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Research Report
The Middle Management – new awareness needed in the current information society?

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The Middle Management – new awareness needed in the current information society?

Stefanie Roth
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The middle management – new awareness needed in the current information society?

1. Introduction - what is middle management?

In every hierarchical organization, the middle management acts as important link and interface between the top management and the operating core, but also as central contact point for supporting service departments. This unit, metaphorically speaking, is horizontally and vertically placed in the heart of an organization. Being responsible to interpret and later transmit the defined strategies into management decisions and corporate action is only one of the main tasks. Which tasks are fulfilled in reality will be outlined later on in this thesis.

In a second major step this thesis handles the problem of the current awareness of middle managers. How are they seen? How are they recognized? Are they perceived at all? In our predominant information society there are a lot of new influencing factors that need to be considered when this topic is treated.

Since the paradigm shift from an industrial society via a service society through to an information and knowledge-based society is having enormous impact on the role of the middle managers in particular, the research for up-to-date information has been quite difficult. In this respect, a study has been performed as to gain first-hand information.

It appears that until now, no unique definition could be found to explain, what middle management consists of. The spectrum being way too large and different in separate industries and businesses, affected by economy and business needs, only very specific descriptions for particular situations yet have been established.

Three different definitions / descriptions are quoted hereafter as to grant a first view of the current predominant perception. Each of them being meaningful, but after having grappled with the topic under newest circumstances, none of them getting really to the heart.

"Comprises of managers who head specific departments (such as accounting, marketing, production) or business units, or who serve as project managers in flat organizations. Middle managers are responsible for implementing the top management's policies and plans and typically have two management levels below them. Usually among the first to be slashed in the 'resizing' of a firm, middle management constitutes the thickest layer of managers in a traditional (tall pyramid shaped) organization."1

Illustration 1: self-created on 22 January 2016

1 http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/middle-management.html#ixzz476jeVQxQ
“[…] the middle management is in the unique position of being placed in such a way that they have access to the top management and they can command the loyalty of the regular member’s employees. Hence, any organizational initiative has to necessarily take into account the importance of the middle management in the larger scheme of things.”

Middle management is the intermediate management level accountable to top management and responsible for leading lower level managers.

- Recognize the specific responsibilities and job functions often assigned to middle-level management professionals.

- Middle management is at the center of a hierarchical organization, subordinate to the senior management but above the lowest levels of operational staff.

- Middle managers are accountable to top management for their department’s function. They provide guidance to lower-level managers and inspire them to perform better.

- Middle-management functions generally revolve around enabling teams of workers to perform effectively and efficiently and reporting these performance indicators to upper management.

2 http://www.managementstudyguide.com/importance-of-middle-level-management.htm, requested on 12 February 2016
Middle management may be reduced in organizations as a result of reorganization. Such changes can take the form of downsizing, “delayering," and outsourcing.”

In connection with this thesis, some of these appealed descriptions will be analyzed more deeply in the appropriate chapters.

Since the early 1990s, notably with regards to the paradigm shifts and the realization of business process reengineering, the question for the necessity of middle management has been raised. On the one hand, many middle management positions have fallen victim to the flattening of hierarchies which resulted from restructurings. On the other hand, proponents emphasize the importance of the middle managers and encourage them, as their – for external parties mostly not visible – work contribute in a very highly manner to the organization's success.

In a third step, this thesis delves the different requirement profiles for middle manager and explores, to which extent intellectual property plays a key role for the success of the middle management. Soft skills like emotional intelligence will be further pointed out as well as the importance of leadership skills.

Within the study mentioned above, I have had the chance to interview some people from all three layers – top management, middle management and operating core. By means of these interesting information received, I focused on outlining the current awareness for the middle management and how the predominant perception could and should be renewed. Even the image given by the media is not acceptable at 100 % and it no longer fits the demands of the current information society.

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2. Interface between top management and the operating level

2.1 Tasks and functions

In view of the central position of middle managers, it is clear that they are seen as collection point for all kind of requests within a company. But only after a closer look it is obvious, that they are not only the interface between the top management and the operating level, but also the nexus between horizontally spread supporting units.

Middle managers are the so-called invisible key players, highly contributing to the company’s success, although their performance is practically never seen by people outside the company.

One of the most important functions of the middle manager is to guarantee the flow of information. To ensure that developed strategies by the top management get through to the operating core, the middle manager needs to transmit such strategies into partial strategies. These strategies mainly consist of ideas and plans whereas on the opposite, the operating core “uses” the middle management as mouthpiece to communicate their ideas, suggestions and problems to the top management. Towards clients or customers, the middle manager also carries out an information brokerage, since he is the one responsible for the client relationship management at a certain level. (In larger companies, there are often special units occupied only with this topic.) There is one last relation of a middle manager where an appropriate information flow may not be underestimated – the relation with other middle managers within the same organization. The exchange of information between the middle managers is extremely important as very often the pieces of information which are received for example from the top management may be understood in different manners. To avoid misunderstandings, to check, whether more than only one department is concerned by a request, to gather a maximum of information and to find solutions within a team, this information exchange is indispensable.

Tieing up to the transformation of strategies, this task seems to be the second most important task to be fulfilled. Middle managers need to ensure that the plans and visions of the top management are understandable and comprehensible for the one’s working on the implementation. Only if a strategy is being operationalized, clearly structured and well communicated, the adjusting wheels are positioned as to realize the organization’s goals. The task of the middle manager consists in the preparation of the operationalization considering the impacts on the concerned business units.

Without a break, this leads to the relationships a middle manager maintains. He does not only work closely with people from all business units, but is in regular contact with people outside the organization. Inside the organization, the middle manager often is not just the professional superior, but also a kind of shelter, especially for younger employees. Nevertheless, it is important for the middle manager not to let these relations influence his work, even though sometimes it is hard to take decisions necessary to achieve business goals, while on the other hand, these decisions may not please everyone.
In order to find a balance between unpleasant announcements and the reactions from concerned people, the middle manager needs to convey. This additional task is in so far an important one, as business processes proceed much better when people feel comfortable in their working environment. To avoid bad mood, regular and clearly formulated communications and explications are essential.

For sake of completeness, it is to be said that relations with external people are also quite important. Clients consider the middle managers as their contact persons, representative for the top management. In this function, a middle manager fulfills an additional representative role. (Depending on the area of business, this role is pronounced more or less.)

Likewise, subordinate to the organization’s size and the density of the cooperation between the top management and the middle manager, a further task in the development of strategies completes the list of tasks. This involvement clearly depends on the style of leadership, whereas a tendency to a deeper cooperation can be seen in small and medium-sized companies rather than in large companies. But, this task is not ubiquitous and has therefore to be considered as an extra task in some organizations.
2.2 The problem of blurred boundaries

Besides the tasks and functions described above, the middle management faces inter alia one great problem: blurred boundaries. The work of a middle manager varies a lot depending on the size of the company, the instructions from the top management, the number of people working in the operating core, the company culture, leadership, the sector, the location of country and in particular due to requirements given by the predominant social society.

The middle management is a fast moving level that needs to adapt continuously. This leads to the problem, that only in very few cases (as recognized during the interviews) the role is clearly defined and a job description existing. In most cases the middle managers do neither have a formulated framework of tasks to be done nor anything like timesheets containing their valuable working hours so that their performance is very hard to evaluate.

