-seeker is acknowledging its lack of competence or skills to solve the problem which CEOs want to avoid as competence and skills are crucial factors to attain more power. Moreover, the fact that support-seeking includes bringing in another individual and their expertise, support-seeking will also decrease the independence of the support seeker. These two factors are hence important to have in mind as they can discourage, for instance, CEOs facing problems from seeking the support they actually are in need of due to fear of losing power (Lee 1997).

Previous research on the area of support-seeking among CEOs is scarce. However, there is some research from a closely related area, advice-seeking among CEOs. The research focuses heavily on internal advice seeking. To exemplify, internal advice sources are less objective and include other top managers, board members, and other organizational members. Their advice is also generally more appreciated by the CEO as they are more aware of the firm's unique circumstances. However, the external advisors provide the CEO with information that is more novel and less distorted than the information received from internal advisers. External advisors are also more used in decision-making as they have more versatile and current information. Internal and external advisors thus differ and can contribute with different types of information that might be more valuable to the CEO in different situations (Ma, Kor et al. 2020).

3. Theoretical Frameworks

3.1 Proactivity

3.1.1 Introduction to the Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used was based on studies on proactivity in order to investigate how proactive the support-seeking conducted was. The model that was used was Crant's proactivity model *An Integrative Model of the Antecedents and Consequences of Proactive Behaviors* (2000), see Figure 1. The originating article thus described antecedents to proactive behavior, proactive behaviors, and the outcomes of proactive behaviors. However, as the aim of the study was to analyze the proactivity in the support-seeking behaviors of the CEOs, the focus was on the proactive behaviors, and constructs and outcomes were left out.

Figure 1
Antecedents and Consequences of Proactive Behaviors (Crant 2000),
Edited by Linde & Zaletaeva (2022)
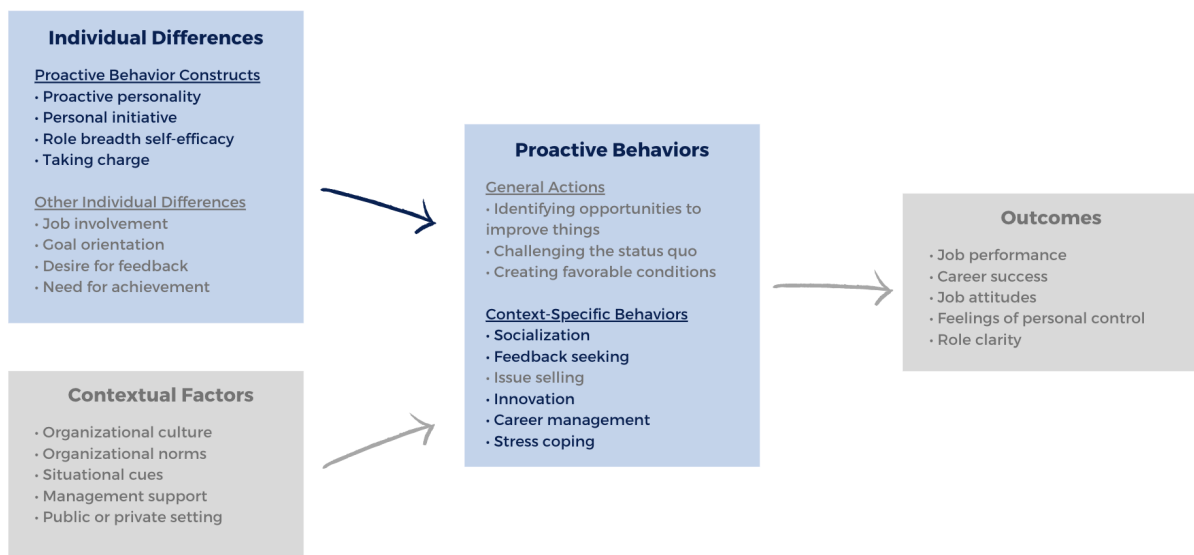
3.1.2 Defining Proactivity

Proactive behavior can be defined as driving improvements in the current circumstances or creating new ones (Crant 2000b). Proactive behaviors also include acting in anticipation of future problems (Grant, Ashford 2008). The opposite of proactive behaviors is reactive behaviors which include passively waiting for improvement opportunities to react on. Proactive individuals therefore continuously and actively work towards changes in their organizations whereas reactive individuals passively await environmental changes (Bateman, Crant 1999).

As the work environment has become more and more dynamic, proactivity has become a crucial trait for success in organizations. There are several reasons why it is important to be proactive as a CEO. It is considered to be crucial to achieving organizational growth. The external business environment has become increasingly dynamic over the years and is rapidly evolving fuelled by for example technological and societal changes (Brege 2018). Therefore, personal initiative and acting proactively to tackle the changing business environment have become increasingly important. Moreover, there are both organizational and personal outcomes that are linked to proactive behaviors. For example, increased job performance and improved career outcomes have been studied to be linked to proactive behaviors (Crant 2000).

3.1.3 Antecedents of Proactivity

To gain a full picture of proactivity, the model includes four different antecedents for proactivity. Proactive personality and personal initiative capture dispositional proactivity whereas role-based self-efficacy and taking charge capture situational proactivity (Crant 2000).

Proactive Personality

Proactive personalities can be seen in individuals who are actively changing and improving current conditions. Individuals who lack proactivity instead fail to find or take opportunities to change and instead passively adapt to the changing environment rather than actively changing the environment themselves (Crant 2000).

Personal Initiative

Personal initiative is a pattern of behaviors that includes taking an active role at work and performing self-induced tasks. Another important feature is that it aligns with the organizational goals, but it reaches beyond formal job requirements (Fay, Frese 2001).

Role Breadth Self-Efficacy

Role breadth self-efficacy is the perceived ability to perform an extended range of tasks that reach beyond technical requirements. It differs from proactive personality as it is more dynamic and changes when the environment changes in comparison to proactive personality which does not depend on the surrounding environments (Parker 1999).

