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From Greenhouses to Headquarters: Improving Feedback Transfer in Global Distributor Network

Single case-study

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ABSTRACT:

The world gets smaller as companies, but also the end-users want constantly the services and goods faster and more efficiently. On the other hand, it is the company's advantage that it can sell its products more broadly. Distributor-based business model gives the possibility to operate around the globe without large initial investments, but it takes the company and end-user very far from each other. This distance might weaken the feedback from the end-user, since the feedback might be filtered or disappear completely on the way to the manufacturing company. The main purpose of this study is to find out how the case company gathers feedback, what issues or barriers the current model has and, in the end, how the current practices could be enhanced and made better, so the case company could get more feedback.

This study was conducted as a qualitative case study. The empirical material was gathered as semi-structured interviews with five international distributors of the case company. The interviewees do business in very different areas, but the combining factor is that they all work in professional cultivation. In the interviews there was a discussion, for example about how the distributor gathers the feedback from the end-user, how they get feedback from the end-user and how they share it with the case company.

By looking at the interviews, it can be said that there is a lot of feedback available from the end-users. However, gathering feedback and getting the feedback is often informal and it depends on a lot from the end-user that what feedback the distributor gets. The feedback itself is rarely direct, most of it comes naturally during the common conversation. Rarely is the feedback documented and most of the time the feedback is only in the distributors' minds. The distributor decides by himself if the feedback should be shared and often only the big complaints are shared with the case company. Naturally this leads to a situation where a lot of potentially good feedback never reaches the case company. The interviewee felt that, for example, the lack of tools and lack of time lead to a situation where feedback is not usually shared with the case company. If the feedback process were more clearly, then the amount of feedback could increase.

As an outcome of the study, it can be said that mobile friendly feedback channel could have demand among the distributors, if it would be easy and fast to use. On the other hand, the case company should be more active and ask the feedback more often, so they might get it more often. This study offers limited possibilities for other industries, since professional cultivation differs a lot from other industries.

KEYWORDS: feedback sharing, international supply chains, relationship learning, supplier-distributor relationship, qualitative case study

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ABSTRACT:

Maailma pienenee jatkuvasti ja niin yritykset kuin asiakkaatkin haluavat palveluita sekä tavaroita jatkuvasti nopeammin ja tehokkaammin, mutta toisaalta on myös yrityksen etu, että se saa myydä tuotteitaan aina vain laajemmalle alueelle. Jakelijapohjainen liiketoimintamalli antaa mahdollisuuden toimia ympäri maailmaa ilman suuria alkuinvestointeja, mutta se vie yrityksen ja loppukäyttäjän hyvin kauas toisistaan. Tämä etäisyys saattaa heikentää yrityksen loppuasiakkaan saamaa asiakaspalautetta, sillä palaute saattaa jakelijan toimesta suodattua tai kadota kokonaan matkalla toimittavalle yritykselle. Tutkimuksen päätarkoituksena on selvittää miten kohdeyritys tällä hetkellä kerää palautetta, millaisia ongelmia tai esteitä nykyinen malli pitää sisällään ja lopulta miten nykyisiä käytäntöjä voisi tehostaa ja parantaa, jotta palautetta saataisiin enemmän kohdeyritykselle.

Tutkimus toteutettiin laadullisena tapaustutkimuksena. Empiirinen aineisto kerättiin puolistrukturoituina haastatteluina viiden kohdeyrityksen kansainvälisen jakelijan kanssa. Haastateltavat toimivat hyvin erilaisissa ympäristöissä, mutta yhteistä heille oli se, että he nimenomaan toimivat ammattiviljelymarkkinassa. Haastatteluissa keskusteltiin muun muassa nykyisistä tavoista kerätä palautetta loppukäyttäjiltä, miten he saavat palautetta ja miten he jakavat palautetta kohdeyritykselle.

Haastatteluja tarkastellessa voidaan todeta, että palautetta loppukäyttäjiltä tulee runsaasti. Kuitenkin palautteen kerääminen ja saaminen on pitkälti epämuodollista ja riippuu hyvin paljon loppuasiakkaasta, että millaista palautetta jakelija saa. Palaute itsessään harvemmin on aivan suoraa, vaan suuri osa siitä tulee keskusteluiden lomassa. Palautetta harvemmin kirjataan mihinkään ja se jää usein vain jakelijan muistiin. Jakelija itse päättää jakaako hän palautetta ja usein vain suuret loppukäyttäjän reklamaatiot ilmoitetaan kohdeyritykselle asti. Luonnollisesti tämä johtaa tilanteeseen, jossa moni palaute, joka mahdollisesti olisi tärkeä kohdeyritykselle jää saamatta. Haastateltavat kokivat, että muun muassa työkalujen puute ja jo valmiiksi pitkät päivät johtavat siihen, että pienimpiä havaintoja ei yleensä lähetetä eteenpäin kohdeyritykselle. Mikäli prosessi olisi selkeämpi, voisi palautteen lähettäminen lisääntyä.

Tutkimuksen lopputuloksena voidaan muun muassa todeta, että mobiiliystävälliselle palautekanavalle voisi olla kysyntää, jos sitä olisi helppoa ja nopeaa käyttää. Toisaalta myös kohdeyrityksen tulisi olla aktiivisempi tiedustelemaan palautetta jakelijoilta, jolloin sitä olisi mahdollista saada enemmän. Tutkimus tarjoaa rajoitetusti hyödyntämismahdollisuuksia muille toimialoille, koska tutkimuskohteena ammattimainen kasvihuoneviljely eroaa huomattavasti muista toimialoista.

KEYWORDS: tiedon jakaminen, kansainväliset toimitusketjut, suhde oppiminen, toimittaja-jakelija-suhde, laadullinen tapaustutkimus

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1 Introduction

As the organizations are constantly more relying on to each other, in order to survive and operate efficiently they must be connected to all different parties within the supply chain, for example with their customers, partners and the markets themselves (Hult et al., 2004). Companies and managers that shared information throughout the organization were more successful than those who did not share the information. But, to acquire this information Hult et al. (2003) propose that one of the key elements are the customers, which in this case are distributors and end-users. Businesses that are operating in business-to-business (B2B) markets might notice soon that getting this information from the distributors is not always that easy. According to Frazier et al. (2009) distributors have many reasons not to share information, for example distributors often do not get direct benefits from sharing the information or they might fear that the producing company might benefit from this information in a way that it hurts the distributor itself. Even though distributor-based business models offer many benefits, for example local knowledge and enhanced logistics procedures, this model can also create distance between the parties (Selnes & Sallis, 2003).

In the direct-to-consumer business the companies are constantly in the customer interface and the trade between customer and supplier is more direct. In the distributor-based business models the situation is the opposite, the supplier most likely does not have any contact with the end-user, but only the information that he receives from the distributor. That is why organizations such as Nike have changed its operation model to promote direct-to-consumer, as the operating model gives the organization the possibility to react fast to the customers' preferences. Based on the study this is not the most profitable operating model, at least in certain industries. (Lee & Ono, 2024).

Ylimäki (2015) points out that the knowledge of the product and production is superior in the supplier side compared to the distributor side. As if the distributor is not willing to share the information the product development of the producing company is inefficient,

because the producing company does not know how to improve its product or operations. Companies whose product development is not up to date and the market information received from distributors is lacking, might lose the possibility to react fast to the changes and overall needs in the market. (Day, 1994; Ylimäki, 2015).

The skill and ability to use and benefit from the feedback from the end-user is a very important part of market orientation (Narver & Slater, 1990). In the article Narver & Slater (1990) proves that differentiation and low costs are one of the most successful strategies, but both require end-user feedback, no matter if the feedback comes from the distributor or the end-user. Feedback and information gained and received from the end-users is not only for the product development team, but the information should also be used throughout the organization. This will lead to better and more efficient supply chain and increased innovations within the organization (Hult et al., 2004).

If the organization is unable to gather feedback or it does not even have structures or procedures to do so, most likely it won't survive in a very competitive market. Gathering the information and "know-how" how to use it in the organization is one of the key questions for every organization. Organizations that do not have any possibility to gather information from the end-user, the only possibility is to create trust with the distributor and invest to the relationship with the distributor. (Liu et al., 2008). Distributors buy more likely from suppliers that can lower the distributor costs overall, everything is not about the product itself. From distributor point of view by working together closely with the supplier and giving them information, the distributor wins in the long run, even if the supplier product is not the cheapest (Hult et al., 2003). As an example, supplier does not have the cheapest product on the market, but they deliver the product always on time and to the right place for the distributor. Especially because this thesis is in the context of professional cultivation, being on time is everything, since the grower must order not just the growing media, but also fertilizers, plants and many other things as well. If one component is late, there is a great risk that the whole crop could fail.

1.1 Research problem and objectives

This thesis examines a Finnish manufacturing company who is operating in over 60 countries. Most of the products are made for export markets, but the company is operating also domestically. The company is purely operating in the business-to-business (B2B) sector, and it operates through a comprehensive distributor network. The goal is to find out how the case company can gather and utilize information from the end-user in cooperation with the distributor, because the distributor usually works solely with the end-user. The manufacturing company gets only a very limited amount or no feedback directly from the end-user. So, it can be said that the case company is heavily relying on the distributors' feedback gathered from the end-users.

