

The effectiveness of an in-company women's network – a case study at the RWE Group

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Abstract

Increasingly, organisations are implementing in-company women's networks to foster women's advancement, to move more women into senior management positions, and as a remedy for gender inequalities at the workplace. However, the literature is relatively silent on how the in-company women's networks' effectiveness can be evaluated. Specifically, this study explores by means of a case study, which dimensions need to be taken into account when evaluating a women's network's effectiveness and in what respects and why the network under examination is perceived as effective by multiple stakeholders. In addition, structuration theory is used as the theoretical lens to further understand how the network's effectiveness is constructed. The results reveal that there are five important dimensions for assessing effectiveness, i.e. setting and accomplishing targets, numerical KPIs, soft/intangible KPIs, stakeholder perceptions, and taking into account time and dynamics. Furthermore, the study also resulted in a list of factors that can contribute to the effectiveness of in-company women's network. Apart from contributing to the literature on the evaluation of in-company women's networks' effectiveness, the findings can help organisations to implement, manage and evaluate in-company women's networks.

Key words: In-company women's networks, effectiveness, multiple stakeholder approach, structuration theory

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Women in top management positions in large companies are still very rare (Bierema, 2005). In 1990, the largest American corporations held less than 0.5% women in the highest paid management jobs (Fierman, 1990). In 1997, there were only two women CEOs in the Fortune 500 companies (Oakely, 2000) which increased to seven women CEOs by 2000 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2002). One decade later, there has been a slight increase, but the status quo regarding the representation of women in top management positions is far from being equal. Women held 16 % of the board seats in Fortune 500 firms and occupied 14 % of the executive positions (Catalyst, 2011). In 2014, within the DAX listed companies in Germany, only 5.5% of the CEOs and 24.7% of the board members were women (Reuters, 2014). According to the British Equal Opportunities Commission (2007), the forecast says that it will take another 60 years until men and women directors are equal in numbers in FTSE 100 firms. It can be questioned why women are underrepresented in senior management and what can be done to change this.

According to Tharenou (1999), there are two major reasons why women are underrepresented in senior executive roles. First, women lack human capital (skills and expertise) and second, women have no access to the relevant networks (social capital). This research focuses on the second reason, the social capital because it is assumed that women are prevented from reaching the top, rather than that women do not possess the right skills and knowledge to become senior managers. Specifically, this research explores what in-company women's networks can offer to assist women in their advancement in organisations.

Networking is considered to play a substantial part in achieving career success (Baker, 1994; Forret & Dougherty, 2004; Pini, Brown, & Ryan, 2004). Networking behaviour refers to “the process of contacting and being contacted by people in our social network and maintaining these linkages and relationships... a set of relations, linkages, or ties among people” (Burke, 1993 in Travers, Stevens and Pemberton, 1997, p. 61). Further, individuals attempt to develop and maintain relationships with others who have the potential to assist them in their work or career (Forret & Dougherty, 2001: 285). Networks are supposed to enhance social support, information exchange, and performance (Flap & Völker, 2004), status attainment (Lai, Ling, & Leung, 1998), career advantages (Ibarra, 1997) and competitive advantage (Benschop, 2009). However, as Ehrich (1994) pointed out, networks which are dominated by men are more powerful than women dominated networks, because they are composed of the employees who hold the power in an organisation (Linehan, 2001).

Women usually face difficulties in accessing these ‘old boy’ networks. According to Cross and Armstrong (2008), the involvement in men’s networks can be crucial in women’s career progression, but women are usually excluded from being part of these almost exclusively male clubs, solely because of their gender. As a consequence, women’s networks have come up to help women move into senior positions (O’Neil, Hopkins, & Sullivan, 2011; Vinnicombe, Singh, & Kumra, 2004). According to Travers et al. (1997), three main forms of women’s networks have emerged. These are: 1) professional and occupational networks, aiming to bring together women with similar qualifications; 2) in-company networks which present either formal or informal groupings within an organisation that focus on the advancement of women’s positions in the organisation and finally: 3) training networks which are classified as support groups with the main focus on training. The scope of this research lies on the formal in-company women’s networks because, up until now, there has been little empirical evidence examining in-company women-only networks’ effectiveness that is, their success in reaching their stated aims (Bierema, 2005, Durbin, 2011). It is important to have this evidence because companies increasingly introduce and rely on these formal women’s networks (Hucke & Kepinski, 2016), for instance Dyrchs and Strack (2012) found that 68% of the 44 organisations they studied employ women’s networks as a means to gender equality, but there is too little empirical proof to be certain that formal women’s networks can be regarded an effective tool for women to advance in their careers or to encounter gender inequalities in general.

Previous studies on collective women’s networks have examined the following topics. Donnellon and Langowitz (2009) explored the structure of women’s networks and their different purposes. In a similar vein, Singh and colleagues (2006) researched the structure of 12 corporate women’s networks from the theoretical perspective of organisational citizenship behaviour. Pini et al. (2004) discussed the benefits but also the disadvantages of collective women’s networks and argued that women-only networks are a first step to move women into management positions. Moreover, two studies focused on structural barriers to the success of the companies’ women’s networks. Bierema (2005) showed that an in-company women’s network failed due to the resilience of the patriarchal organisational culture. Similarly, O’Neil et al. (2011) indicated that the men-dominated culture as a barrier is likely to be ignored and that senior management views women’s limited advancement as an individual choice.

While the previous literature presents valuable contributions to the field of in-company women’s networks, there are still gaps which need to be addressed. First, the literature which

focuses on collective women's networks is largely silent on their actual effectiveness. According to O'Neil et al. (2011), relatively little research has been done on the impact collective in-company women's networks may have on women's career advancement. Second, there is a lack of multiple stakeholder perspectives when studying formal in-company women's networks and their effectiveness. More research concerning how multiple stakeholders perceive the aims and effectiveness of an in-company women's network is needed, as differences in the perceptions of network members and the organisation's executive leadership or line management about the aims and anticipated outcomes of a women's network might impact the network's actual effectiveness. Third, previous studies on collective women's networks have mainly considered the structural barriers that formal women's networks encounter (cf. Bierema, 2005; O'Neil et al., 2011) and have paid little attention to the network's members as active agents. Both structure and agency should be taken into account because both can influence the effectiveness of in-company women's networks.

To address these gaps in the literature, the objective of this research is to further expand the literature on formal in-company women's networks and their effectiveness and - in addition - to make recommendations to various organisational stakeholders to improve the effectiveness of their in-company women's networks by carrying out a qualitative research (case-study approach) in one company with a formal in-company women's network in Germany, thereby providing insights into how and why different stakeholder groups (members of the network, non-members, HR management, executive management, line management) assess the effectiveness of the women's network. Specifically, this research is driven by the following research question:

In what respects and why is the formal in-company women's network effective, as perceived by various stakeholders?

This research question will be explored by employing a structure-agency theoretical perspective (Giddens, 1984). As will be explained in the next chapter, this perspective provides the opportunity to explore how various stakeholders 'construe' both the goals and the effectiveness of the case organisation's women's network, i.e. through dealing with, using and changing, the structural/systemic, enabling and constraining, norms, arrangements and rules concerning these issues. In order to answer the research question using this theoretical perspective, the following sub questions arise.

- 1) *What are the aims of the formal in-company women's network as perceived by the relevant stakeholders in the organisation of which the network is part (members of the network, non-members (men and women), HR management, executive management and line management)?*
- 2) *In what respects and why do the relevant stakeholders consider the formal in-company women's network to be successful in reaching these aims?*

This research contributes to the literature in three substantial ways. First, it develops dimensions for measuring in-company women only networks' effectiveness. Second, it includes multiple stakeholders to assess network effectiveness from different perspectives. Third, by using Giddens' (1984) structuration theory as a theoretical lens, this study investigates how the organisational actors construe the network's effectiveness through the reproduction, re-construction or change of structural norms, arrangement and rules.

The study is also relevant from a societal as well as managerial point of view. Women are still largely underrepresented in top management positions and this study attempts to assess in what respects formal in-company women's networks can be an effective tool for women's career progression. Further, this research can help companies to implement women's networks that are beneficial for women and the organisation because it outlines factors which contribute to the effectiveness of women's network and discusses dimensions which need to be taken into account when evaluating a network's effectiveness. This case study can serve as a basis for recommendations for various stakeholders who want to set up an in-company women's network (e.g. women in a company, HR managers) with regard to what they need to take into account when introducing and managing an in-company women's network. Lastly, the study is also of interest for women who are members of a network or aim to initiate or join a network because it highlights what women can expect from an in-company women's network and what they need to do themselves.

To conduct this study, a case study approach has been chosen because this allows a complete examination of an in-company women's network. The RWE Group, the company which represents the case, is appropriate because it has a formal in-company women's network in addition to the company's diversity program and philosophy. Chapter 3 addresses the methodology in more detail.

The study proceeds as follows: Chapter 2 describes the theoretical framework, Chapter 3

explains the methodology, and Chapter 4 presents the results. Finally, Chapter 5 provides the conclusion, discusses the results and outlines theoretical, methodological as well as practical implications.

Chapter 2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Importance of Networking and Networks

Networks are a source of power (Timberlake, 2005) for individuals and for organisations. Networking has the potential to enhance career success. For example, it can lead to increased salary, promotions, and career satisfaction (Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001) as well as to increased job opportunities, job performance, social support, resources, and professional support (Green, 1982). Moreover, Luthans et al. (1988) confirmed that a manager's ability to network is the strongest predictor of managerial success. Concluding, networking is an important part of managerial behaviour and career success (Singh & Vinnicombe, 2006).

Networking presents not only benefits on the individual level, but it is also seen as a success factor for organisations (Perriton, 2006). For example, networking individuals can bring important information into the organisation. Also, formal organisational networks for women, different ethnicities, sexual orientations or disabilities can strengthen a company's diversity and inclusion strategy, thereby enhancing its reputation and making it an attractive employer.

The literature distinguishes between formal and informal networks. The distinction between formal, mostly collective and informal, mostly individual networks is relevant for this study because the focus lies on investigating the effectiveness of a formal in-company women's network. According to McGuire (2000), formal networks tend to be public, official, and have clear boundaries, whereas informal networks tend to be personal, voluntary, and are characterised by having fluid boundaries. For example, formal work networks are usually officially recognized by employers, focus on the achievement of both members' and social organisational goals and tend to have an identifiable membership and network structure (McGuire, 2000). In contrast, participation in informal networks is not formally governed and the goals of such networks can be work related, personal, or social (Ibarra, 1993).

2.2 Networks, Networking Behaviour and Gender

Men have been more successful in exploiting their individual networks for advancing their careers than women. For example, Hanson (2000) found that men usually have larger, more

economically focused networks, while women are part of smaller, more localised and community-minded, social networks. Furthermore, women networks have stronger tie strength (Knouse & Webb, 2001) while men's networks typically have weak ties (Ibarra, 1997). These quantitative studies do not further explain why this is the case because in their set-up gender is the explaining variable for the differences.

To explain the differences between men's and women's networks, few studies investigated differences in networking behaviour. Studying networking behaviour seems to be important because Gremmen, Akkerman, and Benschop (2013) found that gender as a demographic binary category has no explanatory value to explain gender differences in network structures and outcomes. Van Emmerik (2006) investigated the creation of hard social capital (task-oriented resources that can be used to achieve valued career outcomes) and soft social capital (emotional support resources that can be used to achieve socio-emotional support) and found that men are more effective in using the emotional intensity of ties for creating hard social capital as well as using team-related resources to create soft and hard social capital. According to Forret and Dougherty (2004), men's careers benefit from increased visibility and engaging in professional activities, while this is not the case for women. The authors offer the explanation that work assignments, task forces, or committees in which women are involved have a less prestigious nature than those of the men. Also, Scott (1996) claimed that men have more benefits from work-related socialising behaviour than women. The results by Gremmen et al. (2013) showed that women account managers mostly employ affect-based trust networking and only men account managers use authoritative networking. Nevertheless, men use multiple networking behaviours (e.g. exchange and affect-based trust more than authority), which indicates that gender stereotyped generalisations on differences in networking behaviour between men and women, are too simplified.

2.3 In-Company Women's Networks

The creation of formal women's networks within organisations has been a consequence of the informal exclusion of women from men dominated networks (Fawcett & Pringle, 2000; Linehan & Walsh, 1999) and because men have been more successful in utilising their individual networks for advancing their careers than women.

Different types of networks have emerged (Vinnicombe & Colwill, 1995), especially internal corporate women's networks (Singh et al., 2006). However, also these in-company women's networks can differ and appear in various forms. For instance, they can vary with

regard to the inclusion or exclusion of men (men as sponsors, speakers at events, allow men to participate in the network's activities) or also of women by including only women who hold management positions (Vinnicombe et al., 2004).

This research adopts the definition of in-company women's networks by Bierema (2005, p.208) who defines them as "sponsored and structured groups concerned with women's advancement". These networks share the characteristics that they are usually implemented to help women build skills and create knowledge in order to succeed in the organisational culture and they are usually sponsored by the employer organisation. Typical functions of in-company women's networks are to advise senior management, hold networking events, and support the creation of mentoring programs (Bierema, 2005; Gremmen & Benschop, 2011; Singh et al., 2006).

Since it is argued that in-company women's networks have emerged as an answer to women's exclusion from old-boys networks (Fawcett & Pringle, 2000), a comparison of these network types gives important insights. Previous studies have found that women's networks are not a precise replicate of 'old-boys' networks, but differ from them in two important regards.

First, most men dominated networks are informal (Perriton, 2006). After work drinks and meetings at the golf club are not formally communicated and are also not part of a company's diversity strategy. In contrast, most women's networks, especially in-company networks, are formal which means that they have a name, a known number of members and are often used to promote the firm's diversity strategy. This demonstrates that women's networks usually have a different development than men's networks which may also result in different aims and outcomes, thereby making it important to study women's networks as an own phenomenon. Besides, the difference in formality might also reflect that 'old-boys' networks are perceived as the norm or often invisible standard (Gremmen & Benschop, 2011). Men senior managers will naturally seek out men junior managers and form informal alliances with them (Fischer & Oliker, 1983) and women's networks might create rooms for women to do the same.

The second major difference between men's and women's networks is how they are perceived. While men's network structures, both on the individual and collective levels, are taken for granted in companies and are perceived as a solid tool for career success, formal women's networks are contested. For example, many women have ambivalent opinions about women's networks and some women's attitudes are even hostile (Perriton, 2006). One possible explanation is that formal women's networks are prone to being ridiculed in their organisations, for instance

by being referred to as ‘mother’s meetings’ (Perrtion, 2006), ‘have-a-chat’ or ‘hen’s clubs’ (Pini et al., 2004). The results of Bierema’s (2005) study showed that women perceived the participation in a women’s only network as potentially career damaging or as a desperate call for help. Finally, according to Pini et al. (2004), criticisms about women-only networks also include the argument that they are discriminatory against men. Since the utility of women’s networks is contested, further research about their effectiveness is needed because empirical evidence can clarify the value of in-company women’s networks.