In some organizations the performance is tried to be measured with the help of so-called Key Performance Indicator ("KPI"). The most recent problem has been summarized by Klipfolio, a start-up company based in Ottawa, Ontario: “A KPI is only as valuable as the action it inspires. Too often, organizations blindly adopt industry-recognized KPIs and then wonder why that KPI doesn't reflect their own business and fails to affect any positive change. One of the most important, but often overlooked, aspects of KPIs is that they are a form of communication. As such, they abide by the same rules and best-practices as any other form of communication. Succinct, clear and relevant information is much more likely to be absorbed and acted upon.”

Also, in some cases where middle manager have been recruited from the own operating core, it appears that there is a lack of authority and respect towards co-workers, as the new seniority level often has not been properly communicated. So it might be the case, that instructions are neither accepted nor respected. This discrepancy is not only a problem between the middle management and the operating core, but also between middle and top management.

Whenever a middle management exists within a company, there is a special need to collaborate on all levels. The top management shall provide a maximum of information so that the middle manager is able to take a position and to define his or her main tasks.

Every employee should be aware of the fact, that the middle management has an essential role to fulfill. Ideally, this role is being described with the help of regular internal communications.

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4 https://www.klipfolio.com/resources/articles/what-is-a-key-performance-indicator, requested on 28 April 2016
3. Awareness and reputation of a current middle manager (awareness of others)

In general, the current reputation of middle managers is unfortunately not the best one, as many people only see the dark side of this job. Colloquially, the term “paralyzing layer” is being used to explain, why something within a firm is not working or to have someone to blame in case of failure. It is much easier for the top management to pass on to the middle manager any bad criticism than to take the responsibility.

Right from the beginning, a middle manager had been seen as mediocrity, someone “in the middle”, neither belonging to the operating core, nor to the top management. They are a kind of leader, but are also led and therefore not on top of the cake. Apparently they are able to be chiefs, but only for a small group of people within an organization.

Middle managers might be seen as scapegoats when the top management is not satisfied with the strategic line of approach, when the figures are not correct (in their eyes) or when there is a lack of mentality. They might have not considered, that an aspiration level was too high, that the period of time to implement a new procedure was too short or that the reason for the dissatisfaction is the gap of social distance between the top management and the middle management, which makes it impossible to successfully collaborate.

The next problem is that the work and the performance of middle managers are nearly invisible. For outstanding persons their efforts are elusive and even within a firm it is absolutely possible that middle managers are not perceived as such. There’s a lack of transparency that lead to the fact that only a very limited number of persons is conscious of the work done by middle managers even though there a quite a lot of tools to counteract (like the above-mentioned internal communications).

This problem induced me to collect some opinions from the top management as well as from the operating core to get to know, whether and at which point one need to start with the amendments to the appropriate awareness needed.

In this framework, a dozen of people from the operating core have been asked, if they work regularly and closely with their middle managers. All of them answered, that regular (most times even daily) coordination between them and their respective middle managers takes place. The collaboration allows improving on technical aspects in an easier way as with the top tier, as the middle managers are usually more accessible.

Also, the planning of the work to be done, envisaged conferences, client visits and meetings are much clearer, when they can be discussed in advance. Tasks are attributed, feedback is given and there is always the possibility to discuss own projects, career plans, but also if something is not working well. Such collaboration permits to individually develop.

In reply to the question, whether they are conscious of the tasks done by their middle managers, the answers came apart.
“I understand that their tasks involve the fine-tuning of the work realized by the operating core, as well as coordination of the project (including billing overview) and debriefing to the top tier.”

“Coordination of all colleagues, organization of meetings, review of administrative processes within the firm, establishment of new working processes.”

“More or less. Some tasks are well known, others not at all.”

Unfortunately, this imprecise answer was more than one time the first reaction, which strengthens the need for a better understanding and a correct awareness. Even after a further request, quite a lot of people from the operating core were not able to find an answer to this question.

Nevertheless, with regards to the importance of a middle manager (even though not all tasks are known), all questioned person affirm that their middle managers are rightly in their position.

In addition to these statements of people from the operating core, two top managers agreed to adopt position. They have been asked, if they work regularly and closely with their middle managers and if case may be, how does this collaboration look like?

“We do have regular meetings as to coordinate on different divisions and to transfer the targets and to transmit information on future orientation of the various departments.”

“Yes, as close as possible (estimate: 20% of my time is dedicated to this), final oversight / sign off of engagements, planning of junior staff, performance management of the middle management (identify their growth potentials), regular (monthly) manager meetings and of curse ah-hoc help (any time) in case of issues/challenges/problems.”

Moreover, they have been asked if they are conscious of what the work of their middle manager consists. As expected, they have not answered this question in detail, but unambiguously like a top manager in a situation, where he or she is not willing to confess, that there might be room for improvement.

“Yes, because of the narrow coordination.”

“Yes, because of the narrow coordination.”

“Of course not to the final deepness, but to a level that I can take the final responsibility on signing off. It is a question of timing – in some situations it would be helpful to know better their specific tasks.”

Summarized, a lack of awareness exists. As the middle management is quite an invisible layer, neither the operating core nor the top management is really aware of what is going on, what work is being done, what requirements should a successful middle manager bring along.
Maybe it would already help to find a new term for the middle managers as to get rid of the negative “middle” smack and to arouse interest for this diversified position.
4. The sandwich problem presented by the media

In terms of research within our digitalized environment, what is more obvious besides finding appropriate literature in form of books, articles or interviews than to check the available information on the internet? By searching various key words, using different search engines and comparing the results, one key message globally appeared: middle manager are caught in a sandwich position.

It is overall the first connotation, with which middle managers are being related. At a first glance, it seems that it might be a punishment to work on such hierarchical level. Feeling like a gherkin between roasted, hard bread, wet salad, melted cheese and a salty slice of ham, one gains the impression that this position should be the very last one in terms of career goals.

Illustration 4:  

Quite a lot of recommended online newspapers but also different big firms published articles about the middle management in the past few years. The fact that nearly all the headlines mirror already the sandwich problem speaks for itself. “Middle managers - the meat in the sandwich?”5, “Leading in the sandwich position”6, “The sorrows of sandwich-chiefs”7, “Middle Management: All-rounder sandwich chief”8 and “Between scapegoat and all-rounder”9 are only some examples.

What is striking when reading further, is the superficiality with which this actual hot topic is being treated.

6 http://www.zeit.de/karriere/beruf/2012-06/chefsache-mittleres-management requested on 20 February 2016
8 http://arbeitgeber.careerbuilder.de/blog/mittleres-management-alleskoenner-sandwich-chefs_ requested on 20 February 2016
In around 90% of the articles the middle managers are described as overstrained and underpaid, having a not (clearly) defined role – briefly: they're unhappy and they suffer from their position.

This is however not the whole truth. As briefly laid out before, the tasks and functions of middle managers vary on multiple influencing factors. The way the whole middle management level is presented by the media is not fair to those who are happy and love their jobs. It is not correct to lump all middle managers together to present a unique picture of a paralyzing layer.

Whether the articles analyze the problems, the sufferings or the excessive demand of middle managers – there is always a negative connotation. Taking into account the apparently already existing image of middle managers, which is (as seen in the above chapter) not the best (recognized) one, the press is of no help in terms of sensitizing people in this respect.

