Branding social work in employee assistance

A case study of occupational social workers’ branding for their employee assistance in Austria

by

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Abstract

At the core of this thesis lies the conception that branding theories might bear insights for individuals who aim to establish their professional existence outside of the area for which their profession grants them credibility. One group of such professionals was found in self-employed social workers who offer employee assistance to private corporations. They operate outside of what is widely acknowledged as the competence area of the social work profession, which would be publicly mandated welfare work.

The purpose of this study was to explore how social workers have branded their employee assistance and how companies perceive that service. Based on a case study and fifteen semi-structured interviews with professional social workers, company representatives, and other experts, this study examines which aspects of branding can be seen relevant for the characterised group of professionals. This study focused on brand awareness and brand associations to provide a not yet undertaken application of branding theories to the cases of occupational social workers in Austria.

The findings suggest that self-employed professionals manage their service category, their professional affiliation, and information that target groups have. Performing those branding activities, they should aim to be present in a limited reach, know the context for their service provision, and make the service personally relevant to the target group. The findings suggest they create this relevance, among others, by reframing needs which target groups recognised.

This thesis’ adds a new framework to the literature. It shows factors that were found relevant to the branding of social-work-based employee assistance in Austria and will support practitioners and scholars when analysing similar cases.

Keywords: professional service branding, occupational social work, employee assistance, brand image, self-employment
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<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BBS</td>
<td>German professional association of occupational social work (Bundesfachverband Betriebliche Sozialarbeit)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CH</td>
<td>corporate health</td>
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<tr>
<td>CHM</td>
<td>corporate health management</td>
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<td>CSR</td>
<td>corporate social responsibility</td>
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<td>EA</td>
<td>employee assistance</td>
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<td>EAP</td>
<td>employee assistance programmes</td>
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<td>HR</td>
<td>human resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>HRM</td>
<td>human resource management</td>
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<tr>
<td>IFSW</td>
<td>International Federation of Social Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBDS</td>
<td>Austrian professional association of social work (Österreichischer Berufsverband der Sozialen Arbeit)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OGSA</td>
<td>Austrian society of social work (Österreichische Gesellschaft für Soziale Arbeit)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ROI</td>
<td>return of investment</td>
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## List of translations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>German</strong></th>
<th><strong>English</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sozialarbeit; soziale Arbeit</td>
<td>social work</td>
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<tr>
<td>SozialarbeiterIn; sozialarbeiterisch</td>
<td>social worker; social-work-based</td>
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<td>Handlungsfelder</td>
<td>fields</td>
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<tr>
<td>Betriebliche Sozialarbeit; betriebliche soziale Arbeit</td>
<td>occupational social work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitarbeiterunterstützung</td>
<td>employee assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitarbeiterunterstützungsangebote</td>
<td>employee assistance offers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>betriebliche Sozialberatung</td>
<td>social counselling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>betriebliche Gesundheitsförderung</td>
<td>workplace health promotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betriebsrat</td>
<td>staff representative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betriebsvereinbarung</td>
<td>works agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selbständigkeit</td>
<td>self-employment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gewerbeberrechtigung</td>
<td>business licence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(früher Gewerbeschein)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Gewerbeordnung</td>
<td>order of trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reglementierte Gewerbe; freie Gewerbe; freie Berufe</td>
<td>regulated trades; non-regulated trades; liberal professions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebens- und SozialberaterIn</td>
<td>counsellor</td>
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<tr>
<td>UnternehmensberaterIn</td>
<td>management consultant</td>
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1 Introduction

“[Occupational social work] identifies problems in the areas of economic, social and health problems of individuals, families and groups of workers [sic], helps to solve problems of the clients and promotes mutual commitment between the workers [sic] and the organisation.”

(Bargal, 1983, p. 37)

1.1 Background

At the core of professions lies their competence (Mulder, 2014). They integrate knowledge and skills (Lumina Foundation, 2015; Markauskaite & Goodyear, 2014) and grant their members credibility for deploying their competence to certain fields and topics. Like brands, they allow customers, clients, or patients to know what to expect.

In most cases, one has good reason to consult a member of a known profession with a given problem. Just think of toothache, for instance. It might not be the most fitting example, but consider it for a moment.¹ Knowing that there are professionals who have been specially trained to solve that kind of problem turns the need of pain release into the want for dental specialist treatment without further ado. Moreover, with the legal consolidation that some professions have established, the toothache example becomes a case for a licensed dentist. Professional affiliations or licenses have become a label one trusts for solving a specific area of problems.

Established professions had to convince of their expertise and suitability to solve problems in those specific areas. Professions’ historical remit is, however, also a limit to their contribution to other fields to which their expertise may be relevant as well. Returning to the first example, one might agree that the competence of professionals is not perceived universal, and it could cost some effort to understand why a licensed dentist should, hypothetically, attempt to establish himself or herself with counselling on speech impediment. Without taking this analogy too far or offending colleagues from speech therapy, could one not expect that those

¹ The reader should be careful not to take this example literally because the researcher has little knowledge on dental problems. The example should solely illustrate the character of perceived professional competence.
dental professionals might contribute their expertise on oral cavities and tooth positions to a problem not evidently related to their profession’s core working area?

In such cases, it becomes evident that not only entire professions but also individuals have to prove competent in front of the public, employers, and customers; earning their trust. Professionals are challenged to convince of their problem-solving capacity outside of their professions’ core working area, which is a venture that shares features with brand extensions. As part of those efforts, unconventional professionals are likely to explain to others how they see their skills relevant to the problem in question. They might find help for those explanations by turning to the employability line of thought, which has attempted to teach professionals to communicate the transferrable value of their skills.

In the employability line of thought, professionals would find scholars to acknowledge that defining, measuring, and naming skills can be challenging (PCRN, n.d.). Although it is challenging to communicate skills, it becomes increasingly important. Furthermore, as the value of professional labels decreases due to broader access to higher education, the ability to communicate skills might be a critical means of differentiation in the knowledge-intensive service economy (Brown, Hesketh & Williams, 2004).

Another considerable challenge that arises with the attempt to extend professional credibility to other fields can be seen in the professions already established in those. Some professions have made their case convincing to such a high degree that certain problem areas are placed firmly in their hand; institutionalising or consolidating their competence. Several scholars have published contested critique on the exclusiveness of professions such as medicine or law (Berlant, 1975; Eliott, 1972; Johnson, 1972; Rigertas, 2014). It can be presumed that the upside of some professional groups has led to the downside of others who failed to convince of their problem-solving capacity in those areas.

Economically, the underutilisation of capacities of some groups withholds potential benefits from communities. Those withheld potentials could potentially sum up to a welfare loss, which should be avoided for communities to thrive. One example for such underutilisation could be the attempt of social work – a practice-based profession – to establish itself in employee assistance (referred to as EA in this thesis) in Austria.

### 1.2 Problem statement

Self-employed social workers who offer EA to private corporations operate outside of the perceived core working area of their profession, which would be publicly mandated welfare work and partly or wholly state-funded. Those unconventional professionals who focus on “work, workers, and work organisations” (Kurzman, 2008) are referred to as occupational social workers. Taking a multi-partial and advisory role, and working according to methodical and ethical principles of their profession, occupational social workers are convinced of their contribution to work results and the wellbeing of staff (AvenirSocial, 2014; Engler, n.d.).
However, the low utilisation of the competencies of professional social workers in EA (Wachter, 2011) might suggest that the Austrian social work profession has failed to effectively communicate the essential contribution of their professional knowledge and skills to assisting employees. Communicating these qualities can, to some extent, be seen in the responsibility of individual social workers. As self-employed individuals, they are the managers of their one-person businesses. They are two-fold service providers: the enabling organisations and the front-line counsellors in one person. Many of the roles they have to perform to sustain their businesses are closely linked to marketing, as Gummesson (1991) pointed out. Indeed, they are part-time marketers concerned with questions of marketing while juggling their other responsibilities in management, service development, service provision, and finance.

One viewpoint for understanding what led to the low utilisation of social-work-based EA and what could be done to break through the misconception of historical remit is branding. Associated with marketing, branding is understood to work systematically with brand knowledge to increase awareness and influence associations to which a brand is linked. A fruitful analogy to the problem of professional misconception might be found in brand extensions; being strategic ventures of extending brands into new areas (Young, 2005). According to Young (2005), a professional service brand extension succeeds if the suggested relevance of its approaches to a field becomes acknowledged. Her description matches substantially with what social work had attempted and has, so far, failed to achieve in the occupational field in Austria.

Therefore, this study traces how social workers brand their EA. By doing so, it responds to the suggestion from Gilschwert (2012) that further research on Austrian occupational social work should focus on its marketing; a call that, to the knowledge of the researcher, has not been answered yet. Moreover, branding concepts and the analogy of a brand extension have not yet been applied to the problem at hand. Overall, the social work discipline’s research provides social workers with little indications on how to overcome the many challenges they face in the occupational field. This thesis is, first and foremost, dedicated to them; searching for a fruitful combination of already existing knowledge and collected empirical data. By contributing to the sparsely researched, occupational field in Austrian social work, this study will potentially contribute to social workers’ and social work students’ awareness of EA.

1.3 Research purpose

This study explores how social workers have branded their employee assistance and how companies perceive their service. It examines which aspects of branding are relevant for self-employed professionals who operate outside of the perceived core working area of their profession.
1.4 Research questions

Which factors should be considered when branding social-work-based EA in Austria?

- How have self-employed, professional social workers in Austria branded their EA?
- How do representatives whose companies do currently use social-work-based EA perceive that service?
- How do representatives whose companies do not currently use social-work-based EA evaluate the potential contribution of that service?

1.5 Delimitations

In the context of this thesis, the dimension of branding which concerns itself with the mind of target customers is singled out, and the behavioural and economical brand dimensions are neglected. Based on the brand value creation model from Anselmsson and Bondesson (2017), it is briefly noted that brand value creation combines all three of those dimensions in a logical sequence (see chapter 2.2). Close attention is, however, only given to the first step of their model; being brand image. Behavioural and economic aspects would have, by far, exceeded the scope of this thesis.

A focus on brand awareness (see chapter 2.2.1) and brand associations (see chapter 2.2.2) seemed reasonable for a first insight into the branding of social-work-based EA because an initial review of available sources indicated that the topic was at its very beginning. Following Anselmsson and Bondesson (2017), widespread brand awareness and favourable brand associations can be anticipated to have a behavioural and economic impact, but are not further elaborated. Anticipated impacts might, for instance, involve a growing demand or an intensified willingness of target customers to pay price premiums.

Some references are made to current discussions in occupational social work, i.e. on the suitability of the term ‘employee assistance programme’ (referred to as EAP in this thesis) for the social work profession (see chapter 4.2.3). Even though this critical wording issue is touched upon from a branding perspective, the implications regarding the profession’s theoretical foundations are not elaborated. Overall, the presentation of social-work-specific topics is limited to an introduction to the profession and an analysis of the context for social-work-based EA (see chapter 4). The critical evaluation of the findings from a social work perspective is left to other scholars.
1.6 Outline of the thesis

This thesis is divided into six chapters. Following the introduction, chapter 2 presents a theoretical framework based on literature from marketing and branding. It briefly introduces marketing fundamentals in their relation to branding and addresses brand awareness and brand associations as the first step of the brand value creation process. The chapter concludes with two illustrations, one of which is a preliminary framework on the factors identified as relevant for professional service branding.

Chapter 3 explains the research design, methods, and material that were used as well as participants who contributed to this study. Chapter 4 introduces the context for occupational social work in Austria by drawing on the writing of social work and EA scholars. Chapter 5, then, proceeds to individually introduce the cases used in this study and, subsequently, presents cross-case analyses. The chapter concludes these analyses with a framework on the branding of social-work-based employee assistance.

Chapter 6 continues by answering the research questions and summarising this study’s findings. The chapter, then, discusses the contributions of the developed framework to the literature and briefly indicates implications of the empirical findings for self-employed professionals who operate outside of the perceived core working area of their profession. Finally, it critically evaluates the methodical process, states the limitations of this study, and gives suggestions for further research.
2 Theoretical framework

“Formally and informally, people and organizations engage in a vast number of activities we can call marketing.”
(Kotler & Keller, 2016, p. 25)

2.1 Branding and marketing

Marketing activities might all be connected to ensuring a sufficient demand of what organisations wish to sell, but – at their core – they are more about “identifying and meeting human and social needs” (Kotler & Keller, 2016, p. 27) profitably. Building on the management scholar Drucker (1973), Kotler and Keller (2016) saw selling only at the “tip of the marketing iceberg” (p. 27). They stated that marketing should almost make selling redundant by making something available that fit the customer’s needs perfectly, which makes marketing a “terribly misunderstood subject” (Kotler, 2003, p. xi). Phrased differently, marketing means finding and catering to target customers’ needs. Doing so may direct their wants to the object a company has to offer. Combined with the ability to pay, customers will demand the object (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Kotler (2003) also stated that marketing paved the way for competing “on bases other than price” (p. xi), which would become paramount in times of overcapacity.

Furthermore, Kotler and Keller (2016) defined marketing management around “creating, delivering, and communicating superior customer value” (p. 27), which eventually leads to a growing customer base in a chosen target market and made Kotler (2003) refer to marketing humorously as an organisation’s “customer manufacturing department” (p. xi). Kotler and Keller (2016) did not only believe that organisations relied on marketing for financial success but stated that its “value extends to society as a whole” (p. 25). According to the authors, marketing would facilitate the diffusion of innovation, create jobs, save buyers search and transaction effort, and free up organisations to engage in activities of corporate social responsibility (referred to as CSR in this thesis).

Kotler and Keller (2016) referred to branding as an integral part of marketing and its management. Levy and Bastos (2012) even called branding “a form of marketing” (p. 349). However, some branding scholars, like Kapferer (2012), separated branding from marketing insofar as they commonly referred to marketing as an implementing and more short-sighted concept than branding. Other scholars, like Aaker, Stahl, and Stöckle (2015), did not necessarily see the two conceptually integrated but called for a pragmatic reintegration of branding, marketing, and other concepts under a holistic customer experience management;
arguing that a fragmentation in multiple organisational departments – and the accompanying risk of silos (Aaker, 2008) – would impede a consistent brand message.

Furthermore, and even though branding has existed parallelly to marketing for a long time, marketing research has contributed significantly to its advancement (Levy & Bastos, 2012) and a connection between the two is undisputed. Therefore, and especially drawing on the understanding of Kotler and Keller (2016), branding has been conceptualised as an integral part of marketing management and a duty of the part-time marketer (Gummesson, 1991) in this thesis.

According to Levy and Bastos (2012), a brand is both a sign and a symbol; a form of naming or denoting something that evolves further and starts implying ideas and connotations. In more economic terms, Kottler and Keller (2016) described that brands would put a familiar face on an organisation’s offering; with the latter being a physical representation of an intangible value proposition. “A brand is a storehouse of trust”, a chairman of Unilever (Fitzgerald in Kotler, 2003, p. 9) observed. As choices increase, people would draw to what is familiar and with what they identify. Recently, brands have evolved into “a complex entity that is multi-dimensional and multi-functional” (Levy & Bastos, 2012, p. 347); influenced not only by their creators but by their customers and several other actors.

Branding, thus, means working systematically with brand knowledge to increase the level of awareness for the brand and influence the set of associations the brand is linked to in customers’ minds (Keller, 1998). Following Keller (1998), “branding involves attaching a ‘label’ (for identification) and ‘meaning’ (for understanding) to a product, service, person, [or] idea”. That is to say, marketers are challenged to attach those to brands by managing brand knowledge throughout all points of contact that customers have with brands (Kapferer, 2012).

A brand extension, which was used as an analogy for the research problem, is a strategic venture to extend a brand to new fields or categories (Young, 2005). According to Young (2005), a professional service brand extension succeeds if the suggested relevance of its approaches to a field becomes acknowledged. The author argued that most service brands grew predominantly through an increased reach because the extension to new areas required much effort and a comprehensive strategy. Likewise, Kotler (2003) regarded brand extensions as risky and arduous undertakings. He saw the better choice in establishing a new brand name rather than carrying a brand name “and all of its baggage” (p. 12) to a new field. Beside its disadvantages, Kotler and Keller (2016), however, believed that brand extensions could also benefit a parent brand through renewed interest, and “help to clarify the meaning of a brand and its core values” (p. 348) through feedback effects.

2.2 Brand value creation

Even though there is a widespread recognition that brands are a valuable asset to companies, many opinions exist on how the different components of brands work together in creating value, and how this value creation can be strengthened, altered, or quantified. Keller (2013),
for example, saw brand awareness and brand associations as the two primary sources of brand equity. Emphasising the mental images of customers, he argued that “customer-based brand equity occurs when the customer has a high level of awareness and familiarity with the brand and holds some strong, favourable, and unique brand associations in memory” (p. 73). On the other hand, Kotler (2003) was dissatisfied with companies who used brand awareness as the sole criterion for the effectiveness of their branding activities and, hence, suggested a set of measures around customer behaviour. Anselmsson and Bondesson (2017) argued that many companies who owned strong brands had only a shallow understanding of how those contributed to their success or had become strong at first.

On this backdrop, the brand value chain from Anselmsson and Bondesson (2017) is a notable example of a brand equity framework. Their framework includes the aspects that Keller (2013) and Kotler (2003) acknowledged, but arranges them conceptually in a way that does not overemphasise one or the other. Moreover, it illustrates that brand image, brand strength, and brand value link into one another in a logical sequence (see figure 1).

![Figure 1: Brand value chain (adapted from Anselmsson & Bondesson, 2017, p. 67)](image)

According to Anselmsson and Bondesson (2017), customers’ awareness of a brand and the associations that they link to it (brand image\(^2\)) have a behavioural impact (brand strength). That is to say, their internal image might give rise to attitudes, intentions, or behaviour; preferably to the willingness to buy (volume premium) and to pay more than for other brands (price premium). Finally, customer behaviour will be reflected in revenues (brand value). The most accurate method to determine the financial value of a brand is, however, still at issue (Anselmsson & Bondesson, 2017).

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\(^2\) Whenever a term mentioned in the text directly refers to a figure or table, it is set in *italics*. 
Applying a similar model from Kotler and Keller (2016), it could be argued that there are three multipliers needed to pass through the three steps of the brand value chain. Progressing from the soft aspects (i.e. image and emotions) to hard facts (i.e. revenues and market share), the marketing programmes must, firstly, succeed to affect the brand image (programme multiplier). Secondly, the enhanced brand image should affect customers’ behaviour and brand performance (customer multiplier). Finally, the market performance of the brand should be reflected in shareholder value, which partly depends on investors (market multiplier).

As was stated in chapter 1.5 and is marked in figure 1, this thesis focuses on brand image and its corresponding programme multiplier.

### 2.2.1 Brand awareness

For customers to be aware of a brand, they need to recognise the brand when they see it and be able to recall it from memory when thinking of a specific product category, a need to be fulfilled, or a purchase situation (Keller, 2013). Depending on the context of purchase decisions, one or the other aspect becomes more important. Keller (2013), however, pointed out that brand recognition would come more easily to customers. The author believed that customers would need to actively seek out service providers when appropriate, which puts brand recall to the fore of service branding.

Keller (2013) suggested repeated exposure to any of the brand’s elements to increase the recognition of and familiarity with a brand. A brand should make its presence felt. Such presence is, however, already difficult to establish as a newly started or small-scale company (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Increasing brand recall from memory proves even more difficult than brand recognition because linkages must be created between the brand and appropriate product categories. Instead of mere exposure, this can be done through a slogan which, ideally, also points to other elements and the brand’s positioning (Keller, 2013). According to Keller (2013), the complexity in establishing brand recall from memory would, hence, pose an additional challenge on service brands.

Apart from brand recognition and brand recall, brand awareness is understood to be a node for future brand associations. The node should increase the probability that a brand becomes part of a consideration set for purchase, and is, in case there is a lack of further associations to any brands in the consideration set, itself an essential factor in the purchase decision (Keller, 2013). Aaker (2011), however, argued that brand awareness alone would not have an automatic behavioural impact. Instead, a brand must either also gain brand preference among the considered choices or create brand relevance by changing the way considerations are done in the first place, as is illustrated below (see figure 2).
Aaker (2011) strongly recommended marketers to start their branding efforts from brand relevance and create new categories in which their brands could flourish with little competition. If customers selected a category that had been created and was dominated by a particular brand owner, many competing brands might not be considered relevant at all. Those might be neglected in the consideration set because they are less credible and visible in that specific context (Aaker, 2011). Brand relevance is insofar a component of brand awareness as it links into the recalling process outlined above. To successfully apply the brand relevance approach by Aaker (2011), customers must be able to recall the new categories and the relevance of the brand within it.

Kapferer (2012) added that brand awareness would not merely be an individual phenomenon, even though it is commonly measured at the individual level. Instead, he argued that there would be a collective reality to it where people knew that other people were aware of the brand as well; leading to behavioural effects. He saw the value creation of brand awareness in the point where it correlated with brand associations; referring to which as the halo effect. Applied to brands, this psychological effect entails that merely knowing about a brand influences “consumer’s perceptions of the product advantages beyond what the visible cues had themselves indicated” (p. 38); with one association giving rise to another possibly unrelated one.

This knowledge is, however, far easier said than created. To that end, branding often first concentrates on brand awareness and subsequently on developing brand associations (Kotler & Keller, 2016).
2.2.2 Brand associations and identity

A brand has both tangible and intangible aspects. According to Mercer (2010), a brand’s identity, associations, and personality are its most essential intangibles. If brand communication succeeds and those intangibles turn out favourably, Kapferer (2012) promised that brand “associations are the source of emotional ties, beyond product satisfaction” (p. 39). Before going deeper into brand associations, those need to be delimited from another already mentioned brand concept: brand identity. A brand’s identity and image are distinguished by their viewpoints. The brand image refers to how a particular group perceives the brand, while the brand identity specifies “the brand’s meaning, aim, and self-image” (Kapferer, 2012, p. 151). Brand identity, therefore, sets boundaries to the management of a brand. Kapferer (2012) illustrated the distinction as follows (see figure 3).

