

# Realizing full speed after organizational change projects: Impact of restructuring activities on the motivation of high potentials

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## Abstract

*The COVID-19 pandemic<sup>10</sup> and also digitalisation and international competition have also pushed companies to become more future-proof and the ability to restructure is of considerable relevance for organisational resilience<sup>30</sup>. High potential employees become key players in the implementation of restructuring activities as they have a wide horizon in the company and can take the responsibility<sup>21</sup>. This study used qualitative research to explore the impact of restructuring activities on the motivation of high potentials. The content was analysed according to Mayring's qualitative content analysis<sup>22</sup>.*

*The factors of participation in the restructuring process and an open as well as transparent communication have the strongest influence on the motivation of high potentials during the restructuring phase. Career development and compensation are motivators for high potentials to perform strongly further for a degree of autonomy in a function and the meaningfulness of tasks are relevant aspects that can drive employee motivation. Subsequent research can examine the significance of the motivating factors in more detail for example, at what point does salary become less important for high potentials.*

**Keywords:** Restructuring, High Potentials, Impact, Motivation, Covid-19.

## Introduction

Uncertainties, challenges, crises and complexity represent factors that regularly affect companies. In order to successfully steer a company through this storm of influences, transformations, restructurings and reorganisations are necessary. The need for realignment is thus part of every company's past, present and future. A rather recent need for restructuring concerns the influence of the global COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic has confronted numerous companies with the fact that their business models no longer work. Before the pandemic, digitalisation and globalisation comprised important external factors to lead companies to change their organisation for tackle the challenges. The disruption of technologies and markets requires management to possess

the foresight to identify future impacts and take action accordingly and in many cases, this is accomplished through a restructuring project<sup>54</sup>.

The achievement of corporate goals is largely determined by employees. Meanwhile, employee drive is described and defined by their motivation. A company with highly motivated employees will be able to achieve its goals better, faster and more efficiently than a company without motivated employees. Especially just after a crisis, motivated employees are crucial in order to pick up speed quickly and to once again be successful in international competition<sup>15</sup>.

Companies have long been competing in more than just sales. In fact, it is through staff in particular that companies try to appear attractive in order to win over the best employees. All areas of an organisation require people who can bring added value to the company through special creativity, efficiency and problem-solving approaches. However, simply attracting these employees is not enough; they must also be retained and promoted so that they can positively contribute to the organisation in the future<sup>49</sup>.

Within a workforce, certain employees possess a notably high willingness to perform and a high future potential. They are identified as talents or high potentials. These employees are of particularly high value to a company and perform key functions for corporate success. It is precisely this group of people that is normally characterised by a high level of motivation. Additionally, this group's motivation can be further influenced by restructuring<sup>43</sup>.

A company's success after restructuring is based on following steps: First, one needs an effective restructuring concept that is tailored to the needs of both the company and the market. Second, one needs highly motivated employees who can help the company quickly get back on track and stay there. Third, highly motivated high potentials are needed to take on new or expanded tasks, especially following a crisis.

Restructuring can mean significant changes for a company. Furthermore, this can influence strategic orientation, product portfolio, locations and employees as well. As such, this study seeks to examine how different degrees of restructuring influence the employee motivation of high potentials. In detail, this study will investigate which factors influence employee motivation in a restructuring process.

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## Theoretical Foundation

### Understanding of organisation

**Organisation and organisational science:** There remains no uniform, specific definition of organisational science<sup>67</sup>. In a broader sense, organisational science refers to the collection of theories, models and procedures to help organisations achieve an overarching goal. To this end, organisations deal with the arrangement of certain factors in a system in order to guarantee the long-term achievement of corporate goals<sup>7</sup>.

The content of organisational science has been researched from various different disciplines in the past. Specifically, researchers from the fields of economics, psychology and sociology have used experiments to explore the construct of organisation and to derive theories from it. In fact, it is from this fact that the field of organisational science was later summarised and derived<sup>7</sup>.

Classical organisational science distinguishes between the following systems: First, there is organisational structure. This structures a company according to departments and positions. The individual job represents the smallest organisational unit. The best-known form of this would be the classic pyramid-shaped hierarchy<sup>31</sup>. The second larger system in organisational theory consists of process organisation. The focus here lies more on the work processes and less on the arrangement of the individual jobs. Furthermore, the work processes are to be viewed from different perspectives. These perspectives can be evaluated spatially, temporally, factually and in terms of personnel. The objective of process organisation is to achieve a smooth flow of processes<sup>24</sup>.

**Organisational psychology:** Early records and documentation indicate that organisational structures existed in ancient and medieval times to manage castles and regulate administrative apparatus. This term appeared in an entrepreneurial context in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Max Weber was one of the first to research and publish in the field of organisational theory. As such, he is considered the founder of organisational theory. He developed the bureaucracy approach with the goal of bringing order into an organisation and was one of the first to attempt to describe people's behaviour. To this end, Weber defined three types of rule that can be exercised: traditional, charismatic and legal rule. In all types, however, the rulers represent the apparatus for enforcing power<sup>35</sup>.

One of the best-known theories in the field of organisational psychology was set by American engineer Frederik Winslow Taylor<sup>65</sup> with his work 'The Principles of Scientific Management'. It is from this work that the theory of Taylorism was derived which describes and affirms the procedure of a process-controlled workflow. Taylor explored this theory during the transition from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the

20<sup>th</sup> century, inspired by the shift from traditional crafts to the first industrial factories<sup>62</sup>.

Frederik Winslow Taylor<sup>65</sup> is considered one of the pioneers in using scientific methods to determine an optimum operational process. The Taylorist approach assumes precise control and planning of production. Afterwards, all work processes become technically controllable and calculable<sup>34</sup>. The precondition for this concerns the separation of operational activities and management functions. This approach subsequently made it possible to generate significantly higher production output. Mass production in particular benefited the most from this process. Taylor attributes the gain in efficiency to the simplification of activities<sup>65</sup>.

The Taylorism is criticised for treating employees purely in terms of performance. Physical and mental strains are the results<sup>29</sup>. Another point of criticism is the lack of scientific basis for this theory<sup>6</sup>. A broad application to different companies is also not given<sup>26</sup>.

The next milestone in organisational psychology was set by psychologists Elton Mayo, William John Dickson and Fritz Roethlisberger. The basis for this movement derived from an experiment conducted at the Hawthorne factories of the Western Electric Company between 1924 and 1933<sup>14</sup>. The experiment suggested that a change in the physical environment such as improved lighting conditions, had no effect on employee productivity; rather, productivity was influenced by management attention. The results and the derived conclusion became known as the Hawthorne Effect<sup>60</sup>. The goal of this movement focussed on a conflict-free working environment<sup>66</sup>. As such, the approach focussed on the social relations within an organisation<sup>61</sup>.

However, the human relations approach is also criticised from today's perspective. This is due to the fact that Elton Mayo was influenced by his previous studies in the field and the strong influence of John Davison Rockefeller who co-financed the experiment, but was more eager to capture the ever-increasing power of the trade unions at the time<sup>14</sup>.

**Organisational development:** As a function of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the requirements of organisations have been shaped by ever-increasing market demands and increased global competition as well as the accompanying adaptation and response by companies<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, an increasingly short-cycle product development process and ever-increasing leaps in technology have brought about greater complexity as well, such as in how the use of external personnel is increasing across all industries<sup>51</sup>. Organisations thus need to ensure that these external factors are well integrated into their operations and can be quickly replaced when needed. To make matters worse, however, the demands placed on organisations are becoming increasingly characterised by a demand for ever-leaner corporate structures. This approach

has been strongly established in business practice since 1980 and is summarised under the term ‘lean management’<sup>63</sup>.

The field of organisational science today provides the overarching framework for the special field of restructuring or reorganisation. The first organisational research that led to restructuring in corporate processes dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Even though the science had not yet been established as a closed discipline, there were still people who investigated subjects of today’s organisational development from different faculties and established theories about them<sup>27</sup>.

In the field of organisational development, the treatment of people in an organisation plays a special role. The first documented research and derivation of related concepts were discovered and published in the 1950s by the forefather of this field, Kurt Lewin<sup>42</sup>. The four most famous models brought about by this research include field theory, action research, group dynamics and the three-phase model<sup>33</sup>.

Field theory, one of Lewin's most significant works, was constructed on the basis of design theory. In it, Lewin<sup>42</sup> employed a mathematical approach to derive human behaviour<sup>13</sup>, allowing him to describe the actions of individuals in certain fields, or habitats. The sections in the figure below represent these habitats. Each habitat is characterised by the physical environment as well as by the tasks to be performed. A person traverses a habitat to achieve a goal. The behaviour of person in a habitat is guided by their valence which refers to the prompting character<sup>42</sup>.

Within action theory, meanwhile, Kurt Lewin<sup>42</sup> criticised the divergence between theory and research. Specifically,

Lewin claimed that research was too far removed from the actual problems relevant to practice. Lewin attached special importance to science when it came to solving practice-relevant problems. As such, he called for a stronger involvement of practice within the development of scientific theory<sup>1</sup>.

As mentioned earlier, the origin of theories related to group dynamics can also be traced back to Kurt Lewin<sup>42</sup>. In this context, the term ‘group dynamics’ describes a scheme that explains the processes of people within a group. The field of research that deals with the study of these group dynamic processes is also called ‘theories of group dynamics’. To explain, if one examines individuals individually, they possess certain characteristics. The sum of the individuals’ characteristics, however, does not result in the characteristics of the group. The reason for this lies in processes that take place within a group. As a result, the behaviour of individual persons cannot be equated with the behaviour of a group consisting of these persons<sup>52</sup>.

