Employer branding
-A faddish way of labeling operations or a valuable contribution to HRM?

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Yours sincerely,

Astrid Sjunnesson & Malin Erkander

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Abstract

Employer branding has become an increasingly popular subject among practitioners. In order to gain competitive advantage it is claimed that companies should hold the best employees. However, in this thesis it is argued that the purposes of employer branding and HRM are strikingly alike, since they both aim to attract and retain employees.

Earlier research lacks to explain how companies work with employer branding. Therefore, it is reasonable to wonder how employer branding is practiced and whether employer branding contributes something of value to the company, especially to HRM. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate whether employer branding contributes to HRM regarding attraction and retention of employees.

A qualitative case study was conducted and the findings show that employer branding can contribute to HRM by: (1) giving HRM incentives to approach the whole spectra of employees; potential, current as well as former employees, (2) facilitating the maintenance of the corporate culture and (3) enabling a way for HRM to take a strategic approach.

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1. Introduction

“The one with the best employees wins” - The CEO

A search for “employer branding” on Google retrieves 2 710 000 hits, several of which belong to management consultants claiming to be employer branding specialists. Employer branding is a topic that has become increasingly popular among practitioners (HR Magazine, 2010). Indeed, strong employer brands are believed to attract and retain talented employees (Martin et al., 2011). In addition, the consultant companies within this field emphasize the importance of building a strong employer brand in order to stay competitive on the market (CIPD, 2007). According to Universum, the global leading consultant firm within the field, employer branding is today a topic that executives all the way up to the CEO level take very seriously (Universum, 2012).

The popular management strategy of employer branding builds on an assumption that the knowledge-based economy faces a permanent shortage of skilled workers which is claimed to create great challenges for companies to attract talented employees (Ewing, 2002). Simon Barrow, the management consultant who first came up with the aforementioned concept in 1996, states that technical innovations have changed what employees are supposed to achieve (Barrow & Mosley, 2005). According to the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise (2010), today’s employees are considered to be a company’s most valuable resource. Since work tasks have become increasingly complex and products more knowledge intensive, the demand for competence has increased. Therefore, it is argued that the possession of skilled employees is crucial for companies’ competitive advantage (The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, 2010). Therefore, management consultants present employer branding as a key solution to attract and retain employees.

However, the concern for talent in the knowledge-based economy is not new. About fifty years ago, the American economist Gary Becker won a Nobel Prize for his study on investment in human capital (The Nobel Foundation). Around the same time, the American management
consultant, Peter Drucker (1969), invented the term “knowledge worker” to point out that an increased number of employees labor with their brains rather than their hands. He meant that the employees’ knowledge is a vital resource for a company and with a successful “management of people” companies can gain competitive advantage (Drucker, 1969). Today, most large companies work with Human Resource Management (HRM), which can be defined as “a management function that helps managers to recruit, select, train and develop members of an organization” (Shivarudrappa et al., 2010:5). It is argued that whenever an organization operates in a competitive market, it will find itself under pressure to formulate and implement value-creating strategies (Harzing & Pinnington, 2011). Thus, today it is considered to be important for companies to take a long-term and a holistic business approach with their HRM operations in order to follow business strategies and reach overall goals, a practice called Strategic HRM (Morell & Rundgren, 2012).

1.1 Problematization and Purpose

In this thesis, it is argued that the purposes of employer branding and HRM are strikingly alike since they both aim to attract and retain employees. By marketing employer branding as a key solution to the assumed shortage of skilled workers, management consultants seem to have triggered a perceived obligation among companies to practice employer branding, although it is very likely that they already work with similar tasks within their HRM function. Thus, it is reasonable to wonder how companies work with employer branding and whether employer branding contributes something of value to the company, especially to HRM. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate whether employer branding contributes to HRM regarding attraction and retention of employees.

1.2 Research question

The purpose leads to the following research questions:

• How and why is employer branding practiced?
• How does employer branding contribute to HRM?

In this study, HRM will be limited to practices related to attraction and retention of employees.
1.3 Contribution

Since employer branding has become an increasingly popular subject among practitioners, there is a lot written in the practitioner’s literature about how companies should work with employer branding (Dyhre & Parment, 2009; Barrow & Mosley, 2005). However, we claim there is a lack of empirical research within the academic field that investigates how companies actually work with employer branding. Previous academic research primarily focuses on defining the concept and providing a framework for what such concepts should include (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Martin, 2009). The empirical studies available tend to focus on the receiver of the employer brand, as well as on potential and current employees and how they perceive different employer brands. (Maxwell, 2009; Wilden, 2012; Franca, 2012). As Backhaus & Tikoo, (2004) argue, research needs to examine the extent to which employer branding activities complement existing HRM practices. By conducting this study we intend to contribute with research to this field by providing an increased understanding for how employer branding is practiced and how it contributes to HRM regarding attraction and retention of employees.
2. Conceptual framework

This section discusses relevant literature and theories that are applied in the research and the analysis. First, the concepts of employer brand and employer branding are discussed in a presentation including different definitions and theories that leads to summaries of the concepts. Then, the concepts of HRM and Strategic HRM together with their historical background are presented. The whole section is concluded with a summary that links the concepts of employer branding, HRM and strategic HRM together.

2.1 The employees of a company

The employees of a company can be regarded as one element of the internal resources available to an organization, along with financial, physical and organizational resources (Harzing & Pimnington, 2011). According to the Resource-based view, a company’s possession of valuable resources is the key to competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). However, in order for a resource to be valuable it must be rare, non-substitutable and difficult to imitate (Barney, 1991). Sirmon et al., (2007) highlight the importance of resources but mean that it is not the resources alone that create value; instead it is the management of the resources that is of significance. The resource of human capital can be explained as the employees’ acquired knowledge and capabilities that for allow unique and innovative actions” (Becker, 1962). The resource of human capital needs to be managed properly and this is a challenging task for managers (Sirmon et al., 2007). Through skillful investment in human capital, company performance can be enhanced (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

2.2 The Employer Brand

It is claimed that in order to attract and retain the employees of a company, a strong employer brand is needed (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). An employer brand is when the brand concept has been applied to an HRM setting and is used to refer to a company as an employer (Edwards, 2009). A brand can be defined as “a mixture of attributes, tangible and intangible, symbolized in a trademark, which if managed properly, creates value and influence” (Swystun, 2007:14). Although branding traditionally belongs to the field of product marketing, it can also
be applied to distinguish companies as employers, were the employees can be seen as customers and the branded product is the particular employment experience (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

The employer brand was first defined in 1996 by Ambler & Barrow as “the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employing company” (p. 186) (See Figure 1). This provides a framework for what tangible and intangible benefits an employment can provide where the functional benefits may be factors of convenience such as the location of the office or the possibility to have flexible work hours while economic benefits obviously have to do with monetary or other tangible rewards. Psychological benefits can be explained as the feelings of belonging and the sense of purpose that employment can provide. The sum of these employment benefits creates the mixture of valuable and influential attributes symbolized in the employer brand (Barrow and Mosely, 2005).

**Figure 1:** According to Ambler and Barrow (1996) an employer brand is the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits.

Furthermore, Backhaus and Tikko, (2004) emphasize the differentiation of the employer brand and the importance of a unique employer identity that distinguishes the company from its competitors. This builds on an assumption that the differentiation is what enables a company to gain attention among talents, hence be perceived as a desirable place to work. However, one has
to take into consideration that one person’s preferences and employment experience may differ from those of someone else. Martin et al. (2011) takes this into account when suggesting that the employer brand can be defined as “a generalized recognition for being known among key stakeholders for providing a high-quality employment experience, and a distinctive organizational identity which employees value, engage with and feel confident and happy to promote to others” (Martin et al., 2011:3618). This definition also emphasizes the fact that current employees can be ambassadors and contribute to the company’s external reputation as an employer. To summarize, the employer brand will, in this study, be understood as the overall image of a company’s unique employment benefits perceived by both current and potential employees.

