Albert Heijn: innovation from the roots to the routine

A case study of successful innovation at a routine based level at Albert Heijn

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ABSTRACT

The starting point of this study is a management question posed by the Albert Heijn management:

“How can Albert Heijn create an environment:

1. Which offers the board the possibility to initiate innovations from the top down, living up to the innovative heritage,
2. That anchors innovation within the already existing departments within the organisation,
3. Which leads to a new, innovative network organisation?”

The elements of this management question show some similarities with what Jacobs and Snijders (2008) describe as innovation routine. Jacobs and Snijders typify three mental obstacles and a innovation decathlon that should be concerned in order to be successful in innovation routine. Therefore this study investigates two hypotheses:

H1. Albert Heijn is hampered by one or more of the three mental obstacles
H2. Albert Heijn scores insufficient on one or more of the ten disciplines of the innovation decathlon

From the results of participant observation at Albert Heijn is concluded that:

1. **Mental obstacle 1: Absolutisation of innovation.**
   Albert Heijn is not hampered by this mental obstacle because it is aware of the different forms of innovation. But despite this awareness Albert Heijn is focusing too much on technological innovation.

2. **Mental obstacle 2: Innovation and routine are considered to be incompatible.**
   Albert Heijn is not hampered by this mental obstacle because it is actually trying to find a form where innovation and routine can be united. But the culture should be adjusted in order to put the hands of routine and innovation together.

3. **Mental obstacle 3: Innovation is dependent on leadership.**
   Albert Heijn is not hampered by this mental obstacle. The management set the right conditions and gave the employees the room to flourish but this latter aspect is not yet sufficient.

As a result the first hypothesis is not true.
The conclusion in regard to the elements of the innovation decathlon¹ is:

1. *the link of the strategic profile and the business model with innovation* is right but incomplete, in the present form it is too concentrated around technology and at the head office in Zaandam.

2. Albert Heijn as a whole excels in *society-orientation*. But when innovation is concerned the societal focus is held back by the technological focus.

3. Albert Heijn as a company and the InnovationTeam are very *customer-oriented* especially now that they aim on better idea generation by the store personnel and by customers.

4. Albert Heijn is *ambitious and daring* but the approach of small-scaliness and no budget/low budget limits these factors.

5. *develop and ’milk’ your product lines (incremental evolvement)* is very good.

6. *learn from real figures*: whether targets and key figures exist or not, innovation employees are absolutely unaware of these figures and therefore incapable to *learn* from them.

7. *look for the best people*: as a technology team Albert Heijn has a perfect team, experienced and competent. But regarding the goals and the scope of innovation in general, the lack of diversity is a big problem.

8. *ambiance and open culture*: although everyone at Albert Heijn is ‘blue-blooded’ and proud, the culture is one of claiming instead of sharing and collaboration.

9. *build strong networks*: there are many good networks in and around Albert Heijn but there are no real liaisons.

10. *focus and commitment*: focus and commitment are at this moment mainly shown through the trust and possibilities that are offered to the development of innovation. Setting and holding on to milestones is not an issue yet when but it will be.

One does not have to be the absolute winner in every category in order to be successful in innovation routine. But the scores for every discipline have to be sufficient in order to win at the end. If the technological focus of the team is ignored for a moment, the conclusion is that Albert Heijn scores insufficient at the disciplines *learn from real figures* and *ambiance and open culture*. If the technological focus is considered a shortcoming as well, one has to conclude that the disciplines *the linkage between strategy and business model, society-oriented, look for the best people* are not sufficient either. In both situations hypothesis 2 is true.

In the discussion and recommendations it is stated that the key answer to the management question and to optimising innovation routine has to be found in three areas: diversity, culture and figures. The lack of diversity is mainly the result of the partial influence of mental obstacle 1. Therefore, in the opinion of the author Albert Heijn has to make an important decision, either choose for technological

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¹ The elements of the decathlon are written in Italic.
innovation as main focus and let go of a central role for innovation in general, or be the centre point of innovation and therefore restructure innovation into a diverse team that can handle, answer and/or divide all areas of innovation. Additionally suggestions are given to make better connections between the management and the operating team and the operating team and the Albert Heijn stores in order to improve diversity. To conclude is suggested that a diverse ambidextrous culture with targets and agreements on the one hand and fun, out of the box thinking and free time on the other should be created.
**Root:**

**noun 1** a part of a plant normally below ground, which acts as a support and collects water and nourishment. **2** the embedded part of a bodily organ or structure such as a hair. **3** (also root vegetable) a turnip, carrot, or other vegetable which grows as the root of a plant. **4** the basic cause, source, or origin: money is the root of all evil. **5** (roots) family, ethnic, or cultural origins. **6** (also root note) Music the fundamental note of a chord. **7** Linguistics a form from which words have been made by the addition of prefixes or suffixes or by other modification. **8** Mathematics a number or quantity that when multiplied by itself one or more times gives a specified number or quantity.

Origin: Old English, related to Wort.

**Routine:**

**noun 1** a sequence of actions regularly followed; a fixed unvarying programme. **2** a set sequence in a theatrical or comic performance.

Origin: French, from route ‘route’.

Oxford English Dictionary
The focus is on the customer, “so that we don’t forget for whom we work – Mr. Albert Heijn junior”. Customer satisfaction and loyalty have always been and always will be the basic values of Albert Heijn. I absolutely did not know that it is all about these kind of values in retail, the first day I joined the milkman for ‘a day on the job’ as a eleven-year-old in my hometown Oegstgeest. Seven years later I sure did! All this time, every Saturday for seven years, I worked with great pleasure at this small company, and now, with great sadness, I had to leave. The enormous success of ‘my’ milkman, while milkmen were filing for bankruptcy all around us, had been the fundament of my interest in business and economics. And therefore I left, to study Business Administration at the University of Groningen. During this study I started to admire Albert Heijn more and more. To my opinion Albert Heijn was ‘my’ milkman’s ‘big brother’. Milk, soda, beer or cheese, you can get it everywhere, but ‘my’ milkman and Albert Heijn, those are the companies who put just that little bit of extra effort in their products and services, those are the companies you feel connected to. “The common things affordable, the special things accessible”

This is the beginning of a letter I wrote in December 2007. A letter that gives a striking expression of why I feel so connected to retail. A letter that explains my interest in business administration. A letter that shows my affection with customer satisfaction and loyalty in particular. To me, customer satisfaction and loyalty are the ultimate goals in business, the guarantee for continuous success. But in order to keep customers satisfied and loyal and therefore in order to stay successful, companies have to innovate. Παντα ρετ ουδεν μενει. Therefore, my decision to choose Strategy and Innovation as my specialisation for the Master of Business Administration was no surprise.

The letter I wrote in December 2007 was also the letter that got me in contact with Albert Heijn. It was initially written for another research in the realm of innovation at Albert Heijn. But after the first contact, I was offered an internship at Albert Heijn. And eventually in March 2008 the internship started at the Albert Heijn head office in Zaandam. An internship that combined retail, business administration, strategy and innovation. In other words: wow!

This thesis is the outcome of my internship. Both the internship and this thesis could not have been realised without Jan de Heij. Jan is the innovation manager at Albert Heijn the letter was addressed to, the one that offered me the internship and the one that posed the management question. I owe him great appreciation and a lot of thanks. Furthermore I want to thank my colleagues at Albert Heijn for the great opportunity they gave me, their support, their advises, the fun, the wonderful time!

I also want to thank my supervisors Hendrik Snijders and Thijs Broekhuizen. A special thanks goes out to Hendrik Snijders. Not only for his encouragement and assistance as my supervisor but also for sharing his knowledge and wisdom with regard to innovation and innovation routine in particular. He
offered me the unique possibility to use the book *Innovatieroutine, Hoe managers herhaalde innovatie kunnen stimuleren* even before it was published and moreover his expertise and critical opinions towards this theory.

This thesis is not only the final result of my study, it also enhances the end of an era. My era as a student. Therefore not only for their support during the realisation of this thesis but for all their support and comfort during these years, the great fun, the magnificent times, I want to thank my friends and family. They made this time of my life the time of my life.

But more than anyone else I want to thank my parents. Their help and support to accomplish this thesis was tremendous. But most of all I want to thank them for all those years of believing in me, supporting me no matter what, for giving me the opportunity to study at all, but also for giving me the opportunity to do it as I please, to enjoy life, for giving me the opportunities to make my life what it is. A life of joy and happiness.

*Veeningen, 23 maart 2009*

*Remmelt Mulder*
# Table of Contents

1. **Introduction** .................................................................................................................. 11

2. **Theoretical Framework** .................................................................................................. 14
   2.1 Innovation routine .......................................................................................................... 14
   2.2 Mental Obstacle 1: The Absolution Of Innovation ....................................................... 14
   2.3 Mental Obstacle 2: innovation and routine are considered to be incompatible ........... 17
   2.4 Mental Obstacle 3: Innovation is dependent on leadership ........................................... 19
   2.5 The innovation decathlon ............................................................................................. 22
   The link of the strategic profile and the business model with innovation ......................... 22
   Society-oriented .................................................................................................................. 22
   Customer-oriented .............................................................................................................. 22
   Ambitious and daring .......................................................................................................... 22
   Develop and ‘milk’ your product lines (incremental evolution) ........................................ 22
   Learn from real figures ........................................................................................................ 22
   Look for the best people ...................................................................................................... 23
   Ambiance and open culture ............................................................................................... 23
   Build strong networks ........................................................................................................ 23
   Focus and commitment ....................................................................................................... 23
   Using the innovation decathlon ........................................................................................ 23

3. **Methodology** .................................................................................................................. 24

4. **Analysis and Results** ...................................................................................................... 27
   4.1 The link of the strategic profile and the business model with innovation ................... 27
   4.2 Society-oriented ............................................................................................................ 30
4.3 Customer-oriented

4.4 Ambitious and daring

4.5 Develop and 'milk' your product lines (incremental evolution)

4.6 Learn from real figures

4.7 Look for the best people

4.8 Ambiance and open culture

4.9 Build strong networks

4.10 Focus and commitment

4.11 Mental obstacle 1: The absolution of innovation

4.12 Mental obstacle 2: Innovation and routine are considered to be incompatible

4.13 Mental obstacle 3: Innovation is dependent on leadership

5 Conclusion and Discussion

5.1 Conclusion

5.2 Discussion and Recommendations

6 Limitations

References

Appendix 1: Transcript Interview Jan de Heij

Appendix 2: Roles in participant observation

Appendix 3: Position of innovation in the Ahold EU IM department

Appendix 4: Status of innovation projects according to the innovation funnel
1 INTRODUCTION

With a brand name recognition of almost one hundred percent Albert Heijn is a part of Dutch society one cannot miss. With over seven hundred fifty Albert Heijn convenience stores, twenty four Albert Heijn XL megastores, thirty five Albert Heijn to Go, so called, ‘run shops’ and their albert.nl online shop, the company had a 31.3 percent market share in 2008 in the Dutch supermarket branch (www.ah.nl, 2009; www.fd.nl, 2009). This enormous chain of supermarkets originated from just one small shop, founded in 1887 in Oostzaan. And not only Albert Heijn started off as this small store, the billion dollar multinational Ahold, holding company of Albert Heijn and listed in Amsterdam and New York evolved out of it as well. How did all of this happen? What made this one single store in Oostzaan so special that, somehow, the company flourished in a way that it became a substantial part of Dutch society? This company must have done something incredibly well over the last one hundred thirty years and one might presume that, during this period, innovation must have attributed to this success. Did it? And will it still in the future?

