How to gain and retain customers

A case study of how the daily work with CRM and e-CRM unfolds amongst large-scale firms in a contingent environment

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Degree project/Independent project • 30 credits
Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, SLU
Faculty of Natural Resources and Agricultural Sciences/Department of Economics
Environmental Economics and Management – Master's programme
Degree project/SLU, Department of Economics, 1439 • ISSN 1401-4084
Uppsala 2022

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Credits:	30 credits
Level:	A2E
Course title:	Master thesis in Business Administration
Course code:	EX0904
Programme/education:	Environmental Economics and Management – Master's Programme
Course coordinating dept:	Department of Economics
Place of publication:	Uppsala
Year of publication:	2022
Copyright:	All featured images are used with permission from the copyright owner.
Title of series:	Degree project/SLU, Department of Economics
Part number:	1439
ISSN:	1401-4084

Keywords:	CRM, e-CRM, Contingency theory, Digitalization and performance, Large-scale firms

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Abstract

It has become increasingly important in the last decade to stay on top of the rapid digitalization, which has made efficient management of customer relationships increasingly essential for firms to implement within their business process. This has led to Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and the digital extension of it, electronic Customer Relationship Management (e-CRM) becoming cornerstones to the daily operations of many large-scale firms. Yet, there is only a limited number of research on CRM which also highlight the aspect of e-CRM, whereupon previous studies have not investigated how CRM and the digital aspect of it can stimulate customer relations in a business context within a contingent environment. This research will therefore attempt to fill in the research gap by studying how CRM benefit positive long-term customer relationships within large-scale firms.

CRM has the ability to be a tool for firms to implement within their businesses in order to gain and retain customers through satisfaction and loyalty. Different types of CRM systems let firms interact with their customers in ways by providing services, collecting and storing data and comprehending this data of customer information. Various sets of CRM activities means that diverse sets of combinations of tools can be formed, depending on what the goal of the initiative itself is. However, due to the new environment and changing technologies, firms need to be even more adaptable. As a result of technological advancement, CRM has developed into something that furthermore consists of e-CRM. e-CRM involves traditional CRM activities, while being enhanced with technological aspects to it.

The purpose of this study was to investigate how the daily work of CRM progresses in large-scale firms and how it aids them with gaining and retaining long-term relationships with their customers. In line with the purpose and research questions, a qualitative research method was formed. A multiple case study was decided upon which were performed with semi-structured interviews. The results show that the large-scale firms in this study interpret CRM differently. Furthermore, the results showed that there is no general template as to how firms should implement or work with CRM and its dimension e-CRM in order to gain and retain long-term customer relationships.

Keywords: CRM, e-CRM, Contingency theory, Digitalization and performance, Large-scale firms

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Abbreviations

CRM	Customer Relationship Management
e-CRM	Electronic Customer Relationship Management
SLU	Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

1. Introduction

In this chapter the background will firstly be presented which will constitute the problem formulation. The problem statement will then be the basis for the thesis aim and research questions, which will help to fulfill the research aim and purpose. Lastly the delimitations of the thesis will be presented in order for the reader to gain an understanding of where the thesis is conducted.

The rapid digitalization of the last decades has made efficient management of customer relationships increasingly more important. In line with this, Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and its digital extension electronic Customer Relationship Management (e-CRM) have become cornerstones to the daily operations of many large-scale firms (Bull 2003; Rahimi & Gunlu 2016). The objective of CRM systems is to help businesses gain and retain long-term relationships and stimulate growth with their customers (Khodakarami & Chan 2014; Xu & Walton 2005) – it is a service that is created for people, processes, and technology through an integrated and holistic approach (Chen & Popovich 2003; Rahimi & Gunlu 2016; Law et al. 2018).

Rachinger et al. (2018) suggest that adaptation to the new digital environment and consumer climate is crucial for many daily operations within firms. CRM is often part of these adaptation processes, as it is considered an effective tool for establishing long-term relationships with customers and that this long-termism creates benefits for the organization. Yet, albeit the importance of CRM is increasing, how implementation is to be managed remains contentious in organization theory and practice. One of the reasons behind this is that CRM depends upon that the logic permeates all parts of the organization; and thus, implementation has proved notoriously difficult in practice (Rachinger et al. 2018; Bull 2003; Nguyen et al. 2022). This is augmented by digitalization moving at such a rapid pace. Firms that are not able to adapt to the changing environment, by utilizing the digital element of CRM, may face the risk of losing competitive advantage, customer relationships and profits (Nguyen et al. 2022). Against this backdrop, the overarching purpose of this thesis is to investigate how the daily work with CRM and the digital aspects linked to it unfolds amongst large-scale firms. How do firms adapt to digitalization? How are new tools implemented? How does adaptation affect customer loyalty and retention, value creation and trust? How is profitability affected?

1.1 A short background to CRM and e-CRM

CRM systems help businesses gain and retain customers through satisfaction and loyalty (Khodakarami & Chan 2014; Xu & Walton 2005). Through the CRM system, firms interact with their customers, provide services, collect and store information, and divide this data into more comprehensive customer information (Khodakarami & Chan 2014). Moreover, CRM can be seen as something that is under constant development, especially when taking the customers´ continuously changing preferences into consideration, and the developing digital environment as Rachinger et al. (2018) points to. A reason behind this is the constant push for new technologies that is happening. Kohnke (2018) states that the technological developments within society leads to businesses being presented with new market possibilities to offer new and refined customer experiences. New technologies also mean that consumers get exposed to an increasingly large number of new consumption goods, meaning that organizations need to rigorously change and adapt their CRM initiatives and implementations to something suitable for the situation at hand due to constant competition (Chen & Popovich 2003).

Chen & Popovich (2003) state that different types of CRM activities can consist of differentiating sets of combined 'tools', CRM is therefore not just one type of initiative that can be used for all types of purposes. Due to this, CRM must be modified and, in many instances, also used as a way of accomplishing technical solutions to various problems related to automation tools that are connected to marketing and sales complexities. It is often concluded that there is no quick solution or best way for top management to make decisions in modern organizational culture. This causes that top management have to be adaptive to new environments and changing technologies, which encompasses that firms have to be conscious and on top of its contingencies which may change as well (Donaldson 2001). Furthermore, Coltman et al. (2011) suggest that CRM is increasingly understood as an activity of service that can influence the amount of profit generated by an organization. This has to do with the long-term benefits that follow when firms maintain good relationships with former customers through the service – as argued by Sundar et al. (2012), retaining customers is far more profitable than losing them. This effect becomes even more distinct when combined with the fast development of information technology. Such a combination has the ability to possibly influence long-term relationships and revenues when setting up specific customer-oriented programs, which heightens the effectiveness and efficiency of organizations to manage their customer relationships.

Coltman et al. (2011) suggest that another idea encompassing CRM is that the benefits and activities of the practice itself is an overhyped phenomenon that companies may struggle with – it may be difficult to turn CRM into something profitable. The development area of CRM, and its technology, is robust. Yet, some believe that CRM does not account for all factors (ibid.); e.g., that CRM does not take into account that a vast number of existing customers may not want to add value to a possible 'relationship'. However, according to Saarijärvi et al. (2013) CRM is something that can be seen as a multi-layered tool of analysis, since it is conceptually, empirically and practically used. By using CRM as a tool, firms can use it as a way of achieving input for processes linked to it. This means that value creation to which CRM contributes, can facilitate the different processes linked to activities such as cross-selling and specifically designed marketing communication and segmentation. This opens up possibilities for better management of customer relationships (ibid.).

When the World Wide Web first was introduced, the opportunities for organizations on how to communicate and interact with customers changed (Winer 2001). The Internet allows businesses to gain and retain relationships with more customers than before (ibid.). The continuous improvements of technology in computer, telecommunication, and internet technology have made CRM practices even more efficient. In addition, these advancements have supported the development of CRM which now also consists of e-CRM (Herman et al. 2021). e-CRM consists of traditional CRM activities, while at the same time being enhanced with technological features. e-CRM can therefore be described as an internet-based service that fulfils the CRM objectives faster, by acting as an extension tool to CRM. This has led to companies starting to acknowledge the potential of acquiring and retaining customers through the digital opportunities of CRM (ibid.).

The additional tools that e-CRM provides with, help businesses to further improve their methods of achieving marketing skills and different capabilities associated with it. Consequently, through the new and improved ways of marketing, firms unlock new ways of establishing both long- and short-term relationship management. By doing this, large-scale firms can create additional value with their customers that increase chances of eventual profit realization, customer service, loyalty, and market awareness (Herman et al. 2021; Harrigan et al. 2012). However, by focusing more on the aspect of e-CRM, businesses also increase their satisfactory services through the integrated information, displacement of consistency and lastly processes related to procedure and problem solving. When considering the above-mentioned conditions surrounding e-CRM, those businesses who manages to implement the digital dimension of CRM properly and efficiently, will also as a result increase the satisfaction and loyalty amongst their customers (Abu-Shanab & Anagreh 2015). Factors such as reducing costs and establishing better aid from customers in the sense of support is also probable (ibid.). It’s also of importance that the implementation of CRM is not only customized properly, but also personalized in order to ensure quality interaction with the customers. However, this can turn out to be a practical challenge as customers' preferences, e.g., communication and offers can differ depending on industry and product (Herman et al. 2021).

1.2 Problem statement

This section outlines the empirical and theoretical problems of the thesis.

