The individual Controller role

And how the role is affected by increased information and complex report relations

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Abstract

Previous research of the controller role is extensive and has been studied in several sectors, which provides a wide range of definitions of the controller role. These definitions have contributed to an ambiguous controller role in regards to what work assignments are most important and to whom the controller should report. This thesis aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the controller role based on work assignments within a decentralised organisation working with complex financial products. This thesis also contributes to an understanding of how controllers perceive that their role is affected by their work with handling information and their report relations. This has generated three research questions: What role does the controller have in a Swedish universal bank based on work assignments? What are the eventual differences in the controller role depending on department in the organisation? How do the controllers perceive that their role is affected by their work with handling information and by their report relations? Delimitation was made to analyse controllers at various levels in Handelsbanken. In order to create an understanding of the controller role in this context, an abductive approach as been used in order to combine existing theories with empirical findings. Based on a qualitative approach, triangulation was chosen to combine assembled empirical data with semi-structured interviews. The result of this study implies that controllers mainly lean towards the role as a Business partner as they work as a support function to provide local or higher managers with relevant analysis for decision-making. Based on work processes with information, the controllers lean towards an Analyst and Coach as they generally handle all business related information. From this case study, controllers in decentralised organisations possess the role as a Specialist as they are situated in separate departments with a clear focus. Results also show that more automated work assignments due to technological development do not increase the controllers’ opportunity to dedicate more time on analysis. Instead, increased information flows require controllers to allocate resources towards assembling information. In terms of report relations, close adherence towards the local managers does not affect the controller’s objective reporting to higher management and the controller can arguably be more independent within their report relations than what is described by literature.

Keywords: Swedish universal banks, controller role, work assignments, role expectations capabilities, information handling, report relations
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1. Introduction

This chapter presents a brief background to the study of the controller's role by giving information of its history and development. The background will lead to our research problem and the purpose of conducting this thesis. This chapter will also discuss the thesis' delimitations, as well as the theoretical and practical contributions of this research. Finally, a research disposition has been made in order show the structure of this thesis.

1.1 Background

Previous research of the controller role is extensive as well as to how the role has developed over time. This has contributed to a wide acceptance that the controller has an important role in organisations (Lindvall, 2009; Granlund & Lukka, 1998; Nilsson & Olve, 2013). Nevertheless, there is no unambiguous definition of the controller and what the profession’s primary work assignments are in organisations (Erfors & Igelström, 2006). Consequently, this thesis has aimed to study the controller role based on its work assignments and how they may differ in departments through a single case study of a Swedish universal bank.

In the 1800s, management control systems (MCS) were implemented in US organisations initially to reduce the risk of large financial losses, reputation damage and organisational failure (Merchant & Van der Stede, 2012). As the MCS were developed to monitor increasingly complex organisations with decentralised divisions, a new important role arose in order to monitor these organisations; the controller role (Samuelson, 2004; Källström, 1990). In a traditional US perspective, the controller has been defined as a "bean-counter", which has given the controller role a reputation of being stiff and dutiful (Baldvinsdottir et al. 2009; Granlund & Luka, 1998; Mattsson, 1987). It has also been suggested that the controller role is usually not involved in strategic decision-making. Instead, research has for long described the controller as a "score-keeper", whose main work assignment has been to assemble historical financial data (Simon et al. 1954).
Apart from the US perspective, this thesis focuses on the controller in a Swedish context. Initially, the role was introduced in Sweden from the US in the 1970s (Olve & Petri, 2008; Lindvall, 2009). In a Swedish context, the controller’s role is foremost defined based on its work assignments, but how to define the controller in organisations is widely spread in literature (Källström, 1990; Nilsson & Olve, 2013; Lindvall, 2009). A traditional definition has remained to describe the role as either a "treasurer" or "controller" (Källström, 1990). The treasurer is characterised by its central position in the organisation with an overall responsibility, while the controller is usually located in divisions with a partly responsibility (ibid.). From this perspective, two modern definitions have emerged as accounting controller and business controller (Nilsson & Olve, 2013; Samuelson, 2004). In a Swedish context, the business controller is described to work close to line-management in the organisation to identify risks and opportunities and provide managers with relevant information for decision-making (Lindvall, 2009; Mattsson, 1987; Siegel & Sorensen, 1999; Nilsson & Olve, 2013; Zoni & Merchant, 2007; Granlund & Lukka, 1998). Both controller roles are described to have a shared responsibility in the organisation, although the accounting controller usually provides the business controller with financial data to analyse (Källström, 1990). Further on in this thesis, we will base the discussion of the controller role on what previous research has defined as a business controller (Lindvall, 2009).

Apart from traditional definitions of the controller role, it has since the 21st century developed to become more complex role in organisations (The Mckinsey Quarterly, 2009; Merchant & Van der Stede, 2012). Development of the controller role in its complexity usually refers to globalisation, financial crises and corporate scandals as important factors (The Mckinsey Quarterly, 2009). The financial crisis in 2008 and the great debt crisis in 2010 have contributed to a more changeable environment with increased competition, political uncertainty and volatile exchange markets (Merchant & Van der Stede, 2012). For a Swedish universal bank with equity interest and close relation to financial or non-financial corporations in a variety of markets, uncertainties are constantly present (Granlund & Lukka, 1998; Benston, 1994). Drawing upon this, as Swedish universal banks are heavily affected by these uncertainties, it increases the relevance to further develop research of the controller role in this sector.

The Swedish banking sector has undergone a significant development since the 1960s primarily due to government regulations and legislations (Swedish Bankers' Association,
Since the 1990s, four major banks have come to be developed in order to fall into the category as universal banks; Nordea, SEB, Svenska Handelsbanken and Swedbank (ibid.). Characteristics for a universal bank are the wide range of financial products and services. These include underwriting securities, selling insurance, carrying out security and providing real estate mortgages (Swedish Banker's Association, 2014; Benston, 1994). Swedish universal banks have also increased in size and have become to be more decentralised. In accordance to previous research, this implies that there might arise different expectations on controllers depending on department. In order to develop an efficient internal structure and utilise resources as efficiently as possible, decentralised organisations need to coordinate and monitor internal processes (Eriksson & Thunman, 1990; Lindvall, 2001; Nilsson et al. 2010). This puts further expectations on controllers, as they need to possess capabilities in analysing information based on classified and complex financial products and to communicate information throughout the organisation (Olve & Samuelson, 2008). They also need to possess knowledge about increasing external regulations set by authorities and managing the increased information flow (Maas & Matejka, 2009). Therefore, it can be argued that problems arise regarding different expectations in the controller's work assignments and report relations towards others in the organisation (Ibid.).

1.2 Research problem

Previous research has studied the controller role in several contexts such as in manufacturing and other service sectors. The extensive research has therefore resulted in a wide range of theories and descriptions of the controller role (Maas & Matejka, 2009; Lindvall, 2009; Nilsson & Olve, 2013; Olve & Petri, 2008; Siegel & Sorensen, 1999). However, previous research has not provided an in-depth understanding of the controller role in a Swedish universal bank and how information handling and its report relations affect the role.

As organisations have evolved to become more complex and divided into divisions, the controller role has changed focus from exclusively analysing historical financial data as a bean-counter. Instead, it has been argued that the controller role should dedicate the majority of time working as a business partner in the division with increasing influence over decision-making and strategic planning (Nilsson & Olve, 2013; Olve & Petri, 2008; Lindvall, 2009). Previous research has also indicated that more automated work assignments due to technological development, should increase the opportunity for controllers to dedicate more
time on analysis of information (Stewart, 1967; Mintzberg; 1973). This raises questions in terms of information handling if the technological development increases the controllers’ opportunity to dedicate more time for analysis in a Swedish universal bank.

In this study we have chosen to study the individual controller’s perspective. This is due to that the individual controller is affected by personal attributes such as characteristics and values, which influence how individuals interpret their role as a controller (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Reflecting upon this, Cohen (2007) implies that personal attributes affect individual behaviour to create routines and habits. These routines and habits might have a tendency to remain within a work profession and could therefore act as barriers when an organisational change is needed (ibid.). Accordingly, research argues that the controller role has in real life not evolved as much as stated in theory, meaning that the controllers still dedicate extensive amount of time on work routines and habits that are not considered relevant for the role as a business partner (Merchant & Van der stede, 2012.). Therefore, it is necessary to investigate what the controllers within a Swedish universal bank dedicate their working time to and to increase the understanding of what is not necessary within their role.

Regardless of which definition previous research defines as the controller’s role, other studies also indicate that the definition of the controller role should also be based on what responsibility the controller possesses in the organisation (Hopper, 1980; Maas & Matejka, 2009). According to Goretzki et al. (2013) and Maas and Matejka (2009), organisational structure and report relations have an increased influence over the controller’s responsibility in organisations as the amount of information increases. As such, a decentralised organisation needs to develop a governance model, which supports both vertical and horizontal report relations in order to improve productivity in a controller’s work process with handling information (Sathe, 1982; Säljö, 2001; Nilsson & Olve, 2013; Burt, 2005). Consequently, research often implies there is an opportunity for improvements in handling large amount of information and report relations in order for the controller to efficiently analyse information (Merchant & Van der Stede, 2012). Consequently, information handling and report relations in regards of how they affect the controller have been studied.

Within report relations between departments, previous research implies there is a risk of role conflict or different role expectations as to what the controller experience as the most important report relation in the organisation (Lindvall, 2009). In a Swedish context, previous
research describes the controller’s primary responsibility to support and report to local management. This is different from a US perspective where the controller role should generally function as a support to top management (Maas & Matejka, 2009). These different perspectives arise questions in a Swedish context regarding expectations in the controller’s liabilities towards others within an organisation and how this may differ depending on department of the organisation (Mechant, 2013; Nilsson & Olve, 2013). Hence, different expectations might be problematic as the controller might have a difficulty of having a strong adherence to division manager and objectively report to higher management (Johnson & Kaplan, 1987; Hopper, 1980). Johnson and Kaplan (1987) further imply that a controller with strong relation to division managers can influence reports to higher management in order to favour the divisions, which can decrease the overall control of the organisation. This increases the controller’s ambiguity in report relations and recognises concerns of the controller’s objectivity in the expanded role (Hopper, 1980; Maas & Matejka, 2009; Van der Stede & Malone, 2010). In this research, it is therefore relevant to investigate if different role expectations can arise and how increased information and report relations affect the controller role. What has now been discussed in the research problem has resulted in our purpose and research questions.

1.3 Purpose

The aim of this thesis is to provide an in-depth understanding of the controller role in a decentralised organisation working with complex financial products. From this discussion, eventual differences in the controller role depending on department will be analysed. This thesis will also contribute to an understanding of how controllers perceive that their role is affected by their work with handling information and report relations.

1.4 Research questions

To answer the formulated problem, we will assume three research questions:

- What role does the controller have in a Swedish universal bank based on work assignments?
What are the eventual differences in the controller role depending on department in the organisation?

How do controllers perceive that their role is affected by their work with handling information and by their report relations?

1.5 Delimitations

Narrowing the scope of this thesis, a geographical delimitation has been made to only focus on one universal bank in Sweden, Svenska Handelsbanken, and will continue to be referred to as Handelsbanken. This choice has been made based on cultural differences depending where the organisation operates. Handelsbanken has also chosen on a strategic basis, as it is a decentralised organisation working with complex financial products. As such, these delimitations are expected to provide the most accurate empirical information in order to answer our three research questions. Two other delimitations have been made; a time-delimitation with the purpose of providing a current view of the controller role. The delimitations to only focus on Handelsbanken and other stances will be discussed in the methodology chapter three.

1.6 Expected Contribution

For theoretical contribution, this thesis aims to contribute with an additional understanding of the controller role. From this context and given the theoretical disagreements about the controller's role, this thesis also aims to add an additional understanding of the controller role and its development in Sweden.

In terms of practical contribution, it is aspired that this thesis will provide controllers and managers with an understanding about the controller role and its work assignments. By achieving greater understanding, the controller can receive an overview of work processes, which can provide knowledge to better allocate resources. In regards of generalisation, a single case study contributes to real life experience of the controller role, and therefore it can be argued that this study of the controller role in Handelsbanken can be translated to other similar organisations. How this thesis can be generalised will further be discussed in the methodology chapter three.
2. Research Disposition

The first chapter provided background information about the controller role in a general perspective. From this background, a research problem discussion emerged that led down to the purpose of this research. The following parts have consequently been discussed and processed as the five main chapters through this thesis:

Chapter 3 - Theoretical Framework
In the theoretical framework it is intended to present well-grounded theories regarding role theory, controllers’ expected capabilities and definitions of the controller role based on its work assignments. The controller’s work-processes with information handling will be included, as well as the controller’s common report relations within an organisation. The theoretical section is summarised with a model where we link the theories together in order to show how we relate them to the individual controller role.

Chapter 4 - Methodology and material
The methodology chapter describes and explains the background for our chosen research method, scientific approach, research strategy and how the empirical data has been accessed, presented and analysed. Criticism of method and ethical aspects will also be highlighted in the end of the chapter.

Chapter 5 - Empirical Framework
In the empirical framework we first present information of our chosen organisation in this case study. A shorter description of our chosen interviewed controllers will also be provided. The remaining part of the empirical framework will be the most essential in chapter five where we present answers from our interview guide (See appendix 1).

Chapter 6 - Analysis
In the analysis chapter we relate the results we have gathered from the empirical findings to our theoretical framework. This enables for conclusions to be drawn.

Chapter 7 - Conclusions
In the conclusions chapter we point out the results we have analysed throughout the thesis where we also suggest what research can be made on a further notice.
3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework discusses widely accepted models and theories about the controller role. The chapter begins to define role theory and why different roles are needed in organisations. Secondly, we intend to provide an understanding of what capabilities previous research indicates a controller should possess, as well as an understanding of how previous research defines the controller role based on work assignments, responsibility and work processes with information. Research regarding the controller’s report relations in organisations will also be viewed and how they affect the controller role. The final part is where we link the stated theories to show how they can be related to the individual controller role.

3.1 Definition of the role concept

Literature describes role theory in several different perspectives. The most relevant perspective for our thesis is organisational role theory since it handles a case study within an organisation (Biddle, 1986). Classical organisational role theory focuses on roles in social hierarchies that individuals often hold in organisations (ibid.). In order to define the controller role, literature argues that it is relevant to provide an understanding about how roles in organisations emerge through expectations (Byrne & Price, 2007). Throughout history, organisations create and coordinate roles in order to motivate individuals to work as efficiently as possible (Katz & Kahn, 1978). These roles are often pre-planned, task oriented and hierachal constructed (Biddle, 1986). As roles emerge from expectations from other individuals, it is argued that the expectations themselves are influenced by organisational factors such as structure, size, policies and relations (Biddle, 1986; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Byrne & Pierce, 2007). Accordingly, one can argue that it is important to examine existing relationships between individuals, which help creating roles. Based on this theoretical background, it is therefore necessary to study the expectations on the controller role from the controllers’ own perspective. Literature also acknowledges that personal attributes and values are important factors that influence how individuals interpret their own roles (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Therefore, we have also chosen to take these factors into consideration when examining the controller role.
3.1.1 Modern role theory
Classical organisational role theory has over time been criticised because of its lack of an individual perspective (Lindvall, 2009). Ignoring an individual perspective when examining roles in organisations can be problematic since different roles operate in an environment that increasingly emphasises individualists (Sen, 2006). In addition, modern role theory takes development of new technology into consideration as opposed to classical role theory (Wickham & Parker, 2007). Therefore, it is suggested that modern role theory is more relevant for a contemporary business environment when studying the controller role. As new technology develops, the amount of information to handle in organisations tends to increase significantly. As was discussed in our background and research problem, organisations are becoming more information heavy and it can be suggested that the controller is affected by the increased information flow.

In correspondence to classical role theory, modern role theory also states that roles mirror expectations in an organisation. Accordingly in this theory, an individual needs to accept a role, which reflects the organisation’s culture and norms (Wickham & Parker, 2007; Biddle, 1986). In order for an organisation to function efficiently, roles need to be communicated, understood and accepted by other individuals (Wickham & Parker, 2007). This becomes an important point for our three research questions in the aspect of how controllers in different departments experience their roles and if they experience different role expectations on themselves.