2.3 Employer Branding

The actual activity of employer branding is defined as: “the process of building an identifiable and unique employer identity” (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004:502). The process of building an employer brand can be divided into three main steps. Step one is to identify the value proposition, which is the set of unique employment benefits that the company offers to its employees (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). The identification of the employer brand needs to be based on information about the organizational culture, the management style, characteristics of current employees and their image of how the company is as an employer (Sullivan, 2002). Step two is to market the employer brand externally to target potential employees, and finally, step three is to practice internal branding, which integrates the brand promise made to recruits with the internal practices and the organizational culture (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). The practice of internal branding aims to enhance employee retention but also to incorporate common values in order for employees to strive for the same goals (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) have developed a conceptual framework, presented in Figure 2, which illustrates what employer branding includes and how it incorporates both marketing as well as HRM concepts. According to this model, employer branding can be divided into two parts. One part creates employer attraction through the brand associations and brand image it evokes. This can be seen as the external part of employer branding that is directed towards potential employees. The other part of the model shows how employer branding creates loyalty
among current employees through the organization’s identity and the organizational culture. This can be seen as the internal aspect of employer branding.

Backhaus and Tikko (2004) portray that, similar to product brand loyalty, employer brand loyalty is the commitment that employees make to their employer as a result of identification and involvement. This, in turn, creates an eagerness to work hard and stay within the company (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). According to the model, employer brand loyalty contributes to employee productivity. Furthermore it is suggested that organizational loyalty is related to the organizational culture. The organizational culture can be defined as shared assumptions, values and norms that shape the behavior of the members of an organization (Zheng et al., 2010). The more the culture enhances quality of the employment experience, the more likely the culture will increase the organizational loyalty (Gifford et al., 2002).

In the model there is also an illustration of a two-way arrow between employer branding and organizational culture. According to Sullivan (2002) the identification of the employer brand has to be based on information about an already existing organizational culture. At the same time, Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) show that employer branding is often used to affect organizational culture and organizational identity, and in turn affect employer brand loyalty. Developing and maintaining a productive and supportive organizational culture is an important task for managers and internal marketing efforts can create a culture that reinforces desired work behaviors and supports individual quality of work life (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

**Figure 2:** Conceptual framework of employer branding (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).
Employer branding cuts across many fields and therefore it is also referred to as “an umbrella, under which managers can channel different employee recruitment and retention activities into a coordinated human resource strategy” (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004:513). By integrating traditional HR activities such as recruitment, staffing, training and development under one employer branding umbrella, the effect is claimed to be considerably different than the effect each of the practices would have alone (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). To summarize, employer branding will be understood in this study as an internal and external marketing process in which a company’s unique employment benefits are identified and communicated to current and potential employees in order to attract and retain talented employees.

2.4 Human Resource Management

A practice with a similar purpose to employer branding is HRM, which in simplistic way, can be defined as, “everything that is of concern to the employees of a company” (Granberg, 2011:17). HRM can also be described in a more concrete way as “a function that helps managers to recruit, select, train and develop members of an organization” (Shivarudrappa et al., 2010:5). However, HRM is a concept with many different definitions and to find a general definition of HRM is rather complicated. Examples of the HRM’s working tasks are for example recruitment, work rotation, development and other actions that will increase employees’ working conditions (Söderlund & Bredin, 2005). Granberg (2011) postulates that the HRM can be divided into soft and hard operations. The soft operations are related to education, development and motivation, while the hard operations are about performance, achievement of goals as well as criteria for salaries and bonuses. There have been discussions regarding how HRM should be defined and these have mainly focused on whether different kinds of HRM can be distinguished and if HRM should be separated from the administrative aspect of the HR-function (Granberg, 2011).

To summarize, this study will view HRM as a function that handles everything concerning the employees of a company, such as recruitment, selection, training and development and further actions that increase the employees’ working conditions and performance.
2.5 Strategic Human Resource Management

Throughout the past two centuries, as the economy has developed and work tasks have become more complex, the role of HRM has been subject to change. Until the 1950s the counterpart of today’s HR-function was to take care of industrial workers in a social and supportive way (Damm, 1993). From the 1950s onward, the function of HRM changed and became more administrative. It was not until the 1980s that ideas emerged about the HR-function as taking on a supportive role in the business in a more strategic and long-term oriented way (Harzing & Pinnington, 2011).

In 1987, Schuler and Jackson emphasized the relationship between strategy and individual employees and argued that the employees’ behavior should be linked to organizational strategies for gaining competitive advantage. Different HRM practices are required for effective strategic management and employee behavior should be selected, motivated, retained, developed and rewarded according to the overall strategy of the business (Schuler and Jackson, 1987). Furthermore, Schuler and Jackson (1987) explained that HRM only is strategic when HRM practices match each other in a consistent, reinforcing set of practices. In the late 1990s an increased number of practitioners and researchers studied the links between HRM and performance and found a relationship between HRM and the success of the organization’s strategy (Harzing & Pinnington, 2011). Boxhall and Purcell (2008) argue that strategic HRM can create value and through selection of capable people and motivation of the employees overall business goals can be achieved.

Whenever an organization operates in a competitive market it will find itself under pressure to formulate and implement value-creating strategies (Harzing & Pinnington, 2011). Instead of focusing on doing the things right, strategic HRM takes a management perspective where the focus lies on doing the right things (Granberg, 2011). In order to contribute to the overall business goals, the human capital should work in an effective way, and thus a more concentrated focus on strategic HRM is needed (Morell & Rundgren, 2012). Morell and Rundgren (2012) wrote a Bachelor Thesis that empirically investigated what components strategic HRM consists of. They found a wide variety but also some common factors. Strategic HRM tends to take a long-term perspective and a holistic business approach where the HR function supports the
strategies and the overall business goals through development of human capital in close cooperation with the business executives (Morell & Rundgren, 2012).

It is argued that the purposes and processes of strategic management are often complex and confused. In fact, people often find themselves in situations where they are unsure of why they are doing things and puzzled about consequences that may occur (Harzing & Pinnington, 2011). Furthermore, critics claim that the strategic approach is messy and uncertain regarding planning and action (Harzing & Pinnington, 2011) where the strategies tend to be unrealistically rational and too idealistic (Mintzberg, 1990). Nobody can predict the future and therefore tools and techniques of strategic management must be applied in a flexible manner where organizations encourage experimentation and improvisation (Harzing & Pinnington, 2011).

2.6 HRM today
According to the aforementioned literature within the field of HRM, researchers claim that HR operations should be strategic. In the Cranet study 2008-2010 (the Cranfield Network on HRM), it is concluded that the strategic importance of HR-operations is increasing, which for instance can be shown by a higher representation in the board of directors (Lindberg & Månsen 2010). However it has been found that the majority of the companies’ HR practices still mainly involves administrative work and operations that not necessarily take a strategic approach (Becton & Schraeder 2009; Morell & Rundgren, 2012).

2.7 Summary of theoretical framework
It is claimed that a company’s possession of valuable resources is the key to competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). One such resource is human capital, which can be explained as the employees’ acquired knowledge and capabilities that allow for unique and innovative actions (Becker, 1962). In order to create value, the resource of human capital needs to be managed properly, which is a challenging task for managers (Sirmon & Hitt, 2007).

It is claimed that in order to attract and retain the employees of a company, a strong employer brand is needed (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). An employer brand can be understood as the overall image of a company’s unique employment benefits perceived by both current and potential
employees. The process of creating the brand is called employer branding and can be understood as an internal and external marketing process in which a company’s unique employment benefits are identified and communicated to current and potential employees in order to attract and retain talented employees.

A practice with similar purpose as employer branding is HRM, which can be understood as a function that handles everything concerning the employees of a company, such as recruitment, selection, training and development and further actions that improve employees’ working conditions and performance. Furthermore, it is suggested that the HR operations should take a strategic approach (Boxhall & Purcell, 2008; Morell & Rundgren, 2012; Shuler & Jackson, 1987) Strategic HRM, is in essence, a function that takes a long-term perspective and a holistic business approach where the HR operations support the strategies and the overall business goals through being conducted in cooperation with the business executives (Morell & Rundgren, 2012).
3. Method

In this section the methods used to reach the purpose of the study are discussed. A description of the approach taken and an explanation of the methodological choices are provided. First, the research approach and the research design are discussed and motivated. Next, the data collection and the process of data analysis are explained. To conclude, the boundaries that followed the methodological choices and how the occurred issues were dealt with are described.

