

Wageningen University & Research Centre



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Research Proposal

Supply chain management of a production company, its bottlenecks and improvements

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List of abbreviations

CEO	chief executive officer
EU	European Union
FTE	full-time equivalent
GRQ	general research question
HQ	headquarters
PR	public relations
R&D	research and development
RPM	rotations per minute
SCC	Supply-Chain Council
SCM	supply chain management
SCOR	Supply Chain Operations Reference model
SME	(micro) small and medium-sized enterprises
SRQ	specific research question
UK	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
USA	United States of America

Key words:

supply chain, communication, management structure, order cycle, organization,

1 Introduction

This document presents a research proposal concerning communication in small and medium businesses. The document is divided into following chapters. Chapter one describes the background information of this study (section 1.1), the problem definition (section 1.2) and initial literature review (section 1.3). Chapter two presents conceptual research design and therefore the research objective (section 2.1), research issue (section 2.2), research framework (section 2.3) and definition of concepts (section 2.4) are discussed. The third chapter presents technical research design where research material (section 3.1), research strategy (section 3.2) and research planning (section 3.3) are discussed.

1.1 Background information

Background information about studied company Typhoon will be provided in the following paragraphs. This will help to understand the current situation and occurring problems in the studied business.

Typhoon is a company providing materials for cleaning purposes. Its main focus is washcloths for automatic cleaning of commercial printing machines as well as on quality textiles for manual cleaning of printing machines. These products of Typhoon differ in colour, shape, weight and quality.

Typhoon supplies its products globally via its four subsidiaries and two business partners. Regardless of location or business entity, there is always a strong connection to its German holding company. This connection is either legal (where Typhoon Germany actually owns all shares of the subsidiary) or it is connection with regard to cooperation (Typhoon Germany delivers its products to a legally independent company, which is managed by trusted partners of Typhoon). The annual turnover of the whole Typhoon is approximately EUR 7.5 mil (exchange rate for the calculation sourced from ECB (European Central Bank)), realized by 32.5 FTE.

Strategically, the most important business unit for Typhoon is in United States of America, whom secures the contact with the main supplier of material for further processing and conversion. Initially, supplies of intermediate products were shipped directly from Jamison (independent supplier) located in the USA to Germany where the material was converted into the final products. Such products were either sent back to the USA to be sold, sent to other markets worldwide or were sold on the local German market.

Typhoon was not the only European customer of Jamison. As sales increased, the board of Jamison decided to build a new production factory for the European market located on the Iberian Peninsula. The purpose of said factory was to supply the European market with exactly the same products as the factory in the USA did. Unfortunately, Jamison failed to introduce the right technology to the new factory and the final outgoing products of the European factory were of significantly lower quality than those from the USA. Despite this fact the production continued and since Jamison strictly separated the American and European region, only lower quality was available for European customers.. As a consequence, Jamison has experienced a massive outflow of customers. At a certain point production stopped and necessary steps were made to fix the production technology and recover from the losses and customers outflow. Improved technologies got Jamison back to European business but even with the

improvements there are still some quality differences between products manufactured in the new factory in Europe and the products manufactured in the USA. Nevertheless, Typhoon considered the quality difference as too big and therefore used its partner in the USA to buy products of Jamison produced in USA factory and re-sold these products further to Germany where the conversion process took place. Then the finished products of higher quality were again sold to the customers expecting the top quality who were not satisfied with the products based on Jamison's earlier moderate quality produce from their European factory.

Currently, Typhoon USA is using a consignment warehouse to supply the American region with final products from Germany. That means, that all the products stored in the consignment warehouse are property of Typhoon Germany. They are kept in the accounts of Typhoon Germany, but they are fully available and accessible for Typhoon USA. When Typhoon USA receives an order, it first takes the stock from the consignment warehouse and then charges the customer for it. At the same time an announcement is made to Typhoon Germany about the withdrawal of the goods from the warehouse. After a certain period of time, Typhoon Germany sums up all the goods withdrawn from the warehouse and sends an invoice to Typhoon USA and refills its warehouse to ensure that the full range of products will be available in sufficient amounts. The same sales system is active between Typhoon Germany and Typhoon UK. Their consignment warehouse is located in England and supplies the top quality products of Typhoon to the whole United Kingdom and Ireland.

