

# ‘Why are they leaving?’

STUDYING COLLECTIVE TURNOVER AND ITS ANTECEDENTS IN A  
PRODUCTION CONTEXT

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## Summary

This research contains the answer on the following research question '*What are the most influential causes for the high turnover ratio of Comfoor?*'. After identifying these causes, recommendations are proposed to reduce the turnover ratio. With a mixed methods approach using interviews, participative observations and a questionnaire, data was gathered based on a list of plausible causes distilled from theory. Four of these causes were deemed most influential, namely level of pay, leadership and management quality within Comfoor, the strength of the HR system and (resulting) culture, and the working hours that Comfoor uses.

These results were transformed into three recommendations. First pay needs to be increased for production employees as this is a core reason for people leaving the organisation. Second, the style of leadership should be addressed and become more 'people focused' as opposed to the original 'production focused' style of leadership. As a third recommendation Comfoor should analyse the current values they espouse as a company. The recommendation is to formulate a message that Comfoor wants to communicate to their employees. The next step is to use this message as a guideline to align actions and behaviours with the message and create a coherent and consistent whole.

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## 1. Introduction

According to the UWV the Dutch labour market reached a record peak in 2022 regarding the number of jobs and open vacancies (UWV, 2022). Within a span of two years, the number of open vacancies has more than doubled. The Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) speaks of record numbers, stating that in the second quarter of 2022, the number of jobs increased with 96.000 (CBS, 2022). During this time, the number of unemployed fell by 11.000 and organisations were left with 467.000 unfilled vacancies (CBS, 2022). This means that organisations have a harder time finding new employees, as there are more jobs available. At the same time, it is also harder to keep employees as there are an increased number of opportunities for an employee to find a job elsewhere that might be more to their liking.

Therefore, for a lot of organisations creating a workforce that is committed to the organisation while at the same time reducing their employee turnover is increasingly important. Especially in organisations where organisation/product specific experience is important, as this specific experience is relatively hard to find elsewhere and takes time to teach to new hires.

An example of an organisation dealing with such a situation is Comfoor. Comfoor was originally founded in 1985 under the name of 'Doetinchem Oorstukken Laboratorium bv'. The organisation has been developing, producing, and supplying innovative products in the field of sound experience, hearing protection and hearing improvement for over 30 years worldwide (Comfoor, N.D.). They do this under assorted brands, Pluggers for their commercial line and Akouz specifically for hearing care professionals. Comfoor is struggling with a high turnover ratio for the last few years, as high as 29% in 2020 and 23.5% in 2021 (Comfoor, Personal Communication, January 3, 2022). They would like to decrease this ratio, but it is unclear what causes the high turnover ratio in the first place. Comfoor mentions that it values a nice work atmosphere for their employees and provides a modern employment package (Comfoor, Personal Communication, January 3, 2022). Despite this effort their turnover ratio is still too high for their liking and regarding their growth ambitions and the aforementioned developments in the labour market, the problem is only getting bigger.

Turnover as a whole is an interesting concept and has got a lot of academic attention over the years, both on an individual level of analysis and on group level (e.g. business units or organisations) (Hom, Lee, Shaw & Hausknecht, 2017). Models like the one of Mobley, Griffeth, Hand & Meglino (1979) on the individual level and the one of Hausknecht & Trevor (2011) on a collective level all aim to explain the antecedents and consequences of employee turnover in organisations. Meta-analysis like the one of Heavey, Holwerda and Hausknecht from 2013 for example, cover an extensive list of factors that influence or effect turnover ratios. These different studies show that a lot of varied factors can influence turnover and there are still a lot of open questions regarding causality, and process mechanisms (Heavey et al., 2013; Hom et al., 2017). Due to the unclear causalities and processes hiding behind the antecedents found in meta-analysis, it is still virtually impossible to have a readymade answer to the question why turnover might be high in a certain situation. To understand what is causing a high turnover ratio, a deep dive into the specific situation is often needed to fully understand and subsequently solve the problem effectively.

In order to help Comfoor understand the reasons behind its high turnover ratio and subsequently lower it, the aim of this research is to find the most influential causes for the high turnover in order to give advice to the management of Comfoor on how to decrease the amount of voluntary turnover.

The research question formulated to attain this goal is the following:

*‘What are the most influential causes for the high turnover ratio of Comfoor?’*

Answering this research question has a practical relevance as it helps Comfoor decrease their high turnover ratio. This research, however, also has an academic relevance. As mentioned, turnover is influenced by a great number of factors and their causality and process mechanisms are still often debated. This research analyses the specific situation at Comfoor in detail and can assist in shedding more light on which factors are more influential in this situation. Additionally, this research can help to further understand the process mechanisms behind the antecedents influencing (collective) turnover.

In the following chapter, a selection of most common and influential antecedents of turnover is formulated with the help of literature research. The third chapter will contain the methodology of the research, reporting what data is needed to analyse each antecedent and how this data was gathered and analysed. The fourth chapter will deal with the results of the data analysis. Chapter five contains the conclusion and discussion, discussing the answer to the research question and what this can mean for future research. Subsequently, the relevance and limitations of the research will be discussed while the recommendations will be discussed in the final chapter.

## 2. Theory

Turnover has been a heavily debated topic within organisational sciences (Hom, Lee, Shaw & Hausknecht, 2017; Hausknecht & Trevor, 2011). Turnover can be defined as 'the rate at which employees leave a company and are replaced by new employees' (Cambridge dictionary, n.d.). First, a distinction is to be made between two different types of turnover, namely voluntary and involuntary turnover. Involuntary turnover occurs when an employee would have wanted to keep working for the organisation, but the organisation initiates the termination of the employee (Mobley, Griffeth, Hand & Meglino, 1979). For this research, however, the focus lies on voluntary turnover- 'employees' voluntary severance of employment ties' (Hom & Griffeth, 1995, p.108).

Research on turnover can be further split into various levels. On the one hand there is research that focuses on the individual level, for example the model of Mobley et al. (1979). In these models the individual differences in perceptions, expectations, and values are explicitly recognized. These individual level models aim to explain why an individual would choose to quit their job. Then there is the collective level of analysis for turnover. This encompasses any level of analysis higher than the individual and can thus include teams, business-units, or whole organisations (Hausknecht & Trevor, 2011). Here personal differences between individuals are not taken into account but things are considered on a collective level like, 'collective attitudes and perceptions'.

For this research, the 'collective turnover framework' of Hausknecht & Trevor (2011; see figure 1) will function as a basis to determine what antecedents of turnover need to be considered in order to answer the research question. The collective level of turnover is suited for this research since the aim is to give advice on an organisational level and thus, looking into personal differences between employees to explain why they are leaving is less useful. The collective turnover framework of Hausknecht & Trevor (2011) is the most prevalent framework to this date and frequently tested (e.g. Hancock, Allen & Soelberg, 2017) and thus a good basis for this research.

This basis will be further elaborated or extended if other theories can add relevant insights or details. The framework, created by Hausknecht & Trevor (2011) does a good job explaining what the antecedents of collective turnover are but does not always explain in depth what the mechanism behind the effect are, or how it can be influenced for better or worse. Research done by Griffeth et al. (2000), Mobley et al. (1979) or Heavey, Holwerda & Hausknecht (2013) for example are all central pieces of literature concerning turnover. Borrowing insights from these influential pieces can provide a more complete picture of the mechanisms behind the effect and how this can be used in the favour of the organisation. The same will be done for the antecedent of 'High commitment HR systems', Hausknecht and Trevor (2011) show that this concept influences turnover but are not very in depth as to why the effect is there or how it works. The work of Bowen and Ostroff (2004) about 'System strength' will be used to further elaborate this to better understand why a (High commitment) HR system has effect on turnover, analysing three conditions, namely distinctiveness, consistency and consensus.

The model of Hausknecht & Trevor (2011; see figure 1) is based on the review of existing literature on collective turnover, both on its antecedents and consequences. The antecedents are subdivided in three different categories. HR Systems/practices, Collective attitudes/perceptions, and Collective characteristics. Antecedents are central for this research

as the aim is to prevent turnover from happening to the extent it is happening currently. For the sake of brevity, I will not discuss the numerous consequences of high turnover rates and only focus on its antecedents. Concluding this chapter will be a list of plausible causes for the high turnover within Comfloor that will be form the basis for the empirical research.

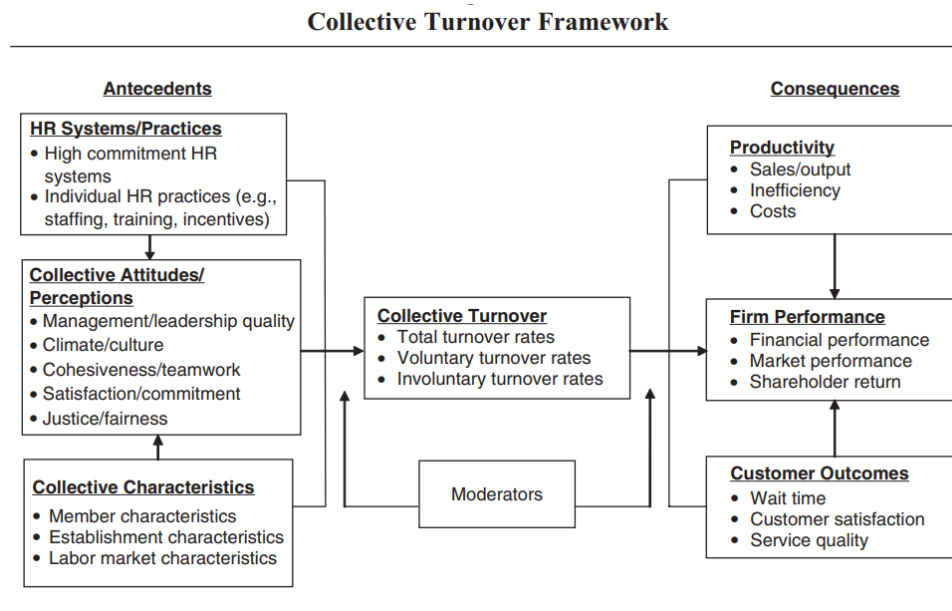


Figure 1 Collective Turnover Framework (Hausknecht & Trevor, 2011)

## HR System

Numerous pieces of research try to explain the link between HR systems and turnover. The idea is that by combining certain HR practices, retention is increased due to the enhancement of workforce skills, motivation, and empowerment (Wright & Boswell, 2002). The HRM system does not only effect firm performance (e.g. financial, employee related etc.) through the actual HR practices, constituting the system, but also through the processes by which they are enacted and the means by which HR messages are received and (re)interpreted by employees (Heffernan, Cafferkey, Harney, Townsend & Dundon, 2021; Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Sanders, Shipton & Gomes 2014). Important to take into account is that not only the content of the system but also the communication and alignment of the content all influence the effect of the system.

Hausknecht & Trevor (2011) focus on 'High commitment HR systems', commitment-enhancing HR systems signal that human capital is valuable and worth retaining while control HR systems plan for a higher turnover via workforce planning, job design and/or technology within the organisation. It is important to mention that often, different terms are used for highly similar HR systems (Boon, Den Hartog & Lepak, 2019). The practices in High performance HR systems strongly overlap with practices in High commitment HR systems for example. Kwon, Bae and Lawler (2010) concluded that, although components of high commitment HR systems vary in current literature, there are some general HR practices that constitute a high commitment HR system. These are '*enriched job design, team-based approach, participation in decision*

*making, pay for performance, high level of pay, accurate performance appraisal, extensive training and development, and selective staffing'* (Kwon et al., 2010, p. 60).

Generally, one finds a negative relationship between a commitment focused HR system and turnover (Hausknecht & Trevor, 2011; Boselie, 2014). There is, however, another key factor to consider when discussing the HR system of an organisation. Although the content of the system might be similar, the process of communicating and implementing the system can explain a significant variation in effectiveness. This variation can partly explain why a content wise similar system has different outcomes regarding not only turnover but also organisational culture and performance outcomes (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). The process of communicating and implementing the HR system is not considered in the framework of Hausknecht and Trevor (2011). In order to capture the most complete picture possible to determine if the HR system might be a cause of turnover, the work of Bowen and Ostroff (2004) is discussed.

