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Towards a better understanding of graduate programmes and their organisational impact

Evaluating the effects of a company's graduate programme

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Executive summary

Graduate programmes grow in popularity amongst companies and individuals, and many companies use them as valuable HRM tools. Multiple studies are focused on graduate programmes, with many focusing on specific elements of these programmes or on the impact they have on the individual level, and to a lesser extent on the organisational level. Many benefits of these programmes are found for the individual participants, but still literature remains scarce about the benefits these programmes could have on the companies themselves. For this study, the graduate programme of a global logistics company is studied with the goal to analyse its impact on both the individuals, and the company as a whole, and therefore contributing to the scientific literature on the relationship between HRM and organisational performance.

In order to achieve this goal, literature is reviewed on several topics. By analysing the current literature on the relationship between HRM and performance, a better understanding is developed about this relationship and its challenges. Furthermore, literature is studied on graduate programmes themselves and how they could be developed in order to be able to analyse the quality of a company's graduate programme. Besides this, to be even better able to study the relationship between a graduate programme and its impact on the company, the four levels of evaluating a programme are reviewed. After this, interviews were conducted to gather data about the elements of the company's graduate programme, the way it is structured, and about the impact it has on its participants and the company's performance.

When the data was collected, analysing it was the next step in order to answer this study's research question. First the programme is described in detail to have a clear view of everything it includes and the factors that influence the programme. After this, all the benefits that are mentioned in the interviews are elaborated on in two parts. First the benefits are stated for the individual participants. It is found that the programme offers personal development, career development, extra opportunities, extra coaching, more networking, and a better understanding of the company. In the second part, the benefits on the organisational level are described. Four main benefits are found. First of all, the company is better able to attract talent. Secondly, the graduate programme contributes to the development of the entire workforce, therefore, as a third benefit, also playing a role in the enhancement of the operations efficiency. At last, the programme develops a pool of potential managers for in the future. After the benefits, critical comments given during the interviews are described as well. The report ends with the discussion of this research's limitations and provides suggestions for future studies regarding the same topic.

Introduction

Training employees was always an important task of the Human Resources Management (HRM) department of a company. There are multiple ways to develop employees and one of these tools is the use of graduate programmes (or called otherwise by companies and literature: traineeships or leadership development programmes). Many companies these days designed and implemented their own graduate programme, and they can be found in many organisations in profit, or non-profit, sectors (Collins & Holton, 2004; Good Education Group, 2019). These are programmes that last one or multiple years and provide graduates with the opportunity to start their career by participating in a structured programme where they rotate through different functions. It provides graduates with a chance to discover what professional field, or specific function, they like most and to gain experience on a broad level. Support is also an important aspect of graduate programmes. Companies facilitate this by linking the participants to a buddy or mentor, who can provide advice or guidance to help the graduate with building his or her early career path (Good Education Group, 2019).

These programmes are not only popular amongst companies, but also amongst graduates themselves (Hayman & Lorman, 2004). This results in a large number of applicants for the graduate programmes, and this gives companies the chance to recruit and select highly talented and motivated employees. Most HRM departments developed an extensive selection process, and use a graduate programme as a way to encourage graduates to show their skills before offering them a full-time contract (Harver, 2018). This gives companies the opportunity to use the graduate programme as an excellent HR tool to attract young talent to the company and making sure that there is a right fit between both parties.

One of these companies which uses a graduate programme is analysed in this study. It is a global logistics company, providing supply chain solutions present all over the world. This study focuses on the graduate programme of their business in Europa. It is in place for almost 25 years, originally part of the company they acquired, but now re-designed to fit with their culture and needs. It is a three-year long programme where participants rotate to a new function every year. Thanks to different forms of support, trainings, meetings, and other activities, the participants get the chance to develop themselves, and to build their own career path as a leader, specialist or sales employee in the company (found in company sources).

In scientific literature, a debate is going on about the relationship between HRM practices and organisational performance. Studies have shown that HRM practices, in the right conditions, and often combined as HRM systems, can have a positive impact on the performance of an organisation (Jiang, Takeuchi & Lepak, 2013). Regarding the right conditions, Bello-Pintado (2015) and other authors refer to this as the HRM practices having an internal fit with each other, and an external fit aligned with the

company's strategy and goals. For claiming this link between HRM systems and performance, multiple studies remain reluctant and treat the results with caution. According to Wall and Wood (2005), a relationship between HRM systems and performance is difficult to conclude since multiple factors can play a role in enhancing organisational performance. It is also more difficult to claim this since there are many types of performances that can be improved. Examples are financial performances like an increase in turnover or a decrease in costs, but also non-financial performances like the improvement of leadership or employee satisfaction.

A graduate programme, containing multiple HRM practices focused on a specific group of employees, can be seen as a unique and valuable HRM tool for the internal development of human and social capital (Lepak & Snell, 1999). Despite cautiousness by authors like Wall and Wood (2005) about the impact of HRM tools, multiple studies are conducted regarding graduate programmes. Often focused on specific topics, for example employee motivation, satisfaction, employability, knowledge development, talent acquisition and retention, studies find positive results linking graduate programmes with these topics (Pernick, 2001; McDermott, Mangan & O'Connor, 2006; Cesário & Chambel, 2017). Positive results for either graduates and companies. Studies are also conducted on specific elements of graduate programmes, like the importance of mentoring (Beecroft, Santner, Lacy, Kunzman & Dorey, 2006; Reiss, 2007; Clarke, 2017) or the use of assessment tools (Solanksy, 2010). Still, in most studies, also when companies promote their graduate programmes, the focus lies on the individual participants and what a programme can offer them and how it impacts their performance, and less is known about the benefits for the organisation as a whole. Therefore, this report fills a gap; it is an empirical study which focuses on the graduate programme of a logistics company and its link with the company's performance. The goal of this study is to see how, and at what level, a strongly embedded graduate programme can have an impact on the performance of an organisation. Because this is a qualitative study focused on finding a relationship between graduate programmes and organisational performance, there is an open view regarding the term performance. This means that this study does not specifically focus on single elements of performance, like productivity or profit, or non-financial results like communication or employee turnover, but that all elements will be taken into account when collecting the data. This study looks for all kinds of individual and organisational benefits that a graduate programme can have. Therefore, the following research question is formulated:

How does the graduate programme of Logistics BV contribute to the individual performance of the graduates and to the organisational performance of Logistics BV?

In order to answer the question, an empirical qualitative study is conducted at a logistics company. This report contains the following chapters. In the first chapter, the literature study is reviewed to gain a better understanding of the impact HRM can have on organisations' performance, how a graduate programme looks like and what benefits are already found. At last, literature is also

analysed on ways to effectively evaluate a graduate programme. Chapter two gives a clear view on the methodology that is used to answer the research question, and provides more detailed information about the company that is central in this research. After this, the analysis is done. The results of the analysis of the collected data are presented in chapter three. The next chapter, the discussion of this report, contains a critical review on the literature that is analysed, the outcomes of this study and the methodology that is used. This report ends with a conclusion.

Chapter 1. Literature review

To get a better understanding of graduate programmes and how they impact organisations, and to find a useful method to support analysing the data of this study, literature is reviewed on three topics. First, the literature on HRM & performance is studied, because as mentioned in the introduction, graduate programmes can be seen as important HRM tools. The second topic that is reviewed is about graduate programmes themselves, to learn what could include them and how they can be developed. At last, a useful programme evaluation model is studied and explained.

1.1 HRM & Performance

The last decades, scientific literature focused more and more on understanding how HRM relates and contributes to organisational performance (Jiang, Takeuchi & Lepak, 2013). Bello-Pintado (2015) stated that there is broad consensus that advanced HRM practices play an important role for a firm's success, but that there is "still an open debate about the configuration of HRM systems and their effectiveness" (p. 311). Many studies found significant positive prove of this link between HRM and performance. In the 1980s, these studies lay the foundation of this field of research and stated that HRM practices have to be integrated with the firm's strategy for a maximum effect (Paauwe, Wright & Guest, 2013). In 2007, Takeuchi, Lepak, Wang and Takeuchi found a relationship between HRM practices and company performance in Japanese firms and Boselie, Paauwe and Richardson (2003) concluded that a relationship between HRM and performance exists, but that the effect differs per sector. Another insight came from Jiang et al. (2013), expressing the importance of looking at this relationship from a multilevel perspective and accepting that HRM practices influence organisational outcomes on multiple levels (individual, team and organisational level).

Whether the concluded relationship is small or strong, Wall and Wood (2005) warn about this relationship by suggesting to treat the evidence with caution, because it remains hard to claim that the HRM system is responsible for the high performance of the company or that it is due to some other factor or individual contribution. Reasons for this are 1) the differences between used theories, 2) the HRM practices the studies focused on, and 3) what factors are used to measure performance.

First of all, a review study of Boselie, Dietz and Boon (2005) states that empirical studies mainly use three theories: the contingency theory, the resource-based view and the AMO framework. The last, and most popular one, stands for Ability, Motivation and Opportunity. In this framework, an HR practice influences performance when it enhances one's individual skills and competencies (Abilities), when it affects the employees' Motivation and commitment, and when it is designed in a way that it supports the Opportunities for employees to show their talents and skills (Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg &

Kalleberg, 2000; Boselie, 2010). For example, Cesário and Chambel (2017) found a positive relation between graduates perceiving training, as an HR practice, and affective commitment, meaning that receiving training resulted in the graduates being more motivated and willing to stay at the company. Intrinsic motivation also shows to influence graduates' motivation, in the sense that it directly relates to their work effort and work quality (Dysvik, Kuvaas & Buch, 2010). Therefore, it is suggested for organisations to make sure that graduates enjoy their work and consider it meaningful and interesting.

Furthermore, Paauwe et al. (2013) state that the "lack of consensus regarding what constitutes the correct set of HRM practices" (p. 7) is another reason for the struggles of linking HRM to organisational performance. Different studies focus on different HR practices and on top of that, studies also use different measurements or focus on either the organisational level or the individual level. At last, researchers also examine different types of organisational performances like profits, productivity, employee satisfaction or turnover. All this makes it harder to understand the relationship between HRM and a firm's performance.

Despite the aforementioned challenges, and to elaborate on the AMO framework as a theoretical base for linking HRM and performance, support is found in the literature for a way to optimise the HRM practices of a company in order to get a higher impact on the organisation's outcomes. Bello-Pintado (2015) and Jiang, Lepak, Hu and Baer (2012b) found empirical evidence of a positive effect of bundling HRM practices into HRM systems. By making use of the AMO framework, they concluded that HRM practices, combined into three bundles of practices (HRM systems) focused on enhancing employees' abilities, motivation and opportunities, and with internal and external fit, have a positive effect on the organisation's financial outcomes, either directly or indirectly. The bundling of HRM systems is important because individual HRM practices do not operate separately from each other (Jiang et al., 2012a; Jiang et al., 2013). Another critical aspect in these studies is the internal and external fit of the HRM practices. The HRM practices inside a bundle have to be consistent and can't contradict each other (internal fit), while at the same time have to be aligned with the company, its market and other external factors (external fit) (Bello-Pintado, 2015; Ridder, Baluch & Piening, 2011). If these conditions are present, HRM can have a positive impact on organisational outcomes.

To sum up, multiple studies found empirical evidence of a positive relation between HRM and performance by using different theories or frameworks, but there is still no wide consensus of this relationship because of the diversity of used HRM practices, theories and measurements.

The study of this paper focuses on the graduate programme of a logistics company. Their programme makes use of various HRM practices, like recruitment, training, coaching, career opportunities, job security and employee involvement (Jiang et al, 2012b; found in company sources) that are specifically aimed for its participants and are different from HRM practices for other

employees in the company. In line with this, Lepak and Snell (1999) developed a theory where they explain that HRM practices not only differ per company, but that also inside a company different practices, or bundles of them, exist for different groups. They created a model with four quadrants of human capital, based on the value and uniqueness of the employees. These four types are 1) developing human capital, 2) acquiring human capital, 3) contracting human capital, and 4) creating human capital alliances. The last two focus on creating external relations (working with people from outside the company) and the first two on internalising human capital (working with employees). Quadrant 1 contains the human capital that has a high value and high uniqueness, while quadrant 2 focuses on the employees with a high value but a low uniqueness. The employees that are part of a graduate programme, with its strong focus on internal development of company-specific skills and knowledge, can be placed in quadrant 1 (McDermott et al., 2006). In this quadrant the focus is on developing employees internally, creating long-term involvement with, and commitment towards the company. This helps firms “realise the benefits of these employees in terms of value-creating potential” (Lepak & Snell, 1999, p.36). Therefore, developing a graduate programme that enhances human and social capital among the graduates could lead to a competitive advantage by developing core knowledge employees for the company. The aim of this study is to evaluate the company’s graduate programme, in order to find out if, and how, it contributes to the individual and organisational performance. In addition, this study contributes to the current literature about HRM and performance by providing empirical data of the effects that HRM, via the implementation of a graduate programme, can have on a firm’s performance.

For the analysis of the data, and to answer the research question, studying this part of the literature provided a better understanding of the link between a graduate programme and organisational performance. From this literature it is also found that the AMO framework could be a useful tool to help analysing the impact that a graduate programme can have on a company by specifically linking it with the development of employees’ abilities, motivation and opportunities. In this study, there is no specific focus on types of performances that could be influenced by a graduate programme. All types of performances that are mentioned during the data collection are taken into account during the analysis of the data.

Before the results are presented and the research question is answered, this chapter further elaborates on previous studies about graduate programmes, in the literature also called leadership development programmes or traineeships. The next part contains general information about graduate programmes, why they are important, how they contribute, and how they can be evaluated.

1.2 Leadership development programmes

“Leadership matters to an organisation’s effectiveness” (Pernick, 2001, p. 429). Therefore, it is important for an organisation to be in possession of high-quality leaders and to retain them. Unfortunately, attracting and retaining these employees is not an easy task. One method for organisations to succeed in this is by developing and implementing a graduate programme. Multiple researchers studied these programmes and the effects, broad or specific, they could have. These studies mainly focus on the effects at the individual level, sometimes focused on one aspect, and less on the organisational level. One useful study that analyses the content of a graduate programme, or by him called a leadership development programme, is done by Pernick (2001). He recommends HR professionals to pay attention to nine determinants which can have a positive impact on the successfulness of a programme. Developing and implementing these programmes are costly, but once successful they could provide an organisation with qualitative leaders, which results in a well-led organisation that is able to attract qualitative employees, develop their competencies and knowledge, produce high levels of employee satisfaction, decrease employee turnover, attract and retain customers, and that has good financial results (Hayman & Lorman, 2004). Other important benefits for an organisation are having the control to align new leaders directly to the company culture and strategy, and the opportunity to develop the preferred / necessary skills and knowledge (Pernick, 2001; McDermott et al., 2006). Related to attracting and retaining employees, Cesário and Chambel (2017) studied the impact graduate programmes can have on these aspects. They analysed if there are any differences between graduate programme participants and employees who enter a company via the traditional way regarding their affective commitment and turnover intention. Although they found no significant differences between the two groups, both of them still showed significant positive relations “between perceived HRM practices and affective commitment and a negative relation with turnover intention” (p. 270). More specifically, they found that trainings have a positive effect on employees’ affective commitment, and that graduates negatively associated positive recruitment experience and positive training experience with turnover intentions, meaning that well received recruitment and training results in less people having the intention to leave the company. These results are in line with the study of May, Korczynski and Frenkel (2002) who proved that organisational commitment reduces employee turnover and absenteeism. This means that when graduate programmes are well implemented, graduates feel more valued and supported by the company and are more willing to develop their relationship to the company.

