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The Impact of Employer Branding on Young Professionals: A Cross-Country Analysis

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ABSTRACT:

Tämän päivän yritysten haasteena on esiintyä houkuttavana työnantajana työntekijämarkkinoilla, jossa pula osaavasta työvoimasta mahdollistaa työntekijälle valinnan työnantajien välillä. Työnantajamielikuvamarkkinointi on yksi yritysten pääkeinoista vakuuttaa potentiaaliset osaajat työpaikan houkuttavuudesta, johon vaikuttavia tekijöitä ovat esimerkiksi työpaikkakulttuuri, rahallinen korvaus työpanoksesta sekä etenemismahdollisuudet uralla. Nuoret osaajat ovat potentiaalisia työntekijöitä yrityksille monella markkina-alueella, jonka vuoksi kilpailu osaajista ei ole ainoastaan paikallista vaan myös kansainvälistä. Tämän vuoksi yritysten tulee kehittää strategisia ratkaisuja työnantajamielikuvamarkkinoinnin saralla ollakseen houkuttava vaihtoehto työntekijöiden näkökulmasta. Uusien sukupolvien astuessa työmarkkinoille vaatimukset työnantajia kohtaan ovat muutoksessa, jonka vuoksi työnantajamarkkinoinnin tulee olla yritysten kehityksen keskiössä.

Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on selvittää, mitkä tekijät vaikuttavat työntekijöiden päätökseen valita työnantajansa kansainvälisillä työmarkkinoilla. Haastateltavina olevat Y-sukupolven edustajat ovat päättäneet opintonsa lähivuosien aikana, ja he edustavat kansallisuksia Suomesta, Ruotsista, Norjasta sekä Tanskasta. Tutkimusmenetelmänä toimii laadullinen menetelmä, ja tutkimus toteutetaan haastatteleamalla yhdeksää viimeisen viiden vuoden aikana korkeakoulusta valmistunutta Y-sukupolven edustajaa edellä mainituista Pohjoismaista. Tutkimusongelman selvittämiseksi käytetään seuraavia tutkimuskysymyksiä: 'Miten saada nuoret osaajat valitsemaan kansainvälinen organisaatio sekä ennaltaehkäistä työntekijöitä vaihtamaan työnantajaa?', 'Minkälaisia odotuksia nuorilla osaajilla on työnantajia kohtaan ja mikä on puoleensavetävän työnantajan määritelmä?' sekä 'Miten kulttuuriset erot vaikuttavat puoleensavetävän työnantajan määrittelyyn työntekijän näkökulmasta?'. Kirjallisuus työnantajamielikuvamarkkinoinnista, osaamisen johtamisesta, urasuunnittelusta sekä henkilöstöhallinnosta toimii tutkimuksen teoreettisena viitekehyksenä. Kirjallisuuden avulla käsitellään myös Y-sukupolven liitettäviä ominaispiirteitä ja niiden vaikutusta työntekijän mieltymyksiin. Tulosten analysointiin käytetään abduktiivista menetelmää, joka yhdistää aineiston päättelemistä sekä aikaisempien teorioiden sekä tutkimusten hyödyntämistä.

Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat, että kulttuurisia eroja Pohjoismaiden välillä esiintyy, ja ne vaikuttavat esimerkiksi työntekijän mieltymyksiin yrityksen kulttuuriin, työnantajayrityksen yhteiskuntavastuun sekä palkitsemiskulttuuriin saralla. Yleisesti nuoria osaajia houkutteleva tekijä on työnantajan tunnettuus, jonka katsotaan tuovan lisäarvoa työntekijälle tulevaisuuden työmarkkinoilla.

KEYWORDS: Employer branding, employer attractiveness, young professionals, career management, talent management, career planning, cross-country analysis, generation Z, talent attraction

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Abbreviations

EB
WoM
eWoM
TM
HR
HRM

1 Introduction

In today's rapidly changing and ever globalising world, the need to attract and manage talent to and within organisations is crucial. The concept 'war for talent' was first introduced at the end of 20th century, and it has been one of the top challenges for companies ever since. As digitalisation has made it possible for information to spread rapidly, companies need to focus more carefully on their image both internally and externally from the organisation. In order to attract talent to an organisation the employer brand must reach and resonate in the potential employee. Additionally, career management is vital from the organisational point of view when pursuing to keep the high-value and high-unique (De Vos & Dries, 2013) human resource assets within the company and preventing the workforce from seeking new career options outside their current organisations. Therefore, the concepts of talent management and employer branding are intertwined.

It has been argued that human capital of any given organisation can be divided into two categories: value and uniqueness (Lepak & Snell, 1999; 2002). *Value* refers to the human capital's potential to contribute to the organisation's core competence and to enhance its competitive advantage, whereas *uniqueness* refers to the extent to which the organisation's human capital would be difficult to replace (De Vos & Dries, 2013). In this thesis, the focus is to study the impact both talent management and employer branding have on the employee's career planning within and outside internationally operating organisations. Whether the differences in talent management patterns influence the employees' intention to continue their career within their current organisation or to seek more prospective job opportunities elsewhere can be a very relevant topic for today's organisations, as the costs of recruiting and familiarising the new employee with the company policies is very time and money consuming. In addition, the impact employer branding has on potential employee's decision to apply to a certain company will be researched. How employer branding supports the company's image regarding career

development is a relevant topic for many companies today as the fight over skilled workforce is constantly intensifying.

1.1 Research gap

Previous studies have stated that there is a serious negligence on talent management and employee branding from the employee perspective (Maurya & Agarwal, 2018). Therefore, the perception of the organisational practices for talent management and their impact on employer branding is much needed. Employee turnover results in loss of capital, talent and time for the organisation (Maurya & Agarwal, 2018), and therefore it is crucial for companies to master employer branding and talent management. Employer branding can be considered as a strategic tool that helps organisations to attract, recruit and retain talent, and therefore is an essential concept for organisational human resource management (HRM) (Maurya & Agarwal, 2018).

Talent management includes HRM practices, which in turn in concepts such as career management and career planning. Therefore, all of these concepts along with employer brand and employer branding activities are being introduced in this thesis, and the focus of the study is on the employee's perspective. Backhaus & Tikoo (2004) discuss employee image attraction, which is a result of employee-organisation fit. This fit indicates that potential applicants compare their personal needs, values and personalities to the employer brand image (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). In this paper, the extent of how much one's needs, values and personalities matter in relation to the employer image when seeking for a potential employer and considering building a career within internationally operating organisations will be studied.

Employer brand perception and employer attractiveness attributes are concepts that may vary across different countries and cultures. Previous studies regarding employer branding and employer attractiveness have focused on specific countries or compared

countries to each other, but so far studies regarding the country-specific differences in terms of employer branding and employer attractiveness across Nordic countries are lacking. There are several studies about gender differences regarding the aforementioned topics, and meanwhile some studies (Eger et al., 2019) have found significant variation between male and female respondents, multiple other studies such as Alniaçık et al. (2014) found no signs of gender differences in their collected data. Therefore, this paper aims to provide additional findings from the Nordic point of view in an international business setting and to define the attractive employer attributes that set these countries apart.

1.2 Research question

The objective of this study is to examine the factors affecting employer attractiveness from the employee perspective along with the importance of organisational career and talent management practices for employer brand loyalty. As the young professionals currently entering work life represent millennial and generation Z values, the potential employees are considered to be more brand aware and to value more highly the work-life balance as well as their personal career growth instead of creating a life-long career path within one singular organisation.

In this study the focus is on young professionals located in Europe and of different Nordic nationalities who have professional working experience from internationally operating companies and multinational teams. The country-specific differences of these young professionals will be analysed, and their response to varying employer branding and talent management practices adopted by different employers will be analysed. Therefore, the following research question for this study is:

How to attract young professionals to global organisations and prevent employees from seeking career development outside of the organisation?

Sub-research questions are supporting questions that aim to target fundamental elements of the main research question by helping to highlight and define the elements needed to answer the research question itself. Therefore, in order to answer the main research question the following sub-research questions have been formed:

1. What kind of expectations do young professionals have towards their employers and what defines an attractive employer?
2. What kind of cross-country differences within the Nordics arise regarding the preferences of an attractive employer for an employee?

1.3 Delimitations of the study

The empirical findings and conclusions of this thesis are based on interview data gathered from nine respondents currently employed by five different companies. The nationalities represented in this study are Finnish, Swedish, Danish and Norwegian, and in each country the respondents work either in different roles and areas of expertise or in different organisations in order to enable somewhat different perspectives. None of the respondents are professionals regarding employer branding and can therefore provide more subjective data based on their own values and experiences, which was the essential purpose of this study. As the interview questions were formed to target the employer brand and organisational activities, some of the interviewees voiced their opinions also regarding their immediate manager. Therefore, it is possible that the roles of the organisation as an employer and the manager as a representative of the employer are somewhat ambiguous.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

This thesis begins with an introduction that provides the reader insight to the main concepts as well as the cause of researching the topic at hand. Next, the objectives, the research question and the delimitations of this study are presented.

The second section of this study focuses on presenting the theoretical framework this research is based on. The literature review consists of three main topics: the significance of employer branding, the importance of talent management and the influence of career management on employee retention.

After presenting the literature review, the research methodology section describes the conducted research more in detail by separating the research strategy, research method and data collection. Lastly in the methodology section, the validity and reliability are critically discussed in addition to the discussion of choosing the research sample and performing research analysis.

Finally, the findings and conclusions of this study are presented along with suggestions for future research in the field, and the limitations of the study are discussed.

1.5 Key concepts of the study

Employer branding is a critical tool used for talent acquisition, development and retention. At the core of this concept is the intention and idea to promote the organisation in question as a desirable place to work both for existing and potential staff members (Berthon et al., 2005).

Employer attractiveness refers to the potential employee's envisioned benefits of working for a specific organisation (Berthon et al., 2005). Employer attractiveness is an important concept when pursuing in attracting employees with superior skills and knowledge, that will further provide a competitive advantage for the company (Maurya & Agarwal, 2018).

Talent management refers to filling key roles with potential talent both from internal and external markets (Son et al., 2020). According to Blass (2007), talent management can be defined as "the additional management, processes, and opportunities that are made available to people in the organisation considered to be talented" (Maurya & Agarwal, 2018, p. 312).

Career management is the company's planned effort to link individual career needs with the organisation's workflow needs. In today's business world the responsibility for career management lies on the individual rather than the firm. (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

Career planning is an action where individuals set career goals and plan strategies for achieving these goals (Gould, 1979). These career goals tend to be more internal and organisation-based, and therefore the career planning is somewhat limited to the organisational boundaries (Jung & Takeuchi, 2016).

Young professionals as a term lacks a specific definition, but in prior studies the characteristics have been set as currently finalising their education, less than five years of working experience in their field of expertise or younger than 35 years of age (Detzen et al., 2021).

Cross-country analysis involves comparing and contrasting data from different countries to identify similarities and differences in economic, social, or political phenomena. This method is used to identify patterns and trends that may not be visible in single country

studies and can be particularly useful for testing theories that aim to explain global phenomena.

1.6 Theoretical framework

This thesis will base its theoretical framework on talent management, career management, career planning, employer branding and human resource management. First, employer branding will be discussed in terms of employer attractiveness from both the employee point of view and its effect on career planning from the current employees' perspective. Then the concept of talent management will be introduced, followed by different theories of career management and career planning and their effect on the recruitment process of organisations. After presenting the chosen theoretical frameworks for this study, a comprehensive overview on the theoretical frameworks used will be presented where the purpose and findings of each study are displayed. Followed by an overview of the findings of previous studies, a specific theoretical framework created for this study is presented.

2 Employer branding

In this chapter, first the concept of employer branding is presented and defined followed by an overview of strategies that can be utilised in order to build an attractive employer brand.

2.1 Defining employer branding

Organisations face a constant struggle of how to attract and retain talented employees, and there are numerous strategies to maintain a healthy talent pool (Maurya & Agarwal, 2018). One of these strategies is employer branding, which is a critical tool used for talent acquisition, development and retention. At the core of this concept is the intention and idea to promote the organisation in question as a desirable place to work both for existing and potential staff members (Berthon et al., 2005). Employer branding itself is a mix of marketing and management practices, but from the management and human resources perspective it has been defined for example as “the package of functional, economic, and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company” (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Maurya & Agarwal, 2018). Marketing and HR theory support the notion of employer branding, and employer brand associations form brand images that affect attraction to the company (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

However, the actions and strategies utilised in employer management are almost entirely focused on talent attraction and recruitment processes, although some companies also practise internal branding to engage current employees and to align them with the corporate culture and strategy (Maurya & Agarwal, 2018). Employer branding strategy can be utilised to create an employee value proposition, that should combine what employees want and what is expected from them in return (Alves et al.,

2020). Alves et al. (2020) present employee value proposition to be defined by the organisation's policies, procedures and culture, and with the help of this value proposition employees attain a sense of loyalty which will help as a retention factor.

