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Employer Branding: Model for Employer Branding Practices in a Multinational Technology Company

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Writing on this subject matter was travelling to the unknown. Admittedly, it takes the unknown to get to know. "There's nothing like tiredness if you need to survive. Therefore, keep up with the strive to thrive. And in the end, it'll be worth the sacrifice" is a quote of mine that has been a guiding principle to accomplishing this master's thesis as the work required sleepless nights and relentlessness.

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The aim of this thesis is to explore the practices involved in the development and implementation of an employer branding strategy in a multinational technology company.

Framework: This research combines employer branding literature and strategy-as-practice (SAP) as theoretical lens by incorporating a five-step employer process model with categories of 'practices' in SAP. The combined model serves as a framework to analyse the empirical practices.

Methodology: The empirical setting is a multiple case-study consisting of three multinational technology companies and two consulting firms. Data was generated through participant observation in the primary case and semi-structured interviews in the secondary cases. With an inherently abductive approach based on this exploratory study, the thesis employs the subjective and interpretative approach.

Findings: Employer branding strategy formation practices amongst the cases revealed a great deal of similarities although some differences were highlighted as key findings in the micro-level details such as the depth of research, EVP testing, creation of a communication handbook and a framework of implementation. Overall, all the cases deem employer branding strategy as a long-term objective, a co-creation process following an incremental implementation pattern aligned with corporate strategy. Intensive engagements and the role of social media are found to play a crucial role in executing employer branding work.

KEYWORDS: Employer branding, Strategy-as-practice, HRM-as-practice

Table of contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

Abbreviations

CEO: Chief Executive Officer

CFO: Chief Financial Officer

HR: Human Resource

HRM: Human Resource Management

SAP: Strategy as practice

1   INTRODUCTION

1.1   Motivation for the study

In a world of increasingly disrupted and competitive business environment, finding and retaining talents have become one of the biggest challenges organizations especially multinational technology corporations face due to the continuous shortage of qualified talents (Chhabra & Sharma, 2014; Mölk, 2018). In a 2014 and 2015 study, 36% global employers and 73% of CEOs of companies raised the concern of labour shortages (Mosley, 2015). As demand of talents outwits supply, it has become extremely challenging to *"motivate and retain them"* (i.e., employees) (Black et al., 2013, p. 1). Indeed, the survival of firms in today's everchanging business environment is dependent upon the quality of its employees since internal human capabilities is one of the foundations of sustainable competitive advantage (Berthon et al., 2005; Chhabra & Sharma, 2014; Staniec & Kalińska-Kula, 2021). Mosley (2014) argue that whether employers deliberately pursue employer branding (i.e., define their value proposition and associated image) or not, they still have an employer brand. The underlying concern in this phenomenon is whether an employer controls its own narrative, or it is defined by others. Due to this fact, it is crucial for firms to enact plans and measures *"to attract the best pool of available candidates and to nurture and retain the current employees"* (Chhabra & Sharma, 2014, p. 49).

Employer branding is a mechanism used by organizations to facilitate employer attractiveness. Chhabra et. al, (2014) referred the practice as a tool to attract and retain talents. Agreeably, one of purposes of employer branding is to attract and retain top talents in an organization as well as become the *"employer of choice"* (Mölk, 2018; Aggerholm et al., 2011; Berthon et al., 2005, p. 152). Although the creation of employer branding strategies does not matter the size of a company, large scale firms especially multinational corporations are known to often have the financial and human capabilities for it (Mölk, 2018). In this regard, employer branding is of strategic importance to multinational corporations as it has impact on organisational reputation, employee engagement, talent management and other relevant agendas (Martin et al., 2011). This study seeks to explore the employer branding subject matter from the strategic management point of view. More specifically, this thesis employs the practical-theoretical perspective using strategy-as-practice as a theoretical lens to study the practical processes in the development and implementation of an employer branding strategy in a multinational technology company.

Undoubtedly, employer branding is crucial to the success of modern organisations due to the increasing contention for talents amongst employers in this knowledge-based economy (Berthon et al., 2005; Staniec & Kalińska-Kula, 2021). Employer branding has become a *"licence to operate"* (Aggerholm et al., 2011, p. 106) for organisations in recouping talents and retaining current employees, to survive and attain a competitive edge (Staniec & Kalińska-Kula, 2021). In employer branding, how strategies are developed and implemented is identified as crucial to its success (Staniec & Kalińska-Kula, 2021). Moreover, activities involved in the employer branding process affects current and prospective employees, company's identity, and culture (Staniec & Kalińska-Kula, 2021). Hence, employer branding should be given equal importance when formulating organisational strategies (Chhabra & Sharma, 2014). Furthermore, Aggerholm et al. (2011) suggest that research on employer branding should focus on processes rather than *"predefined outcomes"* (p.118). Consequently, for a strategy – employer branding strategy, notwithstanding – to be realized, the practices and everyday actions are crucial and must be taken seriously (Balogun et al., 2015).This corresponds with the core concept and context of strategy-as-practice (SAP) as it throws more light on the doings, those people involved, and the methods and tools they use (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007a). Therefore, there is the need to examine the activities involved in the employer branding strategy formation process from a strategy-as-practice (SAP) point of view.

1.2 Research gap

There is a growing interest on the topic of employer branding evidenced by the numerous articles in *"business and practitioner press"* (Frook, 2001; Eisenberg et al., 2001; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004, p. 501). Employer branding literature stems from marketing and human resource management disciplines (Chhabra & Sharma, 2014). According to Mölk (2018), strands of employer branding research has explored diverse areas including employees (both current and prospective), employer brands management, motives and practices of employer branding, attractiveness of employer brand, and many more.

Despite the growing prominence of this subject matter, it is surprising to note that employer branding has been given less attention in strategic management literature. Perhaps the strategic management field has taken employer branding for granted (Mölk, 2018). Nevertheless, Mölk (2018) employed structuration theory to explore the development of strategy in employer

branding. More so, Martin et al. (2011) introduced *"HR strategy-as-practice"* to offer some guidance to the *"logics of differences and social legitimacy"* (Martin et al., 2011).

The 'practice school of strategy' – popularly known as strategy-as-practice (SAP) – is known to dig deeper to reveal the (micro) activities in strategy research (Björkman et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2003). SAP examines what humans do, how they use and are influenced by the use of artefacts such as technology when crafting strategy (Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007). In spite of that, SAP research is yet to explore employer branding as a subject matter. In this phenomenon, SAP research and its linkage with the development and implementation of employer branding strategies is unknown. Therefore, this study examines the process(es) involved in creating an employer branding strategy (model) in a multinational technology company using the lenses of SAP.

Scholars in the field of marketing and human resource management (HRM) have constantly investigated employer branding owing to the turbulent nature of modern business (Berthon et al., 2005; Staniec & Kalińska-Kula, 2021). However, little is known about strategy development in employer branding (Mölk, 2018). Consequently, the increasingly competitive employment environment makes it worthwhile to examine the micropractices of employer branding in a multinational technology company. Figure 1 illustrates the research gap.
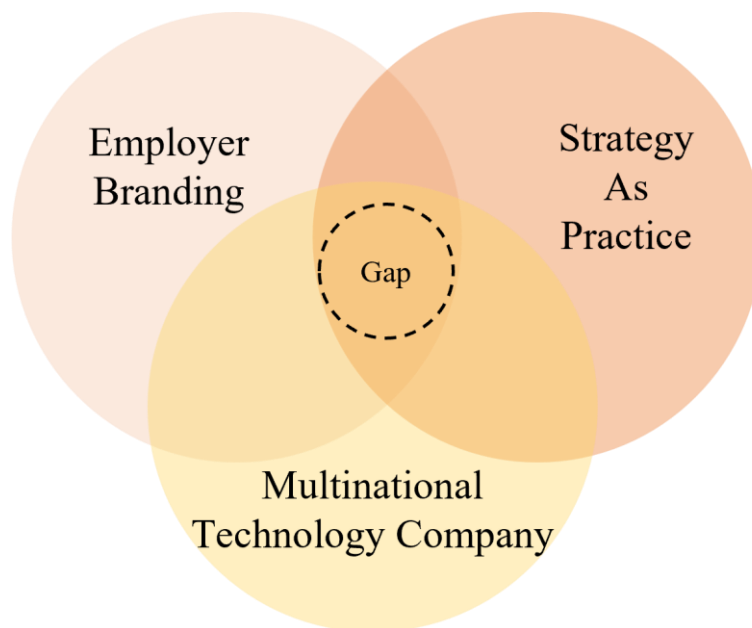
Figure 1. Research gap in existing employer branding literature.

1.3 Research objectives and contributions

Since employer branding as a subject area is new to the field of strategic management and strategy-as-practice in particular, this study travels to the unknown by exploring the practices of employer branding strategy with the lenses of SAP theory in a multinational technology company. Hence, the research question is:

What are the practices involved in the formation of an employer branding strategy in a multinational technology company?

To be able answer this research question, there is the need to set research objectives to serve as a guide. The research objectives include:

i) Describing employer branding and finding out the process(es) involved in crafting an employer branding strategy.

ii) Describing strategy-as-practice research and to demonstrate how employer branding can be studied by using the SAP approach.

iii) Finding out the practices in the process of developing an employer branding strategy for a multinational technology company.

This thesis contributes to research in employer branding in two ways. Theoretically, this work broadens the scope of the employer branding research field to include strategy-as-practice. Thus, this study through the SAP approach adds a new perspective to already existing literature (dominated by the marketing and human resource disciplines) of employer branding (e.g. Backhaus, 2016; Backhaus &Tikoo, 2004; Aggerholm et. al, 2011; Kaur & Sharma, 2015). On top of that, this study responds to the gap in the less attention given to employer branding in the strategic management discipline raised by Mölk (2018), shifts the focus of employer branding research from outcomes to processes called by Aggerholm et al. (2011), and contribute directly to the studies on 'practices' in SAP (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009: Balogun & Johnson 2004, 2005; Laine and Vaara 2007; Samra-Fredericks 2003, 2005; Vaara et al. 2004: Vaara & Whittington, 2012). This research also makes a minor contribution to the studies on strategic emergence (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985).

Moreover, this study contributes to the emerging HRM-as-practice theory (Björkman, I., Ehrn-rooth, Mäkelä, Smale, & Sumelius, 2014) – specifically, intersection of practices and praxis lenses suggested by Björkman et al. (2014). Furthermore, the exploratory analysis model proposed – comprising of the combination employer branding process and SAP – serves as a contribution to both employer branding and SAP theories as well as a gateway for further research.

Empirically, this research sheds light on the characteristics (Moroko and Uncles 2008), benefits (Sullivan, 2004: Branham, 2001: Boxall, 2008: Heilmann et al., 2013: Berthon et al., 2005) and practical challenges (Backhaus, 2016: Moroko & Uncles, 2008: Maxwell & Knox, 2009) for management when pursuing employer branding. Moreover, the thesis provides some implications for management with regards to the practices of employer branding process such as conducting appropriate research, developing a relevant and resonant employee value proposition, creating communication strategy and coherent contents, and effective activation of employer branding work (Aggerholm et. al, 2011: Mosley, 2014: Backhaus, 2016: Mosley & Schmidt, 2017: Mölk, 2018) by analysing the employer branding strategy development and implementation processes in three multinational technology companies and two consulting firms.

1.4   Thesis structure

The structure of this thesis is divided into five chapters. After the first chapter which is introduction, two relevant literature – employer branding and strategy-as-practice – are reviewed. First, the background and definitions of employer branding are explored. Subsequently, the benefits, characteristics and challenges are discussed. Next, some employer branding strategy processes or frameworks are treated, and one is selected to be used in the empirical study.
The second theoretical section reviews the SAP literature extensively to include the background and linkages, and the central frameworks. Furthermore, HRM-as-practice under SAP literature and its conceptual frameworks is also treated since it stems from both human resource management literature and SAP literature, and relevant to this study. The two research fields – employer branding and SAP – are synthesized at the end of the literature review. Here, both fields are summarised and a framework for the empirical part is developed, providing a lens through which empirical data will be analysed relative to theory.

The methodological choices employed in this study in relation to the research objective is tackled in the third chapter. This includes the philosophical assumption, research strategy, and methods. Moreover, the case companies are introduced; data collection and analysis explained; and validity and reliability are discussed at the end.

The fourth chapter presents the results of the empirical setting. The data are analysed within each case and illustrated. Thereafter, a cross-case analysis is conducted to spot the gaps in the practices of the primary case company and that of the comparative cases. The last chapter discusses the theoretical and managerial implications and suggestions for further research. Figure 2 presents the structure of the thesis.
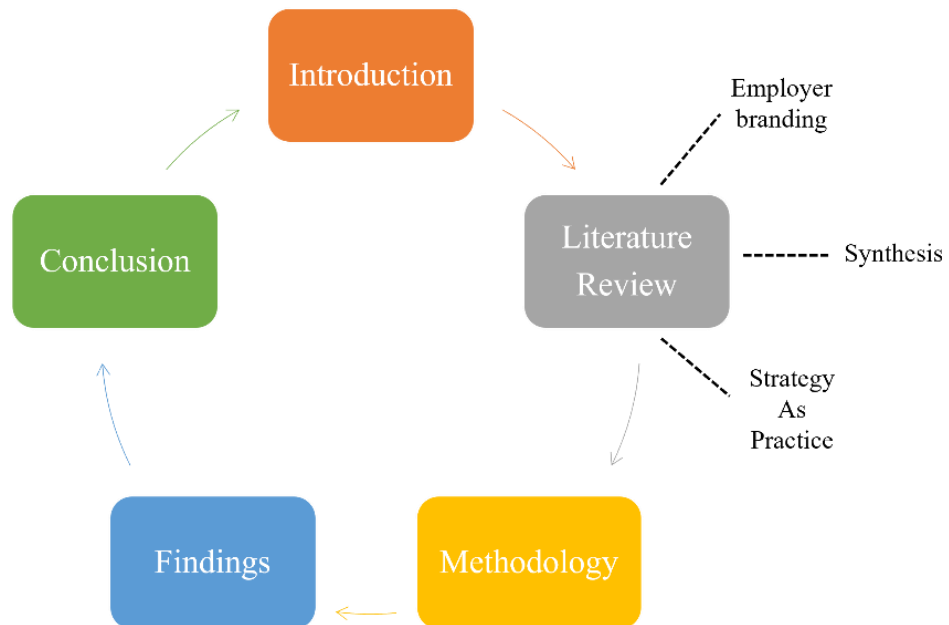
Figure 2. Thesis structure.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews relevant scholarly writings about employer branding and strategy-as-practice. First, the employer branding literature is discussed to include definition, features, benefits, challenges and models. Subsequently, the strategy-as-practice (including HRM-as-practice) literature is treated. Finally, both literatures are synthesized in how the development process of employer branding strategy can be studied using the strategy-as-practice theory perspective. Ultimately, this section intends to enhance our understanding of employer branding from the perspective of the strategic management discipline.

2.1 Employer Branding

Arguably, employer branding has become an important tool for organisations (Edwards, 2009) in the last decade. Employer branding is believed to be invented by marketing academics about two decades ago (Edwards, 2009; Martin et. al, 2005). This is obvious because the term branding is associated with the marketing discipline. However, recent literature reviewed by Edwards (2009) asserts that the employer branding concept consists of the fusion of marketing and human resource (HR) fields. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) and Heilmann et al. (2013) maintain that practitioners have given more attention to employer branding than academia, hence, the subject matter is still theoretically underdeveloped.

The definition of employer branding can be traced from the traditional branding term in marketing. Reflecting upon the definition of branding, the term was traditionally used to differentiate products from competitors (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Regarding employer branding, the concept of branding is applied to firms to distinguish its features as an employer from others (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Hence, Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) coined the term as applying the principles of branding to human resource management (see figure 3). Similarly, Edwards (2009) explained that *"employer branding is an activity where principles of marketing, in particular the science of branding, are applied to HR activities in relation to current and potential employees"* (p. 6). Bagienska (2018) also share a similar notion highlighting that employer branding is a process involving the combination of related human resource management activities with the development of a general strategy.
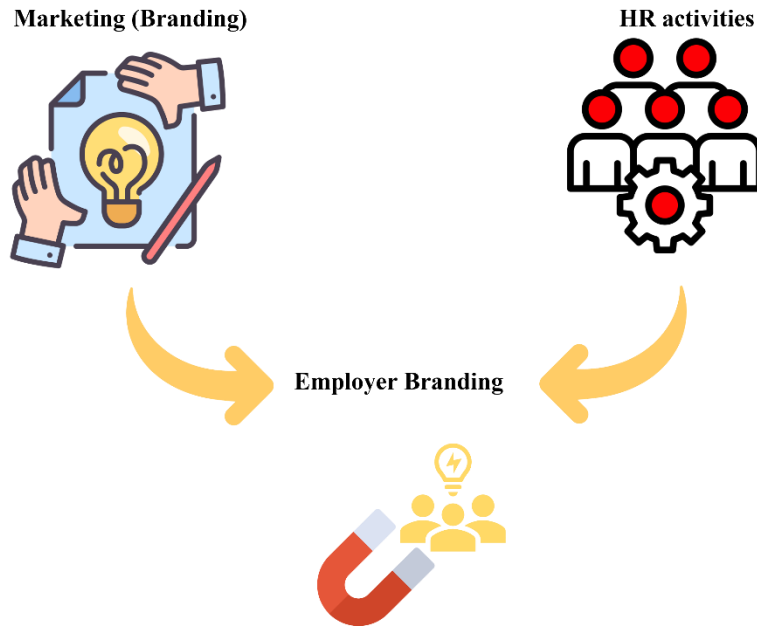
Figure 3. Foundation for the definition of employer branding.

In this phenomenon, it is not surprising that Ambler and Barrow (1996) – proponents of the employer branding research discipline – were *"inspired by Aaker's (1991) notion of a strong brand"* in defining employer branding (Aggerholm et al., 2011, p. 108). They defined employer branding as the provision of benefits (economic, functional, and psychological) identified with an employer (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). This definition has become key in employer branding research (Aggerholm et al., 2011).

Even so, there is a wide range of definitions to describe employer branding. As Ambler and Barrow's (1996) initial definition focused on benefits, Edwards (2009) asserts that it is the *"unique employment experience"* offered to employees by an organisation (p.13). Moroko and Uncles (2008) regard employer branding as a *"psychological contract between an employer and employee"* (Foster et al., 2010, p. 403). Similarly, Biswas and Suar (2016) refer it as the management of a relationship between an employer and employee. Furthermore, Martin & Beaumont (2003), the Conference Board (2001), as well as Dell and Ainspan (2001) explained it as managing a company's identity or building an image as the best employer (Ewing et al., 2002) whereas Lloyd (2002) views it as a form of communicating a firm's effort to current and potential staff (Edwards, 2009). Sullivan (2004) and Bagienska (2018) on the other hand elucidate employer branding as a strategy used to manage the perception and awareness of

employees (existing and potential) in a long-term whilst Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) refer it as a *"process of building an identifiable and unique employer identity [..] to differentiate it from competitors"* (p. 502). Mosley (2014) categorised the definitions of employer branding into "promise", "image and reputation", and "perception" (p. 4) citing the definitions of the Chartered Institution of Personnel and Development (CIPD, UK), Minchington (2011), and Ambler et. al (1996) respectively to corroborate his claims (see Table 1). In spite of that, Mosley (2014) emphasised that a definition of employer branding which inculcates perceptions and association provides an effective way of measuring of its status, value and transparency. Theorists have recently presented employer branding as a two-phase process to include internal branding (Bergstrom et al. 2002; Berthon et al., 2005), and external branding (Sullivan, 1999). Mosley (2017) explained that internal branding builds the working culture whereas the external branding promotes the organisational culture to prospects. Table 1 displays the various definitions of employer branding by scholars featured in this study.

Table 1. Definition of employer branding by scholars.

Author	Definition
Ambler & Barrow (1996)	"[t]he package of functional, economic and psychological benefit provided by employment, and identified with the employing company." (p. 187)
Backhaus & Tikoo (2004)	"[…] the process of building an identifiable and unique employer identity, and the employer brand as a concept of the firm that differentiates it from its competitors" (p. 502)
Bagienska (2018)	"Employer branding is a strategy of creating desired associations evoked by a given company as a workplace in prospective employees' minds" (p.371)
Dell & Ainspan (2001)	"The employer brand establishes the identity of the firm as an employer. It encompasses the firm's values, systems, policies, and behaviours toward the objectives of attracting, motivating, and retaining the firm's current and potential employees"
Edwards (2009)	"[…] identifying the unique employment experience by considering the totality of tangible and intangible reward features that a particular organisation offers to its employees" (p.7)
Lloyd (2002)	"[…] sum of a company's efforts to communicate to existing and prospective staff that it is a desirable place to work"
Martin & Beaumont (2003)	"[…managing a] company's image as seen through the eyes of its associates and potential hires" (p.15)
Sullivan (2004)	"a targeted, long-term strategy to manage the awareness and perceptions of employees, potential employees, and related stakeholders with regards to a particular firm" (para.1)

Drawing upon the above definitions and considering the strategic management background, employer branding is defined in this study as a (sub) strategy extracted from an organisation's strategy that communicates the employment offering (Edwards, 2009) and unique characteristics of the firm (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004: Love & Singh, 2011) in order to motivate and retain

current employees (Conference Board, 2001: Dell & Ainspan, 2001), attract prospective employees, and establish a positive image in the employment market (Lloyed, 2002). Worded differently, employer branding is the formation (planning and execution) and communication of a firm's unique employment offering consistent with core organisational strategy to attract and retain employees. It is argued in this definition that employer branding is a (sub) strategy since it emerges from an organisation's core strategy. This is justified by the views of Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), Sullivan (2004), Barrow and Mosley (2005), Edwards (2009), Van Mossevelde (2010) and Bagienska (2018) who reckon that employer branding is a strategy utilised by firms to attract current and potential talents (Heilmann et al., 2013).

Furthermore, we argue in our definition that employer branding is or must be consistent with organisational strategy as it rests on some elements of organisational strategy such as policies, purpose, values and systems (Dell & Ainspan, 2001: Edwards, 2009). This is validated by Maxwell and Knox (2009) who cited that scholars are of same opinion that a successful employer brand meets three criteria to include consistency with organisational reality. Similarly, Mosley and Schmidt (2017) propound that an employer brand must align with the broader organisational strategy (see figure 5). Foster et al., (2010) also posits that "*employer branding should clearly understand what promise of benefits its corporate brand can offer prospective and current employees to avoid the perceived violation of a psychological contract.*" (p. 404). Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) also maintain that "*employer brands developed to be consistent with […] corporate brand"* (p. 503). Additionally, the sole purpose of an employer branding strategy is to communicate these elements to current employees to motivate and retain them as well as marketed externally to attract potential employees (Conference Board, 2001: Dell & Ainspan, 2001).

The body of research on employer branding has grown markedly focusing on a wide range of issues (see table 2 for examples). One stream of research focusses on employees – both current employees (e.g. Edwards & Edwards, 2013) and potential employees (e.g. Auer, Edlinger, & Mölk, 2014; Wilden, Gudergan, & Lings 2010). Figure 4 presents some key synthesis in this stream.

Figure 4. Employer branding literature on employees. Adapted from Carlini et al. (2019).

On the other hand, the works of Chhabra and Sharma (2012), Elving, Westhoff, Meeusen, and Schoonderbeek (2013), Aggerholm, Andersen, and Thomsen (2011), Foster, Punjaisri, and Cheng (2010), Hielmann et. al, (2013) and Moroko and Uncles (2008) are streams of employer branding research that focus on employer brands management (Mölk, 2018). A number of studies have also investigated the attractiveness of employer brands (e.g., Berthon et al., 2005; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Holtbrugge & Kreppel, 2015; Roy, 2008) (Backhaus, 2006; Maxwell & Knox, 2009). Much of these strands of research fall within the external or internal aspect of employer branding (Backhaus, 2016).

Table 2. Examples of empirical works on employer branding.

Author	Empirical focus	Method	Key findings
Edwards & Edwards (2013)	Employees (current)	Quantitative (Longitudinal study)	Perceptions of the employment brand after acquisition affects employee attitudes with regards to identification and decision-making.
Auer, Edlinger, & Mölk (2014)	Employees (prospective)	Qualitative	Illuminate how highly qualified potential applicants make sense of employer brand material.

Chhabra & Sharma (2012)	Employer brands management	Qualitative and quantitative (Mixed methods)	Most preferred organisational attributes by students include brand name, organisational culture and compensation.
Elving, Westhoff, Meeusen, & Schoonderbeek (2013)	Employer brands management	Content analysis	Employer branding in recruitment communication in Netherlands is less utilised. Further, adverts which contain elements of employer branding is most preferred.
Aggerholm, Andersen, & Thomsen (2011)	Employer brands management	Literature review	Strategies for sustainable development affects the approach in employer branding processes.
Foster, Punjaisri, & Cheng (2010)	Employer brands management	Literature review	Highlights the importance of employer branding and internal branding, and its potential to support the corporate brand-building initiatives.
Moroko & Uncles (2008)	Employer brands management	Qualitative	Highlights the characteristics of employer brands and success drivers.
Holtbrugge & Kreppel (2015)	Attractiveness of employer brand	Quantitative	Demonstrates compensation and job security as important factors of employer attractiveness.
Roy (2008)	Attractiveness of employer brand	Quantitative	Reveals most favoured employer brand attributes to include the freedom to apply knowledge on the job, interesting tasks, ethical work setting, fair and transparent salary.
Wilden, Gudergan, & Lings (2010)	Employees (prospective)	Qualitative	Reveals consistency of brand messaging and current employees' referrals as preferable for jobseekers. Too, higher employer branding investment increases credibility of brand signals.
Hielmann et. al, (2013)	Employer brands management	Qualitative	Illustrates positive employer image, a better job satisfaction and an efficient recruitment as the core motives for employer branding.
Lievens & Highhouse (2003)	Attractiveness of employer brand	Quantitative	Initial stages of recruitment process affect the attractiveness of organisations.

2.1.1 Characteristics of Employer Brands

In the preceding section the background and definitions of employer branding were discussed. However, the various definitions are insufficient to give a clear view of the features of employer brands. Therefore, key characteristics associated with employer brands are discussed in this section to enhance our understanding of the term.

In their work 'Characteristics of successful employer brands', Moroko and Uncles (2008) identified some characteristics connected to successful employer brands. They highlighted five key feature of successful employer brands. These include:

Familiar and visible: The authors argue that awareness of an employer brand propels the decision-making of the targeted group. Hence, a successful employer brand must be *"known and*

noticeable" by employees (existing and prospective) and other relevant stakeholders (Moroko & Uncles, 2008, p. 164).

Relevant value proposition: A successful employer brand has a relevant value proposition also known as employee value proposition or EVP (See more in section 2.1.1.1) for its prospective and current employees. Here, the authors explained that when the EVP is relevant to the target group, it easily becomes resonant with them thereby creating a relationship. In the same way, Bagienska (2018) postulates that an EVP must align with the firm's strategy as well as meet expectations of the targeted group.

Distinct or unique from other firms: Another common feature of a successful employer brand is that it is distinct or unique from other firms. The employer brand must be able to tell the identity and character of the company, what is special about working there, and why it is different.

Delivery of promise: A key characteristic of a successful employer brand is the accuracy in fulfilling the promise(s) it has communicated and marketed to existing and prospective employees. In other words, the company delivers the promise sold to its target audience. For instance, if an employer claims to offer a certain benefit (e.g. work-life balance), employees must be able to experience it in the entire *"employment lifecycle"* (Moroko & Uncles, 2008, p. 165). In essence, the promise(s) existing and prospective employees perceive due to what has been sold to them should meet the reality in the organisation.