1.2.1 Empirical problem

CRM can be considered an essential part of the organizational strategy (Rahimi & Gunlu 2016), as the benefits of implementing the system are far greater than the disadvantages of not implementing it. Chen and Popovich also point to this by stating that “CRM business strategy leverages marketing, operations, … and the Internet to maximize profitability of customer interactions” (Chen & Popovich 2003:2). According to Sundar et al. (2012), firms pay great attention to retaining existing customers since it is believed that loyal and returning customers are more profitable; and that loyalty reduces the need for acquiring new customers and the risk of losing existing ones. However, as voiced by Rachinger et al. (2018), the rapid digitalization experienced by society means that businesses must stay up to date with potential new digital environments, as well as new and changing consumer attitudes and preferences. This means that businesses have to be conscious of contingencies that occur within new digital environments which if they are not, may affect businesses' customer relationship and revenues negatively (Donaldson 2001). This further results in that there is no optimal organizational structure that can be implemented for all businesses in a new digital environment. Thus, the underlying reasons for implementing CRM can differ depending on industry and desired outcome. Furthermore, Rachinger et al. (2018) argue that adaptation is essential for daily operations of firms. This means that responsibilities tied to management need to be effectively and efficiently adapted within the concept of CRM, in order to gain and retain long-term relationships and growth with their customers.

On this basis, an observer can see that the adaptation and orientation within CRM concepts may look differently depending on the industry; which, in regards to longer time frames, can debilitate the outcome of CRM practices. In addition, this the market and customers demand flexibility from the firms. How do large-scale firms engage with these practical challenges?

1.2.2 Theoretical problem

The literature on CRM and e-CRM have been explored from several points of departure, highlighting a number of aspects that are key to the daily work with this logic. However, despite this heterogeneity, most research consider CRM and its digital extension e-CRM to be holistic concepts (Chen & Popovich 2003; Rahimi & Gunlu 2016; Bull 2003) that are “helpful in finding and meeting customers´ needs quickly and accurately” (Herman et al. 2021:14). Following this logic, research has suggested that a successful implementation of CRM involves an integrated and holistic view of people, process and technology (Law et al. 2018).

Albeit research sees a need for holistic approaches in CRM, there still lacks a theoretical understanding of how these approaches are developed and implemented within organizations; and how this affects the contingencies linked to organizations. Chang et al. (2010) suggest that one critical issue of CRM research is to identify the direct effect on the organizational outcome – previous studies, which have studied this direct relationship, have been filled with conflicting results, which strengthen the need for further research on the field. Moreover, Cruz-Jesus et al. (2019) posits that there is a resultant misunderstanding of the concept of CRM. Consequently, there is no appropriate definition within business and academic communities.

Apart from the previously mentioned problems, most studies in the field of CRM have only focused on the individual implementation from the previously mentioned holistic perspective, and not an overall view of CRM which now also constitute e-CRM. The principles of the managerial tool CRM haven’t changed, but due to the digital aspect of e-CRM, CRM can now be utilized in even more differentiating ways. More specifically so in terms of trying to stimulate relationship growth between firm and customer, and the benefits that each service brings. By studying CRM and the digital developments linked to it, new knowledge on the benefits that the service brings in a new digital environment can be developed. Furthermore, an understanding of successful implementation in new contingent digital environments can also be established. This clarifies the importance of studying CRM and its digital characteristics e-CRM, as a successful implementation of both dimensions that may boost and strengthen businesses´ customer relationship, and their profits in a contingent environment. This contributes to an increased understanding of knowledge in contingency theory where CRM can be applied under these conditions. This is emphasized by Harrigan et al. (2012) that points to that previous and copious research have advocated the benefits of CRM in large-scale firms.

To date, only a limited number of studies have been done on CRM and its digital dimension e-CRM, where the latter can be seen as a specific variant of the former. Previous research has had a tendency to handle the concepts separately – typically, one has either explored CRM or e-CRM. Against this backdrop, this thesis contributes to the copious research on CRM with the digital developments linked to it in the essence of e-CRM, in conjunction with contingency theory. In addition, larger firms tend to be subject to great challenges, owing to their size. This is particularly the case with regards to getting different perspectives and factors to work in the same direction. More often than not, larger firms encompass many complex processes that need to be taken into consideration. By extension, this means that holistic methods such as CRM are difficult to implement; and that more theoretical knowledge on its contingent elements is needed.

1.3 Aim & Research questions

This thesis will investigate how the daily work with a combination of CRM tools evolves in large-scale firms and how they gain and retain long-term relationships with their customers. The continuously intensifying competition for customers means that the importance of well-functioning CRM is increasing – CRM is now considered to be important for realizing profits and minimizing the chance for losses. However, implementation of these services is proving difficult. Thus, the motivation and relevance for the research lies in that CRM is something that can be viewed as essentially necessary for businesses to incorporate into their strategy and processes, while it simultaneously remains elusive and sometimes hard to grasp.

In order to fulfil the thesis aim, the following research questions will be answered:

- How do large-scale firms interpret CRM and e-CRM?
- How do large-scale firms work with CRM in order to gain and retain profitable and long-term customer relationships?

1.4 Delimitations

This thesis focuses on investigating how CRM is incorporated into large-scale firms and how the daily work evolves to gain and retain business customers. CRM is commonly incorporated into large-scale firms, which means that this thesis does not engage with SMEs.

Furthermore, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine aspects such as why firms implement CRM into its strategies or focus on a specific industry. It is not relevant for this study, since underlying factors can affect business differently. Within the CRM concept, the thesis is limited to CRM and its digital extension e-CRM, as a result of the new digital environment. Even though CRM can affect and impact other concepts, it’s considered outside the scope of the thesis.

Theoretically, this thesis will focus on CRM, e-CRM and contingency theory, which will help the authors to fulfil the thesis aim and answer the research questions. Although customer relationships may affect firms' revenues and top management differently, this thesis will rather concentrate on CRM and its contingencies in a new digital environment. Thus, theories of revenues and governance will not be considered.

2. Theoretical framework

This chapter will present theories relevant to the research conducted by the authors. CRM can be seen as something that imbues the entire firm while e-CRM is more of a dimension of CRM on how the practical aspects in which the firms adapt their customer management. Therefore, CRM can be seen as a service whereas e-CRM further aids the firms in achieving this goal. Furthermore, contingency theory adds another layer to the theoretical framework by highlighting that firms have to adapt to different sets of contingencies that affect overall processes linked to CRM implementation. In an attempt to conclude this chapter, selected theories and models will be presented in the theoretical synthesis.

2.1 CRM

This section of the thesis will present CRM and the different fields of which it consists of gathered within the research field.

2.1.1 Process, People & Technology

With competition being high amongst firms in order to secure both short, and long-term customers, CRM can be an effective tool for improving quality assurance and service (Rahimi & Gunlu 2016), which may lead to additional gain and retention of customers. In order to have a CRM system that is well implemented and successful, it is important to know the value of its structure and balance. This puts emphasis on firms not only having the ability to integrate, but also balance CRM factors against each other. The factors consist of process, people and technology (Chen & Popovich 2003). By successfully adapting and implementing these factors in relation to each other, firms run a high risk of achieving long-term relationships and customer loyalty.

Process implementation in a CRM activity requires mainly changes from a product-centric view to a more customer-centric view, which entails those changes should be mainly addressed in marketing, sales, and service. What this in other words means, is that CRM projects and the final implementation of them puts the requirement on the firms so that they are able to reengineer their service processes (Rahimi & Gunlu 2016). In order for businesses to successfully implement new processes within their organizational structures, a high emphasis is put on employees being able to adapt and change. Thus, in order to avoid CRM failure, top management has a great responsibility to create a positive and sustaining CRM environment that supports all stages of the CRM implementation (ibid.). According to Bull (2003), CRM can be seen as a very fragmented environment which sometimes makes it difficult to navigate effectively. This adds to the idea that the concept of CRM could have many differentiating meanings. This is due to the fact that CRM can be interpreted differently between individuals. Chen and Popovich (2003) highlight that by shifting towards a more customer-centric view of CRM implementation, firms may heighten their chances of anchoring their business processes more seamlessly, to service their customers and gain increased resilience to market pressure.

Rahimi and Gunlu (2016) state that *People* have an essential role in CRM strategy, activity, and the implementation process. The idea is that both employees and customers are important factors for how well firms manage to incorporate CRM into the decision-making process. Bhat and Darzi (2018) state in their research that it is important to structure the allocatable resources linked with CRM activities, in a way that further contributes to the tacit knowledge within companies for the implementation processes of CRM to have a desired effect. The authors further highlight those potential challenges with grasping tacit knowledge is in many cases imminent. However, by organizing the firm's management team and allocating time and capital to the proper CRM tools, outcomes may increase competitive advantage and improve customer relationships. By rooting the desired CRM processes in the different fields and areas of the firm, increased customer orientation and a better customer-centric system, will in most cases follow as a result (ibid.).

Technology has a key function in CRM, which is to collect information on customer patterns, interpret customer behavior, etc. and to analyze this data to determine the best strategy for the firms. An integrated and holistic view between these three components is required in order to obtain satisfactory results, e.g., retain and nurture organizations´ customer relationships (Bull 2003; Chen & Popovich 2003). With further advancements within the technological sector, firms are presented with new and innovative ways of working with their customer orientation processes. CRM technology has the ability to be structured by firms in a way that CRM capabilities may add to the essence of achieving competitive advantage, which in itself further can be linked to higher customer retention and relationship creation. With the technology that CRM inhibits and further provides with, new and improved ways of achieving higher levels of service is also possible. This is especially true when CRM is perceived as a ‘doable’ service (Bhat & Darzi 2018). Furthermore, the technological aspects of CRM also constitutes that the implementation of it leads to the opportunity of collecting and analyzing data about one's customers. This can be data and or models that for example shows patterns, behaviors, views and predictions. This also contributes to the thought that IT adds to the ability for businesses to respond to different customer scenarios effectively and efficiently. But it also makes it easier for firms to deliver a customized and individualized service (Rahimi & Gunlu 2016).

In further regards to what has already been mentioned and explained about CRM, Almotairi (2009) argues that it is important to underline that CRM is interpreted differently by individuals. It means that CRM is given quite a lot of room to subjective interpretation, meaning that it can have many definitions in many differentiating contexts. This additionally results in that CRM can vary quite heavily because of this broadness, which further translates to that firms and the people linked to it, may define CRM differently in terms of technicality and strategic ability. Rahimi and Gunlu (2016) point out in their research that the definition of CRM itself, is a definition that ultimately includes several perspectives because of the view's comprehensiveness. A statement mentioned in their paper summarizes CRM well:

> "Even with the best definitions of processes and the most advanced technology, the relation between people has a determining effect in any business strategy. It is important, then, to get those people involved with the strategy and motivate them to reach the objectives" (Rahimi & Gunlu 2016:93).

