

## Welcoming Newcomers in Start-Ups

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# **Welcoming Newcomers in Start-Ups: Challenges for Strategic Internal Communication**

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# **Welcoming Newcomers in Start-Ups: Challenges for Strategic Internal Communication**

Start-ups operating under conditions of uncertainty and limited resources face several challenges for strategic internal communication. Meanwhile, their efforts in welcoming newcomers are of vital importance for the achievement of organisational success. This study investigates what the start-up context means for strategic organisational entry communication. Following a review of research at the intersection of HRM and entrepreneurship with implications for strategic entry communication, entrepreneurs and newcomers in six start-ups were interviewed. A thematic analysis resulted in the identification of three themes of challenges for strategic communication connected to welcoming newcomers in start-ups, namely: Aspects related to the overall organisational context and situation, aspects related to newcomers' job content and design, and finally entrepreneurs' communication skills, knowledge, and time resources. The discussion shows implications of the start-up context for strategic organisational entry communication as regards opportunities for strategic communication, as well as the content and form of the strategic entry communication. The study contributes to the body of knowledge on strategic communication in start-ups by drawing on research from the intersection of HRM and entrepreneurship, as well as generating new empirical insights highlighting challenges to strategic internal communication in start-ups, especially for the purpose of welcoming newcomers.

## **Introduction**

Welcoming newcomers in a way which enables them to quickly 'get up to speed' is central to newcomer and organisational performance (Cooper-Thomas, 2009; Rollag et al., 2005). However, although we begin to have a better understanding of what is different about practicing HRM in start-ups (Van Lancker et al., in press), and some studies focus on aspects of start-ups' strategic communication (Wiesenberg et al., 2020), little research has focused on strategic communication related to the HR practice of welcoming newcomers in the context of start-ups. As a contribution to this line of

study, this paper specifically focuses on challenges for strategic communication connected to welcoming newcomers in start-ups.

Following Zerfass et al.'s (2018) definition of strategic communication as encompassing "[...] all communication that is substantial for the survival and sustained success of an entity." (p. 493), HR communication during the entry process can be characterised as strategic communication, since it e.g. entails introducing newcomers to organisational values and practices, and enabling them to fulfil duties connected to their organisational roles (e.g. Taormina, 1997), ultimately enabling them to contribute to reaching organisational objectives.

Within the cross-disciplinary realm of HRM research in entrepreneurial organisations, and of special interest to strategic communication within these, Welbourne and Katz (2002) note that "When any organization is born, the founder does the relationship management [...]" (p. xii). This means that entrepreneurs' communication skills, including their skills in and resources for strategic communication, are of central importance. However, additional research has pointed out that in entrepreneurial firms "The adoption of HRM practices is rarely strategic [...]" (Cassell & Nadin, 2008, p. 74), and Cardon and Stevens (2004) noted that HRM in new ventures can be characterised as "muddle through practices" (p. 302). Considering the importance of human resources for start-ups and the emergence of internal strategic communication practices and products in this type of organisation (as noted by Wiesenberg et al., 2020), and that employment of new organisational members is often a learning experience for entrepreneurs (David & Watts, 2008), it is relevant to investigate what this means for strategic communication in the process of welcoming newcomers to these organisations.

Based on the tension between the importance of strategic communication with newcomers on the one hand, and ‘muddle through HRM practices’ in start-ups on the other, in this paper, I address the research question “*What are the **challenges for strategic organisational entry communication in start-ups?***”, in order to identify challenges and obstacles to strategic entry communication connected to the specific context, with the purpose of discussing their nature and implications.

I first conduct a review of existing literature on HRM and strategic internal communication in entrepreneurial firms, and then analyse empirical material from a case study of Danish information and communication technology (ICT) start-ups. The result is a contribution showing three overall sources and aspects of challenges, two levels of drivers in relation to these, and through this how the start-up context has implications for strategic organisational entry communication, as regards opportunities for strategic communication, as well as the content and form of strategic entry communication.

### ***Theoretical framework***

I follow the definition of strategic communication as “[...] all communication that is substantial for the survival and sustained success of an entity. Specifically, strategic communication is the purposeful use of communication by an organization or other entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals.” (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 493), but I focus on a particular aspect of strategic internal communication, namely strategic organisational entry communication. Communication practices play an important role for the HRM-performance link (Den Hartog et al., 2013), and as communication with newcomers thus has the potential to affect organisational operations, it is central considering the focus of the above definition as regards achieving organisational goals.

Strategic organisational entry communication, as a type of strategic communication, can be defined as all communication during organisational entry that is substantial for enabling newcomers to take up organisational roles, master tasks, and ultimately contribute to organisational goals. As such it includes (but is not limited to) communication which welcomes newcomers to an organisation and helps them learn about and make sense of their new job, and communication where newcomers negotiate (e.g. role responsibilities) with organisational agents.

I draw on a communicative (Bullis, 1993; Scott & Myers, 2010) and interactionist (Griffin et al., 2000) approach to the process of organisational socialisation (OS), i.e. the process whereby newcomers become integrated members of organisations (Cooper-Thomas & Anderson, 2006).

OS is considered a communicative process (Bullis, 1993) and activity (Barge & Schlueter, 2004), e.g. as it entails that individuals are “[...] engaged in acquiring, sharing, and processing information. This assumption creates a specifically communication-based model [...]” (Bullis, 1993, p. 11). As such, socialisation is not just the result of either organisational actions towards newcomers, or individual actions based on needs (Bullis, 1993). Here, I thus focus on aspects related to socialisation as a communicative process which, in the context of start-ups, can be challenging, and show that there are implications for strategic organisational entry communication, as regards opportunities for, content, and form of this type of strategic communication. Thus, in relation to strategic communication research and practice, this study makes a contribution by addressing Ashforth et al.’s (2014) call for OS researchers to “[...] focus on more diverse settings in order to explore the otherwise hidden contingencies and boundary conditions of our models.” (p. 31).

As regards the interactionist perspective of OS, this characterises research which recognises that socialisation is something that both organisations and newcomers actively engage in, and that they influence each other, i.e. the two parties interact (Griffin et al., 2000). Thus, I view the process of organisational entry as something that newcomers and entrepreneurs (and other socialisation agents) negotiate and achieve in collaboration. Considering the central role of all, including new, organisational members in start-ups, this perspective is more relevant to the organisational setting being studied.