Alignment with brand values: Since prospective employees are unable to properly assess the employee experience of a firm, it becomes very difficult for their decision-making. Due to this gap, Moroko and Uncles (2008) maintain that "*understanding of a company's corporate and product brands may be used as a proxy for an understanding of the employer brand*" (p. 167). Hence, a key characteristic of a successful employer brand is its alignment with the vision of the company and its consumer-promise.

In a similar vein, a practitioner article by HR Talent IQ (n.d.) highlighted five common characteristics of an effective employer branding. Firstly, an effective employer brand possesses a well-developed value proposition. In this phenomenon, a company is able to determine what existing and potential employees value about working with them. Second is authenticity. A company's honesty about its offering and working culture is key. What is marketed to the target audience must be the same as the experience lest misrepresentation – which leads to breach of psychological contract (Backhaus, 2016) and higher turnover. Thirdly, an effective employer branding is characterised by employee involvement in the employer branding process. This

facilitates a successful articulation of the entire employer brand lifecycle. Fourthly, in effective employer branding, employees are trained to become advocates of the firm's employer brand. In essence, employees are encouraged to become ambassadors of the employer brand. It is imperative to note that the message of employees about a company is more trusted by potential employees. This is corroborated by research conducted by LinkedIn Talent Solution which found that prospective employees believe the information of an employer about employee experience and working atmosphere from their current employees in three fold than from the company's official page and/or from senior management (LinkedIn Talent Solution, 2016). The last characteristic is consistency in messaging. The message about a company's employer brand must be consistent in both internal and external communication. Furthermore, it must be compelling and engaging.

The characteristics outlined by Moroko and Uncles (2008) and the practitioner article (HR Talent IQ, n.d.) corresponds to the opinion of scholars (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004: Ambler & Barrow, 1996) who argue that employer brands must meet three criteria to include: consistency with organisational realities, unique from other competing firms, and attractive to stakeholders (Maxwell & Knox, 2009, p. 895). In addition, Aggerholm et al. (2011) emphasize that successful employer branding goes beyond the offering of benefits to include co-creation and negotiation between a firm and its current and prospective employees. In spite of that Mosley and Schmidt (2017) propound that an employer brand must align with the broader organisational strategy. More specifically, it should alternate or intersect between HR and talent management strategy and marketing strategy. Figure 5 illustrates employer branding within a broader scope of an organisational strategy.
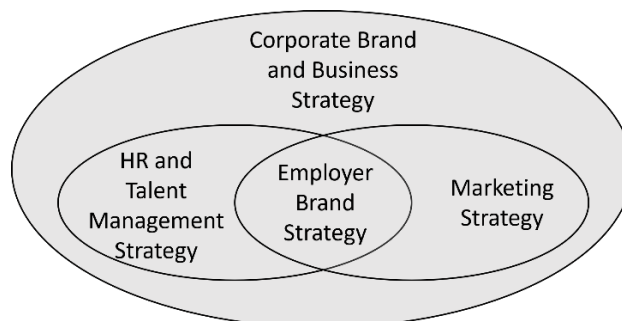
Figure 5. The integrated strategy model (adapted from Mosley & Schmidt (2017)).

2.1.1.1 Employee Value Proposition (EVP)

As firms aim to portray themselves as the best place to work to enable the attraction and reten-tion of committed and dedicated employees to survive in this disruptive employment era, em-ployee value proposition (EVP) is the vehicle used in attaining this feat in the employer brand-ing process. This is because EVP consists of the attractive benefits or values an employee ob-tains (Arasanmi & Krishna, 2019).

Herger (2007) defines EVP as the benefit employees attain or expect to receive by working in a particular organisation whilst Edwards (2009) refer it as a *"package of [...] employment ad-vantages offered to employees"* (p. 7). Minchinting (2010) also defines EVP as *"[...] a set of associations and offerings provided by your organization in return for the skills, capabilities and experiences an employee brings to your organization"* (Heilmann et al., 2013, p. 289). EVP is a give and take agreement between an organisation and an employee (Pawar, 2016; Arasanmi & Krishna, 2019; Staniec & Kalińska-Kula, 2021). Specifically, a firm offers a set of benefits in exchange (Staniec & Kalińska-Kula, 2021) for the performance of an employee (Noe et al., 2008; Peterson, 2007 cited in Arasanmi & Krishna, 2019). This is supported by Minchington's (2010) definition of EVP as the set of values offered by a firm in exchange of an employees' skills and experience to the firm. EVP is an essential component of an em-ployer's brand and serves as the main differentiator of a company's employer brand and that of its competitors (Arasanmi & Krishna, 2019; Bagienska, 2018). Bagienska (2018) argue that EVP is a determining factor for highly skilled employees in influencing their employer of choice. On top of that an effective EVP *"is a tool of building employer branding not only among prospective employees, but also in the whole external environment of an enterprise"* (Bagienska, 2018, p. 377).

It could be deduced from the above scholarly discussion that EVP is the heart of an employer branding strategy – a tool that carries the values (e.g. benefits, rewards, policies) of an employer brand. It presents the central message that is marketed by the employer brand (Eisenberg et al., 2001; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). In essence, EVP is the bedrock of an employer branding strat-egy. Therefore, it is virtually impossible to have an employer branding view without an EVP.

EVP components can be classified into five categories – organisation, rewards, opportunity, work and people (Ryan, 2010; referenced by Bagienska, 2018). The organisation category

comprises of the information about the company, social corporate responsibility, declaration of reliability and credibility, quality of product and service, and many more; rewards concern the remuneration package for employees; opportunity refers to employee development mechanisms such training for employees, career advancement and the like; work consists of employment contracts, work-life balance, work safety, and diversity; the people area involves, quality of team spirit, code of conducts, manager quality, and many more (Bagienska, 2018).

2.1.2 Benefits of Employer Branding

Employer branding, when pursued effectively offers a significant amount benefit. Below are some positive impacts of employer branding on practicing firms. Table 3 highlights some of the outcomes of employer branding.

First, employer branding establishes a positive image about an organisation as the best place to work (Sullivan, 2004: Branham, 2001), a *"first-class employer"* (Heilmann et al., 2013, p. 284) or an *"employer of choice"* (Berthon et al., 2005, p. 152) to succeed in this era of 'war for talent'. Likewise, companies use employer branding to control a narrative or correct a perception. A typical case is McDonald. The company leveraged on its employer branding activities to counter the misguided 'McJob' perception tagged on them. McJob is a slang term used to describe a low paid job or a job without prestige nor future. McDonald succeeded in using its employer branding activities to highlight the positives in the benefits it offers (employee value proposition) to employees. McDonald's campaign received a humungous press coverage and owing to that the company was able to change the wrong narrative. Furthermore, job applications improved markedly – from 4:1 to 14:1 (Mosley, 2014).

Through dialogue and co-creation within the employer branding process, current staff are well engaged with regards to the strategy and culture of the organisation (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). This creates alignment of corporate values and behaviour and a sense of 'corporate citizenship' amongst internals (Aggerholm et al., 2011; Maxwell & Knox, 2009; Conference Board, 2001). Furthermore, this leads to employee commitment and loyalty (Minchington, 2007). The work of Staniec and Kalińska-Kula (2021) supports this assertion as their study reveals that employer branding internally increases the sense of belonging among current employees significantly as well as enhance their commitment. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) added that internal employer

branding creates inimitable workforce. They exemplified that Southwest Airlines is a firm that possesses an enviable workplace culture.

As firms leverage on employer branding to market their employee value proposition – including benefits, career advancement, trainings, and the like – they attain employer brand equity and employer attractiveness as outcomes (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Berthon et al., 2005). These outcomes motivate the retention of current employees as well as attract potential employees (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004: Minchington, 2007). For instance, McDonald's (UK) employer branding activities significantly decreased their employee turnover by -52.5% between 2004-2010 (Mosley, 2014). With regards to talent attraction, Linkedin Talent Solutions' (2016) research suggests that 72% of respondents (recruitment leaders) agree that employer branding has positively impacted their hiring. Similarly, research from the Conference Executive Board (CEB) found that a positive employer brand can attract 20% higher of the prospective employees in the labour market (Mosley, 2014).

Correspondingly, since employer branding enables employee retention and talent attraction, practicing firms stand to save cost in talent acquisition and employee attrition (Biswas & Suar, 2016: Ritson, 2002). For instance, LinkedIn's survey in 2011 amongst 2250 recruiters in the USA found that the *"average cost per hire"* and employee turnover rate was significantly lower in firms with strong employer brands. (Mosley, 2014: p.12). In essence, firms with strong employer brands in this case saved cost for every hire and lowered cost of attrition. Aside that, firms with strong employer brand save cost in terms of employee salaries. This is consistent with the studies of Berthon et. al (2005) and Ritson (2005) which claim that companies who have strong employer brand offer lower salaries for employees in similar positions to the companies with weak employer brands. Likewise, Jain and Bhatt (2015) cite that prospective employees are inclined to accept 7% less salary from organisations with positive employer image than those with negative image.

The positive impact of employer branding goes beyond current and prospective employees to affect the firm's customers, sales, and corporate brand. Research indicates employer branding leads to customer satisfaction and sales at a higher level (Mosley 2014; Berthon et. al, 2005). In general, the importance of employer branding mentioned above suggest that firms who effectively practice it attain competitive advantage (Conference Board, 2001). This is because attracting, recruiting, and retaining a unique workforce enhances performance which is

valuable for a firm. Drawing upon the resource-based view, possessing a pool of talents that is valuable, rare, inimitable, and well supported by the organisation can be a source of attaining competitive advantage (Priem and Butler,2001; cited in Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Boxall (2008) asserts that regardless of the possession of the best facility or technology, competitive advantage can only be guaranteed when employees are able to fully utilize them (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Hence, attracting and retaining highly competent workforce through employer branding creates competitive advantage.

Table 3. Key employer branding outcomes.

Employer branding benefits: For the employer	Employer branding benefits: For the employee	Employer branding benefits: For externals
Synthesis of key developments within this stream	**Synthesis of key developments within this stream**	**Synthesis of key developments within this stream**
Organisation attains a positive image as the best place to work or an "employer of choice". An organisation can control its own narrative as an employer. Employer branding support the corporate brand-building initiatives such as organisational identity and culture. Employer branding offers a framework for engaging potential employees and enhances employee-employer value matching. Employer branding foster employee commitment to the organisation. Employer attains retention of existing employees and attraction of prospective applicants. Employer saves cost in talent acquisition and employee attrition. Employer branding is a source of competitive advantage through the creation of an inimitable workforce for the firm.	Employees are considered internal customers. Employees are well engaged in a dialogical process. Employees get aligned with corporate values. The sense of belonging of employees are enhanced through employer branding. Loyalty of employees are enhanced. Employer branding creates a platform for the voices of employees to be heard. Employer branding enhances employee-employer value matching. Employer branding shapes the understanding of existing employees with regards to unique attributes of the organisation.	Employer branding leads to customer satisfaction. Through employer branding prospective employees get a glimpse of the employment experience of a firm. Employer branding provides a platform for engaging potential staff. Prospective employees can make an informed decision as to the employer of choice.
Contributing articles: Sullivan (2004), Branham (2001), Boxall (2008), Heilmann et al. (2013), Berthon et al., (2005), Mosley (2014), Backhaus (2004), Biswas & Suar (2016), Ritson (2002), Berthon et. al (2005), Jain & Bhatt (2015)	**Contributing articles:** Aggerholm et al. (2011), Backhaus &Tikoo (2004), Backhaus (2016), Heilmann et al. (2013), Moroko & Uncles (2008), Maxwell & Knox (2009), Conference Board (2001), Minchington (2007), Staniec & Kalińska-Kula (2021).	**Contributing articles:** Aggerholm et al. (2011), Backhaus &Tikoo (2004), Carlini et al. (2019), Mosley (2014).

2.1.3 Challenges of Employer Branding

The preceding section revealed the benefits of employer branding. Although practicing employer branding comes with numerous benefits, it does not take away the challenges associated with it. Indeed, the journey to employer branding is not golden. Just like the silky road, challenges arise along the way. This section highlights challenges associated with companies practicing or intend to practice employer branding.

One of the deadly sins in pursuing employer branding is false promises (Backhaus, 2016). Indeed, false promises in employer branding are a mistake (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994; referenced by Backhaus, 2016). Consistency of an employer brand with the realities such as employment experience and organisational culture is inherent in the employer brand concept (Backhaus, 2016). However, in an effort to attract the best pool of talents, some companies promise what they cannot deliver in their employer branding messages. A typical case scenario can be found in Moroko et al.'s (2008) work where an employment branding message did not match the actual processes of a firm. The case demonstrated that a firm had the intention of employing (fresh) graduates and to offer them work-life balance. Consequently, the HR department advertised this message without consulting line managers and/or informing them about the new ways of working. The new employees after recruitment realised their managers where still in the offices at odd hours, forcing them to stay along. Hence, they felt disappointed since that was not what was promised (in the beginning). Within a year, all the new recruits (fresh graduates) had left the company (Moroko & Uncles, 2008). In this scenario, the company was able to attract the right employees through its message, but unable to deliver what was promised in their value proposition leading to disappointment amongst new employees - herein a breach of psychological contract – which in turn ends in higher turnover (Backhaus, 2016; Moroko & Uncles, 2008)

Another mistake some firms commit when pursuing employer branding is benchmarking companies who have been recognised as Best Employers (Maxwell & Knox, 2009). Maxwell et. al (2009) argue that benchmarking impedes the unique characteristics and identity of a firm. Owing to that the values of the corporate brand of the firm can hardly be aligned with the behaviours of employees, this in turn undermines the employer brand. In a multinational

corporation context, Martin et al. (2011) quizzed the authenticity of employer brand constructed at the global level and at the local level. Martin et al. (2011) argue that when the employer brand is developed in a multinational corporation and marketed externally, it may correspond with the desires of top management. However, it may not seem authentic to the lived experience of employees in other locations far from the headquarters. This happens when employees are not involved in the development of the employer brand. Hence, it becomes difficult to develop an EVP that matches the needs and wants of employees. More so, it becomes difficult for employees to live the brand. With this, Martin et al. (2011) emphasised the inclusion of line managers and regular employees representing all levels in the formation of employer brand strategies.

Another difficulty faced by firms that pursue employer branding is the sustainability of it (Backhaus, 2016). Since there is constant change management in especially large organisations, they are required to keep altering their employer branding strategy to stay relevant. In a scenario where there is change in organisational ownership (e.g. merger and/or acquisition), modification of the employer brand becomes imminent. It is then required to alter the employer brand of at least one of the companies to blend both. This is a difficult challenge since employees of the two distinct companies have already associated themselves with their respective companies (Backhaus, 2016). This may lead to commotion. The work of Edwards and Edwards (2013) revealed that employees had to quit after a merger due to brand identity. For instance, the consistency of corporate social responsibility was crucial to employees. Furthermore, their study revealed that the changes in the employer brand impacted employees' decision to stay with the newly created merger (Backhaus, 2016). Aside this, generational shift affects the sustainability of an employer brand. An EVP that may attract generation X may not be attractive to generation Z. And since there is constant generational shift and an ever-changing demand, to have an employer brand that is sustainable over time, becomes difficult.

Additionally, power play in organisations pose a challenge to employer branding. One of the goals of an employer branding strategy is to address the employment interests (needs/wants) of employees (current and prospective) and stakeholders. However, due to the influence of top management, strategies are developed to meet their interest to enable the access to draw resources (Mölk, 2018). This is dangerous as the normative rules of senior management may not meet the best interests of employees and stakeholders. Consequently, the employer brand is bound to fail.

Content creation and channel of delivery is another challenge that can lead to a failed employer branding campaign. A firm may have the best of offering in its EVP. However, inability to create engaging contents to the targeted audience is a recipe for disaster. That said, even if a company produces good content, the mode and medium of delivery is another factor. Instances where the right channel is not recognised, employer branding contents – specifically EVP promises – may not reach the targeted audience for it be heard, hence failure. Lastly, employer branding requires time, monetary investment and other resources to flourish. Without these, firms pursuing employer branding are treading on a fruitless journey.

2.1.4 Employer Branding Processes

The advent of employer branding has given birth to various process models in the development of an employer branding strategy by both practitioners and theorists. In this section, few of the models are discussed briefly and compared to add more insight to understanding the processes. Afterwards, one of the process models will be selected based on its suitability to the empirical setting. One of the models consist of a three-step process whereas the rest consist of five-step process. See figure 6 below.

Employer branding – 3-step process	**Employer branding – 5-step process**
• **Synthesis of key developments within this process**	• **Synthesis of key developments within this process**
• Employers use their organisational culture to develop value proposition for employees and stakeholders.	• Employers examine their current image.
• Externally, employers promote the EVP to potential employees, recruitment agencies and other stakeholders..	• The outcome informs the creation of a relevant EVP
• In-house, employers conduct internal employer branding to fulfil employment offering as well as foster employee commitment and loyalty.	• A strategy is crafted on how to promote the new employment offering
	• The employer brand is implemented.
	• Monitoring and evaluation follows
Contributing articles: Backhaus &Tikoo (2004), Frook (2001), Backhaus (2016), Chhabra & Sharma (2014), Heilmann et al. (2013)	Contributing articles: Bagienska (2018), Heilmann et al. (2013), Nguyen (2019), Parment & Dyhre (2009)

Figure 6. Synthesis of the key steps within employer branding processes.

Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) cited a three-step employer branding process defined by the human resource (HR) practitioner literature. The first step is the EVP development by the firm using the information about its culture, leadership style, qualities of existing employees, image, product and service qualities, and the package of benefits for employees. In the second phase, the firm markets the EVP externally to its target groups such as prospective employees, recruitment consultants and agencies. In the last phase, internal marketing activities is carried out to fulfil the promise made to prospective employees as well as incorporate it as a part of the organisational culture (Frook, 2001; Backhaus & Tikoo 2004). This framework although indicate an outside-inside approach, it is one of the most cited in employer branding literature (e.g., Backhaus, 2016; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Chhabra & Sharma, 2014; Heilmann et al., 2013).
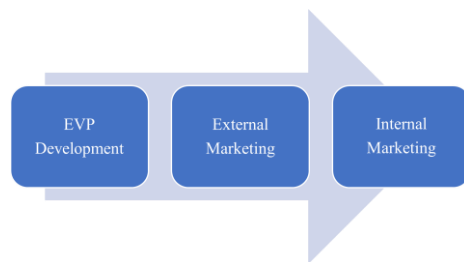
Figure 7. The 3-step employer branding process.

On the other hand, employer branding consulting firm Universum proposed a five-step employer branding process model (see figure 8). The first stage recommended in Universum's framework is to conduct research. Here, the current employer image is examined through internal and external research. Researching on existing employees and the labour market is crucial to understanding the current employer's image. More so, it helps identify the perception of employees about the employer as well as their needs and wants (Van Mossevelde, 2010; Heilmann et al., 2013). The second phase identifies the EVP. Heilmann et al. (2013) stress that the EVP displays the unique employment advantages offered by the employer and the reason to work for their organisation. Van Mossevelde (2010) opines that an effective EVP increases the talent pool of an employer, enhances employee commitment, and has the tendency of saving cost for employers – since employers with weak employer brands pay a premium price to attract highly qualified talents (Heilmann et al., 2013). Next is the creation of the communication

strategy which is based on step one and two. At this stage, Van Mossevelde (2010) recommends that the most attractive factors of the EVP must be emphasized in the communication strategy. Furthermore, the target group and the relevant communication channels must be well defined to enable the right reach. The fourth step is the preparation of communication materials aimed at expressing the EVP to the target group such as current and prospective employees, and other stakeholders. Here, the 'what and how', words (texts), images and videos are communicated in a way that are consistent with customer brands and corporate identity (Heilmann et al., 2013 ; Nguyen, 2019). The fifth and final step is the implementation of the steps to promote the EVP. Furthermore, a close evaluation and monitoring of the process is done, and alteration is required when needed (Heilmann et al., 2013; Parment & Dyhre 2009).

Universum's employer branding process model has been featured by several scholars (e.g., Heilmann et al., 2013; Nguyen, 2019; Parment & Dyhre 2009). In comparison, Universum's framework share some similarities with the three-step HR practitioner model in terms of EVP creation and communication/marketing. However, the HR practitioner framework falls short in terms of 'research'. As earlier mentioned, research gives an idea of the experiences of current employees and the perception the employment market have about an organisation as an employer. More so, crafting an EVP should be adjusted to organisational strategy and the expectations of the targeted group (Bagienska, 2018). In this respect without research, the probability of creating an EVP that matches the needs, wants and/or expectations of the targeted group is less – hence, the employer branding is likely to fail.

Figure 8. Universum's employer branding process (Adapted from Parment & Dyhre (2009)).

Parallel to Universum's employer branding strategy framework is the one proposed by Bagienska (2018). The framework consists of a five-step logical process (see figure 9). First, the current employer image is examined. Next is using the first step to formulate an appropriate employer image. The third step is the development of the EVP. Afterwards, the employer brand

is implemented. Thereafter, evaluation and modification. A critical observation of Bagienska's (2018) model and the one by Universum correspond to each other although there is clear difference in the explicit creation of a communication strategy in Universum's model. Moreover, Bagienska's (2018) model also corresponds with the three-step HR practitioner model with regards to EVP creation. This substantiate the claim that EVP is the heart of an employer branding strategy.
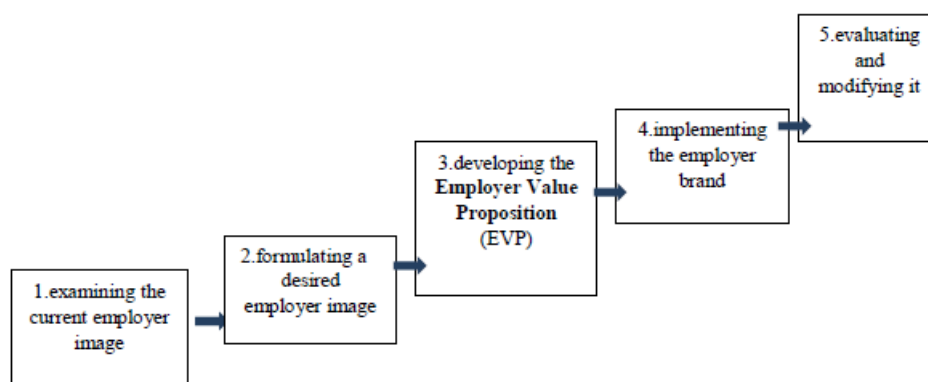
Figure 9. The stages of employer branding process (Adopted from Bagienska (2018)).

After examining the various frameworks, the one proposed by Universum will be employed in the empirical setting. This is because it consists most of the elements needed in an employer branding strategy. More so, this framework fits the definition of employer branding in this study. Moreover, this model has been used in practice by companies as Universum does employer branding consulting for organisations. In addition, as this study involves multiple case companies, hence, the Universum's framework has a potential for the empirical part.

2.2   Strategy-as-practice

Emerged in the late 1990's, strategy-as-practice is an influential research (sub) field that have made (and continue to make) a remarkable impact or progress in the strategic management discipline. SAP research is borne-out of the practice approach that seeks to dig deeper to reveal the micro-level activities in strategy work (Golsorkhi et al., n.d.). SAP applies social theories of practice or sociological theories to traditional strategy process (Jarzabkowski, 2019; Golsorkhi et al., 2015; Vaara and Whittington, 2012). More specifically, SAP focuses on the actual *"doing of strategy"* (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009, p. 69). Similarly, Kohtamäki, Rabetino,

Einola, Parida and Patel (2021) refer SAP as a grounded practice theory approach that views strategy an action taken by an organisation rather *"a quality they possess"* (p. 381). With its three components – Practices, Praxis, and Practitioners (see more in section 2.2.2) –, SAP examines who strategists are and what they do, how they use and are influenced by the use of artefacts such as technology when crafting strategy (Golsorkhi et al., 2015; Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007; Johnson, Melin & Whittington, 2003; Whittington, 2006, 2007: cited in Kohtamäki et al., 2022).

According to Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009), one of the reasons for the emergence of the SAP research field is due to the continuous dissatisfaction with the traditional strategy research. Indeed, conventional strategy research pays attention to formal strategic planning, organisational performance, and strategy outcomes. Furthermore, the normative strategy process is characterized by the configurations of control systems in an organisation (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009). Hutzschenreuter and Kleindienst (2006) also identified the process field to consist of constantly increasing concepts and frameworks. Scholars such as Jarzabkowski and Whittington (2008) argue that there is a gap between the theory and practice in traditional strategy texts (Piipponen, 2018). Hence, the SAP research is an alternative to seal this gap by focusing on the *"micro-level activities in strategy"* or the *"micro episodes of strategizing"* to enhance the understanding of how strategy takes place (Burgelman et al., 2018, p. 12; Vaara & Whittington, 2012, pp. 286–292). This is evident from the definition of strategy and strategizing from SAP proponents Jarzabkowski, Balogun and Seidl (2007, p. 7–8) as a:

> "*[…] situated, socially accomplished activity, while strategizing comprises those actions, interactions and negotiations of multiple actors and the situated practices that they draw upon in accomplishing that activity.*"

Another difference between the two research fields is the 'people' factor in strategy process. In an SAP perspective, people are at the epicenter in strategy-making. This is corroborated by Whittington (2006), who identifies strategy as *"something people do"* (Kohtamäki et al., 2022; Whittington 2006, p. 613). Furthermore, Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009) argue that since SAP explores strategy *"as something people do"*, it gives an important spotlight to actors i.e. strategy practitioners (p.71).

That said, in most conventional strategy theories, actors and their actions are nearly absent. Even those works that consider actors tend to focus on the elite group such as top management (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009). Scholars maintain that SAP focuses on the *"production and reproduction of strategic action"* whereas strategy process research concentrates on strategic change and performance of the firm (Jarzabkowski, 2005: Jarzabkowski, 2008: Johnson et al., 2003: Whittington, 2007: cited in Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009, p.70). Moreover, SAP research gives significant amount of attention to actors, their action, and their interaction in strategizing whilst in strategy process research, actors and their actions are less emphasized in strategy work (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009).

There has also been a huge contention between strategy process scholars and SAP scholars. SAP scholars argue that the focus on "abstract processes" by process scholars make them miss the intrinsic features and activities that make strategic processes actually function (Burgelman et al., 2018, p. 17). Similarly, Jarzabkowski (2019) critiqued that the process tradition although normative is not necessarily reflecting actual practice. Strategy process scholars on the other hand have alleged SAP scholars as lacking with regards to the substantive issues confronting organizational outcomes due to their extreme focus on micro-activities. Furthermore, process scholars have accused SAP scholars of under-theorizing power and less sensitive to issues to do with the objects or the materiality of practices (Burgelman et al., 2018). Figure 10 displays the differences between the two research fields.
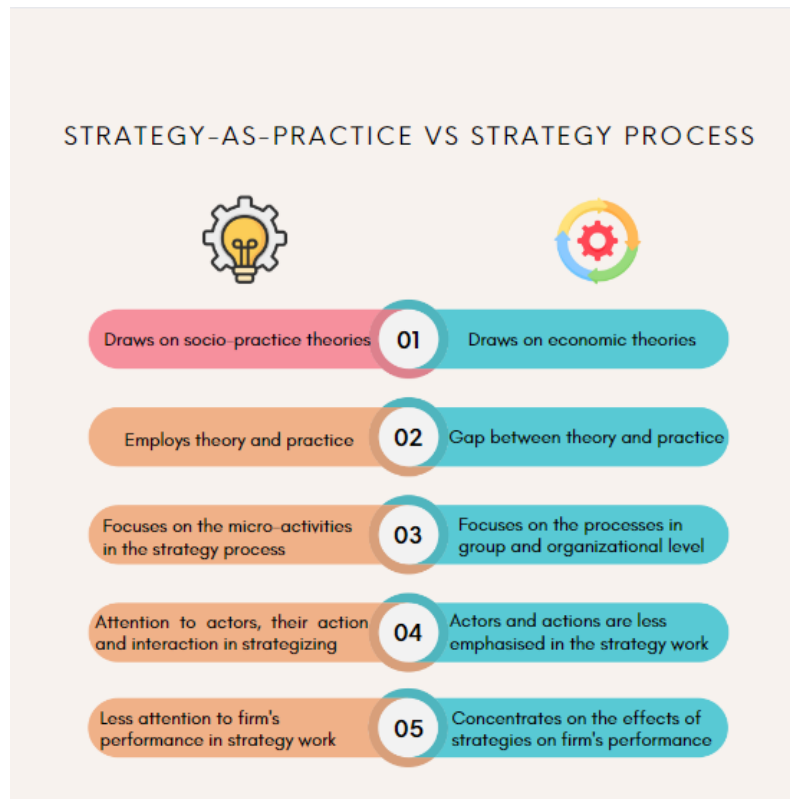
Figure 10. Differences between SAP research and strategy process research.