3.1.2 Different role expectations
Research provides a wide range different of definitions of the controller role. This contributes to the relevance of examining if there are different expectations on the controller role seen from the controller’s own perspective (Lindvall, 2009). If individual controllers perceive different expectations on them from different directions, it often signals that their roles are not managed effectively in the organisation (ibid.). This can decrease commitment and productivity and if there are diversions between expected role and role performed, there may even arise role conflicts (Noor, 2004). As limited time in combination with increasing requirements to fulfil one role often result in role conflicts, it can be difficult to fulfil one's work profession. This can increase stress and dissatisfaction for individuals in an organisation (Ibid.).
Based on this discussion, a role in an organisation is dependent on expectations and therefore will we use this part of the theoretical framework in order to examine if there are different expectations on the controller role seen from the controllers’ own perspective.

3.2 Core capabilities for the controller

As organisations have evolved to become more decentralised, expectations of the controller’s capabilities have also changed (Mattsson, 1987). While the controller as profession arose in the 1800s where the main focus was to monitor and control assets, it is widely regarded that a controller today instead needs to frequently assemble, interpret and transfer an increasingly amount of financial and non-financial information (Mattsson, 1987; Nilsson & Olve, 2013). As work assignments change, new expectations are created on the controller role. These expectations tend to add specific requirements of capabilities that the controller needs to possess which in turn affect the how the role is formed.

3.2.1 Ability to handle information

With information technology in constant development, work processes in organisations become more automated (Burns & Baldvinsdottir, 2007). With a more uncertain environment, it has put pressure on the controller’s capabilities for knowledge in analysing non-financial data in order to predict the future rather than only analysing historical or current numbers (Cooper & Dart, 2009). Historical information becomes less significant and the controller possesses more timely information (ibid). Previous research suggests that this development contributes to that the controller can allocate more time on work with advanced analysis (Burns & Baldvinsdottir, 2007). However, other research points to another trend as a result of increased amount of information. This trend is that employees in large organisations need to search for relevant information individually in large databases (Heide et al. 2005). This contributes to that controllers need to possess increased knowledge in assembling, interpreting and sharing information in organisations (ibid.).

In terms of handling information, financial crises and corporate scandals have as previously mentioned contributed to increased regulations (The Mckinsey Quarterly, 2009). This has put further pressure on controllers’ capabilities to possess an oversight role, as they need to
assemble and analyse information from a wider range of sources such as information regarding new regulations or competitors’ actions (Nilsson & Olve, 2013; Van der Stede & Malone, 2010). Therefore, Nilsson and Olve (2013) also imply that controllers need to possess a creative capability in order to interpret a large and varied amount of information and from this standpoint to draw relevant conclusions. Since research argues that new technology affects the controller’s work with handling information, it becomes relevant for the thesis’ aim to understand how the role is affected by information handling in a large and decentralised organisation working with complex financial products.

3.2.2 Ability to communicate

Being able to communicate information has also increased in importance within organisations that become more decentralised (Olve & Samuelson, 2008). The controllers need to communicate both written and verbal information to provide the receiver with relevant information and explain this in an understandable manner (Merchant & Van der Stede, 2012; Nilsson & Olve, 2013). The controllers therefore need to adjust to the receiver’s request in how the information needs to be communicated. As such, depending on possessed knowledge, information will be interpreted differently, which can contribute decreased quality of information and incorrect decisions (Heide et al. 2005). However, a contrast to this discussion is that Lindvall (2009) describes the controller in this perspective as an isolated individual performing most of the work in an office rather than spending time out in the organisation. This discussion of the communicative ability raises questions if controllers in different departments communicate differently and how this affects their report relations.

3.2.3 Institutional knowledge

Institutional knowledge is suggested to be another necessary capability for the controller. This implies that the controller needs to have great knowledge of the entire organisation. Previous research indicates that within an organisation, having institutional knowledge is different between a US and a Swedish perspective. The traditional controller in a US perspective is defined as an independent internal auditor (Sathe, 1982). On the contrary, the Swedish context refers the controller as a more complex role both as an auditor and advisor (Olve, 1988; Mattsson, 1987). As such, it is important for the controller as an advisor to possess general knowledge of internal systems of the entire organisation as well as in the local department (Lindvall, 2009). The controller also needs to possess knowledge about new
external regulations and accounting in order to monitor and adapt the internal processes (Eriksson & Thunman, 1990; Lindvall, 2001). Due to this, Lindvall (2009) argues that the controller needs to be active in the organisation in order to create an overview understanding and discuss situations directly with other departments. As a contradiction, Judge and Piccolo (2004) argue that in large organisations, the control system should be based on management-by-exception, where the controller rather should entirely intervene with other departments when performances are deviating from expectations. Since literature discusses the significance of possessing institutional knowledge as a capability, it is necessary to investigate if this capability is important for a controller in our case study and if the degree of this knowledge differs depending on department.

### 3.3 The controller's work assignments

Research widely suggests the controllers’ primary work assignments involve analysing and reporting assembled information (Nilsson & Olve, 2013; Granlund & Lukka, 1998; Lindvall, 2009). It is also acknowledged that the controllers’ work assignments have changed from only producing and monitoring internal accounting data to as well become more responsible for analysing and communicating non-financial information (Van der Stede & Malone, 2010; Olve & Petri, 2008). As such, it is suggested that the controller role has moved from being a stiff and dutiful individual to be more active and affect others’ thinking in the organisation as part of a team process (Baldvinsdottir et al. 2009; Granlund & Lukka, 1998; Mattsson, 1987; Simon et al, 1954). In Model 3.3, Nilsson and Olve (2013) describe this evolution by defining the controller by work assignments based on what type of information the controller handles and if this information is mainly used to influence others’ thinking as a consideration of team process. From these dimensions, four different roles appear in this model, Score Keeper, Business Partner, Change Agent and Market Surveyor.

In accordance to Olve & Petri (2008), the controller role has developed mainly based on two trends. The first trend is that the controller role has generally moved from a Score keeper to Business Partner. This implies the controllers’ work assignments have developed from only handling historical internal accounting information as a Score Keeper to also handle non-financial information in order to possess an increasing influence over decision-making and strategic planning (Nilsson & Olve, 2013; Olve & Petri, 2008; Lindvall, 2009). The second trend is that the controller has moved towards directing other employees of what to
accomplish as a result of an increased amount work assignments. Therefore, it is pointed out that the controller role is moving towards a teaching role as a *Change Agent* in order to foster learning throughout the organisation (Olve & Petri, 2008; Hedman, et al., 2009). In regards of *model 3.3*, the controller developed towards *Change Agent* handles internal accounting information in order to affect others’ thinking in the organisation (Nilsson & Olve, 2013).

Based on the research from Olve and Petri (2008), the controller can also be referred to be moving towards a *Market Surveyor*. This implies that the controllers’ work assignments involve working closely to local managers in order to identify risks and opportunities in the organisation and providing them with all business related information for decision-making (Lindvall, 2009; Mattsson, 1987; Siegel & Sorensen, 1999; Granlund & Lukka, 1998). However, increasing responsibility of decision-making and to affect thinking in the organisation indicates that the controller should be viewed as a *Business partner* rather than *Market Surveyor*. The controller as a *Business Partner* is also more involved in team processes that challenge stated assumptions and affect institutional arrangements by discovering opportunities and risks in the organisation, as opposed to the *Market Surveyor* (Nilsson & Olve, 2013).

Research acknowledges that the controller cannot exclusively focus on being an expert in one specific role described in *model 3.3* (Olve & Petri, 2008). Even if these four characteristics

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**Model 3.3: A controller role (Nilsson & Olve, 2013). Reworked.**
can be applied to the controller’s role, it is suggested that the controller role is defined through a variety of work assignments. Therefore, this model contributes to a theoretical understanding and will be adapted to specifically reflect the controller role found in the empirical framework.

### 3.4 Controller role based on information handling

As pointed out in *model 3.3*, the controller role is determined based on its work assignments. In *model 3.4.1*, the controller role is discussed based on what type of information the controller is handling. The type of information is displayed vertically and how the controller mediates information in order to affect in the organisation is displayed horizontally (Olve & Petri, 2008).

![Model 3.4.1](image)

**Model 3.4.1: The controller’s four different roles (Olve & Petri, 2008). Reworked.**

From the perspective of work processes with information, Nilsson and Olve (2013) divide the controller role in four different categories seen above as *Analyst, Coach, Accountant* and *Pedagogue*. The caricature of the controller role as an *Accountant* assumes that internal accounting information is significantly more important in comparison to non-financial measures in the organisation. It is acknowledged that the traditional *Accountant* role exclusively analyses the financial results and reports it to top-management (Nilsson & Olve, 2013; Granlund & Lukka, 1998; Lindvall, 2009). However, during the 21st century, previous research indicates that the controller role has started to handle non-financial information as
customer satisfaction, benchmarking or market shares to a greater extent (Olve & Petri, 2008; Baldvinsdottir et al. 2009). Olve and Petri (2008) therefore argue that the controller role is moving towards an Analyst in model 3.4.1, where financial information is combined with non-financial information in order to provide for business relevant analysis and conclusions.

In regards of model 3.4.1, Olve and Petri (2008) imply that the controller’s way of possessing the role as a Pedagogue and Coach has been gradual. The Pedagogue role was established as the controller began to teach other employees in the organisation how to interpret and understand valuable internal accounting information (ibid.). This role is viewed as a development of the Accountant as the controller still uses mainly internal accounting information but lets others contribute in the analysis process (ibid.). This has come to be essential in order for the organisation to work efficiently in handling information (Lindvall, 2009; Mattsson, 1987; Siegel & Sorensen, 1999; Granlund & Lukka, 1998). As such, Hedman et al. (2009) argue that the controller role has developed from being a traditional and static accounting role to a more comprehensive and active role as a Coach. The main work assignment for the Coach is to make all business related information available, understandable, relevant and usable in the organisation for managers in different departments (Olve & Petri, 2008). Apart from the type of information being handled between these educational roles, the Coach separates from the Pedagogue also through the method of teaching others to understand information. For the Pedagogue, this occurs more formally in the organisation whereas the Coach has regular informal communication with other employees (Ibid.).

As work assignments develop to become more automated, a general assumption in previous research is that the controller role has generally moved up in model 3.4.1 towards Analyst and Coach. In general, controllers conduct work assignments related to all four roles as informational technology develops and report relations expand in organisations. However, as the controller role is shaped by situations, scenarios and organisations’ strategy, it is interesting to study the controller role based on model 3.4.1 to see which ones the controllers can be applied to in our empirical findings (Nilsson & Olve, 2013).

As Olve and Petri (2008) argue that an individual controller can in varying degrees operate in all four of the stated roles, they deem that an individual controller can consequently be defined as a Specialist, Generalist or a Minimalist. Additionally, model 3.4.2 supports us in
explaining where controllers allocate time to related to the four different roles provided in *model 3.4.1* (Olve & Petri, 2008).

The arrows located in the different profiles indicate the amount of time controllers engage in work assignments related to the four roles that have been discussed (Olve & Petri, 2008.). The controller as a *Specialist* has its expertise in one area, which indicates that the controller has a clear direction towards specific assignments. The *Generalist* is argued to be common in organisations where there are only a few controllers within the financial department, and therefore the controller needs to be able to handle a wide variety of knowledge. A clear risk is that the controller does not possess deeper knowledge in any given area, which can lead to a *Minimalist*. As such, the *Minimalist* possesses a smaller collection of arrows, which can indicate that the controller has a narrow delimitation of work assignments and does not possess deeper knowledge in any given area as opposed to the *Specialist* (Olve & Petri, 2008).

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**Model 3.4.2: Individual controller role (Olve & Petri, 2008) Reworked**

Olve and Petri (2008) further argue that there might arise an *expectations gap* between what the controllers expects from its own role and what other employees expects from the controllers. The *expectations gap* implies that controllers’ sees the value in work assignments that other employees within the organisation do not claim to be as valuable. Olve and Petri (2008) also acknowledge the *activity gap* in regards of the controllers’ role. This is relevant for us in order to identity if there is a difference in the amount of activities the controllers is expected to perform and what the controllers in reality perform. The activity gap mainly appears when time or competence is insufficient for the individual controller. Hence, the *expectations gap* and the *activity gap* can both be claimed to be in line with what has been
previously discussed as different role expectations, which generates an additional understanding of the controller role (Koh & Woo, 1998).

3.5 Report relations in organisations

“Communication is a continuous process where members maintain and change the organisations by communicating with individuals and groups both internally and externally” – Jacobsen and Thorsvik (2014, s.257).

Based on this assumption, one can argue that in order to achieve effective organisational communication, individuals need to have a constant exchange of information (Spillan et al. 2002; Derks et al. 2010; Goretzki et al. 2013). As the amount of information increases and communication technology evolves, individuals need to a greater extent coordinate information, both vertically and horizontally in the organisation in order to streamline information flow (Spillan et al. 2002; Goldhaber, 1993; Bartels et al. 2010; Kumar et al. 2000). Specifically in the context of the controller, previous research argues that an organisation needs to develop functioning internal report relations in order to facilitate controllers’ opportunity to quickly adapt to uncertainties (Heide et al, 2005).

Traditional communication theory assumes that the information process always starts with a sender that transmits information to a receiver (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). Therefore, James and Werner (1998) state that individuals need to interact with the aim to seek mutual understanding. With increasing amount of information however, there is a great risk that information is difficult to handle and is often misinterpreted (Fiske, 1997; Shannon & Weaver, 1949). In order to reduce the risk of misunderstanding and increase efficiency in report relations, Shannon and Weaver (1949) imply that information needs to be clearly defined by using a language that the recipient can interpret and a platform that the recipient is familiar with.

Organisations need to implement a combined vertical and horizontal report relations system (Simonsson, 2002). This becomes relevant in order to examine how the controllers’ report relations affect the controllers’ role as part of our research. In regards of the vertical communication approach, it is described as a "transmission method", where the aim is to
exclusively transfer and redistribute information in order to inform employees (Simonsson, 2002; Falkheimer & Heide, 2003; Spillan et al. 2002). Additionally, Heide (2005) implies that vertical information should possess an “informative function”, where information should be sufficient for employees to perform their work assignments efficiently and to clarify responsibilities. Therefore, this information should not be complex since there is usually a one-way communication between the sender and the receiver (Simonsson, 2002). As a consequence, lack of dialogue could contribute to difficulties to solve complex problems and the receiver could misinterpret information (Falkheimer & Heide, 2003; Strid, 1999). As a “regulative function”, the vertical information should also assure that employees have knowledge about organisational regulations, policies, norms and values (Heidi et al. 2002; Kumar et al 2000). The vertical information should also support as a “management function”, where the purpose is to engage employees to achieve organisational goals rather than personal goals (ibid.). At last, as Heide et al. (2005) imply that horizontal information takes form as a “socialisation function”, information communicated in the organisation should integrate individuals in the organisational network.

Reflecting on vertical and horizontal information, there is also a "sense-making” approach (Miller, 2012). This implies that information in the organisation needs to be shared and understood. To achieve this, it is argued that both "transmission method" and "sense-making" report relations need to co-exist in order to increase knowledge among employees and provide managers with relevant and understandable information (Goretzki et al. 2013; Strid, 1999; Simonsson, 2002; Miller, 2012). Based on this theoretical discussion, this can have an affect of how the controller communicates and reports information within its report relations, which related to our third research question, “How do the controllers perceive that their role is affected by their work with handling information and by their report relations?”