2.2 e-CRM

This section of the paper will outline e-CRM and the aspects of which it consists of. As previously mentioned, e-CRM can be seen as an extension of CRM.

2.2.1 Defining and conceptualizing e-CRM

In a world where technological advancements have been made at a rapid pace, it has become increasingly important for businesses to adapt their CRM processes. Humans have become increasingly more dependent on technology itself and general adaptation to it. This also holds true for the need and stimulus to use the digital aspect of CRM, where technological advancements can be seen as a 'bridge' between the traditional and modern tools that CRM consists of (Adlin et al. 2019). The objective of e-CRM is for firms to apply and implement the tools that are deemed necessary in order to try and achieve fulfilments of both existing and potential customers' needs. The reason behind this is so that businesses may increase the value generated between firms and customers. By structuring up one's digital CRM tools effectively, firms may decrease the risk of customers experiencing unequal fairness and general treatment (Yu et al. 2015).

As CRM can be seen as the center of managerial tools and e-CRM being a variant of it, it further boosts the capabilities of transforming and linking knowledge from various types of information sources. This furthermore means that the managerial tools implemented are dependent on the firm's organizational structures, processes and individual skills. It is here that some may argue that e-CRM tools are more practical to use when focus is on compiling larger amounts of customer data, which later on can be used for analyzing and processing (Yu et al. 2015). The digital aspect of CRM has proved to be one of the most efficient information systems tools for firms to implement within their processes, since it aids businesses with their communication with customers. It also helps firms in the sense that they are provided with another tool that is effective at collecting and storing customer data, something that can be analyzed in order to get a better visualization of both existing and potential customers' comprehensive views, attitudes and preferences (ibid.).

According to Abu-Shanab and Anagreh (2015), e-CRM provides firms with additional opportunities in increasing their customer relationships as mentioned above. e-CRM can be seen functioning as an extended arm to CRM. As a result of these additional benefits that e-CRM provides its users with, those implementing it effectively and efficiently also increases their chances of increasing their profits and achieving even higher customer satisfaction, which in turn has the ability to lead to the narrative of increased ‘loyal’ customers. e-CRM is not to be mistaken for something separate from CRM, but the important aspect to it which makes it interesting, is that e-CRM manages to utilize different technological channels with strategies not so different from general CRM tools. This opens up the possibilities for firms to optimize their customer relationship processes even more, which may result in increased chances of gaining and retaining customers (ibid.).

Technological advancements that have been made within the field of CRM, has essentially led to it developing into something that also constitute e-CRM. e-CRM therefore elevates the usage area of CRM since firms may have better capability of reacting to the market operated within (Alshurideh 2022). e-CRM can as a result of this, in an attempt to exemplify things, meet different pressures, requirements and challenges that markets possess in a refined way. Furthermore, what this means is that the technological advancements now present firms with additional tools to modify their CRM practices even more in relation to marketing practices. In a competitive market, this translates to businesses having the ability to adapt to a changing environment that technological advancements contribute with. e-CRM therefore enables firms to additionally raise the overall quality of the service that is to be provided through CRM (ibid.).

Thus, the overall objective for firms who use CRM is to establish and maintain long-term relationships with customers. By adding the technological aspect to this managerial tool, e-CRM can help firms save both time and capital. Factor which are of great importance for all businesses that strive to be efficient with their allocations (Yu et al. 2015; Alshurideh 2022). Therefore, e-CRM arguably provides firms with additional ways of using CRM in order to personalize relationship experience. In order to minimize the chance of customer loss and raise the chance of gaining and retaining customers, it is important that traditional CRM tools are implemented with e-CRM ones. Especially since e-CRM has the ability to act as a bridge between the ‘old’ and ‘new’, which results in CRM becoming even more effective to use within daily operations of firms (Alshurideh 2022).

2.3 Contingency theory

This section of the thesis will present contingency theory and the different fields of which it consists of gathered within the research area.

2.3.1 Through the lens of contingency theory

According to Donaldson (2001), contingency theory can be viewed as a way of observing businesses and the processes that encompasses them and thus the perspective is useful in this thesis; particularly because it is grounded on important studies on sciences linked to both organizations and businesses. The core of which contingency theory is made up of, is the logic that business, and the effectiveness linked to it, is the result of where characteristics fit an organization or firm and the structures surrounding it. But also, the contingencies of which are bound to the firm itself. Firms can be seen as something that is adapting to its environment, which leads to change over time and is linked to the need for businesses to fit their contingencies – which also change. Some of these contingencies are linked to factors that can be seen as more prominently important for businesses to adapt to. Specifically, these consist of environment, size, and strategy (ibid.).

Donaldson (2001) suggests that the *environmental* aspect of contingency theory can be defined as that a firm needs an environmental stability of contingencies as these affect the structures of firms themselves. Technological advancements and the change on market level that directly has an impact on firms, means that the structure can either turn out to be mechanistic or organic. A more mechanistic structure means that the setting of the firm is more stable and often these types of businesses also have a hierarchical approach to decision making processes. Williams et al. (2017) further adds that the result of this also implies that managers at higher levels need contextualized knowledge and information to govern decisions. In contrast to the mechanistic structure of firms there is the organic structure. A more decentralized form of business structure where processes related to decision making and innovation is distributed to the lower levels. Knowledge and information therefore flow more freely amongst the employees. In essence, the environmental settings and conditions that the firms find themselves in, therefore has an impact on the firm’s strategy, structure, and behavior (ibid.).

The *size* of the firm, which typically influences the number of employees of a firm, also has an impact on how decision-making processes are applied. This means that firms with a higher number of employees handle bureaucracy differently. Because of this, the governance of rules can be different amongst firms of different sizes. Generally, a more mechanical structure is more fitting for a larger firm whereas a more organic structure is more fitting for a smaller one (Donaldson 2001). The size of the firm also plays a role when discussing strategies that may be relevant at hand. This further means that design and control of different systems also is dependent on the size factor, meaning that depending on how small or large a firm is, different designs and systems may prove to be more efficient in relation to the specific situation. Additionally, it is important to understand that the size of firms also affect the general strategy of the firm and their strategic management, meaning that choices and influences may very well be applicable differently in the context of managerial strategies (Islam & Hu 2012).

Donaldson (2001) mentions that the *strategy* aspect to the contingency theory is based on the idea that it affects the structure on a divisional level. A functional structure within a firm, also means that it fits undiversified strategies since the general activities present may or may not be focused on a single product or service. This means that factors such as efficiency have the ability to be enhanced by the specialization of the function itself (departments of relationship, marketing product etc.). Williams et al. (2017) further highlights that in contrast to the functional structure, there is the divisional structure, which emphasizes the fit to a strategy that is more diversified. Since this leaves us with activities that also are more in line with diversified patterns, it further means that the product / service serves various markets. Due to this, effectiveness in this regard is achieved by coordination of the product or service within their individual divisions. An aspect that the authors point out is how CRM can be seen intertwined with contingency theory; “Given that there is no one best way to manage an organization, there is no universal template that will ensure the success of CRM efforts” (Williams et al. 2017:455).

2.4 Theoretical synthesis

The overall objective of this section is to bring clarity, both to the readers and the authors themselves, in regard to the theoretical framework that has been formulated, facilitating analysis and discussion.

Figure 1 provides the readers with an illustration of how the theoretical synthesis is connected to the theoretical framework. It further shows how theories are utilized in relation to each other and the connection between them. Both CRM the digital extension of it, e-CRM, provides the implementer with opportunities and challenges alike. The contingency theory adds further depth to the subject and shows that there are some essential factors needed to pay attention to, when implementing and executing CRM practices in a way where the firm gains and retains customers.

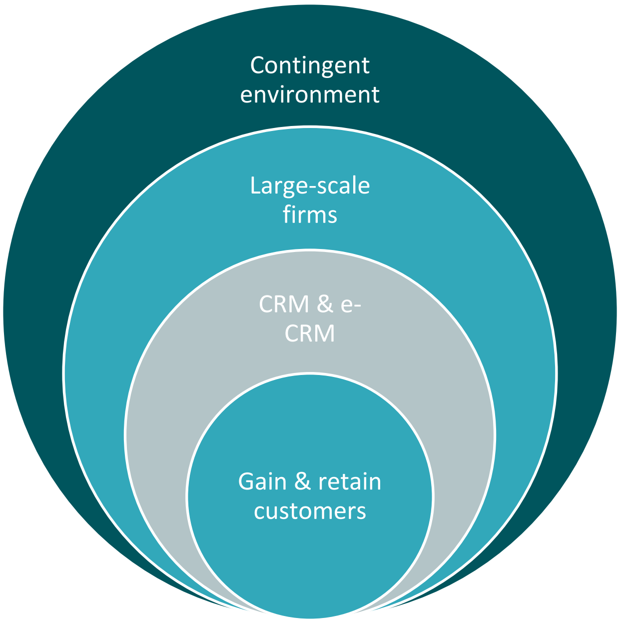

Figure 1: Visualization of the theoretical synthesis (own illustration)

CRM is a tool for firms and practitioners that they can use in order to facilitate improved customer relationships. The goal of it is to establish CRM in an efficient manner so that customers can be gained and retained for both short- and long-term. If implemented and executed successfully, firms may find themselves with higher chances of gaining and retaining customers, which furthermore could result in additional profits being gained. Process, people, and technology are critical pillars when discussing CRM and as a result of this, also play a critical part when understanding, constructing and implementing CRM in practice.

e-CRM can be understood as an extension tool to CRM, working with different dimensions and aspects of CRM to further generate healthy and prolonged customer relationships. As technological advancements are happening at a rapid pace, firms find themselves with the need to adapt to changes relating to their customers. Technology itself can be seen as the bridge between the ‘old’ and ‘new’, where the digital dimension of CRM can add additional utilization to management of customer relationships. The increased ways of heightening the quality of relationship creation that e-CRM provides with, further boosts the adaptability to competitiveness in markets that firms are active in. An essential tool of CRM that further adds to the idea of gaining and retaining customers.