Finally, Lewin’s<sup>42</sup> three-step model is considered one of the first approaches to the process of change in organisations. In it, Lewin divides this process into three phases: The first phase is called unfreezing, which Lewin describes as the preparation phase. Here, the organisation and the employees are prepared for the change and the leaders have to motivate their employees. To this end, the most important thing is to communicate regularly and authentically. Another important success factor concerns the involvement of employees who are influenced by the change. If communication with employees takes place at an early stage and they are involved in the discussion and in finding solutions, they will be highly motivated.

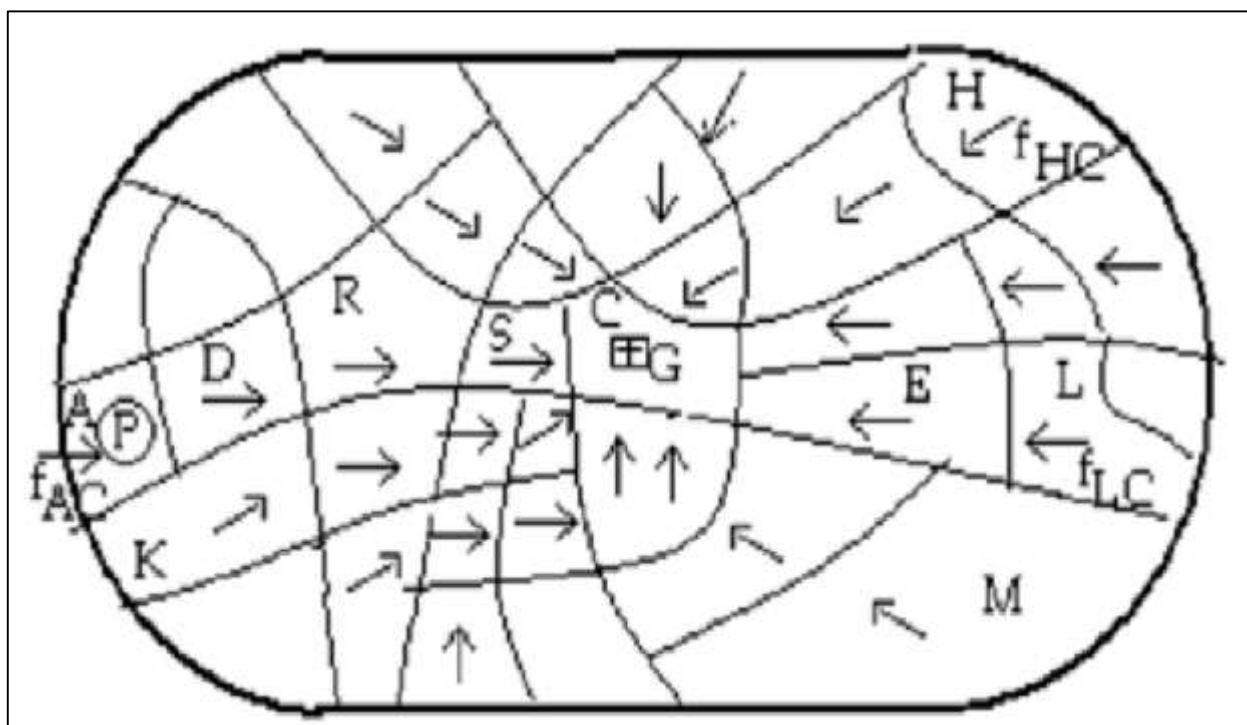


Figure 1: Lewin’s field theory<sup>20</sup>

To this end, the current situation should be analysed in order to prepare for the change process in the best way possible and the target state should be defined<sup>12</sup>.

The second phase is called moving, or change. In this phase, the actual change process is implemented and the new target state is brought about. During this phase, new processes, structures, or guidelines are introduced. To this end, employees and managers are taken by the hand and introduced to the target state with the aid of training. People who oppose the change must be convinced and then successfully integrated into the process<sup>16</sup>.

The third phase is called re-freezing. In this phase, once the change process has been achieved, it must now be integrated and consolidated into the standard work processes. The goal is to establish this target state as a new standard and this must be manifested in both the work processes and in the employees' awareness. Numerous change processes fail in this phase, as employees often resort to old systems or processes because they are more familiar with them<sup>16</sup>.

The three-phase model represents a simple method for describing and assessing behaviour in a change process. As a result, this method enables better planning of the change process. Furthermore, the model enables better preparation for disruptive factors and obstacles in the change process. As such, this model is suitable for change projects with high degrees of change. Figure 2 illustrates the three phases.

**Change management:** Change management describes a process that continuously deals with realignment of the

organisation. The scope of this realignment includes the organisation's goal as well as its structures and resources<sup>50</sup>. Some general influencing factors are summarised under the acronym VUCA, standing for 'volatility', 'uncertainty', 'complexity' and 'ambiguity'<sup>57</sup>.

In order for companies to remain successful, the leadership must be able to act and adapt to changing circumstances. To this end, the people in an organisation play a key role, as new processes, technologies, or tasks cannot lead to success without the support of the people who implement and use them. In this context, change management focusses on the transformation of change into successful results.

In this process, the organisation also has a special role to play. On the one hand, it must adapt itself to remain efficient and effective and on the other hand, it must support and drive all other areas in order to enact the change<sup>58</sup>.

There remains no uniform definition of change management in the literature. Rather, change management can be understood as a collective term that summarises different approaches, procedures and models such as Lewin's three-step model. In practice, change management can affect the adaptation of processes, strategies, structures, or the corporate culture. Furthermore, change management is responsible for aligning the goal, process and tasks in an organisation so that an organisation can continue to act. To this end, the changes to structure and resources play a particularly important role and are critical for the success of the change<sup>50</sup>.

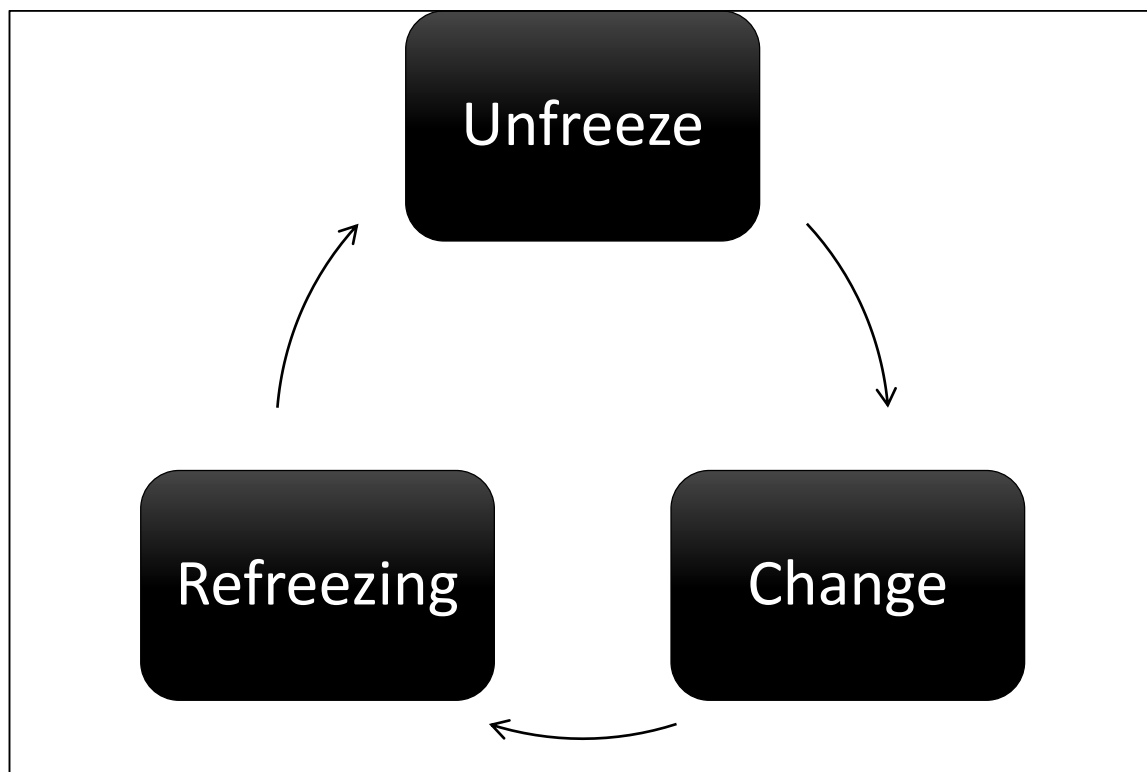


Figure 2: Lewin's Unfreeze-Change-Refreezing model

Beyond this, change management also plays a special role regarding changes that particularly influence employees. For instance, changes are usually perceived differently by employees. On the one hand, there are employees who reject change and on other hand, there are employees who embrace change gladly. Approaches in change management seek to sway rejecting employees into embracing the change project. This is accomplished by involving employees in the change process and thus removing obstacles and concerns. As for the second special group of employees—those who embrace change—although this characteristic is positive, there remains a danger that risks and dangers are ignored by this group of employees. Successful change management thus strives to sensitise employees to risks while maintaining motivation<sup>39</sup>

Organisational change is not possible without change from the people in an organisation. In fact, change processes usually fail because they are not accepted by the employees. This is due to the fact that people are creatures of habit and do not want to leave their comfort zone. Therefore, the task of change management is to analyse these obstacles and to

apply countermeasures to break them down<sup>39</sup>. To this end, behavioural research models are often employed.