One article published in the Managers’ Magazine in February 2015 even contains a guest contribution of Harald Psaridis\(^{10}\), accepted trainer for educating leader. He states that many of the sufferings of middle managers are self-inflicted and tries to explain, how their working life could be made easier – by themselves. Nonetheless, he, as recognized expert, could and should have taken this opportunity to draw the attention to the fact that a middle managers’ work consists of more than being a suffering sandwich.

On the opposite, there are – for God’s sake – still some articles that try to point out, which important role is played by the middle managers. The “Spiegel” published two articles in 2013 and 2015 expressing the need for good middle managers for companies that want to be successful. It is pointed out, that in many cases the main problem consists in the non-existent skills necessary to fulfill such demanding position\(^{11}\). People are promoted and abandoned. No trainings, no seminars, no help to develop. Is it then surprising, that they appear to be overstrained?

The other articles headlines “The hidden heroes of the German economy\(^{12}\)”.

Through the example of a BASF manager, the following job description is given: Permanent changes and increasing efficiency with a simultaneously trouble-free processing of daily life.

Generally speaking, no other highly developed industrial country like Germany has been as successful in staying competitive. Since 1995 the value has been increased by almost 45% (compared to the 3% value of France, this is more than remarkable).

Ruedy Baarffuss (Malik Management Centre\(^{13}\), Berlin) stated that this achievement could only been entered in the books through the help of middle managers. Many of the essential changes have been set up and implemented by them directly.

\(^{10}\) http://www.harald-psaridis.com/index.php/Presse.html requested on 20 February 2016
\(^{12}\) http://www.spiegel.de/karriere/berufsleben/fuehrung-mittelmanager-die-verborgenen-helden-a-1029661.html requested on 20 February 2016
Thanks to the “masters of the middle” Germany is currently seen as job miracle, king of export, guarantor of stability. It is time to save the honor of middle managers – a final statement by the author Klaus Werle that should be taken as to sensitize even more people not having or only having a limited awareness of the middle management. In the current information society, it is not acceptable to be content with the predominant opinion.

5. Self-perception of middle manager

Within a quite small but intense study that I prepared in order to mirror the self-perception of middle managers nowadays, I personally talked to six persons from different sectors and industries; of different ages and origins, but all working in international firms based in Luxembourg. The purpose of these interviews was to get an impression of what - apart from what literature says - a middle manager is really worth in his or her own eyes.

Also, I tried to find out if the middle managers are in their current situation only to be promoted to the top management or if they work as middle manager as they think they found their calling.

In fact, I had to face both answers. The ones seeing in the middle management a career springboard stated, that their current position allows to gain experience in the field of leadership as well as active contribution to the success of the department. They already have the possibility to take decisions, to work on their leadership style, to encourage people and to still pursue their own career, i.e. the promotion to the top management. It is obvious, that they are conscious of the importance the middle management role contains, as they only make progress, when they do a great job. They are aware of the influence such a position may have and how exhausting and challenging work can be. But the most important information to be found between the lines: without the middle management, the company would be much less successful.

On the contrary, some people love their position in the middle management, because they really understood how mighty you can be and how many different aspects of work you can experience. For them, their position is not a milestone on their career pathway, but it is their career goal.

To state one of these motivated, encouraged middle manager, who actually summarized the position in a few, striking words:

“The role within the business unit such as implementing the top management’s policies and plans and motivating the related people are some of the points which are no longer possible as top manager. The decision making and the tasks to be accomplished in the top management are, to me, not achievable. I prefer to be between the operating core and the top management, in order to play some kind of intermediary and sometime also mediator. It is obviously the position with a lot of responsibility for a not appropriate salary, but it is the interesting part of it, because

13 https://www.malik-management.com/de requested on 20 February 2016
you have to communicate with all kind of characters, have to listen to all kind of problems and have always an aim to achieve, which is to transpose the policies and plans within the business unit.”

To illustrate how much time they spend with their specific tasks, they have been asked to indicate a percentage per day:

As expected, the average indicators show the implication of the middle managers mainly in the fields of decision making, planning, coordination and controlling.

These tasks have not always been threatened with the same dedication. In view of the change from an industrial society via a service society through to an information and knowledge-based society, all interlocutors are of the opinion, that the middle management and its work is unexceptionally concerned.

“Communication styles have evolved. Customers are overwhelmed by information and communication needs to be accurate, short and provided in a short time frame. Further, middle managers must develop empathy to ensure that team members do not suffer from their stressful environment.”

“I think that not only the tasks but also the qualification of the middle managers changed. In the past, the cognitive skill and the “normal” intelligence were the most important skill for a good middle manager. But now it is more and more often the question of communication, interaction and behavior with the people and colleagues around you.”

“Tasks definitely have changed. I think dedication and hard work in combination with soft skills are more important than ever. Information flows have become an irresistible factor for success.”
To successfully fulfil all these tasks, they have been asked, in how far intangibles like emotional and social intelligence become more important to prevail in the current information society.

First of all I think it is important to underline at this stage, that all consulted middle managers were aware of the terms and the meaning of social and emotional intelligence. That shows that the topic of intangibles is being placed more and more in the foreground while recruiting good middle managers.

Even though the respondents do not consider intangibles as the utmost important skills, they attribute a great relevance to them.

“They become more important and they have to become even more important for companies to achieve the missions, goals and policies. It is no longer a question of giving an order and watching its execution, but those emotional and social skills permit a new way of delegation of emotional and social coordination within a team. Most of the time, a top manager has a certain lack of these competencies, which is the biggest problem of motivation. A middle manager in combination with these skills plays the role of “being part of the operating core” and “fighting with the top management”. The key skills of a successful company as such.”

Also, the use of such skills as to export the knowledge of people’s head is indispensable.

“As employees may have different hidden skills that are needed to contribute to the company’s success, but that cannot be “pressed out” of someone. You need to find a way to motivate your employees, so that they voluntarily share their knowledge with others. You won’t succeed by just giving an order. The exchange within the team is the important thing.”

After having described and analyzed the current situation of middle managers, their tasks and their functions, one last question needs to be answered.

Do you think, as a middle manager, a new awareness is needed for your existence?

“We should be given more importance or attention because in many cases it is the middle managers that run the daily business and contribute to the company’s success.”

“Middle managers should no longer be considered as instructors and sole knowledge carriers, but the manager of the information flow.”

“Middle managers are responsible for a specific part of the organization and often positioned to force and realize changes in the department. Because of the changes to nowadays an information society, it is important to discuss the role of the middle management. Roles include in this context planner, coordinator, leader, problem solver and negotiator. To accomplish these roles, certain skills and qualifications/competencies are linked to the effective performance of those roles. Skills are and can be human relations, emotional and social skills, and conceptual skills to manage attention, meaning trust and fiscal/accounting management.
Middle managers are more than just the level between the operating core and the top management, they have to promote the mission of their organization, support their employees and navigate successfully in the competitive environment with innovation, creativity and with clue. All these skills are the most important aspects in term of a successful company, which for now is not enough or not at all considered from most of the top management.

6. The (perfect) role of a middle manager

6.1 Personal requirements

How should a perfect middle manager look like? What are the special requirements he or she shall fulfill? Which characteristics describe him or her?

It is out of the question, that middle managers need to have expertise knowledge in their field of activity, because otherwise they would not be able to understand specific processes. In their capability as contact person, they can neither afford to lack an overall knowledge of what kind of work is being done within their sphere by the operating core, nor what visions the top management pursuits in relation to the own department.