Next, there is a subsidiary in Switzerland (Typhoon SUI). This subsidiary serves local customers with the same products as its holding company Typhoon Germany does. Additionally, there are two subsidiaries in Switzerland and Germany, respectively. The other two subsidiaries (CSP Germany and CSP Switzerland) are fighting brands providing products of lower quality and are not a direct competitor to its holding company since they are focused on different customers. German HQ processes all orders of CSP Germany, CSP Switzerland and Typhoon Switzerland. All subsidiaries and partner companies deliver products their local customers. Customers located outside of mentioned countries are served by Typhoon Germany or Typhoon USA.

In order to get an idea about organizational structure of Typhoon, the current structure have to be investigated. It will provide a model of interactions that coordinates and links tasks, technology and human components of the organization in order to realize its purpose.

Two essential objectives of organization's structure are to facilitate the flow of information within the organization in order to reduce uncertainty in decision-making. The second objective is to attain effective coordination and integration.(Duncan, 1979) This objective is particularly important in an organization where the units are interdependent.

“Organizational design is the allocation of resources and people to a specified mission or purpose and the structuring of these resources to achieve the mission.” (Duncan, 1979)

The majority of Typhoon's business operations is done in its HQ. Nowadays, twenty-seven full-time employees are working in the Typhoon HQ and up to three part-time employees are occasionally employed when necessary. Different sets of activities are being held in the buildings and the scattered physical layout of HQ demands well-functioning communication with regards to organizational structure, informational stream and logistics.

Figure 1 shows the illustrative layout of the main buildings and activities in the location that is studied. Business began in the building that is indicated by the number 7

where originally the first products were made. Due to an increase in demand, the company needed to expand so to meet consumers demand. An expansion of both, the production hall and a warehouse with higher capacity was required. First there was a remote warehouse in the city but that was not a suitable solution since the cost for transportation were high and the operations were time consuming and inflexible. Therefore there was a need for a new proximate buildings or completely new headquarters. The first option turned out to be the better solution and the expanding Typhoon has gradually affiliated surrounding industrial buildings that were available. This is the reason why is the complex of the company is somewhat scattered. Originally, different companies not related to Typhoon used the buildings that are now property of the Typhoon.

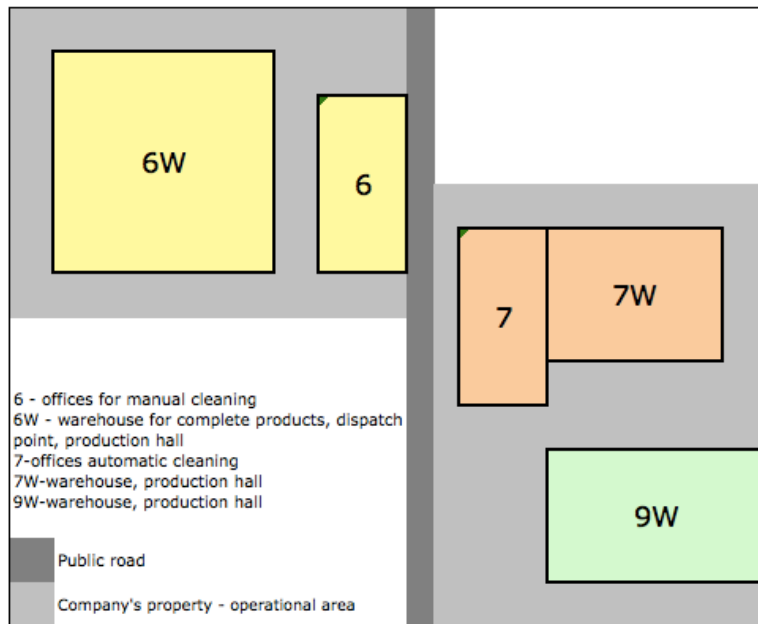


Figure 1 Simplified illustration of the Typhoon's HQ

Since the information obtained during the research is of a sensitive nature, the real names of the companies will remain undisclosed. Therefore randomly selected names Typhoon, CSP and Jamison, respectively, are used.