The internal branding is designed more to prevent losing talent to competitors, and this can be done for example through employee brand identification, loyalty and commitment (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Maurya & Agarwal, 2018). The purpose of internal branding is to create an image for the employee that the organisation is a great place to work and that it can fulfil the promises made for the existing employee when hired (Berthon et al., 2005; Maurya & Agarwal, 2018). The existing workforce is being domesticated with the company's value proposition of employer branding, and the intent is to extend the corporate values to a workplace culture which the internal workforce can further promote to the external workforce (Maurya & Agarwal, 2018). This process will build the employer brand from inside out within the workforce, and not just through job postings and other marketing material designed for potential external talent.

Backhaus & Tikoo (2004) have created an employer branding framework, where potential employees form an employer brand image according to the brand associations that resonate from the company's employer branding. These brand associations are also affected by external information that is not controlled by the employer, and therefore brands (employers) need to be proactive in identifying and developing positive brand associations for example through marketing campaigns.

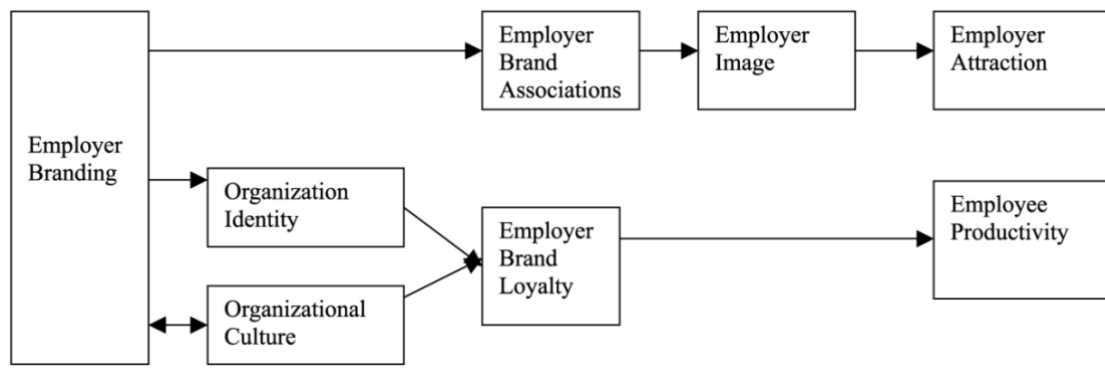


Figure 1. Employer branding framework (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

2.2 Employer attractiveness

One aspect of employer branding is employer attractiveness, which refers to the potential employee's envisioned benefits of working for a specific organisation (Berthon et al., 2005). Employer attractiveness is an important concept when pursuing in attracting employees with superior skills and knowledge, that will further provide a competitive advantage for the company. In other words, employer branding is vital for an organisation due to its effect on attracting better applicants and it can also shape the employees' expectations about their employment within the organisation (Maurya & Agarwal, 2018). Other studies have also found that organisational attributes such as organisational attractiveness, relationships, attractive remuneration, opportunities for growth and recognition along with corporate image are factors that affect organisations to become the employer of choice among potential employees (Maurya & Agarwal, 2018). As opportunities for growth is one of the elements in successful organisational attractiveness, career management is a supporting concept that needs to be considered by the employee.

In addition, Berthon et al. (2005) also suggest that the organisation's employees are its first market, and therefore employer branding and employer attractiveness should not

go overlooked. According to Maurya and Agarwal (2018), employer branding is a tool used to demonstrate the organisational values, benefits and differentiating factors for mutual benefits for the organisation's internal workforce. Internal marketing itself can also be viewed in a sense that the jobs provided by the company are internal products, and they should reflect the organisation in the best way possible. As stated by Berthon et al. (2005), "job products must attract, develop and motivate employees, thereby satisfying the needs and wants of these internal customers, while addressing the overall objectives of the organisation" (p. 152). This in turn creates a link between talent management and employer attractiveness, since it is vital for companies to motivate employees to implement corporate programs in an effective and profitable manner in order to provide a prosperous environment for future growth within the organisation (Maurya & Agarwal, 2018).

It has been generally acknowledged that intellectual and human capital are the foundation of competitive advantage in the modern economy. Therefore, employer attractiveness is a key factor in internal marketing and branding. Employees should be put in the centre of brand building, as their behaviour can either reinforce a brand or company's advertised values or undermine the credibility of the advertised messages (Berthon et al., 2005). According to Bergstrom et al. (2002), internal branding refers to three criteria: communicating the brand effectively to the employees, convincing them of the brand's relevance and worth, and successfully linking each position in the company or organisation to delivery of the 'brand essence'. Internal branding is vital especially when considering career planning and succession strategies within the organisation, since it is very important for companies today to maintain their existing talent pool. As previously introduced in this paper, Backhaus & Tikoo (2004) the fit between an individual and an organisation comes down to the match of values. The better both parties' needs, values and personalities match, the more likely the individual is to be attracted to the employer brand and the organisation in question. As studied by Knox & Freeman (2006), organisations that operate multinationally are dependent on an

attractive employer brand, as there is proven to be a connection between an attractive employer brand image and the likelihood to apply for a job.

2.2.1 Improving employer attractiveness

When organisations face the challenge of attracting unique and valuable human resources, it is beneficial to improve employer attractiveness. According to Chhabra & Sharma (2014), among the interviewees who are finalising their studies and entering working life, attributes such as organisational culture, brand name and compensation are highly valued, and their findings also include the notion of significant and positive correlation between strong brand image and likelihood to apply to the organisation in question. It has been stated that it is equally important for organisations to appear attractive in the eyes of potential employees as it is for the organisations to choose the right candidates (Chhabra & Sharma, 2014). Employer branding is meant to be a long-term strategy that targets both current and potential employees and seeks to manage their perception and awareness regarding a specific firm (Chhabra & Sharma, 2014). Therefore the employer attractiveness is a core instrument in succeeding in employer branding.

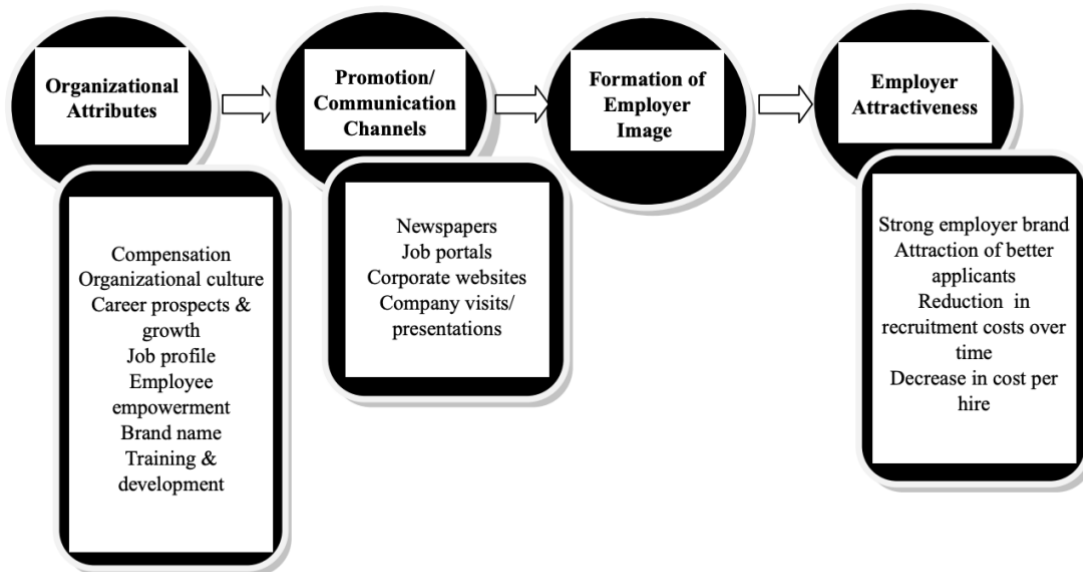


Figure 2. Employer branding process (Chhabra & Sharma, 2004).

It is common to associate employer branding to recruitment activities and attracting new employees, but employer branding plays an important role also with attracting, motivating and retaining also the firm's current employees (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). In order to be sustainable over time, companies need to highlight their uniqueness in job postings and by involving both internal and external environment of the organisation, establish their identity as an employer with the right values (Alves et al., 2020). In order to retain talent within an organisation, there are some critical factors to be considered: security, location, relationships, recognition, contribution, salary, flexibility, learning, responsibility and innovation (Alves et al., 2020). However, in order to meet the new generation's demands, companies are being forced to focus more on motivation, commitment and the performance of the firm (Alves et al., 2020).

2.2.2 Social identity theory

The link between employer brand image and attraction is supported by social identity theory created by Tajfel in 1982, which proclaims that people derive their concept of self from belongingness to certain social groups (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). This is supported by marketing literature, in which the product brand equity is strengthened when the brand image resonates with the consumer (Keller, 2013). With increased brand awareness the consumer begins to develop positive identification with the brand, and the more positive the brand is perceived to be, the more highly the consumer identifies themselves with the brand (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). As social identity theory suggests, the reason a consumer purchases a brand is the positive self-concept resulting from feeling belongingness. This theory can be paralleled to potential employees finding positive aspects of an employer image, and therefore identifying themselves with the employer brand and resulting in seeking belongingness to the group, which in this case is the organisation and its employer image.

Employer branding is especially useful when the brand is able to convey symbolic benefits to potential employees. One of branding's greatest strengths is the power of symbolism, especially the symbolic associations, ideas or feelings the brand represents. In employer branding these symbolic traits may include organisational attributes such as innovativeness or prestige, and branding literature suggests that the importance of symbolic features should be highlighted when functional differences between brands (employers) are limited. It is common that within the same industry job related factors have little variation and therefore organisations need to differentiate themselves as employers from their competition. (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

2.2.3 Word-of-mouth

It is common for companies to care about how their employees perceive them; what do their employees think of them and how do they speak about their employers to others (Eger et al., 2019). Collective employee opinions have a direct effect on employer loyalty,

employee engagement and retention rate, and externally form the organisation employees' word-of-mouth affects the companies' ability to attract new talent based on how they are seen by potential employees (Eger et al., 2019). Stemming from the modern day digitalisation, also word-of-mouth has found its way to digital platforms. Electronic word-of-mouth (eWoM) is also known as online referral, and it has been studied to influence purchase decisions globally (Kietzmann & Canhoto, 2013). In addition, Gruen et al. (2006) have argued that consumer know-how exchange impacts highly the consumer perceptions of product value and the likelihood to recommend the product. Therefore, these same characteristics apply to employer branding as it is the attractiveness of the employer similar to a product or service that needs to be valued in terms of the consumers, in this case the employees.

It has been found that eWoM has a larger impact on cases of negative referrals compared to the positive, and companies have tried to influence what is being said about them online. However, in their own study Kietzmann & Canhoto (2013) found that their respondents were more likely to talk about positive experiences on online platforms, since negative eWoM often requires a severely disappointing experience to generate a referral. As new digital platforms for eWoM are continuously being founded, new opportunities arise for consumers to share their opinions and engage with others. In addition, the authors found that individuals tend to utilise eWoM when their experiences are of the extreme – being either good or bad. Finally, companies need to understand the importance of responding to eWoM, as that also impacts the perception of the company from the consumer's point of view. The need to manage attention given to specific eWoM is crucial, as companies need to prioritise what, where and when to read and respond to eWoM, since it is a way of creating competitive advantage. (Kietzmann & Canhoto, 2013).