As a consequence of the various responsibilities of middle managers which are much higher than the ones in the operating core (and sometimes even more diversified than the ones of the top management), a professional handling with the resource time and the ability to get employees developed so that they may work autonomously and goal-oriented needs to be established.

Furthermore, leading people does not only mean for middle managers, that they lead the operating core. Their tasks contain a regular exchange with the top management as well – and also sometimes to lead them. A middle manager is not just required to do things correctly, but to do the correct things, meaning to take the appropriate measures to achieve his or her aim. It is a question of efficiency and effectiveness.

Such requirements can only be fulfilled if the middle manager possesses distinct self-confidence, self-image and self-control – work-related and personally. Only then an energy arousing effect will jump over to the employees.

One of the most important skills of middle managers is the ability to understand the complex and abstract concepts and to link these to envisaged processes. Also, it is necessary that a middle manager is able to break down such complex concepts into partial strategies that might be implemented little by little.

As a middle manager, one should be able to honestly communicate both with employees from the operating core and the top management, whether about development, feedback on special files, recognition, solution approaches, conflicts or motivation.
To withstand all these difficulties, it is necessary for a good middle manager to be a responsible, credible, natural authority. Even if it is the aim to be promoted to the top management one day or if the middle management constitutes the personal career goal – without the described requirements, one will not be successful.

In order to illustrate the mode of action of a middle manager, the below chart describes the three pillars to be seen as basis for a successful leading person. It shall clarify that – especially in the current information society – a basis of existing know-how in combination with strong soft skills lead almost immediately to success.

Illustration 5: self-created following the information received during the interviews, 7 March 2016

6.2 Known qualifications – leadership dimension

Within a study performed by four fellow students last year (2015), the importance of leadership as indispensable skill for leading people has been analyzed in view of the current information society. They stated that “Leaders [...] motivate and stimulate people through their natural charisma, empathy and integrity. As it is a context related ability, not every leader is the right person at the right time for every challenge and/or environment, but he/she has the ability of accessing to the key components and creating benefits.”

This definition seamlessly interrelates to the above-described role of a middle manager. While they still work as experts in their areas of expertise, leadership skills are one of the utmost skills at all to guarantee the success of the work as subordinated element.

One of the questions, that had been further analyzed, is the one if leadership skills are inherent or learnable. In the context of middle managers this question is in so far interesting, as lots of them had never had a leading position before. So when
leadership is only an inherent skill, does that mean, that recruited middle managers from the operating core are no good? Or, in other words, are middle managers only good enough to lead a middle position without the possibility to be promoted to the top management?

Even though the research group came to the conclusion, that leadership in general is inherent, one cannot disregard the numerous external factors like level of education, social background, integration and identification with the firm, but also communication, management and time management techniques and skills that play significant roles. Some skills need to be learned, others to be experienced, so that the term leadership includes in fact inherent and learnable aspects.

Since there is not yet a way of measuring leadership as a skill, it is difficult to explain and to express the added value generated by middle managers, so that a fair and correct evaluation of them seems not to be possible at all. This also results in a most often not suitable remuneration, as the value they bring to a company cannot be seen within the annual balance.

Hence, only a few tools are available to approximately describe a middle manager's leader values: Key Performance Indicator, Cost/Income Ratios, Corporate Target and/or Account INcome II.

Another important remark which has been discussed is that the term leadership shouldn’t be mixed with the term management, as the tasks and functions of leaders and managers need to be analyzed separately. Frequently both terms are used synonymously, but should be considered as two separate important categories. But as parts of a middle manager's role, they both accentuate the importance inevitably.

What more is important to be a successful leader in the information society?

In a world of information overload, it is necessary to be able to see differences. Information is only then information, when there is a difference. As leader one should be able to see such differences in starting points, in the interpretation of situations and in values.

Furthermore, he or she should not only be aware of effective forces within the market, the company, the department, but also understand their importance.14

As a conclusion, leadership is absolutely one of the most important intangible skills for a middle manager. Besides emotional and social intelligence, which is being further described in the next chapter, it constitutes an immediate asset in view of the tasks and responsibilities. Without leadership skills, it will not be possible to act as successful connection between the top management and the operating core.

14 bilder.buecher.de/zusatz/25/.../25090228_lese_1.pdf requested on 7 March 2016
6.3 Unexplored potential – emotional and social intelligence

Within my researches for this thesis, I couldn’t find one single literature the middle management concerning and referencing to emotional and/or social intelligence, even though this topic is indispensably considerable in the context of a middle manager’s role.

What is to be understood by the term emotional intelligence can be described as ability to influence the quality of soft skills by influencing directly characteristics like empathy, the knowledge of human nature and judgment (following Daniel Goleman, a US psychologist).

Within a self-performed study in the frame of the bachelor’s studies, more precisely in the module “Intangibles” (2015), another research group in which I personally participated, analyzed emotional intelligence as a decisive criterion for the company’s success.

It has been examined whether skills like emotional intelligence are necessary for a successful leading person. As middle managers clearly need to be considered as specific leaders, they are concerned in more than one single way.

So far, the economy only dealt with intangibles as simple intangible assets. This assessment does not satisfy the importance of these existential resources in the predominant information society any longer.\(^\text{15}\)

As a middle manager, it is even more important to possess such skills. In light of the collaboration that needs to take place on different hierarchical levels, they absolutely have to be able to change and to juggle with their behavior, their mode of expression, their presentation and their way of communication.

Capabilities and knowledge in general are to be seen as intangibles, that become more and more important, not least because of the continuous digitalization and virtualization of developed economies.

Thus, the question arises, if a person with the best possible quality in technical fields is also good for a position as a leading middle manager, when there is a lack of emotional intelligence?

For the sake of concreteness, which characteristics describe emotional intelligence? What has been found out, is that emotional intelligence mainly consists of the following: empathy, sensitivity, self-control, self-confidence and communication skills.

All these characteristics are important elements that a middle manager should not only be aware of. They are rather knockout criterions, if not available. This being said, it is clear that emotional intelligence is not only an important factor for middle managers, but also for top managers.

To keep it even more simple: when brain and heart properly work together, a big step up the ladder is done.

Illustrations 6 and 7: https://image.jimcdn.com/app/cms/image/transf/none/path/s6385bf47a5534083/image/i1df3891866fd0c08/version/1435234671/lernen-mit-hirn-hand-und-herz.jpg
http://dialysefachschwester.de/attachments/Image/hirn-und-Herz_1.jpg?1429606487210

One and in my eyes the most important hypothesis that had been set up and examined within our research group, is that emotional intelligence is absolutely necessary to externalize the knowledge that is in the minds of the employees.

By using one’s emotional intelligence skills, it is possible to figure out what is going on in the minds of employees. Ideas and knowledge may be visualized so that a company can profit from these invisible assets. Nevertheless, this area is likewise a very critical one, as one cannot disregard to tolerate and to respect the opinions and beliefs of others. In this context, it is important to keep in mind that a certain self-reflection and a critical analysis with one’s own values and attitudes is indispensable.

The use of emotional intelligence may help middle managers also to solve complex problems within a company, because it allows a different view on the situation as by only rational thinking. In general our research team comes to the conclusion, that emotional intelligence may have an impact on the success of the company, as far as it and rational thinking are being used equally while taking decisions and evaluating situations and people.