In order clarify how report relations affect the controllers’ role, it is necessary to understand how the controllers’ report relations are structured. Therefore, we have used Merchant and Van der Stede’s (2012) model 3.5 (seen below). This model describes that department controllers can either have a strong report relation to the local department manager or to the business unit controller, which in turn report to the business unit manager or corporate controller respectively.
In *model 3.5*, a dotted line indicates that the report relation is weak, while a solid line describes a strong report relation (Merchant & Van der Stede, 2012). As illustrated in the left figure, the department controller has a strong report relation to the business unit controller, which indicates that the corporate controller may usually determine priorities and evaluate performance in the departments (ibid.). This can be related to what is suggested by Maas & Matejka (2009), that the department controllers possess a *functional responsibility* to report the financial situation of their departments to the business unit controller and indirectly to corporate controller on a central level. In regards of report relations, different expectations on the department controller could arise, as the department controller is a member of the local department team, with a *local responsibility* to provide local department management with relevant information (ibid.). Thus, a strong report relation may cause role conflict in regards to which one the department controller should mainly report (Maas & Matejka, 2009).

![Model 3.5: Controller's reporting relationships (Merchant & Van der Stede, 2012) Reworked](image)

Additionally, controllers in local departments located geographically far from headquarters or corporate level can easily become emotionally attached to their local department manager (Merchant & Van der Stede, 2012). At a worse scenario, the department controller can conduct gamesmanship and affect financial results, which is expected to be monitored objectively (ibid). In order to maintain the department controller’s loyalty and correct priorities towards both corporate controllers and department manager, previous research argues that the controller's report relations should be altered between different levels in organisations (Sathe, 1982).
3.6 Linking theories

Model 3.6 (seen below) has been created in order to clarify the important factors that form the individual controller role. This model will also structure the empirical framework and analysis in terms of headings. Organisational environment, such as organisational size, uncertain markets, new technologies and new regulations that influence how organisations develop. As literature suggests, this leads organisations to become more decentralised where controllers are situated within different departments. Based on where the controllers are located in the organisation, different role expectations on them might arise which increases the relevance to study controllers in different departments (Mattsson, 1987).

In order to meet expectations in the organisation, controllers need to possess certain core capabilities within their roles (Nilsson & Olve, 2013). As stated in the theoretical framework, controllers need to possess core capabilities in handling information, communication and institutional knowledge (Burns & Baldvinsdottir, 2007; Olve & Samuelson, 2008; Lindvall, 2009). Together with the empirical findings, this will provide for a well-grounded analysis of which important core capabilities controllers need to possess in different departments.

In accordance to theory, model 3.6 implies that changed expectations on the controller’s core capabilities form work assignments. As such, controllers’ work assignments have changed from only producing and monitoring financial data to also include non-financial data as part of all business related information (Van der Stede & Malone, 2010; Olve & Petri, 2008). It can be argued that this change has affected controllers’ work with handling information.

As organisations become more decentralised, information needs to be coordinated between different departments (Spillan et al. 2002; Goldhaber, 1993; Bartels et al. 2010; Kumar et al, 2000). As implied by research, this can have an affect on how report relations are formed and to whom the controllers should mainly report. This is why report relations are connected together with role expectations in model 3.6 (Heide et al, 2005).

Reflecting upon these factors shown in model 3.6, the individual controller role is formed. Organisational environment and department in organisation will not be discussed as separate headings in the analysis, as they in this chapter will be integrated as background variables.
Model 3.6: The individual controller role (Thornell & Alin, 2016)
4. Methodology and material

The theoretical framework has provided us with a general understanding of the controller’s role and work assignments. In this section, we provide an explanation for conducting a qualitative research. This is followed by a thorough explanation of our scientific approach where we describe our work with an abductive approach. A single case study as the chosen research strategy, the data collection process, criticism towards our method and a discussion of ethical aspects collecting empirical data will also be viewed.

4.1 Research method

A decision was made early in the research process to conduct a qualitative research method instead of a quantitative. The quantitative research method generally involves quantifying numerical data in order to answer the research questions. Quantifying this data can range from creating tables or diagrams to enable for establishing statistical trends (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Saunders et. al 2009). A qualitative research method differs significantly in several aspects, and can be described as a method to describe a phenomenon in its context (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The qualitative method is typically based on five important characteristics; narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography and case study (Creswell, 2007). Relevant characteristics in this thesis have been narrative, phenomenology and case study while grounded theory and ethnography have not been used in this thesis. Hence, we have used a qualitative research method.

A narrative design has been used to study biographical and personal reflections from several individuals in a specific context. This thesis has also aimed to describe a phenomenon in a specific context since we discovered a lack of research about the controller role in the context of a decentralised organisation working with complex financial products. Therefore, an individual controller perspective stems well to answer this thesis’ research questions: 1) What role does the controller have in a Swedish universal bank based on work assignments? 2) What are the eventual differences in the controller role depending on department in the organisation? 3) How do the controllers perceive that their role is affected by their work with handling information and by their report relations?
As part of our qualitative research, we chose to conduct a case study in order to access our empirical findings (Creswell, 2007). This helps us to create a more in-depth understanding of the controller role in a decentralised organisation working with complex financial products and gives us the opportunity to reflect over assembled empirical information with already existing theories (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The case study as our research strategy will be described in heading 4.3.

Neither grounded theory nor ethnography has been used in this thesis. Grounded theory is characterised by developing new theory from collected empirical data. Our analysis has instead been based on a combination of empirical findings and previous theoretical research in order to develop a well-grounded understanding of the controller role in a specific context. Considering ethnography, this thesis does not aim to observe the controller role as a cultural phenomenon, which makes an ethnographic research approach irrelevant.

Apart from the three relevant characteristics of this thesis, a hermeneutic perspective has also been used. A central intention is to understand the controller role rather than explain it (Thurén, 2007). The hermeneutic perspective strengthens the importance of well-grounded conclusions instead of general assumptions. As this thesis attempts to reach the relevant sources of individual experience of the controller role, semi-structured interviews were conducted with experienced controllers in Handelsbanken (Thurén, 2007, Olsson, 2009; Saunders, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2007). As such, the hermeneutic perspective is characterised by our data collection method, which will be discussed in heading 4.5.

4.2 Scientific approach

When analysing empirical and theoretical findings, there are usually two main approaches that need to be considered; a deductive or an inductive approach (Yin, 1994). The deductive approach is used for development of a theoretical framework, where hypotheses are sprung out of theories (Bryman & Bell, 2011). As the deductive approach searches for data concerning the original chosen theories, this was the first approach in developing the theoretical framework. However, the controller is a complex role and studies have rather created several categories of the controller rather than one general definition of the role. Therefore, we will study the controller role and adapt the already existing theories provided in the theoretical framework to our empirical findings.
As opposed to a *deductive* approach, the *inductive* approach describes theory as a result of research, where theories are developed based on conclusions and observations (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Saunders et al. 2009). Since there is a theoretical framework to work from when conducting the analysis in thesis, the risk of nothing being described is decreased (Saunders et al. 2009). It is important to note that it is practically difficult to use either a deductive or inductive approach as separate within a study. This is why these approaches should be viewed as mere tendencies as a part of the scientific approach (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

In literature, the *abductive approach* is described as a third research approach, which is the one used in this study (Bryman & Bell, 2011). It is rather a movement between the deductive and inductive approaches, where the theoretical framework and research questions are reoriented or modified when viewing the empirical world and its findings (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). This approach involves two important steps, making this approach relevant for our research. The first step is to present the *phenomenon* that needs to be explained or understood. The second step in the abductive approach is to construct a new hypothesis by reviewing and reworking the theoretical framework (Fischer, 2001). In this research, we initially viewed the traditional and accepted research theories of the controller role in order to formulate our research problem. This followed to collect empirical material organised on a well-grounded theoretical framework about the controller role. Consequently, it has been necessary to adapt the already existing theories in order to mirror the controller role within our specific context. As argued by Givón (1989), any conclusion based on contextual judgments is deemed to have an abductive approach. This applies to our contextual research strategy of conducting a *case study*, which will be discussed in the following heading 4.3.

### 4.3 Research strategy

A research strategy aims to support the collection of empirical data during the study (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). A common research strategy to understand the interaction between a phenomenon and context is the *case study*, where the researcher focuses on one or more cases (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Dubois & Gadde, 2002). From literature, it can be argued that a case study becomes increasingly relevant in this thesis, as we have studied a contemporary phenomenon in an already existing environment (Saunders et al. 2009; Larsson, 2011; Yin, 2009; Flyvbjerg, 2006). Accordingly, Yin (2009) emphasises the importance of considering
the context when studying a phenomenon. As previously mentioned, research of the controller role has been conducted in other contexts, which strengthens the relevance for this thesis to study the phenomenon of the controller role in the context of a Swedish universal bank. Accordingly, Morris and Wood (1991) describe that a case study is of particular interest if the intention is to gain rich understanding of a phenomenon in a specific context by generating answers to research questions such as “what?” and “how?” This can be clearly related to the research questions initially provided in this thesis.

Case studies can appear in two different dimensions; Single case or multiple cases (Yin, 2007). The method of using a single case study represents an extreme or unique case and may be suitable if the purpose of a study is to observe or analyse a phenomenon that no one or very few have considered before. The method of using a multiple case study focuses on the need to conclude if the occurrence in the first case can be found in other cases, and as a consequence, a multiple case study enables generalisation from the findings in the multiple cases (Yin, 2009; Yin, 2007). For this reason, Yin (2007) argues that multiple cases are often favourable, whereas the motive for using a single case needs to be heavily justified.

Patton (1987) stresses that from studying few examples of a phenomenon in a specific context, it can be generalised in order to contribute with knowledge to a wider perspective. At the beginning of this research process, we therefore intended to use a multiple case study. The original idea was to study the controller role at the four major universal banks in Sweden, as a multiple case study would have given us a more favourable opportunity to generalise in this specific context (Jacobsen, 2002). However, a single case study has been chosen in this thesis in order to generate an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon in a specific context (Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

There are advantages of conducting a single case study. These are that one can gain in-depth context-dependent knowledge and a closeness of real-life situations in order to clarify a deeper understanding of a given phenomenon (Flyvbjerg 2006; Ragin & Becker, 1992). Flyvbjerg (2006) stresses that if a single case study could provide an in-depth understanding of a certain phenomenon, it is most likely that this phenomenon also could be applied towards similar organisations and contexts. As such, it should also be remembered that Handelsbanken operates within an industry whose entities are very homogeneous in regards of products and structures (Merchant & Van der Stede, 2012).
As this thesis aims to study the controller role in different departments of a decentralised organisation working with complex financial products, a comparative research design has also been relevant. Accordingly to Bryman & Bell (2011), this involves comparing how a phenomenon is expressed in different social environments. A comparative study also involves describing the natural variation existing in reality between cases that are as similar as possible (Esaiasson et al. 2012). For this research, all the respondents are entitled controllers, but may have different roles within this title. In accordance to our second research question initially provided, it is possible to get an understanding of eventual differences in the controller role depending on department in the organisation (ibid). The advantage of conducting a comparative research in this thesis will also contribute to create an overview of the controller role in this case study. The selection of departments will be presented further in the empirical framework.

4.4 Case selection

A majority of case studies highlights the importance of reaching a broader population (Gerring & Seawright, 2008). A representative case is however not easy to identify and the chosen case must achieve variation on several dimensions (Gerring & Seawright, 2008; Yin, 1994). As previous research indicates, the ability to generalise from a single case study is depending on the chosen case (Ragin & Becker, 1992). Studying the controller role in Handelsbanken has therefore been chosen through a strategic selection instead of a random selection, with the aim to achieve the greatest possible amount of information on a given phenomenon (ibid.). As such, Handelsbanken as case firm was based on the following sampling criterion:

- An organisation within the Swedish banking sector. As this thesis aims to study the controller’s role and its work with handling information, the Swedish banking sector was chosen due to complex financial products in this sector, which requires heavy information flow. In Sweden there are a total of 117 banks divided between 23 private bank corporations, 29 forging banks, 63 saving banks and 2 member banks (Swedish Banker's Association, 2014). Four of these 117 banks, as mentioned initially in this thesis, are entitled as major universal banks; Nordea, SEB, Svenska Handelsbanken and Swedbank.
• **Major universal banks in Sweden.** Delimitation was made to focus on one universal bank in Sweden, as these are comparable in size seen from revenues, geographic placement, amount of employees in Sweden, range of financial services and organisation structure (Swedish Banker's Association, 2014). This choice was also made in regards of our purpose, which has been to provide an in-depth understanding of the controller role.

• **A decentralised universal bank** – As this thesis aims to study the controller’s work with information handling and its report relations, a decentralised organisation is suitable to examine these aspects since decentralisation stated in our research problem affects the controller’s work with handling information and how the report relations appear. Handelsbanken is known to be highly decentralised and therefore we found this organisation suitable for our case study.

• **Controllers in different departments** – Collecting information from controllers in different departments of Handelsbanken provides an overview of the entire organisation. Consequently, a cross-case comparison study between controllers can be made. By using a cross-case comparison between departments, an analysis between different perspectives of the controller role increases (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

A cross-case comparison could promote generalizability, as controllers in other industries within decentralised organisations can possess similar positions. Collecting information from different areas can also create heterogeneity, meaning that the controller role can differ depending on which level or area that has been examined. During the entire process of analysing information from the interviews, an attempt has therefore been made to identify specific patterns of the controller role depending on which department the controllers operate within. We did not choose to conduct any interview on local office-level. The local offices focus heavily on customer contact while the business controller in Handelsbanken is heavily focused to the internal decision making processes.
4.5 Data collection

In accordance to Bryman & Bell (2011), we have divided our information sources between primary data and secondary data, which will further be described in the following headings.

4.5.1 Primary data

This thesis began with studying documents, such as annual reports to build an understanding of Handelsbanken as organisation and its departments. This information formed the basis of the first two chapters in the empirical framework, *the organisational environment* and *department in the organisation*. Our semi-structured interviews with controllers at Handelsbanken have been the core primary data. The choice of conducting semi-structured interviews was primarily based on previous literature (Merriam & Nilsson, 1994; Bryman & Bell, 2011). As such, when examining a professional role, literature argues that it can only be examined by asking individuals possessing this particular role since there is no access to known variables or any other measurement for analysis that can be collected from the case firm (Merriam & Nilsson, 1994). The semi-structured interview method has been a support for us to reformulate questions during the interview to get a more accurate individual perspective (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Furthermore, these types of interviews involve having specific topics, which gives interviewer the opportunity to formulate questions during the interview and allows the respondents to deepen in certain answers (Saunders et al, 2009). Open questions starting with “What?”, “How?” or “Why?” were formulated. These particular questions encourage the interviewed controllers to provide an extensive and developmental answer, and are suitable to obtain facts (Grummit, 1980).

4.5.1 Secondary data

The theoretical framework was gathered from a wide range of literature from respected authors of Sweden and with international background. This has helped us to concretise the controller concept. Relevant literature has been several articles and books gathered from the database at the library at Linköping University (Liu). Articles from specific authors possessing them as non-public material have also been collected. Regarding empirical data, we have aimed to use triangulation, emphasising data collections about the controller role from multiple angles (Bryman, 2006; Bryman & Bell, 2011). Triangulation can be defined as the usage of two or more independent sources of data or data-collection methods within one
study in order to ensure that the data is telling us what we think it is telling us (Saunders, 2009). In addition to our semi-structured interviews, triangulation has been used by gathering relevant information from Handelsbanken’s webpage and the latest annual report (2015). Using triangulation in this manner gave us the idea of how complex Handelsbanken is built as an organisation composed of several different departments. This also gave us guidance of which areas that were suitable to be examined in the organisation, which in turn helped us to choose the respondents for our interviews.

4.5.3 Preparation of semi-structured interviews

Putting emphasis on preparations before conducting interviews enhances the credibility of gathered information and helps to obtain confidence of the interviewee (Saunders, 2009). We prepared for and intended to conduct a face-to-face interview with our six respondents, which is generally the most suitable as it enables a more dynamic conversation between interviewer and interviewee. This also contributes to a more in-depth interview, in accordance to qualitative research method (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Careful selection was made in which areas of Handelsbanken to interview employees with the title Controller. For instance, if we would have conducted interviews with controllers only at corporate level, it could not have been considered representative. As indicated, the areas that were chosen to conduct our interviews were corporate level, national level, regional level and in different two business areas around the headquarters in Stockholm.