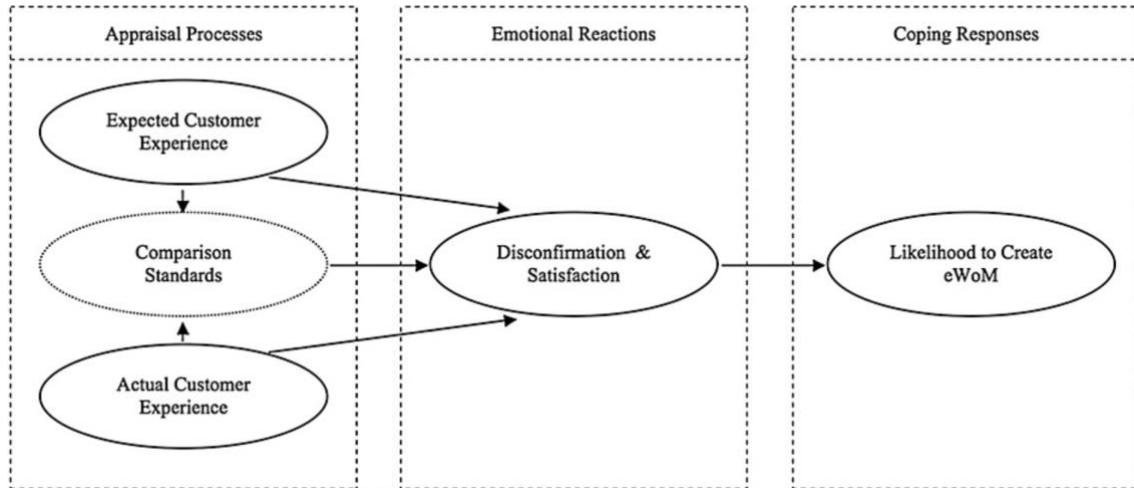


Figure 3. Integrative Model for Unpacking eWoM (Kietzmann & Canhoto, 2013).

2.3 Employer brand loyalty

Employer brand loyalty resonates from marketing literature and brand loyalty, which is the attachment a consumer has to a brand. The purpose of a strong employer brand is that the loyal customer, in this case the employee, is less likely to switch to another brand (a competing employer) (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Brand loyalty has two dimensions – a behavioural dimension representing the consumer’s willingness to repurchase the brand and an attitudinal dimension representing the consumer’s level of commitment towards the brand (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Like brand loyalty, also employer brand loyalty is the commitment an employee makes to their employer.

Chhabra & Sharma (2004) introduce employer brand loyalty as a concept where employees move from employment contract to a psychological contract. These brand loyal employees choose to commit themselves to the company for a longer period of time even if the circumstances would suggest that they seek other employment opportunities. It has also been found that employer branding positively affects the productivity and the organisational culture within the company. Companies with a strong

employer brand enjoy a reduced cost of employee acquisition, improved employee relations, increased employee retention and a lower compensation level compared to their competitors (Berthon et al., 2005). Therefore employer branding should be regarded as important when forming corporate strategies. In addition, many companies are building an employer brand to maintain visibility and communicate the right image both within and outside of the organisation (Chhabra & Sharma, 2004).

Alves et al. (2020) focused their study on the impact of employer branding on current employees, in other words those who could potentially become brand loyal to their employer. Their findings include the notion that individuals become emotionally committed to an organisation once they get involved and identify themselves within the organisation. This affective commitment can result in situations where the employee perceives the employer as fair and supportive, identifies themselves with the organisation's values, trusts their leaders and managers and feels that their personal goals and the organisational goals converge, feels fulfilment in their role and portrays the organisation to be socially responsible.

2.3.1 Creating an innovative employer brand

When discussing trends related to a certain generation, certain characteristics need to be defined. Each generation differs greatly from another, and their needs, preferences, thought processes along with employer expectations and preferred working style are all their own interpretation varying from the previous generation (Pandita, 2022). Therefore it is crucial for organisations to identify and internalise these characteristics in order to attract and attain best and most skilled talent in the future. Pandita (2022) presents the rising lack of skilled workforce and the pressure this creates for organisations to present themselves as the most attractive employer. As presented earlier in this paper, one of the key features in an organisation's success is the high-quality workforce, and in order to attract this the organisation needs to create an innovative and attractive employer

brand. In addition, acquiring a selection of young talent ensures a sustainable business in the following years (Briganti & Samson, 2019).

When interviewing the newest generation to enter work life, representatives of the generation Z “Gen Z” pointed out clear preferences regarding working conditions. The new generation prefers an inclusive workplace, where anyone is free to present their ideas regardless of their age, gender or background. Gen Z is comfortable working with the latest technologies and requires independence but not isolation. One of the main attributes preferred by Gen Z is flexibility, especially regarding working hours and location. Additionally, rigid job titles are not needed, and instead Gen Z employees long for autonomy on work tasks to avoid boredom and feeling of stagnancy. (Pandita, 2022).

To conclude the attractiveness of an employer brand, it is mandatory to identify the workforce desired for the company. If the needed workforce can be categorised by a generation even somewhat roughly, it is simpler to map out the demand for the working conditions and to create attractiveness for the employer brand itself. According to Pandita’s (2022) findings, innovative employer branding strategies targeting Gen Z employees include factors such as: attracting diversity, innovative mindset, flexible environment, collaboration and accord to community. These kinds of requirements can be mapped out for a number of different target groups once the target group has been defined by the company. As the new generation is entering the work life, it is inevitable that what attracts applicants to a job posting is already changing. Therefore if the companies wish to gain or retain a competitive advantage compared to their competitors regarding attracting skilled workforce, the demand needs to be regarded.

2.4 Cross-cultural differences in employer branding

According to Berthon et al. (2005), cross-cultural differences in employer attractiveness are likely to appear. The impact of cultural differences on employer branding has been studied by various researchers, and previous studies have been conducted for example in Australia, Turkey, Latvia, South Korea, Japan, Brazil and Czech Republic. Eger et al. (2019) have made a comprehensive overview of some of the aforementioned countries and cultures in question, including the respective countries' most and least preferred employer attributes according to the interviewed employees. Berthon et al. (2005) call for additional studies of the employer attractiveness scale in different cultures in order to distinguish more cross-cultural differences within the field. Therefore, in this chapter some of the previous studies targeting cultural differences in employer branding and employer attractiveness will be presented and background for a study from the Nordic perspective is introduced.

2.4.1. Previous studies

Alniaçık et al. (2014) conducted a study to assess the cultural and national differences in employer attractiveness in Latvia and Turkey. In their study, the data gathered from Turkish respondents showed that employer attractiveness is a more important factor when applying for jobs compared to Latvian respondents (Alniaçık et al., 2014). In Turkey, organisations' social responsibility and knowledge sharing between employees were held in higher value in contrast to the Latvian respondents (Alniaçık et al., 2014). Both male and female respondents in both Turkey and Latvia studied appreciated career development opportunities within their organisation along with above average remuneration, and the most important attributes for an attractive employer were found to be appreciation from management, good social relationships with colleagues and monetary compensation (Alniaçık et al., 2014). By gathering these kinds of qualities that the potential employees of an organisation value, companies are able to develop their employer branding strategies accordingly (Alniaçık et al., 2014), and therefore attract individuals whose values match with the organisation.

Regarding the most-preferred employer attributes, Berthon et al. (2005) conducted their empirical study in Australia and identified them as good work environment, above-average remuneration, social environment amongst colleagues, career development and job security. Another study conducted in Sri Lanka showed preferred employer attributes to be somewhat similar to the findings of Berthon et al. (2005), but additionally sense of self was shown of greater importance as respondents told that working for a specific organisation can boost their self-confidence and make them feel good about themselves by working for a certain employer (Arachchige & Robertson, 2011). In Norway, Sivertzen et al. (2013) identified most-important employer attributes to be both producing and innovating high-quality products and services, good remuneration and promotion opportunities. In Brazil, Reis & Braga (2016) found the most-important attributes to be the innovativeness of an employer, good promotion opportunities, organisation values highly employee creativity along with good relationship with colleagues. Study by Eger et al. (2017) was conducted in the Czech Republic, and there only more soft values such as good relationship with colleagues and superiors, happy work environment as well as acceptance and belonging were deemed as the most important attributes.

The least-preferred employer attributes were also studied, and from the aforementioned studies the findings will be presented briefly. In Australia, attributes such as opportunity to teach others, innovativeness of the employer and their products or services along with the social responsibility of the organisation were mentioned (Berthon et al., 2005). In Sri Lanka, least-preferred attributes were an exciting and fun work environment, customer-oriented organisation and innovativeness (Arachchige & Robertson, 2011). In Brazil, a good relationship with superiors, an attractive remuneration along with feeling good about oneself when working for an organisation were seen as less-important (Reis & Braga, 2016). Respondents of the Czech Republic found least-preferred attributes to be an opportunity to teach others and apply learned university skills, humanitarian and customer-oriented organisation along with innovativeness regarding products and services produced by the company (Eger et al. 2017).

While this thesis does not aim to identify the most and least preferred employer attributes in a similar manner, the previous studies show that cross-cultural differences exist and vary. Most of the studies conducted about cultural differences regarding employer branding and employer attractiveness have focused on students in universities, often specifically management, business or engineering students (Eger et al., 2019). Therefore, the findings are somewhat homogenous, and no major generalisation can be done. However, these previous studies are a good starting point and comparison for studying recently graduated young professionals within the same fields of education as the previous studies have focused on.

2.4.2 Nordic perspective

As multiple companies today operate internationally, it can be very beneficial to study the cultural differences of certain countries and nationalities in order to provide a starting point for organisations to adapt their employer brands for a specific market. In the Nordic countries companies often have teams combining talents across the Nordic countries, and this paper aims to identify the employer attractiveness attributes for Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark. Cultures can be divided into high-performance oriented and low-performance oriented ones, where “high-performance orientation cultures emphasize results, high-performance targets, and initiative behavior, low-performance orientation cultures highlight family relations, loyalty, and tradition” (Son et al., 2020, p.2209). The Nordic cultures represent the high-performance orientated cultures, and therefore the differences of these countries and their cultures are interesting to investigate. As the preferences of the cultures represented in this study are somewhat similar, the findings of the differences can give more practical implications than a comparison between high-performance and low-performance orientation cultures.

3 Talent management

When discussing talent management, it is important to first understand the definition of talent itself. De Vos & Dries (2013) propose that from an organisational point of view, talent refers to the human capital that is both valuable and unique. An organisation that holds a high portion of both high-value and high-uniqueness employees has to prioritise job continuity, since high turnover of human capital would pose a serious threat in terms of both qualitative and quantitative human capital shortages (De Vos & Dries, 2013). It has also been stated that more and more talented workforce is acting like 'free agents' (Tulgan, 2001), and this results in a situation where the organisation no longer manages their employees' careers but liberates them to perform career planning also outside of their organisation (De Vos & Dries, 2013). Simon and Osipow (1996) have determined continuity as the notion of having an enduring vocational identity, whether within one employing organisation or across employers (De Vos & Dries, 2013).

Prior empirical studies have shown the positive impact of talent management on various outcomes including business goal achievement, company attractiveness, customer satisfaction, corporate profit, innovative company performance along with employee motivation and attitude. In addition, previous studies have argued that in companies using talent management practices, there is a higher chance of competition among employees due to limited opportunities to be included in the company's talent pool. As the environment of talent management is highly competitive, high-potential and high-performing individuals are less likely to share their knowledge and information with their colleagues or superiors. Also companies that openly choose top employees regarding talent can face the possibility of internal discrimination between employees who were and were not selected. (Son et al., 2020). These situations may arise when talent management practices are poorly executed, but overall talent management is designed to provide increased benefits for both the organisation and its employees.

3.1 Defining talent management

Talent management originates from the need to attract talented employees in situations or industries where there is a lack of skilled workforce. The essential purpose of talent management is filling key roles with potential talent both from internal and external markets (Son et al., 2020). In previous studies, talent management has been considered as a more administrative process, whereas now it is a more strategic continual organisational practice that drives organisational outcomes (Maurya & Agarwal, 2018). According to Blass (2007), talent management can be defined as “the additional management, processes, and opportunities that are made available to people in the organisation considered to be talented” (Maurya & Agarwal, 2018, p. 312). As new businesses enter the market constantly, the most important driver for companies’ success is their employees’ talent and skills that they need to attract and manage (Maurya & Agarwal, 2018).

Previous literature also reveals that the concept and definitions of talent management can be divided into three distinct meanings. The first differentiates talent management from the notion of human resource management. The second strand emphasises that talent pools should be further developed through analysing employee staffing needs and managing the progression of employees through positions. The third strand of literature focuses on the management of talented people. (Maurya & Agarwal, 2018). Previous literature regarding talent management has also been categorised into three separate streams by Thunnissen et al. (2013). The first stream labels HRM practices as talent management, only given credit for some minor differences. In the second stream talent equals human capital, and therefore talent management equals HRM. The third stream focuses on talent as a whole without any regard to specific positions or organisational boundaries. In the third stream there are two different views: one focuses on high-performing talent or talent with high potential, whereas the other view states that

individuals have their own talents, and it is up to HR to help everyone achieve high performance.

