

Topics for Bachelor and Master Thesis

Covid-19 reaction

In March 2020, companies suddenly faced unprecedented challenges with the emergence of Covid-19 and the subsequent supply and demand shocks associated with government interventions, such as lockdown measures. As a result, price, demand, and supply forecasts were suddenly out of date, making company steering a challenge. On top of that, nobody could know how long the situation would persist and how long the path back to normalcy would be.

Examples of research questions are as follows:

- How did companies try to capture the revised market outlook, including uncertainty from the onset of the shock?
 - Did they try to simulate the outcomes as Covid developed? Did they simply update the forecasts of their usual assumptions? Did they think through multiple scenarios? How frequently did they update their models? Did they assess how well their first scenarios captured the actual outcomes?
- What were the company reactions following the emergence of covid-19, and how were they decided?
 - Were companies' reactions purely defensive (i.e. cost-cutting, stopping certain activities etc.), or did they also explore other alternatives (i.e. using stronger marketing to capture opportunities and outperform competitors)? How did they explore different actions, and how were assumptions about the future used in the decision process (e.g., did they use scenario analysis as discussed above)?

Decision practices, culture and performance

"The key finding is startling - decisions fail half of the time" Paul C Nutt, Why Decisions Fail - Learnings from a 20-year study of 400 decisions.

There seems to be plenty of evidence that decision-making can go wrong in a number of ways; decision-makers take shortcuts in the decision process, risks are neglected, or people involved in the process engage in irrational behaviour in the form of cognitive biases.

Thesis papers should test the hypothesis that there is a link between company culture and decision processes and that this link influences performance.

Examples of research questions are as follows:

- Are people afraid to speak up and raise concerns?
- Are people (and decision-makers in particular) open-minded when facing a decision?
- Is there a learning culture?
- Is there a discovery-driven decision process, or are support teams just trying to develop the case for the preferred solution?

Papers can measure performance impact in several ways: growth rates, profitability, impairments for specific investment decisions, comparison of promised vs. realized results.

Sustainability reporting vs. Controlling

The role of sustainability has been increasing across all industries since the 1990s. With this, the role of sustainability reporting has also increased. While reporting requirements previously only affected large companies, the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive – CSRD will make SR reporting mandatory for an even larger pool of companies.

With this increased focus on sustainability and its external reporting, a thesis paper should look into the question of how best to embed the topic of sustainability within an organization beyond just communication and marketing. For example, suppose the company's ambition is to become genuinely sustainable. In that case, they must integrate the topic of sustainability into the company's steering systems (incl. tracking of KPIs, target setting, performance review and incentives).

Examples of research questions are as follows:

- What is the content of sustainability reporting, and for what is the report used? Where in the organization is sustainability reporting organized, and who are its internal customers?
- Is sustainability forward-looking with forecasts? Are these forecasts simply a function of the core business strategy, or do sustainability goals impact the development of the core business strategy?
- Subject to the availability of sustainability targets: Are there incentives to meet these sustainability targets, and who is responsible for the associated performance tracking? If performance management for sustainability targets is different from performance management for business targets—how do they interlink.
- Are those responsible for a company's sustainability looking to climate scenarios as a source for their sustainability reporting (e.g. TCFD reporting requirements)? Is there a link between those scenarios and the available future projections used for company steering?