Taking Charge

Taking charge occurs when an individual possesses the willingness to take power and change the current environment in the organization constructively. These changes aim to improve the execution of work in the organization. It can for example lead to replacing existing work processes in favor of more effective new ones (Morrison, Phelps 2009).

3.1.4 Proactive Behaviors

Socialization

Socialization is when new individuals learn to effectively become a part of the organization. This includes both new behaviors and attitudes. Proactive socialization can be conducted by the individual by formulating goals, tracking progress, and practicing new behaviors to facilitate the learning process (Fang, Duffy et al. 2011).

Proactive Feedback Seeking

Individuals proactively search for feedback when they encounter uncertainty. Individuals can seek feedback more proactively in two ways. They can either inquire for feedback by directly asking for it or infer it through environmental observations (Ashford, Cummings 1983).

Innovation

Innovation involves producing and implementing new ideas. This includes bringing in outside perspectives and contributing with new knowledge. The innovation process often begins with a detected problem, leading to an idea generation process and new concepts used by the organization (Kanter 1988).

Career Management

Proactive career behavior involves being responsible and taking an active part in the direction of one's career instead of passively adapting to career changes. It can include developing new skills that are attractive in the labor market and career planning. Proactive career behaviors become increasingly important in order to achieve successful careers (Crant 2000).

Coping With Stress

Proactive stress coping behaviors is when an individual act to prevent or reduce the impact of future stressors. They are linked to personal advantages including reduced stress levels. The stress coping behaviors are for example assessing future stressors, engaging in behaviors that reduce the stressor, and reflecting upon stressful episodes (Aspinwall, Taylor 1997).

3.2 Identity

3.2.1 Self-Distance

Self-distance is described as having a psychological distance from your egocentric perspective through events and emotions (Kross, Ayduk 2011). Self-distance was applied to the CEO role and was used to analyze a CEO's identification with their role and organizational position. Identifying with a work position does not directly indicate a low self-distance, but can bring work-related questions closer to one's self-center and affect support-seeking.

3.2.2 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

When the basic needs of *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs* are fulfilled, individuals will try to meet the social needs, which can be applied to support-seeking, consisting of love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization needs, see Figure 2. Love and belonging focus on a feeling of belonging and building relations. The following esteem needs include independence and achievement, as well as the need for prestige, social status, responsibility, and mastery (Mathes 1981). Furthermore, Maslow claimed that reaching an unhealthily high level of self-esteem that is based on undeserved respect can be harmful (Adair 2006).

Figure 2
Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Wikimedia commons, user:tigeralee 2015)

3.3 Theory Discussion

In the proactivity model, contextual factors were excluded as they majorly included characteristics of the organization and thus would have shifted the focus to the organization from the CEO. The outcomes were also excluded as the study focused on the support sources and behaviors rather than the results. The relevant sections were thus the proactive behavior constructs and the proactive behaviors as these were behaviors that could be encountered within the support-seeking behaviors. Within the individual differences, proactive behavior constructs were focused on rather than the other individual differences to focus on the behaviors rather than traits.

In addition, the chosen proactivity framework focused on proactive behaviors of individuals within an organization and exemplified by employees more frequently than managers. Therefore, although the model described general proactive behaviors, the model might not be fully applicable to CEOs as some parts of the model might fit employees rather than managers. *Issue selling* regarding affecting higher management's decisions is one example.

Lastly, in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, one could argue that a range of actions stems from a need for attention or status. In contrast, it is hard to know exactly what a person's real intention is. Therefore, one might analyze and discuss reasons behind using a source of support, but this can not be fully doubtless.

4. Methodology

4.1 Method of Research

4.1.1 Research Approach and Research Paradigm

The thesis was initially written using an *inductive and exploratory approach* due to the lack of management studies focusing on external support-seeking among CEOs. The approach was thus initially to investigate, without any requirements of existing data, to whom CEOs turn when they seek support and under which circumstances. The selected approach also meant that theoretical frameworks were chosen and applied after the interviews which induced a deeper discussion of the empirical material and resulted in a rather *abductive approach*.

The empirical data was analyzed in line with the *interpretivist paradigm*. The paradigm focuses primarily on recognizing and narrating the meaning of human experiences and actions which aligns with the aim of the study to investigate the social interaction of support seeking by CEOs (Alharahsheh, Pius 2019). In terms of ontology, the study adopted a *relativist ontology* indicating that reality is relative and dependent on each individual's set of experiences and beliefs, and understandings. In terms of epistemology, the paradigm took on a *subjectivist epistemology* which implies that researchers and participants influence each other and together they co-construct reality (Levers 2013).

Although positivist paradigms are often considered to provide better scientific proof than interpretivism. However, when analyzing human behavior, like in this study, interpretivism states that scientific methods are not appropriate as individuals will behave differently as they experience the same reality in different ways (Alharahsheh, Pius 2019).

4.1.2 Qualitative Study

The research design was qualitative to obtain a more extensive comprehension of the leaders' experiences and approaches to seeking support, which matched the investigatory characteristics of the research question. Qualitative research is also more appropriate than a quantitative method when investigating and explaining social relations, like support-seeking, as these are difficult to quantify or reduce into variables (Almeida, Faria et al. 2017).

4.2 Method of Data Collection

4.2.1 Participant Selection and Sampling

The study participants consisted of CEOs who met certain criteria, see Table 2. The criteria were chosen primarily to secure sufficient leader experience to be able to provide valuable input on the topic, but also to ensure a minimum company size to reach companies where there is a lot of knowledge and resources in-house, which may lower the need for external support (Gupta, Govindarajan 2000). The goal of this research was to find the external sources used, while there still were internal sources filled with knowledge and competence. For-profit corporations were a criterion as the strategic goals that the CEOs of value-driven companies have to pursue were believed to differ from the for-profit companies. The participating CEOs had an average of 10 years of CEO experience and their companies had an average of 2145 employees.