By contacting several representatives and managers in the different levels of Handelsbanken, we got access to our respondents’ contact information. This made it possible to book appointments for our semi-structured interviews. As Jacobsen (2002) suggests, interview respondents were chosen from their relevance with the aim to answer our research question. The relevance was based primarily on the controllers’ experience within the organisation. Consequently, our six respondents were selected subjectively since a random selection increases the risk of giving irrelevant information (Merriam & Nilsson, 1994). In other words, we asked our interviewees for advice to further contact other suitable respondents with relevant knowledge. Therefore, it can be stated that a snowball sample has been used for this research (Bryman & Bell, 2011).
By letting other students read the research questions provided below (see appendix 1), they were reworked to the extent that they were understandable. This would decrease the risk of misconceptions during the semi-structured interviews with the respondents. Henceforth, by sending the interview questions to the respondents one to two weeks prior to the realisation of the interviews, the quality of the respondents’ answer was expected to improve, as well as the interview process.

4.5.4 Realisation of semi-structured interviews

Our six interviews were recorded with the respondents’ approval. Recording semi-structured interviews enables comparison between them and has given the opportunity to make follow-ups on the different answers provided. A recording also helped to identify eventual disruptions, which facilitated for us to be fully concentrated to what was being said instead of taking notes (Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2005). Recording our interviews also enables at a later stage to transcribe and reproduce the interview to be accurate in text (Byrman & Bell, 2011).

The interviews were aimed not to exceed 45 minutes. This choice was based on the aspiration that the interviews would not take too much of the respondents’ working time. The interviews took place in the respondents’ respective work place, as this was regarded as a convenient place for the participants to feel comfortable. Interviews with two of the participants were conducted by phone at the request of the respondents.

4.6 Processing collected information

Having conducted each interview, we transcribed the recorded material in order to notice important concepts. Transcribing supports our summary of the interviews to comprehend relevant concepts, and enables to draw conclusions or more easily identify differences between the individual controllers’ perspectives (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Therefore, we chose to transcribe the interviews immediately after realisation to have it fresh in memory. Afterwards, we read through each transcription to ensure that all questions had been clearly explained, but also in the attempt to detect any core answer provided by the interviewed controllers in each question. A summary of the answers from the interviews was consequently written down question by question based on the ones shown in the interview guide (See appendix 1). This coding step made it easier to categorise the answers in accordance to Kvale
It has been important to use terms that are closely related to the operators’ experience and work assignments. Otherwise, if terms are located far from the individuals’ experience, it will instead be explained by theoretical concepts (Gilje & Grime, 2007). This leads to a clearer view of reality and the risk of misconceptions of interpreting data is decreased.

4.7 Presentation of qualitative data

In a qualitative approach with emphasis on semi-structured interviews, there is a difference between reality and what is being presented in written text. Since the statements have been provided from being verbal in content to be displayed in academic writing, it can be suggested that the statements have changed to some extent (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2007). In order to provide an accurate picture of reality, we have chosen to use quotes and excerpts from the interview dialogue (Nylén, 2005). We attempted to rework quotes without misinterpreting the important essence since the answers provided from the interviews were translated from Swedish to English (Ibid.). It is argued that if the respondents' own statements are being typed, the reader will get a better idea and come closer to the different respondents (Ibid.).

The empirical framework has been aimed to follow the same order in terms of headings as model 3.6 in the theoretical framework. General information of Handelsbanken and the interviewed controllers have been provided in the empirical framework to show how we have chosen the respondents. The controllers' answers are presented separately to which department they operate in. This choice has facilitated to distinguish eventual differences in the controller role based on department.

This study is confidential against the individual respondents since their names are not relevant for this thesis’ purpose. Therefore, respondents have been assigned fictitious names. This has also supported us to care about the respondents' privacy (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). To facilitate for the reader, names have been distributed based on the first letter of the departments where the controllers operate, which can be seen in the table below (table 1).

The chosen departments have been the central business department, one corporate business
area, the IT-department which is in the level with the corporate business areas, the Sweden Organisation, which is the national level of Handelsbanken, and to one Regional department. As mentioned, choosing these different departments provides a well-distributed idea of the controller and it helps to identify eventual differences in the role.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fictive name</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>Controller/CFO</td>
<td>Corporate Business area</td>
<td>24/3-2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clara</td>
<td>Controller</td>
<td>Central business</td>
<td>7/4 - 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac</td>
<td>Controller</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>21/4 -2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabelle</td>
<td>Controller</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>21/4 -2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>Controller/CFO</td>
<td>Regional office</td>
<td>8/4 - 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>Controller</td>
<td>Sweden organisation</td>
<td>28/4 - 2016</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All the respondents are educated in the area of economics or business administration and have at least ten years of experience working within Handelsbanken. This increases the reliability of their answers from the semi-structured interviews.

4.8 Analysis of the qualitative data

The analysis will also follow in the same order as model 3.6 in the theoretical framework through its headings. This structure will facilitate for the reader to connect to the purpose of the research and how the important factors in the theoretical framework are connected to the empirical findings. The first two headings in model 3.6, Organisational environment and Different departments of the organisation, will not be presented in the analysis. They have the purpose to describe the case firm and the respondents, but they will be integrated as background variables in the analysis. In the analysis chapter, models from the theoretical framework will be adapted to our context. These adapted models compose a central part in the analysis in order to comprehend the theories and its connection to the thesis’ empirical findings. The abductive approach has allowed us to move between gathered empirical data and theoretical knowledge of the controller role. Any eventual differences between the theoretical and empirical findings will be discussed. As argued by literature, differences between gathered qualitative data and theory could occur, which promotes for a well-processed analysis and discussion (Merriam & Nilsson, 1994; Larsson, 2011).
The analysis begins with a discussion between theory and empirical findings of different role expectations in organisations and where we link this to our context. With a discussion of different role expectations, it is possible to determine if there arise different expectations on the controller depending on department in the organisation. Through this, it is possible to understand how different expectations lead different capabilities in the controller role based on department. In this chapter, we analyse also what important capabilities that the controller should possess in a decentralised organisation with complex financial products.

*Model 3.3* by Nilsson and Olve (2013) will be adapted to our context. This is where we consider work assignments, type of information the controllers use and if they mainly work individually or within controller group functions. With the four roles in *model 3.3* it has been possible to mark out different star tips to different degrees showing which controller role based on work assignments to be the most relevant in our empirical findings.

*Model 3.4.1* will also be adjusted to our empirical findings in regards of the controller’s role based on work processes with information. In the analysis, we determine which one of the roles is the most relevant in regards of what type of information the controllers use in their work, but also how the controllers affect employees throughout the organisation. As such, adjustments in *model 3.4.1* will also be made with star tips. Based on *models 3.3* and *3.4.1* we will be able to determine if the controller’s profile in the organisation can be seen as a *Generalist, Specialist* or *Minimalist* based on *model 3.4.2* shown in the theoretical framework.

The three models will first help us to answer the first research question: *What role does the controller have in a Swedish universal bank based on work assignments?* As we have presented our empirical findings in separate departments, we will be able to analyse eventual differences in the controller’s role and its capabilities. This enables to answer the second research question: *What are the eventual differences in the controller role depending on department in the organisation?*

Additionally, *model 3.5* by Merchant and Van der Stede (2012) of the controller’s report relations, as well as relevant theories of communication, will provide increased understanding of the controllers’ report relations. Based on all four models provided in the theoretical framework where the controllers’ work with handling information is also viewed, it is
possible to answer the third research question: *How do controllers perceive that their role is affected by their work with handling information and by their report relations?*

The analysis will be summarised by reconnecting to *model 3.6* from the theoretical framework, where we link important factors and how they in the end form the individual controller role in this case study.

### 4.9 Quality of research design

In order to mitigate the drawback of triangulation and the threats to the external validity, our data collection is based on Thurén's (2005) and John Scott's (1991) four criteria when interpreting information. These are *authenticity, reliability, representativeness* and *meaningfulness*. *Authenticity* questions if collected information has a clear origin and accurately describes reality. The verbal sources are entirely constituted by the semi-structured interviews, while written sources consist of recently published and current theoretical descriptions of the controller role and its work assignments. *Reliability* discusses errors and misrepresentations in material. In this research, information has been found in electronic articles and literature written by respected authors and the latest financial report (2015) from the case organisation's webpage. As transcriptions have been made, the reliability can arguably be justified. *Representativeness* examines if information is representative in a wider perspective. As discussed, generalizability is a central discussion throughout the thesis and will further be discussed in *heading 4.10*. *Meaningfulness* questions the information's clarity and comprehensibility (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Through sending our interview guide one two weeks prior to the interviews, it can be argued that the information provided from the respondents is clear and well thought through.

### 4.10 Criticism of method

The method of conducting semi-structured interviews contributes to a potential drawback due to that the respondent can take control of the interview. This can increase the risk to that the respondent would provide unrepresentative or false information, which could have an effect on the validity and reliability of the material (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Furthermore, conducting semi-structured interviews with Handelsbanken’s controllers can be criticised since they can present their organisation in a subjective perspective, which would also affect the *reliability*,
validity and reflexivity (Yin, 2009; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Accordingly, it can be difficult to conclude if the respondents would provide the same answer in a second interview, meaning that the respondents tend to provide answers that the researcher want to have, rather than providing truthful answers (Yin, 2009). As such, our research has neither been structured to the extent that it can be replicated in the exact version. Instead, semi-structured interviews have helped us to develop a relation and understanding to the respondent (Ibid.).

As previously mentioned, a snowball sample method has been used in the interviews in order to select suitable respondents for the research. The potential drawback is that the snowball sampling method reduces the representativeness of a sample, and thereby the thesis' external validity to some extent (Bryman & Bell, 2011). However, it can be argued that respondents have provided relevant information, as they all possess general knowledge of the organisation because of their long experience in Handelsbanken. This can be argued to improve quality in the answers.

Initially, the idea of conducting multiple cases came into place for this study. The intention was to collect information from controllers in all four Swedish universal banks. As previously discussed, we realised the difficulty to implement this type of approach since our initial intention as well was to conduct an in-depth understanding of the controller role. What would have made multiple cases even more difficult to carry out is the fact that controllers are situated in several different areas and levels in each of the universal banks (Swedish Banker's Association, 2014). Therefore, difficulties viewed from a time frame to collect representative and qualitative information from a large number of respondents would have appeared if a multiple case study had been carried out. The final choice of research strategy using a single case study in Handelsbanken was therefore selected.

In contrast to Merchant and Van der Stede (2012) arguing that the banking sector can be viewed as homogeneous, the Swedish universal banks do differ in terms of price setting of services, types of customers and distribution methods (Swedish Banker’s Association, 2014). Therefore, generalisation from this single case study of the controller role within Handelsbanken should be viewed carefully. According to literature, using a single case study can limit the external validity due to problematic of generalising research findings (Yin & Heald, 1975; Bennet & George, 2005). It is however suggested that a single case study in a decentralised organisation could provide a more in-depth understanding of the controller role.
(Bryman & Bell, 2011). This implies that a single-case study can add knowledge to confront already existing theories and that the knowledge produced from the empirical findings of a single-case study can be used in a wider perspective.

4.11 Ethical aspects

As this study has proceeded, we have adapted our study to research ethics. In accordance to Zikmund (2000), it is important to take ethical aspects into consideration in order to gain access, collecting, processing and analysing the data in a responsible way. In regards of accessing the empirical data with semi-structured interviews, it has been ensured that this research has followed a specific code of ethics. These are the requirements of willingness, integrity, confidentiality and anonymity (Bryman & Bell 2011; Vetenskapsrådet, 2002).

*Willingness* requires that all individuals participate voluntarily in the investigation. It is of greater importance to also notify the respondents that the participation is voluntary and that they have the right to cancel the participation (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002). In this research, respondents were informed that the semi-structured interviews were completely voluntary and that they had the opportunity to cancel the interview if they refused to answer a specific question.

*Integrity* involves that the researcher shall inform the respondents prior to the interview about the assignment and what conditions that apply for the respondents’ participation. This is to provide the respondents with information that might have an effect of on their attitude towards a participation in an investigation (Ibid.). Prior to the interview, the respondents were therefore informed that the information was only to be used by us as external researchers.

*Confidentiality* states that all the information concerned in the empirical research project is to be remained confidential (Ibid.). This has been considered regarding the case firm. Prior to the interviews took place, respondents were asked to consider approval regarding if Handelsbanken as case firm could be mentioned in this thesis. Once the six interviews were conducted, each one was asked again if Handelsbanken could be mentioned. The intention was to treat the case firm confidentially even if one of the respondents denied this. However, with all the respondents’ approval for the bank to be mentioned, the confidentiality
Anonymity has the same purpose as confidentiality but on an individual basis. Information concerning individual research shall only be used for the investigation and compose a base for analysis in the project, and thus, that research objectives shall not be revealed or used for commercial purposes or other non-scientific purposes (Ibid.). As such, the respondents were given the option to remain anonymous in the empirical framework, as their names were not relevant for this research.

In summary regarding the carried out interviews and ethical aspects, it is suggested that the stated requirements from Vetenskapsrådet (2002) have been regarded meticulously.
5. Empirical Framework

Within the empirical framework, results are presented from the interviews in accordance to model 3.6 provided in the theoretical chapter. This will facilitate for the reader to follow. Since the interviews were transcribed, the data will be presented as summaries in order to extract the core information. Certain information will also be quoted to provide the controllers’ perspective and opinions.

5.1 Organisational environment

Knowing how Handelsbanken is built as organisation and its decentralised working method has facilitated the selection of controllers to be interviewed. The holistic view of the organisation and the idea of the controller role have as well become clearer from the controllers’ answers from their own perspective, but also through information collected from Handelsbanken’s latest (2015) financial report and the main webpage. In short, Handelsbanken's profile can be described as the following:

“... Is a full-service bank with a decentralised working method, strong local anchoring through nationwide office network and long-term customer relationships.” (Financial report, 2015).

It is widely recognised that Handelsbanken differs from the other major banks in Sweden as it does not spend time working with any budget processes. This working method along with the decentralised structure are said to be the core values in their business model, where decision making is supposed to be made locally by the one who knows the customer.

5.2 Different departments in the organisation

From the financial report, a customer chain can be viewed to clarify the different steps in the information flow leading to the customer:
Based on these steps in *model 5.1*, the interview respondents were selected. Clara is situated at *corporate units and staffs*, which will continue to be referred to as the *Central business department*. It is structured as an umbrella function over the entire organisation. It has an overarching responsibility for the four lower functions in the bank shown in the figure above. Ben is located within a *corporate business area*. Within the corporate business areas, product owners develop products and solutions in their respective business areas that are offered to customers at local offices. Simon at the *Sweden organisation* is operating at a national level where the *Sweden organisation* has a functional responsibility to coordinate the regional departments. Robert who operates within a *regional department* has an overview look over *local offices* and their financial products. As Handelsbanken’s *local offices* have increased in numbers within regional areas of Sweden, Handelsbanken has created regional departments that collect financial reporting from the local offices. Along with the decentralised structure, the regional departments have split into six different ones around Sweden and within them there are mutual administrative resources, regional expertise and specialists as support for the local offices (Financial report, 2015).

As mentioned, choosing these different departments provides a well-distributed idea of the controller and it helps to identify eventual differences in the role depending on where the controllers operate. Therefore, the empirical findings will be structured separately between departments.

### 5.3 Role expectations

#### 5.3.1 Central business department

Clara perceives that role expectations in regards to her controller role generally do not differ. She does admit that the highest management of which she works close to, may have a clearer view of her role than employees at a local offices or other units not involved with controlling.
"A department within Handelsbanken working with human resources would probably not have a clear idea of what assignments are being carried out in the central department." - Clara

She has not experienced any role conflict in her daily work and reflects that employees in different ranks of the organisation all require the same tasks to be carried out from her.

5.3.2 Corporate business area

Ben has not experienced any role conflicts working within the corporate business area because of the small amount of employees operating in it. The image of his role might be different, as departments geographically located far away, might not have a clear view of what he dedicates his time to in comparison to representatives that he works with in his local department or mainly reports to. Ben refers the risk of role conflicts rather arises when controllers are lent to multiple departments, as they might require different tasks to be carried out. Currently, Ben is lent out to another corporate business department. Another important point made, which is not related to Ben’s role, is that different role expectations of the controller might arise on a regional level. This tends to occur when a regional manager and management on central level require different information to be reported from the controller group at regional level.