2.4 Effectiveness

While research on formal women’s networks in companies is rare, research on the effectiveness of in-company women’s networks is even more difficult to be found. As Kalev et al. (2006) argued, a large body of literature has examined the sources of inequality, but only few papers investigate the effectiveness of different programs to change the inequality in workplaces. According to them, understanding ‘the cause for the disease’ and ‘knowing the right cure for its treatment’, are two different things. Especially, little empirical evidence exists demonstrating the effectiveness of in-company networks (Bierema, 2005; Burke et al., 1995; Travers et al., 1997). Therefore, it is time to investigate the effectiveness of in-company women only networks in more detail to understand in which respects they can be seen as a cure to the existing workplace inequalities.

Effectiveness is defined as ‘the extent to which objectives are met’ (Erlendsson, 2002) or according to Fraser (1994, p. 104) “effectiveness is a measure of the match between stated goals and their achievement”. Hence, the effectiveness of the in-company women’s network in this study is defined as the respects in which the in-company women’s network is successful in matching the stated goals by the involved stakeholders and their actual achievement.

Donnellon and Langowitz (2009) have conducted research on women’s networks in 32 companies and found that only few companies have a strategy for setting goals and managing women’s networks. The authors developed a mission pyramid for women’s networks which aims to support network leaders in identifying and assessing their network’s effectiveness. According to Donnellon and Langowitz (2009), the hierarchical goals of an in-company women’s network are connection, peer reference and support, competency development, career support, advancement and advocacy, and finally on top, business development. The pyramid mirrors two aspects: first, it stresses that without having the building blocks it is difficult to reach the higher goals and second, it also shows the frequency of the goals mentioned. While the goal of all

studied women's networks was to connect women to each other, only few networks had the objective of business development, meaning that these networks drive business success.

Moreover, previous studies have discussed perceived goals of in-company women's networks. For example, O'Neil et al. (2011) investigated how women and senior management perceived the women's network's purpose and its potential to implement changes in the company. Their results revealed that the anticipated outcomes of what a women's network can achieve, differed for the members and the organisation. While the women expected strategic advantage for the organisation, an active network throughout the company, women in leadership roles and flexible career options, senior management emphasised the activity throughout the company and mentorship opportunities for women and only to a lesser extent women in leadership roles, thus setting less ambitious targets for the network. Also, in terms of anticipated organisational change, the outcomes differed. For example, most women hoped for better career paths for women, while senior management's main goal was the promotion of gender diversity in the company's workforce.

Furthermore, Kalev et al. (2006) pointed out, that women's networks become more influential and effective when the company has the right conditions for the achievement of goals in place, for instance an affirmative action officer, a diversity manager or department, or a committee or task force.

Finally, the perceived goals which are identified for individual networks might also be valid for collective networks. For example, previous studies established that there are two core dimensions why people network. These are, on the one hand, instrumental benefits (Bierema, 2005), such as promotions and total compensation (Forret & Dougherty, 2004), and, on the other hand, psychosocial reasons (Bierema, 2005), for instance having a like-minded community for support. It is expected that these are also goals for the members of a collective network, because women who join an in-company women's network might expect that the network will help them in their career advancements as well as providing a social community.

Concluding, in order to make a judgement about the effectiveness of a women's network, it is necessary to understand the desired results or, in other words, the goals of the network, as well as their achievement, as perceived by the different stakeholders.

However, there are some difficulties involved in assessing the effectiveness of networks. According to Mandell and Keast (2008), there are two main issues. First, the use of traditional performance measures is limited because these measures are not able to capture the relational

style of networks. The authors argue that the main function of a network is centred on developing relationships and processes to facilitate interactions, but that proof that these have been accomplished is often “intangible, difficult to catalogue, and can be diffuse in its specification” (Mandell & Keast, 2008, p. 717). Second, not all networks are alike which makes it difficult to establish meaningful scales that measure the effectiveness of networks. Individual variation of networks is not necessarily a valid reason for not trying to develop a scale for measuring effectiveness, but researchers have not established one yet. Due to these reasons, the current study will largely rely on an inductive approach and aims to extract possible effectiveness dimensions from the data. Although Mandell and Keast (2008) stated that it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of networks, they support the multiple stakeholder approach, as adopted in this study, as a promising avenue to study network effectiveness. They argue that because networks can produce different outcomes for different stakeholders, effectiveness must be assessed through alternative means that firstly allow for the identification and monitoring of changes in relationships and secondly for the different experiences of stakeholders.

Lastly, a recent study by Hucke and Kepinski (2016) investigated formal in-company women’s networks with regard to their actual impact, the quality of the membership experience and whether they live up to employees’ expectations. The authors collected survey data from 58 countries and over 1700 participants and based on the results, developed a diagnostic tool which identifies typical network personas, network effectiveness and embeddedness in an organisational context. The diagnostic tool helps in the assessment in which state the company’s women’s network is situated and can guide targeted steps to strengthen the network and its organisation, thus it can provide practical value for the studied case organisation. Based on the results of this study, the company’s network can be classified in accordance with the diagnostic grid (Figure 1). Nevertheless, the authors do not provide a definition and dimensions for measuring effectiveness. They only mention intended goals of women’s networks from a company perspective, for example, impact on external women hires, impact on speed of career advancement, impact on employee engagement or number of activities and events.

Overall, there are three main takeaways when discussing the effectiveness of in-company women’s networks. Firstly, based on the previous literature, this study departs from the point of view that the general goal of in-company women’s networks is the advancement of the position of women in their organisations. However, this broad goal needs to be further explored and it needs to be analysed in what respects it has been realised as perceived by various stakeholders.

Also, it is expected that instrumental and social goals of the network will be mentioned by the respondents in this research. Secondly, there is no consensus or established scale that measures the effectiveness. An explanation may be that the purposes and intentions when establishing a women’s network, as well as specific network structures, are highly context dependent (Mandell & Keast, 2008), thus, the effectiveness of different women’s networks will also be context dependent and difficult to generalise. More empirical research is needed in order to understand the effectiveness of women’s networks and if they can really present a cure to gender inequalities at the workplace. In order to assess the effectiveness of the network, this thesis mainly analyses subjective measures (perceptions of effectiveness by different stakeholders) and to a lesser extent objective measures of effectiveness (for example % increase of women in senior management positions since the network has been established). Relying only on numbers would be dangerous because this study is not able to establish causality, saying that the network alone is responsible for an increase in women senior managers. Thirdly, previous studies stress the importance of evaluating effectiveness from multiple stakeholder perspectives (Mandell & Keast, 2008; O’Neil et al., 2011). It is possible that the members of the network, non-members, the HR department, diversity office, line managers and senior management evaluate the effectiveness of the network in different terms. Therefore, a multiple stakeholder approach can reveal more complete insights than studying only one stakeholder perspective.

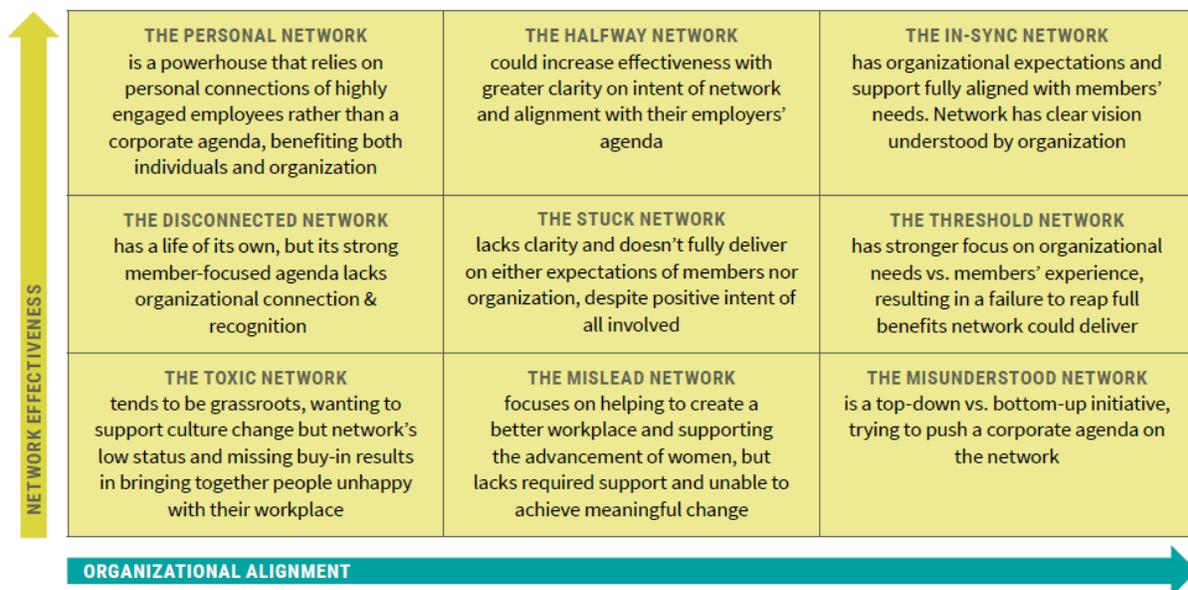


Figure 1: Hucke and Kepinski (2016, p.19), Employee Network Diagnostic Grid

2.5 Theoretical Perspective: Structure and Agency

This study adopts Giddens' (1984) structuration theory as the theoretical lens because it allows analysing the complexities and dualities that in-company women's networks face, as shown in the previous sections.

Giddens' (1984) structure-agency dialectic describes how human activity is embedded in structured historicity. Individual as well as collective action is enabled and constrained by the social structures, in the moment and over time (Gutiérrez & Barton, 2015). Simultaneously, agency has the power to reinforce or reform the patterns of social relations, which construct these structures (Gutiérrez & Barton, 2015). Giddens (1984) acknowledged this duality of agency and structure in time and place. According to him, every day's social activity is under continuous production and reproduction, as structures and actions form and inform each other. As summarised by New (1994, p. 188), humans are born into "a particular set of social relations, a particular culture in which a particular language is spoken" and these are neither chosen by humans, nor is the own relational position with its particular set of opportunities and restrictions. Nevertheless, the existence of society and its future transformation depends on human activity. Orlikowski and Yates (2002) described that structures are easily taken for granted, because they are reflected in human routines. Thus, they appear to be given, invariant, and independent. According to the authors, structures become especially influential when they become closely associated with particular social practices. It has the consequence that actors have little awareness that these structures are socially constituted and may be questionable. Hence, the chance of enacting different structures by changing social practice becomes lower. However, it is to mention that structures are only stabilised for now (Schreyer, 1993) and actors can and do change their community's social structures over time, either explicitly or implicitly (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002). Recognising this duality allows seeing that actors involved in a women's network face constraining and enabling structures beyond their control, but they can also alter these structures through their actions. Therefore, the key theoretical question raised here relates to the role that individuals in an organisation (agents) have in increasing gender equality, by means of an effective women's network, in the context of the social and cultural environment (structure). The structure-agency lens allows analysing how effectiveness is constructed by various stakeholders and how structures are produced, re-produced and changed in this process.

The role of structure has been examined by previous studies, although the focus has been on structure as a constraining factor instead of seeing it as a dialectic concept that can enable and

constrain the effectiveness of a women's network. The major structural constraint on the success of in-company women's networks is the firm's patriarchal culture (for example Bierema, 2005; O'Neil et al., 2011; Singh et al., 2006). All studies have concluded that when the company's philosophy does not truly embrace the concepts of diversity and equality, a women's network is doomed to fail. This is in line with the finding by Foldy (2002) showing that it is crucial to be aware of the complex power dynamics at play. According to her, diversity programmes, including networks, that do not address issues of dominance and subordination cannot achieve even small changes in the organisation. In addition to the organisational culture, gender stereotypes are also perceived as a meaningful contributor to the limited presence of women in high-level positions (Agars, 2004). Stereotypes are "the unconscious or conscious application of (accurate or inaccurate) knowledge of a group in judging a member of the group" (Banaji & Greenwald, 1994, p. 58), meaning that there are not necessarily intended (Agars, 2004). Gender stereotypes are commonly applied as a result of accepted cultural, societal, or unconscious beliefs about women or women's role in the workplace (Agars, 2004) and can further constrain the effectiveness of the in-company women's network.

The term 'Agency' describes that individuals behave independently and have the capacity to create, change and influence events, depending on the course of action they choose to take (Bilton et al., 1996; Clifton et al., 2013; Giddens, 1984). Thus, agency indicates that each single individual possesses a degree of power (Giddens, 1984). In the literature on women's networks, however, this agency aspect is widely ignored. As mentioned above, only few studies investigated networking behaviour which has the consequence that agentic behaviour in networks is under researched. For example, Benschop (2009) stated that networking and gendering are intertwined, because networking is a gendering practice, i.e. a practice that is constructed by the distinction between men and women, masculine and feminine (Acker, 1992). However, she found that through micro-political processes (agency by men and women account managers), networking does not have to reinforce gender inequality. Nevertheless, more research is needed to analyse how various stakeholders construe a particular in-company women only network's effectiveness in order to understand how and in which respects all stakeholders are capable of transcending the limitations placed on them by social arrangements.

Concluding, there are several structures which need to be taken into account, such as organisational culture or gender stereotypes. In this context, the aim of the study is to analyse how various organisational stakeholders construe the women's network's effectiveness by

constructing, re-constructing or changing these structural norms, arrangements and rules.

Chapter 3 Methodology

To conduct this study, qualitative research in the form of a case study has been chosen. The decision to use qualitative research is based on the following reasons: First, qualitative research is used to familiarise with a specific real-life context. One of the main concerns is to understand patterns and processes in social phenomena, and qualitative research seeks to investigate how people understand a situation and how their understanding has an influence on their actions (e.g. Jankowicz, 2005; Neuman, 2011). These aspects of qualitative research are important for this study because it aims to familiarise with the nature of an in-company women's network, to understand in what respects and why the network is perceived to be effective. Second, qualitative research is the best approach to study the effectiveness of an in-company women's network because only relating numbers of women in top positions to their membership in the women's network would not be sufficient to explain why and in which respects the network has been effective for them. Furthermore, there are no instruments established yet which are able to measure the network's effectiveness and only qualitative research can give insights which items should be considered for measuring effectiveness.

Moreover, a case study has been chosen as the methodology for conducting this research. According to Yin (1989, p.23) a case study is "an empirical inquiry that: investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used". As case studies intend to holistically describe all ins and outs of a phenomenon in order to fully understand it, it is the proper method for this study because in-company women's networks have not been sufficiently studied and understood (cf. Bierema, 2005). Furthermore, case studies are deemed to be suited for research that aims to explore its main topic from the perspective of various stakeholders (Swanborn, 1996), which is central to the current study, as explained earlier. Finally, case studies typically use triangulation of methods (Saunders et al., 2012), which is important for this study because only the combination of interviews, documents and participant observations can present a complete picture of the phenomenon being studied, especially because it is a sensitive topic and not everything might be expressed verbally, but by behavioural cues.