The idea of contingency theory is that businesses have to adapt to certain contingencies that are linked to the firm itself; a logic often embraced within CRM literature as well. This means that the degree of efficiency is bound to factors such as the environment, size and strategy. Firms are therefore inevitably finding themselves needing to adapt to certain dimensional processes that encompass the business. As firms change with time, so do the contingencies as well since they are dependent on each other. An important aspect of CRM that can be seen as being intertwined with contingency theory is; that there is not a best way of implementing CRM and managing a firm. There simply doesn’t exist a template universally applicable that ensures CRM success.

3. Methodology

In this chapter the research philosophy and methodology of the study will be presented and discussed. In the beginning of the chapter there will be an explanation of the research philosophy, followed by a description of which ontology and epistemology position that have been taken. Furthermore, a detailed description of what method and strategies for collecting and analyzing the empirical material will be described. Lastly, a description of the research quality criteria and ethical considerations will be presented.

3.1 Research Philosophy

During the development of an academic study the researcher can adopt two orientations, the epistemological- or ontological view which will have a substantial impact on the study (Bryman & Bell 2017). This entails that these views are associated with choices of method and assumptions that are being taken by the researchers in this thesis. Ontology is characterized by how reality can be viewed, for example what is real and what do we know about it (Bryman & Bell 2017). Epistemology, in turn, is characterized by how knowledge can be viewed; this knowledge can be interpreted from an objective or subjective standpoint (ibid.).

The ontology position in this paper is constructivist, a view that is characterized by ‘reality’ as shaped by social actors (Bryman & Bell 2017). These actors attempt at creating local truths, realities and contexts and if they are studied, they need to be interpreted as well (ibid.). This entails that a social constructivist position is of interpretive nature (Berger & Luckman 1967; Searle 1995). Further, by conducting interviews with respondents, the authors of this thesis adhered to a constructivist view whose purpose was to be aware that the respondents also were conscious of their reality and subjective perspectives. Since the aim of the thesis was to investigate how the daily work with different combinations of CRM tools evolves in large-scale firms, and how they gain and retain long-term relationships with their customer, this position was deemed appropriate.

Moreover, the interpretivist epistemological viewpoint is suitable because it addresses the understanding of social actors and their effects. From this perspective, ‘knowledge’ can be viewed as a subjective construction rather than definitive knowledge (Bryman & Bell 2017). In this thesis, this position was considered advantageous since the aim was to gain an in-depth understanding of how CRM and the digital extension of it, e-CRM, effects on large-scale firms. Mackenzie and Knipe (2006) state that an interpretivist author is aware of her/his own influence and impact – the outcome can be subjective by nature. This means that an in-depth understanding of CRM was considered beneficial to create a local picture of reality and social contexts in this thesis then the adaptation of service can be distinguished between different industries. It was further considered beneficial since the thesis is about understanding instead of clarifying human behavior. This entails that interpretivist attempts to understand questions such as how and why human actions occur (Bryman & Bell 2017), which further was considered appropriate for this thesis by the authors.

3.2 Qualitative approach

The qualitative approach is characterized by seeking to understand phenomena in social context, whereupon a method that generates words instead of numbers is more suitable (Golafshani 2015; Bryman & Bell 2017). Therefore, this study has been conducted by qualitative empirical material within the subject of CRM in order to establish an understanding of social actions and contexts. As a result of the qualitative approach that has been applied, the authors of this study have gained a better understanding regarding the relation of CRM and its effects on business profitability and customer relationship.

Furthermore, an inductive approach to the research has been applied which supports the researchers with identifying the essential data within the empirical observation and applied variables (Bryman & Bell 2017). This is beneficial when striving to create a clear and local picture of reality in order to understand and perceive social contexts of the subject. This causes the study to apply an ontological position which is described as social constructivist and is of interpretive point of view (Berger & Luckman 1967; Searle 1995).

3.3 Literature review

In order to develop the theoretical framework, a literature review has been conducted whose purpose was to aid the researchers of existing knowledge in the subject (Bryman & Bell 2017). Within the interpretivist epistemological position an initial literature review usually occurs, this in order to get an understanding of the studied subject, concepts and phenomenon (ibid.). Therefore, a narrative literature review was conducted in order to obtain a better and distinct understanding of the studied subject, i.e., how large-scale firms work with CRM in order to gain and retain customers. The narrative literature review can be described as an aid for the researcher to gain an initial understanding of phenomena which will be beneficial throughout the research (Bryman & Bell 2017). The main focus with the literature review has been to gain a deeper understanding of the chosen theories, i.e., CRM, e-CRM and contingency theory, by critically reflecting and examining what they contribute to the study, which further constitutes to the foundation of the problem statement and the study's aim and research questions. The chosen literature in this study consists of peer-reviewed articles received from databases such as Google Scholar and Web of Science, which are available through SLU library. Key words such as CRM, e-CRM, Contingency theory, Digitalization and Performance, and Large-scale firms have been used in order to find relevant articles.

3.4 Case study

The daily work with CRM and its digital extension e-CRM is bound to contingencies – firms implement and work with different tools, have different knowledge of CRM and therefore also use the managerial tools with different objectives. Thus, in order to fulfil the purpose of this thesis, an exploratory case study was considered to be most appropriate. The phenomenon of CRM is context specific (Almotairi 2009), where a limited number of combined studies of the subject were identified. Furthermore, customers can be considered an essential part for large-scale firms and as a result of this, the authors made a decision to include multiple firms in this specific research as consumers preferences may differ depending on industry.

Bryman and Bell (2017) explain that with a case study, the researcher aims to create an in-depth elucidation of the subject and individuals representing the social phenomena. Further, Yin (2009) emphasizes that the case study is most suitable if the study tries to illustrate contextual relationship with phenomenon or concepts, when there is no clear definition of these boundaries of social phenomena and contexts. In this case, a multiple-case study has been conducted, as there was a key priority of attempting to illustrate the contingencies linked to CRM and e-CRM within business practices. Bryman and Bell (2017) state that an important aspect to multi-case studies and them being performed efficiently and productively, is that there needs to be some form of structure in order to enable cross-case compatibility. Due to the nature of multiple-case studies, the researcher may be presented with data that shows differences but also resemblances. As a result of this, the data at hand may have the possibility of being analyzed both individually and across multiple scenarios.

3.5 Data collection and analysis

The main approach for data collection in this thesis is provided through semi-structured interviews. Representatives from large-scale firms in different industries act as respondents and can therefore be considered the main source of data collection in this thesis. The data collection consists of two case studies, which means that specific analyses have been conducted in the field of CRM in order to answer the thesis aim and research questions.

3.5.1 Semi-structured interviews

Bryman and Bell (2017) describe that an interview can either be conducted as structured or unstructured. Structured interviews are characterized by pre-design questions which do not build upon the respondent’s answer. Unstructured interviews can instead be compared to a normal conversation, where the respondents are allowed to respond freely and respond to points that seem worthy to follow up (ibid.). Semi-structured interviews are characterized when the researcher has predetermined questions, but the adherent questions are instead adapted to the respondent’s answers. This causes that the questions may not follow the exact outlined as predetermined and consist of open-ended questions, which leads to that the semi-structured interview process is more flexible (Bryman & Bell 2017). Open-ended questions allow the researcher and respondent to elaborate on previously given questions and answers; this results in more flexibility because it allows for the authors being more open minded to new insights.

The semi-structured interview was considered the most appropriate form of interview in this study; it creates greater opportunities for the respondents to express their own thoughts and feelings and understand their subjective interpretation of the firm's daily work with CRM and e-CRM tools. Furthermore, the semi-structured interview was considered most appropriate then follow-up questions could create additional dimensions to the study, whereupon the respondent could feel that it contributes to the study's results. Additionally, semi-structured interviews add the opportunity of exploring the participant’s feelings, beliefs and general thoughts about the subject more easily. Rich data is also possible to gather with this interview structure and it is also decently reliable and analytically possible (Bryman & Bell 2017). Another important factor that the semi-structured interview establishes is that it encourages two-way communication. As a result of it, the respondent that is being interviewed may feel more inclined to open up about sensitive topics.

An interview guide, see Appendix 1, was created in order to guide the researcher during the interviews and was created through open-ended questions. The interview questions were created with background to the research aim, question and theoretical framework. Aside from the main questions, there were further adherent questions created which would support the respondent with some follow up questions. This was done with the objective of ensuring that the study's aim was in focus throughout the interview process.

Table 1: List of conducted interviews

	Ellinor - Apotea	Nadja - Sigma Industry East North AB
Date	18/4–22	25/4–22
Interview length	28 minutes	23 minutes
Method	Zoom	Zoom

Table 1 presents information such as date, length of the interview and which method that was used. The interviews were performed through the digital communication platform Zoom, as the respondent’s location was spread out in Sweden. Zoom was also beneficial to use due to the time limit. Even though the interviews were conducted via the specified digital platform, it was possible to not only hear, but also perceive the respondents body language and contextual environment, which stated by Alvesson (2003) is beneficial in order to gain an overall picture of the respondent. Another key advantage that Archibald et al. (2019) and Gray et al. (2020) emphasizes, is that Zoom is convenient in terms of time, cost-effectiveness and geographical locations that can hinder the respondent or the researcher to connect face to face. It also facilitated the transcription as the interviews could be recorded with permission from the respondents. The transcription was performed in order to interpret and analyze the respondent’s answers as correctly as possible.

3.5.2 Data Analysis

When the empirical material had been collected, translated and transcribed, it was subsequently analyzed and interpreted. Bryman and Bell (2017) emphasize the importance of having a sufficient amount of data when conducting a case study with a qualitative method. Then the study applies a qualitative design, is the content analysis most convenient then it defines different themes, patterns and thorough description of the empirical material. Therefore, the content analysis can be interpreted as a tool to recognize social reality in a subjective aspect (ibid.).