Heide et al. (2018) showed “[...] the importance of manager’s and coworker’s interactions as constitutive of strategic communication [...]” (p. 456). By following the interactionist perspective on OS and thus focusing on both entrepreneurs and newcomers, this study aligns with their call for studying strategic communication as accomplished by multiple actors. This makes it possible to identify challenges to and implications for strategic organisational entry communication, viewed from the perspective of entrepreneurs as well as newcomers.

The interactionist perspective also links to the view of communication adopted here, as there is a link between transactional models of communication and this interactionist perspective. The transactional models consider communication as an accomplishment between participants (rather than the transmission of a message from a sender to a receiver), and the interactionist perspective views socialisation as an accomplishment between actors as well (and not just something one party, e.g. the organisation, does to another, e.g. the newcomer). Regarding communication as a transactional accomplishment, and thus focusing on the participants in relation to each other, is thus congruent with the interactionist perspective in OS.



Poole (2011) hints at this connection between an interactionist perspective in OS and the need for a transactional view of communication, as he mentions that whereas socialisation is often conceptualised as a “[...] one-way process in which the organization shapes the employee [...]”, we should instead “[...] think of it as an interaction process involving both the employee and organization [...]”, as the newcomer learns and adjusts, but existing employees and the organisation as such are also affected by the new employee (p. 256). This is consistent with more recent views of strategic communication acknowledging its potential emergent character (Winkler & Etter, 2018) and the implications hereof. For instance, newcomers’ (pro)active contributions to role definitions and task requirements possibly impact how and whether organisational goals are reached. Following this communicative and interactionist frame means that both the individual and the organisational level of analysis need to be considered when studying the challenges in focus here. As such, the focus on challenges includes zooming in on challenges to communicative interactions in entry communication, which can be constituted by hurdles and obstacles to strategic communication. I show where such challenges stem from, and discuss how they affect opportunities for communication, the form of the communication, and the content communicated about.

### ***Literature review: HRM and strategic internal communication in start-ups***

While we know about communication-related HR practices, including entry practices, in larger organisations (Klaas & Klimchak, 2006), relatively less is known about such practices and the conditions for them in new ventures, as this is a more recent interest; e.g. Van Lancker et al. (in press) note that although research on HRM in start-ups has picked up since the 2000s, there are still underexplored areas. In this review, I first explore literature on entry-related HR(M) and socialisation in general, with a focus on

their importance for organisations and links to communication. With this background, I then focus on start-ups as a different context, and the communication challenges related to entry HRM in start-ups suggested by previous literature.

Cooper-Thomas and Anderson (2006) note that part of the practical aim of OS research is to “[...] inform everyday HRM practices including those of selection, induction, and job-entry training.” (p. 506), and list five overall reasons for the importance of socialisation, and hence communicative processes related to this: 1) Failing to socialise newcomers is connected to higher levels of employee turnover, this is not expedient considering that recruitment is costly, and socialisation helps achieve the full benefit of these efforts; relatedly 2) Newcomers are hired for a reason, i.e. to contribute, and socialisation facilitates this, e.g. through newcomers learning about performance criteria and expected role performance; in addition 3) Newcomers need to learn about a range of dimensions to function in the organisation (as indicated by Chao et al., 1994, below); 4) Newcomers’ initial socialisation has lasting effects on adjustment; and 5) Changes in organisations and the world of work has led to increasing turnover, making socialisation an increasingly recurring phenomenon.

Importantly, Bauer et al. (2014) note that “[...] the communication process can truly help new employees and organizational insiders create a successful environment for socialization.” (p. 53). However, socialisation is not just a process involving communication, it is by itself “[...] an inherently communicative process [...]” (Bullis, 1993, p. 10), which “[...] is linked to employee and organizational success.” (p. 10). Thus, considering the descriptions and importance of socialisation indicated above, entry-communication as a particular form of internal communication within the domain of HRM is meant to introduce newcomers and enable them to function, so they can ultimately perform and thus contribute towards organisational goals.

In their original typology of content dimensions newcomers need to learn about, Chao et al. (1994) include: Performance proficiency, people, politics, language, organisational goals and values, and history. I.e., learning about these dimensions, some of which are directly related to strategic aspects, is considered instrumental for newcomers to become integrated and effective contributors.

However, when discussing mechanisms for communicating about these, because there has often been a focus on established organisations, these are assumed to have HR departments (Aldrich & Auster, 1986) and the necessary resources for planning and conducting welcoming programs, facilitating the purpose of managing, motivating, and training newcomers, i.e. helping them get up to speed and become productive, while reducing turnover and facilitating retainment through engagement and development. But context matters; Klaas and Klimchak (2006) note that HR scholars have studied “[...] a set of HR practices that, collectively, are thought to help firms address the pathologies and challenges associated with large, stable, and complex organizations. But small firms face very different challenges and likely have different organizational pathologies.” (p. 248). Here, I focus on identifying pathologies related to strategic entry communication in start-ups. In a recent study, Wiesenberg et al. (2020) noted that “[...] HR and employer branding (in sum, *internal communication*) are a key challenge in strategic start-up communication [...]” (p. 61, emphasis in original). In this review, I draw on literature at the intersection of HRM and entrepreneurship, to lay out previously identified contextual aspects that affect HRM in start-ups, especially focusing on elements with implications for strategic organisational entry communication.