1.2 Problem definition

As described above, the structure of the company is not simple character. Sometimes even for the employees themselves it is unclear how exactly the departments and buildings interact. It is challenging to keep the informational flow within the whole company at a sufficient level. Each building has stock of different materials, products or semi products. But sometimes departments use stock from the other building and due to lack of communication there are occasional gaps in production caused by scarcity of resources available. This has a direct impact on production or picking of the order and therefore the order cycle is extended by time taken to fix the occurred problem. So far it is not clear who has a preference on particular resource, nor use of production machinery.

The main organizational distinction is between products for manual and automatic cleaning; also workers are allocated across the buildings of HQ according to the department they work for. Once this distinction is made, each department has its own subdivision and task allocation. Bridging elements between the departments are those workers who work for both divisions. Nevertheless, the amount and the character of information necessary for successful fulfilment of particular task demands better way of

communication than the current system can offer. In this regard it is necessary to recognize the current ways of information dissemination and its impact on order cycle. The physical structure of the company is linked with organizational issues. Hatch (Hatch, 1997) in her book states, that geography (locations) is linked with communication and transportation, meanwhile layout (buildings) is linked with interaction, coordination, and control in the company. It is probable that the current physical organization of the company does not contribute to the smooth information exchange and communication. The challenging issue would be therefore to find out what would be the appropriate way for communication between the departments and buildings.

Typhoon offers wide portfolio of products from made to order products to its more conventional goods. Product properties can differ in many aspects and therefore it is necessary to identify the exact product demanded and to delegate the right persons to contribute to the order completion. On top of that, some products that are about to be dispatched are not always in stock. In such cases the direct production takes place and additional planning has to be considered within particular order. This has to be in alignment with the current capacities and possibilities. Nevertheless, not always it is possible to deliver the orders on time due to diversify production constraints and therefore production planning should be studied as well.

From the first contact with a customer to dispatch of order is a long way. According to Typhoon's CEO, the process does not work well and is lacking communication. As a result of miscommunication there are for example tasks executed once too many, too many employees engaged in a simple task execution or technologies used under its potential. Concerning attitude towards the customers, Typhoon strives to be flexible towards them with regard to time and production as well. Unfortunately, there is not a clear structure of the work process and organization of order cycle. This affects customer response inquiry time, where average time elapsed between receipt of a customer call and connection with the appropriate company representative is measured. Typhoon uses IT systems to process orders from its customers. However, the technical features of the used IT system do not seem to be fully exploited. Therefore the total time for completion of an order might be currently longer than used technology allows. Apart of underperforming IT systems there is also several production machines used under its potential. Some of the machines are built on the same principal and execute the same task. The only difference is in the set up of machines where variables such size, capacity or RPM play its role. Therefore certain products should be produced on particular machine in order to be effective. Nevertheless, since the machines are for universal use and are able to produce various products, it is necessary to clearly distinguish the right organization of the production processes otherwise the company will continue wasting resources and advantages that the right adjustment of the machines offers. Incorrect use of machinery may cause delay in production, which would prolong the order process in the company and consequently prolong the entire order cycle as well. Such situations occur when dedicated employee cannot execute its task (regardless on reason why). Absence of such employee hinders the whole process, because replacing workers are either not that proficient in allocated task or lack the information on how to solve the absence of the other worker.

Higher stated problem definition can be summarized into four main problematic fields influencing company's performance.

- Communication and informational flows
- Production planning
- Use of resources
- Task division

These are problems affecting company's order cycle. The problems will be studied closely in order to find out how to tackle them and consequently find possible improvements.

1.3 Literature review

Supply chain

Supply chain is a network of companies, facilities and services involved in the transformation process from raw materials to a product and distribution of such product to customers. Within a supply chain, there are financial, material and informational flows between involved firms and customers. (Souza, 2014) Parties involved in a supply chain can be described as agents and together they create supply chain network. The main types of agents forming part of supply chains are (Gleissner & Femerling, 2013):

- Raw material producers
- Producers, manufacturers
- Wholesalers, distributors, importers and exporters
- Users, consumers

Size of networks range from isolated network with two agents only to a multi-level and highly branched supply chain networks. Objective of supply chain is to influence the physical and informational transaction of the logistics processes in a way that meets specific requirements and concurrently consumes as few resources as possible at the lowest cost. (Gleissner & Femerling, 2013)

Communication

Communication is very challenging discipline influencing the overall functioning of the business. It is a basic element connecting all business activities. (Holá, 2006) Its importance concurrently increases with development of communication technologies used and distinguishes between internal and external communication.