5.3.3 IT-department

Both Isaac and Isabelle argue that the view of the controller role in the IT-department is general and brief. Reporting and providing managers with figures and analysis for decision-making to managers on different levels is the fundamental expectation on the controller within the IT-department. Isabelle emphasises though, that the controller varies depending on which business area the controller is working against in the IT-department. On this basis, the controller can form the role itself to reach the overall goals. Being in the IT-department and working close to the local managers, both Isaac and Isabelle have not experienced that different co-workers expect different tasks to be carried out.

5.3.4 Sweden organisation

The term controller according to Simon has a risk of being used carelessly, and that a
controller on local office level and central level should not be seen as equal. He states the financial or business controller in Handelsbanken have clearer definitions in terms of work assignments. Typically, the business controller can be regarded as a support role, but in his perspective, it can depend on where the controller is situated in the organisation, but also on the level of competence. The longer experience a controller in Handelsbanken possesses, it is more likely to work strategic issues.

“(…) We have some places maybe or some people that are a little more juniors and there it might be more of a support function, and then the more senior you get the more strategy and so on (…)” – Simon

5.3.5 Regional office
Robert states the controller role is not clearly defined in the entire organisation since the role varies depending on what product or responsibility the controller works with. The controller role at a regional department is divided into accounting and business controller, but Robert points out that there is practically no distinction between these two roles. In comparison to a manufacturing firm, where a business controller is directed to follow a specific product in production, this distinction cannot easily be made in a bank organisation.

"The one common thing is the accounting and everybody has that (...) but the responsibility of how the analysis becomes might differ.” - Robert

As the regional department is connected to different local offices and higher management they might require different work assignments to be made. Therefore, Robert describes that expectations from different angles appear within his report relations. He states there are usually no differences in expectations leading to role conflicts or increased stress at his regional department.

5.4 The controller’s capabilities
5.4.1 Central business department
Clara would suggest a controller at central level needs an interest in working with a large amount of figures, as well as an analytical knowledge. It is important to be able to pick the
most essential information for the recipients and provide this for decision-making.

"We ought to, from a large amount of data, often extract what is essential and interesting for a specific material. Then it is important to have an eye for what is interesting and what can bring the information further." - Clara

5.4.2 Corporate business department

From a higher management perspective, Handelsbanken’s corporate business areas are heavily prioritised. Ben emphasises that the controller needs to be creative, analytical and structured. In the business area, he needs to work actively to handle a large amount of information since the information is located in many different systems. Additionally, it is important to draw conclusions and find the essence of change, as the receiver of information does not want major text documents to handle.

"We follow a customer group where there are no ready reports to extract information from, so I have to extract information from the Data Warehouse in order to make follow-ups.” - Ben

As Ben often works independently without any typical framework to relate to when following the customer group, it leads to that creativeness and inventiveness become more important in his role than for other controllers at Handelsbanken.

"If we talk about office and regional bank, the majority of the results comes from our own system, but the results do not show for this particular customer group, so you have to create it yourself.” - Ben

Ben also stresses that the controller needs to have communication capabilities in order to teach the recipient of information about how various business areas develop.

5.4.3 IT department

Isabelle emphasises that the controller within the IT-department in Handelsbanken would need to possess capabilities as accuracy and the ability to be structured. When reporting to the central business department from the IT-department, it is also important to be pedagogic in
the sense to easily explain why something has appeared in the results or balance sheet.

"You can be very analytical but if you can't communicate to decision-making in an easy way (...) it facilitates if you are pedagogic." - Isabelle

Isaac also argues that the controller needs to be flexible in combination of having a pedagogic ability since working with employees within IT are generally not interested in financial aspects. On the other hand, both Isaac and Isabelle state they work with specific terminology within Handelsbanken, that other departments of the organisation might not be familiar with.

5.4.4 Sweden organisation

Simon states that important capabilities to work efficiently as a controller are to an interest for the organisation’s business, to be responsive and to have integrity.

The one basic capability is suggested to be the analytical skill since an analytic approach always surrounds what is being carried out as a controller. Having the technical skills is seldom any requirement in order to work efficiently. The final capability pointed out by Simon is also the communicative ability.

“(…) even more important with a good communicative ability, you shall mediate what you have looked at and analysed with the surrounding environment and it can partly be written but most of all often verbally.” - Simon

5.4.5 Regional department

Robert stresses that understanding the business and its complexity. This facilitates to interact with the system, as the controller needs to understand the financial product as it is easy to get lost in systems, formulas and figures. Robert indicates that working with complex financial products is special in there is no physical counterpart to money. Everything is constantly re-valued and the financial market is changing frequently in terms of new regulations. Therefore, he argues that the controller in a Swedish universal bank might differ significantly to controllers in other sectors. Robert also argues for the need of having elementary knowledge in accounting.
"It is the source to all information and it is easier to have the knowledge, than asking the accountant how it works." - Robert

The communicative ability also makes a difference as the controller at regional departments need to support the account manager at local offices to understand the complex internal model for pricing financial products.

"It can be everything from derivative to insurance and for an account manager at local offices, it can be difficult to understand all products from its position." - Robert

5.5 The Controller's work assignments

5.5.1 Central business department

Clara states she has two main responsibilities. The first is to within her controller group at the central business department, support and provide CFO and highest management at Handelsbanken with financial information for internal decision-making. The central business department has no customer relation, meaning her assignments do not involve external decisions. Her second responsibility is to oversee Handelsbanken’s internal control system. In specific terms, it involves analysing different departments in Handelsbanken in terms of their profit and development over time. Within this responsibility, it is important for the controller group within the central business department to be independent since the internal control system affects all employees stretching down to local offices.

The main work assignments within the internal control system often involves capital cost regulations, ensuring that capital is always available in the bank and to determine how distribution of administrative costs should be outlined in the organisation. Time is not spent out in the organisation and no personal contact with the recipient of information is done regularly. Reports are highly standardised through templates, but a lot of work is on an ad hoc basis, as the controller needs to react to the financial market and new regulations.

"Today we see an uncertain environment with negative interest rates, which we did not work with two years ago." - Clara
5.5.2 Corporate business department

Ben supports his local manager by providing figures and analysis of how the business area performs. This is what he refers to as making financial follow-ups. The business area itself functions as a support function for Handelsbanken's six regional departments that in turn support the local offices where the core business is carried out.

Occasionally, personal presentations occur as he teaches other representatives of his department about their performance of the business area in terms of statistics or other measurements. These representatives in turn present the information for the regional departments. Information about the business area’s performance may include development of market shares or performance in comparison to other units and competitors. Showing and teaching others information is however a very small part of his work assignments.

“(...) Really, I do all the analysis, I only help them to understand what I have analysed and those figures that I have extracted (...)” – Ben

Ben indicates the controller’s work assignments are not very directed towards future thinking, but more on current progress.

"If we talk about strategic plans and other long term forecasts, which I guess are being brought up in the central business department, I have a feeling that the controller is not involved, at least I have not been involved in it." - Ben

Instead, the controller at lower departments has a short-term view and majority of the long-term planning is allocated to top management. As Ben has long experience in the organisation, he states that the controller’s work assignments in general have changed.

“They (the controllers) were not involved in management in the regional banks for example.” – Ben

Pointed out is that the controllers used to function more stiff as “figure extractors”. Instead, since the last ten years, controllers’ work assignments have come to be claimed more important in Handelsbanken and therefore they are more included in regional managements.
5.5.3 IT-department

"We are located at a central and important place in the organisation as we are involved in maintaining the financial control model." - Isaac

Isaac and Isabelle who operate in the IT department have responsibility to support the IT-department in its different alignments. Isaac refers to himself as a “local controller” working with a specific division within the IT-department.

"Within the bank we have full-cost transfer pricing where we have different terms of responsibility and in the IT-department we categorise costs in a specific system. The controller then has responsibility for the costs in their specific system and should support the work of monitoring and follow up costs. Therefore it is important for a controller to work against one area in the IT-department." - Isaac

Isabelle refers her responsible within the IT-department to work in connection with the central business department of Handelsbanken. They both state that the responsibility for all the controllers within IT is to support the local IT-managers or managers of the central business department with financial questions. As such, Isabelle and Isaac's work assignments differ. Isabelle spends time on reporting and analysing financial and non-financial information. Specifically, the most important work assignments include presenting a monthly financial report or explaining relevant inaccuracies to the central business department. Making follow-ups on profits and Key Performance Indicators are also frequent assignments.

"We are very exact in understanding where resources are used, what it costs the bank and that the person who consumes the resources should pay for it.” - Isaac

The major focus for Isaac is to analyse and follow up cost development in the internal income statement, since the IT-department is a support unit and needs to reach break-even in profit. Accordingly, increased costs need to be explained if they are a one-time event or a long-term trend. Isaac has experienced that in large re-organisations in Handelsbanken, a lot of new work assignments are allocated to the IT-department, as transfer-pricing systems need to be re-structured and discussed with other departments in the organisation. In these changes, the states he controller needs to take the role as business partner to the local manager.
"You work very close with the local manager and act as a thermometer in the business unit... we have a huge role in helping the manager to in-depth understand the business area." - Isaac

5.5.4 Sweden organisation

Simon within the Sweden organisation refers his controller group’s tasks and his own main responsibility as a support function. He states the controlling function needs to be upheld in the entire organisation, whereas the Sweden organisation has its responsibility to coordinate the regional departments and based on their information, report to the central business department.

Generally, work assignments can be seen from a monthly perspective. The first period of the month is spent towards reporting to the central business department while the second phase includes performance management regarding lower levels of the organisation. The reporting is closely related to things that need to be adapted to.

“Regarding reporting of all of its kinds and in a bank, a lot is connected to musts, authority regulations or world factors that make us have to handle our reporting.” - Simon

Performance management often involves informing the regional departments of the organisation regarding management issues and is often presented through meetings where he needs to have a teaching position. Even if these two assignments take up the majority of the time, Simon states there is no single work assignment that can be characterised as the most important, but rather several different assignments need to be carried out in order for the controller to work efficiently:

“I don’t think you can say that you have one thing to be more important because there are a lot of things that need to cope together in order for it to be good. Both the coaching aspect, base for decision making and analysis work and so on (...)” - Simon

Accounting is a basic part of information that needs to be looked at and checked. However, Simon argues the controller’s work assignment is not to clarify the “realness”.
"Of course we are working towards having orderliness and follow our regulations and routines, and if we find errors we signal it but that is not our starting point." - Simon

The third phase of performance management generally involves other ad-hoc issues where forward-based work is more focused on, that can also be focused on even more.

"In the best of worlds you would have to put more time to forward-based work, with analysis and base for decision-making." - Simon

5.5.5 Regional department

The controller’s work assignments at the regional departments are to within their respective regions gather and analyse financial information from the local offices. This information is as indicated provided and reported to the Sweden organisation.

"They want to know their results, the offices and how they are doing, and the management of the regional banks want to have figures and analysis, but also upwards and outwards in other places." - Robert

With the above quote, Robert states his most important work assignments include monitoring and analysing results and balance sheets on local offices. The first week of the month is dedicated to report results and analyse financial statements. The controlling system is stable and producing financial statements are standardised through templates. Additionally, as regional offices structure their work similarly, considerable amount of measurements for monitoring ratios as profitability in local offices are standardised and used since 1960s. As the financial market is changeable and the controller needs to adapt quickly, varying trends arise according to what key performance indicators including non-financial information are interesting to monitor and analyse. The remaining time of the month is allocated to support regional managers and account managers at local offices with decision-making. Sharing and teaching information at local offices becomes an important assignment.

“At the regional office, you see very broadly and closely, even if we don’t meet with the customer, we are involved before and after the affair...” - Robert
The controller on regional level has an in-depth understanding of the business affairs and financial products in comparison to the central department that is several steps from the customer. Instead, a regional controller provides local offices with information about costs and profits in different scenarios.

"(...) we come very close to the business as controllers compared to the central department." - Robert

5.6 Handling information

5.6.1 Central business department

The controller at the central business department assembles financial information from all departments in the organisation. Clara generally distributes approximately 50% of her time assembling information, 30% towards analysis and 20% towards sharing it. Merging and reworking data from different systems before it can be analysed is time-consuming and unnecessary in her perspective.

"In the best of worlds you would not have to cut and paste so much in Excel." - Clara

A lot of data is located at different places and might be a challenge to find specific data. Accordingly, Clara emphasises it would be more efficient if all data was located at a single system where data quality is assured and easily accessed. Therefore, imposing a common terminology and a user-friendly interface in the system would also be suitable for her position at the central business department. However, Clara states it is difficult to get around the process of extracting data manually.

"I want to know where things are stored and how they are stored and also specifically what is being stored, and even information about a specific thing." - Clara

In the current situation at the central business department, it can be difficult to make correct decisions since there might not be sufficient access to relevant information. For example, a controller might not know why customers disappear from the bank, if there is no such information.
“(…) if you don’t have access to information then you don’t get the idea of how different things really appear (…)” - Clara

5.6.2 Corporate business department

Handling information in the corporate business area consists of assembling and analysing costs, revenues and how market shares change. In a larger organisation, Ben states the controller as a general term handles both financial and non-financial information, but becomes more specialised in one specific area since the organisation is divided in many different departments. However, in a smaller unit, the controller instead needs to handle all information about accounting to analysis. Ben estimates that handling information occupies 60% of his total work time, where 25% is dedicated to compiling information, 25% to analysing and 10% is allocated to sharing this information. Ben describes that compiling information could be more automated and computerised since there are still manual and time-consuming processes.

"(…) That you really want to press a button to compile it and not put too much time to it (…)" - Ben

As information technology evolves and as information increases, corporate business units in Handelsbanken are becoming highly dependent on the business intelligent Data Warehouse. A large amount of data cannot be automatically processed which puts significant amount of time to compile, which he indicates does not create any value for the organisation. Accordingly, Ben argues that in a decentralised organisation as Handelsbanken, different departments tend to handle and process identical information manually, which leads to duplication of work assignments. Duplication also tends to be frequent between the six different regions that gather identical information and make the same calculations. Therefore Ben proposes that Handelsbanken could improve the coordination between regions in order for the controller to save time for advanced analysis.

"Time could be saved for the controllers and they might be able to analysing more sensible things, rather than analysing internal costs, since they are very similar in the different departments within the organisation.” - Ben
5.6.3 IT-department

Isaac argues that Handelsbanken does not have a well-developed support system in the sense that the controller cannot push a button for the reports to appear. The controller often needs to rework information in excel, leading to that most time is spent on assembling rather than interpreting information. Specifically during re-organisations is where information becomes difficult to assemble and the controller often needs to re-structure data in order to compare it. Managing information according to Isaac and Isabelle could also improve in the sense to upgrade the support system to contain the same terminology for all the units of Handelsbanken, which could facilitate the process of assembling information.

"You need to obtain figures that are comparable to last year. For us it is important that we are comparing apples with apples." - Isaac

A major part of work with information is standardised, as tapping information in the system and analysing processes are often conducted similarly. However, these standards also need to be changed over time as the organisation expands globally. Isabelle believes that a lot is standardised in producing reports to local managers and central business department.

"We try to standardise a lot, as we collect data from different systems, but still there are manual processes to tap everything in excel." - Isabelle

As new reports need to be made, both Isabelle and Isaac argue that the manual work could be less for making main work processes more effective and more time for analytical work. If less manual work is made, it will probably also decrease the risk of committing errors when working with reports.

"We constantly try to reduce the manual process in reporting to create more time to analysis." - Isabelle

5.6.4 Sweden organisation

At the Sweden organisation, a major part of handling information other than analysing is sharing it and to make sure other co-workers learn how to handle the information. How information is stored is in constant change since the amount is only increasing. Consequently,
assembling and reworking information is always the more time-consuming part when handling information also at this department.