Bowen & Ostroff's work (2004) about the strength of the HRM system shows the importance of a distinctive HRM system that send consistent messages. They give three conditions in order for an HRM system to be able to create a '*strong situation*'. In a strong situation '*individuals share a common interpretation of what behaviours are expected and awarded*' (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004 p.207). These shared interpretations '*help foster the emergence of a strong organisational climate*' (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004, p. 208) which in turn has effect on the attitudes and behaviours of the employees in the organisation and thus commitment and turnover(intentions). Three conditions determine if an HRM system is likely to create a strong situation. These conditions are distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus.

Distinctiveness refers to the ability of the system to 'stand out in its environment'. This means the HRM system needs to be visible (or observable) to employees. Furthermore, the HRM system needs to be understandable for employees. If the messages that an HRM system sends are ambiguous and/or unclear, it leaves room for multiple interpretations. It is also important that the HRM system and the agents behind it have legitimate authority. Legitimate authority of the HRM system leads people to listen to the expectations that are posed by the system and the agents behind it. Lastly, the system needs to be relevant to the individual employee. The HRM system must be relevant to organisational and individual goals, it is helpful to align these two as much as possible. These features connected to distinctiveness help draw attention to the message that the HRM system tries to bring across.

Consistency is the next important condition. Consistency is firstly about instrumentality; this refers to the establishment of unambiguous cause effect relationships connected to the HRM system and its content-focused behaviours and associated consequences for the employees. Validity '*ensures that there are adequate incentives associated with performance of the desired behavioural pattern*' (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004, p. 210). Secondly, the validity of HRM-practices is important. It is important that HRM-practices are consistent in what they say they do and what they actually do. This creates a situation in which employees know what to expect. Next to that, the signals send with HRM-practices need to be consistent. To achieve this, the different HR practices in the system all need to be aligned with a central HR message. When the content of the system conveys the same message, the individual messages also need to be consistent. Double-bind communications can have severe consequences. Communication is classified as double-bind when communication involves two separate



messages that are incongruent or contradictory although they deal with the same content area.

*'Consensus results when there is agreement among employees—the intended targets of influence by the HRM system—in their view of the event-effect relationship'* (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004, p.212). For consensus to occur you first need agreement among the principal HRM decision makers. This promotes consensus among employees, as it is easier to send an unambiguous and consistent message when the decisionmakers agree on what the message is or should be. Fairness is also important to achieve consensus, the HRM system needs to consider three types of fairness: distributive, procedural, and interactional. When employees understand the distribution rules by which they receive what they feel they deserve for their contribution, consensus is achieved.

### HR Practices

Numerous HR practices have been investigated by researchers to explain how they relate to turnover in organisations. Instead of naming each and every one I will just mention the overall themes of these practices as they suffice in explaining the logic behind the practices without having to discuss every adaptation or variation (Hausknecht & Trevor, 2011; Griffeth et al., 2000).

These practices are pay, training and development, staffing selection, work design and work organisation (Hausknecht & Trevor, 2011).

Overall, research supports a negative relation between pay and turnover (Hausknecht & Trevor, 2011; Griffeth et al., 2000). However, pay has an interesting relationship with turnover as 'straight pay' has often no relation with the turnover ratio of an organisation (Heavey et al. 2013). However, if the salary of an employee is considered inadequate or unfairly distributed, pay is an important motivator that helps explain why people leave an organisation (Chang, Wang, & Huang, 2013; Heckert & Farabee, 2006). Relative pay, pay relative to the average wage for a similar position in the surrounding locality, is consistently exhibiting a negative relationship with turnover (Heavey et al. 2013).

Training and development is another central theme for HR practices to be based around. Most studies report a negative effect between training and development and turnover (Gelade & Ivery, 2003; Hausknecht & Trevor, 2011; Riordan, Vandenberg, & Richardson, 2005). The rationale behind the training and development of employees reducing turnover is varied. For employees it fulfils a common wish to further develop themselves (Hausknecht & Trevor, 2011). If the organisation is ample in providing opportunities for training and developing, it also signals to the employees that they are valuable and are worth investing resources in. For these reasons providing training and development for employees should lead to a decrease in turnover(intention). There are also studies that support the notion that the training and development of employees increases their mobility on the labour market and thus increase the chance of voluntary turnover (Heavey et al. 2013; Trevor & Nyberg, 2008). There are studies that do not find a significant relationship (e.g. Hurley & Estelami, 2007) but the overall consensus is that training and development of employees has a negative relationship with turnover.

Staffing and selection is a theme that has a less clear-cut relationship with turnover. In the meta-analysis of Heavy et al. (2013), they found a negative relation between staffing selectivity and collective turnover. However, a lot of research suggests that selection procedures that test for a fit between the applicant and the organisation are not great predictors for turnover rates (Shaw, Dineen, Fang & Vellella, 2009, van Vianen 2018). Another interesting note is the effect of staffing levels. In understaffed units, turnover is found to be higher (Gelade & Ivery, 2003). So, in this case, a higher selectivity in staffing may cause higher turnover rates if the selectivity leads to understaffing. Research shows that it is hard to identify in what way staffing and selection is affecting turnover, if at all.

The theme of work design and work organisation covers, for example, the extent to which organisations use self-directing teams or to which extent the organisation allows for employee discretion and participation and involvement in decision making (Hausknecht & Trevor, 2011). Other authors describe these work systems as follows, they should enable employee 'influence and voice' (Haines, Jalette, & Larose, 2010 p. 229) and further 'enhance feelings of personal control' (Spector, 1986 p.1006; Heavey et al. 2013). These should, in theory, lower employees' willingness to leave as it should provide more opportunities for continuous learning and improvement (Hausknecht & Trevor, 2011).

### Collective attitudes/perceptions

With 'collective attitudes/perceptions' Hausknecht and Trevor (2011) mean 'aggregated worker views' of management/leadership quality, climate/culture and cohesiveness/teamwork. It also includes attitudes that are predictors of individual level turnover like satisfaction and commitment.

Management/leadership quality is assumed to have a negative relationship with turnover (intentions) (Hausknecht & Trevor, 2011). A lot of studies support this notion (Griffeth et al., 2000; Gordon, Tang, Day, & Adler, 2019; Heavy, et al., 2013; Nishii & Mayer, 2009). Leadership can be researched with the help of various lenses. When looking with a behavioural and style approach, the managerial grid of Blake & Mouton (1967) can be used for example. With a contingency or situational approach, you consider the specific situational context when you evaluate leadership effectiveness. This can be based on the willingness and ableness of the leaders' followers for example. Overall, a 'people focused' leadership approach opposed to a more production focused approach has a negative relation with turnover (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Fleishman, 1998).

LMX (Leader-membership exchange) has also been researched in relation to turnover (Griffeth et al., 2000, Nishii & Mayer, 2009) and overall exhibits a negative relationship. The leader-membership exchange analyses the relationship between managers and team members. Nishii & Mayer (2009) argue that units that score high on LMX have a higher proportion of members that feel validated and supported by their leaders. LMX is often measured with 7 items with a measurement created by Graen & Uhl-Bien (1995). Another concept, frequently found to associate with turnover is transformational leadership (Chang et al. 2013; Richardson & Vandenberg, 2005). Overall supportive management exhibits a negative relation with turnover (Dupré & Day, 2007; Chang et al. 2013).

Climate and culture are rather difficult concepts to measure. They are aggregated constructs of different employee perceptions such as communication, support, training, goal clarity etc.

(Hausknecht & Trevor, 2011). When discussing culture, it is mostly about the *'norms, values, and basic assumptions of a given organization'* (Damschroder et al., 2009; Powell et al., 2021). Climate is often defined as *'the shared meaning organizational members attach to the events, policies, practices, and procedures they experience and the behaviours they see being rewarded, supported, and expected'* (Ehrhart, Schneider, & Macey, 2013, p. 69; Powell et al. 2021). The relation of climate/culture with turnover is overall believed to be negative (e.g. Richardson & Vandenberg, 2005; Gelade & Ivery, 2003). Although not very consistently operationalised and measured (Powell et al., 2021; Hausknecht & Trevor, 2011) it is still often seen as an influential antecedent (Hausknecht & Trevor, 2011; Riordan, Vandenberg, & Richardson, 2005).

According to Hausknecht & Trevor (2011) there is limited support for possible effects of cohesiveness/teamwork on turnover ratios. Heavy et al. (2013), for example, did find a relation between cohesiveness/teamwork and turnover. However, a lot of researchers find no effect (e.g. Hausknecht et al. 2009). Hausknecht & Trevor (2011) stress that there is more research needed to dive into the intricacies of the effects that different group processes, like task dependencies, have on this relationship between cohesiveness/teamwork and turnover. George & Bettenhausen (1990) mention that the turnover rates in units with high cohesiveness tend to be lower because employees value and enjoy group membership in these units.

'Collectives that, on average, consist of more satisfied and committed members should have lower desirability of movement and, thus, lower turnover rates' (Hausknecht & Trevor, 2011 p. 376). Organisational commitment as defined by Allen and Meyer (1990) can be divided into three components, affective commitment, continuance commitment and normative commitment. As the name suggests, affective commitment is about emotional attachment to an organisation. Continuance commitment is about the perceived cost of leaving or staying in organisation. Normative commitment plays with the concept of obligation. This is about the feeling of responsibility towards the organisation and the internalized pressures that make people think staying in the organisation is the right thing to do. Commitment has been found to have an overall negative relation with turnover(intentions) (Griffeth et al. 2000; Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Hurley & Estelami, 2007). Commitment can be seen as an attitude opposing turnover(intention), this makes it one of the strongest predictors of turnover (Griffeth et al. 2000). If you are committed to the organisation, you have no intention of leaving. This makes it more of an end result for the organisation opposing turnover than direct cause of high turnover.

Justice/fairness is the next collective attitude that influences turnover in the model of Hausknecht and Trevor (2011). Extent research reveals no significant relationship between perceived justice levels and turnover (e.g. Heavey et al. 2013, Simons & Roberson, 2003). Some types of justice, like distributive justice considering compensation is more often directly linked to turnover (see pay under HR practices).

Met expectations is not mentioned in the model of Hausknecht & Trevor (2011) as a collective attitude or perception. However, other studies do mention it rather frequently (e.g. Hom, Allen, & Griffeth, 2020; Griffeth et al. 2000; Mobley et al. 1997). Although these studies mostly study turnover on the individual level, it can be expected that on an aggregated level it still

has a possible effect and is worth considering during this research. If an organisation, during the application process, consistently describes a vastly different situation, not consistent with reality, it can lead to disappointment in the future. It can also be the case that an organisation promises certain things that lead employees to expect certain things. If these promises are not kept, it can be a reason for an employee to leave the organisation (Mobley et al., 1979).

### Collective characteristics

Then, the third category contains so called 'collective characteristics'. These are member characteristics, establishment characteristics and labour market characteristics. Member characteristics are for example the workforce composition, the size of the employee base, diversity in terms of gender etc. These are often considered in research as control variables to '*guard against alternative explanations*' (Hausknecht & Trevor, 2011 p.377). Interesting to mention is that average education and turnover tends to correlate positively (e.g. Griffeth et al. 2000) this may show the increase in options for an employee (Hausknecht & Trevor, 2011; Heavey et al. 2013). Age is often negatively related to turnover (e.g. Griffeth et al. 2000) this might resemble a decrease in options as an employee gets older.

Establishment characteristics are about the industry the organisation operates in while also considering the size, age, and customer target group etc. These characteristics are often included as controls to guard against '*common causes that may explain antecedent-turnover ... relationships or to provide a more complete picture of relevant influences*' (Hausknecht & Trevor, 2011 p.378).

Labour market characteristics include unemployment rates and pay levels in a certain industry. In this case researchers often include unemployment rates as a control in their research. Higher unemployment rates signal fewer employment alternatives, this can influence turnover rates.

### Concluding selection of plausible causes

In this chapter, a plethora of different antecedents of collective turnover were discussed. These factors are all mentioned in scientific literature as possible antecedents of collective turnover. With the aim to spend the available time as effective as possible, a selection of antecedents was made that will be examined further in the empiric part of this research. Leaving out these less useful antecedents will free up time to examine the other antecedents in more detail.

This selection is based on a few criteria. First, there needs to be a clear relationship between the antecedent and collective turnover. Some antecedents have often unclear relationships with turnover, these will be excluded. The second criterium is that the antecedent has to be causing turnover. Commitment for example, although a great predictor of turnover, is more of an opposing attitude and is not directly causing turnover. The last criterium is related to the overlap between antecedents. This was problematic in one instance and will be discussed below.