Table 2
Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Current CEO-position	CEO-position in non-profit corporation
Swedish company	
Minimum 1 year of CEO experience	
Minimum 50 employees in the company	

The names of the CEOs were found through Google Search by searching for "*company name*" together with "*CEO*". The company's official website or LinkedIn was used to ensure sufficient CEO experience. Individual email addresses were then guessed by adding the name of the CEO as well as the name of the company in an email address with the following structure: "firstname.lastname@companyname.se". Individual emails were then written to each CEO with a brief description of the study and why their participation was of interest. 105 emails to different CEOs were sent out, out of which 15 of the email addresses were guessed incorrectly and could not be delivered. Replies were received from 17 CEOs, where 14 CEOs approved participation and 3 declined participation, see Figure 3.

Figure 3
Flowchart over the study recruitment process (Linde, Zaletaeva 2022b)
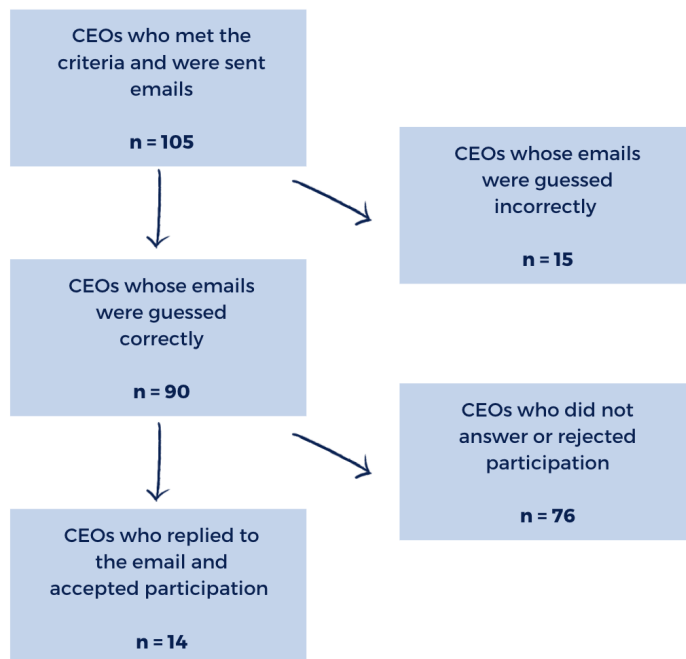
4.2.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Given the interpretive paradigm, the methodology aimed to collaboratively construct a meaningful reality by achieving an adequate dialogue between the researchers and the study participants. The data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews with the CEOs with a limited number of prepared interview questions, see Appendix 2, to allow for the participant to steer the interview to subjects and themes that the interviewee considers relevant that otherwise could have been missed with a script-based interview. Semi-structured interviews are also recommended in qualitative research and complex and sensitive subjects which support-seeking can be considered to be (Adams 2015). The interviews were conducted digitally through Microsoft Teams or Zoom video calls and notes were taken in a Word file.

The interviews were conducted in all of the participant's first language, Swedish, to reduce potential language barriers. Quotes were carefully translated to English, and portraits of the interviewees were approved by each participant.

4.2.3 Method of Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted in line with the *thematic analysis* where emerging themes were identified in the empirical material. Advantages of the thematic method include profound and unexpected observations. Moreover, as the study entailed working with several

different cases as empirical material, another advantage was that it helped one find contrasts and commonalities between the different interviews and thus process the material (Nowell, Norris et al. 2017). Primary data analysis of the empirical data was conducted after every interview. After each interview, a session followed where the authors discussed and summarized the main findings in text such as main sources of support and the type of issues the CEO sought support for. The authors also took out and commented on unique interview components.

The themes that the data were organized after were categories of support-seeking behaviors found in the replies from the interviews. These were found in the more extensive thematic analysis which was done after the majority of the interviews were conducted. Similarities and differences were discussed between the distinct sources of support-seeking that were identified in the primary analysis. The most similar support-seeking sources were then grouped together forming the *Five External Sources of Support*. Subsequently, each study participant was placed under several external sources of support as well as the participant's quotes matched with the external source of support. After interviewing the CEOs, looking at the empirics, and categorizing the sources of support, the theoretical framework was constructed. The interest in why they used these sources and how they worked with them grew with time.

4.3 Quality Considerations

4.3.1 Validity and Reliability

Due to the qualitative research design, the study only looked at a small sample of 14 different CEOs and companies which lowers the external validity and generalizability to other CEOs and companies. However, after a number of interviews, similar ways of support seeking reappeared which indicated saturation in terms of external support sources. Since the study aimed to map the usage of external sources of support, the study will not represent the whole landscape of CEOs and their support sources, but rather the usual methods used by the interviewees. The internal validity of the study, the extent to which the result represents the truth among the study population, was perceived as moderately high (Golafshani 2003). At first sight, there would be very few reasons for CEOs to lie or abstain from telling the truth. However, in a more critical perspective, these reasons do exist and include, for example, low self-awareness concerning support-seeking and trying to appear more independent than what is actually the case. The internal reliability was considered to be high as the two authors participated in all but two interviews and that interview findings were always discussed among the authors to obtain a consistent and deeper interpretation of the results. The external reliability was moderate since the research methodology has been described in detail which increases the replicability. Yet, the retest ability decreased as access to the same or similar CEOs might be limited, and the sources of support-seeking might change over time.

4.3.2 Ethical Considerations

Regarding GDPR, the guidelines from the Stockholm School of Economics were followed concerning collecting, storing, and removing data. Consent to participate in the study and that the collected material could be used was collected several times from each participant. The participants were also well-informed about the purpose and how the data would be handled after the interview. The participants could choose if they wanted their answers to be anonymous and all quotes were approved by the participants. No excessive sensitive data that was not required for the study were asked for and no private information was asked for in the interviews.