Distributor based business model or strategy offers many benefits from the supplier's perspective, for example the reclamations, local marketing and sales to the end-user are handled by the distributor. Even though there are many positive aspects to this strategy, for example the reclamations handled by the distributor as mentioned above, this strategy leads the case company to a situation where it does not really get any real time feedback from the end-user. Usually, the complaints to the producing company (supplier) come with a delay, which means that the case company has not even noticed the mistakes, and this could have been noticed right away if the information had been received in real time. The goal is to understand how the feedback can be gathered in an efficient way from the end-users and how the case company could receive more information from the distributors or even from the end-users. To get to this goal, qualitative research will be concluded on multiple markets.

1.2 Research questions

This thesis is guided by the following questions:

1. How is feedback from end-customers collected and shared in the current distribution-based model?
2. What kind of information can the case company get from the distributors?

3. What is the most practical way to collect feedback?

1.3 Scope and delimitations

The focus on this thesis is purely on the export markets, where the case company operates through distributor network and does not have any contact with the end-users. This case-study does not include cases where the case company operates directly with the end-user without the distributor. The research is conducted as qualitative single-case study based on semi-structured interviews.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

The thesis consists of five main chapters. The thesis begins with an introduction chapter which outlines the background of the research, problems and research questions. It is followed by literature review on the benefits of knowledge gathered from the end-users and the distributor's role in the process, also organizational learning and learning structures are investigated. The methodology chapter describes the research design, and how the data was collected. Findings chapter goes through the data. Finally, the study ends with discussion and conclusion.

2 Literature review

2.1 Organizational learning

Organization learning is an essential part of every organization and their success. Especially in today's modern world where changes come rapidly. Even though in this thesis and the qualitative study conducted in it, the focus is about learning more about the distributor-based business models and getting more information from the end-users. It is important to note that this information has no worth if the organization is unable to use it in its operations. Acquiring the knowledge from the end-users through the distributors is only the beginning of the process. If the organization cannot utilize the information from the distributors to its own daily procedures, creating ways to collect this knowledge and information is just a useless extra phase to the organization and does not create any additional value.

The concept of knowledge creating refers to the ability of any organization to access and utilize knowledge and information and use these in its learning operations. For example, the organization can hire new employees which might bring new points of view and ideas to the organization or hire external consultants, which might be crucial if the organization is in the middle of something completely new and would need new knowledge about some very specific field. But it is also crucial that everyone cannot be new employees or consultants, companies also need experienced employees who have acquired the knowledge throughout the years. One great point is that organizations create knowledge also from failures, it sounds cliché, but in a way, failures should be embraced. Since the mistake has been already made and if there is nothing the employee or organization can do to fix it, main thing is not to repeat the mistake. (Argote et al., 2021).

According to Wegner (1986) all organizations and its employees have transactive memory system, which leads the employees to create a system where they unconsciously create patterns within the organization to ask the same person the same kind

of questions, and they unconsciously lead other employees to do the same. This unconscious system inside the organization emerges slowly and it is a crucial part of any organization, because with this system silent knowledge transfers inside the organization. In a way it could be also said that with this automatic system the processes inside the organization are, for example, faster, because the employee does not have to think about who to ask and when.

One of the most important ways to acquire new knowledge and information is through distributors and end-users or in other words in supplier-customer relationship (Bhatti et al., 2020). The information that can be acquired from either party is important, especially for product development. It is notable that also the end-users are more satisfied when they have the possibility to have an impact on the product (Ylimäki, 2015). The feedback that originates from the end-user, whether it comes directly to the supplier or through the distributor might create new innovations for the organization, but also it might expose some faults in the organization's procedures, which in the long run can hurt the organization. This information does not come only by asking questions from the distributors and end-users, it might also come through silent information. Silent information can be found for example in a sudden change in customers behavior. This silent information must be also included in organizations procedures and decision making. It might also be that sometimes the most important information comes when customer just mentions something that the customer does not even understand is important for the supplier, even though it is the most important thing for the supplier. (Bhatti, et al., 2020).

When the new knowledge and information have been acquired by the organization, this information needs to be shared and integrated throughout the organization (Bhatti et al., 2020). If the knowledge and information are not integrated part of the organization's processes and procedures, organization cannot utilize the maximum value of the acquired knowledge and information, which makes the organization unagile (Boerma, et al., 2024). Argote et al. (2021) in their study also noted that information and knowledge transfer passively throughout the organization. Different members of the organization

share different working methods and by combining these together organizations might end up with new innovations (Boerma, et al., 2024).

During the organizational learning organizations necessarily make mistakes. Organizations that learn from these mistakes most likely will succeed in the future. According to study the mistakes during the organizational learning process should not be seen only as a negative thing, because these mistakes might lead to better decisions in the long run. (Denrell & March, 2001; Argote et al., 2021). Organizations that do not accept mistakes or punish from them, most likely suffer from decreased number of new ideas and innovations in the organization (Danneels & Vestal, 2020).

One of the most known models of organizational learning is double-loop learning (DDL). The idea of double-loop learning is that organizations should not only change their way of doing things, but it forces the organization and its employees to think why they have done things as they have. With this model organizations are forced to look deeper inside the organization and find for example the true values and routines of the company (Auqui-Caceres & Furlan, 2023). Wegner's (1986) study about transactive memory system creates an interesting connection with double-loop learning, as organizations and its employees unconsciously create patterns and ways to do the things, double-loop learning questions this method and makes organizations really think that could be a better way.

Organizations and humans generally have a natural habit of doing things as they have always done. These habits are created automatically and the true meaning of them is to avoid conflicts and to prevent us from taking part in uncomfortable situations. As this is natural for humans, it still prevents the organization from evolving to the next level. Changing these habits in the organization is the key in double-loop learning, but naturally it takes time and needs an organization where mistakes are accepted (Auqui-Caceres & Furlan, 2023).

2.2 Distributor-based business models

Distributor-based business models are essential of many organizations who would like to expand the business abroad, but organizations getting into certain export markets require a lot of knowledge about the regulations and local habits, since those aspects are different in every country. Distributor-based model enables organizations to access markets without a huge investment to the target market (Andersson et al., 2024). The role of distributor is not just logistics and sales, but distributors have a crucial role as the voice of the end-customer (Bilro et al, 2023). It is also notable that distributors have different roles depending on the society, what distributor is meant to do in Japan might differ from the role that the distributor have in Finland (Kim & Frazier, 1997).

Even though distributor-based business models offer advantages compared to dealing directly with the end-users, such as faster market entry and easier logistics, using distributors weakens the knowledge and information sharing between the supplier and end-users, since automatically there is a middleman. This on the other hand weakens the possibilities of customer-based innovations (Ylimäki, 2015) and even customer satisfaction (Gounaris & Almoraish, 2024). On the other hand, other remarkable consequences are lack of innovation, declining customer satisfaction and slower reactions to market changes (Bilro et al., 2023; Gounaris & Almoraish, 2024; Andersson et al., 2024). Because of these weaknesses organizations must invest and truly focus to build structures to acquire more knowledge and information from the distributors to the supply chain to be more consumer-centric (Baldi et al., 2024).

Distributors work as a link between supplier and end-user, they share experiences, needs and changes in the markets, for example price is a very important factor in the markets (Baldi et al., 2024). Because the information is usually shared through the distributor, there is a risk that some of the crucial information goes missing and never reaches the distributor. The distributor usually has own interest, which affects the quantity and quality of the knowledge and information which in the end reaches the distributor (Koponen & Julkunen, 2022). Baldi et al. (2024) on the other hand also points out that even though

the organization is using distributors, organizations and in this case, suppliers should create structures that enable more direct contacts to the end-users, since after all, important knowledge and information can be acquired from there. According to Lee & Ono (2023) this can also be a good thing profit wise, according to their calculations business models that have both supplier and end-user contact possible could generate the most profits.

The distance between the end-user and supplier plays a crucial role and can be seen and examined on multiple levels, the distance can be for example cultural, administrative, geographical or economical. Geographical distance is the easiest to understand, but naturally when the other party is in Europe and the other in Asia, for example the shipping costs and problems with global transportation network might cause issues. Cultural and administrative distance refers to different languages or, for example religion. Good example is Chinese New Year, which basically stops the international trade for a while during the celebrations. Administrative distance causes issues when countries outside of the European Union might require import permits or there could be restrictions on what can be shipped to target country, and lastly economical distance is something every organization must take into consideration. Some countries might have a stricter economical situation, where the pricing policy might cause issues for the supplier side, since the target country might not have the possibility to pay the needed or wanted price compared to other country. (Ghemawat, 2001).

Organizations have numerous ways to support and make distributors better at sharing knowledge and information. For example, organizations can train the distributors to be more customer friendly, create ways and structures to share knowledge and information and even build systems which reward the distributors for the knowledge and information (Bilro et al., 2023; Chen & Li, 2024). Gounaris & Almoraish (2024) show that supporting the long-term partnerships and integrating the distributor better into supplier's organization extends the quality of the knowledge and information shared to the supplier, but also it makes the feedback more direct, also then most likely the distributor will not filter

the information. Digital tools such as customer portals might increase the amount of knowledge and information, since it would be easier to share the information (Andersson et al., 2024; Baldi et al., 2024).