The 2000s saw the emergence of calls for more research on HRM in entrepreneurial organisations (e.g. Tansky & Heneman, 2003). Authors have long noted

that new ventures have a ‘liability of newness’ (Stinchcombe, 1965) compared with more mature companies, and that there is also a distinct ‘liability of smallness’ (e.g. Aldrich & Auster, 1986). Stinchcombe (1965) introduced ‘liability of newness’ as a concept to cover the range of challenges faced by new organisations, as opposed to more mature ones, such as dealing with new roles, ensuring performance, and building social relationships and ties to stakeholders (Cafferata et al., 2019). ‘Liability of smallness’ was later conceptualised by Aldrich and Auster (1986), and covers challenges faced by small (i.e. not necessarily new) organisations, such as resource constraints as regards finances and attracting skilled employees (Abatecola et al., 2012). These notions are also influential in research about HRM practices in entrepreneurial ventures (Barrett & Mayson, 2008), especially as liability of smallness and resource poverty “[...] presents unique challenges to managing human resources in small firms.” (Barrett & Mayson, 2008, p. 111). As I show in my findings, effects of these liabilities for instance occur as challenges for entrepreneurs when communicating about newcomers’ roles, which can lead newcomers to experience role ambiguity. However, this could also lead newcomers and entrepreneurs to engage in dialogue about (new) roles. Such conversations relate to strategic communication, for instance as discussions about role responsibilities link to role incumbents’ contributions to reaching organisational goals.

Previous research at the intersection of HRM and entrepreneurship has pointed to a range of aspects that can challenge and have implications for strategic internal communication connected to welcoming newcomers. These include: Resource constraints (financial, material, human) (Cardon & Stevens, 2004; Field & Coetzer, 2011), entrepreneurs’ lack of experience as personnel/HR managers (Cardon & Stevens, 2004), fit and culture (Cardon & Tolchinsky, 2006), recruiting through networks (Leung

et al., 2006), informality (David & Watts, 2008), lack of structure (Klaas & Klimchak, 2006), and uncertainty (Alvarez & Molloy, 2006). As regards the latter, Klaas and Klimchak (2006) note that:

Emphasis might also be given to the lack of structure in terms of job expectations and in terms [of, sic] formal processes within the firm. Another key component might relate to uncertainty that small firms face and the effect this has on the ability of managers to provide structure or make commitments [...] (p. 248-249).

The various aspects above underscore why “The nature of human resource management in small firms is understood to be characterized by ad hoc and idiosyncratic practices.” (Barrett & Mayson, 2008, p. 111). In addition, the mentioned aspects are all likely to have implications for strategic organisational entry communication, especially considering that these link to HR in start-ups being characterised as “muddle through practices” (Cardon & Stevens, 2004, p. 302), and that several authors highlight that HRM practices in start-ups are likely to be ad hoc and emergent (Barrett & Mayson, 2008; David & Watts, 2008).

This review has identified the importance of OS and entry related communication in general, as well as aspects related to the start-up context and entrepreneurs that can then present challenges for strategic entry communication with newcomers in these organisations. As this paper focuses specifically on strategic communication as part of and during organisational entry, the knowledge from this review will be combined with an empirical study of six start-ups, in order to further explore the nature of such communicative processes in these organisations, with a focus on sources and aspects of challenges and obstacles. I end the paper with a discussion of three specific ways in which these have implications for strategic entry communication with newcomers in start-ups.

## **Methods**

A qualitative research strategy and a case study design were employed. The case study design, data collection, and method for analysis are elaborated in the following sections.

### ***Data collection***

#### *Cases*

The study is an instrumental (Stake, 1995), embedded multi-design (Maaløe, 2002) case study. A case approach is instrumental for the purpose of learning about strategic entry communication in start-ups as case studies are relevant for research where appreciating the context of phenomena is important (Hartley, 2004). As an embedded multi-design (Maaløe, 2002), the study includes multiple overall cases (start-ups), with entrepreneurs and newcomers as embedded cases.

The focus on ICT start-ups specifically was motivated by the fact that this is a knowledge-intensive industry characterised by a ‘war for talent’ as (in a Danish context) there is a significant gap between demand for and supply of skilled candidates. This amplifies the challenge of getting newcomers onboard and retaining them. ICT is itself a broad category, here focus is on software companies. Thus, the cases are both ‘within industry’ and within certain parts of that industry. This means that they share some operating conditions, e.g. as regards the amount of work and consideration going into building their technical foundations, which is also seen in the findings as central topics of strategic communication.

A purposeful selection strategy (Neergaard, 2007) was employed, as cases were identified and selected based on a set of relevance criteria (Maaløe, 2002). These were based on defining start-ups in the ICT industry as new ventures whose value proposition and core offering are centrally related to information and communication technology,

and where entrepreneurs play a vital role for the strategic direction and work. In addition, the start-ups needed to be hiring or have hired recently. Finally, I focused on a specific geographical area, as I selected ICT start-ups in and around the city of Aarhus, Denmark. The geographical proximity means that the case start-ups are all located near Aarhus' relevant educational institutions, other ICT companies, and the various communities focused on and incubators for start-ups (some of which are connected to the local university). Thus, they are to some extent part of the same geographical start-up 'eco-system'.

The selection was oriented towards information-richness (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Whereas random selection is related to sampling and generalising to a population, information-oriented selection has more to do with information-rich cases, the purpose being: "To maximize the utility of information from small samples and single cases. Cases are selected on the basis of expectations about their information content." (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 230). To illustrate: As Table 1 shows, Case 4 differs from the other start-ups as it was started in a different way, the interviewed manager was hired, and he did not contribute to the initial funding. The other case start-ups are bootstrap, initially funded by the entrepreneurs. I included Case 4 because it was to some extent different from the others, and potentially particularly information rich, as they had an ambitious and explicit goal for growth in number of employees.

Not all the start-ups I contacted based on my criteria ended up being a case. Some declined to participate, e.g. due to pressure of time, kind of start-up (e.g. if it was intended as a one-person business), or because they were not hiring. And some of those who agreed to participate eventually did not hire. Before contacting a potential case start-up, I would check for job postings online, although this did not always mean that they ended up hiring someone.

The final selection and number of case start-ups was thus the result of different factors. The expectation about information-richness was coupled with the practical aspect of whether the start-ups had recently hired or were hiring. Although the companies were not all founded in the same month of the same year, they were all at the recruiting stage. A central implication of this is that the entrepreneurs now have to delegate or at least plan their work with other incumbents, creating a need for strategic communication.