Since only attracting and recruiting talent is not enough in today's highly competitive market, the risk of losing the existing talent to competitors is a constant threat (Maurya & Agarwal, 2018). Every organisation today is practising a different strategy to prevent their workforce from leaving to work for their competitors, but attracting and maintaining talent is becoming increasingly difficult. Therefore the support of employer branding is vital, and this will be introduced in more detail later. According to Reis et al. (2021), employer branding provides employer value proposition and acts as a tool for differentiation as well as employees' commitment mechanism. Therefore, employer branding is also a tool for talent management to attract and retain the best employees within the organisations. According to Thunnissen et al. (2013), "creating and delivering a compelling employee value proposition, personalised career plans, highly competitive compensation and a healthy balance between personal and professional lives are elements of successful talent management" (p. 1754).

3.2 Organisational talent management practices

Maurya & Agarwal (2018) utilise Oehley's (2007) organisational talent management competency practices and review their impact on employer branding. The presented competencies and practices used by companies are: 1) display a talent management mindset, 2) attract and recruit talent, 3) identify and differentiate talented employees, 4) develop others, 5) build and maintain a relationship, 6) provide meaningful and challenging work, 7) remunerate and reward fairly, and lastly 8) manage work-life balance (Maurya & Agarwal, 2018). Reis et al. (2021) argue that by investing in the right employees and attaining intellectual capital organisations can contribute to organisational success. Therefore organisations must design and apply certain strategies

in order to attract, develop and rotate their talent within their organisation instead of losing them to competitors.

The expression 'war for talent' originates from one of the most prestigious human resources consulting companies McKinsey in 1997. Since then, employer branding processes have acquired a central role in organisational strategy since organisations need to fight this 'war' in order to attract, retain and be sustainable when it comes to their talent (Reis et al., 2021). As some authors have argued, employer branding is very much alike to internal HR marketing. Therefore employer branding and organisational talent management are supporting strategies in order to both attract new employees and ensure retention within the organisation to keep the skilled workforce from leaving. As talent management is a critical factor for organisational performance, talent management programs are being increasingly applied into practice and day-to-day management by the corporate sector (Alves et al., 2020).

The strategic perspective of talent management requires organisations to develop a talent pool of high-performing individuals, and this requires assistance also from HRM practices (Son et al., 2020). It has been suggested that there are two approaches to talent management – according to the inclusive approach talent management practices are applied to all employees in an organisation, and according to the exclusive approach talent management practices are applied only to a selected group of employees (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). The inclusive approach holds the notion that organisational success can result from focusing on the value of the entire workforce instead of the selected few.

According to Collings & Mellahi (2009), effective talent management has an indirect positive impact on organisational performance mediated by work motivation, organisational commitment and extra-role behaviour. These factors in turn have a positive impact on individual performance. In addition, Stahl et al. (2007) state that companies that create and deliver a compelling employee value proposition,

personalised career plans, highly competitive compensation and a healthy work-life balance can be successful regarding talent management. Talent management practices should include both internal and external activities, and these two must be aligned in order to be effective. When companies do benchmarking regarding competitor talent management practices, it needs to be considered that practices are only best in the context they were designed (Stahl et al., 2007). Talent management practice requires an active role from top management or CEO, line management and HR as well as from the employee itself (Stahl et al., 2007). However, Son et al. (2020) have found that talent management can cause more internal competition and perceived injustice, and therefore it can enhance voluntary turnover. This thesis will seek to answer to what extent this is true in regard to young potentials who are at the start of their careers.

In the case of talent management, not only organisational goals can be considered but instead individual and societal goals need to be taken into consideration as well. When aiming for sustainable business continuity, employee well-being and work-life balance are important factors that need to be considered as talent management goals. The war for talent is a war fought also within the organisation, and it has been argued that line managers should not be solely responsible for talent management practice inside an organisation as they are more likely to focus only on short-term performance, whereas talent is a long-term corporate asset. (Thunnissen et al., 2013).

3.3 Human resource management

Like other previously presented concepts in this paper have shown, also human resource management (HRM) and in particular strategic human resource management is a contributing factor in building a sustainable competitive advantage for an organisation (Delery & Roumpi, 2017). Delery & Roumpi (2017) present the ability-motivation-opportunity model (AMO model) constructed by Appelbaum et al. (2000), which proposes that the relationship between HRM practices and employee and firm level

outcomes is mediated by the direct effect HRM practices have on employees' abilities, motivation and opportunities. In addition, Delery & Roumpi (2017) interpret that competitive advantage may emerge when companies practise such HRM activities that focus on developing company-specific skills that are less transferable than generic skills. It was also found that HRM function should invest in team building, as team outcomes are less imitable and transferable.

As presented earlier in this paper, characteristics of value and uniqueness in terms of jobs and talent arise also in HRM practices. It has been suggested by Lepak & Snell (1999) that jobs can be differentiated based on value and uniqueness, and therefore companies should treat different groups of their workforce with different HRM practices (Delery & Roumpi, 2017). Especially the core workforce should receive particular attention from the organisation as that is most likely to have the greatest impact on the firm's value creation (Delery & Shaw, 2001). Since this paper does not intend to study the firm performance but rather the employees' motivation to apply and retain to and within a company, the HRM models focusing on company performance outcomes are not further presented.

3.3.1 The role of HRM strategies

In terms of talent management, companies utilising HRM practices need to be careful not to create an environment where top employees holding high-potential are severely favoured and those who are not selected end up feeling discriminated (Son et al., 2020). As talent management generates competitive advantage for a company, talent management practices should be aligned with HRM and business strategies (Son et al., 2020). Ideas and knowledge originate from talent, and therefore HRM investments facilitate innovation by enhancing the human capital levels of individuals (Son et al., 2020).

In terms of employer branding, HRM strategies utilised in employer branding processes have been proven to affect mostly talent retention, especially in terms of commitment as a source of organisation's competitive advantage (Alves et al., 2020). According to Michaels et al. (2001), there are five concepts that need to be mastered in order to win the battle for talent and gain competitive advantage: 1) create a winning employer value proposition, 2) redefine the recruitment strategy, 3) implement development strategies, 4) implement a talent mindset and 5) differentiate your employees. Many companies in the B2B market lack a widely recognised product and corporate brand name, and for such companies an employer branding effort is much more needed than to those companies already having an identified product and brand (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Companies that invest heavily in their workforce by high levels of HRM investments provide positive signals for long-term employment relationships (Son et al., 2020), and therefore provide positive connotations to their employer brand.

For companies in practice, managers are able to utilise employer branding as an umbrella, which holds different employee recruitment and retention activities, thereby forming a coordinated human resource strategy (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). When combining recruitment, staffing, training and development activities together a company can have significantly different results when compared to doing each process alone. In the article the authors conclude that "the employer branding concept can be especially valuable in the search for an organising framework for strategic human resource management" (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004, p.513). In companies where extensive HRM investments are applied to the entire workforce, all employees are likely to perceive that they are treated as valuable and useful resources instead of creating a separation between top performers and the rest of the personnel by applying HRM practices only on selected individuals (Son et al., 2020).

3.4 Career management

As defined by Schein (1978), organisational career management is the company's planned effort to link individual career needs with the organisation's workflow needs (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). The HR activities categorised under the employer branding umbrella support the organisational career management effort. Backhaus & Tikoo (2004) have found that multiple researchers argue a shift took place in career management, and nowadays the responsibility for career management lies on the individual rather than the firm. Organisations have become less likely to design internal career programs, but employer management aims to change this trend in this fast-changing employment environment although employer branding has not been designed as a career management program (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). When considering organisations that appreciate continuity from their employees, it has been found that these kinds of organisations tend to favour the more traditional approaches to career management as the shortages of valuable and unique employees are important determinants when it comes to continuity (De Vos & Dries, 2013).

3.4.1 Career planning

The intense global competition over skilled workforce has made organisations more flexible, diverse and complex, and therefore career planning has become crucial for both employees and employers (Jung & Takeuchi, 2016). Career planning has been defined as an action where individuals set career goals and plan strategies for achieving these goals (Gould, 1979). It has been stated that these career goals tend to be more internal and organisation-based, and therefore the career planning is somewhat limited to the organisational boundaries (Jung & Takeuchi, 2016). Discussion on whether it is the employee's own internal criteria for career achievement or the external measures such as salary level or promotions within the organisation that are the career planning criteria have been discussed, but no comprehensive model is yet to be discovered.

Employer branding communicates career expectations in terms of advancement, variety of work and relationships among workers (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Whereas it should be in both the employee's and the employer's beneficial interest to contribute to career planning and career advancement, employer branding can be used to promote the importance of individual career development within the organisation. If there is a lack of career advancement, both individuals and their employers face to lose their competitive advantage. At the individual level, studies have identified factors such as gender differences in career attitudes and behaviours to be one of the most influential factors contributing to subjective career success. At the interpersonal level, studies have emphasised the connection between the support of organisational leaders and individuals' career success. Employees with explicit career goals within their organisation can benefit highly from a good social exchange relationship with their manager, and it can be interpreted that better leader-member exchange relationships may be a key part of career planning within the organisation (Jung & Takeuchi, 2016).

Byrne et al. (2008) have presented two sets of rewards given to subordinates by their leaders that can affect career planning within the organisation. Formal rewards such as salary progress leads to greater decision influence, empowerment and career advancement. Informal rewards such as open communication and frequent feedback from their supervisor in turn lead to feeling more satisfied with their leader, their job and the organisation in general. Therefore, these two types of rewards both contribute to a high-quality relationship between a leader and a subordinate and result in the employee developing a better sense of their career success, job satisfaction, career commitment and career satisfaction (Byrne et al., 2008).

3.5 Overview of the key theoretical frameworks

In this chapter, an overview of the presented theoretical framework is presented according to the main themes of this study. The overview of the theoretical frameworks

includes the research gap, study focus, research method used along with the main findings of the study.

3.5.1 Employer branding (EB)

Author(s)	Research gap & study focus	Research method	Main findings
Alves et al. (2020)	Evaluate the relationship between EB strategies implemented by organisations and their impact on the employees' affective commitment	Quantitative; questionnaire filled by 172 individuals working in private and public sectors in Portugal	High level of affective organisational commitment (AOC) of employees develops when the individual becomes involved and identifies oneself with the organisation
Backhaus & Tikoo (2004)	Combine a resource-based view with brand equity theory; relationship between EB and organisational career management	Qualitative; literature review	Presents a framework to initiate scholarly study of EB
Chabbra & Sharma (2014)	Examine the organisational attributes attracting final-year students towards organisations; study the already adopted EB strategies and the preferred channel for organisations to promote employer attractiveness	Qualitative; semi-structured interviews, survey and literature review	Most preferred organisation attributes were organisation culture, brand name and compensation. Significant positive correlation between strong brand image and likelihood to apply exists
Pandita (2022)	Attract the new generation Z and identify innovative practices in EB	Qualitative; 21 semi-structured interviews with mid-managers, consultant and HR	Gen Z has high career aspirations, education preferences and demands a flexible and an innovative

		experts in India	organisational environment. Monetary compensation is not everything, as gen Z wants to be associated with a workplace that exhibits community support
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Table 1. Overview of the employer branding theoretical frameworks

3.5.2 Talent management (TM)

Author(s)	Purpose of the study	Research method	Main findings
Delery & Roumpi (2017)	Link HRM practices with company performance and sustainable competitive advantage	Literature review; conceptual model	HRM practices can contribute to a company's sustainable competitive advantage by enhancing employees' ability and offering motivation and opportunities
Reis et al. (2021)	Present the relationship between EB and TM	Systematic literature revision	EB is an essential tool in talent management
Maurya & Agarwal (2018)	Examine the impact of organisational talent management (OTM) practices on perceived employer branding	Quantitative; survey data from 232 executive employees in coal and mining industries in India	OTM is strongly and positively intertwined with EB, and factors most effective of attractive EB are

			rewards and fair compensation along with work-life balance
Son et al. (2020)	To study the effect TM practices have on organisational performance	Quantitative; 444 companies in South Korea	TM affects company performance, innovation and voluntary turnover rate

Table 2. Overview of the talent management theoretical frameworks

3.5.3 Career management & Career planning

Author(s)	Purpose of the study	Research method	Main findings
Jung & Takeuchi, 2016	The interaction between employees' career planning and leader-member exchange to explain subjective career success	Quantitative; surveys with 144 Korean employees and 140 Japanese employees	Employees engaging in more explicit career planning tend to display a stronger positive relationship between leader-member exchange and job satisfaction
De Vos & Dries, 2013	Gain empirical insight on how organisations' human capital affects the way organisations design and	Quantitative; organisational-level surveys among HR directors of 306 companies in Belgium	Threats of qualitative (value) and quantitative (uniqueness) human capital shortages impact organisations'

	implement career management policies		attitudes towards continuity and career management
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Table 3. Overview of the career management and career planning theoretical frameworks

3.6 Theoretical framework for the study

The theoretical framework created for this study combines the theories presented earlier in this chapter. As according to Chabbra & Sharma (2014), significant positive correlation between strong brand image and likelihood to apply to an organisation exists. Therefore companies are required to promote their organisational values in order to attract potential employees. Organisational talent management practices are proven to have a positive influence on reducing voluntary turnover rate amongst the workforce, and therefore applying talent management practices is crucial for employer brand loyalty (Son et al., 2020).