Bamberger et al. (2025) note that digital transformation offers new possibilities to decrease the distance between the supplier and end-user. For example, direct customer surveys, digital feedback formats and general analytics can bring a lot of knowledge and information to the organization even though the sales are handled with a distributor. Fehl et al. (2023) also points out that engaging with the end-users more directly will lead to positive results, since if the salesperson for example would visit the greenhouse, most likely the salesperson would better understand the needs of the end-user, but also on the other hand it gives the end-user the possibility to understand better what the salesperson and the organization behind the salesperson can offer.

In the end distributor-based business models offer many advantages, but they increase the risk of end-user feedback getting lost in the way. Because of this, organizations must build structures and processes, which enable them to get access to that knowledge and information. Also, by engaging the distributors closer to the organization itself, it enables them to share more knowledge and information.

2.3 Relationship learning and the role of distributors

According to Örténblad (2001) organizational learning is defined as the ways of organization acquiring information and knowledge. It also emphasizes the ways the organization uses feedback and transfers knowledge throughout the organization (Argote et al., 2021).

Learning organization refers to structure and organization culture that enables organization to learn and gives the best possibilities for the learning. Relationship learning on the other hand is a crucial part of organizational learning. It can be seen and understood as a process where companies acquire information from their customers, distributors or

even from the government. This relationship learning could also be even a slight change in customer behavior, which might create knowledge for the organization. Relationship learning is not only about getting and acquiring knowledge for the employee's own organization, but also a crucial part to create value within the organization but also share that value with the distributor. That way both organizations win and the trust between employees will strengthen. (Bhatti, et al., 2020).

Organization learning enables the organization to adapt to the prevailing market situation. Organizational learning can be seen as a huge concept which includes many different sub concepts. Relationship learning is part of organizational learning, and it emphasizes learning from stakeholders that are not employees of the organization, for example end-customers and distributors as mentioned above. The idea of relationship learning is to understand better the customer's needs, how the market is changing and how to create common and shared value between supplier and distributor. The theory suggests that by sharing the information the supplier and the distributor can both win, but if the two partners are too close to each other, the learning slows down. (Selnes & Sallis, 2003).

Bhatti et al. (2020) define organization learning as a process, where organizations acquire and utilize knowledge and information from distributors and end-users. This learning happens in an interaction, it is not a one-way deal. In theory both parties should win, since then both parties have the motivation to deepen the cooperation. This knowledge and information are acquired in many ways, not just by direct feedback. For example, changes in behavior or frequently asked questions are information that the supplier may use as knowledge. To utilize this information organization must interact with the distributors and end-users and always think if there is a hidden meaning in the behavior, that way the organization can take the next step in its learning capabilities.

According to Boerma et al. (2024) organization learning is happening all the time, not just when organizations are willingly trying to learn. Often organization learning happens by accident between colleagues and distributors. The meaning of social networks of the

organizations is crucial, and the meaning of personal relationships and new challenges connect be underlined. The supplier-distributor or supplier-end-user relationship is not only contracts or technical data, it is a living organism which must be enhanced all the time.

In their article Sima et al. (2024) emphasize that especially for the export companies dealing in the emerging markets it is very important to focus on relationship learning. In the emerging markets and especially in China knowledge transaction and co-creating give foreign organizations operating in China the opportunity to acquire knowledge and information and as an outcome become stronger and more powerful in the markets. The distributors should also be seen as strategic partners more than just distributors or logistics centers. Tedja et al. (2024) emphasizes the meaning of supplier-distributor relationship, a long-term partnership and knowledge sharing from both sides because they should create value for both parties. Customer satisfaction can be a more defining factor than just the value calculated in currency. Even though this thesis examines the supplier-distributor relationship from suppliers' point-of-view, it is also crucial that distributors acquire knowledge from the end-users, this way the business relationship most likely lasts. This was also noted by Ylimäki (2015) that when the distributors or end-users have the possibility to affect to the end-product, they are more satisfied within the cooperation.

The role of distributor is highlighted when a supplier is operating in a market that is very closed or impossible for the supplier to work or gather knowledge directly from the end-user. In these cases, the only possibility for the supplier is to work through the distributor and the meaning of the relationship and good cooperation is crucial. If the supplier does not have the opportunity to gain knowledge and information, this makes it impossible to make new innovations to the target market and to take the cooperation to the next level. If the relationship is not based on trust or the distributor does not feel that supplier can create value, there might be little, or no information provided from the distributor to the supplier. (Tedja et al., 2024; Sima et al., 2024).

In a recent study Atanassova et al. (2025) brought up the relationship learning to a larger scale model where organizational learning and agility was measured. Acquiring knowledge and the ways the organization is using the gained knowledge effects to organizations' all capabilities. Agile organizations can acquire much more information and knowledge from the markets and distributors than organizations that are closed, especially in the current volatile environment. This ability is linked to future success of the organization, and these organizations are much more open to new innovations and to match their customers' needs.

Relationship learning is not a one-way process, but a system where both the supplier and the distributor learn from each other and find ways to gain new knowledge. Knowledge and information do not just transfer automatically, there must be communication between parties, when the cultural differences are notable, or communication happens with a middleman this might be a challenge. These challenges can be won and organizations must invest in relationships. As Bhatti et al., (2020) state, organizations must create structures that emphasize learning and enables to possibility to share knowledge with the distributors and vice versa.

2.4 Learning structures in B2B in international contexts

The organizational ability to learn and utilize new knowledge and information is a crucial competitive factor especially in supplier-distributor relationships in the multinational markets, since the world is getting smaller all the time, competition gets tougher since other companies have easier access to basically any market. Learning structures are part of organizational learning. Learning structures are unique to every organization and usually the concept covers for example processes and procedures of how the organization acquires, shares and utilizes knowledge and information inside the organization on multiple levels, without forgetting what the organization has already learnt (Crossan et al., 1999).

In the international B2B environment where the supplier-distributor supply chains are complex, the meaning of learning structure is much more important, as it is notable that these organizations face many more issues with integration and its opposite differentiation. A study found that when the organization and team structures are looser, then external learning is easier. This can be understood in a way that when the internal structures do not “restrict” the employee too much, it is easier for the employee to contact the distributors and really spend time on learning more about the distributor. If the structures inside the team push the salespersons to contact new clients all the time, then the salesperson does not have any time to learn from the existing distributors. (Bresman & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2013; Sima et al., 2024).

The learning structures are not just formal organizational structures like teams or information systems, but a much larger entity which includes, for example, information sharing and how the organization deals with mistakes generally speaking. Efficient learning structures support the learning of single employees, teams and in the end the whole organization (Bresman & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2013). When the learning structures are strong and efficient, organization’s ability to react to changing markets (Atanassova et al. 2025) or innovate new products is enhanced (Edmondson, 2002).

Teams are a crucial part of organizational learning and most of the organizational learning happens in teams. The positive internal structures of the team such as clear roles, good leadership and exact goals enhance the internal and external learning in the team. Internal learning takes place in reflection inside the teams, interaction with external and internal people and learning from the mistakes. Yet it is good to keep in mind that external learning or relationship learning demands active interaction outside the organization, for example from distributors and end-users (Bresman & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2013).

In the article Edmondson (2002) points out that one of the starting points of team learning is psychologically safe environment. The environment must be safe, as then the team members feel safe presenting unfinished ideas, asking questions and question the whole

organization and its ways to do things, without the fear of negative consequences. It is natural that if the employee fears mistakes or the atmosphere inside the organization is negative, the employee cannot focus on learning new things, whole focus is on surviving itself. Psychological safety in the team also enables the *double-loop learning*. Then the team does not just enhance the current working methods, but question them all the time, why are we doing things as we are right now doing them (Argyris, 1977; Auqui-Caceres & Furlan, 2023).

In the multinational B2B context learning structures are much more complex and they face many more challenges. Ammirato et al. (2019) show in the article that in the Finnish technology companies the use of countless social media possibilities are in the very beginning. Acquiring the knowledge and information through social media from the distributors and end-customers and on the other hand sharing this same knowledge and information back to distributors and end-users is still something that Finnish companies have not succeeded. Because the use of social media with distributors and end-users is so little, acquiring information through social media is very weak. This enhances the need of social media professionals, who would be able to use their time and resources to acquire this knowledge and information from the multinational markets through internet.

Organization's external relationships, especially with distributors, create a very important channel for acquiring new knowledge and information to the organization. The meaning of social capital in knowledge and information exchange between supplier and distributor cannot be underlined. Concepts such as trust, shared values and goals ease the knowledge and information exchange and therefore make the organizational learning and learning structures much stronger. The studies show that by sharing results and experiences, organizations can learn from each other much easier. (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005).

Crossan et al., (1999) used 4I model (intuiting, interpreting, integrating, institutionalizing), which shows how even a single observation (intuition) can be transferred as a concept which defines the whole organization (institutionalization). This process enhances that learning in the organization is not that only the organization can learn its teams and employees, but the learning goes both ways, and for that there needs to be constant interaction between employees, teams and the whole organization. Chiva et al. (2014) examine the learning structures from a more complex point of view. Organizational learning, innovation and internationalization create a dynamic entity, where changes in one affect all else at the same time. Especially generative learning, the ability to create and enhance current working methods needs flexible and adaptable learning structures.