Getting highly satisfied employees thanks to a leadership development programme, as mentioned by Pernick as a possible result (2001), was the main focus of a study done by McDermott et al. in 2006. In contradiction to Pernick’s statement, they found that between two groups, the group

of graduates from the company without graduate programme had a higher satisfaction level than the group of graduates from the company with a graduate programme. As a main finding, they concluded that having a graduate programme does not necessarily mean that participants are satisfied with it. To achieve this, it is important to analyse what the graduates perceive as valuable and what can make them satisfied, but also what the organisation wants to achieve (McDermott et al., 2006). Van Dam (2003), mentioned that when companies offer functional flexibility, in the form of relocation, participation in trainings, and participation in activities to enhance career development, they enhance the motivation of the workforce, and can therefore influence their satisfaction levels.

Furthermore, literature stresses the use of some tools that can influence the outcome of a graduate programme. These tools are mentoring and the use of 360-degree assessments. First of all, mentoring is linking a programme participant to a person with experience in the same role, with the goal to provide support and help the participant become more comfortable and more secure in their role as leader (Reiss, 2007). Solansky (2010) found a significant, positive effect between the time invested by a mentor and the participant's willingness to share information (regarding leadership skills, questions and goals) with the mentor and other participants. Another study, on graduate nurses, showed that when receiving mentoring positively, a mentor can contribute to stress reduction, provide guidance and support during the programme, and positively influence retention and socialisation during work (Beecroft, Santner, Lacy, Kunzman & Dorey, 2006). When it comes to receiving support, Clarke (2017) found that the quality of the line managers involved in the programme had a large impact on the employability of the participants. Meaning that when participants received good support from their line managers, there is a larger chance of them developing the necessary knowledge and skills, and succeeding in the company and in their current role. This study also stated that good mentoring often came from managers who had participated in graduate programmes themselves and therefore know what current participants need and expect (Clarke, 2017). Besides participants learning from their experienced mentors (or managers), there is a growing amount of literature on the learning effects of this relationship in the opposite way. Kaše, Saksida and Mihelič (2019) studied that mentoring can have a reversed effect, leading to the older person developing digital skills and the young employee developing his or her mentoring skills. Therefore, intergenerational collaboration can be an interesting HRM tool for the development of employee skills.

The second tool that is often used in leadership development programmes is a 360-degree assessment of the leadership skills of participants. This is a way of evaluating how a participant is behaving in his or her role as leader / manager and to measure if there is a development in leadership skills and if the programme has its effect or not. The benefit of using a 360-degree assessment is that not only the participant's own view on his or her leadership skills is evaluated, but also the views of co-workers or the participant's own supervisor. This provides a more accurate evaluation of the

participant's leadership skills and a clearer view on what to improve in the future (Solankysy, 2010). Before using this tool, the context of the graduate programme needs to be taken into account, because this tool can be more difficult to use if the participants rotate for example every three months instead of once per year. The shorter the rotations, the more difficult it can be to evaluate someone. Alimo-Metcalf (1998) supports the effectiveness of a 360-degree assessment, but noted that it has to be developed thoughtfully and that the results have to be used with caution, because multiple factors can influence them, like differences in self- and subordinates' ratings, gender, or the experience with the process can differ for the graduates or his or her colleagues / supervisors.

1.2.1 Developing a leadership development programme

In order to achieve all these effects and benefits, and to make the investment in a leadership development programme worth it, the programme must be developed thoroughly to fit with the needs of the organisation and to make sure that its participants are satisfied and motivated (McDermott et al., 2006). As mentioned earlier, following the nine determinants described by Pernick could be a useful guideline, because it provides a structured overview of all the elements that could be of importance for the successfulness of a graduate programme, and it takes the context of the company into account as well (2001). Besides Pernick, Donald Kirkpatrick (2006) also provides a list of determinants that he recommends should be considered and planned carefully when an organisation is about to design a training programme if they want it to be effective. His list, consisting of ten determinants which are mainly focused on small trainings, but most of them also being relevant for larger ones, like graduate programmes, contains much overlap with the list of Pernick. Both lists are chosen from the literature because they are exhaustive and elaborated on in-depth. Furthermore they show overlap with each other, suggesting that the determinants are relevant, and they complement each other. The relevant elements of both lists are elaborated on in this paragraph, following the chronological order that is suggested by both authors. In this part, both the terms *leadership development programme* and *training programme* are used since these are the once used by the authors Pernick and Donald Kirkpatrick. When reading these terms, the same is meant when the term *graduate programme* would have been used.

Before selecting any participant for the programme, both authors start with stressing the importance of making clear what the goals of the programme will be. Kirkpatrick (2006) suggests that these goals should focus on different levels, and that these have to be aligned with his four levels of evaluation, which are elaborated on later in this chapter. These goals could focus for example on:

1. The results the company wants to achieve.
2. The behaviour of the employees that is necessary to achieve these results.

3. The knowledge, skills and attitudes that need to be developed to reach the desired behaviour. Pernick's (2001) first determinant is deciding *the selection criteria for the programme*. These criteria could be related to the personality traits that participants need to have and he recommends that these have a good fit with the company and role demands for now and in the future. Looking at these role demands, they should not only be focused on leadership skills, but could include technical skills as well. His second determinant is *defining the leadership competencies* and can be related to the first one. This determinant suggests that the organisation identifies the competencies that a leader needs to have in order to be effective in the organisation. Different examples of leadership competencies are the willingness to help others, social intelligence, truthfulness, fairness, prudence, and the ability to manage conflicts and tolerate diverse views (Pernick, 2001; Conger & Riggio, 2006). Related to the earlier mentioned benefit of attracting qualitative employees when having a successful leadership development programme, Pernick also suggests that companies may strive for moral leadership as an important competency to help achieving this benefit. Therefore, defining this as one of the competencies and stating its importance when promoting the programme is not only a way to extend the quality of the company's leaders, but could also enhance the qualities of potential new employees.

When it is clear what the company needs and wants to achieve, and what kind of people they want to be part of the programme, both lists of Kirkpatrick and Pernick continue on the selection of these participants. For this, Pernick suggests to pay attention to the criteria for the advertisement of the programme, together with the method of evaluating and selecting the applicants and how to inform them about the decisions that are taken. For the advertisement of the programme it is recommended to mention for example the length of the programme, the kind of occupations that participants can have, and what kind of experience or educational requirements the applicant has to possess.

After this determinant, the authors start to focus on different parts of the programme. Donald Kirkpatrick (2006) focuses more on the details of the programme. He states that it is important for companies to pay attention to detail and that they should try to do anything to make the training as pleasant and accessible for everyone as possible. This positively enhances the attitudes of the participants towards the training programme. Part of this positive contribution is the influence a good instructor (or in the case of graduate programmes, a manager or mentor) can have on the programme. They have to be qualified and in the possession of the right knowledge, skills and the ability to communicate and teach. Adapting to the participants needs and capabilities is also necessary (Kirkpatrick, D.L., 2006).

Pernick (2001) on the other hand, as his fourth determinant, focuses on *the assessment of the current skills* of the participants. This can be done for example through assessment centres,

performance appraisals, and as mentioned earlier, 360-degrees assessments (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1998; Solankys, 2010).

After the current skills are identified, the fifth determinant he suggests is to *provide an Individual Development Plan (IDP)* for the participants. These plans “capture participants’ specific strengths and areas of needed improvement” (Pernick, 2001, p. 435) and the development could be related to three areas: technical, conceptual and interpersonal. Technical skills are related to work unit’s tasks, conceptual skills focus on someone’s ability to think in a more abstract and critical way and interpersonal skills relate to one’s ability to work effectively with others. Developing interpersonal skills is challenging and can be done by a diversity of developmental methods, which usually includes experiential learning. This is “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience.” (Kolb, 1984, p. 41). This means that in order for participants to develop interpersonal skills, it is important for them to do their tasks, experience different situations and to learn on the job.

Later on, both authors have more overlap again in their lists for developing a good programme. Donald Kirkpatrick (2006) states the importance of efficient coordination of the programme as his ninth determinant. This determinant summarises the seventh, eighth and ninth one of Pernick (2001) where he focuses on the alignment of HR structures and the further planning of new leaders for the company.

Aligning the company’s HR structures, as Pernick’s sixth determinant, can make the programme more effective. Aligning these HR structures can be for example done by linking the reward system of the company with the leadership development programme, but also the ways of providing feedback and the formulation of job descriptions in order to match them with the required leadership skills. The importance of this element, aligning HRM practices with each other and the goals of the programme, already stated by Pernick in 2001, is later supported by several studies mentioned earlier in this chapter (Bello-Pintado, 2015; Jiang et al., 2012a; Jiang et al., 2012b; Ridder et al., 2011). In both cases, the HRM department of a company plays an important role in the coordination of the programme, the alignment to the rest of the company, and the further existence of the programme.

As the seventh determinant, *develop leaders in context*, Pernick (2001) recommends to value team-based leadership, where not the leader alone is responsible for an effective department, but where all the employees are. Therefore, the programme should focus on teambuilding and leadership skills that stimulate empowerment, and the development of the leader must occur within the team he or she is leading. Contributing to the development of high-performing teams can result in teams being better able to communicate ideas and feelings, make qualitative decisions, solve conflicts, and could have a higher active participation and distribution of leadership (Johnson & Johnson, 1994).

The next element focuses on *the planning for the next generation of leaders*. Here it is advised that the organisation makes sure that the leadership development programme fits with the organisation's strategy and goals, because these determine what kind of leadership is needed in the future. This leads to the question how a company can ensure it will have the right mix of leaders today and in the future. The challenge is to retain the success of the programme. This can be done by for example assessing the programme's applicants or current participants, by keeping track of what requirements are needed in the future, and by modifying the programme if necessary (Pernick, 2001).

The final determinant for the development and implementation of a successful programme in both lists is the evaluation of it. By performing an evaluation, a company can find out if the programme reaches its goals (Pernick, 2001). McDermott et al. also stress the importance of evaluating the programme in order to monitor what the graduates expect of the programme and to know their satisfaction levels (2006). Besides the insights an evaluation provides in these elements and the effectiveness of the programme, it can be done for several other reasons. First of all, to "justify the existence and budget of the training department by showing how it contributes to the organizations' objectives and goals" (Kirkpatrick, D.L., 2006, p. 17). The second reason can be to decide if the training programme has to continue or not and the last reason is to learn about the opportunities to improve the programme. The depth of the evaluation has to be considered upfront, because it can be very time consuming and it is dependent on resource availability. Pernick (2001) states that an evaluation can take place on five levels, which he had derived from the original four level evaluation model of Donald Kirkpatrick (2006). This original model is elaborated on in the next part of this chapter.

Before this, it is worthwhile to mention that all the determinants of both lists are mainly focused on the development of a programme or training. At the company central in this study, the graduate programme is already in place for almost 25 years and some of these determinants, especially the early ones like the development of the programme goal and the selection criteria for the participants, may therefore be less relevant than the other ones. Nonetheless, it could be helpful for the company to reflect on their programme on all of these determinants to remain critical towards the effectiveness of the programme. Therefore, during the analysis of the collected data, these determinants are used to evaluate the programme and to see how the company's graduate programme is performing.

1.3 Training Evaluation

According to Donald Kirkpatrick (2006), the evaluation of a training programme is not only about the results of it, or the change in behaviour of the participants, or the way they comment on the programme. To evaluate a programme, it is not about just one aspect of it, all of them need to be taken into account. There are four levels that are important in order to accurately evaluate a programme: reaction, learning, behaviour, and results (see Figure 1). These levels are four aspects on which a programme can be evaluated on and Donald Kirkpatrick suggests to do this in a chronological order, therefore calling them levels. The reason to focus a training programme evaluation on all four levels is to thoroughly determine how the programme is going, what it brings to the company and its employees, to answer the reasons for evaluation mentioned above, and to know whether or not the training programme is effective and, if yes, on what level (Kirkpatrick, D.L., 2006). A robust, in-depth evaluation is important since a programme can be very costly and of great importance for a company (Pernick, 2001).

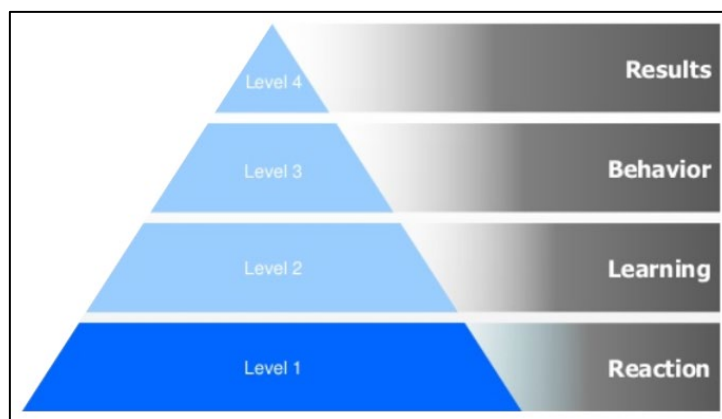


Figure 1: Training Evaluation model

Kirkpatrick's four levels of evaluation are well known in the HRM community (Owston, 2008). It is also an often cited or used model in other studies as mentioned by Alvarez, Salas and Garofano (2004) and Farjad, (2012). This could indicate that it is a reliable evaluation model. Even though Donald Kirkpatrick's book is mainly focused on classroom trainings, he mentioned in the preface of his book that his model can also be used for courses and programmes designed to increase knowledge, improve skills and change attitudes (or to simply develop employees) in a broad sense, which includes graduate programmes. All this, the model's popularity in HRM related literature, its focus on all types of programmes that try to increase knowledge, skills, attitudes and results, and its clear and chronological structure, led to the decision to use this evaluation model during the analysis of the data of this study.

The four levels of evaluation are explained extensively below, but before this, it is worthwhile to mention that all levels are important for a complete evaluation and the sequence of these levels

should be followed without skipping one. Each level is explained one by one and information is given about how to analyse them.

1.3.1 Level 1: Reaction

The first level simply focuses on how the participants of the programme, or others involved, react towards it and what their level of satisfaction is. So far it doesn't say much about the effectiveness of the programme, but participants having a positive attitude towards it could help reaching positive results in the next levels.

The best way to evaluate this is to measure the participants' satisfaction by simply using reaction sheets, or also called questionnaires. For a training to be effective, positive attitudes and a good level of motivation are important. Four reasons are stated to why measuring the reaction is useful. First, it provides information that helps to evaluate the programme and looks for possible improvements. Second, it is a signal to the participants to see that the organisation wants to support them and help them grow. Third, evaluation forms result in quantitative data relevant for managers and others involved in the training programme. At last, this quantitative data "can be used to establish standards of performance for future programmes" (Kirkpatrick, D.L., 2006, p. 27).

Guidelines for effective evaluation of the reactions are to first of all determine what it is that you want to know, and to make these reactions quantifiable. But besides quantitative data, leaving room for written comments and suggestions, and encouraging this, is just as important to know why people react in a certain way and how the programme can be improved. After analysing the data, quantitative, acceptable standards can be developed upon which later evaluations can be compared with to see whether the positivity towards the programme increased or decreased. If standards aren't met, the organisation could take appropriate action to increase the quality of the programme, or they can lower their standards if they are unreachable. The final step for effective evaluation of the reactions is to clearly and carefully communicate the output of the questionnaires to the managers and employees involved or interested in the programme (Kirkpatrick, D.L., 2006).

1.3.2 Level 2: Learning

According to Donald Kirkpatrick (2006), training programmes can result in a change in attitude, the learning of new knowledge and of the development of new skills. These three aspects are the central focus of the second level, because here it will be analysed what the participants learned as a result of the training programme.