2.2.1 Background and linkages of SAP

The increasingly widespread of social theories especially *"actor and system centric perspective"* in management discipline caught the attention of strategy researchers – since it enhances the understanding of organisational actions and societal practices (Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Nini, 2016, p.5). As a result, Whittington (1996) introduced strategy-as-practice (SAP) to the strategic management discipline to shift the focus of strategy research beyond organisational core competence to include the actions and interactions of practitioners. More specifically, the initial introduction of SAP concentrated on managers, how they act and do strategy (Whittington, 1996). The research field at the beginning sort to reveal *"the effectiveness of strategists rather than just of organisations"* (Whittington, 1996, p. 734). In spite of that, SAP research has taken a holistic approach to strategy formation (formulation and implementation) in a wider context (Jarzabkowski 2004; Whittington 2006).

Owing to the earlier influential theorical works by Knights and Morgan (1991), Whittington (1996) and Hendry (2000); and empirical studies by Oakes, Townley, and Cooper (1998) and

Jarzabkowski and Wilson (2002), SAP started gaining visibility and established itself as a sub-field in the strategic management discipline in the early/mid 2000s (Golsorkhi et al., n.d.; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). Since then, the last two decades have seen the proliferation of studies under the label SAP – making it a vital area in contemporary research in strategic management (Kohtamäki et al., 2022; Vaara & Whittington, 2012).

The development and/or origin of SAP research can be attributed to several sources (Golsorkhi et al., 2015). Hence, there is a difference of opinion amongst scholars as to its true origin. Vaara and Whittington (2012) opine that SAP finds its theoretical root in the practice-based theories which can be attributed to the works of Wittgenstein (1951) or Heidegger (1962). Similarly, Burgelman et al. (2018, p. 11) and Schaztzki et al. (2001) acknowledge that SAP research emerged from the *"practice turn in social theories"* whilst its early roots can be drawn from the works of Knight and Morgan (1991) and Whittington (1996). Golsorkhi et al. (2015) on the contrary argue that the *"intellectual roots"* of SAP can be traced from the classics of strategy research. Indeed, scholars such as Langley (2007) and Tsoukas (2010) concur that SAP draw from strategy process research (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009: Piipponen, 2018). As well, Vaara and Whittington (2012) also agree that the substantive etymology of SAP can be traced from strategy process theories. Consequently, SAP can be seen to draw from both practice perspective of sociological theories and strategy process texts (see figure 11) (Jarzabkowski, 2019; Golsorkhi et al, 2015; Vaara and Whittington, 2012). More so, SAP extends to embrace other theories such as activity theory, discourse theory, philosophy, anthropology, and ethno-methodology (Vaara & Whittington, 2012).
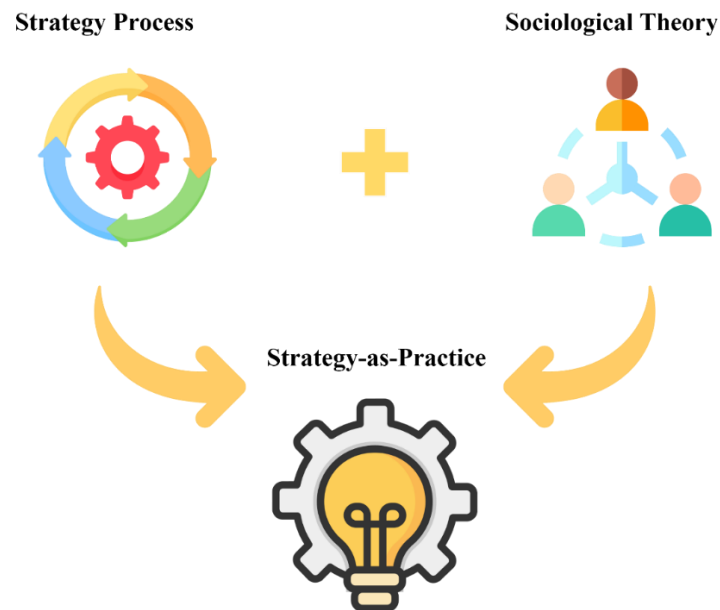
Figure 11. The origin of SAP.

Strategy-as-practice shares some commonalities with traditional strategy research – in particular, the process approach (although Chia and MacKay [2007] argue that this notion is not acknowledged by all scholars) – as well as the new Micro-Foundations strategy approach (Foss, 2011: Eisenhardt, Furr, & Bingham, 2010). However, the uniqueness of SAP lies in its focus on actors and their actions in social practices.

Vaara and Whittington (2012) highlight that SAP complements normative strategy research in four ways:

1) It adds sociological theories of practice to the heavily impacted economic theories in strategy research. More to that, it features other scholars (e.g., Foucault, Giddens, Bourdieu, Latour, Goffman, and others) from social sciences into the strategic management discipline.

2) SAP deepens or widens the scope of explanation (e.g., outcomes, performance) of strategy research.

3) SAP broadens the research scope in strategic management studies to include not-for-profit firms.

4) It brings a paradigm shift to the methodologies in strategy research. These include qualitative methods, observation, videography, action research, photography, research subject diaries, and many more.

In a complementary view, although strategy process research and SAP research have different basic concerns, they can be seen as compatible, belonging to the same family and overlap each other as both traditions create value for managers (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009). This is supported by the views of Baraldi, Brennan, Harrison, Tunisini and Zolkiewski (2007). A typical example of this complementary view is, as the process tradition focuses on the group and organizational level in strategic planning processes, SAP research focuses on the 'the practice inside the process'. Essentially, both traditions come close, but the difference lies in SAP's granularity (Burgelman et al., 2018, p. 16).

Burgelman et al. (2018) reflected on strategy process research and SAP research and suggested a combinatory view to integrate both fields as a single body of research called Strategy as process and practice (SAPP) in the strategic management discipline. This according to Burgelman et al. (2018) is to lessen the difference between the two groups and to understand how both fields homogenously shape strategy. See figure 9.
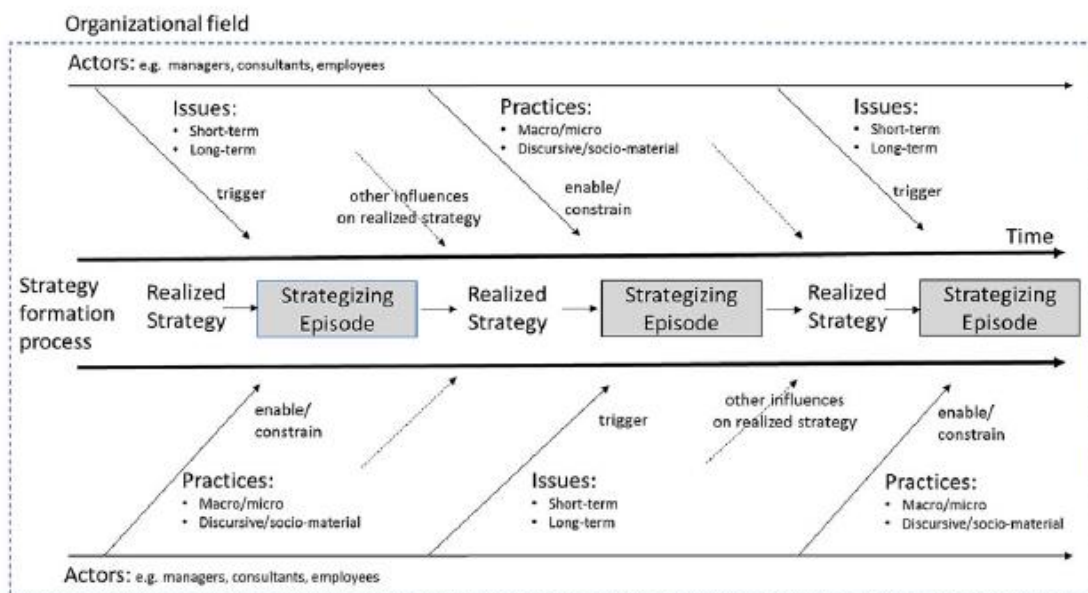
Figure 9. Combinatory Model of Strategy as Process and Practice (SAPP) (adopted from Burgelman et al., 2018)**.**

2.2.2 Practitioners, practices & praxis

Indeed, SAP has advanced social practice theories and established itself as a distinctive sub-field in strategic management discipline (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). Whittington (2006) proposed three different elements to conceptualize strategizing (Seidl & Whittington, 2014). They include practitioners, practices, and praxis (Jarzabkowski et al. 2007; Whittington, 2006). Jarzabkowski et al. (2007) further developed the conceptual framework for studying and/or analysing SAP research (Björkman et al., 2014). These interrelated concepts define the broad parameters of SAP research (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009). Although, Whittington (2007) proposed a fourth element – profession – to treat macro concept such as the institutional field of strategy comprising of business schools, researchers and the like, it is yet to be adopted by majority of SAP scholars.

Many practice scholars deem the three elements as discrete, although, they are closely interrelated (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007a; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). Whittington (2006) confesses that it is not obligatory to simultaneously combine all the three different components in a study. However, Jarzabkowski et al. (2007a) propound that due to the interconnected of practitioners, practices, and praxis, it is impossible to study one of the concepts without incorporating aspects of the other concepts. Nonetheless, with his 'methodological bracketing', Giddens (1979) encourages the use of one or more components. This section discusses each of the three components and focuses on the ones relevant for the empirical setting of this study.

Practitioners
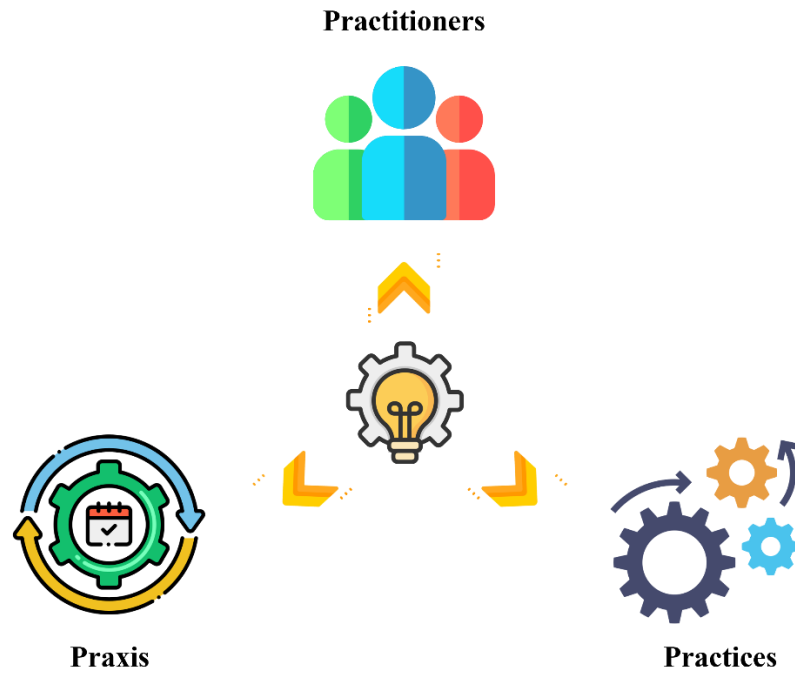
Figure 12. Framework: The 3 core concepts of strategy-making.

2.2.2.1   Practices

'Practices' is one of the vital components of strategizing in an SAP perspective. Within the SAP field are various concepts of practices and a strong research agenda towards its advocation. However, *there is no dominant view on the concept* (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009, p 69). There are varying definitions of practices in practice literature. On the one hand, some scholars refer the term as techniques, tools and frameworks or norms, routines and procedures in doing strategy (e.g. Reckwitz, 2002; Whittington, 2006). On the other hand, some theorists identify practices to incorporate both (see e.g., Orlikowski 2007; Jarzabkowski & Spee 2009; Jarzabkowski and Whittington, 2008; Vaara & Whittington, 2012).

Practices involve the norms, procedures and tools used in strategy making (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). Reckwitz (2002) defines practices to include *"shared routines of behaviour"* (p.249-251; cited in Whittington, 2006). In parallel, Jarzabkowski and Whittington (2008, p. 101) explain practices to *"[…] involve the various routines, discourses, concepts and technologies through which this strategy labour is made possible […]"*. Since the purpose of this thesis is to explore practices involved in the formation of an employer branding strategy in a

multinational technology company, the definition of Jarzabkowski and Whittington (2008) is most relevant as it touches on all aspects of practices in a concise manner.

The view of routine practices is contested by Jarratt and Stiles (2010) in their three categories of practices – *routinized practice*, which occur in a predictable operating context where the alignment of strategy is the focus; *reflective practice* which takes place in a complex and ever-changing operating environment where strategy is emergent; and *imposed practice* which occurs in a stable environment where strategy is incremental – to argue that not all practices can be referred routinised (Piipponen, 2018). In spite of that, practices can be seen to be fundamentally concerned with the doings that enable the understanding of the construction of activities in strategizing (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007a; Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009). Undoubtedly, the concept of practices are entangled and interconnected part of activity, embedded strongly in the doing (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009). Hence, it is challenging to identify them (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009). Due to the interrelatedness of practices, scholars such as Chia & MacKay (2007) define it to resemble praxis. This is not surprising as *"strategy practices are typically emergent from praxis"* (Whittington, 2006, p. 624). Furthermore, Jarzabkowski & Spee (2009) posit that *"practices are a complex bundle"* in that it becomes inconspicuous and unnoticeable to practitioners (p. 82). In a sense, practices are crucial as they somewhat shape reality but do not define it (Björkman et al., 2014; Orlikowski, 2010; Vesa, 2013).

Research on practices, in a wide range, have been treated by scholars. Initially, Jarzabkowski & Spee (2009) discussed some of the common approaches to practices, identifying themes such as discursive practices, which examines the forms of talks of strategists as practices (e.g. Rouleau 2005; Jarzabkowski and Sillince 2007; Sillince and Mueller 2007; Balogun and Johnson 2004, 2005; Laine and Vaara 2007; Samra-Fredericks 2003, 2005; Vaara et al. 2004), and episodic practices, which studies the modes of strategy work such as workshops and meeting as practices (e.g. Hodgkinson et al. 2006; Bourque and Johnson 2008; Jarzabkowski and Seidl 2008).

Vaara and Whittington (2012) recently reviewed research on practices extensively in SAP uncovering four themes (See table 2). They include:

i) Practice of strategic planning: The stream of studies under this theme reveals the influence of the practices of strategic planning in enabling flexible and complex praxis. For instance, Jarzabkowski's (2003) work reveals organisational cohesion

whilst Hendry, Kiel, and Nicholson (2010) study highlights complexities in strategic planning (Vaara & Whittington, 2012).

ii)   Analytical practices: Works under this theme study the use of strategy tools and its influence on strategy work (e.g. Kaplan, 2011; Heracleous & Jacobs, 2008; Molloy & Whittington, 2005).

iii)   Socio-material practices: This theme is similar to the episodic practices discussed by Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009) since both streams of studies examines the *"social nature of strategy"* (Vaara & Whittington, 2012, p. 297) such as workshops and meeting as practices (e.g. Hodgkinson et al. 2006; Johnson, Prashantham, Floyd & Bourque 2010; Jarzabkowski and Seidl 2008).

iv)   Discursive practices: As already discussed above, discursive practices as a theme features a stream of studies such as construction (Vaara et al., 2010) and legitimation (Vaara et al. 2004) of strategy, performative effects of discourse (Kornberger and Clegg, 2011), accounting practices (Ezzamel & Willmott 2008).

Table 4.   Example of practices studies (Adapted from Vaara & Whittington (2012)).

Author	Theme & theoretical base	Empirical focus	Findings
Jarzabkowski (2003)	Activity theory approach towards strategic planning	Formal strategic practices	Mediation between constituents in formal strategic practices can enhance organisational cohesion.
Kaplan (2011)	Analytical practices in discourse	PowerPoint as discursive practice	PowerPoint is embedded in strategy discourse and enables ideation and negotiation in a complex environment.
Molloy & Whittington (2005)	Analytical approach towards practices	Strategic change practices	Adequate skills in standardisation and customisation is a requisite for effective material and analytical practices.
Hodgkinson et al. (2006)	Socio-material approach towards practices	Micro practices in strategy workshops	Strategy workshops form a key part of "planned emergence processes" in strategy-making.
Johnson, Prashantham, Floyd & Bourque (2010)	Socio-material approach towards practices	Rituals of strategy workshops.	The outcomes of strategy workshops are influenced by the role of specialists, the degree of dismemberment, and many more.
Jarzabkowski & Seidl (2008)	Socio-material approach towards practices	Strategy meeting practices	Activities such as voting and bracketing of issues in strategy meetings can lead to either stabilisation or destabilisation of strategy.
Vaara et al. (2004)	Discursive approach towards practices	Strategy legitimation discourse	Discursive practices in strategy formation either legitimate or delegitimate strategy.
Vaara et al. (2010)	Discursive approach towards practices	Discursive practices in strategic plans	Discursive practices (e.g., focused consensus, self-authorisation) have a strong impact on strategic plans.

| Kornberger & Clegg (2011) | Discursive approach towards practices | The power effects of strategic plans | Strategy as text influences organisational redefinition and discipline. |

2.2.2.2 Praxis

Praxis is a one of the three conceptual elements of strategizing and a central theme in SAP research (Kohtamäki et al., 2022; Whittington, 2006). Etymologically, praxis is a Greek word (Whittington, 2006) which means *"doing"* (Whittington, 2004, p. 62). There are variation as to the use of the praxis term (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009) as it is poorly understood (Seidl & Whittington, 2014). Praxis is related to the whole actions of humans (Reckwitz, 2002) consisting of the interconnection between operation and actions (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007a; Sztompka, 1991). Likewise, it is the focal point of a societal activity and human doings (Sztompka, 1991). Praxis concerns how strategy work is conducted, or the actual activity involved in strategy formation (Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Whittington, 2006). Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009) refer the term as a chain of activity in a particular period in accomplishing strategy. Burgelman et al. (2018) simply describe it as strategic activities carried out in a firm. Specifically, Whittington (2006) highlights praxis as an intra-organisational activity required for strategic planning and execution. In contrast, Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009) argue that praxis goes beyond intra-organisational level. From the above definitions, praxis can be described as actions and/or activities involved in strategy-making in a firm.

The praxis domain is wide, incorporating formal and informal, routine and non-routine activities in the confines of an organisation (Whittington, 2006). Praxis and practices are interdependent and mutually constitutive (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). Unlike practices which deals with routines, praxis focuses more on the process, however (Vaara et al., 2004; Whittington, 2007). Praxis shapes practices and practitioners, notwithstanding (Whittington, 2006).

Praxis is increasingly studied by SAP scholars. Kohtamäki et al. (2022) claim that praxis has the largest stream of studies in SAP research. Research on praxis delve deeper to uncover the complex nature of strategy work with focus on activities. The stream of studies on praxis have revealed micro-level details in broad concepts such as resources (e.g., Ambrosini, Bowman, and Burton-Taylor 2007), capabilities (e.g., Salvato, 2003), emergence (e.g., Regnér, 2003). Sensemaking (Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Stensaker & Falkenberg, 2007; Sillince & Mueller,

2007; Kaplan, 2008) is another theme that studies in praxis have treated (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). See table 5.

Table 5. Examples of praxis studies (Adapted from Vaara & Whittington (2012)).

Author	Theoretical base and theme	Empirical focus	Findings
Ambrosini et al. (2007)	Resource-based view towards praxis	Managers' and employees' work and coordinating activities	Formal and informal actions and interactions as well as physical layouts of managers are essential to competitive advantage.
Salvato (2003)	Capabilities approach towards praxis	The recombination of micro-strategies	Management can leverage on the set of resources and organisational routines to directly intervene in strategic evolution processes.
Regnér (2003)	Practice approach towards praxis	Strategy development in the centre and periphery	Strategy making in the centre supports adaptation and further development of existing strategy whereas activities in the periphery facilitate new strategic knowledge courtesy of the utilisation of novel ideas generated externally.
Balogun & Johnson (2005)	Sensemaking approach towards praxis	Change recipient sensemaking	Strategic change implementation demands constant deliberation amongst middle managers.
Stensaker & Falkenberg (2007)	Sensemaking approach towards praxis	Responses to strategic change processes	The interpretations of corporate change by individuals affect organisation-level interpretations as well as the responses of units.
Kaplan (2008)	Sensemaking approach towards praxis	Strategizing as framing and politics	Politics is practiced by actors to gain strategic visibility and support for their frames.
Sillince et al. (2011)	Sensemaking approach towards praxis	Shaping strategy through rhetoric	Emergent strategic action is shaped by actors' construction and exploitation of ambiguity to protect, appeal and adopt common values.

2.2.2.3   Practitioners

'Practitioners' is another central concept in SAP research and a crucial element in strategy-making. Practitioners are the people who make, shape and execute strategies (Whittington,

2006). Vaara and Whittington (2012) assert that practitioners are the people who are involved in strategizing or seek to influence it. Somewhat similarly, Burgelman et al. (2018) describe practitioners as a variety of actors involved in the episodes of strategy work.

Fundamentally, practitioners conduct strategy praxis (Whittington, 2006) and are interconnected with both praxis and practices (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007a). This is nicely explained by Jarzabkowski et al. (2007a):

> *"[practitioners] shape strategic activity through who they are, how they*
> *act and what practices they draw upon in that action."* (p. 10)

In this phenomenon, practitioners are simply humans, people (Whittington, 2006), individuals (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007a; Vaara & Whittington, 2012), or strategists (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009; Whittington, 2006) – who are 'constituents' of the work of strategy. They include actors who are involved directly in the strategy work (e.g. senior executives, middle managers, strategic planners, middle managers, consultants) and others who indirectly influence the strategy (e.g. advisers, the media, policymakers, and many more). In essence, without practitioners it is impossible to conduct or have a strategy (Piipponen, 2018).

Based on the unit of analysis and location of strategy practitioners, SAP literature has classified practitioners into two set of divisions (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009). They include i) individual vs aggregate actor; and ii) internal vs external actor. In the first set, some studies give prominence to an individual such as Håkan the CEO or Minna the CFO whilst other studies classify practitioners as aggregate actors or group of actors such as shareholders, top managers, or middle managers (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009). The second set identify strategy practitioners relative to organisational periphery. For instance, an internal practitioner is the one who is allocated within the organisation (e.g. CEO, managing director, project manager, or middle manager) whereas an external practitioner is the one who could influence the strategy of an organisation but not located within that organisation (e.g. consultants, media, or institutional actors) (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009).

Traditionally, mainstream research on strategy has concentrated on top management (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). SAP research has widened the scope to include other practitioners such as strategic planners (Angwin, Paroutis, & Mitson, 2009; Whittington, Basak-Yakis, &

Cailluet, 2011) and middle managers (Mantere, 2005, 2008; Suominen & Mantere, 2010; Rouleau, 2005) (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). Table 6 displays the findings of the aforementioned scholars. Additionally, through discursive practices, SAP research has revealed the roles and identities of actors (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). For instance, some scholars have demonstrated how managers utilise discourse to exercise their power (Laine & Vaara, 2007) whereas others such as McCabe (2010) have highlighted the exercise of power through strategy discourse (Vaara & Whittington, 2012).

Table 6. Examples of practitioner studies (Adapted from Vaara & Whittington (2012)).

Author	Theoretical base and theme	Empirical focus	Findings
Mantere (2005)	Structuration theory towards practitioners	Strategy "champions" and participation	Structured strategy practices dispels creativity due to its rigid process to allow wider participation.
Angwin et al. (2009)	General practice theory towards practitioners	Senior strategy directors' role	The role of senior strategy directors in strategy formation and implementation is "interconnected"
Whittington et al. (2011)	Sociological lens on the profession of practitioners	The historical development of the strategy profession	Strategic planning as a profession is structurally cumbersome but demands endurance.
Mantere (2008)	Structuration theory towards practitioners	Involvement of middle managers as strategists	Middle managers' inclusion in strategizing is possible only when executive management trust them and are willing to provide the necessary resources.
Suominen and Mantere (2010)	Practice theory towards practitioners	Middle managers in strategizing	Middle managers consume strategies "instrumentally, playfully and intimately".
Rouleau and Balogun (2011)	Sensemaking approach towards practitioners	Middle managers in strategic change	The ability to perform fruitful conversations and to set the socio-political "scene" constitute competences in strategy discourse.

As earlier mentioned in section 2.2.2.1, the empirical part adopts the concept of strategy practices. Therefore, the focus of this study is on practices i.e. the technologies, methods, norms, strategy planning, frameworks, mental and bodily activities, knowledge (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007a; Reckwitz, 2002). However, due to its interrelation with praxis and practitiners, some aspects of the two will be incorporated in the studies.

2.2.3 HRM-as-practice

As employer branding is partly linked to human resource management (HRM) literature, it is imperative to discuss the connection between HRM literature and strategic management literature. The last two decades have witnessed streams of research in human resource management that has concentrated on HRM practices and organisational performance as well as the strategic management of humans (Björkman et al., 2014). This stream of work has broadened the understanding of different effects of performance in HRM (Huselid, 1995; Becker and Huselid, 1998; Boselie et al., 2005; Combs et al., 2006). Parallel to that is another stream of HRM research that has focused on the different roles of HR function. This series of studies have unravelled the *"HR function as an organizational actor"* (e.g., Caldwell, 2003; Storey, 1992; Ulrich, 1997; Welch and Welch, 2012), the enactment of HR roles, the contextual influences of HR, and the role of HR function in dealing with demands of stakeholders (Björkman, Ehrnrooth, Mäkelä, Smale and Sumelis, 2014, p. 123).

Although these two research streams have contributed tremendously to the HRM field, they are seemingly disconnected from each other. Hence, Björkman et. al (2014) developed *"HRM-as-practice"* – imitating the SAP in the field of strategic management – as a research agenda to enhance the human resource management-performance literature with an actor-centric approach and focus on activities that will shift the paradigm regarding the roles in human resource (HR) research, providing an effective theoretical perspective in studying the practice of human resource management (HRM). According to Björkman et al. (2014), HRM-as-practice provides a comprehensive approach that shifts the research in HRM practices or HR function to incorporate the building blocks of SAP (i.e., practitioners, practices, and praxis). The authors suggest this will shift *"HRM practices"* to the *"practice of HRM"* (p.123).

Björkman et al. (2014) translates the conceptual framework from SAP studies by (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007a) – consisting of practices, practitioners, and praxis – to the context of HRM. The authors' notion of 'practices' captures the combination and adaptation of resources on various levels (micro, meso and macro) such as analytical frameworks, tools, norms, processes, technologies, and concepts in HRM construction. Björkman et al. (2014) refer practitioners as knowledgeable and skilful individuals or aggregate actors who perform practices and praxis within and outside an organisation. For praxis, the authors note that it is the activities of people involved in the work of HRM (Björkman et al., 2014).