In order for the organization to create sustainable learning structures in the international business-to-business context the organization needs to have clear team structures and good leadership, psychologically safe environments, social capital with the distributors and end-users and the constant desire to make the relationship better and more flexible. Organizations need processes to acquire more knowledge and information, but also strategic support and organization culture which encourages them to learn and innovate more. Because in the business-to-business environment the knowledge and information sharing is not always simple and it might have multiple phases, organizational structures must encourage and support the learning structures for the organization to acquire and utilize the knowledge and information.

2.5 End-user feedback as a source of knowledge and information

This chapter focuses more on the feedback itself and how it is defined, how it is acquired and analyzed, how it affects decision making and business development and how it should be utilized inside the organization. End-user feedback is one of the most important sources of knowledge and information for the organization, especially now when organizations want to be more customer oriented and the market is more competitive. Gathering and acquiring the feedback is not just surveys about customer satisfaction or handling the reclamations, it is a strategic resource which supports decision making,

innovations and deepens the customer relationship between the supplier and end-user, even though the distributor is working as a middleman in this relationship.

End-user feedback is basically knowledge and information that the end-users create and share consciously or unconsciously with the organization, whether it is directly to the supplier or through the distributor. The feedback can be divided into explicit feedback and implicit feedback. Explicit feedback is “direct” information from the customer for example through surveys or emails or reclamations. Implicit feedback is more about customer behavior, for example what the customer is buying, how the customer is using customer service or how the customer is moving on the company’s online page. Both feedback forms are valuable for the organizations, but they require different approaches from the organization to utilize it. Especially implicit feedback is not often utilized so well compared to the explicit feedback. There are many reasons behind this, but for example to utilize implicit feedback organizations must have highly developed analysis methods, such as machine learning skills and text mining skills so they can utilize the real information and knowledge behind the specific act. This all makes the end-user feedback a complex entity that combines verbal and nonverbal communication. (Ordenes et al., 2014).

The value of the feedback is not self-evident, it is based on how often it is collected, how it is handled inside the organization and how it is utilized in the organization. According to Argote et al. (2021) to maximize the impact and value of the feedback, organizations must be able to integrate the information and knowledge as part of their already ongoing operations. This requires agile and effective technological systems, but also organization culture where end-user-based knowledge and information is seen as a strength and as a resource that can impact organization success.

Many companies face difficulties while collecting and utilizing feedback from the customer, especially when processes are fragmented or informal. This problem is enlightened when the organization is collecting feedback in many different forms and in many

platforms. If feedback is not utilized well, then the feedback does not form into usable form inside the organization. In the end this leads to a situation where the organization is unable to create a comprehensive overall picture of the customer experience. (Celuch et al., 2015). Feedback can be collected in numerous ways, for example with customer surveys or website behavioral analytics, through social media or even through just an open feedback box on the company's website. Especially the rise in different digital platforms has enabled the organizations to acquire more feedback data than ever before (Ordenes et al., 2014). What on the other hand must be mentioned is that according to Ammirato et al. (2019) even though digital platforms offer a lot of possibilities, organizations must learn how to use them.

Kaul et al. (2025) emphasize that if organization sends a feedback request to the customer, it increases the loyalty and strengthens the customer relationship, even if the customer does not answer the request. This proves that the process of acquiring feedback is equally as important as the feedback itself. Without the process of how the organization can collect the feedback, the feedback does not even achieve organization in the first place in its full capacity. Organizations collecting feedback from the customer is part of the customer experience and can have a larger impact on the customer than just the benefit that is achieved from the feedback itself. Tronvoll (2012) on the other hand reminds that customer feedback is more than just numeric data; it is valuable as it is. The feedback from the customer includes much information than just how pleased the customer is. The customer's point of view might reveal product related insights that the organization has not noticed before and could have not noticed without customers' feedback.

Collecting feedback is just the first step for the organizations to turn it into something valuable, then the feedback must be analyzed thoroughly. Ordenes et al. (2014) proposes linguistic approach to analyze the feedback. In this model feedback is analyzed based on the content of the feedback or how the things have been said. With this model it is possible to link the feedback into organizational processes, for example customer

service or product development. Customer feedback should be connected to customer information such as buying history. By this method it is possible to put feedback into the context, since understanding the context of the feedback is relatively important. Even though the technologies of analyzing feedback have evolved a lot, utilizing the feedback still faces some obstacles on organizational level.

Analyzing the feedback requires relatively many resources from the organization and these resources are not always available in every case. If the organizations do not have designated people for the analyzing, there is a great chance that the feedback is not processed and even if it is processed, the long-term development might not be achieved. On the other hand, if the organization has a team or an employee to go through the data, it is notable that the data is often just words or numbers without context. This emphasizes the organizational responsibility to utilize the whole organization to benefit and learn from feedback, not just a single team or an employee. Organizations must also take care of the people who give feedback. It is much more likely for the end-user to be pleased with the company, if they get a fast and polite response. (Zhang et al., 2018).

2.6 Summary of literature review

This thesis focuses on how the organizations can acquire and use the knowledge and information from the end-user through distributor-based business models. This literature review is built on three different crucial concepts, organization learning, relationship learning and customer feedback as a source that should be utilized.

Organization learning creates the basis of this thesis. In literature, acquiring knowledge and utilizing it are critical to any organization, especially now when world is changing rapidly (Argote et al., 2021; Hult et al., 2003; Atanassova et al., 2025). Without the ability to integrate the knowledge and information in the markets into the organization's own operations, this external information has no real use for the organization. Double-loop learning from Auqui-Caceres & Furlan (2023) shows that the most successful organizations do not only react to changes, but they are able to question their own habits

constantly and their way of working. By doing this they are truly able to enhance the whole organization and its employees.

Relationship learning fulfills the organization learning by focusing purely to external factors, such as distributors and end-users (Selnes & Sallis, 2003; Bhatti et al, 2020). By emphasizing relationship learning organizations can acquire knowledge and information from the distributor directly, but they must be able to notice the changes in their behavior. The role of distributor is also crucial when there is no possibility to contact end-users directly or the possibility is very limited.

The distributor-based business models in the international context offer a view about how organizations should build mechanisms to share knowledge and information and how to increase cooperation in culturally or physically different environments (Boerma et al., 2024; Sima et al., 2024). When the organization decides to enter any market with a distributor, it is crucial to create structures that increase trust, knowledge and information exchange and flexibility. The previous studies also enhance the meaning of social networks and the meaning of organization structures as enabling the knowledge and information to enter the organization (Chiva et al., 2014; Bresman & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2013).

End-user feedback is an important part of organizations' knowledge and information entity. End-user feedback, whether it is explicit or implicit, is crucial especially in the B2B environment, where the supplier does not have any direct contact with the end-user. The value of the feedback is highlighted when the organization is able to collect it, utilize it and move it to a part of the organization and product development process. Collecting feedback has a positive impact on every aspect of the organization. It has an operative and strategic purpose, since it increases the amount and quality of innovations, customer loyalty and the market share of the organization (Ordenes et al., 2014; Kaul et al., 2025).

2.7 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this thesis is based on the literature review. The theoretical framework connects the organization learning (Argote et al., 2021), distributor-based business models (Bilro et al, 2023), relationship learning (Selnes & Sallis, 2003) and end-user feedback Argote et al. (2021) to a figure that presents the process where the end-user feedback in the end turns to improved product development (Ylimäki, 2015) and market orientation (Narver & Slater, 1990), once the feedback goes through the distributor.

Since the end-user is geographically and culturally distant from the supplier, the distributor works as a link between the two parties. According to Andersson et al., (2024) distributor-based business model offers many advantages for the supplier, and the role of distributor cannot be underlined. But as shown in the previous literature review, distributor works as a key player from the supplier's perspective. The feedback given from the end-user to the distributor must be processed by the distributor and distributor must share the feedback with the supplier. If the feedback does not move from the distributor to the supplier, the supplier does not get the possibility to improve its operations.

Because the feedback sharing from the end-user to the supplier is not a straightforward process and the supplier is relying on the distributor, the supplier must motivate and support the distributor to collect the feedback. According to Gounaris & Almoraish (2004) by integrating the distributor better into the suppliers' operations, the feedback should be more direct, and the distributor should not filter the feedback as much. This is understandable because the distributor should better understand how the feedback impacts on the supplier and how the feedback creates value to both parties. On the other hand the supplier should create ways and channels for the distributor to make the feedback sharing as simple as possible, but as mentioned by Ordenes et al., (2014) especially implicit or indirect feedback is something that the supplier could be a bit complicated to gather without the help of the distributor.

Once the feedback reaches the supplier, the feedback has no worth if the supplier is unable to implement it in its operations. According to Argote et al. (2021) when the organization truly implements the feedback into its process, decision making and operating models, then the feedback has true value and its worth gathering. Organization can also enhance the learning operations with for example double-loop learning, which also forces the employees to think why they have done the thing as they have in the past (Auqui-Caceres & Furlan, 2023). In the end, the feedback gathering process should lead to a situation where the product development (Ylimäki, 2015) and market orientation (Narver & Slater, 1990) are enhanced and the organization has a better possibility to react to the changes on the markets.