I asked myself all these kind of questions when I was investigating the impact of (non-technical)-innovation at Albert Heijn on the Dutch supermarket industry in ‘How is Albert Heijn competing on the basis of non-technical innovation in the supermarket industry?’ (Mulder, 2007). During this study I found out that Albert Heijn has innovation in its roots. As Mister Albert Heijn himself said it once, “we are honoured to constantly be the first with things” (InnovatieCafé, 2008). Among these ‘things’ were the concept of the Dutch supermarket as the convenience store as we know it now, the customer shares of the holding company Ahold, several advertisement and promotion actions, the customer loyalty card Bonuskaart, the use of barcodes, a lot of product types and formulas, the idea of self scanning your products and paying without a cashier, and many more initiatives (Mulder, 2007). Still, the research showed that in order to stay proud and keep being the first for the next decades, innovation needs more and constant attention. Interviews at the Albert Heijn head office in Zaanstad illustrated that there is a discrepancy between the innovative history and the reliant beliefs of the board on the one hand and the innovative culture throughout the whole organisation on the other hand. Therefore Albert Heijn faces a big challenge, the hierarchical structure and long-established culture of the company that has brought the company to its present position has to be ‘transformed’ into an atmosphere of learning, experimenting, entrepreneurship and small-scaliness. In order to create and manage this innovative environment, Albert Heijn did not want to create a specific policy for innovation. When concentrating the subjects of innovation within a single department with specific people being responsible for such a policy, the structure might turn out to be too formal and traditional still.²

² For a transcript of the interview that led to this management question see Appendix 1.
Therefore the management question for this thesis is: “*How can Albert Heijn create an environment:*

1. Which offers the board the possibility to initiate innovations from the top down, living up to the innovative heritage,
2. That anchors innovation within the already existing departments within the organisation,
3. Which leads to a new, innovative network organisation?”

“The aim of Albert Heijn by using this philosophy is to change the organisation, not by redefining the structure but by fine tuning the culture of the company. The traditional boundaries of asking permission for every step you take and concentrating on responsibilities of managers should be substituted for a culture where ‘thinking different’ is promoted. The employees of Albert Heijn should constantly surprise and inspire the management with unusual ideas outside the traditional structure of the organisation; out-of-the-box thinking.” (Mulder, 2007: 27)

The idea of an organisation ‘where innovation is anchored in a network and a culture where employees should constantly surprise the management with innovative thinking’ is very similar with what Jacobs and Snijders (2008) describe as innovation routine in their book *Innovatieroutine, Hoe managers herhaalde innovatie kunnen stimuleren.* In this book Jacobs and Snijders (2008) study what managers can do to stimulate repetitive innovation success. It seems that innovation on a routine based way has not had (m)any attention in innovation literature ever since Schumpeter in 1950. Right at the time that Jacobs and Snijders studied this forgotten area of innovation Albert Heijn posed its management question. The combination of these factors is the starting point of this thesis.

In their book Jacobs and Snijders (2008) define three mental obstacles that have to be challenged in order for innovation to be successful:

1. Absolutisation of innovation.
2. Innovation and routine are considered to be incompatible.
3. Innovation is dependent on leadership.

Furthermore, they identify ten disciplines within which organisations must excel in order to repetitively succeed in innovation. They typify these disciplines as the ‘innovation decathlon’, which implies that, as in a regular decathlon, it is not sufficient to excel in some areas, but that in order to ‘win’, companies should stand out in all the disciplines. The ten disciplines are the following:

1. the link of the strategic profile and the business model with innovation
2. society-oriented
3. customer-oriented
4. ambitious and daring
5. develop and ‘milk’ your product lines (incremental evolvement)
6. learn from real figures
7. look for the best people
8. ambiance and open culture
9. build strong networks
10. focus and commitment

The management question posed by Albert Heijn suggests that the environment at Albert Heijn is not (yet) optimal for successful innovation at a routine based level. Moreover the suggestion is made that the culture at Albert Heijn is not optimal for successful innovation at a routine based level either. Both the environment and culture are subjects that are influenced a lot by factors like attitude and behaviour. The mental obstacles used by Jacobs and Snijders (2008) could be interpreted as prejudices towards innovation. Prejudices in general tend to influence the behaviour and attitude of people. In this case it could very well be that the mental obstacles influence the actual behaviour and attitude of employees and managers in particular with regard to innovation. This could have its effect on the innovation decathlon and the other way around. Therefore this study investigates two hypotheses in order to find out why the environment at Albert Heijn is not yet optimal for innovation and advises on how this could possibly be improved, based on the mental obstacles and the innovation decathlon presented by Jacobs and Snijders (2008). These hypotheses are:

H1. Albert Heijn is hampered by one or more of the three mental obstacles

H2. Albert Heijn scores insufficient on one or more of the ten disciplines of the innovation decathlon

In order to test these hypotheses a theoretical framework is set up in the next chapter, followed by a description of the methodology used at Albert Heijn to come to empirical results. These results are subject of the following chapter. Finally the outcomes of the hypotheses will be described in the conclusion, eventually leading to recommendations for the management question.
2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Innovation routine

As Amabile et al. (1996:1154) put it: “All innovation begins with creative ideas”, and therefore some people might say that it is something better left to really creative intellectuals with whom genial ideas pop up “just like that, every once and a while”. In that view innovation does not seem something which can be structured or, moreover, can exist as a routine. In their book Innovatie in routine, Hoe managers herhaalde innovatie kunnen stimuleren Jacobs and Snijders (2008) conclude that, in fact, innovation can be managed very well and that leadership is of great importance in order to do so. Innovation should be an organisational and management routine in order to be successful. As stated in the introduction Jacobs and Snijders (2008) defined three mental obstacles that should be considered in innovation and they found out that innovation routine is the result of ten areas of expertise that companies should excel in. In the previous chapter it was also mentioned that there has not been many attention for routines in innovation in literature during the last half age. Therefore it is not surprising to see that this decathlon and the mental obstacles used by Jacobs and Snijders are the guideline for this theoretical framework. However, to anchor this framework within a more solid scientific fundament, every issue in the decathlon and the mental obstacles will be accomplished with other theories that define the principles of this guideline. By doing so one should be able to see the relevance and validity of these theories in investigating innovation routine (at Albert Heijn).

In the theory of Jacobs and Snijders (2008) the mental obstacles are the elements that should be considered when innovation is regarded in a broad sense. The innovation decathlon in their theory is a more operational view on innovation and handles about the view of managers on the innovative process and what they must do to control and improve that process. Both these areas of innovation are based on the same underlying theories and ideas. Therefore, in this theoretical framework the mental obstacles and underlying theories are discussed broadly and, to avoid repetitions, the elements of the decathlon are only explained briefly without much further theoretical background. This does not mean that the innovation decathlon is a direct result of the mental obstacles. But as stated in the introduction the mental obstacles can be considered as prejudices to innovation, a certain attitude towards it. As prejudices in general tend to influence people’s behaviour, one might suppose that one’s attitude towards the mental obstacles does influence one’s position in the innovation decathlon and the other way around.

2.2 Mental Obstacle 1: The Absolution Of Innovation

“If you want things to stay as they are, things will have to change” (Tomasi Di Lampedusa, 1960: 40). Instead of focusing on production only, companies should focus on the future needs of customers and have to try to create a long-term relationship with these customers (Leeftlang, 2003). So for companies
as well, this saying applies. If they want to stay successful, things will have to change. But what is innovation and why is it that important? Apparently it is and it comes in many forms, otherwise how could one absolutise innovation. Why it is so important in this matter is shown in its definition by Wijnberg (2004: 1416): “Innovation is something new which is presented to relevant selectors in such a way that its value will be determined”. Other definitions of innovations also refer to this combination of something new and the need for something additional in order to create change. Jacobs (2007: 32) simplifies the definition by posing that “innovation is something new with an added value”, Garcia and Calantone (2002: 112) focus more on technology and distinguish the difference between macro and micro level when they state that “innovation is an iterative process initiated by the perception of a new market and/or new service opportunity for a technology based invention which leads to development, production and marketing tasks striving for the commercial success of the invention” and Tidd et al. (1997: 24) bring it all back to “successful exploitation of new ideas” when they quote the UK DTI Innovation Unit definition. But the overall message is clear: παντα ρει, ουδεν μενει.

But, as one can conclude from the variety of definitions, innovation is not an indisputable concept. Jacobs (2007) and Jacobs & Snijders (2008) use the ‘fuzzy approach of innovation’ (figure 2.2) to underline some differences in innovation.

![Figure 2.1](image)

This fuzzy approach does not consider innovation as a binary process. It is not like something is rather innovative or not. In this theory only both ends of the axe are absolute. Something which is marked 0 is not innovative at all and 1 is total innovation. The distinction between incremental and radical is not absolute either in this model but the figure shows that most innovations are incremental. In fact, Schumpeter (1934) poses already that actually 99,9 percent of innovation is incremental.

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3 In this theory Jacobs (2007) notices that in fact total innovation(1) would be impossible, since nobody would understand such an amount of ‘newness’.
But innovations come in more forms. Another distinction is between services and products, but even then there is a lot of variety. Figure 2.2 by Jacobs (2007) gives another partition between the different kinds of innovation. In his typification Jacobs (2007: 43-48) describes these different types of innovation as follows:

- Product (service) innovations
- Process innovations: changes in the production processes of products (and services) which in principle should lead to more efficient or effective production.
- Transaction innovation: new ways of both bringing products to the attention of customers and selling them

![Figure 2.2](image.png)

**FIGURE 2.2**
Basic forms of Innovation
Source: Jacobs, 2007

A combination of the different forms of innovation is also possible. Furthermore Jacobs points out the difference between technical and non-technical innovation. Technical innovation, obviously, results from technical and technological research and development. Non-technical innovation on the other hand is innovation in the realm of style, content, the development of new concepts, services, experiences, or the introduction of new forms of organisation (Jacobs, 2007). It is noteworthy to acknowledge that technical innovations may have a non-technical influence as well.

With all these different kinds of innovation one might say that almost everything is innovation. But on the contrary, in most of the cases only ‘very radical’ innovation is considered real innovation. This is what Jacobs and Snijders (2008) call ‘the absolutisation of innovation’. In order to be successful in innovation all kinds of innovation are to be taken seriously. As just stated, 99 percent of innovations are incremental, so they evolve of something what was already there. Radical innovation should be a goal and can mean a lot of success. But companies should still keep their eyes and minds open for little, incremental changes and exploit them. It seems obvious that it does not matter in this case whether the innovation is technical, non-technical, transformation innovation or product innovation or
what so ever. This principle of focusing on both radical and incremental innovation can be considered ‘ambidextrous’. This means organisations are able to use both hands, in this case the incremental one as well as the radical one.

2.3 **Mental Obstacle 2: innovation and routine are considered to be incompatible**

“Innovation Delivery: Not A Matter Of Routine” (Bekkering, 2008) is the header of an article in an acknowledged Dutch management magazine. The article describes that the idea of being able to structure innovation as a process is naive and that is all about leadership and vision in order to be successful in innovation. Without stating that this is what the mental obstacle implies, does not this seems likes some kind of absolutisation as well? Why cannot leadership, vision, structure and process exist next to each other when it comes to innovation?

Mintzberg (1980: 322) concludes in his research on organisational design that “the effective organisation will favour some sort of configuration as it searches for harmony in its internal processes and consonance with its environment.” On the one hand ‘the harmony in the internal processes’ suggests some kind of structure where, on the other hand, ‘the consonance with the environment’ suggests some kind of vision and leadership. For the ‘sort of configuration’ Mintzberg (1980) uses some ideal or pure organisational types:\footnote{In *Structure In S’s: A Synthesis Of The Research On Organization Design*, Mintzberg (1980) defines 5 types, eventually he defined 7 types. Only the 4 basic types are used in this thesis.}

The four most important and commonly used types are:

- **Simple Structure (Entrepreneurial Firm):** Typified by what is not elaborated. Hardly any formalisation. Coordination is based on direct supervision. Simple and dynamic environment. No room for standardisation because of the indefinable future.