There were six case start-ups in total. One served as a pilot, and material from the remaining five start-ups constitutes the data for analysis. Case 1 (the pilot), was identified through my personal network. Other cases were identified through the websites thehub.dk where IT start-ups can post job openings, and virk.dk where it is possible to search for companies in Denmark through industry codes (e.g. ‘computer programming’). On both websites, but especially on virk.dk since it is linked with the Danish central company register, it is also possible to see when the company was first founded/registered as such (see Table 1). Case 2 and 6 were identified via thehub.dk, Case 4 and 5 were identified on virk.dk (I looked for companies in Aarhus registered under ‘computer programming’ and similar industry codes). Finally, Case 3 is an example of snowball sampling (Atkinson & Flint, 2001): the manager in Case 4 mentioned Case 3, and offered to be a reference.

In each start-up, I conducted interviews with the entrepreneur(s) with personnel responsibility and newcomers. Thus, I include the employee perspective called for by Wiesenberg et al. (2020). Interviewed newcomers had a tenure of approximately two to four months. Table 1 presents an overview of case start-ups and the number of informants from each.

**--- Insert Table 1 here ---**



Informed consent was obtained in the beginning of the interviews. To ensure anonymity, start-ups are referred to by numbers. References to informants include start-up number and whether the informant is an entrepreneur/manager (M) or newcomer (NC). E.g. 'C2/NC1' indicates the first newcomer interviewed in start-up 2.

### *Interviews*

The interviews were semi-structured, with the addition of the use of narrative techniques (e.g. Hollway & Jefferson, 1997) for the newcomer interviews. The interview guides were originally designed with a focus on processes of OS, and in this regard knowledge communication, in start-ups. As such, the interviews feature strategic communication linked to newcomer entry. Appendix 1 and 2 show template interview guides.

For the entrepreneurs, I e.g. asked what they thought was necessary to know about the start-up in order for newcomers to get off to a good start. I also asked specifically what they would do when a newcomer entered, and how and where newcomers could find information and learn about different aspects. In addition to enquiring about what strategic communication newcomers are met with, how, and where/by whom, this is also related to how entrepreneurs attempt to 'give sense' or help newcomers make sense.

As regards the newcomers, I e.g. asked them how they had been introduced (to tasks, the organisation, colleagues), what information they had received, and what they had done to learn more and get answers. I also asked whether they had learned something important along the way which would have been expedient to know earlier. These questions thus also touch on what the newcomers could beneficially have learned earlier, which would e.g. have helped them make decisions or prioritise tasks. I took into account Ashforth et al.'s (2007) comments that 'how' OS is done can be important

beyond content, e.g. by asking *how* they had been introduced, instead of just *what* they had been introduced to.

In addition, the questions were guided by the interactionist approach, i.e. understanding OS as achieved by multiple parties in interaction (Griffin et al., 2000). This means that, for instance, in relation to newcomers' role in the start-ups (as new companies), I asked entrepreneurs what they expected of newcomers and what they thought it would take for a newcomer to succeed.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Quotes in Danish were translated by the author.

### ***Data analysis***

I conducted a thematic analysis, following Owen's (1984) criteria for identifying themes: *recurrence*, *repetition* and *forcefulness* (p. 275). Recurrence focuses on sections with overlap in meaning, even though different words are used (Owen, 1984). Repetition focuses on "[...] repetition of key words, phrases, or sentences." (Owen, 1984, p. 275), i.e. repeated use of the same words (p. 275), whereas recurrence "[...] involves an implicit recurrence of meaning using different discourse." (p. 275). I primarily drew on these two criteria in refining themes, especially the notion of 'recurrence' at the meaning level. This means that themes 'emerged' from something that 'cut across' accounts. However, I sometimes also used the forcefulness criterion as a supportive criterion, in terms of understanding it as emphasis. In spoken discourse, forcefulness includes e.g. volume and dramatic pauses that emphasise some words or sentences over others (Owen, 1984, p. 275).

The coding and analytical process consisted of two cycles and multiple steps. The two cycles were (1) individual annotation and categories, and (2) categories and

themes across. As regards the specific steps, after (re)reading the transcripts, I In Vivo annotated the individual interviews and refined categories within each by clustering the annotations via pattern coding (Saldaña, 2013). I then compared and refined categories across the interviews, taking into consideration possible differences between entrepreneurs' and newcomers' accounts. Finally, I refined the categories into themes by considering the content of the categories and the nuances and potential overlaps between them. This led to three overall themes.

## **Findings**

The findings include three interrelated themes covering challenges to strategic organisational entry communication in start-ups, namely: Aspects related to the overall organisational context and situation, aspects related to newcomers' job content and design, and entrepreneurs' communication skills, knowledge, and time resources. Table 2 gives an overview of the main elements of each theme.

--- Insert Table 2 here ---

The **following** presentation is structured around these **themes** as sources and aspects of challenges. However, it is also organised in relation to the interactionist framework and context focus, as the analysis shows both individual and organisational level drivers of the challenges. Thus, in relation to the overall theme structure, I highlight which factors are individual level factors having to do with entrepreneurs and newcomers, and which are organisational level factors related to the start-up context (which often affect individual level factors).

### ***Challenges and impact of organisational context and situation***

The entrepreneurs and newcomers point to a range of aspects of the organisational context and situation that have implications for strategic organisational entry

communication. These include resources, the stage of development of the start-up, and growth. Thus, these aspects show that ‘liability of newness’ (Stinchcombe, 1965), and ‘liability of smallness’ (Aldrich & Auster, 1986) also present challenges to strategic organisational entry communication.

#### *Organisational level resources*

Resources affect the conditions for the “[...] purposeful use of communication [...]” (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 487) as regards strategic organisational entry communication, but also constitutes a topic for discussions with newcomers about the operating conditions of start-ups.

A central focus point regarding resource-scarcity in start-ups has been money. In the studied cases, financial resources had implications for who and how many were hired, and their terms of employment. The more sporadic and limited presence of part-timers, remote newcomers, and interns is a challenge for strategic communication in the start-ups, e.g. C6/M2 considered introducing video briefings to keep these employees updated on organisational developments.

The contextual level financial resource perspective links with the individual level aspect of experience as a number of entrepreneurs mentioned that their tight budgets influenced which candidates they could employ. This also has strategic implications. C5/M1 said that he onboarded ‘green’ (inexperienced) people, who asked very practical questions, and that if he was onboarding experienced people, they would be more likely to ask questions about strategy. Across the start-ups, there are indications of these differences between the questions asked and information sought by different groups of newcomers, with more experienced newcomers talking more about strategy, planning, and future outlook. It suggests that experienced newcomers are more likely to start conversations with explicitly strategic content than less experienced newcomers.