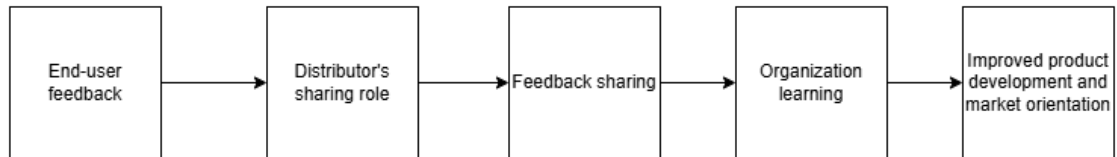


Figure 1. Theoretical framework

3 Research Methodology

3.1 Research design

This thesis utilizes a qualitative case study approach, aiming to increase the understanding of how a Finnish growing medium manufacturer and supplier can collect and utilize end-user feedback through an international distributor network. Qualitative case study was chosen because it gives the possibility for an in-depth examination about the subject in true context (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

This study followed the interpretive paradigm, which means that knowledge is created through interaction between people. This point of view suits well then, the subject of the study is related to organization culture, feedback and knowledge and information share (Mann, 2011, Elo et al. 2022). Because the thesis is focused on the actual process and the phenomena of feedback and how it is and could be transferred from the end-user to the supplier, qualitative approach was the best option to reach the goals of this study as the case company did not have such data before (Baxter & Jack, 2008, Kallio et al, 2016, Elo et al. 2022).

The data was collected via semi-structured interviews, which allowed comparability of the interviews, but it also gave a flexible approach to the interviews, which is possible for the conversations to have unexpected points of view. In the semi-structured interview, the interviewer has the possibility to lead the conversation with the themes that the thesis is focusing on, but it also gives space for new ideas from the interview side, and the conversation can be turned into that topic for a while. This is important especially in the multicultural and complex environment. (Kallio et al. 2016).

The thesis also takes advantage of *embedded units* methods, where the single case, such as the case company includes many different analysis units, which in this case are the

distributors. This method enables comparison between different units but keeps the focus on the case company and its operations. (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

3.2 Case company

The case company for this thesis is a Finnish growing media manufacturing company. The case company produces and sells growing media for professional growers to over 60 countries. The company operates solely on the business-to-business markets. The company operates mostly through distributors in all of its target markets. The participants in the study operate in markets where the case company does not have any direct end-user contact, and all the feedback goes through the distributors.

The case company's products require technical expertise and proper use to ensure that the result meets customer expectations. Distributors are responsible for local logistics and sales, but they also are responsible for customer service and technical advice. In this business model the manufacturer (the case company) does not receive feedback from the end-users directly, since all the local business is done between the distributor and the end-user.

The case company has implemented its interest in gathering feedback more thoroughly to understand the rapidly changing market better, but also to ensure customer satisfaction and boost its product development. In the rapidly changing markets, the lack of feedback might lead to a situation where the case company's ability to be competitive might decrease, the number of mistakes might increase, and it is unable to react to the changes. The case company strives to enhance the feedback processes and utilize it at a strategic level.

3.3 Data collection

The empirical data of this thesis consist of five semi-structured interviews, which were implemented with the case company's international distributors. The interviews were chosen by the following criteria:

1. Geographical area
2. Cooperation time with the case company
3. Business segment

All interviews represented different geographical areas, all participants had at least two years of cooperation with the case company and all the participants were operating in a business segment that was mainly focusing on professional end-users and non-hobby market. (Gentles et al., 2015). Since the case company does not restrict the sales of the goods, basically the case company cannot restrict the distributor to sell to the hobby markets as well.

The interview body was based on research questions and on previous literature about organizational learning and feedback utilization in the organization. The themes in the interviews were, for example, current feedback collecting methods, forms of the feedback, how the feedback is used and suggestions for further development regarding how the case company could acquire it more.

The interviews lasted 10-20 minutes and were collected via online meetings. Before the interviews began, the writer told the participants that the interviews would be recorded. It was told to the participants that if there are questions that they do not want to answer, it is completely fine. The interviews were littered word by word and after that the interviews were anonymized in a way that it is not possible to recognize the participant based on their answers (Tietoarkisto, 2025). The participants were granted full anonymity to increase trust and openness (Nowell et al, 2017). The interviewer made sure that the participants felt safe while giving their comments, which is important to gather truthful

data, but also because of the rather small scale of the industry and many participants are well known in the industry.

After five interviews the writer thinks that the saturation was achieved and there were not any new perspectives or themes related to the thesis. Also, the participants represented multiple markets and other criteria's which strengthened the comprehensiveness of the data. On the other hand, the market is very niche and similar all around the world, which leads to similar answers from the participants.

3.4 Data analysis

Qualitative thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, which enables the identification of meaningful themes and patterns in the research data. Qualitative thematic analysis is flexible, but systematic method which suits the subject of this case study such as understanding the current feedback practices. (Nowell et al., 2017).

The analysis process involved open coding, where the content of the interviews was looked line by line and key phrases were identified. The codes were grouped into categories based on their content similarity. Finally, the categories were used to form main themes that describe the core content of the research results in relation to the research questions. (Naeem et al., 2023).

The analysis identified five main themes which were:

1. The nature of end-user feedback
2. Feedback collection
3. Challenges and barriers of feedback sharing
4. Motivation and engagement of distributors
5. Suggestions for enhancing the current process

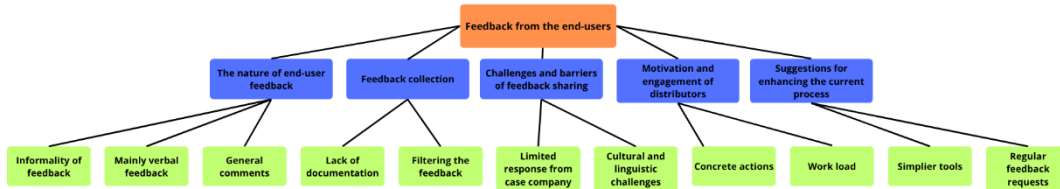


Figure 2. Outcome of thematic analysis

These themes act as a basis for the fourth chapter.

Because the thesis is case-based and there are only five interviews and the industry that the case company is operating in is a niche market, the goal is not intersectional generalizability or analytical generalizability or inferential generalizability, but naturalistic generalizability. This means that the insights generated by the study may also be useful for other organizations operating in a similar context or industry, but the generalization to other context or industries might be difficult and on readers' responsibility. (Hays & McKibben, 2021).

3.5 Ethical considerations

In the qualitative research the researcher does not act only as a passive machine that collects the data but has an active role throughout the research. Reflectivity refers to researchers' own consciousness about its values and assumptions. This is rather important when the data is collected via semi-constructive interviews (Mann, 2011).

The interview is an interactive situation, not just a communication channel. The researchers' wording and how the questions are designed to have an impact on the answers by the participants. Alongside reflectivity, ethical principles such as anonymity of the participants and ensuring participants consent were secured. The sections from the interviews that would allow the participant to be identified have been removed. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that responses have a context, they are always part of the situation in which they are collected. A reflexive and contextual approach increases the credibility of the research and makes the interpretation of the data more transparent (Mann, 2011).

4 Findings

4.1 Overview of the interviews

This chapter describes the background, execution and overview of the five semi-structured interviews. The interviews create the whole empirical basis, and the result of the interviews are the basis of this chapter and its analysis. Under review is the background of the participants, the assumed market share of the company, what kind of customers the company has and the feedback that the distributors receive. The goal of this chapter is to create a clear context for the later chapters, which more deeply reflect the feedback gathering process, challenges in it and further develop ideas. This overview serves as a summary for the empirical analysis and enlightens the business environment where the case company is operating, but on the other hand also tries to hear the end-users voice through the distributor.

The participants represent five different countries and two continents geographically. Three of them are from Europe and two from Asia. The participants are all working in the same industry, but the business concept, size and client base are different. Also given that all participants were in different parts of the world, the crops that their clients are cultivating differ from each other, as the climate itself makes it impossible to cultivate the same crops. All participants have long experience from the industry, but the time that they have worked as a distributor for the case company depends. All participants have over 2 years of experience of dealing with the case company, so they are familiar with the case company and the industry.

The participants and the companies they represent typically act as importers and distributors, but many of them also offer more technical assistance as a growing media specialist. They support their clients by giving advice about proper growing conditions, but also, they can help the grower with crop problems or irrigation problems. Some of the participants have technical teams that work as a quality department to support the end-user.