3.1 Epistemology

There are two main epistemological paradigms which influence considerations about the research methodology (Anderson, 2009). Epistemology or the philosophical theory of knowledge is concerned with questions such as, what is knowledge. How is knowledge acquired? How do we know what we know or why do we know what we know? (Steup, 2014). On the one hand, the positivist paradigm argues that first, objectivity is possible, and second, that the researcher can act neutrally and distant in the data collection as well as data analysis phase. The emphasis lies on facts, and the researchers' subjective biases should not disturb the observations. Third, researchers who adopt the positivist perspective focus on causal relations in order to generalise and to find a universal truth (Anderson, 2009).

On the other hand, the interpretivist or social-constructionist paradigm suggests that a separation of facts and values is impossible. According to the interpretivist paradigm, knowledge is socially constructed and there is no independent truth/reality. Instead, 'reality' is partly constructed through the researchers' observations and identities (Anderson, 2009). When conducting interviews, it is nearly impossible that the researcher is completely detached, so there will be an influence of the researcher, which is neglected when the research is guided by the positivist paradigm. Furthermore, because multiple stakeholders will be interviewed, it is likely that they have different interests and opinions. The interpretivist paradigm allows for and even focuses on conflicting views.

Nevertheless, the criticisms of the interpretivist approach which have to be accounted for are the possible loss of direction, time and resource constraints (Anderson, 2009), and the relationship between researcher and research subjects. To account for these issues with the interpretivist approach, this study started by taking previous literature as guidance, only one case has been chosen to deal with time and resource constraints, and the researcher reflected on and evaluated the relationships which have been built with the research subjects and the process of 'reality construction' by the researcher in the analysis of the data to make these transparent.

3.2 Deduction and Induction

This study began by taking established concepts from the literature as an initial guide for the data collection and analysis by using definitions from the literature and relying on specified theoretical concepts. However, it was not possible to operationalise the concept of in-company women's networks' effectiveness by working deductively because there are not sufficient dimensions available from previous studies which capture the concept of effectiveness in this context. For

example, as it has been argued by Mandell and Keast (2008), networks have specific structures and interrelations related to explaining effectiveness, thereby making it difficult to study their effectiveness by using traditional performance measures, such as time spent for the network's activities or measuring its output only by the number of women who were promoted. As a consequence, this research relied to a large extent on an inductive approach. This means that the data collection and analysis proceeded in an emergent way (Anderson, 2009) and an operationalisation of the in-company women's network effectiveness is the result of the study, rather than its starting point. By working inductively, the thesis can contribute to the existing literature by defining and adding dimensions which can measure the effectiveness of a formal in-company women's network.

3.3 Data Collection

The research has been conducted at the RWE Group (Rheinisch-Westfälisches Elektrizitätswerk), one company with a formal in-company women's network. RWE is a DAX (Deutscher Aktienindex (German stock index)) listed German company, operating in the energy industry with more than 60000 employees in 10 different countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, UK, Hungary and Poland. The energy industry typically searches for employees who are qualified for MINT jobs (MINT = Mathematics, Informatics, Natural science and Technology), which are usually occupied by men. In 2011, the number of women in executive positions was 11% and the company aims to increase this number to 17% percent by the end of 2018. RWE has an international women's network, in which more than 500 women from all countries involved and across all hierarchical levels are (virtually) connected. The official goals of this network are to support women in their careers as well as to exchange business topics, for example about current debates in the energy policy or new ideas for innovation (Diversity Flyer RWE, 2014). This company and its women's network present a typical case (Gerring, 2007), because it is a large multinational company which operates in a by men dominated industry with an established in-company women's network.

The research was based on triangulation, which means that three different data collection methods have been used to 'cross-check' the findings, thereby adding credibility to the conclusions (Saunders et al., 2012). The three methods that have been used are semi-structured interviews, document analysis and participant observations. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that the interviews provided the main data collection method and the document analysis as well as the participant observations presented only additions.

First, concerning the interviews, this study relied on semi-structured interviews because they are well-suited for studying perceptions and opinions of respondents concerning complex and also sensitive issues because they provide the option for situation specific follow up questions which can clarify underlying reasons and they allow for a certain degree of standardisation by having a standardised set of questions for all respondents (Barriball & While, 1994), which can enhance the study's reliability and validity. To collect relevant information, the pre-specified interview guide helped to explore the concept of effectiveness by asking the respondents for their perceptions of the goals of the network, in what respects these have been achieved in their view, and why this has been the case. The interview guide can be found in appendix 1. The interviews were scheduled according to the employees' time and lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. The interviews started with a short introduction to the research and the respondents have been informed about ethical and practical issues, such as anonymity, confidentiality, and the recording and coding of the interviews.

The second method to complement the interviews was participant observation. Participant observations have been made during the interviews. Behavioural cues can be important for the analysis because respondents can be either unaware of or unable to express certain aspects of the subject under study or their experiences which are, for example, related to gender and power relations. As recommended by Robson (2011), the researcher kept a diary with observations which have been updated on the same day the observations were made because records which have not been made within 24 hours after the observation can be deemed unreliable (Anderson, 2009). The research relied on primary observations, as classified by DeWalt and DeWalt (2002), which are 'field notes' made near to the time of the observation, in form of a diary or journal.

Third, internal documents of the company have been collected. The analysis of documents served as a check in which regards the information received from the interviews and the own observations made over the weeks are in line with the written policy documents by the company or if any discrepancies arise, which might deserve further study.

3.4 Data Sources

Regarding the interviews, 15 respondents have been interviewed because of the multiple stakeholder approach that requires more interviews to achieve data saturation (Bertaux & Thompson, 1997). The respondents were selected by the diversity officer because she has good connections to various organisational actors and the choices were based on the researcher's considerations which stakeholders to include in the study. It has also been in the company's

interest to include a diverse stakeholder group in the study in order to receive extensive and critical results. The majority of the research subjects were women who are members of the in-company women's network. However, other stakeholders who are involved in the success of the network and have been interviewed are the HR manager and diversity manager, executive managers and line managers. HR and diversity managers have been included in the study because they are usually involved in the activities of a company's women's network and they monitor the execution of the company's diversity initiatives. Senior executives are included because they can share insights on how they perceive the network's effectiveness for the organisation. Line managers present an important stakeholder group because line managers have a critical function in day-to-day policy implementations (Cornelius, Gooch, & Todd, 2000) and have the power to enable or hinder women's career advancement. Additionally, it has also been important to hear the opinion of men and women employees-, who are not members of the network, to find out about their views and estimates of the network's effectiveness. By asking all participants to assess the goals and their achievement in all respects, data on varying or conflicting definitions and assessments could be collected. In total, 2 HR/ diversity managers, 2 executive managers, 2 line managers, 2 employees who are not members of the network (man and woman) and 13 members of the women's network have been interviewed because they represent the most important stakeholder groups for this study. Table 1 shows the exact overview of the respondents since many respondents fulfilled double or multiple roles, for instance they were HR managers and members of the network.

Concerning the participant observation, it is important which situations to select as data sources and to substantiate the choices (Spradley, 1980). According to Spradley (1980), social situations involve three elements: a place, actors and activities. In this study, the places were the different company buildings, the important actors were the men and women interviewed for this study, and activities related to their behaviours during the interview. Additionally, the researcher was invited to the women's network's annual conference to collect further impressions.

The basis for the document collection was published items (e.g. available from the company's website), for example the most recent annual report and HR figures which reveal information about the company's diversity strategy and workforce composition. Further, the researcher received additional documents about the women's network, which describe its structure, activities and self-understanding.

Respondent number	Network member	Non-network member	Sex	HR/Diversity Manager	Line Manager	Executive Manager
1	X		Woman	X		
2	X		Woman	X		
3		X	Man		X	X
4	X		Woman			X
5	X		Woman			
6	X		Woman			
7	X		Woman			
8		X	Woman			
9	X		Woman			
10	X		Woman			
11	X		Woman			
12	X		Woman			
13	X		Woman		X	
14	X		Woman			
15	X		Woman			

*X indicates belonging to a category as some respondents fulfil multiple roles in the interviews

Table 1: Overview Interview Respondents

3.5 Data Analysis

The data analysis proceeded by the following steps. First, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and transcripts of the participant observations have been generated on the basis of the field notes. Second, all transcripts and the relevant documents were analysed. This content analysis followed the Grounded Theory Approach and applied methodological guidelines by Bleijenbergh (2013), Boeije (2002; 2010) and Glaser and Strauss (1967). For this inductive coding process, the study relied on three phases: open coding, axial coding and selective coding.

First, in the open coding phase, any fragment in the text that hinted at effectiveness, for example goals and achieving goals, has been marked and a code has been attached to each fragment. Therefore, all statements and terms which are related to the sensitising concept ‘effectiveness’ served as clues for the analysis, for instance, reaching goals, achievement, success or failure. Second, axial coding consists of identifying relationships among the open codes (Boeije, 2002). For instance, the researcher looked for dimensions for evaluating effectiveness, thus everything that was related to measuring effectiveness. Third, selective coding refers to the final phase of data analysis, when concepts emerge from the data that have been coded through open and axial coding. Selective coding describes the phase, in which concepts are identified, and then abstracted (LaRossa, 2005). In this study, the intention was to find dimensions or a typology for effectiveness.

During and especially after the coding process, comparing and contrasting has been used to optimally go through the coding stages. According to Tesch (1990, p. 96), “the method of comparing and contrasting is used for practically all intellectual tasks during analysis: forming categories, establishing the boundaries of the categories, assigning the segments to categories, summarizing the content of each category, finding negative evidence, etc. The goal is to discern conceptual similarities, to refine the discriminative power of categories, and to discover patterns”. In the current study, continuous comparison and contrasting has especially been important to indicate in what respects the data collected during the interviews have been mirrored by the data of the observations and documents, thereby complementing or contrasting each other (Bleijenbergh, 2013).

3.6 Validity and Reliability

Regarding validity and reliability, several issues arise: First, having only one case means that there is only limited empirical generalisability possible with regard to the population, which consists of all companies with formal in-company women’s networks. While a larger number of cases would increase the external validity, it could deteriorate the quality of this research, given the short time of the research project. Therefore, in favour of feasibility, the external validity is rather low. External validity is, however, increased by analysing a typical case because this can allow generalisations to companies operating in similar, men dominated industries.

Furthermore, adopting the constructionist idea means for the internal validity that the research process is not too detailed, for example there are no concrete ideas of cause and effect, because this would imply that the researcher already has an idea what reality looks like and how it should be measured (Conklin & Hayhoe, 2010). Nevertheless, because internal validity is the most important measure for case studies (Riege, 2003) it was increased by basing the study upon findings from previous studies. Also, the use of semi-structured interviews helps to increase internal validity because it allows for adding questions during the data collection process. Further, letting the respondents check whether the answers have been written down correctly by the researcher can also increase the internal validity. The transcripts have been sent to the respondents who wanted to check them. Finally, 13 of the 15 interviews were conducted in German and the quotations for the results chapter needed to be translated. This has been done thoroughly to assure that the quotations do not deviate from the original statements.

Lastly, arguing from the social constructivism perspective, reliability is also rather low because the bond between researcher and respondent is unique and unique truths are created,

which are difficult to replicate. The semi-structured interviews achieve some standardisation (Mann, 1985), thus increasing reliability because the respondents are asked to some extent the same questions. Furthermore, in order to satisfy the reliability criterion as far as possible, transparency is important because the researcher needs to demonstrate how researcher and research subjects produce the knowledge together and also needs to explicate the research process as detailed as possible in the report (Anderson, 2009). This can be achieved by explaining the processes of data collection and data analysis as clearly as possible and by using coded transcripts, memos and diaries. Transparency is also important for the analytical generalisability of the study. Other researchers can only adopt the dimensions found for women's networks' effectiveness when it is clear how these dimensions have been developed.

3.7 Research Ethics

One area of concern when doing research is how research ethics are addressed (Anderson, 2009). The main issues that need to be satisfied are informed consent or transparency, anonymity, confidentiality (Lincoln, 2009), and research integrity (Cottrell, 2014). In order to guarantee that these ethical requirements are met in this research, the following measures have been implemented.

To assure transparency, the participants of the case study as well as the organisation have been informed upfront why they participate in the study and what the overall aim of the research is. Participants have been further informed that they are allowed to withdraw from the research without facing negative consequences when they do not feel comfortable with answering the questions. Additionally, before starting the interview, the researcher has asked for permission to record and transcribe the interview and before working with the results, the interviewees could check the transcripts whether all information was correct and could be kept for the analysis. Lastly, the interviewees and the organisation received the final report.

With regard to anonymity and confidentiality, the organisation could decide whether it wanted to remain anonymous or if it would like to be named in the report. They decided for the latter regardless of the outcome of the study. Also, the interviewees have been assured that their data is anonymous, confidential and that it will only be used for the purpose of answering the research questions of this thesis. The aim is that the respondents can answer open and honestly to the questions. A formal privacy statement that addresses all ethical issues which is signed by the researcher has been written to serve as an additional guarantee for the respondents (appendix 2).

Chapter 4 Results

The results chapter is structured as follows: Section 4.1 provides an overview about RWE's women's netWORK with respect to its history, structure, activities, and acceptance in the company. Sections 4.2 and 4.3 outline the results of the analysis, which evaluates the concept of effectiveness in the light of the network's aims and in which respects and why the stakeholders consider these aims as being achieved, thereby answering the sub-questions. Furthermore, guided by the main research question, section 4.4 explores the dimensions of an effective in-company women's network and section 4.5 provides an answer how RWE's women's netWORK is so effective as to have become an integral part of the company. Structuration theory is used as the theoretical lens for this analysis to provide additional insights on the network's effectiveness.

4.1 Overview: RWE's women's netWORK

RWE's women's netWORK has been founded in 2006 by a small group of senior women managers who saw the need to connect women in management positions because there were too few women in management positions and they didn't meet each other: *"We have started company-wide as a senior women's network, meaning that only women in management positions could join. That was 10 years ago and we had, I am not sure but 6% or 9% senior women, in any case not too many and the success or the benefit of the women's network already existed because we met each other. (...) the men have met each other every day in the halls or in the canteen. But when you have a company with different business units at different locations and only every 15th manager is a woman, who also work in different areas, these women never meet by accident"* (Network Member, Resp. 2). Two other network members added that the women's netWORK followed a women's mentoring program, which has been initiated by the company's CEO to achieve that the company becomes more diverse: *"We have this women's netWORK now for 10 years at RWE (...) and eventually it has emerged due to the initiation by our former CEO. (...) he said that we have to become much more diverse, especially with regard to internationality and gender. And he initiated the women's mentoring program (...) for 20-30 women, all on the L3 level below the executive board and they got a top-ranking manager as a mentor. And these women were in principle the core, because we liked each other and the idea was born, what do we do when this mentoring program is over? How do we support ourselves? We wanted to become more diverse and this is how the women's netWORK developed"* (Network Member, Resp. 6).

