Commercial Sustainability Partnerships for B2B Customers – Case Company X

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Abstract

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Sustainability, commercialization, and partnerships are at the core of this thesis. They are explored through a case study for company X. The research approach was chosen as case study as the aim was to have an in-depth understanding of a narrow real-life situation.

Company X operates in the Nordic. Through its essential position in society, the organisation is expected to make a positive societal impact and advance sustainable development. The organisation has a commercial partnerships team tasked with taking sustainability development forward through commercial partnerships serving consumer or business customers. The team approach the task with an assumption that sustainability can be commercialized through partnerships.

Main objective for this study was to understand the current situation in case company X regarding commercial sustainability partnerships for B2B customers. In addition to understanding the current situation, the study aimed at identifying the potential challenges, their root causes and generating ideas to overcome those challenges.

Research methodology consist of qualitative methods. First a document analysis was performed by gathering several formal and informal documents from different stakeholders. The analysis provided a good overview of issues that were recognized as a challenge or had potential to be a challenge for partnerships. The author then proceeded to facilitate a workshop using collaborative problem-solving methods for experts and consultants to work on identifying root causes for challenges and generate the ideas to overcome those challenge. The workshop used brainstorming, cause-and-effect diagram, also known as the Ishikawa or the fishbone diagram. To go deeper into identifying the root causes, the Five Whys Technique were also introduced. Finally, in the attempt to solve the challenges, the Six Thinking Hats method was practiced ensuring all perspectives were included in idea generation.

Literature review consists of partnerships and sustainability theories. Partnerships were introduced in general and then explored the different ways to define a partnership. Advantages, different types of partnerships and finally forming a partnership followed. Sustainability theory framework started with general introduction of the theme, followed by sustainability partnerships and finally commercialization of sustainability through partnerships was explored.

As an outcome of this thesis, the case company X received an analysis of current situation and an initial roadmap for future development.

Keywords
Partnerships, Commercial, Sustainability, B2B

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1 Introduction

This thesis is about commercial sustainability partnerships for B2B customers in company X, more specifically about the challenges the case company X might have faced while attempting to form those partnerships and how to overcome them. This project started both as part of a larger initiative in the case company and as the author's own interest and professional development idea; harnessing information through analysing documents and applying theory to develop the situation by practicing different collaborative methods as tools.

This report begins with an overview of research objectives and the author's personal objectives. Next, the report introduces some background information of the case company and the starting point for the project. This chapter also includes a short introduction of the author's professional background. Next sub-chapter explains the research problem and questions, followed by the scope of project. Finally, expected outcomes are discussed in the chapter.

Chapters three and four focus on the theoretical framework that is built around literature about partnerships and sustainability. Chapter three includes definitions of partnerships, different types of partnerships and the process of forming a partnership. In the fourth chapter, partnerships are viewed from the sustainability point of view. A general definition of sustainability is presented, followed by a closer look on sustainability partnerships and commercializing sustainability through partnerships.

Research approach and methodology are described in the chapter 5, which also presents how the study was conducted in practice. Information in this chapter consists of the following topics: case study research, document analysis and collaborative methods. The used collaborative methods in the research are brainstorming, cause-effect diagram and Six Thinking Hats. The successful use of these tools depended upon well-planned facilitation; thus, facilitation is also introduced among used methods.

The final chapters of the report, chapters six and seven, are composed of study outcomes and conclusions. Chapter six presents the way the study was conducted, how the author used the theory framework to implement the study plans, and finally the general outcomes from the document analysis and the practice of collaborative methods. As the project was done for a specific company and study results contain confidential information, research findings will only be addressed on a general level, as are any information related to the company or findings in any other part of the report. A short evaluation of the study reliability and validity is also included in the chapter 6. As the research scope is to evaluate the starting point using document analysis method, identify the challenges and brainstorm ideas for development, the work does not include in-depth evaluation of those ideas nor any implementation plans. Report does, however, include a short ending note from the author as to what further research could be done within the organisation.

Chapter seven includes argumentations how the study met the research questions and objectives. Thoughts on how the study impacted the personal competences of the author was also added, as well as reflections on how the thesis process proceeded and what kind of further research should be carried out to further the theme of commercial sustainability partnerships for b2b customers. The report ends with closing words from the author.

2 Objectives

The purpose of this project is to take a closer look at case company X's commercial sustainability partnerships for B2B customers and the issues that may have hindered a successful forming of such partnerships. The main objective is to identify the challenges involved and generate ideas for overcoming those obstacles. The project is meant to have an immediate influence on the future performance of case company X in identifying, forming, and managing those partnerships that fit the scope of this project.

A personal learning objective for the author was to gather theory to both complement practical information, but to also develop professional expertise. In addition, the author has previous experience in commercial activities as well as industry understanding and partnerships management. However, sustainability is a relatively new area for the author. Learning the basics of sustainability, sustainability partnerships, and how sustainability can be commercialized, was another personal objective for the author.

2.1 Background information and the starting point for the study

The case company operates in the financial sector and has a presence in 8 countries, however, focuses on the Nordic market. The company has over 20 000 employees and over three million personal and business customers in all markets combined. Financial industry is very regulated by law and activities are monitored by supervising authority. Financial industry is very relevant in societies and operators have an essential role in e.g., leading a change towards a more sustainable society. This means that case company X has limited abilities in applying creative solutions such as partnerships.

The commercial partnerships of case company X are managed by a small team of partnership managers and consultants located in 4 different countries. The team works internationally using interactive tools such as Microsoft Teams to interact. The managers and consultants come from different backgrounds and experiences, forming a pool of diverse expertise. Some are experienced in relationship management, some have more knowledge of digital and data capabilities, while others have never worked in financing sector prior to this but have amassed a vast understanding of partnerships.

The author has almost 15 years of experience in working in the financing sector and has built a career in relationship management and business banking, most recent experience in working with commercial partnerships. With an insight into commercial partnerships and business customers segment, coupled with the rising awareness and demand for sustainable choices, the author had a personal interest in working with commercial sustainability partnerships to create value for business customers. At the time of beginning the project, the situation was that case company X had a larger initiative for development. The author was tasked with one area from the initiative and while working on it, the author identified a need for understanding and developing commercial sustainability partnerships for B2B customers. Therefore, it was decided to make necessary evaluations on the subject, which then presented the author the opportunity to make this her thesis study.

2.2 Research problem and aim of the research

The research problem in this study is the challenges the case company X is facing in forming and managing commercial sustainability partnerships for B2B customers. The study is built around the following assumptions:

1. Sustainability can be commercialized through partnerships.
2. Sustainability partnerships can be formed to offer commercial value for B2B customers.

With these assumptions giving the framework, the research questions are:

1. How can case company X commercialize sustainability in the form of a partnership for B2B customers?
2. What challenges are involved in commercial sustainability partnerships for B2B customers in the case of company X?
3. How can case company X overcome the challenges preventing the forming of commercial B2B partnership within the sustainability area?

2.3 Research scope

A characteristic for a developing research project, is that the initial object of development can be remarkably large and comprehend different areas of expertise and theories. For the project to be manageable, a clear scope of the project is needed. Once the objectives are set, the researcher must scope the research perspective and determined what the purpose of the project is. (Ojasalo, Moilanen & Ritalahti 2015, 26–33.)

The scope of this study was to cover the current situation of case company X’s development of commercial sustainability partnerships for B2B customers. A case study was chosen as the research approach, as the purpose of the project was to gain a deep understanding about a narrow issue involving only a small team of partnerships experts in an international organisation. The study is part of a larger initiative, a sub-project for a long-term development plan. While the project begins at evaluation of the current situation and ends with idea generation phase, the next phases of the larger project are excluded from the project. Out of scope is also how to evaluate the ideas generated during using the chosen collaborative methods.

In terms of literature, supplier relationships have been left outside of this scope despite many opinions for and against supplier relations being a form of a partnership.

2.4 Expected outcome

The expected outcome of the study can be divided into two parts, which are aligned with chosen methods:

1. awareness of current situation; a result of doing a document analysis
2. identification of challenges, their root causes and development ideas; a result from practicing collaborative methods

The expectation for document analysis is for it to provide an understanding of what kind of dialogues there has been about commercial sustainability partnerships for business customers. More importantly, expectation is that analysis will shed light on whether those dialogues, and the actions they are related to, have been successful or not. It is also expected that the analysis findings will be structured and therefore useful for the second part of the project, where challenges and their root causes are identified.

Expectations for the second part of the project, which is focused on identification of challenges and idea generation, is that it provides concrete development suggestions based on known information (document analysis) and the expertise of participants involved the collaborative methods workshop. In addition, for the literature review, expectations if that it will prove the previously mentioned assumptions correct.

As stated in the research scope, this work does not include the in-depth evaluation of ideas nor the planning of roadmap or implementation of the roadmap, thus, they are not listed as expected outcomes for this study.

3 Partnerships

This chapter starts the theoretical framework of the project by introducing literature review of partnerships in general. Review also presents different types of partnerships and names the process phases in forming a new partnership. The second part of the literature review is a separate chapter and focuses on sustainability.

3.1 Defining partnerships

Partnerships have a variety of definitions, and they seem to differ from each other depending on the context. This sub-chapter will present some of the definitions found in literature but does not represent a complete list of what different researchers consider as partnerships. The chapter will also include the author's own definition for a partnership coming from experience in working with commercial partnerships.

To explore the different definitions for partnership, let's start with how it is explained in a dictionary. According to Cambridge dictionary (2022), a partnership is an agreement between organisations, people, etc. to work together. Through working together, companies may achieve efficiency, improved productivity, or profitability, accelerated development or lower costs (Lank 2006, 7). A partnership is a combination of trust, honesty, and common set goals, and evolves over time as a result of dialogues between involved parties (Tranel & Gasen 2003, 8–19.)

McQuaid (2000) has gathered in his work several definitions of partnerships, such as partnership is about a co-operation between people or organisation. Or that partnership is a co-operation between actors, who have agreed to work towards a specified economic development objective. Another definition is that a partnership is a collaboration in which risks, resources and skills are shared and benefits each partner. These definitions vary according to their perspective, some had economic development perspective, some more political, while other definitions had specific features such as in the European Commission's definition with implications of a consultation. By introducing many definitions, McQuaid argues that partnership is a varied and ambiguous concept and presents assumptions related to partnerships. First assumption is that there is potential for synergy in forming a partnership, meaning that there is more value in working together than apart. Second assumption has to do with actions being involved in partnerships; development, strategy execution or specified partnership related projects or operations. (McQuaid 2000, 3–5.)

McQuaid (2009) also studied how the OECD defined partnerships in their 1990 publications in Paris:

> “Systems of formalised co-operation, grounded in legally binding arrangements or informal understandings, co-operative working relationships, and mutually adopted plans among a number of institutions. They involve agreements on policy and programme objectives and the sharing of the responsibility, resources, risks and benefits over a specified period of time.”

In a discussion paper for the World Bank in 1998, an operational definition for partnerships was introduced: “a partnership is a collaborative relationship between entities to work toward shared objectives through a mutually agreed division of labor.” The goal of a partnership is not the partnership itself, rather it is a tool or a way to reach a shared objective in a more efficient way enabling all parties benefiting. (The World Bank 1998.)

According to Vakaslahti (2006, 10) partnerships can be described as collaboration, clusters, alliances, or constellations, and even co-operation with a competitor is considered as partnership activity. Through partnerships, an organisation can better respond to the demands of their operating environment, hence, partnerships enable a competitive advantage (Vakaslahti 2006, 10.)

As a result of partnerships, organisations tend to evolve as they gain experience. Partnerships are often complex and involve actions both on operative as well as strategic level, leaving partnership managers with vast experience. Thus, partnerships can be described as learning mechanisms that can teach organisations to improve performance and enable the achievement of goals. (The Compassion Capital Fund, 2010.)

The author adds her own definition of partnership to previously mentioned descriptions: partnership is a co-operation between organisations where jointly agreed activities benefit all parties. Two or more organisations embark on a partnership journey, when a common interest is identified. This “sweet spot” is visualised in figure 1 as the overlapping parts of the partnership organisations’ interests.

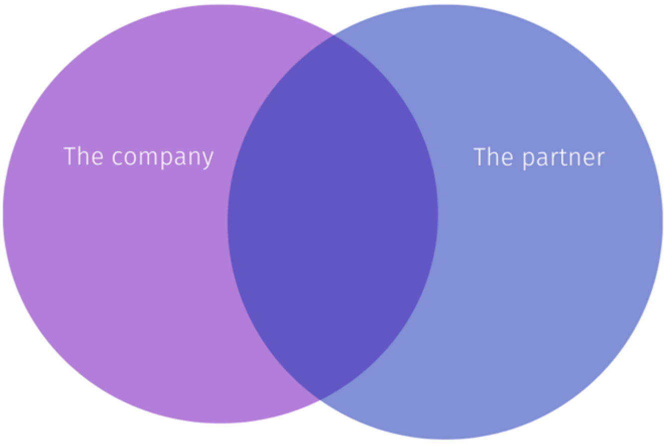

Figure 1. A partnership visualised as overlapping of interests. (Huynh 2022.)