5. Empirical Material

5.1 CEOs' View on Support-Seeking

An ideal leader was described as one who valued all perspectives, let go of the prestige of being right, exposed imperfections, and asked for support. One CEO highlighted the importance of being humble: "*Everyone already knows that I am the CEO*". He explained that there is no need to make this clear by showing power or trying to prove a higher knowledge level in conversations with employees. Rather, being open to all perspectives and competencies will strengthen your ability to lead and make decisions. Another CEO highlights that your role as a CEO should not be what you identify yourself as. He thinks that you should be confident in yourself and that you primarily are an individual and not the role that you have gotten.

5.1.1 Asking For Help

The first interview question was "*do you find it easy to ask for help?*". The answer varied from a clear yes to an absolute no. Some said that "*yes I find it easy, my role builds on seeking help and support, you can not be the best in every area*", "*yes, I am quick on asking for help*" and "*It is a natural part of my role*". One mentioned that "*It is a lonely role, and help-seeking is an important part of it*".

While others expressed thoughts like: "*I think that most of the bosses have a hard time asking for help*", "*I think, how hard can it be? And just go on and try to fix the problem myself*" and "*I am paid a big amount of money to solve the problems, not to ask for help*".

5.2 Development of Support-Seeking

Consequently, in the view of an ideal leader, the more secure and mature the CEOs get in their role, the more they ask for help. The interviewees describe that "*there are many good young leaders, but often, time and experience make you more self-aware and make you realize that there are many positive outcomes of involving other thoughts in your decision-making.*"

The need for support-seeking has been lowered with time, but maturity in the role makes the CEOs more willing to seek support. However, One CEO described difficult situations as something that occurs less and less as he is gathering more and more experience passing through different sorts of crises. Thus, in this perspective, seeking external support occurs less and the CEO said "*here we go again*" to himself when a new crisis took place.

A second CEO described a dynamic between the two perspectives as "*it goes in some kind of curve. First, you are young and stupid and ask for too little help. Second, you realize that you know nothing and seek help. Finally, you start to become competent and can seek less help but in specific issues*".

5.2.1 The End of the Career

Some CEOs mentioned that "*my career is almost over by now*", and saw this role as their last position before pension. One of them mentions that a big part of how he works right now, and his goals, is affected by the thought that these years are his last ones in the company. He asks himself: "*How do I want this company to continue after me, and what is my plan going forward with the last years I have (at this company)*".

5.3 Five External Sources of Support

The common ways used by CEOs to get support externally have been assembled into the Five External Sources of Support. These were the External Professional Network, the External Personal Network, the One-Way Consulting, the Impersonal Information, and the Alone Time, see Figure 4.

Figure 4

Five External Sources of Support (Linde, Zaletaeva 2022a)
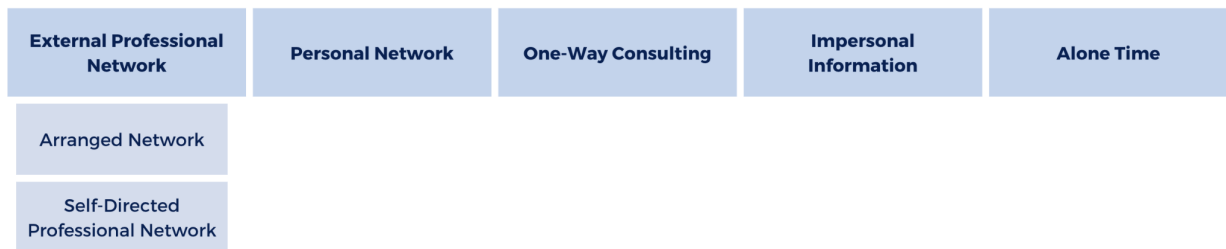
5.3.1 External Professional Network

Firstly, all CEOs described that they are using some type of External Professional Network. These were networks and connections that derived from their career and could be divided into Arranged and Self-Directed Networks. These included CEO networks, old colleagues, and contacts gathered through years of education and work.

5.3.1.1 Arranged Network

For some CEOs, support-seeking was done primarily through formalized networks. The value and companionship of these networks were described by one of the CEOs in the following quote: "*It's like a second family. You say things you do not say to the family. Similar to the mafia. It's a useful thing. You get help. Extremely valuable. The structure of the meetings is based on creating trust between members and you can bring up both private and professional issues. They tell things based on their own experiences so it is 100% equal between the members.*".

Portrait: Anders Kjällström, CEO Branäsgruppen

> A man that has been using an Arranged Professional Network for 15 years is Anders Kjällström, the CEO of Branäsgruppen. He explained the details of his engagement in an ERFA-network, where company leaders, both from big and small companies in different industries meet to exchange their experience and knowledge. "*Everyone has experience to share, no matter company size. Sometimes it can be even harder to work at a small company. A big company does not equal a harder job.*"

They met up over two days, three to four times per year, with a maximum of 8 people to keep it close, and discussed mainly one participant's case per meeting. "*You can not be too many (people) if you want to build trust*". On the first day, the case and questions regarding it were presented, and after that they had dinner. The day after, solutions and perspectives to the case were presented. Kjällström said that "*it is useful and self-disclosure. One must be honest in the process*". One of the reasons Kjällström had been active in this network for many years is that he thought that he could develop and get solutions to his problems by thinking about and solving other leaders' problems. "*It feels good to revel in someone else's case, and to see that, oh, they have the same problem as me.*"

Kjällström explained that he brought strategic professional problems to the network. Previously, Branäsgruppen had grown a lot in their organization, which made him experience problems with leading from a distance which he presented to the network. The other participants gave their views on the problem and Kjällström understood that he needed to improve the structure of the organization and his work, "*keep clear goals and benchmarks, keep myself and the others updated about what goes well and what does not*". Regarding the secrecy, he mentioned that he could not spill out everything about the company, but that he still felt safe in the network and that this was crucial for valuable exchange.