“(…) Collecting the data does not have an intrinsic value… It simply costs a little too much to assemble it (…)” - Simon

Simon states collecting information is not realistic to be completely automated. He would rather suggest general information to be easily available in the system that can be reworked for analysis in accordance to what an individual wants.

5.6.5 Regional department

At the regional department, handling information often involves assembling financial information in order to conduct a well-grounded analysis. New information technology facilitates for faster compiles and sharing of it than before, but as noticed in other departments, gathering data is still the most time-consuming step as information needs to be reworked from different systems.

“I don’t know how it looks like in other companies, but in banks, a lot of time is spent towards collecting data. It takes a lot of time and it might not be the most fun or important part of the role.” – Robert

Handelsbanken has set up a specific control system, which in general terms is functioning well, but Robert stresses that the support for the complete system tends to be problematic.

“The controller needs to create information that is not available in the system, so even if you want everything to be automatic, then your job disappears.” - Robert

Robert suggests that Handelsbanken would need to assemble all information in the same system to improve his work with analysing information. However, reconstructing the system will cost a lot of money, which would affect the core business benefit.

“If you have a bag of money and you want to distribute it, then the business benefit often is prioritised last since new regulations always are imposed. A lot of resources are needed in
order to adapt to new regulations." - Robert

Since Robert states he dedicates a lot of time towards assembling data, he instead recognises that time could also be spend time out in the organisation where the core business is being carried out.

5.7 The controller’s report relations

5.7.1 Central business department

Clara’s position at the central business department has as indicated a direct report relation to top management. She does have a closer relation to the manager at the central department as they have daily contact. Reporting to higher management is often through sending reports without any presentations in person occurring.

"If you are situated further out in the organisation, then there might be a great lack of information, and there is unfortunately space for misinterpretations." - Clara

Within the organisation she argues that report relations could be improved. However, she does not state that her work is affected, but as a central function she has observed that the most difficult thing is for other departments in lower levels of the organisation to disseminate information correctly. She indicates there are opportunities for the new founded Sweden Organisation to accurately coordinate information and report relations, which can save costs. Clara indicates there currently is a major lack of information for controllers working in the entire organisation. The sender of information may think that s/he shares clearly defined information, while the recipient interprets the information completely different. Therefore, she argues the controller should try to share more information and more often than the current situation.

5.7.2 Corporate business department

Ben reports directly to the local manager and the central business department. Additionally, he also sends statistics concerning the specific business area directly to regional and local offices.
There is a higher adherence to the local manager at the business division as they have more frequent contact and sharing information at a daily basis. The controller discusses problems and daily work often with the local manager, which rarely happens with higher management. In Ben’s perspective, there are opportunities to be more time-efficient in sharing and reporting information between divisions and units. He indicates that this does not apply to his business area, but more in regards to the report relations between the six different regions.

"They design excel-files and design access-data-bases in different places within the bank that are later used for the same stuff, and look the same." - Ben

Since duplication is frequent, Ben suggests there are opportunities for more efficient knowledge exchange between units in the organisation and therefore should be utilised more often. He explains the Sweden organisation has been created for organising the communication for learning between the regional departments. The aspiration for this is as well to work more time efficiently and allocate resources for analysis, open up for more sales-related work or that fewer controllers are demanded in the organisation.

5.7.3 IT-department

The IT-department integrates and communicates regularly with other support units and business departments in the organisation. Accordingly, Isaac describes a constant internal economic flow in Handelsbanken, creating the increasing need for the controller to report relevant statistical indicators about changes in costs to the local managers and central business departments. Isaac has a close relation to the local managers at the IT-department and reports directly to Isabelle or the local department manager, while Isabelle is responsible for communicating and reporting to the central business department. Isabelle indicates that most time is spent in the IT-department but time is also spent to report information in person to local managers.

Isaac argues that the understanding of what various expenses indicate and why they occur in the organisation needs to increase, since it can be difficult to know whom to contact to get relevant answers.

"We are business people working with IT managers and when we send information to the
central business department we need to describe cost reductions or increases of costs pedagogically so people outside the IT department understands. That is a challenge to mediate." - Isabelle

What would be a learning opportunity for the IT-department is that processes can be improved in the communication, as to have a more common language between departments with the use of the same terminology to decrease misunderstandings, especially between IT and employees at the central business department. This can facilitate in report relations rather than what is the current situation where the communication is critical for the controllers working within IT.

5.7.4 Sweden organisation

As the controller group at the Sweden organisation reports to the controller groups at the regional departments and the central business department, Simon points out the there is no value in internal reporting:

"Reporting is nothing we profit from." - Simon

Simon suggests the ongoing reporting could be reduced because of its lack of intrinsic value. It is consistently worked on in order to become as slimmed down as possible. The quality still needs to be consistent, meaning there has to be a balance between quality in reports and a quicker process in order to create a base for decision-making for the central business department and higher management.

Within the report relations either upward or downward in the organisation, there is always a risk of misjudgement. Therefore, Simon states that the communicative and pedagogic capabilities become essential in order to improve report relations and to work efficiently across departments.

5.7.5 Regional department

As a controller at regional level, there are complex report relations through the organisation. The work at the regional offices touches every local office, as they want to know the regional profits and figures. Therefore, report relations are strong between regional departments and
local offices.

The report relations are direct but how the reports are formed can differ widely. Robert describes that a large part of the communication to local offices consists of written reports and verbal coaching about specific affairs. At the regional level, there are clearly opportunities for more knowledge sharing between regional and local offices. Therefore, Robert signals that less assembling of information as part of his current work assignments would probably affect his work to be more present at the local offices than the current situation.

“Many calls are always being made to different local offices and sometimes seminars or meetings can be held at the local offices (...)” - Robert

At regional level, Robert states there is usually no ambiguity to which levels that Robert has a strong report relation. However, different expectations can appear between local offices and higher management, which can create overanalysing or that priorities need to be made to cope with both directions.

"Sometimes we need to say stop." - Robert
6. Analysis

The analysis chapter based on model 3.6 in the theoretical chapter seeks to interlink the theoretical framework with important indicators from the empirical findings. The first two chapters, organisational environment and departments in organisation, will not be analysed as separate headings as they are integrated within the entire analysis chapter. This will generate an in-depth discussion of the controller role and how information handling and report relations affect the role. The analysis is based on a hermeneutic approach, emphasising the importance of understanding and interpreting the empirical data. For this reason, we will suggest how the central models in the theoretical framework should be adjusted to the empirical findings in regards of the controllers’ work assignments, information handling and report relations.

6.1 Role expectations

As pointed out by Byrnes and Pierce (2007), roles emerge in organisations through expectations. Among the interviewed controllers, the expectations on them are usually clearly viewed from their own experience. As such, role ambiguity in the sense of what the controllers expect from themselves and what co-workers expect from them generally do not clash. In accordance to Wickham and Parker (2007), we have noticed that the term business controller role is clearly communicated, understood and accepted by other employees. Thus, role conflict within the controller role cannot be seen as an issue. However, what can be found in this case study in regards of different role expectations are three aspects.

First, the issue with different role expectations is rather the view of the controller, where Clara and Ben state that departments they do not cooperate with might not have a clear view of their role. However, they also imply that the departments they cooperate with require the same assignments to be carried out. In accordance to Olve and Petri (2008) this could not be viewed as an activity gap as employees close to the controller do not expect different activities from the controller than what the controller in reality performs. As Katz and Kahn (1978) argue, the size and structure of organisations affect the expectations of the controller role, which should clarify that the controllers might not have a clear role seen from every
department in a decentralised organisation (Koh & Who, 1998). As such, there is rather unclearness of the role seen from departments located far away from the controller function (Koh & Who, 1998).

Second, priorities need to made for different reasons. Within the corporate business area, the role is clearly defined seen from Ben’s perspective. However, he states that he could experience multiple expectations of his role as he recently has been lent out to another department than the one he is mainly responsible for. It can be argued that this could decrease productivity and commitment for his main department, as he might need to make priorities (Noor, 2004). From this aspect, it can be seen as role ambiguity since departments might expect or require different assignments to be carried out (Koh & Who, 1998). At regional level, the controller works closer to the core business of the organisation. Since there is a closer relation to the core business and that higher levels want to know local offices’ profits, the regional departments have a wide range of report relations in the organisation. In accordance to Biddle (1986) and Byrne and Pierce (2007), empirical findings imply that there might arise different expectations between higher management and local offices in regards to which department the controller at regional level should mainly report. This is where it can be suggested that an expectations gap could arise, as the regional controllers’ role depends on which one to report to. This implies that controllers might put value in work assignments that other employees depending on level within the organisation do not claim to be as valuable (Olve & Petri, 2008). This can accordingly make it difficult to fulfil other roles in the profession as suggested by Lindvall (2009). Therefore it is shown by the priorities needed be made rather than that stress is created in order to cope with all report relations at the regional level.

Third, the term controller within organisations can have different significations and should not be a general term. As stated by Wickham and Parker (2007) roles need to be communicated, understood and accepted by individuals in order to function effectively. In accordance to our empirical findings, the term might be used very freely, and has a risk to equalise a controller at a local level with a controller at central level of the organisation. Therefore, the controller can easily be misinterpreted, and the terms financial or business controller should instead be used more frequently. The view of the business controller is in accordance to our empirical findings generally a support function rather than strategist. However, in regards if the controller should be seen as a support function or strategist, it is
suggested that the controller tends to have a stronger role as a strategist with longer experience within the organisation.

Reflecting on different role expectations, we can see tendencies that within a decentralised organisation, the controller needs to have the ability to handle different expectations depending on relations and level of the organisation. In contrast to Noor (2004) however, there are no signs of role conflicts appearing from different role expectations or report relations in this case study.

6.2 The controller's capabilities

6.2.1 Ability to handle information

Having discussed role expectations, the controller role is formed differently depending department. As information technology increases, controllers need to possess capabilities of assembling information and analyse it from a wide range of sources (Nilsson & Olve, 2013; Van der Stede & Malone, 2010). In this case study, we noticed in accordance to Heide et al. (2005) a general statement among controllers that assembling and searching for information in large databases is specifically the most time-consuming process. This affects and increases the requirement of possessing knowledge in assembling, interpreting and sharing information. As a common denominator in terms of handling a large amount of information, it can be suggested from the empirical findings that all controllers regardless of department need possess capabilities of being structured, analytical, accurate and pedagogic.

As we have studied controllers in a decentralised organisation operating in an uncertain environment, Copper and Dart (2009) imply that controllers need to possess capabilities to handle both financial and non-financial information. Nilsson and Olve (2013) argue further that controllers need to be creative in order to interpret large amount of information in order to draw relevant conclusions. Accordingly, the interviewed controllers imply they handle all business related information, including internal accounting information. At the regional department and at the corporate business area, it can be argued that controllers need to be more creative than in other departments. At the corporate business area, there are no ready reports to extract relevant information from, implying that Ben needs to spend a large amount of time extracting information from the data Warehouse. In the regional department, Robert needs to handle a large amount of both financial and non-financial information, located in
several different systems. An assumption could therefore be that the closer the controller works to the financial product delivered to the customer, the controller can be expected to be more creative.

As Isaac and Isabelle dedicate a large amount of time with the full cost pricing system within the IT-department, it can be implied the IT-costs are varied and can be difficult to understand for employees outside of the IT-department. In this aspect, being structured as well as flexible become important capabilities. As Isaac works towards other IT-employees, he needs to be flexible as they are generally not interested in financial terms. On the other hand, as Isabelle reports to the central business department, she needs to be flexible but also pedagogic, as she needs to simplify her explanations within her reporting to employees that are not familiar with IT-costs or other terms. Drawing upon this, while information technology and reporting constantly develop, controllers need to be flexible and explaining within their internal reporting (Burn & Baldvinsdottir, 2007). This assures that higher management understands reported information within the organisation to base decisions on.

Accordingly, Nilsson and Olve (2013) and Heide et al. (2005), argue that controllers need to identify potential opportunities and draw meaningful conclusions based on assembled information. From empirical findings, a controller at central department needs to possess capabilities to assemble the most relevant information from the entire organisation and communicate this to top management. As such, we have noticed that controllers at higher level in organisations need to possess great analytical knowledge rather than pedagogic, flexible or creative that have been noticed in other departments.

6.2.2 Ability to communicate

In a decentralised organisation, Olve & Samuelson (2008) emphasise that due to an increasing amount of information, the controller possesses a key role in communicating information. Nilsson and Olve (2013) and Heide et al. (2005) also emphasise there is a risk that shared information in the organisation is interpreted differently than intended. This contributes to that controllers need to possess the capability to communicate information clearly (Heide, 2005). In addition, the interviewed controllers emphasise an underlying importance to analyse and share information in an educational way. In other words, controllers need to possess the ability to formulate complex information in a simple and interesting way in order to highlight
the importance and relevance in the information. Based on this discussion, it can be found that controllers regardless of department need to possess the ability to communicate one way or the other.

Furthermore, Merchant and Van der Stede’s (2012) imply that information interpretations differ depending on what type of background knowledge the receiver of information possesses. Similarities can be drawn to the controller in the empirical findings where it can be argued that information needs to be adjusted depending on who will receive the information. This can specifically be applied to the controllers at the IT department and the corporate business department where they confirm they need to design information and rework technological terminology in order to explain activities to employees outside the department. Therefore, it can be suggested from empirical findings that controller in departments working with specific terminology needs to possess an increased communicative capability.

6.2.3 Institutional knowledge

Despite that controllers are situated in different departments, Lindvall (2009) implies that controllers need to possess general knowledge of the entire organisation. However, in a US perspective, Sathe (1982) defines the controller as an independent auditor working individually. On the contrary, Mattsson (1987) describes the controller role in a Swedish context as a complex role with both capabilities as an auditor and advisor. In accordance to the empirical framework, we notice that controllers need to possess knowledge in both accounting and the core business as most of the information consists of both complex financial data and non-financial data. This tends be a significant difference for controllers at a Swedish universal bank as opposed to controllers in other sectors such as in manufacturing where information usually follows a physical product. Conforming to Nilsson and Olve’s (2013) institutional knowledge, the controller in this case study deems to have knowledge about complex financial products. Controllers also need to possess a general understanding of organisational values and work processes in the organisation. In turn, this could be applied foremost to the controller role in the regional department that has a close relation to both local offices and central department. From the regional department it is argued that a controller at a central business department or the Sweden organisation possesses a more overview understanding of the organisation.
In accordance to Eriksson and Thunman (1990), the interviewed controllers imply the importance of possessing knowledge in regards of external regulations in order to adapt these to internal processes. This can foremost be related to controllers at the central business department. With an umbrella function over the rest of the organisation, it can be argued that this is a specific important knowledge in the controllers’ role. On the other hand, as new regulations need to be adjusted for, controllers at higher levels might lack insight knowledge of specific business affairs conducted at local offices. Reflecting on Judge and Piccolo’s (2004) “management-by-exception”, controllers at regional levels develop an insight understanding of specific financial products by regularly and daily communicating with the local offices and other departments. On the contrary, empirical findings imply that “management-by-exception” is more common at higher level as controllers receive information from lower levels and examine if differences occur in the organisation.

6.3 The controller's work assignments

As indicated in our research problem, previous research argues that with more automated work assignments due to technological development, controllers should be able to dedicate more time on advanced analysis (Nilsson & Olve, 2013; Stewart, 1967; Mintzberg, 1973). As such, literature states that controllers’ primary work assignments include assembling, analysing and reporting information to managers for decision-making (Nilsson & Olve, 2013; Granlund & Lukka, 1998; Lindvall, 2009; Baldvinsdottir et al. 2009; Mattsson, 1987). However, Sathe (1982) and Säljö (2001) argue that controllers should exclusively and independently monitor as an internal auditor, while Merchant (1998) suggests that modern controllers instead focus mainly on internal reporting, analysis, planning and budgeting.

By comparing empirical findings with the theoretical framework of the controller’s work assignments, we notice that apart from budgeting, the controllers perform all these types of work assignments in different degrees depending on department. Therefore, differences and similarities in work assignments will be highlighted.