An example of a partnership is one where company A produces service X and company B produces service Y. Companies A and B have the same target customer group and share interests in efforts involving entering a new marketing. Companies A and B then proceed to form a partnership and agree on joining resources regarding doing market research, obtaining licenses etc.

3.2 Advantages of a partnership

The advantage of a partnership is essentially about answering the question why should an organisation form a partnership instead of operating alone?

> "Effective partnerships can be expected to generate: information sharing; improved communication; a better understanding of what each stakeholder can offer; the avoidance of duplication and inefficiencies; and the identification of opportunities for effective sharing of resources" (Miller 1999, 349).

When the collaboration is mutually beneficial, the partnership can generate success. Brand awareness, expansion and reaching new markets, higher revenues or decreasing churn rates or cost of customer acquisition; these are some of the advantages of a partnership from a commercial point of view. (Reveal 14 June 2022.) There is an assumption about partnerships, that co-operation activity will lead to greater results than what organisations can otherwise accomplice, and those organisations will receive improved return for invested resources. Main incentives for organisations to pursue partnerships are resource availability, effectiveness and efficiency, and legitimacy. (McQuaid 2000, 13–17.)

Some partnerships are formed to combine complementary resources, with the goal of operating in a more resource-effective way compared to their normal approach (McQuaid 2009, 5–10). Pooling resources between partner organisations can lead to increasing the scale of resources, making different types of resources available, or enable to devote some resources originally targeted at elsewhere. Especially commercial partnerships may be used to increase the level of resources available and impact the commercial results by lowering costs or creating more sales. Partnerships can also enable smaller organisations to remain smaller and easier to control, hence more agile, compared to larger scale companies. (McQuaid 2000, 13–17.)

Partnerships allows organisations to find the synergy and reduce wasteful duplication of resources. Therefore, partnerships can impact the level of effectiveness and efficiency of organisations, which can lead to greater outputs and cost savings. By collaborating, the partner organisations can create a positive external perception as people are potentially able to identify with the partnership better than the standalone organisation. (McQuaid 2000, 13–17.) By sharing ideas, expertise and practices, the partner organisations also can have the ability to test new innovations and approaches, while holding a relatively manageable level of risks (McQuaid 2009, 5–10). The advantage of efficiency can also be found in the form of e.g., increased sales volumes, lower churn, better conversions for commercial partnerships.

McQuaid (2000,13–17.) also mentions legitimacy as one advantage of partnerships and refers to involving representatives from local government, non-governmental organisations, other officials etc. Especially in situations where change is needed but achieving it requires more resources than one organisation can afford. Digitaalinen asuntokauppa DIAS Oy was formed out of such need for change. The legislation for Residential and Commercial Property Information System in Finland came into force in 2019, this enabled the digitization of the housing markets. As it is a regulated industry and digitizing the way housing markets operate is a resource demanding task, a startup together with several banks, real estate agencies, and some government bureaus teamed up to transform the way properties are traded in Finland. As a result, a joint venture, separate entity was established, where each partner was also a shareholder. (DIAS 2018.)

3.3 Different types of partnerships

According to McQuaid (2000, 5–13), each partnership has many dimensions and different types of partnerships can be presented according to those dimensions. He proposes five main dimensions presented in a form of questions:

1. What is the partnership seeking to do?

2. Who are involved?
3. When is the partnership happening?
4. Where is the partnership taking place?
5. How are the activities carried out?

The dimensions and types of partnerships are explained next:

By categorising partnerships according to what the partnership is seeking to do, partnerships can further be divided into purpose driven and strategic or project driven partnerships. Purpose driven partnerships are formed to gain a specific outcome. Purpose can be e.g., joining efforts to gain extra resources or complement each other's value proposition. The focus of each partner's purpose may differ, which makes it critical to clarify priorities within the partnership. Strategic partnerships tend to be formed to address long-term issues or cover broader issues of an organisation. Project driven partnerships are focused on specific tasks or are a part of larger, strategic plans. (McQuaid 2000, 5–13.)

McQuaid (2000, 5-8) also adds the underlying basis of the partnership as part of the dimension of understanding what the partnership is seeking to do. He explains this further; as the partnerships ultimately evolve over time, there is an underpinned reason such as trust or mutual belief in the positive gains that keeps the partnership going despite other elements around the partnership changing or even disappearing. Therefore, there are not only differences between partnerships but also within a partnership over time. (McQuaid 2000, 5–8.)

Commercial partnerships and sustainability partnerships, the types of partnerships essential in this project, fall within this dimension. Commercial partnerships are driven with a common goal of accelerating commercial results; hence they are purpose driven. Sustainability partnerships are linked to sustainability being part of strategy or larger demand from the public; hence they are strategic or project driven partnerships depending on the actual goal of partnership.

B2B partnerships, which are also in focus in this project, are linked to the second dimension McQuaid mentions. In this dimension, the stakeholders involved in the partnerships define play an essential role in defining it. Stakeholders can range from different types of organisations such as non-profits, local government or even competitors. In addition to identifying who are involved in the partnership, it is important to acknowledge the manner they are involved, i.e., the structure of the partnership. Partnerships can be formal with legal contracts or general agreements to co-operate. Even informal networks that link individuals can be considered a form of partnership. Identifying the stakeholders and their contribution to the partnership is essential for successful partnerships management. (McQuaid 2000, 8–10.)

The third dimension McQuaid (2000) presents is time. The priorities of organisations or individuals driving the partnership may change over time and depending on the stage where the partnership is, it may impact the partner relationship. The power balance is different in each stage of the partnership. For example, in the beginning where a potential partnership is still being evaluated, the smaller organisation might be in a disadvantage position compared to its larger counterparty. Thus, acknowledging that there can be different objectives for partnership in different time, defining the nature of the partnerships at each stage, is also relevant. (McQuaid 2000, 11–12.)

Fourth dimension is about geographical area and answers the question of where the partnership is happening. Some partnerships may direct their focus on specific customer group in certain area. Fifth dimension concerns the how a partnership is implemented, what kind of mechanics there are. At the core of this dimension is what the partners agree regarding responsibilities; who provides resources, who produces the services or who controls the process? (McQuaid 2000, 12.)

As commercial partnerships and commercial partnerships for B2B customers are relevant for this project, this report includes a separate sub-chapter for this partnership type to go deeper into the literature review.

3.4 Commercial Partnerships

The term ‘commercial’ is related to making money by buying and selling things and is used to describe a product or service that can be bought (Cambridge Dictionary 2022). Based on McQuaid’s (2000) definitions of partnership dimensions and type, a commercial partnership is a purpose driven type of partnership, where the purpose is to generate income for partners through commercial activities.

Organisations tend to have a one-sided view on commercial relationships where performance is measured through internal indicators such as turnover, profitability and costs. In a commercial partnership, those performance indicators are a result of a joint effort with a partner. Thus, understanding what drives the commercial success in a partnership, is relevant. (Gibbs & Humphries, 2009, 7–8.)

Partnerships can be a driver for a company’s commercial growth. In an online survey by Forrester Consulting (2019), 77 % of the 454 companies who answered the survey, saw partnership development as central to their 2019 sales and marketing strategy. In the same survey, over 50 % of respondents informed that more than 20 % of their revenue come from a partnership channel.

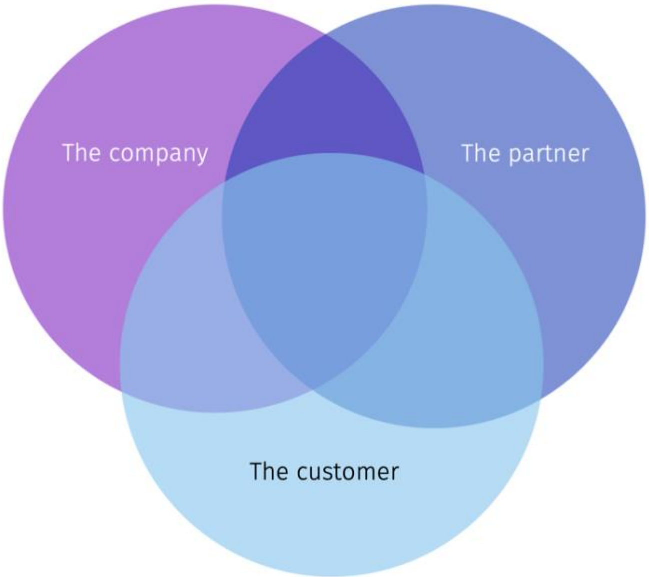

Figure 2. Elements of a commercial partnership. (Huynh 2022.)

As the commercial partnership's purpose is to generate commercial value for all partners, it cannot do so unless the partnership creates value for the customers. If a partnership lacks the customer value, it will not generate interest in the customer, who likely will not proceed to purchase the product or service. This in turn will not generate additional income and the commercial purpose of the partnership will not have reached its' goal. Figure 2 visualizes that the element of customers is present in a commercial partnership and that previously mentioned "sweet spot" (Figure 1) is likely to be smaller.

Commercial partnerships are very typical in consumer-oriented industries, where two companies harness the power of their brands to appeal to consumers. To name a few recent commercial partnerships; Marimekko (2021& 2022) has a partnership with Adidas as well as with Ikea, Oura Ring and Gucci announced their collaboration in May 2022 (Phelan 2022). Although these examples highlight commercial partnerships where value proposition for customers are a tangible product, commercial partnership can as well be formed between service providers. In these partnerships, customers might be referred by a company to their partner, who potentially gets a new customer. The customer could then receive a special partnership offer which otherwise would not be available, and the company improves their customer satisfaction, which leads to better customer retention and profitability. Banks and insurance companies tend to collaborate through these commercial partnerships, as their services are seen as complementary.

A commercial partnership can also be formed to create a value proposition for B2B customers. For example, a partnership between a telecommunications company and a real estate business where the formal has a target group of business customers and is looking to acquire new customers. While the latter has a service model for business customers but doesn't have a strong enough value proposition to keep the churn levels low. The customers, small businesses and entrepreneurs need both services when setting up a new business or expanding to a new location. These two companies may form a commercial partnership, where the real estate company refers new customers to the telecommunications company, which then proceeds to pay a commission of its new sales from these referrals to the real estate company.

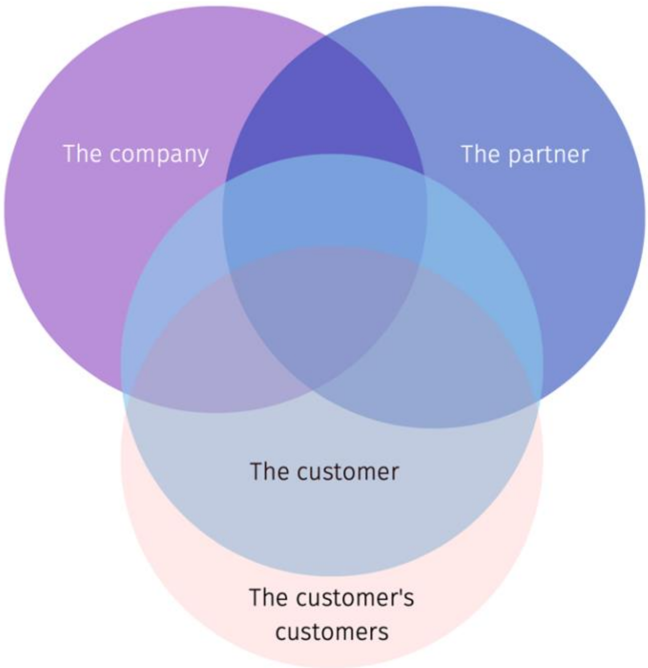

Figure 3. A commercial partnership for B2B customers. (Huynh 2022.)

As shown in figure 3, partnerships targeting B2B customers has an additional fourth element, the customer's customers. In partnerships where a customer has a need that can be met by the combination of partner companies, this fourth element is not relevant in forming the value proposition for the partnership. Partnerships like this typically provide a solution to the customers' internal problems. For example, a customer has inefficient sales processes, which can be improved by a tailormade ERP system, which is the product of a partnership. By purchasing the ERP system, the customer's sales funnel improves, and resources are freed for other tasks. However, the partnership does not affect the end customer directly, hence, there is no need for taking the fourth element into consideration.