The content analysis in this study is based on what the authors consider to be relevant and of significance to the contribution of the conclusions, which therefore highlights the subjectivity in this study. In order to get an objective assessment of the empirical material, the authors reviewed the transcript individually based on predetermined categories. Afterwards, the review from each researcher was compared in order to perceive differences and similarities, which then were summarized within the predetermined categories. By adopting coded categories, it enables the researcher to perceive a clear and local picture of the empirical material (Bryman & Bell 2017). It further aided the authors to do a more in-depth analysis of large-scale firms' daily work with CRM and e-CRM. By coding the empirical material through ideas and concepts, the material could be divided into similarities and differences. Furthermore, categories were formed based on the conceptual framework of this thesis. In this study, the chosen categories for coding are based upon Chen and Popovich (2003) and Donaldson (2001) which was used to identify how large-scale firms work with CRM and e-CRM. The chosen categories for coding are process, people, technology and contingencies.

Furthermore, the authors of this thesis coded the collected empirical data in two different cycles. The authors compared the codes of the two interviews with each other, in order to establish different themes whereupon Ryan and Bernard´s (2003) recommendation on how to approach theme search where adapted. For example, the authors searched for themes such as similarities, differences, technology and repetition of the collected empirical data. During this process, it was important for the authors to remember that not all themes could be included or relevant for the research aim and questions (Bryman & Bell 2017), which led to some themes being excluded during the analysis.

3.5.3 Sampling strategy

In order to answer the thesis aim and questions, the sample chosen was based upon large-scale firms who actively work with CRM and e-CRM. Therefore, the idea was that they should have sufficient knowledge and routines of the systems used. CRM and e-CRM can be viewed as rather complex phenomena, hence two cases that work actively with CRM were chosen for this thesis. The sampling strategy was therefore interpreted as purposive, to allow the researcher to answer the research questions (Bryman & Bell 2017). With the help of digital communication tools such as Zoom, the interviews could be conducted both at a distance and with short notice which aided the sampling. Furthermore, the sequential approach was applied, which refers to a first sample, whereupon more samples are gradually added to the case study in order to answer the research questions (Neergaard & Ulhøi 2007). This was considered beneficial due to the systems’ versatility.

3.6 Quality criteria

Reflexive research is an important quality criterion to consider in qualitative research, which Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) describe has two basic characteristics; *careful interpretation* and *reflection*. The authors describe that careful interpretation refers to the study´s references and that they are the results of interpretation, which means that there is an unproblematic relationship to anything outside the empirical material that is being rejected on principle (ibid.). Reflection on the other hand, turns the attention towards the researcher, society as a whole and intellectual and cultural tradition. This means that reflection seeks to consider various dimensions in the work of interpretations (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2009). In an attempt to acknowledge the term reflexive, the authors for this thesis maintained a neutral position and did not affect the research with their own thoughts and values. This through close contact with the supervisor that repeatedly pointed out the author's biases and opinions, and whether the findings were clear for the reader. Furthermore, the authors were attentive to the respondents' opinions and did not interfere with them during the interviews. It was considered important to let the respondent speak freely and not controlled by the authors in order to achieve the purpose of the interviews and maintain a safe space for the respondents during the interviews.

Bryman and Bell (2017) notes that to have trustworthy conclusions, of any type, they need to be established on a logical approach. The term trustworthy is usually evaluated to four sub-criteria: credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability (ibid.). By considering these sub-criteria in this thesis, through the above measures, trustworthiness could be reached.

3.6.1 Credibility

Credibility aims to demonstrate if the empirical material that has been gathered corresponds with the reality narrated by the respondents in the research (Bryman & Bell 2017). It is accomplished by ensuring that the research has been conducted after the existing rules and that the results and conclusions are being reported back to the respondents. Another way to achieve credibility is through triangulation, which Bryman and Bell (2017) describes as a concept that uses different perspectives. Furthermore, to strengthen the credibility even more, the authors have the opportunity of presenting the empirical gathered in an objective way. The idea with objectivity, is to try and limit the subjectiveness of the research. The authors of this thesis have worked with credibility in a number of ways in order to strengthen this field. In an attempt to increase the credibility, consciousness of trying to involve as little personal opinions and beliefs as possible have been made. The reason behind this is so that the study, which employed a qualitative method, still could remain objective. The idea is so that the data collected does not get influenced in any way and that it remains as true to itself as possible. This by ensuring that respondents' answers during the interviews had been interpreted correctly and that it reflected their opinion by emailing the transcript to the respondents in order to ensure the researchers have interpreted their answers in a correct way. Furthermore, a critical reflection towards oneself is critical for this to be realized. By being critical, the authors make sure that they reflect on the process of interpretation linked to data collection and writing. Another factor that the authors have paid close attention to is transparency. In an attempt to be more credible, the authors have made sure that the respondents have been given a fair chance to go through the gathered data from the interviews.

3.6.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to demonstrating how the research result stands and relates in a new context or location (Bryman & Bell 2017). Shenton (2004) specifies that if the sample and methodology is clearly described the transferability can be strengthened. This causes the reader to understand what circumstances and assumptions influenced the study's results. Therefore, the underlying methodology in this thesis has been described thoroughly by the researchers in a detailed way, resulting in the reader being able to use the results in other contexts. Bryman and Bell (2017) further mention that due to the depth and breadth of qualitative research, findings usually tend to orient themselves within contextual uniqueness and significance linked to the social world that is being investigated. The authors have therefore attempted at exemplifying how the research can be applied in differentiating contexts. How they have done it, is by presenting relevant gathered material in conjunction with the overall aim of the thesis, to showcase their point of view and the applicability of contextual differences.

3.6.3 Confirmability

Bryman and Bell (2017) states that, while it can be difficult or almost impossible to focus on recognizing the overall objectiveness within business research, confirmability focuses on the process of ensuring that the researcher has conducted the research in good faith. What this in broader terms means is that it should be completely clear that the researcher has not involved personal values and or theoretical inclinations that may manifest themselves to sway the general conduct of research and its findings in a certain direction. This implies that it is of utmost importance to try and implement confirmability throughout the research process to try and ensure as little interference as possible. An objective that should be high on the agenda for the researchers (ibid.). In order to raise the overall confirmability of the research the authors have paid good attention to critical thinking. This has been done especially throughout essential parts of the thesis that usually is sensitive to subjectiveness. The goal with it has been to make sure that the research has not involved personal values and or inclinations that might have swayed the research in a certain way. The data collected have not been tampered with in any way to try and get a result that is more favorable for the researchers at hand.

3.6.4 Dependability

Dependability is a term mostly paralleled with reliability for the quantitative research approach. The idea with dependability is that in order to establish a merit for the research in association with the criteria of trustworthiness, researchers should consider putting emphasis on 'auditing' (Bryman & Bell 2017). By doing so, the authors may ensure that total records are kept and secured during all of the research processes. This would include the chapters; problem formulation, selection of participants of research, notes from fieldwork, transcripts of interview, analysis of data and the decision of them and furthermore. However, a key factor to this is that it is done in an accessible manner. Potential problems with dependability however, is that it can be a challenging task for the auditors, especially since qualitative research more often than not accumulates large quantities of data that needs to be processed (ibid.). The authors of this research have therefore in an attempt to raise the consciousness over dependability, been making sure to be timely and showing up to certain seminars and meetings that have been arranged. The authors have also tried to be responsive and showing willingness to communicate and follow up on topics discussed. But more importantly, the authors have tried to be as consistent and reliable with the findings linked to the research, and that documentation has been well put together. All this, in order to make sure that someone external has an easy time following the research.

3.7 Research ethics

Bryman and Bell (2017) notes that when conducting research, some ethical dilemmas may occur during the process. Consequently, it is important for the authors to be conscious of the ethical aspect in order to make a correct decision. It is therefore important to adopt the ethical perspectives during the process and to not ignore them. The integrity and the disciplines that are adopted should be respected.

It is also important to consider that the researcher has her/his own interpretations and perception of knowledge and society, which may affect the thesis discussion and results (Bryman & Bell 2017). This can cause that earlier experiences, interest, and contextual aspects may affect the empirical material and be subjective during the process (ibid.). It is therefore important for the study´s trustworthiness to maintain an objective standpoint where the authors are critical and aware of her/his personal values and how they affect the process. In this thesis, the researchers have been conscious of its personal values and therefore adapted a reflexive approach throughout the thesis process. This through close contact with the supervisor throughout the thesis process, which has led to more perspectives being taken into account during the study. Other perspectives from opponents have been considered after seminars during the thesis process, which further have led to more interpretations and understandings of knowledge and society in the study. Further did the respondents voluntarily participate during the interview where they received the interview question beforehand. The respondents were also informed that the interview process was to be recorded in order to empower better quality of transcription. Finally, the final transcripts were sent to the respondents in order to ensure that their answer had been interpreted correctly by the authors which helped to prevent misunderstandings.

4. Empirical findings

In this chapter the empirical cases and the data collected will be presented and described which essentially makes up the empirical material. The purpose of the empirical background is to provide contextual understanding and interpretation of how large-scale firms focus their daily work with processes linked to differentiating CRM tools and implementations. Presented findings are the data collected from the interviews which furthermore are structured in subheadings to make it easier for the reader to navigate.

4.1 Ellinor, Apotea

Apotea was founded in 2003 under the name Familjeapotektet AB, which in 2012 was changed and developed to its current organization form. Apotea was one of Sweden's first full-scale pharmacies that did not have a physical store. They only do e-commerce, but they are still viewed as a ‘regular’ pharmacy. This further means that there is no major difference between them and a physical one. Ellinor describes Apotea as a pharmaceutical company that has authorization by ‘Läkemedelsverket’ (The Swedish Medical Products Agency), to sell prescription and non-prescription pharmaceuticals along with other goods within the category of health and beauty. Apotea´s head office is located in central Stockholm, whereupon a modern and sustainable logistic center is located in Morgongåva, Heby municipality (Apotea u.å.). Ellinor has worked for six years at Apoteas marketing department as a project leader. Besides this role, she has worked in several different positions in the firm as well. This has led to her having accumulated a lot of experience within the firm.