3.1 Research Approach

Based on the character of the purpose and the research questions, which can be regarded as both exploratory and descriptive, a qualitative approach was adopted. The study can be considered exploratory since the aim was to discover what is actually happening in the field and seek new insights (Saunders, 2007). The study can also be considered as descriptive since it provides a picture of the employer branding-phenomenon (Saunders, 2007). The qualitative approach is appropriate when the aim of the research is to gain a broad understanding and description of a contemporary phenomenon (Merriam, 1998). Moreover, Merriam (1998) states that qualitative research is useful when “there is a lack of theory, or existing theory fails to adequately explain a phenomenon” (p. 7). This also fits the purpose of the study due to the lack of previous research about how companies actually work with employer branding.

3.2 Research Design

A case study was conducted in order to gain an increased understanding for how employer branding is practiced in a company. As Yin (1984) points out: “a case study is an empirical inquiry, which investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p.23). Furthermore, the strategy chosen was what Yin (2003) refers to as a “single case” due to the complexity of the research questions which required a deeper study in one single company in order to broadly explore the practice of employer branding and how it contributes to HRM.
3.3 Case-selection
The case selection began by searching for a company that would be a suitable object of study in accordance with the purpose of our research. A primarily criterion was to find a company that expressively works with employer branding. A second criterion was for the case company to have a well-established HR department, which in our opinion should be indicated through representation from the HR department in the board of executives. A suitable object of study was founded in a company within the service sector that was established in 1998. Due to anonymity reasons, the name of the company as well as the respondents cannot be mentioned. The fact that the company is young also enabled a retrospective picture since an opportunity occurred to interview the founder and CEO who could provide a picture of how the employer branding-phenomenon has evolved in the company.

3.4 Data collection
The empirical data that has formed the basis of the analysis was collected through four in-depth interviews and one e-mail correspondence with carefully selected respondents from the case company. To ensure validity, the respondents were selected on the basis of three criteria: (1) their role within the organization, which had to be related to employer branding and/or HRM, (2) the level of their role, which was important since the aim was to interview respondents working on different levels (strategic as well as operative) in order to get a full picture of the employer branding is practiced (3) the number of years they had been in the company, which was of significance since the intention was to interview respondents with as much experience from the company as possible. Additionally, the aim was to interview respondents who had been in the company at least since they explicitly started to work with employer branding in order to gain a picture of how the phenomenon was implemented in the company. The respondents that were chosen for the interviews were as follows:
Table 1: The respondents of the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Experience in the company</th>
<th>Interview type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CEO and Founder (CEO)</td>
<td>Strategic level</td>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head of Employer Branding (Head of EB)</td>
<td>Strategic level</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>E-mail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head of Talent Acquisition (Head of TA)</td>
<td>Strategic and Operative level</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event Coordinator (EC)</td>
<td>Operative level</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment Assistant (RA)</td>
<td>Operative level</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner. This data collection strategy was in accordance with the qualitative and exploratory approach of our research since semi-structured and in-depth interviews can be very helpful to gain new information and to seek new insights (Saunders, 2007). Furthermore, this interview technique is appropriate when gathering data for a qualitative analysis as a part of a case study strategy (Saunders, 2007).

In addition to the information provided by the respondents, secondary data was collected from the case company’s website and from their annual report. This allowed for more complete understanding of the company’s characteristics, background and activities.

3.5 Interview guide

Interview guides were created prior to the interviews, in order to make sure that all the topics were covered. According to Saunders, it is important to consider your approach to questioning even for in-depth interviews that are semi-structured (Saunders, 2007). When writing the
interview guides, open questions were formulated enabling the respondents to reply as freely as possible. In order to operationalize in accordance with the purpose of the study and create valid interview guides the research questions were divided into several themes, from which questions were posed:

- Employer branding and perception of the concept in general.
- The company’s employer brand and how it is perceived.
- The company’s practice of HRM.
- The company’s practice of employer branding.
- Employer branding in cooperation with HRM and other departments of the business.

The interview guides were partly customized to the respondents’ different roles in the company although some standard questions were posed in order to facilitate comparison and strengthen reliability (see appendix for interview guides).

### 3.6 The interview process

All the respondents received an e-mail a couple of days before the interview with the interview questions and a brief description of the study. This allowed them to prepare and reflect upon important information, in order to not forget anything of significance.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face in a conference room at the case company’s offices, which allowed for privacy and an undisturbed conversation. The interview data was recorded, which allowed repetition of what had been said and secured that no errors were made due to failed memory. In order to make sure that everything had been correctly understood, we tried to listen actively and sometimes repeated and summarized what the respondent had said. If there were any unclear answers the respondents were asked to elaborate and concretize with examples. For this reason, it was a great benefit to conduct the interviews in a face-to-face manner. Furthermore, this allowed the respondents to write illustrations, which facilitated the communication.

One of the planned interviews unfortunately had to be replaced by an e-mail correspondence since the respondent was currently abroad. The information from this person was considered to
be of high significance for our study and fortunately the respondent provided very descriptive answers. E-mails were sent back and forth and the correspondence allowed us to reflect upon what follow-up questions needed to be asked. It also allowed us to summarize how the responses had been interpreted, which was a good way to make sure that everything was covered.

3.7 Data analysis
Right after each interview the recordings were transcribed. We also discussed our findings, highlighted interesting information and made sure that the research team had congruent impressions of what had been said. Thereafter, tables were created in accordance with the themes, which facilitated a comparison of the information that the different respondents had provided. This made the data more pragmatic and easy to analyze. Stake (1995) iterated that it is important to ask the question; “What did that mean?” in order to investigate and elaborate different data. The next step was to apply the conceptual framework to the empirical findings and analyze it all together in an attempt to find different patterns and answers to the research questions.

3.8 Research limitations and quality of study
The choice of company is believed to strengthen the validity of the study since the company expressively works with both employer branding and HRM. Though, one could argue that a limitation of the study is that a single case study was done rather than a multiple case study, which means that the study cannot be used to make generalizations (Yin, 2003). A single case study was actively chosen due to the complexity of the purpose, which required a deeper study in one single company in order to broadly explore the practice of employer branding and how it contributes to HRM. Furthermore Drogendijk (2009) claims that case studies have to “make use of data collected from different sources using different methods” (p.11). It is possible to claim that this study made use of different sources since interviews with several respondents were conducted. However it can be discussed whether different methods were used since all primary data was collected through qualitative interviews, which was believed to be the appropriate method. Yet, in addition to the interviews, secondary data was collected and therefore it can be claimed that different methods actually were used.
The chosen case company has subsidiaries in several countries, although the study was limited to activities conducted in Sweden. This could decrease the holistic picture of how the company works with employer branding, however since employees with different roles, working on different levels were interviewed, a broad understanding of the operations in Sweden could be obtained. By keeping the interviews in Sweden, any language issues could be avoided since they were conducted in both our own and the respondents’ native language. However, it ought to be mentioned that the empirical data inevitably had to be translated into English when written into this report. In order to not lose any important nuances of what had been said, the translation was done in a cautious manner, and therefore it is not believed to have considerately affected the quality of the report.

Eriksson & Kovalainen (2008) state that high reliability is when the same results are to be found in similar studies. One person in the research team had previously worked in the case company for more than a year’s time. This enabled a good understanding of the company and its business, which is something Saunders (2007) states is important. Nevertheless, there is a chance that personal experiences could have affected the analysis and in order to limit personal reflections as much as possible, the interviews were transcribed right after they were conducted and an effort was made to draw conclusions from them only. However, a qualitative research is inevitably influenced by judgments and interpretations from the researchers since it is part of a qualitative study’s nature not to provide absolute findings in numbers or statistics, thus in qualitative studies personal reflections may affect the result (Yin, 2007).