When the value proposition of a partnership affects the end customers, they become an essential part of the partnership. An example of such partnership: a car dealership and a car maintenance company want to collaborate to offer a service package for high-end private transportation companies. They plan their value proposition based on the assumption that their target customers', the transportation companies', main concern is to have a working vehicle that is maintained properly to be able to provide transportation for their customers. What they don't anticipate is that the customer demand and behaviour of these transportation companies' customers are changing. Instead of private car services, the end customers are demanding more sustainable choices and would pay extra for transportation in a green solution vehicle packaged with a compensation solution for each ride, e.g., "Thank you for choosing our services, we planted two trees to compensate you ride." By considering the needs of the whole value chain, a commercial partnership can provide a lucrative collaboration.

3.5 Forming a partnership

There are several checklists and process descriptions available on the internet for starting a partnership, and different sources will provide different opinions on what are the main stages in designing and forming a partnership. Most organisations likely have their own unique processes due to the differences between organisations, industry structures, environment influences etc. Although each tool and checklist may differ in how the process is described and what terms are used, they all have in common the idea that the basis for forming a partnership is to define the need and the purpose of the partnership. This part of the report introduces a few sources that can be used as a basis for understanding the different phases of forming a partnership. As the scope of this study was to understand the current situation of the case company X through analysis and to generate ideas for further development, while the next parts part of the partnership process was excluded from project, this chapter will only focus on the first steps of forming a partnership. While this chapter does mention mapping of potential partners, it does not go into the details of phases included in choosing an organisation to form a partnership with.

The Compassion Capital Fund (2010) describes three steps in forming a partnership: 1) defining the need for a partnership, 2) starting the process and 3) setting up and maintaining the partnership. The Partnerships Analysis tool by VicHealth (2016) introduces three main activities to do in the process of forming a partnership: 1) assess the purpose of the partnership, 2) map the partnership and 3) provide feedback using a partnership. These three activities are further divided using a checklist with 7 different these which are:

1. Determining the need for the partnership

2. Choosing the partners
3. Making sure the partnerships work
4. Planning collaborative action
5. Implementing collaborative action
6. Minimising the barriers to partnerships
7. Reflecting on and continuing the partnership

The Partnership Analysis Tool by VicHealth can be found in a toolkit bank provided by OPSI, the Observatory of Public Innovation for OECD. OPSI provides services and tools to use in innovation that supports governments to adopt new approaches to address a variety of problems (OPSI 2013). Another toolkit providing a framework for partnership forming process found on the OPSI toolkit bank is the Partnership Co-Design Toolkit (P.ACT), where there are three steps mentioned that can be used in forming the partnership. The steps are 1) Identify individual drivers, 2) define partnership goals and 3) establish partnership commitments.

Stibbe, Reid and Gilbert (2018, 19–23) present their version of process for forming a partnership through the Partnering Cycle (Figure 4) and the Partnership Journey (Figure 5.). In their Partnering Cycle model, they present the main phases of a partnership development, and in the Partnership Journey they explain the main steps the partners go through from identifying a potential partner to signing a partnering agreement. They argue that there are two different journeys. One journey is the one partners take together through development, negotiations, and planning. The second journey is the one each partner goes through, involving the rationalizing and justifying entering the partnership. (Stibbe & al 2018, 19–23.)

Figure 4. The Partnering Cycle. (Stibbe & al. 2018, 20.)

In the first phases of scoping and identifying, the organisation must find who are the relevant stakeholders and of similar kind of initiatives already exist. They emphasize that a partnership should not happen, if there's a lack of three things: 1) an overlap of interests and compatibility between organisations, 2) a clear collectively understood advantage and 3) a net benefit for each partner. (Stibbe & al 2018, 19–23.) Therefore, it is essential in this phase to scope and identify the stakeholders that match the organisation's expectations. Lank (2006, 26) argues that even before beginning the journey of scoping for potential partners, organisations need to gain an understanding of all their existing collaborative relationships. Thus, making a relationship audit is the first step in partnering, where the organisation gathers data from stakeholders to form a comprehensive overview of current collaborations (Lank 2006, 25–27). This is also when organisations should evaluate the possibilities to strengthen or broaden the relationship into a partnership. Current customers might offer a channel for an interesting pool of new customers, existing supplier relationship can be developed into a mutually beneficial commerce relationship and a non-profit organisation might be able to provide intangible value to complete offerings.

After gaining an understanding of the current situation, Lank (2006, 27–29) suggests making a strategic assessment. In this phase, organisations define the need and purpose for the partnership by clarifying the expected outcome from the partnership and considering the advantages and disadvantages of collaborating versus doing it themselves. This is equivalent to Stibbe & al. (2018, 19–23) Partnership Journey's first three steps, as seen in figure 5. As partnerships is a means to an end, and not an actual purpose (The Compassion Capital Fund 2010), only by clarifying the purpose for a partnership, one can justify the decision to collaborate. This means that an organisation should not look for collaboration possibilities through an interesting potential partner, rather, it should identify potential partners that can complement and add value based on the need the organisation has for partnerships.

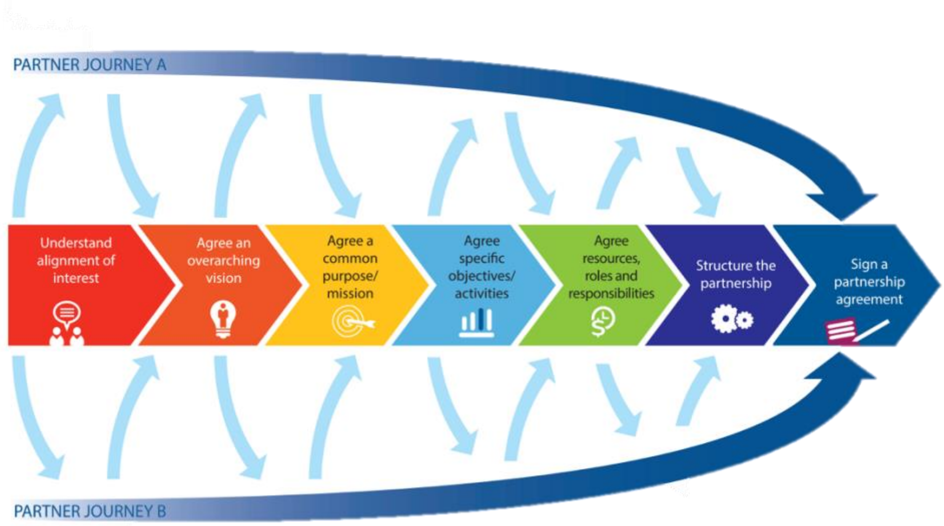

Figure 5. The Partnership Journey. (Stibbe & al 2018, 21.)

After having identified and clarified the purpose, organisations can start the initial mapping of potential partners. How will each potential partner contribute and how will they benefit? Is there a strategic, operational, and cultural fit between the organisations? What are the challenges and risks regarding this specific partner? Are there any conflicts between the values of each potential partners? By answering these questions, a strategic evaluation can be performed. The previously done evaluation of current relationships can be helpful in this phase, so that an organisation can utilize existing collaborative processes or models to join instead of creating a new one (Lank 2016, 28–29). Another way to approach potential partners, is to look for similar partnerships by other organisations and joining an existing set-up (The Compassion Capital Fund 2010).

Finding potential partners can be done in a structured way with a clear list of criteria as the framework or approaching potential partners through different networks. The exploration part of building a relationship with a partner can be described as a sales process, where both parties need to convince each other of their virtues and what they can offer each other. The focus of the first discussions should be on identifying the wins for both sides, since there will inevitably be differences in perspectives, business contexts or even personalities. (Lank 2016, 29–39.)

Lank (2016, 29–30) argues that after identifying a possible collaboration opportunity, potential partners need to align and agree on goals to succeed in a partnership, as no organisation can unilaterally decide on forming a partnership. Hence, before entering the next phase of choosing a partner, organisations should allocate enough time to explore potential gains with the partner candidate. Only after all parties have individually assessed and are satisfied with the achievable gains, can the process continue. (Lank 2016, 29.)

Before progressing in the process and taking the next step of deciding on a partnership, the partners can choose to test the collaboration to provide proof of concept. This can be done by agreeing on a smaller test or pilot project. This is a way to validate the potential partnership without engaging too many resources or jeopardizing reputation if the collaboration between partnership doesn’t succeed. A pilot typically offers the partners a lower risk opportunity to evaluate the potential benefits and a chance to adjust the partnership model, if necessary. Another obvious advantage of piloting a partnership, is the possibility to withdraw before committing in potentially years long relationship (Lank 2016, 29–30.)

After identifying a suitable partner and agreeing on common missions, objectives, and responsibilities, as well as, completing an assessment potentially through a pilot, the next phase is to start the process of entering into a partnership agreement. This phase includes determining responsibilities, processes, and resources etc. This is then followed with setting up and maintaining the partnership, which includes agreeing on e.g., governance structures and assessment periods. Final phase is exiting the partnership. These phases are not in scope for this study and therefore, are not explored in this report with more details.

4 Sustainability and Partnerships

This chapter starts with presenting the key concept to sustainability, while later the commercial potential of sustainability is discussed.

4.1 Sustainable Development, Corporate Social Responsibility & Corporate Sustainability

The concept of sustainability, or more accurately, sustainable development was introduced in 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) and it states that sustainable development is development that meets the present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED 1987, 41). It means that the earth's productive capacity acts as the constraints within which the wealth created through business must not only meet everyone's basic needs but also ensure that the needs of future generations are met (Bansal 2019).

Sustainability ensures intergenerational equity by balancing the resource usage and supplies over time. When the usage of resource matches the capacity earth can regenerate for future supply, we are spending resources sustainably. However, if the spending exceeds the regeneration capacity, the spending is supplied by borrowing resources from future needs. Corporate sustainability means that companies can meet their short-term resource needs without compromising the ability to meet future needs. (Bansal 2015.)

Gutterman (2021, 1) studied Laughlan and Bansal's way of describing corporate sustainability as more than just accounting for environmental and social impacts, but to also being resilient and creating economic value, healthy ecosystems, and strong communities. Sustainable development for companies is often associated with corporate social responsibility CSR, which can simply be described as company taking actions with the aim of making a positive social impact required by law. However, it is distinctive for CSR activities that these actions or their impacts are outside of the company's immediate interests. Although CSR and corporate sustainability are both based on the attempts to operate businesses in a more humane, ethical, and transparent way, there are differences between the two. CSR is often seen as a voluntary action, albeit being part of a company's CSR strategy. Corporate sustainability, however, is an integrated activity of the company and the business strategy. (Gutterman 2021, 1–2.)

Figure 6. The UN Sustainable Development Goals. (United Nations Development Programme 2022.)

In 2015 United Nations (UN) introduced the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs, which are listed in figure 6. The main message from UN was to universally call to action for ending poverty, protecting the planet, and ensuring that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity. The SDGs are designed to end poverty, hunger, AIDS, and discrimination against women and girls. A balanced development between social, economic, and environmental sustainability is necessary, as actions in one area impacts the other as the SDGs are integrated and linked. (United Nations Development Programme 2022.)

As sustainability is essentially about balancing between long-term and short-term supply and demand of resources, business sustainability is about the ability to achieve short-term success without risking and compromising the survival in the future. Businesses can survive and thrive over the long term by being sustainable, by innovating enduring designs, by investing in long-lasting infrastructure and by building long-term relationships. (Bansal 2015.)

4.2 Sustainability partnerships

The United Nations has recognized the importance of partnerships, and UN Sustainable Development has set a target for partnerships. As seen in figure 6, the 17th SDG is Partnerships for the goals and this refers to realizing the other SDGs through strong global partnerships and cooperation. The UN recognizes that inclusive partnerships are required for achieving successful development. Partnerships are needed on a global, regional, national, and local levels. And they are needed to be built upon shared principles, values, and vision where people and planet are at the center. (United Nations Development Programme 2022.)

The UN's definition of partnerships for the SDGs:

> "Partnerships for sustainable development are multi-stakeholder initiatives voluntarily undertaken by Governments, intergovernmental organisations, major groups and other stakeholders, which efforts are contributing to the implementation of inter-governmentally, agreed development goals and commitments." (Stibbe & al 2018.)

Optimizing the use of resources is at the core of sustainability since the earth has limited resources. And, as established in earlier chapters, partnerships are a good way to bring resources together. By pooling resources, sustainability partnerships can together generate more impact, greater sustainability, and more value for society (Stibbe & al. 2018.)