Especially in a small country like Luxembourg, that does not possess any resources but the knowledge of the people working in here, there is a need to illustrate the importance of emotional intelligent middle managers. In view of the numerous resident service providers, banks and advisory firms and in times of digitalization, it is irresponsible not to grapple with this hot topic.

To accentuate these statements I’d like to quote two top managers who confirmed, that

“… soft skills like emotional and social intelligence are the most important requirements for a successful middle manager in the future.”

And “these soft skills will be key – on the one hand side to manage a team and motivate and engage them on a daily basis, on the other hand to deal with top managers to whom middle managers are reporting, social intelligence is a differentiator and winning factor.”

The importance couldn’t have been expressed better than that.
6.4 Influence of corporate culture

What is meant by the term corporate culture and how does it affect middle managers and their work? Within a company there are beliefs and behaviors that define the interaction between the top management, the middle management and the operating core. It also describes how to act and handle business outside the company. “A company’s culture will be reflected in its dress code, business hours, office setup, employee benefits, turnover, hiring decisions, treatment of clients, client satisfaction and every other aspect of operations.”16

This being said, it is clear that the corporate culture influences the work of middle managers. Instructions for the operating core, strategies that need to be implemented and trainings need to be in line with what is expected from the top management. One more task for the middle managers, as they are obliged to adapt their communications and to ensure, that the company’s image is protected – inside and outside the company.

Can the corporate culture also be an instrument for middle managers to influence, evaluate or accompany employees?

Corporate culture is not to be seen as an instrument, but it constitutes the environment in which people work. Without a doubt, the ambiance is an important factor that influences the work – work of top and middle managers, but also the work of the operating core.

Also, it is a way of how the top management lives the corporate culture. There might be just a spark that needs to jump over to the middle management and also to the operating core. It is much easier for the middle management to instruct and to request a certain work and behavior from the team, when right from the top the same values are being respected and lived.

7. Problem areas (following *inter alia* Dr. Jürgen Meyer)

During the 1990s, the middle management has been used as excuse for the non-communication between the top management and the operating core. What is worse, that the middle managers have even been criticized as being obstacles destroying the flow of information in the process organization. Lack of knowledge, ignorance and a non-proactive attitude have let to the disadvantageous reputation with which middle managers in the current information society are struggling.

The change that (young) middle managers experience often triggers a series of fears and anxiety. These problems include disorientation, disbelief and not having developed an own way of leadership yet. Feelings of loneliness, even solitude, as well as inner blankness add to these problems, because certain topics cannot be talked about with colleagues who used to be available as contact persons or even friends any longer. Additionally, for the outside world, the appearance of being competent and confident has to be preserved.

This behavioral pattern can often be seen in the private life as well, so that a certain façade is created in order not to appear vulnerable to the outside. This is especially problematic for young middle managers being in an organizational intermediate existence and having to do live up to their double role with regard to the top and the bottom. The discrepancy between top management and operative core means a lot of pressure for them.

Another difficulty for new middle managers who just arrived on this intermediate level is the behavior towards old colleagues and former employees. All of a sudden, they are their supervisors and need to take decisions that they would have decided on differently once they were colleagues, but which need to be decided on in a way that the top management wants them to be taken. In different terms, the middle manager needs to translate those decisions and make them comprehensible to/for his former colleagues. This seems to be especially problematic in conflict situations.

In literature (cf. Freimuth & Friedman, 1995) an aptly visual representation of this inner conflict can be found in the form of the “Janus” head.

Another problem seems to be the field of duty of middle managers, which is not always possible to be generalized. Their tasks vary because of the different sectors that middle managers work in, the size of the companies and the branches that they lead. Often, in companies that just had a re-structuring, the tasks of middle managers are even not yet clear. What are their responsibilities? Which decisions are they allowed to take on their own, which do they have to check with the top management?
7.1 Definition of the role

One problem that can lead to existential fear if not counteracted in an early stage is the rather vague definition of the role. If a person decides on a job in the middle management he/she takes on major responsibility, which will be one of the main points of evaluation later on.

On the whole, it is safe to say that the main tasks of middle managers consist of planning, organizing, answering questions of staff, leadership and supervision. According to each sector and each company, the order of importance is defined differently, though all of these main areas include major problems that shall be further analyzed in the following parts.

When one talks about roles in relation with the middle management, it is about definitions found in the 1960s. Nevertheless, some of the described role problems are still relevant. Hereinafter the main problems are described:

*Intra-Transmitter-Conflict*

At the same time the middle manager has received the instructions to cut jobs and to find a way to increase employee satisfaction.

*Inter-Transmitter-Conflict*

The top management expects cost savings, while the operating core does not want to renounce vested rights.

*Inter-Role-Conflict*

Due to the heavy workload, the middle manager cannot meet the requirements of his or her family any longer.

*Person-Role-Conflict*

The instructions of the top management to dismiss someone from his job while this decision is not compatible with the own moral concept of the middle manager.

Each of these role-related conflicts may cause trouble, but each of these conflicts can also be avoided. If middle managers would be earlier integrated in decision processes, the framework could be adapted. In view of the information society, it is indispensable to share information and knowledge as to contribute to the organization’s success.
7.2 Stress ratio

In the last decade the number of days missed because of sickness has increased enormously. In 2012, Germany registered 53 million days missed due to mental illness.17

Middle managers represent a rewarding group of test objects. As per an empirical study done by the Bundesanstalt für Arbeitsschutz und Arbeitsmedizin in 2012, they are most vulnerable because of their sandwich-position. In principle, there are four main stress triggers: increase of work intensification, shortage of human resources, more requirements to fulfill as a leader and contradictory expectations of the top management, the operating core, clients and colleagues.

Even if for every company there should be an individual plan to counteract, there exist already a lot of general approaches towards stress prevention. These include for example the granting of more time to fulfill requirements, the strengthening of the collaboration between the top management and the middle management, a direct, active involvement of the operating core in change processes, the promotion of soft skills, the provision of seminars that allow people to develop, the regular evaluation of individual processes and the implementation of successful partial processes within the whole company.

Middle managers may contribute even more efficiently to a company’s success, when the company provides or at least tries to provide a well-balanced working environment. It is not seldom that resentment is transferred to co-workers and this displeasure may be reflected in the work and the performance.

7.3 Pressure to perform

Basically, the performance pressure is the most often indicated problem of a middle manager. This pressure results from the four different sides that influence such a position: the top management, that wants the ambitious goals to be communicated and realized; the operating core, for which the middle manager is a mixture of superior and shelter; the internal concurrence with other middle managers and the urge to assert oneself; and finally external clients whose requests want to be handled contemporary and still with good quality.

The attempt to meet all these requirements seriously affects the work of middle managers. In order to deal with the pressure and to withstand, it is not only necessary to have a thick skin, but a personality allowing all the above-mentioned effects to happen, but not to increase alarmingly. They need to be conscious of the fact, that their role contains a buffer function – not only upwards and downwards, but also sideward.

In this context, the term “sandwich-position” is mentioned in most of the literature and studies to describe the

17 ZFO, Wieser, Doris / Bungard, Walter “Der praktische Nutzen von Stresslehren,” 04/2010
dilemma. It might be a nice comparison, but actually it does not reflect the whole reality.

The whole situation is rather to be seen as a complex construct, alike a small universe with lots of planets orbiting a fixed star. All of them have their own intentions, but they also need the help of the fixed star to achieve their goals.