5.3.1.2 Self-Directed Professional Network

Many of the interviewees had been a part of an Arranged Network at the beginning of their career but expressed that they felt like it was more time-consuming than valuable and that they have found persons that could help them solve their problems in different and more suitable ways. Networks that were more informal and not part of a larger arranged organization were then used as a support function for the interviewed CEOs.

Portrait: Jesper Göransson, CEO PEAB

Jesper Göransson, the CEO of PEAB AB, described that one of his main sources of support was a small group of advisors that he had known for a long time who had pursued different careers within CEO positions or similar positions in other companies and political organizations. Göransson used this source mostly for help in practical questions that he felt like there was no room for bringing up internally. Although not being a part of an arranged network, they had created a formal way of meeting with scheduled monthly meetings with an aim to go directly into discussing the problems they wanted to raise.

This group of advice sharing started as a coincidence. Göransson mentioned that he had known the two others for a long time and had met them a couple of times in different settings. They had noticed that instead of regular mingling, they always went

straight to the problem and discussed solutions. This made them think that they could exchange valuable perspectives and saw that there were reasons for them to formalize this.

Another CEO had built up a support network which he used in a more informal context with private lunches several days during the week. These were often CEOs or managers of companies that faced similar situations like his own company and consisted of both new acquaintances and older contacts.

A third CEO described the importance of building a network and always building relations and connecting to the people that seem to be interesting. "*I do not like to mingle at all, but if there is someone that I perceive as interesting, I will always contact them and ask to take a coffee.*" This is described as a way of creating a big self-directed network and widening possibilities for the CEO's career.

Portrait: Anna Bäck, CEO Kivra

> Anna Bäck, the CEO of Kivra, also told us about her Self-Directed Professional network. She said that she had built her own network and created contacts, and did not feel like she needed an arranged network to structure it for her. Her professional network consisted of old contacts from her university and MBA-time whom she met every other month. Also, Bäck expanded her network with interesting people in the same industry, old colleagues for example. Moreover, Bäck told us about her support-seeking by contacting new individuals when there was a need for specialist' help. She told a story about how she expanded her self-selected network in 2019 when she needed help regarding PSD2 regulation. "*I attended a dinner and succeeded to find the only lawyer that worked solely with payments.*" The solution to this need for help was a specialist, so she went out and found one. In other questions that were more related to soft values, such as culture, Bäck could turn to people she knew who had interesting perspectives, preferably some of her closer relations. This support-seeking was not as specific toward a single issue, and could therefore not only be answered by a specialist.

> Lastly, Bäck mentioned a small but important distinction between work and private life that you have to do when contacting someone that is a part of your self-directed network: "*When it comes to asking someone out for a lunch, I am clear with what I want to learn more about and hear their opinion about, so they know that this is business and work-related*".

5.3.2 Personal Network

Some CEOs made a clear distinction between work and private life, and their personal selves and roles. They felt like being around friends and family was a place to recharge and let go of their work. One CEO described her stance as "*you have to separate work and private (life) to gain strength in your friends and family*". However, some liked to mix these and felt like they gained more by not making such a sharp line between these but still said that "*it is important to have a good judgment regarding what is confidential and what is okay to speak about while using connections from a network*".

Portrait: Malin Parkler, CEO Pfizer

> Asked to explain how she separated private life and work life, Malin Parkler, the CEO of Pfizer said that "*I am who I am*". She explained that it did not matter which time of the day it was, she was still Malin. The person she was consisted of both Malin as a CEO and Malin as a private person. She would always be willing to speak about non-confidential work-related subjects and felt like personal networks could be a great source of support and new perspectives. "*There are interesting people to learn from everywhere, not just in a work context.*" She did not mind elaborating on these subjects over dinner with her friends. Here she discussed strategic questions like "*how is the best way to move forward from this?*", and "*how do you work with innovation?*". Some friends might be in totally different roles and industries, nevertheless, there can always be some type of help that can be exchanged. Although, Parkler highlighted that similarities in workplaces or roles could contribute to an even more rewarding conversation and exchange.
>
> Parkler added that "*women should discuss more work and career in their time spent together, there is so much competence and experience which goes in vain*". She also mentioned that friends could give a lot of work-related support, not just emotional support.

Moreover, family members could play an important part in supporting the CEO role. One CEO says that "*my daughter is one of my main sources of inspiration*" when he described the external support when following trends and getting feedback from the younger generation. "*When I see how she resonates regarding money, economy, investments, what she thinks about the company - it is super interesting to listen to her and her friends' view on this type of questions*", "*this is a source for knowledge and information*". When we asked another CEO about his external sources for support, he answered: "*My wife, she is much smarter and better than me*", and highlighted his wife's broad perspective since she worked in another industry.

5.3.3 One-Way Consulting

This source of support was in contrast to the others mentioned above not an exchange of support, but rather a one-way communication. This source included the support and feedback gotten from work-related mentors, psychologists, and pastors. These relationships could either be initiated by the organization or the CEOs themselves and can change the CEO's way of leading or act as emotional support. Because of professional secrecy, the external person could rarely be fully involved in the particular cases, but still gave support in other ways.

Portrait: Ulrika Wallberg, CEO Estrella

> Ulrika Wallberg, CEO of Estrella, was involved in mentorship programs both as a mentee and as a mentor. She also described that she had received support from different coaches, both individual coaching and for her team. A situation where she found coaching very important was when taking on a new role or doing something new. To achieve this, she and her coach formulated goals and action plans with different time horizons based on the book "*The First 100 Days*" which followed up the next meeting. The coaching areas were often considered to be very personal and mostly related to personal leadership and building relationships at the workplace. Specifically, questions, where she received coaching, were how to get the new team on her side and how to find a mentally sustainable way to do her job. Regarding the question concerning the team, goals that were formulated had been having a team-building exercise within a certain period or identifying who the important stakeholders were. In terms of working sustainably, she mentioned that they also discussed components of private life such as family and friends and "*made sure they were in place to have the energy to do your job and to make work something fun and sustainable instead of just a duty*". Ulrika summarized the benefits of having a coach as: "*Time for reflection is really what it gives you. Someone who makes sure that you do not just continue running, that you stop occasionally and take a moment to reflect on the holistic priorities for you and your team*".