![Figure 3: Identity and image (adapted from Kapferer, 2012, p. 152)]

The model on brand identity and brand image (see figure 3) appears to be based on a general communication system, as it was already used by Shannon and Weaver (1949) much earlier. The two models share a sender and receiver side, a message to be transmitted, and unwanted additions called noise. Kapferer (2012) argued that brand identity is a projected image of what a company wants to communicate, which they transmit through signals. The brand image, on the other hand, is “both the result and interpretation thereof” (Mercer, 2010, p. 151). The model of Kapferer (2012) points towards potential interferences that might contribute to inconsistencies between a brand’s identity and image; necessitating brand owners to think ahead, tailor their messages, and react to noise.

According to Kapferer (2012), three such interferences could be that a brand is willingly or unwillingly imitative or opportunistic, or that its brand communication is “too remotely connected [or] radically disconnected” (p. 152) from the brand. In those cases, the brand identity might be perceived inauthentic and, thus, be rejected. The risk of being perceived opportunistic is closely linked to the question of how coherent a brand must be. On that matter, Kapferer (2012) argued that every brand needed a clear sense of identity “for the brand meaning to be reinforced by repetition” (p. 243). He, however, conceded that external dynamics would eventually require brands to act flexibly and that brand management would need to oscillate between coherence and diversity.
To not compromise too far and, thus, lose customers’ trust, Kapferer (2012) suggested differentiating kernel facets of the brand identity from peripheral facets and, consequently, negotiables from non-negotiables. Only a few attributes “that are necessary for the brand to remain itself” (p. 243) belong to the kernel and should, for new brands, be decided, documented, built consistently among all brand elements, and promoted inside as well as outside the company. Kapferer (2012) recommended not to keep those kernel attributes – also called core values – generic of the category in which the brand positioned itself. Unless, though, the brand had created the category and was a prototype for the same. As was mentioned earlier, a brand extension might also help to clarify the core values of a brand (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Brand managers utilise several brand elements to make a brand’s identity known. Those include, above all, the brand name, and extend to “logos, symbols, characters, packaging and slogans” (Keller, 2013, p. 59). According to Keller (2013), brand associations would be more beneficial for a brand’s equity, the stronger, more favourable, and more unique they were in customers’ minds. To improve the same, the author recommended marketers to do the following.

- strength of brand associations → create personal relevance and present the brand consistently; prefer direct experiences and word-of-mouth as they have the most substantial influence; use advertising subordinately and aim to cause customers to elaborate
- favourability of brand associations → convince customers that the brand is relevant to satisfy their needs and wants
- uniqueness of brand associations → show customers, implicitly or explicitly, the competitive advantage or unique selling proposition of the brand

As was mentioned earlier, the halo effect creates associations beyond what the brand itself had indicated. Keller (2013) referred to the results of this effect as secondary associations, which he saw as having great potential to leverage. To not leave them to chance, he suggested linking the brand to source factors that themselves had existing associations, i.e. a company, geographical regions, channels, other brands, characters, spokespersons, or events. The created links would make customers infer similarities and make the brand benefit from the transmittance of seemingly shared associations. Even though brand associations should be linked to a product category as secure as possible for optimum brand recall, marketers need to be aware that associations from the product category and other brands in the same would be transferred to the brand itself (Keller, 2013).

Therefore, it should be carefully chosen in which categories a brand should be positioned. A brand’s positioning is a dimension that appears both in its brand identity and brand image (Kapferer, 2012). According to Kotler and Keller (2016), positioning is the act of designing an offering and image to occupy a distinctive place in the minds” of target groups. The distinctive place should maximise the benefit for the brand. Brand managers can establish a positioning through points-of-difference and points-of-parity towards competitors in their chosen category (Kotler & Keller, 2016). That is to say, a positioning always contains a comparative element to other brands in the frame of reference.
Regarding service brands, Grönroos (1984) pointed out that the impact of traditional marketing activities on brand associations should not be overrated, especially regarding existing customers. Instead, he saw image mainly as a “result of the perceived service” (p. 42). For a service to be perceived of high quality, the promises made by marketing communication must be fulfilled and should, therefore, not be unrealistic. Likewise, Kotler (2003) concluded that brands could not be advertised, but must be lived. According to the author, marketing communication might create attention and interest, but the trust and favourable associations that belonged to a great brand would result from brand experiences which fulfilled brand promises.

**Brand personality**

As part of the brand image in the minds of the customers, brands “may take on personality traits or human values” (Keller, 2013, p. 116). According to Aaker, Stahl, and Stöckle (2015), this anthropomorphism has the potential to support the value proposition, underpin a brand’s credibility, and give meaning. Keller (2013) suggested that a brand’s personality comprises five dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. A brand’s personality can be inferred through any aspect or element of a brand and proves long-lasting.

In the context of professional service brands, the dimension of competence is seen particularly relevant. According to Lusch and Vargo (2004), service value is co-created in the meeting of a provider and a user. The front-line provider should, therefore, be perceived competent in the interaction; becoming the instrument for brand experience. In their ground-breaking article on a service-based logic for marketing, Lusch and Vargo (2004) saw the new unit of economic exchange in “the application of competences, or specialized human knowledge and skills, for and to the benefit of the receiver” (p. 15). They believed services would supersede tangible goods as the primary unit of exchange, even in producing industries. How much more relevant can their description of the crucial role of competencies, therefore, be seen for service-based companies.

It might be that not-for-profit brands are at a disadvantage in the competence dimension of their brand personality. A striking finding from Aaker (1997) suggested that customers perceived not-for-profit organisations as less competent than for-profit organisations, which resulted in a reluctance to do business with the former. Those concerns, however, disappeared when a credible entity endorsed the not-for-profit providers. The reluctance to cooperate with not-for-profit providers might lie in their dissimilarity to customers. Keller (2013) found that customers tended to choose brands which had a “brand personality consistent with their own self-concept” (p. 115).

In the cases of self-employed social workers, which are discussed in this thesis, the brand personalities of their one-person businesses are strongly connected to themselves as persons, their credentials, appearance, and interactions. One could say that the concepts of brand personality and personal branding converge in these specific cases to a certain degree, with the reservation that their professional brand needs to extend beyond their persons and also include their EA. Notwithstanding, the person-related aspect is deemed particularly relevant in the service economy in which providers “distinguish themselves by personal attributes and qualities” (ed. Dahlgaard-Park, 2015a, p. 2).
Personal branding

The idea of strategically managing one’s reputation or image is believed to trace back to the sociologist Goffman (1959) and his concept of impression management. He used a theatrical analogy to explain how individuals presented themselves in the context of work and how they controlled and sustained the impression which others formed of them. The author concluded that persons who managed to create a loyal, disciplined, and circumspect impression through day-to-day interactions would be favoured. Ten years later, the first explicit link between marketing and persons was drawn by Kotler and Levy (1969). The authors stated that persons could be marketed just like physical products, services, organisations, or ideas.

Almost twenty years later, an article by Peters (1997) became widely regarded as a milestone to the field that would be referred to as personal branding afterwards. He told white-collar workers to “take a lesson from the big brands” and utilise a brand mindset to stand out in a flexible labour market. His casually written text had a far-reaching effect on popularising personal branding. Most material from personal branding should, however, be treated with caution because it stems from self-help books “about how to succeed in business” (ed. Dahlgaard-Park, 2015a, p. 2). As an academic field, it is poorly theorised. Particularly little research can be found on how a person brand can be created and maintained (ed. Dahlgaard-Park, 2015a).

One example of such research is a study that Parmentier, Fischer, and Reuber (2013) conducted on fashion models. The authors argued that building a valuable person brand positioning would be field-specific. Moreover, the authors documented that to succeed, fashion models needed to stand out (points-of-difference) while they fitted in (points-of-parity). According to the authors, one “must discern what kinds of accomplishments and affiliations are valued in [a] particular organization field” (p. 383) to stand out. For fitting in, one must become “habituated to a field’s institutionalized expectations” (p. 383). Their findings also point out how difficult it is to build and maintain person brands in multiple professional areas at a time because those respectively have different values, expectations, and logic. The authors believed that it would harm the consistency of person brands if those differences were catered to, respectively.

Another notable example from the personal branding field is Roberts’ (2005) framework on professional image construction. With the same, she provides individuals with a manual for impression management (see figure 4).
According to her, one needs to start with monitoring and becoming aware of how one is perceived in given situations. This perceived professional image should, then, be compared to the desired image\(^3\); determining the degree of inconsistency between the two. If someone has identified a severe image discrepancy or experienced a severe threat to his or her identity, this person is likely to be motivated to change those people’s impressions. Such severe threats could be if other people have deprived someone of his or her traits and characteristics (personal identity), or if other people have devalued a group someone belongs to (social identity).

\(^3\) Following a brand logic, the desired image might be equated with a brand’s identity.
Roberts (2005) understood the following impression *construction* to come about through the enactment of someone’s personal and social identity. Those efforts may include the following.

- assertive and defensive self-presentation tactics
- managing information others have about groups and topics one is associated with
- changing group memberships or behaviour that is linked to specific groups

However, Roberts (2005) acknowledged that people would sometimes not want to reduce their connection to a socially devalued identity group. She suggested they, then, communicate the group’s desirable attributes and attempt to challenge other people’s stereotypes on the same. For others to accept someone’s image construction, it would need to be believed credible and authentic; with credibility referring to the overlap in attributes and self-presentation and authenticity to the “congruence between internal values and external expressions” (p. 699).

In contrast, Lair, Sullivan, and Cheney (2005) provide a somewhat critical perspective on personal branding. They called personal branding self-packaging and contrasted it with more genuine self-improvement. To that end, they argued that in personal branding, “success is not determined by individuals’ internal sets of skills, motivations, and interests but, rather, by how effectively they are arranged, crystallized, and labeled” (p. 308). From their objection, one can derive that personal branding should not be taken too far as it bears the risk of commodifying persons and relationships; possibly leading to social alienation. Therefore, this thesis is careful not to use branding for blaming individuals like Lair, Sullivan, and Cheney (2005) observed: “economic failures become simply a result of [people’s] inability or unwillingness to package themselves correctly” (p. 333).

### 2.3 Relevant factors in professional service branding

By now, the reader will have noticed that a brand is a complex entity, and many concepts have been built around it. A brand is understood to have tangible and intangible aspects and to exist both on a strategic level (brand identity) and in the minds of customers (brand image). Throughout chapters 2.1 and 2.2, it has been evident that even though its communication is a vital part of a brand, and its name and design eventually become symbols for its significance, those elements are to a great extent projection surfaces for customer experience.

The following illustration (see figure 5) presents how the concepts used in this chapter relate to one another and the purchase decision.
Customers are understood to have pre-existing needs. When defining which product category would be appropriate to meet those needs, they are subconsciously making a first-level decision. The link between needs and wants is thought to be as arbitrary as language and shaped externally to a large extent. Finally, customers choose to demand a particular product.

The brand image has been conceptualised as the mental image that customers have of brands. This image consists of their awareness about and associations towards the same. Utilising the definition phase, brand relevance attempts to create new product categories for customers to link their needs to. Since they entail the first-level decision, the categories that customers are aware of are deemed essential. Within the defined product category, customers select their set of brands to consider. For brands to be included in the consideration set, customers need to be able to recall them and their relevance to the product category. The brand recall from memory is the part of brand awareness that is most vital to professional service branding. Marketers who do not use the brand relevance approach equally need to make sure their brands are linked to appropriate categories to be included in customers’ consideration sets. Repeated exposure to a slogan has been mentioned as one way to support this link.

Finally, the associations which customers have towards the brands in their consideration set will, to a great extent, determine which product they choose to demand. Their preference for specific brands in the consideration set draws on how strong, favourable, and unique the associations were. Moreover, customers tend to choose brands whose personality is in line with their self-image. In the context of professional service brands, the dimension of competence becomes essential to brand personality.

Just as these different aspects of brands play a vital role in customers’ minds and influence the steps explained, the marketer is challenged to manage the points of contact customers have
with brands. It has been pointed out that they should do so in an integrated way to increase awareness and accumulate favourable associations. This integrated and focused influence is, thus, called branding. The following preliminary framework (see figure 6) indicates relevant factors when branding professional services.

**Figure 6: Preliminary framework on the branding of professional services**

The concepts of **brand identity**, **brand awareness**, and **brand associations** have been identified as most relevant for understanding the branding of social-work-based EA. As presented in figure 6, several factors have been distilled from the literature that was presented in the two subsequent chapters.

Parmentier, Fischer, and Reuber (2013) have pointed out the need to know about and adapt to a given professional context, comply with occupation-specific expectations and, thus, fit in. Kapferer (2012) deemed it essential to distinguish between the **kernel** and **peripheral facets** of a brand’s identity to enable the said adaptation to eventually different or changing contexts without losing identity. This distinction should allow for consistency and flexibility. As they withstand adaptation, kernel facets need to be carefully decided, documented, built consistently among all **brand elements** and communicated internally and externally.

Before communicating externally, existing perceptions should be monitored so that actions can be tailored accordingly (Kapferer, 2012; Roberts, 2005). It is a widely held view that marketers, then, have two options for influencing the brand image: they can attach **labels** to
their service for increasing **awareness**, and attach **meaning** for influencing **associations**. To improve the brand recall from memory which is needed for service brands, marketers need to go beyond **presence** and repeated exposure to brand elements, and **link** their service to a **chosen** product category (Aaker, 2011; Keller, 2013; Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Subsequently, marketers can manage the **information** customers have on the brand or topics connected to it to create strong, favourable and unique **brand associations** (Keller, 2013; Roberts, 2005). They can, furthermore, reinforce meaning through **repetition** to create **consistency** (Kapferer, 2012), convince customers that the brand is **relevant** to their personal needs and wants (Keller, 2013), and show them the **unique** selling proposition of the brand. Communicated promises will only be reflected in favourable associations if they are **fulfilled** (Grönroos, 1984; Kotler, 2003). Finally, leveraging **secondary associations** strategically (Kapferer, 2012; Keller, 2013; Parmentier, Fischer & Reuber, 2013) might be just as important as impacting on unfavourable associations (Roberts, 2005) stemming from group memberships.

The preliminary framework should not be understood as a causality chain or a guarantee for successful branding, but rather as factors relevant to consider and variables to be studied.
3 Research design

“The interview method is the art of questioning and interpreting the answers.”
(Qu & Dumay, 2011, p. 243)

As was pointed out in the theoretical framework (see chapter 2), the professionals themselves have a crucial role in the branding of their professional service; not just in their role as part-time marketers but also as objects of branding. Moreover, brands are, beyond their kernel facets, subject to contextuality and adaption, which makes the individual perception of and reaction to context a crucial aspect of branding. Those two aspects, therefore, suggested a qualitative research approach and a case study to answer the research questions (see chapter 1.4). The branding of five occupational social workers was studied as cases. Those included the perspectives of the social workers themselves and other relevant groups. The form of a case study allowed for examining the problem in its context; using several angles, perspectives, and methods for data collection (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016).

3.1 Methods

This thesis is based on a literature review and semi-structured interviews with fifteen persons from three groups (see table 3.1).

Table 3.1: Interview persons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#S…social workers</th>
<th>#A, #B…company representatives</th>
<th>#E…other experts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5 self-employed occupational social workers</td>
<td>3 from companies which do currently use social-work-based EA</td>
<td>3 other experts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>two social workers do currently have EA customers, and three social workers do not</td>
<td>managers from two social service organisations and one manufacturing company</td>
<td>managers from companies in engineering, energy, telecommunication, and manufacturing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chapters 3.3.1 and 5.1.1; table 6.1</td>
<td>chapters 3.1.2 and 5.1.2; table 6.2</td>
<td>a chairperson of the OBDS and two managers of EA providers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chapters 3.3.2 and 5.1.3; table 6.3</td>
<td>chapters 3.3.3 and 5.1.4; table 6.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The interviews averaged one hour and ranged from a 15-minute phone interview to a personal interview of one hour and 45 minutes. Please refer to Appendix A for an overview of all interview persons and a more detailed account of interviews. The collected interview data were documented and analysed, as shown below (see figure 7).

![Research process diagram]

**Figure 7: Research process**

Applying an inductive research approach, this study interpreted and, to the extent possible, generalised the collected empirical data.

### 3.1.1 Semi-structured interviews

To incorporate the contextuality explained above, it was deemed crucial that participants would be allowed and encouraged to describe the context of their service provision, their assumptions made about it, and their corresponding branding. The prospected value of contextuality suggested interviews, where information is asked verbally from interviewees, and they may elaborate on their perspectives. In line with Sekaran and Bougie (2016) who argued that “personal interviews provide rich data when respondents spontaneously offer information” (p. 116), a semi-structured interview approach was realised. Close to human conversations, semi-structured interviews are believed to be “flexible, accessible and intelligible and, more importantly, capable of disclosing important and often hidden facets of human and organizational behaviour” (Qu & Dumay, 2011).

A predetermined list of questions in a given order, as it would be followed in a structured approach, was expected to interrupt the unfolding of the interviewees’ arguments, and hinder them from contributing spontaneously. An unstructured approach, on the other side, would not have been able to appropriately enquire on the previously defined variables (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). It could, moreover, be expected that the branding aspects would be neglected in unstructured interviews because prior knowledge of marketing was identified as being moderate in social work (see chapter 4.1). The semi-structured approach, thus, introduced aspects of branding to the interviews but also allowed interviewees to “provide responses in their own terms and in the way that they think and use language” (Qu & Dumay, 2011).

As is typical for semi-structured interviews and the most frequently used qualitative research method (Qu & Dumay, 2011), all interviews were based on interview guidelines; being lists
of themes and probes that may be covered in any given order. Instead of confronting interviewees with branding vocabulary, the guidelines translated them into questions that could be expected to have meaning for the interviewees, and with which they could engage. Topics grouped all questions; respectively starting with an open question to introduce the same (Flick, 2009; Gläser & Laudel, 2009). Within the groups, specifying questions were used to “develop more precise descriptions from general statements” (Qu & Dumay, 2011, p. 249). Moreover, indirect questions were used to enquire social workers’ presumptions on the awareness and associations other groups had of them. Where relevant, direct questions were used to elicit short responses on relatively objective matters, i.e. their service portfolio, qualifications, or positions (Qu & Dumay, 2011).

During the interviews, the guidelines were used flexibly in the spoken interaction with the interviewees. For example, structuring questions were accordingly used when transitioning from one thematic group to the other. Where appropriate, the researcher used interpreting questions to clarify before transitioning. The researcher, furthermore, included scheduled and unscheduled probes to encourage interview persons to state their opinions and experiences more in-depth. Scheduled probes followed right after an interviewee’s statement and could be in the form of follow-up or probing questions, while unscheduled probes followed later in the interview process (Qu & Dumay, 2011).

Building on the localist view shared with Qu and Dumay (2011) who call interviews an empirical phenomenon, the researcher modified the style and order of questions during the interviews. This modification allowed interviewees to steer their response to information that had not been previously known to the researcher. The responsiveness and sensitivity of the researcher were, thus, just as mattering as the interview guidelines (Qu & Dumay, 2011). The reader may find the guidelines for occupational social workers and company representatives in Appendices B, C, and D.

3.1.2 Thematic coding

The interview data were analysed with thematic coding, a method to reduce, rearrange, and integrate qualitative data to form theory (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Flick (2009) developed this method based on Strauss (1991) for studies with multiple perspectives. He aimed at increasing comparability while preserving the contexts of statements and opinions. Following the multi-stage procedure Flick (2009) suggested, the cases were first introduced with a typical statement from the interview, a personal description of the interviewee, and a summary of critical statements covered in the interviews. In the first step, the brief case descriptions had heuristic value for the subsequent analyses. Later, they were included in the thesis (see chapter 5.1) for readers to become familiar with the persons whose statements are subsequently analysed and discussed (see chapter 5.2).

Based on the notion that brand identity, brand awareness, and brand associations are the most relevant factors to consider when branding social-work-based EA (see chapter 2.3), they were used as thematic codes when analysing the interviews with data management software (NVivo). The codes were assigned to themes which were understood as expressions of ideas with no set length (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Additionally, three elements from the coding
paradigm of Strauss (1991) – being conditions, strategies and tactics, and consequences – also penetrated codes instead of being used as guiding questions for subsequent analysis as Flick (2009) suggested.

Conditions, as interview persons perceived them, were coded as context; a dimension that had also been pointed out by Parmentier, Fischer, and Reuber (2013) and Kapferer (2012) as vital for brands to which to adapt (see chapter 2.2.2). The second element from the coding paradigm of Strauss (1991) resulted in the code branding strategies and tactics; comprising of all efforts social workers had undertaken to increase awareness and influence associations (see chapter 2.1). Furthermore, consequences of social workers’ efforts were coded as programme effectiveness; building on the notion from Kotler and Keller (2016) that the effectiveness of marketing programmes should be judged by the degree they manage to affect brand image (see chapter 2.2).

Finally, one code was added during the coding process and developed from the interview material; being the outlook. This last code was assigned to several statements about the future, i.e. how the discussed matters could, should, or might develop. The adjustment was made in line with Flick (2009) who recommended researchers to adjust the initial thematic structure during the coding process if later reviewed material suggested so. Interviews already coded at that time were of course re-examined; allowing for an iterative process. The thematic structure and the leading question for each code which were developed for the cases in this thesis are, therefore, as follows (see table 3.2).