Measuring the level of learning "is more difficult and time-consuming than the measurement of reaction" (Kirkpatrick, D.L., 2006, p. 43). One method to analyse the learning results, if possible, is

to use a control group. This is a group of employees that did not participate in the training programme. The experimental group, the employees who did participate, can then be compared with the control group to see if any difference in knowledge, skills or attitudes can be found and explained by the participation in the programme. Besides measuring differences with a possible control group, it is also optional and suggested to measure the difference between before and after participating to the training. The same can be done with the control group to combine both methods of analysing and to get even more reliable results on the effects of the programme.

If a difference does not occur between the two groups, or if the participants didn't gain new knowledge, learned new skills or developed a different attitude, action is necessary. This suggests that the programme could be altered, or that maybe the wrong people are training / supporting the participants (Kirkpatrick, D.L., 2006).

1.3.3 Level 3: Behaviour

The third level evaluates the change in behaviour of the participants due to attending the programme. It is stated that four conditions are necessary for a company if they want change to occur. First, the employee must be motivated and have a desire to change. Second, the employee must know what to do and how he or she can do this. Third, the right climate must be there to support a change in behaviour (e.g. management support) and lastly a reward needs to be in place for change in behaviour (Kirkpatrick, D.L., 2006). In this level, the importance of first analysing level 1 and 2 can be seen. When there is no change in behaviour after the programme, it is important to know if the reaction towards, and learning from, the programme is positive. If this isn't the case than the problem probably lies there, but if that is the case than the change in behaviour that didn't happen might come from a wrong climate or lack of rewards. Reaching this level, and achieving a positive, permanent change in behaviour is the most difficult one. Much time and effort by trainers is usually put in level 1 and 2, and many top managers are mostly interested in the final level, results, which means that level 3 "is "the missing" link in evaluation" (Kirkpatrick, J.M., 2006, p. 83). This results in many cases where the participants are left on their own. Support of supervisors to transfer the learning of level 2 to behaviour, and maintaining this behaviour, is therefore very important.

Once again, measuring the amount of change in behaviour after participating in the programme is more difficult and time-consuming than the previous two levels. Before starting the evaluation, it is important to decide when to evaluate, how to evaluate and how often this needs to happen. Just like with learning, behaviour can be evaluated by comparing the results with a control group and by measuring before and after the programme. However, this is difficult, because when comparing with a control group, the company must be sure that during the comparison all factors that

could have an effect on behaviour are equal. If this is not the case, results can be misleading. Donald Kirkpatrick (2006) also states that the participants first should be given enough time to use their newly acquired knowledge or skills, and to show a change in behaviour before starting to measure it.

The measurement of change in behaviour can also be done by interviewing or surveying one or more people who are familiar with the previous behaviour of the participant (360-degree assessment). This can be the participant self, a supervisor, their subordinates or other colleagues. When conducting interviews, more information can be gathered and if all interviewees are asked the same questions, the responses can be combined and made quantitative. The downside is that it is time-consuming work and maybe not representative, because maybe not everyone who can say something about the change in behaviour is spoken with. Using surveys on the other hand can be more practical and if designed well, can also provide the quantitative data necessary to analyse the behavioural change. The last guideline for evaluating this level is to repeat it two or even three times. This is important because not every participant changes his or her behaviour at the same time and therefore only one evaluation does not provide reliable data on the effect of the training programme.

1.3.4 Level 4: Results

The final level of the training evaluation model is aimed at the results the training programme achieves for the company. These are for example tangible results like increased productivity, profits, quality, sales, or a decrease in costs or a lower turnover. As an addition to this list it can also be possible to have intangible goals or desires, like improved leadership, communication, motivation, teamwork or a decline in complaints (Pernick, 2001; Kirkpatrick, D.L., 2006). If these are the goals and the programme results in changes in behaviour related to for example communication, tangible results like increased profits could eventually also improve.

Measuring positive results and being able to link them, fully or partially, to the training programme is a very difficult task, in some cases due to multiple possible factors even impossible. Still, some guidelines for the evaluation of this final level are developed and these are almost identical to the ones for evaluating behaviour change (Kirkpatrick, D.L., 2006). First of all, a company can use a control group to for example measure the difference in decrease of costs for departments that participated to a training programme and departments that didn't. Once again, it is important to take into account all the factors that can influence the differences, to allow plenty of time for changes to happen before starting to measure, and to measure the results repeatedly. The other possibility besides control groups and comparing before and after the programme, could be to use company figures, which are often more easily available. But again, a cautious approach is necessary since it is hard to claim that an increase in profits or in quality of work is completely related to certain training

programmes. It is even here that Donald Kirkpatrick, in his early years of developing this evaluation model, stresses the difficulty of linking HRM practices to organisational performance.

In conclusion, both Kirkpatrick and Pernick provide a thorough list of determinants of which they suggest that when these are all taken into account, a well-structured programme could be developed. Earlier in this chapter, a comparison is made between both lists and despite some differences, both include determinants that are relevant to use for the analysis of the data of this study. These are the determinants related to the development of the programme's goals and which people it wants to attract, and how they will select these people. Another relevant determinant is the assessment of the skills of the participants, as suggested by Pernick. The determinants of Kirkpatrick about the selection of the facilities and instructors are less relevant, because they are mainly focused on small classroom trainings and less applicable for a large graduate programme. The same goes for the selection and preparation of audiovisual aids. On the contrary, the last two determinants of both lists, coordinating the programme, evaluating the programme (Kirkpatrick, D.L. 2006) and planning for the next generations of leaders, and evaluating the leadership development programme (Pernick, 2001), are very relevant for this study. During the analysis of the data, the relevant determinants mentioned above are constantly reflected upon, providing a better insight in the quality of the graduate programme. Furthermore, this is done in combination with all four levels of the evaluation of a programme. All this results in an even better understanding of the effects that a graduate programme can have on different levels inside a company.

Chapter 2. Methodology

To achieve the goal of this report and to answer the research question, qualitative in-depth information was needed about the graduate programme of the logistics company, about graduate programmes, their link to HRM in general and how to analyse them, and about the company itself. In order to get all this data, interviews are conducted with multiple employees. This process is explained later on in this chapter. First the company itself is elaborated on to gain more knowledge, and to learn more about the context of the research object this report is focused on. This chapter ends with a description of the measurements that are taken to ensure this study's validity, reliability, and ethical standards.

2.1 Research object

The company where this study is conducted is as global supply chain solution provider, offering warehousing and international and domestic freight forwarding all around the world. Over the years, they expanded throughout the world via acquisitions and in 2019 they were present in 24 different countries, including 260 branches and over 8000 team members. The company is divided in three business units, each focusing on a different aspect of the company (found in company sources).

Since the early beginning of the company, they adopted a 100-year vision. This philosophy gives them the opportunity to make decisions on a very long term (found in company sources). Besides this vision, the company has a unique culture in many ways. On a financial level, they don't work with budgets and focus on weekly profit and loss reports with the goal to achieve a higher profit than the last time. Even though they are a global company, they let the branches operate as decentralised as possible. As part of their culture, there is a strong confidence in the success of making decisions as close to the customer as possible. Therefore, they see it as important that people in the company take their responsibility, don't ask their manager, but make decisions on their own.

Furthermore, as part of the company's culture, there is a high focus on complete reduction of bureaucracy, simple structures, open-plan offices, and the belief that a team focus is everything and that everyone is part of the company family. In order to be part of this team, people working at the company should be willing to start on the operational level, to help loading trucks and driving a forklift in order to learn about the company and their operations (found in company sources). To conclude on the company culture, they have a strong Promote from within philosophy. This suggests that normally people from the outside won't be placed in managerial positions, because they don't know the company and don't share the same values. They hire only the smartest and the best, with the belief that everyone that's part of the company has the potential to grow to the top one day. All these parts

of their culture are written down by the senior management team under three pillars (found in company sources).

2.2 Research goal

As stated in the introduction of this report, studies are done on the effects of graduate programmes on all kinds of aspects and multiple individual, and in some cases organisational, effects are found (McDermott et al., 2006; Cesário & Chambel, 2017). The focus in these studies is often about effects, or benefits, on the individual level, and also on one specific element (Beecroft et al., 2006; Solansky, 2010; Clarke, 2017). This study is conducted with the aim to find out what benefits a graduate programme has for an entire organisation and therefore the impact it has on its performance. The choice is made to not focus on a specific element of a graduate programme or a specific type of performance, therefore contributing to the scientific literature by remaining an open attitude regarding all kinds of benefits a graduate programme can have on the individual and organisational level. The empirical data collected about the company's graduate programme, and the results of this study, also increases the amount of knowledge available on this topic in the current literature. The research question that is formulated for achieving this goal is:

How does the graduate programme of Logistics BV contribute to the individual performance of the graduates and to the organisational performance of Logistics BV?

Because the company's graduate programme is separately organised by continent, and since the study is conducted from the Netherlands, the focus of this report is only on the programme of the company on the European level and its specific context. This makes it a single case study, and in order to answer the research question one specific method of data collection is used, which is explained below.

2.3 Data collection

2.3.1 Interviews

For this study, 20 interviews are conducted at the company. These are done in a semi-structured way with an interview guideline which allowed for probe questions. The choice to conduct interviews, and to choose this interview structure, provided the opportunity to collect as much qualitative in-depth information as possible about the type of benefits the graduate programme has, combined with detailed examples of them. Three different interview guidelines are used. They are structured in the same way, but since three different groups of employees participated, with different roles regarding the programme, the questions were adapted to them. These interview guidelines can be found in

Appendix 1 – Interview guidelines. The interviews are structured in three parts: general information, questions about the graduate programme itself, and questions about the influence it has on the company. For the development of these questions, Kirkpatrick's model is used to develop some specific questions regarding the four levels of evaluation. Examples of these questions are: *How do/did you experience the programme (reaction)? What do you think are the benefits for someone who participated to the programme regarding someone who started working at the company without the programme (learning / behaviour)? What are, according to you, the effects of the programme on the company (results)?* Multiple different, sometimes contradicting, answers are given. Examples are employees stating participants being more motivated, ambitious and open-minded (behaviour), while others stated that there are no differences between participants and non-participants. Respondents have further showed positive reactions towards the programme (reaction), but also stated some critical notes about it.

The 20 people that are interviewed were chosen based on their current or present role regarding the programme. Different criteria are used in the selection of the participants in order to get a wide range of answers and perspectives. These criteria are developed by the researcher and presented to the Training & Development employees of the logistics company. They provided the researcher with a selection of employees who matched the criteria, who are experienced with the programme, and who were willing to participate in this research. Therefore, the following people are interviewed. First of all, two employees of Training & Development, because they organise and coordinate the programme on a daily basis. These two employees are interviewed first to get a better understanding of the entire programme and everything it includes. This made it easier during the other interviews, because there was already more familiarity with the programme. Second, current and old participants are interviewed. Two current participants whom were at the end of the third year of the programme, which had the benefit that they experienced almost everything of the programme and had the most actual perspective of it. Besides them, twelve old participants are interviewed, divided in four employees who recently finished the programme (2 to 3 years ago) and eight employees who finished the programme at least five years ago. Combined, they were able to tell about their experience with the programme, the influence it had on their careers throughout the years and the benefits that came for the company. At last, four employees are interviewed that haven't participated to the programme, but are related to it since they have a mentor / coaching role towards the current participants and therefore could also see how the programme impacts the company. Of all these interviews, five of them are held at different branches in the Netherlands and the other fifteen are conducted via the phone or Skype. The lengths of the interviews varied between 20 and 55 minutes. Table 1 provides an overview of the interviewed employees and the criteria that are used for the selection of these people.

Group	Number of participants	Criteria
Training & Development	Two	Active in the organisation of the graduate programme.
Current participants	Two	Minimum of two years participation; already had multiple roles
Old participants (recent)	Four	Finished the graduate programme two or three years ago
Old participants (longer ago)	Eight	Finished the graduate programme at least five years ago
Mentors	Four	Minimum of three years of experience in mentoring participants

Table 1: Interview participants and the criteria for participation

2.3.1.1 Coding

When all the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed literally. The 20 transcripts can be found in Appendix 5 – Interview transcripts. The analysis of the data is done by the use of the template analysis, where the development of a coding template is central to this technique. It provides a flexible method to develop the code format and does not specifically require a developed code set in advance (King, 2012). Another advantage of the template analysis is that it does not place any restrictions on the levels of coding in the hierarchy, but it stimulates the development of themes as extensive as necessary (King, 2012). The flexibility of this method is used in the way that the first round of coding is done openly, with the only restrictions that the first codes were within the topics of the interviews. Therefore, all first codes are related with the three topics used, 1) general information, 2) questions about the graduate programme itself, and 3) questions about the influence it has on the company. The interviews are analysed one by one and interesting fragments are labelled with a first code related to the company and its graduate programme. This process took place in an iterative way, meaning that codes could have been revised during the analysis of the interviews when more suitable terms / themes were found. All the first codes that are found, and the number of fragments they are linked with, can be found in Appendix 2 – First codes.

The second round of coding was a more complex one. During the coding of the first round it became clear that some fragments had the same first codes, but had a different perspective. Examples are fragments with the code Networking, mentioned by one respondent as the goal of the programme, by others as an individual benefit and again by others as a benefit for the entire organisation. Another example is the code Training, with fragments referring to general information, individual benefits, organisation benefits, and some referring to them from a critical point of view. Therefore, because

fragments with the same first code are focused on different elements, all the first coded fragments were analysed again and were given the following global codes: critical reflection, individual benefits, organisational benefits, programme context, programme evaluation, programme goal, and programme structure. These global codes are used to structure the results in four parts. First the description of the graduate programme, including the codes: programme context, programme evaluation, programme goal, and programme structure. The second and third part of the results are about the benefits of the graduate programme, divided in individual benefits and organisational benefits. The last part of the results contains the critical reflection towards the programme. All the fragments, including their first codes and global codes, can be found in Appendix 4 – Coding scheme. In each part, some first codes, depending on the information in the fragments of it, are combined as well. Examples are the first codes Supervisor coaching, Influence management, Extra coaching, Coordinator coaching, and Buddy system, being combined under the topic Support. The developed structures for the four parts, and the first codes that are used in them, can be found in Appendix 3 – Coding structures. About these structures, it is worthwhile to mention that in some situations fragments had the same first code and global code, but they still referred to different topics and therefore are mentioned multiple times in the same structure. One example of this is the first code Graduate sessions with the global code Organisational benefits. The Graduate sessions are used many times as an example related to different kind of benefits, therefore being listed under multiple benefits.

2.4 Validity & reliability

To enhance the validity and reliability of this study, the following measurements are taken. First of all, although different groups of people are interviewed, with different relations towards the programme, the interview guidelines show a consistency in the questions that were asked in order to collect the data. For all the interviews, the questions are focused on the respondents' opinions towards the graduate programme, and the programme's impact on the individuals and on the company as a whole. Asking the same questions could decrease the subjectivity of the data, therefore supporting the reliability of this research since the same topics were discussed with all the respondents, and examples of the same benefits were given multiple times. Secondly, all the interviews that are conducted were recorded and transcribed literally. This further enhances the reliability, because during the analysis of the data the exact words said by the respondents are used which reduces the risk of wrong interpretations. Thirdly, all this could also enhance the repeatability of this study. If in future research the same, or similar, respondents are interviewed, and if the same interview guidelines are used, with

the same probe questions (which can be found in the interview transcriptions in Appendix 5), there could be a higher chance that the same answers and examples will be given.