A challenge with semi-structured interviews is the issue of how much information the respondents are willing to provide. Also, when interviewing someone who represents a company there is a possibility that the respondent will try to give a good impression and only give answers that are favorable for the company. The fact that the interview questions were sent out to the respondents a couple of days prior to the interviews could have affected a non-spontaneity and fueled answers that sounded good for the company. Therefore we made an effort to have a critical mind and question the answers. Another challenge with semi-structured interviews is to compare the answers of different interviews since the respondents may speak about different topics. Fraenkel & Wallen (2006) say that questions are posed differently to each respondent due to a response to something that is said. Even though customized interview guides were used, a few
standard questions were posed to everyone, in order to facilitate a comparison and strengthen reliability.

Regarding the e-mail correspondence, it would certainly have been preferable to conduct an interview in person. Yet, the e-mail correspondence allowed us to e-mail back and forth and reflect upon what follow-up questions needed to be asked. Therefore it can be claimed that we still collected reliable data.

4. Empirical findings

This section outlines the findings of the empirical research that are relevant in the context of the research purpose. First an introduction of the case company is provided, then a summary of how the respondents describe the concept of employer branding and also how the employer brand is perceived. Next, it is described how the company works with HRM and how employer branding is practiced. Finally, a description is provided of how different departments cooperate in order to work with employer branding. In this section the practice of employer branding will be referred to as EB.

4.1 Company profile

The case company belongs to the service sector. Founded in Sweden in 1998, it is claimed to be a young and successful company that is expanding at a fast pace (Case company homepage) and already in 2011 it had a turnover of more than one billion SEK (Case company annual report 2011). Even though the company has subsidiaries in several European countries, the majority of its operations are conducted in Sweden with approximately 600 employees (Case company homepage). The company is striving to become a global leader within its area of business and their strategy to reach this goal is by differentiation on the market, something they accomplish through acquiring the best employees (The CEO). The CEO states that “The one with the best employees wins”.

4.2 Employer branding and the perception of the concept in general

All the respondents agreed that employer branding (EB) is about building a brand towards the labor market where the main focus is to be perceived as an attractive employer. Furthermore the
brand needs to be directed towards potential, current, and former employees, and EB is therefore referred to as both an internal and external practice. However, the CEO associated EB, to a larger extent, as internal practices while the Event Coordinator (EC) emphasized EB as external activities. Some of our respondents also saw EB as a very broad and multifaceted concept, due to the high amount of things that can contribute to how the employer brand is perceived. In other words, they suggest that the practice is both internal and external and it is not just the planned EB activities that create the brand image, the employees are ambassadors anywhere they go (Head of TA & Head of EB).

Concerning the external EB, it was referred to as a practice that needs to accentuate certain attributes that the company wants to be associated with (EC). However, what most of the respondents emphasized when talking about EB was that the internal EB actually is of higher significance. Current and former employees are considered to be important ambassadors of the brand and their potential for communicating the employer brand externally should be acknowledged. It is pointed out that their message may be more genuine and honest in comparison with the employer brand message communicated in traditional marketing campaigns. The CEO of the firm reasons that if the employees think they are a great workplace, they will most likely share this with their friends and people they know, which will contribute to the employer brand, as well as also creating a favorable reputation and contributing to the overall brand. The CEO states that: “all branding you need is employer branding”. Therefore the most important thing that can be done for the employer brand is to build a great workplace: “every cent we invest in improving this workplace will be significant for the employer brand” and “my goal is for the employees to not want to work anywhere else, that is what I constantly strive for” (The CEO). In summary, EB is seen as a practice that in particular aims to improve the company as a workplace and consequently enhance the employees’ willingness to be ambassadors and share their positive experiences, which will strengthen the employer brand. Most of our respondents seemed to be aware of this, from Assistant to CEO-level.

4.3 The company’s employer brand and how it is perceived.

All our respondents agree that the employer brand to a large extent is characterized by the three core values of the company, which are claimed to summarize and define the corporate culture. The assistant claimed that the corporate culture was the main reason why she wanted to start her
career in this company. The culture is described as energetic and fast-paced where people constantly want to improve their results at the same time as they support and care for each other (EC & RA). Everyone we interview mention the three core values and their significance for the corporate culture, which proves how established they must be in the company. The first core value is about creating a workplace where the employees get energized for instance through focusing on goals and possible rewards such as travels and kick-off events. The second value is about creating an atmosphere where the employees compliment, help and support each other. The third value is about performance and development, where the norm is for everyone to constantly strive for improvement. “If individual employees get a tiny bit better every day, the company as a whole will improve significantly” (The CEO).

Even though all our respondents point out how important the corporate culture is for defining the employer brand of the company, it is stated by the Head of EB that the culture and the core values existed within the company long before the structured EB work was introduced. The CEO claims that one of his most important tasks, as founder and CEO of the company, is to establish the culture. According to him, the core values have been present since day one. However, it was not until four years ago that the three core values were defined, which was before the company explicitly started to work with EB. Even though the EB work may contribute to maintenance of the core values, it was not the EB work that created these (Head of EB).

4.4 The company’s practice of HRM.

In the case company, approximately 10 persons work full time with HRM (Head of TA). The HR department consists of the HR-director, who is present in the Swedish board of executives, the HR-business partners who secure the quality of HR-processes and work with goal systems for the employees, the Talent Acquisition Managers, who are responsible for recruitment, and the Leadership and Development Manager who works with education. Also the Head of Employer Branding is included in the HR Department. The work tasks of the HR department can be summarized in the figure presented below, which was provided by the CEO when he explained how the HR department works with HR operations. These operations were also confirmed by the Head of TA and the Head of EB. This figure can be called “the HR wheel” and consists of five different stages: attracting, recruiting, on-boarding, retaining, development and exit.
The HR-operations can be divided into five different stages:

1. This stage is about attracting the right sorts of employees. This is for example done by cooperation with different universities and sales schools where they have workshops and different events. Further, the respondents point out the importance of attracting potential employees by word of mouth.

2. The company is specialized in this field and emphasizes the importance of recruiting the right sorts people with the right sorts of skills and personality.

3. Also, the employees on boarding period is emphasized. Taking care of the employees before they actually start to work and in the beginning of their employment is crucial for them in order to thrive. They do this for example by keeping in touch and getting an introduction course.

4. The company highlights the retention of their employees and further their development. The employees should get the opportunity to take on challenges, thus it is important with work rotation, education and promotion possibilities.

5. When the employees end their work they hold closure meetings and keep in touch through an alumni-network.

(Source: The CEO, The Head of TA & The Head of EB)
4.5 The company’s practice of employer branding.

In January 2011 the company decided to appoint someone responsible for the EB work and thus the role as “Head of Employer Branding” was assigned. The reason they decided to invest in this kind of practice was because of difficulties to recruit for certain positions and the EB practice came up as a solution to these issues. The CEO means to say that if a company doesn’t have problems to attract and retain talented people, the EB activity won’t come up naturally, but if the company faces issues, then the managers need to contemplate their practices and find solutions to how one can be perceived as a more attractive employer. However, the concern for creating an attractive workplace has, according to the CEO, always been present within the board, although they haven’t called it anything special and it has certainly not been as structured as it is today, as an established practice.

After the EB-role was introduced, the function soon gained an increased focus and the role gradually included more activities (Head of EB). Today the board of executives is engaged in the EB practice and aware of the fact that employees are the company’s most valuable asset and a key to competitive advantage (Head of EB).

The first step of the EB-work was, according to the Head of EB, to come up with an employer brand promise, which includes identification, profiling and imaging in order to make it clear what to communicate externally as well as internally. The Head of EB points out how important it is that the employer brand message is truthfully communicated so that also current employees can recognize themselves in a marketing campaign. As a part of identifying the EB-brand promise, the head of EB revealed that an external consultant was hired to have workshops and to conduct in-depth interviews in order to identify an objective picture of the company’s EB offer. The workshops were arranged with the company’s key executives, in order for them to share their view on how they wanted the company to be as an employer while the in-depth interviews were conducted with employees so that they could express their picture of the company (Head of EB). The following action was to screen the market in order to see how the company could be positioned compared to competitors and finally a marketing agency was hired to package the employer brand concept (Head of EB). One of the results was a new slogan that is now a part of the employer brand and that is used to attract new employees (Head of EB). The CEO says that
this slogan summarizes the corporate culture of the company in an easy and comprehensive way.