Employer branding, talent management and career management activities are all proven to affect the attractiveness of an employer brand, and therefore combining these concepts can result in enhancing employer brand loyalty when applied into practice by employer organisations. As employees who engage in career planning activities are more prone to reach job satisfaction (Jung & Takeuchi, 2016), the result often is employer brand loyalty and a positive attitude towards the employer, which in turn may result in providing positive WoM and therefore contribute in promoting an attractive employer brand to other potential employees.

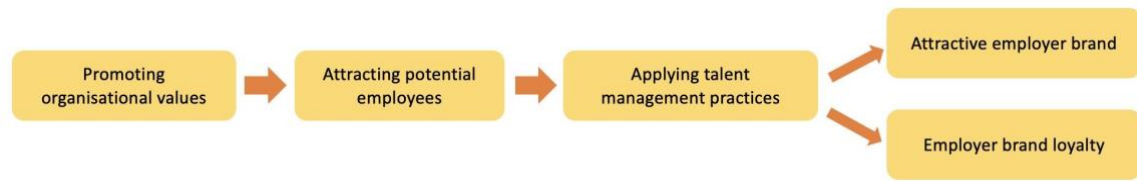


Figure 4. Model for creating an attractive employer brand and reaching employer brand loyalty.

4 Research methodology

In this chapter, the research methods used in the thesis will be discussed along with providing the description of the study's empirical section. First, the research philosophy is discussed, followed by research approach, research design, data collection and lastly the procedures of data analysis. Finally, the validity and reliability of the thesis will be addressed.

4.1 Research philosophy

In all stages of research a number of types of assumptions will be made. These types of assumptions include for example assumptions about the realities encountered in the conducted research (ontological assumptions), about the human knowledge (epistemological assumptions), and about the influence of the researcher's own values on the research process (axiological assumptions). These assumptions inevitably shape the understanding of the research questions and the methods used along with how the findings of a study are interpreted. When the set of assumptions is well-thought and consistent, it will result in a credible research philosophy which supports the methodological choice, research strategy and data collection techniques along with analysis procedures. (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 130).

The term *ontology* originates from Greek, and its meaning can be translated to 'study of being'. Business management research philosophies can be divided roughly to two extremes, objectivist and subjectivist extremes. Objectivism argues that the researched social reality is external to us and others (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 134), whereas subjectivism asserts social reality to be made from the perceptions and consequent actions of social actors (people) (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 136). An objectivist researcher

seeks to discover universal facts and laws that govern social behaviour, and a subjectivist researcher focuses their interest in different opinions and narratives that provide different social realities of different social actors (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 137). Between these two extremes lies social constructionism, which puts forward that reality is constructed through social interaction, social actors create partially shared meanings and realities, and therefore reality is constructed intersubjectively (Saunders et al. 2016, p. 137). In this thesis the social ontology of the study can be described to be constructionist, as the study aims to identify cultural differences between individuals of different nationalities and backgrounds that have been shaped by their environment and social realities throughout their lives.

In order to understand the essential purpose of the research, the research philosophy needs to be described. There are considered to be five main philosophies in business and management research: positivism, critical realism, interpretivism, postmodernism and pragmatism (Saunders et al., 2016. P. 144). This study applies interpretivism as the research philosophy, as it emphasises that humans are different from physical phenomena as they create meanings, and social worlds cannot be studied in the same way as physical phenomena (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 148). Interpretivists do not seek to discover universal 'laws' that are applicable to everybody, but rather study different people of different cultural backgrounds under different circumstances and at different times (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 149). In business and management research the aim of interpretivist research is to create new, richer understandings and interpretations of social worlds and their context by looking at organisation from the perspectives of different groups of people (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 149). Therefore, interpretivism is applicable for the research of this thesis, as the studied interviewees hold various cultural backgrounds, different work experiences and different educational backgrounds.

4.2 Research approach

There are three primary research approaches that can be used when conducting a study: deductive, inductive, and abductive. The approaches help to clarify how the research relates to the theoretical framework. The most common research approach used is deductive approach, which starts with a theoretical foundation, and hypotheses are developed based on what is already known. These hypotheses are then put to the test in practice by conducting empirical research. The inductive approach begins with observations and data gathering in order to draw conclusions and research results, and the theory is then derived from the findings. Finally, the abductive approach can be viewed as a combination of the preceding two methods as it includes dialogue between the theoretical and empirical frameworks and is therefore a somewhat hybrid of deductive and inductive methods. (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

During the research of this thesis, the theoretical framework was considered and revised accordingly as the empirical study was conducted. Themes arising from the data gathered were compared to the theoretical framework and previous literature, and therefore the research approach of this study follows the abductive approach, that is a combination of the two extremes.

Depending on the study's time period, the research approach can be based on a cross-sectional or longitudinal study. A cross-sectional study is undertaken over a short time period, whereas longitudinal studies take longer to complete (Bryman & Bell, 2015). A cross-sectional study is more common in university research such as thesis studies. As this thesis was time-constrained, this study was conducted as cross-sectional research.

4.3 Research design

The key part of the methodology section is the research design, as it refers to how the researcher decides to collect the data and in turn how the collected data will be analysed, and further information be collected. The alternatives for the research design are quantitative and qualitative – quantitative design typically uses statistical processing and measuring methods whereas qualitative design focuses on more softer methods, such as interviews, observations and interpretive analyses (Berends & Deken, 2021).

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, using semi-structured interviews to collect data from participants. Qualitative research describes reality from the respondents' point of view, and it is often used in business studies targeting the customs and behaviours of people from different cultures (Adams et al., 2013, p. 6). When utilising qualitative research design interpretivist research philosophy is chosen as the researcher must interpret the social contexts along with subjective perspectives of the phenomena examined (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 148). Therefore, a study utilising non-numeric data gathered from a small sample is best applicable by using a qualitative research approach. In qualitative studies the theoretical framework supports the conclusions drawn from the collected data, and the goal is often to further develop an existing theory (Berends & Deken, 2021). Since qualitative research methods are not restricted by standardised procedures, it is possible to gain results in a deeper understanding of a concept or phenomena for the researcher (Berends & Deken, 2021). Semi-structured interviews are appropriate for this study as they allow for flexibility in questioning, while ensuring that key areas of interest are covered. This study is considered empirical, as the data or evidence is gathered from real-life individuals and their experiences (Adams et al., 2013, p. 8).

4.4 Research strategy

The research strategy links the research design and the research philosophy, in addition to describing how the research topics will be addressed. There are several techniques a researcher can utilise when gathering data, for example surveys, archive searches and case studies. The research strategy can apply either a single method of data collecting, such as interviewing, or it can apply a combination of methods. When choosing only one data collecting technique a mono-method study is conducted, while multi-method research combines multiple data collection techniques to be used in a study (Saunders et al., 2016). This study will be based on a mono-method qualitative research conducted in the form of interviews, as the focus is on the employees' preferences and decision-making patterns rather than those of the employing organisation.

Following the research philosophy and research approach chosen for this study, this thesis utilises a narrative inquiry strategy. This strategy entails discovering a story involving interviewees' personal experiences and describing certain events or sequences. As in qualitative research conducted through interviews the respondents are often telling their personal stories and experiences, and therefore a "narrative" can be associated with the outcome. (Saunders et al., 2016).

4.5 Data collection method

In this study data will be collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in person or via online video conferencing, depending on the location of the participants. The interview guide will be designed based on the research questions and will consist of open-ended questions. The interview guide will be pilot tested to ensure that it is clear, relevant, and appropriate for the research objectives. The data collection for this thesis took place between February 2023 and March 2023.

When utilising semi-structured interviews the themes and possible questions are predetermined, but the order of the questions and themes is fluid and may change during the interview (Saunders et al., 2016). Since semi-structured interviews can include questions that arise during the interview, the possible discussion stemming from these undetermined questions may provide more details about the topics as well as enlighten areas that may have been overlooked (Saunders et al., 2016). In addition, as the semi-structured interviews are more of a flexible nature it allows certain parts of the interviews to be more structured and others less so.

According to Saunders et al. (2016), interviews are commonly used when research questions of the study require information that cannot be obtained via other methods, such as surveys, since the answers need to reflect deeper opinions, thoughts and values of the respondents. Interviews can provide reliable and credible data to support fulfilling research objectives in addition to clarifying less clearly stated goals (Patton, 2015). When selecting interviews as a data collection method there are two approaches for researchers to choose from: a subjective or an objective approach (Saunders et al., 2016). The subjective approach recognises subjectivity in interviews by considering the interviewees and the interviewer's interpretations along with the interview context, whereas the objective approach regards interviews as a tool for getting answers rather than comprehending the interview candidates (Saunders et al., 2016). In this study, the subjective approach is adopted as a data collection method. As presented earlier, semi-structured interviews are used in this study conducted with the help of an interview guide. Semi-structured interviews allow open discussion between both parties of the interview, while maintaining the focus on the main themes of the thesis. The interview guide of this study is presented in appendix 1, and the guide has been structured to follow the main themes of the study. The interview questions have been designed to minimise predetermined answers.

The first section of the interview consists of background questions that help the researcher to categorise the respondents based on their professional and educational backgrounds. The interview guide follows the theoretical framework of the study focusing on three main themes: employer branding, career development and talent management. Following the background questions, the second section focuses on employer branding and employer attractiveness from the employee's point of view, followed by questions around talent management and training within organisations. Finally a section focusing on career planning and career management is embedded, where the aim is to identify motivators behind deciding whether to focus on career development within or outside the interviewee's current organisation. Throughout all of the sections, the supporting questions rely on employer branding as the main focus of the study is to identify what kind of expectations employees working in global companies who have recently started their careers have towards their employers and what defines the attractiveness of an employer.

Prior to the interview, each theme was explained, and a short introduction of the study and its objectives was given to the interviewees. The respondents were also clearly informed about the data handling process and complete anonymity was guaranteed. Finally, permission to record and transcribe the interviews was given by each respondent, along with the promise of data being handled solely by the interviewer.

4.6 Sample

The participants for this study were selected using purposive sampling, which is one of the primary methods for sampling qualitative data when conducting interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In purposive sampling the researcher relies on their own judgement when choosing the respondents for their study, and it is a form of non-probability sampling (Adams et al., 2016). One of the subcategories of purposive sampling is called homogeneous sampling, which aims to reduce variation in order to simplify the analysis

and describe a specific subgroup more in depth (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In a homogeneous sample the respondents share similar traits or characteristics such as educational backgrounds, jobs or cultures (Adams et al., 2016). Therefore, the purpose is to focus on the precise similarity in relation to the research topic in question, and it is commonly used when analysing the values and behaviour of a specific subgroup (Adams et al., 2016).

When acquiring data used in this study, purposive sampling was used. This sampling method is effective as it focuses on a limited sample size resulting in a thorough investigation. The interviewees were chosen based on their current employment in a global company operating in a minimum of four different countries in Europe or internationally. In addition, the interviewees have graduated from a university and have a maximum of five years of professional experience after graduation. These characteristics were chosen due to the fact that young professionals are more likely to focus on career development and enhancing their professional skills, and therefore are more likely to have input on the topics of this study. In order to generate a variation of opinions and values and enable the possibility of cross-cultural findings, the interview candidates were chosen from all Nordic countries excluding Iceland (Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark). All of the nine interviewees of this study were women, as gender was not considered to be a major influential criterion based on the previous research conducted of the topic. The respondents' ages varied from 24 to 29 years, and the work experience gained after graduation varied between six months to five years. Of the interviewees six worked in marketing or advertising, one in consulting, one in HR and one in data analysis. Between the respondents five different employers were represented. All of the interviewees chosen for this study worked in multinational teams and global companies, and this factor is essential as the employer brand and talent management practices of an organisation need to be adjusted accordingly to reflect the specific values and characteristics of each country and their respective culture.