Finally, time is a resource affecting and a topic of strategic communication.

Time pressure has implications for the focus on and content of the strategic organisational entry communication. Start-ups often need to get their product to market quickly. As such, one hurdle for the strategic organisational entry communication is the importance that entrepreneurs and newcomers attribute to it, e.g. as planning and executing long onboarding processes is not always prioritised or feasible. This links to an identified ‘task’ as opposed to ‘organisation’ focus which I return to in later sections.

### *Stage of development and growth*

Innovation itself presents challenges to strategic communication with newcomers. E.g. C4/NC6 said that there had not been much introduction because “there is nothing to introduce” (lines 866-867), and this newcomer and C3/M1 both mentioned that the first deliveries to customers would partly shape the direction of the start-ups. This affects the context for the strategic communication, and means that what a newcomer is presented with (timeline, goals) can quickly change.

As the life of start-ups is marked by contingencies, this holds the two-fold challenge of communicating strategically about how to handle these, while operating and engaging in strategic communication knowing that they will occur, but not being able to foresee what they will be. E.g. C6/M1 mentioned that the “snapshot” of a start-up changes rapidly (lines 440-446), and C4/NC8 mentioned that the business plan for the start-up was being developed while they had already started working. This has implications for strategic communication, both as regards communicating about the offering and goals, and communicating about organisational practices. In addition, it affects the practices where strategic communication takes place. Thus, it affects the content (what is talked about), and the form and process (how).

Several entrepreneurs touched on the emergence of their procedures for onboarding. This relates to constraints on financial and time resources (organisational level), as well as to entrepreneurs' competences (individual level), such as experience with personnel management. E.g. in Case 6 onboarding procedures were characterised as trial-and-error, and C6/M2 cited resource constraints as a challenge for what they would like to do when welcoming newcomers.

Entrepreneurs and newcomers agreed that it can be easier to have an influence in a start-up. However, this 'Room to influence' was also mentioned as a challenge, e.g. because while newcomers are expected to take on ownership and responsibility, the frameworks for doing so might not exist. This lack of framework (e.g. procedures, plans), indication of direction, and structure can make it difficult to grasp where and how to contribute. This can lead to uncertainty, affecting performance, ultimately affecting sustained success. E.g. C4/NC6 said that, although it was a start-up, it could not stay a "muddled place", but had to set a course (lines 674-680).

### ***Challenges and impact of newcomers' job content and design***

Aspects related to newcomers' job content and design, which have implications for strategic organisational entry communication, include elements such as: Job descriptions, function, role, and tasks. In addition to contributing to overall organisational discussions, the newcomers often play a (central) part in defining their roles and tasks.

#### ***Job descriptions***

It is recognised in the research literature that start-ups have a need for employing candidates who are flexible (Cardon & Tolchinsky, 2006), as their roles and tasks can change according to what is needed at different moments in the development of the

company. Thus, it can be difficult to present clear job descriptions, if entrepreneurs do not yet know which assignments will be connected to a specific position. E.g. C4/NC1 and NC3 referred to the descriptions of jobs during their job interviews as “fluffy”. However, it can also be problematic if a candidate has been presented with a specific job description and it turns out upon entry that the newcomer will also have to handle other tasks (C4/NC8). This can violate the psychological contract (see Rasmussen, 2020). This double-edged challenge, being clear about what the candidate will work with while allowing for the need for flexibility and room for development, is thus a challenge for the strategic communication of start-ups who are recruiting.

At the same time, unclear job descriptions can lead newcomers to be uncertain about what is expected from them and when assignments have been solved satisfactorily, constituting challenges to evaluating performance, and as noted in the literature review, facilitating performance is a central purpose of entry practices (Cooper-Thomas, 2009; Rollag et al., 2005). This difficulty related to expectations was exemplified by C4/NC8, who, after having been employed for a month, called a meeting with his manager and asked “am I doing what I am expected to be doing?” (line 765).

Finally, it can be difficult for entrepreneurs to describe positions and functions for newcomers who have a different background from them. I return to this in later sections.

### *Function and role*

Newcomers’ functions and roles also have implications for strategic organisational entry communication. In Case 3 and 4, newcomers took part in deciding on and building the system architecture, contributing to major business decisions as ‘strategic actors’ (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 499). However, they mentioned that it could be challenging to

engage in strategic decisions when they were still making sense of existing products and decisions of the start-up (C3/NC1; Rasmussen, 2019).

In addition, newcomers' functions and roles were, in some cases, very amenable, and this created situations where their participation in the strategic organisational entry communication was conducive to individualisation and explicit agency. This is illustrated by a Case 6 entrepreneur:

[...] so they come in and then it is . 'we are probably roughly going in that direction over there that is your responsibility', [...] the company always sells it job adverts on freedom, that is a giant challenge to give a new employee freedom that is not a plus for many people to come in and get freedom, it must also give an immense insecurity as an employee to come in and then . not have specifically defined what is it I am supposed to do (C6/M1, lines 114-119).

This entrepreneur also mentioned hiring employees for areas that he and other partners were not knowledgeable about. Thus, for the entrepreneurs who were engineers and developers, a challenge in their strategic entry communication was defining clear ideas of newcomers' contributions, due to their lack of knowledge about the possibilities in certain types of coding (C6/NC1), and about how product designers (C6/NC2) work.

The stage of development can have implications for how strong a concept of the start-up entrepreneurs have, for instance influencing whether they introduce newcomers to pre-conceived ideas about what they want in a role, or whether they develop ideas and roles with newcomers. For some newcomers, this led to uncertainties about expectations. Kammeyer-Mueller and Wanberg (2003) note that "Ambiguous situations with unclear role expectations may make it difficult for individuals to assess where to direct their efforts, resulting in confusion and dissatisfaction [...]" (p. 781). Besides



comparing to experiences described by C4/NC8, the aspect of uncertainty related to prioritising tasks was mentioned by both newcomers in Case 6.