A middle manager needs to resist and to elaborate a balance between self-determined and other-directed leadership. Employees are looking for middle managers with strong leadership skills, authenticity and a sense of responsibility. (Löhner 2009).

In view of the history, there is one more considerable aspect that plays in the problem of pressure performance. In the 1990s, a lot of middle management jobs had been cut within the so-called Lean Management movement.
More precisely, in the course of restructurings a lot of companies tried to remove hierarchical levels and to downsize within a more efficient way of organization. This was expected to result in a faster communication between the top management and the operating core but inevitably linked to an abolishment of middle management jobs.

The remaining middle managers had not only been penetrated to subsist, but they faced new developments and new needs within the globalization, the mechanization and notably the digitalization.

Tasks and requirements changed and are still changing, work processes become more and more complex. The middle manager need to be prepared: their responsibilities today may differ significantly from the ones of tomorrow.

**7.4 Qualification**

The problem area qualification illustrates the variety of skills which middle manager ideally should have, but often do not possess. In general, they are all-rounder, multi-talents fulfilling management tasks, specialized task and leadership tasks at the same time.

The term “middle manager” describes a multiple personality – in the good sense of the term. Simultaneously being motivator, communicator, personnel manager and domain expert is the hardest requirement at all.

But how to gain all these skills?

In order to manage the job scope, people need to be prepared prematurely. Besides the specific studies, a range of training offers, further education and seminars need to be provided. Whether these trainings should already be part of the general studies or if they should be part of the internal company training activities is disputed.

Should the middle management position be considered as the career goal, the preparation of leadership skills and the promotion of emotional and social intelligence is indispensable right from the beginning of the education.

Nevertheless, if companies recruit middle manager out of the internal operating core, it is their responsibility to ensure their ability to fulfill the new requirements and to support them as much as possible. As per a survey done by Bischoff in 2010, it is the lack of qualification that represents barriers for young middle manager to start their career.

Furthermore, another study of 2004 (Neuland) proves, that more than 90% of young middle managers have problems with the development of their own leadership style. Not only because their skills are not yet mature, but more often the global understanding of the work performance within a company is not given. The interaction between the top management and the operating core can only then be fructiferous, when the middle manager understands his role as interface and the impacts his or her work has on the overall structure of a company.
The second most mentioned problem for middle managers recruited from the own operating core of a company is the new hierarchy between former colleagues and themselves. Not necessarily envy can pose problems, but also differences in seniority and the period of employment. A clear definition of the role needs to be communicated as to avoid misunderstandings and to ensure the acceptance of someone in a more senior position.

Once again, it is necessary to emphasize the importance of foregoing trainings so that the middle managers learn how to act and react in an appropriate manner and how they should position theirselves.

Qualification also contains a certain ability to delegate and to screen, which tasks can and should be done by others. If a middle manager is not able to prioritize and to coordinate vertically and horizontally, there is a growing risk of overload.

To obtain the above-mentioned qualifications, various methods should be considered. In the current information society it is quite easy and possible to exchange for example via e-learning, during on-site seminars or within an online community. The wide range of possibilities should definitely be more used.

7.5 Ethics

Is “business ethics” an oxymoron (for middle managers)?

As already mentioned, middle managers are the interface mainly between the top management and the operating core. But at this level and besides the specific tasks to fulfill, the middle management also often struggles with the ethics conveyed by the top management. The own values do not necessarily correspond to the values of the top management.

Being the interface of various moral concepts may imply to leave behind one’s own values to enforce business values. This is not even as simple as said. Acting against one’s own senses of responsibility causes inner diremption and leads to unease.

What is worse, the consequences might be frustration, loss of self-confidence and loss of authority18. Middle managers sometimes reach a certain point, where they feel so powerless that they do not see any other way out than to leave a company.

Another critical issue is the fact, that it is not seldom that the middle management is being blamed for failure, even if it is not been their fault. For some top managers it is just much easier to blame the middle management, so that the reputation of the top management is not affected.

But nevertheless, ethics or business ethics are not to be considered as something bad. What is the most important to avoid such uncomfortable situations, is to live the business ethics on all levels of the company.

18 „Das mittlere Management : Die unsichtbaren Leistungsträger“ – Dr. Jürgen Mayer Stiftung, 2011
Right from the start of a new collaboration, it should be clarified if the personal values and the values of the company are compatible. This basis is indispensable for a longstanding, successful working relationship.

New ideas, changes or solutions that are profitable and also ethically justifiable, are the ones from which the company will most benefit, as from this point on one can count on the collaboration on every level.


In the ideal situation, the business ethics help even in decision making. The moral concepts serve as important guide for middle managers. The great advantage is, that whenever a decision needs to be taken rapidly and without the possibility to consult the top management before, one can rely on the accordance of the decision with the business ethics.

To respond to the question raised right at the beginning of this chapter: in principle, “business ethics” is not an oxymoron. But it is also not to exclude that for one or another person the ethics of a company may collide with the own values in such an engraving way, that a collaboration is just unimaginable.
7.6 Planning

Planning is a responsible task, as long as it is clear what exactly has to be planned and if any own-initiative of the middle managers is asked. In reality, however, middle managers are only sometimes included in the top management’s strategic planning, so that planning and coordination of the tasks and aims at the level of the heads of division can be very difficult. Non-communication in terms of change management can lead to inefficient processes. Instead of analyzing the actual causes of this, resulting nuisances are unfortunately often seen as the middle manager’s incompetence. As a result, the middle managers often receive negative feedback which seems to outbalance the work performed. Efficient planning is only possible if middle managers and top management communicate regularly with one another and if the middle manager’s competences are clearly defined.

Planning plays a major role in implementing new strategies within the company. In order to realise the top management’s general ideas and add to the company’s success, the middle managers are responsible for transforming the top management’s different ideas into different stages. However, particularly in big companies, many structures have been so tightened over the years that change suggested by the operational level will only be accepted reluctantly or not at all.

Next to planning tasks and coordinating missions also the operating of the staff plays a big role. Often, the top management is in charge of the recruitment of new employees, while the middle managers are only allowed to use the available (human) resources according to how they think it makes sense.
8. Importance for a company's / organization's realization of strategies

Strategy – a method or plan chosen to bring about a desired future, such as achievement of a goal or solution to a problem. The art and science of planning and marshalling resources for their most efficient and effective use.\(^{19}\)

There are mainly three types of strategies within a company:

- individual strategies with substantive reference in relation to the company;
- strategies for the company; and
- strategies of the company.

In most of the literature, the following graphic (a very simplified one) describes the strategy process:


For the sake of clearness, the different concerned management levels have been added.

\(^{19}\) http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/strategy.html
As set out in chapter 2.1., it is one of the main tasks of the middle managers to implement the strategies given by the top management. Their interaction is indispensable, as the abstract instructions they receive need to be made operational before any new strategy may be implemented. Within most of the companies they only act within the two phases of implementation and evaluation / control (as outlined in red in the above graphic).

A better involvement of the middle management already during the elaboration of strategies would offer an even wider range of information collection and avoid that strategies may be developed, that are not entirely feasible. With the help of their experience, the middle managers can offer relevant and important additional information as to support the management in finding appropriate strategies.

Also, they may transpose the strategies even better when they have been in the loop right from the beginning.