The second step of the EB-work was to divide the work into three segments: (1) activities towards potential employees (2) activities towards current employees and (3) activities towards former employees. The Head of EB points out that it is the current challenges within the organization that determines what block to focus on. Every eight weeks, the board of executives has a meeting that focuses on the Employer brand and the company currently needs to invest resources (Head of EB). Since the company has grown a lot recently, much focus has been put on attracting potential employees (Head of EB).

4.5.1 Potential employees

When working towards potential employees, the effort is to understand the target groups and how to differentiate the company from other companies within the same business in order to attract (Head of EB). The employer brand practices toward this segment have, according to the Head of EB, contributed to an improvement of the attraction and the recruitment process and made it more structured.

The key activities towards the potential employees are done in cooperation with the marketing department, who is responsible for the external marketing. Examples of external employer branding activities are events, workshops and TV commercials (EC). However the ambassadorship and word of mouth marketing also seem to play a central role for the EB towards the potential employees. Both the EC and the Head of TA claim that when they are talking to potential employees during marketing events and job interviews they always promote the workplace by sharing their own experiences of the company as a workplace.

According to the CEO: “approximately 83% of the new employees last year, were recommended to this workplace from someone they know who already works here”. This is also confirmed by the assistant who claimed the she applied for this job after having been recommended by some classmates. The corporate culture is often communicated when information is spread about the workplace (Head of TA). An important strategy to maintain the organizational culture is to be very conscious to only recruit people with personal characteristics that match the core values. Therefore, during an interview the interviewer needs to communicate the core values in order for
the applicant to choose if it fits him/her. Also, the interviewer only recruits those people with personal characteristics that match the organizational culture (Head of TA).

### 4.5.2 Current employees

The aim of EB, when working towards current employees, is retention: to keep the employees in the company. Employee satisfaction surveys determine what kind of activities that will be performed toward the current employees. For instance, the activities could be to review what is offered to the employees and to highlight and communicate different activities internally (Head of EB). In other words, the activities related to maintenance of the corporate culture are an important part of working with this block. The culture enhancing activities may be the most important strategy to retain employees (EC). Examples of culture enhancing activities are different routinized activities that include the core values and also communication of the core values through the internal network (EC). As new employees start to work in the company they will get introduced to colleagues that breathe the culture and act in a certain way. The employees that are ambitious and live by the corporate goals gets promoted and rewarded (The CEO). The CEO points out that it’s very important that employees like the core values and are determined to behave accordingly. “If we would accept that people behaved contradictory to our core values, our culture would dissolve, which we can’t allow for since we are very concerned to preserve our culture” (The CEO). The EB role toward the block of current employees is a lot about giving recommendations to the HR department, where the aim is to become a long-term employer and to encourage the employees to be good ambassadors for the company (Head of EB). It was also pointed out that the managers of the company have a great responsibility in spreading the culture through leading by example (Head of TA).

### 4.5.3 Former Employees

Regarding EB-work towards former employees, the EB-function has the responsibility to manage the alumni-network. This was a new practice that was implemented after the company started to work with EB (Head of EB). According to the Head of EB, the alumni-network aims to encourage former employees to be good ambassadors for the work place. Furthermore, the CEO points out how important it is to handle the exit-process well. “If an employee needs to quit, whatever reasons there may be, we need to help that person to continue his or her career”. If the company doesn’t handle the exit-process well, the former employee may not be a good ambassador, which could harm the reputation of the company. The head of EB points out how
important it is to see the EB practices as a long-term work that aims to strengthen the employees’ ambassadorship through providing the best workplace possible.

4.7 Employer branding in cooperation with HRM and other departments of the business

It is claimed by the Head of EB that it is difficult to separate the EB practices from the HR-practices, especially the internal activities of EB since they belong to different parts of the HR department. Therefore a close cooperation between the HR and the EB-functions is inevitable (Head of EB). However, the external practices of EB also have to be done in cooperation with the marketing department when it comes to creating marketing materials and planning of different events (EC). In addition to this, the Head of EB points out that a cooperation with the board of executives is also necessary in order to decide what activities, EB-blocks or target groups need to be focused on within the upcoming time period. Furthermore, in order to attract their most important target groups they have specific people working with the attraction and the recruitment operations, a task that belongs to the Head of TA in close cooperation with the rest of the HR department and the marketing department.

In summary, one can say that the marketing department plays a central role in communicating the employer brand in external marketing campaigns and during events, though in order to make sure they attract the right sort of talent, they have an extra function working with the recruitment and attraction for specific positions. Furthermore, the HR department and the managers have important roles for the internal employer brand as they decide what to communicate (Head of TA).
5. Analysis

In this section the empirical findings are analyzed with help from the theoretical framework, highlighting aspects of significance to understand the practice of employer branding. The basis of this section can be found in the research questions with the aim to fill the lack of empirical research within the field and investigate whether employer branding has created a new way for companies to work with their HR operations in order to attract and retain employees.

5.1 How and why employer branding is practiced

5.1.1 The significance of the internal employer brand

The respondents understood employer branding as a practice that aims to build a brand towards the labor market where the main focus is to be perceived as an attractive employer. In particular, employer branding was seen as an internal practice that aimed to improve the company as a workplace and consequently enhance the employees’ willingness to be ambassadors and share their positive experiences, which according to the case company is considered to be an effective way to strengthen the employer brand. This internal emphasis on employer branding could be seen as something unpredictable since employer branding in theory has an equal focus on the internal and external branding. With help from the conceptual framework, employer branding was understood as an internal and external marketing process in which a company’s unique employment benefits are identified and communicated to current and potential employees to attract and retain talented employees.

It is reasonable to assume that a potential discrepancy between the external and the internal employer brand can be avoided when the internal employer branding is being prioritized to the external employer branding. One could expect that it may be risky for a company to put too much emphasis on external marketing campaigns to promote the workplace, since it may beautify and polish the reality. If the external employer brand doesn’t correspond with the internal, it could create unrealistic expectations, which may result in the employees getting disappointed. This could further affect their commitment and loyalty to the workplace. Therefore it may be a reasonable strategy to prioritize the internal employer brand and focus on the importance of improving the workplace.
If the employees consider the company as being a great place to work, they will most likely share this with people outside of work and this might strengthen the external employer brand as well as the company’s reputation in general. However, in order for a company to provide a good workplace they probably need a well functioning HRM as they work with operations that aim to retain the current employees. In the conceptual framework, HRM was summarized as a function that handles everything concerning the employees of a company, such as recruitment, selection, training and development and further actions that increase the employees’ working conditions and performance. Thus, by working with HRM, the company indirectly works with their employer brand. It is therefore reasonable to argue that employer branding cannot be seen as separated from HRM since HR activities aiming to improve working conditions most likely are crucial for how the company is perceived as an employer.

Even though the company prefers to use current employees as ambassadors to promote the employer brand externally, they do initiate some external employer branding activities. However the Head of EB accentuated how important it is that current employees can recognize themselves in the marketing campaigns. For this reason they were very thorough when they identified their employer brand slogan and even hired an external consultant to interview employees and have workshops with managers in order to distinguish an authentic employer brand. This is in line with Sullivan (2002) who means that the identification of the employer brand needs to be based on information about the organizational culture, the management style, characteristics of current employees and their image of how the company is as an employer.