Nowadays, the netWORK is open for women across all hierarchy levels, counts more than

500 members and is a truly interdisciplinary and international network with members from all regions of the RWE Group. While sub-networks in other European countries, for example Poland or Hungary, are open to also include men, the German women's network is for women only and men are just invited as sponsors or speakers. As a network member explained: *"A women's network is intended for women. A sailor's community is intended for sailors (...) and any man can establish a men's network"* (Resp. 2).

The network's self-understanding as inferred from the women's network presentation (2015) is that it is an informal and independent organisation, meaning that the membership as well as the active participation is voluntary and there is no separate organisational department for the network. As one network member outlined, it is very important for the network to remain autonomous: *"We do not have to report to anyone, thus we can develop a certain self-will or stubbornness, and usually you don't have this freedom, and I think this is what binds the women to the network"* (Resp. 14).

In order to guarantee that the women's netWORK can work, it has a certain structure. There is a co-ordination committee, currently consisting of four women, who is responsible for the co-ordination of network activities, for example to organise special activities such as communication training. Additionally, three women, who have been active network members from the beginning and hold senior positions, are sponsors of the network. Their role is to see the big picture and they drive initiatives or give support and guidance. Finally, there is a steering group which meets three times per year and consists of the sponsors and co-ordinators of the sub-networks. They identify relevant group-specific issues and discuss old and new initiatives in the netWORK. Due to the large membership and all the different sites in different countries, it has been necessary to establish sub-networks within the women's netWORK. These sub-networks are free to determine their activities during the year and differ in terms of their goals, projects and strategies. Apart from the main women's netWORK, the researcher could also interview members of four different sub-networks, namely the MINT network, the sub-network of the retail department and the sub-networks in Budapest and Warsaw.

How the women's netWORK deals with structures can be analysed by the structure-agency perspective. First of all, hierarchy has been identified as a hindering structure for women's advancement. The line manager argued: *"Barriers (for women's advancement) certainly lie in the very hierarchical men's culture, I believe that in companies that are dominated by men, the hierarchy is more distinctive than in other companies and this is just*

about to change” (Resp. 3). However, while hierarchy is a structure that seems to hinder that women can connect and advance, the network members try to use this structure in an enabling way. A high position in the organisation’s hierarchy implies power and since many senior women are network members and a few even in top management positions, the women’s netWORK can benefit from their positions. It seems to be important that these women who made it to the top are active members of the network because they have the connections to other influential people in the organisation: *“This is of course my advantage that I am relatively high in the firm’s hierarchy, that I know what is happening, what is important and I can contact many people”* (Executive manager, Resp. 4). Although high positions in the hierarchy and power in the organisation can benefit the women’s netWORK, it is interesting to see that within the network, the women do not replicate hierarchical structures but decided to open the network and transform it into a cross-hierarchical organisation: *“I have always been an advocate of a completely open network so that you can really say ‘across all hierarchy levels’. Otherwise, you cannot fulfil this claim”* (Network Member, Resp. 15). At the annual conference, it has also been observable that the input from all members is valued, regardless of the member’s position in the company. For instance, everyone was encouraged to contribute to the discussions during the workshops and all ideas have been heard and written down. Summarising, this example shows how hierarchy can be an enabling as well constraining structure for the netWORK and that the women’s netWORK undermines and transforms the constraining side of this structure rather than re-producing it.

Since 2008, the netWORK organises annual group wide conferences, which focus every year on a different topic and are hosted at different locations of the RWE Group, for example in Berlin, Essen, s’Hertogenbosch, Budapest, Cardiff or Warsaw. Furthermore, these conferences are also there to learn what RWE’s different business units are doing and to discuss cultural aspects (Women’s netWORK presentation, 2015). Additionally, yearly business workshops have been introduced in 2012 which are also hosted at different sites and focus on a specific business issue that has a strong relevance for the company. Finally, the netWORK has initiated several activities and projects, which also provide benefits for the company. Examples include the project “Women in Energy Policy” which supports co-operation between the company and external partners such as universities, or the project “Urban Solutions” which focuses on innovation.

As this short description of the network’s history, structure and main activities already shows, RWE’s women’s netWORK is complex, dynamic, and focuses on much more than gender topics, support for women and the advancement of women into higher positions. Some network

members made it very clear that talking about women's topics is not the core of the network anymore: *"The second thing that I like is that we don't talk about the quota and statistics, where are how many women and why and why did someone get the job and these women specific topics which used to be discussed: parental leave, kindergarten, more kindergarten, job sharing models"* (Network Member, Resp. 12). Furthermore, despite operating in a volatile business environment with various company restructurings or budget cuts, the women's netWORK has become an established, stable and valued element for the RWE Group. For instance, the women's netWORK receives a budget and full support from the executive board: *"We are sponsored by the executive board or by the executives of the different business units, we receive a budget and we also get the executive managers, so for example, when we say we want to host an event, please come and answer our questions or join a discussion, they are happy to join, so I have to say that this is a fully accepted network"* (Network member, Resp. 2). The documents that were analysed did not provide information about the size of the budget, but it was observable at the conference that the company has invested in this event. Also, men managers attended the panel discussion round, thereby showing their interest in the netWORK's activities.

4.2 The Aims of RWE's women's netWORK

The first most basic aim of the network, as perceived by the interview respondents, is to establish networking possibilities for the women in the company. The connection of the women is already seen as a significant accomplishment. As one network member described: *"I think what is very important is that it has to be a real network and it can provide a lot of opportunities to the members for networking and I think this is one of the main goals"* (Resp. 7). Furthermore, the aim is to offer a platform for exchanging experiences and knowledge and for giving support and guidance. The diversity officer pointed out that: *"These women's networks are there for mutual encouragement, support and exchange"* (Resp. 2). Also related is the aim of providing role models for women in the company, especially for women in the technical and men dominated parts of the company. Since many of them only have men as superiors, they lack role models and hope to find some in the network: *"I found it great to meet other women (...) and I could see some role models for me. I always seem very self-confident, but I have some insecurities nonetheless and when you are always the only woman among men (...) you sometimes feel a bit weird"* (Network member, Resp. 10). Another network member added: *"There are still too few role models, too few examples, successful women in high management positions and you get to*

know these women via a women's network" (Resp. 15).

The second aim of the network that has been mentioned is to benefit the company by working on relevant topics which support the aims of the business on an international and interdisciplinary level or, in other words, to make a business case for the network. This goal has been mentioned by the majority of the respondents and one network member summarised: *"Actually, our network is oriented towards business topics" (Resp. 4).* The network members agreed that creating networking opportunities among women and contributing to the company's success are both of high importance and value to the network, but that the connection of women had to be achieved first and the business orientation followed. One network member outlined: *"The women first have to meet each other and when they are supported, for example, through informal mentoring (...) when they are encouraged to take on responsibilities (...) this is a big part of the network's success. And my second strand is the business orientation of which I am convinced" (Resp. 13).* Also, the diversity flyer (2014), which has been published by the diversity office, summarises the network's two main goals, namely to support women in their careers and to exchange business topics. Moreover, the aim of the business orientation is also transparent to the executive board: *"They (the members of the network) have set the goal, that they use the network to work on relevant topics across the company's national boundaries" (Executive manager, Resp. 3).* The non-network member has also been informed about the annual conference and that the women's netWORK focuses on business topics: *"They (the women's network) have a rhythm for meetings and these meetings are hosted by a business unit and this is one or two days with a program, I have also seen the program, and they all get together and exchange their knowledge about a certain topic and also learn something about the business unit (...) and then they split up in working groups and work on some topics" (Resp. 8).* Finally, the aim of having a business orientation is also reflected in the network's name "RWE's women's netWORK", since 'work' in network is written in capital letters. This illustrates that the women rather emphasise the aspect that they contribute to the company's success by working on relevant business topics, than focusing on gender issues.

In the light of this aim, it is to stress that there are double standards for women and also for the women's network. Some women reflected that: *"Women always have to fulfil high expectations (...). So, it is the case that when you are a woman, you are strongly judged by your competences and how much you are committed. And I observe that this is still the case that women simply have to achieve a bit more than men to be taken seriously" (Network Member,*

Resp. 15). The same holds for women's networks. At the annual conference, some participants complained about the full and ambitious agenda. According to them, the women's netWORK had to do this to convince men that they are not only drinking coffee and chat, but that the two days are very work intensive to provide good reasons why the women could take two days off for the conference. Some of the women also added that men would never have to set such an agenda when they meet. Similarly, some network members made it clear that the women's network is there for the company's benefit and not only to benefit the members: *"We shouldn't forget that the women's network does not exist as an end in itself, but also to make a contribution to the company"* (*Resp. 11*). In contrast, men's networks focus on networking to promote men's careers as one network member described: *"I would always see that I'm focusing on the benefit for the company and that is the absolute difference to men's networks. Men create networks for networking and to give each other good positions"* (*Resp. 5*). However, while double standards are recognised as a hindering structure for women, they are not challenged or changed by the women and the network. For example, instead of setting a less ambitious agenda for the conferences, the women's netWORK reproduces the structure to justify the conferences.

The third aim of the women's netWORK that has been mentioned by many respondents is visibility, meaning that the network should be visible in the company and that the members of the network become visible, especially women who work in the typically men dominated MINT jobs. One member of the MINT sub-network mentioned: *"Making women colleagues more visible is one point which is important for me and I think also important for my women colleagues, that people know that they exist"* (*Resp. 11*). Another network member explained: *"And the main goal I think is to show that (...) there are a lot of women and we have the same knowledge and skills as men and we can be visible, as well"* (*Resp. 7*).

The fourth aim concerns the advancement of women in the company or as one network member pointed out: *"At first sight, networking is equated with being a motor for the career"* (*Resp. 6*). The HR manager amended: *"I find it really important (...) to also pass your experiences, to be a role model or also that a young woman comes to your mind, which you can support. I find it important to follow suit people"* (*Resp. 1*). Lastly, the line manager supported this aim because he explains: *"I am friend of first building a basis below the top level because there are also no men who will jump from the sixth to the first level so you first need to fill these levels in-between"* (*Resp. 3*). Concluding, the women network's aim is to generally advance women in the company, following the argument that a larger pool of women is also needed in the

levels below top management, in order to have more potential women candidates for these positions.

Fifth and certainly related, is the aim of having more women as top managers as summarised by one network member: *“The higher-order KPI is the women’s quota. Women in management positions”* (Resp. 5). However, the general tenor is that more women top managers, is seen as the network’s sub-goal or that this will be achieved automatically when the network is successful. One respondent explained: *“We don’t focus on increasing numbers of women managers (...) I mean, sometimes they count how many women managers we have and yes, it would be great to increase the numbers but it’s just a statistical data and not the focus of the women’s network”* (Network Member, Resp. 7). The network member gave two reasons why the network doesn’t want to focus only on the statistics. First, it would not be particularly encouraging for the network if its success would only be defined in terms of percentage increases of top women managers, since this is still a long process and also to a large extent the company’s responsibility and out of scope of what a women’s network alone can achieve. Second, she made the meritocracy argument that the focus should not be on gender but on the manager’s individual skills: *“It was interesting to hear that the company’s goal (talking about General Electric’s women’s network) was to increase the number of the women managers, but at the time the board consisted of nine members and all of them were male so it was quite...yeah. So that’s why we, that’s what I said, we don’t focus on increasing numbers of managers, women managers, because it is not like that. I mean a woman can become a manager but it is not because she’s a woman but because she can do that position, I mean, she is able to be a manager”* (Resp. 7). The second argument is a reproduction of the idea that appointing individuals on the basis of their competencies is a gender neutral process. It is ignored that many competencies are gendered, for example that men are assumed to be assertive and women to be emotionally competent. Since top management positions have traditionally been occupied by men, they are also associated with men’s attributes and skills and this can hinder women in their advancement to the top because they might not replicate men’s behaviour, which is (unconsciously) expected. The inherent genderedness when defining management competencies is passed by when focusing on the meritocracy argument and underlying gendered assumptions that can constrain women remain unchallenged.

The sixth aim of the network is the network’s contribution to foster diversity in the company. One network member mentioned: *“Of course we also have different aims, such as*

supporting the business or to bring diversity and various perceptions and perspectives into the company” (Resp. 15). Another network member added: “So for me, the women’s network work or in general gender specific network work is an element of balance for one-sided heavy weights and I believe this is the success factor because I think no company can forgo diversity in decision-making in the future” (Resp. 13). Furthermore, various stakeholders mentioned the rationales for bringing more diversity in the company: “Because my experience in this job (...) has been that you definitely have better successes in diverse manned teams and projects. Certainly” (Line Manager, Resp. 3). A network member added that diversity is important to be taken seriously as a business by its customers and business analysts and that the network can help there: “And I believe that a contemporary corporation, which cannot write diversity a priori on its banners due to its origin (...) and an enterprise such as ours needs also to be accepted by analysts and customers who represent both sexes, to be taken seriously, I believe this company needs such a network” (Resp. 13).

Many of the above mentioned aims of the netWORK have been summarised by one network member: *“I believe that we have good goals which intend to strengthen the network, the exchange and the cooperation and team work, to define us with regards to content and to give us mutual support in order to achieve that RWE becomes more feminine, meaning that there are more women colleagues in order to have a greater pool of women candidates for top management positions. I think that these are the right goals” (Resp. 12).*

Finally, the perceived greater aim of the netWORK is that it will not be necessary anymore at some point in the future. The women want to achieve, that women in top management positions are taken for granted, that special sponsorship and treatment for women is not necessary and that women do not have to feel an outsider or exotic when they hold management positions. *“Women in executive positions need to be self-evident and not something special (...) I don’t want to be a noticeable element. How often am I in management meetings and I am the only woman” (Network Member, Resp. 5). The HR manager added: “This would be my ultimate aim, that it is normal to have men and women in top management positions, in the executive board and everywhere else” (Resp. 1) and one network member concluded: “As more women reach the essential hierarchy levels of the company, the importance of the network will vanish” (Resp. 6).*

To make a final remark about the network’s aims as perceived by multiple stakeholders, the company’s top management seems to be informed about the network’s aims. The executive board member summarised three goals in a statement but also mentioned the other aims during

the interview: *“I know that they have achieved the connection of women, which has been one of the goals. They have set the goal that they use the network to work on relevant topics across the company’s national boundaries, for example, there are sub-networks in all European countries, so I believe they have met this target as well. The goal that they had to reach a specific quota of women in management positions, they won’t have met this target because the quota used to be higher”* (Resp. 3). However, the netWORK’s aims seem to be less communicated to the lower hierarchy levels in the company. The women’s netWORK presentation (2015) does not explicitly state a list of official goals, to begin with, and the non-network member did not know the goals of the network: *“The network’s agenda has not reached me and I don’t know the aims”* (Resp. 8). Furthermore, the non-network member assumed that the women’s network pursues the following goals and is suspicious that the organisation uses the network for its own marketing purposes: *“So, I don’t know the aims but I would say that the aim is that RWE can say, that they have a women’s network, so to the outside, that the company has the diversity thought which is promoted and that we are a good employer who cares about diversity and internally, that the women feel considered and empowered, that they can exchange certain topics”* (Resp. 8). Contrary, the women’s netWORK’s intention, as described by its members, is to be inward oriented for the members’ benefits rather than marketing the network to the outside world and thereby promoting RWE’s diversity claim: *“The point is of course, one could blame us for not being outward oriented. (...) So, that doesn’t mean that we don’t invite external people, but we are not promoting this women’s network much to the external environment. I don’t know how you have found us”* (Network Member, Resp. 4). This point illustrates the importance of communicating about the women’s netWORK within the company, in order to avoid the formation of stereotypes by colleagues, for example, that the women’s netWORK has only been implemented as a diversity showcase for the organisation.