Sustainability driven partnerships come in many forms: networks of e.g., small producers or financiers, alliances between businesses and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), government led efforts, etc. The partnerships can represent multiple sectors and motivations for joining efforts varies. However, sustainability partnerships are based upon the value created by combined resources. The diverse resources, skills and competences of stakeholders involved in partnerships, offer better prospects at solving the challenges of creating a sustainable planet, compared to each organisation working independently. An essential factor influencing the sustainability partnership, is the way each partner defines the term. Sustainability as a term is very broad and continues to evolve, each organisation has their own way to interpret what sustainability means to their operation, how will they approach the problems and at which level will they engage in the partnership. (Gray & Stites 2013, 11–14.)

Gray and Stites (2013, 17–18) present different types of sustainability partnerships. A partnership between a business and government is called a public-private partnership, where as a business-NGO partnership is formed by a private company and a non-governmental organisation. Sustainable Local Enterprise Network, SLEN, happens when an NGO joins forces with civil society members. The partnership is a multi-sector partnership when partners represent three or more sectors.

In figure 7 by Gray and Stites (2013, 23–25) offer a visual representation of the different levels of sustainability partnerships. The possibly most known and simplest form of collaboration for sustainability is philanthropy or sponsorship, which typically involves a single business giving a financial contribution to a charity. Short term or once occurring collaborations happen when business takes into consideration or consults NGOs for solving a specific problem or environmental impact assessment. These short-term collaborations might generate solutions and lead to changes that impact the company’s supply chain and even resulting in widely accepted eco-labels or industry sustainability standards. Finally, policy dialogue, base of pyramid strategy and collaborative governance are presented as the levels where the partnership engagements has taken the furthest. In these partnership forms, local policy makers, communities, regulators, and governments are involved. (Gray & Stites 2013, 22–24.)

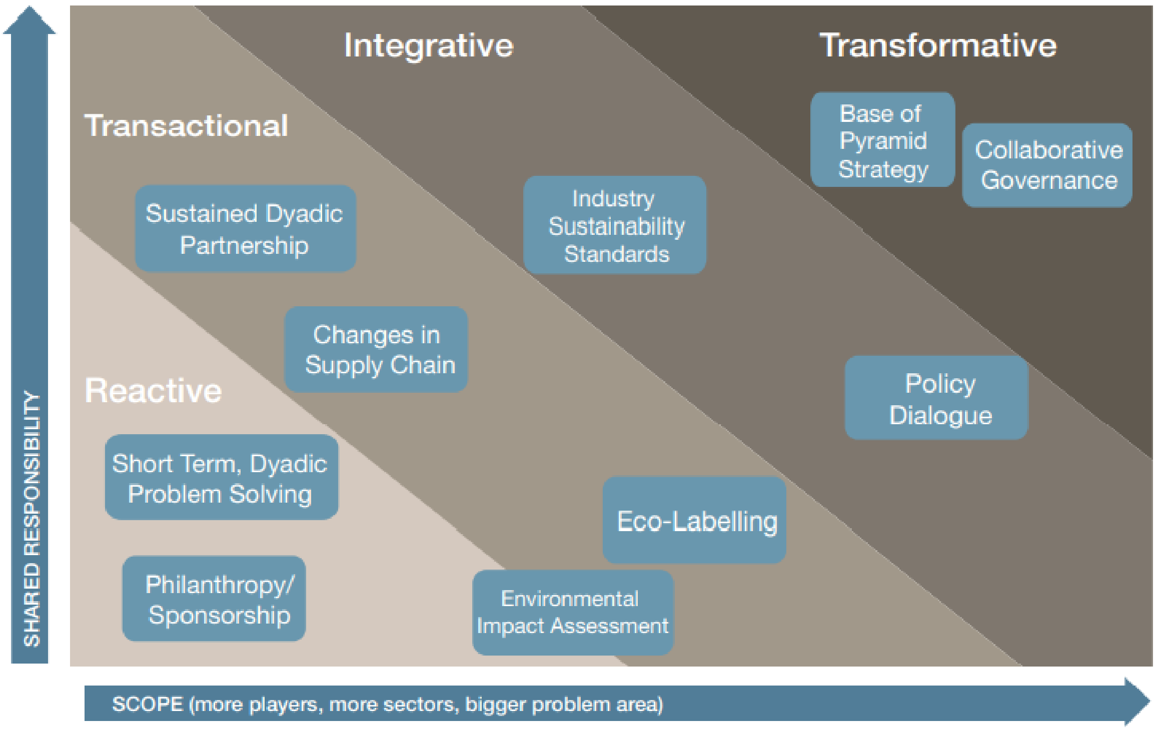

Figure 7. Sustainability partnership type and shared responsibility. (Gray & Stites 2013, 25.)

Just as other partnerships, sustainability partnership types can be categorized according to their purposes and what kind of challenges the partners are looking to solve. Reactive partnerships such as sponsorships and short-term problem-solving collaborations, tend to only be between a few partner organisations and has less shared responsibilities. These are typically threat-induced or a result of a compliance response. Transactional partnerships focus on business motivations such as improving profitability or market share. Commercial sustainability partnerships go into this category. Partnerships taking integrative approach are motivated to balance the considerations of social and ecological concerns. And finally, partnerships in upper right area have the most shared responsibilities and largest scope. These partnerships seek wider societal improvements and typically authorities and governments are involved. With increasing awareness and demands from the publics, partnerships evolve over time, and ones that start out as reactive may transform into transactional partnerships, or even directly join a transformative movement (Gray & Stites 2013, 24–26.)

4.3 Commercializing sustainability through partnerships

Consumer awareness and technologies enabling transparency are contributing to the development of a more sustainable business environment. Brands are expected to deliver both superior products and services and sustainability. They demand products to not harm people or environment during the whole life cycle from production to end. As businesses, NGOs and governments share a common goal for sustainable development, the business cases involving sustainability actions are becoming more compelling and harder for business managers to ignore. (Hicks 2013.) While sustainability has become a vital condition for businesses, sustainability partnerships offer a possibility for a competitive advantage (Peltonen 2020).

Sustainability will act as a commercial partnership’s catalyst, according to Webb (2012), who says that sustainability and social concerns should be used as the framework for the next generation of partnerships. He argues that these smart partnerships are long term investments and may be the way for organisations to reduce risks when compared to venturing in a merger and acquisition. To succeed in combining sustainability and commercial objectives, it is essential for the organisation to get the buy-in from executive leadership, otherwise forming a partnership with a sustainability agenda could take a long time or not succeed. Funding, research, and other relevant resource demanding tasks won’t likely be allocated for setting up the partnership without executive engagement. Another significant detail to pay close attention to, is that the responsible person driving the partnership has an understanding of both business and sustainability agendas. The potential gains must be strong from both points of view; what kind of contribution to commercial results as well as sustainable development. (Webb 2012.)

Although sustainability awareness has led to companies no longer questioning the relevance for being green, there is still room for improvement in capturing the value of sustainability-related activities. Sustainability actions often have a longer payback period before they start to generate return on investments or can produce only intangible rewards. If the business case is weak, it makes it harder to pitch a sustainability project for decision-makers. Business savvy managers might prefer the easier to understand projects that provide faster financial results over intangible justifications that might not produce any concrete value during their management period. (Laughlan & Bansal 2011.) The partnership manager will have a challenge not only in convincing these executives but also in making sure that the business case is attractive for the partner organisation as well. The partnership needs to be equally good now and in the future for all parties involved, so that it can last a long period of time. Webb (2012) adds that the community or otherwise society getting serviced through the partnership, should also be considered as one party in a partnership.

To be able to demonstrate the value and a strong business case for a sustainability partnership, metrics for measuring success need to be established and they need to be easy to understand. As issues tend to get managed only if the performance is measured, Laughlan and Bansal (2011) explain that sustainability initiatives are harder to tackle as there aren't any obvious ways to assess and justify the investments. Adding the fact that sustainability actions typically have macro-level impacts causing it to be too abstract to demonstrate the value. Linking the impacts of sustainability initiatives to commercial performance can increase the level of engagement from all stakeholders. (Laughlan & Bansal 2011.)

Commercialization and sustainability combined creates a balance between economic, environmental, and social impact and is essentially about managing available resources in an effective way whilst maximising profitability. To commercialize sustainability is to identify from a commercial context the relevant actions in ensuring the planet's ability to renew resources. Organisations have responsibilities towards the society and shareholders, and to live up to these expectations, organisations need profits. Profits are in fact an essential resource in delivering a balanced performance and therefore enabler for sustainability. (Donnelly 2011.)

Historically, businesses have provided products and services by capitalizing on resources without worrying about the long-term impacts on our globe. With increasing awareness and public demand, existing businesses are increasingly evolving and streamlining their use of resources. Businesses today are built on the understanding that organisations and corporates have an essential role in shaping the earth's future. New companies are founded with the driving purpose of societal impact and sustainability benefits. Relationships are formed between existing businesses and new companies to realize the potential in combining efforts for achieving a common goal. Synergies can be found in e.g., supply chain relationships. Another example of joint efforts resulting in commercial benefits is companies innovating a business model where one company's waste is reused and turned into profit by the other, resulting in a positive situation where less waste is produced, and more income is generated. (Laughlan & Bansal 2011.)

According to Horne and Fichter (2022) new generation of purpose driven companies innovate ventures that lead or contribute to the transition towards a more sustainable society. They define impact startups as companies with solutions that contribute to society at a scale that have a sustainability net impact. These impact startups potentially provide the solution for corporates to solve their societal issues and can give them input on how to create an impact (Tamayo 2021). A McKinsey report (2021) on corporate-startup partnerships reveal that the motives for corporates for partnering include gaining access to faster innovation and product development, gaining early insights into technologies and untouched customer segments, gaining insights to new ways of working, gaining access to top talent and to receive financial ROI. The same reports researched the startups' motives, where market access, legitimacy, financial and other resources were listed as the benefits startups expect to gain from the partnerships. (Dörner, Flötotto, Henz, & Strålin 2020, 11.) Commercial possibilities of sustainability is increasingly being explored, as partnerships are formed between corporates and impact startups, which despite having a sustainability driven purpose they are in also for-profit organisations with responsibilities to their shareholders.

5 Research approach and methodology

A research development work typically aims at making a change and starts with recognizing objectives for development and ends with evaluation of the complete development work and its results. Figure 8 presents the process for a research development project. However, development work does not always follow the phases in the presented order, but often goes back and forth as the work progresses. (Ojasalo & al. 2015, 23–26).

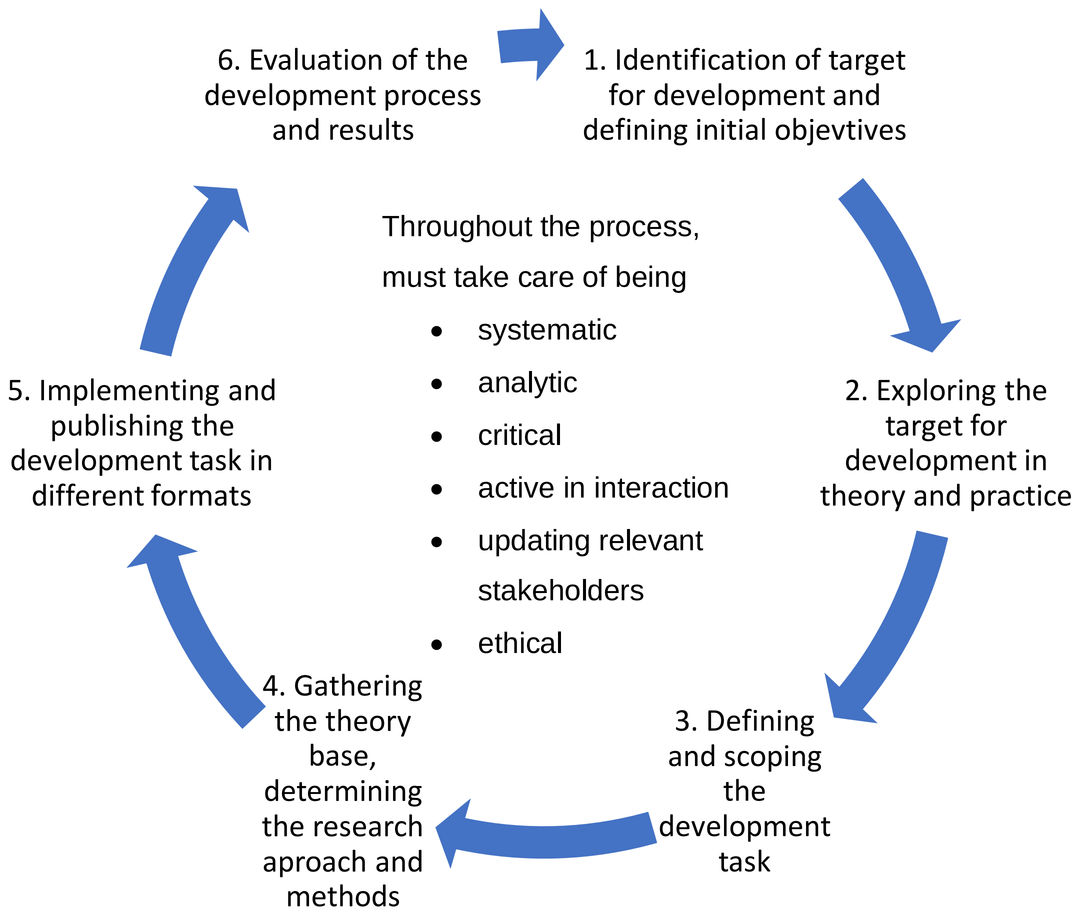

Figure 8. Research development project process. (Adapted from Ojasalo & al 2015, 24.)