5.1.2 The organizational culture and its significance for the employer brand

Backhaus and Tikko, (2004) emphasize the differentiation of the employer brand and the importance of a unique employer identity that distinguishes the company from its competitors. All of the respondents accentuated the organizational culture when they were asked what distinguishes the company as an employer and gives it its unique employment benefits. According to the conceptual framework, the benefits provided by employment could either be functional, economic or psychological (Backhaus & Tikko, 2004). Furthermore, an organizational culture can be explained as shared assumptions, values and norms, which shapes the behavior of the members of an organization (Zheng et al., 2010). Therefore, one can assume that the employment benefits, generated by the organizational culture in the case company
primarily are of the psychological kind, rather than functional and economic kind. The respondents described the organizational culture as supportive, ambitious and energizing and it is likely that this might have an engaging and motivational effect on the employees and result in commitment and loyalty to the company. Therefore it can be suggested that a strong employer brand and an attractive workplace can be built through the culture.

One aspect that is relevant to reflect upon is the functional aspect that the organizational culture has for the company since it may enhance a preferred behavior and improve performance. A possible reason why the case company does not emphasize economic benefits in their employer brand could be because it is a Swedish company. The authors who claimed that an employer brand consists of economic benefits are British and it is possible that British companies may emphasize economic benefits (such as bonuses) more than Swedish companies, due to cultural differences.

One interesting aspect was how all the respondents, from CEO to assistant level described the workplace in a similar way since they all mentioned the core values when describing the culture and the employer brand. Backhaus and Tikko (2002) argue that creating a culture is an important task for managers and the CEO of the case company claimed accordingly that one of his most important work tasks, as founder and CEO is to establish the culture. It seems like the CEO together with the other managers really have succeeded in making the organizational culture a part of the employees’ everyday lives. However, it is possible to question whether a strong culture only is positive since it may result in uniformity among the employees. One could wonder if uniformity is always something good or if diversity is to prefer since it might enable a creative platform, generating new ideas. On the other hand, an explanation to why such emphasis was put on the culture may be because they have expanded in a fact pace, both in Sweden and internationally and therefore the culture may be a way to unify the company and make them strive for the same goals.

5.1.3 The reasons why it is desirable to attract and retain employees

The CEO states that the talented and ambitious employees are to be thanked for the company’s success. Together with all the respondents he stress the employees’ value for the company. The reason why the employees are considered so important is undoubtedly because the company is in
the service sector, where human competence is the product. Therefore, it is evident that the employees are the company’s most valuable resource since the business builds on their capabilities rather than on physical products. According to our theoretical framework, the key to competitive advantage is the possession of valuable resources (Sirmon & Hitt, 2003) and a company’s most valuable resource is considered to be the employees (the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise). The CEO explains that it is through the employees they can differentiate themselves and thus gain competitive advantage. Boxhall and Purcell (2008) highlight the employees’ importance and state that through recruiting and retaining capable people the company gains competitive advantage.

One can assume that a competitive differentiation is made by the employees’ unique skills or capabilities. This may especially be valid in the technology sector, were work tasks can be rather complex. However, it is uncertain whether this argument is valid in the service sector were the work tasks do not require advanced knowledge to the same extent. Yet, it is important to emphasize that it’s not only about attracting and retaining talent in general; it is about acquiring the right talent. This does not only have to include advanced technical knowledge but also suitable personal characteristics or social skills that might be crucial in the service sector. It is very likely that the acquisition of suitable personal characteristics is what enables a company to follow its strategies and reach its business specific goals. Also, one person’s preferences may differ from the one of someone else and therefore an identifiable employer brand may facilitate the right sort of people becoming attracted to the workplace.

According to the Resource Based View, a resource must be rare, non-substitutable and difficult to imitate in order to be valuable (Sirmon & Hitt, 2003). Even though it can be argued that the case company’s employees are the key component in the business, it is questionable whether an individual employee can be considered to possess the attributes of being rare, non-substitutable and difficult to imitate. There may actually be plenty of people on the job market with charismatic personalities and social skills suitable for the service sector. However what may be rare, non substitutable and difficult for a competitor to imitate is a whole workforce that possess those attributes and in addition behaves in accordance with a strong organizational culture that both motivates the employees and increases their performance.
5.2 How employer branding contributes to HRM

5.2.1 Employer branding, a way for HRM for approach the whole spectrum of employees

After the case company started to work with employer branding the stages of attracting, retaining and exit were explicitly included as parts of their HRM work. HRM activities related to these stages may have been present before but probably in a less organized way. It is claimed by our respondents that employer branding has improved the process of attracting and recruiting by making it more structured. This can be explained by the fact that employer branding has given the company an incentive to gain an increased awareness and understanding for its target groups of potential employees. It is also reasonable to assume that employer branding has helped the company to better emphasize what differentiates them as an employer, which attracts the right employees and simplifies the recruitment process.

Regarding the stage of exit and HRM activities towards former employees, it is claimed that employer branding has contributed to new activities such as the emergence of the alumni network. The reason they introduced this activity can be explained by the perceived importance of acknowledging former employees as ambassadors of the employer brand. Before the company started to work with employer branding, former employees may not to the same extent have been considered as transmitters of the company’s reputation. Although, if the company handles the exit process well and keeps in touch with its former employees, they may become good ambassadors of the employer brand.

It is therefore possible to claim that employer branding contributes to HRM by providing incentives to approach the whole spectrum of employees; potential, current and former, in order to build a strong employer brand. Nowadays, HRM does not only acknowledge current employees, but also practice activities towards potential and former employees. This gives the company a large group of ambassadors who not only have the potential to contribute to a strong employer brand but also to the company’s overall reputation. In the long run, this might be a way for HRM to contribute to the company’s competitive advantage.
5.2.2 Employer branding and the maintenance of the corporate culture

It is evident that the organizational culture is an important part of the case company’s employer brand since the culture and its core values according to the respondents are what distinguish the company as an employer. However, it is claimed that the three core values of the company existed long before they started to work with employer branding. Therefore, it is not reasonable to associate employer branding with the emergence of the culture. Nevertheless, it was pointed out by the Head of EB that culture-keeping activities are an important part of the employer branding work. Hence, employer branding can be understood as a practice that contribute to the maintenance of the culture by communicating it to potential as well as current employees. For instance, according to the Head of TA, the core values are always mentioned during recruitment interviews, thus it is very probable that this structured way of communicating of the core values to potential employees may lead to hiring of new employees who match the culture on a personal level. Partly because the job seeker may be attracted the culture when he/she learns about this, but also because the company may be more careful when selecting their employees.

Furthermore, it is also mentioned by our respondents that employer branding contributes to the core values being communicated to current employees, for instance through routinized activities as well as messages through the internal network. It is reasonable to assume that this kind of communication creates awareness and encouragement among current employees to live the culture. Therefore, one can argue that the practice of employer branding contributes to maintenance of the corporate culture.

5.2.3 Employer branding, a way for HRM to become more strategic

It is claimed by the Head of EB that employer branding is a task that requires a close cooperation with all different functions that belong to the HR department. The Head of EB makes sure that the communication of the employer brand is intact throughout all the stages of the HR-wheel, from attracting to exit. The reason why this is important is probably because all the HR-activities are of significance for the employer brand. One could say that the sum of all HR activities together is what creates the employer brand. Therefore, it is possible to incorporate the practice of employer branding in the HR-wheel as in the figure presented below:
The Head of EB also states that it is a part of the job to cooperate with other departments such as the board of executives and the marketing department in order to make sure that the employer brand is congruent with external marketing practices as well as overall business strategies. Therefore the role can in general be regarded as highly coordinating since it not only synchronizes the whole HR department but also links HR together with other important functions of the business. This is in line with Backhaus and Tikko’s (2004) argument that employer branding can be seen as “an umbrella, under which managers can channel different employee recruitment and retention activities into a coordinated human resource strategy” (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004:513).