These criteria led to the exclusion of four of the aforementioned antecedents. Firstly, staffing and selection will not be examined further, due to its often-unclear relation with turnover. Commitment will also not be examined further since (lack of) commitment is not necessarily

a cause of turnover. A lot of the same antecedents influence both commitment and turnover and therefore commitment is less useful to answer the research question. The justice/fairness attitude will not be treated as a separate antecedent either. The proven relationship between pay-related distributive justice and turnover will be included in the pay antecedent. For distributive and procedural justice/fairness in other areas of the organisation, proof is lacking of there being a relation with (collective) turnover and will thus be excluded (Hausknecht, 2011). This is also the case for cohesiveness/teamwork as there is limited support for there being a relationship between this antecedent and turnover. Another reason for not using this antecedent is the fact it overlaps in part with the climate of an organisation (Ehrhart et al., 2013; Powell et al., 2021). If, for example, teamwork is not supported within the organisation as part of the climate, it will most likely not occur.

The antecedents that are not excluded based on these criteria will be the basis for the empiric part of this research. These are divided into four different categories. Firstly, the HR practices, including pay, training and development and work design/organisation. The HR system is a separate category further looking into the communication process of the HR system as the relevant content regarding turnover, the HR practices, is already discussed separately. For this antecedent the distinctiveness, consistency and consensus of the HR system will be discussed. The next category is called collective attitudes and includes the perceived management/leadership quality within the organisation. The second collective attitude is culture/climate, although hard to operationalise, this antecedent can be an influential factor and very telling of where possible causes may reside. 'Met expectations', although not mentioned in the framework of Hausknecht and Trevor (2011), will also be examined, as it comes up often in other studies.

Collective characteristics are most used as control variables to guard against alternative explanations. It is important to keep these characteristics in mind when analysing the other relevant antecedents. These will be further discussed in the methodology chapter.

### 3. Methodology

The first stage of this research has been deductive, I used already existing theory to formulate a collection of plausible causes for a high turnover rate within an organisation (see concluding list of plausible causes). The next step is to identify which of these antecedents are causing the high turnover within Comfoor. In the final part of this chapter, ethical considerations that were important during this research will be discussed.

For the remaining part of this research a mixed methods approach is used. Turnover is a complex construct that can be influenced by multiple interacting factors. Having the ability to gather detailed information from diverse sources is helpful to make sense of the different factors and how they together influence turnover in this specific situation. Using a variety of methods including (participative) observations, interviews, analysis of internal documents, and a questionnaire it is possible to have the best of multiple worlds as the strengths of the different methods can be utilised while the influence of the weaknesses are negated. This ensures an answer to the research question and a set of recommendations to Comfoor that are both well informed and nuanced. This is combined with an in-depth analysis of the specific situation of Comfoor, earlier summarised as collective characteristics.

This mixed method approach in conjunction with the in-depth analyses of the specific situation at Comfoor resulted in a research design most akin to a case study. Case studies are useful when the actors' behaviours cannot be controlled (Yin, 1994) and when the research wants to investigate "how" and "why" questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). *'By using a case study method, researchers can take a holistic view and explore social processes in rich and complex detail'* (Lindgreen, Di Benedetto, & Beverland, 2021, p.7). This approach is very suitable for this paper and in the following sections I will first discuss Comfoor as a case and subsequently the data gathering will be described.

#### Case description of Comfoor

In this description of the case of Comfoor I will detail the characteristics of Comfoor labelled as collective characteristics in the theory chapter. These are all characteristics that need to be considered when analysing the other antecedents.

As mentioned in the introduction, Comfoor is an organisation that develops, produces, and supplies innovative products in the field of sound experience (Comfoor, N.D.). The company has an 'office' department, which includes marketing, sales, finance, HR, and product innovation (24 employees in December 2021, 20.5 FTE). The production side of Comfoor consists of 108 employees (December 2021, 83.1 FTE), here the products are made and distributed. Introductory talks with the company indicated that turnover is only problematic in the production department and that the turnover on the office side is not perceived as problematic (Comfoor, personal communication, April, 2022).

The employees working for Comfoor are mostly female (76% in 2021). This percentage is even higher in the production department. For a lot of the production activities fine motor skills are required, and generally females experience less problems with these activities (Comfoor, personal communication, April 2022).

For these production positions Comfoor has no education requirements of any sort. Additionally, no documentation is kept on the education level of employees. However, the average education level is believed to be somewhere in between the level of primary school education and MBO (vocational education) (Comfoor, personal communication, April 2022).

The average age of the employees in 2021 is 42 years old, ranging from 22 to 63. The average tenure is 5.5 years in 2021 (was 6 in 2020), ranging from 47 people having a tenure of 0-2 years and 1 person having a tenure of 38 years.

The production department of Comfoor works in two shifts. The morning shift is from 6:00 till 13:00 with a one-hour break. The afternoon shift starts at 13:00 and ends at 20:00, also with an hour break. The team leaders have overlapping shifts in order to transfer important information that is relevant for the other group.

During the study, the production manager of Comfoor got ill and had to be replaced by an interim production manager from the beginning of July until the end of September 2022. One of the two team leaders, operating under the production manager, got sick as well. The team leader was partly internally replaced by someone who had already fulfilled this job for some time a few years prior.

Comfoor experiences a steady growth in their sector and an increased interest in earplugs and hearing solutions in general. Comfoor wants to grow with the market and keep expanding their business. As mentioned in the introduction it is hard for all organisations to find employees. That alone creates a need to hold on to current employees, but connected to the growth ambitions of Comfoor this becomes even more important.

#### Data sources general

In this section the general details of the data sources will be discussed. The next section contains how these sources were used to gather the specific information for each of the antecedents without having to repeat the general details of the sources.

Important to mention is that Comfoor is a Dutch company, all communication thus has been in Dutch. When using quotes from the data or if certain questions are discussed, one should keep in mind that these are translated from Dutch in cooperation with the HR manager of Comfoor.

In terms of internal documents, several types were used during this research. First, 22 **exit forms** from 2020 and 2021 were analysed, these were all completed by former employees of Comfoor. These forms are not obligatory for employees to fill in, the HR manager mentioned that a lot of former employees did not fill in the exit forms.

23 **evaluation forms** from the same time period were also used. Not all the employees that filled in the evaluation forms necessarily left Comfoor, but they contain experiences of employees that joined Comfoor six to eight weeks prior to filling in the form.

Two different **employee satisfaction surveys** were used as well. The employee satisfaction survey of 2019 was conducted by an external company between the 15<sup>th</sup> of April and the 5<sup>th</sup> of May of 2019 and had a response rate of 78% (71% for production employees). The employee satisfaction survey of 2021 was conducted by another external company and was

conducted between 28<sup>th</sup> of June and the 15<sup>th</sup> of July of 2021. This employee satisfaction survey had a response rate of 71% (66% for production employees).

Eight **conversations** with managers operating in different parts of the company took place. These talks happened on the 16<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2022 lasted around an hour and were semi-structured in order to leave room for asking follow-up questions. In consultation with the HR manager of Comfoor, the choice was made to not record these conversations, as some of the discussed topics are sensitive. Both the sensitivity of the topics and the fact that the managers were unfamiliar with me and the aim of this research would probably cause the conversation partners to be less open and honest in the conversation. During and after these conversations I took notes in order to accurately use the information later on in the process. The guideline for the conversations can be found in appendix A.

For the next data source, I sent out a **questionnaire** to **former employees** of Comfoor. Comfoor was willing to award a voucher worth 25 euros to every participant. This questionnaire was open from July 18<sup>th</sup> until 15<sup>th</sup> of August 2022. This questionnaire was aimed at gathering information from the people that actually left the organisation, gaining insight into these first-hand experiences is a helpful tool in answering the research question.

Together with the HR manager of Comfoor, we decided to approach former employees that left from October 2021 onwards. Asking people that left before that date might lead to confusing answers, as a lot changed since then within Comfoor as a company. Next to that, the HR manager outed concern about the accuracy of the answers that former employees, who left earlier, would provide. After such a long time it could be hard for them to accurately recall and describe their work experience at Comfoor. This resulted in a rather small list of possible respondents, 29 in total. These 29 potential respondents were initially approached by the HR manager of Comfoor via e-mail. The rationale being, that a 'friendly, familiar face' approaching the potential respondents would decrease the chance of the respondents thinking it is a spam email. The potential respondents were informed that an email with an invite link would come their way in the oncoming days and were told about the compensation that they would get in return for completing the questionnaire. From these 29 people 21 people responded, a percentage of 72,4%. In order to make sure the respondents could stay anonymous, Comfoor did not get access to the answers nor the identity of the respondents. A name and e-mail address were needed for sending the voucher to the respondents, this information was gathered and used for this purpose only and deleted after confirmation that the voucher was received.

Due to limited number of potential responses, it was possible to ask more open questions instead of only closed ones. This made it possible to gather more detailed responses on the questions.

In total the survey counted thirty-two questions that covered a range of subjects derived from literature. The questions not directly related to one of the antecedents will be covered here. The remaining questions will be discussed per relevant antecedent.

In the first three questions participants were asked about their gender, age, and former function within Comfoor. After these general questions the participants were asked to formulate in an open question format why they decided to leave Comfoor. This question gave



the respondents the opportunity to formulate, in their own words, their foremost reason for leaving Comfoor without steering their answer into a particular direction.

In the next question the participants were asked if they started at new job since they left Comfoor. If they did not, this whole block of questions would be skipped (8 questions). If they did start at a new job, they were asked to compare their current workplace to Comfoor. Respondents were asked what their current employer did better and what Comfoor could improve on. The questions of the questionnaire can be found in appendix B.

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of August 2022 I visited every individual section of the production department of Comfoor for a **participative observation**. I spend 30 minutes at every station working together with the respective people there. They explained their work activities and told me about their experiences with the organisation. During the entire day, I took notes, writing up as much as possible to accurately recall the experiences of the employees later. At the end of the day, an hour-long conversation was planned with the interim production manager. Talking about what had happened during the day and I asked the interim manager about his thoughts considering the antecedents discussed in the theory chapter and how they applied to the situation of Comfoor.

Four **semi structured interviews** were conducted, these were aimed at further investigating already identified causes of the high turnover ratio of Comfoor. These semi structured interviews took about an hour each. The choice was made to bring a limited number of questions to the interview to ensure every question could be addressed in depth without running into time limitations. Not all the already identified causes were given an equal amount of attention during the interview. Most subjects, like pay and training/development, and work design/organisation were already addressed often and in enough detail in the other methods. The subjects that were given the most attention were 'leadership/management quality' and the HR system of Comfoor and if it leads to a strong situation as mentioned by Bowen and Ostroff (2004). The guideline used for these conversations can be found in appendix C.

#### Data gathering per antecedent

In this section it will be discussed what information needs to be gathered in order to answer the research question and conclude what causes the high turnover within Comfoor. Both the needed information and the way it was analysed will be addressed per antecedent.

#### HR practices

**Pay** as an antecedent of turnover generally exhibits a negative relation with turnover, which was already discussed in the theory chapter. In order to find out if pay is a reason for employees to leave the organisation, it is important to establish if the pay is considered high enough by employees and if they believe the pay is fairly distributed throughout the organisation. To do so, first, the following documents were analysed to find any statements regarding pay. First, the employee handbook to see the pay scales per function within Comfoor. Next the annual HR report of 2021 was analysed to see the number of employees in each scale and the average salary paid within each scale. Subsequently, the results of the employee satisfaction surveys of 2019 and 2021 were examined for any pay related statements. The next step was to analyse 22 exit forms and 23 evaluation forms on statements

relating to pay. These statements were compiled into a document, next to the contents of these statements, the frequency of them occurring was also considered.

In the conversations with managers, they were asked what they thought of the current pay levels within the organisation and if they thought this could be a cause for the high turnover. If they thought so, further questions were asked about why and in which cases they thought this was the case.

For the questionnaire for former employees, different questions were analysed to establish if pay was a potential cause for high turnover. First off, the overall question asking for the main reason the respondent left Comfoor was coded for any pay related statement. The question asking the respondents to compare their current job (if applicable) with their former job at Comfoor was also coded in the same manner. A separate part of the questionnaire was dedicated to distributive justice as discussed in the theory chapter. Respondents were asked if they thought certain people in the organisation 'get more than they deserve' and, in a separate question, if they thought some people 'get less than they deserve'.