6.3.1 The controllers’ role based on work assignments

As previously stated, the controller role has moved towards being a business partner with increasing responsibility in strategic decisions (Baldvinsdottir et al. 2009; Granlund & Lukka,
1998; Mattsson, 1987; Simon et al, 1954). Reflecting on our empirical findings, the degree of involvement in strategic decision-making usually depends on where the controller is located in the organisation and its competence. As Simon points out, a senior controller with more than 15 years of experience usually has more involvement in strategic decisions, while a junior controller often would more likely possess a support function. Worth of consideration is that controllers in accordance to Ben have in the past not been involved in strategic decisions, indicating it has been a change in this aspect in accordance to what Nilsson and Olve (2013) suggests as a business partner. Model 6.3.1 seen below is adapted based on the type of information controllers in this case study primarily use and if this is done independently or as part of a team process. Through this model by Nilsson and Olve (2013), it is possible to draw conclusions of what role the controller has based on work assignments.

By illustration, a star in model 6.3.1 is covering the box showing how the controllers are involved in work assignments related to one of the four specific roles. Further on in heading 6.3.1, our analysis will be conducted of why controllers in this case study lean towards Market Surveyor and Business Partner.
Relating to model 6.3.1, star tip A describes the controller role as a *Score keeper* with the main work assignment to assemble historical internal accounting information (Simon et al., 1954; Nilsson & Olve, 2013). As previously discussed, controllers possess an important role in analysing and reporting information as the amount of information increases in organisations (Burns & Baldvinsdottir, 2007; Granlund & Lukka, 1998; Lindvall, 2009). Through conducting each interview, we have found that the controllers in a decentralised organisation with complex financial products handle both financial and non-financial information in their analyses. This decreases the significance of the *Score keeper* in this case study. However, at the start of each month, a major part of the controllers’ work assignments is associated with balancing of books and financial reporting. The remaining part of the month, controllers dedicate the majority of time to combine financial information from balance sheets with non-financial measures as customer satisfaction or benchmarking in order to draw more comprehensive conclusions. This is also pointed by the IT-department where they conduct analysis of key performance indicators including non-financial figures. All the controllers indicate that possessing knowledge in internal accounting can be regarded as basic knowledge in order to carry out their work assignments. Therefore, the *Score keeper* should not be excluded in model 6.3.1 but instead star tip A should not cover the *Score keeper* area to the same extent as *Market surveyor* or *Business partner*.

In accordance to Olve and Petri (2008), star tip B indicates that the controller role based on work assignments is moving towards a *Market surveyor*. This is based on the fact that the controllers’ work assignments involve working closely to local managers in order to identify risks and opportunities in the organisation and providing managers with relevant analyses (Lindvall, 2009; Mattsson, 1987; Siegel & Sorensen, 1999; Granlund & Lukka, 1998). What can be found in the empirical framework is that the controllers work constantly with providing local managers with all business related information for decision support. As a major part of the controllers’ work assignments consists of analysing independently, star tip B in model 6.3.1 is highly extended. However, start tip C as a *Business partner* is more extended than star tip B as the controllers at Handelsbanken also work in their respective controller teams.

As previously discussed, the extended star tip C in model 6.3.1 indicates the controllers’ increasing ability to challenge assumptions and affect institutional arrangements by
discovering opportunities and risks in the organisation (Nilsson & Olve, 2013). Reflecting on the empirical findings, the controllers lean towards Business partner to support local department management, as the controllers affect others’ thinking through reported analysis in all type of business related information. In accordance to Mattsson (1987), the controllers can also be seen as a support function to the local department manager with the purpose to provide relevant information for decision support. However, in contrast to Baldvinsdottir et al (2009) controllers in this case study are not highly involved in strategic planning. As such, Star tip C is not illustrated as fully extended within model 6.3.1 as a Business partner.

At last, star tip D illustrates that controllers’ role have developed to possess a more educational role in the organisation towards other employees and should therefore be viewed as a Change Agent to a certain extent (Nilsson & Olve, 2013; Olve & Petri, 2008; Hedman et al. 2009). To further support this, Olve and Petri (2008) describe the controller role moving from being an isolated expert in specific areas towards possessing a teaching role to foster learning throughout the organisation. During the interviews, controllers in the IT department, Sweden organisation, corporate business department and regional department in Handelsbanken imply that the educational role along with the communicative ability is important in their controller role. However, they imply they handle and communicate a wide variety of information apart from internal accounting information, and therefore the Market surveyor is less extended than the Business partner in regards of the educational role in the organisation. The controller at the central business department could be viewed as an exception seen educational perspective, as the controller does not allocate time in the organisation educating employees, but rather reporting information without personal contact. None of the interviewed controllers in the organisation indicate confirm involvement in clarifying strategy and setting objectives as a Strategist. Found in the empirical framework is that this depends on experience, but also here in the organisation the controller is situated. Due to this, Star tip D (Change Agent) is not excluded, but still illustrated as extended as Star tip B (Market Surveyor) and Star tip C (Business partner). Instead controllers’ primarily responsibility is to constantly follow changes in revenues and costs.

As argued by Olve and Petri (2008), controllers cannot focus on being experts in one specific role described in model 6.3.1. Therefore, we have drawn the star tips in different extensions in how we interpret the controller based on its work assignments. We interpret that the Market Surveyor and the Business Partner are strongly linked to the controller as they handle all
business related information instead of exclusively internal accounting information. Their work is strongly characterised by an analytical capability. Indicated is that Star tip C is however the most accurate area, as controllers imply they are involved in a team process in their controller functions and effect others’ thinking by analysis as decision support for local managers.

6.3.2 The controllers’ work process with handling information

Model 6.3.2 (seen below) is based on what information the controllers use and to whom and how the information primarily is aimed for (Olve & Petri, 2008). In accordance to previous research, the controller is in a traditional perspective described as an Accountant. However, as organisations develop to become more complex, decentralised and information heavy, the controller has received a variety of roles (Mattsson, 1987). In model 6.3.2, Olve and Petri (2008) define these additional roles as Analyst, Coach and Pedagoge.

![Model 6.3.2 Controller role profiles (Olve & Petri, 2008) Reworked](image)

As an Accountant, the controller’s analysis is mainly based on internal accounting information (Olve & Petri, 2008). Throughout the case study, the controllers argue that accounting knowledge is important in order to accomplish the role as a controller. On the other hand, we have noticed that the controller role increasingly is using both financial and non-financial information. Accordingly, exclusively handling internal accounting information does not apply to the controller role in this case study. For this reason, star tip A is not as
extended as the others.

We have noticed from this case study that the controllers’ role could be described as an *Analyst*. This role increasingly uses non-financial information as customer satisfaction and other statistics in order to analyse the market (Olve & Petri, 2008; Granlund & Lukka, 1998). Accordingly, at a central business department and the Sweden organisation, which both function as umbrella-departments over units in the organisation, controllers are usually described to possess the role as an *Analyst* above being an *Accountant, Coach or Pedagogue*. The main work assignment for these units is to assemble information from departments in lower levels in the organisation and compile this information for further analysis to higher management. As controllers’ overarching work assignment in general found in the empirical framework is based on a form of analysis, *star tip B* is the most extended in *model 6.3.2*.

The educational role is important for all the interviewed controllers except for the controller at the central business department. Clara states that she is not out in the organisation to present information. This is in contrast to what is characterised by the role as a *Coach* (Olve & Petri, 2008). Furthermore, she does not claim to handle any other information than financial information. Even if the controller at the central business department has a more overview role than the controller at Sweden organisation, Simon indicates that he alongside to his primary work assignment is to conduct presentations in regional departments as a part of coordinating them. This behaviour in adjusting information to suit the receiver’s degree of knowledge and requirements can be viewed as a *Coach* (Hedman et al. 2009; Olve & Petri, 2008).

The role as a *Pedagogue* is argued to have an important responsibility in an organisation towards employees and actively restructure internal accounting data to make it understandable for receivers (Olve & Petri, 2008). Through conducting the interviews, it can be stated that sharing information is a crucial process throughout the entire organisation. As such, controllers indicate they need to be pedagogical in sharing and educating information to reduce the risk of misinterpretations. Reflecting on the empirical findings, controllers at a higher level in organisations could therefore be viewed as a *Pedagogue* in their reporting. Controllers within the IT-department and the corporate business area could arguably possess the role as a *Coach* rather than *Pedagogue*. They often need to adjust information towards receivers, as they might not be familiar with IT-terminology or non-financial terms within the
specific business area. This is usually performed through formal regular presentations to give the recipient information and opportunity to state questions. Since the Pedagogue is related to only teach internal accounting data, it can be argued that the Pedagogue is not as important as the Coach. The tendency is rather that the controller at higher level needs to communicate financial information while the lower levels combine this with other non-financial information. Therefore star strip D is less extended than star tip C.

Reflecting upon this discussion of the four different roles in terms of work processes with information, the controller at a higher level in the organisation can be seen as an Analyst and a Pedagogue. Observing the controller role on the lower levels in the organisation, we have noticed a tendency that the controllers instead lean towards Analyst and a Coach. However, what is not shown in model 6.3.2 in contrast to the empirical findings is that the controllers indicate assembling information is more time-consuming than analysing. If assembling information within the system were a more automatic process, the controllers would be able to dedicate more time for advanced analysis. Therefore, it can be argued that assembling information as part of handling information inhibits the controller’s role as an Analyst.

Model 6.3.3 (Seen below) implies whether the controllers can be defined as a Specialist, Generalist or Minimalist (Olve & Petri, 2008). Based on our discussion and the theoretical background, we assume the controller can be categorised as Specialist.

Model 6.3.3 The controller profiles (Olve & Petri, 2008) Reworked

As controllers in a decentralised organisation possess deep knowledge in their respective areas, but also for the entire organisation, they should not be defined as Minimalist. The
Minimalist possesses a narrow delimitation of work assignments and does not possess deeper knowledge in any given area, which cannot be related to controllers’ answers from the interviews (Olve & Petri, 2008). The Generalist is as indicated by Olve and Petri (2008) more common in organisations with only a few controllers within the financial department and therefore need to have a wide variety of knowledge. The organisation in this case study is a highly complex, large and decentralised organisation with multiple functions and business areas. As such, controllers have a function in different specialised departments of the organisation. Therefore, the controller as a Generalist in a large and decentralised organisation should be viewed carefully. It should be noted that the longer experience the controller has within the organisation, the more institutional knowledge is possessed as they can work more with strategic issues. The Generalist as suggested by theory related to this case study, would however work with all different departments, products and services (Ibid.). This cannot be regarded possible in the chosen decentralised organisation. The controllers can all be regarded to possess a general understanding of the entire organisation, but it can be argued that they need to specialise in their specific areas. As such, if controllers are located in different departments and possess a clear focus towards a specific area, the controller should instead fall into the category as a Specialist in model 6.3.3.

6.4 Report relations

In order to understand how report relations affect the controller role, we first discuss how report relations in the organisation are formed in the case study. This has lead to the creation of model 6.4.1 in order to illustrate the report relations more clearly. As such, the departments connected with solid line have a regular report relation. Secondly, we will discuss the individual controllers’ report relations within the different departments. Therefore, model 6.4.2 has been created in heading 6.4.2.
6.4.1 Report relations on a organisational level

Reflecting on previous research, the increasing amount of information in organisations contributes to that controllers possess an important role in analysing and reporting information (Burns & Baldivasdottir, 2007). Developing functioning internal report relations becomes important in facilitating controllers’ opportunity to quickly adapt to uncertainties (Heide et al, 2005). As this research has been made in a decentralised organisation with complex financial products, controllers have great responsibility in separate departments. Therefore it can be argued that there are extended needs for functioning report relations in order to communicate expertise knowledge between departments, as they are Specialists in their separate areas. As the amount of information increases and communication technology evolves, individuals need to a greater extent coordinate information, both vertically and horizontally in the organisation in order to streamline information (Spillan et al. 2002; Simonsson 2002; Goldhaber, 1993; Bartels et al. 2010; Kumar et al, 2000).

Accordingly, our empirical findings also show that report relations facilitate information sharing both vertically and horizontally in the organisation.

The vertical communication from the central business department down to lower levels in the organisation can be related to Simonsson’s (2002) and Falkheimer and Heide’s (2003) transmission method. This is where the primary aim is to convey information usually through
a one-way communication. The purpose is for the information to serve as an informative function, where employees will receive information that facilitates their work and responsibilities (Heide, 2005). Throughout the interviews, controllers imply they do not have responsibility in strategic planning. Instead strategic planning occurs at top management, which in turn is communicated to the central business department and down to lower levels. As such, vertical information contributes as a management function, where the primary purpose is to convey employees with organisational goals and how to reach them (ibid.).

From the empirical findings, if organisations constantly face new regulations and restrictions set by public authorities, information shared in the organisation needs to possess a regulative function, in order to convey employees with new regulations, policies, norms and values. However, only using a one-way communication in reporting information increases the risk of information being difficult to handle or to be misinterpreted (James & Werner, 1998; Fiske, 1997; Shannon & Weaver, 1949). This is since information might be interpreted differently depending on the receiver’s knowledge, which can contribute to decreased quality of information and incorrect decisions (Heide et al. 2005). In effective organisational communication, individuals need to have a constant dialogue and exchange of information (Spillan et al. 2002; Derks et al. 2010; Goretzki et al. 2013). This is where we have found the importance of a sense-making approach with the purpose for the controllers to mediate conducted analysis as part of being a Coach or Pedagogue (Simonsson, 2002). Throughout the interviews we have noticed that communication can be regarded as a socialisation function within departments. As such the horizontal communication becomes important in developing a learning process between controllers as Specialists in how to handle or interpret information (Heide et al. 2005).

In the central business department, it is pointed out that the controllers’ report relations within the organisation can be improved by reporting more frequently. Clara argues that this would decrease the risk of misunderstandings in the organisation. She also suggests in accordance to Falkheimer and Heide (2003) and Strid (1999), that there is always a risk that the receiver could misinterpret information. Therefore, it is suggested by Clara that more dialogue could solve complex problems within the organisation. In contrast, Simon indicates that more frequent reports generally would not give an additional intrinsic value for the organisation. What gives an intrinsic value remains to conduct well-grounded analyses that in turn are reported effectively. Reporting should thus be more automated or slimmed down in
order to focus more on advanced analysis. In accordance to Shannon and Weaver (1949), controllers imply that imposing a common language in report relations could improve communication and decrease the risk of misunderstandings. Instead of dedicating time on advanced analysis, the controllers currently need to allocate time on interpreting assembled information. It can therefore be found that using a common terminology within the entire organisation would also support the controllers’ analytical related work assignments.

In regional departments, it can be found that report relations could be problematic. It is indicated there is a risk of duplication in work assignments between the different regional departments. Therefore, by also improving coordination between the regional departments, more time could be spent towards analysis for the regional controllers. In this aspect, the Sweden organisation has a great responsibility. In line with Simonsson (2002) it can be suggested that the Sweden organisation coordinates horizontal communication between the regional departments and facilitates for vertical communication up towards central business department. In accordance to literature, large and decentralised organisations need a special coordination on a national level in order to decrease the risk of duplication in the controllers’ work assignments on lower levels (Spillan et al. 2002; Goldhaber, 1993; Bartels et al. 2010; Kumar et al. 2000).

6.4.2 The controllers’ individual report relations

Report relations on an organisational level have now been discussed. Since controllers operate in different departments within the organisation, following heading 6.4.2 will analyse the controllers individual report relations within in their separate departments.

As discussed in theory, Merchant and Van der Stede (2012) imply that controllers can either possess close report relations to local management or towards the business unit controller. Based on our empirical findings, it can be argued that controllers possess an important role in reporting to local management in different departments of the organisation. Reflecting on our empirical findings, report relations differ from Merchant and Van der Stede (2012) and therefore the left part of model 6.4.2 is reworked in order to accurately illustrate controllers’ report relations in this context.
As illustrated by the *solid line* in *model 6.4.2*, controllers imply they feel more connected to the local department managers as they have regular personal communication with them. In accordance to Maas and Matejka (2009), if controllers are closely located to their local department manager it becomes easier to be emotionally attached to them. As such, controllers in this case study experience clearer *local responsibility*. They primarily discuss problems with local management and provide them with relevant analysis for decision-making in their role as a *Market surveyor* and *Business partner* (Maas & Matejka, 2009; Nilsson & Olve, 2013).