Another model that deals with the successful implementation of change processes would be the eight-step model developed by Kotter<sup>38</sup>. The background for Kotter's model concerned the question of why transformation processes fail. To explore this, Kotter<sup>38</sup> published an article in the Harvard Business Review in which he dealt with the factors behind failure in transformation processes. In addition, this article also presented his model for overcoming these obstacles<sup>38</sup> illustrated in figure 3.

The first approaches and theories published under the term 'change management' were recorded as early as the 1960s. During this time, parallels were also discovered between grief research and job loss<sup>69</sup>. Advancement in the field has been strong since then, as well as necessary, particularly for identifying and managing the drivers of success and failure in change management projects. In fact, research on the topic has revealed that 73% of organisational change processes fail<sup>18</sup>, further illustrating the need for more research in this field.

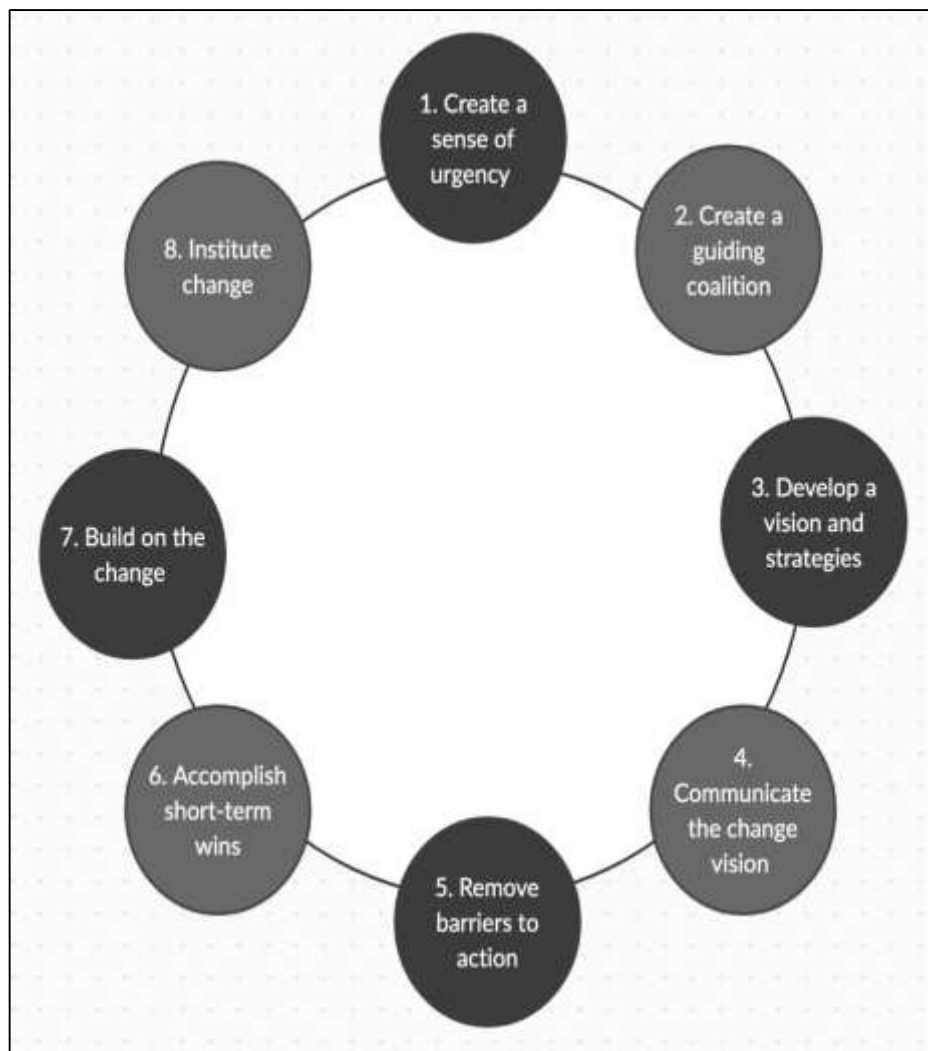


Figure 3: Kotter's eight-step model<sup>44</sup>

**Restructuring:** The term ‘restructuring’ is understood as changes to structures, systems and processes with the goal of improving the company’s efficiency. Restructuring differs from a normal continuous improvement process in that it requires a more intensive examination of the company’s problems. In order to carry out such a restructuring programme, this process is organised in the form of a project. Additionally, restructuring programmes are understood as change management projects due to their considerable influence on a company. Further goals of restructuring procedures can include restoration, improvements to the organisation’s efficiency, or securing continuance<sup>9</sup>.

In science, the term ‘restructuring’ is often equated with the previously mentioned terms of ‘change management’ or ‘organisational development’. Furthermore, the term ‘restructuring’ is also alternatively referred to as ‘organisation design’, ‘rightsizing’, ‘business transformation’ and ‘downsizing’. Additionally, models, procedures and theories from the fields of organisational development and change management are employed in restructuring<sup>40</sup>.

In practice, the conscious use of restructuring as a concept and as an instrument has been part of many companies since the early 1980s<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, the importance of restructuring has continuously increased as companies face new challenges. Global competition and disruption through digitalisation, for instance, require many companies to adapt regularly and more rapidly to new environments. However, despite the fact that the term is broad in content, it is associated with negative impacts when applied by employees of an organisation<sup>36</sup>. For instance, the term ‘restructuring’ is often used when talking about major job cuts.

In terms of content, restructuring can be divided into four major areas: strategic, structural, performance and financial restructuring. In many cases, more than one area is addressed during a restructuring process, as these areas also influence each other<sup>36</sup>. For example, in many cases, financial and organisational restructuring are often related. As another example, in order to make savings on the financial side, the staff may need to be reduced on the organisational side.

Strategic restructuring focusses on improving the company’s competitiveness. During this restructuring process, the market and competitors are analysed. Different strategies are accordingly developed and evaluated within a business plan. Review and adjustment of the current corporate strategy also represents part of this process<sup>37</sup>.

Meanwhile, structural restructuring concerns operational restructuring. In this approach, the structures of the organisation are adapted. This is usually linked to an adjustment of staffing levels. Such realignment of staff can be based on new technology or leaner processes. Furthermore, this approach also involves examining the

extent to which digitalisation and automation can support a more efficient organisation<sup>36</sup>.

Like structural restructuring, performance-based restructuring seeks to improve the earnings situation. The measures taken are aimed at two areas: First, an attempt is made to increase turnover. To this end, measures aimed at market profitability are also defined. Second, measures are taken that directly optimise the costs associated with the production of the service, including both personnel and material costs<sup>11</sup>.

The final approach consists of financial restructuring, which holds a special position. While this approach is no more important than the others, financial crises can quickly bring down an organisation. Therefore, the implemented procedures must be particularly effective and efficient. The objective is to ensure the company’s financial solvency<sup>25</sup>.

The restructuring measures can be divided even further into radical and incremental restructuring. Depending on how serious a crisis or threat to a company can be, the choice of measures is made for instruments that require a longer-term application or for measures that must bring about improvement in the short term<sup>17</sup>.

**High potentials:** The term ‘high potentials’ describes a group of people in an organisation who possess a particularly high value for the company due to their characteristics, skills and competences. Additionally, among their peer group, high potentials stand out through their particularly high level of performance. High potentials are also driven by ambition and focus heavily on success in their company. To achieve a goal, they are willing to go the extra mile, even at the cost of private sacrifices. Rather than being beholden to a classical closing time, in order to solve a problem or achieve a goal, they also use times outside of normal working hours, such as weekends or late evenings. Beyond this, while excessive ambition can often harm people physically and mentally, high potentials possess the ability to channel this ambition effectively in order to achieve their overall goal<sup>59</sup>.

High potentials are further characterised by the fact that they accept challenges and often leave their comfort zone to discover unknown areas and try other way of problem solving. They are very creative when it comes to problem solving and innovation in order to advance in their development. In addition to high motivation, flexibility and resilience, high potentials are also characterised by the fact that they represent and embody corporate values and the corporate culture in the best way possible. Yet another important factor that distinguishes high potentials concerns their high growth potential. They can take on different functions in an organisation and contribute greatly to the company’s success. Compared to other employees, high potentials also possess a faster and more effective way of working<sup>59</sup>. High potentials are also usually rather perceptive regarding the current situation in a company.

The factors described above form the essential characteristics of high potentials. Employees who are not labelled as high potentials may also possess these characteristics, of course, but they are usually not as strongly represented as in high potentials<sup>19</sup>. In order for employees to qualify as such, they must make a special value contribution such as outstanding sales performance for the organisation. High potentials are important for a company because they are responsible for the achievement of important company goals. Quantifiable results play a role in this. A strong track record can vary from position to position. A project manager, for instance, can be measured by the number of successful project completions. In addition to a strong track record, a future high potential candidates must also demonstrate credibility.

To this end, they must demonstrate competence and build trusting relationships with other employees in order to influence stakeholders. A key factor behind why high potentials are so important is that they can motivate other employees to contribute to achieving the company's goals. Without the involvement of the employees, goal achievement remains impossible. A high potential, however, can gain the trust of other employees and managers such as by using their competence to solve problems for the organisation, thus creating added value for the company, employees and managers<sup>59</sup>.

For candidates to identify as high potentials, they must first master the knowledge necessary to perform the position. With each promotion, their expertise must also be expanded and sharpened. Furthermore, there are also issues such as managing staff which can include teams of various sizes. Each new element in a position must be trained by the high potential with expertise. High potentials are also characterised by their ability to reproduce skills and procedures. In addition to the motivation to learn new fields, high potentials often possess the ability to learn catalytically. More specifically, one can say that high potentials possess the ability to examine their environment for new ideas. They are then able to extract these ideas and transform them to suit their own needs in such a way that they can take actions that add value to their organisation<sup>59</sup>.