5.3.4 Impersonal Information

Next, another source of support used by the CEOs was through different types of online media sources. One CEO emphasized the fact that a lot of answers to difficult questions or uncertainties could be found without asking another person, but rather by using information sources online. "*There is so much knowledge that can be found nearby. A lot of the answers can be found by yourself.*"

Portrait: Anonymous CEO

>*"I often tend to try to find help and support on my own, and there is so much information and inspiration only a few clicks away all the time"* says one CEO. *"I have not thought about it before, but I get a lot of inspiration from leadership accounts on YouTube"*, *"there are new, fresh perspectives regarding leadership and my field that I can get from YouTube"*.

>He explained that impersonal information could touch upon so many relevant subjects, *"something that I see as important regarding leadership can be everything from questions that touch upon psychology and philosophy to business history. As well as pure leadership techniques"*. *"For me personally, I would say that I find a lot of inspiration (online), I always sit in the car 25 minutes to work and 25 minutes from work, then I listen to different podcasts and YouTube about personal development or leadership"*

5.3.5 Alone Time

Lastly, after getting input from external sources, some of the CEOs felt a need to reflect on these. To be able to perform at a high level, decisions had to be thought through rather than hasty decisions. This resulted in Alone Time. Alone Time might not be an example of an external source. However, it was considered a source of support from the CEO itself excluding internal organizational members. It was also regularly mentioned as an alternative way of dealing with difficulties compared to other external sources.

Portrait: Rikard Josefsson, CEO Avanza Bank

>Rikard Josefsson, the CEO of Avanza Bank, said that *"my dog is probably tired of hearing all of my work-related thoughts"* since he did a lot of reflecting during alone walks with his dog. *"Right now we are working with a reorganization and people ask me if I am going to take in external help, no I am not going to do that, but I usually say, with a sense of humor, that I will take a really long walk with my dog"*, *"then that's my little therapist for me to sort my thoughts and end up with good solutions"*.

>While reflecting on the beginning of his career, he said that *"when I was younger I was hurrying things and decisions, like, I need to get this done by Friday"*. Now he wanted to take his time and marinate the question. *"Take a walk, go for a run, think, reflect and sort out my thoughts."* Josefsson said that *"you become your own coach the more experience you get"*. *"It might sound boring, but nothing that is happening has not happened before."* Obstacles like firing someone, or when people quit, could be hard but it was nothing that has not happened before. He emphasized that you build your own experience bank that you can use as guidance in future decisions and situations.

6. Analysis

6.1 Proactivity

The empirics showed that the CEOs used different sources of support in different ways. Some were used more reactively to solve a specific situation and others were used more proactively to gain knowledge to solve future problems. However, to determine how proactive the support sources were, an in-depth analysis of each source was conducted.

6.1.1 External Sources of Support-Seeking

Support Networks

The network support sources, namely the External Professional Network, Self-Directed Professional Network, and the Personal Network, all have some proactive qualities in common. Firstly, they all align with *proactive feedback-seeking* since they often entail discussing solutions and sharing views on the other's solutions (Ashford, Cummings 1983). The Arranged Networks spend an extensive amount of time presenting problems and receiving input and feedback from others. The Self-Directed Professional Networks discuss working-related problems and the Private Networks discuss strategic questions with friends and provide input on different strategic directions.

In terms of *innovation*, the Private Networks can contribute with the newest perspectives compared to the Arranged and Self-Directed Professional networks. Friends working in totally different roles and family members can provide more external and divergent perspectives, for example from another generation, than other CEOs or similar as in the Arranged and Self-Directed Professional Networks. Seeking support from the three network sources also shows *personal initiative* as they go beyond formal job requirements and are self-induced (Fay, Frese 2001). However, the initiative to take part in the Arranged Network with very time-consuming meetings and new acquaintances can be considered to be greater than seeking support from family members or old colleagues. In contrast, in terms of organizing, one can argue that the Arranged Network, once joined, demands less personal initiative as organizing is done by an organization.

Some networks are also more effective in terms of *coping with stress*. To some extent, receiving support itself, from any of the sources, can relieve stressors. The Arranged Network allows the participants to receive support that relieves any current stressor, both private and work-related, and gives a good feeling when they can identify with other CEOs' problems. In contrast, the Personal Network which mixes private and professional worlds can increase stress as friends and family are no longer a way to disconnect from thoughts of work. There are also some proactive qualities that only one of the networks showed. For instance,

Self-Directed Professional Networks include seeking specialist knowledge rather than for example leadership skills and thus include tasks beyond technical requirements aligning with *role breadth self-efficacy*. The act of seeking specialist knowledge is however conducted when such a need arises which can be seen as reactive rather than proactive. In addition, the active network building of Self-Directed Networks is a proactive *career behavior* as these networks can entail future career opportunities (Crant 2000). Arranged Networks have, in contrast, only contact during meetings potentially leading to less private network building and career opportunities.

One-Way Consulting, Impersonal Information & Alone Time

One-Way Consulting and Impersonal Information share some features. They are both used to improve leadership and personal development which make them *proactive career behaviors*. However, One-Way Consulting can be considered a more proactive career behavior with more effective learning because it allows for follow-ups and more personalized learning. In addition, it also requires more *personal initiative* due to its active participation increasing its proactivity, compared to Impersonal Information which is conducted more passively by listening or watching.