Specifically found in the empirical framework is that the controller at the central business department can be viewed as the corporate controller to the left in *model 6.4.2*. As illustrated by the *dotted line*, it is found that the corporate controller receives reports from department controllers at lower levels of the organisation. Hence, department controllers in this case study do not have to report through the business unit controller or local managers in contrast to Merchant and Van der Stede’s model (2012). However, as the vertical report relation to corporate controller (*dotted line*) is only based on non-personal reporting, the department controllers still indicate they have higher adherence to the local department manager. Similarities can be drawn to controllers at corporate level where vertical report relations to top management (*dotted line*) only involve non-personal reporting and the daily contact with managers at corporate level increases the corporate controller’s adherence to them.
As discussed in theory, controllers with emotional attachment towards local managers have increased risk to conduct gamesmanship and affect financial results to benefit the local department (Maas & Matejka, 2009).

Reflecting on the empirical findings, department controllers can report directly to higher management without having to go through local managers. As department controllers can have varied report relations and report directly to corporate controller and local department managers, this indicates in accordance to Sathe (1982), that the department controller can still maintain loyalty towards the entire organisation and not just to local department (Johnson & Kaplan, 1987; Sathe, 1982; Säljö, 2001). As such, the department controllers’ independence in regards of report relations favours loyalty for the entire organisation. Therefore, we have the impression that controllers still can monitor decentralised departments objectively despite a strong loyalty towards the local managers.

The controllers are part of a controller group function within their separate departments. In Handelsbanken, this can be found in the IT-department, where controllers at IT such as Isaac, work towards a specific IT-function requiring knowledge in a specific area, and then report to the department controller, which in this case is Isabelle. Within these controller groups, a high adherence to the controller function and the local manager is created as they have daily communication and close report relations. Reflecting on our empirical findings, controllers with multiple vertical report relations assigned, such as regional level, could be affected negatively, as controllers at this level need to allocate more time on reporting towards multiple levels in the organisation, and less time towards analysis.
6.5 Summary – the individual controller role

Our analysis has provided an in-depth discussion of the important factors from model 3.6 in theory that has led to understand the individual controller role. A summary of the analysis will follow in accordance to model 6.5 used in this research.

Model 6.5 The individual controller role (Thornell & Alin, 2016)

Based on our analysis, it has been found that different expectations on the controller role might arise depending on department. As shown in this case study, the regional departments controllers have multiple report relations, which increases priorities needed be made in order to cope with these report relations. Therefore, as report relations are shown to affect role expectations in organisations, these are connected with a solid line in model 6.5. However, controllers imply that different expectations do not increase stress, which indicates that role conflict is not a major issue in this case study.

As controllers are situated in decentralised departments the role might not be clearly defined seen from departments far away from the controller function or where controllers do not operate. The term controller should not be used as a general term within the organisation.
**Business controller** is however seen as a clear term within the organisation. In regards whether the controller should be seen as a *support function* or *strategist*, it is suggested that this depends on experience within the organisation. The longer experience a controller possesses, the more likely is the involvement in strategic issues.

As controllers are situated in different departments, there might arise different expectations of which capabilities they need to possess. It can be found that the controllers regardless of department in the organisation need to possess the capability of being *structured, analytical, pedagogic and accurate*, but also the *ability to communicate* is shown. At higher levels we notice that controllers possess a more *overview understanding* of the organisation in line with *institutional knowledge*. As such, new regulations need to be adapted to, but controllers at higher levels might lack *knowledge regarding specific financial products* as opposed to controllers at lower levels. At lower levels, controllers can also be expected to be more *creative* than controllers at higher levels, as they need to a further extent extract information from different systems that cannot be assembled automatically. *Flexibility* tends to be the important capability within departments with specific terminology, such as in the IT-department. The controllers within IT need to simplify explanations within their reporting to employees that are not familiar with IT-costs or other terms. On the contrary, they also need to cooperate with IT-employees that do not possess financial knowledge or interest.

Based on work assignments, it can be argued that the controllers lean towards a *Business Partner* and *Market Surveyor* in accordance to *model 6.3.1*. They need to possess knowledge in all business related information and not just internal accounting data. However, the other two roles as *Score Keeper* and *Change Agent* should not be excluded. It has been found that internal accounting information composes a basic part in their work with analysis as a *Score Keeper*. The longer experience within the organisation, the more likely the controller is to work with strategic issues as a *Change Agent*. However, as the controllers need to possess knowledge from all business related information assembled from a wide range of sources the *Change Agent* and *Score Keeper* are not as suitable as *Market Surveyor* and *Business Partner*. As the controllers are situated within their respective controller groups, the *Business partner* remains the most relevant role.

Indicated in *model 6.3.2*, the controller can be seen as an *Analyst* and *Coach*. The controllers need to handle all business related information in order to create a base for decision-making.
for local or higher managers. It has been found that their work assignments are related to conduct an analysis that needs to be shared and that they would like to spend more time on this. The Accountant is less related to the controllers’ role in this case study, as being capable of analysing internal accounting information is a mere base. The Pedagogue is still more relevant for the controller role than the Accountant as the controllers need to share internal accounting information, but still as part of all business related information. This makes the role as a Coach more suitable than a Pedagogue for the controller within its work processes with handling information. However, the controller at the central business department does not need to possess the role as a Coach to the same extent as the others. Therefore, the controller at this level should be seen as an Analyst. Sharing information is an important task in terms of reporting to highest management, but not for educational purposes.

Based on model 6.3.1 and 6.3.2 in summary, the controller can be seen as a Specialist. Even if the controllers possess a great general understanding of the organisation based on the interviews, the controllers can still not be regarded as a Generalist. They operate in a decentralised and large organisation and therefore they need to specialise in their respective department. The majority of their work assignments are composed of analysing and educate other employees in all business related information from their respective departments.

Through the conducted interviews, the controllers imply they need to assemble information from large databases in order to analyse information. This contributes to that assembling information is a time-consuming process and affects the controllers’ role as an Analyst. They would rather spend time on advanced analysis and therefore they state that assembling information could be more time efficient. The controllers also argue that reporting information as part of handling information can be time-consuming if not managed correctly and that reporting does not have any intrinsic value. Thus, reporting could be more automated, coordinated and slimmed down. We have noticed a problem in report relations at regional level, where the controllers tend to have duplicated work assignments as lack of coordination between the different regional departments. The Sweden organisation has been created for the purpose to coordinate horizontal communication between the regional departments and facilitates for vertical communication up towards the central business department.
As such, if the department controller can be coordinated and send reports directly to higher management without having to go through local managers, controllers can maintain their loyalty towards the entire organisation and also be more independent within their reporting. Our analysis indicates that the individual controller with emotional attachment towards local managers can still monitor decentralised departments objectively with strong loyalty in report relations both to towards higher management and local department manager.
7. Conclusions

The overreaching aim of this thesis has been to provide an in-depth understanding of the controller role in a decentralised organisation with complex financial products. It has also been to generate an understanding of how controllers perceive that their role is affected by their work with handling information and by their report relations. Drawing upon this, the three principal questions were asked:

(1) What role does the controller have in a Swedish universal bank based on work assignments?

It can be argued that the controllers lean towards Business Partner and Market Surveyor as they generally handle all type of business related information. The other two roles as a Score Keeper and Change Agent should not be excluded. As controllers work with complex financial products, working with internal accounting data as a Score Keeper should be seen as a basic part in working with all business related information. In contrast to studies conducted of the controller role in other contexts such as manufacturing, controllers working with financial products do not follow a physical product. Connecting to our research problem, as the controller needs to possess internal accounting knowledge as a base in order to understand the product, the Accounting Controller can therefore be seen as part of being a Business Controller, as opposed to previous research suggesting the controller role to be clearly divided between these two.

What has also been in found in this study in contrast to literature is the controller’s tendency to work with strategic issues with longer experience in the organisation. As the controllers in this study work with all business related information, the Business Partner becomes more relevant as the controllers need to affect thinking in the organisation. The Change Agent is in the model 6.3.1 of Nilsson and Olve (2013) only working with internal accounting data and therefore it becomes difficult to apply the Change Agent role specifically in this context. Instead, the Change Agent’s work assignments should be part of the role as a Business Partner as setting strategic objectives in the studied organisation are based on all business related information.

Based on the above discussion, the controller role based on work processes with information
handling can be seen as an Analyst and Coach. As information increases within the organisation and the type information becomes more varied than exclusively internal accounting information, the lower boxes as Accountant and Pedagogue become less relevant.

What has not been highlighted in literature is that a controller can be seen as a Specialist within a large decentralised organisation with complex financial products. As the controllers’ work assignments generally include specific terminology in their respective departments, they need to be Specialists in their areas. As they are specialists with deep knowledge in their respective departments, they also need to educate other employees outside of their departments of the organisation.

(2) What are the eventual differences in the controller role depending on department in the organisation?

As implied in our research problem, this study confirms that in decentralised organisations there might arise different expectations towards controllers depending on department. What has been noticed is that the term controller might not be clearly defined from departments located far away from the controller function. Controllers’ capabilities and work assignments differ depending on level of the organisation. Reflecting on our analysis, controllers at a higher level in the organisation tend to lean towards the role as an Analyst and less as a Coach compared to other departments. On a higher level, controllers’ main work assignment is to instead assemble internal accounting information from lower levels and report to higher management.

The controller on a higher level also possesses a more overview understanding of the organisation in regards of regulations that need to be adapted to. On the contrary, controllers working closer to the financial products can be expected to be more creative than controllers on a higher level. While creativity is an important capability within these departments, flexibility tends to be the important capability in departments with specific or advanced terminology such as the IT-department.

(3) How do the controllers perceive that their role is affected by their work with handling information and by their report relations?
Controllers imply they need to allocate time to assemble information from large databases in order to analyse information. This is in contrast to previous research stated in the research problem, stating that more automated work assignments due to technological development should increase the opportunity for controllers to dedicate more time on analysis. Assembling information is still a time-consuming process that inhibits the controllers’ role as an Analyst since they want to spend more time on work assignments connected to this role. Dedicating a large amount of time on assembling information has not been found in the theoretical models used to describe the controller’s work assignments and work processes with handling information.

As information flow increases it has been noticed that reporting information as part of handling information could be more automated, coordinated and slimmed down. In a decentralised organisation, controllers imply that lack of coordination between departments increases the risk of duplicate work assignments and inefficient communication. Controllers also perceive that different role expectations arise with multiple report relations. This affects controllers as their responsibility to report in the organisation increases and therefore priorities need to be made. Contrary to theory, close adherence towards the local managers do not affect the controller’s objective reporting to higher management. Reflecting on the analysis, reporting is not required to go through the local managers or business unit controller prior to reporting to corporate controller and therefore the controller in different departments can be viewed as more independent within their reporting relations than what is described by literature.

Reflecting on the conclusion, this thesis has provided an in-depth understanding of the controller role in a decentralised organisation working with complex financial products. Drawing upon this, the thesis has fulfilled its purpose and research questions have been answered. It can be argued that the result of this thesis could mainly be adapted to large decentralised organisations working with similar products and multiple departments.
8. Discussion

8.1 Future research

This thesis has generated a valuable understanding of the phenomena controller role in a Swedish universal bank from the controllers’ own perspective. During the process of studying the controller role, we have encountered interesting questions, which we believe could be relevant to discuss in a future research. First, a comparative study of the controller role could be conducted between the four different universal banks of Sweden in order to get an increased general understanding of the role in this context. We would suggest that this would be conducted by studying a specific work process within the controller role in order to create a suitable limitation. Second, through our interviews, we have noticed that the controller role can differ compared to other sectors. Therefore, it could be suitable to conduct a comparative study between firms within the bank sector and another sector, such as manufacturing.
9. References

9.1 Articles


Spillan, J. E., M, Mino., & Rowles, M. S. (2002). ”Sharing Organizational Messages Through Effective Lateral Communication”, Qualitative research reports in communication, (3), 96-104.

Sörling, S. (2002). ”Construction of the academic discipline ekonomistyrning”, (Doctor Thesis), Royal Institute of Technology, Department of Industrial Economics and Management.


9.2 Books


9.3 Webpages


Appendix

Interview guide

The interview questions for our research are shown below. The interview questions were conducted in Swedish but translated into English meticulously in order not to affect the questions’ signification. The 33 questions have been structured in accordance to the controllers’ role based on work assignments, handling information and report relations. As the interviews were semi-structured, it can be argued all questions have not been formulated in the exact order or how they are expressively written. Instead, the interview guide has functioned as a structure in order not to exclude essential information.

General information
1. Name/gender

2. Age

3. Education, Year of graduation

4. Title

5. Years in the position

6. Describe where you are in the organisation. How long have you been employed in the organisation? How long is your experience as a controller? Where have you operated earlier in the organisation?

Role information
7. Describe your role as a controller in the organisation. Where do you see yourself fit in in the organisation? Which division or department do you usually work in or with? Which employees do you work with? Who is your closest manager?

8. Do you consider that the controller role is clearly defined in the organisation? Is the controller regarded as a key person? How? As a support role, strategist or other?

9. What would you consider to be the most important capabilities to succeed in your role as controller? Why?

10. In what area do you spend most of your working time? a) Financial control and
11. According to literature research, the controller role can be divided between 4 different main roles. These roles imply (...). Which one of these would you identify yourself with more than the others? Why? Do you teach others to handle information? Do you spend a lot of time out in the organisation in relation to analysing independently? How do you communicate with the recipient of the information?

12. Are there situations where you experience that you do not have the possibility to affect something that you are responsible for in your role? Can you be more specific?

13. Do you experience any difference in the perception of your role between your closest co-workers’ experience and higher management? Do they require different things from you that can be difficult to combine simultaneously? Can this create stress?

14. Has your role within this firm changed since you started? How has the role changed?

15. Based on your previous experiences as a controller, what would you point out to be the difference with your current role within this firm?

The controller’s work assignments

16. Describe your current work assignments. Which work assignments do you spend most time work with? Are they dynamic or standardised? Can you be more specific?

17. What do you consider to be the most important work assignments for the controller? Eg. a) Controlling financial information b) Act business partner towards department manager c) Extract basis for decision making? d) Manage business, operational or organisational development? f) Anything else?

18. Is there anything within your work assignments that you consider irrelevant that you put a significant amount of time to? Does this take too much time from you that can be done differently?

19. Are there work assignments that should be included in your current role? Is there anything you would like to dedicate more time to?

Information handling

20. What type of information do you use in your daily work? Financial, non-financial or other data? Has there been any change in handling this information?

21. How is your time distributed between the work assignments: a) gathering information
b) interpreting and analysing information c) sharing information d) anything else?

22. What would you consider to be the most important work assignment for you to add value to the organisation? *Why?*

23. Do you have the opportunity to analyse in the way you prefer on already existing data without having to rework it?

24. What do you consider are the most common consequences as a result of poorly handled work with information, analysis and decision making? Eg. a) Increased costs as a result of poor decision making b) Slow decision making processes c) Difficulty in making decision because of lack of access to relevant data?

25. What improvement would you suggest to be necessary within information handling? *In what way? Can you be more specific?*

**Report relations**

26. Who do you mainly report to? *How? Local manager or higher management? Directly or indirectly?*

27. How do you transfer information to divisions in the organisation? *Is this done directly or indirectly?*

28. Do you feel a stronger adherence to the local manager or to the higher management such as board of directors or CEO?

29. In terms of sharing information between units and co-workers, is there anything that you consider could be improved?

30. Would you claim there are opportunities for learning and knowledge exchange between units or are there difficulties to cooperate?

31. Do you experience that you can affect decision making in the organisation? *Does the information that you extract and report lead to decision-making?*

**Future role**

32. How do you see the future role as a controller within the organisation? *Different or similar? Why?*

**Final Question**

33. Do you have any questions? *Anything you would like to add?*