Although the high willingness to perform represents one of the essential characteristics of high potentials, another characteristic is even more prominent—namely, their role model function, which is of particular value to companies. This function keeps potentials on the radar of the potentials. To this end, high potentials must also embody the values and culture of a company like no other. They have to be the people in a company that others want to follow. They must inspire and motivate employees and managers to ensure the achievement of the company's goals<sup>59</sup>.

**Motivation:** Motivation represents a highly important topic from a psychological perspective, as it plays a role in different areas of the business environment. Motivation

includes all motives that lead an individual to perform a certain action. Motives themselves can be understood as the basic characteristics of a person. Through motivation, employees can be induced to achieve goals<sup>41</sup>.

Reasons or motives are understood as the drive to perform an action. From a psychological perspective, it is interesting to understand what factors can affect motivation and how they can be influenced. In research, the transformation of motives into real actions is called volition<sup>32</sup>.

Psychology has been studying the field of motivation since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The theories of motivation that have developed as a result can be divided into three different classes: First, there are content theories. These theories focus on the motivational content and examine the reasons that motivate people. The second class of theories, context theories, focus on the connection between organisational factors and employees' behaviour, thereby establishing a cause-effect relationship. The third group comprises process theories. These theories explain how and why people act in a certain way in certain situations.

Psychologists Herzberg and Maslow shaped the first steps of motivation research in the field of content theories<sup>68</sup>. Maslow<sup>45</sup> in particular set a milestone in motivational research and theory with his concept of the pyramid of needs. This pyramid of needs groups different needs and places them in order. According to Maslow's<sup>45</sup> theory, an individual's motivation is shaped by the satisfaction of differently grouped contents. Only when the needs on the lower level are satisfied, does a person possess the motivation to satisfy the needs on the next level<sup>45</sup>.

Maslow<sup>45</sup> distinguishes between two types of needs: deficit and growth needs. Deficit needs include physiological, safety and social needs. As the name implies, a deficit in these needs results in a physical or mental deficiency on the part of the individual. Examples of such needs include food, a place to live and love and affection.

Growth needs, meanwhile, include individual needs and self-actualisation. This category includes needs of sovereignty and success. Self-actualisation makes the top of the pyramid of needs. From this point on, an individual is motivated to achieve a social optimum<sup>45</sup>.

Psychologist Herzberg studied the topic of work motivation in the mid-90s. He sought to investigate which factors influence employee satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Like Maslow<sup>45</sup>, Herzberg also classified different needs, developing the two-factor theory, which also belongs to the content theories. In his theory, Herzberg distinguishes between motivators and hygiene factors. The term 'motivators' refers to the content of a job, which helps to create job satisfaction. Motivators possess a strong intrinsic origin. The second factor comprises hygiene factors. These are shaped by the work environment and thus possess an

extrinsic character. Hygiene factors do not directly support job satisfaction.

However, they do influence employee dissatisfaction when they are not present. In the absence of motivators, motivation is not promoted, but this does not mean that there is dissatisfaction. For many people, hygiene factors are taken for granted. If these hygiene factors are missing, however, dissatisfaction is initiated. The two-factor theory further states that motivators can become hygiene factors when they are taken for granted and hygiene factors can act as motivators.

The economic psychologist Victor Harold Vroom also dealt with motivation in the context of working life in his research. He developed the expectancy theory to explain why an individual prefers one option over another. Vroom’s theories belong to the process theories and describe how and why people act in certain situations. Vroom’s expectancy theory is based on cognitive processing. The initial situation in the

theory concerns a decision situation with at least two alternatives leading to different actions. Vroom divides the process into three stages: the first includes the individual with his or her options for action. These actions in turn lead to a first-level outcome. This outcome is called an organisational goal. The organisational goals are subsequently linked to individual needs, called individual goals.

The expectancy theory further describes the cognitive process that precedes the decision. An individual decides on a course of action that leads to an organisational goal. The decision-maker then checks the extent to which the organisational goal affects the individual goal. This is repeated for all options for action. Which option an individual chooses, depends on the following factors: First, there is an evaluation of the subjective probability. Here, an individual evaluates how likely it is that the respective organisational goal can be achieved.