Although the sample size was not determined prior to the study, the intent was to interview eight to ten people so that a minimum of two people were chosen from each country represented in the study. Seven of the nine interviews were held via video calls due to the candidate's locations, and two of the interviews were conducted in person. The mean interview time was 27,5 minutes, ranging from 20 to 34 minutes. The interview participants are briefly described in the table below. The table includes information of the respondent's nationality, education, age and work experience. To ensure the anonymity of the respondents, job title and company name were excluded in order to provide a setting where the interviewees could speak freely about their employer and organisational culture. Of the nine employees participating in this study, five work in marketing, two in consulting, one in e-commerce and one in advertising. An overview of the interviewee information is provided in the table below.

	Age	Nationality	Education	Experience after graduation	Amount of transcribed interview data
1	28	Finnish	Economics, Master	0.5 years	11 pages
2	27	Finnish	Business, Bachelor	3.5 years	8 pages
3	26	Finnish	Economics, Master	2 years	10 pages
4	28	Norwegian	Communications, Master	3 years	8 pages
5	29	Norwegian	Business, Bachelor	5 years	9 pages
6	24	Swedish	Economics, Bachelor	4 years	9 pages
7	27	Swedish	Business, Master	3 years	10 pages
8	28	Danish	Information Sciences, Master	2.5 years	8 pages

9	29	Danish	Communications, Bachelor	1 year	11 pages
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Table 4. Interviewee guide.

4.7 Data analysis

The approach for data analysis should be compatible with the study's research philosophy. When analysing data for a qualitative study, there are various ways to conduct the analysis. Thematic analysis is one of the most common techniques for data analysis to be used in qualitative studies, and it focuses on discovering comparable themes in transcriptions for example by assessing the frequency of certain words or phrases used by the respondents (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In the analytical process of thematic analysis there are multiple steps to take, which include discovering themes, refining the focus, organising the found themes to a hierarchical order and finally relating the discovered themes to the theoretical framework (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). In this study, the data collected from the interviews was first transcribed and then thematically analysed. The analysis consisted of manually coded interview transcripts, which were broken down into three main topics of the thesis. By using colour coding for the transcripts themes and sub-themes were identified, and then transferred to three different excel tables according to the primary theme of the study they related to.

4.8 Reliability and validity

Ensuring reliability and validity of a research is a way of demonstrating the accuracy of the research processes and the credibility of the research findings (Hancock et al., 2021).

Reliability refers to how the study can be replicated and how it is structured, and if the reliability is good other researchers should be able to replicate the research techniques resulting in conclusions alike (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Saunders et al., 2016). Validity refers to a method of determining whether the measurements used in the analysis are appropriate for the investigation and able to produce reliable results (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Saunders et al., 2016).

Reliability in qualitative research calls for trustworthiness of the generated data and procedures used in the study, and the extent to which the study's results are measurable and repeatable in varying circumstances (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Qualitative research has faced continuous critique about its generalisability, and therefore challenges to gather data with a high level of reliability can be challenging. In order to increase the level of reliability, recording and transcribing interviews is a common practice in qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2015). As this study is based on a purposefully selected group of individuals reflecting their own social constructs and cultural backgrounds as well as their generational values, it can be challenging to generalise the findings of this study. However, as the interviews conducted were recorded and transcribed, this can act as a factor to support the reliability of this study.

Validity in qualitative research in turn evaluates the quality of the empirical analysis as well as the research methodologies used for data collection (Saunders et al., 2016). The validity of a study relies on the extent of how well the research tools are capable of measuring the investigated phenomena, and one of the major challenges to validity in qualitative research is the research bias (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The factors affecting this research bias are for example selective collection of data and the researcher's personal perspectives affecting the interpretation of data (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Hancock et al., 2021). When utilising interviews as a method of data collection the validity of the research needs to be considered. As the methodological choices have been presented and discussed in detail in this chapter, the readers of the thesis may now assess the quality of the research process and its conclusions.

An essential part of the validation process is participant validation, which includes the process of exchanging research data with the interviewees to validate the authenticity of the gathered data (Saunders et al., 2016). During each interview, the verbal consent and the matter of transcription were introduced to the respondents, and the approval for the process of data handling and usage was received. To ensure that the interview data was used appropriately, the interviewees were also given the opportunity to comment and leave out sensitive parts of the interview transcriptions if needed. None of the interviewees of this study chose to exclude any interview data besides the names of their employers that may have been mentioned during the interviews.

5 Results of the study

This chapter will introduce and discuss the empirical findings of this study. A total of nine interviews were conducted in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors that attract young professionals to work in global companies in a multicultural setting. In addition, the focus was on the importance of career development and talent management within the organisation in order to reach an attractive employer brand and to create employer brand loyalty. This chapter will be divided into three different sections following the main theoretical themes presented earlier in the theoretical framework of this thesis.

All of the employing organisations represented in this study operate in multiple countries around the world, ranging from operating in the Nordics to operating in 50 countries globally. The smallest employer of the study employs a total of 1000 people, and the largest employer has over 30 000 employees worldwide. The industries these employing organisations operate in are financing, banking, advertising, consulting and e-retail.

5.1 Perception of employer attractiveness

The attractiveness of an employer is a relatively subjective topic, and yet both cultural and generational characteristics can be defined. Employer brand associations form brand images that affect the attraction to the company (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004), and the respondents of this study named numerous factors impacting their perception of an attractive employer. As presented in the theoretical framework of this study, the young professionals consisting of millennials and generation Z are more brand aware than their predecessors (Pandita, 2022). Overall, the interviewees all shared the notion that

choosing a well-known and respectable employer with a strong employer brand affects both their own value as well as their career development possibilities in the future.

When asking the respondents what kind of attributes they prefer in an employer, some trends across the studied countries were found. The Finnish interviewees all highlighted the importance of the company's well-known reputation as well as a global presence, which may result in opportunities to work in the organisation's other international offices in the future. These aspects were not mentioned by the interviewees from the other countries included in this study.

I wanted to work for somebody who I felt is established and is a big company, potentially international as well, which [company name] is, although mainly in the Nordics of course there's a few branches abroad like in New York and Singapore and so on. Because it was my first so-called real job, I wanted it to look nice in my CV so it would be like a respectable employer (Respondent 1).

For me it's super important that the employer is global, so I don't only work with Finnish people and preferably also the work tasks that can be like global, so that I also take care of stuff that doesn't have to do with Finland necessarily, rather also like other countries and offices (Respondent 3).

This shows that the Finns are more prone to consider the brand recognisability of their potential employer, which in turn may affect the way other employers portray them in the future. In addition, when asking the employee what made them choose their current employer and if there was something unique about them, the same theme on international presence was mentioned:

Because it was an international company, a big international company in the advertising business, so I thought that they would offer some possibilities to move abroad if I wanted to, to their other offices (Respondent 2).

In terms of employer attractiveness, also the possibility to further develop their professional skills and grow within the organisation was only mentioned by the Finnish interviewees.

Also development opportunities are super important for me so that I actually know that I can advance in my career and get more responsibility following my learning and performance (Respondent 3).

For example, with my current employer, I looked at what kind of customers they have, and if there's a possibility for growth within the organisation. For example, since I started as an intern, I looked at the factors if it's possible to kind of move into different departments and have some sort of broad experience in the organisation (Respondent 2).

From the Swedish respondents' interviews the arising theme for an attractive employer was a competitive salary. Both of the Swedish interviewees mentioned monetary compensation to be their most important factor when choosing employers, but as the interviewees have different life situations, one of the respondents highlighted the importance of work-life balance and the freedom to choose their working hours, whereas the other respondent valued highly the company's reputation and the social status working for their current employer may offer.

I would say that I prefer these big, well-known companies. Both that it would kind of look good on my CV, but also, I think that on some level I think it would give me nice credibility and it's nice when meeting people that they know the company that I'm working for (Respondent 7).

From the Norwegian respondents the arising characteristics of an attractive employer differed from the others in terms of the company's social responsibility. Whereas the Norwegian respondents also mentioned preferring a well-known company as their employer, the respondents also highlighted the company's respectable values such as inclusivity and sustainability. These kind of factors were not mentioned by any of the other respondents, which can suggest that sustainability and corporate social responsibility are more contributing factors in Norway in comparison to the other countries.

Just taking into account people's different values, cultures, languages, and basically understanding where you come from and not collectively having one big company (Respondent 5).

For an employer, I would say that how the company is perceived, the company's reputation is important to me. [— —] And relevant is that I also can see that it's a company that is sustainable. It's taking responsibility, following up what is happening in society (Respondent 4).

In addition, both of the Norwegian interviewees brought up the matter of office location, as it is a significant factor in work-life balance. The employee benefits such as healthcare and discount on the company's products and services was considered as a weighing factor in their decision of employment.

When looking at the findings from the Danish respondents, the attractiveness comes from interesting work tasks and good social relationships among the employee's teams. Also the possibility to improve their professional skills and grow within the company were seen as attractive attributes when choosing a place of employment. In addition, the Danish interviewees both stated that it is important to work for an established company that is a stable and reliable employer, as job security is also one of the main attributes for an attractive employer.

I think I focus more on the role and the tasks compared to the specific company that I work for. But I think it's important for me to obviously check if there is anything in the media with the company, and then I would also check the [— —] profitability or like how safe is the company? Can I trust that they're still here in five years? (Respondent 8).

5.1.1 Employer brand image and conspicuousness

In addition to being an attractive employer, the image a certain company holds in society can be an important factor when choosing employment in the company. As stated by one of the Danish respondents, the media coverage of a company also affects the employers' willingness to apply and work for a specific employer. Many of the respondents mentioned that they are prouder to work in the company when the company is portrayed positively in the media. When the interviewee confirmed that they

associate themselves with their employer, they were asked specifically what kind of factors have had the most influence on identifying themselves with their employer.

And nowadays I feel people think it [working for their current employer] as a positive thing or a good thing. There's a positive association to my employer (Respondent 1).

[– –] if the employer doesn't have several shitstorms in the media that's also sort of important. I feel like there's a lot of businesses that have and also I know my workplace has had some. I don't know. I kind of feel like it's also quite important (Respondent 9).

One of the respondents confirmed that when naming the company they work in, people perceive the respondent to be “very smart” and therefore enhance the positive association they feel towards their employer. Also some of the companies the interviewees work from were named to be well-known amongst university students, and that made the decision of employment easier when starting their careers.

So basically this company is super visible for university students, at least in the Helsinki region. So that's why I already knew the brand, because it's so well known.

[– –] The reputation is also good, at least I hadn't heard anything bad about this company.

As the majority of the respondents of this study named one of the attractive attributes of an employer to be the conspicuousness, many of them concluded that to be one of the main reasons the interviewees do not research a potential employer beforehand. If the company and its image as an employer is well-known, the need to seek additional information is minimal, and this was supported by many of the interviewees.

I don't think I spend much time actually [researching a potential employer], I think it depends how much knowledge I have in advance or how much I've heard of the employer in the media or from friends or family (Respondent 8).

I think that varies a lot. Maybe if I have, if I know the company and I've heard about them before, like for example [company name], I don't think I would

necessarily do that much research, sort of more read up to prepare for an actual interview. But it would be more if the name is not familiar to me, I would spend more time reading about the company, what they do, maybe (Respondent 4).

I would say that since I usually go for these well-known brands, I don't do that much research because if for example working for H&M or I don't know [current employer] or something like that, I already know so much about the brand. So there's not that much research that I would put into finding about the company (Respondent 7).

5.1.2 Influence of Word of Mouth

As presented earlier in this study, the word of mouth (WoM) is often given more freely when it's positive (Kietzmann & Canhoto, 2013), and the findings of this study support this fact. Some of the respondents said that they rely more on the positive than the negative WoM, and it was commonly agreed that the negative reviews former employees give about the company as an employer are more subjective and therefore may not play a part in their process of decision making. Even when the negative WoM would come from a friend or relative, the respondent would consider if they worked in a similar setting or team as the posted job would be. Furthermore, all of the respondents said they seek some additional information of the employer from Google before applying, but the WoM was given importance merely when coming from someone they know.

I think it [WoM] could affect super negatively if someone like one of my friends would say that they actually hate working here, that would affect a lot [—] but if it's negative, then I think that could make me not to even join the whole company depending of course what the negative things are, but still (Respondent 3).

Regarding eWoM, the Finnish respondents mentioned using social media channels dedicated to their industry or employer specifically in order to keep up with the current employer brand image and eWoM. When asking where they tend to seek more informal information about a potential employer, specific social media channels were mentioned.