- **Machine Bureaucracy:** Specialised, routine based operating, (mostly) mature companies. Depends above all on standardisation of work processes for coordination. Planning and control emerges as the key part of the structure. Therefore relatively much power to the analysts and planners. Stable and simple environment. Performance organisations, no problem solvers, consequently more focus on efficiency then on entrepreneurship.

- **Professional Bureaucracy:** Standardisation of skills and behaviour of specialised professionals. Coordination based on these principles. Relatively autonomous workers. Complex but relatively stable environment. Inflexible structure but open to the adaption of new products and services, learning and development.

- **Adhocracy (Innovative Organisation):** Organic structure with low formalisation of behaviour. Job-specialisation in market based project teams. Reliance on liaisons for mutual adjustment. Managers are co-workers in the specialist teams with special focus on this liaison role. Complex and dynamic environment. No standardisation for coordination but step aside from the establishment in order to innovate.
From these typifications it should be clear that, in the vision of Mintzberg (1980) the Adhocracy is most suitable for innovation. In the Simple Structure innovation would be possible but is very dependent on the leader and the (very) unclear future and the machine bureaucracy focuses on efficiency, not on entrepreneurial progression. The Professional Bureaucracy focuses on standardisation as well but then again it is open for new products and services as well as for learning and development. Mintzberg (1980) acknowledges multiple relations between the Professional Bureaucracy and the Adhocracy. First of all he mentions the fact that every job performed in the Professional Bureaucracy has some aspects of an Adhocracy, Adhocracy just has a broader orientation. “The former, because of its standardization, can allow its professional operators to work on their own; the latter, in order to achieve innovation, must group its professionals in multidisciplinary teams so as to encourage mutual adjustment.” (Mintzberg, 1980: 337) Second of all, Mintzberg (1980: 338) states that according as companies ‘grow older’ they tend to “bureaucratize, for example, by settling on the set of skills it performs best and so converting itself from an (...) Adhocracy into a Professional Bureaucracy. Moreover, because Operating Adhocracies in particular are such vulnerable structures (...) many of them shift to bureaucratic configurations to escape the uncertainty.” These remarks to the typologies and the conversion between them, are a input for what Jacobs and Snijders (2008) mean by innovation on a routine based way. They combine the typologies of Mintzberg (1980) with the concept of ‘open innovation’. Chesbrough et al. (2006: 1) define open innovation as ‘the use of purposive inflows and outflows of knowledge to accelerate internal innovation, and expand the markets for external use of innovation, respectively’. In this approach innovating firms are searching for interesting ideas, techniques and knowledge (far) outside the own organisation in order to improve internal innovation. They state that “becoming ‘an open professional bureaucracy’ is the challenge faced by the majority of innovative organisations: organisations that manage to combine an open, creative learning and collaborative culture with the smoothly-running management of a rapid succession of innovative projects within a clear organisational structure”. (Jacobs & Snijders, 2008: 67)

In order to really profit from ‘open innovation’ and really learn from other companies, firms should develop their absorptive capacity. (Vanhaerbeke et al., 2008) Cohen and Levinthal’s (1990) theory on Absorptive Capacity defends this view. They regard external knowledge as a critical component for innovative capabilities. In this theory “prior related knowledge confers an ability to recognize the value of new information, assimilate it, and apply it to commercial ends. These abilities constitute (...) a firm’s absorptive capacity. (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990: 128”). Absorptive capacity can best be described by illustrating the cognitive structures that underlie learning (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). Bower and Hillgard (1981:424) explain that “the more objects, patterns and concepts are stored in

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5 The theory of open innovation also attends to the marketing of innovations through external partners and contacts but this will not be discussed in this thesis.
memory, the more readily is new information about these constructs acquired and the more facile is the individual in using them in new settings”. In order to really develop absorptive capacity the prior knowledge has to be founded intensely in the minds of the team members. These examples already show some essential elements of both Mintzbergs (1980) Adhocracy as his Professional Bureaucracy: a team with routine based knowledge and learning capabilities and mutual understanding enhances the absorptive capacity of an organisation. And there is more. Learning is about new knowledge, and being founded in prior knowledge, novel areas of expertise are therefore difficult to explore. In order to be able to learn in different expertises and innovate in these expertises, diversity is essential. “A diverse background provides a more robust basis for learning because it increases the prospect that incoming information will relate to what is already known. In addition (...) knowledge diversity also facilitates the innovative process by enabling the individual to make novel associations and linkages (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990: 131).” And since absorptive capacity is not only about retrieving information but also about doing something with it, the diversity of sub-units and departments inside an organisation and the transfer of knowledge between these units are equally important. In fact, the sub-unit with the relevant knowledge to be able to learn from certain information might be quite removed from the point of entry of this information. For that reason, “the firm’s absorptive capacity depends on the individuals that stand at the interface of either the firm and the external environment or at the interface between subunits of the firm”, the so called boundary spanners or gatekeepers” (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990: 132). Here one might see the function of the liaison as mentioned in Mintzbergs (1980) definition of the Adhocracy. All this suggest a really big responsibility for these gatekeepers, and that might be the case, but real absorptive capacity for an organisation is only achieved when a team as a whole has the relevant knowledge and internal connections. This is what Cohen and Levinthal (1990) describe as the trade off between inward-looking versus outward-looking capacities.

The theory about whether companies should function on a routine based way or operate ad hoc to be as innovative as possible suggests a familiar solution: act ambidextrous. The idea of Adhocracy, Professional Bureaucracy and open innovation converging into the Open Professional Bureaucracy and the theory stating that teams with routine based knowledge and learning capabilities and mutual understanding enhancing Absorptive Capacity show that innovation and routine are actually not incompatible. In an ambidextrous organisation the one hand provides the open informal culture where there is room for learning, creativity and innovation and the other hand provides the structure for standardisation, organisation and routine.

### 2.4 Mental Obstacle 3: Innovation is dependent on leadership

The introduction of the previous paragraph started with an article that defended the view that innovation is not a matter of routine but a result of leadership and vision (Bekkering, 2008). Where the
last paragraph questioned whether or not innovation is a matter of routine, this paragraph discusses to what extent innovation is dependent on leadership and vision.

“The starting point of managing knowledge in an organization is an understanding of the core capabilities.” (Leonard, 1995: 4). And the same applies to innovation (Leonard, 1995). These core capabilities create the competitive advantages for the firm and are therefore essential in the survival of the firm. Leonard (1995) states that innovative activities should always be linked to these core capabilities. Furthermore, the core capabilities should be maintained and grow. They do so by the effort of the employees, all of them at every level, though their actions and behaviour (Leonard, 1995). The role of the manager in this process is, on the one hand to identify and really understand the core capabilities and on the other hand to “identify, implant, nurture and enhance those activities that create knowledge to be absorbed and retained by the organization and its employees.” (Leonard, 1995: 28)

This seems comparable with the absorptive capacity which was mentioned in the last paragraph. Acting on core capabilities is almost a managemental rule of thumb. Still, as mentioned before, companies should expand their capabilities as well and they should not be blind for developments outside their familiar area of expertise. This is what Jacobs (2008) describes in his theory on ‘the edge of chaos’. Figure 2.3, which is based on the traditional S-curve of innovation\(^6\), shows that the edge of chaos or turbulence zone is situated somewhere between 1. the field of expertise (and aligned core capabilities) a product or innovation is situated at a certain time and 2. the point where a new technology or innovation enters the market (the strange attractor).

![FIGURE 2.3](image)

**FIGURE 2.3**

The edge of chaos

Based on: Jacobs (2008)

\(^6\) The S-curve is an overview of performance against time: a product or innovation evolves slowly in the beginning, incrementally grows until it is generally accepted, to decline slowly at the end of the curve, the introduction of a new technology or innovation sets the beginning of a new S-curve on top of the existing one (Luecke, 2003; Jacobs, 2007)
In order to be prepared for ‘the next generation’ or, even better, to be the leader in this next generation, companies have to prepare and develop their core capabilities for the next step ahead. Without enough absorptive capacity, when new opportunities emerge, the firm might not appreciate them and a competitor probably will be first (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990).

But, now that we are focusing on leadership so what should managers do in this matter? Woodman et al. (1993) studied organisational creativity as a function of group creativity, where group creativity itself is a function of individual creativity. For this thesis it is not useful to go to deep in their theory, but they show that, in fact, given the right conditions, these functions are multipliers. The remark on the right conditions though, is very appropriate for this study. What to consider when forming creative groups. Luecke (2003) focuses on the importance of diversity and the ‘right’ composition. In most cases this does mean that different thinking styles and skills have to combined. These individual differences create a creative friction and prevent group thinking. In other words, teams most likely need ‘deviated minds’ and ‘strange people’ instead of people who ‘really fit’ in order to enhance the creativity. Luecke (2003) mentions four paradoxes which managers should consider in order to get this ‘right’ composition and diversity in a team: beginner’s mind vs. experience; freedom vs. discipline; play vs. professionalism; and improvisation vs. planning. One might see the ‘paradox’ of the Professional Bureaucracy vs. the Adhocracy pop up in these paradoxes as well. On top of that the group itself and its members should think both divergent, moving away from the establishment, as convergent, combining the common value of different insights. The most important factors that are to be considered by the management in stimulating both these groups and creativity in general are a creative culture, providing the right resources and reward creative behaviour (Amabile, 1988, 1996; Woodman et al., 1993). What this means in a more operational form will be explained in (some of) the elements of the innovation decathlon, which will be the subject of the next paragraph.

Concluding from this paragraph one might say that leadership and management is nevertheless key to innovation. And maybe it is. But as the mental obstacle states, is it dependent on leadership? No it is not. This paragraph shows that managers are responsible for setting the right strategy, environment, conditions and so on, but eventually the employees are getting the work done also the creative and innovative work. Therefore also the answer to the third mental obstacle is ambidextrous. Effective leadership means being as visionary as one can be in order to set an open and innovative culture but also making sure this culture is structurally anchored in the organisation so that employees can flourish and are not dependent on the visionary leader.
2.5 The innovation decathlon

The link of the strategic profile and the business model with innovation

“Your point of departure should be a strategic concept, built on a strong business model.” Innovation should be an essential part of the strategy and the strategy of innovation. Act and innovate based on the core capabilities but stay open and alert for changes and development, after all innovations happen on the edge not in the core.

Society-oriented

“Keep an eye on what is happening in the world.” Society is quick and dynamic and therefore insecure. Once again, innovations happen on the edge of chaos. Make sure that the liaisons and boundary spanners are aware of the societal changes and developments so that the company can act on them.

Customer-oriented

“Learn from your customers, also especially about what bothers them in your area.” Use their knowledge, suggestions and criticism. After all, the customers are specialists in the use of the company’s products and services.

Ambitious and daring

“Formulate your next step realistically, but ambitiously so that your entourage understands that half measures are not enough.” Think divergent, move away from the establishment. Take responsible risks on the way to the edge of chaos.

Develop and ‘milk’ your product lines (incremental evolvement)

“There is nothing wrong with limited ‘incremental’ improvement. Many ground-breaking innovations that have radically changed people’s lives started small.” Small steps that bloom from the core capabilities can lead to great insights and developments. Do not absolutise innovation.

Learn from real figures

Moving to the Open Professional Bureaucracy, the goal is to become an organisation that combines continuous innovation with clear agreements. Therefore a company should register, report, analyse, control and evaluate every step in the innovation process. By doing so everybody involved, and

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7 All the citations in this paragraph, unless mentioned otherwise, are from the innovation decathlon by Jacobs and Snijders (2008: 136-142). The English quotes are taken from the executive (English) summary which can be found on http://www.managementstudies.nl/publiciteit/executive_summary_si_081119.pdf. The pages used in the references refer to the according quotes in the (Dutch) book by Jacobs and Snijders (2008).
managers in particular, is constantly aware of the progress and can learn and act whenever mistakes or breakthroughs appear.