Table 3.2: Thematic codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>number</th>
<th>code</th>
<th>leading question</th>
<th>reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.2.1</td>
<td>context</td>
<td>how has the social worker experienced the context for their provision of EA?</td>
<td>chapter 2.2.2 and coding paradigm (Strauss, 1991)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.2</td>
<td>brand identity</td>
<td>what does the social worker see at the core of his/her profession, EA, and professional identity?</td>
<td>chapter 2.2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.3</td>
<td>brand awareness</td>
<td>how has the social worker experienced the awareness of target groups?</td>
<td>chapter 2.2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.4</td>
<td>brand associations</td>
<td>how does the social worker evaluate the associations of target groups?</td>
<td>chapter 2.2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.5</td>
<td>branding strategies and tactics</td>
<td>what has the social worker done to increase target groups’ awareness and influence their associations?</td>
<td>chapter 2.3 and coding paradigm (Strauss, 1991)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.6</td>
<td>programme effectiveness</td>
<td>what consequences did his/her actions have?</td>
<td>chapter 2.2 and coding paradigm (Strauss, 1991)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The leading questions were adjusted to the company representatives and other experts. Moreover, the identity category was removed from the thematic structure for the company representatives because identity cannot be determined on the receiver side (see chapter 2.2.2). After the coding process, the cases were brought into the thematic structure for initial case-related analyses, which penetrated a comprehensive cross-case analysis (see chapter 5.2). According to Flick (2009), the downside to thematic coding lies in the great effort that is required for the viable analysis of all individual cases.

### 3.2 Material

Ten out of fifteen interviews were audio recorded. Since the interviews with occupational social workers are the centrepiece of this study and detailed documentation was required of their answers, consent to the audio recording was a condition to qualify as an interview person. For the interviews with company representatives, interview persons were, beforehand, given the freedom to choose whether the interviews should be audio recorded or not. Five out of fifteen interviews were personal interviews, another interview used a video call, two interviews were conducted in written form, and the seven remaining interviews were conducted via phone. For the written interviews, the interview persons were sent the guidelines and given a week to return their answers.

All interviews were protocolled, summarised, and, if desired, sent to the interview persons for inspection. The documentation averaged 3.000 words per interview; with the written responses from company representatives #A1 and #A3 accounting for the smallest share and less than a thousand words, respectively. Three interview persons responded to the sent interview documentation and requested minor changes, which did not affect the core statements of the interviews.

The interviews were conducted in German, the official language of Austria. This approach was chosen because it could be expected that the interviewees would respond more freely to the interview questions if asked in a language in which they were highly confident. Based on the notion of Sekaran and Bougie (2016) that interview data is more valuable if interviewees spontaneously offer information – which requires confidence –, the chosen language is believed to have contributed to the validity of this study.

While the interview material was protocolled and coded in German to stay close to the original wording, the transition to English was made with the case presentations and cross-case analysis (see chapter 5.1 and 5.2). Translated quotes from interviews were avoided (except for the typical statements in chapter 5.1), and their statements were, instead,
deliberately paraphrased and synthesised to make the reader aware of the intermediate process. A brief list of translations was included at the start of this thesis (see page viii) to make the translation of critical terms transparent and support German-speaking readers in retracing the original wording.

3.3 Participants

3.3.1 Self-employed, occupational social workers

The backbone of this study are the perspectives of five self-employed, professional social workers who are currently offering or have offered EA to companies in Austria (see table 6.1). Nine social workers meeting these criteria were identified through internet search and inquiry at the Austrian professional association of social work (referred to as OBDS in this thesis), the chamber of commerce, and further vital persons.

Interview invitations were sent to all nine population members, along with a brief description of this study. All contacted social workers replied to the invitation, two of which had no interest in an interview and one of which had not taken her self-employment beyond a business concept at the time of this study. One social worker withdrew her definite answer when she was provided with interview guidelines upon request; reasoning that her self-employment lied too far behind to answer marketing-related questions. As the number of definite answers did not exceed the number of planned interviews, no final selection had to be taken by the student. If differently, the selection would have been based on the population members’ experience in the field of EA and the number of current service users.

3.3.2 Company representatives

Furthermore, the opinions and experiences of three representatives whose companies used social-work-based EA (see table 6.2), and four representatives whose companies did not currently use the same (see table 6.3) were consulted. All representatives held a managerial position at the time of the interview.

Interviewed social workers were asked to identify, at best, two representatives of their service users who would be able to relate to the service in question. This relation was suggested to either stem from a collaboration with the social worker or from involvement in the decision-making process that had led the company to implement the social-work-based EA. One social worker was able to identify two representatives, another social worker had only one service user, and the remaining three social workers had no companies which used their EA at the time of this study. Interview details were sent to all three representatives who had been informed by the respective social worker beforehand.

Given the low utilisation of social-work-based EA, the perspectives of companies which did not use the service in question were considered valuable as well. Therefore, four companies,
each holding more than 2,500 employees in Austria, were selected from different industries. These include companies in manufacturing, engineering, energy, and telecommunication. CH managers or HR managers at those companies were contacted and invited to a phone interview.

3.3.3 Other experts

Additionally, a chairperson from the OBDS and a manager of a leading EA provider not employing any professional social workers were interviewed to include their expertise on social work and EA (see table 6.4). Instead of the interview guidelines shown in the appendix, individual and looser guidelines were created for those two experts which catered to their diverse areas of expertise.

Since it was reasonable to believe that some aspects of the challenges faced by self-employed, occupational social workers were connected to their company size, the manager of a medium-sized EA provider employing professional social workers was consulted on her experiences as well (see table 6.4). She was interviewed based on the same guideline as social workers (see Appendix B).

Before being interviewed personally, via phone, or in written form, all interview persons gave their informed consent to the audio recording and use of interview data in this study. By anonymising all names, positions, and company affiliations in this thesis, the confidentiality of the interview persons is maintained.

3.4 Evaluation of sources

For the theoretical framework (see chapter 2) and context analysis (see chapter 4), literature on marketing, branding, social work, and EA was consulted. In the beginning, related encyclopaedia entries were accessed in the Encyclopaedia of Social Work and the SAGE Encyclopaedia of Quality and the Service Economy to gain a first impression on the topic fields. The references and citations mentioned in the entries about “Employee Assistance Programs” (Akabas, 2008), “Occupational Social Work” (Kurzman, 2008), “Personal Branding” (ed. Dahlgaard-Park, 2015a), “Brand Management” (ed. Dahlgaard-Park, 2015b), and other related encyclopaedia entries were followed to identify reliable and widely recognised sources.

Later, various online searches on Lub-search and Scopus with terms such as ‘branding’, ‘service marketing’, ‘personal branding’, ‘occupational social work’, and ‘employee assistance’ were conducted in English and German. The author also searched in a comprehensive literature list from the BBS (n.d.), the German professional association of occupational social work, with the same search terms and additionally for publications relating to Austria. Authors and magazines were contacted to gain access to the publications. For EA, the Journal of Workplace Behavioural Health (formerly Employee Assistance
Quarterly) was identified to be the most relevant journal, and its tables of content were browsed.

From the literature on marketing and branding, relevant factors for the branding of professional services were distilled and presented in a preliminary framework (see figure 6). The empirical and theoretical data are linked insofar as the theoretical framework was used to develop the interview guidelines and the variables to be enquired. To reduce bias, the literature on social work and EA was reviewed in-depth only after the collection of empirical data. Then, it was used to complement the empirical data and apply the preliminary framework to the broader context of the studied cases (see chapter 2).

3.5 Validity and reliability

From a constructionist approach, validity, reliability, and generalisability are ensured through a sufficiently high number of diverse perspectives and a transparent data collection as well as interpretation. The methods of data collection and interpretation have been made transparent (see chapter 3.1 and 3.2) and the selection of interview persons aimed at including diverse perspectives relevant for the branding of social-work-based EA (see chapter 3.3). Beyond the commitment to reflect both the service providers’ and the service users’ viewpoints, the researcher looked for diversity in terms of gender when choosing interview partners within the group of self-employed social workers. It, however, seemed that only one man was currently employing himself in the researched area.

Interviewing not only social workers who currently had company customers but also including the perspectives of less ‘successful’ social workers was pragmatically reasonable, given the low number of social workers employing themselves in the researched field. On the other hand, it is believed to have insofar contributed to the reliability of this thesis as it shows a more complete picture and reduces bias. Moreover, including the account of a medium-sized EA provider, which employed social workers, increased the reliability of this study by serving as a reference. The reference was insofar relevant as the additional perspective was less affected by the possible effects of small-scale and tested the reliability of the variables developed from the other cases.

To represent the providers’ and the users’ perspectives, access to interview persons from both groups was necessary. To provide a valid account, the company representatives needed to be able to relate to the service of the respective social worker. Therefore, social workers were encouraged to select potential interview persons based on these criteria. When, in contact with the nine identified occupational social workers, it became clear that very few companies did currently use their EA, it posed a threat to the reliability of this study. To act on this threat and not risk losing the valuable viewpoint of the few representatives whose companies used their EA, those were given more freedom to choose their preferred interview setting. Two of them took the initiative and asked for an interview in written form, which was granted to them. Furthermore, the researcher lengthened the interviews with the social workers and asked them to also reflect from their target groups’ angle.
4 Occupational social work in Austria

“No, ‘counselling’ is not the problem. […] ‘Social’ is the problem. ‘Social’ has a poor name in our society.”
(translated from German: social counsellor in Baumgartner & Sommerfeld, 2016, p. 87)

4.1 Social work fundamentals

“Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people” (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014). The International Federation of Social Workers (2014; referred to as IFSW in this thesis) state that the profession is interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary. In other words, it draws on knowledge from its research and other social sciences. In Austria, social work is not a protected professional title. When social organisations, however, speak of professional social work, they commonly refer to professionals who have completed a bachelor’s degree in social work or equivalent training in social pedagogy.4

As the IFSW (2014) pointed out, the profession is understood to intervene “at the point where people interact with their environment” and aims, more generally, at addressing life challenges and enhancing wellbeing. While doing so, social work bases itself on a plural ethical foundation, which comprises of deontological, utilitarian, and virtue ethicist elements (Pullen-Sansfaçon & Cowden, 2013; Snoeyenbos & Humber, 1999; Solomon, 1999).

Deontology is an ethical tradition that was significantly shaped by Kant and his categorical imperative; being an appeal to uphold the negative and positive freedom of people (Bowie, 1999).

It is reasonable to believe that the profession’s overall strong deontological orientation makes them treat marketing, and especially advertising, with caution. As Eagle and Dahl (2015) pointed out, marketing communication has been commonly associated with untruthfulness and deception, and such “would be considered morally wrong, regardless of the

4 In the lack of professional regulation, the OBDS represent social workers who hold at least one of these proofs of qualification. In the context of this thesis, the group of professional social workers is defined accordingly.
consequences” (p. 37) in deontology. According to Bowie (1999), deceptive or coercive acts would restrict people’s negative freedom. However, deception is not intrinsic to marketing communication, as it ideally “presents people with potential solutions to problems they recognise” (Eagle & Dahl, 2015, p. 31) rather than creating a demand for something for which they previously had no use. Provided that social workers might hesitate to utilise marketing insights, studies which synthesise social work and marketing theories should draw on the conception of Eagle and Dahl (2015) or similar understandings that emphasise the non-deceptive nature of marketing.

As part of welfare work, social workers commonly act based on social policies or in state-approved organisations. In the social sector, social workers provide social, person-related services (Christa, 2010). Those become paramount, as Christa (2010) argued, when people face social problems, which put the service in a “deficit-orientated context” (translated from German: p. 27). The IFSW (2014) refrained from using the terms ‘problem’ or ‘deficit’ in their definition but stated that social work became active when a current situation was deemed to need change and development. Soothingly, Christa (2010) hastened to clarify that in those problematic situations, social workers utilised strength-based methods. Nevertheless, he did not manage to undo the bitter taste of deficits, which has been recognised as associated with social work (Legood, McGrath, Searle & Lee, 2016; Wermeling, 2013).

To that end, Legood et al. (2016) reported that interviewed social workers in the UK had experienced an unfavourable and inaccurate public image of their profession. The authors concluded that social workers felt public mistrust in their competencies and had the impression to start at “a lower baseline” (p. 1878) than other professions; having to prove themselves more. Moreover, the social workers who were interviewed by Legood et al. (2016) did not only feel undermined by the general public but also by colleagues from other professions; saying that those did not endorse social workers because they did not want to be associated with the social work profession. Likewise, Wermeling (2013) found that a significant number of surveyed social workers in the US believed that “society did not value the social work profession” (p. 335) enough.

The unfavourable public image of social work might be connected to the social problems to which it reacts. Wachter (2011) criticised that social work would itself contribute to stigmatising its clients through classification criteria and social diagnoses. Several social work scholars have elaborated this stigma and presented ideas on how to mitigate it (Hamburger, 2012; Thiersch, Grunwald & Köngeter, 2012). Hamburger (2012), for instance, traced the stigma to media and public perceptions and claimed that social workers needed to address those when communicating about social problems and their professionality. Seithe (2012), however, placed the responsibility for the unfavourable public image predominantly on the profession itself. She did so by criticising that social work had taken itself for granted far too long, and had refrained from making its orientation and standards visible.

Another source of overcoming the deficit-orientation of the social work profession might, according to Wachter (2011), be found in the occupational field, which would contribute to the vision of social work in primary prevention. There, she saw social workers deployed in a context not charged with deficits at first glance; working with clients who had employment.
Applying the analogy of a brand extension, Wachter (2011) might be right that an extension of social work to the occupational field could benefit the profession (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

4.2 Occupational social work

When referring to occupational social work, one adds the adjective ‘occupational’, which means job-related or work-related (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.), to the social work profession. In other words, social work is put into an occupational context, where it focuses on “work, workers, and work organisations” (Kurzman, 2008). Despite the increasing interest in this relatively young field, Klein and Appelt (ed. 2017) spoke of a persisting information deficit – even in social work practice – about what occupational social workers did, and in which way, as well as under which conditions they operated. That information deficit might be one reason for the poor representation of the occupational field within the social work profession, which will be elaborated later.

Occupational social work operates outside of the traditional welfare work with which its profession is entangled. Provided that the private sector follows different principles and logic, Baumgartner and Sommerfeld (2016) stated that it was anything but obvious that the German and Swiss social work profession has managed to assert itself in the occupational field since the early 1900s. In the guideline of the BBS, the German professional association of occupational social work, Engler5 (n.d.) gave a likely explanation for what had made the contribution of social work relevant: “occupational social work bases itself on the common interest of employees and employers in willingness and capacity to perform” (translated from German: p. 3). On this common ground and through preventive and curative activities, social workers aim to restore, stabilise, and promote psychosocial wellbeing of staff; indirectly contributing to work results (Engler, n.d.).

In the early days of the occupational field in Germany, its present objectives such as staff retention, performance motivation, and health promotion were already in place. It was, however, called industrial welfare (“Fabrikspflege” in German). In the 60s and 70s, industrial welfare was increasingly redefined under the term social counselling (“Sozialberatung” in German) and moved from corporate welfare6 to a counselling service. Regular discussions among German occupational social workers in BBS meetings speak of an ongoing struggle on how to label their professional service (Bremmer, 2017).

5 In the guideline for the occupational field, Engler spoke not only for himself but for the BBS and presented how the German professional association of occupational social work positioned itself on behalf of its members.

6 Corporate welfare meant employer benefits that exceeded what was required by law or the industry, as Herring (1926) pointed out regarding early industrial social work in the US.
As external staff or employees, social workers intervene on multiple levels within companies, as the Swiss professional association of social work, AvenirSocial (2014), pointed out. They counsel employees, consult executives, and raise awareness for their EA on all levels. Further, they take a multi-partial and advisory role. According to Kurzman (2008), social workers “become agents of progressive social change” while providing an expert service within companies. Klein and Appelt (ed. 2017) were less pretentious and concluded that occupational social workers would hardly manage to influence the structures on which they depended. The latter, however, believed that social workers’ viable ethic foundation would, nevertheless, enable them to operate successfully in a field of conflicting interests and between desirable objectives and economic constraints.

Given the conflicting interests in companies, Engler (n.d.) insisted on a number of conditions to be met for occupational social work to operate successfully: the service should be voluntary for employees to use, and social workers needed to be independent, organisationally detached, autonomous, and granted professional secrecy as well as opportunities to educate themselves further. The AvenirSocial (2014) stated similar terms, which were, however, formulated as quality criteria instead of conditions. Moreover, those conditions or quality criteria could also be seen as service characteristics that would be part of the professional service brand identity of occupational social workers.

4.2.1 Social workers’ professional profile

Apart from their ethical foundation, Gilschwert (2012) was convinced that social workers had a critical contribution to make to EA because they had been trained in communication and networking skills like no other profession. Moreover, they would be familiar with the world of social benefits, support, and organisations. According to her, other strengths lied in social competence, broad expertise, and personal skills such as reflectivity, networked thinking, and the ability to deal with conflicts. Lesnik (2001), on the other hand, traced the core competence of occupational social workers to the inclusion of multiple levels: individuals, social relations, groups, and systems, as well as macrosocial factors, which would reach into companies. To that end, she saw the future of occupational social work in the consulting of social relations in companies and not primarily in supporting individuals in problematic situations. Her statement can be seen in line with her profession’s fundamentals (see chapter 4.1).

That said, most scholars seemed to agree that occupational social workers needed to continue their training beyond social work to understand the companies for which they worked and assist their employees effectively, i.e. drawing on business administration or economics (Blemenschitz, 2003; Gilschwert, 2012; Lesnik, 2001). Gilschwert (2012) also points out that social workers could balance their shortcomings of business knowledge with versed colleagues in a multi-professional team. To Baumgartner and Sommerfeld (2016), a multi-professional collaboration in EA could, however, only work if all team members and professions knew their contribution and competence. The authors, further, criticised that occupational social workers themselves struggled to understand their profile, let alone their colleagues. Their notion can be seen as indicating an unclear positioning of occupational social work towards other professions in EA.
Overall, Baumgartner (2017) saw the legitimisation of occupational social work in Germany threatened by cost saving. In Austria, a legitimisation to be threatened does hardly exist. Deimbacher (2001), for instance, described Austrian occupational social work as the “Cinderella of social work” (translated from German: p. 18). There, the handful of scholars and students who followed the call of Lesnik (2001) and wrote on occupational social work engaged in a different discourse around a more existential question: if the occupational field exists, has ever existed, and should exist in Austrian social work.

4.2.2 Conditions in Austrian social work

Wachter (2011) concluded in the currently most comprehensive study on Austrian occupational social work that, even though the field could be traced back to its origin in the early 1900s (where it was called “Werksfürsorge” in Austria), it did not exist at the time of her writing. Not only did she presume that occupational social work had no future in Austria, but she also referred to the conflict of interests, which was mentioned earlier, and reasoned that it made the occupational field incompatible with the profile of social work. Her objection did primarily refer to external services like EAPs, which will be elaborated later.

In 2012, Gilschwert compiled a list of fifteen providers of social counselling or EAPs and found that at least six of them involved professional social workers. She was convinced that the number would speak for the existence of occupational social work in Austria and disprove the argument from Wachter (2011). However, Gilschwert (2012) failed to acknowledge that, for a field to exist, service needs to be utilised and not only offered. She did not attempt to quantify the corresponding service utilisation. Not to mention that only four of the six identified providers sustained themselves until the time of this writing and one of which has not been found active in the occupational field.

In their current framework on the fields of social work, the OBDS (2004) hardly acknowledged occupational social work. Their framework should not only reflect social work in Austria but can, as it is commonly referred to by practitioners, also be seen as a document leading the way in the profession. Even though the OBDS mentioned occupational social work once under the field of occupation and education (“Beruf und Bildung” in German), the

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7 In interviews with 34 persons, 20 of which were EA providers or company representatives, Wachter (2011) could only identify three companies who used social-work-based EA in 2011: Austria Tabak GmbH, Schirnhofer GmbH, and MA 3.

8 The mentioned providers Crosslink and Socialprofit could not be found in an internet search and seem to have closed down. The organisation Sozialmedizinisches Zentrum Liebenau (n.d.) does not state occupational services on its website. The providers Consentiv Employee Assistance Services GmbH (n.d.), Sozialmass OG (n.d.), and Zeiträume (n.d.) seem to be active and involve professional social workers.
subsequent descriptions refer solely to the integration of people outside of the labour market. Not to mention that the OBDS described the field of occupation and education in the least detail; with its chapter being the shortest in their framework.9

Scholars have given different explanations for why the occupational field is generally underrepresented in social work. Bremmer (2017), for instance, traced its weak position to its dependence on the private sector and conflicts of loyalty relating to it. According to him, the profession would not trust its occupational social workers to be neutral, or multi-partial as it was referred to earlier, despite being financially dependent. Therefore, they would distance themselves critically. Wachter (2011) saw the retreat of occupational social work in Austria connected to the development of the welfare state, and Gilschwert (2012) added that the lack of a lobby or public relations work did not help occupational social workers establish themselves either.

It is reasonable to believe that the lack of commitment of the profession to stand by its occupational field contributed to its low prominence within social work and beyond. On an individual level, Gilschwert (2012) recommended that social workers focus the marketing of their EA on the economic value that it created. In the lack of actions from existing organisations, she suggested that an advocacy group should be established to promote public relations. That said, the determination of social services’ economic value is complex, and its methods not uncontested (Wachter, 2017).

Outside of the occupational field, self-employed social workers are less seldom in Austria as one could assume. Based on survey results, Wögerer (2006) estimated that roughly three-fifths of Austrian social workers had been self-employed in one way or the other during their careers; with the education sector being the most common area of work. That said, the majority of surveyed self-employed social workers could not sustain itself through their self-employment but had parallel employment, even though they carried on multiple trades in many cases (Wögerer, 2006).

Despite the high numbers of social workers who had been in touch with self-employment, the profession remains dominated by employment (Wögerer, 2006). Wögerer (2006) criticised that self-employed social workers had no lobby and, unsupported as they were, encountered difficulties in advertising and selling their service. Due to its broad education, social work was believed to have significant overlaps with other professions in terms of methods, approaches, target groups, and problem areas. In their self-employment, social workers would compete with other professions, which claimed those problem areas for themselves (Wögerer, 2006) and might, furthermore, have more specialised knowledge regarding the same. Those overlaps might be one reason why the professional profile of occupational social workers was

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9 It has, however, to be mentioned that the OBDS (2004) briefly discussed occupational social work in its appendix; stating that only one Austrian occupational social worker was known to them in 2004.
earlier described as unclear and could necessitate their branding to start from an individual brand positioning.