Also, social media channels, I think that's one of the important things. If they [potential employer] have any sort of internal social media presence. What kind of word of mouth do they have? For example, Jodel channels. And yeah, basically ask around, friends and so forth what they think, because there are companies that don't have a great employer brand. Or you've heard things talked about the employer that you have like some sort of image about them (Respondent 2).

Additionally, those who research potential employers said they focus more on the previous employees' experiences in the workplace as well as the company culture and values, which may differ from the overall company image.

[—] reading other people's experiences online, you can just find them easily by Googling and then actually there is almost always someone I know who is working or who has worked for big companies like this. So I think the most important, or like the most useful way is to just contact that person and ask how it is really like to work there (Respondent 3).

Some of the respondents also said to have given employer reviews to their friends or family, and that they believe their feedback has made an impact on another person's decision of employment. This feedback has been only positive, as the respondents highlighted that their possible negative experiences in the company may not reflect the employer but more of their immediate manager or a specific part of a bigger organisation.

I have given my impression of my employer two times actually; I've been talking positively to two old colleagues who are now employed here as well. So I think that also had an impact. [—] I will probably talk more positively than negatively about the employer. And yeah, maybe I'm biased but when compared to other jobs I've had, my current employer gives me more flexibility. And yes, as I have mentioned a couple of times, that is important to me and also one of the parameters that I've been talking positively about to all the colleagues (Respondent 8).

5.1.3 Association to employer

According to social identity theory, people base their sense of self from belongingness to certain social groups (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). The brand equity is strengthened when the brand image resonates with the consumer (Keller, 2013), in this case the employee. As discussed earlier in this paper, when employees find positive aspects of an employer image, they begin to identify themselves with the employer brand and seek belongingness to the group, which in this case is the employing organisation and its employer image. When asked in the interviews about associating themselves with their current employer, variation between respondents was found. Those who had been employed longer in the organisation felt a stronger connection to their employer than those who had just entered the organisation, and the respondents who had been in more than one role in the organisation said to identify themselves strongly with their employer.

Overall, the most important thing is that I'm proud of where I work, and I can stand behind the values. Because I have previously worked with companies where the company values and the actual business, like the idea of the business, I didn't think they really resonated with my own values. So yeah, now I'm like, super glad that I work at the company that I'm actually proud of since I've been in companies where I didn't feel proud of working there (Respondent 3).

I guess I feel proud of working at [company name]. I feel like it's a big company that everyone knows, and my impression at least is that there's a good thing about or it's good to work here, that is the impression I get from other people. That it seems like you have a good career at least (Respondent 4).

Oh yeah, like the [company name] values. [—] I think those core values, they're like pushing me into the right direction [—] So yeah, I'm like 100% my employer at this point (Respondent 6).

Two of the respondents said the reason for not associating themselves with their employer to be the disconnect between the industry the company operates in and the field of expertise they have in the organisation. As their daily tasks differ vastly from the company's core operations, they feel that they do not represent the company as such.

I work in the financing industry, but my tasks have nothing to do with financing, it's more related to data analysis and digital activities. So I think that the gap between what my employer actually does and what my daily job is, that gap is quite big, so I don't think my job within financing is not really my identity. I'm more related to my job tasks than to the brand of the employer (Respondent 8).

One of the respondents also said to have changed their mind on associating themselves with their employer during their time of employment. At the time of entering the organisation they felt that their personal values and the organisational values matched, but over the course of time this opinion was changed.

I did [associate with the company] at the beginning a bit more because they kind of, let's say they marketed themselves as being very diverse. We take care of our people. The company culture is great, but little by little I've noticed that actually they're performance oriented. And it's not maybe for me when I mean, especially if it's a management consultancy company, they should be people oriented because [– –] the service that they sell to the other companies, it's kind of contradictory (Respondent 5).

In addition, the respondents of this study clearly demonstrate the “Gen Z values” in action, as they prefer an inclusive and diverse workplace, which are factors also found in earlier studies (Pandita, 2022). Also factors such as flexibility and autonomy on work tasks are greatly valued by today’s young professionals, which is evident from nearly all of the interviews conducted for this study.

[My manager] is really encouraging me to take on more responsibility all the time and she's not micromanaging or anything. And it can go even like days that I don't even hear from her, which is good, because then if I need her in something, then I can message her or call her and then she answers right away, so basically, she's there, but not supervising me all the time. [– –] That's what I like, the freedom to do things in my own way (Respondent 3).

5.1.4 Loyalty to an employer brand

As established earlier, the purpose of a strong employer brand is to prohibit employers from switching to another brand, which in this case is a competing employer (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). The attitudinal dimension of brand loyalty represents the employee's level of commitment towards their employer (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001), and in employer brand loyalty the employee moves from employment contract to a psychological contact (Chhabra & Sharma, 2004). Berthon et al. (2005) have found that companies possessing a strong employer brand and loyal employees can offer a lower compensation level compared to their competitors without facing a vast number of employee retention.

However, the respondents of this study have stated that one of the main reasons they consider seeking employment outside of their current organisation is the remuneration. The compensating factors in their current organisations are for example flexibility, possibility for career development as well as the company culture and the social environment with colleagues.

For me it's the salary that I'm dissatisfied with. I feel like otherwise I like my job. I enjoy the company culture, my colleagues. My work in the industry that we're working in, that I feel like I'm not fairly compensated for my work (Respondent 7).

I really, really enjoy what I do. I could work like 24 hours per day because it's really, really fun. And I really like that I have the opportunity to work from home because that provides me such a great work life balance. I don't think that employers think about it enough. I think that they're hurting themselves if they force people to the office. I like the core values that we have in this job. I like the job security. What's dissatisfying about this job is the salary, and I know that I'm being underpaid, so that makes me want to look at the other employers because I know that I could get such a higher salary (Respondent 6).

According to Alves et al. (2020), emotionally committing oneself to an organisation is a result from finding the employer to be supportive, identifying oneself with the

organisation's values and trusting that their leaders and managers guide them towards their personal goals. Some of the interviewees of this study have stated that the reasons they felt associated with their employers was a result of finding similarities in their personal and organisational values. However, if these values were to change or to be proven misleading, the brand loyalty and belongingness towards an employer may cease to exist. Many of the interviewees mentioned their dissatisfaction about their current salary level, but the majority of respondents were still satisfied with their employer. Therefore, it can be stated that the findings of Berthon et al. (2005) about employees accepting lower compensation when they are loyal to their employer brand is accurate, but the generation of young professionals is clearly aware of the fact and ready to switch employers if they do not receive for example career development or more challenging tasks to enhance their skills in return.

5.2 Importance of talent management

As introduced by De Vos & Dries (2013), there are high-unique and high-value employees in each organisation, and it is crucially important for the companies to manage job continuity within the organisation in order to prevent losing talent to competitors. In previous studies it has been argued that companies using talent management practices have a higher chance of competition among employees due to limited opportunities in the organisation (Son et al., 2020). In this study, only one of the respondents voiced this kind of behaviour in their current organisation.

We're a performance-based company, so those who do not perform well they do not get [– –] promoted and they don't get the same training either (Respondent 5).

This kind of organisational practice greatly affected the respondents' attitude towards their employer in a negative way, as it was a clash between the company's communicated values and their actions in practice. However, this can be interpreted as

a strategic perspective of talent management, where the organisation develops a talent pool of high-performing individuals and applies an inclusive approach that focuses talent management practices only to a selected group of employees (Son et al, 2020; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). The other eight respondents felt that there had been no favouring in terms of training and development of skills within their team or organisation, and this was seen as a positive factor in their attitude towards their employer.

Some people don't utilise the training opportunities we have, so it's been more like their own choice that they want to prioritise something else, or they don't feel the need to take training even though they would be offered (Respondent 3).

5.2.1 Talent management in practice

One of the talent management practices is the rotation of talent within the organisation to prevent losing employees to competitors (Reis et al., 2021). Many of the respondents of this study said they prefer working in a big organisation, as it can offer more chances for career development, and therefore make the employer more attractive.

Obviously, people have moved to another function before as well, but now it's being made official, and you can try out the function. For instance, if I would like to move to, I don't know, the finance department, I can try that out a bit and see if that's what I want. Then if there's the need, then I can easily transfer to that function. So it's not only like necessarily upwards, we also have these like horizontal career opportunities and development opportunities (Respondent 3).

These kinds of opportunities provided by employees are clearly the way to attract, develop and rotate talent, which according to Reis et al. (2021) results in organisational success and is evident also from the findings of this study. In comparison, one of the respondents stated that as their role has not been evolving and no other career opportunities in the organisation are provided, the only solution is to seek employment

elsewhere, which in turn will be causing monetary loss for the current employer in terms of attracting and recruiting new talent for the position.

Getting new challenging job tasks and developing my skills is something that I would look for in a new employer. If I would be dissatisfied with my current job tasks and if I felt that I have reached kind of the top of what I can do and there's nothing more that I can do within my role to develop that would be also a big factor for me switching jobs (Respondent 7).

In addition, respondent two stated that “I would say that there hasn't been enough training, which is why I'm interested in looking elsewhere”. As talent management and employer branding together are supporting strategies in order to ensure retention and to keep the skilled workforce from leaving (Alves et al., 2020), then in this case the respondents' current employers have failed in both. One of the five concepts that needs to be mastered in order to win the war for talent and to gain competitive advantage for a company is implementing development strategies (Michaels et al., 2001). When this concept fails, the others become irrelevant as the talent is lost to a competing organisation offering a more attractive employer brand and concept of talent management.

5.3 Effect of career management

It has been argued in previous studies to which extent the responsibility of career management lies on the individual or the organisation (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). However, the importance of winning the global competition over skilled workforce is evident to organisations and therefore career planning has become crucial for both employees and employers (Jung & Takauchi, 2016). All of the interviewees of this study said that career development was either the most important thing when choosing their current employer or at least one of the most contributing factors.

In my previous job, I didn't really feel that I was developing and also the work tasks, they were quite like routine, which I really hated (Respondent 3).

I think it was one of the most important factors to know that I can grow within the company and have different roles. You just go into one department and then you stay there forever from trainee to something else. And that's it. And then you need to constantly apply for different jobs. But in my case, it's not like that, so I have a clear career path (Respondent 5).

I felt like when I started to work here, I was sort of like more at the beginning of my career, professional career after being finished studying so it was really important to me to get like a good opportunity to work in a field that I find really interesting and that I can see that there's a lot of opportunities here, a lot of learning and that I would also see the opportunity to continue to grow in the role (Respondent 4).

I feel like it was quite important at the time. I believed in this climbing the corporate ladder thing. I believed that if I do my job and I do it well and I take on new responsibilities, I would get a better role, better salary, and develop my career in that way (Respondent 7).

The essence of career planning is for the individuals to set career goals and plan strategies for achieving these goals (Gould, 1979), but as the career goals are often internal and organisation-based, the career planning is somewhat limited to the organisational boundaries (Jung & Takeuchi, 2016). Career planning includes different activities, such as salary increase or promotions, and as demonstrated in the quotations from the interviews, the respondents associate big organisations with various opportunities in terms of job tasks, different departments of the organisation as well as better salary once their skills and experience in the company have been increased.

Key part of employer branding in career management is the communication in terms of advancement, variety of work and the social relationships among workers (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). When asking the respondents if they received information about career development possibilities or talent management practices before the interview, the majority of the respondents said to have just assumed the possibilities were there, as the organisation in question was a big one.

Maybe it was also just that I knew it [current employer] was a big organic organisation and I just knew the possibility was there (Respondent 9).

I think there were talks about how it is good to be employed by [company name], in the sense that it's a big company. So there will also be a lot of other different opportunities here (Respondent 4).

It was clearly stated that, yes, you're going to start like this. And then after two years, you can become this, and then it's always said like if you perform well, it can be less than two years (Respondent 5).

I think also even the career development possibilities were mentioned in the job ad already and also during the interviews. And actually, because of the reputation of the company, I knew that people get developed here. So yes, the career development opportunities affected my decision to apply for this position I have now (Respondent 3).

I was told that this is the best place you can learn this from and when you have this company in your CV that you can choose any place to work in the future (Respondent 2).

If there is a lack of career advancement, both individuals and their employers face to lose their competitive advantage. Employees with explicit career goals within the organisation require a good leader-member exchange (Jung & Takeuchi, 2016), and from the interviews this was proven to be correct. If the employee is lacking good communication about their career path with their immediate leader, they felt that their role and talent in the organisation was not valued.