In short, the netWORK’s basic goals are the connection of women, peer reference, support, and the creation of role models. Next, the women’s netWORK aims to support the company’s goals and strategy by working on business topics in the international and interdisciplinary context of the network. This in turn, automatically leads to the next goal, i.e. the visibility of the network and its members, so that more women have the chance to advance into higher positions when they are visible and have connections to other managers due to their participation in the relevant projects. Again, having a larger pool of women candidates in management positions increases the chances for more women as top managers. Finally, the

netWORK aims to bring more diversity in the company and thereby tries to achieve, that women in all positions and parts of the company are self-evident.

4.2.1 Personal and Professional Aims to achieve with the women's netWORK

Apart from reviewing the network's aims, it was also interesting to analyse if and in what respects the different stakeholder groups associated personal goals as well as goals related to their formal position with the women's network.

Surprisingly, none of the network members said that they use the netWORK for personal goals in the sense of advancement in the company or associate other personal goals with the network. Instead of personal goals, the respondents emphasised that the netWORK has a personal benefit for them. For example, the majority of the network members mentioned the instrumental advantage for their daily jobs: *“That you know people from different parts of the company who you can give a call, this aspect shouldn't be underestimated, it is extremely important that you know, there sits this and this woman colleague and I can just call her”* (Network Member, Resp. 5). Also, another network member summarised: *“Connections, faster access, especially having heard about topics before, simply having a better picture of the company, which is extremely important for me because I need to know all parts and all emotions and cultures and I get this for free in the network”* (Resp. 14).

Moreover, the focus of the members was to support young women colleagues by means of the netWORK as a personal goal. As one member pointed out: *“My aim is to support the women colleagues in their own development and to give them a platform for exchange by means of the MINT network”* (Resp. 11). In this sense, the netWORK also serves the members' psychosocial and not only instrumental aims. However, this can be explained by the sample because the interviewed network members were already in management positions and didn't need the netWORK anymore for their own careers. This finding would probably be different for a sample of women who are still at the beginning of their careers.

Besides, some stakeholders saw advantages of the netWORK for their specific work field, while others have not considered this yet. For instance, *“having a pool of candidates for positions”* and *“knowledge exchange”* have been emphasised by the HR manager (Resp. 1). Since the diversity officer's task is to advance the number of women in management positions, the network can help her to reach this: *“And we (the diversity office) have this special emphasis on women and that, of course, fits well with the women's netWORK, so the increase of women in management positions and also the stronger support or very strong support for MINT women”*

(Resp. 2). Another respondent mentioned: *“Especially for the job that I am doing (Corporate Responsibility) the network is extremely important. (...) I need to understand what is going on with the company and for this I need to know more than only the small assignment I currently work on”* (Network Member, Resp. 14).

It seems that non-network members do not relate personal goals with the women’s netWORK, although it could be beneficial for achieving goals that are related to their positions in the company:

“Interviewer: Do you have personal goals which you would like to achieve by means of the network, although you are not a member?”

Respondent 3: No, that is separated. But this is an interesting question (...) because HR could play an important role there.”

Concluding, in this study, the network members do not associate personal goals such as career advancement with the netWORK. Instead, they value the netWORK and are active members because they see the personal benefits it can offer in their daily work and they have the motivation to support other women in the company with their career advancement. Furthermore, the netWORK also helps various stakeholders to achieve goals which are related to their formal positions, especially in the HR department, diversity office or in the area of corporate responsibility.

4.3 Reaching the Aims of RWE’s women’s netWORK

Effectiveness is defined as the match of stated aims and their achievement (Fraser, 1994). Consequently, it is examined in how far and why the goals of the netWORK have been achieved as perceived by the various stakeholders.

Beginning with the first aim, the connection, communication and networking between women from all hierarchy levels and different parts of the company, the network members commonly agreed that this aim has been met: *“So, a big aim of the women’s netWORK has been to be an organisation that functions across hierarchy levels and across different business units and the women’s netWORK is the only organisation at RWE which accomplishes that. This is a huge merit because you can engage in conversations with women on a different level, who you would not get to know in your normal job”* (Network Member, Resp. 15). The network members emphasised that there is a strong connection between them and also the line manager approved that the women have accomplished this aim: *“I know that they have achieved the connection of*

women, which has been one of the goals” (Resp. 3). Factors which probably contribute to the achievement of this aim relate to the openness of the netWORK in terms of national boundaries, work fields and hierarchy levels. For example, while the network started as a Senior Women’s Network it decided to include also women who are not in management positions, but are motivated and also committed to the company. As one network member explained: *“An in-company women’s network is successful when it achieves that women with similar, that women who have ambitions to contribute to the company’s success, it is not necessary that these women are already in management positions but they need to be motivated to advance the company. These women first have to meet and get to know each other”* (Resp. 13). Furthermore, the women’s netWORK structure to employ different sub-networks has been beneficial for the connection of women, especially in parts of the company where only few women work. For instance, there was little connection between women in MINT jobs and the MINT network has achieved that these women know each other and can network: *“In the beginning it has been the task just to see how many women colleagues are there for the MINT network and to develop a community among them, but now it is time (...) to create opportunities for the women colleagues to work in these strategic projects that I have just mentioned”* (Network Member, Resp. 11). Finally, also the aim to provide role models for other women has been achieved. As the HR manager summarised: *“The members have the advantage that they have contact persons, knowledge exchange, can learn from others and their lessons and that they have role models”* (Resp. 1).

Next, according to all stakeholders, the netWORK’s aim of having a business orientation and contributing to the company’s future success has also been accomplished. The women’s network fulfils this goal by means of its activities and projects. Most frequently have been mentioned the two day annual conferences and the yearly Business Workshops as *“superordinate events”* with a high participation of 120-150 women. One network member explained the importance of these events: *“It is necessary to have this stable structure (...) these conferences which offer reliability and also raise expectations (in the organisation and in the network, expectations about the network’s work), this is important”* (Resp. 14). For example, this year’s annual conference at the Süwag in Frankfurt, a subsidiary of the RWE Group, has offered nine different workshops which addressed a variety of business topics in the fields of Sales, HR and Diversity, as well as Change, Organisation and Leadership workshops. Moreover, the projects Urban Solutions and Women in Energy Policy have been initiated by the women’s netWORK. In

these projects, the network members have the chance to actively contribute to the company's success and to gain new connections and become more visible. One respondent added: *"Also another topic is the European energy policy, it's one of the most important information for us, I mean, regarding our future. So, that is also important, it is very a hot topic and I think thanks to the women's netWORK I am quite up to date in this"* (Network Member, Resp. 7). Another member concluded that the women who steer the women's netWORK can see the big picture and address topics in the women's netWORK which are relevant, up to date and in line with the company's goals and strategical direction. *"These annual conferences are a huge effort, but they have top-quality and there is always an increase in everyone's learning curve. This is due to the interdisciplinary steering group which includes women with insights into all parts of the company and the founder and sponsor of the network has a helicopter view which allows addressing current needs and topics"* (Network Member, Resp. 13).

This is also the connection to the third goal, visibility of the network and its members in the organisation, which the respondents perceive could have been largely accomplished because of the netWORK's business orientation. The HR manager described: *"We (the network members) work on team projects and you are visible in the network which is completely different from working in some part of the company just for yourself"* (Resp. 1). The key for visibility is the connection to the company and the benefit that the women's network can offer to the company. Examples, which have been mentioned in the interviews and are summarised in the women's netWORK presentation (2015), are providing a pool of role models, being a marketplace for business topics and ideas, enhancing effective co-operation throughout Europe, and positioning RWE as an attractive employer for women. Furthermore, the network members mentioned that it is important to report their initiatives and successes: *"What you shouldn't forget is making yourself visible, showing that you work on something that is important for the company, show successes, I think this is essential"* (Network Member, Resp. 10). The network members were confident that the women's netWORK and its members are visible and that this visibility has eventually led to acceptance in the company: *"An in-company women's network is also successful when it is visible and supported, so it is extremely interesting how the acceptance for the RWE women's netWORK has increased over the years (...). In the beginning, it (the network) was a bit weird but as it became visible you could first sense resistance (...) and now it is absolutely self-evident and conferences and similar events are possible and for me, that would be parameters for success"* (Network Member, Resp. 14). Another network member added: *"We*

have definitely been noticed and seen” (Resp. 2). Again, also the line manager, who is not a member of the network, agreed that a certain visibility in the company and definitely within the executive management team has been reached. He highlighted the work of the retail sub-network: “They have initiated workshops which made it possible (for the subnetwork’s members) to get in touch with the wide workforce, as a network, they have become visible, organised everything and established new ties” (Resp. 3).

The fourth goal mentioned by the respondents is the general advancement of women in the company. Here, it becomes clear from the interviews that the respondents believe that this aim is not completely reached yet, but they perceive that there are important initiatives in place by the network which can fasten the process. For example, the diversity officer described that the executive board frequently asks her if she would know a suitable woman candidate for a project or position: *“Don’t you know a women in your women’s network who would fit or who could lead a project or could fill a position?” (Resp. 2).* The HR manager added: *“And to come back to the topic of women’s networks, you have more visibility and a women candidate pool at which the managers look when positions need to be covered” (Resp. 1).* This illustrates that the company values the pool of women talents that the women’s netWORK has gathered and provides to the company. Furthermore, in 2013, the network has concentrated on bringing more women into the supervisory boards of the affiliated companies. The initiative called “FidAR” (German abbreviation for women in supervisory boards) has offered a special training for women to equip them with the specific knowhow about laws and regulations of supervisory board functions and the additional transfer of soft skills, in order to make it easier for interested women to accept such a position at short notice (Diversity flyer RWE, 2014). The line manager concluded: *“They (the women’s network) had a really big success with one project together with FidAR, they have started a project (...) and I believe we have identified 50 women who are interested to be in supervisory boards (...) and we have within one year, I don’t know the exact figure but we have increased the number of women in supervisory boards exorbitantly within a year. [...] If they had a sub-goal to push women into supervisory boards, they have achieved that” (Resp. 3).* The HR figures from 2015 show that the percentage of women in supervisory boards increased from 11% to 15.5% in two years. Next, the network members publish all job vacancies in the netWORK in order to alert all members when a position becomes available: *“If there are job offers in the different departments which reach us, we share these in the network, look, here are the vacancies, is it of interest to anyone in the women’s network?” (Resp. 12).* Lastly, the women’s

netWORK also offers the opportunity for informal mentoring, which can help women in their career advancement: *“I would say this platform for discussion is offered by the network and I would call it a kind of informal mentoring” (Network Member, Resp. 13).*

Concerning the fifth goal, to have more women top managers, the respondents concluded that this aim has not been achieved yet. According to many respondents, the technical oriented energy industry contributes to the low women’s quota in management positions. One network member pointed out: *“No, we haven’t reached this aim yet. Our company is driven by engineering (...) and only few women study MINT subjects. This is a real problem, because where should we take women candidates from when they don’t study these subjects? So, when you want to recruit managers, you have a smaller pool of candidates and this is the reason why our women’s quota across all management levels is 13% or 14%. Not much” (Resp. 12).* Another network member outlined: *“I believe the energy industry is not very attractive for many women. Here, there are simply not many women who apply for jobs on the top level, because if I am a career-oriented woman and also successful, I search for a field of activity which makes me enthusiastic (...) and if this is the energy industry, for some definitely, but for many probably not. These women will rather work in another industry” (Resp. 5).* Apart from the industry, another argument is that there are probably not enough women who would like to take the responsibility and apply for management positions. The network member further explained: *“It doesn’t make sense to assume 50% because there are not so many women who are willing to work with full effort in a management position, but even when we assume that 40% should be realistic according to the distribution, we are obviously far below that goal” (Resp. 5).* So the target of having more top women managers has not been reached. However, it is noted that this is beyond the scope of what a women’s network can achieve, since all the work is voluntary and it is also not their main focus or responsibility. The company at large, e.g. the diversity office and the HR department are responsible for a diversity strategy which has the also the goal to increase women in top positions and for hiring new women talents. One network member emphasised: *“We are not an alternative institution (...) for the HR department, because we cannot provide this, since a network such as ours (...) can only function when it is voluntary and free of given directions” (Resp. 13).*

Similarly, the goal of bringing more diversity in the company, which is related to the previous goals, and also the aim that women are self-evident at all hierarchy levels, are not accomplished yet, as perceived by the stakeholders interviewed in this study. As one network

member admitted: *“But the management decisions have been made within the existing networks, so that I have felt exotic for a long time. So, while I wouldn’t say that I have suffered, I have always been alone and there was no real development possible”* (Resp. 13). The line manger also mentioned that he is not satisfied with the current status quo of women in management positions and confesses that there is still a lot of room for improvements: *“I just want to make very clear that we are not a show case company, but I believe that is the case for many technically shaped companies, when I look at the power generation, there are very, very few women in management positions, only 4% or 5%, that is, of course, not much”* (Resp. 3). Nevertheless, the respondents commonly agreed that there has been a cultural change in the company within the last 10 years which is likely to continue and they also mention that these change processes cannot be accomplished within a day, but need time. The diversity officer summarised: *“It has certainly improved, but it also the case, I assert, that all managers realise that it is necessary to support women, but also diversity in general, however, this is not easy, everyone has stereotypes in their minds, this is a long process”* (Resp. 2).