This chapter will first introduce the research approach, case study, and then move on to methods. Chosen methods are document analysis followed by collaborative methods.

5.1 Case study research

Case study approach is used when the objective of a research is to provide development ideas. It can be applied to answer research questions starting with “why?” and “how?”. This approach is best suited when the research objective is to have an indept understanding of a certain situation and solve the problems caused by that situation. The benefit of a case study approach is that it presents a way to explore atypical behaviour or poorly understood situations and processes. The approach does not strive to simplify the research problem in order to understand how common a problem is, or how to approach the problem statistically. On contrary, case study explores the complexity and focuses on gaining extensive amount of information on a narrow subject, making a potentially very broad field of research researchable. (Ojasalo, Moilanen & Ritalahti 2015, 52–57.)

Eriksson and Koistinen (2014, 4–5) describe a case study to be a research that aims to define, analyze and provide solutions to one or several cases. A case study research can be executed as a comparison of two or serveral cases, and it provides information concerning phenomenons occuring in the present moment and within its real-life setting (Ojasalo & al. 2015, 52–57). The connection to its real-life setting is what makes the case study approach contextual; research aims to understand the case as part of its environment (Eriksson & Koistinen 2014, 16).

The object of research, the case, can be an organisation as an entity or it can be scoped to cover only a part of the organisation, such as a department or unit, a product, service or process. The case can be scoped categorically, functionally or situationally. Scoping a case categorically means separating a physical unit or units. Functional scoping is done by separating a functional entity, a process, an incident or series of incidents. Finally, a situational scoping refers to researching a case that has occurred in certain time period. (Laitinen 1998, 20–21.) Defining the scope of the case study is a critical phase in a case study research, where the researcher typically defines the scope themselves. The researcher needs to be able to rationalize their choise and argue why a chosen scope is beneficial for the research (Eriksson & Koistinen, 2014, 5–7.)

According to Ojasalo & al (2015, 36–37), in an authentic case study the research does not result in concrete development or implementation of the suggested development, but rather focuses on creating those development ideas or solution recommendations based on detected problems.

A research project is always based on existing theories, methods and prior researches. While it is not required to rigorously follow old practices, the researcher must be aware of the theoretical framework. A case study, however, begins from the case at hand instead of the theory of it. Typically the researcher has some prior knowledge of the case, which enables the required defining and scoping phase of the research. A case study can be divided into four phases, where typically the first phase is about identifying the initial development task or problem. The second phase is about learning about the practical and theoretical framework and then scoping the case study. Third phase is about conducting the empirical data and analyzing. Finally, the fourth phase is about coming up with proposals for development based on the findings of the previous phases. (Ojasalo & al. 2015, 53–54.)

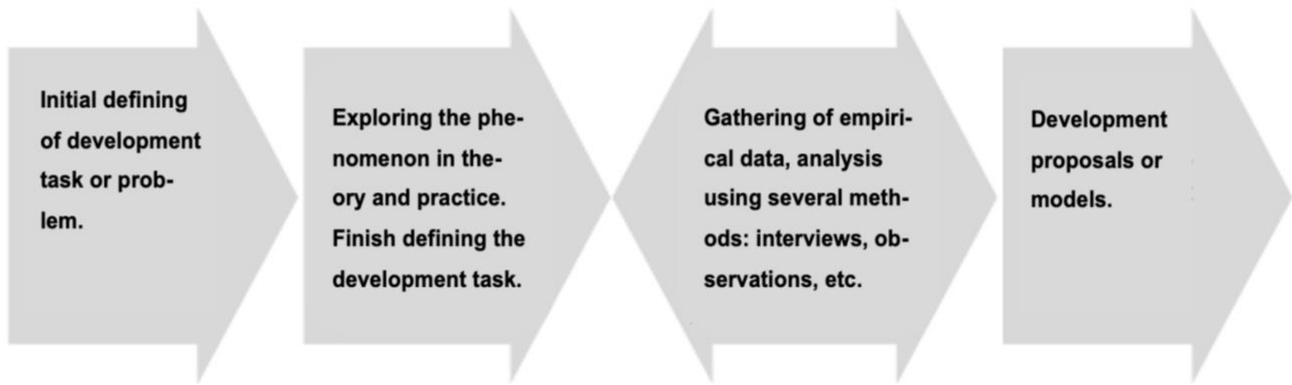

Figure 9. Case study process phases. (Adapted from Ojasalo & al. 2015, 54.)

A natural characteristic of a development project is that as the project progresses, the original development task is no longer relevant. This means that altough the above figure 9 suggests that the a case study starts by identifying the initial development task or problem, this might not always be the case. Ojala & al. (2015, 54–57) propose that once researchers have familiarized themselves into the task at hand, only then can they find out what really needs to be researched.

Eriksson and Koistinen (2014, 11–21) lists different types of case studies: descriptive case study, illustrive case study, explanatory case study, exploratory case study, intrinsic case study, instrumental case study, collective case study, intensive and extensive case study. Descriptive case study is filled with descriptions of the study, but also focuses on producing a good story, which can be argued as creating new theories itself. Illustrive case study is one that is full of illustrations of an everyday life situation, e.g. practices in a company. Explanatory case study aims at answering why a case is as it is, or why has it develop in such matter. Explanatory case studies are especially applicable in cases where phenomenons are difficult to study otherwise. Exploratory case study contributes to new theoretical ideas, concepts, proposal or hypothesis. Exploratory cases can also be used as a starting point for a larger research, that aims to provide more analytical and theoretical aspects into the matter. A case study is described as intrinsic when the researcher has an interest to a unique case and wants to learn all about it. Primary target fo intrinsic case study is not to form an abstract format or understanding of a larger phenonem, but to understand all about the object of the study. When a case study is used as means to understand something else, it is called instrumental case study for its instrumental conditioning. Collective case study is formed out of several cases, where emphasis is on the cases' coordinative and parallel characteristics. Intensive case study aims to produce a unique, hence theoretically interesting, description, interpretation and understanding of the case by contextualizing the information. The idea in intensive case study is to umderstand the logic of the world where the case study is from, instead of making general conclusions. Extensive case study, on the other hand, aims to identify common characteristics and general models. New theoretical ideas and concepts can be then developed through a systematic comparison of cases. (Eriksson & Koistinen, 2014, 11–21.)

Using several different data collection methods is typical for case studies in order to form a comprehensive understanding of the situation (Ojasalo & al. 2015, 36–37). A case study can be conducted using qualitative or quantitative methods, or even a combination of both.

5.2 Document analysis

Analysis of documentary evidence is essentially about utilizing existing documents as a way of collecting data for a research project. Different types of memorandums, meeting minutes, reports, handouts, handbooks, annual reports, budgets, statistics, intranet or even websites can be used as documents for analysis, even if such documents aren’t originally produced at the request of a researcher or otherwise for research purposes. (Ojasalo & al. 2015, 43.) Bryman and Bell (2011, 533) argue that visual documents are also relevant source for document analysis since organisations are significant producers of visual documents. Visual documents encompass photographs, graphic or artistic images, visual content on websites and video data including films. With the European Accessibility Act (European Commission 2018) requiring information on websites to be accessible via audio for persons with disabilities, audio documents may be added to list of materials accepted as documents.

The benefit of the method is the connection of the documents to the research case as the documents may present the object of research in its real-life environment better than other methods. The downside of document analysis is that there isn’t a sure way for the researcher to know what kind of relevant documents exists. In addition, confidential documents might not be accessible for the researcher. Thus, document analysis is typically combined with other means of collecting data, with the suggestion that the methods complement each other. (Ojasalo & al. 2015, 43.)

Document analysis as a method for collecting data focuses on making conclusions based on verbal, symbolic and communicative material put into written form. The aim of the analysis is to systematically evaluate the documents and come up with a written description and conclusion of the research objective. (Ojasalo & al. 2015, 136.)

Critical thinking is essential in conducting a document analysis as the relevancy and credibility of a certain document depends on who has produced the document and for which reason and purpose. These are issues that impact the characteristics of a document. (Ojasalo & al. 2015, 43.) In their book ‘Business Research Methods’, Bryman and Bell (2011, 533) present a list of criteria, by John Scott, for evaluating the quality of documents; authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning. Authenticity refers to evidence of genuineness and the document’s origin. Credibility issues stems from possibilities for error and distortion. Representativeness is determined for how typical the evidence is of its kind. And meaning answers the question ‘Is the evidence clear and comprehensible?’

Ojasalo & al (2015, 137) presents two main document analysis approach: content analysis and content categorization. In content analysis, researcher aims at describing the content of documents verbally to identify meanings in the texts. Content categorization means the texts are sorted quantitatively according to e.g., figures. Basically, document analysis relies on logical thinking and interpretation skills of the researcher to first gather the material, then conceptualize it via content analysis or categorization. And finally, piecing the materials back together in a different, more logical matter.

5.3 Collaborative methods

Collaborative methods are used when a group of people come together to create new perspectives with the help of a creative tool or technique. In an innovation process, where the aim is to create something new, research can be conducted by observing brainstorming sessions, interviewing stakeholders, analysing documents from sessions, or sending out surveys. Instead of new information, innovation techniques are used to generating new ideas. Such techniques are brainstorming and Six Thinking Hats. (Ojasalo & al. 2015, 88–89.)

Arguably, one of the most used methods for generating new ideas is a brainstorming (Ojasalo & al. 2015, 44–45). Brainstorming was used in this case study also. Other collaborative methods used in a workshop session were the Ishikawa Diagram, the Five Whys Technique, and the Six Thinking Hats. In addition, the author acknowledges the importance of good facilitation has on the outcome of a workshop, thus, basics of facilitation is also mentioned in this report.

5.3.1 Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a problem-solving technique often applied for generating and refining ideas. Although best used in a group environment, brainstorming can also be done alone. In brainstorming, a group of people work together on a predetermined subject or theme. Typically, in a brainstorming session there is a facilitator, who moderates the group's work towards the objectives. Facilitator also has a significant role in stimulating the group to keep generating ideas when it has started to slow down. (Ojasalo & al. 2015, 160–163.)

The benefits of brainstorming according to Eckerson (1988) is that it breaks down barriers between departments and organisations by bringing together people with multiple expertise to work towards a common goal. In a brainstorming session, ideas and solutions may present themselves that otherwise would not have if the same individuals were working separately. People tend to also better commit to ideas that they can claim ownership in.

While the advantages of brainstorming lie in the power of group work and collective creativity, there are some criticisms also. Boddy (2012) discusses peer pressure as a barrier to idea generation in groups as participants might be reluctant to share their own ideas due to fear of ridicule. Another disadvantage of brainstorming is that people with less experience with brainstorming, might find it challenging to come up with ideas. Self-censorship is often associated with participants feeling their ideas are less worthy than others. Engagement is also a challenge, because in a group environment, it is easy to take on an observer role and let the other members create (Ojasalo & al. 2015, 160–163.)

Brainstorming session starts by agreeing on objectives for the session and defining the scope to help narrow down the discussion. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019, 36) list five stages in brainstorming: defining the problem, asking for suggestions, recording the suggestions, reviewing the suggestions and finally, analysing the suggestions. However, Boddy (2012) highlights two main stages: rapid idea generation stage and evaluation stage. In the rapid idea generation stage, participants are encouraged to freely innovate around the topic. At this point, it is critical to create a positive environment free of criticism to enable the generating of many new ideas, which are then written down (Ojasalo & al. 2015, 44.)

In the evaluation stage of brainstorming, all ideas are viewed critically according to the facilitator's instructions. For the creative atmosphere to continue, critique needs to address the ideas and not the person the idea came from. Ideas can be evaluated by sorting and categorizing them into themes, which can be general or chosen based on the idea's feasibility (Boddy 2012). All ideas or themes should then go through a commentary round to get everyone's opinion. However, in larger groups other tactics can be utilized e.g., participants vote on the three ideas they find best (Ojasalo & al. 2015).