However, Impersonal Information can be seen as more *innovative* compared to One-Way Consulting as external perspectives from people all over the world can be accessed. One-Way Consulting includes very few new contacts and aims to discuss how the CEO could improve rather than obtaining new perspectives or ideas leading to a lower degree of innovation. One-Way Consulting is extra important when the CEOs are new in the role or are doing something new compared to other support sources which can also be seen as a way to conduct *socialization*. In terms of *proactive feedback-seeking*, that is something that Impersonal Information will not be able to provide as it is conducted without the interference of other people, whereas One-Way Consulting can still entail feedback from the mentor on the specific learning objects discussed when following up on goals although a great focus is on self-reflection. One-Way Consulting can also be linked to the proactive behavior of *coping with stress* as aspects of private life are prioritized by together finding a reasonable workload.

When analyzing the source Alone Time, it can at first be seen as passive rather than active and thus have little to do with proactivity. Alone Time does not create environmental change actively which defines proactivity. However, by looking deeper into the support-seeking type, Alone Time can be linked to several of the antecedents and proactive behaviors. First of all, this can be seen as a way to *reduce stressors* as thoughts are sorted out and decisions are allowed to take time instead of making fast and stressful decisions. Another aspect of independent decision-making can be linked to another antecedent of proactivity, *taking charge*. Therefore, alone time still shows a few features of proactivity. However, alone time might not at all align with other proactive behaviors or antecedents. No other perspectives but

the CEO's own are considered when making decisions which contrast *feedback-seeking* and *innovation* where other people's input and new perspectives are asked for.

Sub-conclusion

To summarize, the different sources show different sets of proactive antecedents and behaviors, see Figure 5. One could argue that Alone Time is the least proactive support source as it includes the least proactive behaviors or antecedents meanwhile there are no opportunities to receive feedback or be innovative. Self-Directed Networks or One-way Consulting can be considered the most proactive sources of support where the highest number of proactive behaviors or antecedents can be found, namely *feedback-seeking*, *personal initiative*, *stress coping*, *role breadth efficacy*, and *career management* for Self-Directed Networks. Yet, this does not mean that the two are always the optimal way for all CEOs to pursue. For instance, empirics suggest that some support sources may be of higher relevance under certain circumstances. For instance, for new CEOs, One-way Consulting can be the most beneficial due to its proactive *socialization* whereas for more experienced CEOs Alone Time can still be advantageous as they could gather their knowledge and *take charge* which lets them make decisions effectively and work towards change.

Figure 5
Proactive usage of external support (Linde, Zaletaeva 2022c)

External Professional Network	Personal Network	One-Way Consulting	Impersonal Information	Alone Time
Arranged Network	· feedback-seeking · innovation · personal initiative	· career management · personal initiative · socialization · feedback-seeking · stress comping	· career management · innovation	· stress coping · taking charge
· feedback-seeking · personal initiative · stress coping				
Self-Directed Professional Network				
· feedback-seeking · personal initiative · stress coping · role breadth self-efficacy · career management				

6.1.2 Development of Proactivity

As support-seeking change with time, the proactivity of the CEOs also changes throughout their careers. Gathering experience and seeking an extensive amount of support at the beginning of a career can be seen as a way of being proactive. However, as the empirics suggest, for experienced CEOs who already encountered a range of different difficulties, certain proactive behaviors or antecedents might become increasingly important such as Taking Charge rather than e.g. Feedback-seeking to effectively drive improvements (Crant 2000).

Furthermore, counting in the last years of one's career changes the content and aim of proactivity. At first, proactivity consists of excelling in the role and gaining experience to be prepared when problems arise. In contrast, at the end of the career, proactivity shifts towards preparing to hand over the role with dignity and leave the best future possible for an organization.

6.2 Identity

Social needs

By analyzing the social needs of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, reasons behind CEOs' choices of seeking support can be found. In terms of love and belonging, relationship building of different intensities is expressed in the networking support sources. It plays an extra important role within the private networks where CEOs seek support from their families but also for staying friends with old colleagues and study mates and the ability to use them for support. The self-esteem needs can however play a greater role in overall support-seeking. Some used support seeking as a natural part of their role whereas others rarely used it and believed the tasks would be manageable anyway. An ideal manager will not be insecure and totally dependent on asking others, nor totally independent that others' opinions do not matter. Thus, there needs to be a healthy level of self-esteem for balanced support-seeking (Adair 2006). CEOs also can be affected by prestige in their choices of support sources when they turn to people with powerful roles or want to join prestigious networks. For instance, the empirics show that other CEOs or people with other high positions are common sources of support. However, turning to people with high positions can be due to wanting to access their knowledge as they often have a lot of management experience which aligns with mastery rather than prestige. The urge for prestige can also affect the CEOs' support-seeking negatively since they can feel like they should are independently responsible for the problems and do not want to appear incompetent. Support-seeking can also be a forum for the self-actualization need, since realizing personal potential and seeking personal growth can be implemented in various ways. For instance, CEOs using a mentor or coach have an interest in growing as individuals and feeling that they improve.

Self-distance and identification

Some CEOs described clearly that they did not identify themselves as their role while others fully identified with their role. These CEOs see the role as a part of themselves, that they can always express. Identifying more or less with their role can affect them in their support-seeking. Identifying with a role might lead to work-related subjects closer to one's inner self and less openness to show uncertainty and a bigger urge to independently excel. Not identifying with a role might create a greater self-distance, and therefore more openness to show imperfections and ask for help (Adair 2006). On the other hand, identifying with the CEO role can make the individual express the role more often and therefore result in increased networking which can be used for support-seeking. Many of the CEOs have been coaches and mentors themselves. This makes them ask other people questions that they also might have reflected on themselves. This is a great way for them to think over their own way of working while feeling important to someone else (Adair 2006). Being a mentor can also affect CEOs in another way when the mentor role is another hierarchically higher position for them to intake, they are the ones who know best and can enrich others with their knowledge. Here, self-distance is important to be able to learn from the mentorship and not reach an unhealthily high level of self-esteem.

7. Discussion

7.1 Answer to Research Question

The research question this thesis have aimed to answer is:

How and why do CEOs work with external sources of support?