4.1.1 CRM and e-CRM processes

When Ellinor was asked about how they currently work with CRM and e-CRM and the reason behind the implementations, the response was that there was confusion around the term e-CRM. She was not familiar with it and stated that CRM is what essentially makes up their customer relationship work. They simply did not differ between CRM and e-CRM. The term e-CRM turned out to be something that was new for Ellinor to hear about when she was presented with a question linked to e-CRM. For them, CRM constitutes customer relationships and is something they have implemented in order to work with their customer service. For them it is mainly through newsletter e-mail that they try to reach out to their customers, which essentially is an e-CRM tool. However, this was not the only customer relationship tool that they used. For them, CRM is a way of caring and communicating with their customers in order to retain them. An example of how they do so, is that a package reaches the customer in a certain amount of time.

When asked about potential problems or struggles when forming their CRM tools, Ellinor states "it’s a problem and challenge with the communication in regard to how much you should communicate with your customers”. For most of their customers, an order-, and delivery confirmation is enough to satisfy their needs. However, when delays happen, they felt that it could be difficult to find a balance of exactly when to reach out to their customers about this. There was a challenge regarding identifying what the customer expects, but also the delivery company's communication with Apoteas’ customers. Another challenge of theirs was to understand how many times a week they should be sending out their newsletter e-mail, especially since it is highly individual to the customer at hand of which preferences they might inhibit. She further points out that they are in the process of implementing additional tools, to be able to do more segmentation in their newsletters, whereupon she explains “we do it little today at a pretty basic level”. However, they will continue their work by attempting to understand how often they should send the newsletters and how they can further improve the maintenance of their customers' integrity.

4.1.2 Contingency process

When asked about what tools Apotea uses in order to gain and retain long-term relationships with their customers, Ellinor pointed out that during the covid pandemic they had to make big changes to their customer communication. They specifically used the newsletter to inform about delays, hand hygiene etc., which meant that the need to inform customers before purchases, was considered more important than what eventual sales the newsletter would potentially bring.

When questioned about future challenges they might face with CRM, Ellinor points out that the challenge will continue being finding a balance of sending the newsletter to customers, and what information it should contain in regards to geographical location. Ellinor further points to future challenges by emphasizing that new marketing- and integrity laws may be established and that; “you have to constantly work and find solutions around it”.

4.1.3 Future outlook on CRM implementation

When asked about the firm's future views on CRM implementation and how they might develop their tools, in order to increase revenue and better their customer relationships, they did not believe any specific new implementations will be performed. They are skeptical that any new systems will be needed since they do not want to push their customers and potentially discriminating their integrity. Furthermore, when asked about their future views on how their CRM work might unfold and which challenges may follow as a result, they believe that further emphasis needs to be put on finding a balance as to how much they communicate with their customers. They firmly believe that customers in today's society have a critical mindset towards businesses; “consumers are more aware of what kind of marketing and advertising you get”. Furthermore, they believe that the relationships they themselves have created throughout the years is enough for having returning customers. This, combined with their newsletter e-mail and making sure that packages are delivered on time, was said to be enough and optimal for them.

4.2 Nadja, Sigma Industry (East North AB)

Sigma group is a leading consulting organization with the objective of making its customers more competitive. This through combining the firm's technical knowledge, cutting-edge expertise, and its passion for constantly developing new and improved solutions (Sigma u.å.). Nadja is working at Sigma Industry East North AB - who works with industrial technology. She started working for the firm in 2018 as a consultant and has worked as a section manager since October 2020. During her time as a consultant and now as a section manager, she has had the opportunity to work with Sigma Industry’s CRM tools that she has accumulated experience with. According to Nadja, Sigma group values short decision paths as they believe an important factor to inherit, is rapid decision-making processes in order to be adaptive and to always explore new opportunities. As earlier mentioned, Nadja is working in the section of industrial technology which means that their main focus is the life science area. They work with different types of solutions for their customers, which ranges from sending out consultants to on spot locations, to aiding real estate projects or modelling and delivering a product.

4.2.1 CRM and e-CRM processes

When Nadja is asked about the reasons behind CRM and e-CRM implementations, she highlights that the primary focus for them is to establish a connection and communication with their customers. They do so through their website but currently they are working mainly with customer relationships through their system ‘Lime’. Furthermore, Nadja states “we also do phone calls and customer meetings”, which they do in order to stimulate growth with both existing and new customers. Lime however, is a system where they are able to follow up their processes with their customers, but it also enables them to look back at which customer process that has been done in the past. This means that they are able to follow up their relationships with their customers in order to gain and retain them. The reason as to why they work with this system, is that it allows them to easily set up communication paths in the form of e-mail or an offer to their clients. This simplifies the process of establishing customer relationships and caring for the ones already existent more efficient. Lime also transfers relevant data at hand directly to their website where they are able to; “source the service/need, which makes it possible for smaller firms/self-consultants to apply for the employment”. Nadja further highlights that the system simplifies the communication with other offices within the company. One of the benefits that they achieve by using Lime, is that it allows them to be flexible and adaptable to the situation at hand. Especially since it does not require the company to be in a specific city or country. Lime enables the people at Sigma Industry that works with CRM, to quickly get an understanding of when their customers want the contract to start, general scope, length, an approximation of what the offer will land on in terms of cost and eventual fees.

The system allows Sigma Industry to efficiently work with their own consultants, but they also work with their partner consultant as well. If a smaller firm would like to get in on a contract at Sigma Industry, because they have framework agreements, then they go through the system that Sigma Industry uses which is packed with adverts that describes title request, role description, length of contract etc. When discussing the aspect of eventual problems or difficulties they might face during their daily work with their CRM and e-CRM tools, Nadja points out “we believe there is always room for improvements, one of which is surrounding the ability to more effectively identify our customers' creditworthiness”. They want to avoid delivering a job where their customer in the end can't fulfil their payments. With what's already been mentioned, Lime also delivers a value in the sense that they enable the process of retaining their customers, since it allows them to easily follow up requests and to establish a flexible and adaptive communication path.

Lime further aids Sigma Industry in terms such as profitability since everything is documented in the system. This means that the employees working with their CRM and e-CRM tools, get a clear overview of documents linked to potential and existing customers. It could be in the form of a signed deal and things that have been mentioned already, such as contract length etc. But it can also problematize processes as it may sometimes be quite administrative labor that has to be performed.

4.2.2 Contingency process

Nadja emphasizes that “CRM is one of the most important systems we use in order to do follow-ups and facilitate daily work”. She further highlights that Sigma Industry is ISO certified within quality management, meaning that they must comply with the processes they have regarding CRM and e-CRM implementations in correlation with the ISO certification. This means that there are clear and detailed guidelines on how to work with CRM at Sigma Industry, which facilitates the use of CRM regardless of position in the firm or if one is new to the system.

Nadja also points out that the CRM system Sigma Industry uses, consists of different functions which strengthen the importance of the system for its company. However, Nadja emphasizes that she occasionally does not utilize the system optimally within a contingent environment; “there are many features that I know I'm not good at using”. She exemplifies this by explaining that within the CRM system, one can document who and how often one has communicated with a client or employee and what agreements they have made. The system can be applied from different perspectives depending on the aim of the system. e.g., Nadja illustrates that if the firm wants to increase sales, there are functions such as balanced scorecards which enables the firm to see how many calls one has made, how many orders one has etc. At the end of the interview, Nadja states that if Lime continues to develop with time, more features can possibly be utilized within a contingent environment.

4.2.3 Future outlook on CRM and e-CRM implementation

When Nadja was asked about future challenges and how their CRM and e-CRM processes might advance, she feels that it could be beneficial to develop an app, that enables the employees working with customer relationships to effectively and efficiently document. “Many times, we find ourselves being on the move when suddenly getting a work-related phone call, where it’s needed to document important information in the system”. There is the option of doing so when getting back to the office, but this leaves room for error in the sense that they might forget to document valuable and important information. Therefore, she believes that an app could potentially help in instances, where they find themselves on the move, to then easily through their phone make the needed documentations. The potential outcome of this implementation could be that it optimizes their work process and that they become even more adaptable to uncertain environment settings. A final implementation that could be beneficial for the firm, is if Lime gets integrated with other systems as well in order to delimit it.

5. Analysis & Discussion

This chapter will be focusing on examining the results and data from the empirical studies that have been performed. In accordance with this, data gathered from the interviews will be analyzed by implementing the theoretical framework in the process of developing an analysis and discussion.

5.1 CRM practices amongst the firms

CRM can be considered as an effective tool for gaining and retaining long-term relationships with customers (Rahimi & Gunlu 2016), which further emphasizes that firms work in balance of the three factors; *process*, *people* and *technology* (Chen & Popovich 2003). The analysis of the empirical data shows that the work with these three factors differs between the firms. In general, Apotea works with their CRM more modestly. Ellinor described that one way they work with CRM, in broader terms, is through newsletter e-mail in order to reach out to their customers. They also work with CRM through their supplier/delivery companies. At Sigma Industry, they are more conscious and active with their CRM implementations by using e-CRM more effectively. Nadja described that they mainly work through an e-CRM system that allows them to effectively do follow ups with both new and existing customers which simplifies communication both internally and with their customers. Through their e-CRM system Lime, CRM tools are affected positively in the regard that it lets the workers at Sigma Industry efficiently sort and plan phone calls and book customer meetings. The way Apotea works with CRM in comparison to Sigma Industry, shows that the two firms working in different lines of business, navigate the space of customer relationship differently in regards to the three factors stated above. This observation only adds to what Rahimi and Gunlu (2016) highlights, that the concept of CRM could have many differentiating meanings. More precisely as to how they differentiate from each other will be further analyzed and discussed below.