**Look for the best people**

“The majority of us are average people with average capabilities. The more we want, the more we need to surround ourselves with the best, smartest and most enterprising people. The most strategic decision that you will ever make is in hiring people.” Hiring the right people influences the whole company: the better the individual, the better the group, the better the organisation. Consider the diversity of your teams, look for ‘deviated minds’ and be aware of the internal and external liaisons and gatekeepers.

**Ambiance and open culture**

Culture and organisational atmosphere are some of the most important elements in stimulating people. “Ensure that there is a climate of trust that allows difficult issues to be discussed; even better: get annoyed with people if they do not. Keep the atmosphere fun, but also keep people focused: agreements are agreements.”

**Build strong networks**

“(…) knowledge diversity (...) facilitates the innovative process by enabling the individual to make novel associations and linkages (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990: 131).” “No matter where you work, most of the smartest people work somewhere else” (www.dutchcowboys.nl, 2009). Therefore build networks, both inside as well as outside the company. Use good liaisons and gatekeepers, also both internal and external, to profit as much as possible from the knowledge and contacts in the environment.

**Focus and commitment**

“Keep your eye on the ball. Ensure as much as possible that the milestones are reached by the agreed times.” Be persistent to be the first mover whenever the company has a great innovation but do not be afraid to slow down when projects fall short. Timing is crucial.

**Using the innovation decathlon**

Like in any other decathlon, in the innovation decathlon one has to perform adequate in every discipline. Totally failing in one area means you will not win at the end. Therefore the decathlon cannot and should not be reduced. Of course companies cannot excel and be the best in every area but focus should be on every element and within the company’s ability it should strive for the very best for every element.
3 METHODOLOGY

The theoretical framework illustrates that identifying the possibilities and impediments for innovation routine and innovation in general, is highly dependent on understanding quite abstract factors like environment, organisational encouragement, open culture, the strength of networks and so on. When Albert Heijn posed its management question and asked me to investigate this question we were very aware of this abstractness. As a result, we deliberately chose to study the organisation from the inside over a relatively long period of time. Furthermore we chose, also deliberately, the method of participant observation research. Participant observation is especially effective for studying the subtle nuances and attitudes of behaviours in factors like environment, organisational encouragement and culture. “Furthermore, the strength of this method lies in the depth of understanding it permits, without being superficial, and it offers a lot of flexibility.” (Baxter & Babbie, 2004: 321) Therefore one has the opportunity to study and analyse situations when they appear (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). By observing through participation over a longer time, these appearing situations include the existence and experience of the factors discussed before like environment and culture. Both the Albert Heijn manager and I were in great favour of this method and its advantages. By doing just interviews the results would probably be a ‘reflection of a moment’ plus it has the possibility that favourable answer would have been given. The roles we chose in participant observation were participant-as-observer and complete participant8. The biggest advantage of the participant-as-observer role is that it offers the possibility to step aside from the activities from time to time to focus fully on the study. The main disadvantage of this method is that the presence of the researcher in the group might affect the results. (Baxter & Babbie, 2004) The great advantage of acting as a complete participant, moreover, is that the data will be more trustworthy: the observed group will be more honest and natural if they don’t know they are the subject of a research. The key disadvantage of this role is that the results may be influenced by the knowledge that a research is being held. (Baxter & Babbie, 2004)

For the participation observation in this thesis I have been working in the InnovationTeam at the Albert Heijn head office in Zaandam for four months. The team was founded in 2005 by some executive managers and some operational managers. These managers had a ‘gut feeling’ that something had to be done in order to be ready for the coming decades. Therefore they built the InnovationCafé, as home of the InnovationTeam and as recognition point of innovation for the whole organisation. Nowadays the team has a permanent position within the Information Management department9. The team is managed by a manager who operates on the so called management+2-level. This means he is two steps, or responsibility levels, away from the executive management. Innovation and the InnovationTeam are a part-time responsibility for the manager, the rest of his time he is

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8 For a complete overview of the different roles in participant observation see Appendix 2.
9 This department is part of Ahold Europe. Since the InnovationTeam handles just Albert Heijn and therefore has an European position only on paper I will not further discuss this.
responsible for a part of the Information Management department. When innovation is involved he reports directly to the executive management, despite his management+2-position.\(^{10}\) The InnovationTeam consist of about ten members (depending on fluctuations) and meets as a team every week for approximately four hours. Next to the meetings, most of the members of the team work full time on innovation but they mostly work solo and on a project based way. The operational roles, responsibilities and backgrounds of the team and the team members will be further discussed in the analysis.\(^{11}\)

On the same organisational level as the InnovationTeam there is another team responsible for innovation, the ProductInnovationTeam. As the name suggest, this team mainly focuses on product innovation. Albert Heijn is a very differentiated company, therefore all product groups are concentrated in different departments (categories). The ProductInnovationTeam concentrates on activities and innovations that exceed these categories.

As a participant observer in the InnovationTeam I acted full time in this team. The weight of the disadvantages of the two observation roles, influencing the research through being present without being noticed as a researcher on the one hand and favourable behaviour through awareness of the presence of a researcher on the other, was obviously present, but in my consideration minimal. Through my presence as a regular employee, I became an innovator among the innovators, nobody would look funny to see me there. Especially over such a long time it would be almost impossible for the environment to look at me as a researcher and act and behave on that knowledge. Moreover, my responsibilities in the team were relatively small, therefore I could not really influence the behaviour or policy of the team and its members.

My role in the InnovationTeam was mostly supportive. I was present during the meetings and fulfilled work related to the projects or to the communication of innovation in general. As stated before my responsibilities were minimal but the work was very diverse. Since I was not aligned to a single project or task I gained the opportunity to meet a lot of different people on several levels and with a lot of different connections with innovation. Apart from the contact with the responsible manager for innovation almost all my contacts were on the operational level. The purpose of this research was to observe the culture and behaviour of the Albert Heijn employees with regard to innovation and possible routines. Since it is not likely for team members to meet or work with the executive management on a regular basis (routine based) I intentionally avoided these kind of contacts as well. To my opinion, and in consensus with the team management, adding executive management’s views

\(^{10}\) During my time at Albert Heijn, the management structure of the InnovationTeam changed, the results of this change will be mentioned in the analysis when necessary. Yet, for the clarity of the methodology and my role and position I here describe the situation when I started.

\(^{11}\) For the complete overview of innovations position within the IM department and the official job descriptions see Appendix 3
and opinions would more likely blur the results than improve them. After all, the goal of this thesis is to observe what is happening not what was intended. On the contrary, I repeatedly met all kinds of contacts that a regular team member would meet in his day to day job. These contacts included external advisors, external business partners, representatives of potential new business partners, internal partners at the head office, store managers and personnel, suppliers and customers. Dependent on the situation my roles in these contacts were discussion partner, spokesperson, contactman, promoter, independent advisor and auditor. None of the parties other than the InnovationTeam members were at any point aware of my task as researcher and did not change their opinions or behaviour towards innovation or the company as a result of that. When necessary other details about my roles and responsibilities are further discussed in the following section.
4 Analysis and Results

In paragraph 2.1 it was stated that the elements of the innovation decathlon and the mental obstacles are based on the same theoretical backgrounds; where the mental obstacles refer to the general attitude towards innovation, the decathlon is a more operational guideline for the manager. For that reason the mental obstacles were discussed extensively and the elements of the decathlon were only handled briefly. In this research Albert Heijn was observed in her day-to-day business. Consequently the observation first of all provided an operational insight in the organisation. Based on these results a more general view can be analysed. Therefore, in contrast with the theoretical framework, this analysis starts with the results for every discipline of the decathlon and ends with the translation of these results into the theory of the mental obstacles. Here as well as in the theoretical framework, this does not mean that the results of the mental obstacles are a direct result of the results of the elements of the innovation decathlon, although regarding the elements of the decathlon can help understand the mental obstacles and the other way around.

4.1 The link of the strategic profile and the business model with innovation

“Your point of departure should be a strategic concept, built on a strong business model.” (Jacobs & Snijders, 2008: 136) Already in the introduction I mentioned that Albert Heijn has innovation in its roots. The strong business model and continuous growth made Albert Heijn the biggest supermarket of the Netherlands and over the years many innovations in the (Dutch) supermarket can be subscribed to Albert Heijn. Yet, as the management question suggested Albert Heijn was not satisfied with the strategy of innovation over the past decades. Where the strategy had been to set up big expensive pilots for big expensive projects the focus had to be changed to creating an atmosphere of learning, entrepreneurship and small-scaleliness. Innovation had to become less ad hoc and more constant and wide spread throughout the organisation. The new approach to innovation had to be an approach in which the culture of the company would change without embedding innovation in a specific department and aligning it to responsible managers (Mulder, 2007). Still, this ‘new wave’ had to be initiated by interested employees and managers. Therefore in 2005 the InnovationTeam was set up.

The vision or philosophy of this team and Albert Heijn in general, is pointed out through the following key points:

- Customer driven innovation
- Innovation is a revolutionary vision with an evolutionary approach
- Innovations are driven through:
  o distinct and latent customer needs (satisfiers)
  o efficiency drive of the AH organisation (dissatisfiers)
  o technology push (high tech and low tech)
Innovations derive from genuine passion and interest: innovate together!

These key points on their part are translated into the following strategic pillars:

- Start with small initiatives.
- Before an initiative turns into a business case, it must have been tested repetitively by customers.
- Innovations are developed by AH and/or provided by suppliers. Furthermore innovations are annexed from competitors and other industries. Outward look for consumer trends!
- Initiatives can and will run parallel.
- Per initiative a content partner and a technology partner is consulted.
- The innovation process has to be followed based on a no budget / low budget principal.
- “Just mature” technology is used.

These points of attention match very well with the core mission, vision and strategy of the company. The vision of Albert Heijn is “It’s all about people at AH: about customers and employees.” Innovation is essential in meeting the ever-changing demands and expectations of these customers and employees. “The common things affordable, the special things accessible” is the well known mission of Albert Heijn. Innovation keeps the common things up to date and the special things unique. According to its strategy, Albert Heijn wants to offer everybody as much choice as possible in products, prices and formula-types in order to serve as many people in the best way possible. Innovation is one of the key solutions to deliver this diversity (Albert Heijn Intranet). In these key points one might see some elements of the decathlon already. The elements of incremental evolvement, customer oriented and building networks can respectively be found in the items step-by-step, consumer trends and suppliers, competitors and other industries. But where the decathlon is a managerial guideline this strategy also includes very operational rules like budgeting and prescriptive technologies.

What do these fundaments on paper mean operationally? The team defined some areas of attention that should have extra focus, like new manners of paying, the growing importance of the mobile life style and so on. These areas are initially defined by the management in line with the thoughts of the executive managers and the team members. During this research I noticed that whenever the executive management brought forward new ideas and interests in internal messages or in the national press, the team responded to it. For instance after an internal lecture of the executive management about corporate responsibility the team recognised the need for further attention about that area. Furthermore
when an executive manager gave an interview about Albert Heijn’s need to use crowdsourcing\footnote{Crowdsourcing: to use the creativity and knowledge of the mass \textit{and} the will to share this knowledge and creativity, in order to develop or enhance products and services.}, the team speeded up her plans about that to align with the strategic wishes. However over the time I observed the InnovationTeam, there was no official moment of alignment of the (strategic) plans and wishes of the executive management and the areas of attention and the team. The other way around this was done very well, through presentations about the developments and accents of the team, but there was no moment of official feedback towards the team.