Legally, social workers have multiple options for self-employment. However, none are open to them solely based on their academic training but require work experience or additional qualifications (Wögerer, 2006). This restriction motivated several scholars (Blemenschitz, 2003; Deimbacher, 2001; Wachter, 2011) to say that self-employed social work as such is unfeasible in Austria. The order of trade provides three routes for self-employment: regulated trades for which candidates must prove their qualification, non-regulated trades that can be carried on by anyone who meets general criteria, and liberal professions that operate without a business licence (Bundesministerium Digitalisierung und Wirtschaftsstandort, 2019a, 2019b).

The regulated trades of counsellors and management consultants can be seen particularly relevant for occupational social workers (Blemenschitz, 2003, 2003; Gilschwert, 2012; Wögerer, 2006) and enable them to offer their person-related, social service in a context of counselling and consultancy.

### 4.2.3 Social work in employee assistance

EA can be seen as a distinct consulting market with several service categories (Schulte-Meßtorff & Wehr, 2013). As was mentioned earlier, one category in which social workers can position their EA are EAPs. Following Roche, Kostadinov, Cameron, Pidd, McEntee, and Duraisingam (2018), an EAP is a generic term for “workplace programs designed to assist employers to improve productivity and to identify and address workers’ personal concerns [...] that may affect job performance” (p. 168). The programmes are known as service packages that external providers offer to companies. If a contract comes about and a company carries the cost of the service, it is made available free of charge to people in a defined relationship to the company (Akabas, 2008). The EA service package has its roots in alcohol prevention programmes in the US and has since expanded globally (Roche et al., 2018).

After World War II, the demand for skilled workers made American employers seek ways to increase productivity and improve staff retention. Their search led to the evolution of EAPs, which were first aimed only at reducing alcoholism. When these programmes did not manage to restore the productivity of their target group, many providers expanded their counselling to other issues; developing a ‘broad brush’ approach. Those were increasingly staffed by social workers (Akabas, 2008; White & Sharar, 2003). Estimates from the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicate that almost two out of three employees in the US have access to EAPs (Akabas, 2008), which makes them an integral part of US businesses.

During recent decades, EAPs have been diffused in and adapted to a wide range of countries around the world. Roche et al. (2018) stated that consumer demand, industry-based initiatives, and legislation drove this development. In Austria, for example, Göbl (2013) stated that the potential market for EAPs expanded significantly when the Austrian government revised its work and health legislation roughly eight years ago. As a result of the diffusion, Buon and Taylor (2008) found that middle and senior human resource managers in the UK, Denmark,
Germany, and Switzerland, were generally aware of EAPs and had an overall positive image of the service. Austrian managers were, however, not included in their sample.

Buon and Taylor (2008) advised EA providers to listen to companies in order to identify what they need and what to emphasise in their marketing communication. The authors stated that respondents had expressed the most interest in employee counselling (general, alcohol and drug support, critical incidents and trauma), information services, childcare or eldercare. Additionally, stress management ranked high. Buon and Taylor (2008) concluded that EA providers would be most successful if they “stick to their knitting” (p. 443) and played out their core competencies. Their findings suggest that EA providers assess needs and interest in companies to provide a service that those would deem relevant.

Regarding organisational forms, studies have identified both for-profit and not-for-profit organisations to provide EAPs in the US and globally. Sharar, White, and Funk (2002) found for-profit providers more vulnerable to ethical breaches such as deliberate misinterpretation of utilisation figures. Moreover, they reported that the underbidding in which for-profit organisations participated led to quality erosion and the inability to serve multi-problem clients. Hence, there might be a potential for not-for-profit organisations to highlight the service quality that is upheld through their organisational form. Communicating that form as ensuring quality might help overcome the lower perceived competence that Aaker (1997) found.

Apart from ethical standards, Schulte-Meßtorff, and Wehr (2013) pointed out that the qualification of counsellors would also be a highly critical factor to EAP quality. The authors stated that neither the term EAP nor the professional title of counsellors was protected in Germany. Consequently, no binding standard existed on the training and practice of its counsellors, which would make it challenging for companies to assess the quality of such programmes (Schulte-Meßtorff & Wehr, 2013). In Austria, this effect might be mitigated by the order of trade that requires specific qualifications for obtaining a business licence. On the European level, the Employee Assistance European Forum (2004, 2013) has worked to fill this gap with guidelines and a code of ethics. Their standards are, however, only binding for their members.

The mentioned ethical breaches and the uncertainty about quality standards might be one of the reasons why Wachter (2011) sharply delimited occupational social work from EAPs. The author seems to be critical about social workers engaging in any form of EA not explicitly labelled as occupational social work. To that end, she mentioned objections towards social counselling, EAPs, CSR, and human resource management (referred to as HRM in this thesis). She seemed to share the prevailing view that CSR would, in many instances, be “window dressing rather than a real commitment” (Eagle & Dahl, 2015, p. 33). Moreover, she clarified that a for-profit EA field had evolved under the exclusion of professional social work and that it would be epistemologically unacceptable to attribute those services to the latter.

However, the study of Wachter (2011) does not sufficiently address how social work could, with its specific professional profile, act within the EA field that cannot be attributed to it. The author did only briefly suggest that social work would have to provide its service through a not-for-profit organisation, refrain from involvement in downsizing, act partisan for
employees, and prevent companies from instrumentalising them for economic benefits. Then again, she did not analyse which value it would have for a company to pay for and use a service from a provider that, for example, acted partisan towards its employees.

Shortly after her writing, Göbl (2013) pointed out that EAPs would be more or less compatible with different theoretical foundations of social work; something that Wachter (2011) had failed to recognise. Referring to the service discourse (“Dienstleistungsdiskurs” in German) or Luhmann’s line of thought in systems theory, Göbl (2013) saw EAPs, as rejected by Wachter (2011), appropriate for being a field of social work. She could imagine such a field, even though she recognised the programmes as being less compatible with other theories because she did not conceive of theoretical foundations as rigid corsets. Instead, she portrayed them as different concepts that social workers could choose for their professional identity.

Regarding labels, Gilschwert (2012) observed that social-work-based EA was, in practice, already labelled as EAPs or social counselling in Austria. According to her, the term occupational social work was, on the other hand, only modestly used for social-work-based EA. She presumed it could be marketed less well. EAPs were an external service from their start and, therefore, had a long history of defining and marketing themselves. Consequently, it might be that EAPs were able to develop a sharper profile than occupational social work. Even more so as the latter is, in essence, social work applied to work settings. An early article, in which Goldman, Reyes, Gary, Barsamian, Rhimas, and Thuss (1984) already defined a field of competence for EAPs, could suggest so. In that article, they further recommended EA providers to focus their sales pitches on solving problems, increasing productivity, and improving morale.

It has become clear that labels on social-work-based EA are more than just brand elements but are matters of dispute in the social work discipline. In this thesis, EA is seen as a distinct consulting market on which social workers compete with other self-employed professionals and larger organisations. It has been pointed out that social-work-based EA has already been labelled as social counselling and EAPs in Austria, and that occupational social work is a less frequently used label. Moreover, EAPs might be a service package that is more sharply defined and well-known than occupational social work, which would suggest self-employed social workers draw on those strengths when branding their EA.
5 Results and analysis

“You won’t get far if you don’t know who you are.
Who are you, and who will you be?”
(Snell, 1984)

5.1 Introducing the cases

5.1.1 Self-employed, occupational social workers

Social worker #S1

“Wording is the most difficult part. My customers want the service to be labelled as occupational social work, but this is not ideal. In Austria, people do not like to be associated with social work. It has a negative connotation.”

Social worker #S1 was trained and employed in the areas of business administration and engineering before she studied social work. More than ten years after graduation, she became self-employed and started her own business for social counselling, which she also labels as EAPs. Since then, she has managed to build a customer base of three direct business customers and ten intermediate customers, which she supports through an occupational health provider.

When employees hear about her free and confidential service, she wants them to feel appreciated by their employer who paid for it, and understand that any problem can be addressed within the counselling sessions. She wants managers and employees to know her for competent counselling, trustworthiness, and appreciation. In general, she wants people to know more about occupational social work and have a more positive image of her profession. To influence this image, she uses social occasions to talk about her work, describes her service on a website, and communicates actively through internal channels.

To social worker #S1, social workers are specialists on system knowledge; joining systems by explaining their logic and translating their specific jargons. In other words, they help people understand the school system, the social insurance system, the health system, or other systems, and how one can move within them. Regarding health, social work bases itself on a bio-psycho-social model; acknowledging the different dimensions of wellbeing.
Social worker #S2

“Companies do not want to say that they work with social workers, that would point towards problems. Who would go public and say ‘we were hacked’?”

Social worker #S2 studied social work, social management, marketing, and supervision. Directly after graduation from social work, he founded a reintegration project for long-term unemployed persons, which quickly evolved into a business with around 100 employees. Having started with an outplacement service, he has now been self-employed as a counsellor, management consultant, and supervisor for almost 20 years. Less than five years ago, he started to assist employees at a manufacturing company.

When employees hear about his service, he wants them to know that he is there for them, and they have the opportunity to use ten hours of confidential coaching for free every year. To create these associations and make employees aware of the service, he visited managers and staff representatives at the start, held a talk in front of the whole workforce, put together flyers for employees, and regularly shows his face at the workshop facilities.

To social worker #S2, social work is a reflective profession which acknowledges the complexity of problems and is, therefore, qualified for their analysis. He believes that social workers recognise that the visible manifestation of a problem seldom gives a direct indication of its root cause. That said, he does not proudly proclaim his affiliation to social work when he introduces himself. He believes that all people come in touch with social work at some point in their lives, and he does, hence, not need to show off his professional label.

Social worker #S3

“Many professions are competing for occupational social services. This is no niche but a crowded for-profit business opportunity. Social workers face difficult conditions; managers are not able to understand the differences in the offers they are bombarded with.”

Social worker #S3 finished high school as an autodidact and later studied social work, sociology, and HRM. She became self-employed as a counsellor already during her studies. No company has ever requested her social-work-based EA, which she advertises on her website and in her folder as social counselling.

She believes that social work faces poor conditions on the EA market. According to her, their multiple mandates make social workers more cumbersome than other EA providers who may unambiguously serve employers’ interests. Social worker #S3 sees several demarcation lines between occupational social work and EAPs that make social work involvement in those difficult. According to her, the most controversial issue is the partiality with employees that she believes her professional ethics requires but EAP objectives would breach.

According to social worker #S3, her profession contributes with its unique view on problematic situations; seeking out resources that had previously lied idle. As experts for the general, she sees social workers competent in connecting with other professionals, fostering reflectivity, and insisting on individual responsibility. They, however, lack knowledge in business administration, which is needed for EA.
Social worker #S4

“When we informed companies about occupational social work, they responded: ‘Interesting service, but social work…?’ Later, we called our service ‘social counselling’.”

Social worker #S4 studied social work, social management, supervision, and health promotion. More than 15 years after graduation from social work, she became self-employed and, together with two colleagues, started a business for social counselling. In the ten years to follow, she worked to kickstart occupational social work in Austria and managed to collaborate with several companies. When she could not find enough social workers who wanted to become self-employed in the occupational field, she first hired counsellors from other professions and later terminated the social counselling business.

According to her, the business could have been continued if any social worker had wanted to take over. The initial objective of their advocacy effort was that it would be necessary for all Austrian companies to introduce social-work-based EA until 2020 because of changes in the labour market. At the end of her business, she had already realised that this scale was not possible. The fit2work initiative that the Austrian government introduced shortly afterwards has since partly covered what she had had in mind.

To social worker #S4, social work is the profession most obviously suited for EA. She believes that social workers’ ability to view situations holistically, think in correlations of personal and professional lives, and understand employees as embedded in possibly hindering corporate structures enables them to consider different layers in their interventions.

Social worker #S5

“Managers are not aware of the potential that occupational social work has, for example, for staff retention. Maybe, the professional association needs to make us visible. As an individual, it is not possible to accomplish what needs to be done.”

Social worker #S5 was trained and employed in costume design before she studied social work. More than ten years after graduation, she became self-employed as a counsellor and proactively approached companies with service packages for social counselling and corporate health management (referred to as CHM in this thesis). She collaborated with two other counsellors, one of which was social worker #S1, for offering these services. Even though she established many contacts with companies, she did not manage to conclude a contract.

When interested companies had repeatedly told her to get back to them months later but then still stated they could not implement the service at the time being, she decided to pursue a more lucrative direction than EA. After some years, she made her business dormant and increased her weekly hours in employment for personal reasons. She has, however, remained in EA networks and could imagine resuming her self-employment at some time.

To social worker #S5, the generalist training of social workers enables them to view problems from multiple angles; using a more holistic approach than other professions. She believes her profession to be one step ahead of other psychosocial professions in securing a livelihood, social diagnosis, and designing suitable as well as sustainable support. She is, however,
troubled that social work continues to be not much more than street work and care for homeless people in the public image but also to its professional circles. To social worker #S5, its diversity is not yet sufficiently acknowledged.

5.1.2 Companies which use social-work-based employee assistance

**Company representative #A1**

“I see [social worker #S1] as a social worker; she is solution oriented, empathetic and gives practical advice.”

Company representative #A1 studied law and trained for quality management. For almost ten years, she has worked as a quality manager and corporate health (referred to as CH in this thesis) manager at a social service organisation that assists its employees in various ways. Within the organisation, representative #A1 is the contact person to social worker #S1. She promotes her service internally, processes her invoices, and reports to the director and division managers about her EA regularly.

The EA by social worker #S1 was introduced to the service organisation roughly five years ago to increase employee satisfaction and reduce sick leaves. At current, less than 1% of their employees use this service each year. However, representative #A1 is delighted with social worker #S1 and believes that it is the responsibility of their employees to use her service more.

To company representative #A1, social work concerns itself with problematic conditions in the life and environment of a person; including social relations and family.

**Company representative #A2**

“I do see [social worker #S1] as a social worker, but even more as a competent business partner. To our employees, she is a partner in problem-solving; to us, she is a service provider we can rely on.”

Company representative #A2 studied business administration and worked as a personnel advisor in the private sector for some years. For less than five years, she has worked as a human resource (referred to as HR in this thesis) manager at a social service organisation. There, she heads the department of personnel development which is responsible for EA. Within the organisation, representative #A2 is not the direct contact person for social worker #S1 because the collaboration is, according to her, trouble-free. However, she extends the service contract annually.

The EA by social worker #S1 was introduced to the social service organisation roughly ten years ago to improve staff retention and support employees to solve private and work-related problems. At current, roughly 1% of their employees use this service each year; with an above-average utilisation from employees in the care sector. Company representative #A2 believed that social-work-based EA is a confidential and highly attractive offer to their employees that needs to be communicated more proactively to reduce obstacles and stigmata.
To company representative #A2, social workers solve problems with their clients and not for them. Hence, they leave the decision making power with the client at all times; aiming to empower them and make themselves redundant.

**Company representative #A3**

“Untypical for social workers might be that [social worker #S2] needs to cater not only to individual needs but also to operational requirements and find solutions for all people involved. He does so very competently.”

Company representative #A3 studied industrial engineering and has been in the management of a manufacturing company for more than 25 years. He worked as an HR manager for some time and, now, covers the commercial and financial management of a subsidiary company in his current function. Within the organisation, representative #A3 is the contact person to social worker #S2. They meet regularly to discuss the current situation at the company and exchange information on individual issues connected to employees or departments.

Social-work-based EA was introduced to the subsidiary company more than ten years ago to assist their employees with financial, family, personal, and health problems. It had become increasingly clear to management that human resources matter and that non-work-related problems affect employees’ work performance. To that end, the intervention should contribute to corporate success and increase health rates. Social worker #S2 has covered this specific EA offer for less than five years. Representative #A3 and the subsidiary company are highly pleased with the support of social worker #S2.

To company representative #A3, social work is a kind of personal assistance which promotes and supports people in social plight; aiming to restore their capacity to manage their lifeworlds by themselves.

5.1.3 Companies which do not use social-work-based employee assistance

**Company representative #B1**

“Social workers can empathise with employees. The word ‘social’ means human interactions and those require empathy. But this has to do with the kinds of people that work in the social sector, not necessarily with their academic training.”

Company representative #B1 started as an apprentice at an engineering company almost 25 years ago. Since then, she has been involved in many areas of the company such as administration, health and safety, or, currently, HR. In her position as an HR manager, she advises employees in problematic situations.

An area of concern to representative #B2 is the centralisation of budget decisions concerning EA to the headquarter. She is assigned to several peripheral locations and sees them disadvantaged in what benefits they can offer their employees. According to her, the leeway for support is narrow, and suggestions of preventive staff are regularly not taken into account. Hence, she can often not solve problems, but she deems it necessary to show employees at least that she listens to them.
To representative #B1, social work is connected to people from a lower class that need support because they cannot solve a problem themselves. From a befriended social worker, however, she knows that the profession is complicated, extensive, and differentiated. She thinks the most significant benefit of social counselling, as implemented elsewhere in the company, would be that the threads of EA come together in one place and are not spread over multiple departments. It would, thus, bridge rigid divisions.

**Company representative #B2**

“People will not understand why another profession should be relevant to the occupational field. Occupational medicine and work psychology are well capable of meeting the physical and emotional needs of employees.”

Company representative #B2 studied medicine and trained for occupational medicine, among others. She has been an occupational physician for thirty years and has headed the CH department at an energy company for less than ten years. Recently, she has experienced obstacles in her position and in her commitment to advancing occupational medicine in Austria.

A cause for concern to representative #B2 are current discussions in politics and the chamber of commerce to put an end to the legal consolidation of occupational medicine and work psychology. She sees the motivation of companies to use EA decreasing, even though the increasing strain on employees would necessitate more interventions.

To representative #B2, classical social work is care for marginalised groups, and support of deprived people. She cannot imagine the social work profession managing to establish itself with EA.

**Company representative #B3**

“If I had to hire into my team, I would look for more psychologists. They know about mental illnesses and can find the root of a problem in the short time frame given. Social workers could survey employees; they know how to connect to people. Training in social work would not be an exclusion criterion, but I would not search for them either.”

Company representative #B3 studied psychology and trained for work and organisation psychology. For less than five years, she has headed the CH department at a telecommunications company. In her position, she has the freedom to set priorities in workplace-health-promoting activities and chose EA providers.

According to representative #B3, her company invests above-average resources into EA. Grown structures, however, cause misalignments. Employees usually approach occupational physicians or staff representatives who assist them in navigating through the offered benefits. CHM tries to be an interface, implement standardised processes, cover demands in-house, and establish offers that cater to the majority of employees.

To representative #B3, social work is a profession that has many similarities with psychology but is inferior to the same in counselling employees because it lacks basic training in mental disorders and is not equally sufficient in short-term interventions. Social workers are,
However, respectful, see people at the centre of interventions, and know how to foster a pleasant atmosphere in conversations. If able to develop company thinking and commercial language, they could survey employees, determine needs, or consult managers.

**Company representative #B4**

“Our company is excellent in offering our employees everything that classical social work could. It is only humanity that might still be missing. Maybe it is time for social work to redefine itself. The term ‘social’ has tarnished in society.”

Company representative #B4 studied industrial engineering and trained for quality and project management. For more than ten years, he has been a manager at a manufacturing company. In his position, he works closely with top management and corporate quality.

An area of concern to representative #B4 is talent attraction and retention in times of full production capacity. As an individual, representative #B4 is concerned with employer benefits that do not reflect in interpersonal dealings or structures; with bright minds having left the company despite the broad range of EA. He believes that companies must listen to their employees more and put them at the centre of all activities to remain competitive.

To representative #B3, social work deals with severe cases at the margins of society and is, for example, found on the streets to reach out to drug addicts or youth displaying behavioural problems. According to him, the term ‘social’ has lost the value it had during the industrial era. However, he thinks that the profession could be highly relevant to business, but its label might impede success. Therefore, he suggests occupational social work to redefine itself around more current needs in business and society.

5.1.4 Other experts

**Expert #E1**

“The professional ethics of social work are its unique selling proposition. Because I believe that social work has a contribution to make in society, it has to move away from sole public financing and expand to the private sector.”

Expert #E1 studied social work and has worked in social service organisations for many years. Since recently, he has been a chairperson at the OBDS. In his position, he represents roughly 1300 social workers and social pedagogues towards the public and governmental bodies. Moreover, he collaborates with several schools of social work to further the profession.

He wants to contribute to the successful establishment of occupational social work in Austria and plans to cooperate with the chamber of commerce for this matter. Expert #E1 has regularly been contacted by companies who enquired about assistance for their employees. He could, however, not refer them on because structures needed are, to his knowledge, not yet in place. Such fundamental structure could be an entity which enters into contracts and enables social workers to counsel to several companies at a time.
To expert #E1, social work is a human rights profession oriented at the everyday experiences of people. He sees the profession’s unique selling proposition in its ethics; being a humanistic foundation respecting the individuals’ rights for self-determination. He deems social workers’ approaches valuable to society and companies. Hence, occupational social workers’ contribution to the wellbeing of employees should be acknowledged within the profession.

**Expert #E2**

“Employee assistance programmes can be branded as occupational social services. They are then perceived as ground-level support for workers. This track goes well together with staff wearing leather sandals, but might not be the most profitable option.”

Expert #E2 studied law and obtained additional qualifications in mediation, counselling, and coaching. For more than five years, she has headed a for-profit EA provider that employs professionals from psychotherapy, psychology, law, mediation, consultancy, and counselling. She does not currently employ social workers as such, even though some professionals have had their basic education in social work before advancing themselves to other fields.