Furthermore, lack of titles and defined roles meant that some newcomers were unclear about what other people in the organisation did, or who to go to with specific questions. Also, the role aspect does not just have to do with figuring out what other people do, but also what one's own role is, and where one then fits in. Gaining role clarity can be difficult when the organisation is permeated by newness and the structure and perhaps even focus is continually developing. Thus, even though there might be reasons for initially wanting to avoid titles (such as aiming for role innovation), it also comes with a set of challenges.

### *Tasks*

For some newcomers communication about their tasks was marked by lack of specificity, not only as regards what the tasks were, but also how they should be prioritised and solved. The OS literature distinguishes between serial and disjunctive socialisation (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Serial socialisation involves a current/previous role occupant showing a newcomer how that role and the connected tasks should be performed. Thus, most newcomer entries in start-ups are likely disjunctive, as they often take up roles not previously occupied by anyone.

There were differences in how specific and pre-defined newcomers' tasks (and roles) were across the start-ups, and this was sometimes also related to their degree of previous experience. In Case 2 (NC1) and 5, newcomers did not take part in defining and developing projects to the same extent as the experienced newcomers in Case 3 and 4. In Case 3, newcomers participated in discussing and choosing which IT tools were appropriate for the work they would be doing. In Case 4, there was no pre-existing product, and newcomers took part in defining tasks, and even, to some extent, the goals.

Thus, whereas Chao et al. (1994) list goals as one of the six dimensions newcomers need to learn about, here newcomers do not just receive information about goals and how to work towards them, but take part in defining both goals and relevant practices to achieve them. This has implications for the extent to which newcomers are directly involved in strategic conversations.

In the start-ups with less experienced newcomers (Case 2, Case 5, C6/NC1), there was a tendency to focus entry communication on tasks, and giving less attention to overall organisational and long term aspects (e.g. C6/M2 mentioned this task focus, and the interview with C2/M1 also suggested this). Here, ‘the bigger picture’ seems to sometimes have been missing; the interviews suggest that some newcomers needed more information about the organisation and practices in order to handle their tasks. The idea of ‘overview’, getting a holistic understanding of the start-up, and of the background and reasoning for decisions made, surfaced recurrently. The lack of ‘bigger picture’ communication might have been due to constraints on entrepreneurs’ time as well as to some degree being attributable to their communication skills and/or experience with onboarding. These topics are the subjects of the final theme.

### ***Challenges and impact of entrepreneurs’ communication skills, knowledge, and time resources***

Finally, individual level aspects related to the entrepreneurs that have implications for strategic organisational entry communication include entrepreneurs’ skill sets, especially communication skills, their knowledge, and resources (time and presence).

#### ***Communication skills***

Some - especially younger - entrepreneurs pointed to their own communication skills as a challenge. E.g. the entrepreneurs in Case 6 reflected on wanting newcomers to get to

know more about the organisation, for reasons of motivation (C6/M1), but also as a result of realising that there was information which newcomers needed (C6/M3).

There seemed to be a tendency for the less experienced entrepreneurs to focus more on tasks than on communicating ‘the big picture’ to their newcomers. In addition to the challenges mentioned earlier, this gives rise to a paradox regarding especially newcomers whose work is directly related to strategic communication with external constituents. For instance, even though entrepreneurs have a vision, they might not know about e.g. marketing as an area. In both Case 2 and 6, there had been marketing and communication newcomers who were tasked with external communication. Ensuring this marketing communication is aligned with entrepreneurs’ visions is crucial, but can thus be challenging.

### *Knowledge*

Previous literature suggests that becoming an employer is a learning experience for entrepreneurs (David & Watts, 2008). This is especially echoed in Case 2 and 6, where the entrepreneurs were young and did not have previous management experience. For C2/M3, being a manager still felt new to him.

Besides the impact of this lack of experience with handling strategic organisational entry communication, some entrepreneurs (C5/M1, C2/M1) mentioned that they had sourced help for marketing newcomers, as this is an area they were not familiar with. As such, as regards entrepreneurs’ knowledge, challenges to strategic organisational entry communication can stem from both a lack of general management experience and specific functional insights. This can lead to strategic conversations taking other forms and having other contents when entrepreneurs e.g. lack insight into a certain area, making it difficult for them to communicate explicitly about it. C2/M1,

C5/M1, and C6/M1 all mentioned challenges in relation to onboarding newcomers with a different background than their own.

#### *Individual level resources*

In addition to general resource constraints (the first theme), entrepreneurs' time resources can also play a role, e.g. as regards the extent to which they are (physically) present in the start-ups' offices. If they are often unavailable there are less spontaneous opportunities for conversations of strategic significance.

### **Discussion**

Heide et al. (2018) found that

[...] an organization's capacity to communicate strategically is constituted by a multitude of subprocesses that take place between coworkers, managers, [...] on a daily basis. It is thus necessary to regard these processes of interaction not only as important in themselves, but also as constitutive of an organizations' [sic] strategic communication and overall performance (p. 463).

Although there was a high degree of interactionist socialisation in the start-ups, with newcomers playing a part in shaping their tasks, roles, and the organisations as such, this study has shed light on aspects that affect interactions with newcomers in start-ups and thus affect the capacity for and constitution of strategic communication in this setting. Zerfass et al. (2018) note that "[...] strategic communication happens under conditions of complexity, uncertainty, ambiguity, and considerable risk [...]" (p. 495). Incidentally, these conditions are especially characteristic of the situation in start-ups, and the findings show that these affect strategic organisational entry communication. Specifically, the three identified themes cover the sources and aspects of challenges and obstacles, and the drivers for these can be identified as individual and organisational level drivers. Individual level drivers include presence and skills of the entrepreneur (in

relation to HRM, communication, area specific knowledge) and individual newcomer differences in experience. Organisational level drivers include situational aspects such as uncertainty, development stage, and scarce financial resources, often related to liabilities of newness and smallness. The entrepreneurs in particular reproduce the ideas of liability of newness and smallness, especially as regards resource constraints, and these then link to individual level drivers of challenges. This identification of themes (3 sources and aspects of challenges) and organisational (context) and individual level drivers is relevant for further discussions on how to handle strategic entry communication in start-ups. Three groups of implications are discussed below.