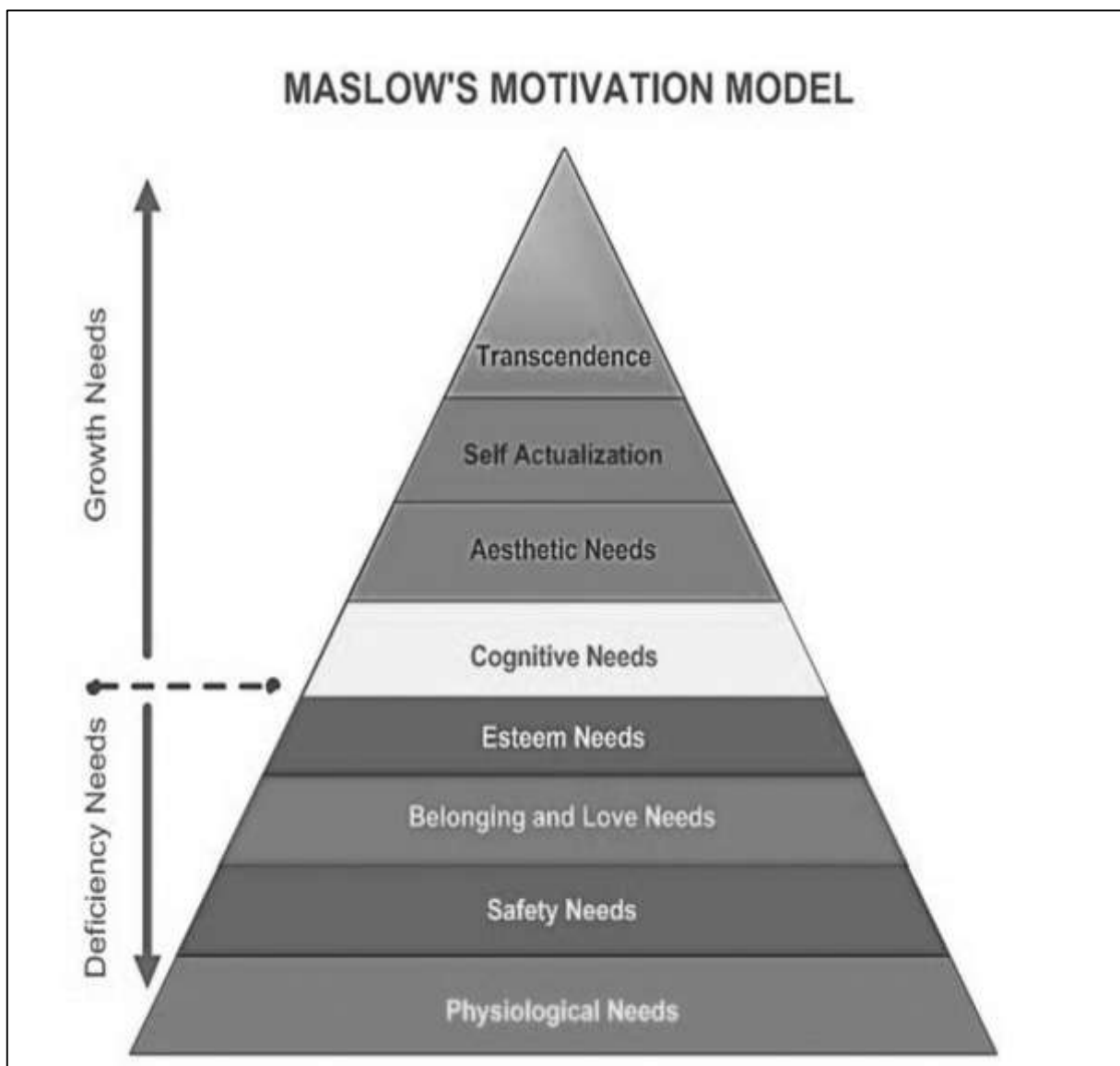


Figure 4: Maslow’s pyramid of needs<sup>48</sup>



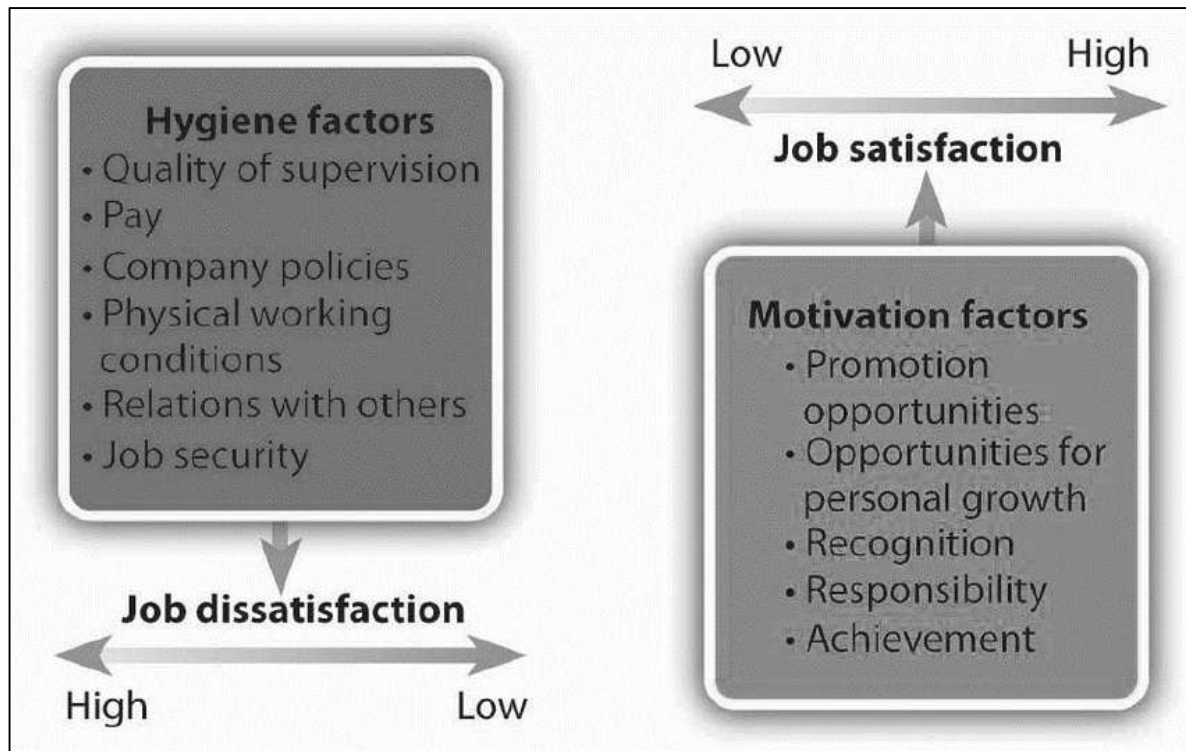


Figure 5: Two-factor theory<sup>3</sup>

The second element is what Vroom terms instrumentality. With this, an individual assesses the extent to which the organisational goal can aid in achieving the individual goal. Finally, it should be noted that each individual evaluates the importance of the individual goal differently. Vroom calls this valence in his theory. By linking these individual elements, the option for action to be chosen can be predicted<sup>53</sup>.

One of the best-known context theories would be the job characteristics model by Hackman and Oldham. The starting point of this theory concerns the question of how a work activity can be designed in such a way that an individual can be motivated intrinsically rather than by extrinsic factors or constraints. This means that the focus resides in the relationship between intrinsic motivation and task design. The model states that the following conditions must be fulfilled for a task to lead to intrinsic motivation: experienced meaningfulness, experienced responsibility and feedback.

Furthermore, in order for experienced meaningfulness to take place, the work should be designed in such a way that multiple characteristics of the employee are addressed. Another factor is that the task should be holistic and not small-scale.

To create the condition of experienced responsibility, the employee's autonomy must be strengthened. For example, this can be achieved by delegating decision-making power. The last factor of feedback can be created if, for example, feedback is provided regarding the achievement of goals. However, feedback on corrections is also useful<sup>2</sup>.

**Assumptions:** This research seeks to examine how restructuring activities influence the motivation of high potentials. On one hand, restructuring is necessary to remain competitive in a challenging environment or to become competitive once again.

On the other hand, employees represent the core element of an organisation and high potentials in particular are crucial for achieving corporate goals and restructuring objectives. Based on the theories and models described above, we present the following assumptions to be supported or rejected by this research.

**Research framework:** The figure 6 illustrates the research framework. From this, it is clear which context is to be investigated—namely, how restructuring activities influence the motivation of high potentials. To this end, this research investigates restructuring as an element of organisational development and motivation as a driving force for employees and for the motivation of high potential employees in particular.

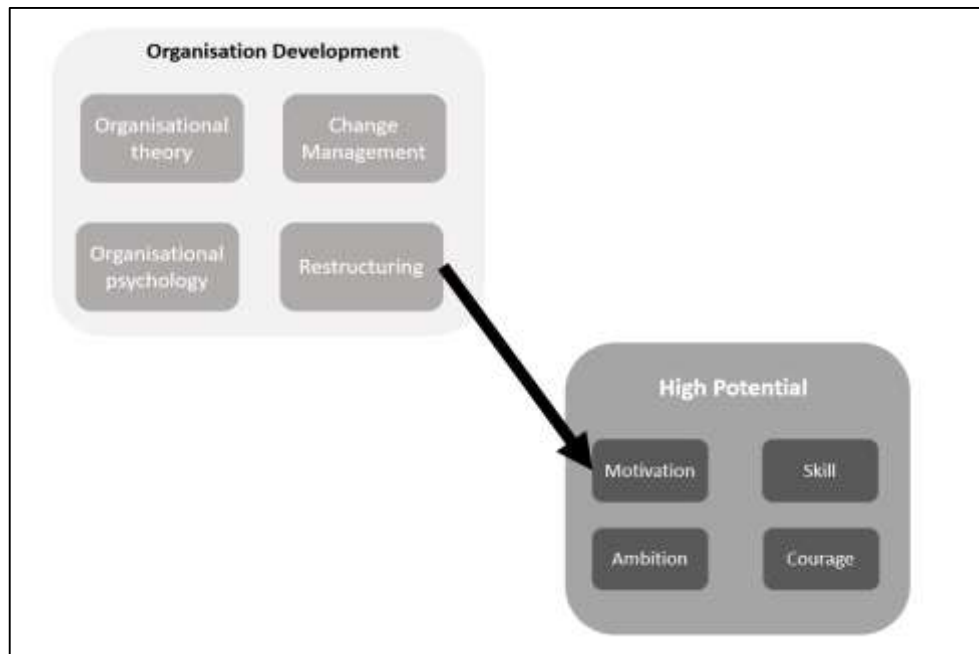
### Choice of Method

**Justification of the research direction:** To answer this research question, a qualitative research approach is employed. This method is best suited for conducting this research for the following reasons:

- It allows a simple application to the research question.
- A perceived impact of the effects can be recorded.
- Qualitative information is recorded and processed rather than just pure numerical material.

**Table 1**  
**Research assumptions**

1.	High potentials are generally strongly motivated by change management projects.
2.	High potentials are the first to join restructuring projects in order to actively influence the company’s future.
3.	Restructuring measures that endanger the careers of high potentials negatively influence their motivation.



**Figure 6: Research framework**

- A deeper understanding and a deeper investigation are possible.
- Hidden key elements can be uncovered.
- With the help of this method, scientific theories can be derived or new areas of research can be uncovered.
- The method is particularly well suited to uncovering multi-layered relationships.
- The qualitative method is suitable for a smaller group of people who need to be studied in greater depth<sup>57</sup>.

In order to gain a deeper understanding regarding the motivational impact of restructuring, we decided to employ the qualitative method. The content generated can be best captured using such a method. Furthermore, the broad field of motivation makes it possible to include knowledge that is not yet known to me. As such, we have chosen this method in order to prepare in the best possible way. Additionally, the connection between the field of restructuring and employee motivation seems to be quite complex and a qualitative method can best help navigate this<sup>56</sup>.

**Explanation of the survey instrument:** A semi-structured interview guide consisting of one closed and one open question is deemed suitable for this research. Due to the current Coronavirus situation, however, the interviews cannot be conducted in person at a physical location. Alternatively, a virtual space was created for the interviews

to take place. For interview partners who did not consent to the recording of the interview, we recorded the interview so as to not forget any information.

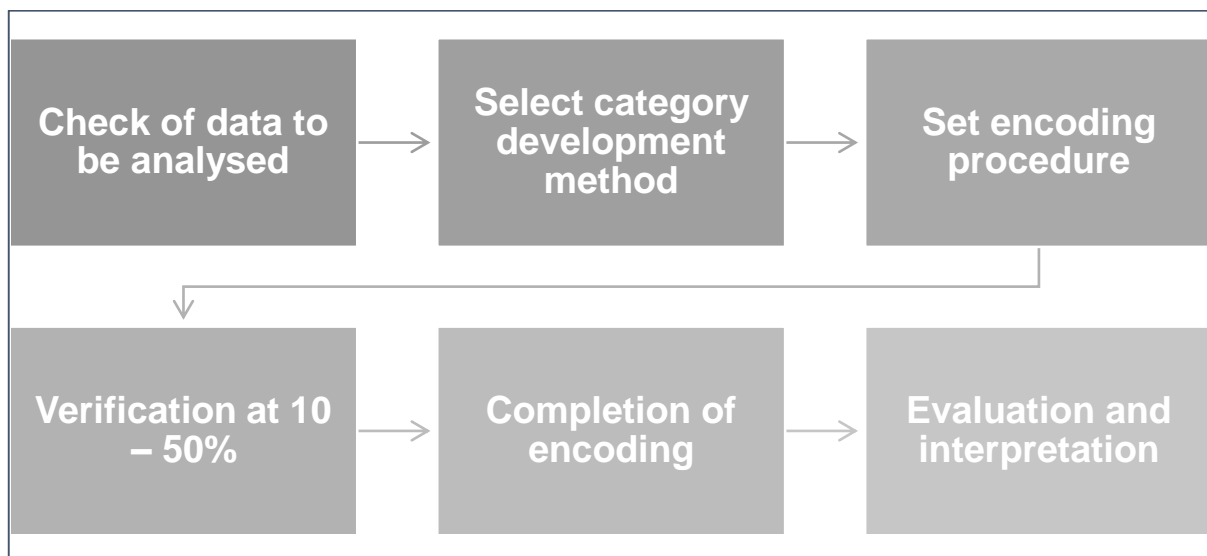
The interviewees consist of people who work in different companies. They range from small owner-managed companies to global corporations. Furthermore, the interviewees also come from different fields such as development, administration, sales and production. The table 2 lists the interview questions.

The questionnaire consists of 12 questions that can be divided into six units. The first two questions are designed to test whether or not the person being interviewed is considered a high potential within his or her company. The second question examines the conditions that enabled the person to become a high potential. Furthermore, this question seeks to ascertain the commonalities of high potentials within a company.