For the antecedent of **training/development** it is important to examine the (perceived) availability and quality of training and development opportunities within Comfoor and if they are deemed (un)satisfactory by employees. First, the employee handbook was examined to better understand how training and development was organised within Comfoor. Then the annual HR report of 2021 was consulted with the aim to gain insight in what proportion the development opportunities are utilised and if HR themselves have insights surrounding the availability and quality of training/development opportunities. Then the exit and evaluation forms were analysed to check for any statement connected to training and development similar to the approach with the antecedent of pay. The same was done for the employee satisfaction surveys of 2019 and 2021.

In the conversations with managers, the managers were asked about their opinions considering training and development opportunities within the organisation. Here an extra consideration was the communication surrounding these opportunities, to see if, according to the managers, the actual availability of opportunities was consistent with the perceived number of opportunities.

During the participative observation, working in the production of Comfoor, I talked to multiple employees about their opinions and experiences considering the availability and quality of training and development opportunities within Comfoor. With these insights, combined with the actual data from HR and the thoughts of the managers, a diverse set of information was gathered from varied sources.

**Work design/work organisation** is the next antecedent that needs to be examined. This antecedent was harder to gather information about in the documents used for earlier antecedents. The opportunities for influence and voice within work systems of Comfoor are hard to grasp by reading an annual HR report and the exit and evaluation forms do not ask employees about this subject.

In the conversations with managers, the managers were asked how individual jobs were designed and how the work was organised throughout the organisation. They were asked how much influence and discretion individual employees have when doing their job. During the participative observation in the production, I asked several employees, in different positions, about their level of personal discretion and influence within their job. While working in every part of the production process I was able to see the level of personal control an employee has at a certain position first-hand.

#### HR system

As described in the theory chapter, Hausknecht and Trevor (2011) state that a High Commitment HR system negatively relates to turnover. This relationship is however not very useful in and of itself. Checking if Comfoor has a High Commitment HR system in place does not explain if this is, in fact, causing the high turnover to occur. In this study, the individual HR practices that are known to impact turnover will be examined individually as separate antecedents. As the content of the system is covered, you are left with the process surrounding the HR system, or its 'strength'. This will be examined using the work of Bowen and Ostroff (2004).

Because this research was tied to a specific time frame and conducted by only one individual, it was deemed ineffective to create a detailed description of the complete HR system of Comfoor. Secondly, it was not in the interest of the organisation to describe every condition Bowen & Ostroff (2004) mention in detail and how Comfoor does or does not satisfy with these conditions. The goal of this research is to find out if the HR system of Comfoor is a cause for high turnover in the organisation. To do this, I actively searched for cases where Comfoor was not satisfying the conditions for a strong HR system as defined by Bowen & Ostroff (2004), and thus could be causing problems.

By looking at the espoused core values of Comfoor via their website, employee handbook and by talking to managers, it was possible to determine what message the HR system should convey. This is also linked to the espoused values important for the Climate/culture antecedent. This is a logical link since a strong HR system lays the groundwork for a 'strong situation' which is the basis for a strong organisational culture (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). Next, by examining the other HR practices as antecedents for turnover, the researcher can assess if the practices as part of the HR system are visible and understandable for employees, seen as legitimate and relevant for both employees and the organisation. In the same manner the researcher can start looking for inconsistencies in instrumentality, validity, and the conveyed message.

For the consensus condition, the conversations with managers were used on the principal decision maker level to compare their views and look for discrepancies between them. By speaking with both the production manager and the team leaders it is possible to see if there is a consensus between two levels of decisionmakers on what the conveyed message should be. By investigating the other antecedents, I can identify situations or practices that are not deemed fair by the employees of Comfoor, as this is mentioned as a vital component in the process of creating consensus.

### Collective attitudes/perceptions

The first antecedent under collective attitudes/perceptions is **Management and leadership quality**. This antecedent can be viewed through a variety of lenses as pointed out in the theory chapter. Rather than choosing one and risk missing aspects that are not within the chosen lens/framework, it seemed more appropriate to gather as much information as possible surrounding management/leadership from different sources. This collected data was then compiled and coded to identify common themes that are specifically problematic for Comfoor in the eyes of its (former) employees.

First the exit and evaluation forms were analysed, these documents contained specific questions about how (former)employees evaluated their supervisors. Both employee satisfaction surveys (2019 and 2020) also contained questions about the direct supervisors of employees. These results were compiled and coded to establish common themes of potential issues considering leadership and management.

During the conversations with managers, management and leadership quality was also extensively discussed. Managers were asked what their own management style is and how they would describe the management style of their colleagues. They were also asked if there were known problems surrounding this antecedent and if the management/leadership style of supervisors could be a cause for the high turnover.

In the questionnaire for former employees, Management and leadership quality was measured using the standard set of seven questions used to research LMX by Graen & Uhl-Bien (1995), as it has an often-verified relationship with turnover and is easy to measure with a limited number of questions. Next to this multiple-choice section, respondents had the opportunity to describe their overall opinion and possible tips for their supervisor in an open question format. These answers were colour coded to establish themes of responses that came up frequently.

During the follow-up interviews, leadership was extensively discussed again. Due to a number of people in leadership positions being replaced, there was a great opportunity to ask people to compare the leadership/management style of these people. Furthermore, they were asked what kind of behaviours or actions of supervisors they deemed negative or positive and how this, in their eyes, resulted in turnover (or not). These interviews were also colour coded.

**Climate/culture** is, as discussed, often not consistently operationalised between studies and can consist of many different factors. A possibility would have been to measure if Comfoor has an 'involvement climate' for example as it has a proven negative relation with turnover (Richardson & Vandenberg, 2005). But since the aim was to find out if the culture and climate of Comfoor could be a possible cause for turnover, I decided to use the same approach as for the leadership/management quality antecedent. I tried to gather as much information as possible that connected to the definitions of culture (Damschroder et al., 2009; Powell et al., 2021) and climate (Ehrhart, Schneider, & Macey, 2013, p. 69; Powell et al. 2021) used in the theory chapter. By compiling all this information, I could craft a basic description of the culture and climate of Comfoor and identify parts that might be a cause for extensive turnover.

As a start, I analysed different documents that were already present within Comfoor. First the employee handbook, I coded parts of the handbook that seemed to express the norms and values of Comfoor. The website of Comfoor and their annual HR report of 2021 were coded in the same manner.

In the conversations with managers, they were asked to formulate what Comfoor 'stands for' and what their core values and norms are. Shared meanings that employees attach to events, policies, practices etc. are harder to grasp. By asking every manager about what they think about the antecedents and why practices and policies are in place, it was possible to formulate a set of meanings of these people. The researcher tried to identify overlapping themes thus the shared meanings within this group.

This was also done with the questions asked in the questionnaire, no direct questions about the culture were asked but by reading the answers to the questions, it was possible to gather shared meanings that might shed light on a cause for high turnover. During the participative observation in the production this practice was continued, by asking employees how they thought about Comfoor and why different practices and policies were in place, it was possible to create a set of shared meanings between these employees. Next to these shared meanings, it was also possible to get their opinions on what behaviours are rewarded, supported and expected.

The shared meanings were discussed in the follow-up interviews. This was aimed at not necessarily confirming the identified shared meanings but to ask if these meanings were recognizable and if so, which are problematic and what could have caused them.

**Met expectations** is the last antecedent of the collective attitudes/perceptions. For this antecedent the goal was to examine if the real situation that employees experienced in their time with Comfoor, matched their expectations they had beforehand.

The evaluation forms contained a specific question regarding their function and if it turned out to be according to their expectations they had beforehand. These answers were compiled and coded to identify common themes.

In the conversations with managers, the managers were asked about the application process and what kind of expectations it creates for employees. They were asked if these expectations are realistic and if the non-matching expectations could be a possible cause for the high turnover.

In the questionnaire for former employees the respondents were asked if their work activities and employment conditions were in line with their expectations beforehand. Additionally, respondents were asked, in an open question format, if their experience with Comfoor, and the people within Comfoor, was as expected. The answers on the open-ended questions were coded to identify common themes.

### [Ethical considerations](#)

In the process of this research I worked with a lot of personal data, (former) employees told me their thoughts and opinions about the organisation and the people within it. It is of the utmost importance that this information is handled with great care and will not hurt or

compromise the provider of the information in any way, shape, or form. The information gathered in the different conversations, (including the interviews) was presented to the company (especially towards the HR manager) in such a way that it was not possible to lead it back to the person who provided the information. The questionnaire data was handled similarly, additionally, the communication with the respondents was done via a non-company e-mail address and the data was stored on a non-company account. The raw data, transcripts, questionnaire answers and (observation) notes were not provided to the company as to ensure that the individual people were not affected by my research.

Next to the careful handling of information I also did my utmost best to inform the participants of the purpose and possible results of this study. I informed them how I would use the information they provided and that they could, at any point, decide to not cooperate further and that the information provided up until that point would not be used in any way.

## 4. Results

In this chapter the results of the research will be discussed. The relevant results will be discussed for every antecedent mentioned in the concluding list from the theory chapter. The results from different sources will indicate if there is any reason to believe that a specific antecedent is causing the high turnover Comfoor is experiencing.

### HR practices

#### Pay

Pay as an antecedent of turnover turned out to play a significant role in the situation of Comfoor. According to the HR annual report of 2021, forty-two people are situated in the lowest pay scale, with an average pay of 1758 euros gross per month. Twenty-nine people are situated in the second to lowest scale with an average pay of 1879 euros gross per month. These two groups together account for almost 54% of the total number of employees (132). Especially the average pay of lowest scale is close to the minimum allowed wage in the Netherlands (Rijksoverheid, 2022).

In the exit forms, the salary paid by Comfoor is negatively evaluated in some instances although not mentioned frequently (only three times in 22 exit forms), this can be seen in quotes like: *'The salary is very low'* and *'The pay is too low if you see what they expect of us.'*

In the employee satisfaction survey of 2019 respondents often put pay as an improvement point for Comfoor. In the employee satisfaction survey of 2021, better pay was one of the reasons 6 of 49 respondents were planning on leaving Comfoor in the following year.

In the conversations with managers, every manager considers pay to be a likely cause for turnover. Some stress it is not the most important factor for leaving Comfoor but that the pay levels certainly need to be addressed. This sentiment also visible in the questionnaire results, one of the most frequently mentioned reason (tied with the working hours) was the salary they received for their work at Comfoor. Six respondents mentioned pay as one of the foremost reasons for leaving Comfoor. An example of this sentiment is *'Bad salary, never got the salary that fitted my function.'* Pay was frequently brought up again when asked what their current employer (if applicable) did better.

Respondents were asked if they think that there are people within Comfoor that get more than they deserve and if there are people that get less than they deserve. When asked if there are people that earn too much, a lot of people are neutral (47.62%), 9.52% disagrees and 4.67% strongly disagrees. A lot of people agree with this statement though, 9.52% agrees and 28.57% strongly agrees. When asked who earns less than they deserve, a lot more people agree with this statement. This was to be expected, as the salary was already a pain point as identified in earlier questions. Only 4.76% disagree with this statement (1 respondent), 14.29% is neutral (3 respondents) and 47.6% agrees and 33.33% strongly agrees with this statement. When asked why they thought so it was often mentioned that the production employees are not rewarded for their hard work and that the salary is higher among organisations that offer similar jobs. Others describe that Comfoor does not pay attention to employees that are crucial for the functioning of the production, *'you need to value these people as they are worth a lot and there are not many left.'* Some mention that the

management of Comfoor makes too much but most people just think the production layer should be paid more.

In the semi-structured interviews the level of pay was discussed but more so what kind of HRM message the level of pay conveys to the employees of Comfoor, as part of the HR system and its strength. Again, it came to the forefront that pay is problematic within Comfoor, *'Pay is the number one reason people are leaving the organisation, it is the biggest issue here (in the organisation).'*' (Interview 2 appendix C). *'People leave easily, especially as the organisation, in my opinion, lags far behind in terms of salary'* (Interview 4 appendix C). However, not only the pay itself but also the message the level of pay sends to employees is perceived as problematic, *'Employees do not feel valued at all! They only ask things of them, and they get nothing in return.'* (Interview 1 appendix C).

In conclusion, pay can be said to be an important factor in explaining the high turnover within Comfoor. Paying many employees close to the minimum wage not only results in a situation where people can make more elsewhere but also feel undervalued and unappreciated.