The study makes a general theoretical contribution to furthering discussions of types of and actors in strategic communication (as called for by Heide et al., 2018) by focusing on strategic organisational entry communication as a specific form of strategic internal communication, and, based in an interactionist perspective, focusing on both entrepreneurs *and* newcomers as central actors in strategic conversations.

Furthermore, the study contributes specifically to the body of knowledge on strategic communication in start-ups by drawing on research from the intersection of HRM and entrepreneurship, and the field of OS, as well as generating new empirical insights to identify sources and levels of challenges to strategic internal communication in start-ups in the context of welcoming newcomers. Being aware of these can help improve entry communication and facilitate strategic conversations with newcomers. The interactionist perspective facilitated a deeper understanding of the sources and drivers of challenges, while also showing newcomers' active contributions to strategic conversations, e.g. as they do not just take part in communication supporting the fulfilment of goals, they take part in defining those goals.

## ***Implications***

Klaas and Klimchak (2006) argued that context matters for HRM and entrepreneurship. It also matters for strategic entry communication. Specifically, the start-up context has implications for (1) opportunities for strategic communication, as well as (2) the content and (3) form of the strategic entry communication, forming three dimensions along which strategic entry communication practices can be different in start-ups. Overall, the onboarding practices in many of the start-ups are emergent, echoing Wiesenberg et al.'s (2020) comments about the emergence of internal strategic communication and HR in start-ups. The implications discussed in the following concern both strategised communication as a product, and practices as strategising processes (Winkler & Etter, 2018), as entry communication can be seen as a strategised communication product, while newcomers also take part in practices of entry communication which thus become strategising processes, e.g. as they engage in strategic conversations about goals and tasks.

### *Opportunities for strategic communication*

While the start-up context offers possibilities such as meeting managers and colleagues during the hiring process, the analysis identified time pressure and entrepreneurs' time resources as challenges to the scope and extent of the initial strategic communication. However, most newcomers mention the ease of asking questions and the informality in the start-ups as helpful in order for them to settle in, and some highlight that they discuss important decisions with colleagues. Thus, even though the planned strategic communication might be of smaller scope and scale compared to entry in other organisations, this does not mean that strategic communication does not take place at all, but the content and the form is affected by the context.

Overall, some of the challenges mentioned concern things in the start-ups being undecided, muddled, or even chaotic. It has been suggested that less structure in newcomer entry is connected with more newcomer proactivity (e.g. Griffin et al., 2000). Here, the ease of asking questions (e.g. mentioned by C2/NC1) creates opportunities for strategic communication. Some degree of challenge, insecurity, uncertainty, and frustration might drive newcomers to be active and ask questions as they try to make sense of the start-ups. However, availability of entrepreneurs and colleagues could be an obstacle for such ad hoc strategic conversations.

### *Content*

As regards content, the findings show that, whereas entry communication can be expected to focus on various aspects enabling newcomers to contribute to reaching set goals, in some of the start-ups, newcomers contribute to defining and setting the goals, both overall, as in Case 4, and for their specific function, as for C6/NC2. Thus, while newcomers need to ‘learn the ropes’, they also contribute to strategic conversations about organisational practices and products. The analysis also showed that newcomers’ positions and backgrounds, e.g. whether they are interns or enter with many years of experience, have implications for how they are received.

In addition, several newcomers indicated lacking a better introduction to ‘the big picture’, as the organisational setting influences how they should solve their tasks, but their introductions had been marked by a task focus. This is reminiscent of the anecdote of the builders who, respectively, lay bricks, build a wall, or build a cathedral, and underscores the importance of strategic entry communication.

Previous research emphasises that entrepreneurs must communicate their vision to employees (Invernizzi & Romenti, 2015), engaging in ‘management of meaning’ (Zerfass & Huck, 2007). However, especially for young entrepreneurs, even if they

have a vision, perhaps they are not good at communicating it. Findings showed that this both had to do with an initial lack of awareness of the need to communicate it and entrepreneurs' communication skills. Thus, in addition to entrepreneurs' likely inexperience with HR (Cardon & Stevens, 2004), their awareness about communication and their communication skills also influence the content of entry communication.

### *Form*

Perhaps the most important trait of strategic organisational entry communication in start-ups is its emergent character, e.g. in the form of "trial and error" (C6/M3) and (ongoing) negotiation of tasks and goals. The process can be characterised as a kind of 'creolisation', since the agents together create, import, and mix practices, as part of defining and working towards goals.

Zerfass et al. (2018) note that "Communication can play a distinctive role for the formulation, revision, presentation, execution, implementation, and operationalization of strategies." (p. 487). In the start-ups, the context means that the forms of communication during entry involve a high degree of newcomer (pro)activity. Both because newcomers are often (and sometimes explicitly) expected to contribute early, and because the general developmental state of the start-ups means that members discuss a range of aspects and make decisions together, including decisions about practices such as weekly meetings (Case 4). In addition, newcomers might be motivated to reduce uncertainty, resulting in proactive behaviours, such as asking questions, in order to get started.

Finally, as regards the form, the context also suggests the importance of other 'socialisation agents', as Cooper-Thomas and Anderson (2006) note that colleagues who were recently newcomers themselves might, based on their own experiences, help



new colleagues “[...] to fill in the gaps left by official OS programs [...]” (p. 509). I.e., newcomers in start-ups sometimes meet colleagues who help them with information that they themselves missed. A number of the interviewed newcomers mentioned a ‘pay-it-forward’ sentiment.

### ***Limitations***

This study has a number of limitations. First, data was collected exclusively from entrepreneurs and newcomers, whereas the literature on OS also recognises the importance of other socialisation agents (Field & Coetzer, 2011), especially colleagues. These other socialisation agents are not directly represented in the study. Second, the study was conducted with cases from a specific industry, ICT. While this within-industry focus enables specific across start-up comparisons, there might also be industry-related idiosyncracies.

In addition, it should be emphasised that both entrepreneurs and newcomers also mention upsides for strategic organisational entry communication stemming from the context, e.g. that the stage of development of the organisations involves opportunities for dialogic processes. However, focus here has been on the challenges mentioned and implications for strategic communication.