Per Björkman et al. (2014), the most common research in HRM is at the practice level focusing on high performance work systems (HPWS). It has been contended that this stream of research has concentrated on intentions rather than actual doings, however. Nevertheless, subsequent HRM studies have gone beyond to tap into *"implementation"* and *"internalization"* (Björkman et al., 2014, p. 126). Similar to this is HRM process theory which draws on broader perspectives of practices and goes beyond to feature praxis and practitioners (Björkman et al., 2014). It could be concluded that HRM literature is yet to treat other elements in the concept of practices such as cognitive, material, physical and discursive practices (Björkman et al., 2014). Hence, this thesis will contribute to the HRM literature as it focuses on practices to include what has been missing (e.g., cognitive, material, physical and discursive practices)

Regarding practitioners, the HRM international literature and the HRM-performance literature have paid insufficient attention. Closely linked is the HR role literature but it has also been silent on individuals and how they enact their roles (Björkman et al., 2014). Studies on actors outside the HR department has also received less attention. This brings to the conclusion that definition of practitioners in HRM literature is narrower compared to the SAP literature definition which includes people with direct (e.g. managers, employees, consultants) and indirect (e.g. media, gurus, policy-makers, business schools) influence on strategy work (Björkman et al., 2014; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007a).

Although the HRM field has a compilation of works in macro, meso and micro levels, the concept of praxis – to some extent – is absent. More so, praxis related questions – compared to practices – have not be given much attention (Björkman et al., 2014).

As a result, Björkman et al. (2014) suggest HRM-as-practice as a new lens in HRM studies. Furthermore, the authors advocate the intersection between the three related concepts (practices, practitioners and praxis) as a research agenda for future research. They propose the following:

   i)   Practitioners and practices: Practitioners and practices as an intersection refers to HR professionals' everyday practices through which they engage and do their work. In this section, the authors suggest investigating three key areas to include 'time (i.e., on which activities individual HR practitioners spend their time)', 'assigned importance (i.e., which people, resources and activities HR actors prioritize in their

everyday work)', and 'conduits' (i.e., through which means, and methods HR actors seek to exert influence) (Björkman et al., 2014, p. 130).

ii) Practitioners and praxis: This category primarily concerns the relevant HRM people in a particular setting and their interactions with one another in influencing the doings of HRM work in organizations. Björkman et al. (2014) propose that the examining of discursive narrative through this intersection can increase the understanding of the influence of discourse construction and collective identities in the development of HRM macro-praxis (Björkman et al., 2014). In addition, investigating narratives can enhance understanding of who HRM practitioners are, their roles, what they do, and who they regard as a legitimate practitioner (Björkman et al., 2014; Fenton and Langley, 2011; Mantere, 2005).

iii) Practices and praxis: This intersection relates to the interconnection between methods, tools, and discourses that HR people use in executing their daily tasks and the influence of these at different levels in HRM work (Björkman et al., 2014). Here, the agenda highlights the inclusion of discursive (e.g., the use of discourses in HRM work), cognitive (e.g., logic and reasoning of practitioners in HRM work), material and spatial practices (e.g., influence of location of HR department and staff in the patterns of HRM work) that influence the work of HRM praxis at micro, meso, and macro-levels. It is worth noting that this intersection is a potential for the empirical part of this thesis.

Figure 13 presents the framework for HRM-as-practice including the suggested intersections of study by Björkman et al. (2014).
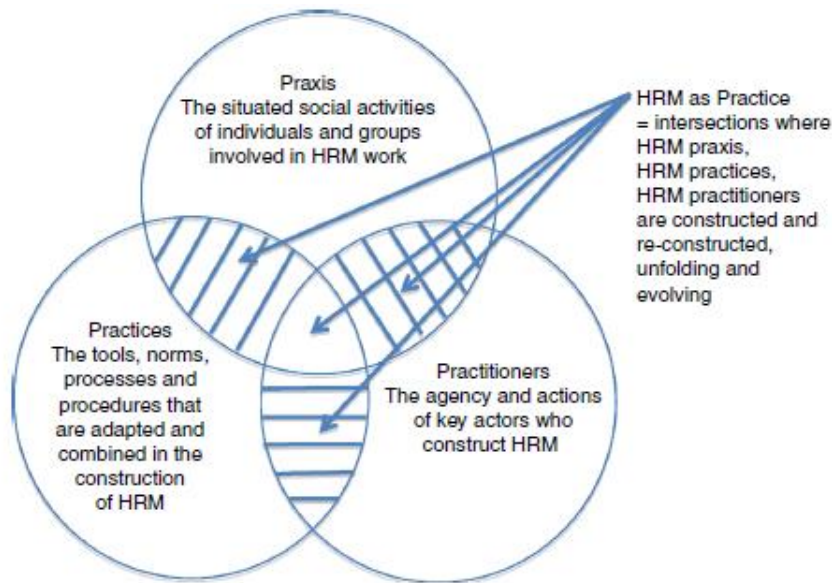
Figure 13. HRM as Practice framework. (Adapted from Björkman et al. (2014)).

2.3 **Synthesis:** A model for studying employer branding practices.

After treating the two main literature – employer branding and strategy-as-practice – relevant for this study in the previous sections, this part combines both research areas. Ultimately, this section introduces a framework that seeks to answer the main research question, which is, what are the practices involved in the formation of an employer branding strategy in a multinational technology company?

The literature section began with exploring the background and definition of employer branding. It is established that the roots of employer branding arose from the marketing discipline, and it involves the combination of marketing principles and HR activities. This thesis defined employer branding as a (sub) strategy extracted from an organisation's strategy that communicates the employment offering and unique characteristics of the firm in order to motivate and retain current employees, attract prospective recruits, and establish a positive image in the employment market. Subsequently, the characteristics, benefits and challenges of employer branding were treated. Afterwards, few employer branding strategy models were discussed and compared. Here, particular attention was given to the processes. Although all the featured models had slight differences, EVP is a central element in all. Consequently, Universum's five-step process model was selected. Researching (internally and externally) the current employer image to measure the attractiveness of the employer to different target groups, is the first step.

Next is the formulation of EVP which stresses the unique employment offering and firm characteristics. The third and fourth phase is the creation of a communication strategy and communication materials. The final step is the implementation of the strategy to promote the EVP and its accompanying attributes, as well as evaluation and monitoring of the entire process (Heilmann et al., 2013; Nguyen, 2019; Parment & Dyhre 2009; Van Mossevelde 2010).

The second part of the literature discussed strategy-as-practice (SAP). This literature is relevant for the employer branding process as it enhances the understanding of organisational actions and societal practices (Vaara & Whittington, 2012: Nini, 2016, p.5). Hence, SAP serves as a good lens to examine the micro-level activities in the employer branding process from a practical approach. Section 2.2.1 discussed the background and linkages of SAP. In summary, SAP is seen to draw from both practice perspective of sociological theories and conventional strategy (process) theory (Jarzabkowski, 2019; Golsorkhi et al, 2015; Vaara and Whittington, 2012). Section 2.2.2 described the three interrelated elements of strategizing – practices, praxis and practitioners. Each of the element was discussed separately. However, 'practices' was selected as the centre of focus in this work. The definition of practices – *"[…] involve the various routines, discourses, concepts and technologies through which this strategy labour is made possible […]"* – by Jarzabkowski and Whittington (2008, p. 101) was chosen for the purpose of this study as it goes beyond concrete tools to incorporate analytical and social practices.

To combine employer branding process with SAP theory perspective, the process model by Universum is adapted and incorporated with 'practices'. In this study, 'practices' is divided into two main categories: discourse (sayings in discursive practices) and doings (tools or technologies, routines, and praxis). Discourse in discursive practices involves sayings that occur when the process is described by different people. Hence, discourse in this instance will be of assistance to revealing how each step of the process is described by respondents in the empirical setting. The 'doings' comprises of the various mechanisms that makes the strategy work happen. Elements in the doings category comprise of tools/technologies, routines, and praxis (Kohtamäki et. al, 2021). Tools/technologies in this category refers to concepts, technologies, and devices used in the process; routines involves the meetings, strategy workshops, community calls and many more; and praxis are the actions that takes place in the practice of executing strategy.

The two main categories of 'practice' together with Universum's employer branding process framework creates a model that will be used in examining the practices involved in the

formation of an employer branding strategy (model) in a multinational technology company. Indeed, the combination of employer branding strategy with SAP theory is new. Therefore, this thesis contributes to both research areas. It also extends to contribute to HRM-as-practice.
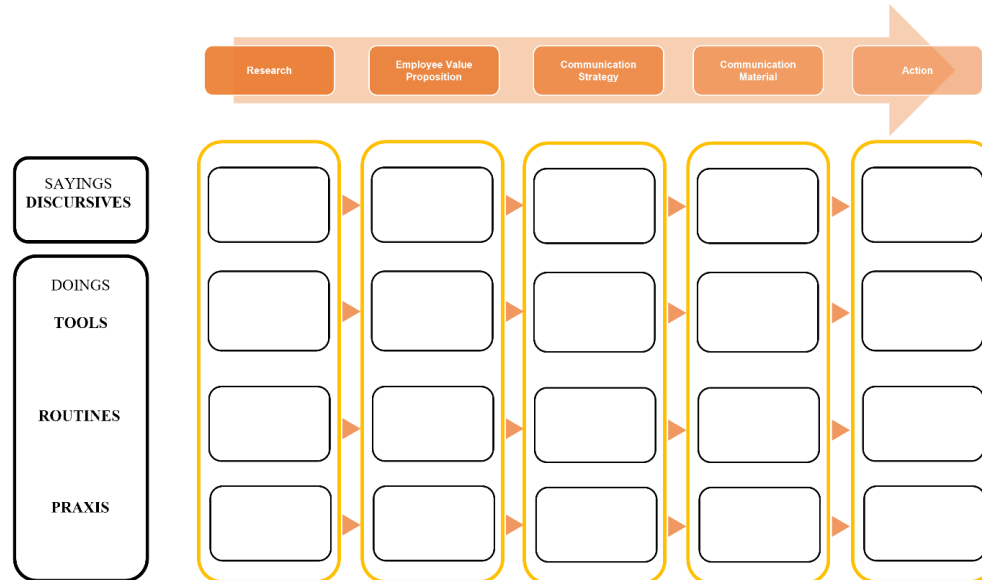
Figure 14. Framework to study and analyse the practices of employer branding strategy.

3   METHODOLOGY

The previous chapter reviewed relevant literature to give an understanding to the subject matter as well as assist in the formulation of the right questions to be used in this chapter. This chapter presents the choices employed with regards to the methods in this study. It explains the philosophical assumptions, research strategy and method. Subsequently, the case, data collection, and analysis are presented. This helps in the validity and reliability of the study explained at the end of the chapter.

3.1   Philosophical assumptions

Development of knowledge in a particular field comes with some belief systems and assumptions (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2019). Consciously or unconsciously, a researcher makes some number of assumptions at every stage in research, hence, it must be tackled carefully to help design a well-organized research project (Burrell and Morgan 2016; Saunders et al., 2019). These assumptions include ontological assumptions, the encountered realities which affects the researcher's approach in research; and epistemological assumptions, concerns human knowledge i.e., acceptable knowledge (Saunders et al., 2016) and its dissemination to others (Burrell & Morgan 2016; Saunders et al., 2019). These assumptions affect the methodological choices and interpretations of findings (Crotty 1998; Saunders et al., 2019). Nevertheless, a credible research philosophy can be attained through consistency of assumptions, underpinning the entire methodological parts together (Saunders et al., 2016; Saunders et al., 2019).

Ontological, and epistemological assumptions fall between opposing extremes namely objectivism and subjectivism. Based on the purpose of this study, subjectivism in ontology and epistemology are adopted (see figure 15 below). This is because this study employs different narratives of different actors that inform different social realities. In this phenomenon, there is no universal facts. Subjectivism embraces the notion that the social nature of reality is based on perceptions and experiences of different social actors – constant to change which is relative to time and context (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2016; Saunders et al., 2019). On top of that, subjectivism acknowledges that the values of the researcher cannot be detached from the data analysis, hence, reflecting on the values of the researcher is imperative (Saunders et al., 2019).

Assumption type	Questions	Continua with two sets of extremes		
		Objectivism	⇔	Subjectivism
Ontology	• What is the nature of reality?	Real	⇔	Nominal/decided by convention
	• What is the world like?	External	⇔	Socially constructed
	• For example:	One true reality (universalism)	⇔	Multiple realities (relativism)
	– What are organisations like?	Granular (things)	⇔	Flowing (processes)
	– What is it like being in organisations?	Order	⇔	Chaos
	– What is it like being a manager or being managed?			
Epistemology	• How can we know what we know?	Adopt assumptions of the natural scientist	⇔	Adopt the assumptions of the arts and humanities
	• What is considered acceptable knowledge?	Facts	⇔	Opinions
		Numbers	⇔	Written, spoken and visual accounts
	• What constitutes good-quality data?	Observable phenomena	⇔	Attributed meanings Individuals and contexts, specifics
	• What kinds of contribution to knowledge can be made?	Law-like generalisations	⇔	

Figure 15. Extremes in research assumptions (Adapted from Saunders et al. (2019)).

On a broader scope, the research philosophy of this work is interpretivism since the findings of this thesis are interpreted by the author alongside the different interpretations of employer branding strategy practices by interviewees. Interpretivism primarily concerns how people make sense of the social world with the aim of enriching *"the understandings and interpretations of social worlds and contexts"* (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 149). Indeed, interpretivism is tightly knitted to the subjectivist paradigm of ontology and epistemology (Chowdhury, 2014; Saunders et al., 2019).

Deduction, induction, and abduction are three types of approaches to theory development. The deductive approach develops a theoretical framework, and a research strategy is designed to test it; the inductive approach uses empirical data to build theory or a conceptual framework; and the abductive approach is an iterative process which combines the deductive and inductive approaches – i.e., abduction alternates between induction and deduction (Saunders et al., 2019). Saunders et al (2019) explained abduction as:

> *"[…] collecting data to explore a phenomenon, identify themes and explain patterns, to generate a new or modify an existing theory which you subsequently test through additional data collection […]"*

Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016) maintain that abduction explains and give meaning to a phenomenon through concepts and categories. This study adopts the abductive approach because the collected data is used to identify themes and patterns by using a framework generated from existing literature. Although theory is built from the beginning, the theory is further enhanced in the empirical setting which in turn offer suggestions for further research.

3.2 Research strategy & method

Case study as a research strategy is often used in social sciences (e.g., business, anthropology, education, nursing and many more) and across other disciplines to conduct an in-depth investigation of a contemporary event without manipulating relevant behaviours (Yin 2014: 2019). Yin (2009) maintains that case studies contribute to the better understanding of complex social phenomena such as a group, an organisation, an individual and the like – which allows for retaining a holistic and real-life perspective in an investigation. Yin (2014) further argues that possibility to deal with variety of evidence such as artifacts, documents, interviews, and observations is a unique strength of a case study research. Since this study examines the model for employer branding practices in a multinational technology company, case study is an appropriate strategy to use as it employs a systematic data gathering approach.

The approach to case study research can either be single or multiple. The difference lies in the number of cases employed in a particular research. Multiple case study – herein comparative case study – approach differs from the conventional single case study in that it investigates multiple phenomena within a common conceptual framework (Agranoff & Radin 1991). In this work, the comparative case study approach (see Agranoff & Radin, 1991) is adopted. This is because the practice of a primary case is analysed comparatively with secondary cases in this thesis purposely to identify gaps, common and unique patterns. Indeed, comparative case study stems from the multiple-case research design by Yin (1984) which follows a replication logic (Agranoff & Radin, 1991: p. 204). The advantage of employing this approach is that it is rigorous and identifies *"important variables that emanate from multiple settings"* (Agranoff & Radin, 1991: p. 205). The downside, however, is the time constraint in generating relevant cases for the investigation (Yin 2009). Nevertheless, this is the best alternative for this study as it allows for drawing the ideal model in the formation of an employer branding strategy. Moreover, this will enhance the practices of the primary case (company) since the study reveals the best practices.

Generally, research falls under three main categories – descriptive, explanatory, and explora-tory. This also applies to case study research. Case study research is categorised to include: i) descriptive case studies, ii) explanatory case studies and iii) exploratory case studies (Yin 2014, p. 8). Per the purpose of this study and the research question at hand – *What are the practices involved in the formation of an employer branding strategy in a multinational technology company?* – the nature of this research is designed to fulfil an exploratory case study. Overall, exploratory research is useful in understanding an uncertain nature of a phenomenon. Moreover, it is emergent and can be focused broadly in the beginning and then narrowed as the investigation progresses (Saunders et al., 2019).

To be able to accomplish the purpose of this study, selecting the right method of data collection and analysis is crucial. Ordinarily, there are two main methods of data collection and analysis – qualitative and quantitative. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016) contend that it is hard to indi-vidually define the two methods but easier to compare them. Saunders et al. (2019) assert that numeric data and non-numeric data differentiate quantitative research method from qualitative research method. Technically, quantitative method generates and uses numerical data (numbers) whereas qualitative method generates and uses non-numerical data (audio recording, words, videos, and many more).

Considering the research question, philosophical assumptions, and the research strategy, the qualitative method – as a way of collecting and analysing data – is suitable for this study. The qualitative approach is interactive and naturalistic (Saunders et al. 2019). Data generated through qualitative research is categorised as either primary data or secondary data. Primary data are empirical data or first-hand information collected by the researcher through interviews, observations, or in some other way. On the other hand, secondary data are already existing empirical data such as memos, diaries, video recordings and many more (Eriksson & Ko-valainen, 2016). In this study, primary data are generated through participant observation and semi-structured interviews. With participant observation, the researcher becomes a member of a social world by observing and participating in the activities of those to be observed (Saunders et al. 2019). Participant observation was selected as the best way to gather primary data from the primary case company since *"it records action as it takes place"* (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p.100). More specifically, the researcher participated in the formulation of the EVP and employer branding strategy process of the primary case company in order to adequately

compare the practices to the other selected cases. Saunders et al. (2019) argues that the *"high level of immersion"* of the researcher in the research setting creates an atmosphere of understanding informants' perceptions and interactions better (p. 390). Furthermore, the researcher sees beyond what people say to include what they actually do which in turn gives access to data that are hardly possible in other methods (Yin, 2014: Thompson, 2016). Semi-structured interviews are used to gather empirical data from the secondary case companies. Saunders et al. (2019) propound that semi-structured interviews are ideal for exploratory research. The flexibility in semi-structured interviews allow for further probe to give meaning and understanding (Saunders et al., 2019). Moreover, company blogs, presentation slides, and published reports served as secondary data to enhance the study.

3.3   Case selection

As earlier mentioned, this thesis explores the formation of employer branding strategy in a multinational technology company in comparison to four other cases – two multinational technology companies and two employer branding consulting firms. The other two multinational technology companies were selected based on the industry they operate in and their employer branding performance (latest employer branding rankings). Furthermore, the two employer branding consulting firms were also selected to add a consultative perspective to the study. These consulting firms work with clients to include multinational companies who operate in the technology industry. For the purposes of confidentiality, the cases are named as follows: Multinational Technology Company 1 (primary case company), Multinational Technology Company 2, Multinational Technology Company 3, Consulting Firm 1, and Consulting Firm 2.

3.4   Data collection and analysis process

Data collection

This research uses a multiple qualitative data collection technique. Also called the multi-method qualitative study, this design uses more than one qualitative technique in collecting data (Saunders et al. 2019). As earlier mentioned in section 3.2, primary data were generated from participant observation and semi-structured interviews.

At the primary case company, there was a participant observation. An EVP and employer branding strategy meetings served as a source of generating empirical data in analysing the formation of employer branding strategy. Six EVP workshops were observed online between April 28 to July 1 consisting of a core team made up of 18 participants from HR, Talent Acquisition, Corporate Communications, Marketing, and Brand Management – including the Project Manager and the participant observer. Each workshop lasted an hour. Furthermore, a two-hour duration employer branding strategy (focused on students in Finland) formulation meeting was observed online. An additional online interview was conducted with the project manager (participant 1) and an employer branding specialist (participant 9). Furthermore, a clarifying interview was held with one of the Vice Presidents of strategy. The response from the vice president is coded as VPS. All the meetings were conducted in English, video recorded, and transcribed. To clarify, the researcher did not actively intervene in the strategizing process as a participant observer. Additionally, access to three EVP and employer branding presentations (totalling 92 slides) from the meetings were used as a secondary data. The table below presents the details of the participant observation and the additional interview.

Table 7. Details of workshops.

Meeting	Date	Duration
Workshop 1	28.4.2022	60 minutes
Workshop 2	5.5.2022	60 minutes
Workshop 3	12.5.2022	60 minutes
Workshop 4	19.5.2022	56 minutes
Workshop 5	25.5.2022	60 minutes
Employer branding strategy formulation meeting	27.6.2022	90 minutes
Workshop 6	1.07.2022	47 minutes

Table 8. Participants list.

Participant	Position
1	Project manager
2	Senior Business HR partner (US)
3	HR Manager (US division)
4	HR Business partner (MP, US)
5	HR Manager (UK division)
6	Talent Acquisition Specialist (UK)
7	Senior HR Advisor (China)
8	Head of Local HR (Finland)
9	Employer Branding Specialist (Finland)
10	HR Advisor (Norway)
11	Talent Acquisition Team Lead (Europe)
12	People Development Expert
13	Senior Manager, Corporate Communication

	14	Marketing Manager
	15	Brand Management Trainee
	16	Internal Communication Lead
	17	Global Lead of Talent Acquisition Services
	18	Participant observer

Regarding the secondary cases, a semi-structured interview was employed in generating primary data. A total of six interviews were conducted over a period of three months. At Consulting Firm 1 and Multinational Technology Company 2, two separate interviews were arranged. At Consulting Firm 2 and Multinational Technology Company 3, one interview was arranged for each. In the case of Multinational Technology Company 3, there was a group interview. The informants representing the respective cases have worked with as well as have in-depth knowledge in EVP and employer branding strategizing. All the interviews were conducted in English and online via Microsoft Teams. The duration of all the interviews ranges between 31 minutes and 67 minutes.

Cameras were put on during the interview to allow the observation of interviewees' body language and facial expressions – enhancing the understanding of the expression of informants. The interviews were recorded, and transcripts downloaded. Overall, access to the selected case companies provided rich data for the analysis process. Hence, all the selected cases represent valuable in-depth case study investigation (Kohtanmäki, Einola & Robetino, 2020; Patton, 2015). The table below presents the details of the interviews.

Table 9. Details of interviews.

Case Company	Interview date	Inter-viewee(s)	Position(s)	Interview duration
Consulting Firm 1	21.7.2022	1	Employer Brand Consultant	63 minutes
Multinational Technology Company 2	22.7.2022	2	Senior Talent Acquisition Specialist	55 minutes
Consulting Firm 1	28.7.2022	3	Digital Communication Project Manager	52 minutes
Consulting Firm 2	14.8.2022	4	COO and Employer Branding Strategist	61 minutes
Multinational Technology Company 3	18.8.2022	5, 6, 7	HR Communications Manager, Brand and Marketing Vice President, Global Resourcing and Development Manager	67 minutes
Additional interview with Multinational Technology Company 1	24.8.2022	Participant 1 and Participant 9	Project Manager, Employer branding specialist	60 minutes
Multinational Technology Company 2	14.9.2022	2, 8	Senior Talent Acquisition Specialist, Global Talent Acquisition Manager	29 minutes

Additional interview with Multi-national Technology Company 1	19.09.2022	VPS	Vice President, Strategy	29 minutes

Data analysis

In a research design involving multiple cases, data are analysed in two phases namely within-case analysis and cross-case analysis (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). Initially, each individual case is analysed separately using the within-case analysis approach. This permits the familiarisation of each individual case as well as provides detailed analysis for all the cases which in turn makes it easier to identify and link empirical patterns to form a holistic perspective (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016: Stake, 1995).

In this study, within-case analysis of the five cases are conducted by rewatching recorded videos of the observation and interviews as well as reading through transcripts. Subsequently, the relevant information from informants are summarised and supported with in-text quotes. It is imperative to note that sensitive data is not reported for the purposes of confidentiality. Moreover, the actual names of the companies and respondents are replaced with coded names to guarantee anonymity of both the case companies and informants (Kohtamäki et. al, 2020). Afterwards, the highlighted information are used to fill the relevant boxes in the analysis framework for each individual case consisting of a five-step (Universum's) employer branding process model incorporated with four categories of 'practices' (refer to Figure 12). Even though the analysis framework interpretated the data effectively, a data structure was used as a tool to present identified outcomes and enhance the connection between data and findings (Kohtamäki et. al, 2020: Nag, Corley & Gioia, 2007). In the data structure, the first-order categories stem from the data, the second-order themes are formed based on interpretation to help describe the concepts, and the third-order categories are created from the *"aggregate dimensions"* of the second-order category (Nag, Corley & Gioia, 2007, p.20). A table of synthesis comprising of direct quotes from the individual cases is presented to back up the data structure. This serves as further evidence to conclude the within-case analysis section. The figure below displays the data structure.
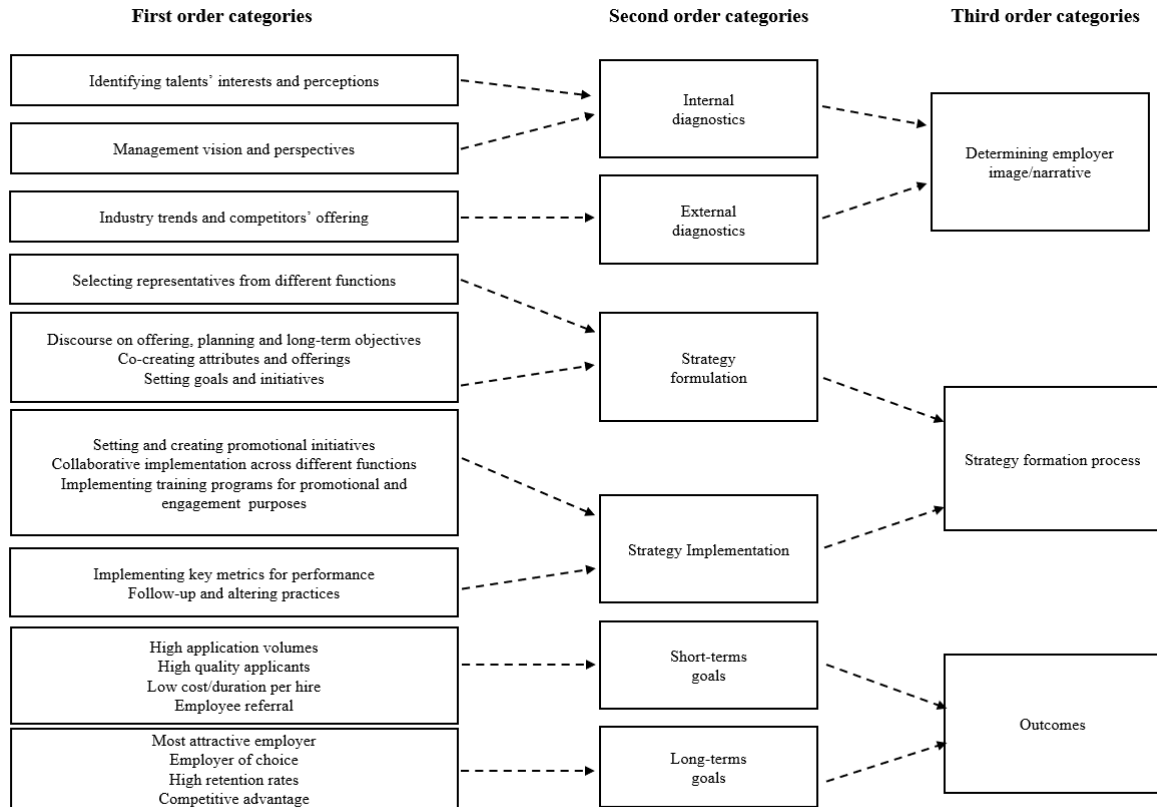
Figure 16. Data structure.