Questions three and four are aimed at motivation. The goal is to ascertain whether a person feels motivated by his or her tasks and from the potential’s perspective, to compile the most relevant factors for influencing motivation. Questions five and six examine whether an interaction exists between job and motivation, as well as which factor exerts the strongest influence.

**Table 2**  
**Interview guide questions**

1.	Are you part of the high potential community in your company? (yes or no)
2.	How were you accepted into this circle? What distinguishes you and other members of this congregation?
3.	Do you feel motivated to complete your tasks? (yes or no)
4.	What are the strongest factors that influence your motivation, both negatively and positively?
5.	Do you find your job itself motivating? (yes or no)
6.	What motivates you most about your job or your company?
7.	Do you feel positive when it comes to change management projects that may also affect you? (yes or no)
8.	What motivates or demotivates you in change projects?
9.	Have you ever been part of a restructuring project, or have you ever assisted in a restructuring project? (yes or no)
10.	How involved were you in the restructuring project and how did the restructuring measures impact you?
11.	Have restructuring measures ever negatively influenced your motivation? (yes or no)
12.	What was the impact and how did it influence your motivation?



**Figure 8: Process for Mayring's<sup>46,47</sup> qualitative content analysis**

Questions seven and eight examine the attitude of high potentials towards change within the company. The following two questions investigate whether there are links between change projects and the motivation of potential. Questions 11 and 12 explore the direct motivational impact of restructuring projects.

**Method of evaluation:** The collected data is evaluated based on qualitative content analysis by Mayring<sup>46</sup>. This method is characterised by a highly structured process. Mayring employed this method to examine interviews within communication science.

Today, this represents one of the best-known and most successful methods employed within qualitative research. Since the method is rule-driven, results can also be reproduced. A disadvantage is that there is restriction in the recording and processing of information. Therefore,

coordination between data collection and data processing is indispensable for efficient use<sup>46</sup>.

**Quality criteria:** Quality criteria guarantee a high quality of the research work, ensuring that subsequent researchers in the field can also use the results. For this work, the quality criteria presented in figure 9 are applied in particular.

Reach represents a criterion that guarantees reproducibility of the results. This means that the investigation will lead to the same results if carried out in the same way by other researchers. This offers the advantage in that the results possess a more general character, allowing theories and models to be derived<sup>47</sup>. This particular investigation is processed in a rather small way and is documented precisely, fulfilling the criterion of transparency. As such, other researchers can retrace the steps at any time<sup>23</sup>. During the examination, all the rules that are described and documented

are followed. Mayring’s qualitative content analysis is conducted following a precise procedure. The processes of categorisation, coding and verification described above are followed<sup>28</sup>.

The documentation of the results and the derivation of interpretations also enable other possible interpretations. This criterion is called ‘inter-subjectivity’ and it ensures that the interpretations are not limited to those made by just one researcher. Through this criterion, the results are also made useful for other researchers<sup>64</sup>.

**Results and Recommendation**

**Composition of the interviewed:** A total of 10 interviews were conducted for this research. The interviews all took place online and an audio transmission was employed. All of the interviewees agree to be recorded. The contents were then transcribed and prepared for analysis. The prospective interviewees were selected according to the following criteria: First, they have already participated in a change process within an organisation and second, according to internal development discussions, they are characterised by high motivation and high potential. The interviewees came from different functional areas, sectors and company sizes. This included people from the functional areas of R and D, administration, SCM and production. The industries are broadly diversified, including production, logistics and consulting. The different company sizes illustrate an effective cross-section of the economy. The table 3 provides an overview of the interview partners.

**Characteristics and formation of high potentials:** The interviewees all comprised high potentials in their companies. There are four main arguments answering the question of how the candidates were included in the circle of the high potential’s community. The strongest argument concerns participation in a programme which qualified the candidates to be included in this circle. The programmes are

usually comprised of different parts. For instance, many companies feature annual interviews to strengthen human resource development. These interviews serve to review performance and potential growth.

Another point that was often repeated in the interviews and which many interviewees viewed similarly, involves the company investing in further development of high potentials. This development is also part of this programme and includes external training or even university education, as well as internal training that occurs, for example, through secondment to a project or to another area.

A second important point regarding what makes one qualified as a high potential concerns the role carried out by the person. To this end, one’s area of responsibility plays a decisive role. Employees who are responsible for life and limb qualify as high potentials through the position itself. The same applies to employees in leadership positions. Especially at C-suite level, the decisions that are made, have a far-reaching impact. Therefore, it is precisely these people who belong to the elite of the company. Another important aspect is that these employees have qualified themselves through previous performance in the company or through experience in other companies.

The next argument summarised from the interviews concerned the performance itself. Employees who are considered high potentials demonstrate a high level of performance for the company and they qualify for these titles through above-average performance. Especially in areas where performance can be easily measured, such as in production and sales, employees with high-performance potential have the opportunity to become high potentials. This argument is the strongest, as all candidates responded to this in some fashion. Furthermore, performance can also be increased and developed through appropriate programmes.

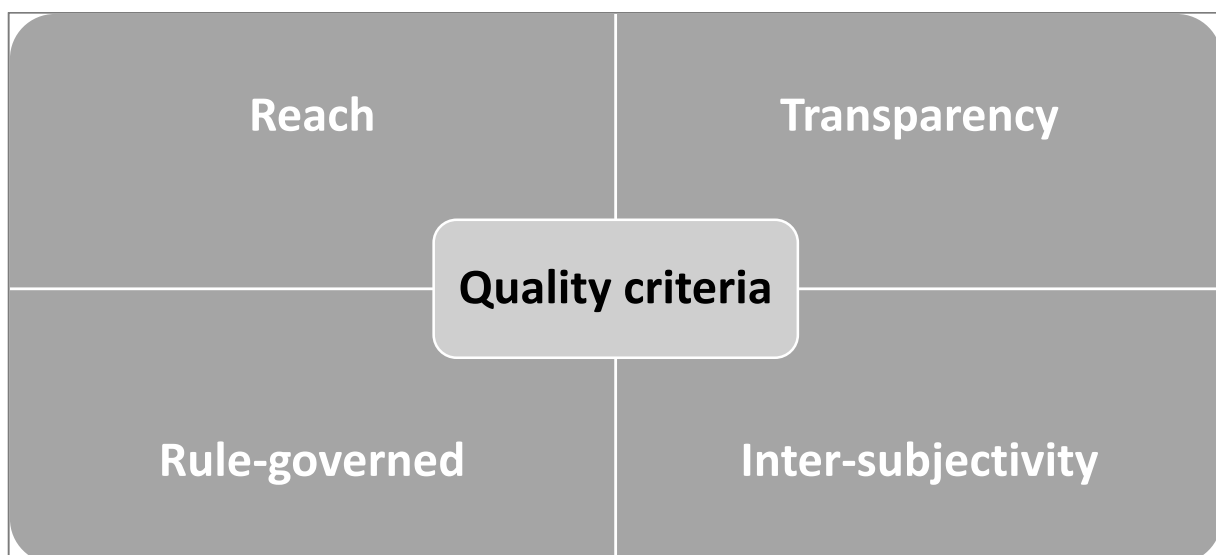


Figure 9: Quality criteria for qualitative research

**Table 3**  
**Overview of interviewees**

Index	Male/ Female	Job title	Age	Industry	Number of employees	Revenue of the company
01	Male	CEO	36	Consulting	3	0.5–0.7M€
02	Male	First Officer	35	Aviation	3,500	1,600M€
03	Male	Business Analyst	33	Consumer Goods	12,000	3,400M€
04	Male	CEO	32	Logistic	5	0.2M€
05	Male	Senior Area Sales Manager	34	Financial Services	80	19,000M€
06	Male	Production Operator	32	Chemical Industry	100,000	40,000M€
07	Male	Production Supervisor	39	Pharma Industry	100,000	42,000M€
08	Male	Financial Analyst	27	Pharma Industry	6,000	45,000M€
09	Male	Head of Procurement	47	Production	1,400	140M€
10	Male	Senior Consultant	28	Consulting	400	50M€

**Table 4**  
**Anchor example for development programmes as criteria for high potentials**

Subcode	Anchor example for entering the high potential community
Development Programme	Accordingly, we have set up the human resources development.
	I joined the company as an apprentice and I followed different classes to become such in high potential.
	And I was a trainee.

**Table 5**  
**Anchor example for role as criteria for high potentials**

Subcode	Anchor example for entering the high potential community
Role	Yes. So, at Reg-, at High Potential-. I am the managing director, the CEO.
	So on the one hand, I'm in the management circle of the company, which is basically where the managers are.
	And have developed, at the end of the day, a certain seniority.

**Table 6**  
**Anchor example for performance as criteria for high potentials**

Subcode	Anchor example for entering the high potential community
Performance	So, that means that we have to be very on the point. Because there is just a limited time to be capable of fixing a situation.
	I work in sales. And got into it through the sales performance that I did.
	Yes, so that was once through performance.

Another interesting point concerns the employees' visibility to management and other employees. The previously mentioned arguments support the qualification for high potential, especially when they occur in combination.

The point of performance in particular comes into its own most strongly when attention is created for it on the part of management. As one candidate stated in this context, 'And of course, as I said, it is about presenting yourself and of course just standing out'.

Beyond this, the common characteristics of high potentials can be divided into six major areas. During the interviews, we picked up on one trait as particularly intense—namely, having the ability to understand problems on different levels and going beyond their own silo to achieve sustainable solutions. Put differently, the high potentials focus the big picture for the company. Furthermore, when it comes to sales tasks, the best sales people are characterised by their ability to get to the bottom of the customer's problems and offer a solution to the problem.