Most voted and highest valued ideas are then chosen to be further developed. Depending on resources, it may also be relevant to have a further stage in the brainstorming session where required tools, roadmaps, or processes for these ideas are identified. This is especially beneficial in the case where the brainstorming participants are also in charge of implementation. (Boddy 2012.)

5.3.2 Facilitation

Kantojärvi (2012, 11) describes facilitation as managing a group process in a neutral manner and successfully guiding the group on their journey of meetings, trainings or planning sessions towards a specific goal. Facilitation is used when the participants possess the knowledge to solve the problem but might lack the proper way of working together.

To facilitate is to help a group maintain focus and move forward towards the desired end by managing the journey. A facilitator provides opportunities for synergy and productive interaction. Instead of focusing on what is being discussed, a facilitator focuses on how the discussion is proceeding. A facilitator is not a team leader or a project manager, and a facilitator's role is not to solve the actual problem but to help participants in solving the problem together. (Jones, M. L. 2021, chapter 1.)

A facilitator has a significant role in the success of a brainstorming session. It is the facilitators responsibility to ensure rules and processes are followed, facilitator also makes sure the session is paced correctly and everyone gets their turn to speak. The facilitator needs to be sensitive in recognizing situations where new ideas are no longer generated, and involvement is needed to re-accelerate the process. (Ojasalo & al. 2015, 160–163.)

According to Kantojärvi (2012, 29–30), a creative problem-solving process can act as a structure for a facilitated workshop. The process involves five phases that are then described below.

1. Beginning
2. Clarification
3. Planning of solutions
4. Preparation of actions
5. Closing

In the beginning phase the facilitator creates a safe environment ensuring that participants feel comfortable to take part into discussion. In this phase the facilitator tunes the atmosphere into creative thinking and ensures that participants are fully present. Target setting, establishing why everyone is present and going through the rules, everyone's roles and the overall workshop process, happens in the beginning.

The clarification phase involves clarifying the situation and focus. In this phase, a mutual understanding of present situation is established: what is known and what are the concerns related to it? At the end of this phase, the facilitator makes sure that participants agree on a key question that they will try to answer.

Third phase is about generating ideas and developing them, i.e., participants are planning the solutions. Ideas are generated, then sorted and finally chosen to be further developed in this phase. An analysis of development ideas is facilitated.

Next, implementation of the ideas is planned, and a roadmap or action plan is drawn. Finally, in the fourth phase, the workshop is evaluated. Results are reflected on original targets. The facilitator's responsibility is to enable a dialogue where next steps are agreed upon.

The above process of creative problem-solving is comparable to brainstorming process with many similar phases. Thus, by succeeding in facilitating a workshop, the facilitator can ensure a successful brainstorming session. Kantojärvi (2012, 29–30) argues that most problems in facilitation are results of incomplete execution of the process.

5.3.3 Cause-effect analysis: Ishikawa Diagram and The Five Whys Technique

Olivier Serrat (2009) states that there is a cause to every effect but identifying those causes can be complicated when the chain between the two is long. For identifying the root causes for challenges, Ishikawa Diagram and The Five Whys Techniques were used in this project.

Ishikawa Diagram was developed by Kaoru Ishikawa, a Japanese quality control expert. Also known as the fishbone or cause-effect diagram, it was originally developed by Ishikawa to explain the relationships between factors, to be a quality control tool (Beckford 2010, 101–102). Ishikawa Diagram can be used to break down a complex problem and focus on it from various perspectives (Williams 2017.)

The diagram can be described as a visualisation of a problem situation, which resembles the bones of a fish, hence the name fishbone diagram. The goal or problem is placed on the right side as the head of the fish. Contributing factors are categorized and placed as the bones. (Beckford, 2010, 101–102.) The diagram then graphically illustrates the relationship between the consequence and all the factors influencing the consequence. The process of constructing an Ishikawa diagram includes identifying the problem, identifying the causes, and then identifying all other factors that affect the occurrence of the cause (Hlevnjak, Dmitrović & Čerepinko 2021.)

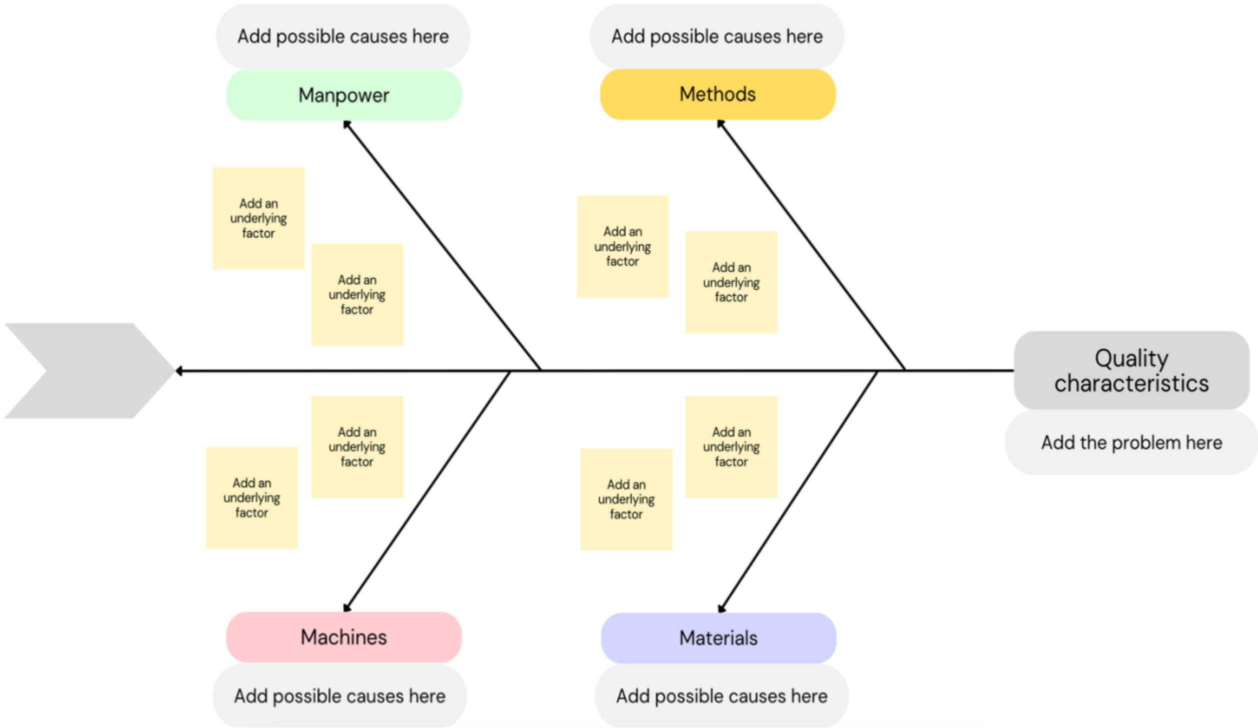

Figure 10. The Ishikawa diagram. (Huynh 2022, adapted from Beckford, 2010, 102.)

When developing a product or service, the Ishikawa diagram is suitable for teamwork; it combines the practice of brainstorming with mind-mapping and focuses the conversation on a problem (Lewis 2020). Some of the benefits of using the Ishikawa Diagram include helping to determine root causes and encourages group participation while having an easy-to-read format (Liliana 2016 1–7).

The Ishikawa Diagram can be argued to be an excellent tool for dissecting a problem on a higher-level. Criticism include that the approach does not carry with it any automatic means to prioritize the issues, and ideas emerging are not constrained by any limitations. The diagram also includes an assumption that cause-effect chains of events are linear. This, according to Beckford (2010), does not take into account the interrelationships between causes and may lead to problems while trying to fix one causes which then leads to changes in another cause. (Beckford 2010, 101–102.)

As limitations of the Ishikawa diagram is previously recognized, a Five Whys Technique can be used as a continuance for the work on Ishikawa Diagram and thus, to have a broader understanding of emerging issues and problems. The Five Whys technique, developed by Sakichi Toyoda for the Toyota Industries Corporation, can be used to solving problems systematically. The process of using the technique begins at the result, the problem, then continues with reflecting on the causes for the problem followed by questioning the answers five times. The principal of the technique is that asking ‘why’ several times, five is merely a reference, to peel away the layers of symptoms that hide the root cause of a problem. (Serrat 2009, 1–4.)

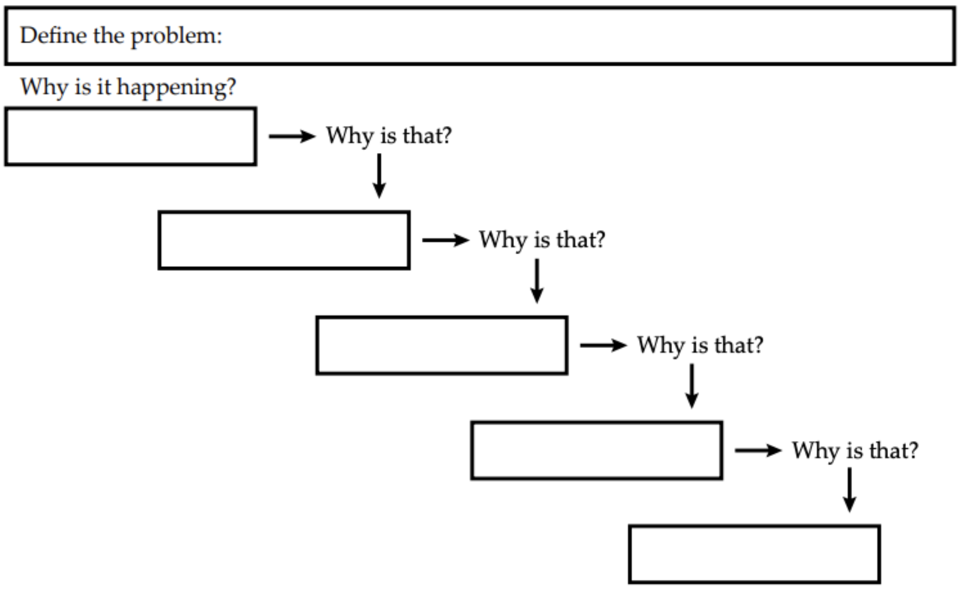

Figure 11. The Five Whys worksheet. (Serrat 2009, 1–4.)

Criticism of the Five Whys technique, according to Serrat (2009, 1–4) fault the tool of being too basic to use in analysing root causes and thus, not providing enough depth needed for fixing the causes. Problems of the technique manifests in following ways:

1. Users tend to stop at symptoms instead of proceeding to lower-level root causes.
2. Users are unable to think beyond their current information and knowledge.
3. The technique does not facilitate or help users to ask the correct questions.
4. Results cannot be validated through repeatability as different teams using the same technique have known to come up with different causes to same problems.

Serrat (2009, 1–4) argues that the technique will suffer if it is applied through deduction only, and to avoid problems, answers to the ‘whys’ need to be verified on during the process.

5.3.4 Six Thinking Hats

According to Edward de Bono (2000, 176) the main difficulty of thinking is complexity as it leads to confusion. While trying to do too much at once, the complexity of dealing with emotions, information, logic, hopes and creativity easily becomes confusion. As a creative thinking tool, de Bono's Six Thinking Hats can be used as a problem solving and brainstorming technique to evaluate problems through different perspectives. Narrow thinking can be prevented, as the Six Thinking Hats technique is designed to break stereotypes and allow innovation to be generated by stimulating creative thinking (Smith, R. 2020).

De Bono (2000, 176–177) explains that there are two main purposes for the Six Thinking Hats Concept. First purpose is to simplify thinking by separately using one perspective at a time. The second purpose has to do with switching the way one thinks, making sure all perspectives are taken into consideration, leading to uncovering options that might otherwise be overlooked.

Figure 12. Six Thinking Hats of Edward de Bono. (Huynh 2022, adapted from de Bono 2000.)

The Six Thinking Hats are not descriptions of people but modes of behaviour. De Bono uses parallel thinking to describe the method, saying that the point of parallel thinking in The Six Thinking Hats technique is that the experience and intelligence of everyone should be used in each direction. Parallel thinking in this context means that at any moment everyone is looking in the same direction - but direction can be changed. In The Six Thinking Hats technique, the hats are symbols for the directions of thinking. (De Bono 2000, 4–7.)