An area of concern to expert #E2 is the image that employees have about her EA. She has observed the level of entry at the company mattering more for perception than their website, advertisement material, or sales pitches. While entry through staff representatives made employees understand them as a corporate social service, entry through HR departments allowed for a management consulting image, which she aimed to obtain. That is to say, she wants their service to be accepted by all employees, including executives.

To expert #E2, EA is more than a single profession could ever cover. She is convinced that social workers can only provide a narrow aspect of the same and should, therefore, not label their service as EAPs. Overall, personal attributes such as appearance or level of experience are more relevant to her than professional affiliation.

**Expert #E3**

“It did not take long until I realised that social work was a great solution for the existential problems in the low-wage sector, but we needed other professions in the team to meet the needs in companies with highly qualified staff.”

Expert #E3 studied sociology and migration management. For roughly five years, she has headed a not-for-profit EA provider that employs professionals from social work, psychotherapy, and psychology. The EA provider is part of a large social organisation and, therefore, shares in its reputation, know-how, business contacts, and room for manoeuvre.

Retrospectively, expert #E3 deems the full backing of the parent organisation vital for successfully moving through the foundation phase and establishing a customer base. Since their launch, they have managed to retain almost all of their business customers. She is, however, still concerned with the uncertainty of the one-year contracts with which they operate. Often, individual managers in companies which use their service would be essential for their business relationships, and expert #E3 does not know if their successors would give equal value to their EA.
To expert #E3, social work is highly competent in dealing with the existential problems that employees in the low wage sector face. When starting the occupational service area in the social organisation, she decided to label their offer as social counselling rather than occupational social work. She wanted to not only target companies in the low wage sector and believes that companies with highly qualified personnel might have been deterred by the sound of ‘social work’; possibly associating the term with indigence.

5.2 Analysis

5.2.1 Context

In the EA field, social workers faced challenging conditions. They offered a knowledge-intensive service that would be mostly unknown to companies. Meanwhile, managers at those companies would struggle to understand the potential contribution of social-work-based EA. Social workers would need to translate their professional jargon to terms managers recognised. Moreover, they conceived their professional association to neglect the occupational field, and social work colleagues criticised their undertakings because they seemingly fraternised with the economic system. Those are just an extract from the concerns social workers brought up during the interviews. Since a high degree of contextuality had been suggested for the research problem, the following section gives attention to aspects in which the branding of social-work-based EA is embedded. Those include, above all, the employee needs that company representatives recognised.

A central theme to company representatives was the need to attract and retain skilled staff in times of a changing labour market. Calling it employee satisfaction (#A1), employee loyalty (#A2), employer image (#B1), employer attractiveness (#B4), or the significance of human resources (#A3), they agreed that it required corporate action and was a growing concern to their companies. Acknowledging that challenging physical and psychological conditions at work would affect employees and their work performance, the representatives (#A2, #B1, #B2, #B3, #B4), furthermore, referred to the necessity of sustaining employees’ capacity to perform through health and workplace-related interventions. Representatives #A1 and #B4 also articulated difficulties the company had to react to; namely absenteeism or low employee morale after recurring layoffs.

That said, only representatives #A2 and #A3 deemed employees’ non-work-related problems relevant to their companies and voiced a correlation between employees’ private concerns and work performance. In that respect, social worker #S5 and expert #E3 implied that most companies would not be aware of those existing correlations but expected employees to handle their non-work-related problems in their leisure time. Their assumption might be correct, given that most company representatives did not touch upon the issue.

Nevertheless, the impression dominated among representatives that companies were overall paying more attention to employee needs than previously and, thus, displayed increasing willingness to meet the same. Notwithstanding, representative #B2 held an opposite view and
did not join in portraying this upward trend. Instead, she was alarmed by the lack of understanding which the energy company and the chamber of commerce displayed towards prevention work. Overall, the employee needs that company representatives did most frequently recognise included the following (in descending order).

- physical health and prevention
- stress and psychological strain
- reconciling work and family life
- training and personal development
- team conflicts
- financial difficulties
- childcare and eldercare
- addiction
- reintegration after long-term sick leaves
- burnout
- relationship problems

Moreover, individual representatives referred to psychological disorders, mobbing, sexual harassment (#B2), multi-dimensional problems, and mental hygiene (#A2). Some needs were linked explicitly to employee groups, such as burnout and personal development to managers, financial difficulties to the low-wage sector, or mental hygiene to caring professions.

From a marketing approach, providers should present solutions to problems target groups recognise. Therefore, it is crucial that social workers are themselves aware of the employee needs that company representatives detect. It can be said that social workers are aware of those to different extents. While the employee needs that social workers #S1 and #S2 indicated were almost congruent with the needs perceived by company representatives in terms of content and formulation, social workers #S3, #S4, and #S5 seemed to struggle in phrasing the demand for the EA they offered. The latter only referred to team conflicts, burnout, or overall quality of life. Moreover, social workers were able to identify similar concerns to business as company representatives. They mentioned work performance (#S2, #S3, #S5) and staff retention in times of skills shortage and rural exodus (#S2, #S4, #S5).

Social workers were divided over how disadvantageous the recent developments in the business sector should be seen. Interestingly, social workers #S3 and #S5 who did not phrase employee needs in line with company representatives showed particularly sceptical of recent developments. They singled out the conflict of employer and employee interests (#S3, #S5), the declining loyalty towards staff (#S5), increasing profit orientation, the privatisation of state-owned enterprises, and severe weaknesses of managers in handling human capital (#S3). According to them, employees were, however, still seen as priority in family businesses (#S3) or old school management (#S5).

Hence, they emphasised that there were conflicting interests in companies which were neither a family business nor employing old school managers. Their emphasis, however, goes against the notion from Engler (n.d.) who saw social-work-based EA grounded on common interests.
of employees and employers. The lack of interest companies that displayed towards the EA of social workers #S3 and #S5 might indicate that taking away from the common ground between employers and employees has implications for the attractiveness of social-work-based EA. A discussion of these would, however, reach too far into brand strengths and the behavioural dimension of brands.

Apart from the division over recent developments in business, all social workers agreed that social-work-based EA was hardly pronounced in Austria. While social worker #S3 and #S5 articulated that it was not established at all, the other social workers were more confident about its existence. Likewise, social worker #S4 and expert #E1 stressed that the service existed, but that it was commonly administered internally. It would, for example, exist in the social economy or accompany interventions of the public employment service in Austria but would neither be labelled as such nor be provided by professional social workers.

In contrast, social worker #S2 believed that social-work-based EA would be found mostly externally because companies did not want any form of social work to be organisationally attached to them. To that end, social workers #S2 and #S3 commented that Austrian companies and their employees did not want to be associated with having problems. They believed that social work involvement would indicate those. Although, the former expressed that he had experienced German and Swiss companies as having a more transparent approach to problems and their endeavours to solve them.

With externally provided social-work-based EA, there seems to have been a fluctuation of providers. Social workers #S1 and #S2 saw several attempts of their colleagues fail during the last years. This motivated #S2 to speak of a pioneer phase that social-work-based EA would currently find itself in; a period of finding out if it would be feasible to provide the service in Austria. Expert #E2 noted that there had also been a significant fluctuation of providers in the EA field. She traced that development to the volume and economy of scale needed to provide the complete service package, which some providers had failed to obtain and, hence, had to terminate their business.

Most diverse arguments were given on the modest level of occupational social work’s development in Austria. Social worker #S1, for instance, saw providers as disconnected initiatives, social worker #S4 held the lack of interest on the part of social workers responsible, and social worker #S5 presumed that their professional association did not exploit their potential to advocate for the occupational field enough. Social worker #S3 agreed to that end but went one step further by saying that the social work profession and discipline seemed not interested in developing their occupational field; even distancing themselves from economics in their foundation documents.

Equally crucial to social worker #S3 and expert #E1 appeared a factor utterly independent from their profession. They believed that the economic landscape in Austria hindered the development of social-work-based EA insofar as its majority of small and medium-sized enterprises could not afford to hire a social worker at a reasonable amount of working hours.
5.2.2 Brand identity

As was introduced in chapter 5.1.2, the interviewed social workers held different opinions on what social work meant and would be competent in and, hence, how their unique professional contribution would look. At the core of all their definitions did, however, lie the breadth of their professional perspective. That characteristic was, for instance, reflected in the profession’s knowledge about systems concerning all areas of life (#S1), a multi-level perspective in its analyses and interventions that considered the structures in which people would be embedded (#S2, #S4), and its ability to think in correlations between areas of life (#S4).

Apart from the breadth of the social work perspective, social workers #S1 and #S5 mentioned social diagnosis as a highly relevant tool. Moreover, social workers #S2, #S3, and #S5 counted adroitness in collaborating with members of other professions as one of their core qualities. Accordingly, the notion of social worker #S5 that her profession was interdisciplinary in itself can be seen in line with the official definition of the social work profession (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014). One social worker (#S3) combined the profession’s interdisciplinarity and breadth in a slogan on her website; saying that her competencies would correspond to the capabilities of a qualified interdisciplinary team. Her slogan might be particularly appealing to organisations familiar with that term.

It is reasonable to believe that the social workers’ depictions of what their profession means indicates not only their understanding of the same but also the professional brand identity they build upon it (Göbl, 2013). In that case, their account and delimitations describe how they see themselves and would like to be perceived. It is, thus, interesting how they delimit themselves from some schools of thoughts within social work. Social worker #S1, for example, stressed that she had no fear of contact with companies and did not hesitate using the same for doing social work; drawing a line between her and lines of thought which decry any collaboration with the economic system. Her rationale: social work could not be separated from the economy.

Likewise, social worker #S2 criticised the denigration of entrepreneurs or business people in his profession; saying that he has met business people who were just as social as social workers but, naturally, had to consider economic aspects, among others to be able to pay salaries. He even went one step further by expressing pragmatics towards redundancies in cases where the level of employee cooperation was low. He did, thus, oppose to the position of Wachter (2011) who saw the involvement in layoffs as an uncrossable red line for social work. Apart from layoffs, social worker #S2, moreover, positioned himself in a social work profession about and for all people. He wanted the profession to move away from black and white thinking, where the poor and weak had been played off against business people.

The accounts of social workers #S1 and #S2 and their corresponding professional brand identity included a significant degree of openness towards business. Together with their high degree of context knowledge, their openness might contribute to meeting managers at eye level and understanding them as critical cooperation partners for EA, which they also indicated. Equally important is the concern from social worker #S5 that her profession would
have a far too narrow concept of itself and not acknowledge its diversity. Again, this might indicate that her professional brand identity endorses diversity.

Even though the term occupational social work, which all social workers used on the character of their EA, might have indicated a brand identity that strongly relied on the social work profession for definition, social workers delimitated themselves from some lines of thought in social work. Nevertheless, none of them stated dissatisfaction or disagreement to a degree where they considered to break with the social work profession. Conversely, all social workers made their professional membership clear. Although, social worker #S2 stated not to highlight his social worker label when he introduced himself.

Concerning their positioning, all but one social worker (#S1) indicated points-of-difference towards other professions in EA. Being the exception, social worker #S1 stated that even though points-of-difference might exist, she had moved to emphasise collaboration with other professionals rather than competing for employee attention. Social workers #S2 and #S5 joined with her that collaboration was critical to effective EA. Notwithstanding, social worker #S2 saw a distinct positioning not undermining but even facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration. The following points-of-difference were mentioned.

- psychologists and therapists trace problems to the individual level, while social workers approach them on multiple levels (#S2, #S4)
- most professions think in clusters (#S4) and overestimate the significance of their area of expertise (#S3), while social workers provide cross-cutting support (#S4) and approach correlations holistically (#S3)
- psychologists lack the competence in social diagnosis that social workers have (#S5)

Those points-of-difference reflect the outlined professional understandings and, again, emphasised the breadth of the social work profession’s perspective.

Social workers described their EA as a service that was meant to be used by all employees who needed assistance in any of the areas mentioned in the previous section. In that respect, social worker #S2 was the only provider who had decided to target a specific employee group within the served company; namely blue-collar workers. During the interviews, social workers pointed towards several aspects of their EA that they saw as critical characteristics. Those were outlined in the following table (see table 5.1).

**Table 5.1: Features of social-work-based EA**

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The listed service features (see table 5.1) are not exhaustive because they were derived from the accounts of social workers without having asked them about the categories specifically during the interviews. Therefore, social workers might have forgotten to mention some attributes or components. Notwithstanding, table 5.1 informs of what they deemed relevant to mention on their EA and might, thus, also indicate which characteristics they would emphasise towards target groups; working to position their EA in their minds.

The EA of social workers shares features such as confidentiality or the inclusion of individual and group interventions. Social workers stated to have orientated their service towards professional standards and did almost unanimously agree on adopting a multi-partial role. Their EA seems to be differentiated along the lines of their emphases, the links they created to
organisational units and topics, and the effects they proposed their EA to have. Interestingly, social worker #S1 stood out with the feedback value for organisational development, which she attached to her annual report. Social workers #S2 and #S5 did also see a regular report as a component of their EA but, respectively, described it as a means to show their service utilisation rather than bearing value in itself.

Even though all but one social worker (#S2) decided to label their service with terms other than occupational social work (see chapter 5.2.5), they seemed to have sourced the core features of their EA from the social work profession. Social workers #S4 and #S1 explained this when they stated that although they had altered the label on the service, their EA had, in essence, always remained occupational social work, as their profession would define it. The other social workers seemed to agree along similar lines. Consequently, the definition of their brand identity’s kernel facets, as it was suggested in the preliminary framework, does not prove particularly relevant to self-employed social workers.

5.2.3 Brand awareness

All company representatives stated to be aware of the social work profession. Moreover, the social organisations #A1 and #A2 employed several professional social workers, and representative #B1 counted a professional social worker to her circle of friends. The latter recounted that a befriended social worker had corrected her image of the profession, which she had based on external influences beforehand. It is reasonable to presume that the other representatives based their image on external influences such as the media since they did not indicate any other points of reference.

Their overall awareness is consistent with the excellent stand that expert #E1 attested the social work profession in Austria. Although, he expressed concerns that the fact that non-governmental organisations had recently moved away from labelling their services and jobs as ‘social work’ might affect the awareness towards the profession. Those organisations would increasingly label their services as ‘counselling’ and ‘support’, which he saw as more natural to understand categories.

Despite the high awareness that interviewed company representatives showed of their profession, social workers expressed diverging opinions on the matter. On the one hand, social workers #S1 and #S3 joined with the interviewed representatives and expert #E1 and spoke of an existing awareness of the profession which would, however, not be linked to EA. On the other hand, social workers #S4 and #S5 believed that those responsible in companies were hardly aware of the social work profession and would not understand its features and qualities.

In the first group, social worker #S1 attributed the missing link between her profession and EA to the media, which would not join social work with business in their coverage. Likewise, expert #E1 believed that the profession’s secure link to institutions made it difficult to convince companies of the personal relevance of social-work-based interventions. In the second group, social worker #S4 concluded that it would be necessary to clarify social work
fundamentals to executives; being a complicated undertaking given the lack of time she experienced those to have.

For brand recall from memory, it is, however, not only critical that company representatives know the profession. They should also know the categories in which social workers position their service and be able to link the profession to EA in general. More specifically, social workers spoke of four groups that would need to develop an awareness of social-work-based EA for the profession to establish itself in the occupational field. Those included general and HR managers as decision-makers, staff representatives as crucial multiplicators, and society at large.

Other than regarding their profession, all social workers attested that company representatives would be hardly aware of social counselling. As will be elaborated in chapter 5.2.5, social workers regarded social counselling as a relevant service category in which to position their EA. If managers were aware of the category, social worker #S3 presumed that they would only have a vague image of the service, and be unable to link the same to social work. She argued that management consultants who offered social counselling without pertinent education were the cause for the missing link. That way, they would not only dominate the image companies had of the service, but also undermine its quality as such. Then again, social worker #S4 conceded that international companies might know of social counselling from offers in other countries, which is how her consulting company received its first assignment.

Representatives whose companies used social-work-based EA were undoubtedly aware of the service. Company representative #A1, for instance, learned about it through a personal recommendation from the director of #A2. Representative #A2 recalled that the service had already been implemented before her time, and she learned about it when she started her present job. Likewise, representative #A3 had no previous knowledge of social-work-based EA before it was implemented under one of his predecessors. Consequently and as they had no previous or separate knowledge of social-work-based EA, the awareness representatives #A1 and #A2 had of the service converged with the awareness they had of social worker #S1.

Matters look different for representative #A3 because social worker #S2 was not the first social worker to assist their employees. The representative became aware of social worker #S2 through a personal recommendation of a divisional HR manager with a social work background.

In contrast to the appraisal of social workers, a part of the interviewed representatives was aware of social counselling despite not having it implemented in their companies. Representative #B1, for example, knew that the service was widely established in their company locations in a different country. She, however, could not motivate why that specific kind of EA was not equally constituted in their Austrian locations. Both her and representative #B3 stated that they had regularly been contacted by consultants and service providers, which presumably included social counsellors.

Representatives #B1 and #B3 concluded that they ignored offers on EA for the most part. They motivated their ignorance with the immense quantity of proposals received and with the priority of internal coverage. While to representative #B1, internally meeting employee needs was more feasible given the tight budgets for external services, company representative #B3
stated that internally covering EA was one of her primary objectives for CHM. The latter believed that the flow of sensitive information required for high-quality EA necessitated employment within a company.

All representatives whose companies did not use social-work-based EA did not state a link between professional social work and companies, or between the profession and social counselling. That missing link can, thus, be seen as the missing element in the awareness of company representatives. Representative #B2, for example, almost dismissively postulated that she could not imagine social workers employing themselves with EA. Unfamiliar with social-work-based EA but curious, #B4 kept asking how exactly social work would relate to companies. Beyond that link, company representatives #B2 and #B4 were not aware of social counselling at all; they had never met anyone who used or provided that service.

Even though it would be convenient to presume the awareness towards EAPs to be more widespread among company representatives than the modest knowledge on social counselling, expert #E2 indicated otherwise when she stated that most companies would not know the term EAP. Instead, she needed to extensively explain her organisation’s service to most of the companies to which she reached out. On that matter, she disagreed with Buon and Taylor (2008) who spoke of a widespread awareness towards EAPs. However, it was already pointed out in chapter 4.2.3 that the authors’ sample did not include Austrian managers. Therefore, the statement from expert #E2 is given priority, and it must be presumed that the findings of Buon and Taylor (2008) cannot be directly translated to Austria.

5.2.4 Brand associations

As was portrayed in chapters 5.1.2 and 5.1.3, company representatives had various associations about the social work profession. Interestingly, a significant difference can be observed between the representatives whose companies used social-work-based EA and those whose companies did currently not use the same. While the descriptions of the latter centred around a target group (#B1, #B2, #B4) or compared social work to other professions (#B2, #B3), the former defined social work relating to its aim (#A2, #A3) or concerns (#A1). This observation is insofar relevant as the mental attachment to target groups such as socially deprived people (#B1, #B2), marginalised groups (#B2, #B4), drug addicts, or youth displaying behavioural problems (#B4) can be seen as an unfavourable association. Building on Keller (2013), that kind of associations are unfavourable insofar as they make social work appear irrelevant to meet the employee needs that company representatives recognised. The profession would, hence, seem unable to satisfy the representatives’ wants.

It is, therefore, no surprise that the three representatives who associated social work with the indicated target groups agreed that what the profession had to offer would already be covered well by their companies. Representative #B1 even continued by saying that any company of a certain size would doubtlessly have covered everything social-work-based EA could contribute; only labelled differently. Moreover, representative #B2 pointed out that two other professions – namely occupational medicine and work psychology – would be well capable of fulfilling the entire spectrum of employee needs.
Representative #B4 was most receptive to the idea of social work in companies. He noted that, even though his manufacturing company covered classical social work well, the profession might be capable of weighing in the humanity he saw business lacking. Drawing on the Latin root of the term ‘social’, which he translated to ‘associate’, ‘fellow’, ‘together’, and ‘sharing’, he highlighted that the profession could respond to what had remained unmet. However, he suggested that social workers should consider changing the label on their EA and, thus, remove the word ‘social’ to indicate an attractive value proposition. He understood that word to mislead associations towards politics or the margins of society.

Strikingly, even though representative #B1 pointed out how a befriended social worker had changed her image of social work, the first association that she indicated was nevertheless tied to a target group, as was outlined above. In a second step, she described several qualities of the profession and listed fields to which social work would contribute. Those included geriatrics, work psychology, companies, youth work, street work, disabilities, childcare, and family work. She called social work a service of psychological and private relevance. Thus, her image of the profession could be argued to consist of two layers; with the less favourable one seemingly dominating.

On the other hand, the comparison to other professions that representatives #B3 and #B2 drew can be seen as an association of low uniqueness, according to Keller (2013). Moreover, it did not reflect the desired positioning of social workers (see chapter 5.2.2). While the comparison of representative #B2 resulted in the upfront rejection of the social work profession, the comparison of representative #B3 granted the profession more value but, in essence, portrayed it as second-class psychology. From her standpoint as a work psychologist, she presumed that social workers would share some features of psychology, while others would remain unique to her profession (see chapter 5.1.3). Hence, she did not identify any features that might be unique about social work. Her conclusion that she would favour psychologists to carry out psychosocially challenging tasks in her CH team reflects how her comparative association does not support the brands of social workers.

In the statements of representatives #B1 and #B2, a secure link between the mental dimension of employee wellbeing and the profession of psychology is evident; with the link almost converging into an equation. According to Aaker (2011), such an equation can be seen as a successfully fought brand relevance battle. The profession of psychology had entered companies after the notion that employees were increasingly burdened mentally, as representative #B2 pointed out, and has since then been a category on its own. It might be argued that, in the minds of representatives #B1 and #B2, psychology occupied the mental dimension of employee needs to the degree that it became reflected in language. This reflection is, for example, apparent when representative #B1 recounted how she had listened to employees even though not being able to solve their problems, and reasoned that she then acted as a ‘psychologist for a day’.