Process

Process in this instance relates mainly to that firms CRM activities have to change from a product-centric view to a more customer-centric view (Rahimi & Gunlu

2016). From the empirical data gathered, it is shown that both firms work with a customer-centric view which leads to customers being considered an essential and vital part of their business. By valuing the customer-centric view, these firms can gain and retain customers simultaneously as their revenues possibly increase, which can be considered a win-win situation both for the customer and the firm. However, both firms' CRM processes and incentives differ where top management presumably has had different perspectives and goals with CRM. Apotea highlighted that a lot of their CRM work goes into securing orders being delivered on time. This means that the firm has processes which are closely tied to their delivery and manufacturing partners. They are therefore directly dependent on them and that their processes function accordingly. As Apotea mentions, delays are prone to happen which means that they as a firm have a responsibility to their customers, by informing them and potentially also allocating disposable compensation. This is in line with Chen and Popovich (2003) argumentation, that by shifting towards a more customer-centric view of CRM, possibilities of anchoring one's business processes to service their customers, results in gaining increased resilience to future market pressure. On the contrary, Sigma Industry works with their CRM processes a bit differently, which certainly is due to the general differences between the two industries the firms operate within. How Sigma Industry more specifically works with CRM, is that it consists of regular phone calls and customer meetings that they arrange. What their e-CRM system provides is a solution to establish communication lines through the entire firm, which ensures greater customer focus and work that is related to it. This means that the e-CRM system is adapted from a customer-centric standpoint, which is in line with Rahimi and Gunlu (2016) observation that firms have to shift towards a customer-centric view instead of a product-centric view. This difference between the firms, highlights the importance of top management responsibilities, to create sustainable processes within the CRM system in order to navigate effectively. Rahimi and Gunlu (2016) also emphasizes that top management have responsibilities to successfully implement new and sustainable processes, e.g., if Apotea would implement e-CRM tools on a broader scale, in order to avoid future CRM failure.

People

People have an essential role in CRM strategy, activity, and implementation process as customers and employees are regarded as a key role in the decision-making process (Rahimi & Gunlu 2016). From the empirical data gathered, it is obvious that both customers and employees have a significant part in CRM work in both firms. Based on the CRM work within Apotea, it can be interpreted that both employees and customers have good and established communication with top management, even though the communication and decision-making processes occur differently. As earlier described, Apotea mainly communicates with their customers through newsletter e-mail, which can be interpreted that the communication is of an informative nature from the firm. Ellinor exemplifies this by stating that most of their customers are satisfied when they get an order- and delivery confirmation, which encompasses that Apotea mainly communicate through those channels. This means that the balance between confirmation and information, in forms of delays or their newsletter, is of the essence whereupon both employees and customers have a significant participation in it. However, it is difficult to interpret to what extent employees can influence this type of communication, as it mainly is between the delivery company and customers. Even though Ellinor pointed out that warehouse employees have some influence over the delivery date communication, it remains hard to interpret that type of communication based on this study's purpose.

Sigma Industry on the other hand, demonstrates that the employees' interaction with its customers is at the of their CRM system. They use the CRM system mainly to establish communication paths in forms of phone calls and customer meetings in order to gain and retain both existing and new clients. This is done as previously described, through phone calls and customer meetings, where information can be flexibly processed and stored in order to gain a better understanding of the customer's needs and demands. However, there is a big difference between the companies in how they choose to incorporate employees in the CRM system. It can be interpreted from the collected empirical material, that Apotea to some extent incorporates its employees into the CRM system, as they mostly work with newsletters that can be viewed as controlled communication from a specific division in the firm, e.g., sales or marketing. While within Sigma Industry, it is interpreted that their work with CRM is based on employee´s knowledge and willingness to interact with the system. This is in line with the argumentation of Bhat and Darzi (2018) who claims that by allocating time and money to proper CRM tools, such as employees, outcomes such as competitive advantages and relationships can be gained. However, it is important to acknowledge that top management's aim with incorporating CRM into the firm is of the essence and can affect the results in either direction.

Technology

The technology function of CRM refers to collecting information on customer patterns, interpreting customer behavior etc. in order to determine the best strategy for the firm (Chen & Popovich 2003). This adds to the understanding that technology within CRM adds to the ability for firms to respond to different customer scenarios in advance and deliver tailored services (Rahimi & Gunlu 2016).

The way Apotea utilizes newsletter e-mail in order to stay in touch with their customers, can be viewed as an effective and efficient way of communicating with one's customers. It most likely brings value by the realization of customer retention, which they also stated that it does during the interview. The e-CRM tool itself is however limited to what it can do and in the sense of diversification and development potential. Apotea neither sees the need or value that it would bring to the firm by exploring new ways of working with customers electronically. It goes to show that when a firm is more focused on not communicating ‘too much’ with their customers, that they also limit themselves as to what they potentially can achieve by exploring new options of working with their customers, and potentially losing out on several benefits. Abu-Shanab and Anagreh (2015) explicates that the benefits of e-CRM, is that it can increase the profits and achieve higher customer satisfaction which leads to loyal returning customers. This furthermore means that Apotea might lose out on these factors by not adopting additional e-CRM tools. Sigma Industry on the other hand, clearly shows that by having a mindset of always striving towards improving already existing options and developing new ones, they may increase the eventual outcome of positioning themselves more competitively. Since they focus intensively on adapting to the digital environment, they are also becoming more resilient to changes that are happening within our space, making it easier for them to navigate their customers and being adaptable to the situation at hand. The e-CRM system that Sigma Industry works with, also enables employees to communicate with other offices within the firm. This can lead to a greater understanding of customers’ demands and agreements within the firm which can lead to better accounts in the broader perspective.

By implementing a well-established CRM technology within the firm, they potentially create valuable benefits like competitive advantage, customer retention and creation. However, this is only possible if top management interprets CRM as a service (Bhat & Darzi 2018). Both firms have their competitive advantages in their own industry, however Sigma Industry works after established and proven e-CRM methods, which therefore can be interpreted as beneficial as top management appears to be more adaptable to changes in digital environments. This argumentation is further in line with Rahimi and Gunlu (2016) statement that firms have to be adaptable and respond to new customer scenarios.

5.2 e-CRM practices amongst the firms

e-CRM consists of traditional CRM tools and activities, but as a consequence of the technological development, it is enriched with technological features. Meaning that it can be described as an internet-based service that aids the firm to achieve CRM objectives faster (Herman et al. 2021). When looking at how the firms had implemented their e-CRM processes and their general thoughts and views on it, the empirical material showed that the firms differed quite a lot with how they work and relate to it. When Apotea was asked about their implementations of e-CRM tools, she got quite confused with the terminology and further pointed out that they only refer to their work with customers as CRM. This highlighted an important aspect of this study, specifically since CRM practitioners sometimes find it difficult to define the term, and therefore is subject to being interpreted differently amongst individuals (Almotairi 2009). An argument that can be made with background to this, due to the lack of acknowledgement of e-CRM and its differentiating characteristics compared to CRM, firms may not realize the differences between the tools that make up CRM and the digital dimension of it. Or that e-CRM is a thing that has developed into something, as being an extension tool of CRM due to the technological advancements that have been made. Apotea did however work thoroughly with newsletter e-mail in order to stay in touch with their customers.

Sigma Industry on the other hand, worked thoroughly with their different implementations of e-CRM tools. They were also well familiar with the term e-CRM and highlighted that it was a key part to their success in the sense of gaining and retaining customers. As a result of their implementation of e-CRM tools and the processes linked with it, they were also able to establish good communication lines, both internally and externally. One particular benefit that they've discovered by using Lime is that it creates an adaptability and flexibility to the situation at hand with their customers and other divisions within the firm. This is in line with Abu-Shanab and Anagreh (2015) observation, that e-CRM provides firms with additional opportunities of increasing customer relationships. With their use of Lime, an argument can be made that they not only position themselves in a way which makes them more appealing to customers, but that they are also able to manage their customers more effectively. This way of working with digital CRM tools may further lead to a greater chance of achieving higher levels of customer acquisitions. Additionally, this goes well with the idea and thought that a higher chance of profit may also be realized, which is an essential part for firms to relate to in order to survive and strive towards higher levels of competitiveness. This can be tied to Alshurideh (2022) point, that businesses can adapt to a changing environment, and that technological advancements contribute to developments, such as e-CRM, which consequently improve the quality of service that is to be provided by the firms. Furthermore, through their usage of Lime, they have been able to achieve a greater understanding of processes linked to their customers which bolsters their customers relationships. As stated by Yu et al. (2015), by implementing e-CRM into the firm's processes, firm's may improve their communication with their customers, by generating a better visualization of existing and potential customers' views, attitudes and preferences. What this furthermore might insinuate, is that through e-CRM implementation and development, firms have the potential to gain and retain more customers.

By not implementing the digital dimension of CRM initiatives within firms, the possibility of losing out on the aspects of gaining and retaining customers is potentially realized. Sigma Industry, which is constantly striving towards new technological advancements and improvements of their e-CRM systems, can be argued being a way for them to secure long-term competitiveness. This is due to the fact that they are using a system which is heavily focused on efficiency and optimization of labor linked to customer relations. Apotea, which does not see a necessity to explore new and possibly even improved customer relationships tools linked to e-CRM, might lose out on higher retention rates and acquisition of both new and already existing customers. Factors which arguably have a big influence on both realization of profit and competitiveness. By seeking and adapting to new technological improvements and advancements of CRM, firms inevitably also strive towards optimized ways of caring for their customers, which is in line with Yu et al. (2015) argumentation that firms' CRM work can decrease chances of customers experiencing unequal fairness and treatment. Hence the importance for firms to constantly work and develop tools linked to e-CRM in order to stay on top of their contingencies.

5.3 Contingency’s role for the firms

As stated by Donaldson (2001), contingency theory can be seen as something that is encompassing firms in regards to different processes that are inhibited within them. It means that firms are formed by characteristics and structures that they are surrounded by. Therefore, the contingencies are also bound to the firms themselves. When looking at the environmental and size aspect of contingency theory, both respondents work at large-scale firms, which Williams et al. (2017) states usually are constructed and organized in a mechanistic manner. But as Donaldson (2001) also states, the environmental aspect also refers to firms and organizations being able to create stable contingencies.