One final remark is that the netWORK can only achieve its goals when stakeholders value its work. For example, the interviews have supported that women’s networks are still contested, also among women. For example, the non-network member explained after being asked about her opinion about the women’s netWORK: *“My opinion is not a good one (laughs). As I said, I don’t really know the network and because of that I also don’t want to condemn it, it is possible that they are doing really helpful things and I am just too narrow-minded, that I don’t see that, but for me it wouldn’t have any added value, I find it a bit superfluous and maybe that it is just for publicity”* (Resp. 8). This shows, again, that the non-network member is rather critical of the reasons why the network has been established, i.e. as a marketing tool for the company, but also that she doesn’t see the necessity to join the network. This is because she perceived to already have a large informal and mixed gender network in the company and didn’t want the special emphasis on being women: *“I don’t want this extra ‘women thing’, but networking is very important”* (Non-network member, Resp. 8). While the respondent might be in the position that she doesn’t feel an immediate need to join the women’s netWORK, there is a risk of reproducing gendering structures concerning women’s networks in this argumentation. As mentioned above, the network members explained that it would be desirable if the women’s netWORK would not be needed anymore because gender mixed networks in all organisational layers were self-evident. However, as this is not yet the case, the interviewee forgoes the reason why in-company women’s

networks were established to begin with, namely because women often do not have access to men's networks. Ignoring this fact and criticising women's networks for the extra emphasis on women, reproduces gendering structures. Also some of the network's members admitted that they had a rather negative attitude at first: *"I was angry (...) and I said I feel equally treated and what is this nonsense with a women's network, I don't want to have anything to do with it"* (Resp. 10), but that this attitude was little reflected: *"I have decided to see everything positive and as a benefit. I was really annoyed when someone told me you get extra training 'women in supervisory boards'. And I told them (the network) why do I have to do the training and men get the positions without training? But I can also see it differently: Awesome, I have the opportunity to learn and receive extra input, meaning I am better prepared for the supervisory board position than men"* (Resp. 5). Consequently, it is important for the network's effectiveness that women reflect and reposition their attitudes to recognise the value of the network's work. When women ignore existing gender inequalities, they reproduce gendering structures instead of changing them. The last example shows that the network member clearly rejected the assumption that women lag behind men, and that, by changing perspective and seeing the benefit that training is always helpful, she benefitted from the additional support. By doing this, women can change rather than reproduce structures that hinder women's career advancement.

In summary, the interviewed stakeholders concluded that, as one network member put it: *"We are on a good track and we have some very good initiatives that work"* (Resp. 7) with regard to achieving the netWORK's aims. The aim to connect women with each other has been accomplished due to the international, interdisciplinary and cross-hierarchical network structure which allows all women to come in contact with each other. Next, the respondents perceive that the netWORK fulfils its claim to be business oriented because of its projects, events and activities which deal with relevant business topics. Relatedly, visibility has also been accomplished, mainly due to the work in important projects. Moreover, the women's netWORK is trying to contribute to women's advancement by means of informal mentoring, distributing internal job vacancies and the cooperation with initiatives such as FidAR. However, regarding the advancement of women in top management positions, the numerical aim is not perceived to be reached yet. All goals and their perceived state of achievement by the stakeholders are visualised in Figure 2.

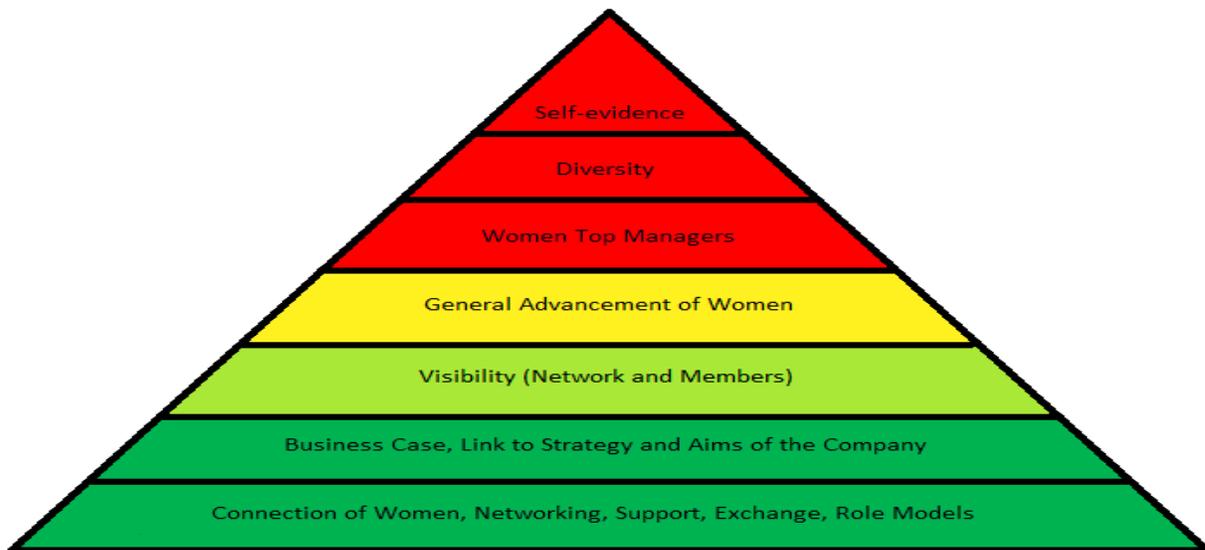


Figure 2: Mission Pyramid RWE women's netWORK

4.4 Dimensions of Effectiveness

The interview material showed that measuring the effectiveness of a women's network probably cannot fully be accomplished by matching set goals and their achievement, but that more dimensions need to be taken into account when evaluating an in-company women's network's effectiveness. Many network members pointed out that it is indeed very difficult to measure the success of the women's netWORK. However, four aspects can be identified as additional dimensions to measure an in-company women's network's effectiveness apart from setting and reaching targets.

First, there are soft, mostly intangible and informal dimensions which can say something about the network's effectiveness, as one network member pointed out: *"Sometimes our goals are intangible"* (Resp. 9). Many network members gave the example that they can call women in other functions if there is a problem or a work process to be completed and mentioned that this can significantly reduce time and effort, thus leading to faster results: *"Decision making processes are much more shorter because you know your colleague and you just call her and discuss some topics"* (Network member, Resp. 9). Another network member added: *"What has been very beneficial is that you suddenly have contact persons in many different parts of the company. So also for your daily job that you know, okay XY works in this department, I will give her a quick call and ask how did you do this and that, so that is, for example, absolutely beneficial for the daily work"* (Resp. 1). Additionally, a network member mentioned the aspect of

creating bonds of trust, which are also difficult to measure, but very important for the daily job: *“I got to know women colleagues from many different departments of the company and when I have a question, I can call one of them and this mutual trust has developed which is utterly important, that you have someone to tell: Look, I am in this and this situation (...) what do you think about that? This certainly is a success factor, a soft one, which you cannot express in numbers”* (Resp. 11). Hence, the network benefits the network members in their jobs and thereby also the company, but it is nearly not feasible to transform this into a key performance indicator (KPI).

Second, speaking of KPIs, the network members explained that they do not have an official list of KPIs for the network and were also rather critical about it because the work for the network is something they do voluntary and on top of their normal jobs: *“No executive board should come and ask for an assessment tool for the network to evaluate the financial contribution of the women’s network. That is nonsense”* (Network Member, Resp. 10). Other members mentioned that there are some marginal KPIs or measures of success for the network, namely the number of activities and events per year initiated by the network, the growing number of members and the network’s acceptance throughout the company, for example, that the annual conferences and workshops are supported by the executive board. Moreover, the network’s activities can also be seen as KPIs, as one network member explained: *“But if I had to answer (...) so what did you actually achieve? Then, I would be able to say that we didn’t have women in projects before and now we achieved that so and so many women participate in projects and they wouldn’t have been nominated into these projects due to their hierarchical position (...), the second thing is the women’s quota, the third thing the supervisory boards, the fourth thing the initiative “Women in energy policy” (...) which is also initiated by the network, so these are the things which exist”* (Resp. 2). Additionally, the growth and stability of the network have been mentioned by the network members as other tangible factors that mirror the network’s effectiveness:

“Interviewer: And specifically for RWE’s women’s netWORK, would you say that these success factors (for in-company women’s networks in general) that you have just mentioned are given?”

Respondent 14: I see these as existing. Otherwise, we wouldn’t have this growth and we celebrate next year the 10th anniversary, I think this is definitely noteworthy”

So, there are some numerical or tangible KPIs in addition to the soft and intangible KPIs, which are important measures of effectiveness because they can provide proof in numbers. However,

only numerical KPIs would not be sufficient to assess effectiveness.

Third, another dimension to assess a network's effectiveness is the perceptions by the network members. Overall, the respondents were proud about the network and judged it as effective or successful. During the interviews, all respondents have been asked how they would describe a successful in-company women's network in general before talking about RWE's women's netWORK specifically and there were two main findings: the network members either inferred the success factors based on their own network or mentioned thereafter that they have just described RWE's women's netWORK. For instance, one network answered this question: *"I mirror this a bit with regard to the MINT network because there we have also set ourselves targets"* (Resp. 11). Also the next two examples show that describing a successful women's network is inseparable from describing the own netWORK:

"Interviewer: How would you describe a successful in-company women's network?"

Respondent 4: An internally accepted organisation, an organisation which benefits its active members, an open organisation and an organisation that supports the company's strategy and aims.

Interviewer: Okay, and maybe directly the switch to RWE's women's netWORK

Respondent 4: I just have described that (laughs). Yes, indeed."

"Interviewer: How would you describe a successful in-company women's network?"

Respondent 13: Just like ours."

However, not only the network members are convinced that the women's network is effective, but also the line manager concluded: *"Now, regarding the women's netWORK, that is a huge success"* (Resp. 3).

Fourth, the company and also the women's netWORK are dynamic and evolving, and targets are changing or once they have been achieved, new targets are set. Therefore, the idea of matching stated aims and their achievement is not sufficient to evaluate the network's effectiveness. For example, the MINT network has achieved to connect women with MINT backgrounds, which has been the first target. Now, the MINT network has set a new target to accomplish that more MINT women participate in technical projects in order to become more visible. This will be again a process that takes time and it cannot be concluded that the MINT network is not effective only because it has not reached this new aim yet and the same holds for the women's netWORK. One member pointed out: *"We perceive ourselves as a network which is*

in a permanent improvement process” (Resp. 14). Therefore, time is another important dimension when measuring effectiveness. One needs to be aware that an effective network is also dynamic, constantly changing, adapting and striving for improvement.

Summarising, it is a challenge to measure the effectiveness of an in-company women’s network, but there are four important dimensions of the concept which need to be taken into account when evaluating effectiveness, apart from setting aims and reaching these. The latter approach would be too static and would ignore especially the aspect of time when measuring effectiveness. Furthermore, apart from the network’s goals, there are additional informal KPIs, which are usually soft and intangible and only few numerical KPIs, which can further assess a network’s effectiveness. Last but not least, it is also important that the network’s members as well as other stakeholders who are involved perceive the network as effective because these are the people who should benefit from it. Nevertheless, the questions “*what to measure*” and “*if you want to measure*” (*Network Member, Resp. 14*) effectiveness or success, are still valid and stress the difficulty of defining dimensions of effectiveness. Concluding, while it seems to be important to set targets and to strive for their achievement, there are these additional dimensions which need to be taken into account when evaluating the effectiveness of an in-company women’s network.

4.5 The Effectiveness of RWE’s women’s netWORK

Finally, in order to be able to answer the research question, RWE’s women’s netWORK is evaluated in the light of the effectiveness definition and additional dimensions identified in this study and with regard to Hucke and Kepinski’s (2016) terminology about effective in-company women’s networks.

To start with, the women’s netWORK largely fulfils the definition of effectiveness of in-company women’s networks, which states that in-company women’s networks are successful in matching the goals as stated by the involved stakeholders and their actual achievement. The network’s goals can be differentiated into four immediate goals that can be directly influenced by the women’s netWORK and three higher order goals, which also depend on different factors than the women’s netWORK. These four immediate goals are the connection and networking of women in the company, including the provision of role models, then the business case of the women’s network, the visibility of the women’s network and its members in the company and lastly, the general advancement of women in the company. All these goals have been largely accomplished so far, but are also still on-going tasks. For example, the women’s netWORK

continues looking for topics which are currently relevant or of future relevance for the organisation and to develop these into projects. The three higher order goals of having more women top managers, more diversity in the company and reaching that women's career advancement is self-evident are not achieved yet, but here it is important to mention that the women's netWORK does not have the capacity to achieve these aims alone. It can make a valuable contribution and support to fasten these processes, but in the end it is the company at large, e.g. through its HR department and the diversity office, that has to accomplish these goals. Concerning the multiple stakeholders, this study found that the aims of the women's netWORK are understood and supported by the top management team as well as the line managers. The views are less in-sync in the lower hierarchy levels of the company for men and women employees, which can be explained by a lack of knowledge about the women's netWORK and general stereotypes as well as negative attitudes when it comes to women's networks, quotas etc.

Furthermore, the analysis showed that there are at least four more dimensions which need to be considered when evaluating the effectiveness of in-company women's networks. Apart from the goals, there are tangible and intangible KPIs which can measure the effectiveness of RWE's women's netWORK. Examples include its growth (from 30 to 500+ members), stability (10 years), the number of activities (3 steering group meetings per year, 1 annual conference and 1 business workshop) or the benefits for its members in their daily work (finish projects faster, have more insights). Also, it is very important that the members perceive the network themselves as effective and this is clearly the case for this network. Finally, the dimension of time is also important because the women's netWORK always strives for improvement and sets new goals according to arising challenges. While there can be some short term gains, for example the connection of MINT women, a transformation of structures, stereotypes and the corporate culture takes time and requires persistence and passion.

Additionally, based on all the results from the interviews, observations and documents, RWE women's netWORK can be classified as an 'in-sync network', according to the terminology by Hucke and Kepinski (2016). On the one hand, it fulfils the aspect of having organisational expectations and support because the network clearly makes a business case, supports the business by means of its activities and in return, is supported by the company's top management team. On the other hand, the network is also aligned with its members' needs. These needs can differ but usually include networking opportunities, career advice and support, helping others and sharing knowledge and experiences. The interviews have shown that the benefit for

the network members and the benefits for the company are currently considered equally important, which distinguishes the ‘in-sync network’ from the ‘halfway network’ which could increase effectiveness by a stronger alignment with the company’s agenda and the ‘threshold network’ which has a stronger focus on organisational needs than the members’ needs and experiences. Moreover, the women’s netWORK has a clear vision with regard to its aims and its self-understanding which is also understood and accepted by the organisation as evidenced by the perceptions of the executive managers and the fact that the netWORK is supported with a budget.