In addition, interviewing 20 different employees, with different relations towards the programme provided answers from multiple perspectives, which could enhance this study's validity. It could increase the chance that all aspects of the programme are well covered, and that the data more accurately reflects the real situation, meaning the real impact the graduate programme has on the company. Also, because employees are interviewed who are in the company for a long period of time or a short one, the data includes answers from employees with a lot of experience with the company and its programme, but also from people who have a fresh, maybe less affected, look towards it. Both measurements could positively impact the internal validity of the data, because there is higher chance that the data covered everything that was supposed to be measured. The external validity of the data remains difficult to claim, since this is a single case study, and the same questions have to be asked at other companies, with other graduate programmes, in order to find support for the external validity of this study's data.

At last, during the interviews not only benefits and positive comments were given. Some respondents were also critical towards certain aspects of the graduate programme, and in order to be as truthful about the results as possible, thus increasing the validity of the data even more, these critical notes are also stated in the results. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, these notes are elaborated on in a separate paragraph after the benefits and this is done for two reasons. The first reason is to maintain a clear, chronological structure in the results. The second reason is because multiple examples are given about elements of the graduate programme referring to different benefits, and the specificity of the critical comments made it challenging to place them among one of these. Therefore, the choice is made to elaborate on them in a specific paragraph. This also made it possible to group critical notes on a specific element.

2.5 Ethics

At last, some aspects of this research's methodology also ensure the research ethics of this study. First of all, because of literally transcribing the interviews, attention is paid to the objectivity of this research, because it reduces the risk of wrong data interpretation. Secondly, including the critical comments in the results, as mentioned above, leads to more honest results and more openness to not only the positive aspects of the graduate programme, but also to the ones who are experienced more negative. Thirdly, no names or function titles are used in the results to assure the anonymity of the respondents. Whenever a quote is used, only a reference is made to the number of the interview, and the role the respondent has regarding the program (Training & Development employee, current or old

participant, or mentor). Furthermore, the use of quotes also enhances the honesty of the data by showing that the results truly come from the respondents. At last, interviews were conducted via the phone or in person, but always in a private setting with no other people around to make sure that the information that was shared stayed between the respondent and the interviewer, protecting the confidentiality of the data.

Chapter 3. Results

This chapter contains the information that is gathered via the interviews that are conducted. Before explaining the benefits of the graduate programme, the programme itself is elaborated on to give a clear view of all the elements that are part of it and the context that influences the programme. After this, the benefits are explained, divided in benefits for the individuals and benefits for the organisation as a whole. The chapter ends with a critical reflection towards the graduate programme. All the codes used in the headings emerged from the coding process and are therefore developed and selected by the researcher himself.

3.1 The graduate programme

3.1.1 General information

The graduate programme of the company in Europe exists for almost 25 years and has evolved during the years, not only in its structure and the way it is organised, but it has also grown in size. In its early years it was a small graduate programme with about eight participants, focused on the Netherlands, and specifically on their biggest branch of Europe. During the years, thanks to the growth of the company, the programme now consists of around 40 participants every year. This group is not only present in the Netherlands anymore, because the programme developed a more international focus with participants located in all the different branches in Europe. According to some employees, the programme also developed into a more professional programme. Some respondents said the following:

"I think a lot has changed in our company since then and that it all became more professional and also with the trainees, that this is being handled much more seriously than it was back then"
(interview 19, old participant)

"It is not just something extra we do" (interview 1, Training & Development employee)

With this the respondents suggest that the programme gained more attention over the years and it is not something they simply do besides their main activities, but it is taken a lot more serious than before and it became a more structured and established programme.

3.1.2 Programme goal

Most of the respondents explained that the main goal of the programme is to develop managers.

"It's self-explanatory especially with the new name" (interview 12, old participant)

According to them, like it says in the title, the programme has to develop new leaders for in the future. Aligned with this overarching goal, the programme appears also to facilitate in a couple of specific development targets for the graduates.

First of all, some of the respondents mentioned that participants in the programme have to learn about the company culture, as one employee stated:

“What I think is the most important is that they get to know the company culture very well, and who we are” (interview 2, Training & Development employee)

This suggests that from the beginning of their company career, the participants get to know what the company values are and how they may behave according to its culture. Secondly, respondents suggest that the graduate programme gives participants the opportunity to gain experience in the field of logistics and to learn the basics, which is illustrated by the following quote:

“That they really know what is happening on the workplace and that they understand what they are doing” (interview 20, old participant).

The graduate programme aims to make sure that participants understand the company’s processes and this opportunity to gain experience includes the opportunity for the participants to look beyond just one occupation by having the chance to go work at different branches and different business units as well. This, combined with learning the culture of the company, could lead to the development of future managers who understand the company. With the programme, the company wants to develop employees who are able to see the bigger picture, who understand that one aspect of the business influences others and that the three different business units are still one company. Eventually, when participants occupy a management position, they have to be able to talk along with other managers from other divisions and understand what they are talking about.

The programme also has the specific goal to make sure that individuals end up on the positions that fit them the most. It provides the opportunity to practice different functions, which enhances the possibility that the participants end up on a job they like most, where they can perform best, and are the most motivated to do so.

According to some respondents, the last specific aspect this programme facilitates in is the development of a network inside the company, as mentioned in the following quotes:

“Getting in touch with other people and creating your network” (interview 3, old participant)

“So, knowing very much people in the company..... I also know much people and therefore you have very much contacts in the network” (interview 11, old participant)

With this the respondents suggest that by seeing multiple branches or divisions during the programme, the participants do not only develop more knowledge about the company, but they also meet a lot of new employees and learn who works where. All these specific goals are in line with Pernick’s (2001) second determinant, which suggests companies to determine upfront what competencies or

knowledge participants of the programme have to develop in order to be effective leaders in the future. Besides the main goal of developing new managers, and the specific aspects that support this, respondents also mentioned two other goals.

In the first place, the programme serves as an HRM tool to attract young talent. Respondents mentioned that it is difficult for the company to attract young and talented people into the business as stated in the following quote:

“And then you notice that we have a lot of trouble to attract certain people as organisation in a non-trainee function” (interview 4, current participant)

This suggests that the company, by offering a graduate programme and everything it has to offer, can help in attracting these people in order to further develop. The second goal of the programme that respondents mentioned is the impact it can have on the continuity and the further growth of the company. The following quote underlines this goal:

“As a company we want to grow.... and for this you just need good people and thanks to the programme we can develop these people” (interview 10, mentor)

The respondents suggest that the graduate programme can play an important role in the company's growth and future. But besides this quote stating the company wants to grow, other respondents also mentioned that the company is already growing, therefore they want more participants in their programme to make sure that new positions can be filled. Continuous development of potential managers could make sure that when somebody is leaving the company, or when a new branch is opened, that there are employees ready to become the next manager.

Here, a link can be made with Donald Kirkpatrick's (2006) model and his suggestion to link the goal of a programme to the four different levels of evaluation. In this case, the programme's main goal is that it may result in the company having a pool of potential new managers at its disposal. And the specific goals can be linked with these people behaving according to the company culture and learning about the company, its processes, and developing the right knowledge and skills to be successful there.

3.1.3 Programme context

Before going into the description of the programme elements, it is worthwhile to explain a few aspects that were mentioned during the interviews, which are important at the company and are therefore influencing their graduate programme and the way it is organised.

At the company there is a very strong culture which is highly valued by its employees. As mentioned earlier in this report, the company's management developed three pillars which explain where they stand for and what they believe in. Nine of the twenty respondents explicitly mentioned these pillars, two spoke about the company and their colleagues as family, which suggests a strong focus on the social element, as can be seen in the following quotes:

"We have to help our family. Our brothers and sisters, to stay inside the three pillars" (interview 4, current participant)

"It is a family company still" (interview 6, old participant)

The three pillars and the statements below them, are not only mentioned often during the interviews, but are also written on big boards in the warehouses and offices to remind everyone about them and to express how important these are for the company.

One aspect of this culture that is mentioned by the respondents, and that is part of the three pillars, is the value of fast decision making. One of the old participants said:

"This is I think also what, especially from management, is emphasised quite well is to make steps and take decisions. Don't wait too long and everyone is independent, gets the chance to take decisions" (interview 6, old participant)

Hereby it is suggested that the employees at the organisation, at any level, are pushed to take responsibility and to make decisions themselves or with their direct colleagues. Respondents also mentioned that this is preferred over planning a meeting or asking the supervisor. A good example is the company's 'Ready, Fire, Aim' philosophy. One respondent explained it as:

"Having this mindset is that you should be ready and ready means that you can take some calculated risk" (interview 12, old participant)

With this it is suggested that the company supports people making decisions and, as other respondents also mentioned, they accept it if not every decision turns out well, as long as people move forward and learn from it. Linked with this aspect of fast decision making is the value of trust within the company. One example of this is the fact that graduates get a permanent contract from day one, because the company wants to develop long-term relationships with them based on trust. According to one of the respondents, they also show this level of trust by for example sending someone abroad with barely any experience. Another respondent mentioned a different example:

"The company never fails to, in my experience, speaking from my personal experience, to give you just a little bit too much responsibility, to give just a bit more than you think you can handle yourself" (interview 15, old participant)

This suggests that the company may put a lot of trust in its employees, even if they are graduates, and therefore not that long at the company. These examples of trust and the creating of a long-term relationship are in line with one of the elements of Lepak and Snell's model of developing employees, where they explained the development of core knowledge employees (quadrant 1) and the importance of creating long-term relationships with this group of employees (1999).

Another important aspect of the company culture is their Promote from within philosophy. It is mentioned in eleven of the twenty interviews. It means that the company, not only inside the graduate programme, but companywide, has the philosophy that they always try to give employees

the opportunity to promote from within instead of hiring managers from outside the company. Some respondents stated the following:

“Someone from the outside did not get the culture injection from day one” (interview 3, old participant)

“Because of the philosophy of the company and the importance of the culture, is that promote from within almost, yes I think just essential. You can’t let people from outside enter into leadership positions, because they miss that piece of culture.” (interview 15, old participant)

This suggests that the company values this philosophy and that it may have the benefit they don’t need to promote from outside, because there are already qualified employees present at the company who are that familiar with the company culture and the way it operates. According to the respondents, it still sometimes happens that managers are hired from the outside, but these are incidents and the majority of the current group of managers comes from the company itself. Offering all these chances and responsibilities mentioned above is the first sign of the programme supporting opportunities for its participants, which is part of both the AMO theory and level 3 of the evaluation model which suggests that the right climate to show development needs to be in place (Appelbaum et al., 2000; Kirkpatrick, D.L., 2006).

3.1.4 Programme structure

The next part of this chapter explains all the elements that are part of the company’s graduate programme.

3.1.4.1 Recruitment & Selection

The recruitment for the programme is mainly done by Training & Development. They are actively looking for potential graduates, but sometimes they get help from colleagues of different branches who go to universities to promote the company and the programme itself.

After sending the application, the process contains the following steps. When positive, the applicants get a first phone call so the company gets the chance to know them. After this there will be two interviews, the first one including someone from the Training & Development department to learn more about the applicant’s personality and to discover if there is a fit with the company culture or not. If yes, the final interview will be held on the location of the branch where the applicant could start and here the direct supervisor or the Branch Manager, which is the person responsible for the entire branch, is also present to talk more about the job specifics, and to evaluate if the person could fit in their business unit, branch or department. Before this interview, the applicants will first complete a personality assessment to give them an insight in their work preferences (found in company sources).

During this process, the company culture plays an important role. According to the respondents, there is a strong focus during the interviews on the applicant's characteristics and motivation, as stated in the following quotes:

"Especially the motivation letters are very important we find someone's motivation, as organisation, much more important than what you can do" (interview 1, Training & Development employee)

"Looking if someone really fits within the company" (interview 17, old participant)

Respondents mentioned the importance of these elements and that a cultural / organisational fit is more valued in the company than someone's educational background and experience. They believe that if someone is motivated, and if there is a fit between the company and the individual, the employee will learn how to do his or her job anyway. Here it can be seen that the company's selection process is well developed and that there is a strong fit with the company and what kind of people they are looking for, as is also suggested by Pernick (2001).

3.1.4.2 Rotations

With a programme duration of three years, there is the expectation that the graduates rotate after approximately one year to another role to eventually have done three roles at different places. On the first one, the graduates usually start in an operational role, where they gain experience on the workplace itself. Respondents stated that graduates for example become a supervisor of a small team in the warehouse where they also learn how to pick orders, unload a truck or drive a forklift in order to understand the basic processes. After the first year the participants will rotate to other roles. These rotations can happen in the same business unit or branch, but the participants usually go to another business unit in another branch, or sometimes even to another country. Staying in the same business unit or moving to another one can have different results. Some respondents said the following:

"If you step into a new business unit, you start again on the operational level. Then you start again at the bottom of the ladder to learn how that business unit works" (interview 5, current participant)

"On the one hand I would have wanted to go to forwarding, but on the other hand I now could go more in-depth at logistics, otherwise I would have gone wider" (interview 17, old participant)

It is suggested by the respondents that staying in the same business unit may result in a more in-depth rotation leading to a more specialised career. Switching to a different business unit, as a horizontal rotation, could lead to the participant seeing different aspects and processes of the company and therefore could develop his or her knowledge in a broader way. Some respondents mentioned that having the opportunity to do different roles, figure out what they like or not, to gain international

experience, see multiple parts of the company, or to start in an operational role, was their reason to participate to the programme.

Although there is the guideline of rotating every year, the programme has a flexible structure. This means that participants are not simply given the next function and that it doesn't have to be after exactly one year. In multiple cases the graduates rotate after one and a half year or even before one year, meaning that some will do two roles and others four. Since the rotations are flexible, there are multiple people playing a role in them. First of all, the participants themselves are responsible for their own rotations. They have to take initiative and show interest in seeing other parts of the company. Multiple respondents mentioned that it is the responsibility of the participants to show to their managers that they want to rotate and that it is part of the graduate programme to take matters into your own hands. Secondly, the managers of the company play a role in the rotations as well. They keep track of the development of the participants when they are in their branch, and they talk with them about their interests in the sector and company, and give advice about possible next steps and further career development. The managers have a strong impact on the rotations by assessing if someone is ready for a next role or not. As a third group, Training & Development also provides the participants with suggestions about other functions that match with their interests. So, with the three parties they will look together for the next step, depending on the interests, development and the situation of the participants, and the options that are available at the company. It can be seen that, as suggested by Donald Kirkpatrick (2006) in his seventh determinant, having good managers and other supporting parties can be very important for the success of the programme, because they play a big role in the development of the individuals. The following part elaborates on this.

3.1.4.3 Support

During the three years of the graduate programme the participants get support from multiple people. In the first place they get support from their direct supervisor. This is the person who sees them on a daily basis, coaches them on the job, and has the best position to see their development and know the participant's capabilities and struggles. Dependent on the participant's role and the size of the branch, the direct supervisor could also be the Branch Manager itself. If this is the case, then the graduate normally has one person at the branch from whom her or she gets feedback or support. If this isn't the case, then it could be that the graduate gets support from two different people. According to the employees that are interviewed, and just as with the rotations, it usually are the graduates who have to take initiative if they want extra support from their supervisors or Branch Managers. The frequency of the coaching depends on the agreement that is made between the participant and the direct supervisor and/or Branch Manager. This can either be in a formal and/or informal way.

During the programme, when the participant gets a new function, and depending on if the person goes to another branch, he or she will get a new direct supervisor and Branch Manager. During this transaction, the old and new manager will contact each other to share information about the qualities and development of the graduate. To make sure that all this information doesn't get lost, the Training & Development department is involved here to centralise all this. During the programme, they frequently have contact with the supervisors to talk about the graduate's development. Via check-in meetings, they also stay in contact with the participants themselves to get an update on how it is going, what their personal goals are, what they would like to do in the future, and if they could be of any help for them. These phone calls happen four times in the first year, three times in the second year, and two times in the last year. Besides this, graduates can always ask Training & Development for extra support.

