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## Implications of employer branding

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An interpretative case study at Sparbanken Öresund

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## ABSTRACT

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- Keywords:** Employer branding, Image, Identity, Identification and Competitive Advantage.
- Thesis Purpose:** The purpose of the thesis is to highlight, the concept of employer branding, how it is interpreted and what implications the concept might have on an organization.
- Methodology:** The thesis uses an interpretative, abductive and qualitative research method.
- Theoretical Perspective:** The concept of employer branding in relation to the adjacent theoretical foundation of image and identity.
- Empirical Foundation:** The empirical foundation of this thesis was a case study conducted at Sparbanken Öresund. Empirical material was collected through semi structured interviews and secondary data.
- Conclusion:** The concept of employer branding is found to be complex and therefore we believe that conveying the employer brand to potential employees is hard to accomplish. Aligning existing employees with the employer brand can be accomplished but still a complicated task since people are different and thus interpret the brand differently.



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Gustav Hoffer, Per-Christian Nilsson and Kenth Åström

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

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*We will start this chapter by presenting the background for thesis and to the term 'employer branding'. Secondly we will demonstrate why we decided to investigate Sparbanken Öresund and what makes them interesting with regards to employer branding. Thirdly we will present our research problem and research question. We will also present our target audience together with the intended contribution. Lastly the structure of the thesis will be presented.*

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### **Background**

Over the past 25 years it has been proposed that a crucial factor in strategic competitiveness and sustainable development is successful management of human capital. This notion of internal resources being a unique source of competitive advantage and an important potential factor in organizational success has led to the extensive development of Human Resource Management (HRM) (Hoskisson et al., 1999; Backhaus et al 2004). According to Aggerholm et al (2010) there has been an increased focus towards social responsibility and ethical work practices amongst organizations worldwide. This new trend is due to globalization and increased media scrutiny of company's treatment of its employees (Aggerholm et al, 2010).

Brands could be considered among the most valuable assets in an organization and managing those brands are important activities. Branding is used to differentiate your product from competitors in order to attract customers. The principles of branding applied to HRM and the employee/employer relationship is termed employer branding and originates from the same principles as traditional branding (Backhaus et al 2004). Employer branding is an organizations intended strategy towards creating a specific perception of the employment situation in the company in order to attract and retain the right kind of personnel. It is in essence the image work of the organization as an employer (Dooley et al, 2007; Sullivan, 2004). Amongst practitioners, using employer branding is considered to be an important tool in order to create a competitive retention and recruitment situation in the organization. This process could potentially ensure future success and sustainability. Employer branding and sustainability could therefore be considered closely related. The concept also encompasses corporate culture and values in order to create a high employer value in the eyes of the employees (Dooley et al, 2007; Backhaus et al 2004).

According to Morsing (2006) organizations today depend extensively on their employee's commitment to the organizational brand. Employee's personal morals and ethics are

important to match with the organizations in order to achieve the intended results. Employees take their personal identities and personalities to work and that influences their performance hence, making it vital to find the right type of employees (Gossett and Kilker, 2006). Work life is no longer restricted to the hours we spend in the office. Work life is also important when building your personal identity making it a big part of your life (Baldry et al., 2010). Employees are no longer considered a simple tool of production in order to achieve results for the organization. Instead employees are seen as value creating members, creating meaning for the organization (Baldry et al., 2010). Employer branding is therefore in our opinion an interesting concept to further explore since it both connects to the employees existing identity and the need to create a new identity, shared with the organization.

Even though employer branding has risen to become a popular term amongst practitioners and a seemingly important aspect of HRM practices in organizations, there is not much academic literature written about it (Backhaus et al, 2004). This presents according to us an interesting gap in academic knowledge and therefore makes it an interesting and relevant topic to study. In order for us to investigate the actual practice of employer branding and its relationship and function within an organization, we would like to apply it on a well-known industry that is an intricate part of our society and demands specific professionals in order to retain its status and reputation. With these guidelines in mind we have chosen the banking industry.

### **Why Sparbanken Öresund?**

There are numerous reasons for choosing Sparbanken Öresund as the object of investigation. Firstly, banks have been under public scrutiny ever since the global financial crisis, putting credibility and reputation into question, forcing the banks to alter the public perception by creating a more desirable image. Financial institutions aim to portray an image of being committed to the customers, coherent, autonomous and permanent in order to counteract this negative image of the banking industry. The aim with conveying such messages is to project an image of being caring and supportive for both their customers and their employees (De Cock, Baker and Volkman, 2011). In order to be supportive towards their customers they need to have the right employees which can meet both the bank's and the customers' expectations. We believe Sparbanken Öresund tries to solve this problem by using employer branding as a way of attracting the right employees which will share the common values of the bank.