This study has explored the area of CEOs' external help and support-seeking. The sources of support have been mapped to be the External Professional Networks, the Personal Network, the One-Way Consulting, the Impersonal Information, and the Alone Time. The different support sources were used in different questions. For instance, Arranged Networks was used to seek support in strategic questions in extensive case formats with other managers, Self-Directed Networks to attain specialist knowledge, and Personal Networks to gain new perspectives from other generations or individuals within other industries. Moreover, One-Way Consulting was used in relational questions and personal leadership and Impersonal information provided the CEO with leadership inspiration. Lastly, Alone Time let the CEO support itself in problem-solving due to self-reflection. Further, the usage of these sources has been analyzed through a *Proactivity Framework*, *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs,* and from an *identity perspective* relating to self-distance.

These ways of seeking support are differently proactive in different ways. For example, one of the most proactive sources to seek support from was the Self-Directed Professional Networks which show several proactive features such as proactive *feedback-seeking*, *career management*, *role breadth self-efficacy*, and *personal initiative*. Other support sources also have proactive qualities e.g. *coping with stress*, *innovation*, or *taking charge*. Also, CEOs' usage of supportive sources can stem from different human needs including friendship and belonging, prestige and mastery, or self-actualization and personal growth. Self-distance and identification can also affect support-seeking, where identifying with the CEO role can lead to a willingness to independently excel and seek less support.

7.2 Contributions and Implications

Contributions

This study has applied the Proactive Framework to CEOs rather than organisational members and has contributed to a new applicable group. This study reveals a tendency among CEOs to change their way of working proactively at the end of their career. The same goes for Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, this theory has not been used in the context of CEOs' external support sources.

Mainly, this study has mapped five common external sources of support and described the usage of these which has minimized the research gap of CEOs' external support seeking, with understanding of possible support-seeking sources outside of the organization as well as the behavior connected to them, including in what questions they turn to the various sources and how they are using them. The findings indicate that CEOs seek help in majorly five different ways which are differently proactive.

Implications

As the business environment has become increasingly dynamic over the past years, proactive organizational behaviors are important to conduct in order to improve, for instance, job performance (Brege 2018). Therefore, if the CEOs become aware of their support seeking and choose the most proactive ways to seek support, they can become better prepared and run their companies with success. For example, this could include exchanging an alone reflection to solve problems with a more feedback-seeking approach such as an external professional network. However, it would still be important to take individual experiences and knowledge into account and be aware that not all CEOs' working situations and problems could effectively be helped with the sources of support that were found in this study. For example, many of the senior CEOs mentioned that they had no use of formalized external networks as they had already built up their own professional networks with the right expertise. Also, this research can enlighten CEOs about their personal resistance to seek support, which will lower their support-seeking barriers and make them more willing to work proactively with support outside of the organization.

7.4 Discussion of Limitations

Firstly, a limitation to consider is professional secrecy. The study participants might not have been able to leave out all information due to professional secrecy. A second limitation includes the company structures where some of the companies were Swedish subsidiaries of multinational companies that could provide support or might have more in-house support and thus require less external support. A third limitation includes a possible discrepancy between espoused and enacted behaviors in terms of support seeking. This limitation could have been reduced by interviewing their networks, but it was not done due to a shortage of time.

Another limitation, concerning the method, includes the length of the interviews which were about 30 minutes which could be considered short in order to collect qualitative material. In addition, 14 interviews were conducted which could be more. However, as mentioned, similar ways of support seeking reappeared which could have indicated saturation in terms of external support sources.

7.4 Future Research

Future research can look into detail how CEOs work with one of the external sources of support. The professional self-directed network is an interesting area not researched enough. How do leaders build relationships? Is there a need to connect on personal grounds to be able to exchange work-related help?

Moreover, future research could analyze managers also working as mentors and how that affects their role. Another idea for future research could elaborate on the identity of the CEOs. Our interviewees' thoughts on separating work and private life varied. Some saw work as a lifestyle, while some wanted to distinguish these two. The CEOs who identify with their role could allegedly achieve better results (MEED 2021). Is this really the case and what could this originate from?

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Appendices

1. Conducted Interviews

1. Anonymous CEO
2. Anders Kjällström - CEO Branäsgruppen
3. Anna Bäck - CEO Kivra
4. David von Laskowski - CEO Picadeli and Greenfood
5. Henrik Eklund - CEO Ikano Bank
6. Jesper Göransson - CEO PEAB
7. Malin Parkler - CEO Pfizer Sverige
8. Rikard Josefson - CEO Avanza Bank
9. Simone Margulies - CEO Hemköp & Tempo
10. Sven Eggefalk - CEO Länsförsäkringar Bank
11. Susanne Andersson - CEO Visit Sweden
12. Sören Schelander - CEO Sörmlands Sparbank
13. Thomas Evertsson - CEO Willys
14. Ulrika Wallberg - CEO Estrella AB

2. Interview Questions for the Semi-structured Interviews

General questions about the CEO position

How long have you had your position at X?
What did your career look like before X?
Do you have previous experience in the industry?

Help/support-seeking related questions

Do you find it is easy to ask for help and support and why do you think that is the case?
What makes you seek help and not try to resolve the situation on your own?
How often in your professional role as a CEO do you feel that you need to seek help to cope with your challenges/tasks?
Has the number of times you have sought help or support increased or decreased over the years, and if so why?
To whom or where do you seek support/help in difficult situations linked to your work and why?
Could you explain what type of questions or problems you normally seek help for?
If you do not turn to others in the company, where do you turn and why?
Could you explain how the sources where you seek help changed over the years?
If you want to ball career questions with someone, where do you turn?
How did you start using these external resources?
Are you or have you been a part of an arranged network?
Have you ever used a coach in your CEO role and how was your experience regarding that?
Can you explain a difficult situation you encountered during your time as CEO of X where you sought help/support?
What was it that distinguished this and made it a tough situation for you?

Anonymity questions

Do you want your answers to be anonymous?
Do you approve of having your name in an appendix or similar?