Recently, the programme also includes a buddy system. This means that for every new graduate, a second- or third-year graduate is appointed to be his or her buddy. The role of this buddy is to, especially in the beginning, provide a warm welcome, make sure that everything is arranged before the start of the first day, introduce the new graduate to the rest of the participants, and to provide answers to possible questions.

Besides all this, some respondents mentioned that there is always an opportunity to ask feedback or advice from colleagues, old participants, other Branch Managers, or employees from the European Support Team. This shows again that at the company the right climate is in place and participants have multiple opportunities to learn from others and to know how to behave and how to adapt to what they have learned (Kirkpatrick, 2006).

3.1.4.4 Training

As part of the graduate programme, graduates also participate in a structured training programme. The first year includes two trainings. First there is the Team Leadership Services 1 (TLS1) training, which is a one-day training about self-reflection, and here the participants will learn about their own leadership style and create a personal development plan, which is also suggested in Pernick's nine determinants (2001). Furthermore, they get a training called Presenting With Impact, which focuses on their presentation skills and provides the participants with tips about how to effectively bring their message to the audience. In the second year the graduates will participate in the Emerging Leadership Course. This is a training about the company itself and here the European management will come and tell about what the company does and values, what they expect of their supervisors, and what specifically happens at their three business units. In their last year, graduates will get the TLS2 training. Here they focus for three days on the development of a more in-depth work preferences profile

including a 360-degree feedback report. This means that beforehand they have to ask feedback of their peers, supervisors and the people they supervise themselves, leading to an extensive overview of their capabilities, their weaknesses, and about the way they work and how to improve in the future. This 360-degree feedback report can be a useful tool, which is also explained in multiple scientific articles (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1998; Solankys, 2010). Besides the structured trainings, graduates can also, depending on their role, get sales trainings or more practical courses on leadership or providing and giving feedback.

3.1.4.5 Projects

Next to their daily tasks and responsibilities, graduates also participate in company improvement projects. The participants will work on all kind of different projects which could exceed their own branch or business unit. These projects are done in groups of two to three graduates, who could also be from another branches or business units. The projects could for example last for less than a year to two and a half years, and from developing a report to implementing the entire project. The graduates conduct these projects for their 'sponsor', which is the person responsible for the project. Some examples that are mentioned by the respondents are the development of a continuity plan of a branch, looking for and implementing electric pallet trucks in the Netherlands, implementing a data warehouse system, improving the weekly reports, or finding out if there is a need for a second cross dock.

3.1.4.6 Graduate sessions

Four times a year, all graduates, together with the European Support Team and all the Branch Managers of Europe, gather in the biggest branch of Europe to participate in the Graduate sessions. These are one-day sessions coordinated by Training & Development, but hosted by three graduates and they contain three different aspects. First, the sessions are focused on a specific topic chosen by the participants who organise it, for example E-commerce, Continuous improvement, Sales or Gamification. The organisers have to gather theoretical information about this topic, but also make a link with the company by asking managers for input. Sometimes managers themselves present parts of the presentation, for example a Sales Manager who comes and tells about how sales is going at the company. The organisation also has to develop a business case, workshop, or create a discussion to make the session more interactive. During these activities, graduates and managers are mixed. Respondents said the following about this:

"It is of course very interesting as a 24-year old to sit at the same table with the CEO and to have a discussion about 'how do we handle careers ourselves at this company?'" (interview 7, old participant)

“To see who do we have and where are they..... so it is very interesting to know, who is doing what” (interview 9, mentor)

The first quote suggests that the graduates can learn from the managers when having an interaction with them during the sessions, and second quote suggests that the managers get a chance to get to know all the participants, and to learn from them, and about their projects, as well. Some managers mentioned that they also use Graduate sessions as a way to promote their branch, and to recruit graduates for their next rotations.

As the second part of these sessions, new participants will introduce themselves by giving a short presentation about who they are, and participants who finished the programme will briefly present their experience of the past three years, what they learned, what they developed, and they give some advice to the current participants. At last, project groups will give an update about their projects and the progress they made since the last Graduate session.

3.1.4.7 Teambuilding weekend

The last element of the graduate programme, and recently added to it, is the yearly teambuilding weekend. It is developed to create more bonding between all the graduates so they get to know each other better. The weekend is organised by Training & Development and it includes for example outdoor camping, a bootcamp and other teambuilding activities. The respondents who mentioned the teambuilding weekend were also positive about it, as one current participant said:

“You get social bonding. You get a pleasant time with the trainees” (interview 5, current participant)

The respondent suggested in the interview that the weekend focuses on the creation of more bonding, new friendships, and getting to know other people. Although respondents are positive about the content of the weekend, one critical comment is given about the fact that the graduates didn't get paid during the weekend or received any free hours in return, leading to dissatisfaction since the weekend is part of their work.

3.1.5 Programme evaluation

During the interviews, several interesting topics are mentioned about the way the programme is evaluated and about how people experienced the programme or certain aspects of it.

3.1.5.1 Evaluation system

Because the employees of Training & Development speak with the graduates on a regular basis, there is no formal evaluation in place. In the past, multiple types of evaluation were used as mentioned in the following quotes:

“Often with the trainees I did a final evaluation, just a one-on-one to ask for feedback like ‘how did you experience the past three years?’ But most trainees I already saw quite often, so feedback was there, but a formal final evaluation, we don’t do that.” (interview 2, Training & Development employee)

“We tried for a while to let them fill in an evaluation report” (interview 2, Training & Development employee)

Both systems, one-on-one feedback moments and evaluation reports, were tried in the past but are not used anymore. According to the respondents, the evaluation of the graduate programme currently goes on a more informal way, and if participants have some feedback, they often share it themselves. One of the respondents mentioned that this is more in line with the way it goes at the company. For now, it remains unclear if there is interest at the company to formalise the evaluation system.

3.1.5.2 Programme experiences

When asking the respondents about their experience with the graduate programme, all respondents reflected on the programme in a very positive way. The employees of Training & Development mentioned that they received a lot of positive feedback. Examples are given in the following quotes:

“During the teambuilding weekend I received a lot of positive reactions” (interview 1, Training & Development employee)

“Well I get enough questions from them so I assume that they are very positive” (interview 1, Training & Development employee)

“The three years were over very fast, because you do so many different things” (interview 2, Training & Development employee)

These quotes suggest that many positive comments are given, also in more informal ways like during the teambuilding weekend. The second quote relates to Training & Department receiving many questions from Branch Managers to ask for more or new graduates for their branch. Other responses they received often were that time flew by very fast and that it was good that people tried different things and took their chances. Another old participant mentioned the same by explaining that he learned a lot because the programme forced him to get out of his comfort zone. Other respondents mentioned a sufficient amount of training, chances, and challenge as positive reactions towards the programme that helped their development.

Some reactions are also given on specific topics regarding the programme. First of all, the respondents stated that the extra time they had to spend on the projects was challenging, because they had to create time next to their daily tasks or work extra hours, but that it was still manageable. It is mentioned as a good way to learn how to plan your day, set priorities at work, and find solutions.

Furthermore, most respondents experienced, as being a graduate as well as a Branch Manager, that there are high expectations of the graduates. One comment related to this, focused on projects, is:

“Next quarter I don’t want to hear that there were a few meetings and that two things are adapted. I actually want to hear that it is already implemented or that you really are a step further.” (interview 6, old participant)

This quote refers to Branch Managers expecting graduates to always move forward with their projects in between every Graduate session, and in this case the Branch Manager acknowledges that in these days results are expected faster. Furthermore, it is also mentioned that graduates are also expected to be there to help organise events that are not linked to the daily operations. This is because the company believes that the participants have a high potential, and that they want more. Although the expectations are high, one Branch Manager also mentioned that he experiences graduates to simply be faster, and that they do have the capabilities to learn faster, therefore meeting their expectations. This doesn’t mean that every participant is content with what is expected of them, as mentioned in the following quote.

“The disadvantage is that sometimes your colleagues put you on a pedestal where you don’t want to be” (interview 5, current participant)

The respondents suggest that sometimes colleagues could expect graduates, because they simply carry the name ‘graduate’, to be able to do more than they actually can or could feel comfortable with. In line with this, another respondent mentioned that participants can be more pushed to make a promotion. This shows that although all respondents are positive towards the programme in general, there are still some aspects that make it more challenging to be a graduate.

As can be concluded based on the participants’ experiences, all the respondents showed a positive reaction towards the graduate programme, which is the first level of Donald Kirkpatrick’s evaluation model (2006). Although the reactions are positive in this study, Kirkpatrick suggests to conduct a survey and to gather quantitative data. For now, the reactions are only given during interviews and when conducting a survey, it is easier to evaluate this level on a larger scale and therefore to provide more reliable data.

Furthermore, a few examples are already given about the learning effect, as the second level of the model, that the graduate programme has on its participants. Besides all these reactions towards the programme, the respondents mentioned that the programme offers many benefits for the individual participants as well as for the organisation as a whole. These benefits are elaborated on in the next parts of this chapter.

3.2 Individual benefits

This part of the chapter provides an extensive overview of the benefits that a graduate programme can offer the individual participants. The benefits that are mentioned emerged from the data collected for this study. Whenever relevant, connections are made with literature that supports the benefits.

3.2.1 Personal development

First of all, the graduate programme is considered to be a great tool to develop the participants' personal knowledge, skills and capabilities. The respondents appear to have a positive view on these developments as is shown in the following quotes:

"You can see everything and you can move, because you can move really quickly" (interview 18, old participant)

"You gained a lot of knowledge which means that you can contribute quite fast" (interview 17, old participant)

These quotes suggest that graduates have the opportunity to gain knowledge rather quickly in a short time thanks to all the elements of the programme. According to some respondents, the amount of knowledge they gain is also more than for non-participants, because participants are automatically part of more trainings, and participate in the Graduate sessions. Some manager-respondents stated that they could see the development of the participants throughout the years and that they could spot which of them are in the first year or which are in the last year of the programme. This is shown by the following quote:

"I like it to see how divers the trainees are... and how strong they developed towards their second and third year.... But I was able to tell within fifteen minutes who is in his first year, second year, or third year, because you notice that everyone gets more mature during the programme" (interview 7, old participant)

Furthermore, respondents were positive regarding the development of graduates' leadership styles, as one respondent stated:

"You are more in contact with other supervisors outside your own supervisor, which means that you can check what you think is a good way of managing... You don't have to be a direct reflection of the way your supervisor behaves" (interview 7, old participant)

This suggests that the programme, thanks to for example rotations and projects, could give the graduates the possibility to learn from different supervisors and their leadership styles, and to experiment with these themselves. Graduates are still learning about their roles, and learning how to be a leader, therefore someone mentioned the following:

“So, it is really something, you know developing yourself. Also, you can learn from your mistakes and you are still young and a future manager, but not leader at the moment” (interview 18, old participant)

The respondent suggests that participants are allowed to make mistakes, and that learning from these is part of their development. To further learn about their roles and the company, the rotations also help the graduates by providing them with a lot of experience on different roles of which they had no experience before, since most of them start directly after finishing their studies. One respondent stated the following about this:

“If I think about that you just left college and just started working, then you knew nothing. You build something, knowledge. But you don’t have real experience But then you think that in the first three years you grew very much at the company” (interview 11, old participant)

Besides the rotations, the trainings that the graduates participate in may have a large impact on their personal development as well, and respondents referred positive to them, as stated by the following quotes:

“That was for me the most valuable” (interview 4, current participant)

“And also very useful, the trainings that I had, I still benefit from them every day” (interview 20, old participant)

Respondents further mentioned that everyone at the company gets trainings, but some respondents suggested that there is a difference between graduates and non-graduates:

“I think the extra trainings. And others get them as well, but it takes a bit longer. And now you just get these trainings directly, because all of our team members get as much trainings as possible, but I think that because of the graduate programme you get for example leadership trainings in your first year.... So, if you directly start at the operation it could take a longer time before you get these trainings. So, I think that this is a benefit.” (interview 17, old participant)

“That there is a fixed format with multiple trainings and leadership trainings, so yes these are opportunities that are given” (interview 19, old participant)

Here the respondents suggested that graduates get easier access to trainings than non-participants, and that it could also be in a higher amount. Being part of the programme simply more guarantees employees to have all the trainings. Some more specific benefits that are mentioned about the trainings are that they provide guidance regarding leadership, as mentioned in the following quote:

“It is necessary that if you go work somewhere as a graduate, that you receive challenging trainings and a bit of guidance in leadership and that you know how to handle that, also with emotional intelligence and situational leadership.” (interview 11, old participant)

The trainings provide challenge during the programme too, and they teach the participants more about themselves, their work preferences, and what their values are. Furthermore, the trainings are

beneficial for the participants because they receive them in the early stages of their careers, as mentioned by one of the respondents:

"The potential is identified in the early stages of the career and there is a strong foundation being built with training and with information and feedback from the beginning in such a way that the rest of the career is built on a really nice foundation. And on a stable one." (interview 12, old participant)

It is suggested that receiving trainings in the beginning of a career can result in participants adopting the information and techniques they learned and therefore using them as the norm for later in their careers.

At last, the rule that graduates start at operational roles is also mentioned as having a great effect on the learning process, as stated by one respondent:

"That is maybe the biggest learning process. You start on the workplace. You become a team leader of people who work for 25 years on the crossdock. You are there as a rookie of 22 or 24 years old and you have to learn these people something or manage them. There is where you really learn to manage, I think." (interview 6, old participant)

The respondent suggests that graduates immediately leading a small team of people with lots of experience in their jobs is something beneficial for their development.

3.2.2 Career development

Related with the development of the participants knowledge, skills and capabilities, participating in the graduate programme benefits the participants career development as well. According to multiple respondents, the programme provides the opportunity to start at the operational level, and to make a fast career at the company. These career developments may be aligned with the company's Promote from within culture, where the goal is to develop the employees in a way that they are able to grow to the higher management levels of the organisation. Four respondents even stated that without the programme, they wouldn't be in the position in which they are now:

"Without the programme I probably wouldn't have stand where I am now. I am six years at the company. I wouldn't have been Branch Manager without that programme. Partially because I was able to learn faster." (interview 11, old participant)

"Yes, without the graduate programme I wouldn't sit here now" (interview 20, old participant)

Two respondents specifically mentioned their opportunity to go abroad as being a career booster:

"The most important thing is that it gave me the opportunity to go to Romania. That gave my learning process, and also my career, a real boost from the beginning I think." (interview 15, old participant)

Despite these positive experiences, cautious is still required according to the following quote:

“And then the question will always remain when you wouldn’t have participated in the graduate programme if you wouldn’t have got in contact with the roles you have done” (interview 19, old participant)

The respondents suggest that it is hard to claim if without the programme someone would have had the same roles that he or she got during their career and during the graduate programme.

One interesting comment came from one of the respondents who explained that simply because someone is participating to the programme, it basically means the company sees potential in that the individual can become a manager later on in his or her career. When a participant is labelled in this way, and both the organisation and the individual are investing in the participant’s development, it could be beneficial as is shown in the following quote:

“And on the moment that both parties are working on that, you are actually structurally working on your career. And to make sure that you rise to that level.” (interview 13, old participant)

Therefore, having this label could be an advantage for the participant’s career.