All social workers agreed that they experienced companies which would not use their EA to have negative preconceptions of their profession. With doing so, they joined with how Legood et al. (2016) and Wermeling (2013) had portrayed the public perception of the social work profession; at least from the perspective of social workers. Social worker #S1 also joined with Hamburger (2012) by saying that the media had a central role in the reproduction
of unfavourable associations. She argued that it consistently and repeatedly described social work solely in the context of certain target groups rather than joining it with business, as was mentioned earlier. Those target groups would typically include families in touch with youth welfare or people affected by homelessness.

As was discussed concerning representatives #B1, #B2, and #B4, social workers #S1, #S3, and #S5 believed there to be an active link between their profession and specific target groups in the minds of company representatives, i.e. to marginalised, excluded, homeless, or addicted people. Social worker #S3 also thought that company representatives would link social work to people with disabilities. She also got to the heart of the profession’s image by saying that company representatives did not think that social workers would do a lousy job, but they would connotate the profession negatively based on its target groups. This may, on the one hand, lead to secondary associations and, on the other hand, impede personal relevance.

In contrast, the associations representatives #A1, #A2 and #A3 had towards social work centred around its aims and concerns, as was stated earlier. In not limiting the target group of the profession’s social services, those associations allowed for personal relevance of social-work-based EA to the employee needs that representatives recognised. By drawing on empowerment (#A2) and the effort to restore people’s capacity to manage their lifeworlds by themselves (#A3), those company representatives conceived of the social work profession as relevant to their employees.

Irrespective of whether companies used social-work-based EA or not, social workers believed that another factor was relevant to the image they held of their profession: the link to social problems. Their notion blends into what Christa (2010) referred to as a deficit-orientated context (see chapter 4.1). The connection to problems caused social worker #S3 to voice concerns that the implementation of social-work-based EA might reflect poorly on a company’s image. Similarly, social workers #S1 and #S2 believed that employees did not want to use or be associated with social work since it would indicate that they had problems which they failed to solve on their own; implying the stigma discussed thoroughly in social work literature (see chapter 4.1).

The association with problems might be especially evident in the reluctance of companies to endorse social workers or go public about the implementation of social-work-based EA, as social workers #S2, #S3, and #S4 pointed out. Indeed, company representatives #A1, #A2, #A3, #B1 used the word ‘problem’ or a comparable term when describing their associations towards the social work profession. Similarly, representatives #B2 and #B4 mapped out circumstances of target clients that can be seen connected to problems. A link to problems in their images of the profession is, therefore, likely. None of them, however, expressed hesitation to publicly endorse social workers who would assist their employees or go public about their social-work-based EA.

None of the representatives whose companies used social-work-based EA did, however, argue the converse. The only communication they stated to have carried out regarding the service in question referred to internal promotion, i.e. editing intranet pages, reminding employees in problematic situations of the counselling offered, or encouraging managers to spread the message. It can, therefore, be concluded that companies did not actively use social-work-
based EA for their company image, i.e. to communicate their CSR efforts to stakeholders or to enhance their employer brands, as social worker #S1 suggested (see chapter 5.2.2). Be it because they actively distanced themselves from the social work profession and its deficit-orientated context, as social workers #S2, #S3, and #S4 assumed, or be it for some other reason. The empirical data does not allow for a determination of motives.

Either way, if social workers are not able to use endorsements, they cannot use their customers’ credible and well-known brands as source factors for secondary associations. Therefore, social workers cannot leverage the awareness and associations around those for their credibility. However, and following Aaker (1997), the endorsement from a credible entity must be seen as a crucial element for improving the perceived competence of occupational social workers.

Although their one-person businesses are, in fact, for profit, the strong public welfare orientation of their profession (see chapter 4.1) might attribute less competent personality traits to social workers (Aaker, 1997). Moreover, as small and recently established businesses, they cannot directly draw on the reputation of a pre-existing brand like expert #E3 could. She, for instance, highlighted that their first customer presumably approached them for their reputable name and size before they even offered social counselling. All those aspects seem to intensify the need for self-employed social workers to use credible source factors such as their customers in their brand communication.

Even though company representatives #A1, #A2, and #A3 seemed not to be actively communicating about social-work-based EA externally, they all stated being highly satisfied with the service and the social workers who provided it. Furthermore, the social workers #S1 and #S2 were both described as highly competent by their customers #A1, #A2 and #A3. As was outlined in chapter 5.1.2, those companies initially introduced social-work-based EA to meet various needs they recognised, and the representatives, analogically, formulated different expectations and associations towards the same. Company representative #A1, for instance, expected the service to be confidential, competent, and readily available to employees.

A critical influence on the perception of the service might also be found in the point of entry or organisational attachment. That is to say, company representatives and employees might attribute associations about those entities to social-work-based EA. While company representative #A1, in whose organisation social-work-based EA was attached to CHM, saw the service as an integral part of workplace health promotion, company representative #A2 who oversaw EA as part of her personnel development department made a sharp distinction between the two. According to representative #A2, the separating aspect between workplace health-promoting activities and social-work-based EA lied in the anonymous character of the latter. Therefore, she saw them as distinct offers with similar objectives. Apart from these differing views on the relation of social-work-based EA and workplace health promotion, expert #E2 also recognised the point of entry as crucial to their brand image (see chapter 5.1.3).

At the same time, social workers held diverse conceptions of the image which companies had of their EA. Social worker #S2, for instance, believed that management at company #A3
wanted problems to be looked at professionally, and would expect his interventions to show results. His conception seems to match with the account of representative #A3 who wanted his EA to contribute to their corporate success (see chapter 5.1.2) and particularly appreciated about social worker #S2 that he could be counted on as a problem solver on demand. Meanwhile, the last aspect was referred to by social worker #S2 as potentially problematic to the confidentiality he strived to uphold with his EA.

Overall, social workers #S4 and #S5 stated to have experienced managers very positive about their EA if those realised the professionality of the service and the discharge it granted them. However, they could not retrace how those managers had come to that realisation and which parts of their communication had supported that image. Likewise, social worker #S3 could not explain how a positive image would come about either. She deprived company representatives of the ability to see the difference between professional EA and a would-be social service. Her conception may root in her disillusionment on occupational social work that built up since no company ever demanded her EA.

Expert #E3, although, offered a possible explanation on that matter. She believed that the understanding of EA could not be influenced but depended on the conception of man that underlay a corporate identity. According to her, this argument would be backed with the fact that all of the twelve companies which used their social counselling were family businesses with a high appreciation for their employees. To the knowledge of the researcher, however, none of the companies who used social-work-based EA was a family business, which would not support her theory to be generalised. Notwithstanding, it might be an interesting thought to segment companies based on their conception of man, but that would reach into a more hands-on marketing discussion.

Social workers #S1 and #S2, furthermore, discussed the importance of business licenses and job titles for their brand image. The former concluded that company representatives would take management consultants more seriously than counsellors, which she could not back with any specific examples. It cannot be concluded if her consideration is substantiated because no statements from company representatives could be found to back her argument, and no other social worker stated any discontent with their business license in counselling. Meanwhile, social worker #S2 who already held a business license in management consulting experienced that company #A3 had demarcated his EA from leadership coaching, seemingly based on his job title, even though he believed competent to coach leaders. While he saw himself perceived as responsible for workers and staff, he was dissatisfied that managers were granted coaching by another consultant who, he believed, knew the company less well.

Regarding the competence of professionals in general, company representatives stressed either personal experiences and expertise (#A1, #A2, #A3, #B1, #B4) or professional training and affiliation (#B2, #B3) as decisive factors. To company representatives #A, personal attributes (#A2, #A3), appearance, and design (#A1) were core indicators of social workers’ #S1 and #S2 high competence. The mentioned personal attributes included the following.

- capacity for teamwork (#A2, #A3)
- the ability to critically assess one’s expertise and refer to other experts (#A2)
- reflectivity (#A3)
• the ability to deal with conflicts (#A3)
• the ability to find solutions for all people involved in the company context (#A3)

Overall, representatives #A1 and #A3 gave similar accounts of how they perceived social workers #S1 and #S2; mentioning solution orientation, empathy, and sensitivity. Moreover, they individually attributed a likeable (#A1) and calm personality (#A3) to the social workers assisting their employees.

The account that representative #A2 gave of social worker #S1 differed from the ones of representatives #A1 and #A3 insofar as she distinguished between the role the social worker fulfilled towards their employees and the role the same assumed towards the organisation’s management. While in the former, the representative saw her partnering with employees to solve problems, social worker #S1 acted as a competent business partner in the latter. The social worker was believed to do so through reliable invoicing and making her service quality transparent with comprehensive reports that representative #A2 appreciated considerably.

Overall, representative #A2 perceived social worker #S1 to be structured, efficient, drawing on broad expertise, and having an attractive business name.

Apart from solution orientation and high competence, the portrays that representatives #A1 and #A2 gave of social worker #S1 did not have any overlaps. This considerable variation might lead back to the different roles the representatives referred to; possibly indicating a high degree of role flexibility on the part of social worker #S1. A similar variance was visible in the comments the company representatives gave on the social workers’ websites. While representatives #A1 and #A3 were generally positive about the websites of social workers #S1 and #S2, representative #A2 stated that the website was not relevant to her since she had no intention to terminate the business relationship with social worker #S1. Nonetheless, she added that it might be relevant to her employees who, especially if having a first language other than German, might favour a less crowded and easier-to-understand website.

Interestingly, social workers provided much more information on what they conceived companies to think of their service and profession than of themselves as individuals. According to Roberts (2005), such self-awareness would, however, be relevant to influencing impressions. The only aspect that social worker #S3, for instance, pointed out in that respect was that her affiliation to social work had been, in many cases, not received well. Likewise, social worker #S5 stated only one aspect relating to the scale of her one-person business. She conceived companies to think of financial risk when hearing of her small business; presuming that large companies would prefer to do business with other companies of similar scale. Social worker #S2 could, although, provide more reflection on his impression. He expressed that companies had always perceived him as a coach rather than a social worker and appreciated his expertise in the employment of people with disabilities.

Altogether, social workers were concerned that the deficit-orientation of their profession might reflect poorly on their service users. They felt reassured on that viewpoint because companies seemed to refuse endorsement. Companies who used social-work-based EA were, however, highly satisfied with the service and the social workers who provided it. Even though personal attributes mattered profoundly to perceived competence from the perspective
of company representatives, social workers reflected little on their impression. Moreover, the accounts of company representatives referred to different roles that social workers performed.

5.2.5 Branding strategies and tactics

Turning now to the strategies that self-employed social workers pursued and the tactics that they used to influence the professional service brand image discussed above, all but one social worker indicated a low systematisation of their marketing and branding efforts. It was only social worker #S4 who intentionally seems to have pursued a far-reaching strategy to increase companies’ awareness towards occupational social work in Austria. Social worker #S1, for instance, stated that her strategy had not been planned but had emerged in contact with others. After this first step of strategy development, as she called it, she deemed it necessary to formalise now the strategy that had been decided along the way and tailor her tactics to the same.

Likewise, social worker #S3 stated not to have pursued any intentional marketing strategy. However, different from social worker #S1, she did fundamentally not want to market herself, which she equated with selling herself. To her, someone who advertised his or her competencies attempted to hide that he or she had none, which she experienced with colleagues who she believed were the more confident, the more ignorant they were. The caution with which she treated marketing might stem from the deontological foundation of her profession (see chapter 4.1). That became evident when she stressed various times that she wanted to be anything but inauthentic, which the social worker would see as deceptive because it would not give customers the option to choose her freely for who she is.

Similarly, but for different reasons, social worker #S2 stated not to push his marketing efforts at current. He even made it difficult for potential customers to identify his service offers by structuring his website in a way that put a different face to the front. Since he worked to his full capacity, he stated to be able to afford to discourage interested parties. Those would have to actively search his website to find any information on social-work-based EA. According to him, those reverse advertising efforts worked as a filter, which made only those interested parties contact him who would also accept his mainstay other than social work, as put to the front on the website.

Social worker #S3 believed that her website also worked as a filter. Since it was designed to be authentic, she stated that anyone who did not like her online presence should not contact her. She had rejected the advice from others to redesign her website or remove some pictures by arguing that people who did not share her taste in pictures would not be her targeted audience. Her definition of a target group as people who like her or display a similar taste might fit her understanding of authenticity but can be seen as restricting her reach dramatically. Nevertheless, she did not want to afford a redesign and expressed that she would instead keep her self-made website.

Increase awareness

In one way or the other, all but one social worker (#S3) undertook efforts to make themselves, their EA, or occupational social work in general known to companies. Being the exception,
social worker #S3 did not endeavour to increase companies’ awareness of the stated at all, apart from mentioning social counselling on her folder and website. On those, she, however, categorised her EA under HRM because she believed that company representatives would better understand the service under this known term. Overall, she believed that her passive approach would reveal to her the demands on the market.

Responding to the missing link that was identified in chapter 5.2.3, social workers #S1, #S2, and #S4 worked to communicate the link between the social work profession and EA. Social worker #S4, for instance, precisely focused on that link in the image of companies and social workers during her many years in the field. At the start, she used her chair to initiate research projects and industry internships for social work students. When she realised that the awareness on the side of companies was challenging to increase without a business partner that could deliver the service she promoted, she started a business for social counselling. At the same time, she started a not-for-profit association that was solely concerned with raising awareness for occupational social work in Austria. Knowing that information was needed just as direly as the product itself, social worker #S4 published newspaper articles, developed information material, and organised information events.

On a smaller scale, social workers #S1 and #S2 used networks to promote their service. Focusing on the missing link, social worker #S1 used social occasions to talk about social-work-based EA and her intention to become self-employed in the field. When conversation partners were interested, she sketched its vast opportunities for business. Additionally, she collaborated with an occupational health provider who subcontracted her to assist employees of their business customers. That way, she could utilise the centre’s already existing network of companies. In retrospect, she believes that talking has been the most critical aspect of raising awareness; stating that the more social-work-based EA is talked about, the more people will be able to form an image.

Social worker #S2 would probably join with her statement. He obtained most of the requests for his EA directly or indirectly through students who heard of occupational social work in his lectures. For his other services, he also relied on his comprehensive network, including companies, social work colleagues, and students, with which his high profile in seminars, consulting, and teaching had provided him. Regardless of a similarly extensive network of students that social worker #S3 had obtained through teaching, she did not work to establish the mentioned link but appeared solely as a social worker and supervisor in the educational context.

Social worker #S5 applied a different approach to promoting her service. Firstly, she endeavoured to be put on the expert list on stress and burnout prevention that the chamber of commerce makes publicly available and which she believed companies would consult when searching for experts. Additionally, and together with social worker #S1 and another counsellor, she attempted to acquire business contacts through cold calls. They also emailed those company representatives and sent their professional profiles as well as a description of their service. Their emphasis lied on being present in the minds of as many companies as possible, and they tried to keep these contacts alive by regularly calling themselves in memory.
As was pointed out in the preliminary framework, it is crucial that company representatives can recall social-work-based EA from memory when needed. Therefore, the category in which social workers position their service is critical. From the accounts of social workers, it is evident that the label of the service itself is a vital option to establish a link to a product category. All but one social worker (#S2) moved away from the occupational social work category and, instead, positioned their EA in social counselling, which is a service category that they share with counsellors and other professionals. From a brand relevance approach, the occupational social work category might have been more beneficial because it was limited to professional social workers and they, therefore, faced no competition from other professions within this category (see chapter 2.2.1). Aaker (2011), however, pointed out that a category must not only be created but must also be visible.

With this in mind, it must be presumed that the social work profession has failed to manage the visibility of its occupational category. This failure is evident both in the accounts of representatives whose companies do not use social-work-based EA (see chapter 5.2.3) and those of social workers themselves (see chapters 4.2.2 and 5.2.1). While the representatives were not aware of the much referred to link, social workers did not report a commitment of their profession to increase the visibility of its occupational field. Furthermore, self-employed social workers did not feel capable of managing the visibility of their profession’s service category individually, which approves of what Kotler and Keller (2016) stated regarding small companies: presence is difficult to establish at a small scale.

Therefore, the considerations and actions of social workers to position their service in a better-known category and loosen ties to occupational social work have to be considered sound decisions, despite the competition within social counselling. This consideration can be expected to hold as long as no increased commitment of the Austrian social work profession towards its occupational field is displayed. Correspondingly, social workers #S1 and #S2 do both consider renaming their service. While the former is not yet satisfied with the social counselling category, the latter was considering to move away from the occupational social work category for the first time and call his service EAP instead.

No concluding recommendation can be given on how social workers should label their EA. According to expert #E1, the term EAP might not be more anchored in the memory of Austrian company representatives than social counselling (see chapter 5.2.3). However, EAPs might be a service with a sharper profile and a more independent identity than occupational social work, as was mentioned earlier (see chapter 4.2.3). To that end, it might also source fewer associations from the social work profession, and could provide the fresh start that Kotler (2003) recommended for brand extensions.

**Influence associations**

How social workers label their service is not only relevant for brand awareness but does also attach meaning to the same. As was outlined in chapter 5.2.4, representatives whose companies did not use social-work-based EA defined the social work profession around its target group or through a comparison with other professions. If social workers include ‘social work’ in their service title, such as in ‘occupational social work’, company representatives are, hence, likely to project unfavourable associations from target groups of social work to the professionals who offer EA. Those secondary associations have been pointed out as impeding
the personal relevance of their EA to companies to which it is proposed. This is, thus, another reason why social worker #S1, for instance, worked to develop a new service title and believed it would be the first step to improve her brand image.

The term ‘social’ in the social counselling category, in which most social workers positioned their EA, might still evoke unfavourable associations as representative #B4 and Baumgartner and Sommerfeld (2016) pointed out. However, taking away the term ‘social’, as representative #B4 suggested, was not considered by most social workers. Going further and dissolving their membership to the social work profession seemed to be not an option for social workers #S3, #S4, and #S5. Those were convinced of several points-of-parity between social work and other professions in EA (see chapter 5.2.2). Besides, social work seems to be interwoven with their professional brand identity to such a degree that they appear little motivated to dissolve the membership to their socially devalued identity group, as Roberts (2005) would phrase it.

Like the other social workers, social worker #S1 did not want to break with her profession because she recognised positive aspects that were crucial for her professional service brand identity. In that respect, social worker #S1 mentioned that she had met many supervisors and coaches with a social work background who broke with the profession; a decision that social worker #S1 would not support. A similar separation might apply to the social workers who worked for expert #E2 and were not recognisable as social workers. Instead, they were known under the professional groups into which they advanced themselves.

From all social workers that were interviewed, social worker #S2 seemed to be least concerned about putting his professional affiliation to the fore (see chapter 5.1.1). He respected that the staff representative at company #A3 did not introduce him as a social worker, and did never demand his contacts to refer to him as such. Social worker #S2 did, moreover, respect the wish of company #A3 and its employees not to be associated with him and his profession. Consequently, he met employees outside the company’s premises and did not state the company’s name anywhere except on his website.

In line with Roberts (2005), individual social workers did nevertheless manage information on their profession in personal encounters and tried to influence the images company representatives held of the social work profession. Social worker #S1, for instance, consistently and repeatedly communicated that health had a social component, which needed to be met – just like the physical and psychological aspects of health – to achieve wellbeing. Her profession would, moreover, be suited to improve that social aspect of health.

Based on the accounts of social workers, personal encounters seem to be very suitable for influencing associations. They can be seen as suitable insofar as they granted social workers rather long timeframes to explain their knowledge-intensive services, and as they allowed them to convince as persons. Social worker #S4, for example, stated that she had moved away from using a professional sales force for similar reasons. After an initial test phase, she realised that those sellers did not manage to explain the service as uniquely as professional social workers who were passionate about what they did. She believed that social workers, moreover, embodied the service. That is why she and her colleague, then, personally completed many appointments to explain the uniqueness of their EA.
Social worker #S1 presumably also used her person to embody her social-work-based EA. Moreover, she worked with her appearance – trouser suits and high heels – to break with stereotypes on social workers. With that clothing, it can be expected that she better fitted into the business world than with leather sandals and dreadlocks, which she had experienced to be part of the image that company representatives had of social workers. Thus, she became habituated to the expectations of upmarket companies (Parmentier, Fischer & Reuber, 2013). Through her appearance, social worker #S1 also wanted to, overall, change the image of social work and present it as a competent profession. Likewise, social worker #S3 aimed to use the competence people perceived her to have for the benefit of her profession. Those noble objectives make it even more unlikely that they would be willing to break with their profession.

Regarding her EA, social worker #S1 put the high value of annual reports for organisational development to the fore (see chapter 5.2.2). She believed that her reports provided learning organisations with valuable insights into their workforce and, thus, used annual meetings to hand over her report and feedback her observations to management. On the other hand, the core message that social worker #S2 communicated to managers at company #A3 was straightforwardly connected to the return of investment (referred to as ROI in this thesis) on his EA. Building upon some German occupational social work scholar, he told managers that they could expect an ROI of 260%. By using this number, he wanted to indicate that his EA was no waste of money but had a measurable financial output through reduced sick leaves and increased productivity.

On the contrary, social worker #S4 and expert #E3 argued that ROI was not a particularly decisive feature of the service; with effects stretching over multiple years and several professions claiming the outcomes for themselves. Stemming from his brand message, social worker #S2 experienced that managers at company #A3 expected a simple cause-and-effect relationship from his EA. However, and presumably for similar reasons as social worker #S4 and expert #E3 pointed out, he could not fulfil his brand promise. To reduce harm, he regularly stressed towards managers that his interventions were iterative processes without one-dimensional correlations to outcomes. This inconsistent brand message might be one reason why most social workers did not promise a specific ROI even though it would help their brands by putting a number on an otherwise unclear value proposition, as was suggested earlier (see chapter 4.2.2).