More in general, when the work floor is concerned, the alignment with the business model and innovation at all is rather vague. Several times I hosted some visitors from the shops to show them around in the InnovationCafé and tell them about innovation at Albert Heijn. Almost none of these visitors, from store managers till re-stockers of the shelves, were aware of the existence of the InnovationTeam or had any idea how to get in touch with anybody about innovation. Even though the stores are the core business and a core capability of Albert Heijn there is very little awareness and influence of the people at the work floor when it comes to innovation. It must be said that the team and the management are aware of this problem, in a way it is part of the management question even.

Looking back at the strategy, mission and vision of both the InnovationTeam and Albert Heijn itself it is illustrated that the customer and its diversified demands and ‘its distinct and latent needs’ are core to both the team and the company. In the methodology is already explained that the InnovationTeam is part of the Information Management department. Despite the quite broad view and focus of the vision and strategy of the InnovationTeam, the main interest and activities of the team are based on its position within the IM department. These interest and activities are mainly technical or technological. This leads to a discrepancy between the ‘distinct and latent needs’ that customers might have and what the InnovationTeam can handle. Especially since the InnovationTeam wants to function as the pivot of innovation it must be able to get a grip on every realm of innovation. Colleagues outside the head office and customer are not able to define in advance which ideas and needs they can attribute and which not, if they will be able to get in contact with the InnovationTeam (which is not the case in the present situation). At least the InnovationTeam should be able to distribute these ideas to other departments. But there is no guarantee that those departments will be able to handle these innovative ideas and suggestions. In the present situation ideas, which derive mainly from the head office, are in fact transferred to other departments but they have no specified time or team to work this out. During the research I witnessed a couple of times that the team concluded that an idea had potential but that it was put aside since there was no good connection to the expertise of the team or the contacts in other divisions. At the end of this research the work of the InnovationTeam was divided over two different sub-departments within IM. The purpose of this split was to get a more clear distinction between idea
generation and idea exploitation. The realisation of this separation was too premature to be considered in this study, however the basic assumption for both the teams still was rather technical.

4.2 **Society-oriented**

“Keep an eye on what is happening in the world.” (Jacobs & Snijders, 2008: 137) Albert Heijn uses quite a lot of trend watchers, external advisors and market intelligence firms. Also the InnovationTeam uses these external parties to keep an eye on what is happening in the dynamic and insecure society. The team actually has a specific external network (Figure 4.1).

![External Innovation Network](image)

**FIGURE 4.1**
External Innovation Network
Source: AH Innovatie (2008)

During the investigation I met people from all the different circles from Figure 4.1. All of these contacts were very interesting and more importantly diverse. The different contacts came from different branches and therefore gave insights outside the core spectrum of Albert Heijn. Next to these already identified contacts Albert Heijn, and the InnovationTeam itself as well, is frequented a lot by suppliers and other external parties which are very aware of Albert Heijn’s innovative potential. Therefore Albert Heijn is kept up with the trends and developments in the fast moving society through scanning its known network and open to potential new contacts. Within the technological scope the
InnovationTeam is constantly scanning the market for possible leads to ‘create’ the supermarket of the future. For instance, as albert.nl, the Albert Heijn online supermarket is growing fast, the team wants to be prepared for possible ‘hybrid’ shops where internet and the physical shop emerge. However, with the technology based operational form in mind, the scope is not always very broad. Since the team members work mostly project based there is not much time left for scanning the market outside the known contacts. On the contrary, the ProductInnovationTeam (the earlier mentioned ‘sister team’) started their team without any notion where to start exactly. They did so deliberately and as a result they started their search for innovation by doing an enormous market research on trends and developments in food, eating and consumers in general. For this research they used several trend watchers and bureaux which gave them a lead for the coming years. For a more divers and broader view, the InnovationTeam could add these ‘abnormal’ insights to her existent network in order to become even more society-oriented. Albert Heijn in general does this very well. The growing two and one person households in the Netherlands can very well found back the product assortment of the company and as a result this part of the assortment, which focuses on ease and smaller portions, is growing every day. The actions where gadgets for kids could be collected in the stores is another example of the societal orientation of Albert Heijn. The importance of families is growing and therefore this was the aim of marketing for a while. The company does the same in some neighbourhoods with actions and promotions focused on ethnical minorities. More generally Albert Heijn has a policy and strategy to connect the stores more with the neighbourhoods through local actions and promotions. The societal focus on health is also an issue for Albert Heijn. Not only did the company set up a quality stamp for healthy food, they organise workshops for teenagers as well to ‘teach’ them about the growing importance of health. Within the InnovationTeam the importance of health is shown by health being one of the innovation themes. This led for instance to ‘the allergy check’, where allergy information was optionally provided on a self scan payment device. The InnovationTeam did also pick up the trend of open innovation/co-creation with customers by crowdsourcing which was explained in the last paragraph.

4.3 Customer-oriented

“Learn from your customers, also especially about what bothers them in your area.” (Jacobs & Snijders, 2008: 137) Looking back at the strategy and vision of the InnovationTeam one can expect Albert Heijn to excel in this area. ‘Customer oriented innovation’, ‘repetitive consumer tests’, ‘Albert Heijn is all about customers’, are some of the earlier mentioned basic principles of innovation at Albert Heijn. And in fact the company does excel in this area. Albert Heijn has for instance won the business intelligence awards and if they were not bothered by privacy regulation they could learn and profit even more from their business intelligence. (www.computable.nl, 2008; www.distrifood.nl, 2008) The Albert Heijn loyalty card, Bonuskaart, provides a lot of insight about customer behaviour, and some innovations are based on these data or give customers the opportunity to use them.
themselves. Innovation is used as well in other less obvious parts of customer behaviour. Through the use of RFID\(^{13}\) for instance the company can track down the moving patterns of customers in the stores in order to optimise the store design.

But as the strategy already illustrated, the innovation process itself is very customer-oriented as well. Through the small-scaleness of the innovation projects Albert Heijn is able to test every innovation initiative in her stores. This means whenever a prototype is set up a pilot is installed in one or multiple (but never many) stores where customers can experience the innovation and give feedback. Another aspect of customer-orientation can be found in the different kinds of innovation. Projects like the ‘electric bike charge point’, where several charge points for electric bikes where installed at Albert Heijn in a region where bike transportation for tourism is very popular, and ‘the allergy check’, were and will probably never be in the direct economic interest of Albert Heijn. Still these initiatives were worked out, tested and, especially the ‘allergy check’, will probably be rolled out and be used in the near future.

Also for idea generation Albert Heijn is becoming more and more focused on the customer. As said, at the InnovationTeam is setting up several projects to test and use crowdsourcing. Although it is very difficult to create a system which is able to scan the knowledge and needs of Albert Heijn’s over seven million unique customers the InnovationTeam acknowledges the fact that it needs ‘to go out there and find their customers’. At the very beginning of this research there were several meetings with the so called ShopInnovationTeam, which consisted of both shop-employees, customers, external partners and members of the InnovationTeam. This team, which resulted from the starting days of the innovation wave at Albert Heijn, consisted mostly of interested acquaintances of the InnovationTeam members. Unfortunately this team has bled to death somehow. Inviting customers is however relatively common at Albert Heijn, be it not always directly connected to innovation as it was for the ShopInnovationTeam. In line with these thoughts one could imagine that (innovation) employees are in some way obligated to shop in the stores of the competitors so that they can see what the customer is facing and how the competitor is challenging the customer. There is no official policy to this matter at Albert Heijn. To overcome this possible gap of information, the retail-magazine Distrifood is key literature for every employee. This magazine provide very up to date information about almost everything that is happening in the retail branch.

\subsection{4.4 Ambitious and daring}

“Formulate your next step realistically, but ambitiously so that your entourage understands that half measures are not enough.”(Jacobs & Snijders, 2008: 139) As I mentioned before, Albert Heijn has innovation in its roots. Albert Heijn was responsible for the introduction of the kiwi in The

\footnote{Radio frequency identification: a technology which is used to collect, save and screen data on a distance through using tags on people or objects.}
Netherlands, Albert Heijn made sherry a commodity, as did they for drinking wine, and even the use of the refrigerator and the microwave can be subscribed to Albert Heijn promotions (De Jager, 1995; Van Dinther, 2008). Although the risk of these introductions and developments was not enormous in economic ways, it shows that the company was never afraid to show their guts by introducing totally new concepts. Especially with a totally new phenomenon like the microwave the danger of harming the ultimately strong image of Albert Heijn is high, never the less Albert Heijn saw the opportunities the product could provide and persisted. Another daring action where the image was concerned was the competition on prices Albert Heijn initiated in the early years 2000. Albert Heijn used to be the upper class supermarket which never focused on price but always on quality. Nevertheless, they saw they were losing market share quickly they did anyway and even introduced the low price own brand Euroshopper. Once again the image of the company was at stake but they persisted. But even when the economic risk was high Albert Heijn acted ambitious and daring. They were the first Dutch supermarket to use automated distribution centres and replenishment systems, they were partly responsible for the introduction of the PIN electronic payment system and they initiated the use of barcodes in Western-Europe. (De Jager, 1995; Fenema & Koeiman, 2003; De Nederlandsche Bank, 2006) A marginal comment to these innovations is that Mr. Albert Heijn was in most of these cases personally responsible for the striving behaviour of the company (De Jager, 1995). Nowadays the company itself by means of the InnovationTeam has to act in the same way. And they do. The InnovationTeam works by the self-declared ‘just do it’ principle. This means the team has to innovate and act quite informal and it must not let itself be limited by rules, regulations and managerial opinions. This manner of work is validated by the atmosphere and day to day work mentally in the team. On the other hand, the process of innovation (figure 4.2) is quite formal and gradually as is the general idea of small-scaliness. One could imagine that if a company is really ambitious and daring, really good ideas would have to be introduced much quicker, less informal and much wider spread out over the organisation. Although the InnovationTeam deliberately choose not to do this, there always is an escape possibility to do so at Albert Heijn. For instance the sudden interest in crowdsourcing by the board made the team decide to come up with two different pilots, one following the usual way of small-scaliness and one with a bigger budget, bigger range and, dependent on the boards reaction, quicker actions14.

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14 The proposal for this binary solution was just realized at the end of this research. Therefore it is not known whether this way actually was chosen.
The principle of no budget/low budget from the innovation strategy is another example of some restraint to risks. Explicitly mentioning such a rule in the strategy of innovation does not show much ambition and daring. However the ‘Touch and Go Again’ project, where a pilot was set up to scan and pay products with the mobile phone showed a that this principle is not persistent. While still small scaled, a one shop pilot only, the budget for this innovation excelled the innovation budget by far, however because of the potential of the project the project was approved by the board and executed outside the regular innovation budget.

Yet, on the contrary, during the research there were some examples of projects and initiatives that were held back by a lack of daring. The most illustrating example is the ‘Media Cart’ project, where Albert Heijn was offered the European scoop for introducing a ‘smart’ shopping cart which uses technologies like shop navigation, narrowcasting, self-scanning, electronic shopping lists. In a worldwide survey this innovation was chosen amongst the top seven potential innovations consumers expected to use in 2015. (www.elsevierretail.nl, 2008) Although the InnovationTeam unanimously supported the project and Albert Heijn only had to invest man hours, the project was rejected for budgetary reasons. Some of the members of the InnovationTeam however stated that the offer was resigned because of the possible danger it might consist. That is, the cart was said to be not in line with the managements preferences and a vaguely similar project at Ahold USA failed a couple of years before. Maybe as a result, the team itself handled in some cases also somewhat reserved. When a proposal was made to create an interactive platform together with the relatively controversial website marokko.nl the team suggested choosing a partner which was less contentious and therefore easier accepted by the management. Even though the general management declared, be it not officially, it wanted to gain access to the multicultural aspect of the market, the team suggested to choose a partner which aligned more to the established customers of the company. Without judging about whether this

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15 The use of the funnel for the different innovation projects is further illustrated in Appendix 5
was wrong or just realistic it showed that in some cases the team was holding back in favour of the possible reaction of the management.