In this study the main focus will be on communication with regards to the company's order cycle, company's managerial structure and company's physical layout. Communication has a lot of different meanings. Generally, communication can be described as "a transmission process in which a message travels across space (a channel) from one point to another" (Krone, Jablin, & Putnam, 1987). Transmitted elements are usually words in spoken or written form. Transmission is happening between sender and receiver whereas the elements are travelling from one point to another via communication channel or medium. Transmitted data is in fact, information that is put into context after receiving. It is important to remember, that communication is (at least) bilateral process and there are always ongoing information streams in both directions.

Internal communication is commonly being perceived as equivalent of intra-organizational communication. According to Welsch (Welsch, 2011), internal communication has many types ranging from informal chat to corporate communication to all employees. Nevertheless, Qvortrup (Qvortrup, 2006) in his study mentioned fact, that that successful communication is a highly improbable phenomenon, not natural.

Internal communication has an impact on job performance, work behaviour of employees and cooperation within business. Management carries out comprehensive content of internal communication, where one of the challenges for managers is to achieve such state that would be beneficial for the company as well as for its employees. Internal communication is one of the elements of working environment and its objectives are summarized to the list as follows (Holá, 2012):

- Information
- Understanding
- Cooperation
- Forming of desired working positions
- Effective feedback for continuous evaluation

According to Holá (2012), a set of tasks can be derived to take care of internal communication. Providing information for employees needs (e.g. to inform particular person about job duties of given position), internal marketing relations in the company (which is affecting working behaviour and working attitude), consolidation of employees stability and loyalty (working atmosphere and business culture) (Holá, 2012)

External communication is perceived as the exchange of information and messages between an organization and other organizations, groups or individuals located externally of its formal arrangement. External communication is meant to facilitate relationships with suppliers, shareholders, investors or other stakeholders and present favourable image of the organization and its activities to potential and actual business partners as well as to the broad public. This interaction can be done via different communication channels such as printed and broadcasted media, individual meetings or diversified information technology. Fields of PR or marketing management are integrated in external communication and form its significant part.(Holá, 2006)

Supply Chain Operations Reference model (SCOR)

In this study, the SCOR model will be used for analysis and evaluation of data. The SCOR model is a framework that evaluates and compares supply chain activities and their performance. This framework allows its users to determine and compare the performance of supply chain within own organization against other organizations. The SCOR model helps organizations to define and refine strategy, manage processes and measure performance. The SCOR model can also capture the “as-is” (current) state of operations in businesses, which is important for deriving the desired “to-be” (future) state.

The SCOR model identifies the unique processes of a supply chain to support the fulfilment of customers order. Supply-Chain Council (SCOR developer) defines process as unique activity to meet predefined outcomes. The model divides supply chain management (SCM) activities into four main areas: Plan, Source, Make ad Deliver. The fifth area is Return and it represents the reverse stream of elements in the supply chain (see Figure 2). The model spans supply chain from supplier’s supplier to customer’s customer. (Supply-Chain Council, 2010)