Chapter 5 Conclusion and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify how the effectiveness of in-company women’s networks can be measured because the effects of women’s networks are contested in the literature. To reach this aim it was necessary to investigate one in-company women’s network in depth, also by interviewing multiple stakeholders. The basis was to understand the network, its aims and in how far and why these were accomplished or not, as perceived by multiple stakeholders. Additionally, by using effectiveness as the sensitising concept, more issues that need to be taken into account when discussing effectiveness could be detected. Furthermore, although it has not been the original intention of the study, the data provided also factors that contribute to the effectiveness of women’s networks and these have been added to the results of the study because they seemed too important to be omitted. The theoretical lens of structure and agency further supported that structures and agency are interrelated and that structures as well as agency can hinder and enable women’s networks’ effectiveness. In the current study, some constraining structures remained unchallenged, while others were confronted or even transformed. In summary, the answer to the research question: *In what respects and why is the formal in-company women’s network effective, as perceived by various stakeholders?* , is that RWE’s women’s netWORK is effective in the sense that it performs well in the respects that were identified as important dimensions for evaluating a network’s effectiveness. For example, it has set ambitious goals, focuses on the accomplishment of these goals, and has achieved the majority of its immediate goals. Also, the network is perceived as effective by various stakeholders and it strives for continuous improvement. Secondly, the answer to the why part of the research question can be found in the list of factors that were identified in this study as contributing conditions to becoming an effective women’s network. Examples include that the

company provides support in terms of resources and acceptance, interacts with the network, and at least the top management, HR department and diversity office recognise the contributions made. The network is an integrated, yet autonomous part of the company and a vital contribution to the on-going cultural change at the RWE Group. While RWE's women's netWORK is an effective in-company women's network, there are still some challenges that the network has to address in the future, which will be investigated in the managerial recommendations. The findings of the study will be discussed below.

5.1 Effectiveness of In-Company Women's Networks

This research has been driven by the aim to find dimensions to measure the effectiveness of in-company women's networks. Based on the grounded theory approach, four dimensions could be identified which represent additional elements to measure a women's network's effectiveness, that are additional to achieving set targets.

First, numerical KPIs can give first hints at the effectiveness of an in-company women's network because the number of members, activities, length of network's existence or satisfaction surveys reflect general trends. However, while it is worthwhile to look at these figures, they are not sufficient for evaluating effectiveness and one cannot define universal standards which would apply to all corporate women networks.

Second, intangible or soft KPIs seem to be very important in the context of measuring an in-company women's network effectiveness because one could say that a women's network is also effective when it has benefits for its members, which can be manifold. The feelings of mutual support and trust, the merits of informal mentoring or the faster and better handling of work processes are difficult to measure, but are part of the network's effectiveness.

Third, it is necessary to take into account how the network members perceive the network's effectiveness. If everyone is satisfied with the activities, networking offers and resulting benefits, this certainly is another indicator for a well-functioning network.

Fourth, time is in many aspects an important dimension to consider, since targets change over time, the network has to react to external and internal developments, effectiveness also relates to continuous improvement, and finally, reaching a cultural change is a very long process which cannot be expected to be achieved in a few years.

While these dimensions hint at possible starting points to evaluate in-company women's networks' effectiveness, the study has also resulted in a list of factors that enable effectiveness.

First, the data has shown that it is important that the company's structure and culture

support diversity, for example by means of an inclusive culture, a diversity office and diversity champions. Also being accepted and supported, for example by the top management team, in form of budgets or by giving space for development, presents an important factor which can contribute to a network's effectiveness.

Second, women's networks require a structure, for instance a steering group, network sponsors, the division into subnetworks when the membership becomes too large, and specific activities which are in line with the network's goals. Additionally, it is beneficial for a network's effectiveness when it is open and inclusive, meaning that women from all hierarchy levels, parts of the company and from different countries are invited to join and contribute to the network. Probably, it is also beneficial to include men in the network's activities. Furthermore, an autonomous network might achieve more, because it is not dependent on the company's course of actions and the danger of becoming a substitute institution for the HR department is minimised. Moreover, an effective network needs to be transparent and visible for everyone in the company to avoid the formation of stereotypes and negative images on behalf of men as well as women and to foster effectiveness. Lastly, a network needs to be sustainable, meaning that its success is not tied to individual members but endures even when its founders leave the company.

Third, the analysis supports that two focal points can further contribute to a network's effectiveness. These are on the one hand, that the members can benefit from the network, for instance by the connection to other women, role models, informal mentoring, experience and knowledge sharing, and on the other hand, also benefit the company by linking the network's activities to the company's goals and strategy. All factors that contribute to the effectiveness of women's networks and the dimensions which need to be taken into account when discussing effectiveness are summarised in Figure 3, which represents a potential coding tree for researchers who want to study the effectiveness of in-company women's networks.

Finally, the starting definition for effectiveness of in-company women's networks in this study was the respects in which the in-company women's network is successful in matching the stated goals by the involved stakeholders and their actual achievement. Based on the results of this study, this definition can be extended: an in-company women's network is effective when it succeeds in achieving its stated goals, is perceived as effective by the involved stakeholders, provides intangible and tangible KPIs to the members and the company, and is dynamic through continuous adaptation and improvement.

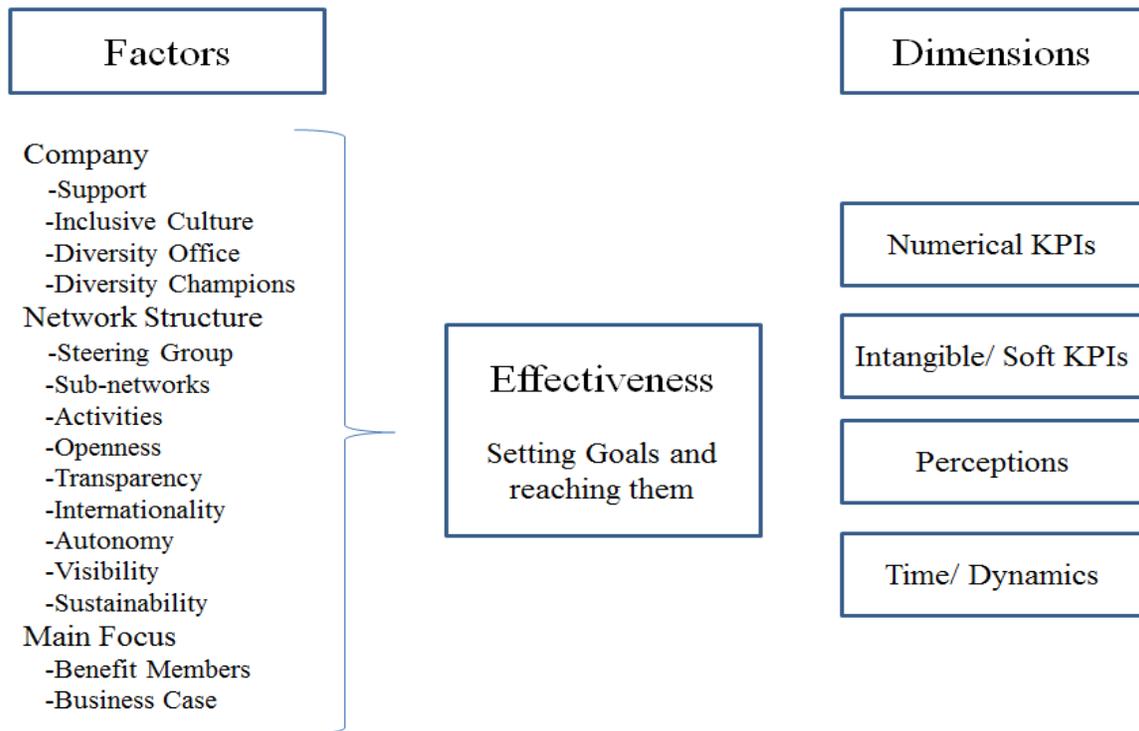


Figure 3: Coding Tree: The Effectiveness of In-Company Women's Networks

5.2 Theoretical Relevance

The main findings support that it is indeed very difficult to measure the effectiveness of in-company women's networks, which is in line with the argumentation by Mandell and Keast (2008). The authors suggested that the dynamic nature of network relationships in combination with changing network tasks and their shifting importance over time increase the complexity to understand and assess network effectiveness. These findings are supported in this study because the network is a dynamic organisation with regards to the relationships, for example opening up for new members, inviting men as sponsors, and also concerning its tasks and goals which are constantly adapted to the current situation. Also, another finding from this study might capture what Mandell and Keast (2008) referred to by the 'relational operating style of networks', namely that the network members mentioned how they can use the established relations from the women's network in their daily jobs to achieve faster and better results. Furthermore, Mandell and Keast (2008) stated two implications when trying to evaluate network effectiveness. First, evaluators need to accept that many results will not occur immediately and second, evaluators

have to become more comfortable with the legitimacy of evaluations done by the network members. This reflects the two dimensions found in this study, namely the importance of time when evaluating effectiveness and the perceptions by the involved stakeholders if they deem the network effective. Additionally, a recently published study by Bourdil and Géraudel (2016) stated that satisfaction is a key indicator to measure network performance of women's networks. This further supports that perceptions, for example in terms of satisfaction, are crucial for assessing a network's effectiveness.

In general, the women's network's aims can be seen as a pyramid, similar to the mission pyramid by Donnellon and Langowitz (2009) because the aims are related and one goal can lead to the next one. However, while the basic building blocks connection and peer reference and support are identical, the next level in the current study would be the business case or development which is the top aim in Donnellon and Langowitz's mission pyramid (2009). The authors' argumentation for having business development on top was that this was the rarest element mentioned by the networks they studied, but this study found that business development is the next building block for achieving the following goals, such as visibility, women's advancement, more women top managers and diversity in the company. In line with the findings by O'Neil et al. (2011), this study confirms that it is important that the women's network as well as the top management should recognise the value and utility the network can bring to the company.

Furthermore, as expected, some of the goals of the in-company women's network can be classified as psychosocial and instrumental goals (Bierema, 2005). For instance, the connection of women, mutual support, and experience exchange can be classified as psychosocial goals since they provide women with social benefits such as being a like-minded community, in an otherwise men-dominated culture. The results are similar to the findings by Ibarra (1992) that women look for ways of organising themselves, social support and friendship or by Pini et al. (2004) who showed that women's networks help women overcoming the sense of isolation and enable contact with experienced women in the same sector. However, aims such as informal mentoring, knowledge exchange or increasing visibility by working in company relevant projects are examples of instrumental goals because these are clearly related to job performance and career advancement.

Although originally unintended, the study also contributes to the literature which examines enabling factors for in-company women's networks' success. To begin with, it is to

highlight that responsibility structures on behalf of the company, for example a diversity office and diversity champions and the inclusive culture support the network's effectiveness, as it has been found in a previous study. Kalev et al. (2006) outlined that some diversity programs work best in combination with others, especially that diversity training, networking, and mentoring programs are more effective in firms with these responsibility structures.

Moreover, already in 2004, Vinnicombe, Singh and Kumra developed a guide of best practices for corporate women's networks. Their recommendations largely coincide with the factors contributing to a network's effectiveness in this study and what the network of the case study has done. For instance, Vinnicombe et al. (2004) suggest that when starting a network, it is necessary to define the network's purpose and set aims, to give the network a name which clearly indicates who and what it is for, decide about the openness of the network, to recognise the business case for a network and to link it into the corporate structure. All these points have been fulfilled by the RWE women's netWORK, thereby laying an important foundation for becoming an effective network. Also, Vinnicombe et al. (2004) recommend having a steering group and to hold annual conferences, but also that the network doesn't create too many aspirations, for example, regarding career development which cannot be solely done by the network, or not to take on tasks which lie in the responsibility of the HR department such as official mentoring programs and policies for balancing family and career. These aspects also have been found to be important and were discussed by the network members in this study.

Furthermore, the recommendations made by Hucke and Kepinski (2016) reflect the results of this study. They propose to align network resources with expectations of the network and its agenda, to put relevant metrics in place to measure impact and progress, to consider members' needs and expectations when setting the network's priorities and strategy and to make the network part of organisational culture. Nevertheless, the crux is, again, to determine the 'relevant' metrics. Hucke and Kepinski (2016) found that most networks track their number of members and the number of activities (90% and 80% respectively) which are the same numerical KPIs as found in this study. However, according to Hucke and Kepinski (2016) only one in about eight networks has metrics in place to measure how well a network delivers on its intended outcomes. Here, it is important to highlight again the distinction between immediate goals of the women's network, which are usually feasible to be accomplished solely by the network, and higher order goals of the network to which a network can contribute but which it cannot reach by itself. For instance, Hucke and Kepinski (2016) mentioned performance measures of impact on

employee engagement, impact on speed of career advancement, impact on retention and impact on external women hires. Keeping in mind that the participation and work in women's networks is voluntary, on-top and unpaid, these performance measures seem overly ambitious and also cannot be fulfilled by a women's network alone. Therefore, measuring effectiveness by looking at the goals and reasons for their achievement, accomplished change over time and also by means of perceptions as proposed in this study seem to be more realistic.

The starting point of the study was that the main purpose of women's networks is the advancement of women in organisations and to achieve that more women make it as top managers. However, the results have shown that these goals are considered, but not regarded as the network's core function. This is in line with the recommendation made by Vinnicombe et al. (2004) that women's networks should not raise aspirations for career development when these cannot be met. Dyrchs and Strack (2012) argued for a systematic approach to gender equality by organisations and to focus on measurable objectives with regard to women's recruiting, promotion and retention. This supports that women's networks alone will not be the panacea for closing the gender gap in management positions, but that they represent one important element of a company's diversity strategy.

Lastly, Ely and Meyerson (2000) stressed that organisations are inherently gendered because they were created by and for men, and that many of these organisational practices have become the norm and are taken for granted to such an extent that they appear to be gender neutral. Therefore, the authors argued for a complete transformation of organisations to greater gender equality which requires that organisations step away from 'traditional approaches' that only accommodate the existing system, but do not fundamentally challenge the sources of power or the daily social interactions and practices that reproduce and maintain the status quo. The execution of two traditional approaches could also be observed in this study. The organisation implemented affirmative action programs to create equal opportunities for men and women, such as formal mentoring programs, flexible work arrangements (e.g. home office, job sharing), and equal payment. Moreover, the example discussed in section 4.3 showed that women were offered extra training for supervisory board positions, which according to Ely and Meyerson (2000) belongs to the approach of 'fixing the women'. However, as the structure-agency perspective revealed, the women rejected this idea that women lag behind men with their skills and by changing perspective and reasoning that training in general is beneficial, they were able to transform rather than reproduce these gendered assumptions. Nevertheless, it becomes evident

that it is still a long way until organisations are ready to embrace Ely and Meyerson's (2000) proposal of an emergent approach to systematic organisational change, where all organisational stakeholders identify and transform these deeply embedded gendered social practices.

The study has set out with the aim to make three contributions to the existing body of literature about in-company women's networks. First and foremost, the intention has been to find dimensions which need to be taken into account for assessing their effectiveness. The study has resulted in five dimensions that can help measuring effectiveness. These dimensions are achieving stated goals, including goals which can be achieved by the women's network alone and goals which are the main responsibility of the company, numerical KPIs, intangible KPIs, the perceptions of the network's effectiveness by its members and other involved stakeholders and, finally, the dimension of time. Second, the aim was to include multiple stakeholder perspectives which turned out to be a fruitful approach. For example, contrary to the results by O'Neil et al. (2011), this study found that the perceptions about the network's goals and its effectiveness were aligned from the network members, the top management, and line management, hinting at good communication between the different stakeholders. Including different stakeholder perspectives adds additional insights which otherwise might be omitted. It thus allows for seeing a greater and also more critical picture, which is important for a complete evaluation of effectiveness. Third, Giddens' (1984) structure- agency lens provided an insightful perspective when studying women's networks and the results clearly show that structure and agency determine each other and can both be enabling and hindering, for instance stereotypes about women's networks or assumptions about gender can be constraining, but by rejecting these and changing perspective, these structures can be transformed. However, by acting in line with the expected double standards for women, for example by having extra ambitious goals and agendas, the women's network also reproduces rather than changes current structures. It is recommended for future research to take this perspective into account when analysing the effectiveness of in-company women's networks because it was helpful in coming to conclusions about the dimensions identified for effectiveness.