White, red, black, yellow, green, and blue are the six colours of the hats in the Six Thinking Hats method, where the colour of each hat is related to its function. White Hat is neutral and objective, and the wearer of this hat is concerned with facts and figures. Red suggests anger, rage, and emotions. Thus, the Red Hat gives the emotional view. The colour black is associated with sombre and serious, making the Black Hat having a cautious and careful approach and pointing out weaknesses of ideas. The person representing a Yellow Hat is required to be optimistic and spread hopeful and positive thinking. The Green Hat indicates creativity and new ideas, as green reminds of grass, vegetation, and growth. Finally, the colour blue is cool and reminds of the sky above. Therefore, Blue Hat is concerned with control, the processes, and the overall use of the other hats. (De Bono 2000, 13–14.)

6 Conducting the research

This chapter of the report will present the development process for this project and introduce how the study was carried out using the chosen methods and tools. Finally, a sub-chapter was dedicated for discussion about reliability and validity of the study.

6.1 Development process

This study is part of a larger and long-term development initiative in case company X that has plans for sustainability transformation. As part of those plans, the company had identified a need to develop commercial sustainability partnerships. The idea for this study came as the author was part of a group of consultants tasked with making necessary evaluations and plans for the long-term development. The author recognized a gap in commercial partnerships within the area of sustainability and the offerings for B2B segment. It then became a natural decision for the author to take the responsibility for this part of the larger project and make a deep dive into the issue, which then offered this thesis project its topic. Due to the nature of long-term development in the case company, this study was narrowed down to include only parts of the whole process in the development commercial sustainability partnership for B2B customers.

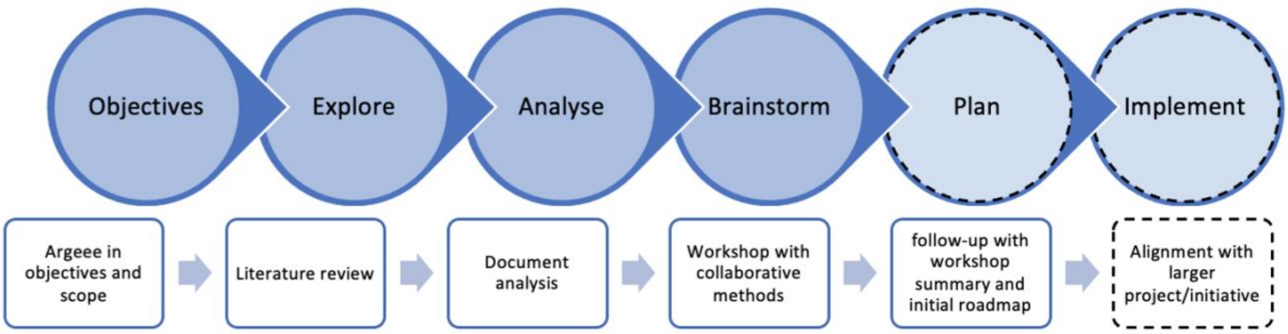

Figure 13. The project plan. (Huynh 2022).

The project started out with the author identifying the needs and objectives, what questions needs to be answered. Next, the author familiarized herself with existing theory and information regarding the topic. At this point a lot of exploration into the theory of sustainability had already been done as part of the larger initiative. Theory about partnerships was used to complement the author's own experience and knowledge of partnerships. The main exploring at this point was done to understand the research approach, methodology and tools. Research approach was easily chosen as a case study, since it was clear from the beginning that this will focus on a narrow issue within the case company. Also deciding on doing a document analysis was very straightforward, as the author was already in the process of going through existing documents on the issue to learn about the current situation for the larger initiative.

The author had an assumption prior to conducting the document analysis, that there are challenges in forming commercial sustainability partnerships for B2B customers otherwise there would have already been success cases to learn from. However, what the author did not know is whether the analysis would present the causes for the challenges or not. At the planning phase of the project, the author had already decided upon arraigning a brainstorming workshop that either focuses on a) identifying the challenges and their root causes, or b) identifying the root causes for challenges found in analysis and work on generating ideas on how to solve them. At the planning phase of the project, it was already decided that idea generation would be the final part of this study as the next steps of the larger initiative had specific resource requirements that would have postponed the finalizing of this report, hence, the project scope was decided.

6.2 Findings from document analysis

Document analysis for this project was done in two phases: collecting the documents and producing an analysis and summery of findings. The collection of material was done during a period of 3 weeks. Analysis of materials took over 2 weeks including a summary of findings. This work was done on top of other work responsibilities and 100 % of working hours was not spent on this project during.

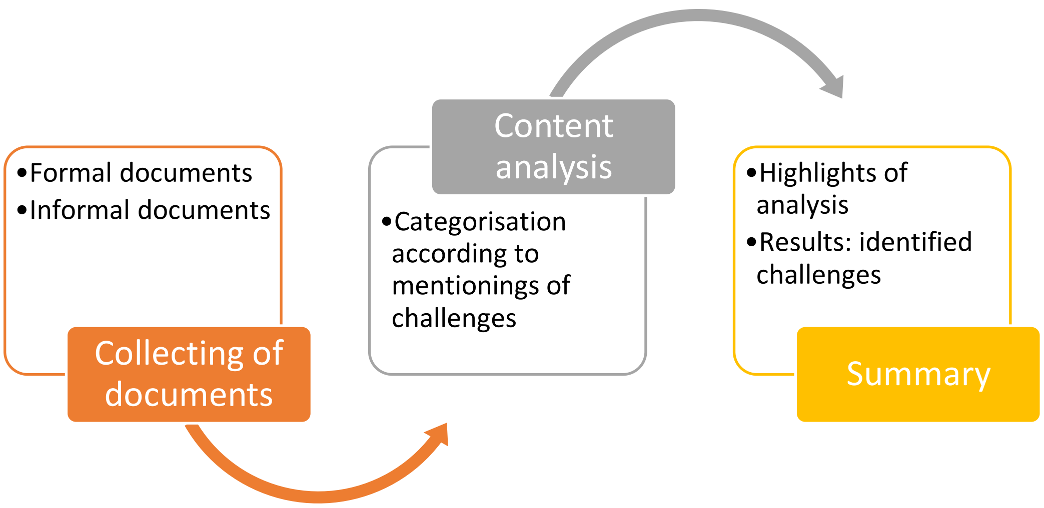

Figure 14. Document analysis. (Huynh, 2022).

The author started the document analysis with collecting formal documents such as implementation plans, evaluation documents, business case drafts, partnership proposals and reviews, strategy papers, meeting minutes, memorandums, etc. Collecting these documents was the easier task, as they are available upon request due to position and work responsibilities of the author. The author went through altogether 28 different formal documents.

Collecting the informal documents presented one of the biggest challenge or the project; how to get access to these informal documents, how to know which documents could be relevant, and more importantly, how to know if some potentially relevant document exists. The author reached out to all relevant stakeholders that could have input on these issues or have access to relevant documents. Author also used materials found on shared files. Informal documents combined 43 separated documents including emails, power point presentations, extracts from chat conversations and informal meeting action point lists. Some email chains were counted as one single document for the sake of practicality.

After the collection of documents, began the content analysis which was done by categorizing the documents according to main themes arising in the documents. The first categorizing was to divide the documents into two: 1) documents that have mentioning of issues that the author identified as a challenge and 2) documents that were deemed issueless by the author. These two categories were then further analysed. Most issues found in the documents had to do with the following themes: process, resources, business case and relevance. The author then proceeded to systematically count how many times each issue comes up in the documents and ranked the potential challenges according to how many times they occur. The author counted 12 separate issues, mentioned 213 times in 59 documents. The rest of the 71 documents didn’t have a mentioning of potential challenges. These issues were then categorized into previously mentioned themes, ranking a) resources as the most mentioned potential challenge, and b) processes as the second most mentioned potential challenge.

Regarding the quality of the analysis, the author relied on her critical thinking in assessing whether a document was relevant, authentic, and credible. The author’s own assessment skills were also essential when the contents of documents were being categorized and the representativeness and meaning was being inspected. As the author was solely responsible for this part of the project as part of the larger initiative, no peer-validation was done for this the analysis, although a colleague of the author was involved in the project and looked through the results of analysis. From reliability and validity point of view, if the document analysis were to be repeated by someone else, there might be a few differences in how they are able to gain access to relevant materials, they could have a more limited access due to their position in the organisation or they could yield more mandate and receive more materials. Also, the way the author using her personal skills to interpret the relevant issues as potential challenge and categorize the documents according to this, had a significant impact on the outcome. Whether another researcher shares the same thoughts on the significance of the issues, would impact the results of the analysis. In a situation that another researcher was to gather the exact documents and agreed on the exact same categorization metrics, the end results would likely be similar, since the part of counting and ranking themes according to number of mentions, is rather a straightforward task.

As the aim of a document analysis is to systematically evaluate the documents by breaking them down and then putting them back together in the form of a description and conclusion (Ojasalo & al. 2015, 136), the author made a summary of the findings and used it as a base for the second part of the research, the brainstorming session.

6.3 Outcomes from using collaborative methods

Right from the beginning, the author had decided to harness the power of collaboration and include colleagues in the next phase, the idea generation phase. Using collaborative methods was also a logical choice when the team of partnership managers had pre-scheduled off-site team meeting days in May 2022, 6 weeks from beginning of the document analysis. The team was to use one workday to workshop on the issue.

Planning for the workshop began simultaneously while the document analysis was being conducted, however the final format for the workshop was decided only after the document analysis was done. During the workshop planning phase the author familiarized herself into the theory of collaborative methods in general, learned about facilitation to ensure the workshop would succeed in achieving its targets. The challenge was to choose which tools in the workshop. Decision to apply brainstorming, Ishikawa Diagram, the Five Whys technique, and the Six Thinking Hats was based on the author’s previous experience in similar workshops. The workshop followed a process visualized in figure 15.

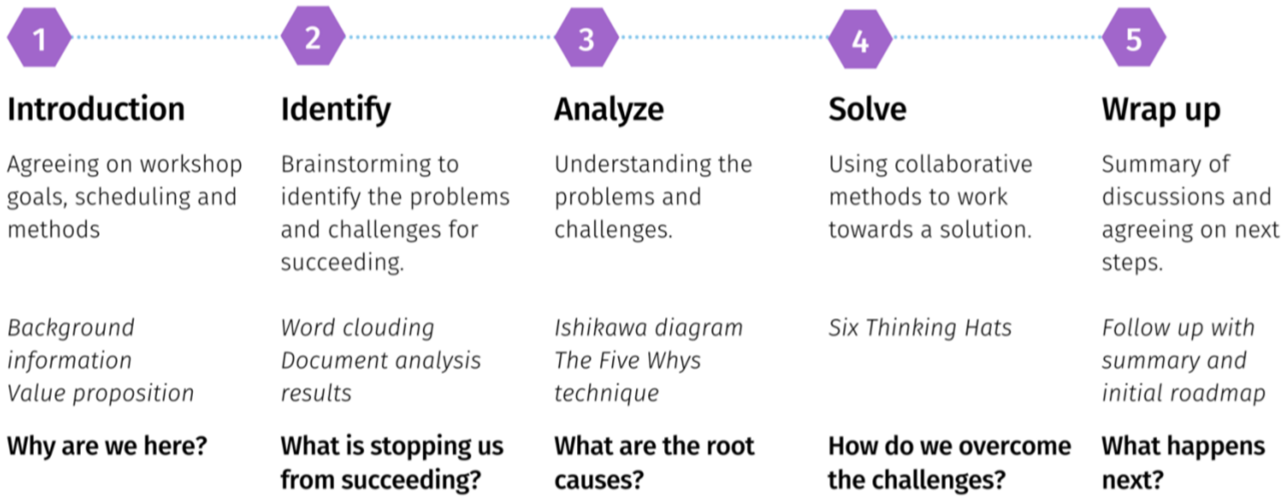

Figure 15. Workshop agenda. (Huynh 2022).

Altogether 14 partnerships managers, consultants and leaders participated in the workshop. The author included, there were two facilitators. The participants were divided into three groups, where one group had 4 members and the other two 5 members. The workshop started with a warm-up intro where two videos were presented, which were custom-made by stakeholders for the sole purpose of setting the expectations for the workshop. The intro included basic information about the themes around the topic (B2B partnerships and commercializing sustainability), but also about trends, current geopolitical situation, and future predictions. In addition, the facilitators spent a moment to talk about the basic of commercial partnerships through the value proposition and the partnership sweet spots as were visualized in figures 1, 2 and 3. As part of the introduction, the groups were introduced three different initiatives and potential partnerships for B2B and sustainability. All three groups then were asked to evaluate the benefits and the value proposition of the potential partnership from all three points of views: the case company X's, the partner's and the customer's. A comprehensive introduction to the topic was used to ensure alignment of expectations and workshop target setting.