The second characteristic mentioned by several candidates concerns the desire to develop. Specifically, the interviewees stated that they and other people in their companies want to develop themselves as well as the company. Another factor that was mentioned involved motivation. High potentials possess a high intrinsic motivation. With this energy, they can tackle different issues and remain goal-oriented in the implementation of difficult tasks.

Yet another characteristic distinguishing high potentials is achievement. High potentials are results-oriented and complete tasks effectively and efficiently. Furthermore, they possess the ability to prioritise in order to focus on the most important issues in an emergency.

Another quality that high potentials have is trust. Specifically, they are trustworthy for both their company and for employees outside the high potentials community. Furthermore, high potentials also trust and can rely on each other.

**Motivating factors for high potentials:** During the interviews, none of the interviewees stated that they were not motivated in the performance of their tasks. However, the question of whether a job in itself is motivating for candidates was answered negatively by employees who are not entrusted with management or leadership tasks. The interviews further revealed four distinct categories into which the motivating factors of high potentials can be classified.

The strongest response to the question regarding factors that can influence motivation positively or negatively consisted of job design. This category demonstrated by far the strongest response to the question. Additionally, this category can be divided further into two main sub-categories: First, there is the area that focusses on the content of the job. Arguments in this category were put forward from all the different functions. In this context, freedom of choice proved particularly important to the interviewees. When it comes to solving problems or making fundamental changes, it was considered important for the candidates to possess a certain autonomy to implement topics independently.

A further point in the design of the work concerns the work being oriented according to the employees' qualifications. The candidates' motivation can be increased if the job demands what the candidates have been trained in. Other factors include challenging work and confidence on the part of the company and management to do the job and to ensure the autonomy to do the job on an own way.

Regarding job content, the meaningfulness of the job was also frequently mentioned. Especially when it comes to problem-solving approaches or implementing projects, the candidates stated that it is important for them to understand the meaning and purpose of the whole matter. Managers further stated that it is motivating for them if they can influence and develop other employees.

**Table 7**

**Anchor example for performance as criteria for high potentials**

Subcode	Anchor example for high potential characteristics
Big Picture	That we have many interfaces with other units in the organisation.
	So I would say that I don't have a limited view, but rather a wider horizon than perhaps one or two other colleagues.
	The quality that could be highlighted is just thinking outside the box.

**Table 8**

**Anchor example for job design as the greatest influence on motivation**

Subcode	Anchor example for job design as a motivating factor
Content	For me, this is a challenging job or a challenging task.
	That you just don't have the freedom and can't develop.
Sense	A meaningful task, that I know why I am doing something.
	Once the task must be challenging, the reward must be good and should make sense.

**Table 9**

**Anchor example for compensation as a motivating factor for high potentials**

Subcode	Anchor example for compensation as a motivating factor
Personal Development	That means that it is of course also a motivation to know that if you work in a company that also belongs to a specific organisation, you probably have more opportunities to develop professionally than if it is perhaps a smaller company.
	And of course, the opportunities for promotion, or rather the promotion itself
Salary	Of course, I am also motivated, clearly, by the salary in a job.
	So of course, the financial aspect must not be missing, because we don't all do it just for the sunshine.
Appreciation	In addition, it motivates me when I get good feedback from colleagues or clients.
	And the recognition at the end of the day for the work you have done.

Another motivating factor possessing a corresponding weight in the interviews concerned compensation. Across all the different positions, reward and salary progression were identified as a motivating factor. However, appreciation is also part of this category.

In particular, employees who are at the beginning of their high potential career feel recognition as particularly important. This is a sign for them that the performance they have achieved is both qualitatively good and seen by the management level.

Furthermore, in this context, trust also plays a crucial role. The trust placed in the employee by the company is perceived by the candidates as recognition for previous performance.

Beyond this, the framework also proved to be a strong motivating factor. For example, some found working in a team to be a positive motivating factor. Yet another positive motivating factor concerned open and honest communication. Employees who are at the beginning of their career will be motivated by the development opportunities in a company. Additionally, the company's resource endowment also influences the company's motivation as more resources enable greater flexibility. Beyond these four strong factors, other factors were also included that are either specific to the interview partner's job or were not confirmed by the majority of interviewees. For example, passion for a role can make the role itself a motivating factor.

Negative motivators were mentioned around the same time as consequences. For example, operational or performance-related layoffs represent factors that negatively influence motivation. Excessive pressure due to increased performance expectations or additional issues was also mentioned as a negative motivating factor. Beyond this, participants also put forward arguments related to motivational factors determined by the company. Effective team composition, flat hierarchies and career opportunities comprise three of the strongest arguments put forward.

**Position of high potentials regarding change in an organisation:** The interviews revealed that almost all high potentials possessed a positive attitude towards change projects. In fact, some candidates stated that change represents part of the business cycle for them. The strongest factor indicated for motivation in connection with change projects concerns participation in the change project. This factor positively influences employees when they are integrated into the process and can contribute to defining and implementing the new target state. If employees are not involved and cannot participate in the change process, this strongly negatively affects the motivation of high potentials.

For some of the high potentials interviewed, a change project also provides them the opportunity to shape their own development in a company. As such, they see the change

project as a new opportunity to develop their own career. If high potentials do not find themselves in the new situation, or if the sense of purpose is not clear to them, this strongly negatively influences motivation. In fact, the interviews indicated that this can even lead to the employee's resignation.

The second strongest point related to high potential and change projects concerns the participation of high potential in the change process. They want to be part of the change process and it has a strong motivating effect on them if they are. If they are left out, however, this produces a strong negative effect on them.

Another point that most candidates viewed similarly concerns the role of communication in a change project. Early, open and transparent communication represents an important positive motivating factor for the candidates.

For some candidates, this factor even represented a key position. With communication comes reasoning regarding the project's meaningfulness. Specifically, high potentials want to understand where the new value will be added after the change.

The consequences of a change project can also be better accepted if the previously mentioned aspects of communication and meaningfulness are carried out efficiently. In such a case, the consequences produce less of a demotivating effect than if the previously mentioned aspects are not adhered to.

**Impact of restructuring activities on the motivation of high potentials:** Almost all candidates were part of or had been part of a restructuring project. Furthermore, the interviewees found themselves in a new environment after the restructuring. For some, the restructuring costed them their current position and they had to pursue other activities. All but one of the high potentials reported negative experiences through restructuring projects. Despite this fact, however, almost all candidates stated that they were positive about a change project. The candidates also indicated different impacts on themselves and with different intensities.

One point that was made concerns the imposition of measures without first understanding the purpose or having accurate information. Specifically, the lack of meaning behind the activity, coupled with insufficient information exchange and the fact that the candidate could not participate in the restructuring design, negatively influenced motivation.

This aspect is reinforced by the role of communication. Furthermore, certain companies make a difference between the intention communicated to the employees and the actions that are carried out in the end.

**Table 10**  
**Anchor example for motivating factors in change management**

Subcode	Anchor example for motivators in change management
Personal Development	Yeah, when I can see that there's also a possibility for me to develop.
	And it also really goes in the direction that you can also really derive certain advantages from a change.
Communication	When a change is coming, communication is the key.
	Very important. Because without open and honest communication, you have exactly the opposite.
Participation	These were actually management decisions where I had no influence.
	So it's the fact that you feel like you don't have anything to say, or you cannot influence the organization, since it's always decided from the top.
Consequences	Even if it sometimes means that you have to make cuts in your personal environment or in your company.
	Unfortunately, this is sometimes part of a restructuring process.

**Table 11**  
**Anchor example for restructuring impact**

Subcode	Anchor example for restructuring impact
Impact	Firstly, we had to replace a lot of staff at the beginning.
	The job was no longer available and then you were downgraded, also financially.
	So we all became more distanced from the ExCom, including myself.

When employees notice that there is an inconsistency between what is said and what is done, this extremely disturbs the trust relationship between management and employees, frustration and demotivation are the result. In addition, there is demand on the part of the management, the executives and the employees to carry out the measures. Without honesty and transparency, however, no trust can be created between the employees who carry out the measures and the management. In addition, superficial communication cannot create transparency.

In smaller companies possessing more of a start-up character, regular recalibrations represent part of the process. This makes the work more difficult, though there is no real constant to focus on. Despite this, improvements achieved through this dynamic were noted by the candidate as having a positive effect on motivation. As soon as results emerge that contribute to improving the company's situation, this positively influences the candidate's motivation. Decisions related to downsizing, meanwhile, were noted as negatively influencing motivation.

One candidate stated that over the course of a strategic reorientation, he no longer identified with the company's goal. Additionally, he could not take part in shaping the new direction. In the end, there were still some minor adjustments that could be made, but the results were insufficient and the candidate left the company. The new sense of purpose did not make sense to him and the new focus had nothing to do with his preferences. For two other candidates, restructuring in the pharmaceutical industry resulted in the closure of a company. As a result, both had to reorient themselves within the group of companies. Another candidate with a management responsibility had to mediate his employees before-hand. Poor communication and the lack of

opportunities to contribute to the new target state led to strong demotivation.

Another interviewee who works in the finance department stated that after a restructuring, close exchanges with higher management were lost. He also stated that following the restructuring, the areas of responsibility became unclear. Again, a lack of purpose, failure to truly involve the person and superficial communication led to a dismantled attitude.

**Review of the assumptions:** Assumptions were made that can be confirmed or refuted with the aid of the analysis. The first assumption—High potentials are generally strongly motivated by change management projects—can be confirmed. In particular, questions 7 and 11 demonstrate that despite the fact that the majority of candidates have had negative experiences with restructuring activities, they are generally positive regarding change projects. Some candidates were further convinced that change is part of business cycle and hoped for positive changes from the process, even if they do not know the extent to which they will be affected by the restructuring.