The next phase, cross-cases analysis, follows. In this phase, the analysis draws comparison of the cases to identify differences and similarities (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). The cross-cases analysis – stemming from the within-case analysis – reveals the gaps as well as similar practices in the formation of employer branding strategy in the primary case relative to the secondary cases. The relevant patterns are presented in the analysis framework.

3.5   Validity and reliability

Validity and reliability are credibility theories that are used to determine the quality of a research. Validity is concerned with the ability to measure what the research has intended as well as the accuracy of data collection and analysis (Saunders et al., 2019). Reliability, on the other hand, concerns consistency. In a sense, reliability measures the repeatability of a research. In this way, same methodology should be able to generate similar results when used by a different researcher.

Thompson (2016) contends that the likelihood of repeatability in participant observation is low because observation is often dependent on researcher's characteristics and personal skills. Similarly, Saunders et al. (2016) argues that repeatability is less achievable in the long-term with regards to semi-structured interviews given that data is collected over a particular period of time and is prone to change. However, the degree of validity in both participant observation and semi-structured interviews are high (Saunders et al., 2016: Thompson, 2016).

Nonetheless, the recorded (video) interviews and transcripts generated as data in both participant observation and semi-structured interviews and the overall description of the research methods increase the degree of reliability of this study as they serve as the means of interpretation. To corroborate the validity of this study, interpretations of the data were sent to the informants for validation purposes. Furthermore, building a data structure is a key component of establishing the precision of this qualitative research (Nag, Corley & Gioia, 2007). In addition, due to the number of cases employed in this study, it could be stated that the findings of this study can be externally generalizable (Saunders et al. 2016, p. 205–207) for the formation of employer branding strategy in a multinational technology company.

4   FINDINGS

Findings of the empirical setting is presented in this section. Detailed analysis is conducted for each individual case using the within-case analysis approach. Afterwards, all the cases are analysed using cross-cases analysis to reveal the gaps as well as the similar practices in the formation employer branding strategy in the primary case relative to the secondary cases.

4.1   Within-case description and analysis

In this section, the individual case is briefly introduced. Subsequently, the case is analysed following analysis framework. Each of the five steps of Universum's employer branding strategy process (Research, EVP Development, Communication Strategy, Communication Material, and Action) is discussed relative to each of the four categories of practice (Sayings, Tools, Routines, and Praxis). Afterwards, the finding of the respective case is presented in the analysis framework at the end of the within-case analysis. This is done in a similar manner for all the cases. At the end, a table of synthesis is presented to illustrate the practices and interview passages related to each individual case.

4.1.1   Multinational Technology Company 1

Multinational Technology Company 1, established in the third decade of the 19th century, operates in the marine and energy markets in over 70 countries. Currently, the organisation's employer image has dwindled in the last two years based on the employer branding ranking in its home country.

Research

Multinational Technology Company 1 conducted desktop research to renew its organisational strategy. What arose as a discursive practice in this stage was the thoughts of creating a corporate story by senior management that flows through to employees. VPS highlighted that the corporate value was created to *"really relate to every employee"* and be a guiding principle to shape the behaviours.

The tools and routines in this phase are tightly interlinked. A strategic framework was used as a tool to analyse benchmarked companies. Communication tools were also used to facilitate

internal communication. The general routine at this stage was benchmarking and testing. VPS explained that senior management took a *"top-down approach"* to *"benchmark a set of companies"*. Afterwards, values or narratives were created and later the resonance of the values were tested across the communication and marketing as well as HR communities. It could be realised that communication and collaboration were central at this stage.

The praxis in this phase is conducting desktop research to analyse a set of benchmarked companies and cascading it to corporate values and employee engagement. Afterwards, the Multinational Technology Company 1 'Narrative' was created from the organisational strategy. The general narrative became a tool for corporate communication. The observation revealed that job profiles of talent groups are yet to be tackled.

Employee Value Proposition

Whilst observing the creation of the EVP, Participant 1 highlighted that the absence of EVP in Multinational Technology Company 1 has created a lack of focus and inconsistent messaging with employer branding and its activities. Therefore, the creation of the EVP will serve as a foundation to own a narrative and *"be able control it"* (Participant 1).

In this stage, Multinational Technology Company 1's 'Narrative' was used on a case-by-case basis for brainstorming session when constructing the EVP. Secondly, Participant 1 emphasised that the *"knowledge of data, research, and expertise [of the team] into the workshops and the co-creation process"* was crucial. Hence, this can be considered an essential tool. Copywriting tools such as a Microsoft PowerPoint and Word are used for the co-crafting of the EVP. In addition, communication platforms and tools such as Microsoft Outlook and Microsoft Teams were used as a means of communication and collaboration. The routine of the EVP development stage consists of five consecutive weekly meetings following a formal process to create, benchmark and tailor the EVP. This process also included reflection sessions to consolidate the efforts of the team as well as discuss the way forward after a final version of the EVP was sent to the executive board.

The praxes identified in this stage are team formation and co-crafting. As mentioned in section 3.2 a core team was formed for the development of the EVP project. The team consist of 18 participants from HR, Talent Acquisition, Corporate Communications, Marketing, and Brand Management functions coming from different levels within the company's hierarchy.

With diverse background, the team brought different perspectives in the dialogical and co-creation process. It could be drawn that the right team selection is central in an EVP development process. Afterwards, the team came together to develop the EVP. This is known as co-crafting. From the observation, the core team was sub-divided into smaller teams to work on designated assignments related to the EVP. Part of the sub-division was the copywriting group who synthesised the common elements by the various group to create a masterpiece. Alternately, the preliminary draft was reflected upon, and a lot of concerns were raised by different participants. For instance, Participant 9 raised concerns about 'diversity and inclusion' as being *"more of a concept than an action"*; Participant 6 proposed the interlinkage of *"wellbeing, psychological, safety"* in a single pillar; and Participant 9 questioned the effect of the *"global collaboration"* stated in the EVP pillars. In addition, Participant 1 hinted that the copywriting team *"crossed checked"* the draft with the latest internal employee survey (executive summary results) to ascertain resonance. Subsequently, the draft was finalised and presented to the Board of Management for approval – to which they approved.

Communication Strategy

When discussing about the creation of a communication strategy for the employer brand, it became apparent that Multinational Technology Company 1 *"don't have [...] a separate strategy as such"* for communicating the employer brand. However, the intention was to integrate it with corporate communications. The reason behind this thought according to Participant 1 is that the corporate communication strategy was carved out of the organisation's 'narrative'. Therefore, having a separate communication strategy for the employer brand was not necessary.

In spite of that, after the EVP was developed, presented and approved by the executive board, a general meeting was held within the core group to discuss the different tactics to use in communicating and promoting the EVP. The EVP was drafted in English. However, since other functions (e.g., field services) operate in local languages, there were concerns as to the translation of the EVP. Participant 2 justified her support for local language by stating that it *"up the impact and it [will] help [employees] feel part of the company and the community"* there by increasing *"inclusion"* and *"engagement"*. At the end, it was agreed to translate the EVP to various local languages to accommodate local understanding. From the above conversation, it can be deduced that the need for flexibility is crucial in the communication of the EVP as it gives meaning to employees, enhances their understanding of the EVP and

increases their sense of belonging. In addition, using the local language in the countries of operation may grab the attention of externals and attract them to some extent.

The core team used Microsoft Teams as a tool to converge and discuss the communication plans online. Per the observation, the routine and praxis in this stage are tightly knitted. They include brainstorming and deciding on the themes and content materials to create, as well as the channels to use. Regarding the content materials, the participants suggested variety of contents to be created to include banners (roll-ups) for career events or trade shows, people stories for social media publication, customised souvenirs (e.g., T-shirts, hoodies) bearing some elements of the EVP and many more.

At the end of the observation, it was realised that the discussions about the tactics for the communication of the EVP was not formalised. Rather, it was later revealed that the intention was to integrate it with corporate communications. Participant 1 pinpointed that a separate communication strategy for employer branding was not required since it demands just only *"actionizing"*.

Communication Material

Whilst discussing about the creation of content materials, the 'narrative' – herein the EVP elements – were mentioned several times. Participant 9 highlighted that the elements of the EVP must be reflected in all the contents to be created. There are variety of tools used in this stage. Often, video contents are created by external vendors and hence, their experience and knowledge can be considered as tools. Copywriting tools (Microsoft Word, PowerPoint) and graphic design tools (Canva) is used to create blogposts, posters, and other visual contents.

The routines in creating communication materials vary depending on the kind of content. However, content creation follow three common patterns. Developing the concept of the content, creation of the content, review and approval. For instance, if a video content such as employees' stories is to be created using an external vendor, a meeting is held in the initial stage to define the concept. Moreover, a separate meeting is held with the employees to be featured to inform them about the outlines in the content to be created. Next, the external vendor creates the video with the employees. Subsequently, the videos are edited and sent for review. The final version is sent to the company after approval. It could be seen that constant communication and collaboration is observed in this stage. The actual doing in this stage are tasks

related to content creation. Contents for employer branding are often localised. However, blogposts, videos, articles and many more are created in all locations – overall. Specifically in the Nordic location, video contents are created to include employee stories, diversity themes, and sustainability themes. Participant 9 accentuated that there are *"trainees' stories"* contents created purposely for Instagram. Furthermore, contents containing the elements of the EVP is created for the company's careers page. It could also be inferred from the discussion that the contents created are applicable to both internals and externals

Actions

Observing the discussion about the action stage suggested that actionizing the whole process did not follow a global framework, but localities may implement in their own way and how they deem fit. For instance, Multinational Technology Company 1 – based on the newly developed EVP – did not create an overall employer branding strategy. However, they first created an *"employer branding student strategy"* focused on the Finland locale (Participant 1). In this way, it can clearly be seen that strategies are created and implemented segment by segment. This means that the other regions may have to implement the EVP in their own way since plans have not been made for their locales. Nonetheless, Participant 1 mentioned the integration of the EVP with corporate communications may still be a guide for implementation in other regions.

Another issue that arose as a discursive practice was the need for an extensive collaboration with functions such as communications and marketing. Participant 1 hinted that employer brand and corporate brand should be closely connected. This is because when both brands (corporate and employer) are aligned, messaging about the organisation becomes consistent. Therefore, any messaging that is *"put out is also about employer branding"* (Participant 1). In this way, customers/consumers of the firm's products and services get informed about the employment environment of the firm and could be attracted to apply for jobs in the company. Participant 9 added that employer branding involves all players in an organisation and *"it's not only one person's [HR] job"*. Overall, it can be stated that aligning both brands leads to systematic and consistent messaging about the organisation which in turn solidifies the overall brand. More so, execution of the employer branding demands the involvement of both *"business functions and support functions"* from all levels (Participant 9).

Tools and routines in this stage are interlinked. Variety of tools are used in this phase to publish employer branding contents, communicate with stakeholders (internally and externally), and analyse the performance of the entire implementation. Promotion of the employer brand – which is a routine – is done through publishing employer branding contents or campaigns on social media. Publishing contents on social media also generates data for the analysis purposes. Furthermore, social media serves a platform to engage with the public – who may be current employees or prospective employees – which is very key. The company also uses its intranet and newsletters to promote employer branding activities to existing employees. More so, data collection tool such as Microsoft Forms is used to collect feedback from participants in any employer branding related activity. Aside social media and internal platform, there are other tools that are used to promote the employer brand. For instance, customised souvenirs are used at events for promotional purposes.

Implementation and evaluation are the core praxis in the action phase. Regarding implementation, the EVP and the employer branding strategy in general is promoted in different ways and on different platforms. In Finland specifically, Multinational Technology Company 1 promotes their employer brand through participating in career fairs. Participant 9 disclosed that an *"ambassador group"* is established for *"employee advocates to speak [...] about the EVP"* and its offering to their network. Indeed, employee advocacy is considered one of the most effective ways to promote an employer brand because the words from employees about their employer are more believed than the one coming from HR, Marketing, and/or Senior Management of a firm. Additionally, the company promotes its brand as an employer by partnering with relevant organisations such as educational institutions (of all levels), and other non-profit organisations and advocacy groups. For internal employees, for instance, the Finland region has a programme specifically designed for summer trainees. The programme consists of different events such as career workshops, sporting activities and many more that seek to enhance the employee experience of trainees. It was highlighted that another way to promote the EVP internally was to use the CEO as a tool to share the new EVP in his monthly greetings to increase the awareness and engagement.

Evaluation of the employer brand is basically following up on employer branding and hiring related activities. Specifically in Finland, Participant 9 typified that prioritised schools and student groups were monitored whether the focus on them has made an *"impact on [...] applications or on selected people"*. Another way of measuring the EVP and the employer

branding in general is through feedback from employees with attention on some of the EVP elements or employment promises as well as employment experiences mentioned in the feedback. Complementary to the employee survey is following other external studies such as Young Attraction Index study. In addition, the number of applications received per year is also monitored. Participant 9 emphasised that although getting a lot of applications is appreciated, the focus is to gain quality applicants. It was hinted that the employer branding strategy is furthered developed after evaluation. Participant 9 exemplified that if the target groups are not getting the EVP message there is the need to *"think about the communication again"*.

Overall, it could be deduced that developing the EVP and implementing it through employer branding activities demand a lot collaboration across different functions. Hence, the role of networking and collaboration – which can be termed as a routine – is central. Getting to work with people from different teams from different functions is an enabler for a successful implementation. The figure below presents the summary of the practices discussed.
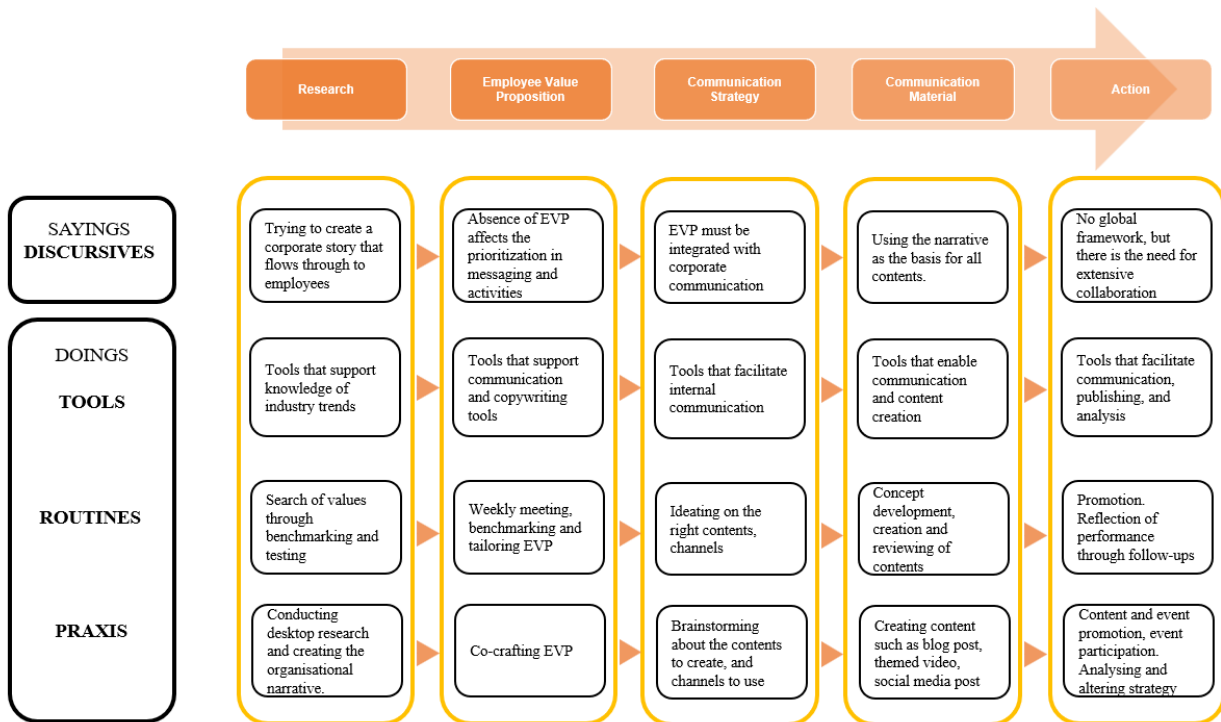

Figure 17. Employer branding practices of Multinational Technology Company 1.

4.1.2   Consulting Firm 1

Consulting Firm 1 is an employer branding consulting firm established in a Nordic country 30 years ago and located in 20 countries. The company is specialised in guiding employers in their quest to attract and retain highly qualified talents through their employer branding surveys and reports.

Research

In the discussion about research, Interviewee 1 revealed that it would be a travesty to develop an employer branding strategy without research. In essence, research is a necessity or a prerequisite as it guides the entire employer branding strategy journey. Although research is crucial, Interviewee 1 emphasised that it demands *"understand[ing] the talent market [internally and externally] and the company's visions, mission, goals, strategy"* to be able to *"make strategic decisions"*. The discursive practice in this stage reveals research as a key initiator and a necessity as well as a proactive approach that shapes the EVP development stage.

The tools identified in the research stage can be divided into two themes: i) knowledge of industry trends, corporate strategy and brand perception ii) concrete tools (e.g., social media and panel providers), analytical tools (e.g., spreadsheets) and communication tools (emails, team calls, and many more). The two categories of tools give insight on the employment market and the corporate vision as well as gathering and analysing data. Interviewee 1 emphasised the important role of social media in data collection since Consulting Firm 1 *"do a lot of ads on social media to collect all these responses"*. The routines observed in the first stage include team meetings and/or client meetings to identify the core interests of the talent market in relation to the company's goals and values. Interviewee 1 stated that a lot of meetings are held to *"keep the processes consistent"*. The team deliberated about the type of research to conduct and to get the preliminary survey approved as well as. Thereafter, other routines such as survey launching, data collection, and data reporting are followed. It is imperative to note that the tools are tightly connected to the routines in this stage.

Finally, the actual doings in the first stage is conducting research internally and externally. Interviewee 1 stressed that interviewing senior management reveals their strategic perspectives such as *"company's visions, mission, goals, strategy"* that allows for the development of an EVP that aligns with the overall corporate strategy. Subsequently, an internal employee

survey is conducted *"to have an authentic perspective from employees"*. Indeed, this is important to know the 'real' employment experience from existing employees since senior management *"don't know really what's going on in the lower levels of the organization"* (Interviewee 1). Alternately, an external survey is conducted to find out the general perceptions and preferences of the talent market as well as attributes that are attractive to them. On top of that, competitors are analysed. This is of assistance to differentiating an employer's employment attributes and offerings from competitors – thereby becoming unique. It can be identified that the tools and routines are directly embedded in the praxes of conducting employer branding research. Overall, the research gives a strong foundation to start developing the EVP and the entire employer branding strategy.

Employee Value Proposition

Regarding the EVP discussion, two themes were identified. Interviewee 1 mentioned that there is the need to ensure that the EVP is unique, authentic, attractive and aligns with the overall corporate strategy. This is achieved by research that fulfil strategic perspectives, internal employees' perspectives and external perspectives. Interviewee 1 also pinpointed that a lot of companies nowadays have *"same taglines"* for their EVPs. This is perhaps, differentiation has become difficult. Interviewee 1 added that the development of EVP *"can last up to 6-7 months"* as the process needs to understand the key three perspectives.

The tools identified in this stage include knowledge of internal, external and strategic perspectives, and communication tools that makes internal and external communication possible. Knowledge of the above-mentioned perspectives are key to establishing a relevant and resonant EVP. More so, business communication tools, channels and platform such as emails and Microsoft Teams are used for effective communication between stakeholders. Interviewee 1 mentioned that concrete tools such as *"PowerPoint and Excel"* are used for the purposes of presenting data and copywriting.

The EVP stage involves series of interactions amongst stakeholders in the various stages of the EVP development process. This phase consists of a three-interconnected-step namely development, co-crafting, and finetuning. Interviewee 1 summarised that meetings with clients are observed to present and discuss research findings in the development stage; workshops and breakout rooms are observed in the co-crafting stage for EVP co-creation and preliminary approval; whilst in the finetuning process meetings are held together with randomly

selected employees to validate the EVP as well as presenting the final draft of the EVP. Simply put, the routine is observed to define key priorities and attributes of the EVP in a collaborative strategizing manner. The routine is tightly connected to the praxes.

The praxes at this stage follow the three-interconnected-step earlier mentioned in the routines. Since the EVP development rests on the research, Interviewee 1 specified that the development stage utilises the findings of the research to map what is *"overlapping in terms of authenticity, strategy and attractive[ness]"*. Subsequently, the co-crafting process is observed consisting of Consulting Firm 1, its client and their stakeholders to create the EVP. In this phenomenon, the information derived from the development stage is presented and discussed with clients. Thereafter, the client together with their key stakeholders involved in the employer branding project – such as global employer brand lead, local employer branding managers, HR leaders and communication leaders – are put in breakout rooms to discuss *"the overall topics that the EVP should be talking about"* (Interviewee 1). Once the key priorities of the EVP are defined, the EVP attributes are drafted, and goes through a series of iterative processes until the suggested draft is approved.

Finally, the approved EVP is tested to verify authenticity of the EVP messages, resonance to employees, and attraction to externals through validation focus groups consisting of a collection *"between 50 and 150 [...] completely random employees"* (Interviewee 1). Interviewee 1 exemplified that there was an instance where a focus group confessed that the sustainability status claimed by their employer was an overpromise because they *"are not there yet"* (Interviewee 1). Subsequently, the EVP is *"fine-tuned"* based on the feedback from the focus groups (Interviewee 1). Afterwards, the final version of the EVP is converted into content materials such as brand books or guidebooks which consist of the EVP, its pillars, HR guidelines and many more.

Communication Strategy

In this stage, Interviewee 3 encapsulated that setting a clear goal for communication in the long and short term was central. Furthermore, the communication goal must be tied to the already created EVP and its attributes, and then tailored to specific target groups. Interviewee 1 specified that for a multinational company, *"the communication strategy is usually just localized"* (Interviewee 3). In essence, tailoring the communication to specified target groups is

essential since specificity of interests and preferences of audiences in every country/region differ considerably.

With regards to the tools in this phase, Microsoft teams is used for online meetings with client and stakeholders. More so, project management tool called Monday.com is used for strategy planning and internal communicating to *"guide the flow of the process"* (Interviewee 3). In short, tools that foster communication and collaboration is a necessity. Conventionally, the formulation of the communication strategy is a collaboration between Consulting Firm 1 and their client consisting of series of meetings i) to discuss a set of goals to consider in the communication strategy ii) to follow-up with the clients for approval of suggested communication strategic initiatives. It could be inferred from this instance that collaboration and communication in the creation of the strategy are routines which interconnect with the tools.

Obviously, the praxis in this phase involves planning and development of the communication. The scope of the project, the EVP (and its attributes), corporate brand, and target groups are highly considered when planning in order to have a clear strategy. In this instance, the communication strategy process starts with brainstorming with the client to "*come up with different strategy suggestions"* (Interviewee 3). Subsequently, strategic initiatives are crafted and presented to the client and feedbacks are sought after. Interviewee 3 stressed that the strategic initiatives are converted into campaigns and content materials after approval. Tasks such as identifying the type of campaigns, deciding on channels and tools, and scheduling (timelines) are important praxes relevant to the communication strategy formulation.

Communication Material

Regarding the discussion in the communication material process, the themes of establishing the kind of employer brand to present as well as an integrated communication focus are vital. This include considering the type of content to produce, the tone of voice in messaging, the channels to use, the visual consistency of the employer brand with corporate brand, and many more. Here, Interviewee 3 elaborated that the visuals must be consistent with the corporate brand for easy identification and recognition which in turn lead to a consolidated image *"in the eyes of the targeted audience or community"*.

Tools used in this phase are interlinked with knowledge and experiences of the designing teams. In addition, tools that facilitate internal and external communications (e.g., Outlook, Microsoft Teams, SharePoint) as well as tools that enable the creation and production of contents are central (e.g., InDesign, Photoshop, AfterEffect, Premiere, Illustrator, Lightroom). The routine at this stage include i) client deliberation to set a clear path for the content production; ii) designing and presentation of contents to the client for feedback; iii) as well as adjusting (if needed) and finalising the contents for implementation.

Brainstorming and content production are the two main praxis themes in this stage. The team initially brainstorm about design ideas, how to tailor them to meet client details and needs, identify the relevant content for the targeted group as well as the appropriate channels for the right reach. These thought processes are needed in the beginning before the actual materials are created. The second theme is virtually translating the ideas into different type of contents and formats. Interviewee 3 highlighted that the team creates employee introductory or employee story videos or other relevant themed videos by using client's employees. This is done by conducting a video interview with the client's employee. A similar content is created in a written format (article). In a sense, a photo of the employee is accompanied with the texts to give it a human touch. Hence, photoshoot is required, a praxis in this case.

Interviewee 3 also elaborated that their data suggests that stories of current is *"one of the […] biggest points of interest that people have when they are considering an employer"*. Indeed, prospective employees want to hear employment experiences from regular employees than hear from senior management. This is because the employment experience coming from a regular employee represents the true picture as to how it is like to work for the employer.

Action

Two themes were identified as discursive practices in the action stage. First, the focus of employer branding should not only be geared towards attracting external talents. Interviewee 3 emphasised that employer branding should *"actually focus on […] internals […] before focusing on external talents"* to enable employee retention and serve as the *"best sort of testament"* as to the kind of employer an organisation is. Further, internal focus leads employees to speak highly of the firm which makes it *"very easy […] communicating that [employer brand]"* to externals (Interviewee 3). Secondly, the implementation of employer branding strategy according to Interviewee 1 should alternate between intended and emergent

approaches. For instance, a scenario where an employer branding campaign during the imple-
mentation "*is really not resonating at all and that people are not getting it*" there should be
the possibility to alter the strategy (Interviewee 3).

Various tools are used in communicating with clients, publishing and analysing performance
of campaigns in this stage. Content materials are generally published on websites (e.g., com-
pany websites and/or third-party websites), and social media platforms to get the employer
branding campaign or message to the targeted group. Interviewee 3 noted that the type of
content and channel of delivery is highly dependent on the targeted audience and the market.
Aside publishing, social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and many oth-
ers) also serve a multifaceted purpose to include engaging externals and analysing the perfor-
mance of the employer branding campaign or contents. It was also highlighted that *"Face-
book is still the obvious channel"* to reach a significant amount of people (Interviewee 3).
Other analysis tools are used to conduct internal survey in the implementation stage to evalu-
ate the effect of the employer brand amongst existing employees.

Routines in this phase is essentially the promotion of the employer brand internally and exter-
nally. Interviewee 3 asserted that routines such as community calls are observed to talk about
the employer brand to existing employees from the employer context. The external promotion
of the employer brand follows some sequence of events consisting of series of meetings with
clients. Interviewee 3 narrated that meetings are held to *"share the previews with [the] clients
and for final approval"* as well as *"provide a full report on the metrics"* at the end of the
campaign. This routine is crucial to assess the launching and performance of the campaign.