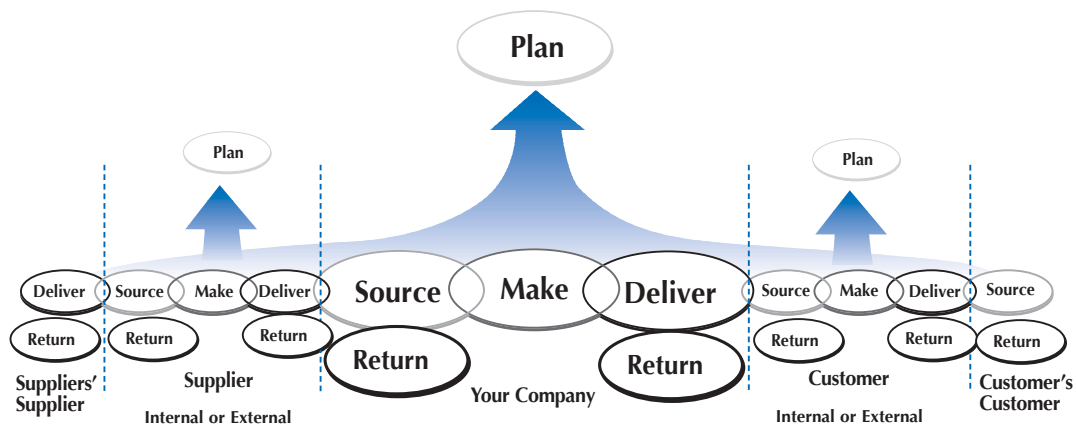


Figure 2 SCOR model activities and span(Supply-Chain Council, 2003)

2 Conceptual research design

This chapter discusses what is going to be studied, why and up to what extent. To solve the higher defined problem the research objective will be formulated as well as research questions.

2.1 Research objective

This research focuses on headquarters of Typhoon in Germany since it is considered to be the centre of majority operation of the company. Since the company was not studied so far, this research will provide a better understanding of ongoing processes.

This research is practice-oriented. According to Verschuren and Doorewaard (Verschuren & Doorewaard, 2010) practice-oriented research is meant to provide information and knowledge that can contribute to a successful intervention that can change an existing practical situation. The structure of Typhoon, the interaction between subsidiaries, partners, departments and co-workers is not clear. By providing an overview of the current state of this lack will provide a better understanding of studied problem.

The objective of this research is:

To make recommendations to the management of Typhoon to improve its performance by assessing its supply chain management and discovering bottlenecks of its order cycle.

By doing this it is hoped that a greater insight will be gained into the logistics for this type of company. If this is done correctly, this paper will be of value not only for Typhoon, but as well as any academic or company whom wish to learn more about how to improve communication throughout their company and thus, improve its performance.

2.2 Research issue

General Research Question (GRQ):

What are bottlenecks in the supply chain management of Typhoon and how can these be reduced by improvements in company's order cycle and communication system?

Specific Research Questions (SRQ):

1. Which theoretical framework is appropriate for this case?
Which relevant theories can be found in literature about supply chain, order cycle and communication?
2. How is the current order cycle in Typhoon organized?
3. What communications take place that affect Typhoon's order cycle and its performance?
4. What are bottlenecks that affect efficiency and effectiveness of Typhoon's order cycle?
5. What are the possible improvements