### ***Outlook***

In this study, I have focused on strategic organisational entry communication. This involves developmental aspects that could be investigated further, namely future research could be longitudinal or involve prolonged fieldwork, benefitting from the opportunity to follow developments for newcomers and start-ups over time. One possible avenue would be to focus on what happens to entry-related communication practices as start-ups grow and mature. For instance, C6/M2 touched on having to

prepare more text-material for welcoming newcomers when “scaling up the team” (lines 400-406). It would be interesting to follow how start-ups develop HRM communicative practices over time, and the impact this has on strategic conversations with newcomers.

This paper has focused on communication related to getting newcomers to new ventures onboard. The newcomers are not only informed of strategies and have to execute, in a number of the start-ups they are part of building the organisation, as regards both goals and practices. Thus, through the conversations engaged in during entry, these newcomers take part in the “[...] formulation, revision, presentation, execution, implementation, and operationalization of strategies.” (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 487). A strategy-as-practice approach (Aggerholm & Asmuß, 2016) involving more detailed studies of this process would be a relevant next step.

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## Appendix 1 – Template entrepreneur interview guide

### Section 1: Introduction

### Section 2: Questions/talking points

- Introductory information about personnel responsibilities
  - What are your personnel responsibilities? (in terms of recruiting, hiring (job interviews) and introductions)?
- Welcoming new employees
  - Have you had any thoughts on/deliberated how to get newcomers/interns off to a good start?
  - Do you have a specific procedure when welcoming new employees?
  - What do you do in order to ensure that a new employee or intern gets off to a good start?
  - How do you brief new employees about the organisation and their job, once they are employed?
- To be successful as a new employee
  - In your opinion, are there special challenges as a new employee in an IT startup?
    - As they are not only a newcomer, but a newcomer in a new company, what do you think about that?
  - What does it take to succeed as an employee in your company? What does it take to be successful?
    - What do you expect from your newcomers and interns?
- Necessary knowledge for new employees
  - In your opinion, what is it necessary to know about this organisation and your way of operating/functioning in order to get off to a good start?
    - And how do you ensure, that a new employee can become knowledgeable about this?
      - Not just knowledge sharing, but communication about knowledge, process (becoming knowledgeable)
  - Which possibilities do new employees have in order to get answers to questions and uncertainties?
  - Are there any questions from new employees that you have heard more than one new employee ask?



- Thoughts on information material?
  - Which resources do you make available for new employees?
    - What are the advantages?
    - What are the disadvantages?
- Transitioning from new employee to insider
  - Do you have a trial period for new employees?
  - When is a new employee no longer a newcomer but an insider? (when are you a newcomer, when are you an insider?)
- Ending
  - Is there anything you feel I should ask you/ that I have not asked you?
  - Is there anything you feel you did not get the chance to say?

### Section 3: Round-off

## Appendix 2 – Template newcomer interview guide

### Section 1: Introduction

### Section 2: Questions/talking points

- (What is your background?)
- (How long have you been with this company?)
- Can you tell me about your experiences with entering this organisation?
  - How did you experience the process of entering this organisation?
    - Can you describe/tell about the process?
    - Do you recall an incident where you:
      - Met a colleague for the first time?
        - How have you gotten to know your colleagues better?
      - Sat down to lunch for the first time?
  - What did/do you think about it? (the process of entering and starting in the organisation)
- What were your first impressions when you started?
- How have you been introduced to your job tasks?
- How have you been introduced to the organisation?
- Learning the ropes (procedures, routines)
  - What about you colleagues working together, what can you tell about that?
- Can you tell me about a time where you had a question/was insecure about something, what did you do to get an answer/to resolve the situation?
- Have you done anything yourself in order to become knowledgeable about how the organisation functions (formally and informally)?
  - What motivated you to do this?
  - How did you do this, which tactics would you say you used?
    - Can you give a specific example?
  - What have you done yourself?
- What do the specific questions/uncertainties that you have had concern?
- Have you been able to get answers for the questions that you might have had during the entry period?

- Would it have made a difference to you if you had received a ‘welcome-package’ with information material, or guidance on specific information on the website or blogs to read?
  - o What about the IT systems with the logs and information? (both learn system + system as/with information)
- Is there anything where you think that it would have been nice to know earlier? / What would you have liked to know earlier/in the beginning (about organisational routines etc.)?
- Do you feel that you have settled in to the job and the organisation?
- Would you say that your introduction to the organisation and your job has been adequate?
  - o How would you have preferred to be introduced to the job/the organisation?
- Are you wondering about any questions that you think I should have asked you?
- Is there anything you would like to add/ anything you feel you did not get the chance to say?

### Section 3: Round-off

Table 1: Overview of cases and interviews (adapted from Rasmussen, 2019; 2020)

<i>Case start-up #</i>	<i>Activity</i>	<i>Year founded (record)</i>	<i>App. size (persons)</i>	<i>Initial ownership</i>	<i>Interviews</i>
2	B2B software development	2016	7-8 (Dec. 2016 – Feb. 2017)	Multiple entrepreneurs as partners	Entrepreneur: 1 Newcomers: 2
3	B2B software development	2016	4-5 (Jun. 2017 – Sep. 2017)	Multiple entrepreneurs as partners	Entrepreneur: 1 Newcomers: 2
4	B2B software development	2016	10-16 (Mar. 2017 – Aug. 2017)	Shared corporate ownership	Manager: 1 Newcomers: 8
5	B2B software development, consumer aspect	2016	9-10 (Apr. 2017 – Jun. 2017)	Entrepreneur	Entrepreneur: 1 Newcomers: 2
6	B2B software development, consumer aspect	2014	8-9 (Mar. 2017 – Aug. 2017)	Multiple entrepreneurs as partners	Entrepreneurs: 3 Newcomers: 2

Table 2: Themes

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Description</i>
Aspects related to the overall organisational context and situation	Aspects of the organisational context and situation which have implications for strategic organisational entry communication, such as: resources (money, time), stage of development (e.g. organisational practices and the offering), growth
Aspects related to newcomers' job content and design	Aspects related to newcomers' job content and design which have implications for strategic organisational entry communication, such as: job descriptions, function, role, and tasks
Entrepreneurs' communication skills, knowledge, and time resources	Aspects related to entrepreneurs <b>which have implications for strategic organisational entry communication:</b> communication skills, knowledge, and resources (time and presence)