Even though graduates can have this advantage, respondents mentioned that they still have to show what they can:

“It is now up to you to show that you are worth it. You have the advantage compared to others who work in the company. That is your advantage and you need to make sure that you utilise it as well as possible.” (interview 13, old participant)

This suggests that it is not guaranteed that participating in the graduate programme leads to positive results, but that graduates have to work for this themselves. All the elements of the programme, the rotations, projects, Graduate sessions, and trainings, could facilitate participants in achieving success, and could help to put themselves in the spotlights, and to convince managers about their capabilities. When participants are succeeding in this, managers could speak or think about them and they can build a reputation and as can be seen in the following quotes:

“If you can cooperate in this and you are doing a good job, well then you build a name for yourself” (interview 13, old participant)

“So, people will think about you faster when there is an open position” (interview 16, old participant)

These examples suggest that the programme could be an opportunity for graduates to develop their careers faster.

3.2.3 Extra opportunities

According to the respondents, graduates have the benefit that they have more opportunities to develop themselves. First of all, being part of the programme not only means that it is easier to switch between roles, but it also makes it mandatory to do so, which could lead to the following results according to some respondents:

“You can see everything and you can move, because you can move really quickly” (interview 18, old participant)

“I think what for me was very important was that I did all those jobs and I know what I can do well, what I like and what I don’t like... if I would have done the same job for seven years, than I wouldn’t have known if there was something better somewhere else” (interview 16, old participant)

It is suggested that the rotations could give graduates the opportunity to see more of the company and to be able to experiment and find out what they like and which roles they don’t like. These rotations can also lead to experiences abroad. According to some respondents, benefits of going abroad could result in more personal growth by learning about yourself, but also by experiencing different cultures, which could positively impact someone’s future career options as shown in the following quote:

“If for example we expand to Spain, then I would prefer to send someone who has already worked a year abroad and who adopted that culture. I would prefer to send someone like that instead of someone who has always been in the same country.” (interview 3, old participant)

Secondly, participating in the graduate programme results in having more trainings and more projects. This means that it not only enhances their personal development, but they also learn more about the company, which may benefit their future career at the company. Furthermore, two respondents gave the example that if there would be a vacancy at the company, someone who has been a graduate could have a bigger chance of getting this role than a non-graduate:

“If you get in a situation where two people apply for the same role, and they both have the same qualities, personality, et cetera, et cetera, and one of them has been a graduate, than I think that there is a big chance that they will choose for the graduate” (interview 13, old participant)

This suggests that graduates can have a preference over non-graduates which could result in them having extra career opportunities. Contradictory to the examples that are mentioned by multiple respondents, there is one respondent who stated that graduates do not get more opportunities:

“I don’t think that they get offered more opportunities per se, because I think that you can see that throughout our entire organisation everybody has opportunities and that the Promote from within philosophy is very strong and that we are paying attention to it at all levels of the organisation.... It is maybe a bit more strongly present, but I don’t believe that you have more opportunities.” (interview 15, old participant)

Both sides agree on the presence of multiple opportunities for graduates, but it is stressed that opportunities are not only given to employees who participate, or have participated, in the graduate programme. According to the respondent it is important that this doesn't get lost and that not all opportunities go to the graduates alone.

Despite graduates having more chances than non-participants or not, it could be concluded that programme does provide them with plenty of opportunities to develop themselves and to learn about the company. Important to add to this is that multiple respondents mentioned that success is not easily guaranteed and that participants have to perform:

"The goal of the programme is on the one hand to have the opportunity to show yourself in a short period of three years" (interview 6, old participant)

This suggests that participants do have the opportunity, but still have to live up to them and to work hard to prove themselves and to achieve success. The programme offers them a lot, but it is up to the participants to take the opportunities:

"You need to make sure that you utilise it as well as possible." (interview 13, old participant)

3.2.4 Extra coaching

Besides the extra opportunities mentioned above, having extra coaching during the graduate programme is mentioned as an individual benefit as well. Compared to employees who do not participate in the programme, graduates have the opportunity to get feedback more easily from others than only from their direct supervisors. Part of the programme are the buddy system, frequent meetings with Training & Development, and the fact that they rotate and therefore get multiple managers early on in their careers. Examples were given that meetings with direct supervisors often resulted in conversations including counselling, as stated in the following quote:

"On the moments that you sat together with your supervisor and purely talked about the content of projects, that these moments were also used for guidance by asking 'what did you do well? What would I have done different and try it with the other way'? ... Or we were discussing the progress of my team ... and it was nice that we also talked about 'what do you want to do next year? What do you like? What gives you energy? Where do you see yourself in half a year? What do you want to do?'" (interview 7, old participant)

This example suggests that during meetings related to work content, other topics as personal development, interests, or career perspectives could also be discussed. Some respondents mentioned that, even after the programme, they can, and still do, ask their previous managers for advice or to have a discussion with them.

"Six years since I finished the programme I am still in contact, I don't know, every six months to discuss for some advices" (interview 12, old participant)

Creating all these options for coaching, or mentoring, and the extra guidance it can result in, could enhance the participants comfort in their roles (Reiss, 2007) and increase their retention and socialisation (Beecroft et al., 2006).

As can be concluded, multiple people are involved in the programme and graduates could have the opportunity to discuss personal development or work-related issues with different people from different sides and levels of the company. Non-participants can ask feedback or advice from others as well, but the graduate programme facilitates in these relations, which can make them more accessible for its participants.

3.2.5 Networking

Often mentioned as the most valuable aspect of the programme is the contribution that it has on the development of someone's network at the company as shown in the following quotes:

"What I got most of it is actually the network that I built" (interview 4, current participant)

"You know the people, which can definitely help you in your first role here" (interview 8, mentor)

"And your network. I mean if you have so many different departments and you so often have meetings with people, you have Graduate sessions, there you see all kinds of people from throughout the entire organisation. Yes, if you know a lot of people it is easier to move forward and to grow faster." (interview 16, old participant)

This suggests that the graduate programme contains many elements that put participants in situations where they get to know new people, and that they truly do. First of all, making multiple rotations means that someone, in his or her early career, can work at different departments and business units and therefore has to meet and work with new people. Secondly, graduates have to participate in trainings and projects, meaning that they need to work with other employees outside their own department or branch, leading to more connections inside the company. Thirdly, and mentioned by many respondents as having a great impact on someone's network, are the Graduate sessions that happen four times a year.

"But also, the sessions are meant to get in touch with others or board members. And that doesn't have to be about your next role or a different career, but also like 'oh but you are also working on that, I didn't know. Then I would like to hear more and how you think about it.'" (interview 3, old participant)

As mentioned earlier, all the Branch Managers from Europe and the European Support Team members who are available are also present during these sessions. This quote suggests that graduates have the opportunity to meet with senior management and to speak with them and learn what is going on at the company on the European level, and to hear about their experiences with, and opinions on, all kinds of topics. One respondent stated the following while discussing the Graduate sessions:

“Because of the trainee programme the distance between colleagues is much smaller” (interview 7, old participant)

This suggests that the Graduate programme may facilitate in a smaller distance between management, at a European level, and the graduates. At last, since graduates meet each other on a regular basis thanks to the Graduate sessions, trainings, projects, but also via the teambuilding weekends, it is mentioned that friendships between them could be developed, possibly resulting in more bonding inside this group. And these relations may have a positive impact on the company’s results as well, according to the following quote:

“So, because of the programme you actually develop very much ties and friendships and relations at the company. So that also just helps to better work together, which helps our clients” (interview 11, old participant)

This could strengthen their networks even more and during all these events they can hear and learn a lot from each other.

To sum up, thanks to all these elements of the programme, the participants can build their network, which may lead to easier access to more knowledge and information about topics they are not specialised in yet. In addition, knowing more people throughout Europe, especially people from the higher management levels, brings the graduates in the position to maybe get even more opportunities, which could lead to being more in the spotlights and developing their careers even faster inside the company.

3.2.6 Understanding the company

The last benefit for the individual participants is related to being able to better understand the company as a whole. Starting in an operational role provides participants with a solid, in-depth understanding of the daily operations at the company. They get to know all the basic processes and have to work along on the workplace. When graduates later on go to managerial or more specialised roles, this provides them with more credibility as shown in the following quote:

“In the last year of the programme you think ‘okay really good that I learned how to push a pallet, because now I have some credibility when I go on the crossdock’, because I know how a forklift works and how everything works and the people don’t laugh at me and also understand that the advice I have to give them comes from someone who knows what he is talking about” (interview 18, old participant)

Because the participants have done the operational tasks themselves, they know what they ask of their team members and are better able to explain themselves. It is not the goal of the programme to know every process inside out, but to gain a general understanding of what is going on, as mentioned by one of the respondents:

“We also believe that if you finally end up on a managing position, you don’t have to know every in and out, as long as you know in general what is happening” (interview 2, Training & Development employee)

Working in the operational role for one year could help with this, because you for example know how much time a task can take. What further supports the understanding of the company’s processes are the rotations that come after the first role. Switching to different departments, branches or even business units can help getting a clearer view of the company. One respondent stated the following about this:

“Maybe you can also do this without the graduate programme, but the graduate programme puts the emphasis on this” (interview 15, old participant)

This suggests that everybody could have the chance to learn more about the company, but that the graduate programme makes this easier for its participants. This may lead to not only developing a broad understanding of how the processes go and how everything is connected, but also why things are done the way they are going. Other benefits of seeing more of the company, as seen by the respondents, are that graduates better learn how management runs the business at the European level of the company and how the company culture is embedded. One respondent said the following about this:

“Yes, also that you understand our culture, that is I think the most important for a manager at our company. That you have knowledge.” (interview 10, mentor)

This suggests that culture, and knowing the company, is highly valued at the company. All these programme elements, again, may support the development of leadership competencies that are needed at the company. Therefore, the programme could comply with Pernick’s second determinant (2001).

Furthermore, it is mentioned that the type of rotations someone makes also has an impact on the amount of company knowledge. From one side, graduates can choose to rotate between different business units, getting a broad view of the company and learning about all different kind of processes. After every rotation to another business unit, the participant starts again on the operational level to understand how the business unit works. This could bring some advantages with it, as shown in the following quote:

“That you can very easily switch between the business units. You can talk easily. You know people everywhere.” (interview 5, current participant)

Here the respondent suggests that having experience in different business units may positively influence your efficiency at work, because you are more knowledgeable. The other option is staying in one business unit and developing very in-depth knowledge about that one. This could result in graduates becoming specialists in one specific part of the company. Either way, the graduate

programme contributes to the development of human capital by creating employees with very company-specific knowledge (Lepak & Snell, 1999).

Besides having different roles during the graduate programme, simply being part of it has more benefits than seeing a lot of the company. As mentioned by one of the respondents, graduates get more involved in the company's figures, as shown in the following quote:

"You get more triggered on the figures being a trainee.... Because it is expected of them to look beyond their own operation" (interview 5, current participant)

All European Branch Managers develop weekly reports and share these with each other and the lower management at their branches, and as can be seen in the quote, also with the graduates present there, because more is expected of them.

At last, graduates gain more knowledge about the company during the Graduate sessions. Here graduates and senior management share information about different business-units and departments, about the company culture and its history, and about the projects that are going on. Together with the fact that graduates work on these projects themselves, this leads to even more knowledge about the company. One respondent mentioned the projects as a benefit for graduates compared to non-graduates:

"The chance to do projects. Everybody gets these chances, but you get just a bit different kind of projects, also with other business units" (interview 17, old participant)

This suggests that, although everybody can have the chance to work on projects, there is the difference between what projects graduates can get compared to non-graduates, which could have a positive impact on their development by gaining broader knowledge. In the end, being part of the graduate programme means that someone is not only doing his or her tasks, but that these people get more exposure to what is happening at the company on the European level and where the company is going to. The programme provides a broad overview of the company.

As can be concluded, many examples are given that could suggest the achievement of Kirkpatrick's second level of evaluation (2006), learning. The graduate programme, thanks to all the rotations, projects, trainings and Graduate sessions, offers lots of experience to learn more about the company and to develop new skills. The trainings also make the graduates learn more about themselves. As mentioned earlier, some respondents even stated that they could see the development of the graduates over the years, by being able to notice who is a first-year participant or who is in its last year. All the benefits that are found, and the examples given, suggest that the graduate programme could be seen as successfully enhancing the skills, competencies and knowledge of its participants, which is the first aspect of the AMO framework (Boselie, 2010). The other two aspects, motivation and opportunities, are also referred to. One respondent mentioned that because being

part of the programme means being labelled as a potential manager, this could work as a motivator to work towards this goal. At last, many examples are given about having extra opportunities thanks to the programme. These opportunities may lead to further developing the graduates' abilities by gaining more knowledge and skills by doing different functions and by being involved in different processes of the company.

Examples are also given about the graduate programme being supportive in helping the participants to change their behaviour, as being the third level of evaluation (Kirkpatrick, D.L., 2006). Thanks to all the elements of the programme, participants can get the chance to learn how the company wants its managers to behave and how the culture is embedded in the company. Knowing this is an important element in effectively changing the participants behaviour (Kirkpatrick, D.L., 2006), and according to the respondents, the right climate to do so is also present. Some respondents mentioned that without the programme, and the Promote from within philosophy, they would not be in the positions in which they are now. Other examples about providing the right climate for behaviour change are that participants are allowed to make mistakes, and are encouraged to learn from them, and that the programme offers support from different people which could make it possible for graduates to ask for feedback and guidance and to learn how to do things better the next time. At last, the rotations, projects and Graduate sessions may provide participants with the opportunity to apply what they learned and to show their development and skills.

3.3 Organisational benefits

3.3.1 Attracting talent

Having the graduate programme is a valuable tool to more easily attract talent to the company, and to look for potential new managers. Having a programme like this, with everything it offers, can make a job more attractive as mentioned by one of the respondents:

“So, you have to find a way to make the job more attractive and because of having a graduate programme and offering this you attract more interest” (interview 11, old participant)

Two respondents mentioned that attracting qualified people and having a large pool of talent are the biggest contributions of the programme for the company. Some very specific aspects of the graduate programme even helped some respondents to make their decision to go work there.

“I was looking for a company who wanted to invest in young people, who could commit people to them for the long term” (interview 20, old participant)

It is mentioned that the long-term vision of the programme and the company as a whole, but also the flexibility in choosing the rotations, could be decisive factors for the attraction of talent.

Besides attracting talented people, the graduate programme could also facilitate in attracting a specific type of people, as shown in the following quotes:

“The biggest advantage of the traineeship is that you can attract people early and you can completely shape them, explain them how we see it and that results in safeguarding your culture” (interview 16, old participant)

“The biggest contribution is the attraction of well qualified personnel” (interview 10, mentor)

This suggests that on the one hand, the participants are high educated, qualified people who are motivated and willing to invest in themselves. They can have a better fit with the culture as well since the programme could facilitate in gaining more knowledge related to their culture. The case above about the person who applied at the company because of the flexibility of the programme also supports this. This immediately creates a cultural fit since the company values flexibility in their employees. On the other hand, the participants are also young and in the beginning of their working career. For this, two benefits are mentioned.

“I also think that educating these people in the end is more lucrative than trying to get the knowledge later on at the company” (interview 13, old participant)

“I think that trainees when they recently graduated, that they could also bring technologies from the outside who are less embedded in your company. So that they are easier in, or could more easily adapt or work with systems. So, they can also help to give a push in that way” (interview 19, old participant)

Firstly, multiple respondents suggested that it could be more attractive, also financially, to educate young people as a company yourself instead of looking for people with multiple years of experience

outside the company. According to the respondents there is no guarantee that, when giving a person from the outside a managerial role, it will be a success. Secondly, one of the respondents mentioned that recently graduated people can have the benefit of being more adaptive to technologies compared to older generations. They could also bring new technologies to the company. This could be a first sign of intergenerational learning, as mentioned earlier by Kaše et al. (2019), where the older generations learn from the younger graduates.