#### Training/development

The training and development opportunities within Comfoor are evaluated very positively overall. In the exit forms, with a few exceptions, everyone was positive about the quality and quantity of training and development opportunities. The few negative outings are connected to the fact they were not always actively offered (enough) by Comfoor.

In the employee satisfaction survey of 2019, the most frequently mentioned point of strength of Comfoor was the training and development opportunities. In the survey of 2021 the respondents were asked how the rate the possibility for internal training and development. Sixty percent of respondents were satisfied (from which 18% very satisfied). Twenty percent answered neutral, 18% unsatisfied and 2% very unsatisfied.

In the conversations with managers, it was said that, in the production, employees can learn a lot of different things and the team leaders of the production mentioned explicitly that there is a lot of interest and usage of these possibilities. Three managers explicitly mentioned that they would find it extremely hard to believe if this antecedent would turn out to be causing the high turnover.

In the semi-structured interviews one respondent mentioned that Comfoor should try to convey that the organisation is valuing their human capital and that they should *'invest in their people'* (interview 2 appendix C). In terms of pay they did the opposite but in terms of training and development they *'... investing in the area of training they do very well. They do that perfectly'* (interview 2 appendix C).

When all data sources are compiled, there is little reason to believe that the antecedent training/development causes the high level of turnover within Comfoor. Employees and managers both seem to have a mostly positive opinion about this antecedent.

#### Work design/ work organisation

Managers, who are not situated in production, mention during the conversations that the management positions in the production are occupied by people who set very strict



‘frameworks’. They said that the direct form of leadership leaves less responsibility and freedom to the employees themselves. A few of the managers explicitly said that they themselves would do it differently and leave more discretion to the employees.

During the day I visited every production station of Comfoor I, while working, watched and asked how employees did their job and how much personal control they felt over their work. At this point in time the interim production manager was already working at Comfoor for a little over three weeks. A lot of employees mentioned during the day that the interim manager was way less directive and had more of a delegating leadership style. This can be characterised by people saying that as long as they do their job and nothing goes wrong the manager will not get involved, only when they need help or something goes wrong.

During the day, it was visible that experienced employees are responsible for a task, or set of tasks, and have developed their own ways on how to effectively fulfil these tasks. There are quality standards that need to be upheld but there is quite a lot of freedom on how to achieve those standards. Since there is a lot of precise manual work, there are not a lot of machines dictating exactly how something should be done.

The less experienced employees (like myself during this day) are told what the most effective ways are to get the job done and what to pay attention to in order to create a good quality product in a time effective manner. On all the stations, the employees teaching the work do mention, without fail, *‘this is how I like to do it but some people like to do it this way’*. This signals a certain freedom, on the condition that the quality of the products is satisfactory.

Overall, it seems that the work design/work organisation is not contributing much to the high turnover Comfoor is experiencing. Especially with the interim production manager in place, employees seem to have quite a lot of control on how they perform their jobs. And since the complexity of the activities scores more than sufficient, both in the exit forms and in both employee satisfaction surveys (2019 and 2021), it shows that the feeling of personal control is not over a set of very simple tasks.

## HR system

### **Distinctiveness**

For an HR system to be distinctive it first needs to be visible. Generally, the data indicates that this is the case. For example, the pay levels of different positions are clearly displayed in the employee handbook. And although there is some room to manoeuvre in between the pay levels, it is still pretty clear on what you can expect in terms of pay.

Organised activities and trainings are communicated via different channels. A German course for example, organised by HR (Comfoor, Personal Communication, August 2022), was communicated via the newsletter, different posters throughout the building and on the TV screen in the cafeteria. For general training and development opportunities everyone seems to know they exist, the team leaders of the production (Personal Communication, March 16, 2022) mentioned a high degree of interest by employees. During the participative observation it was also evident that the employees knew of the opportunities, they could tell a lot about them, both in terms of content and for who they were applicable. A small portion of

employees who filled in the exit forms say they were never actively approached but knew the opportunities were there.

The next condition for distinctiveness is understandability. Overall, the understandability of the HR system seems to be sufficient. The practices within the system are clearly communicated via different channels throughout the company. These communications are performed via the newsletter for example or in 'soapbox sessions' where the director explains what is happening in the company and what future changes in terms of policies and practices are going to look like. There are however some problems regarding a certain vagueness in the run-up before changes are implemented, this will be addressed later under consistency. One aspect that is not well understood is how you are evaluated by your supervisors. Since this mostly determines if you get a raise or not, employees want to know what the evaluation is based on. Managers say this evaluation is mostly done on qualitative criteria that are hard to make explicit, one of the managers emphasized this by rhetorically asking what the difference is between a seven and an eight (on a scale of ten) and that it is hard to explain that to someone.

Another condition for distinctiveness is legitimacy. For legitimacy, the support of upper management for the HR system is important. Since HR itself is in the management team, this is not necessarily a problem. The only thing that stands out regularly is that some people have the feeling that the management team as a whole 'does not know what they are doing' (Interview 3 appendix C) This undermines the legitimacy of the key decision makers, as everything they say is less credible when you are viewed as uninformed or even incompetent.

Relevance is the last condition for distinctiveness. For relevance to be attained, employees first need to see a certain practice or change as relevant to attaining a certain personal or organisational goal. What is important, is that Comfoor takes both its organisational goals as their employees' personal goals in mind. Especially in between organisational and personal goals there is some misalignment to be found. Comfoor for example lays a big emphasis on the delivery time promised to customers. This was mentioned by every manager during the conversations with them and was emphasized by the employees themselves during the participative workday. Some employees (including managers) say this delivery time is unrealistic and unreasonable, quoting one of the managers '*Delivering within five days is madness*' (Interview 3 appendix C). Another big emphasis is on both the quality but also the production speed of the products. These goals are seen as very important for the organisation and this is reflected in how Comfoor deals with the evaluation of employees in terms of productivity.

These organisational (strategic) goals seem to be of the utmost importance while employee related goals are pushed to the background. Goals like a pleasant working environment, financial compensation or getting a more personal approach by your supervisor for example are not shown to be as important, quoting a former employee, '*We have always worked hard for them, what do we get in return?*'.

## Consistency

The first condition related to consistency is instrumentality, this means that clear cause effect relationships can be established between HR system desired content-focused behaviours and consequences for the employee. One prevalent situation where this is not the case is with the performance evaluation of employees, as already pointed out under understandability. Otherwise, desired content-focused behaviours of the HR system are clearly linked to consequences for employees. Comfoor focuses a lot of attention on ensuring the quality of its products and wants their employees to do so as well. This is reflected in the quality criteria and quotas that are used. This creates a clear cause-effect relationship, as there are different incentives in play pushing for the HR-system's desired behaviour.

The validity of the HR practices constituting the system is problematic in certain instances, as employees perceive a difference in what the practices purport to do and what they actually do. An example is the shortening of the break times and the delayed start time of the afternoon shift. HR communicated that the shorter break time of the afternoon shift and the delaying of the start time from 13:00 to 13:15 was a measure against the spread of COVID-19. However, after that was not deemed a necessity anymore the break times and starting times kept unchanged. It was unclear why the less favourable system (in the eyes of the employees) was still there. In a conversation with the production manager, it turned out that the measure was taken partly, to avoid parking problems at the beginning of the afternoon shift. So, although COVID was no reason to keep the measure in place, the parking situation was. This was however not clear for employees and resulted in a questionable validity of the measure. Another instance of questionable validity is the recently changed sick leave policy. Although it was meant to reward employees that were never sick. Some people felt like it was pressuring people to come to work even though they were sick. This instance will be discussed in detail under double-bind communications.

Consistent HRM messages seems to be the foremost problem in the HR system of Comfoor. It is important that the espoused values, the values that are claimed to be important by the management of an organisation, are consistent with the inferred values, the values that employees infer to be important through the HR practices. In this particular case, Comfoor conveys for example that they value a personal approach towards employees (Comfoor, personal communication, 2022). When asked about this, employees mention that they do not feel heard and that there is no understanding for their personal situation. This is reinforced by the fact that it is hard to get a day, or even a few hours, off. Indicated by the conversations with managers, the responses on the questionnaire and the conversation with the interim manager (Personal Communication, August 24, 2022). Employees feel like the managers are not informed at all of what is going on, on the shopfloor and that their supervisors do not listen to them (further discussed under leadership/management quality). Indicated by respondents of the questionnaire saying things like *'listen more to your colleagues'*; *'listen better to the people'* when asked to give a tip to their former supervisor.

Comfoor also states that they value a pleasant working environment, but when asked, former employees feel like a number because of the high work pressure and emphasis on the number of products produced. The value of a pleasant working environment is also negated by a team

leader saying that they look for people that do not nag and just do their job (Personal Communication, March 16, 2022).

Another value that is stated by Comfoor is the no-nonsense mentality (or open and honest communication). This was severely contradicted when the director became sick and eventually left the organisation, the communication from the management was quite vague and people felt like there was more going on, *'And whether there is more to it? I think so'* (Interview 4 appendix C). The secrecy around the whole situation made people question the honesty of the management and they surely did not see it as a no-nonsense mentality.

Another point to avoid are double-bind communications, and although not intended to be double-bind, some could be conceived that way. For example, the sick leave policy that was changed. Introducing one or two unpaid waiting days (one the first time you call in sick, 2 days the next time, up till a total of 7 days a year) when you call in sick. If you do not call in sick for a whole quarter, you get a 'bonus day' so you can possibly get four extra days off if you did not call in sick. Although meant as a way to reward people that never call in sick and dissuade people to call in sick too often, managers and supervisors were worried that this would feel like an extra punishment atop of being sick. In the conversation with the new interim production manager (Personal Communication, August 24, 2022) he mentioned that people feel like they are pressured to work, even when they are sick. This shows the employees that Comfoor, apparently, does not care about their wellbeing.

## **Consensus**

Consensus among principal decision makers seems to not always be present within Comfoor. A notable example of this, is the fact that the team leaders are often not well informed and do not know how to communicate the message upper management tries to convey or they do not know what the message is supposed to be. A team leader stated that he/she was not informed on what the management team was working on, he/she mentioned a proposed policy change but followed with *'but that's what I heard from the employees.'* (Interview 1 appendix C). This signals to employees that there is little consensus between the people thinking of the message and the ones partly tasked with conveying it. This does not necessarily mean that there is no consensus between these groups, it might just be a case of poor communication.

Fairness is also an important condition for consensus to occur among employees. Fairness is strongly connected to the transparency of the HR system. If practices are transparent employees can see for themselves if they are fair. If it is not transparent, they have to guess and this would more quickly lead to the suspicion a practice is not fair. There was very little mention of things being not handled fairly or employees not being treated equal. A very important side note is the salary paid to employees. This is not seen as a fair compensation of the work done. This was already explained in more detail under the HR practices section.

In conclusion, especially the conflicting HRM messages are problematic. The lacking consistency between what is espoused and what employees infer, leads to a weak situation as defined by Bowen and Ostroff (2004). The inconsistency has more direct negative effects as well, people feel used and unheard by the management and the organisation as a whole.

These direct negative effects are likely to incentivise people to leave. The conflicting HRM messages and lacking consistency makes it increasingly hard to create a strong situation and thus a strong organisational climate. In the case of Comfoor, the lack of a strong situation might not necessarily lead to turnover directly but creating a strong situation might help increase commitment and lower the existing turnover.

### Collective attitudes/perceptions

#### Leadership/management quality

To accurately assess this antecedent, it is important to underline that the leadership situation within the production department changed during the duration of the research. As already mentioned in the case description, the production manager of Comfoor got ill during the research. Around the same time, this was also the case for one of the team leaders. The production manager was replaced by an external interim manager while the team leader was partly replaced internally. This results in a situation where the last semi-structured interviews have been conducted when the interim production manager had been working at Comfoor for around seven weeks. The rest of the data refers to the original leadership situation.

The data from the exit forms and employee satisfaction surveys paints a rather positive picture of the antecedent of Management/leadership quality. The exit forms did contain some negative evaluations of leadership, some remarks that exemplifies this are *'take other people's feelings into account'* and *'show understanding for mistakes'*. Another person mentioned *'(the production manager) always seemed very busy, this made asking questions very difficult'*. Most of the forms, however, were positive and most respondents did not write down a tip for their, now former, supervisor.