After introduction, the first brainstorming session began. Prior to showing results from document analysis, participants were asked to brainstorm the challenges they identified. Interactive online presentation tools were used in this situation to facilitate this. An example of such tool is Mentimeter, described to be an audience engagement platform (Mentimeter 2022). The benefit of using such tool, is that the answers are anonymous, thus, it prevents any barriers caused by peer pressure, which was a major challenge Boddy (2012) mentions in brainstorming. The challenges mentioned by participants were very industry, organisation, and partner organisation specifics. However, all of them could be categorize into the same themes that were discovered in the document analysis. At this point, all the challenges were discussed on a general level without any further evaluation or ranking. The author then proceeded to present the summary of document analysis and the workshop participants proceeded to have a discussion which was then followed with a vote to rank three most important challenges to work upon. Each group was tasked with one challenge.

After agreeing on the main challenges, the workshop proceeded to the second part, which focused on understanding the challenges and what causes them. The author and the other facilitator helped participants to understand the task by talking about an example case of challenges in a partnership. Then they proceeded to show a video by Williams (2017) that explains how the Ishikawa diagram works and explain to use the Five Whys technique. Participants were then given 30 minutes time to work on their own Ishikawa diagram and find the root-causes for the specific challenge chosen for them. Some groups proceeded to work well together; others however felt they needed more guidance in figuring out the “fishbones” i.e., the causes. All the diagrams were then presented to the other groups and discussed as the other facilitator took notes and the author facilitated further dialogues to get as much information as possible. This part of the workshop focused on identifying the problems and understanding the challenges, but solving those challenges were the main theme of the next phase.

The groups then moved on to the final phase of the workshop that focused on generating ideas to solve the challenges which were previously identified. Most of the workshop time was allocated for this phase, as it was the main objective for the workshop. The author planned for this to be done leaning on the experience of previously done value proposition exercise and root-cause evaluation. The groups were tasked with creating a value proposition for three different potential partnership models that had to do with sustainability and focuses on the B2B segment. They needed to identify potential challenges and the root-causes. In addition, they needed to come up with suggestions on how to overcome those challenges. As the groups progressed to this phase, it was clear that unless facilitated, the groups would run into challenges on agreeing on the suitable approach. For this reason, de Bono’s Six Thinking Hats concept was introduced to help the groups to assess the value propositions and agreeing on how to proceed. In the workshop, the team was introduced to the Six Thinking Hats through watching an introductory video (Litmos Heroes 9 December 2014, min. 0:00-1:58) of the method, followed by a more elaborate explanation and examples from the facilitators. The groups then proceeded to spend 60 minutes on working their value propositions and 20 minutes each to present and discuss them.

The main purpose of the workshop was to produce ideas to be used in the next phases of the larger initiative. For this reason, not much time was allocated in the workshop for evaluating the value propositions and all the ideas to overcome the challenges. The ideas were discussed and shortly commented upon after they were presented by each group. The author focused on taking notes for later purposes instead of starting the process of evaluating them during the workshop. However, it was agreed that a follow-up with the partnerships team was needed, and the author would prepare a summary of the workshop findings and a proposal for the roadmap for forming these commercial sustainability partnerships for B2B customers. The follow-up meeting was held two weeks after the workshop. Since the project scope was limited to document analysis and the using of collaborative methods to produce development ideas, this report will not describe the following steps in the development initiative.

As a summary of the findings, the study provided information on the starting point through the document analysis. After the document analysis, the organisation now knows what some of the things are that have been done or have been planned to do regarding the research area. Most importantly, the document analysis provided information on what issues have arisen and how often. The systematically produced information provides the needed data for decision making. Other findings of the study came from the application of collaborative methods, which provided information on how to proceed next after the gaining the situation awareness from document analysis. This was more operational than theoretical. The suggestions for value proposition, the root-cause analysis, and the ideas to overcome challenges provide the basis for creating the roadmap towards new commercial sustainability partnerships for B2B customers.

6.4 Reliability and validity

Reliability refers to the consistency of data collection findings; can another researcher make similar observations and are the conclusions aligned? Validity refers to the used data collection methods and how accurately they measure what is intended to measure, i.e., does the research method answer the research questions. (Altinay & Paraskevas 2008, 40.)

To ensure reliability and validity of the study, first the author explored the theory of research approach, methods and tools and helped the other facilitator also familiarize himself into the same topics. Throughout the data collection of document analysis followed with the actual analysing phase, author documented all relevant steps in a separate excel sheet with additional information such as the rationale for the classification of the document and even the copied specific quotes from the documents for validation purposes. However, as the documents and the project itself is confidential, only personnel involved in the project had access to the materials. This policy extends to the whole research project and its larger initiative; hence, results and materials are not disclosed even internally. All indications of personal data or identifying information were also anonymized to protect the integrity of the research. The author also acknowledges that the steps taken in this project to ensure reliability and validity are due to it being part of the author's thesis, and thus, more extensive measures were taken compared to normal internal projects, where there are different existing procedures to ensure required steps are taken.

Another reliability aspect to consider is the document contents. As mentioned, the challenge remains in document analysis to know whether all gathered documents are relevant or is there any relevant materials that are missing. This was already shortly addressed earlier in this chapter as there is a possibility that if another person were to conduct the research, would that person gather the exact same documents, or would they be able to find other materials that this author was not able to find. This scenario is possible as this is a qualitative research project, where personal input and resources and e.g., time to spare on this process phase, can impact the results. However, the author estimates that the document gathering was done rather successfully as during the data analysis phase, new information didn't arise after a certain number of documents were already categorized, i.e., no new issues were found that could be identified as challenges. Therefore, the author doubts that having more documents to analyse would bring new information that the already analysed documents did not contain.

The author considered using other methods and tools to conduct the study. Instead of document analysis, in-depth interviews were originally planned for data gathering followed by results analysis. Information from the analysis were then planned to use in drafting an initial roadmap/plan, which would then be tested amongst the partnerships managers using e.g., anonymous collaborative tools. However, this approach was deemed resource demanding and time consuming. Also, it would be influenced by opinions of interviewees and depending on their objectivity, the results could have been impacted. The chosen methods and tools were chosen for their practicality and their potential in providing objective information. Also, the available time and resources, such as the already scheduled workshop days provided the needed framework to proceed with the chosen plans.

As this is a case study that focuses on a narrow issue and aimed to learn about a real-life situation, generalization of findings is not possible. What was reality for case company X, might be completely different for other organisations. However, the study does present useful information on how to proceed in similar situation where a potential challenge is recognized but specified information to back the assumption is needed. For the organisation, the outcomes provided needed information to proceed in the next phase of the development initiative; an analysis of the starting point, the identified challenges, and the suggestions to overcome them.

6.5 Development suggestions for project and case company

This study was a part of a larger initiative, a multiyear development plan for case company X. Hence, since the beginning, it had a framework for the different phases of development. However, due to reasons mentioned earlier in this report, i.e., the resources, confidentiality, and long period of time the development expects to take, this study was narrowed down to include only a small part of the whole process. That means that when beginning the study, it was clear what are the needed development steps beyond this study. The study ended with the author making a summary of the findings from workshop and a draft of the roadmap using the information from summary. The summary and draft of roadmap was presented in the follow-up meeting two weeks after the workshop.

The author does have one development suggestion for the project, that is that the analysis would dive deeper into the situations the issues and challenges arise. In this study, the document analysis focused on identifying the issues and challenges without exploring the situations the issues arise. Challenges regarding e.g., resources or processes can be very different in the phase where the organisation is looking for a new partner versus when a current partnership is being managed. This was addressed indirectly when one of the workshop groups were doing their Ishikawa diagrams. Further categorization of content found in document analysis would then reveal more than the current analysis.

The next steps for the project will include, not in this order or importance, feasibility and business case evaluations, formal decision makings to proceed or withdraw, implementation plans and long-term management plans, it is clear for the author, that as an individual study it is somewhat incomplete. However, as part of the larger initiative, this study gives a lot of needed in-dept information about the current situation and perspectives from different stakeholders, to make necessary strategic decisions regarding the issue of commercial sustainability partnerships for b2b customers.

7 Conclusions

This last section of the report presents final conclusions of the study, author's reflections on the work and recommendations for further research.

7.1 Meeting the stated research questions and expected outcomes

The objective of this study was to form an understanding of the current situation of case company X's commercial sustainability partnerships for B2B customers and make development suggestions for future. This was done as two-part research, which was carried out by document analysis and a workshop using collaborative methods.

Before starting the study, the author had two assumptions that she expected to be proven correct through literature review:

1. Sustainability can be commercialized through partnerships.
2. Sustainability partnerships can be formed to offer commercial value for B2B customers.

Chapters 3 and 4 focuses on the theory and literature review. In those chapters, partnerships and sustainability is introduced from several points of views: partnership advantages, different types of partnership, sustainability partnerships and commercializing on sustainability. Sustainability is first presented from a general level and further moved on to exploring sustainability partnerships and finally how to commercialize sustainability through partnerships. The conclusion argument from the literature review is that sustainability can be commercialized through partnerships and since partnerships can offer value to business customers, sustainability partnerships too can create commercial advantage for B2B customers.

Expectations for document analysis was that it should shed light on the situation regarding commercial sustainability partnerships for business customers. This the analysis did provide. Analysis indeed showed that there are challenges involved in the processes and it was proved useful in the second part of the study, as it provided data to validate the challenges individual workshop participants suggested. Expected outcome of the second part of study focusing on identification of challenges and idea generation, was also delivered. The workshop results provided concrete development suggestions that can be used in the next development phases. The results do need more evaluation and formal decision-making whether to progress according to those suggestions or not, but that was not in scope for this study.

Based on the assumptions being validated and expected outcomes being delivered, it is the authors assessment that the research questions were also answered.

1. How can case company X commercialize sustainability in the form of a partnership for B2B customers?
2. What challenges are involved in commercial sustainability partnerships for B2B customers in the case of company X?
3. How can case company X overcome the challenges preventing the forming of commercial B2B partnership within the sustainability area?

Research question number 1 was answered in the study's second part, the workshop, as their final work, participants came up with three different value propositions for commercial sustainability partnership for b2b customers. Research question number 2 was answered both by findings in document analysis and the beginning of the workshop. And finally, research question number 3 was answered as the end product of the workshop presented ideas for developing the situation.

7.2 Thesis process and learning outcomes

The personal expectations and learning objectives the author had for the study were met. Familiarizing herself on the literatures of partnerships gave the author the needed theory basis that both complemented her current experience of the partnership, but also the new ideas to further develop her professional approach to working with partnership. Understanding basics of sustainability and the possibilities for commercialization gave the author the much-needed information to proceed in her work with sustainability partnerships.

The thesis did not proceed according to the typical process of the educational institution. The process was majorly impacted by changes in the organisation and the author's professional responsibilities and position, by the changes in the author's personal life and indirectly by the geopolitical situation. The author first struggled with the actual research topic and scope changed along the way several time due to previously mentioned reasons. However, once the topic, study objective and scope were determined, it was straightforward progressing from planning to execution and finally to reporting. The confidential nature of the business and the study presented its own challenges, as well as the changing environments that the organisation operates, gave the project an extra challenge to deal with. In addition, colleagues resigning and changing positions mid-project caused a significant resourcing challenge for the author. For these reasons, the author was forced to narrow the study very strictly. However, all things considered, the study was successful in its scope.

From this point of view, expected outcomes for personal development was met. The author's professional expertise was improved and as a result, the author has now more experience and capabilities in terms of project management, making document analysis, planning, facilitating, and implementing a workshop, using collaborative methods for problem solving and a large knowledge base of partnerships and sustainability.

7.3 Suggestions for further research

As the actual study results are confidential and organisation related development suggestions were presented in the previous chapter, these development suggestions will focus on the theory and more general research only.

If we are to better understand the commercial possibilities of sustainability partnerships, more research into the theme is needed, whether it is for consumers of business customers. More highlighted case studies of actual commercialized actions in sustainability through partnership. The most challenging part in finding trustworthy objective sources about commercial sustainability partnerships. There are many theories around sustainability and partnerships separately. To some extend there even are theories about sustainability partnerships or commercializing partnerships, however commercial sustainability partnerships were missing from the theory sources, for both consumer and business customer segments.

7.4 Closing words

Sustainability is no longer something that is only nice to have, but an integral part of the business. Organisations are met with expectations from stakeholders to meet their sustainable development plans. The winners in this will be the organisations that identify areas of social impact that fit with its core strategy, products or services and operations. Organisations that make commitments to enable sustainable development through dedication of resources and setting clear key performance indicators to measure achievements. (Carvill, Butler & Evans, 6-7 & 230-234.)

Given the complexity of partnerships and the commercializing potential, there is so much to be discovered in the field of commercial sustainability partnerships for B2B customers. This author argues that the more we learn to commercialize sustainability partnerships, the more competitive advantages and resilience we will gain.

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