2.3 Research framework

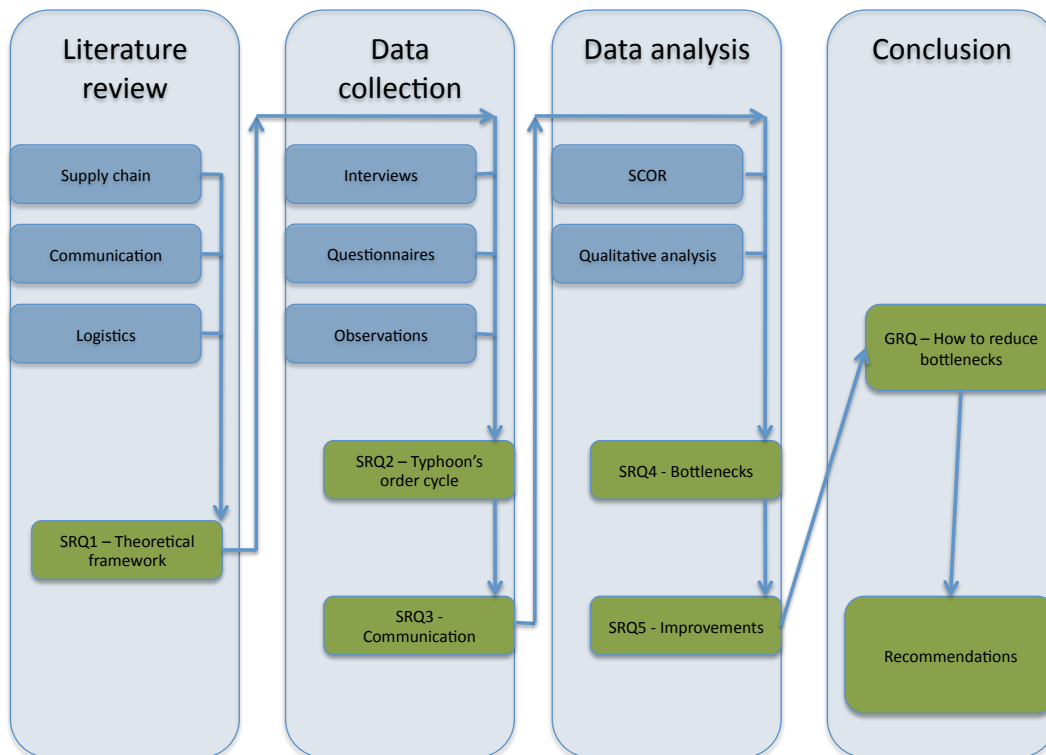


Figure 3 Research framework

To provide an answer to the first question, a literature review will be conducted. The review will provide information about supply chain management theories as well as about communication theories. The literature review will be conducted by using academic literature obtained through the Scopus website as well as through Google scholar. To obtain as much information as possible, also topics related to the studied topics will be reviewed. The keywords that will be used to find these articles are communication, internal communication, logistics, supply chain, organizational structure and order cycle. The answer to SRQ1 will be discussed in the chapter of theoretical framework.

An answer to the second specific research questions will use findings and answers of SRQ1. Once the theoretical framework will be done, characteristics of Typhoon's operations will be studied in alignment with appropriate methodological framework. Since the order cycle is a complex sequence of activities, and not all of them are in competency of Typhoon, the main focus will be on order processing and order preparation. Nevertheless, other activities will be examined as well in order to provide complete empirical overview of the entire cycle. To do so, questionnaires, observations and interviews will be carried out.

To answer the third specific research question it will be necessary to have a clear answer to the second specific research question. Communication flows within the current order cycle will be studied closely in order to describe the structure of communications and its relation to performance of Typhoon. Ambition of this SRQ is to

collect as much information as possible to provide representative overview of communication and interaction in Typhoon. The answer to the SRQ3 will be discussed in the data collection part in the final report.

An answer to the fourth specific research question encompasses the inconveniences in Typhoons operations. The current state of the processes in the company will be compared to the theories found literature. Not just the structural differences will be described. Important part of this research is also to provide measurable outcomes. To be able to do so, some performance measures describing productivity and customer service will be used. Productivity measures relate the outputs generated by an activity to the resources consumed during the activity and is typically presented as a ratio. Customer service measures usually focus on matters related to time, availability, and satisfaction. Customer satisfaction is beyond the scope of this research and therefore will be omitted. Measures used in this research will be for example response time to enquiry, production to due date, on time delivery, order cycle time, or complete orders. Theory, previous findings of this research and performance measures will help to determine the bottlenecks affecting efficiency of Typhoon's order cycle. This answer will be elaborated in the data analyses part.

The fifth specific research question will be answered by an overview which will help to distinguish the current state characteristics and characteristics of other known practices. This will allow the researcher to derive and discuss possible improvements applicable on Typhoon's case.

An answer to the general research question will be represented by discussion part in the final report. All answers to specific research questions will be summarized and discussed in this part of the report. Finally, recommendations based on the discussion will be made. The recommendations will be elaborated in the conclusion chapter in the final report.

2.4 Definition of concepts

To make sure that research ambitions are clear to every reader, some concepts are defined.

Cooperation – arrangement where two or more units (persons, departments, companies) engage in mutually beneficial activity together (Tuomela, 2000)

Information – Data that is accurate and timely, specific for a given purpose and bonded to a certain context and lead to an increase in understanding the occurred or described phenomenon (Brillouin, 2013)

Efficiency – Economic efficiency is denoted by use of resources per time/quantity unit (e.g. costs per delivery, average costs of storage space)(Gleissner & Femerling, 2013)

Perfect order fulfilment – A perfect order is an order that is delivered complete, on time, with complete documentation, and in perfect condition. Fulfilment is the percent of orders that are perfect (Ratio perfect orders – total orders)(Fawcet, Ellram, & Ogden, 2007)

Productivity – Performance per time/quantity unit (e.g. orders per day, transportation time per order) (Gleissner & Femerling, 2013). To make productivity measures useful, it needs to be compared to past performance, competitor performance, or industry standards. (Fawcet, Ellram, & Ogden, 2007)

3 Technical Research design

3.1 Research material

Information collection during the field study

- Scientific literature
- Interviews (structured, non structured)
- Questionnaires
- Data gathered from different stakeholders
- Internal information of the researched company
- Participant observation

3.2 Research strategy

Characteristics of the Typhoon have not been studied so far. To be able to discover structure of the company and functioning of its communication, a qualitative in depth analysis will be conducted. This should provide adequate overview of the current state of the company.