The same sentiment was present in the employee satisfactions surveys of both 2019 and 2021, although a bit more critical. Direct supervisors score a 3.2 on a five-point scale in the employee satisfaction survey of 2021. Most people got enough feedback from their supervisors and felt safe to say and ask their supervisor what they want. However, 25% of the employees were dissatisfied (4% very dissatisfied and 21% dissatisfied) with the recognition they got from their direct supervisor. 28% percent of people are dissatisfied (5% very dissatisfied and 23% dissatisfied) with how their direct supervisor deals with problems on the shopfloor. As added reactions, people mention that the way of communicating is not always pleasant and that there is a need for recognition. In the, less recent, employee satisfaction survey of 2019, employees are very pleased with their supervisors, and they score a 4.1 on average.

During the conversations with managers, however, three non-production managers explicitly voiced their concern that the Management/leadership style of the production manager might be causing high turnover. They put forward that the production manager had a very 'direct way' of management that some described as micromanaging. This manager was described as having a very strong focus on production and its goals and less on the people working in the production. The managers said that they, personally, liked to leave more responsibility to the employees themselves instead of controlling and surveying everything. This seems to seep through in how the production side of Comfoor deals with requests for time off. Often the requests for time off from employees are rejected on the basis of not knowing 'how busy' it will be at that time and thus time off is not granted. There appeared to be very little room for

negotiation as it was described by multiple managers as a 'no is no' approach by the production manager. This further exemplifies the strong focus on the production and less on people. This seems contradictory with the information found in earlier discussed documents, this might be explained by the fact that the exit forms were not filled in by many people and thus, might not show the full picture. Another possible reason is the fact that, since the employee satisfaction survey of 2021 the production got a lot busier, as did the production manager. This might have led to a change in behaviour that might explain the difference in sentiment between the documents and the rest of the data.

The results of the questions about leadership were mixed. The responses of former production employees resulted in a 2.9 average (5 point scale) score for the LMX construct (3.04 including former office employees). The respondents were divided regarding a lot of the questions. The participants were asked if their supervisor was personally willing to help them solve problems on the job. The answers to this question were mostly neutral (40%) and were equally divided between (dis)agree (both 20%) and strongly (dis)agree (10%). The following statement scored the poorest with an average of 2.78 (excluding office employees). With this statement participants were asked if their supervisor understood their problems and what they needed. 5.56% of people answered strongly disagree, 50% answered disagree, 5.56% answered neutral and 38.89% answered agree. The next statement scored slightly higher with a 2.83 average. Respondents were asked if they think their work relation with their supervisor was effective, 11.11% answered strongly disagree and 27.78% answered disagree. 33.33% was neutral and 22.22% did agree and 5.56% strongly agreed.

From these results it seems that former employees of Comfoor did, mostly, trust their supervisor so that they would even defend his/her decisions while he/she was not there. However, there is certainly debate about the effectiveness of the working relationship with their supervisor. Also, there were a lot of employees (10 of 18) that felt that their supervisor did not understand what they needed as employees.

As a last question the respondents were asked what they would give as a tip to their former supervisor. These tips can be divided into three categories. The first category is listening, quotes like *'listen more to your colleagues'* or simply *'listen better'* show that people did not feel that their supervisors were listening to them. Another key point can be called understanding/appreciation. This is signified in quotes like *'take people seriously and first and foremost listen better'* or *'sometimes show more understanding for employees that have a hard time at home'*. Another telling quote is *'realise you work with blood pressure not with hydraulics, in other words you work with people not with machines.'* Another theme that was less prevalent but still stood out, was the supervisors' way of communicating. One employee gave the following tip *'Never lash out at an employee and always remain respectful.'* Another quote that shows employees do not always approve of the way of communication chosen by the supervisor is *'Do not negatively address the employee every time something goes wrong but sometimes tell an employee when they are doing a great job.'*

The employees seem to be missing a personal touch from their supervisors, they want to be heard and valued by their supervisor. Some people explicitly mention the focus on production

numbers *'do not look at the numbers to see how good a person is (at their job) and give a person the chance to learn everything.'*

In the semi-structured interviews the interviewees were asked to compare the current situation, with the interim manager at the helm, with the former situation with the, now sick, production manager. One interviewee describes it as follows *'after (production manager's) departure actually. Then the whole cesspool opened up.'* (Interview 1 appendix C). It became increasingly apparent that the new leadership style was perceived as more pleasant, *'I just had bad luck that I had this manager. I now found out, with a temporary supervisor for three months, how I have brightened up'* (interview 4 appendix C). The more delegating style of management, giving more responsibility to employees was appreciated *'(Interim manager) just says, I think your department works nicely, I hear no one talk bad about it. Do your thing!'* (Interview 3 appendix C). They described the original production manager as micromanaging, *'trying to control every dot and comma'* (interview 4 appendix C). The communication was also better according to the interviewees, they mentioned that the interim manager came by more often to check if everything went well and they got more explanation why, for example, a budget is feasible or not. *'With (production manager) it was only a yes or a no'* (Interview 2 appendix C). Another interesting note is the approach towards days off. The interim manager was way more flexible with approving requests for days off, saying that your private life comes before work (Interim manager, personal communication, August 24, 2022).

Not only the flexibility was appreciated but this also led employees to feel like the manager understood them and valued them personally. This was also clearly visible during the workday in the production. Employees spoke very highly of the interim manager and his consideration for the employees. A story circulated where an employee broke out in tears when the interim manager told her that she could start three hours later because she had a doctor's appointment for her child. The manager explained that her private life was more important than three hours of work. She was very thankful and said that this was really unexpected considering her previous experiences.

Not every respondent was as positive though. One of the respondents fulfils the role as team leader. This respondent leads one of the two shifts under the (interim)production manager. He/she voiced that the interim production manager was overly concerned with *'my people'* and this led to a situation in which *'I was not able to win the trust of the employees'* (interview 1 appendix C). The team leader said the following *'I was already 5-0 down because I always had to say no because of (production manager). Now with (interim production manager) I am, in an instant 10-0 down. ... he goes around saying yes to everything.'* (Interview 1 appendix C). The team leader does also agree that the original production manager had a micromanaging style and was hard to argue with.

One interesting fact to know, is that during the time that the interim manager was working with Comfoor (from July until the end of September), no one left the company (HR manager, personal communication, October 24, 2022).

Overall, the Management/leadership quality antecedent can be safely said to be problematic within Comfoor. The directive and production focused style of leadership is likely to have

contributed to the high turnover ratio. The interim manager working within the production of Comfoor seems to have initiated a turnaround concerning this antecedent with a more people focused leadership style.

#### Climate/culture

In the employee handbook of 2022, the core values of Comfoor are presented front and centre. These give an insight in what the culture and climate of Comfoor should look like. The handbook states that Comfoor wants to create a pleasant working environment for their employees and that they do this by '*open and honest communication*' and by '*stimulating each other towards developing on emotional and social values*'.

Furthermore, they have formulated four core values, being: *expertise*, *passionate*, *responsible*, and *listening ears* (Employee Handbook 2022, Personal Communication, 2022). With *expertise*, Comfoor expects employees to try to keep their knowledge up to date and to share their knowledge with colleagues. They also expect employees to be open to feedback from their colleagues.

With the core value of *passionate* comes additional expected behaviours. Comfoor wants employees to 'go the extra mile'. They want employees to feel responsible for their own input, the end product and the achieved results. With the core value of *responsible*, Comfoor wants the employee to show concern for other employees and be social towards each other. The last core value is '*listening ears*'. Comfoor wants the employees to listen to each other and the customer.

On the website of Comfoor (Comfoor, n.d.) the core values, also found in the employee handbook, are repeated but it focuses more on what this means for a (potential) customer. In the annual HR report of 2021 (Personal Communication, 2021), there is a prominent section concerning the training of employees to 'keep their knowledge up to date' (p.8).

In the evaluation forms, the new hires often mention the friendliness, collegiality, and helpfulness of their new colleagues. In the exit forms, the leaving employees were asked to rate the communication and atmosphere between their direct colleagues. With a few exceptions they were both rated very positively. The exceptions were mostly linked to high work pressure making the communication and atmosphere more tense and less enjoyable. In the employee satisfaction surveys both of 2019 and 2021, the atmosphere between co-workers is often mentioned as a strong point of Comfoor. This seems to show that the *responsible* core value explained earlier, is actually translated into the real culture and climate of Comfoor. One of the managers, who started working for Comfoor eight months ago, further supports this point by saying that he/she immediately felt that everyone is willing to help each other.

In the conversations with managers, they point to the fact that the customer centric way of thinking within Comfoor is very important. They are willing and able to listen and subsequently adapt to the wishes of the customer.

One of the team leaders mentioned that the employees that work in the production show little initiative and do not take responsibility for the production process. The team leader does



not think employees 'go the extra mile' as mentioned in the employee handbook but come to Comfoor just to earn their pay and go home. When this team leader was asked what he/she looks for in an employee, he/she said that it is important that employees do not nag and just do their job (also mentioned in the HR system). The production manager said during the conversation that Comfoor is organised too 'sweet' considering absenteeism.

Employees seem to feel like there are no listening ears from the management team and their supervisors. As seen under the leadership and management quality antecedent, the answers from the questionnaire showed that the former employees would have liked more understanding and appreciation from their supervisors. They feel like they go the extra mile and work hard but are not rewarded or appreciated for doing so. Shown in the following quote '*no matter how hard you tried it was not appreciated*'. One quote, already used for the pay antecedent is especially telling '*Employees do not feel valued at all! They (Comfoor) only ask things of them and they get nothing in return.*' (Interview 1 appendix C).

So, it seems like the part of the management believes that employees are not *passionate* enough, but a lot of employees think they are not being listened to and are only asked things without getting anything in return. Behaviours that should be rewarded and supported are not in reality. From reading the handbook, it is expected that you would see a situation in which people are passionate about their job and are taking initiative to make things better, both for their colleagues and customers. In reality employees are expected to just do their job and not nag while doing it. In their eyes, they are expected to go the extra mile while not being paid accordingly and not getting the appreciation they would expect. This disconnect and the subsequent negative feelings the employees of Comfoor experience can be expected to be a driving factor of the high turnover.

#### Met expectations

The evaluation forms are completed by employees that, at that point, have been working for Comfoor for six to eight weeks. This form contained a question asking the employees if their function is as they expected beforehand. Almost everyone states that the function is as expected, some even praising the accurateness of the vacancy. In two instances, the expectation of the employee did not fully line up with the real situation. In one instance the work was a bit more intensive than expected and one person (a team leader) thought there would be less administrative/process work and more time spent with the employees he/she was leading.

In the conversations with managers, most managers were not overly concerned with the fact that Comfoor was causing unrealistic expectations with their employees. Some stressed that it is important that the employees fit within the organisation and giving a realistic representation of the organisation is important so employees can see for themselves if they would fit.

In the questionnaire for former employees, the respondents were asked to what extent the work they did matched what they expected beforehand. Most people answered 'most of the time' (47.62%). 9.52% of people answered 'always', while 33.33% answered 'sometimes' and 9.52% almost never. After that item, the respondents were asked to give an example of a

situation in which their expectation did not match reality. One of the most present themes was the emphasis on production numbers and the pressure that emphasis creates. They expected a more relaxed atmosphere especially for employees that were recently hired and still had a lot to learn. Multiple people did not feel valued by the company. Some did extra work that was not compensated, and others felt like their hard work was not appreciated enough, *'the last two years I felt more like a number'*.

The next item considering expectations asked the respondents to describe an instance in which they expected different from Comfoor, not necessarily in working activities but overall. The most present theme can be described as 'understanding'. Some people expected more understanding for their personal situation at home or consideration for their mental or physical health. Others expected more understanding considering their working conditions and would have liked that their concerns and ideas for change were taken seriously.

Other present themes are appreciation and (lack of) communication. Respondents working in production expected more recognition and appreciation from the office side of Comfoor and the management team in particular. One respondent's answer summarizes this point *'Show more interest, think along, and consider ideas and show appreciation. The production cannot function without the office and the other way around.'*

Overall, it is difficult to determine if the expectations of the employees of Comfoor are met and if this could be causing the high turnover ratio. The function employees fulfil generally turns out as expected by the employees. What is often not according to expectation is the focus on production numbers. Additionally, employees expected more recognition and appreciation for their work. They also expected more understanding from their supervisors in certain instances, regarding their psychical and mental health. It seems that job related expectations are met but 'human' expectations are not always fulfilled, as already described under the Management/leadership quality antecedent.