More in general Albert Heijn still works ambitiously, as was stated in the introduction: “we are honoured to constantly be the first with things” (InnovatieCafé, 2008). As they did with the PIN electronic payment system, the company is still introducing and testing new ways of payment. Especially, the earlier mentioned ‘Touch and Go Again’ project and the ‘Tippy’ project are nice examples. The ‘Tippy’ project, where customers pay with their fingertip by using the biometric data from the fingertip as a bankcard, gave Albert Heijn an enormous amount of media exposure because they were the first company to introduce this system in the Netherlands. As a result, the company received a lot of critics about the program not being save, as well, still the customers loved the concept and trusted Albert Heijn fully, even if it was not one hundred percent save. The InnovationTeam knew the critics might have come and were partly right as well, still they ‘just did it’.

4.5 Develop and ‘milk’ your product lines (incremental evolvement)

“There is nothing wrong with limited ‘incremental’ improvement. Many ground-breaking innovations that have radically changed people’s lives started small.” (Jacobs & Snijders, 2008: 139) In many ways Albert Heijn has ‘milked’ its competitive advantages over time. With a little fantasy the whole concept is a form of incremental evolvement and change. It all started with one small shop, it resulted into a chain of convenience stores which was rolled out even more into megastores, ‘run shops’ and an online store. More specific, a part of the success of Albert Heijn can be allocated to the ever evolving distribution system of the company. Albert Heijn was the first to supply her stores centrally, the first to automatis these distribution centres, connected its point of sale system to the replenishment system and eventually is at a point now where it is able to ‘fight’ the competition through what Albert Heijn calls the ‘today for tomorrow’ replenishment system. This (for now) final step in distribution evolution means that stores can be supplied every day, or even several times a day exactly following the store demands. This system was one of the reasons Albert Heijn was so successful during the great competition ‘battle’ on prices of the early 2000’s. Also in the projects of the InnovationTeam the incremental evolvement of innovation is noticeable. Through the use of themes, which was already explained in paragraph 4.1, some projects are very connected and do sometimes emerge. The ‘Touch and Go Again’ project for instance is a perfect example of the fusion of the payment and mobile lifestyle themes: it emerged from an earlier project where payments were made with mobile phones on the one hand and on the other hand a project where products where scanned with a mobile phone. The scanning technique itself was an evolution of the self scan booths that Albert Heijn already uses in some of its stores. Moreover, the allergy check that was mentioned before is an additional service on these self scan devices. The cohesion of these projects depends on coincidence sometimes but in many occasions the team members are very aware of the similarities and use these similarities as well. For
instance, if it turns out that the mobile phone is going to be the ‘wallet’ of the future, the allergy check can be applied in a future version to a self scanning telephone as well. The same goes for the use of digital vouchers, 2D-barcodes with product information and so on. But also generally spoken, the ever changing systems of paying at Albert Heijn shows the constant evolvement of innovation at the company: after the introduction of the PIN system, they were the first to use biometric payment systems in The Netherlands, the first to combine scanning and paying on the mobile phone and still they are looking for whatever may come. Also when products are concerned Albert Heijn focuses on evolvement of successes. After the successful introduction of all kinds of products that were aimed at ease and quality, small households and so on, spin offs quickly followed.

4.6 **Learn from real figures**

“A company should register, report, analyse, control and evaluate every step in the innovation process” was stated in paragraph 2.5. Later on it was issued that Albert Heijn stands out when it comes to business intelligence and that every article that leaves the store is automatically replenished. Registration, analysis and control are key items at Albert Heijn so it seems. When it comes to innovation however this does not happen. It seemed that there were no official targets at all or, if they existed, they were not shared with the team. Even though in some projects everything is registered and analysed, the ‘Tippy’ (fingerprint) and ‘Touch and Go Again’ project, for instance, were directly connected to payment procedures and therefore the figures were very detailed and numerous, there is no mutual understanding within the team when a project is a success or not. This was even more the case with projects where direct measuring is difficult or impossible. For instance the use of the charging points for electrical bikes was based on the experiences of store managers and personnel without any targets for success what so ever. Also the number of utilisation of the allergy check can be found out but there is no distinction between usage by coincidence and deliberate exertion. And here as well, there was no indication that there was a mutual understanding about when a project was a success and when not. There was a great distinction between the projects when it comes to evaluation and gaining feedback as well. Some projects had very professional customer questionnaires, other projects obviously should have been evaluated with customers during the pilot in the shops, but there was no plan to do so.

For the team as a whole there were no outspoken performance indicators either. Not in input as well as output. One could imagine a system where the budget of innovation must be a certain percentage of the total turnover of the company or a system where a team has to come up with a certain amount of pilots per year but this was not the case. As a relatively young team with a “just do it” mentality and, at the time of the end of this research no fully finished projects, this is quite understandable, but not in line with the general approach of Albert Heijn towards figures and results. Possibly the management did have some targets, but if so, it was not shared with the team so nothing could possibly be learned from these figures.
4.7 **Look for the best people**

“The majority of us are average people with average capabilities. The more we want, the more we need to surround ourselves with the best, smartest and most enterprising people. The most strategic decision that you will ever make is in hiring people.”(Jacobs & Snijders, 2008: 140) The better the individual, the better the team, the better the organisation. The InnovationTeam in its present form does only exist for a couple of years but almost all of the members have a tremendous amount of relevant knowledge based on their prior functions. On top of that almost every Albert Heijn head office employee has years of experience in the shops or distribution centres, with the consequent knowledge. The drawback of this common knowledge is that it is quite difficult to integrate as an outsider into this team, it takes a lot of time in order to really understand the Albert Heijn standards. Moreover, there is hardly any diversity in the team. The general interest and centre of expertise in the team is (information) technology. This aspect as well makes it difficult to integrate in the team. And as a consequence there are no ‘strange people’ or ‘deviated minds’ in the present formation. During this research the composition of the team radically changed. At the foundation of the team some external advisors where part of the team from which the last left at the beginning of this research. They mainly represented the non-technical influence in the team. The only team member without a technical background, apart from the support staff, that was left, was forced to leave at the end of this research. Some new members were adjusted to the team just before the end of this analysis and they all had a technical background as well. Although my observation of these new team members was very short I do think they were a fine attribution to the team and that it expands the expertise of the team.  

As pointed out before, (external) colleagues and customer are not able to define in advance which ideas and needs they can attribute and which not when it comes to innovation in general. In the renewed structure of the IM department, where innovation is divided over two sub-divisions, there is a technological division and a division that needs to identify the (latent) needs of other divisions within Albert Heijn and of the market. Still, these needs serve as input for the other division and are thereby limited within the technical scope once again. Moreover, this part of innovation was at the end of the research filled in by one employee only. This employee had a lot of knowledge about the organisation and did not have a technical background but had no experience in innovation or business development either. Therefore, if the InnovationTeam wants to be the propagator of innovation for the whole organisation, the composition of the team is not quite how it should be. In other words, when the actual qualities of every individual are concerned Albert Heijn hired the best technological specialists but for every other area of expertise the specialists still need to be hired in order to get the right diversity and the right quality for the team as a whole.

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16 The composition of the Innovation and especially the radical changes in this composition were heavily influenced by the reorganisation of the IM department as will be explained in the Limitations in Chapter 6
4.8 Ambiance and open culture

“Ensure that there is a climate of trust that allows difficult issues to be discussed; even better: get annoyed with people if they do not. Keep the atmosphere fun, but also keep people focused: agreements are agreements” (Jacobs & Snijders, 2008: 141) The mutual proud and connection of the employees and the company is called “blauw bloed” (blue blooded) at Albert Heijn. Even as an observer I felt the connection with the company. You are proud of what the company is achieving and the same goes for its innovations. In the InnovationTeam this feeling is maybe even stronger, everyone is striving for the same goal and all the members share the honour of the achievements. Operationally however there are some other interests. In general there is quite an individual atmosphere at Albert Heijn. Although everyone wants the company to be the best, the personal interests of the employees are disturbing the innovative process from time to time. Eventually project managers would like to have personal confirmation for their achievements instead of really sharing the glory with the whole team. In practice this resulted in small disputes about who would make a presentation for the board, whose name to put under a document or about who could present a certain achievement. The same goes for the different interests of the different departments. In general there are quite a lot prejudices about divisions that are not willing to cooperate and managers at different levels who supposedly do not subscribe the innovative way of working. Actual prove of this intolerance to work together did not appear directly during this investigation, but the existence of the feeling alone is enough to limit innovation’s possibilities. In both cases, personal and department related, the general culture seemed more a culture of claiming instead of sharing. This does not mean that the atmosphere or the relations are awkward but one always has to be aware of possible underlying intentions and goals. This is found back in the participation, sympathy and solidarity of the management with certain projects as well. If managers take the credits for a project without having showed much interest and/or without actual participation in the project, the atmosphere is worsened, not because of bad intentions but because of the remaining feelings of the people who were not able to ‘claim’.

Despite the conflicting interests the team always functioned as a team. The atmosphere of the team meetings itself always was jovial and friendly (as goes for most of the contacts at Albert Heijn). But because of the formal structure of the meetings they cannot be typified as fun. The structure and agenda of the meetings was based on the status of the different projects, and therefore consisted mostly of following lists and predefined procedures. During this investigation there was almost no room for workshops, brainstorms or other activities to break away from the establishment or to stimulate out of the box thinking. Moreover the agendas of the team members were always completely filled so that there was no time left to explore different areas of interest then the regular tasks.

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17 The status overview that functions as the guideline of the meetings can be found in Appendix 5.
The InnovationCafé where the meetings of the InnovationTeam are held does attribute to the innovative open atmosphere and culture. This work- and hang out spot is very informal and modern and functions as a meeting point for (potentially) all head office employees. For employees that are interested in innovation monthly lunches and drinks are organised in the Café which are well attended. At the end of this research there were plans to reorganise the arrangement of the offices as well in a far more informal way. In the present situation the offices, where the innovators spent most of their time, are surprisingly bleak and uninspiring.

4.9 Build strong networks

“No matter where you work, most of the smartest people work somewhere else.”

(www.dutchcowboys.nl, 2009) Figure 4.1 already showed the external network of innovation the InnovationTeam uses. This network exists and although the contact is not equally strong with all the partners mentioned in this network, the network is strong and useful. Especially the technology partners profit a lot from the relation with Albert Heijn and therefore suggest a lot and are always willing to help out with new projects. On top of that, as a big successful organisation a lot of potential partners with all kinds of offers and skills show up every day and the team always analyses these partners for potential mutual interests. With the experience and backgrounds of the team members about technology and related subjects, they function as (almost) perfect gatekeepers who are aware of what is happening in the environment of Albert Heijn, be it only when it comes to technology. But because of the lack of diversity the team needs a lot of boundary spanners inside the organisation in order to spread their knowledge to other departments where this knowledge can be used and, the other way around, to recognise the wishes, demands and possibilities in other areas of expertise.