"We are the local contact and they know that we are the ones who can act fast. We deal with the situation directly. Sometimes we pass things on to xxx, but not everything"
(Participant 2)

The ownership of the participants varies, most of the participants were family-owned businesses who work only on a local basis, but there is also one international operator, who is distributing the case company's growing media to other countries as well. The biggest difference was, however, the importance of the case company to the participants. All participants have the exclusive right to sell case company's products in their market area, but the difference was that some of the participants had also other brands in their portfolio. This creates a different approach to the issues and how they are handled. Participants who have also other brands in their portfolio do not need to lose the customer if one brand fails, they have other options that they can sell to the end-users. On the other hand participants that do not have any other growing media brands in their portfolio are unable to offer anything else to their customers, this leads to the situation where the participant has a strong will to solve all issues and they are ready to make more in order to find solutions with the case company who in this scenario work as a manufacturer and supplier of the product. The price is also one of the defining factors in the industry, this is something that again differs the participants. If some participants have cheaper options in stock their ability to compete with all other competitors is much better, especially now when the costs have risen a lot lately and again, distributors that do not have any other brands are only forced to compete with quality and great service.

"And of course, price comes up all the time."
(Participant 5)

"I think that price is something we have been talking about more and more during the years."
(Participant 3)

One of the most defining and combining factors of all participants was the constant and very strong dependence on the customer interface. All participants were actively involved in the fields and greenhouses and in the cultivation process, offering help and advice whenever they were needed from the end-user. They know their customers mostly personally and they have made cooperation with them for years, even a decade.

"Yes, I visit them all the time, twice a week, sometimes more. And we don't just talk about orders. We go into the greenhouse, we look at the plants, irrigation, the whole process. That's where the feedback happens."
(Participant 2)

"Now we have tested many mixes and introduced them to local farms. Some customers use them for years now, others try and compare. We are like the long-time partner."
(Participant 3)

Given that the participants and the companies that they represent work so closely with the end-users as a trusted link between the case company and the end-user, the end-users understand and know who the manufacturer is, and that the distributor has not manufactured the product, but still, they operate solely with the distributor. This puts the distributor in the middle of all feedback and the distributor works like a "gatekeeper" for all the information that is afterwards sent to the case company.

"They know the xxx name well. If they have a problem, they tell us. If they are happy, they tell us."
(Participant 4)

The contact and relationship with the customer are not limited by only purchasing the growing media but goes way beyond that. Most of the participants do regular visits to the end-users fields or green houses, where they check the growing results, talk with the grower and collect valuable knowledge and information about the growing media, but also all other silent information, for example if they see another brand in the end-users yard, that is a straight signal that the competitor might be trying to get the distributor's

client or maybe the end-user has not been pleased with the latest batches, so something must be done.

The participants enlighten that most of the feedback they receive is during everyday interaction with the end-users. The feedback that the participants receive is not official or structured, usually the participant must form the feedback from the small pieces of information that the end-user offers. The knowledge and information are formed via casual conversations, asking questions and making observations. One notable thing is that technology has also developed, and it was shown in participants' answers. They also receive and share this feedback via instant messaging apps, for example in WhatsApp, but also via more traditional email.

"After we verify it, if it is such a case, we send photos that we capture via WhatsApp, as it is faster than email."

(Participant 1)

Some participants have internal folders where they put the acquired feedback, but these folders are not shared with the case company, so the case company has no access to them. But of course, that is understandable, since the case company does not share its folders with the distributors. Overall, the participants receive feedback, but it is not easy to collect it, and it often comes in fractions, all depending on the current relationship with the client.

All participants emphasize the importance of the relationship between them and the case company. The problem with knowledge and information exchange was not that the communication or relationship would be bad, but participants felt like it is mostly one sided and not required enough, sending feedback requires too much initiative from the distributor.

"If I know someone is reading and actually cares, I will send. Even if small things. But now I have to decide alone if it's worth sending or not."

(Participant 5)

Especially feedback related to small changes or inquiries about slightly different mixtures often never reach the case company. These kinds of small inquiries are easier for the distributors to handle with a shrug, as it is extra work for both parties and most likely the volumes would not exceed the amount needed to start manufacturing with an updated recipe. But here is the catch, if the case company would have this information, there is a great chance that it has already received similar information from another market, this way the case company could be able to receive large enough orders together by combining market areas and then the manufacturing of the needed product could be profitable.

*“Sometimes growers have smart ideas. They say what if this was packed different or can we try coarser mix.”
(Participant 5)*

When asked about feedback and how the case company could receive it more often all participants agree that if the process itself were clearer, easier and they would really see the change and impact of the feedback, it would be shared more often. It is notable that participants let the interviewer know that if case company would start to collect feedback more often, it should be done in a way that does not really cause them too much extra work either. This is understandable as before seeing the possible impact of possible new feedback procedures, participants, for natural reasons, do not want to do extra work.

The case company’s distributors work in a very centric role as a player who receives and filters the information. They have a lot of experience in the field, and they are true professionals, they have tight relationships in the client interface and the best way to acquire and share the information with the case company. Acquiring the knowledge and information from the end-customer is often based on informal and to personal dependents relationships, which would be almost impossible for the case company to build and maintain. On the other hand, participants did not have any established practices to

acquire, document or share the feedback. This leads to a situation where there is a high probability that the case company does not receive the knowledge and information and by this it is not able to use and utilize it.

4.2 Current feedback collection practices

In this chapter the participants interviews are analyzed from the feedback collection perspective. This chapter focuses on how the feedback is formed, how it is collected, where it is collected, how it is documented and where it is shared to. Moreover, it is examined how the participants use the feedback in their operations and what kind of challenges they face. The structure of this chapter is based on the themes that arose during the interviews with the participants. According to the interviews with the participants collecting and acquiring feedback is part of everyday processes, but very informal. The end-users often do not even understand that they are giving valuable knowledge and information to the participants while having the conversation. They share their insights, questions and experiences spontaneously, naturally part of all the other interactions.

“But you know, xxx customers don’t always speak directly. They will say something like this one is different, but they don’t say this is feedback.”
(Participant 4)

The form of the feedback differs a lot. Often it is a verbal message during the conversation. but sometimes growers are very specific, and they send pictures and even some data, if the greenhouse is very technologically advanced. Often feedback compares the same product between batches. Batches in this industry might vary a lot, and this might cause problems for the growers as they are used to specific quality and if the growing media harvest year is bad, before the new harvest begins the remaining raw material might be slightly worse than it is during the harvest when it is well available.

“They give comments, but not like real feedback. When I visit, they say something like this peat takes more water or plants grow slower this week or sometimes just this batch feels not same, it is too heavy.”
(Participant 4)

Often especially when the feedback concerns poor growth results, the process of getting into the real cause, the growing media is the easiest to blame. Often problems caused by irrigation water or fertilizer are much harder to prove than problems with growing media.

*"I can't take their first comment as full answer. Maybe problem is irrigation, or weather, not the product. But they just tell me, and expect I understand everything."
(Participant 1)*

This places the distributors and lately the case company into a complicated situation, because the most obvious reason for poor growing results is the growing media, but only in very rare cases is it the true reason. None of the participants had an official way to collect feedback, all the end-user feedback that they collect came from an informal way. The end-users do not fill in any forms or take place to any formal queries. The feedback is collected via everyday conversations, emails and end-user visits. This informality acts as a weakness, but also as a strength. It enables the participants to create a strong bond between them and the end-users and it gives the end-user the possibility to express their feelings more freely. On the other hand, when the feedback is often in verbal mode, it is not documented, which leads to a situation that often is forgotten.

*"But most times it stays in my head. We don't have real reporting system. Too busy, honestly."
(Participant 1)*

One of the most defining themes of every interview was the lack of documentation. The participants do not acquire the feedback to any concentrated system. The feedback is collected to personal notes or shared folders, but there are not any clear operating methods of how to do that.

*"We don't have like an official way to do it. It's more like, if I feel it's useful, then I send it."
(Participant 5)*

*“Sometimes I take photos. But we don’t have system.”
(Participant 4)*

Because of this when the feedback is not collected to any specific place, it leads to a situation where it is much more complex to create a bigger picture about the current quality. And because this information is not shared to the case company, case company is also unable to see patterns in certain batches.

*“If it’s something repeating from multiple growers, then I take it more seriously. But one time comments usually sometimes I forget and customer forget.”
(Participant 3)*

The case company has noted that if the complaints are not properly documented, it could lead to a situation where the problems have been noticed too late, when corrective actions could have been taken much earlier if the distributor had been collecting and documenting the feedback correctly.

4.3 Challenges in the current practices and barriers of feedback sharing

Even though the distributor-based business model offers many possibilities and advantages compared to operating directly in the target markets, for example local knowledge about the language and culture and enhanced logistics possibilities. Based on the interviews this operating model might cause some challenges when considering the feedback that the case company is currently receiving. From the participants comments about the feedback that they share with the case company there is clear room for improvement, at least when considering only the amount of feedback.

The informality of current feedback collection practices, lack of proper documenting practices and filtering the feedback that the case company receives are some of the current issues related to the feedback sharing from the distributor to the case company. The feedback sharing is not a proper systematic process, so it might lead to a situation where

the feedback never reaches the case company and the case company is unable to develop its own processes further.

The feedback that comes from the end-users is often received when the distributor visits the end-user in the natural habitat of the end-product, fields and greenhouses. The feedback is formed in a natural and personal situation with the end-user and the feedback that the distributors receive is not always asked for and at least it is not a structured situation. This means that most of the feedback received is contextual and it is mainly received verbally.