#### [Related to collective characteristics](#)

Collective characteristics are often used as control variables in turnover studies to guard against alternate explanations. In the case of Comfoor, there are a few of these characteristics that should be considered as to prevent accrediting turnover to antecedents that can also be explained by a more common cause.

As for member characteristics, one characteristic of Comfoor to take into consideration is the male/female distribution of employees. 76% of employees are female, with the average age of 42. Lots of employees are mothers with (young) children (HR manager, Personal Communication, March 15, 2022). This in and of itself is not necessarily problematic, but it becomes so in combination with the working hours of Comfoor. In the conversations with managers, every manager mentioned that the shift style working hours of Comfoor were a likely cause for turnover. Especially for employees that have children. They stated that a lot of employees with children want to drop off their children in the morning or pick them up in the afternoon. When working the morning shift (06:00 – 13:00) it is impossible to bring your children and when working the afternoon shift (13:00 – 20:00) you are unable to pick up your children and have dinner with them. This is (slightly) better workable in a 09:00 – 17:00

scenario, although longer from home it is possible to bring your children to school or day-care in the morning and pick them up before dinner.

When the respondents of the questionnaire were asked why they left Comfoor. The working hours came up the same number of times as the paid salary. When asked what their current employer (if applicable) did better quotes like these were not uncommon, *'Working hours are much better, (8:30 – 17:00) I can work for 8 hours, and I can bring and get my children myself.'*

In terms of establishment characteristics there is one general characteristic of the work activities within Comfoor that should be taken into consideration. Making Comfoor's products requires a lot of delicate handwork. This had led to multiple people having problems with their physical health. Four(!) of the 21 respondents (18 were working in production) mentioned problems with their physical health, like carpal tunnel syndrome, as their main reason for leaving Comfoor. It is important for Comfoor to take this into account and to keep addressing this issue. Comfoor is already planning to implement shorter stints of the most intensive work (both in terms of 'screenwork' and handwork) in order to prevent these cases. They have also conducted a preventive medical examination (preventief medisch onderzoek (PMO) in Dutch) to shed light on how big the issue is and how to address it (Comfoor, Personal Communication April 10, 2022).

The last characteristic that should be considered is the state of the Dutch labour market, already discussed in the introduction. The significant number of open vacancies offer a lot of opportunities for people to switch jobs. The competition between organisations may result in more favourable conditions for employees when negotiating new terms of employment. This situation may strengthen the effect of the other antecedents. For example, in a situation with less available jobs, the not-so-great relationship with your supervisor and the relatively low pay might not be enough of a reason to make you leave the organisation. But since there are numerous opportunities with other organisations and they are openly advertising the amount of money you can make there. Employees might be inclined to leave the organisation quicker as they would have done otherwise. One of the managers put it as the labour market being an 'employee market' (Personal Communication March 16, 2022) meaning they are the ones picking and choosing their jobs and the organisation they work for.

## 5. Conclusion and discussion

This study is aimed at answering the following research question: *‘What are the most influential causes for the high turnover ratio of Comfoor?’*

The answer to the research question will be discussed first. Subsequently the results of this study will be discussed in the light of what it means for future research and in relation to the existing literature.

To answer this question, a mixed method study was conducted. The most influential causes for the high turnover of Comfoor are the following antecedents: pay, Management/leadership quality, Climate/culture in conjunction with the HR system, lastly the working hours are a lead cause of the turnover the organisation is experiencing.

The pay employees of Comfoor receive is close to the minimum allowed salary in the Netherlands. Employees feel that the reward is inadequate in comparison to the work they have to put in. This is also acknowledged by the management of Comfoor.

Management/leadership quality is a more diverse antecedent. Especially since the production manager was substituted by an interim manager in the course of the research. Generally speaking, under the original production manager employees did not feel heard or appreciated. This is likely to heighten turnover as a supportive, people focused management style is proven to have a negative relation with turnover. The situation clearly changed when the interim manager started in the organisation. The more delegating and people focussed style of management was appreciated by the employees.

Another influential cause for the high turnover is the Climate/culture of Comfoor. Comfoor has a certain set of so-called espoused values that are not reflected by earlier stated antecedents like the (original) management style and the relatively low salary. Other practices do reflect these values, the training and development opportunities that Comfoor provides for example. The differing messages send by these practices do not create a strong situation from which a strong positive culture can arise that assists in decreasing turnover. Furthermore, there are more direct effects of the mismatch between espoused and inferred values. The employees of Comfoor feel used and not listened to, this is another reason for the high turnover ratio.

The working hours, organised in a two-shift format, are also influential as a cause of turnover. The morning (06:00 - 13:00) and afternoon (13:00 - 20:00) shift are difficult to incorporate in the personal life of employees, especially if they have children. This is a reason for people to leave the organisation.

These aforementioned antecedents cannot be seen as complete separate entities though. The low pay in isolation would, for a lot of employees, most probably, not be enough reason to leave Comfoor. The earlier mentioned reasons combined create a situation in which a lot of employees rather search for another job.

It appears that some antecedents strengthen the effect of others. In the case of Comfoor, the style of leadership severely impacts the culture and climate found in the organisation. The controlling and directive nature of the leadership creates a non-flexible, non-supportive culture and climate. The style of leadership also impacts the effect that the working hours have. In the time the interim manager was working in the organisation, the working hours

were less problematic as employees could take time off more often and employees were allowed to solve availability problems among themselves (by exchanging shifts for example). This is an example how Management and leadership quality has an effect on multiple antecedents, this is important to acknowledge when coming up with a solution to the problem of a high turnover ratio. Changing the working hours can affect turnover but might be unnecessary when the change of leadership already alleviates much of the negative effect. An initiative to change the Climate/culture of Comfoor to decrease the high turnover might be way less effective if not enough attention is paid to management and leadership quality.

Another point that characterises the situation at Comfoor is the difference between what is espoused in terms of values and focus (people versus production), on the website and in handbooks for example, and what is actually inferred by employees. It is hard to estimate what effect this has on turnover, especially in different contexts. In the case of Comfoor, employees feel used and unheard but there might be a variety of other outcomes, and these might change/strengthen depending on the severity and kind of the disparity. This is an interesting direction future research can be taken, as the effect of such a disparity can further help to explain why high collective turnover ratios might occur.

Additionally, for future research it would be very interesting to study the interconnecting nature of the antecedents of turnover further and possibly try to establish a hierarchy within a set of antecedents. This could assist in further explaining the process mechanisms behind each antecedent. This has already been pointed out by multiple researchers as a focus point for future research (e.g. Hausknecht & Trevor, 2011; Heavey et al., 2013) but is still a underdeveloped topic regarding (collective) turnover (Hom et al., 2017). In the case of Comfoor, the management and leadership antecedent appears to be the leading antecedent affecting the other antecedents. This does not necessarily mean that this is the case in every situation as dynamics might vary in different contexts.

## 6. Research limitations and relevance

This chapter contains the limitations of this research, these are important to be kept in mind when evaluating the results of this study. Subsequently the academic and practical relevance will also be discussed in this chapter.

Every study has its limitations, so inevitably this research has limitations too. Regarding the documentation of the research, the eight conversations with managers were not recorded. The reasons for this are stated earlier, due to the sensitive nature of the subjects and the non-existent relationship between me and the conversation partners, it was deemed likely they would answer less openly if the conversation was recorded. This does however hurt the repeatability of the research. It becomes harder for other researchers to conduct the research in exactly the same way as it was done in this instance. I did, however, take many notes during and after the conversations to recall the data as accurately as possible later.

Another point is the number of follow-up interviews that have been conducted. The four interviews may not have been enough to create a detailed picture that represents the entire population of employees working for Comfoor. The limited number of interviews is mostly due to the limited time available for the research. Comfoor wanted the conclusions and recommendations of the research on quite short notice as they were important for decisions the company was planning to take. Although the number of interviews is quite limited, I did speak to the people that were considered, both by me and the HR manager, knowledgeable about the topics. The four people came from different parts of the organisation, and data saturation was still achieved.

One last point, that is not necessarily a methodological shortcoming but more of a circumstance that makes it harder to perform the research in a repeatable and valid way. This circumstance is the constantly evolving and changing nature of the situation within Comfoor. Some key people left the organisation, and some interesting operational and policy changes were made during the time of conducting the research. This constantly changing situation made it increasingly difficult to create a research design and stick to it without it needing further change.

This research has a great practical relevance as it assists the management of Comfoor by providing them with a selection of leading causes for the high voluntary turnover they experience, and ways to solve them or alleviate their effects.

In terms of academic relevance, this research provides a case that was documented and analysed in detail, giving more insight into collective turnover and its antecedents and the interaction between these antecedents. Furthermore, solid options for future research are proposed based on a combination of already existing literature and results from this study.

## 7. Recommendations

The goal of this research is to give advice to the management of Comfoor on how to decrease the amount of voluntary turnover. Based on the conclusion and discussion chapter, three recommendations have been formulated.

In order to decrease voluntary turnover, the pay needs to be increased for the production employees. Market conformity is the most important aspect as the effect of pay on turnover can be expected to be negligible when pay is close to market conforming (Heavey et al., 2013). This would eliminate a common mentioned factor of why employees are leaving the organisation.

The next recommendation is concerned with Management/leadership quality, although a lot has changed with respect to leadership, it is important to make sure that this antecedent does not become problematic again in the future. Although the interim manager already headed in the right direction, it is important to make sure the people that occupy this position in the future are proven to be more 'people focused' as opposed to 'production focused' (Blake & Mouton, 1967). By assigning the position to a manager that is more prone to focus on the needs of employees the chances of high LMX scores and a supportive relationship between employee and manager increases. There are very explicit examples of ways the new manager could do this, that would all improve on the original situation. Being more flexible with time off for instance, this is appreciated on its own, but it also shows employees that their manager values their personal life and their wellbeing. Another action is showing more appreciation for the (amount of) work the employees deliver. In the old situation, employees felt unappreciated and undervalued. By showing more appreciation both in spoken terms but also through salary, these feelings could be turned around.

What makes the above points (in the original state) even more problematic, is the combination with the espoused values of Comfoor. The promised 'personal approach' and the 'listening ears' for example make the original situation all the more painful, as the inferred values are radically different from the espoused ones. One major recommendation is to increase the consistency between espoused values and the actual 'messages' sent to employees. Both in terms of the HR system and in leadership practices. It would be beneficial to formulate a specific message that Comfoor (especially HR) wants to communicate to its employees. This message can be used as a guideline to align practices and behaviours to. This can be done by rethinking the espoused values with the principal HR decision makers, both the management team and the team leaders. What does Comfoor want to offer their employees? Answering this question and coming to a consensus formulates the (HR)message that Comfoor wants to send. The next step is to align the practices and behaviours with this message. Say, for instance, that Comfoor would really choose for valuing a 'personal approach' and 'listening ears' and reflect these values in their day-to-day practices and behaviour. For a personal approach it would be fitting to have a more flexible approach to time off for example. For 'listening ears' a people focussed management style would be fitting. In addition, one could say that when you want to send the message to employees that you have 'listening ears' for their problems, the problem of insufficient pay would have been addressed, in some capacity, already.

There is a dual positive effect to this way of working. By having a specific message, it is easier for employees to understand the message Comfoor is trying to send. Simultaneously the message acts as a guideline for the decisionmakers and 'performers' of the message to align their actions with. This is more prone to create a 'strong situation' as described by Bowen & Ostroff (2004), in which there is no mismatch between espoused and inferred values. Such a strong situation is more prone to create culture that people will feel commitment towards and thus lowering turnover (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). In the case of Comfoor, by really acting out their message of a 'personal approach' and 'listening ears', the feelings of not feeling appreciated and valued would decrease and so would the voluntary turnover.

Although the shift style working hours are a leading cause of turnover. Completely abolishing this system is not feasible due to the number of products that have to be produced and the limited space available in the building. It is not possible to fit that amount of production in just an 8-hour day shift. However, with a more people focussed production manager and more flexibility surrounding these hours, a lot of difference can be made. For employees to have an exception here and there to better combine their personal life with the shift hours would help alleviate the negative effect.



## Literature

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## Appendices

### A. Guideline conversations with managers

#### **Algemeen**

Wat is uw functie? Wat houdt dat precies in/ wat zijn uw werkzaamheden?

Wat is de taak van jullie afdeling? / Wat zijn de werkzaamheden?