Conspicuously, the praxis in this stage is basically the implementation of the employer brand-
ing strategy that has been set forth in the preceding stages. The implementation includes
launching/publishing and promoting the employer branding campaign or contents to the tar-
geted market and groups, as well as monitoring and evaluating the performance of the cam-
paigns. Undoubtedly, the praxes can be seen to be tightly interlinked with the tools and rou-
tines in this phase. Hence, it is virtually impossible to separate them. The figure below pre-
sents the practices of the formulation and implementation of employer branding strategy by
Consulting Firm 1.
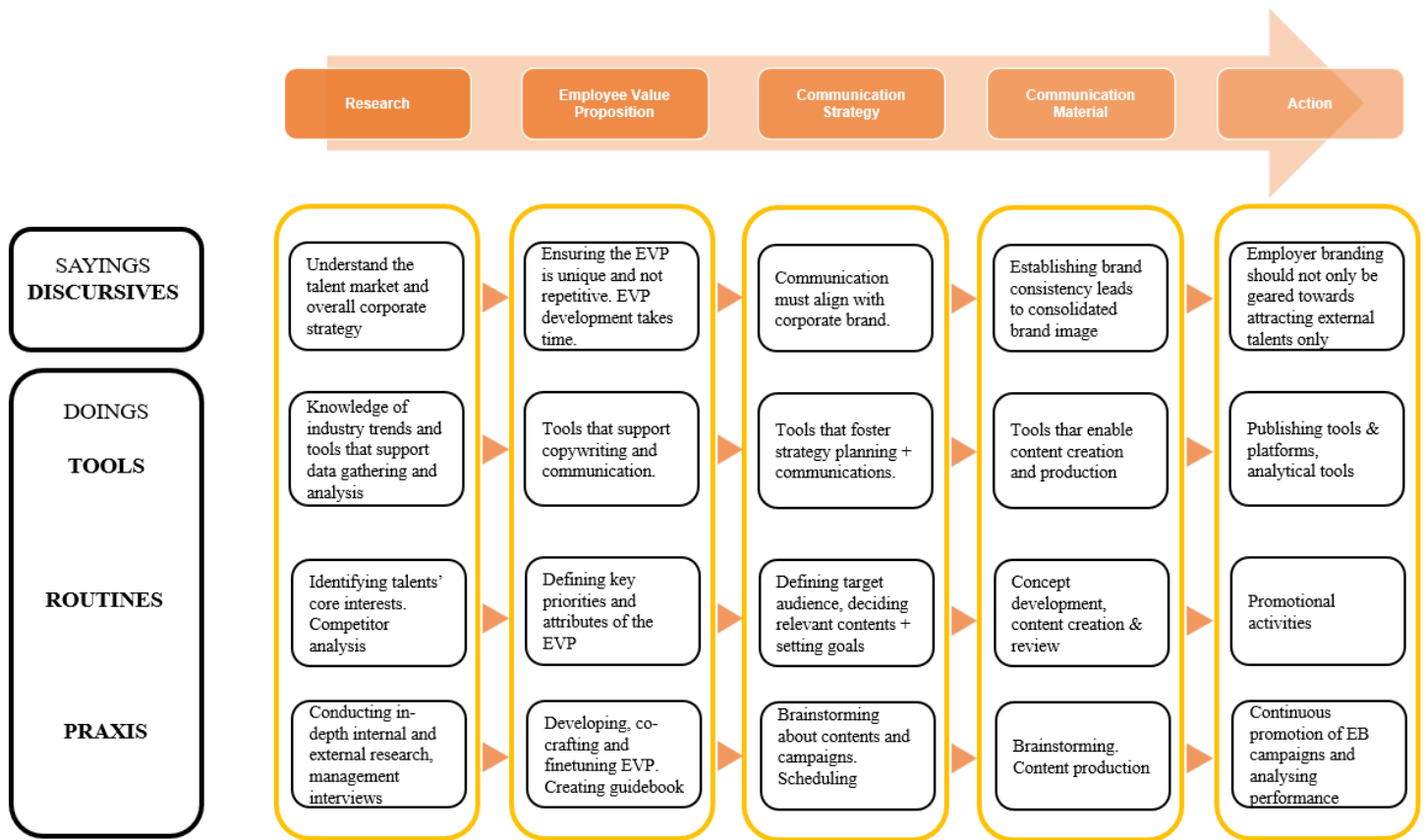
Figure 18. Employer branding practices of Consulting Firm 1.

4.1.3 Multinational Technology Company 2

Multinational Technology Company 2, founded in the first decade of the 20th century and headquartered in one of the Nordic countries, specialises in elevator and escalator engineering. The firm's brand as an employer has consecutively been ranked highly in the last five years in annual employer branding scorings in its home country.

Research

In the research discussion, Interviewee 2 emphasized that research influences the entire employer branding strategy process as it serves as an enabler to understanding *"what kind of things in employers are important for [employees]"*. Overall, the discussion surrounding this phase was about the concomitance of research to the success of the entire employer branding strategy process.

Tools used in this stage are feedback collection tools such as *"Google forms as well as Webropol"* (Interviewee 2). Moreover, tools that enable effective communication such as email is used. The routine in this stage is searching for the drivers of interest and attractive attributes. The routine include informing employees about the survey, launching the survey, reminding employees to respond, and reporting the results. Clearly, it can be deduced that the tools and routines are tightly interlinked.

Fundamentally, the actual doing in this stage is conducting research. Interviewee 2 revealed that "*two folds of questionnaires are in use"* to "*figure out the kind of feedback that [employees] have for the employer, the things that are motivational for them and what kind of things [...] are important when thinking of an employer"*. The outcome of the survey further reveals the strength and weaknesses of the employer from the perspectives of existing employees globally and locally.

Externally, Interviewees 2 and 6 stated that data is generated from candidate feedbacks through job applications, and from customers and partners through interviews. Furthermore, external surveys are purchased from third. Cumulatively, it can be concluded that the research phase determines existing and potential employees' perceptions of the employer, their values and motivations, and their habits. The findings derived from the research is used to develop the EVP.

Employee Value Proposition

When discussing about the EVP development, three core themes were identified – corporate alignment, flexibility, and length of time. Firstly, Interviewee 2 highlighted that the EVP must be developed in a way to *represent the [organisation] as an employer for [its] employees*. This is because such an EVP depicts genuineness and honesty. Moreover, Interviewee 8 hinted that the EVP must align with the corporate brand because it is impossible to *"fully separate the [corporate] brand from the employer brand"*. From the above discussion it can be inferred that the development of an EVP is heavily dependent on the results of research (e.g., employee feedback survey, external feedback survey) and elements of the corporate vision, values, brand and strategy.

Secondly, the interviewees (2 & 8) emphasised that the EVP is crafted to represent the organisation on a global level. However, it requires flexibility in order to adapt to specified locale(s). Thirdly, Interviewee 8 stressed the entire EVP development process could take "*between 9 to 12 months*" to get finalised.

In this stage, concrete tools that foster internal and external communication (emails and conference calls) are essential since the EVP is created through cross-functional collaboration between the global HR, marketing and branding teams. Interviewee 8 clarified that Multinational Technology Company 2 hired an external partner to help in the process because the external partner "*has a good market and benchmarking data and understanding of where the other companies are [...] profiling and how they are building their EVP*". Therefore, the knowledge and skills of the external partner can be considered as a tool. Furthermore, tools that foster copy writing and presentation (e.g., PowerPoint and Excel) were used for EVP planning purposes. Knowledge of the research findings is considered a tool since it gives insight on the habits and preferences of employees (existing and potential).

Routines and praxis in this phase are tightly interlinked. According to Interviewee 8, the working group come together to review and compile the various survey results to assess their strengths, current image (employer and corporate) and the expectations of internals and externals stakeholders. Based on that and a review of existing EVP from competitors, an EVP is drafted. It is important to note that benchmarking is done in this phase for the purposes of differentiation. Next, the preliminary draft goes through an iterative process through workshops until an approved version is reached. In summary, the routines in this phase are survey result review, drafting and benchmarking, reviewing draft and approving EVP.

Multiple themes can be identified as praxes in this stage. First, a team is formed for the creation of the EVP. Interviewee 8 explained that the "*the working group [includes] the program team, the talent acquisition team*" and some personnel from HR as well as an external partner, notwithstanding. After the creation of the core team, planning and development of the EVP is next. Interviewee 2 stated that the result of the research is reviewed in this process. Thereafter, the EVP pillars and messages are drafted. In addition, the finalised version is converted into a guidebook or a framework (template) that guides the implementation process. Interviewee 8 also mentioned that *budgeting for [the EVP is done] in the same process"* for its implementation.

Communication Strategy

The third phase, creating communication strategy, are highly dependent on the first and second phases. Interviewee 2 emphasised that communications about the EVP and the employer brand in general should be "*representing [the organisation] as employer*". Specifically, the communication strategy must draw from the findings of the research as well as elements of EVP. In addition, it was mentioned that the EVP is the root of the communication strategy. Therefore, it could be drawn that the discussion about the creation of communication strategy revolves around the theme of ensuring a communication that represents the true employment environment. Another theme identified as a discursive practice is the thoughts of flexibility in the communication strategy. Although the strategy is formulated on the global level "*it is up to countries to figure out how it fit for them*" (Interviewee 2). Hence, the need for flexibility is paramount to enable effective implementation in different locations and for different target groups.

With regards to tools, Interviewee 2 stated the team also uses an internal tool which *"collects monthly or quarterly level communication plans"*. Furthermore, copywriting tools such as Microsoft Office (Word, Excel, and PowerPoint) are used to document the communication plan. More so, communication tools (e.g., emails, Microsoft Teams) are used to foster internal communications. Fundamentally, the routine in the third phase is planning and scheduling. Detailed plans as to communicating the EVP and the timelines to implement them in the various locations is done by kind courtesy of a *"collaboration between the Global HR and Global Marketing teams because they are in charge of the communication plan"*.

Brainstorming the communication strategy in accordance with the EVP is a praxis in this phase. Interviewee 2 highlighted that during brainstorming, the team ideate and decide on the kind of messaging, themes and campaigns, types of communication materials, and communication channels to use. This process is not only considered a praxis but a routine as well.

Communication Material

In the discussion about the communication material, Interviewee 2 stressed that creating coherent contents was central. Although a company may have an EVP consisting of the most attractive attributes, without a resonant content, it will be given less attention. Therefore, the type of content created is one of the drivers of a successful employer brand as it serves as a

vehicle to delivering EVP/employer branding message. Per Interviewee 2, Multinational Technology Company 2 creates contents that are centred on employee experience and the employment environment.

Since the communication strategy guides the type of content to be created, it can be referred to as a central tool in this stage. Copywriting tools and videography tools are used to create blog posts, theme video contents and many more. Furthermore, the skills of external vendors are considered as tools when creating content materials that require their input. The routines of the communication material stage include concept development, creation, and review. From the company's perspective, the concept of the content (e.g., employee career story) and the mode of content (e.g., video or article) are defined in the initial stage. Subsequently, the content is created according to the defined concept. Afterwards, the content is reviewed and approved for implementation.

The praxis explains this phase further. Creating appropriate content materials for internals and externals are the actual doings in the communication material phase. Contents – such as blog posts, articles, themed videos – which highlight career stories and daily routines of existing employees are created for both internal and external audience. Specifically for internals, employer branding related contents or training materials are created to give them insight on employer branding and its importance. The respondent stressed that themed videos are created to give *"visibility to the employees"* as well as reveal *"more concrete"* employment environment of the employer as possible (Interviewee 2).

Actions

Themes surrounding a clear framework of implementation and flexibility of implementation were identified as discursive practices. On the one hand, Interviewee 2 highlighted that there should be uniformity and consistency in the implementation to prevent miscommunication and misrepresentation of the employer brand. Therefore, a flexible and *"clear frame[work] globally"* is central as an important guidance tool (Interviewee 2).

Undoubtedly, concrete tools and analytical tools are used in the action stage. A communication framework is used as a template for implementation. Communication materials are content tools that carry the employer branding message. Furthermore, publishing tools such as (company) website, social media platforms are used to publish and disseminate the content

materials or campaigns to the targeted audience. These tools also serve as analytical tools to evaluate the performance of contents and campaigns. Lastly, communication tools such as emails, team calls and many more are used for information sharing about the EVP and employer branding campaigns.

The routines and praxes in this stage are closely interrelated. Fundamentally, the routines include promotion (internally and externally) and following up of the EVP and/or employer branding campaigns. Internally, the EVP is promoted through global HR calls to brief all HR representatives. Alternately, contents about the EVP or employer branding campaigns are published on the company's intranet to reach internal employees. External promotion is done through publishing employer branding contents on company's websites and social media platforms as well as participating in employer branding related events such as career fairs, student collaboration, and the like. Simultaneously, following-up of the promotional campaigns are observed. This is done in various ways depending on the type of promotional activity. For instance, contents promoted on social media are followed up through engaging and answering the questions of commentors.

Clearly, implementation and evaluation are considered praxes in this stage. Implementations include the various mechanisms that get the EVP and/or employer branding activities promoted to the targeted audience. As it can be realised from the discussion in the routines, implementation through promotion is done virtually and physically using different themes. More specifically, Multinational Technology Company 2 promotes their EVP through constant communication across their HR community. Moreover, internal employees are also informed about employer branding related topics via internal info-sites.

Interviewee 2 added that Multinational Technology Company 2 has established an employee advocacy network that trains employees to become active ambassadors. The interviewees 2 stressed that *"in the future, [...] [employee advocacy] is even more needed"* citing that existing employees will become *"active ambassadors and [will] tell their story about [Multinational Technology Company 2] as an employer*. Moreover, line managers are trained on ways to project and promote Multinational Technology Company 2 as an employer.

In the second praxis, evaluation of the entire employer branding implementations is observed. Externally, the company evaluate their entire employer branding campaigns through their

social media engagements (e.g., like, comments, followership), and recruitment performance and efficiency such as application volume, application quality, duration per hire, and many more. Employee engagements, employee lifecycle (e.g., onboarding, and exit surveys), and *"how people refer other people"* (employee referral) are some of the ways Multinational Technology Company 2 evaluate their employer branding internally (Interviewee 2).

Overall, Interviewee 2 emphasised that employer branding should be embedded in the behaviours of the people that are representing the company. The figure below presents the summary of the practices of Multinational Technology Company 2.
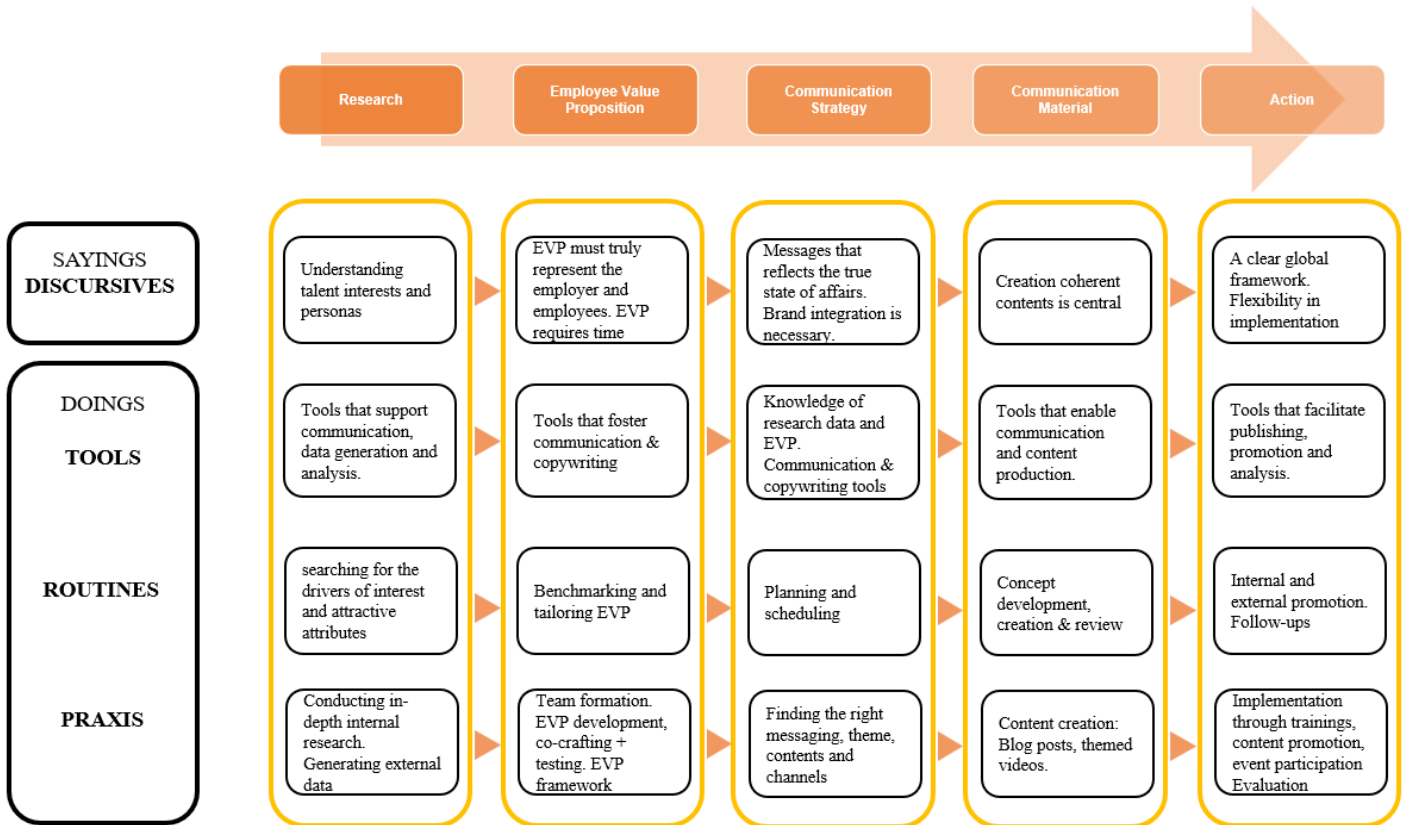

Figure 19. Employer branding practices of Multinational Technology Company 2.

4.1.4 Consulting Firm 2

Consulting Firm 2, established 3 years ago, is a consulting firm that is specialised IT recruitment and employer branding. Consulting Firm 2 has guided dozens of companies on a successful employer branding strategy journey.

Research

The discursive practices identified that employer branding research must be conducted to *understand […] the talent audiences […] to attract"* as well as *"understand […] the most business critical and hard to find categories"* (Interviewee 4). Interviewee 4 explained that considering the employee experience in the research process is a *"key phase in successful research"*. However, this is often overlooked.

Data gathering and analysis tool such as *"Excel and Google Data Studio"* are used in this stage (Interviewee 4). Interviewee 4 highlighted that Consulting Firm 2 often utilises the tools of their client company as well to gather data. In this phase, it was brought up that deliberation is a routine to outline goals of the project, define the kind of research to undertake, settings questions based on the research goals, launching and sending survey to respondents, and analysing and reporting the survey results. In essence, the routine is primarily searching for the signals of interests of the talents and management.

In the praxis stage, Interviewee 4 explained that Consulting Firm 2 conducts internal research through online survey or in-person interviews to uncover the current employees' *"real feelings"* and employer's vision and aspirations (Interviewee 4). Interviewee 4 also highlighted that the Consulting Firm 2 further examines the client company's social media presence, career sites and *"thought leadership game"* of their employees. In addition, external research is also conducted to reveal the perceptions of externals (e.g., potential candidates, recruitment agencies, the employment market) have about the company. It can be concluded that the types of research conducted uncovers the strategic perspective, internal perspective, and external perspective. These perspectives reveal the key selling points for the client company and serve as the root for the formulation of a genuine EVP.

Employee Value Proposition

When discussing about EVP development, the common thought that arose in the case of Consulting Firm 2 is that EVP is *"ever evolving"*. Although EVP is built for the long-term, it *"needs to be revisited"* to stay up to date with the ever-changing nature of stakeholders – both internal and external. It was also mentioned that revising an EVP depends on the size of the company. For multinational companies, it is recommended to revisit the EVP *"every*

three to five years" (Interviewee 4). In addition, it was stressed that EVP development in a multinational company can *"take a year"* to be completed (Interviewee 4).

Another theme that arose as a discursive practice is the degree of involvement in the EVP development process. Interviewee 4 propounded that in many companies, HR or Talent acquisition team often creates the EVP. However, in the EVP creation process *"no [regular employee] is involved"* (Interviewee 4). Such an EVP is hardly resonant and hardly reflects the true nature of the company as an employer – hence, liable to fail. It can be inferred from the discussion that for a genuine and resonant EVP to be created, key and diverse talent groups in the organisation must be involved in the EVP development process.

It is obvious that the formulation of the EVP is highly dependent on the research. Hence, the research is regarded as a tool in this phase. Secondly, the knowledge of Consulting Firm 2 in the EVP creation process can be considered as a tool since they are an external service provider to the clients. Due to intense collaboration in this phase, communication is a necessity. Interviewee 4 mentioned that *"Miro"* is used to foster internal and external communication and collaboration. Additionally, tools such as *"Microsoft Word and PowerPoint"* are used for copywriting (Interviewee 4). The routine in this phase is basically identifying the interests of internals and the interests of key talents groups to attract. The routines include drafting the EVP (headline, pillars and the employer attributes); testing the EVP via focus groups for authenticity and resonance; and reviewing and approving EVP through an iterative process.

Multiple themes can be identified as praxes in this stage. This include team formation and EVP development (co-crafting and finetuning). A team is formed as a core group to the steer the formulation of the EVP. According to Interviewee 4, often the people involved in the core team are selected diverse representatives from HR, talent acquisition, marketing, design and branding teams. Consulting Firm 2 always emphasise the mandatory inclusion of people who *"represent the key talent group [the company] wants to attract"* in the EVP process (Interviewee 4). The lack of involvement of the key talent groups in the process often lead to skipping the testing of the EVP. With this, it becomes difficult to create a true, compelling and resonant EVP.

The second praxis theme is the actual development of the EVP where the team members come together to ideate and start drafting the EVP. This is called co-crafting. Afterwards, the

EVP is finetuned. Finetuning is done by testing the EVP draft with employees from different levels and from different talent segments to validate authenticity and resonance. The initial EVP draft is adjusted based feedback from the tested group

Communication Strategy

In this stage, two themes arose as discursive practice. The communication strategy primarily concerns the choices in messaging, contents and the right channels to use. Interviewee 4 highlighted that knowing and understanding the specified audience with regards to their 'wants', 'motivations', and 'where they spend their time' is crucial. Without this, the *"communication strategy goes to waste"* (Interviewee 4). Interviewee 4 underlined that although this is basic, most of the companies *"overlook it"*. Hence, when they do employer branding, they hardly understand their target audience. Adequately resourcing employees to communicate is a way of empowering and encouraging them to share. This leads to building a *"thought leadership game"* in the organisation to enable employees share their expertise, professional lives and career stories to the public(Interviewee 4). When it comes to career decisions, people follow other people rather than company communication. Therefore, involving some key employees in the communications strategy is *"one of the cornerstones stones in modern employer branding"* (Interviewee 4).

Ordinarily, Consulting Firm 2 as a vendor is a tool to the client company in the process. Furthermore, tools such as Excel, PowerPoint, Word and email are central for documentation and communication in this stage.   The routine and praxis of this phase are tightly interlinked. Routine-wise, the talent audience, the key points that resonate with them, and their preferred channels of use are defined. Moreover, deciding on the relevant communication contents and/or materials are observed. Brainstorming on the contents and campaigns to create for specified audience as well as the channels of reach can be seen as the actual doing in this stage. Another praxis theme identified in this phase is the creation of *"social media strategy and setting key metrics"* for the employer branding implementations (Interviewee 4). This is of assistance to effective measuring or evaluation of the performance of the employer branding campaign and activities.

Communication Material

In this phase, what arose as discursive practice is the need to consider the prominence of the corporate brand when creating communication materials. Interviewee 4 asserted that when

"the world already knows [the corporate] brand", the communication materials to be created could focus more on the elements of the EVP. If the case is the reverse, the communication materials could incorporate both the corporate and employer branding messaging. For example, including product and services of the company with a people-centric approach. Another discursive practice concerns making internal employees the epicentre of the communication materials as it will give them public recognition and in turn enhance internal employer branding.

Concrete tools that facilitate copywriting, photo and video editing are central in this phase. Interviewee 4 indicated that Consulting Firm 2 uses a collaborative platform called Miro for structuring content concept. More so, Canva is used to create employer branding related material such as flyers, presentations and videos. Working with client companies requires constant communication, hence, tools that facilitate external communication is vital. Consulting Firm 2 as an external vendor follows a three-step routine when creating content material for client companies to include content definition, content development, content review and approval.

Praxis in this stage involves variety of material contents created for employer branding communication purposes. They include video materials, presentation materials, recruitment communication materials. For video materials, diversity, career, and sustainability are essential themes that can be used in creating employer branding communication video materials. Interviewee 4 recommended the creation of *"short video material"* which can easily grab the attention of the viewer *"within three seconds"*. It also mentioned that video materials grab the most attention since *"people are attracted to other people"* (Interviewee 4). Presentation materials such as PowerPoint deck are created as a recruitment communication material and sales material for engaging key talent groups about career choices. Furthermore, companies must ensure that recruitment agencies update their recruitment materials to fit the companies' promises.

Action

The most effective way of activating an employer branding strategy is the involvement of *"[internal] employees to take part in the activities"* (Interviewee 4). Additionally, as employer branding is broad, division of labour or responsibilities is required to foster effective

implementation. The discussion surrounding effective activation is deemed a discursive practice in the action stage.

In this stage, the communication strategy is used as a guide tool for implementation. Communication tools, copywriting tools, publishing and analysis tools are central in this stage. Project management tool is also used to facilitate the process. Consulting Firm 2 facilitates the employer branding activities for the client companies. Hence, Consulting Firm 2 collaborates with the right team from the client company for the specific employer branding activity and "*set certain KPI's for each quarter or annually, and then follow them through*" (Interviewee 4). It can be stated that this process demands a lot of meetings and collaboration. Simply put, the routine in this stage is facilitating employer branding promotion and follow-ups.

The actual doings in the action stage is implementation and evaluation of the employer branding strategy. Implementation is done through promoting online via website and social media channels. Offline promotion also occurs through physical events career events, seminars, conference and many more. In addition to the implementation, Interviewee 4 mentioned that "*trainings and also individual sparring*" sessions are organised for internal employees on effective communication about their expertise or about the company as an employer. The performance of the various employer branding activities are analysed after implementation through internal surveys and "*applicant tracking system*" (Interviewee 4). Interviewee 4 highlighted that some of the targeted impact after implementation include gaining "*highly relevant and qualified talent leads*". The figure below presents the summary of Consulting Firm 2's practices.
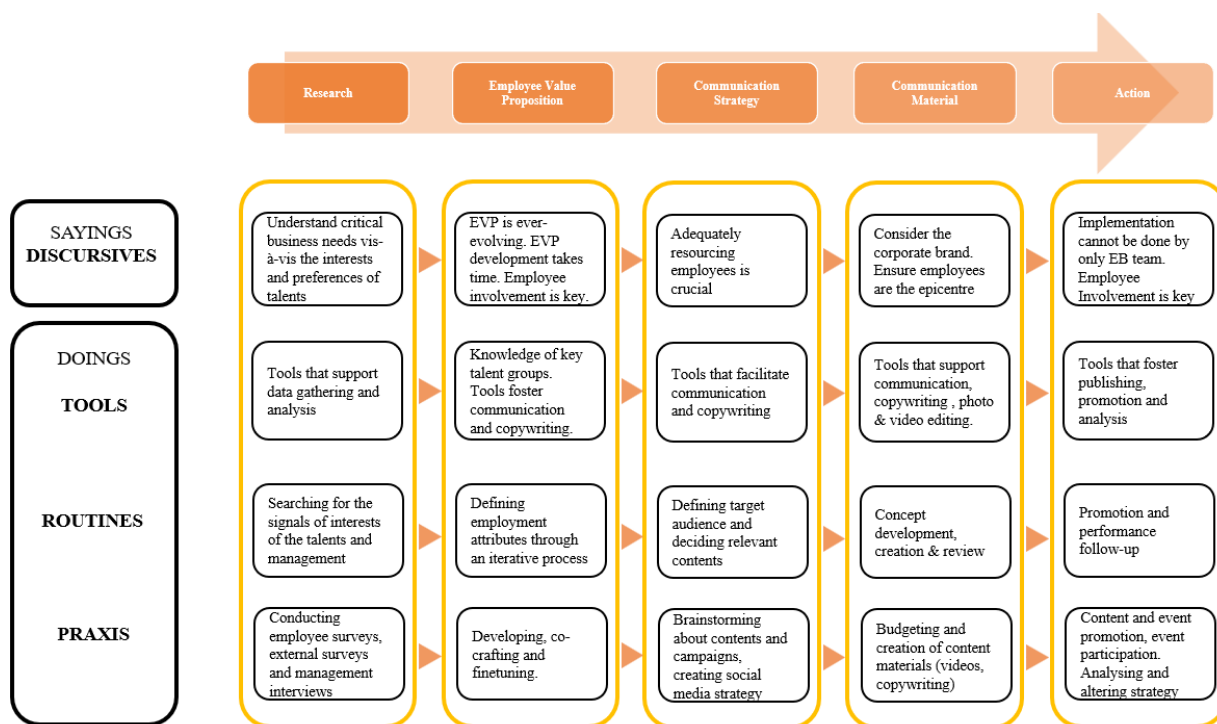
Figure 20. Employer branding practices of Consulting Firm 2.