This will be a qualitative and practice oriented study, information will be collected from different sources and deep understanding will be necessary. Data generation and interpretation will be of labour intensive character. It will be necessary to identify and understand organizational constitution and ongoing processes. Considering all so far know facts, a case study design will fit the best.

Case study will take place in German HQ of Typhoon where various stakeholders will be interviewed. Firstly, the staff of the company will be interviewed to discover background of the communication within Typhoons HQ. Also, representatives of partner companies and subsidiaries will be contacted (interview or questionnaire). Secondly, researcher will observe the characteristics of different working positions. Next, researcher will execute some tasks of different positions to gain a notion and understanding what given employees encounter during their assigned job. Apart from that, a questionnaire will be introduced where, as in case of interviews, respondents will be recruited from the staff members. To obtain the most valid data as possible, respondents will not be intimidated by providing their names and they will be assured of that in advance. The questionnaire will be anonymous. The sample population will depend on previously explored findings, but will not significantly exceed the environment of studied company.

There will be data triangulation and method triangulation since the data collection will be done by using more than one method and will be collected from more than one source. Thus, the validity and reliability of results will be strengthened. Data will be collected from primary sources during own research (interviews, observations, questionnaires) Data collection will also use secondary sources (e.g. Typhoon organization records, journals or SCOR database with previously studied cases). Collected data will be analysed and further research might be shaping accordingly to the findings, but only in scope defined by general research question. After completed data collection, a set of descriptive findings and conclusions will be introduced. Throughout the whole study the approach “in which a particular instance or a few carefully selected

cases are studied intensively” (Gilbert 2008:36), listed in Kumar’s methodology book(Kumar, 2011), will be used.

3.3 Research planning

Time schedule

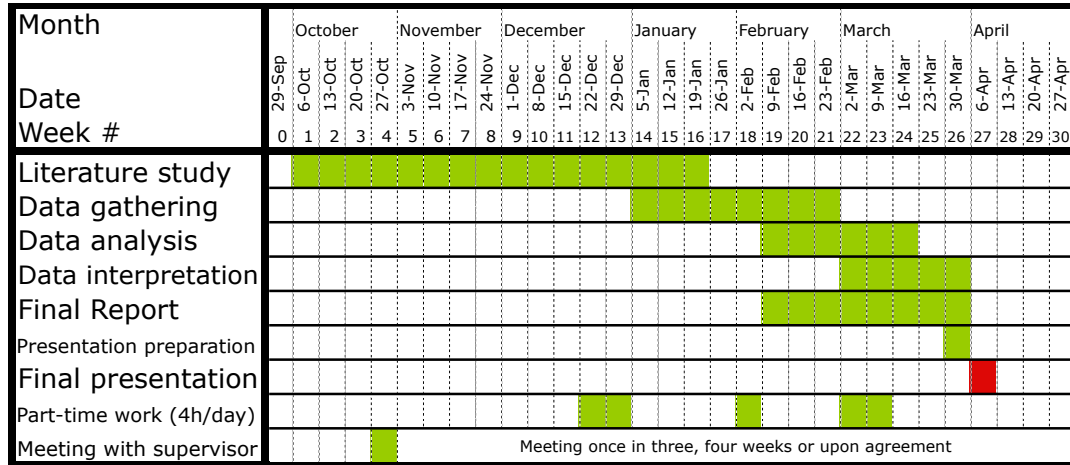


Figure 4 Gant chart - research planning

Financial plan

Total cost for the research shall not exceed EUR200. This amount will cover costs of transportation, printing, use of telecommunication technologies and services as well as unexpected expenditures.

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