Consequently, the internal networks in such a big company as Albert Heijn are equally important as the external networks. Right from the beginning of the InnovationTeam a network was set up of so called InnovationFriends. This internal network consists of interested colleagues who support the team by contributing ideas and attending information meetings. This is the start of spreading innovation over the organisation but in its present form the main function of the ‘Friends’ is passive, the mainly consume information instead of addressing it. Still, most of these contacts are very useful and contribute to the diversity of innovation at Albert Heijn. Other contacts with non-technological departments within Albert Heijn do exist, but are mostly based on happenstance, rather than that there consists a real network of integrating sub-units. On management level the network of boundary spanners is increasing and getting structured, but there is no direct connection to the team anymore. There is no physical attendance by the management at the meetings and therefore their knowledge and

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18 At the start of this research I had quite some difficulties to get in contact with Albert Heijn. Still, during the research I found out that a lot of companies with different interests and areas of expertise eventually found their way to the InnovationTeam. Therefore I do not want to conclude anything from my personal experience, but it raises the question that Albert Heijn might not always be very open to external parties.
contact information is not carried out. Before this analysis begun there used to be a specially appointed liaison for some of most important contacts and during my stay at the InnovationTeam there always were plans to fulfil this function once again, but nobody was actually attributed to the team. Another aspect of the internal network is the contact with the stores. When I observed two introductions of innovations in two different pilot-shops, two totally different situations occurred. In the first shop all the employees were prepared and willing to help with the introduction of the innovation. In the second shop the employees literally opposed to the implementation of the innovation although they supported the idea and the innovation itself. There is no say whether the situation in the first shop were just luck or personal effort by the project manager, but in any case there is no (standard) procedure yet to inform and include the staff at the shop floor so that they can help to enhance the quality of the innovations.

4.10 Focus and commitment

“Keep your eye on the ball, ensure as much as possible that the milestones are reached by the agreed times.” (Jacobs & Snijders, 2008: 142) Of course there is a direct connection with learning from real figures which was discussed in paragraph 4.6. In that paragraph it was already issued that Albert Heijn without actual targets cannot learn from them either, but that in this stage, as a young team with none of the initiatives finished at the end of the research, it is quite understandable. The same goes for focus and commitment, without milestones you cannot stick to them. Yet, the fact that the InnovationTeam exists and that they bloomed from a vague feeling of some managers to a structured team with multiple innovations in the pipeline does show the focus and commitment of the company. The executive management was personally committed to the founding of the InnovationTeam and still attributes to it and shows its interest, be it indirectly through the manager. For the near future the company acknowledges the need for real focus and commitment: identifiable milestones, relatively strict agreements on what to achieve and when and which projects to launch quick and what to put aside for a while. With the start of the new IM organisation the message to the Innovation divisions was that these rules and regulations will be set up for the coming years: we have had our eyes on the ball, but training is over, we need goals now. However since this movement started at the end of this research I cannot comment on that so far.

4.11 Mental obstacle 1: The absolution of innovation

In order to be successful in innovation all kinds of innovation are to be taken seriously. Radical, incremental, technological, service, process, product in does not matter what kind of innovation, it all is innovation and therefore potentially good for the company. In the strategy for innovation it is stated that innovation at Albert Heijn happens step by step. Thereby it is already clear that there is room for incremental innovation at Albert Heijn and the results confirm that view. Does this mean that there is no room for radical innovation? No. Although no radical innovations occurred during the research,
which is not very remarkable since radical innovations are rather scarce, there is no indication that whenever it might occur Albert Heijn would oppose to it and thereby absolutise innovation to only incremental, however it does not seem to be the direct aim of the InnovationTeam to find Columbus’ Egg.

There is however a certain form of absolution at Albert Heijn: the extreme focus on technical and technological innovation. Because of the position of the InnovationTeam and the background of the team members this seems inevitable, no matter how hard they try. But: they try. And by trying, they acknowledge the fact that that this is a shortcoming and by being aware this cannot be a mental obstacle. However Albert Heijn should be more ambidextrous, the technical hand is working fine, but the non-technical hand needs a lot more training.

4.12 Mental obstacle 2: Innovation and routine are considered to be incompatible

Comparing the results from the decathlon with the organisational forms of Mintzberg (1980), Albert Heijn fits the profile for a Professional Bureaucracy almost perfectly: Standardisation of skills and behaviour of specialised professionals. Coordination based on these principles. Relatively autonomous workers. Complex but relatively stable environment. Inflexible structure but open to the adoption of new products and services, learning and development. But in order to innovate on a routine based way Jacobs and Snijders (2008: 67) stated that that is not enough: “organisations need to manage and combine an open, creative learning and collaborative culture with the smoothly-running management of a rapid succession of innovative projects within a clear organisational structure.” In the present form the open creative learning and collaborative culture does not yet exist in an optimal form. Therefore Albert Heijn needs some aspects of Mintzberg’s Adhocracy as well. And partly they do. The InnovationTeam is a perfect example of job-specialisation in market based project teams. Managers are co-workers in the specialist teams with special focus on the liaison role is not realised quite as it should be, after all, the manager is not really a co-worker, but realisation is nearby. With the existing networks and the initiatives of crowdsourcing the movement towards open innovation Albert Heijn is also heading towards the open professional bureaucracy. Still, the ties of the different networks both internal as external have to be connected. Whenever this is realised the reliance on liaisons for mutual adjustment can be achieved as well. This should deliver the diversity both inside the team as in the networks which are so needed. So, the answer to the question whether Albert Heijn is bothered by this mental obstacle is somewhat similar to the first obstacle. The company is aware of its challenges and should therefore focus a little bit more on one area: the basic for innovation and routine does already exist, the management question even states that they are looking for it, but the culture should be adjusted in order to put the hands of routine and innovation together.

- 41 -
4.13 Mental obstacle 3: Innovation is dependent on leadership

Managers are responsible for setting the right strategy, environment, conditions and so on, but eventually the employees are getting the work done, also the creative and innovative work, they should really innovate in the environment created by the management following the strategy set up by the management. The management should therefore not only create the environment but should make sure as well that the employees flourish. The management of Albert Heijn gave innovation and the InnovationTeam its present position, its freedom, the possibilities to innovate, the contacts and so one. Therefore the management did create the needed environment. But the InnovationTeam at Albert Heijn is sometimes held back by the management’s actions and expectations. Furthermore, a large part of the organisation is unaware of the possibilities of innovation. And the culture at Albert Heijn is not yet optimal for innovation. In direct relation to the InnovationTeam this also enhances more direct participation and dedication from the management. So is innovation dependent on leadership? No it is not. The management set the right conditions and gave the employees the room to flourish but this latter aspect is not yet sufficient\(^{19}\).

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\(^{19}\) One might say that innovation at Albert Heijn used to be dependent on the leadership and vision of mister Albert Heijn jr. in the past. And that maybe the direct influence of the executive management/CEO is nowadays very important in the day to day business as well. However, during the research there was no sign at all that this enhanced that innovation and/or the behaviour of the InnovationTeam was dependent on this influence therefore this is not included in the results.
5 Conclusion and Discussion

In this chapter the conclusion will give the answer on the hypotheses which were formulated in the first chapter. The discussion and recommendations are the author’s reflection of this conclusion on the management questions that led to this research.

5.1 Conclusion

Albert Heijn is hampered by one or more of the three mental obstacles was the first hypothesis that had to be tested in this research. So is this the case? To be very straight and direct: no, Albert Heijn is not hampered by any of the mental obstacles. Then again, are they perfectly aware of the elements of the mental obstacles? Neither. They are trying to be, and that is exactly the reason that they are not hampered, but they still are somewhat restricted by these elements. Operationally this enhances that Innovation at Albert Heijn is still too technological; there is no (perfect) open, collaborative culture and although the managers have created an environment where innovation is possible, they should try harder to create an atmosphere all over the company were all the employees can attribute to a flourishing innovation system. If these elements are taken care of without letting go the things that are done right already, the mental obstacles will be no problem for Albert Heijn anymore. But since the answer to all the questions aligned to the mental obstacles are ambidextrous, this will always be a process of balancing and stabilisation in order to be successful in innovation routine.

The second hypothesis that was tested in this research was “Albert Heijn scores insufficient on one or more of the ten disciplines of the innovation decathlon”. To conclude from this hypothesis a brief conclusion per discipline is given now.

1. Albert Heijn has the right alignment between strategy and innovation, however the link with the business model is incomplete, in the present form it is too concentrated around technology and at the head office in Zaandam.

2. Albert Heijn as a whole excels in society-orientation. And within their technological expertise the InnovationTeam has a great network which keeps them very society-oriented. But within the team the societal focus is held back by the technological focus. Moreover, the team might need more ‘strange’ ideas and unexpected influences, like the ProductInnovationTeam does by using trend watchers.

3. Albert Heijn as a company and the InnovationTeam are very customer-oriented especially now that they aim on better idea generation by the store personnel and by customers.
4. The history of ambition and daring is impressive at Albert Heijn. And they still are ambitious and daring. Still, the deliberately chosen approach of small-scaliness and no budget/low budget and the somewhat ‘favourable’ attitude towards the management limits these factors.

5. The incremental evolvement and improvement approach has been and still is very good.

6. Albert Heijn has a history of excellent business intelligence and focus on figures but this does not apply to innovation. It might be because of the age of the team, or because of the fact that no project is fully finished yet. But whether targets and key figures exist or not, the team as a whole is absolutely unaware of these figures and therefore incapable to learn from them.

7. As a technology team Albert Heijn has a perfect team, experienced and competent. But regarding the goals and the scope of innovation in general, the lack of diversity is a big problem.

8. Although everyone at Albert Heijn is ‘blue-blooded’ and proud, the culture is one of claiming instead of sharing and collaboration, therefore internally there is no real open culture.

9. There are many good networks in and around Albert Heijn and the InnovationTeam but there are no real liaisons. Albert Heijn does not fail on this discipline but has to make sure to connect the ties of the different networks.

10. Focus and commitment are at this moment mainly shown through the trust and possibilities that are offered to the development of innovation. Setting and holding on to milestones is not an issue yet when the InnovationTeam is concerned, but it will be. Given the history and culture at Albert Heijn this will probably not be a problem for the company.

It was already stated that, as in every decathlon, one does not have to be the absolute winner in every category in order to be successful in innovation routine. But the scores for every discipline have to be sufficient in order to win at the end. If the technological focus of the team is ignored for a moment, the conclusion is that Albert Heijn scores insufficient at the disciplines learn from real figures and ambiance and open culture. If the technological focus is considered a shortcoming as well, one has to conclude that the disciplines the linkage between strategy and business model, society-oriented, look for the best people are not sufficient either. In both cases the hypothesis “Albert Heijn scores insufficient on one or more of the ten disciplines of the innovation decathlon” is true.

5.2 Discussion and Recommendations

Looking at the conclusion two main themes derive from it: diversity on the one hand and on the other hand ambiance and culture. Therefore the answer to the question how to optimise innovation routine and to the management question, “How can Albert Heijn create an environment:
1. Which offers the board the possibility to initiate innovations from the top down, living up to the innovative heritage,

2. That anchors innovation within the already existing departments within the organisation,

3. Which leads to a new, innovative network organisation?"

must be found primarily in these two subjects.

Furthermore it was pointed out that Albert Heijn is not hampered by the mental obstacles. In other words, their attitude towards innovation is not based on these prejudices. But this does not mean that they do act ambidextrous in such a way that they are not influenced by these obstacles. So Albert Heijn is doing very well but there is room to optimise the possibilities to innovate on a routine based level. Especially the absolutisation of technological innovation and the fact that the management is not able yet to create an environment where the whole organisation can attribute to innovation and make it flourish, holds back the possibilities. This lack of diversity can be found back in some disciplines where Albert Heijn does not rate sufficient in the innovation decathlon, that is, as stated in the conclusion, whenever the technological absolutisation is considered, the disciplines the linkage between strategy and business model, society-oriented, look for the best people are not good enough. Therefore, in my opinion Albert Heijn has to make an important decision, either choose for technological innovation as main focus for the InnovationTeam and let go of the pivot function, or the InnovationTeam remains this centre point of innovation and therefore has to be restructured into a diverse team that can handle, answer and/or divide all areas of innovation.