Since company #A3 was the only company who used the EA of social worker #S2, he highly customised his service. Overall, he accommodated their needs extensively. Those efforts become visible when he accepted to engage with cases that management suggested to him even though he saw those as a clear instrumentalisation. To be able to comply with these expectations and, at the same time, not compromise on his professional standards, he negotiated individual helping alliances with employees and was careful about what to say towards managers when they followed up on their referrals. Likewise, social workers #S1 and #S3 stressed that confidentiality was crucial to deliver the service quality they promised. Therefore, they built trust with employees and strictly adhered to confidentiality.

In line with Keller (2013) who suggested using direct experiences rather than intermediate advertisement to build personal relevance, social workers #S4 and #S5 worked with
experiences to promote their EA. Social worker #S4, for example, carried out projects in companies and evaluated their employees’ needs, among others, to make managers curious about her EA. Similarly, social worker #S5 presented her service in person and attempted to kick off discussions on what companies would need; while not disclosing all of her EA concepts. In one company, she managed to develop a customised service package over some time. The package was, however, never utilised.

Individually, social workers did predominantly use personal contacts (#S2, #S3) and the design of their websites (#S1, #S3, #S5) to convey personal attributes. In personal contacts, social worker #S2, for instance, wanted to be perceived as willing to tackle problems and, thus, worked proactively and took people as well as their problems seriously. He did, furthermore, work to quickly develop solutions that employees could put into practice right away. Social worker #S3, on the other hand, believed that she could only in personal contacts indeed play out her strengths; being appreciative, able to talk to most diverse people, fully customer-oriented, and modest.

Social workers #S1, #S3, and #S5 wanted their websites to display clarity that should reflect on themselves. Social workers #S3 and #S5, furthermore, wished to feature their qualifications and work experiences. The objectives of social workers #S1, #S3, and #S5, however, diverged apart from this shared emphasis on clarity and qualifications. While social worker #S3 wanted her website, above all, to be authentic, social workers #S1 and #S5 had taken their considerations further. Social worker #S1, for example, approved of a corporate colour that a designer suggested as appropriate to communicate brand attributes such as freshness and vibrancy even though she did not particularly like the shade. Similarly, social worker #S5 tested colours, images, and website designs on several contacts and, thus, used the ones where the associations were in line with her intentions; being a sense of warmth.

Besides the websites, only social worker #S1 had a company name other than her own and, therefore, used an additional brand element to convey her brand identity. She, furthermore, used a straight logo to convey technical attributes and was convinced that her logo set her apart from more circular, ornate emblems which were typical for psychosocial professions and therapists. Besides, the pictures that showed social worker #S1 were, according to her, unconventional and humorous; being two attributes that she wanted to convey. To employees who saw those pictures, she wanted to be a partner in finding different and, thus, unconventional ways to approach their problems. Moreover, social worker #S1 strived to obtain a business license in management consulting to improve her perceived credibility. As was mentioned in chapter 5.2.4, she was convinced of the higher credibility that business license would provide, as opposed to a business license in counselling.

Concerning secondary associations, it can be said that social workers did hardly used source factors in their branding efforts, as they were proposed in the preliminary framework. The only exception was their discussion on how to manage the affiliation with their profession, as was outlined earlier. Consequently, they might have missed out on the potential of the halo effect and of leveraging those secondary associations, as Kapferer (2012) and Keller (2013) suggested. One way to manage those could lie in drafting their lists of cooperation partners and including credible entities to share in their favourable associations.
Social workers #S1 and #S5 stated cooperation partners on their websites but had not drafted the list of partners as to strategically source favourable associations from them. The former, for instance, wanted that list to complement her service. To that end, it featured other counsellors with whom she partnered and organisations to which she referred employees. On the other hand, social worker #S5 straightened up her list in recent years and removed all partners whom she had experienced not to cooperate selflessly. Thus, only two counsellors with whom she had partnered intensively remained on the list. Their joint venture, which had been mentioned earlier to have approached companies for EA and CHM, served to overcome the one-person business image towards larger companies.

Turning now to an aspect that expert #E3 suggested as critical to the brand image of EA: the utilisation of EA offers on the employee level. Expert #E3 articulated that the fact that 10% of employees utilised their EA each year on average had earned her organisation the reputation of providing a high-quality service. She traced the high utilisation rate to their great internal marketing efforts that included personal introductions of counsellors at all company locations. Likewise, social worker #S2 expressed that an EA offer from a counsellor before his time was terminated by company #A3 because employees had not received her demeanour well and, thus, refused to use her service. The efforts of social workers to promote their EA to employees can, therefore, be seen as essential tactics to improve their brand images.

Social workers #S1 and #S2, for instance, worked to be visible to employees through seminars on ‘harmless’ topics such as communication, profiles on intranet pages (#S1, #S2), articles in employee newspapers and newsletters, regular presence at events (#S1) or onsite, and an introductory lecture to the whole workforce (#S2). They, furthermore, managed relationships to key actors such as general or HR managers, staff representatives (#S1, #S2), and occupational physicians, i.e. through regular phone calls or meetings.

They influenced the associations which employees had on them through the priorities they set and the way they approached them. Social worker #S2, for example, concentrated on blue-collar workers at company #A3 and regularly reached out to them in the manufacturing sites. Meeting them, he distributed information cards that he had made just for company #A3 and which used a shade similar to the corporate colour of #A3. When he talked to them, he consistently and repeatedly communicated that he was there for them, the company paid the counselling units, the service was confidential, and they could meet him at his office location. In personal interactions, he took care not to appear aloof or treat blue-collar workers condescending.

5.2.6 Programme effectiveness

As was outlined in chapter 5.2.5, social workers did hardly pursue clear-cut marketing strategies with which they planned and systematically implemented actions, as it might be expected if referring to them as marketing programmes. The more or less integrated actions of self-employed social workers will, nevertheless, be analysed as if they were marketing programmes, and their effectiveness to affect the brand image will be examined, as Kotler and Keller (2016), suggested.
Through personal contacts and networking, social workers #S1, #S2, and #S4 managed to increase company representatives’ awareness of social-work-based EA and communicate the missing link between the social work profession and EA. Each in their way, those social workers acknowledged the significance of awareness. They worked to raise awareness for occupational social work in settings which were not related to sales, i.e. information events (#S4), teaching (#S2), or social occasions (#S1). Those undertakings can insofar be regarded as useful as they helped to spread knowledge on to interested parties such as the director of company #A2. Moreover, social worker #S4 reported that companies who had directly experienced her while evaluating the needs of their employees were more likely to be motivated to tackle identified problems and understand the professionality of social workers. Through adaptation in personal interactions and a project tailored to a company, they were able to show presence and create personal relevance. These two factors that were proposed in the preliminary framework can, thus, be seen as highly relevant to their branding efforts.

Social worker #S5 did also attempt to raise awareness of her social-work-based EA through cold calls and presentations. Her efforts were, however, always connected to sales. Registered on the expert list on stress and burnout, she stated to have been perceived as an expert on those topics and selectively utilised as a speaker. Since the perspective of the companies which she contacted was not regarded in this thesis, the effectiveness of her endeavours on brand awareness cannot be conclusively assessed. At the same time, the actions of social worker #S3 can be assessed as ineffective with reasonable certainty. None of her actions could be interpreted as attempts to actively raise awareness for her EA or social work in the occupational field. She interpreted the absence of requests from companies as the non-existence of demand for social-work-based EA in Austria and did, therefore, not perform any actions. Even though she was generally present with teaching, she did not establish any links to the occupational category and did, therefore, disregard the brand awareness aspect.

Then again, the endeavours of social worker #S1 to emphasise the value of her annual reports in the minds of her customers can be seen as an effective set of actions. Not only did she express that her observations have regularly resonated with HR managers as being representative for their workforce, but representative #A2 also called the annual reports from social worker #S1 an excellent instrument for personnel development. It is, therefore, reasonable to conclude that the importance social worker #S1 had attached to the report when she communicated to her customers #A1 and #A2 has contributed to the high value and uniqueness those saw in her service. They did not even see the rather low service utilisation of around one per cent as a problem on the part of social worker #S1 (see chapter 5.1.2).

Even though social worker #S1 had consistently and repeatedly communicated about the social dimension of health, no account of the same could be found in what company representatives #A1 and #A2 described as employee needs. However, company representative #A2 picked up on other statements of social worker #S1 when she set out employee needs. Her acceptance of the opinions and observations of the social worker suggests that the latter managed to influence her way of framing employee needs and problems of the workforce. That effect becomes especially visible when representative #A2 articulated that their employees increasingly found themselves in multi-dimensional problems that would require timely and cross-cutting support. Then, she added that social worker #S1 had also stated precisely that. Since cross-cutting support is a core strength of social work (see chapter 5.2.2),
it might be reasonable to conclude that social worker #S1 has, in small scale, succeeded to manage information and, thus, convince of framing needs in a way that suggested a social-work-based intervention.

In light of this influence, it also becomes critical how representative #A3 adopted statements from social worker #S2. He did, for instance, employ social work vocabulary when using the term ‘lifeworld’ to describe the social work profession. While social worker #S1 utilised annual meetings to weigh in her perspective, social worker #S2 engaged in regular informal conversations with company representative #A3 instead. The latter stated that they regularly discussed the current situation in the company (see chapter 5.1.2). In his account, it becomes visible that he highly appreciated the perspective of social worker #S2.

Not only representative #A3 but also other vital persons at company #A3 seem to have been influenced by social worker #S2. The social worker did, for instance, recount that the director of company #A3 had picked up on the ROI the social worker had suggested; regularly arguing in front of others that the investment in social-work-based EA was not in vain. Moreover, the social worker had heard from employees that the staff representative recognised him as a competent problem-solver; telling employees that if anything exceeded his competence, they must consult the social worker. Social worker #S2 did also believe that the leeway he acquired for his EA would show the trust that managers at company #A3 had in him as a person; possibly being effects of the way he accommodated to their expectations.

As was mentioned in chapter 5.2.4, representatives whose companies used social-work-based EA defined the social work profession significantly different than companies who did not. It might be presumed that social workers #S1 and #S2 influenced their images. It is, however, not possible to conclusively judge if and how they influenced those associations. Such a judgment is, on the one hand, impeded by the fact that company representatives #A1 and #A2 can be expected to have held a positive relationship to the profession preceding the collaboration with social worker #S1, given that their organisations themselves provided social services. This positive relationship becomes visible when they demanded social worker #S1 to label her service as occupational social work internally. On the other hand, the fact that social worker #S2 was not the first social worker to assist the employees of company #A3 does, further, impede the judgement.

On an individual level, the appearance of social worker #S1 managed to dissolve stereotypes as people recognised how she was different from what they had expected social workers to be. She reported that, in personal encounters, people did regularly become curious and were willing to listen to what she had to say about her profession. Hence, they told her that their previous images on social work had been wrong, and they would walk away from the encounter with a revised image. It can, thus, be concluded that she used visible cues to manage not just information on social work but also its appearance; with a seemingly profound effect. To social worker #S2, on the other hand, the way he treated employees was the most vital brand aspect on the individual level. He experienced employees and managers to value him as a person and to attach more importance to his personality than to his qualification.
5.2.7 Outlook

Social workers mentioned four levels that they saw relevant to how social-work-based EA would develop in Austria: society at large, companies, the social work profession, and their individual actions. Since social workers #S4 and #S5 were not currently offering social-work-based EA, they did not consider actions to contribute to the development of their profession’s occupational field. From the others, only social worker #S1 and #S2 planned to translate their ideas into practice. Social worker #S3 did not want to make the effort that would be required to establish herself with EA.

On the most general level, social worker #S2 believed that society would face severe changes shortly. He anticipated digitisation and automatisation to change labour markets profoundly and would, then, see a significant opportunity for social work to promote meaningful work. At that point, he projected that corporate culture might be a more substantial concern than merely improving work performance. Social worker #S5, moreover, believed that there would be enough work to do for social workers in companies and wanted society at large to be sensitised for social work issues. Although this may be true, social worker #S4 argued that only if public funding incentivised companies to invest in social-work-based EA would her profession manage to establish itself with EA; a scenario that she did not find likely to become a reality. Furthermore, social worker #S3 added that the retreat of the social state might increase the responsibility of companies, which she saw already happening.

Within companies, social worker #S3 saw pressure and overload increasing to a degree where employees could not stand them much longer. Similarly, social worker #S5 called for managers to understand that business could not continue in like fashion, and social worker #S2 believed that all reputable companies would need to think about social-work-based EA within the coming decade. On the other hand, he argued that social work would only manage to respond to the challenges faced if its EA became more professional; assessing the need in companies and developing a clear value proposition. According to social worker #S3, the value proposition should be set down in a concept that the profession could, acting as a unity, present to critical positions such as the work inspectorate. Social worker #S2 added that if occupational social work would prove professional, it might obtain a central position.

On the profession’s level, the OBDS, the Austrian society of social work (referred to as OGSA in this thesis), and the schools of social work received criticism from social workers #S3 and #S5. The latter concluded that it would be impossible for an individual to change the image of the profession and its occupational service. Both social workers believed that the OBDS would have a critical role in this matter that it did not fulfil. The social workers charged the OBDS with not promoting the occupational field (#S3, #S5), failing to back its occupational social workers, and refusing them a defined field in their framework (#S3).

One reason for the attack on the OBDS might be that social workers #S3 and #S5 did not experience any support from the association that they believed should work to represent their interests as well. However, the OBDS did, according to expert #E1, indeed work to further the occupational field in Austrian social work, i.e. through a collaboration with the chamber of commerce. As was outlined in chapter 5.1.4, expert #E3 turned down several companies, which had been interested in social-work-based EA, because he saw the undertaking not yet
feasible, given the lack of supporting structures. That he did not refer those companies on to self-employed social workers speaks of a lack of knowledge, not necessarily a lack of goodwill.

A lack of goodwill is, however, precisely what social worker #S3 attributed not only to the OBDS but also to the OGSA and the schools of social work, which she saw tabooing the economisation of social work and aspects of business administration. She believed that if those large organisations did not pick up on the intertwining of social and economic aspects, the profession would ultimately lose the occupational field to others, i.e. to social economists, social managers, or counsellors. Moreover, if those large organisations did not emphasise occupational social work in research, social worker #S3 outlined that it would elude critical evaluation, and the field might harm the profession’s reputation.

Individually, social workers #S1 and #S2 planned to remake their websites and emphasise seminars. While the former stressed that she wanted to be more proactive in developing seminar formats, the latter planned to start a series of more ‘harmless’ topics. He had experienced employees not to be interested in topics charged with deficits, i.e. crises and serious problems. As was outlined in chapter 5.2.5, both social workers also considered renaming their service to improve their brand images.

Moreover, social worker #S2 dreamt of assessing needs in companies and accordingly putting together an interdisciplinary team that might, at some point, cover all employee needs from different perspectives. Social worker #S1 had a different objective for the coming years. She aimed to improve networking among occupational social workers and could imagine initiating a platform for social-work-based EA. On such a platform, occupational social workers could move away from competition and shape the image that the public had of their unconventional professional group together.

5.3 Relevant factors in branding social-work-based employee assistance

The preliminary framework (see figure 6) consisted of seventeen factors that the reviewed literature proposed as potentially relevant to professional service branding. The synthesis of interview persons’ accounts, as presented and analysed in this chapter, identified six of those factors as particularly relevant to the branding of social-work-based EA in Austria; being choice of categories, manage information, fulfil promises, presence, context knowledge, and personal relevance. Moreover, it indicated additional factors that had not yet been mentioned in the consulted literature.

In the following illustration (see figure 8), the factors supported by the empirical data were rearranged in a new framework. A different format was reasonable because the neatly defined categories from the preliminary framework (see figure 6) proved interlinked in the cases of the social workers. The most relevant factors were positioned in the middle, and other factors which link into them were arranged besides.
Figure 8: Framework on the branding of social-work-based employee assistance

As illustrated in figure 8, relevant factors in branding social-work-based employee assistance are either landmark brand decisions that social workers have to make, branding activities that they can undertake to increase awareness and influence associations, or objectives they should set when developing their brand strategies. Additionally, some factors, as presented on the sides, link certain branding activities and objectives. Hence, they indicate which forms an implementation of the respective brand objective might take.

**Brand decisions**

Since the social work profession has failed to manage the visibility of its occupational category, self-employed social workers would experience disadvantages for their brands’ awareness from positioning their service in the same. Therefore, all but one social worker featured another category, social counselling, in their service title, which is – apart from their own name and a logo – the only brand element they utilised. Two social workers considered repositioning their service in yet another category.
When branding their EA, social workers should carefully choose the category in which they position their service.

The service category should, above all, be visible. Therefore, the existence of a lobby, which works to improve the visibility of the category, and the commitment of the category owner have to be regarded as critical factors when deciding whether or not to position their service in a particular category.

Besides the service category, they can manage their brand image on a second level. That is the extent to which they make their professional affiliation visible. Even though they deal with their social work identity openly to a different extent, none of the social workers could imagine dissolving affiliations with the social work profession. One reason why they hold on to the profession, despite delimitating themselves from some lines of thought, is that they strongly source their professional identity from the same. In that respect, social workers orientated their service towards professional standards and believed that core features such as confidentiality or partiality were given requirements; not to be altered or defined by themselves.

Their choice to stay with their social work affiliation might affect the willingness of companies to endorse self-employed, social workers. Several social workers stated that Austrian companies would not want to be associated with problems and they, thus, assumed that an endorsement of professionals charged with deficits – through secondary associations from the profession’s target groups – would not be seen beneficial. Social workers’ presumption was supported by the observation that none of companies #A seemed to promote the social-work-based EA externally. It was pointed out that the denial of endorsements has to be seen as a severe limitation to their branding.

Social workers can essentially perform two sets of branding activities: managing information and fulfilling promises.

As one-person businesses, social workers lacked the resources and scale to establish the brand presence that was suggested in branding literature. This becomes visible when most
representatives whose companies did not use social-work-based EA stated to have never met or heard of any social worker offering the service in Austria. With this in mind, it is plausible that social workers believed that large organisations such as the OBDS, the OGSA, or schools of social work had untapped potential to contribute to the visibility of their service. They suggested that those organisations made the profession’s link to EA better visible. However, neither recent debates (see chapter 4) nor the accounts of social workers (see chapter 5) suggested that the Austrian social work profession or those organisations were likely to prioritise EA shortly.

On an individual level, however, several social workers managed to show presence with their EA. They used information events, teaching, or social occasions to increase the awareness towards social work in EA rather than merely selling their service. Managing information in exchange with a critical mass of people who might not necessarily belong to their target groups helped spread knowledge to interested parties. In that respect, the use of networks and personal encounters proved effective for branding their service; partly because social workers could adapt messages to create personal relevance.

↪ As organisations engaged with advocating social work cannot be expected to support the visibility of social work in EA shortly, social workers should use personal encounters to be present with their service in a limited reach and spread knowledge to interested parties.

Knowing the context for providing social-work-based EA proved significant to self-employed social workers in three ways. Firstly, monitoring the discrepancy between their professional identity and the perception their target group had of the social work profession helped social workers to tailor their messages. The effect of a well-tailored message was, for instance, visible when one social worker received full attention from her conversation partners because her appearance broke with their stereotypes on social workers.

Secondly, social workers needed to know which needs company representatives recognised and how they framed those to be perceived as competent partners in meeting employee needs. Social workers who were effective in reframing problems and, thus, creating personal relevance were very knowledgeable about current trends in companies and their workforce, which was visible in their accounts that were highly congruent with descriptions of company representatives.

Thirdly, integrations of expectations were received well and contributed to favourable associations of companies towards the social-work-based EA they used. This was, for instance, visible in the praise one social worker received for accommodating the companies needs and accepting to engage with cases they proposed to him.

↪ When branding social-work-based EA, social workers should engage with the context for their service provision: assess brand images to adapt their messages, engage with company needs to translate their value propositions into known terms, and integrate their expectations.

From all factors in the preliminary framework, creating personal relevance proved most significant for occupational social workers. As was pointed out in this chapter, the lack of
personal relevance was the primary deficiency in the brand image of social-work-based EA and also showed the most significant improvement when social workers specifically worked on the same, i.e. through establishing links between their profession and the chosen service category or through pointing out the uniqueness of their EA.

In that respect, the most effective activity, which social workers undertook to make their EA relevant to their target group, can be seen in reframing problems in a way that suggested their expertise to solve them. They, for instance, reframed problems company representatives recognised through informal conversations, the presentation of annual reports, and projects in which they evaluated employee needs. Thus, they managed information to their favour. Overall, the adaptation to conversation partners and, later, to company needs proved more critical to creating personal relevance than the consistency of brand messages.

↪ When branding social-work-based EA, social workers should aim their efforts at creating *personal relevance* for company representatives. First of all, they can do so by *creating links* to the *service category*. Moreover, social workers should *reframe problems* recognised by representatives in a way that points at the *uniqueness* and significance of social work interventions for their employees.

Finally, the internal utilisation of EA offers was shown critical to the brand image of social-work-based EA. Based on accounts from two interview persons, high utilisation rates can be understood as to support the social workers’ brands in appearing relevant to the needs of employees and, therefore, fulfil their brand promises. To that end, social workers performed a variety of activities to make their EA known internally, and influence the image employees had of the same.

↪ Social workers should consider *managing information* not only towards company representatives but also towards employees. Having *employees utilise their service* can fulfil their brand promise of being relevant to employee needs.
6 Conclusions

“Marketing theory is too good
to be wasted only on ordinary products.”
(Fine, 1981, p. 18)

Professions and brands have much in common. Both can be understood as signs and symbols at the same time; being labels that are trusted and carrying meaning for people who know about them. At the core of this thesis lies the idea that branding theories might bear insights for individuals who aim to establish their professional existence outside of the area for which their profession grants them credibility. In those cases, professionals are challenged to convince of their problem-solving capacity and prove competent in the minds of target customers, because professional competence is not perceived universal.

To examine which aspects of branding are relevant for self-employed professionals who operate outside of the perceived core working area of their profession, the branding of occupational social workers were studied as cases. Occupational social workers offer employee assistance (referred to as EA in this chapter) to private corporations and, consequently, operate outside of what is widely acknowledged as the competence area of the social work profession: publicly mandated welfare work.