4.1.5 Multinational Technology Company 3

Multinational Technology Company 3 is a large Finnish multinational company. In recent years the company has risen markedly in Finland's employer branding ranking surveys.

Research

The discursive practice in the research stage revolved around the importance of a structured approach in the whole employer branding development process to identify the *"most important target group, and […] to differentiate from many other employers who are also looking for talents"* (Interviewee 6). In this phase, data generating tools and internal communication tools were used. Interviewee 5 also mentioned that Multinational Technology Company 3 used an existing survey conducted in cooperation with a *"leading engagement survey provider"*.

Data gathering and analysis are the main routines in this stage. Practically, the research routines for Multinational Technology Company 3 involves compiling the results of the engagement survey and the reputation survey and then creating a global marketing and HR survey to

enhance the employer branding process. All of these together led to identifying the key messages, preferences, tone of voice and key channels of targeted groups. The interviewees (5 & 6) also emphasised that the systematic structure in place was of assistance to the success of the whole process. Praxis-wise the company conducted three different types of survey to include *"employee survey, reputation survey, global marketing and HR survey"* (Interviewee 5). After analysing the results of the surveys, Interviewee 6 stated that a guidebook (document) was created which helped in the documentation and organisation of thoughts with regards to target groups, relevant and supporting messages and many more to steer the formulation of the EVP. Clearly, the routines, tools, and praxis in this phase can be seen to tightly intertwine.

Employee Value Proposition

Multiple themes were identified as discursive in the third phase. During the EVP creation process, interviewee 5 acknowledged that it took Multinational Technology Company 3 *"nine months"* for the EVP (from construction to approval) to be ready for implementation. Secondly, the degree of flexibility in the EVP is to enable any easy implementation for regiinal locales. Interviewee 6 exemplified that the Multinational Technology Company 3 summarised its main EVP message in a sentence which *"very nicely applied to address different target groups and different needs and situations"*. The degree of flexibility according to the interviewees (5 & 6) encouraged employees to utilise the main message in their own way on social media. Another theme that can be identified as a discursive practice is that even though the company engaged an external partner, Multinational Technology Company 3 was very involved in all aspects of the EVP work.

Various tools were used in the EVP creation stage. A template also called the 'framework of thinking' is used as a tool in this stage to guide the process. Additionally, communication tools such as emails, video conferencing tools were used to foster communication between everyone involved. The skills of external partners can be considered a tool in this stage. Obviously, routines in this phase can be seen to consist of series of events to include defining, evaluating, and approving all aspects of the EVP development work. Although this process is considered a routine, it could also be classified as a praxis in the EVP development process.

The first praxis in the EVP phase is assembling the relevant team for the project. This includes the search for the relevant teams as well as the right partner to cooperate with. In the case of Multinational Technology Company 3, the relevant team from the internal perspective was

made up of selected representatives from the HR and Marketing & Communication teams. Interviewee 6 pinpointed that the contribution of senior management (e.g., Head of HR and Head of Marketing and Communications) in the process was crucial. More so, a marketing and communication agency was involved to help with *"the messaging and visualisation of the EVP"* (Interviewee 6). Another praxis in this stage is the actual formulation of the EVP which encompasses the values and culture of the company, and attributes and many more. Afterwards, to support the implementation, a guidebook containing the practical deliverables was created. This guidebook outlines the details of the EVP such as definition, key messages, the tone of voice, and the different elements in practice.

Communication Strategy

The discussion in this stage revealed that the creation of the EVP as well as communication strategy are simultaneous and highly entwined. In this phase, the discussion was centred around partnership – looking for the right partner i.e. a marketing and communication agency to help in the process. The informants (Interviewee 5 & 6) highlighted partnering with an external is of utmost importance to the development and success of the entire employer branding strategy work. The mutual thoughts about it and the intense involvement of the external partner is deemed a discursive practice in this phase. Another discursive practice identified in this phase was the thoughts *"about the common messages and the specific messages for each target group"* (Interviewee 6).

The tools used in this phase include the EVP guidebook, external partners and communication tools (e.g., emails, video conferencing tools). The routine in this stage is similar to the routines in the preceding stage. The interviewees (5 & 6) disclosed that there was a high-level collaboration between the internal team and the agency in this stage. Here, the routines consist of defining the target groups, planning the relevant contents and channels, and informing the relevant teams about the launching plan.

As part of the doings, the team came together to brainstorm about how to bring the EVP to life. The ideation process considered *"the messages of the target group, the main message of the EVP, and the visuals involved"* – and the appropriate channels to reach them, notwithstanding (Interviewee 6). More so, existing contents were also mapped in the brainstorming process. In addition to brainstorming in this stage, Interviewee 5 specified that a guidebook was created *"about how [to] communicate [the] EVP, the tone of voice, [and] how the career site should*

look like". It can be inferred that this is a proactive approach as it creates a clear path for implementation.

Communication Materials

The discursive practice identified in this phase is ensuring that the created communications materials served the purpose for the implementation of the EVP. In this phase, concrete tools and materials are used to get the work done. The communication guidebook is used as a tool in this stage to serve as a guide in creating the appropriate contents for the right audience. Furthermore, concrete tools such as cameras, editing tools, word processing tools were used to create videos and blog contents. Moreover, communication tools such as email and videotelephony tools were used for internal and external communications.

Naturally, the crafting of communication materials is a routinised process as it follows the the 'framework of thinking'. Interviewee 5 stressed that the selected people from HR and Marketing & Communications teams meet to discuss the kind of contents to create. Once the materials are created, they are handed internally to the relevant teams *"for them to implement area by area."* (Interviewee 5). It can be stated that examples of materials were created to ensure good quality contents and alignment of the brand. Obviously, the praxes of the fourth stage include content creation related tasks such as newspaper advertisements, blog posts and the main EVP and/or employee videos. Interviewee 5 also accentuated that some of the contents *"are applicable to internals, externals or both"*.

Action

When discussing about the action stage, the common thought in the case of Multinational Technology Company 3 is *"systematically implementing the messages"* – although some level of flexibility is allowed – to ensure the success of the entire employer branding work. Interviewees 5 also pointed out that the employer branding implementation must be "*integrated into the [organisational] strategy process"*. This is because employer branding does not become successful in isolation since "*whatever the company does, affects [the employer brand] as well"* (Interviewee 5). Hence, incorporating the employer brand and the corporate brand from the planning to the implementation stage propels a strong employer brand.

The tools in the fifth phase are basically used for implementation and evaluation purposes. The communication materials earlier created are used as tools to convey the message of the EVP.

Publishing tools such as company websites and social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Youtube, Instagram, and many more) are used to publish the communications materials. With the help of the guidebook, all content materials for publication must be scheduled in advance. Although contemporary channels such as social media plays a vital role in publishing contents, the impact of traditional channels such as the newspaper is still relevant. Aside that, social media serves as a platform to analyse the performance of the published materials or campaigns.

Per Multinational Technology Company 3, the promotion of the employer brand especially externally is vital to the employer branding work and can be seen as a routine in the action phase. Training sessions are held with relevant teams and stakeholders as to how to promote the employer brand. Furthermore, analysing and reflecting upon the implemented campaigns is crucial for improvement purposes. Interviewee 6 stressed that *"regular meetings around implementation"* are held internally to talk about the process and progress.

Primarily, the actual doing that can be identified in the action phase is the simultaneous promotion of the employer brand externally. This is done through publishing contents, campaigns, and event participations. For instance, employee videos are published on the company's websites and their social media channels about the employment experience in the company. Notwithstanding, career websites are also updated with the EVP messaging. Furthermore, the company engages potential employees and other external stakeholders at recruitment events to talk about Multinational Technology Company 3 as an employer. Another theme in this process is evaluating the employer branding through the company's job application portal to determine the *"application volumes and application quality"* (Interviewee 7); and purchasing talent surveys and monitoring employer branding rankings to identify its status in the employment market. Afterwards, *"new elements related to the EVP may be developed"* (Interviewee 5).

For Multinational Technology Company 3, *"collaboration with different parts of the organisation on the EVP topic as much as possible"* is a necessity because it supports the promotion of the EVP to externals (Interviewee 5). Interviewee 5 further highlighted that social media *"has become more and more important"* to express an EVP or disseminate an employer branding campaign. Due to the extreme importance of social media, Multinational Technology Company 3 trained its HR and Marketing & Communication on the effective promotion of

EVP on social media platforms. Multinational Technology Company 3's practices in the formation of their employer branding strategy is illustrated in the figure below.
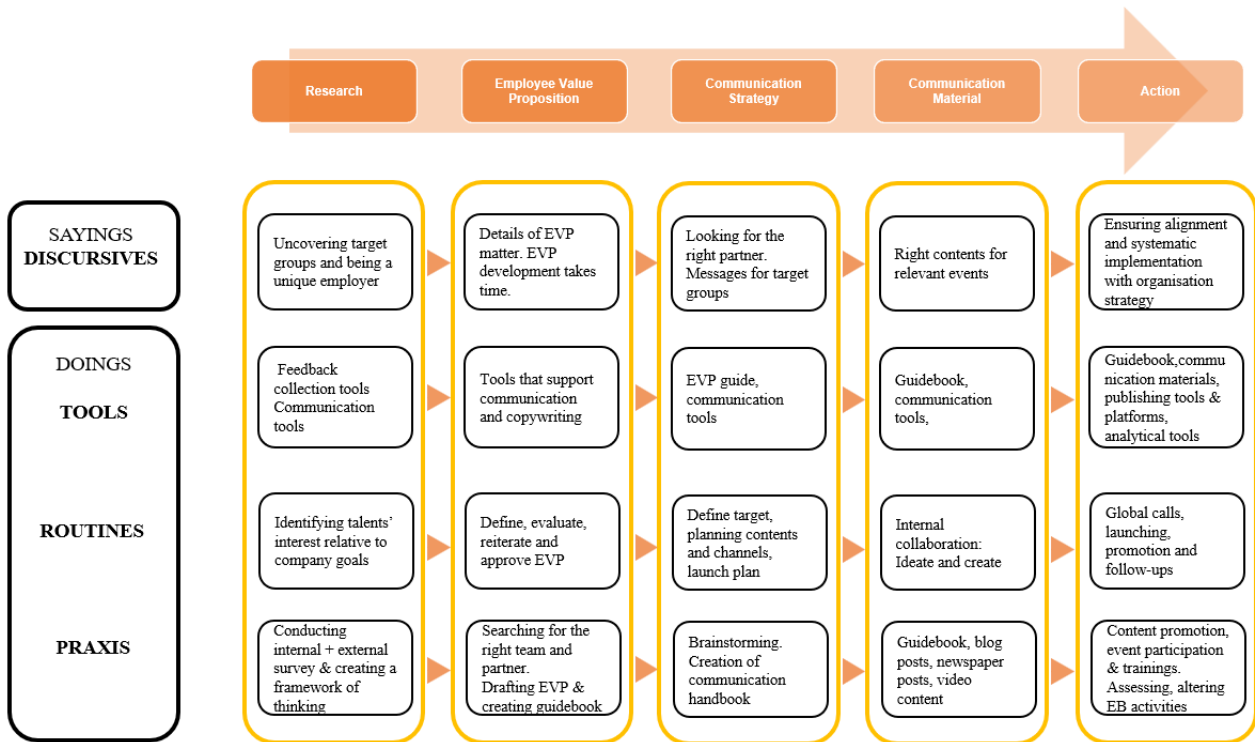
Figure 21. Employer branding practices of Multinational Technology Company 3.

During the within-case analysis, key highlights were taken into consideration and provided as evidence of practices with interview quotes from the various cases employed in this study to back up the data structure in section 3.4 (refer to figure 16) to further enhance the visibility of the emergence of data and how it means to the findings. The table below synthesises the key practices of employer branding by each individual case.

Table 10. Synthesis of the key practices of employer branding.

Practices	Multinational Technology Company 1	Consulting Firm 1	Multinational Technology Company 2	Consulting Firm 2	Multinational Technology Company 3
Determining employer image/narrative	*"The key important point is that we wanted the values to really relate to every employee working here"* VPS *"Then the thinking is that we need to create persona cards for that group, understand them really well, who they are, what they like, what they don't like, what are brands they follow and so forth."* Participant 1	*"Especially important for [your] employer branding strategy, you need to understand the talent market. [...] understand the company's visions, mission, goals, strategy, etc. You will not be able to make decisions just by 'I think this is like that' or 'I believe' [...]"* Interviewee 1	*"[the research] is very fruitful information for us to understand what kind of things in employers are important for them [employees]. So that we can think through that do we fit into those criteria and are there some things we can utilise somehow"* Interviewee 2	*"[The research] is everything. I would never do employer branding without at least some type of research. So first I would understand [...] the talent audiences that we want to attract especially. So, we need to understand what are the most business critical and hard to find categories. Still, many people don't really link the employee experience to employer branding and that's the key phase in successful research"* Interviewee 4	*"[...] We had specific questions about our values, teamwork, your own work development. It is extremely helpful."* Interviewee 5 *"We were thinking about what would be our most important target group, and we were also thinking about how we differentiate ourselves from many other employers who are also looking for talents. [...] What we were looking for whilst analysing the results was [...] what is the essence and the positive thing about working at [our firm]. [The research] strengthened how we already thought."* Interviewee 6
Strategy formation process	*"So we had these 18 experts and we asked them to bring that knowledge [data, research, expertise] into the workshops and that co-creation process. Our strategy is that we start integrating it [the EVP] as soon as possible and as many*	*"let's make sure that your EVP is not a repetition of your neighbours. We do [...] smaller group sessions with these big group of 30 people and we separate them maximum 10 people and we do exercises with them. We identify the overlaps, the gaps, and then we work from there. And ...*	*"We are building the employee value proposition and employer brand based on the new overall [corporate] brand. [...] I don't think you can fully separate the [corporate] brand from the employer brand. We have been discussing that we have a clear frame globally. We can say that*	*"What I always say to my clients is like [EVP is] ever evolving. [EVP creation] is an iterative process. [...] The communication strategy is filling the*	*"We created it [EVP] so that there is a main message, but it can be very nicely applied to address different target groups and different needs and situations"* Interviewee 6

channels and ways that we can." Participant 1 *"One thing that we are working on and doing in the Americas is teaming up with our marketing on conference in making sure that when we go to different conferences within the areas or within the regions that if there is an opportunity to sell [the company] as an employer that we can do that."* Participant 2 *"We have the Ambassador Group that we are now establishing [...] to speak the message of our employer branding strategy"* Participant 9	*we come to a point where ... we discuss... the overall topics that the EVP should be talking about."* Interviewee 1 *"The goal setting and the target groups are usually the ones that are really big on that sort of communication strategy creation. I think it's really important to be open minded to optimizing it. [...] If you see that something is really not resonating at all and that people are not getting it, make sure you highlight this."* Interviewee 3 *"These projects can last up to 6-7 months"* Interviewee 1	*these are the things that globally we want to have in a similar way everywhere. But at the same time, we also have the localisation and segmentation guidance."* Interviewee 8 *"So of course we all need to be aligned with the global strategy, but then it is up to countries to figure out that how does it fit for them and have some flexibility here and there so that they can use it as they see"* Interviewee 2 *"We have been training the employees and managers that these are the key messages and this is how you can for example, set up your social media accounts and start to promote in those channels and how you can get the message out"* Interviewee 8 *"If we combine the whole brand process, I will say we are looking between 9 to 12 months ..."* Interviewee 8	*blanks. [...] Usually, the most effective is when we get [internal] employees to take part in the activities. We implement the campaigns through meetups, seminars, conferences. Yeah, those can be or internal knowledge sharing events or external knowledge sharing events. It's a lot about trainings, arranging trainings and also individual sparring"* Interviewee 4 *I know that some big, big companies, [the employer branding process] can take a year"* Interviewee 4	*"It was definitely a collaboration. And then working systematically together to then come to a successful end result. Again I have attended the global marketing and communication meetings to encourage much collaboration with different parts of the organisation on the EVP topic as much as possible. [...] Social media has become more and more important that we had a joint training session to make it relevant as well"* Interviewee 5 *"There is no separate track. It is integrated into the [organisational] strategy process. It is very important to focus to build the employer brand but then is also the performance and whatever the*

				company does, affects it as well." Interviewee 6 *"When the work started and when the guidebook was done and we were ready to hand it for implementation, I think it was nine months"* Interviewee 5
Evaluation of outcomes	*"Of course, the number of applications per year. So we have a good talent pool, but we also want to focus on quality of the applicants."* Participant 9	*"So we have much more clear metrics. The return on investment from these campaigns is that you actually get those goals met and then the client starts to see more applications."* Interviewee 3	*"The external ones, of course we are looking at the recruitment KPI at the moment. Do we get more relevant candidates, and do we decrease the time to hire? And internally we have been following up, for example, these referrals that how much our people refer the people ..."* Interviewee 2	*"So we need to understand from the ATS the applicant tracking system like what are the sources of the leads and what's the quality of them. Not just random like applications, but highly relevant and qualified talent leads."* Interviewee 4	*"The Universum and other surveys is the way we evaluate them. When we get the results of the engagement survey, you do look at it [...]"* Interviewee 5 *"Then application volumes and application quality [...]"* Interviewee 7

4.2 Cross-case analysis

The preceding section introduced each individual case and discussed its employer branding strategy practices. Following the order of the preceding section (Research → Employee Value Proposition → Communication strategy → Communication Material → Action), this section will discuss the differences and similarities in the practices between the primary case and the secondary cases in connection with SAP and employer branding literature.

In general, the results of cross-case analysis can serve as an ideal model for employer branding practices in a multinational technology company.

4.2.1 Research

A successful employer brand has been the goal of all the individual cases. However, such a feat cannot be attained in the vacuum. Undoubtedly, adequate research is the root for the success of businesses. Same is the case when creating an EVP and/or an employer brand strategy. Without research, the EVP and the whole employer branding strategy would be based on assumption. The creation of an EVP and subsequently an employer branding strategy **demands understanding the experience of internal employees and employer perceptions by externals through research**. Although all the individual cases conducted research (a common praxis) or had some existing data prior to developing their EVPs and employer branding strategies, the degree of research differ considerably. More specifically, as the Multinational Technology Company 1's Narrative (corporate values) – which is the basis for the development of their EVP – was based on desktop research, only the aspirations of management were factored. In essence, internal employee experiences and external data of talents were missing. On the contrary, the secondary cases mentioned that prior to developing their EVPs, different types of research were conducted to identify the aspirations of management, the current employment experience, the employer image within and beyond the industry of operation, as well as the competitors who are competing for the same talents.

In short, the research conducted by the secondary cases (especially Consulting Firm 1 and Consulting Firm 2) managed to understand three key perspectives such as strategic perspectives, internal (employee) perspectives, and external (potential candidates and competitors) perspectives. This corresponds to the Mosley and Schmidt's (2017) suggestion that the

diagnostics prior to the creation of an EVP and subsequently an employer branding strategy must include 'employment experience', 'external perception', and 'competition' (p. 41, 42). It can be understood that the research conducted by the primary case company– herein Multinational Technology Company 1 – for their 'Narrative' fulfilled the strategic perspectives and fell short of the other two – a clear gap in this case. This may mean that an EVP created from only the aspirational source may lack grounded reality of employment experience and candidates' needs. Mosley and Schmidt (2017) argued that research that informs the creation of corporate values has potential for the creation of an EVP. However, an EVP built on research devoid of the elements of employee experience and external talents may not be able to stand the test of time. Therefore, having a dataset that addresses the three key perspectives is a proactive approach that enables the creation of an ideal, credible and resonant EVP. If not, a reactive approach may be required to finetune the EVP.

Agreeably, **knowledge of industry trends** was mentioned as a central tool when conducting research. This serves as an underlying support to asking the right questions to gather relevant data. Moreover, **tools that foster communication, data gathering, and analysis** is unanimous. In general, the routine for all the cases was **searching for drivers**. Critically, the primary case was in search of the drivers of corporate values whereas the secondary cases were searching for the drivers of talents' interests (perceptions) relative to corporate values.

4.2.2   Employee Value Proposition

When discussing about EVP development, there were mutual thoughts amongst all the cases about **authenticity and distinctiveness of EVP in alignment with corporate brand**. On top of that, all the cases view EVP as a long-term project. However, the most apparent difference between Multinational Technology Company 1 and the rest of the cases is the duration for the creation of the EVP. Contrary to the secondary cases who claim that EVP development takes between six months to a year and half, Multinational Technology Company 1 constructed its global EVP within five weeks. Gharsallah (2022) maintain that it can take up to one year to develop an EVP. In essence, **EVP development takes time**. This could mean that – as Mosley and Schmidt (2017) put it – Multinational Technology Company 1 fell into *"the common temptation to fast-forward to a new employe[e] value proposition"* after senior management has given the green light to invest in employer branding (p. 42).

It is imperative to note that taking a considerable time to develop an EVP ensures that all the key issues are addressed in the build up to a relevant and resonant EVP. From the interviews it was also revealed that redefining or redeveloping the EVP in a multinational company within three to five years is vital. This is consistent with Mosley's (2014) empirical findings that most employers revisit *"their EVPs every 4-5 years"* (p. 142).

Tools that support communication and copy writing are central for all the cases in the creation of the EVP. Indeed, communicating and documenting is a necessity when strategizing (creating an EVP). Aggerholm et al. (2011) postulate that communication has gone beyond being identified as a mere problem-solving tool to be seen as an essential part of an organisation's *"dialogical processes, complex discursive formations and interpretation of meaning among the organi[s]ational stakeholders"* (p. 106). In spite of that it is unsurprising per se to identify that (various) communication tools were mentioned by all the cases. As strategy tools are central to the strategy planning process, it can be drawn that communication and copy-writing tools are strategy tools that form an integral part of the EVP process (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009).

The most common routine amongst all the cases is the **collaborative** creation of the EVP**.** All the cases also observed weekly meetings. From a strategic management perspective – SAP specifically – the development of the EVP and creation of the employer branding strategy process across all the cases can be seen to alternate between deliberate and emergent processes. Mintzberg, Ahlstrand and Lampel (1998) assert that there is the need to mix deliberate and emergent strategies to *"exercise control while fostering learning"* (p.11). Undoubtedly, the interplay between deliberate and emergent processes is considered the best strategic approach in this ever-changing business environment and can be attained by virtue of collaboration (Bodwell & Chermack, 2010: Mintzberg & Walters, 1985). Multinational Technology Company 1 and Multinational Technology Company 2 observed **benchmarking** in their EVP development process. However, the rest of the cases did not mention that as a routine. Mosley and Schmidt (2017) propound that benchmarking competitors activity allows for comparative assessment and tailoring of EVP. Therefore, benchmarking is an essential routine in the process.

Team formation and **co-creation** is a common praxis amongst across all the cases when development the EVP. Although this study focusses on practices, the role of actors in the

process cannot be totally ignored. As SAP scholars put it, practitioners are the people who are constituents and shapers of strategy and without them it is impossible to conduct strategy work (Whittington, 2006; Piipponen, 2018). Same applies to EVP development and employer branding strategizing. Involving the right people in the process is pivotal to the creation of an ideal EVP and a successful employer branding strategy. All the cases involved representatives from HR, marketing and communication, and talent management. Although this is in line with Mosley's (2014) definition of key stakeholder groups for EVP creation, the scholar recommends the inclusion of line managers in the process (e.g., interviews, development workshops, validation meetings) (p.126). This corresponds to the view of Martin et al. (2011) who also suggest the inclusion of line managers in the process. Conversely, the inclusion of line managers in the process allows for the alignment of organisational processes and realities which further solidifies authenticity and dispels false promises. Aside from that Multinational Technology Company 3 involved a representative from their sustainability team. This follows Aggerholm et al.'s (2011) re-conceptualisation of employer branding stakeholder definition to include corporate social responsibility. This according to the theorists transforms employer branding *"into a sustainable and trustworthy value-creating process"* (Aggerholm et al., 2011, p. 107).

A common practice in organisations is that the core responsibility of employer branding is often left on the shoulders of HR. Bäckström (2022) argue that organisation – especially in Finland – treat employer branding as a subset in the job scope of HR and/or marketing. As a result, employer branding tasks are less prioritised. From a consultative perspective, Consulting Firm 1 recommend that having employees or a team (e.g., a global employer branding lead and local employer branding managers and/or specialists) dedicated solely for employer branding is an ideal way for an efficient and effective practice.

Another crucial difference in the praxis was the issue of testing the EVP. The primary case did not conduct a test on its EVP before finalising it. However, Consulting Firm 1 and Consulting Firm 2 mentioned the evaluation of EVP via focus groups (randomly selected employees) on their preliminary EVP drafts to validate resonance and finetune it if necessary. Mosley and Schmidt's (2017) described an unvalidated EVP as *"a pie-in-the-sky EVP"* (p. 79). Pawar and Charak's (2014) study and review of EVP highlight the need to test the EVP in the creation stage. Employee surveys may identify employees' experiences and motivations, but it is not sufficient to be a proof point to validate the credibility and appeal of an EVP (Mosley

and Schmidt, 2017). Indeed, an EVP devoid of evaluation may deliver false promises which will undermine the employer brand. Hence, **finetuning of the EVP** through testing the preliminary EVP draft with focus groups is an essential praxis that cannot be ignored. Additionally, three of the cases created an EVP guidebook after finalisation. The guidebook is an essential tool which enables a systematic implementation of the EVP across the organisation – especially for multinational corporation. Consequently, **producing an EVP guidebook** is crucial.

4.2.3   Communication Strategy

A common pattern in the discussion of the communication strategy for the employer brand were **flexibility and corporate brand alignment**. Often is the case that in multinational organisations, communication strategy for the EVP are on a higher level. Mosley (2014) emphasize that the core pillars of a global EVP must be translatable to the local level. Hence, flexibility is essential to adapt the communication to different target segments. Sanchez (1997) propound that strategic flexibility is required to readily respond to changing phenomena. This is achieved through *"planning approaches and allowing for locally emergent strategies"* for a spontaneous response (Sanchez, 1997, p. 81). Furthermore, the alignment of the communication strategy to the corporate brand was emphasised by all the cases. Mosley and Schmidt (2017) agree that the integration of employer brand and corporate brand brings consistency outcomes in terms of messaging and visuals. This breeds familiarity and trust, and in turn solidifies the brand (Mosley & Schmidt, 2017).