Now after my experience here I feel like that [career development] is not possible. I still believed when I started that career development is an opportunity, but now I would just say that I want a job where I can learn. But I don't expect that learning those skills would lead me anywhere within the company (Respondent 7).

However, many of the respondents felt that their manager had already assisted them in their career path and had suggested future opportunities or at least these possibilities had been discussed. This in turn resulted in a positive attitude towards their employer, as the employees felt more valued and appreciated in the organisation. According to Byrne et al. (2008), informal rewards such as open communication and frequent

feedback from the supervisor can result in feeling more satisfied with their leader, their job and the organisation in general. This was proven to be correct in all of the interviews of this study. The result of these informal rewards in turn result in job satisfaction, career commitment and career satisfaction (Byrne et al., 2008).

I messaged my manager about a salary increase and then she explained it in a way. Because the salary it's like tied to the career steps and a career development model. [– –] I have had active discussions about the career development things and kind of know where I am currently at. [– –] I think it makes it easier to see myself here, as then I know that there actually are like advancement opportunities. It's not that I have to wait for someone else to leave before I can get the promotion, for instance (Respondent 3).

5.4 Cross-country analysis

In this section, a cross-country analysis of the expectations, attractive employer attributes as well as the reasons to switch employers is provided. As the interviewees of this study represent four different Nordic countries, the findings are also analysed on a country level. Meanwhile many similarities arise across the countries, it is also possible to detect differences in the interview data.

Since the respondents are young professionals and are therefore more likely to focus on their career development early on in their careers, both Swedish and Finnish respondents stated to expect future career possibilities and professional growth when applying for their current employer. Danish respondents stated to expect interesting job tasks and flexibility, whereas the Norwegian respondents expected a good onboarding programme and a good company reputation. The attractiveness of an employer has the most variety across the countries analysed. The Finnish respondents value a global company presence, possibility for international experience and career opportunities. The Swedish respondents value a good salary and a good company reputation. The Danish participants in turn value more social aspects, such as good relationship with

colleagues and good leadership. The Norwegian respondents in turn prefer a sustainable and socially responsible company with a good office location and an inclusive and diverse workforce. In terms of possible reasons to seek employment outside of their current organisation, salary, flexibility and career opportunities were the most important factors. In addition, the Norwegian participants were also to consider switching employers if the company image were to gain some negativity and therefore affecting the employees' willingness to associate themselves with the employer organisation.

In conclusion, of the countries analysed in this study Finland and Sweden share preferences of career development and monetary compensation. Denmark and Norway in turn favour more of the social aspects such as interpersonal relationships and good management along with the social responsibility of the employer. In the table below, an overview of the preferences of each country is presented.

	Finland	Sweden	Denmark	Norway
Expectations towards employer	Professional growth Future career possibilities Good and structured onboarding Clear career path	Future career possibilities	Interesting job tasks Salary Flexibility	Good and structured onboarding Good company image
Employer attractiveness	Global presence Possibility for international experience Career development opportunities	Salary Good company image	Good relationship with colleagues Flexibility Good leadership	Sustainable and socially responsible company Office location Inclusivity and diversity within the workforce Employee benefits
Reasons to switch employers	Salary Flexibility	Salary Work-life balance	Salary Variety of job tasks	Negative image of the company Salary Flexibility

	Career development possibilities	Career development possibilities		
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Table 5. Overview of cross-country analysis

6 Conclusions

The combination of employer branding, talent management, and career management and their impact on employer attractiveness was observed throughout the theoretical framework of this thesis. As employer attractiveness affects the employee's willingness to apply, develop and rotate within an organisation, it is crucial for companies to master these concepts in order to win the war for talent. This study was conducted from the employee perspective, as they hold the value and uniqueness wanted by organisations across the world (De Vos & Dries, 2013). Therefore, no secondary data was analysed as the focus was on analysing the primary data gathered from interviews. When moving from the theoretical framework to the empirical part of this study, the key assumption was that young professionals prefer a well-known and inclusive employer that provides opportunities for career development within the organisation (Pandita, 2022; Jung & Takeuchi, 2016).

The purpose of this study was to examine what makes an attractive employer in the eyes of young professionals and how companies can prevent losing their employees to competitors. Therefore, the main research question was: How to attract young professionals to global organisations and prevent employees from seeking career development outside of the organisation?

As predicted by the theoretical framework, employer attractiveness correlates to the benefits an employee expects from working for a specific employer (Berthon et al., 2005) as well as the social identity and sense of belongingness that can be expected from being associated with an employer (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). In addition, the organisational talent management practices result in an attractive employer brand image and employer brand loyalty (Maurya & Agarwal, 2018). The results for the research question are concluded in this chapter, and the analysis of the results will be compared to the previous literature presented in the theoretical framework. Finally, practical implications and

recommendations for future research will be presented based on the research findings of this study.

6.1 Theoretical contributions

Through the abductive cross-sectional approach, the findings of this study contribute to the theory of employer attractiveness and its impact on choice of employment and career development within the organisation. This study proposes a framework to describe the influencing factors that result in achieving an attractive employer brand along with employer brand loyalty, which have not been researched in depth from the perspective of young professionals in the Nordics. Most of the prior research has focused on either identifying gender differences or studying a specific industry, and therefore there has been a lack of research on young professionals seeking international or multicultural work experience.

This study brings its own contribution to various theoretical ideas that are based on the findings presented earlier. As stated by multiple respondents of this study, the brand name of an employer is considered as one of the most attractive attributes. Chhabra & Sharma (2014) found that the most preferred organisational attributes were organisation culture, brand name and compensation. All of these attributes were named multiple times by the study participants and therefore this study supports this finding from the Nordic perspective. In addition, Pandita's research (2022) found that Gen Z has high career aspirations and demands a flexible and an innovative organisational environment, and the findings of this study are aligned as the respondents stated to be considering switching employers if their career development and learning curve was not supported by their current employer. Additionally, the inclusivity of a workplace as well as the social responsibility of the employing organisation were mentioned by the respondents, and Pandita's (2022) research supports this as it has been found that monetary compensation is not everything for Gen Z.

The findings of this study are aligned the most with the study conducted by Chhabra & Sharma (2014), where they found that the most preferred organisation attributes were organisation culture, brand name and compensation. In addition, significant positive correlation between strong brand image and likelihood to apply was proven to exist. The respondents of this study highlighted the importance of a workplace where good relationship amongst colleagues exists, but the brand image and the reputation their employer holds were mentioned the most. As the focus of this study was on young professionals who are at the start of their careers, the importance of monetary compensation was also one of the top factors making an attractive employer, therefore supporting the findings of Chhabra & Sharma (2014). Additionally, Jung & Takeuchi (2016) state that employees who engage in career planning activities are more likely to reach job satisfaction and less likely to switch employers. These kinds of findings were also evident from this study, as respondents voiced their increased motivation towards their employing organisation when knowing their planned career path in advance. Also the prospect of switching area of expertise within their current organisation was stated as an attractive factor about their employer.

To conclude, the findings of this study are highly aligned with the theoretical framework of this study. As suggested, the employer brand and the recognition it can bring to the organisation's employees is something that employees find attractive. The respondents who had received a sufficient career plan from their managers told to be more satisfied with their jobs than those interviewees who felt that their role and career development was stagnant, and this is highly aligned with the previous findings of Jung & Takeuchi (2016) and also the theoretical framework created for this study. This study adds significance to the previous findings by supporting the importance employer branding and talent management practices have on creating an attractive employer brand in order to attract key talent to organisations. Additionally, this study adds to previous research in terms of providing cross-country differences gathered from the Nordic countries represented in this study.

6.2 Practical contributions

Resulting the interview process and data analysis, important notions on creating an attractive employer brand and therefore attracting and retaining key talent was found. This section provides practical suggestions for managers to improve their organisational talent management practices and employer branding activities towards young professionals of Generation Z.

Firstly, managers in charge of global young talent need to take career planning and fair remuneration into consideration when recruiting new talent or focusing on retaining their existing talent. Career planning as a part of leader-member exchange needs to be applied into practice, and this is supported both by the findings of this study as well as previous research conducted by Jung & Takeuchi (2016). According to Son et al. (2020), talent management can cause more internal competition and a feel of injustice, which in turn may result in increased voluntary turnover. According to the findings of this study, some of the respondents felt that if there was a lack of equal training or career development opportunities, the result was to seek employment elsewhere. When young professionals feel their learning curve has come to its end either in a specific role or in the organisation as a whole, then the only option would be voluntary turnover. As one of the key elements of talent management is fair remuneration (Maurya & Agarwal, 2018), several of the interviewees stated that being underpaid compared to the salary level of competitors was a major factor in switching employers. Therefore, although previous research by Pandita (2022) found that monetary compensation was not the most important thing for young professionals when choosing employment, the findings of this study show that in the Nordics salary is one of the key factors when considering entering an organisation or switching one when the employee feels they are not fairly compensated. This is something managers need to consider when prioritising their resources regarding talent management.

Secondly, it is important for managers to understand the generational differences that affect the preferences of these young professionals, and factors such as inclusivity and supporting and inspiring organisational culture are essential. Generation Z has been found to prefer an inclusive workplace that utilises the latest technologies, offers flexibility and a great location for their office (Pandita, 2022). Practical actions such as good onboarding experience, work-life balance and social activities improving relationships amongst colleagues were stated as important by the respondents of this study. These are activities managers can create an action plan for, and in turn receive a good WoM experience that promotes their employer brand to potential employees.

Finally, when conducting research on the reasons the interviewed young professionals were to switch employers, the three recurring reasons were lack of flexibility, salary and career development possibilities. Flexibility referred to possibilities to choose their own working hours, to work from home as well as the possibility to work from abroad if applicable to their position. Salary was mentioned in situations where the respondent knew they would be compensated more generously if they were to switch to a competitor or where their tasks and salary had remained stagnant for too long. Career development possibilities are in close relation to salary, but also to developing the employees' professional skills and maintaining the interest and motivation towards their job. These factors are important for managers to consider when facing a high involuntary retention rate within their team or in the organisation altogether. Additionally, the overall employee satisfaction is tightly connected to the WoM given by employees and therefore affecting the employer brand as a whole.

6.3 Recommendations for future research

The importance and effect of employer branding on attracting talent and more specifically young professionals was investigated in this study. A specific focus on studying the preferences of young professionals from the Nordic countries was lacking, and this study focused on providing research for this gap. However, as this study has its

limitations in terms of the sample size and therefore generalizability, more research is still needed.

As this study focuses on the young professionals of the generation Z, the preferences of future generations are likely to differ from the ones presented in this study. Therefore, recurring research on defining the attractiveness of employers in the eyes of future young professionals will provide further insights to the field. This study also focuses on interviewees currently employed by the private sector, and therefore no implications to the public sector can be drawn. In the future, more research focusing on the preferences of the Nordic talent both from the private and public sector and the possible differences is needed.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview guide

Category	Question
Interviewee information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could you introduce yourself? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Name * Gender * Age * Nationality and country of residence * Educational background * Name of your company and its industry • What is your role in your current organisation?
Background information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How many years of work experience do you have after graduation? • How many years have you worked for your current employer?
Employer branding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the most important attributes of an employer in your opinion, and what made you choose your current employer? Why? • What are the most important factors for you when applying for jobs? Why? • How much do you research a potential employer? Why? • Was there something unique about your employer that affected your choice of employment? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * If yes, how did you receive that information? • Were you familiar with what was expected from you when you joined your current organisation? • What kind of expectations did you have towards your employer when starting in your organisation? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * How have your expectations changed since and why? • Do you associate yourself with your employer? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * If yes, how do you do that in practice? * If not, why?
Talent management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kind of factors make you want to stay employed in your current organisation? Why? • Has your company provided you some kind of training or education during your employment?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Do you believe that impacts your decision to stay employed within the company or seek employment elsewhere? • Do you know if everyone in your team has been given an equal opportunity for training?
Employer branding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the provided training or lack thereof impact your attitude towards your employer?
Career planning / Career management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When applying for your current job, how important was career development to you? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Was career development addressed by your employer already in the recruitment phase? • Have you had multiple roles within your current organisation? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Did your manager / supervisor suggest for you to apply to another position? * Were the future career possibilities openly discussed? * How did this affect your attitude towards your employer? • Have you discussed your career path with your manager? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * If yes, how did that affect your attitude towards your employer? * If not, how did that affect how you see your career in the future within or outside of the organisation?
Employer branding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the main reasons you are currently satisfied or dissatisfied with your employer? • If you were to think about switching employers, what would be the main factors affecting your decision?