The second assumption—High potentials are the first to join restructuring projects in order to actively influence the future of the company—can also be confirmed. The research demonstrated that high potentials are particularly interested in actively shaping their own and the company's future. If they cannot participate in a restructuring project, this produces a highly demotivating effect. Furthermore, all candidates who had participated in a restructuring project in the past and had negative experiences with the measures indicate that a lack of participation on their part is felt to be demotivating.



The third assumption—Restructuring measures that endanger the careers of high potentials have a negative effect on their motivation—can be partially confirmed. Questions four and six demonstrated that high potentials attach considerable importance to their own development within a company. Their career is important to them and positive development contributes to positive motivation. Restructuring activities that act as an obstacle to their career produce a demotivating effect in the short term. In the long term, high potentials tend to pull themselves together and continue on their way. However, it is also possible for them to leave the company and seek opportunities in another company.

**Recommendations:** In order for companies to become or remain successful, changes are inevitably necessary. It is the task of management to identify and monitor VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) influences and, if necessary, initiate countermeasures. This can also mean that the company's fundamental orientation has to be recalibrated. Furthermore, effects such as the disruption of traditional business models by new smaller start-ups led to additional pressure on the competitive side. Stronger global competition, meanwhile, makes market success more difficult on the sales side, but also attracts beneficial employees. To manage this, management should strengthen its own position by regularly analysing the market and competitors as well as by strengthening the bond with employees through open and transparent communication and the possibility for employees to contribute.

The number of changes a company has to face, has increased rapidly in recent years. In order for companies to implement changes in their company in the best possible way, the use of so-called 'change agents' or 'change managers' has proven successful in practice. The tasks involved vary from company to company. In general, however, it can be said that they have the task of accompanying a change project and supporting both its planning and implementation. Furthermore, they connect management with the levels below. In doing so, they ensure effective communication in both directions and remove obstacles that stand in the way of the change project. Change projects should be done on the side; rather, the primary focus of the staff, the management and the change managers should be on the project itself.

Employee motivation represents an essential driving force for achieving corporate goals. High potentials in particular are strongly motivated by job content. When designing a job, managers should thus pay close attention to the fact that the job itself contributes to motivation. Beyond this, employee motivation is further driven by performance recognition. A lack of recognition produces a strong demotivating effect on employees. As such, recognition should not be lacking, especially when top performance is being achieved. In fact, according to this study, recognition constitutes the second strongest factor. One type of recognition is monetary reward. Additionally, the interviews indicated that for the

employees, the reason given for the reward was that this was a necessary step following the achievement of an above-average performance.

Continuing, high potentials also attach considerable importance to being able to follow a career path in their company. As such, in order to retain and develop high potentials, a special development programme should be established for them. This programme should explain in a transparent and simple fashion what a career could look like and what the next steps are. It should also state what the employee needs to do to develop and what the company will provide to support him or her.

High potentials in particular should be integrated into restructuring activities. On one hand, they can bring the performance necessary to successfully implement the project. On the other hand, they are strongly motivated by participating in the change. Structured and organised implementation is also crucial here. To begin with, the purpose of the change process must be clearly described and communicated. Participation and communication represent two key factors for employee motivation. If both are missing, this demotivates high potentials. Furthermore, if the target state does not correspond to the expectations of the high potentials, this can even lead to the dismissal of these important employees.

## Discussion

**Major contribution:** This research investigated how restructuring activities influence the motivation of high potentials. To this end, the ensuing qualitative research was able to provide the following major contributions:

High potentials qualify themselves through the performance they contribute to achieving the company's goals. To this end, it is important not only to provide the services, but also to be perceived by the company's management. Above all, the benefits for the company must be perceived. As such, companies should establish development programmes for identifying, promoting and developing high potentials. This can help companies better manage high potentials. Such programmes are also perceived by high potentials as positive and motivating, as they represent a structured and transparent procedure for career planning. High potentials attach considerable importance to their own development and thus also to career planning, making these some of their strongest motivators. Support from the company in this area is thus seen as a strong positive motivating factor. In addition to internal qualification as a high potential, people who qualify through their position are also included in this circle. They attain the status of high potential through a particularly high area of responsibility, such as by being CEO, or through many years of experience.

High potentials are further characterised by a high level of motivation and the ability to think beyond their own area of responsibility in order to achieve the best possible result for

the company. They usually question the issues faced in order to thoroughly understand them and to focus on the meaningful tasks that can bring a company forward. The organisation of work thus plays an important role for high potentials in terms of motivation. High potentials demand the freedom to work independently on topics or to solve problems. Furthermore, the work's meaningfulness plays a relevant role for them. Accordingly, this research has demonstrated that job design influences motivation in the restructuring process in addition to motivation in everyday work. High potentials expect problems and solutions to be explained to them so that they are accepted.

Yet another crucial point concerns participation in the restructuring process. For high potentials, participation in restructuring activities that will strongly influence them or their company is highly relevant, as they want to be part of the action and shape the company's future.

In general, high potentials consider change projects more as a chance to move forward in their personal development. Therefore, it is also important for them to participate in the design. Related to this, the topic of development represents another important factor, especially for newly qualified high potentials, as they possess a specific objective in mind that they want to achieve.

The interviews further indicated that if information about a problem or the reason for restructuring is not communicated properly, this will lead to demotivation. Other negative factors include exclusion from the restructuring process. If this is coupled with poor or incorrect communication, this can result in heavily demotivating high potentials. However, if the previously mentioned factors are avoided, this results in stronger acceptance even if there are negative consequences for the high potentials. After a brief lull in motivation to allow the effects sink in, energy can be built up once again to continue to perform for the company.

The interviews also demonstrated that compensation constitutes a relevant factor for high potentials. In this context, compensation is classified into three subcategories: purely financial remuneration, appreciation for the work by superiors and management and personal development. This research has further indicated that for high potentials, appreciation must go hand in hand with salary. This represents an expression of appreciation and provides a quantifiable value to their performance. Personal development represents a special role for high potentials. On one hand, personal development is linked to career planning in the company. This is also linked to salary development, reputation and responsibility. On the other hand, a company that invests a lot of time and money in the development of high potentials is interested in using the skills and competences of these people for the company. Therefore, companies will be interested in involving high potentials at an early stage and they will also give them a certain degree of freedom in finding solutions.

**Limitations:** Despite the in-depth research conducted, this work remains subject to certain limitations. First of all, it should be mentioned that only 10 high potentials could be interviewed for the research. A larger number of participants could support the results more strongly. Furthermore, only male high potentials could be interviewed for this work. A more heterogeneous composition of the participants would support a more generally valid statement.

Additionally, the high potential group was composed of two subgroups. While both groups were qualified by their high performance, the difference resided in their entry into the circle of high potentials. On one hand, there were those who had become high potentials through a development programme and on the other hand, there were those who were defined as high potentials by their role in the company. Focussing more on one of the two groups may provide more precise results for that group. For example, considering only the CEOs may provide a better picture of motivation in restructuring activities for this group of people.

Another limitation to this research concerns the use of only virtual interviews. A face-to-face interview would have helped to classify the behaviours to the statements. Unfortunately, this was not possible due to the COVID-19 situation.

Another limitation relates to the COVID-19 pandemic itself. Many of the candidates work in companies that have come under severe pressure due to the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, it was difficult to determine whether the restructuring activities mentioned and their impact on motivation, were influenced by this pandemic.

Finally, the interviews focussed primarily on high potentials in German-speaking countries. A more international composition of interview partners would enable a more generalisable response to the research question.

**Future research directions:** Employee motivation represents a rather broad field of research. Employees differ from company to company, culture to culture and generation to generation. Especially with regard to high potentials, individual motivational factors such as the design of work or compensation could benefit from being studied separately. For instance, further studies could investigate Generations Y and Z including whether they differ from other generations regarding how they view change, what factors drive high potentials of these generations and how far digitalisation can be employed as a motivator.

Another possible direction for future research concerns the interdependence of compensation, appreciation and personal development, as well as whether one factor can be replaced by another in terms of motivation. It could also be beneficial to investigate the extent to which a factor no longer motivates high potentials, such as at what salary level does financial reward no longer produces a motivating effect.

Another interesting question would be how the interviews would have turned out if they were not high potentials. For instance, future studies could explore whether the same factors play a role for them. Another interesting topic would be a separate examination of male and female high potentials regarding the research questions.

## Conclusion

In the field of organisation science and theory, researchers from various disciplines have been attempting to increase the efficiency of organisations since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Taylor<sup>65</sup>, for instance, sought to increase output through a process-oriented approach. Mayo, meanwhile, attempted to strengthen management and increase efficiency through his human relations approach. In the field of change management, Lewin<sup>42</sup> used his models to steer change in an organisation.

In practice, restructuring and change represent part of a company's development. In the past, there have always been changes in companies. The automobile market illustrates this quite clearly, with conventional combustion engines being replaced by electric drives. As a result, companies in the automotive industry have to change in order to continue playing a role in the field in the future. In order for these changes to be implemented in the organisation, however, they must be actively managed.

For high potentials, change and restructuring are part of life. They are generally positive about this and hope for the opportunity to further develop themselves and their organization. You are very interested in participating in the change activities and getting actively involved. Participation in a restructuring project and open, transparent and honest communication have a very positive effect on the motivation of high potentials. The acceptance of negative consequences is better when there is participation and communication.

Motivation represents the source of energy for high potentials to continue at full speed, especially after a previous crisis and restructuring. Factors that cripple motivation include poor communication, lack of participation on the part of high potentials and insufficient explanations of what the crisis is, what the restructuring activities are needed for and what the sense behind the measures is.

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