To illustrate, the below graphic – roughly amended – shows that the middle management could and should already play a role in the strategy formulation.
This collaboration constitutes (under the condition that both the top management and the middle management live their role and have the common goal of success) a key factor in the information society. In times of digitalization such a narrow coordination about processes and process optimization, strategy implementation and reputation taking into consideration the visions and missions of a company provides an (un)measurable advantage.

The reason why I used the term “(un)measurable” is that even when the collaboration is fruitful and the company profits in whatever way, it is not said that the middle management will be recognized for such achievements.

The two top managers who were ready to give their view on that point have been asked, if they have the impression that their middle managers implement strategies just like they have been prescribed by the top management.

“Half-half. In general yes, strategy is clear for everyone (it is part of the goal setting within the performance management process); nevertheless it is difficult for them to grow in a strategic direction and to acquire new business if they need to manage a team and operate a service in parallel.”

On the one hand, I agree that it is a multifunctional role to play and that the opinion may come up, that middle managers are not able to do everything like it is foreseen by the top management. On the other hand, it may also be a well thought out strategy of a middle manager to get processes started in an alternative manner – as more often he or she is more aware of how to work with the operating core. They know better how to tackle a challenge within their area of activity than the top management.
The second questioned top manager stated, that he is of the opinion that strategies are well implemented by the middle managers and that “control is done during performance reviews and by checking goal achievement parameters.”

After having further discussed on this with both of them, they agreed that it needs to be pointed out that the middle management plays an essential part within the realization of strategies – independent of the way in which they are implemented.
9. Contribution of intangibles to the company's / organization's success

Intangible: unable to be touched; not having physical presence.\(^{20}\)

Intangibles: intellectual values, soft skills, expertise.

When we talk about intangibles, we clearly need to define the terms used. Intangibles are not to be confused with intellectual property, such as patents or rights. It is mainly about soft skills, like emotional and social intelligence, that constitute one of the last unexplored potentials within our current knowledge-driven environment.

Different scenarios illustrate the importance of intangibles as key to success. Four such scenarios are briefly described hereunder.

1. At a certain point, it may seem like the possibilities for developing a team, a department or even whole companies are exhausted. At that stage, it appears that with known tools or aids no further amendment is possible.

2. Within a team there is an almost insurmountable conflict between different members that affect the performance of the whole team. No solution can be found by the concerned people themselves.

3. There is a lack of motivation noticeable by the performance of an employee. He or she neither talks openly about it, nor are any measures taken to amend the situation.

4. By analyzing the work done by an employee, one can divine that he or she is able to perform even better. Why is he or she not able or willing to do so?

A company that possesses of (perfect) middle managers, who are emotional, social and technical intelligent is more successful, more competitive and more popular. The middle managers are able to put themselves into the shoes of others. For every of the above-mentioned four scenarios a solution could be developed – with the help of intangibles.

A new view, rethinking, profiting from the ability to empathize oneself into others as to understand their ambitions, their values, their fears and their ideas constitutes an advantage like no other.

But only such capacity is not to be considered as key to success for a company. It is the fact that with the help of intangibles the knowledge can be exported from the head of the people. By posing the right questions in the right moment, by knowing which incentive creates the utmost motivation, by offering the possibility to

\(^{20}\) http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/intangible
personally develop and profit from the disclosure a good (middle) manager is able to use the gained information as to the company's success.

Even if not directly, intangibles may influence indirectly the performance of a whole company. Correctly deployed, there is an enormous potential to be explored and used.

Success of a company is not only monetarily measured, but also by the internal perception of all hierarchical levels. Facts show that happy employees have much better performances than unsatisfied ones. Another factor that influences indirectly the result of a company.

In how far are the intangibles so important for middle managers in the information society?

Work becomes more and more abstract. With a short look at the historic development in Europe over the last century, it is obvious that we leave more and more the material environment. From an industrial society via a service society to now, the European world turned - less and less people work in the primary and secondary sectors and even the number of people working in the tertiary sector decreases – while the number of employees quaternary sector increases.

Luxembourg constitutes a great example, as the second-smallest European country, the last Grand-Duchy does not possess any physical resources. Nevertheless, it is one of the most important and economically best positioned countries in the world.

With a GDP of 82.700 EUR in 2012\(^{21}\), one may ask, how this is possible. Economy focusses on international oriented business, varied industries and a network with a lot of other markets. It is an exemplary function for the use of human capital – a kind of pioneer in the process of externalizing knowledge from the people's heads. This task relates to the middle managers, who are nearly present in every larger company. They act as to keep this flourishing work place alive, but still there is a need for investigating further on the potentials of emotional and social intelligence.

10. Influence of the paradigm shift from an industrial society via a service society through to an information and knowledge-based society

To understand the importance of this chapter, it is first of all necessary to understand what paradigm shift means and to know the characteristics of the different social systems.

Paradigm shift in general describes a change in the way of thinking and acting within a consisting environment. More precisely, in relation to economics, it describes a developing new view and opinion of the current circumstances compared with economic characteristics of foregone social systems.

Thomas S. Kuhn (1922-1996), a US economist known for the implementation of the terms “paradigm” and “paradigm shift”, further describes and popularizes these terms in his 1962 published “The Structure of Scientific Revolutions” by analyzing the entry of a so-called extraordinary situation, whenever a paradigm seems no longer to be valid. This may happen, when over a period of time different new observations question the predominant paradigm so that the “normal situation” is out of balance.22

In what sense is the middle management concerned?

The tasks and functions of middle managers vary with every new circumstance and every new trend. Therefore it is clear, that middle managers need to rapidly adapt to new situations and new economic requirements. Also, as for quite a long time only few people dealt with this topic, the importance of a middle manager in the current information society has almost been forgotten.

In every social society a middle manager’s clearly defined work can be seen as normality. With every change, every new framework condition a paradigm shift may start and lead to a need for a new awareness of the work and the important role of a middle manager.

Let’s take a closer look on the historic development to better understand the various changes a middle manager was obliged to experience.

In the late 19th century the industrial society was born in most central European countries. Industrial society is the term used for a time, when the conditions for the industrial production mainly determined the economic, social and cultural life.23

At that time, the middle managers primary focused on expertise and special know-how the production concerning. Their aim and ambition was to supervise the operating core and to impart knowledge to younger or subordinated employees as to guarantee a high quality of work as well as smooth processes.

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23 http://www.bpb.de/nachschlagen/lexika/politiklexikon/17629/industriegesellschaft
They have always been considered as contact person, but their tasks weren’t too diversified at that stage.

As from the 1970s on, a new change could be recognized. Within the tertiarisation the society started to become a service society. From that time on, people focused more on the provision of services than on the production of goods. In Germany, first-time in 1975 there were as many people working in the service sector as in the industrial sector.¹

For the middle management there were now two problems to face: On the one hand, their tasks changed and were much more diversified and on the other hand, companies tended to downsize the hierarchical levels to – in their eyes - shorten the way between the top management and the operating core. As a consequence and in the curse of the so-called lean management, many positions in the middle management had been broken down. The remaining middle managers had to identify the new needs, they needed to adapt to these new circumstances and at the same time, they had to justify their position as essential and indispensable within the company.

At that time, a lot of companies were not aware of the work performed by the middle management. They only recognized their need, when the society changed and developed once again.