Finally, there are three major recommendations for future research in this field. First, based on the finding of this study that time is an important dimension when studying effectiveness and also based on the findings by Mandell and Keast (2008), a longitudinal study would be best to assess the effectiveness of in-company women's networks. Studying the network and the involved stakeholders over a longer period of time would allow recognising

changes and thereby making more reliable statements about the network's actual effectiveness.

Second, when more qualitative studies have further explored the dimensions of effectiveness, an area for future research is to develop a questionnaire with items that investigate to what extent these dimensions are given for in-company women's networks. This would allow that a large number of in-company women's networks and their effectiveness could be systematically assessed, thereby presenting more generalizable results or a status quo about women's networks and their effectiveness.

Third, another question in the context of effectiveness is: for which women in the organisation is the network to be most effective and why? It would be interesting to study in more depth what women members want to achieve with the network for themselves and if patterns can be identified concerning certain personal backgrounds, such as age or other variables that may have an impact on the goals the women want to achieve by means of a women's network. Starting points for this research are present in the study by Ibarra (1997) who distinguished between high-potential (HP) and nonhigh-potential (NHP) women and found differences between HP and NHP women's networks because NHP women had less close and extra group ties. Furthermore, McGuire (2000) found differences in women's networks due to race and Durbin and Tomlinson (2010) studied networking opportunities for female part-time managers in the UK and found that the transition into part-time employment meant that opportunities to network drastically decreased for these women because they had less time and opportunities to join network activities. Holvino's (2010) paper on intersectionality may provide an interesting theoretical lens on how and why the simultaneity of race, gender, and class influences the benefit individual women can gain from an in-company women's network. Hence, it can be interesting to investigate how the effectiveness of an in-company women's network might vary for various groups of women network members.

5.3 Methodological Implications

Although the study has contributed to the limited body of literature that investigates the effectiveness of in-company women's networks, there are some limitations.

Due to the bonds that were created with the respondents during the interviews and the two days at the women's network conference the researcher had the role of an insider and outsider at the same time. On the one hand, this increased the potential risk of over-attachment towards the subject and limited neutrality when analysing the data (Anderson, 2009), but on the other hand it provided additional information that has been fruitful for the results. To prevent becoming too

subjective, the researcher critically reflected on the extent of participation and her neutrality concerning the results, for example by including only results in the analysis which can be traced back to the interviews, documents or observation data.

Next, the intention of this research was not to test or validate previous studies, but to contribute to the development of theory. Therefore, the findings of this study will require validation and possibly can be extended. This research presents one building block in the development of theory, but more cases need to be studied for an extensive theory about the effectiveness of in-company women's networks.

Furthermore, the results of this research are based on a single case-study which limits the generalisability (Bleijenbergh, 2013). It will be necessary to conduct similar studies in different companies. It would be beneficial to first study in-company networks in similar environments, for example, technical and men-dominated industries, and then to expand the research to different sectors as well as other countries than Germany.

Finally, the study has been limited in the sample size as well as in the diversity of stakeholder perspectives because of the limited time and resources. While it has been useful to interview many network members to fully understand the network, it is suggested for further research that especially more men should be interviewed to understand their perspectives and also more line managers because they are important stakeholders when it comes to the realisation of the network's activities and participation. Also, similar to O'Neil et al. (2011), the interviewed members of the women's network were professional women in mid to upper management levels, and hence their perceptions may not be representative of women in lower levels of management or non-professional positions. Consequently, empirical studies with larger sample sizes which also include women employees from all hierarchical positions are needed to verify and complement the results of this study.

5.4 Practical Implications

5.4.1 Case

In this section, some specific recommendations for RWE women's netWORK are made, but it is possible that they also apply to other women's networks. The two most prominent challenges and possible solutions are discussed.

One of the big challenges for the women's netWORK is to achieve a better connection to the men in the company below the top management level. This doesn't mean that men need to

become members of the network, but especially for further improvements concerning the instrumental goals of visibility, general career advancement and more women in top management, it might be necessary to reach out to the men and to involve them in the activities. This is important because the company is mostly dominated by men, especially in management positions across all hierarchy levels, thus the women also need to become visible for these managers. Additionally, prejudices and fears about women's networks can be diminished when men are involved and know the activities of the network. Strategies to deal with this challenge can be to find men as sponsors for sub-networks, or to open specific workshops initiated by the women's network also for men so that men and women can come to joint solutions. One of the initiatives by the retail sub-network to include men in the women's network is the so-called 'god-children' model. The idea is that men managers become the god-children of a group of women (usually one senior woman and two younger colleagues) and the god-mothers and god-children meet on a regular basis to inform each other about everything that has been going on with respect to the gender topic, for instance the current women's quota in the retail department or what has been done by the sub-network and the women's network in general, and also work together on specific business projects. The motivation behind this project is to create new connections between dedicated women and men in management positions for networking opportunities and informal mentoring which can have an impact on women's advancement in the company. The god-children model has been implemented in 2012, and according to the respondent, has been positively experienced and perceived by the women as well as the men involved. Furthermore, the creation of the 'World Café' where men managers and the members of the women's network can discuss topics and exchange knowledge and get to know colleagues from different departments, is another initiative by the retail sub-network with the aim to create additional networking opportunities for women. It is highly recommended that these initiatives are also implemented in the other sub-networks. While these activities require a lot of extra work by many active and committed network members, they are already well-functioning concepts to achieve a closer connection to men in place in some parts of the company.

The second main challenge which is on the agenda of the women's netWORK is the sustainability issue, especially with regard to the leading roles in the network, and attracting new members in general. Firstly, many active members are senior women who have been part of the network since its foundation in 2006. Now, it is time to involve the women of the next generation because there is still a long way for gender equality in the company and it would be a shame if

the women's network would have to forfeit some of its effectiveness when the founders will eventually leave the company. The women's netWORK is aware of this issue and the women who hold specific functions in the steering committee or are sponsors are also willing to give up their positions for younger colleagues. Nevertheless, it might be important to identify members who are interested in contributing to the women's netWORK and this might be achieved by means of informal mentoring through the senior women. The 'god-children' model could also be applied for women within the women's netWORK, that senior women informally mentor young potentials, who in return are actively involved in the future success of the network. Secondly, the women's netWORK might need to increase the company-wide internal communication and self-marketing so that more women become aware of it. Also, since many women have prejudices against women's networks and specific women support in general, it is essential to communicate what the network does, what it can offer and what it also doesn't take care of. Flyers and posters in the company with the goals and the agenda of the network, as well as its self-understanding and offers can attract new members to join. Furthermore, especially younger colleagues might lack the self-confidence to go alone to a network meeting where they don't know the other women. Therefore, especially young women (25-35) might need open events where they can go together with a close colleague. Finally, the interviews and conversations at the women's netWORK conference showed that younger women would also be interested in self-development workshops, such as communication- and negotiation training, differences between men and women leadership behaviour, or even self-defence courses. However, here it is also important that the members don't only 'consume' the offers and don't feel responsible for active participation in the network otherwise, so the younger women also need to be integrated in other projects which are relevant for the network and the company.

5.4.2 General

The study shows to organisations and all stakeholders who are involved in the implementation and management of in-company women's networks that the evaluation of effectiveness is a non-static, complex process. The results of the study provide a framework of factors and dimensions that can be taken into account when developing, implementing, and managing in-company women's networks and for evaluating their effectiveness. The factors, for example, developing a business orientation, having fixed structures and being open and transparent, can be taken into consideration when developing and implementing a new in-company women's network, but also for improving the management of established networks. The factors provide guidance what helps

in-company women's networks to become effective. Furthermore, since in-company women's networks are still under the unspoken pressure to justify their existence - for example, are they really an effective solution to get more women into top management positions? -, it might be necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of one's own network. An evaluation can have two positive effects. First, it can silence critical voices because there is evidence of successes and changes, for instance due to projects that have been initiated by a women's network. Second, and more importantly, an evaluation allows for reflections and the women's network can assess what it has achieved so far, which new goals can be set, what challenges lie ahead and what could be initiated for keeping or increasing effectiveness in the future. If women's networks want to try and measure their effectiveness, it is recommended to start with the dimensions identified in this study because they present a framework to facilitate this task. A good starting point is looking at the goals set by the network and in how far and why these could be reached. Also, the assessment by non-network members can be beneficial to see if people who are less attached to the network perceive the same results. Next, it is easy to look at some numbers which can also tell something about the network's performance, for instance number of members, yearly events or budget received. Additionally, to evaluate the soft KPIs, members can be asked to write down what they expect from the network and why and in what ways the network has been able to benefit them. Relatedly, it is important how the network members perceive the network. Here, annual surveys asking about participation, experienced benefits, and suggestions for improvement can give valuable feedback and input. Finally, when evaluating the network, it is necessary to consider the impact of time. Especially more fundamental changes are not achieved within a month, a year, and sometimes not even five years, but that doesn't mean that a women's network is ineffective. One piece of final advice is that despite the pressure to have proof for the effectiveness of women's networks, women should not forget to have fun and use their networking possibilities without having a constant coercion to fulfil some KPIs. Probably, in-company women's networks need to find the fine balance between these two poles. However, since women are allegedly better in organising than men, there are no doubts that they will be able to accomplish this.

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Appendix 1 Interview Guide

Introduction

First of all, I would like to thank you for your cooperation with this interview. I am a master student from the Strategic Human Resource Management master at the Radboud University in Nijmegen. I am conducting interviews for my master thesis about in-company women's networks and I want to find out how effective the company's women's network is perceived to be by various stakeholders in the organisation. The investigation is conducted with approval of the organisation.

The interview will last a maximum of one hour and if you do not have any objections, I would like to record the interview. The recording is to prevent information from being misunderstood and will help me to achieve more precise results. The interview will be transcribed based on the recording. The information will be used anonymously and only titles of the stakeholder groups will be used (e.g., member of the network, HR manager, senior management etc.).

After the interview, I will offer you the opportunity to check the interview on paper (transcript) and if necessary adapt quotes of the interview. The results will be dealt with confidently and will remain the possession of the Radboud University and not available for third parties. The master thesis will be sent to the company at the end of August. Based on the results, I will write my master thesis that will be reviewed by two supervisors and the research results may be used in scientific publications.

In this interview it is your experiences and opinion that counts. After some introductory questions on your background and your work, I will ask questions about the company's women's network and your opinions and experiences with it.

Topic list

Number interview:

Date interview:

Time interview:

Location interview:

Name interviewer:

Position interviewee:

Write down sex interviewee: male / female

This is an overview of the questions that will be addressed during the interview. These questions present the basis for the interview and can be extended by follow-up questions. It is important for you to know that you do not have to answer a question if you don't want to.

The questions cover work-related background information and your opinion and experiences with women's networks and RWE's women's network in particular.

Background information (work)

- 1) What is your current position?
- 2) Can you describe the type of activities that you do in your work?
- 3) How long have you worked in this position/ this department?
- 4) Have you worked in other departments within this or other organizations?

Women in the company and women's networks in general

- 5) Based on your experience and observations, what enables success for women working within your company?
- 6) Based on your experience and observations, what hinders success for women working within your company?
- 7) What does a successful women's network in an organization look like?

RWE's women's network

- 8) What is your opinion about the activities of the network?
- 9) What is your opinion about the goals of the network?
- 10) Why do you think is the network important?
 - a) For the members
 - b) For the company

Questions 11-14 are for network members only

- 11) How have you become a member of the company's women's network?
- 12) Why have you joined the company's women's network?
- 13) What do you feel your participation has resulted in?
- 14) What do you expect yourself to do differently based on your participation in the women's network compared to women who are not members?

Questions 11-14 are for non-network members only (women)

- 11) What are your reasons for not joining the network?
- 12) What would convince you to join the network?
- 13) How do you network?
- 14) What do you expect the women of your company to do differently, based on their participation in the women's network?

Closing question

- 15) What would you envision for the network in three years from now?

This is the end of the interview. Are there any subjects which were not addressed during the interview and that you would like to discuss?

I want to stress that all information of the interview will be dealt with anonymously. I only ask for your contact details so that I can send you the interview transcript if you would want to see the transcript. Thank you very much for your cooperation and the time you made available for me. It has been a big help for writing my master thesis.

CONTACT DETAILS:

Time of interview:

Field remark:

Observations:

Appendix 2 Privacy Statement

In this document, you can find all information regarding the use of interview data in my master thesis about the effectiveness of in-company women's networks.

Researcher: Lisa Marilena Waberg (lisawaberg@gmail.com)

Supervisor: Dr. Ine Gremmen

Institution: Radboud University Nijmegen

Company: RWE Group (RWE AG)

Study Program: Master of Business Administration: Strategic Human Resource Management

Anonymity

All interview respondents will remain anonymous in the thesis, meaning that you will not be named in it. Instead, I will use terms such as 'network member' after quotations.

It has been agreed on that the company name can be published in the thesis. In case that my supervisor would like to publish the master thesis in a journal, I will first ask for your permission.

Confidentiality

I will handle your data confidentially and with integrity, and I will under no circumstance share information about the answers you give during the interview with third parties. The thesis will be only accessible for the company and the university.

Before conducting the interviews, I have asked all respondents whether they agree to record the interview for the purpose of transcribing it afterwards. I use two recording devices, one professional voice recorder and my mobile phone to prevent that I lose any data. Especially the data on the mobile phone will be deleted immediately, after I secured it on an external hard drive. The same holds for the telephone interviews which I record with my phone.

The transcripts are primarily for my own usage to facilitate the analysis and will not be attached to the thesis as an appendix. I will have to copy all transcripts on a CD and deliver it to my supervisor so that she can check that I transcribed all interviews. Afterwards, this CD will be marked as 'confidential' and will be stored at the Radboud University. According to the Radboud University, the retention period for research data is a minimum of ten years.

I offer all respondents the opportunity to check the transcript. If you do not wish that certain statements will be used in the thesis, these are excluded from the analysis and will not be used as quotations.

Citations and Translation

In the thesis, I will only use short quotations from the transcripts to underline certain points in the results chapter. Regarding the interviews that were conducted in German, the selected quotes will be translated into English. When I select the quotes which will appear in the thesis, I will only use quotes for which I am sure that the person who said it cannot be identified.

L. Waberg