Throughout this thesis the term edge of chaos is used several times. This term might sound a little bit vague, but to me it is the essence of this decision and consequently to some of Albert Heijn’s shortcomings in the innovation decathlon. In paragraph 2.4 was explained that the edge of chaos is situated somewhere on the S-curve between 1. the field of expertise (and aligned core capabilities) and 2. the point where a new innovation enters the market (the strange attractor). According to the theory real innovations happen at this edge not in the core. I know shall consider innovation at Albert Heijn as a ‘product’ on the S-curve. Whenever Albert Heijn chooses to stay focused on technology they are already approaching the edge of chaos as is explained in the results. However when innovation in general at Albert Heijn is concerned, the InnovationTeam, and thereby the largest part of innovation of Albert Heijn is constantly moving around in its own field of expertise, being technology. Because of the lack of diversity there is hardly any room to move to the point where the strange attractor, in this case the other areas of expertise in innovation, enters the market. Therefore innovation at Albert Heijn has to move away from the established technological core, become more diverse and, as a result, approach the edge of chaos. In other words, there is no use of being the heart of innovation when there are no good veins to distribute the blood. This applies also to the anchoring of innovation into the already existing departments within the organisation. Moreover, at this point the management teams are very well aligned and aware of the possibilities of innovation but there is no direct connection to
the InnovationTeam. Since there are no managers operating as co-workers in the team there is a vein missing and a lot of blood, knowledge in this case, is lost. Whenever this is realised this gives the board better possibilities to initiate innovations from the top down. If this missing vein is regarded in the terms of the edge of chaos, the InnovationTeam works in its own field of expertise and the management is the strange attractor. Because of the missing vein the team does not move away to the edge of chaos, where the real innovation is happening. In this case the theory could also apply the other way around with the management as the field of expertise and the team as the strange attractor. Yet another vein is missing. There is no permanent connection between the store organisation and the head office when it comes to innovation. The StoreInnovationTeam was a very good initiative which could be realised again in a more structured form. The crowdsourcing initiatives that are set up now could actually lead to a similar team. However, in my opinion this process should be waged step by step. It is impossible for the present InnovationTeam to process the ideas and suggestion of millions of customers and ten thousands of employees. Therefore I would suggest peer-to-peer selection on every level, so that the InnovationTeam ends up with a reasonable number of initiatives to work out and improve incrementally. But once again: there is no use of being the heart of innovation when there are no good veins to distribute the blood. This can be the start of a new, innovative network organisation. This missing connection can also be considered in the terms of the edge of chaos with the stores as the field of expertise and the InnovationTeam as the strange attractor. A schematic representation of the three different versions of the edge of chaos is shown in Figure 5.1

![Figure 5.1](image)

*Albert Heijn and the edge of chaos
Inspired by: Jacobs (2008)*
But the *innovative network* and its employees only flourish whenever the atmosphere and culture is open and fun. Here lies the biggest challenge for Albert Heijn: it has to change its culture. Innovation is about achieving the best, all together and on that way failure and time loss is aloud. Another conclusion was that innovation at Albert Heijn is not yet acting on targets and figures. They should be set up but if they are, my suggestion would be to set them up for the team and make clear that there is room for exploration, fun and goofing around as well. In its present form the InnovationTeam is far too formal and project based. There should be a diverse ambidextrous culture with targets and agreements on the one hand and fun, out of the box thinking and free time to really reach the edge of chaos on the other. After all, Albert Heijn has innovation in its roots, but only a heart and some loose veins are not sufficient. Therefore the goal remains: a sound mind in a sound body, from the roots to the routine!
6 LIMITATIONS

Apart from the limitations that were mentioned in the methodology, there are some influences and adjustments that have to be pointed out to be able to really understand the results. As stated in the introduction innovation routine has not been a very highlighted subject in the innovation literature in the last centuries. Therefore this research focuses on the relatively new study by Jacobs and Snijders. Because of this newness not many reviews or challenging reviews are written about this investigation. Whether it is appropriate to use this theory as a guideline for a thesis can therefore not be defended by any scientific report. It might therefore be useful to investigate in another study whether the theory by Jacobs and Snijders is good enough to use in the (further) research of innovation routine. For this thesis I simply made the assumption that it is.

In the empirical part of the book by Jacobs and Snijders Albert Heijn is already investigated, therefore one might wonder whether this investigation does still attribute anything to their findings. But since the results of Jacobs and Snijders are based only on one interview of about two hours this thesis has a far bigger empirical fundaments and therefore has a significant added value.

During the investigation, the IM department of Ahold Europe was reorganised quite radically. Officially this should not have had a big impact on the InnovationTeam, but it did. The members of the InnovationTeam all had double functions in the old structure, if not literally then theoretically. The reorganisation meant that they all had to be appointed to different jobs. Whenever this was possible these new jobs were fulltime innovation jobs. However some of the team members were appointed to different jobs but still kept their function in the Team. One member of the Team was asked to leave Albert Heijn as were some colleagues from the old structure. Without a doubt all this had its consequences on the behaviour and atmosphere in and around the team.

Moreover the official manager of the InnovationTeam was fully occupied with this reorganisation and therefore showed up at lot less than he might have done in a relatively more stable period.

Nevertheless, I do think that the results are a representative representation of the situation in the InnovationTeam. Furthermore, it was already stated that at the end of this research the Team was split up over two management divisions, the actual implementation of this change might have led to some improvements in for instance the diversity of the team as a whole. However there was no such direction or indication at the team of this research.

The focus on this InnovationTeam specifically, needs further explanation as well. Albert Heijn chose to make the InnovationTeam and its Café the pivot of innovation. Therefore this research was performed from this team. As a result some of the results may show a view that is a better representation of the situation within the team rather than the company as a whole. After all innovation is far more widespread then this team only. I already mentioned the ProductInnovationTeam, but of course in every product category and in the other departments such as store development, format and marketing innovation does exist as well. However the management question that lead to this
investigation came from the management of the InnovationTeam and as the pivot of innovation the management and organisation of innovation is based around this team, therefore I think this research is representative for the management of innovation although some aspects and areas are not fully exposed in this thesis.
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- 51 -
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- Different Internal Papers, Albert Heijn, Zaandam
APPENDIX 1

Transcript Interview Jan de Heij, Friday Januari 11 2008, 12.00 h. – 13.30 h., Albert Heijn, Zaandam

Interview: Remmelt Mulder

This interview was held in Dutch and therefore the transcript is as well.

Jan de Heij → functies veranderen snel, ervaring in supply chain, commercie, internationaal en lokaal → nu Manager Architectuur en Planning, zowel Ah als Ahold Eu (= Ahold Company)

Nieuwe organisatie → mbt IT : nieuw IT landschap; één IT landschap → zelfde technologieën etc. door heel Ahold EU

Herstel Ahold vanuit AH → klopt d.w.z. Business Model AH toegepast op Ahold → kostenreductie, prijzenslag, zie bijvoorbeeld ETOS
De Heij begonnen met innovatie

Begin situatie → Innovatie vanuit de directie → gericht op veranderende markt/consument → research in target groups → marktpotentieel

Veel geld mee gemoeid → vaak onsuccesvol → veel falen + prijzenoorlog → geen budget

Nieuwe situatie → innovatie op een nieuwe manier → experimenteren, leren, ondernemen, kleinschaligheid → “als kleine organisaties” want AH te star en te formalistisch

Innovatie niet in één afdeling → breed door de organisatie verankeren → niet één verantwoordelijke als toch 1 dan de CEO. Want:

1. Aantal punten in de organisatie innovatie verankeren
   - Productinnovatie (Commercie → concepten ontwikkelen)
   - Innovatiemanager duurzaamheid (winkelinrichting)

2. Netwerkorganisatie wat betreft innovatie
   CFO + Directeur winkels + De Heij = Innovatiekader, innovatieagenda, innovatiepilots → door de organisatie heen dingen doen als extra verantwoordelijkheid naast de officiële functies

Niet beleid tav innovatie → de directie zet de lijnen uit

Externe Consultants + “wijze heren” uit de organisatie als adviseurs maar minder want komt vanuit de traditionele cultuur

Dus ‘beleid’ vanuit de directie MAAR voor de hele organisatie: verras ons! Inspireer ons! Buiten het beleid!

Stimuleren door → niet de as van structuur maar de as van cultuur & proces inrichten wat dat tot stand brengt → stimuleren van andersdenkenden en die koesteren!

Twee jaar geleden → fundamenteel iets anders doen in het denken en naar de wereld kijken en het veranderen van AH → echt iets anders of ten dode opgeschreven → binnen 10 à 15 jaar kapot

Dus → bestaande structuren doorbreken → “IT-meneer moet zich niet met de business bemoeien” → de Heij wel ervaring maar voorzichtig omgaan met de business → maar VOLHARDEN → experimenteren op het gebied van commercie en marketing

Voorbeeld: KPN Pluk → sms-info over producten van AH → veel media-aandacht → conflict met Marketing → ons terrein! → da’s innovatie! Traditionele structuren veranderen en verrassen, binnen en buiten het bedrijf!
Toch nog veel topdown ipv bottom up → Stimuleren eigen initiatieven → niet altijd toestemming van de manager vragen/eisen

50.000 man stimuleren moeilijk → toch → 5 winkels + filiaalmanagers → personeel + klanten AH → nadenken over innovatie EN we gaan het doen! → geen ideeën bussen, het proces veranderen → de barrière van de manager wegnemen → rol de Heij

Hiërarchische processen zitten ingebakken → proces herinrichten → kanalen openen

Niet direct de caissières → innovatie is een talent, is gave → select aantal mensen

Kern van innoveren → assembleren → combineren van ideeën → ieg voor Albert Heijn → meer oplossingen dan ideeën

Stimuleren → Innovatiecafé → fysieke plek voor het bij elkaar brengen van ideeën → “not done” in een beursgenoteerd retailbedrijf → in de traditionele Zaanse cultuur → dat kost geld! → toch gewoon gedaan → link: andersdenkenden!!

In eerste instantie → hoofdkantoor → volgende stap → online innovatiecafé → Hyves-achtige omgeving om mensen (lees: andersdenkenden) bij elkaar te brengen → moeilijk:

1. Oude structuurdenkers

2. Timemanagement

Ad. Timemanagement: à la Google → tijd vrijmaken voor vrij denken → meet & greet / flexwerkplekken

Verandering bij AH → in denken héél ver → we weten wat we gaan doen → we weten wat we willen → trekken jonge mensen aan → we zijn een nieuwe netwerkorganisatie

Kenmerkende innovaties:

- Kies en Kook: assemblage → wegbewegen van ingrediënten en producten naar oplossingen!
  Kenmerkend voor filosofie AH en filosofie Strategie en Innovatie Rijksuniversiteit Groningen! Nadeel: Alleen assemblage → geen totaal nieuwe inzichten
- Self scanning: in historisch perspectief: introductie supermarkt → paradigma verschuiving → self scanning ook → klant wordt medewerker
- Koken en Stomen: technologie en product versterken elkaar
**Roles in participant observation**

In the typology of Gold (1958, In: Baxter & Babbie. 2004), the researcher in participant observation can operate in four different manners:

1. *complete participant*, where there is no awareness at all of any research taking place;

2. *participant-as-an-observer*, here the researcher participates fully in the observed population but it is common knowledge within the studied group that the research is done;

3. *observer-as-participant*, this means the researcher is mainly observing and participates only in a superficial way to justify observations;

4. *complete observer*, the only participation here is being present to observe.
APPENDIX 3

Position of innovation in the Ahold EU IM department

Job descriptions innovation departments IM

Technology Enabled Innovation

- Drive the technological innovation (in line with Innovation Agenda)
- Develop Proof-of-Concepts
- Involve the business to collaborate on and evaluate the potential of technological innovations

Innovation (Business Programs)

- Identify and communicate new developments, opportunities and insights that have potential business value
- Keep track of current technological developments and their future impact for Ahold
- Manage the process of innovation (capture ideas, assess ideas, develop capability) for Ahold
## Status of innovation projects according to the innovation funnel

### Status Innovatie-initiatieven

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<th>Idee/activiteit</th>
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<th>Briefing</th>
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