In regards to what's been mentioned, decision making processes and knowledge flows usually therefore have a top-down characteristic to them. In regards to how Apotea works with their CRM and e-CRM processes, they are rather simplistic which can insinuate that decision makers within the field and solution work, doesn't necessarily have to encompass top-down management being relevant. By utilizing and focusing on rather ‘simplistic’ CRM tools, they can also minimize eventual risks and effectivize time allocation to other processes. This arguably means that they create a stable environment internally in the sense of not having big and complex CRM systems, but it may also make them less adaptable to the technological environment that is growing and constantly changing. When analyzing Sigma Industry’s CRM and e-CRM work, they have set themselves up with a system that is both adaptable and flexible to a technological environment. They further emphasize that adaptability and continually optimizing CRM and e-CRM tools is necessary for success. This can be linked to Donaldson (2001) point, that firms can be interpreted as something that is adapting to its current environment, which entails that they are linked to contingencies that also change. Lime can therefore be seen as efficiently and effectively stimulating their chance of navigating the technological environment, which essentially means that they also increase the chance of gaining and retaining customers.

As earlier mentioned, Donaldson (2001) also highlights that the *strategy* aspect to contingency theory emphasizes that it affects the structure on a divisional level. What this furthermore means is that the functional structure of the firm, is linked to the general set of strategies focused on either a product or service. Undeniably, as a result of this, efficiency levels have the chance of being altered to new levels of improvement, simply by enhancing the function itself. The function in this case can be said to be the CRM implementations of the firms, which are strongly tied to the aspect of service that the CRM tools aims to stimulate. In further regards, what this means is that CRM strategies that are more diversified, potentially can lead to results that are more applicable on a broader spectrum of various markets and customers.

By having a strategy and vision of constantly striving towards development and adaptation throughout their business processes, Sigma Industry ensures that they are keeping up with technological advancements, their market and its general developments. Furthermore, this means that they are able to observe the value of working thoroughly with their CRM processes that are adaptable with time and space. Since they are positive that constant improvement of CRM and e-CRM tools are necessary to keep up with changes and demand, they also set themselves up for success with their customers. The strategy that Apotea uses differs from Sigma Industry in the way that they don't see a necessity of improving or adapting their CRM processes. This doesn't necessarily mean that the approach itself is wrong, but it rules out potential aspects of improvements and the opportunities they may provide with. Especially when considering the digital aspect to CRM. At the same time, while having a strategy that is focused on more modest CRM implementations, they can dilute capital to other divisions of the firm, or strengthen the CRM tools that they already use. It ultimately depends on what the firms deem brings value and if adaptation and development is needed. Depending on the situation at hand, we find that the strategies differ quite a lot between the two firms, and perhaps so with background to the market that they operate within, which further highlights Williams et al. (2017:455) statement “Given that there is no one best way to manage an organization, there is no universal template that will ensure the success of CRM efforts”.

6. Conclusion

The final chapter concludes the thesis by addressing and answering the aim and research questions. The aim focuses on investigating how large-scale firms work with CRM processes in order to gain and retain long-term customer relationships. Following what's been stated, the aim also includes investigating how large-scale firms realize profits and minimize chances for losses through their CRM and e-CRM implementations. Lastly, suggestions for further studies will be presented.

Research questions:

- How do large-scale firms interpret CRM and e-CRM?
- How do large-scale firms work with CRM in order to gain and retain profitable and long-term customer relationships?

With the empirical material gathered on how large-scale firms work with CRM processes and on the basis of the analysis, acknowledgement stands as to the fact that the firms in this research interpret CRM and its digital extension e-CRM differently. As stated earlier, CRM is something that firms may interpret differently, especially as the CRM environment can be difficult to navigate and grasp (Bull 2003; Rahimi and Gunlu 2016). In regards to this, the research shows that large-scale firms can have differentiating opinions and views about how they relate to the terms CRM and e-CRM. Whereas it’s even possible some do not refer to parts of their CRM implementations as e-CRM, but instead refer all their customer relationship implementation and work as CRM. This adds to the idea that when something is hard to interpret due to having broad room for subjective interpretation as stated by Almotairi (2009), room is also given for confusion and unclarity as a result of this. A reason as to why firms may have different levels of clarity surrounding the differences between their CRM and e-CRM tools, is that it can be linked to their overall view of adaptability and necessity to strive towards new efficient, and improved ways of communicating with one's customers as technological advancements are made.

Furthermore, this research concludes that a well-established and utilized CRM approach that is also up to date with technological advancements, is essential in order to gain and retain customers. Whereupon this research clarifies that there are some clear differences as to how the two firms might do so. The CRM work can alter depending on the firm's communication channels and knowledge on customers and contingencies, which further concludes that there is no general understanding or template of how to work with CRM in order to gain and retain customer relationships. The CRM process has to be based on the customers' preferences and willingness to interact with the firm, which means that firms have to find an acceptable and sensible balance between confirmation, informative and sales communication in order to gain and retain long-term relationships.

For large-scale firms that ponder or intend to incorporate CRM or e-CRM tools in the future, these findings become relevant as they demonstrate significant insights in a contingent environment. A key takeaway of this study is that large-scale firms can interpret CRM and e-CRM differently, whereas it becomes important to have a clear understanding in order to avoid misinterpretation of the systems during the implementation phase. This means that a universal template or approach on how to establish and incorporate CRM into the firm does not exist. Each firm's implementation and daily work should remain unique in its kind and be formed individually. However, by being adaptive and flexible, firms increase their chances of being on top of their contingencies, which inevitably is positive for gaining and retaining customers.

6.1 Future research

Since this thesis was conducted with a qualitative methodology with semi-structured interviews with large-scale firms, there are some limitations that give direction for further research. For example, a broader case study could be worth considering in order to perform greater comparative research, on either similar or distinct line of business. This future research is also backed by Rachinger et al. (2018) emphasis, where more analyses are needed in order to highlight the importance of digitalization in organizations, concerning their implementation and strategies of CRM and e-CRM tools. Furthermore, it would also be beneficial to conduct a quantitative study with a broad number of respondents, in order to investigate if there are correlations between e-CRM implementation and increased profits.

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Popular science summary

As the digital environment is expanding at a high rate of pace, it's is also changing as a result of it. This furthermore means that firms have the ability to implement new ways of working with their customers. As a result of this, Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and electronic Customer Relationship Management (e-CRM) can be used in more refined and efficient ways. However, there exists a research gap as to how CRM and the digital aspect to it e-CRM work when implemented simultaneously. Especially when looking at context of how CRM works within a contingent environment. This research therefore tries to investigate how these CRM and e-CRM tools can add value to long-term relationship creation amongst large-scale firms.

CRM can be seen as a something that firms add to their business processes, with an intention to gain and retain customers. But this further means that different sets of CRM activities can be constructed. By having differentiating CRM activities, firms can interact in different ways with their customers. In accordance with this, firms also have the opportunity to modify a CRM activity to something depending on the goal of the implementation itself. But as our environment is changing and becoming more technologically dependent, firms need to be more adaptable as well. As technological advancements are being made, e-CRM has emerged. e-CRM has traits similar to CRM, but the tools linked to e-CRM are more efficient in some ways due to the technological aspects to it. e-CRM can therefore be viewed as something that potentially lets firms achieve their customer relationship goals faster.

This study's purpose was to try and investigate how CRM and e-CRM activities are combined, and how these similar yet differentiating tools are implemented within large-scale firms, and how it aids them with gaining and retaining long-term customer relationships. A qualitative research method was formed which suited well for the purpose of the study and the decided research questions. A multiple-case study was conducted where more than one firm was interviewed, with semi-structured interviews being performed. The results showed that the large-scale firms in this study, interpret and worked with the two terms differently. It also showed that there is no general guideline as to how firms should implement or work with CRM, in order to gain and retain long-term customer relationships.

Acknowledgements

With the thesis coming to an end, we would like to express our gratitude to the respondents for making time for us and being cooperative, but also that they have been transparent with how they work with certain processes. Giving us an insight to their daily operations.

We also want to let our supervisor, Erik Melin, know that we appreciate him. He has guided us and provided excellent feedback and support throughout the entirety of the thesis. Thank you, Erik!

Appendix 1

Interview guide
Can you describe *(the company's name)* with your words to us?

Background questions:

- For how long have you held your existing professional position and how long have you worked within the organization?
- How much work experience do you have with CRM usage?
- As you work with CRM and e-CRM today, on what grounds/basis did you decide to implement CRM/e-CRM?
    - Describe what the organization's purpose is with CRM/e-CRM.
    - Describe what the work with CRM/e-CRM looks like within your organization.
    - What problems and difficulties have you encountered in the implementation (and development) of CRM/e-CRM?

In depth questions:

- What CRM and e-CRM tools do you use to gain and retain long-term relationships with your customers?
- How has the implementation of CRM/e-CRM contributed to the company having a greater customer focus than product focus?

If so, in what way?

- Do you believe that the implementation of CRM/e-CRM helps the company to create and deliver value creation?

If so, in what way?

- How do you work with CRM/e-CRM to create profitable and long-term customer relationships? How do you do it practically?
- How does the CRM system affect your profitability, customer relationship and long-term goals? Does the system have a positive/negative impact?
- Do you believe that your CRM system is used optimally today in accordance with the prevailing technological development that is taking place in society? If not, what suggestions do you have for possible development areas?

- Is your CRM system integrated in any way with the company's social media channels? If so, what benefits/challenges do you feel social media provides for working with the CRM system?
- Which specific CRM/e-CRM tools have you found to be most effective and, do these differ depending on what the goal is? If so, how?

Closing questions:

- What future challenges do you see with the work within CRM/e-CRM within, for example a 5-year period?
- What do you think the work with CRM/e-CRM will look like in the future? For example, practically will the same system be used or will changes take place?

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