It is very likely that HR activities, aiming to attract and retain employees will enhance their effect when they are integrated and when the communication that follows these HR activities is structured and consistent. This goes in line with Schuler and Jackson (1987) who states that HRM is strategic only when HRM practices match each other in a consistent and reinforcing set of practices.
It is reasonable to claim that the company works strategically with HRM by having employer branding as an integrated part of their HRM. This not only provides consistency to the communication that follows all the HR activities, but also integrates different departments’ practices so that the employer branding strategy is in accordance to the overall business goals. The company’s overall business goal is to become a leader in their industry and their competitive strategy is to differentiate themselves on the market by holding the right employees. Thus, they need to attract employees through having a strong employer brand. They make an effort to accomplish this by providing an appealing workplace, where the culture is strong and where the core values define the employee behavior needed in order to reach the business goals. The HR function not only tries to recruit employees with the right personal characteristics they also make an effort to train, develop and reward employees in a way that encourages them to live the culture.

As discussed by Schuler and Jackson (1987) competitive strategies should match with HRM practices in order for HRM to be strategic. If handled properly, it is possible that the practice of employer branding can provide a consistency in the communication that follows all the HR activities and facilitate the integration of the culture throughout the company. This helps the company to provide an appealing workplace, attract the right employees and in the long run, reach its overall business goals. This is in line with the conceptual framework were strategic HRM is explained as a practice that takes a long-term perspective and a holistic business approach where the HR function supports the business goals through its different HR-operations in close cooperation with the business executives. Therefore one can argue that employer branding is a way for HRM to become more strategic.
6. Conclusion

In this section, we draw conclusions from the analysis and answer the research questions. The findings of the study are specified and the contribution to the academic literature is discussed. Subsequently, managerial implications, research limitations as well as suggestions for future research are presented.

The popular management strategy of employer branding builds on an assumption that the knowledge-based economy faces a permanent shortage of skilled workers, which is claimed to create great challenges for companies in attracting talented employees (Ewing, 2002). Management consultants present employer branding as a key solution to this issue. However, in this thesis it is argued that the purposes of employer branding and HRM are strikingly alike. Due to this background we initiated a research with the purpose of investigating whether employer branding contributes to HRM regarding attraction and retention of employees. The purpose led to the following research questions:

• How and why is employer branding practiced?
• How does employer branding contribute to HRM?

6.1 Concluding remarks

Employer branding is practiced because of the importance of attracting and retaining the right sort of employees in order to achieve differentiation in the market, and thereby gain a competitive advantage. A main finding regarding employer branding is the importance of the internal approach. This means that employer branding is not to be seen as a separated activity since all HR-activities that improves the workplace are of significance for the employer brand. A good workplace will most likely encourage employees to be ambassadors and share their positive experiences, which will strengthen the employer brand. In order to provide a good workplace it’s important with well functioning HR activities while working with attraction and retention of employees. Thus, by working with HRM, companies work with their employer brand.

With regards to the research purpose, employer branding can according to the findings of the
study contribute to HRM as follows:

1) Employer branding gives HRM incentives to approach the whole spectrum of employees.
2) Employer branding reinforces the maintenance of the corporate culture.
3) Employer branding enables HRM to become more strategic.

One finding is that employer branding contributes to HRM by providing incentives to approach the whole spectrum of employees; potential, current and former, in order to build a strong employer brand. Not only are HR-activities towards current employees being held but also activities towards potential and former employees. This gives the company a large group of ambassadors who not only have the potential to contribute to a strong employer brand but also to the company’s overall reputation. In the long-run, this might be a way for HRM to contribute to the company’s competitive advantage.

A second finding is that employer branding contributes to the maintenance of the corporate culture. Even though it may not be reasonable to associate employer branding with the emergence of the culture, culture-keeping activities are an important part of the employer branding since the culture is what may distinguish a company as an employer. Communication of a distinguished employer brand not only attracts suitable employees, it also creates an awareness of the core values among current employees and an encouragement to live the culture. This is something that may increase the employees’ motivation as well as their performance.

A third finding is that employer branding enables HRM to become more strategic. One can argue that the employer branding activities together with HRM helps the company to provide an appealing workplace and attract the right employees by having a distinguished employer brand. Furthermore, employer branding not only provides consistency to the communication that follows all the HR-activities, it also integrates different departments’ practices so that the employer brand and the HR activities are in accordance with the overall business goals.

What all these three contributions have in common is that they contribute to HRM regarding attraction and retention of employees, which also provides something valuable to the company as a whole.
6.2 Impact on existing field of research

With this study, we hope to have contributed an increased understanding for how employer branding is practiced and how it contributes to HRM. Furthermore, due to our findings we have revised our definition of employer branding and suggest that employer branding can be understood as a marketing process in which a company’s unique employment benefits are identified and communicated to current, potential and former employees. It can be used as a strategic tool for HRM to constantly improve the workplace in order to attract and retain talented employees in a structured, consistent and reinforcing set of HRM practices.

6.3 Managerial implications

Employer branding can be a way for managers to take a strategic approach to HRM by enabling the HR activities to contribute to the overall business goals. The study indicates that it could be a good idea to encourage companies to work with employer branding as an integrated part of their HR activities in order to build an attractive workplace and gain a competitive advantage by attracting and retaining the right talent in accordance with overall business goals.

6.4 Research limitations and future research

When searching for an answer to the research questions, other interesting questions were raised. Since this study provides only one example of how a company works with employer branding, it cannot represent a general picture. Therefore, a recommendation for further research is to conduct a study with several companies within the service sector and compare it with this study. This would provide a more holistic picture of how companies actually work with the practice. Furthermore it would be interesting to see if other companies also practice employer branding as an integrated part of their HR operations and how the cooperation between the HR department and the other departments are facilitated. Also, future research could investigate what impact the employer brand has on the corporate brand.
7. References


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8. Appendix

Appendix 1

Interview questions: CEO and Founder of the Company

Background

1. Tell us about your position in the company
   a. What are you work tasks and areas of responsibilities?
   b. How is your position today different from position that you have had in the company before?

2. Tell us about when you founded this company
   a. Who were you?
   b. What were your visions and goals with this company as an employer?
   c. What were your visions and goals with the business in general?

The company’s employer brand and the perception of the concept employer branding

3. How would you describe this company as a work place today?
   a. What distinguishing factors does this company have as an employer?
   b. What differentiates this company as an employer compared to competitors?

4. How would you describe the concept of “employer branding” in general?
   a. How did you encounter the concept for the first time? (how were you first introduced to the concept?)

5. How would you describe the employer brand of this company today?

The company’s practice of employer branding
6. When did this company start to work with employer branding?

7. Why did you start to work with employer branding?
   a. What goals did you have with the employer branding work?

8. How did you implement the employer branding work? Describe the process.
   a. What roles were created?
   b. How did you identify you employer brand?
   c. Which parts/attributes of the employer brand existed since before and which ones were created?

9. How do you work with employer branding today?
   a. What different work tasks are included in the employer branding work?
   b. To what department does the employer branding work belong?
   c. What key roles belong to the employer branding work and what departments do they belong to?
   d. Is employer branding something you discuss in the board of executives? How and to what extent?
   e. What are the challenges with the employer branding work?

10. How has the employer branding work changed over time?
    a. How has the purpose of employer branding changed over time?
    b. What are your goals with the employer branding work today?
    c. How has these changed over time?

**Employer branding in cooperation with HRM and other departments**

11. Has the employer branding work affected the business?
    a. Can you distinguish any changes? What changes and how?
    b. Do you think you worked with the moments that are included in the employer branding work before you explicitly started to work with employer branding?

12. How important is employer branding for you business?
a. How much money do you invest on employer branding?

b. How does employer branding help you to reach your business goals?

c. Do you measure the effect of the employer branding work? How?

13. What are the links between employer branding and HRM
   a. In what way does employer branding contribute to HRM

14. What are your business goals of this company today?

15. What significance does employer branding have for reaching your business goals?

The company’s practice of Human Resources Management

16. Do you work strategically with HRM at this company?
   a. In what way?
   b. What is strategic HR? Explain.
   c. Is anyone from HR included in the board of executives?
   d. What is the effect from this?