Furthermore, having a well-organised trainee programme could also influence the employer brand of the company as is shown in the following quote:

“I think that if you have a serious trainee programme, then people who want to become, or already are a trainee could think like ‘well we are at a professional company, with a professional Training & Development, HR department” (interview 16, old participant)

This suggests that a graduate programme can show people that the company is well organised and the same respondent even stated that this image can go beyond attracting individuals, and that it could attract customers as well. It could therefore be used as a marketing tool to show how the company deals with and cares about its employees.

3.3.2 Workforce development

The second benefit is related to the development of the company’s entire workforce. Once talent is attracted and these people participate in the graduate programme, their development will be tracked by Training & Development and all the managers that are involved. For example, during the Graduate sessions, the managers that are present will watch the graduates during the presentations, business cases or workshops, and they will see which participants’ performances are better than the others.

One respondent stated the following:

“On the one hand the management traineeship offers the opportunities and tools to develop them towards these places. On the other hand, it is also a selection mechanism and you are selecting potential people who are able to do that.” (interview 15, old participant)

This suggests that the programme is also a selection mechanism to find the most talented participants who may be eligible to become Branch Managers in the future. Eventually, when the people with the highest capabilities and the best skills are occupying the senior management positions, the rest of the workforce and the organisation may benefit from their qualities as well. The management’s influence goes beyond evaluating the participants. It is mentioned that current managers, who were graduates themselves, could be more supportive to let highly qualitative graduates take the opportunity to leave their branch to explore different business units, as can be seen in the following quote:

“I understand from my own experience that it can be very beneficial for that guy for the rest of his career. And for the company in the long run.” (interview 11, old participant)

This suggests that managers with experience of the programme and the benefits it can have for someone's personal development, could be more willing to look beyond their own branch and its performance and support the graduates to go work somewhere else. The more graduates becoming managers, the more managers there could be who can support the current participants in choosing their own development, which may improve the company in the long run. This development is in line with Donald Kirkpatrick's (2006) suggestion to select the right managers to be involved in the programme. In this case, the programme itself develops these managers.

The graduate programme further develops the workforce by bringing more ambitious people into the company. Even though three respondents mentioned that someone's attitude is always dependent on the individual, or that in general the attitudes of participants and non-participants are basically the same, many respondents still referred positively to the attitude of the graduates, as is shown in the following quotes:

"As graduate you have a different view and are more willing to relocate.... And we also expect that of these people, so than it is very easy to ask of course. But I think that in the basis there is no difference at the company, if you are a graduate or not." (interview 20, old participant)

"These people have the will. They have a drive, and they can do it. So, we see a difference if we can deploy a couple of trainees in a branch, in an operation. It enhances the quality and speed everywhere." (interview 9, mentor)

During the interviews, there is referred to the graduates as being very ambitious, enthusiastic, eager to learn, open-minded, having a drive, and willing to take initiative, prove themselves and go beyond the 40 hours a week. One respondent also stated that graduates are quite determined, more than others. In the end, also the respondents who mentioned that there aren't many differences praised the graduates for their motivation, skills and competences. They simply didn't want to give the impression that there is a division between both groups inside the company:

"We want to prevent that only the people who participated to the programme are special... we want to keep the level of quality of the programme high, but we don't want people taking status from being in the programme" (interview 19, old participant)

In general, as seen from the examples above, for the company, being able to attract and maintain young, talented employees at the company could be an improvement for the entire workforce.

Besides having employees with the right attitude at the company, the graduate programme also has the following benefit:

"It creates very well-educated people" (interview 20, old participant)

This suggests that the company can benefit from the knowledge and skills that the graduates gain during the programme. The programme includes many elements that enhance this, examples are the Graduate sessions, where young employees can have discussions with, and learn from, Europe's senior management. In addition, via the programme many employees, early in their careers, are trained the

same way, gained the same knowledge, learned the same techniques, and could use these during their careers as suggested by one of the respondents:

“So, without any training you act on an intuition, you act on your logic. But then when you get in contact with that kind of trainings, then you adapt, you change yourself. Well having them early in the career helped me to shape my behaviour in my career based on those that’s being the normal.” (interview 12, old participant)

Here it is suggested that the trainings may lead to graduates adopting what they learned and implementing this in their daily way of working because they are seen as the norm. At last, the operational experience that graduates gain could also influence the total quality of the workforce. When the participants leave the programme and later in their careers end up in managerial positions, they still carry their experience from the workplace, which could enhance their credibility and make them more knowledgeable of what is going on at the daily operations as mentioned before, and therefore perhaps make them more effective as leaders (Pernick, 2001).

Furthermore, the graduate programme is a tool that could support the embeddedness of the company culture in the workforce. Respondents stated the following:

“We don’t do anything more special around culture for them than we do for the others” (interview 14, mentor)

“The company puts a lot of emphasis on culture... I am not used from previous employers that the culture is so expressed and if you truly believe in it, yes than the biggest advantage of the traineeship is that you can attract people early and you can completely shape them, explain them how we see it and that results in safeguarding your culture”(interview 16, old participant)

These contradicting statements suggest that it is not the case that graduates get more knowledge regarding, or training on, the culture, but that the benefit is there for the company that the participants are attracted at the beginning of their careers, at a young age, and often have no experience somewhere else. Therefore, the company can train them completely within their own culture from day one. This may suggest that they learn to do their job inside the three pillars of the company and that they only work with people who share the same values, which could result in having more employees spread out throughout the company who understand the culture and believe in it. This is in line with the company’s Promote from within culture as one respondent mentioned the following:

“It is much more difficult to learn an external Branch Manager or an external team member, a new team member the way we do things in the company than just promoting one person from inside” (interview 12, old participant)

Besides this, one of the respondents also suggested that it is beneficial for the company that if they give someone more responsibilities, it is good if that person has experience with their culture for a longer period of time.

The last aspect of the graduate programme that impacts the quality of the workforce is related to the support participants receive during the programme.

“It is more known and maybe it is also the case that the current generation of managers is also more accustomed to it and a lot of them were graduates themselves” (interview 15, old participant)

This suggests that because the programme exists for a long time, the current managers could be more accustomed to and experienced in having graduates at their branch. Many of them have participated at the graduate programme themselves. It is also mentioned that the programme is more structured than before and this could enhance the quality of coaching of the graduates, because current participants meet with their managers on a more structured basis and two Branch Managers mentioned that the fact that they were graduates themselves may be a benefit for them when they coach these current participants. This is shown in the following quote:

“I can better guide someone, coach someone. I think I am a bit better at that” (interview 11, old participant)

This could result in a higher quality of coaching which can positively influence the development of the graduates, hence leading to a higher quality of employees at the company.

To conclude on this part, the graduate programme attracts and develops highly skilled, motivated, and knowledgeable people which are immersed in the company culture from day one of their careers. Once more, many examples are given that may support the graduate programme as a successful HRM system by influencing the three aspects of the AMO model (Boselie, 2010). Thanks to the programme, when graduates leave the programme and start in their fixed roles at the company, the quality of the company’s entire workforce could be enhanced.

3.3.3 Enhancing operation efficiency

As a result of having more highly qualified personnel thanks to the graduate programme, this could lead to the enhancement of the entire operations’ efficiency as well. One of the respondents stated the following:

“I think you get some people that are just more efficient, because they know how it works and you also find some people that are really made to your own culture” (interview 18, old participant)

The respondent further mentioned that in his experience recruiting people from the outside leads to having employees in your team who don’t share the same values. This is strongly linked with the part in the previous paragraph regarding culture, but here a relation is made that suggests that the company could become more efficient because of the programme. Another example that is given multiple times is that thanks to the programme and the rotations between business units, employees are better able to understand others, as shown in the following quote:

“That you can place yourself in someone else’s shoes. That you know where the question comes from.” (interview 5, current participant)

This could further result in them being better able to switch between topics, come up with propositions or solutions faster, and have a higher efficiency during discussions or meetings. Furthermore, it is mentioned by many respondents that besides better understanding each other, they also better understand the entire company and its processes. This could in the long-term result in the following benefit:

“You have a much bigger group of team members inside the organisation who understand what the goals are and where we want to go to as a company. We have a much better distribution of the company which means that the strategy is much better and much broader distributed inside the organisation.” (interview 7, old participant)

Multiple managers further mentioned that the graduates really improve the company and one Branch Manager stated that they can see a difference regarding quality and speed when there are a couple of graduates in a branch, as quoted in the previous paragraph. This suggests that the graduate programme helps branches to develop their operations. These opportunities go beyond developing processes as shown in the following quote:

“If you also have trainees who worked in different business units, for example at transport and at air & ocean. Yes, that makes it easier to later in your career, if you are at the table with a client, to ask ‘and how do you run your ocean freight?’” (interview 2, Training & Development employee)

This suggests that when employees have an understanding of multiple business units, it can make them better able to talk with current or new customers not only about their own business unit, but also about others and this could lead to more collaboration with customers and enhancing the company’s turnover.

During the interviews, some more specific elements are mentioned that could be improved thanks to the graduate programme. First of all, the programme stimulates the sharing of knowledge between employees, branches and business units, as shown in the following quote:

“You see for example that because we have trainees here in the Netherlands and if we send them abroad, that they can add value over there, because there is more knowledge in the Netherlands, than the trainee is able to add something abroad” (interview 10, mentor)

This suggests, combined with examples of other respondents, that because of the rotations, graduates may bring knowledge from one place to the other. In this quote it is specifically mentioned by one of the managers that graduates who worked in the Netherlands can bring more knowledge towards other countries, but other examples are also given that suggest the benefit for smaller branches when they receive a graduate who worked at a larger branch, despite the country they worked in. The Graduate sessions support the sharing of knowledge as well, because graduates learn about specific topics, but it is mentioned to be beneficial for the managers as well.

“Usually you are in a group of five or six people, with a combination of trainees, Branch Managers and European support team members, and you discuss a given topic. And yes, it is very nice to get a fresh look at these, because I think that I can learn more from the way they look at it.” (interview 7, old participant)

“It is very interesting for them to tell to the business, but also for us to know” (interview 9, mentor)

These quotes suggest that the Graduate sessions may be very informative for them as well, with the second quote referring to the project updates that are given at these sessions.

Secondly, the graduate programme also may enhance the communication and collaboration inside the company. One respondent stated:

“It is maybe the biggest advantage that I worked with so many people in a department. It is now for me super easy in the communication.” (interview 16, old participant)

This suggests that because of the rotations, participants work in more branches during the years and therefore developed a large network within the company. This is referred to multiple times as a big advantage and most important element employees have. For the company, this network across all levels and branches of the company has two advantages. First of all, it could enhance the speed of daily operations, because having employees with large networks creates direct communication lines between all the branches and people know better where to look for information as is shown in the following quote:

“Then you get to know these people as well and that is important if you want to get things done. Like I don’t know everything, but it is important to know that if you don’t know something that you know where to find the information or who to ask.” (interview 6, old participant)

Furthermore, and mentioned earlier, there could be more bonding and stronger friendships between the graduates, as said in the following quote:

“If you can create such a young group who are close with each other, who want to help each other and who don’t let each other down, who can look over the branches and see the different business units, yes that only helps of course” (interview 5, current participant)

This again suggests that the programme may develop employees who understand the company and who want to help each other to improve the daily operations of the company. Because of the graduate programme, the company can have more employees who more easily help and find each other, and therefore have access to more information and can do their tasks more efficient. All this is in line with the company’s will for branches and business units to work together, and these networks and friendships could be of great help to achieve this. One respondent stated:

“It helps to enhance the collaboration, which helps our customers” (interview 11, old participant)

This could mean that the programme has a positive impact on the results of the organisation by being better able to help the customers, leading to satisfaction and retention. The second advantage of all the networks and connections is that it does not only increase the speed between communication, but

that more employees also talk the same language. The graduate programme exists for a long period of time and many current and old participants have worked at different department in different business units, leading to a better understanding of the colleagues there as stated by one of the respondents:

“That I still see these people today on the crossdock and that we still can work well with each other and know each other. And now, that has the benefit that if I need to get something done, that I know all these guys and that makes it easier to arrange things. We get each other and we don’t have to go all the way via the official way.” (interview 6, old participant)

In this example the respondent suggests that thanks to the programme there are more people someone knows, and that since they have worked with others and know these people, they can more easily understand each other.

In conclusion, the graduate programme may enhance communication, knowledge sharing, and the creation of more employees who understand the company and all its processes. All this could make individual employees more effective in their work, and therefore increasing the effectivity of the company as a whole.

3.3.4 Developing managers

As the final benefit for the company, the graduate programme develops a large pool of potential managers, and already developed multiple managers during its years. It is mentioned by the respondents that the programme facilitates in this as is shown in the following quotes:

“And I think that the biggest contribution is that you develop or coach a lot of leaders for in the future” (interview 11, old participant)

“The traineeship offers them the opportunities and tools to develop themselves towards these places” (interview 15, old participant)

Multiple respondents gave examples of branches having managers who all participated in the graduate programme before. Furthermore, the majority of the current Branch Managers, and also two European Support Team members, are all old participants. Also, the graduate programme has participated in the Best Traineeship Benelux awards in the past where they won the Return on Investment category twice in 2017 and 2018. All this, the awards, and the examples of respondents stating the programme really develops a lot of managers, suggests that all the investments done in the programme do deliver results and that it does achieve the goal of developing future managers for the company.

Additionally, it is mentioned often that the Promote from within philosophy of the company plays a very important role in the programme and the achievement of its goal. Some respondents stated the following about this:

“We have a strong culture regarding to the promotion from within. So yes, that fits nicely with the traineeship in my opinion.” (interview 16, old participant)

"If we develop our own people. That is good for them, but also interesting for the company to let relatively high educated people rise from the bottom of the company." (interview 13, old participant)

This suggests that the company's philosophy has a strong fit with the graduate programme, and that the programme gives the company the opportunity to let young, high educated people start in the company and their philosophy lets them grow and rise to higher positions.

As a result of the development of new future managers, the programme also contributes to the continuity of the organisation as shown in the following quotes:

"That is, I think the biggest contribution the development of our managers, our new managers, to continue our growth" (interview 10, mentor)

"I think that for the company you guarantee a kind of continuity. When somebody drops out, there is often someone ready to take over from inside the organisation who knows the organisation." (interview 16, old participant)

When for example a current manager leaves the company, and because they have a pool of potential managers at their disposal, open positions can be filled quickly by someone from the inside who has, according to the respondents, already knowledge of the company and its processes. It is mentioned that this reduces the risk of loss. Furthermore, the future growth of the company can be made possible as well. One of the respondents mentioned that the graduate programme can be seen as a strategic plan that could help the company focus on expanding in the upcoming years.

"It is very important that we are now recruiting for the different business units in the different countries. That if we want to realise the growth we want to realise as an organisation, then we have to focus now, for in five or ten years, we have to work now on the development of these people." (interview 15, old participant)

This suggests that when the company wants to grow or to open a new branch, a Branch Manager and other managers are needed and the graduate programme may develop these people and make sure that they are already present in the company. Therefore, the graduate programme also complies to the ninth determinant of Pernick (2001), achieving the goals of the company and developing the next generation of leaders.