In the year 2000, the Lisbon European Council announced that “The shift to a digital, knowledge-based economy, prompted by new goods and services, will be a powerful engine for growth, competitiveness and jobs. In addition, it will be capable of improving citizens’ quality of life and the environment. To make the most of this opportunity, the Council and the Commission are invited to draw up a comprehensive eEurope Action Plan to be presented to the European Council in June this year, using an open method of coordination based on the benchmarking of national initiatives, combined with the Commission’s recent eEurope initiative as well as its communication "Strategies for jobs in the Information Society".”²⁴

This was probably the point when it became clear, that in such a fast moving society companies of a certain size may no longer be able to work efficiently without the use of strong middle management. But it is not only necessary to hire some middle managers and to leave them to theirselves, but to create a company-wide awareness and understanding of the role of the middle management.

Nevertheless, awareness is the most sensitive issue. In reality, most middle managers who answered the above-described questionnaire indicated, that in their opinion, they are not as well-known as it should be the case.

11. Solution approach

How can the current situation and the awareness be amended? Shouldn't it be the goal of large companies to offer respected and valued jobs in the middle management as it is obvious, that this level contributes to the success of a company – especially within our information society?

To reach such a desirable situation, the middle management absolutely needs to be promoted. We need to detach from the obsolete view that the middle management is a paralyzing layer. It is out of the question, that middle managers do not receive the recognition they deserve. That leads us to the next question: Why should people aim to be a middle manager?

In order to amend or even renew the view of the middle management, two great changes need to take place. First of all, companies have to adapt and rethink their organizational structure, to analyze their current middle management (if existing) and check, whether the right persons are in such positions. As described in chapter 6.1., a good and successful middle manager needs to possess various requirements. It is of no help, if it is just decided to have some people working in the middle management, without having the appropriate human resources necessary for this important layer.

This being said, there is a need for motivation and incentives. If a company offers to the middle management a package including an appropriate salary, a (possible) bonus, trainings, possibilities to develop, even non-monetary incentives such as appreciation and praise, the middle management becomes a final career goal. Otherwise it will always be seen as intermediate level. And in a long view, a successful company needs to possess a stable basis – built by the middle management who supervises and coordinates the operating core.

Ideally, the company creates an environment in which people really want to work. If the framework offers free development, people will automatically be intrinsically motivated – the best base for the middle management to flourish.

Second, middle managers need to work even more proactively as to be recognized. They need to find a way to make their work more transparent and more obvious. That may happen with the help of the top management, by sending out internal communications on a regular basis or by presenting good results to the top management and the operating core.
Furthermore, people need to be conscious of the fact, that not everybody is able to be a middle manager. Only those who are really self-confident, self-controlled and possess a positive self-image will persist in the information society, as the requirements of companies and the society constantly change and advance rapidly.

Illustration 15: http://worklife.consulting/fuer-unternehmen/mitarbeiter-finden/

12. New definition of the middle management in the current information society

At the beginning of this thesis it’s been annotated that after all research done and information gathered with the help of interviews and questionnaires, the existing definitions don’t cover the middle management entirely. Therefore, I produced my own middle management definition in order to demonstrate, what middle management in the current information society means.

The middle management is the most invisible but yet simultaneously the most important central point within an organization, which networks top management, operating core, supporting units and external players while it requires to be staffed with the most emotionally and socially intelligent people having leadership skills and being able to multitask in order to adapt rapidly to any new challenge and to be able to communicate with and to all people within and directly related to an organization.

13. Conclusion

The middle management - new awareness needed in the current information society? Under this headline I tried to focus on the importance that middle managers have within their organizations and their perception in the current prevailing information society which is characterized - amongst others - by digitalization and the possibility to use information as economic resource and subject of mass consumption. [25]

The various chapters presenting the tasks to be done by the middle management show how flexible and how responsible-minded middle managers need to be when they want to succeed and defend their position towards critics. Most often their tasks are neither know, nor recognized. The term “invisible key player” well describes the fact, that the achievements cannot always be seen at a first glance. A deeper analysis is needed as to really understand a middle managers daily work.

They need to rapidly adapt to new situations, comparable to specific antibodies that develop receptors matching the requirements of docking demands. To be able to correspond to these conditions, middle managers need to be trained. They should get possibilities to develop, either through trainings and seminars or through continuing education supported by the company. It is necessary (especially for young middle managers), that they have the opportunity to improve, to establish their own leadership style and to be assured, that a collaboration takes place on all levels within a company.

The current perception of middle managers (as laid out in chapters 3 and 4) is not to be considered as true at 100 %. This statement is not a reproach. It is a determination of the prevailing situation that needs further improvement. It is crucial to make people aware of the positive effects a well-structured middle management consisting of well-educated and emotional intelligent middle managers may have for their companies. To show, that they are not a paralyzing, but a driving layer. That their leadership skills are the reason for a profitable operating core and a fruitful exchange with the top management.

At this stage I’d like to take up once again the importance of intangibles. We are living in such a fast-moving environment, surrounded and often overwhelmed by way too many information, that in future it will not be possible anymore to act as a successful middle manager, when soft skills are not developed.

Leadership, social and emotional intelligence - key factors for success, when correctly used.

Without a doubt, technical skills also need to be present – it is mainly what is described by the IQ (intelligence quotient) and the reason somebody is hired. Nevertheless, by making use of one’s EQ (emotional quotient) the changes for getting promoted are a lot higher.
But not only for promotion is the EQ most useful. Born middle managers help themselves to create, to stabilize and to form a team. It’s their ambition to create a work environment, where people feel comfortable so that the company can make use and profit of their full potential. In parallel they (sometimes even subconsciously) use their skills for the communication with the top management, since there is always a difference in discussing and analyzing situations and problems. 

As described above, changes need to take place on various instances. There is a necessity for making people aware of concrete actions in their environment, so that they may understand the importance of the middle management.

Summarized, if it is really envisaged to empower the situations of the middle managers, it is indispensable to create a new awareness. Otherwise, they will never be seen as what they really are – the beating heart of an organization.
Survey “The middle management – new awareness needed in the current information society?”

1) Please choose your nationality:
   - German
   - English
   - French
   - Luxembourgish
   - Belgian
   - Other (please specify: ________________________________)

2) Please choose the country in which you are currently working:
   - Germany
   - Luxembourg
   - France

3) Please choose your age:
   - 20-29
   - 30-39
   - 40-49
   - >50

4) Please choose the sector of your company:
   - Service provider
   - Financial institution / bank
   - Public services
   - Crafts enterprise
   - Educational establishment
   - Other (please specify: ________________________________)

5) For how many years have you been in a position of the middle management? ______

6) Do you want to profit from your current position to be promoted to the top management? ______

7) If yes, please indicate, how do you think the current position offers you a career springboard?

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________
8) If no, please explain the reasons for which you do not want to leave the middle management:

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________________________________________________________________________

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9) In view of the change from an industrial society via a service society through to an information- and knowledge-based society, do you think that the tasks of middle managers have changed?

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10) How much of your time during a day do you spend with … (please indicate in percent %)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Planning and coordination</th>
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<td>Motivation</td>
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</table>

11) Do you think that intangibles like emotional and social intelligence become more important for middle managers to prevail in the current information society?

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________________________________________________________________________
12) Do you think that in general and on the surface, the perception of middle managers should be renewed? Why?
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### EIKV-Schriftenreihe zum Wissens- und Wertemanagement

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