17. What are your goals with the HRM work?
   a. Describe the goals?
   b. How do you follow-up on these?
   c. How does HRM contribute to your business goals?
Appendix 2

Interview questions: Head of Employer Branding

Background

1. How long have you had this role as “Head of Employer Branding”?

2. Did anyone have this role before you? If yes, how does your role today differ from the one’s before you?

The company’s practice of employer branding

3. How would you describe the concept “employer branding” in general?

4. How does this company work with employer branding?
   a. Please describe as detailed as possible the different activities/work tasks/functions that are included in the employer branding work.

5. Do you work towards any employer branding or HR goals? What kind of goals are these, please explain.

6. How was the practice of employer branding implemented in the company?
   a. Explain how the practice was introduced and the process that followed
   b. Why was the practice of employer branding introduced?

7. Describe how your role as Head of Employer Branding has developed over time since you first got this role until today

Employer branding in cooperation with HRM and other departments

8. Do you cooperate with anyone or any other departments who helps you with the employer branding work? If yes, please describe this cooperation and also explain how it contributes to the employer brand.
   a. Cooperation with the HR department:
   b. Cooperation with the marketing department:
   c. Cooperation with the board of executives:
   d. Cooperation with other departments:

9. How do you think the employer branding work is related to other things that the HR department does?
a. What are the similarities and differences between employer branding and HRM?

b. How does employer branding contribute to HRM, please explain.

Follow-up questions by e-mail to The Head of EB

Hi X,
Thank you for the reply!

We are interested in possible changes and effects that the expressed employer branding activities may have caused since the start two years ago. In our study we are going to analyze whether employer branding has led to new activities or not.

Thus, we have formulated further questions concerning the topic and we would be sincerely grateful if you had the chance to answer them as soon as possible.

1. You wrote that employer branding is about enhancing a genuine, not a forced, ambassadorship.

   - Have employer branding created any HR-activity that in a way has strengthened the employees’ positive ambassadorship? If so, explain.

   - Have you on company X been able to distinguish any measurable effects that the employees’ ambassadorship has contributed to? If so, what effects?

2. You wrote that you worked with running an alumni network towards former employees in order to maintain their ambassadorship.

   - How did you work with the alumni before you initiated the practice of employer branding?

3. You mentioned that in the start of the employer branding the company developed an employer brand promise (identity, profile and image).

   - How did the procedure look like when identifying your employer brand promise?

   - Was the employer brand promise created as you started working with employer branding or did you develop the promise when you started with the practice?
4. When it comes to focus on the potential employees you have worked a lot with differentiation (what makes your company unique and how you can communicate it). From former interviews together with TV commercials and other types of advertisement we understand you use slogans like ”X”, ”X”, ”X”. Therefore we wonder:

- Were these slogans defined before you started to work with employer branding or is this something employer branding has led to?

- Did this type of communication exist to the same extent before?

5. When it comes to employer branding towards current employees you acculturated activities were of highest importance. We have from former interviews understood that the company’s core values are of high importance for the corporate culture.

- Were there any activities toward the culture before you started to work with employer branding?

- Has employer branding created acculturated activities and the establishment of the core values?

Thank you X!

Yours sincerely,
Malin Erkander och Astrid Sjunnesson
Appendix 3

Interview questions: Head of Talent Acquisition

Background

1. How long have you been working for this company?
   What different positions have you had since you started working here?
   a. What roles have you had?
   b. How do they differ from the role you have today?

2. Tell us more about your role in the company.
   a. What is your title?
   b. What are your work tasks / areas of responsibility?
   c. What department/function of the company do you belong to?
   d. Who do you get directives from / who do you report to?
   e. Are there any ones who report to you?

The company’s practice of Human Resource Management

3. Describe the HR department at your company:
   a. How many employees work there?
   b. What different roles belong to this department?
   c. What different work tasks do they have and how do they differ from yours?
   d. Are you in the same office or are you divided into separate offices?

4. What impact does HRM have on your company?
   a. Is there anyone from the HR department who is included in the board of executives? Why do you think this is necessary? (what effect does it have?)

5. Do you have any HRM goals at this company?
   a) Describe these goals
   b) Do you follow up on these goals? Tell us how?
6. What is strategic HRM according to you?

7. In what way does this company works strategically with HRM? Please give us some concrete examples.

**The company’s employer brand and the perception of the concept employer branding**

8. How would you describe this company as an employer/ as a workplace?
   a. Can you come up with any distinguishing factors?
   b. How do you think this company as an employer differentiates itself from competitors?

9. How would you describe employer branding in general

10. What do you communicate in your employer brand?

**The company’s practice of employer branding**

11. When did you start to work with employer branding and why?

12. How did you implement the practice of employer branding?
   a. What roles were created and why?

13. Do you think the company implicitly worked with employer branding before you started to use the actual term “employer branding”?

14. How do you communicate your employer brand?

15. How do you work with employer branding at this company? What different tasks are included in the employer branding work? What different roles do the people who work with employer branding have?
16. Has the employer brand at your company changed or has it been the same since the start?

**Employer branding in cooperation with HRM and other departments**

17. Is there a link between HRM, employer branding and the business strategies? Please explain how?

18. Is there a link between the HR department and the employer branding work? Please explain how.
   a. Does the HR department cooperate with the ones who work with employer branding? How?

19. What are the differences between the work tasks related to HR and the work tasks related to employer branding?

20. To which department belongs the people who work with employer branding?

21. Did anything change the way you work with HR since the employer branding work was implemented? How?

22. Who/what role has the responsibility for:
   b. Attract potential employees?
   c. Recruiting employees to the company?
   d. Engage the employees and work with the organizational culture?
Appendix 4

Interview questions: Event Coordinator

Background

1. Tell us about your role at the company:
   a) What is your working title?
   b) What does your role imply? Specify your working tasks.
   c) What division/function do you belong to?
   d) Who gives you directives and whom do you report to?
   e) Are you responsible for anyone/s?

2. For how long have you worked at the company?

3. Was there anyone else that had your role before you?

4. Have you had any other position/s within the company prior to the one you have today? If yes, what positions and how does it differ from the one you have today?

5. For how long have you possessed your current role?

6. In what way were you introduced to the role you have today? How did they introduce your work tasks and themselves as a company?

The company’s employer brand an the perception of employer branding

7. How would you describe the company as a workplace?

8. What would you consider is employer branding?

The company’s practice of employer branding

9. What are your work tasks?

10. Would you say that you work with employer branding? If yes, how? (How do you work with attracting, retaining and engaging the employees)

11. Who/what function is responsible for:
    a. internal and external recruitment
    b. engage the employees and work with the organizational culture
    c. to attract potential employees

12. What do you strive for as you communicate the company’s employer brand?

13. What are your goals?
Employer branding in cooperation with HRM and other departments

14. What are the business yearly goals?

15. Do you believe your function’s goal contributes to the business overall goals? If so, how?

16. In your role at the company whom do you cooperate with? (schools, other organizations etc.)

17. Do you work alone or do you have other colleagues that work with the similar tasks as you? If yes, what roles and tasks do they have?

18. How would you distinguish your work tasks with others who work with employer branding?

19. How do you coordinate your work with employer branding within your function?

20. What do you, who work operative with employer branding, have for cooperation with:
   a) HR department?
   b) Marketing department?
   c) Other departments?
Appendix 5

Interview questions: Recruitment Assistant

Background

21. Tell us about your role at the company:
   a) What is your working title?
   b) What does your role imply? Specify your working tasks.
   c) What division/function do you belong to?
   d) Who gives you directives and whom do you report to?
   e) Are you responsible for anyone/s?

22. For how long have you worked at the company?

23. Have you had any other position/s within the company prior to this one? If yes, what positions and how does it differ from the one you have today?

24. For how long have you possessed your current role?

25. In what way were you introduced to the role you have today? How did they introduce your work tasks and themselves as a company?

The company’s employer brand and the perception of the concept employer branding

26. Why did you apply to work for the company?

27. Did you know anything about the company before starting? If so, what? Did you know anything about the company as a workplace

28. How would you describe the company as a workplace?

29. Describe what you regard as employer branding

30. Can you see any difference from how you explain the company as a workplace now from when you started?

31. Can you see any difference in what communicates within the organisation today from when you just started working?

32. Anything you like to add regarding the topic?