*"We sit down for coffee, or we walk around the greenhouse. But it's not official feedback, no papers."
(Participant 4)*

While naturally it is a great situation that the relationship is personal and very close, it creates a situation that is partly paradoxical. The personal and close relationship makes the feedback much less informal and undocumented, which leads to feedback that is difficult to interpret and difficult to share. The feedback is not seen as official, but as a normal everyday interaction. This is why noticing the feedback related to the company's case products is mostly on the distributor's responsibility.

One of the most defining and most frequently repeated parts of every interview was the lack of documentation or deficient documentation. All participants had some kind of system to gather feedback, but it was not systematic or properly documented. Popular methods were notes on the phone or using team chat in some instant messaging platforms, but the feedback that was collected was not collected in any proper order.

*"Sometimes I write notes in my phone, or I just remember."
(Participant 3)*

*"We don't have like an official way to do it. It's more like, if I feel it's useful, then I send it."
(Participant 5)*

When all the feedback and later knowledge and information that could have been documented has not been documented, it makes it impossible to have systematic data about the quality of the end-product that the end-user has been using. Because of this the case company cannot create proper statistical data about the quality or end-user satisfaction with the product, which later would help the case company to focus on the similar quality to the batches that have been satisfying for the end users before.

Especially in certain markets the differences in culture and language as they differ relatively much from the case company cause misunderstanding and especially technical vocabulary might be hard to translate and transfer from the end-user to the case company. According to one participant the cultural differences might cause some issues as the case company's culture is much more direct than the culture in other parts of the world.

*"Sometimes they just smile and say okay even if not okay. It's part of our culture."
(Participant 4)*

This means that the distributor does not only receive the feedback but must also interpret it. After this the distributor must translate the local language and terminology into English and send it to case company. In this process there are many faults which could lead to a situation where misunderstandings are well possible.

Most of the participants had to think whether the feedback received is valuable or not. This filtering mechanism is often based on distributors' intuition and experience from the field, but at the same time it logically means that a great part of the feedback never reaches the case company.

*"I have to decide alone if it's worth sending or not."
(Participant 5)*

Here lays the great challenge from case company's point of view, if the distributor has not any proper logic whether the feedback is valuable or not, it is impossible to estimate

how much of the potential knowledge and information never reaches the case company. On the other hand, if the distributor did not have this filtering mechanism, it would be challenging for the case company also to go through all the feedback unfiltered.

From the participants' interviews one notable theme was that the participants felt a lack of motivation towards sending it to the case company. Some of the participants felt that the feedback that they send does not lead to any further measures in most cases, so why would they send every small detail.

When the case company in theory demands more specific feedback, it should also focus more on giving back on the distributors. Even though theoretically speaking the case company would benefit from the received information and knowledge, the outcome of that might not be seen by the distributor. This is something that the case company must further develop.

The interviews reveal that valuable information and knowledge from the end-user side is available, but its collection and further transfer to the case company is random and mostly under distributors responsibility. The feedback sharing lacks clear structure and operating models, which is not optimal for the case company as crucial feedback might never end up to its organization.

One of the most defining observations of the interviews was that information is not transmitted systematically from the field or greenhouses to the case company, the transmission is dependent on the context, situation and even sometimes distributors own discretion. The feedback sharing is not part of the supply chain now, it could be said that it is more like an exception mode that is activated when there is a true crisis, or the same problem occurs often. This observation was noted especially by some interviews, that the feedback is mostly related to negative things.

"If it's something critical, yes. Like, we had one batch a few years ago it was full of rocks, and customer had problems. That I sent right away."

(Participant 5)

This means that the current feedback practices, generally speaking do not support continuous development, they only react at the last minute when it is already too late to make changes that could have prevented the current critical issue in the first place. For example, if the end-user mentions that there is something different in this batch or this batch feels different, these could be the signals for the case company that there must be something that we should do right away before we send the next batch.

Second issues in the feedback sharing are the individualism or in other words “stand alone” situation. The participants enlighten that collecting and sharing feedback is currently based on only their own work, for example own notes, personal considerations and in some cases messaging their own team. None of the participants in the interviews indicated that there would be any commonly agreed and structured place or ERP-system that they would store feedback data, nor that some structured methods for collecting feedback were used.

"We decide what to pass. But also if we are busy, or it is not a big thing, we maybe keep it to ourselves. Not because we want to hide, but no time, no system."

(Participant 4)

The above sentence sums up the problematic nature of the current situation. The distributors are ready and willing to share more feedback, but they are busy and under pressure as well all the time, which from case company's point of view might be seen as passivity towards sharing the feedback. In a way this current practice also leads to a situation from the case company's point of view that they do not even know what they do not know. This lack of feedback from distributors prevents the case company from forming the overall picture and makes the decision-making process more uncertain.

Individualism and lack of structures regarding feedback procedures, especially from the case company's side, leads to a situation where it is up to the distributor whether the

feedback is transferred to the case company or not. If the distributor in theory would be active, technically advanced and careful, the feedback could be collected very comprehensively. But in theory other distributors might collect feedback without documenting it and without using any technical systems, when most likely a great part of the feedback is not utilized. The blame about inequity cannot be implemented for the distributors, it is only an outcome when the case company has not created clear expectations nor tools for feedback collecting.

Third observation is related to feedback processing and how the case company is handling the feedback and how it is related to distributors motivation towards feedback sharing. From the interviews it was possible to notice some indicators that more feedback would be shared if the feedback processing would be more visible, and it would bring a more concrete impact to the operations. When the answer from case company's side is a simple "thank you" to the provided feedback from distributors side and if there is no visible impact on that shared feedback, it is not motivating to share the feedback in the future.

Reacting to the feedback should not mean that all the feedback should be turned into new products or something concrete, but if the distributor feels like there is not any reaction to the feedback or suggestions from case company's side, slowly the motivation to share the feedback decreases.

*"Even small things like we are checking this or thanks for the suggestion. That would be enough. It shows they listen."
(Participant 3)*

It seems that it is not about big investments or even upgraded technological solutions, it is more about focusing on communications towards the distributor. When the distributor feels that the feedback is valued, there is a greater chance that the case company will receive it more often. The feedback coming from the distributor must always been seen as a possibility, not as a potential threat. The distributor does not only feedback,

inside the feedback there is often a hidden meaning and hidden signals that the case company can use to enhance its operations and to create strategic advantage towards the competitors. Just like what the distributors are doing right now with their end-users.

4.4 Suggestions for improving the knowledge and information shared in the future

Based on the participants' comments in the interviews, the case company must have a more systematic and structured approach towards the feedback collection from the distributors. The feedback is well available from the end-users and based on the interviews the end-users share it often. During the current feedback process, part of the end-user feedback is lost and is never received by the case company. Main reasons for this are that there is a lack of structured processes and tools, the end-user feedback is mostly not documented, and it is mostly solely on distributors responsibility to share it. In this chapter are some concrete examples of how the process could be enhanced further to increase the amount of feedback that the case company receives and furthermore increasing organizational learning based on that feedback.

One of the themes that came up in the interviews was the need for easy-to-use and additionally even mobile phone friendly feedback channel. Most of the participants mentioned that some kind of form, which could be easily filled after the end-user visit would be the most beneficial. The form should be simple and should not require too much effort. The distributors might gather a lot of feedback from the end-users, so it is crucial that the case company creates a form where there are all the defining factors regarding, for example, the batch quality. Case company must notice that if the form is too exact or too complex to fill, most likely it won't lead to any increased amount of feedback received from the distributors.

"I don't want a big complicated platform. Just something simple. Maybe a small form I can fill in 5 minutes, with product name, problem or comment, and upload a picture."

(Participant 3)

"If there is a form, where I can choose product, write two sentences, and upload photo I can do it in the car after customer visit."

(Participant 1)

These comments show clearly that no overly technical solution is needed nor wanted from the distributors' side. It is enough if the feedback could be shared with a fast and efficient form that could be easily filled after the customer visit. For this form there should be also the possibility of giving comments, as the feedback that is received from the end-customers is often in verbal mode, not in written. Naturally this takes a bit more resources from the case company compared just "fill the blanks" type of form, but as it was implemented from distributors side, case company also must put more effort to the feedback collecting.

Most of the participants mentioned that feedback is not often asked from the case company's side. These comments are important as case company cannot expect any additional feedback if it does not require or ask for it by itself. This current operating method leads to a situation where the distributor must decide whether the feedback received is worth sending to the case company or not. One of the ways to increase the amount of feedback would be to ask the feedback more frequently. Just a simple email once per month asking if any feedback would be available. This could be enough to increase the amount of feedback received compared to the current amounts.

"If someone from xxx sent a message every month hey, do you have any feedback from growers I would take 10 minutes to write something. Or even better, if it's just click and send. But you don't ask, so we forget."

(Participant 5)

If the feedback is asked for regularly, it might not only increase the amount of feedback that is received, but also it gives the distributors a clear message that the case company is very interested in receiving the feedback more often and truly wants to hear what the end-customer has to say. Before focusing on the new technological solution or enhancing the current operating methods, the case company must focus on making the

distributor feel like the feedback is really leading to concrete things, for example new products or even the small issues are fixed right away. If from the received feedback, there is no conversation or any additional modifications by the case company, distributors' motivation towards sending feedback decreases.