To conclude, statements are made by the respondents that the graduate programme positively influences the results of the company. This is a first indication towards meeting level four of Donald Kirkpatrick's evaluation model (2006). Having more employees who understand the company, its processes, who know more people, and who have a strong cultural fit with the company could all influence the effectiveness of the company, and therefore improve its results. It is mentioned by many respondents that the graduate programme may improve the communication in the company, because networks are bigger and thanks to all the rotations and operational experience, people are better able

to understand colleagues from different departments or business units. All this could possibly lead to processes going more efficient, decisions being made faster, or managers being better able to lead their teams, because they have more knowledge and are more credible. Furthermore, the graduate programme has showed during its years that it resulted in the development of new managers for the company since many current managers have participated in the programme. Examples are even given that the graduate programme could contribute to more customers and sales, thanks to more managers having a better understanding of the entire company. Still, the information from the interviews only provides an indication for most of these results. Since no figures are analysed or quantitative measurements are done, and since results can be influenced by many different factors (Kirkpatrick, D.L., 2006), it remains hard to say if the graduate programme truly results in higher efficiency, better communication, or more turnover. Nevertheless, multiple respondents mentioning the same effects or benefits, still shows that within the company there is a perception of the graduate programme positively influencing all these results.

3.4 Critical reflection

The last part of this chapter contains a description of the critical notes that are given towards the graduate programme. An important reason for evaluating a programme, according to Donald Kirkpatrick (2006), is that it can result in finding opportunities to improve it. These critical notes, and the suggestions that are made, are divided in notes regarding specific programme elements or more general critics.

3.4.1 Programme elements

First of all, some critical comments are made about the goal of the Graduate sessions. Two respondents mentioned that the goal of these sessions could be reviewed as is shown in the following quote:

“The quarterly sessions are seen by many as, from the side of a company it is seen as a kind of training that you get and I see it more as a kind of social event.... I think the company still sees it as a kind of training and that it is very useful. And I agree that it is very useful, but on a different point. It is useful because there is a low threshold and it is nice to discuss certain topics with each other. That has to be something for sure, but the attitude of everyone is different.” (interview 5, current participant)

According to this, there is also value in the network part of the sessions and not only on the training part, and the people who are present at the sessions have different attitudes regarding the goal of it. Furthermore, one of the respondents commented that the information about the topics of the sessions could be given differently. He suggested the following:

“I would put a guest speaker on stage who works the whole day on this, who gives the information about the topic and that afterwards the trainees get assignments to continue on this” (interview 10, mentor)

Here it is suggested to not let the graduates present the information of the topic, but to let a guest speaker do it whose daily work is related to the topic. This could result in more in-depth knowledge. It is also suggested to let the graduates be more active and work on assignments rather than to listen to the presentation most of the time. Another comment is given on the project presentations. The respondent mentioned that because the group of graduates is so large now, it could bring the following difficulties:

“The group has become much bigger, we used to be there with maximum 25 to 30 people. Now the Graduate session contains 60 people. So, there is less space to be critical and to ask difficult questions. So, I thought that it was very effective when we had it back then.” (interview 20, old participant)

It is mentioned by the respondent that there is less time to listen to all the project updates, because the group of graduates is so large now and this may influence the critical discussion about the projects.

The last suggestion regarding the Graduate sessions is that it would be good to organise the sessions not always at the same branch, but to also meet at other, smaller branches in Europe.

Secondly, related to the trainings of the graduate programme, some minor suggestions are made as stated in the following quote:

"I had the feeling that I wanted more technical training or a more content related training"
(interview 7, old participant)

Respondents mentioned that the trainings are focused on developing soft skills, like leadership, communication, presenting and feedback, but that during their participation they missed trainings on more technical, work related, skills or analytical trainings for example about six sigma, or similar techniques for project management. One respondent mentioned that she missed the opportunity to choose her own trainings and to focus them on topics more relevant for her personal development. These comments are in line with Pernick's (2001) suggestion to focus the development of the participants on three areas: technical, conceptual and interpersonal skills.

Critical comments on the projects are given as well by the respondents. Two people noted that graduates sometimes, because of their daily work or because of setbacks, barely pay any attention to their projects anymore. Therefore, the following suggestion is made:

"If we need to improve something than I would think that we could perhaps structure the projects a bit more" *(interview 2, Training & Development employee)*

Besides this, one respondent also stated that in the past there was a higher focus on the projects thanks to constant presentations and constant updates, and now this focus has diminished. This is in line with the comment on the project updates during the Graduate sessions.

Fourthly, it is mentioned that the quality and success of the rotations can be very different and is very context dependent. Some respondent stated the following about this:

"There are always departments were things go better than at others.... Well if you send a trainee over there than that can have consequences. It can work really well, but it can also, speaking about profiling, lead to a not so positive image for that person." *(interview 13, old participant)*

This suggests that when someone rotates to a department or branch which is not performing well, or where for example the graduate's coaching isn't optimal, this can create the impression that their performance is not good as well, and it could make it therefore more difficult for them to show management what they are capable of. Other comments on the rotations that are made are related to the duration of them. Some respondents prefer to see graduates to stay longer in their roles than only one year and noted the following:

"Sometimes trainees, because they want to move on so fast, end up not learning as much as they should because they're so eager to get to the next step" *(interview 14, mentor)*

It is suggested that staying longer, for example for one and a half year, makes them able to better understand their tasks and to learn more. Branch Managers and Training & Development could play an important role in slowing the rotations down and making sure that the participants really understand their roles and the processes of the branch or business unit. Making rotations too fast isn't beneficial for the branches either, as shown in the following quote:

"If you rotate people all the time.... You actually all the time have a loss of knowledge in the branch and you get a new person and that has to be built again. So that is also a small disadvantage of it." (interview 11, old participant)

This quote suggests that after every rotation the branch loses knowledge and when a new graduate comes, they have to start over. For some roles it also takes a while to understand them and when the graduate is finally adding value to the branch he or she has to leave after a few months.

At last, during the interviews it is mentioned that for some branches, the smaller ones, it is hard to recruit graduates and the following is said about this:

"I now have two graduates. Soon I only have one and I barely accomplish in finding a new one. I have for as long as we work with graduates only had first-year graduates." (interview 9, mentor)

It is suggested by this respondent that most of the graduates prefer to go to bigger branches and that few of them go to the smaller ones. Therefore, it is suggested that the programme could pay more attention towards making sure that the graduates come everywhere and that every branch has the opportunity to benefit from the programme. This is in line with two respondents who noted that the company, when focusing on the Netherlands, is not known everywhere. The company could increase their employer branding in the western part of the Netherlands, by using the networks of the current participants to find new talent as suggested in the following quote:

"And a very active contribution of the trainees, because they have the best network in a university and at college, to recruit new people" (interview 3, old participant)

3.4.2 General critics

Besides the critical notes on the individual elements of the graduate programme, some more general comments are made as well.

First of all, multiple respondents commented on the name of the graduate programme and the impression it can give on current and potential participants. Someone mentioned that the title could lead to participants already thinking that they will become the next Branch Manager, forgetting that they really have to earn this and that it is hard to reach. Furthermore, many participants end up working in specialist roles at the company instead of managerial ones and one respondent mentioned the following:

"It also has to be a programme that looks for specialists" (interview 15, old participant)

This is in line with others stating that more specialist roles are available and that not all participants are suited, or willing, to become a manager and end up in these positions. Therefore, it is suggested that the company manages the expectations of the participants, but on the other hand keeps making sure that there are sufficient opportunities for them to grow at the company. Furthermore, for current, talented students who have the ambition to become specialists, the programme's name could repel them from applying at the company as mentioned in the following quote:

"Somehow that name repels. If you have the goal to become a specialist in something, then you won't apply for a programme that focuses on developing managers" (interview 15, old participant)

Therefore, some respondents suggested that the programme could carry a broader name and focus on more than only developing managers.

Finally, some individual comments are made on the following topics. It is suggested that, even though participants to the programme are really developing themselves and become more qualified, the programme still has a self-fulfilling prophecy as is shown in the following quote:

"You have delved more deeply into things, but there is of course the little thing that the programme has to make itself, how do you say that? Fulfil itself." (interview 13, old participant)

The respondents suggest that for the continuity of the programme, it is necessary that its participants end up in managerial positions, and, as someone else also mentioned, that the company still could choose graduates above non-graduates when a role is available. This may create a disadvantage for qualified non-participants. Another respondent commented on the familiarity other employees have with the graduate programme by stating the following:

"I think that for the people who didn't or don't participate in the programme, so the people who work here locally, that to them they can explain the programme better. Look I know what the programme means... but the people in the warehouse they think 'yes there is a graduate, but no idea what they do'.... I think it is not clear enough for a lot of people and that they could say 'yes that is an intern'." (interview 9, mentor)

This suggests that for some employees of the company, for example the ones who only work in smaller branches and never went to other, larger ones, it is unclear what the graduate programme contains and why it is in place at the company. Therefore, more information could be given to other employees about the goal of the programme and that there are graduates at their branch who are more than just interns.

Chapter 4. Discussion

This chapter puts the results in its context. It contains a critical reflection on the limitations of the data, the research methodology, and the literature that is used to help analyse the data. At last, it provides recommendations for future studies regarding this same topic.

At first, all the interviews that are held were with employees who participated or are still participating in the graduate programme, or are having a mentor / coordinator role. This resulted in the respondents being able to give plenty of information about the programme because of their experience with it, but it has the risk of them being positively biased towards the programme and its success, because they are directly contributing to or benefiting from it. Also, the respondents are all currently working at the company, so none of them have left during or after the programme. Interviewing people who left the company could have given different insights in the quality and benefits of the graduate programme. Furthermore, interviewing employees who are not involved in the programme, but are still working at the company, could be valuable as well. Information can be given from a different perspective, resulting in a better understanding how others, non-participants, think about the programme, how much they value it, and how it impacts their daily work. Interviewing these two groups would have improved the validity of the study by providing better insights into the real situation, therefore better measuring what is supposed to be measured. Non-participants can also be used as a control group to find out if there is truly a difference between participants and non-participants regarding the effects on the four levels of evaluation (Kirkpatrick, D.L., 2006). The same can be done by analysing quantitative data to analyse the effects of the graduate programme. However, just as mentioned earlier in this report, it is hard to analyse this, because many factors could influence the results and therefore need to be taken into account.

Secondly, interviews are only conducted with the participants once. This means that the interviews, and the data gathered from them, are just single moments in time. For this study it was necessary to interview the employees, because broad, in-depth information was needed to answer the research question and to learn what the benefits of the programme are for the company. Therefore, it was also relevant to interview many old participants, because they know best what the graduate programme has meant for the company during the years. But because the respondents are only asked about their knowledge and opinions once, it makes the data less reliable. For future research it is recommended to interview or to survey employees multiple times. By doing this it is possible to verify if their opinion regarding the graduate programme has changed and if they started to notice other advantages, or maybe disadvantages. It could be especially valuable to do this with current participants of the programme, because they have a fresh look regarding the company. Conducting a longitudinal

study with this group could provide clearer and more reliable data about their individual development, and the benefits for them personally.

As mentioned earlier during the organisational benefits, the graduate programme can also enhance the company's image and attract new customers. To make sure if graduate programmes have this effect, and if current or potential customers do appreciate a company more because they have a certain programme in place, interviews or surveys should also be held with them. It provides a better understanding of the company's employer brand and the impact that a graduate programme can have on it.

Additionally, to enhance the external validity of the results of this study, it is recommended to evaluate other graduate programmes in order to verify if the same organisational benefits come up. This could either be done by conducting interviews or via surveys, as long as multiple people from the same company are involved in it. And as recommended earlier, a diverse group of employees has to be included to gather insights from different perspectives. However, when evaluating different graduate programmes to look for similar benefits, a remark has to be made on the generalisability of the information that is gathered in this study. As many benefits are found, it is worthwhile to mention that the context of the company and the way the graduate programme is structured have a large impact on the successfulness of it. Examples are given in this study about the strong company culture and their Promote from within philosophy playing important roles in their graduate programme. Therefore, since every company and graduate programme is different, the context of the company, and its impact, has to be included.

At last, during the data analysis, each part of the results is linked with the evaluation model of Donald Kirkpatrick (2006), and his and Pernick's (2001) lists of determinants for the development of a training or programme. It can be concluded that, albeit not the main goal of this study, for this case all four levels of evaluation are mentioned and reflected upon, and that therefore the model could be a useful tool for the evaluation of graduate programmes. But since the model is only used as a guideline to reflect upon the results, and not to analyse the effectiveness of the model, it remains challenging to truly state its successfulness for evaluation graduate programmes. The used methodology makes this even more challenging since only interviews are conducted and no wide scaled questionnaires or control groups are used, or no quantitative data is developed from the interviews, all being tools suggested for a successful evaluation (Kirkpatrick, D.L., 2006). Therefore, to gain a better understanding of the way graduate programmes can be best evaluated, more, perhaps longitudinal, research is needed which links Donald Kirkpatrick's model with the evaluation of graduate programmes, and uses more than only interviews to collect data.

Furthermore, the lists of determinants of both authors are, when relevant, reflected upon as well. Here the determinants suggested by Pernick (2001) corresponded better with the graduate

programme than the ones of Donald Kirkpatrick (2006), but still not all of them are included in the results. This has two reasons. At first, as mentioned in the literature review, the determinants of Donald Kirkpatrick are mainly applicable on classroom trainings and for a lesser amount on graduate programmes, as can be seen in this study as well. The second reason is related to the purpose these two lists have. They are both mainly focused on the development of a training or leadership development programme, and only the last determinant of both lists suggests the importance of evaluating them. Therefore, to state the effectiveness of these lists, and to know if these are thorough enough, future studies on this topic can be better done with companies who want to develop a graduate programme, or only recently did. In these cases, more determinants could be relevant, or others can be found which have an impact on the successfulness of a programme as well. In this study the graduate programme is already well-established and determinants as setting the objectives and developing selection criteria and the application process are done a long time ago.

Conclusion

Many companies nowadays have a graduate programme in place and multiple benefits can be found for the individual participants, and to a lesser degree for the organisations themselves. This study is aimed at contributing to the scientific literature by providing more empirical data about these benefits by making the connection between graduate programmes, as bundles of HRM practices aimed at a specific group of employees, and their impact on individual participants and organisations as a whole. The goal of this research, as a single case study, is to analyse the graduate programme of a logistics company to find out what benefits it has for the company and how it contributes to its performance.

In order to effectively evaluate the company's graduate programme, the four levels of evaluation of Donald Kirkpatrick (2006) are used in addition with his determinants for developing a training, and those of Pernick (2001), for developing a programme. To gain knowledge about the benefits of the graduate programme, 20 employees who have a relation with it are interviewed. By analysing the interviews many examples are found that suggest that the programme has benefits for the individual and the organisation, and therefore could positively impact the organisation's performance. Most of these benefits on the organisational level, even though they are specifically mentioned by the respondents, come from indirect relations with the benefits the graduate programme could have on the individual level. On the individual level, the programme and all its elements may offer more personal development, more career development, extra opportunities, extra coaching, more networking, and a better understanding of the company. In conclusion, the programme could develop highly skilled employees, who possess much knowledge about the company and its processes, therefore enabling them to be effective in their work. Here a link could be made with the programme being successful in the first three levels of evaluation by respondents showing positive reactions towards the programme, learning new skills and developing their knowledge and capabilities, and being able to adapt what they learned and to change their behaviour thanks to the opportunities and coaching they get.

In line with the individual benefits, and as an answer to this study's research question, the graduate programme could lead to multiple organisational benefits. The most important one, being the goal of the programme, is that the programme creates new managers and a pool of potential ones for in the future. This may contribute to the continuity of the company. Other organisational benefits that could be linked with the programme are the attraction of more talent, the development of the entire workforce, and the enhancement of the operation's efficiency. These benefits could be a signal towards the fourth level of evaluation, achieving results (Kirkpatrick, D.L., 2006). Still, as suggested in this report, more research needs to be done on the relation between graduate programmes and organisational performance in order to be better able to claim its effects on the results of a company.

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