Similar to the EVP development phase, **tools that facilitate communication and copywriting** are essential for communication and documentation. Overall, the mutual routine in this stage is **collaborative strategy development** to define the communication of the EVP message (key selling points), contents to create, channels of reach, and scheduling plan. From the observation, Multinational Technology Company 1 did not define their social media strategy perhaps because talent personas were not (yet) defined. This leaves the process unstructured and may negatively affect the communication of the employer brand if the right medium of delivery is not identified for the right targeted audience. Mosley and Schmidt (2017) postulate that the media preferences of targeted talents (e.g., their social networks and where they consume news) should be well defined to enable a smooth mapping when strategizing.

Brainstorming can be seen to play a vital role in all the cases praxis-wise. When strategizing about the communication of the EVP, the teams collaborate to ideate on the key selling points relative to specified audience, the relevant contents and channels, as well as an editorial calendar. Whilst brainstorming, it is important to document it and **create a communication handbook**. This was mentioned by Multinational Technology Company 3 and Consulting Firm 1. The handbook serves as a guideline to enable consistency in the presentation and implementation of the employer branding strategy across the organisation. Moreover, it serves as a toolkit to ensure local adaptation (Mosley & Schmidt, 2017). Multinational Technology Company 1 neither formalised its communication strategy nor created a communication guidebook for its employer branding. This is a praxis that cannot be left out.

4.2.4 Communication Material

Obviously, the discussion about the creation of communication material(s) revealed similar thoughts centred around the **coherence of content material relative to specific theme** as well as **consistency with corporate brand**. Heilmann et al. (2013) stress on consistency of content materials with customer brands and corporate identity. Indeed, consistency is one of the traits of successful brands, and it requires a system or a clear framework that can synthesise both employer brand and corporate in visual designs (Mosley & Schmidt, 2017). As earlier mentioned, brand alignment when done successfully results in a consolidated brand image in the eyes of the targeted audience or the community.

When creating communication materials for employer branding, **tools that enable communication and content production** were seen as central. Although all the cases used different types of applications and softwares, all the tools served the common purpose of communication and content creation. With regards to routines, a shared behaviour in terms of **concept development, content creation, and review** can be identified in all the cases.

Content creation is a common praxis amongst all the cases. **Coherent content relative to the specified theme and channel** (in the form of text, image, video and many more) was emphasised strongly. Furthermore, the creation of videos centered around employees' experiences and the employment environment was highlighted. Employee videos estbalish authenticity and reality of the employment environment, and it has a huge impact on externals. Videos that are 1-2 minute long easily grabs attention (Mosley & Schmidt, 2017).

4.2.5   Action

The activation of the employer branding strategy in the secondary cases could be seen to fol-
low a clear (global) employer branding framework. This global framework is interlinked with
the corporate brand to ensure a common implementation with the overall organisational strat-
egy. In contrast, the primary case has no global employer branding framework to guide its
employer branding strategy activation in various locations. Perhaps this could be attributed to
the lack of a global employer branding strategy by Multinational Technology Company 1.
Without a global framework, implementation in the various localities becomes cumbersome
and may undermine consistency of the employer brand. Therefore, global employer branding
strategy as well as **a global framework of implementation** is required in this regard.

It could be identified that all the cases developed their strategies in an **incremental manner**
through learning and flexibility to be able to effect the required changes (when needed). It
was emphasised that whenever an implementation plan is not generating the intended out-
come, there is a possibility to alter it. This according to the Minzbergian view (notion of
emergence), is an adaptive process that intertwine formulation and implementation
(Mintzberg &Walters 1985). Indeed, strategy is a complex phenomenon consisting of in-
tended and unintended outcomes (Bakir & Bakir, 2006), and the emergent approach is ideal
in this phenomenon (Bodwell & Chermack, 2010). In view of these complexities, Kohtamäki
et. al (2020) call for managerial tools to cope with emergence. More so, the practices of the
cases support the assertion that organisations have become dynamic and emergent and no
longer cling to rigidity (Taylor and Van Every, 2000; Cheney et al., 2004; cited in Aggerholm
et al., 2011).

In this last stage, similar **tools** are **used for publishing and communication** purposes. From
the cases discussed, it could be noticed that all the cases used their intranet, career sites, and
social media platforms to publish and promote their EVP elements and employer branding
contents and activities. Survey tools are used to generate feedback from internal employees.
Aside that social media serves a multifaceted purpose to include analysing published contents
and/or activities since the channels provide data on the performances of published contents
and/or activities. It could be inferred that the similarity in the use of social media channels
such as Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn and Instagram in employer branding is conventional in

the multinational technology industry. Although Consulting Firm 1 and Consulting Firm 2 mentioned TikTok – a latest short-form video channel –, it seems the multinational technology companies are yet to adapt to it. The empirical setting signifies the important role of social media as a strategy tool. Despite its central role to the cases in this study, there seem to be no trace of social media's role as a strategy-making tool in strategy literature (Piipponen, 2018).

Facilitating the promotion of employer branding related contents and activities as well as **following-up of promotional activities** are an essential routine in all the cases. All the cases promote employer branding internally and externally. The discussion with the various cases revealed that constant communication is a necessity to ensure effective promotion.

All the cases activate their employer branding strategy through **implementation and evaluation**. Implementation concerns the use of different mechanisms to market the EVP and/or employer branding activities to internals and externals. This is realised through virtual platforms and physical events. A common practice in the implementation stage is event participation (e.g. career event, seminars, and many more) and publishing contents on company sites and social media. Furthermore, the importance of **employee advocacy** was strongly highlighted. Simply put, employee advocacy is a deliberate programme geared towards training existing employees to become ambassadors of the employer. In a sense, this mechanism reveals the true experiences of employees in the working environment, churns an authentic message and a serve as a source of attracting externals. As earlier stated, words from employees about their employer is believed three times more than what is communicated by senior management or through official marketing communication (LinkedIn Talent Solution, 2016). Consequently, it can be drawn that employee advocacy can be used as an avenue for prospective employees to properly assess the employee experience of a firm and aid their decision-making. The implementation of employee advocacy complements Moroko and Uncles' (2008) stance on using corporate product brands *"as a proxy for understanding employer brands"* (p. 167).

The other praxis, evaluation, analyses the performance of the implementations of the employer branding. All the cases mentioned the use of annual internal survey to assess the performance of the employer brand from existing employees. Moreover, employee referral, employee engagements and employee lifecycle are other means of evaluation. Externally, all the cases monitor their recruitment performance (e.g, application volume, application quality,

duration per hire), social media engagements, and external studies related to employer branding. With regards to the targeted impact after implementation, a similar goal by all the cases is attaining highly qualified leads or quality applicants.

Overall, it could be deduced that a **strong collaboration and engagement** across and beyond the organisation is paramount for a successful activation of the employer branding strategy. Leaving employer branding to only one department in an organisation is a dangerous mistake and tantamount to failure. HR, Marketing & Communications, Sales, and the business functions need to collaborate extensively for a systematic and consistent communication of the organisation as a corporate body and as an employer. Additionally, intensive engagement with existing employees in a dialogical process is required to align corporate values and behaviours. This will evoke strong emotional affinity, sense of belonging, and leads to employee commitment and loyalty (Minchington, 2007; Staniec & Kalińska-Kula, 2021).

In conclusion, it can be stated the practices of employer branding strategy in the primary case have many similarities in common with other multinational technology companies as well as the practices of the consulting firms featured in this study. However, the few gaps that were identified such as the degree of research data, testing the EVP, creating a global employer branding strategy and a guidebook are crucial and must be given the necessary attention to get the employer branding flourished. In general, the role of engagement is crucial in all stages of the employer branding strategy process as it reveals the priorities of senior management, the actual motivations and experience of existing employees, and the preferences and interests from externals in the research phase; fosters the creation of a relevant and resonant EVP for both internal and external stakeholders in the EVP stage; facilitate the creation of a coherent communication strategy and communication materials; and serve as an enabler for a successful implementation. The figure below presents the summary of the cross-case analysis.
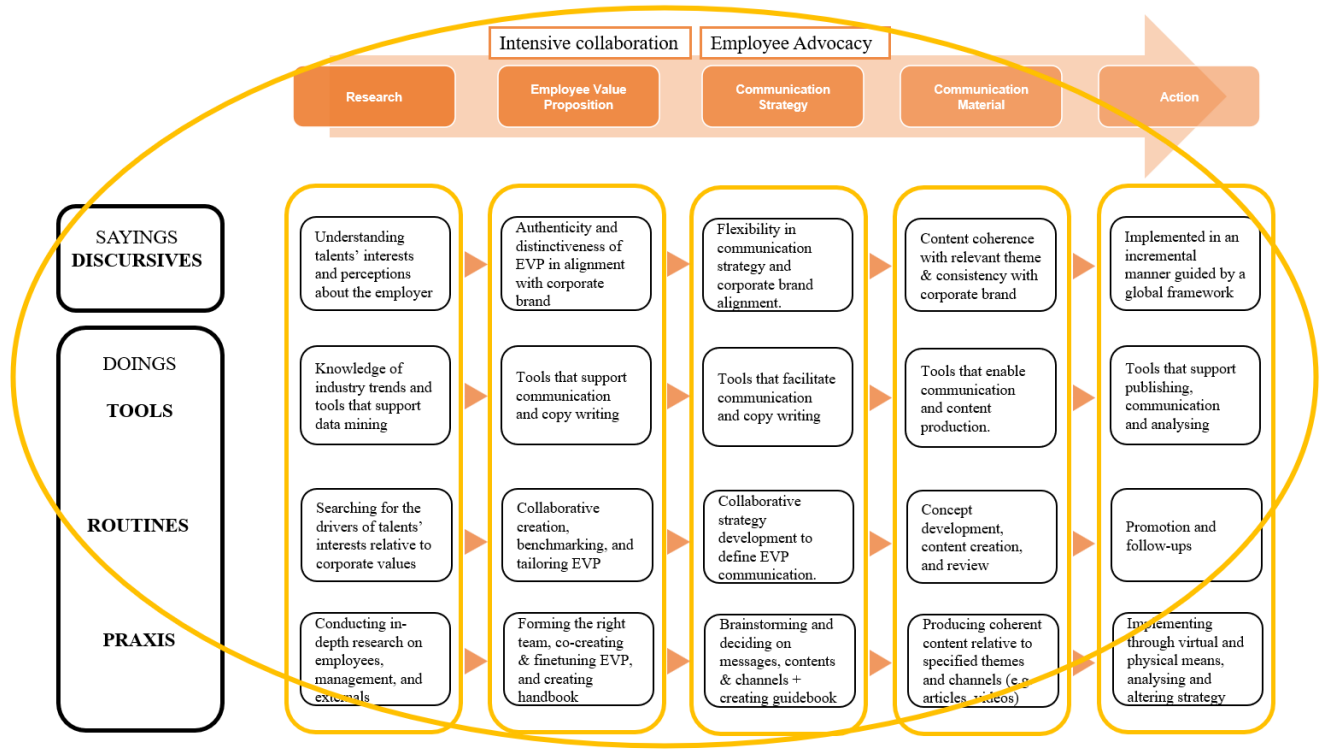
Figure 22. Formation of employer branding practices in a multinational technology company.

5   CONCLUSION

5.1   Theoretical implications

Employer branding has become an active practice in organisations, especially in multinational corporations due to the increasing war for qualified talents to survive in this disruptive employment era. By acquiring and retaining the best talents, this enables firms to sustain their competitive advantage (Berthon et al., 2005; Chhabra & Sharma, 2014; Staniec & Kalińska-Kula, 2021). In this regard, employer branding has become a *"licence to operate"* (Aggerholm et al., 2011, p. 106) and require significant attention. Previous literature on employer branding has examined employees (both current and prospective), employer brands management, motives and practices of employer branding, and attractiveness of employer brand (Mölk, 2018). Moreover, current studies on the subject matter has focused on outcomes rather than processes (Aggerholm et al., 2011). Despite that the literature that conceptualise the employer branding processes neglect the micro-level details in the employer branding work. Hence, the actual doings in the development and implementation processes of employer branding are less known.

The aim of this study has been to explore the practices involved in the formation of an employer branding strategy in a multinational technology company in a bid to shift the focus from *"predefined outcomes"* (Aggerholm et al., 2011, p. 118) to deepen the understanding of the processes. The thesis began with exploring the background and definition of employer branding. Subsequently, the characteristics (Moroko and Uncles 2008), benefits (Sullivan, 2004: Branham, 2001: Boxall, 2008: Heilmann et al., 2013: Berthon et al., 2005) and challenges of employer branding were treated (Backhaus, 2016: Moroko & Uncles, 2008: Maxwell & Knox, 2009). Afterwards, few employer branding process models (Backhaus & Tikoo,2004: Parment & Dyhre 2009: Bagienska 2018) were discussed and compared, and a five-step process model by Universum was selected. The steps in the model include research, employee value proposition, communication strategy, communication material, and action.

The practice perspectives of strategic management – herein SAP – was treated as it serves as a good lens to examine the practices in the formation of employer branding strategy from a practical approach. SAP is relevant for the employer branding process as it enhances the understanding of organisational actions and societal practices (Vaara & Whittington, 2012: Nini,

2016). The background and linkages of SAP (Kohtamäki et al., 2022; Vaara & Whittington, 2012: Whittington, 1996:2006), and the three elements of SAP – practices, praxis and practitioners – were discussed (Seidl & Whittington, 2014: Jarzabkowski et al., 2007a: Whittington 2006). Furthermore, HRM-as-practice was discussed as it serves as an interplay between HR literature and strategic management literature (Björkman et al., 2014). Afterwards, the employer branding literature and the SAP were synthesised. In this instance, the selected five-step process model was combined with the two main practice categories of discourse (sayings in discursive practices) and doing (tools or technologies, routines, and praxis). The combination creates a model used in analysing five different cases as well as making a cross-case analysis. In short, an in-depth multiple case study was used to unravel the processes of employer branding work by using saying and doings to map the development and implementation process (Kohtamäki et. al, 2021).

The findings of the study reveals a great deal of similarities in the practices as far as the formation of employer branding strategy is concerned although there are differences in the micro-level details that cannot be ignored. All the cases acknowledged the importance of research as a practice prior to creating an employer branding strategy. That said, there were differences between the primary case and the secondary cases regarding the depth of research that was conducted. Nonetheless, there is similar routine of searching for drivers with the support of industry knowledge. In addition, there exist a mutuality in the praxis of conducting internal and external research.

Creating an authentic and distinctive EVP in alignment with corporate brand (Mosley & Schmidt, 2017) is a mutual thought amongst all the cases when developing EVP. This corroborates the fact that EVP is a core component of an employer brand and the formulation of its strategy as it serves as the main differentiator of a company's employer brand and that of its competitors (Arasanmi & Krishna, 2019; Bagienska, 2018). More so, all the cases have a similar view that EVP is created for the long-term but needs to be revisited to stay relevant. However, the duration of EVP development was a clear difference between the primary case and the secondary cases. Collaborative strategy creation (Bodwell & Chermack, 2010: Mintzberg & Walters, 1985) of the EVP was seen as a mutual routine facilitated by communication and copywriting tools. In spite of that benchmarking (Mosley & Schmidt, 2017) during the development process was the difference amongst the cases. In general, the EVP stage identified similar praxes such as team formation and co-creation. However, the dissimilarity

lies in the testing and finetuning of the EVP. This is a requirement that cannot be skipped when the goal is to have an authentic EVP (Mosley & Schmidt, 2017).

Alternately, creating a flexible communication strategy (Mosley, 2014) for the employer brand in alignment with the corporate brand was a common pattern found in the third stage. Routine and tools in this stage is the same as the ones in the preceding phase. There lies a commonality in the praxes in terms of brainstorming on the messaging, contents to create, and the channels to use. The main difference is that the primary case did not formalise its communication strategy for the EVP. Another difference amongst the cases is the creation of a communication handbook (Mosley & Schmidt, 2017). The gaps mentioned in the praxes are crucial and must be given utmost attention.

Creating content material for employer branding purposes have similar thoughts centred around coherence and consistency (Mosley & Schmidt, 2017). The mutual routines – concept development, content creation, and review – brings the EVP to life with the support of communication and content production tools. It was interpreted that coherent content relative to the specified theme and channel is a requisite. The mutual praxes in the fourth stage is related to creating contents centred around employees' experiences and the employment environment.

Similar amongst all the cases, the employer branding strategy is seen to be activated in an incremental fashion (Mintzberg &Walters 1985). Notwithstanding, there is a clear difference between the primary case and the secondary cases with regards to implementing the employer branding strategy using a global framework. Tools used in the action stage support launching/publishing, promoting, and evaluating employer branding contents and/or activities as well as communicating with stakeholders. Routines-wise, facilitating the promotion and follow-ups of employer branding activities is mutual. The actual doing in the last stage is implementing the employer brand by marketing it to internal and external stakeholders and evaluating the performance. It was strongly interpreted that there is a strong need for employee advocacy to enable a successful promotion of the employer brand to externals. Moreover, social media is highlighted as the most important tool in promoting and analysing the performance of the EVP and employer brand. In addition, the need for a strong collaboration and engagement across and beyond the organisation was strongly highlighted. Indeed, there are

mutual patterns found between the primary case and the secondary cases. However, the gaps identified are less but crucial, and should be given considerable attention.

In summary, this thesis contributes to research in both employer branding and SAP. The research broadens the scope of the employer branding research field to include strategy-as-practice. As the first theoretical contribution, this research through the SAP approach adds a new perspective to the already existing literature of employer branding dominated by the marketing and human resource disciplines (e.g. Backhaus, 2016: Backhaus &Tikoo, 2004: Aggerholm et. al, 2011: Kaur & Sharma, 2015). More specifically, this thesis unwinds the micro-level details of employer branding process neglected by employer branding scholars by using the sayings and doings of practice theory in SAP to reflect and shape the employer branding journey (Kohtamäki et. al, 2021) and reaffirms that praxis and practices as interdependent and mutually constitutive (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). Moreover, three main topics of practices (determining employer image/narrative, strategy formation process, and evaluation of outcomes) which emerged from second order categories were identified from the connection between empirical data and both theories in this study.

On top of that, this study responds to the research gap in the less attention given to employer branding in the strategic management discipline raised by Mölk (2018), shifts the focus of employer branding research from outcomes to processes called by Aggerholm et al. (2011), and contribute directly to the studies on 'practices' in SAP (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009: Balogun & Johnson 2004, 2005; Laine and Vaara 2007; Samra-Fredericks 2003, 2005; Vaara et al. 2004: Vaara & Whittington, 2012). In this way, the scope of explanation of employer branding strategizing is widened (Vaara & Whittington, 2012).

Additionally, this study contributes to the emerging HRM-as-practice theory proposed by Björkman et al. (2014). Specifically, this work contribute to the intersection of practices and praxis lenses as it highlights the role of HR people in the execution of employer branding work. Furthermore, the exploratory analysis model proposed – comprising of the combination employer branding process and SAP – serves as a contribution to both employer branding and SAP theories as well as a gateway for further research. Overall, this study argues that merging of employer branding literature with SAP theory is an important way to enhance the understanding of the actions, interactions, and the flows of activity as well as the frameworks,

tools and technologies that shape employer branding work. Moreover the merging of both theories strengthen the links between theory and corporate reality.

5.2 Managerial implications

Employer branding is still considered an emerging approach for the acquisition and retention of highly qualified talents in this increasingly competitive employment environment. The findings in this study provides value for managers and especially for the primary case (Multinational Technology Company 1). The findings in the practices of employer branding strategy formation in a multinational technology company demonstrate that the creation of an ideal EVP and subsequently an employer branding strategy demands understanding the experiences of internal employees and employer perceptions, and this is acquired through in-depth research that fulfils the strategic (management) perspectives, internal (employees) perspectives, and external (potential candidates and competitors) perspectives (Mosley & Schmidt, 2017, p. 41-55). Since the primary case's research fulfils only one perspective, it is prudent to fulfil the other perspectives to ascertain the resonance of the EVP. More so, Multinational Technology Company 1 will need to have a global consensus as to the talent in need and to attract.

Secondly, EVP development takes time. The need to spend considerable length of time on an EVP development project ensures that all the critical processes that will bring better outcomes such as in-depth research, collaboration, and many more are exhausted. Furthermore, testing to finetune EVP in the development stage is often overlooked by many companies because they believe data from research is sufficient as a proof point. This is a deadly mistake that can render an EVP irrelevant. Multinational Technology Company 1 will need to test its EVP with focus groups to assess its authenticity and resonance (Mosley & Schmidt, 2017). This recommendation is applicable to all companies developing their EVPs.

Additionally, the role of actors in the EVP development stage was emphasised. The inclusion of line managers and selected regular employees that represent all part of the organisation (Aggerholm et al., 2011) – aside from the commonly known representatives from HR, talent acquisition, marketing & communication and branding – is crucial in the EVP development process. This strengthens the dialogical creation process that results in the development of an authentic and highly resonant EVP. Moreover, this changes the helicopter structure of

strategy development and make it more open, resulting in a more robust employer branding strategy bearing less rejections during implementation (Mölk, 2018). Furthermore, involving an external consultant when crafting EVP is recommended especially when the company does not have a team who have adequate knowledge, skills and experiences in EVP strategizing. Aside that, external consultants usually have sets of data which can be resourceful in the EVP development process.

Practicing employer branding as a multinational organisation requires consistent communication in all locales. Hence, creating a communication handbook and a global framework of implementation for employer branding purposes is important. This happens when the company creates a global employer branding framework.

The scope of employer branding tasks was highlighted in the findings. Management in multinational technology companies could strengthen the practice of employer branding by finding a dedicated and diverse team solely for employer branding. This could comprise of an employer branding global lead and local representatives. A dedicated team can prioritise all employer related tasks, which is key to effective and efficient practice. Furthermore, the practice of employer branding is not for a particular team but the entire organisation. Most especially, HR, Marketing & Communications, Sales, and the managers of the business functions need to collaborate extensively for a systematic and consistent communication of the organisation as a corporate entity and as an employer. Rightly put by Backhaus (2016), *"consistency in messaging, both internally and externally, results in a greater employee commitment of the overall brand"* (p.12).

Often when marketing employer branding, many organisations tend to concentrate much on external marketing and less on internal marketing. However, employer branding is not developed to only create a positive image to externals (Backhaus, 2016). Thus, less concentration on internal (employer) branding ultimately destabilises the employer brand. Before marketing a brand as an employer to externals, it is prudent to communicate it to existing employees. Internal employer branding has a positive impact on organisational identity and help shape the understanding of existing employees with regards to unique attributes of the organisation (Backhaus, 2016: Maxwell & Knox, 2009). As such, management could foster strong engagement with employees across the organisation to ensure delivery of employment promises, understanding employees' experiences and realities, as well as addressing other agendas

that will enhance retention (Mosley & Schmidt, 2017, p.122). Indeed, retention of internals preserves *"valuable, rare and inimitable human resources"* that leads to competitive advantage (App, Merk & Buttger, 2013: Backhaus 2016, p. 15). Furthermore, HR can leverage on employer branding to improve recruitment activities to enhance candidate experience which in turn impacts the employer image and brand.

It is imperative to note that employer branding require substantial investment in terms of money, time, and resources. Moreover, the impact of employer branding takes time. Hence, management could avoid high(er) expectations in the short term. The role of social media was emphasised in this study. Hence, considering a social media strategy in the employer branding work is important.

Overall, employer branding is an ever-evolving process because preferences of talents change over time. Due to this, a static employer image will become less appealing and perhaps become obsolete over time. Therefore, there is the need to revisit the EVP. For a multinational company, 3-5 years is a recommended period to revisit the development of the EVP (Mosley & Schmidt, 2017: Backhaus, 2016). Since multinational companies are prone to change management, it is important to adapt the employer branding message to match the current reality. This will build trust and prevent reputational damage (Backhaus, 2016).

5.3   Limitation and suggestions for future research

Due to the fierce competition for talents in the labour market, employer branding has become significant. Therefore, employer branding as an emerging field has a lot of potential. Most especially, its introduction to the strategic management discipline is relatively new. Hence, there are several opportunities for further research. This thesis explores the formation of employer branding practices in multinational technology companies using the SAP practice lenses. Similar studies could be conducted for small and medium-sized enterprises using the same analysis framework created in this study. This could be of assistance to comparing the practices between large firms and small and medium-sized enterprises. Moreover, as the cases employed in this study originate from only one country which is a limitation, further studies conducted in different countries could increase the understanding of the practices of employer branding in different locales. Alternatively, a study could be conducted using the lenses of practitioners and practices, or practitioners and praxis to explore the employer branding

strategizing process. These intersections (see Björkman et al., 2014) could give more insight on the actions and influences of actors and their practices in employer branding strategizing.

In addition, the study mentioned numerous social platforms to include TikTok. It was realised that the multinational technology companies are yet to utilise emerging social media channels. It would be interesting to study emerging social media platforms and their impact on employer branding marketing. Furthermore, investigating how employees make sense (drawing from Heidegger's sensemaking) of employer branding strategies could uncover and enhance employer branding best practices.

Another study could examine the coordination of how corporate strategy, business strategy and employer branding strategy is crafted. How does each of the process interrelate and varies? The resource-based view has been utilised in employer branding to support the claim of attaining competitive advantage through the retention of valuable, rare, and inimitable workforce. Likewise, the effects of dynamic capabilities on employer branding could be examined. This could give more insights into how the renewal and reconfiguration of a firm's resources can be a source of attraction and retention of employees. A study of a sort will further contribute to research in both employer branding and strategic management.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

Interviews questions for secondary **Multinational Technology Companies**

Name of case: Interviewee's position: Date of interview:

How did your employer branding journey start? How has its progress been?

Research

Prior to constructing your EB strategy did you conduct research? If yes, what informed the research?

What kind of research was conducted? Internal or external? What kind of analysis was done?

Which tools were used in conducting the research? What kind of routines did you have when researching?

How valuable was the research? What was the research used for?

Employee Value Proposition

How was your EVP developed? Who were involved in the development process?

What kinds of routines did you have when creating the EVP? Tools?

Is the EVP constructed on the global level same as the local level?

Communication Strategy

What kinds of processes are involved in the creation of the communication strategy?

What do you consider/emphasize in the communication strategy?

What kinds of routines were observed? Tools?

Is the communication strategy global or localised?

Communication Material

What kind of materials do you create for your EB campaign?

What do you factor in the creation of communications materials? What tools do you use?

What is done for internals? What is done for externals?

What kinds of routines are involved in the creation of communication materials?

Action

How do you implement the EB strategy?

What kind of routines do you observe in the EB strategy implementation process? Tools?

What is the role of employees, line managers, and others in the implementation process?

What has been the (targeted) impact after implementation? How do you monitor and evaluate the implementation?

Do you alter the EB strategy after evaluation?

APPENDIX 2

Interview questions for **Consulting Firms**

Name of case: Interviewee's position: Date of interview:

In a general perspective how will you describe an employer branding strategy process?

Research

Prior to constructing EB strategy do you conduct research? If yes, what informs the research?

What kind of research is conducted? Internal or external? What kind of analysis is done?

Which tools are used in conducting the research? What kind of routines do you have when researching?

How valuable was the research? What was the research used for?

Employee Value Proposition

How do you develop EVP? How involved are you in the EVP development process with your clients?

Who else are involved? What kinds of routines do you observed in the creation of the EVP? Tools?

Is the EVP constructed on the global level same as the local level?

Communication Strategy

What kinds of processes are involved in the creation of the communication strategy?

What do you consider/emphasize in the communication strategy?

What kinds of routines were observed? Tools?

Is the communication strategy global or localised?

Communication Material

What kind of materials do you create for your EB campaign?

What do you factor in the creation of communications materials? What tools do you use?

What is done for internals? What is done for externals?

What kinds of routines are involved in the creation of communication materials?

Action

How do you implement the EB strategy?

What kind of routines is observed in the EB strategy implementation process? Tools?

What is the role of employees, line managers, and others in the implementation process?

What has been the (targeted) impact after implementation? How do you monitor and evaluate the implementation?

Do you alter the EB strategy after evaluation?