The perspectives of social workers, companies who use their EA, companies who currently do not use social-work-based EA, and other experts have been consulted to approach the research problem from several angles. The following section summarises the main findings of this study by answering the research questions in reverse order.

6.1 Summary of main findings

*How do representatives whose companies do not currently use social-work-based EA evaluate the potential contribution of that service?*

Representatives whose companies did not use social-work-based EA were aware of the social work profession but did unanimously not see a link to EA. It was argued that the fact that they strongly associated social work with its target groups might impede them to conceive of the profession as relevant to their current problems or the employee needs they recognised. Some company representatives, moreover, compared social work with other professions and failed to understand its uniqueness. Social work was, thus, not found relevant to company representatives who did not have related experiences, and they did, therefore, not consider social workers when seeking out solutions.
Although, when explicitly asked, two representatives were able to identify a potential contribution of social-work-based EA. According to them, the service could bridge rigid divisions, or weigh in the humanity that business was believed to lack. Moreover, one representative evaluated social workers, if employed, to be able to survey employees, determine employee needs, or consult managers; while leaving more psychosocially challenging tasks to psychologists.

**How do representatives whose companies do currently use social-work-based EA perceive that service?**

Representatives whose companies used social-work-based EA conceived of the service as highly relevant to the needs of their employees and to their managerial objectives. Their organisations had initially introduced social-work-based EA to increase employee satisfaction, improve staff retention, reduce sick leaves, or assist employees in a variety of problems. The representatives, analogically, formulated different expectations and associations towards social-work-based EA. Those expectations included that the service should be confident, competent, readily available, and contribute to health rates as well as corporate success. Representatives saw their expectations fulfilled and all expressed to be very satisfied with the EA and the service provider.

Company representatives much appreciated the solution orientation that social workers displayed on all levels. They also mentioned social workers’ broad expertise as an essential characteristic. While two representatives highlighted the competence of social workers to assist their employees with great empathy and sensitivity, one representative stressed the qualities of the social worker to act as a competent business partner. Those qualities included reliable invoicing and a comprehensive report, which the representative perceived as an excellent instrument for personnel development.

**How have self-employed, professional social workers in Austria branded their EA?**

Even though most self-employed, professional social workers hardly pursued clear-cut strategies with their branding, they performed several activities that can be seen as efforts to brand their EA. Those efforts, for instance, included increasing awareness towards their EA and, more generally, towards occupational social work. Given their small scale, the efforts which they focused on personal encounters, networks, and selective projects can be regarded as most useful. The label on their EA and, consequently, the category in which they positioned their service was an essential brand element they employed and elaborated on.

Most social workers labelled their EA as social counselling and made their affiliation to the social work profession visible. Even though they recognised unfavourable associations towards their profession, they could not imagine dissolving their membership in the same. Beside the affiliation to their profession, they did not actively manage source factors to leverage secondary associations. Individually, most social workers used websites to convey personal attributes and qualifications. One social worker habituated her appearance to upmarket companies and, thereby, managed to dissolve stereotypes, which conversation partners had on her profession.

They managed information in personal encounters and adapted to conversation partners to make their EA personally relevant. In some cases, they reframed problems that company
representatives recognised and portrayed employee needs in a way that suggested a social-
work-based intervention. Finally, social workers performed a variety of activities to make
their EA known internally and influence the image employees had of the same.

**Which factors should be considered when branding social-work-based EA in Austria?**

Relevant factors to the branding of social-work-based EA in Austria can be categorised in
brand decisions, branding activities, and branding objectives. As illustrated in the framework
(see figure 8), critical brand decisions that social workers should regard are which service
category to choose and how to manage the affiliation to their profession. For those decisions,
they should consider the visibility of available categories, the favourability of the professional
source factor, and the importance of their profession to their brand identity.

In essence, two sets of branding activities have proven relevant to the branding of social-
work-based EA: managing information and fulfilling promises. These activities should aim to
accomplish branding objectives, of which four were identified as particularly relevant to their
cases. They should aim to be present in a limited reach, know the context, the target group
and the needs it recognises, make the service personally relevant to the target group, and have
employees utilise their service.

Linking into the listed objectives, their efforts to create links to the chosen service category,
to show the uniqueness of their service, to reframe problems that their target group
recognises, to integrate expectations, and to adapt to the given context were also regarded as
relevant factors.

### 6.2 Contributions

The purpose of this study has been to explore how social workers have branded their
employee assistance and how companies perceive their service. Furthermore, it aimed to
examine which aspects of branding were relevant for self-employed professionals who
operated outside of the perceived core working area of their profession. As summarised
above, those aspects were extensively elaborated in this thesis. Moreover, the image that
company representatives had of the social work profession and, where applicable, of
individual social workers were also analysed to approach the research problem from several
angles.

This thesis’ contribution to the existing literature lies in a new framework (see figure 8) that
the researcher developed. The framework shows factors that were found relevant to the
branding of social-work-based employee assistance in Austria. It covers the different
perspectives that were studied and will help practitioners and scholars to direct their focus
when analysing similar cases. Besides the wider theoretical contribution, the findings fulfilled
their aim to make a fruitful combination of already existing knowledge and collected
empirical data available to social workers who offer EA. Furthermore, it answered the call of
Gilschwert (2012) and contributed with a branding perspective on occupational social work in Austria.

The findings indicated that only a part of the factors suggested in the literature is particularly relevant to the branding of social-work-based employee assistance in Austria. Consistency and repetition of brand messages were, for instance, pointed out as less relevant to their cases as the adaptation to context. Moreover, the separation of brand identity into the kernel and peripheral facets, and, consequently, the definition, documentation, and application of the brand identity’s kernel facets did not prove applicable to the studied cases. Instead of defining those for themselves, social workers orientated their EA towards professional standards.

Besides, the empirical data indicated several factors that had not yet been mentioned in the literature. Those included, for instance, considering the commitment of a category owner before positioning EA in a specific service category, or being present in a limited reach rather than aiming to become commonly known. Professionals were shown as having better chances to succeed with extending their professional approaches to a new field by focussing on a limited reach. Based on the fact that their undertakings required explanation efforts, the findings suggest professionals utilise non-sales-related occasions to spread knowledge to interested parties.

Since occupational social workers were shown to operate outside of the perceived core working area of their profession, other self-employed professionals in a similar undertaking can draw on the factors that were outlined in the framework to focus their branding efforts. Particularly insightful to those professionals might be the suggested emphasis on personal relevance in their branding efforts and the decision on their professional affiliation. Firstly, their service can be expected to appear irrelevant in the brand images of target groups at the start, given their unusual combination of professional backgrounds and working area. Secondly, they might face disadvantages from maintaining the affiliation to their profession, which is not recognised as credible in the area that they want to employ themselves in. They should, therefore, critically evaluate whether or not to uphold their professional membership.

However, it cannot be concluded if the consideration of the factors outlined in the framework may lead to broader acceptance and higher utilisation of services from unconventional professionals. As was indicated at the start, this study focused on brand images and, thus, neglected behavioural brand dimensions. Notwithstanding, widespread brand awareness and favourable brand associations can be anticipated to have a behavioural impact. Beside that reservation, this study has several other limitations that should be regarded when applying its findings to other cases.

### 6.3 Limitations and suggestions for future research

This thesis was designed as a case study and includes the perspectives of self-employed social workers, company representatives, and other experts. Chapter 5 showed that the viewpoints of interview persons differed in many aspects. This thesis is built upon the notion that the statements of interview persons are grounded in their individual and subjective perceptions
and are, thus, socially constructed. From a social constructionist approach, the diversity and subjectivity of interview partners, as they were selected for this study, are seen as merits. Despite the advantages of those that were briefly outlined in chapter 3, the subjectivity of perspectives is, at the same time, the most critical limitation to this study. Not only are the individual standpoints of the interviewees limited in how representative they are of the study groups they were placed in, but also the researcher’s worldview is socially constructed just the same.

The researcher herself played a prominent role in how qualitative data were collected, analysed, and interpreted. As was described in chapter 3.1.1, the localist view, which drove how the interviews were designed and conducted, allowed for customisation of the same. Highlighting the interpersonal aspects of interviews, the localist view is, however, likely to have increased the influence which the researcher’s personality had on the interview outcomes. Moreover, the interpretation of qualitative material was, undoubtedly, influenced by the perception and prior knowledge of the interpreting person, which is a factor whose influence has been mitigated by adhering to the thematic coding method (see chapter 3.1.2). To that end, the decisive role of the researcher in the research process is likely to have reduced the chance for other researchers to replicate this study accordingly.

It must, furthermore, be acknowledged that the researcher’s preconceptions might have influenced the outcomes of this case study. As a management student, she viewed the cases through a managerial perspective and emphasised the aspects of social workers’ self-employment that concerned their duties as part-time marketers (Gummesson, 1991). This managerial perspective included the general ideas that branding might be relevant to the research problem, and self-employed social workers had already undertaken branding activities without labelling those as such. Moreover, and because of her previous training in social work, the researcher might have placed disproportionate weight on the potential contribution of social-work-based EA to companies.

Even though the stated personal limitations are problematic to the generalisability of this study, they can also be seen as strengths. Those are strengths insofar as they were a perspective not yet applied to the research problem, equipped the researcher with knowledge, and made the interviewed social workers treat the researcher as a respected colleague, which is believed to have contributed to their willingness to share their experiences and, hence, to the quality of the empirical material.

Besides the epistemological considerations, the researcher would like to highlight some methodical aspects that place further limitations on the generalisability of this case study. First of all, the company perspectives were limited to the part of one manager, respectively. A more democratic approach which had included the employee level might have provided insights into the effects of social workers’ internal marketing, the brand image which employees had before and after using a social-work-based service, or the adaptation of professional behaviour to the intervention level. Those aspects were, however, waived for the feasibility of this study.

Secondly, the high standards on interview interactions which included the modification of the style and order of interviews (see chapter 3.1.1) to receive spontaneously offered information
and, thus, rich data did not apply to the two written responses from company representatives #A1 and #A3. As was mentioned in chapter 3.5, those were given more freedom to choose their preferred interview setting and were allowed to submit their answers in written form. They filled out the sent interview guidelines rather statically, which turned the semi-structured interviews into structured interviews in their cases. As probes were not feasible in the same way as in spoken interaction, their responses can be seen as less in-depth than the ones of the other interview persons.

Thirdly, the language transition that was undertaken in this thesis bears the risk of misinterpretation. As was mentioned in chapter 3.2, the interviews were conducted, documented, and coded in German, while the presentation, analysis, and interpretation of the empirical material were done in English. Notwithstanding the usefulness of the German language for collecting high-quality data on the chosen research problem, the subsequent translation has to be seen as a potential source of error; possibly limiting the validity of this study.

Finally, the interview guidelines were designed broadly and did not allow for an in-depth investigation of particular aspects. As was stated in chapter 1.5, this thesis aimed at providing a first insight into the branding of social-work-based EA. To that end, this study attempted to cover a broad range of topics. The sheer quantity of data that was collected from fifteen interviews was overwhelming, and the lack of previous papers synthesising branding, social work, and EA led the researcher to survey each of these topic fields individually. Given this enormous scope, some perspectives lack depth. This applied especially to the perspective of companies, which did currently use social-work-based EA. Fundamental questions such as what social workers #S1 and #S2 were initially chosen for and what induced the company representatives to extend their contracts annually were hardly covered in the interviews and could, thus, not be elaborated.

This case study explored and elaborated clearly defined cases and is relevant to other cases only to a limited extent. Likewise, Sekaran and Bougie (2016) argued that case studies were limited in their generalisability as long as findings were not substantiated in other research or case studies. Therefore, future research should study cases of self-employed professionals other than occupational social workers in Austria to test the framework and its factors.

However, if aiming to develop the branding of social-work-based EA in Austria further, future research should single out specific elements of its brand image and elaborate on how self-employed social workers and other entities could influence those. By including other entities such as professional associations, advocacy groups, or educational institutions, future research could take heed to the perspectives of those key actors who were mentioned by social workers several times in the interviews but could only shallowly be dealt with in this thesis. Learning from this research’s shortcomings, other researchers should consider including employee level perspectives if they want to gain insights into internal aspects of branding, critically weigh if to accept written responses, and favour writing their paper in the language of the interviews. The latter would allow them to cite interviewees’ statements in the original tone and, thus, give a more authentic account of perspectives.
Future research should use a more narrow scope than the one outlined in chapters 1.3 and 1.4 and provide deeper insights into topics that this thesis could only briefly elaborate on, i.e. the reasons that companies chose unconventional professionals to assist their employees and decided to keep them. Since this aspect is unlikely to be answered with the case of occupational social workers in Austria, given the low number of companies who currently use their service, the researcher encourages future research to extend to other professionals in a situation of higher utilisation.
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Appendix A

Overview interviews

Self-employed, occupational social workers (#S...social workers)

Table 6.1: Self-employed, occupational social workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#S1</th>
<th>#S2</th>
<th>#S3</th>
<th>#S4</th>
<th>#S5</th>
</tr>
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<td>has ten EA customers</td>
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<td>has no EA customers</td>
<td>has no EA customers</td>
</tr>
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<td>21 March 2019, 2:30 pm</td>
<td>21 March 2019, 9 am</td>
<td>21 March 2019, 4:15 pm</td>
<td>22 March 2019, 4 pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 hour 30 minutes</td>
<td>1 hour 40 minutes</td>
<td>1 hour 35 minutes</td>
<td>45 minutes</td>
<td>1 hour 25 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>personal</td>
<td>personal</td>
<td>by phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>audio recorded</td>
<td>audio recorded</td>
<td>audio recorded</td>
<td>audio recorded</td>
<td>audio recorded</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Representatives from companies who do currently use social-work-based EA
(#A...companies from category A)

Table 6.2: Company representatives #A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#A1</th>
<th>#A2</th>
<th>#A3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>customer of #S1</td>
<td>customer of #S1</td>
<td>customer of #S2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CH manager</td>
<td>HR manager</td>
<td>commercial manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>social service</td>
<td>social service</td>
<td>manufacturing company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>organisation</td>
<td>organisation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>2 April 2019, 2 pm</td>
<td>19 April 2019, 11 am</td>
</tr>
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<td>55 minutes</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>written</td>
<td>by phone</td>
<td>written</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>audio recorded</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Representatives from companies who do not currently use social-work-based EA**
(#B…companies from category B)

**Table 6.3: Company representatives #B**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>#B3</th>
<th>#B4</th>
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</thead>
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<td>CH manager</td>
<td>line manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>energy supplier</td>
<td>telecom-communication</td>
<td>manufacturing company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>company</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 March 2019, 1 pm</td>
<td>25 March 2019, 4:45 pm</td>
<td>30 March 2019, 10 am</td>
<td>4 April 2019, 11:30 am</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 minutes</td>
<td>15 minutes</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
<td>45 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>by phone</td>
<td>by phone</td>
<td>by phone</td>
<td>by phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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**Other experts (#E…experts)**

**Table 6.4: Other experts**

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<th>#E3</th>
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</thead>
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<td>manager</td>
</tr>
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<td>OBDS</td>
<td>for-profit EA provider not employing social workers</td>
<td>not-for-profit EA provider employing social workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 February 2019, 9:30 am</td>
<td>1 February 2019, 2 pm</td>
<td>1 April 2019, 10 am</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 minutes</td>
<td>1 hour</td>
<td>55 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>personal</td>
<td>personal</td>
<td>by phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>audio recorded</td>
<td>not audio recorded</td>
<td>audio recorded</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

Guideline for semi-structured interviews with self-employed, occupational social workers

**Interview person**
- How has your professional career looked like?
- How would you describe your current professional profile? (i.e. education, employment, self-employment)

**Self-employment**
- How was it when you first became self-employed? (i.e. point in time, obstacles)
- What motivated you to become self-employed?
- How did your self-employment develop since you started it?

**Service portfolio**
- Which services do you offer?
- How has your portfolio developed over time?
- How have your different services been demanded and used?

**Employee assistance**
- Since when have you offered EA?
- What motivated you to include EA in your portfolio?
- Which competencies do you see essential for providing EA? How do they relate to your competencies?
- What do you think is the primary objective of EA? How does it relate to your objectives?
- What do you think EA can accomplish in companies?

**Scenario i - if you currently have companies who use your EA:**
- To how many and what kinds of companies do you provide EA? (i.e. sectors, sizes)
- How do you adapt your EA to the respective companies?
- What professional and personal impulses do you bring into companies through your EA?
- How has your EA developed over time?
Scenario ii - if you currently have no companies who use your EA:

- Where do you see the reasons for having no companies who use your EA?
- Which other professions provide EA?
  How do you evaluate their competencies, and how do these relate to social work?
- What do you think is the unique contribution social work would make in EA?
- Do you aim to establish yourself with your EA?
  If yes, how do you evaluate the process necessary to reach this goal?

Branding

Label and identification

Channels and instruments

- Which channels and instruments do you use to present yourself and your EA? (i.e. website, social media, personal network)
- How do you use these channels and instruments, and which image do you try to convey?
- How do you use colours, shapes, pictures, and slogans?
  What do these elements mean to you?

Labels on EA

- How do you label and categorise your EA?
  What do these labels and categories mean to you?
- How do your customers label and categorise your EA?

Labels on professional identity

- How do you describe and label your professional identity and competencies through the used channels and instruments?
- Which role does social work play in communicating your professionality?
- How do customers refer to you or introduce you to their employees?

Meaning and understanding

- What do you want your EA to be known for? What do you think your EA is known for?
- What do you want to be known for? What do you think you are known for?
- What do you do (or communicate) to create these associations or influence existing ones?
• How do you present connections to other organisations (i.e. partners, existing customers) or topics through your channels? What would you like to communicate through these connections?

Scenario i - if you currently have companies who use your EA:
• Which groups of people are relevant to your EA?

Scenario ii - if you currently have no companies who use your EA:
• Which groups are relevant to you being able to establish yourself with your EA?

• How do you want to be perceived by these groups? How do you think these groups perceive you?
• How do you think is these group’s perception of professional social work?

Occupational social work in Austria
• What are your experiences and perspectives on occupational social work in Austria?
• How do you evaluate the position of the occupational field within social work?
  In which ways might this position be relevant for your self-employment?

Closure
• Would you like to add anything?
Appendix C

Guideline for semi-structured interviews with companies who do currently use social-work-based EA

Interview person

• What is your professional background?
• What is your current position and area of responsibility?

Connection to [the social worker]

• Which links do you have to the EA provided by [the social worker]?
• How does your actual collaboration with [the social worker] look like?

Company

• How would you describe the conditions for social-work-based EA in your company?
• When was social-work-based EA introduced to your company?
• What were the reasons which underlay that decision? What need had been noticed?
• How has the area of social-work-based EA developed since its introduction?
• How do you see the field of EA and/or CH in your company developing in the coming years?

Professions

• Which other professions provide EA in your company?
• What areas do these professions cover? How do their areas of responsibility, services, and competencies differ?

Decision for [the social worker]

• Since when has your company used the service from [the social worker]?
• How did the collaboration with [the social worker] come about? Through which means did you search for service providers? What would the alternatives have been?
• Who was substantially involved in the decision to contract [the social worker]? Which decision criteria were applied? What did you choose [the social worker] for?

[Social worker]

• If you had to describe [the social worker] concisely, which characteristics would come to your mind first?
• How competent do you perceive [the social worker] for assisting your employees? What is it about [the social worker] that makes you perceive him/her that way?
• How familiar are you with the [the social worker’s] online presence? How familiar are you with [the social worker’s] marketing material? How do you perceive those?

**Social-work-based employee assistance**

• What do you expect of the [the social worker’s] EA?
• How exhaustively do your employees utilise [the social worker’s] EA? Which groups of employees are particularly well served?
• How satisfied are you with the work of [the social worker]? What could [the social worker] do to better comply with your company’s and employees’ needs, or improve his/her service?

**Social work**

• What is your first association when you hear ‘social work’?
• Do you perceive [the social worker] as a social worker? What do you think is typical and atypical about him/her?

**Closure**

• Would you like to add anything?
Appendix D

Guideline for semi-structured interviews with companies who do not currently use social-work-based EA

Interview person

- What is your professional background?
- What is your current position and area of responsibility?

Company

- How is EA organised in your company?
- How have the functions and areas of your company concerned with assisting employees developed throughout the last years?
- Which EA offers can your employees use for work-related and non-work-related issues?
- What are the objectives of those EA offers?

Professions

- Which professions provide EA in your company?
- What areas do those professions cover? How do their areas of responsibility, services, and competencies differ?
- Where do you see the unique competencies of those professions?

Changes

- Did you introduce EA offers during the last years? What were the reasons which underlay that decision? What need had been noticed?
- How did the collaboration with the service providers come about? Through which means did you search for providers? What would the alternatives have been?
- Who was substantially involved in the decision what kind of EA was introduced and which providers selected? Which decision criteria were applied?
- Did you terminate EA offers during the last years? What were the reasons which underlay that decision?
- How do you see the field of EA and/or CH in your company developing in the coming years?

Social-work-based employee assistance

- What do you know about social-work-based EA? What do you know about social counselling?
• Since your company does not currently offer social-work-based EA to its employees, what do you see responsible for not having this specific service?
• Does your company offer social-work-based EA (or social counselling) to its employees in other geographical areas? If yes: How are the components of the service covered at your Austrian locations?
• Do any professional social workers assist your employees? (self-employed or employed)
• Has any professional social worker ever approached you or another representative of your company with an offer for EA? If yes: What do you remember about that instance? How was the reaction of the decision makers to the offer?
• How could a social worker possibly convince the decision makers at your company of their EA?
• What do you think that social-work-based EA (or social counselling) could contribute positively to your company? If it was implemented, what would you expect of the service and the social worker providing it?

**Social work**

• What is your first association when you hear ‘social work’?
• Which competencies do social workers have? Which of those competencies could be relevant for the assistance of your employees?

**Closure**

• Would you like to add anything?