Aantal werknemers?

#### **Algemeen Comfoor**

##### **Product/market/technology**

Wat zijn belangrijke aandachtspunten voor Comfoor om effectief te zijn als bedrijf.

Wat vinden jullie klanten het belangrijkste? Kwaliteit, snelheid, flexibiliteit etc./ waar onderscheidt Comfoor zich in?

Eventueel: is de organisatie effectief ingericht of zijn veranderingen nodig? Eventueel: wat is de grootste kans en wat is het grootste knelpunt voor de organisatie?

##### **Organisational culture**

Als u de cultuur bij Comfoor zou moeten omschrijven, hoe zou u dat doen? (communicatie, houding etc.)

Zijn medewerkers betrokken bij de algemene bedrijfsvoering of zijn ze vooral gefocust op hun eigen functie/afdeling?

##### **Social/cultural**

Wat zijn de principes achter het HR beleid? (Verwijs naar de no-nonsense mentaliteit/korte lijnen bv)→linken aan cultuur

Hoe gaat Comfoor om met zijn medewerkers

Hoe werk je binnen Comfoor samen.

##### **HR practices**

###### **- Ontwikkelingsmogelijkheden**

Eventueel: wat zijn de aandachtspunten op het gebied van kennis en vaardigheden of houding en gedrag?

Is er volgens u genoeg mogelijkheid om jezelf door te ontwikkelen en nieuwe dingen te leren?

Kan het management zich ook nog verder ontwikkelen? Wat voor trainingen of opleidingen zit u aan te denken?

Is dat in de functies die u overziet ook het geval?

Wat zijn de mogelijkheden waar u van weet?

Wordt daar ten volle gebruik van gemaakt denkt u?

Waar zitten knelpunten? (Geen wetenschap van, lastig te regelen etc.)

- **Verzuimbeleid**

Bent u zelf tevreden over het verzuimbeleid?

Zijn er problemen/ klachten?

Eventueel: zitten medewerkers goed in hun vel? / Zie je een verhoogd risico op uitval van sommige collega's in het team?

- **Werkdruk**

Wat vindt u van de werkdruk voor uzelf?

Wat vindt u van de werkdruk binnen uw afdeling?

Waar naar mogelijke invloedrijke factoren, zowel positief als negatief

Misschien interessant: hoe komt het dat de werkdruk eventueel te hoog is?

- **Beloning**

Denkt u dat loon voor de medewerkers een motiverende factor is?

Zou het voor sommige een reden zijn om te vertrekken?

- **Werktijden/Pauzes**

*Productie*

Heeft u het idee dat de medewerkers onder u tevreden zijn met de werktijden, de indeling, lengte etc.

*Kantoor*

Ik hoorden dat jullie op het moment ook veel thuiswerken, functioneert dat goed?

Eventueel: Is er voldoende flexibiliteit qua indeling van de werkzaamheden, pauzes e.d.?

- **Evaluatie**

Evalueren jullie bij Comfoor de performance? van de medewerkers? Hoe doen jullie dat?

Op welke vlakken zouden daar nog verbeteringen aan kunnen worden aangebracht?

- **Structuur (*Alleen bij tijd over*)**

Op basis van werkzaamheden vragen hoe werknemers zijn ingedeeld en samenwerken.



## **Beslissing structuur rondom HR beleid/strategie**

Hebben jullie invloed op het HR beleid? Wat de gesprekspunten zijn of delen van de invulling bijvoorbeeld?

Hoe kunnen jullie laten weten dat iets niet werkt of dat medewerkers niet tevreden zijn met iets?

Hoe kan u aan die HR-informatie komen, bent u daar tevreden over?

Hebben jullie op strategisch niveau invloed? (Linken aan expertise afdeling, met kennis over x input geven qua strategie)

Hoe worden jullie op de hoogte gehouden met betrekking tot berichtgeving van hogerop of andere afdelingen?

## **Leadership management quality**

**Communicatie:** Vragen in cultuur, leidinggeven. Indirect in evaluatie,

### **Leiderschapsstijl:**

Hoe zou u, uw eigen leiderschapsstijl omschrijven?

Eventueel: Welk type leidinggevende past het beste bij Comfoor? Over welke eigenschappen moet deze beschikken?

Wat zijn belangrijke waarden of kernpunten die u over wil brengen als u leidinggeeft?

Wat vindt u belangrijk?

Past dat altijd goed binnen de organisatie, cultuur en procesgewijs?

Motivatie van persoon zelf en werknemers onder zich

Waar haalt u zelf de meeste motivatie uit?

## **Verloop:**

Merkt u veel van het verloop in de organisatie?

Is bekend hoeveel medewerkers (latente) vertrekplannen hebben?

Wat zijn denkt u de voornaamste redenen? Geen zekerheid nodig, hersenspinsels zijn ook al interessant.

Zijn er bijvoorbeeld HRM praktijken die aangepast zouden kunnen worden?

Moet er wat gebeuren op het gebied van communicatie, evaluatie etc.

## B. Questionnaire questions

Beste,

Mijn naam is Luke Druijff en ik doe namens de Radboud Universiteit onderzoek bij Comfoor. Dit onderzoek gaat over de medewerkerstevredenheid, het HR-beleid en het personeelsverloop bij Comfoor. Ik ben erg geïnteresseerd in hoe jij je tijd bij Comfoor hebt ervaren en wat volgens jou verbeterpunten zijn voor Comfoor als organisatie.

Ik doe dit onderzoek om uiteindelijk aanbevelingen te kunnen geven aan Comfoor om de huidige situatie te verbeteren. Jouw antwoorden op deze vragenlijst zijn belangrijk om goede aanbevelingen te kunnen doen! De antwoorden worden anoniem verwerkt en verder niet door medewerkers van Comfoor ingezien.

Het invullen duurt ongeveer **10 minuten** en als bedankje ontvang je een bol.com waardebon van **25 euro**.

Alvast hartelijk bedankt voor de moeite!

Q2

Wat is jouw geslacht?

- ☐ Vrouw
- ☐ Man
- ☐ Anders, namelijk:
- ☐ Beantwoord ik liever niet

Q3

In welke leeftijdscategorie val je?

- ☐ 18 - 25 jaar
- ☐ 26 - 35 jaar
- ☐ 36 - 50 jaar
- ☐ 51 - 65 jaar
- ☐ 66 jaar en ouder

Q4

Welke functie vervulde je bij Comfoor?

Q5

Wat zijn de voornaamste redenen dat je bent vertrokken bij Comfoor?

Ben je werkzaam, of werkzaam geweest bij een andere werkgever na je vertrek bij Comfoor?

- ☐ Ja  
☐ Nee

Q7

Is de functie die je na je vertrek vervuld(e) ongeveer gelijk aan de functie die je had bij Comfoor? Zo niet wat zijn de grootste verschillen?

- ☐ Ja  
☐ Nee

Q8

Wat was voor jou de eerste reden om bij deze werkgever te solliciteren?

Q30

Is het aantal uren die je werkt (of hebt gewerkt) ongeveer gelijk aan dat bij Comfoor?

- ☐ Ja, het aantal uren is ongeveer gelijk.  
☐ Nee, het aantal uren verschilt met Comfoor

Q24

Zijn de werktijden die je nu hebt (of had) ongeveer gelijk aan die bij Comfoor?

- ☐ Ja, de werktijden zijn ongeveer gelijk.  
☐ Nee, de werktijden verschillen met Comfoor

Wat verschilt voornamelijk in de werktijden, het aantal uren of de contractduur vergeleken met die bij Comfoor?

Ervaar je deze verandering als positief?

- ☐ Ja  
☐ Nee  
☐ Neutraal

Q9

Wat doet/deed deze werkgever beter in vergelijking met Comfoor? Dit kunnen bijvoorbeeld voorwaarden zijn, werksfeer, planning etc.

Leiderschap LMX

Q10

De volgende statements gaan over je directe leidinggevende bij Comfoor. Je kunt met de bolletjes aangeven in hoeverre je het eens of oneens bent met deze statements.

	Zeer oneens	Oneens	Neutraal	Eens	Helemaal eens
Mijn leidinggevende wilde mij persoonlijk helpen bij het oplossen van problemen op het werk	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mijn werkrelatie met mijn supervisor was effectief	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ik had voldoende vertrouwen in mijn leidinggevende dat ik zijn/haar beslissingen zou verdedigen als hij/zij niet aanwezig was	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mijn leidinggevende hield rekening met mijn ideeën voor veranderingen	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mijn leidinggevende begreep mijn problemen en wist wat ik nodig had	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mijn leidinggevende zag wat ik kon en hoe ik mijzelf verder kon ontwikkelen	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q17

In hoeverre ben je het eens met dit statement?

	Zeer oneens	Oneens	Neutraal	Eens	Helemaal eens
Binnen Comfoor zijn er mensen die veel meer krijgen dan ze verdienen.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Binnen Comfoor zijn er mensen die veel minder krijgen dan ze verdienen.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Kun je verder uitleggen waarom je dat vindt?

Hartelijk dank voor het invullen van de vragenlijst!

Als je graag de Bol.com bon ontvangt van 25 euro dan kun je hier beneden het e-mail adres invullen waar de bon naartoe gestuurd kan worden.

**BELANGRIJK:** Je naam en e-mail adres worden alleen voor het versturen van de bon gebruikt! Daarna worden deze verwijderd. Comfoor krijgt jouw antwoorden, naam en e-mail adres niet te zien!

Voornaam:

E-mail adres:

### C. Guideline semi-structured interviews

#	Function	Time	Date	Online/Live
1	Teamleader	10:00	05-10-2022	Live
2	Head of logistics	10:00	16-09-2022	Live
3	Supervisor support custom fit	10:00	13-09-2022	Live
4	Technical Employee	12:00	13-09-2022	Live

Ik heb al eens eerder met je gesproken, dat ging meer over Comfoor in z'n algemeenheid maar wilde nu wat dieper ingaan op enkel het HR beleid en een stuk leiderschap bij Comfoor. Er is ondertussen ook al weer veel veranderd, dus als je denkt dat het van waarde is laat dan ook vooral weten of dit misschien wel onlangs veranderd is.

#### Leidinggevenden

Ik zou graag nog wat vragen stellen over de directe leiding op de productie:

Hoe zou je het leiderschap op de productie beschrijven, zowel de algemene productie managers als de teamleiders?

Zie je verschil sinds dat (interim Manager) hier rondloopt?

Zo ja, zie je dat verschil als positief of negatief?

Als je net zo'n reden zou moeten geven als voor het HR beleid. Wat voor bericht geeft X af als leidinggevende?

Kosten besparen, helpen service te verbeteren, het meeste werk uit werknemers halen of het welzijn van de medewerkers verbeteren?

Is dit bericht constant?

Verder doorvragen op effecten van en meningen over.

#### Kracht van het HRM systeem (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004)

Is het volgens jou duidelijk wat HR precies doet? Waar ze zich mee bezig houden? Waar zijn ze verantwoordelijk voor?

Als HR iets communiceert is dat dan duidelijk over het algemeen? Wat het doel is en wat er moet gebeuren?

Luisteren mensen hier over het algemeen ook naar denk je?

---

Wat vind jij zelf van de huidige planning met de ochtend en middagploegen?

Wat denk jij zelf over het loon wat Comfoor betaald?

Wat is denk je de reden voor het huidige verzuimbeleid met de wacht- en bonusdagen?

Is dat een vertaling van het doel om kosten te besparen?

Of om medewerkers te helpen zo goed mogelijke service aan de klant te verlenen

Doen ze dat om het welzijn van de medewerkers te verhogen? Zodat ze zich ook gewaardeerd en respecteert voelen?

Om het meeste werk uit de medewerkers te krijgen

Wat is over het algemeen het doel van HR binnen Comfoor denk je?

Denk je dat anderen daar hetzelfde over denken?

Denk je dat de besluitvormers achter het HR beleid het met elkaar eens zijn? Over het doel van het beleid maar ook de manier waarop?

Hoe zit dat met de uitvoerders van het beleid (productie leiding en teamleiding bijvoorbeeld)?

Is dit doel elke keer constant of schommelt dat doel per onderwerp? Of per bericht? (Consistency)

Komt het geen wat ze doen ook overeen met wat ze zeggen?

Wat zijn de kernwaarden van Comfoor denk jij?

Wordt dit gereflecteerd in de huidige situatie?