"I think small things make a big difference. Like, if we send a comment and get a quick thanks, we got it that's already motivating. I'm not saying that. But to see they actually did something with it. That gives a sense that we're not just pushing information into a black hole."

(Participant 2)

Short reports from the case company's side about what has been done and what will be done soon could encourage the distributor to send feedback more and more often. The importance of feedback could be also educated to the distributors, a short lecture or even a phone call about the advantages of feedback sharing and in addition to that a concrete example of how the feedback received in the past made an impact would encourage the distributors. At the same time, knowing that the case company now invested in new methods of feedback collection and is ready to share the feedback received in a way that would benefit the distributor as well would make distributor feel appreciated.

5 Discussion and Conclusions

In this chapter empirical observations are connected to theoretical framework and research questions. The chapter evaluates the value of the study for the case company, identifies the limitations of the study and presents ideas for further studies. The purpose of this thesis was to study how end-user feedback could be utilized in the distributor-based business model in the international business-to-business context and about the importance of feedback regarding organizational learning and relationship learning. In addition to that, the chapter links the findings of the thesis to previous literature and gives managerial implications for the case company and industry, but hopefully also to other organizations which are operating in different industries.

5.1 Linking findings to theoretical framework and research questions

The research questions of this thesis were:

1. How is feedback from end-customers collected and shared in the current distribution-based model?
2. What kind of information can the case company get from the distributors?
3. What is the most practical way to collect feedback?

One of the most important findings in the thesis was that with the current practices feedback collecting is informal and even person dependent. This was mentioned by Bhatti et al. (2020) that information and knowledge in relationship learning often is not only direct queries or forms, the information and knowledge often transfer via silent information, changes in behavior and shared moments. This kind of feedback can be seen as implicit feedback (Ordenes et al., 2014). All the participants had a slightly different way of collecting and storing feedback, but in summary neither of them had a systematic way of collecting it, but neither has the case company. Because the feedback structures are missing, the case company does not receive all the feedback that it in theory could receive. According to the participants feedback sharing from end-users to the case

company is always through the distributor, end-users do not have direct contact with the case company and partly this is also case company's interest, as dealing with the end-users without knowing the local culture or local habits is complicated. The feedback sharing from the distributor to the end-user is currently mainly on distributors' responsibility and the distributor and it could be also said that distributor is partly seen as a gatekeeper of the information based on the interviews. Liu et al (2008) emphasized that trust between the supplier and distributor is a crucial factor considering the feedback share, but according to the participants trust was not the issue, the issue was that the participants did not see the impact of the feedback. When the case company is unable to show that the feedback is leading to concrete results, it might increase the amount of feedback. Even though the in the current processes feedback is well available in every market, case company is unable to utilize it. When the feedback does not even reach the case company, according to Argote et al. (2021) the feedback that the end-users produce now does not bring additional value to the case company as it is unable to internally process and utilize it as part of its ongoing operations. This ability would be crucial for the case company as Hult et al. (2004) and Atanassova et al. (2025) mention, the organizational ability to react to the market changes is dependent on its ability to collect and utilize the knowledge and information. By creating formal structures to the informal way to collect the feedback, the case company could truly enhance its operations.

About practical ways to collect feedback, the participants were positive about feedback collecting solutions that would be mobile-friendly, easy-to-use and something that won't remarkably increase the workload. All the participants were very busy, and their days were full, so to find practical ways to collect feedback the case company must find solutions that do not require anything extra from the distributors. Most convenient time to fill the feedback form would be directly after the client visit. In addition to that if the solution would benefit the participants right away, for example by giving statistical information right away, it is always better to convince the distributors to use the possible application or website. This insight is in line with Ordenes et al. (2014), when the feedback collecting methods are made easy for the end users and the method is user friendly,

most likely the feedback collection will be more successful. In addition to that another solution was addressed by the participants, which would not require investment in new technology. In the interviews the participants mentioned that if the case company would ask the feedback more often, they would share feedback more often. This is in line with Kaul et al. (2025) insight that customer loyalty and customer satisfaction can be increased by only asking the feedback, whether the customer answers to the feedback request. In a way it could be said that before any technical systems are established, case company's support and being more active overall could increase the feedback in the first place. Also motivating the distributors to send feedback would increase the amount. Motivating the participants did not mean any monetary compensation but seeing that the feedback sent implemented something new or better is the price, by involving the distributors into the processes it creates value to both parties, but this means that the distributors' comments and improvement ideas must be better implemented to the case company.

Based on the interviews, the distributors have access to many different forms of useful information and knowledge from the case company's perspective, mostly because they have such a good relationship with the end-users. They have access to technical data, such as growing results, but also more general information and knowledge, which includes general market information more widely. Now the participants mostly mentioned the price as an issue, which could be seen as general market information. According to the writer's own knowledge of the industry the possible threats for the case company such as alternative growing media options or new aggressive competitors are information from the markets that in theory only the distributor can share with the case company. Much of this information is silent information, it is gathered from the end-users during the visits as for example changes in behavior, which is in line with Bhatti et al. (2020) in their article about relationship learning. Other information that in theory the distributor could provide based on the interviews that are in line with the literature are for example product development related improvements (Ylimäki, 2015) and cultural or linguistic knowledge (Sima et al., 2024).

5.2 Managerial implications for the case company

Even though the distributors of the case company are in touch with the end-users very often and collect very useful feedback, most of this information and knowledge never reaches the case company. The feedback is collected by the distributors, but at some point, during the process, it never reaches the case company, mainly because the current practices are not easy, fast or motivating.

Clear and simple feedback gathering structures, which would be easy to fill and not require too much time would be optimal for the distributors. Since the time of the distributors is very limited, if the company wants to get more feedback it should make it as easy for the distributors as possible. On the other hand, if the case company would simply ask for the feedback more frequently, this could affect the motivation and amount of the feedback that the case company receives.

Since the goal is to receive more feedback from the distributors, the case company must motivate the distributors to gather the feedback and integrate it better into its organization. One motivating factor could be, for example, sharing the feedback results better and more often with the distributors. Then the distributors would really see how the feedback is affecting the case company and see the results, for example in product development. The case company should also take a more significant role in the distributor's operations. This could be done on joint end-user's visits, where the trust between the distributor and the case company could increase.

It is also important to mention that there is much to be done internally in the case company's organization. Feedback should be appreciated more, and the case company should concentrate on developing the products and their services based on the feedback received.

As a summary the case company could benefit a lot if the focus would be more on the distributor and end-user feedback. To acquire and utilize this information the case company must enhance its feedback collection practices, it must be done internally, but also the distributors must be taken into part of this process. Feedback must be asked more frequently, it must be documented properly, and it must be utilized and taken into the part of case company's learning processes. Some options for improvement might require technical investments, but more importantly the case company must change its whole operation culture and see every feedback as a possibility to learn, not as a possible problem.

Even though this thesis emphasizes the importance and the benefits of feedback, it is important to mention that if the organization is too client or competitor oriented, it is not always the best solution for any organization and might lead to negative results (Guo & Wang, 2015). Also, the case company must find ways to collect feedback that does not waste time or resources from neither parties. If the solutions that are mentioned in this thesis do not bring the wanted results and create additional value, they should not be used.

5.3 Limitations of the study

This thesis and its qualitative research offer understanding and knowledge about the feedback sharing between the supplier, distributor and the end-user, but it has limitations. First, the interviews only included five participants and the interviews lasted 10-20 minutes. The writer is positive that for this case study the number of participants was sufficient, but the findings and managerial implications most likely cannot be used directly in other industries. Secondly, even though this thesis tried to understand the end-user better, interviews with only the distributors might not be the best solution. For this reason, the writer thinks that end-user voice and the possibilities that it could offer are not that well studied in this thesis. On the other hand, the writer also argues that by interviewing competitors' distributors the study could have created more managerial implications.

5.4 Suggestions for future research

In the future it would be interesting and beneficial to study more about the end-user directly and their opinions on feedback sharing. It would be also interesting to compare how the point of view between the end-user, distributor and supplier differs about the current feedback sharing.

Moreover, it would be interesting to test these implications in real life, especially digital solutions, and to explore the impact of it. Now the thesis is mostly focused on the solutions for distributors, but it would be interesting to study further so that could some technical solutions to be implemented to end-users as well.

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Appendix 1. Interview guide

1. Could you briefly describe your role and your company's relationship with xxx?
2. How long have you been a distributor of xxx products?
3. How and in what ways do you currently collect feedback from customers regarding xxx products?
4. What kind of feedback do you usually receive from your customers? Is the feedback mostly about product quality or about something else?
5. What challenges do you face in collecting feedback from your customers?
6. Are there any barriers that make it difficult to obtain feedback from end-customers?
7. How often and in what ways do you share customer feedback with xxx?
8. What type of feedback do you most frequently pass on?
9. What factors support or hinder the sharing of detailed feedback with xxx?
10. What could be done to make it easier to collect and share feedback from end-customers with xxx?
11. Would some kind of support or tool help you better collect and share feedback and information from your customers?