Many financial institutions also sought out to exemplify that they have an ethical function of wealth within the society besides the self-interest of profits, their ethical function being

creating non-monetary wealth (De Cock, Baker and Volkman, 2011). We believe that Sparbanken Öresund attended to this matter by focusing on employer branding, since they saw it as relevant in order to increase credibility and reputation. Secondly, the organization act within a sector which is considered to be highly important for our functioning society, having trustworthy and knowledgeable staff is very important in order to gain and keep a good reputation making the topic highly imperative. Thirdly, one of the researchers is currently employed by the bank and as such provided a useful and personal connection with the bank. This has resulted in a good relationship with the bank from the start. Lastly, the bank has a locally grounded foundation which we found interesting and therefore made it easier for us to encompass the whole bank in our study.

### **Research Problem**

With the previous discussion in mind our research problem stems from banks being homogeneous organizations that require skilled employees in order to portray trust and create customer satisfaction. In order to become a competitive bank it is crucial to portray an image as an attractive employer and therefore obtain skilled personnel. Due to the characteristics of the industry and the core concept of employer branding this topic could therefore be of high importance for the organizations.

### **Research Questions**

1. How does Sparbanken Öresund work with the concept of employer branding?
2. How do the employees interpret the concept?
3. What implications might exist with the concept of employer branding?

### **Target Audience and Contribution**

This thesis target both university academics as well as ordinary layman. The purpose of this study is to both function as a spark for further research as well as a potential eye opener for relevant professionals within the academic area as well as the banking and financial industry. Since our target audience is of varied expertise and knowledge, we aim to use a simple and clear language and explain all relevant theories in detail so there will be no confusion. This will be done in an easy to follow structure that will be presented below.

Since the concept of employer branding concerns both organizations and the employees this thesis aims to display and shed light on the implications of using the concept of employer branding and to contribute to the overall understanding of employer branding from both an employer and an employee perspective.

## Thesis Structure

The second chapter of this thesis aims to present our methodological approach and the foundation for this thesis. We will discuss our ontological and epistemological basis as well as our applied approach collecting and analyzing our data. We will end the second chapter discussing reflexivity weaknesses, limitations and its importance for this thesis.

The third chapter aims to present the relevant theoretical concepts regarding employer branding. We will present the context through relevant theory such as image and identity which links back to our research questions. The purpose with the third chapter is to establish, define and link the different concepts and their interrelationship to employer branding.

The fourth chapter will present the empirical material collected throughout the interview process with Sparbanken Öresund. We will present different key themes, discrepancies and misalignments which we find relevant for the research problem and the analysis.

The fifth chapter aims to analyze the empirical data in relation to our chosen theoretical foundation. We will delve deeper into the implications of employer branding at Sparbanken Öresund, ending the chapter by presenting suggestions for further research.

Our sixth chapter will conclude our findings and thoughts around the thesis topic.

## CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

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*In this chapter we will explain and present our methodological foundation for this thesis. We will discuss our ontological and epistemological foundation as well as our research design and data analysis. We will end the chapter by discussing weaknesses, limitations, reflexivity and its importance for the thesis.*

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### **Research Design**

According to Alvesson & Sköldbberg (2009) there are two main arenas of research methodologies, qualitative and quantitative research. The quantitative research method is founded in the belief that data is something which can be quantified in a standardized manner (Lundahl & Skärvad, 2009). Qualitative research on the other hand is founded in the belief that the world is socially constructed, not fixed nor measurable (Merriam, 2002). Instead the world is filled with multiple interpretations and the aim using qualitative research is to understand those interpretations. The nature of qualitative research is of a more emergent nature where the data is found through an unknown and flexible approach instead of a predefined route as it would in a quantitative research. The qualitative approach can in a sense, both open and close doors, possibly redirect the research to something unknown (Creswell, 2003). The concepts of epistemology and ontology discuss how to relate to knowledge. Epistemology addresses questions of what should be, or is regarded as acceptable knowledge and ontology concern itself with questions regarding its origin, whether knowledge is to be considered socially constructed or an objective entity separate from social actors (Bryman & Bell, 2007). In this thesis we have chosen an interpretive view of knowledge and hence we believe that knowledge is socially constructed. Having an interpretive approach emphasizes the fundamental differences when conducting research between the social and the social science world, the social world require a different logic, not following a preset guideline. Theories are there as influences and guidelines not truths (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

According to Alvesson & Sköldbberg (2009) there are three perspectives and standpoints of how to relate and link empirical findings to theory. These are induction, deduction and abduction. In this thesis we have chosen an abductive approach. The abductive approach could be considered a mixture of both inductive and the deductive approach. Abduction starts from an empirical foundation, much like induction but does not reject theoretical

preconceptions and thus in that sense link to the deduction approach as well. The abductive research process uses previous theory as a source of inspiration and guidance in order to find new interpretations within the empirical material and hence create understanding (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009).

For this thesis we have chosen a case study design, which entails a detailed analysis of a single case. This research design can be applied on a single location, a person, an event or a single organization (Bryman & Bell, 2007). In this case we will look at a single organization, Sparbanken Öresund. Since almost all research in a way could be considered a case study research, one way of distinguishing it from other research designs is by highlighting a particular feature of the specific case. In this thesis the employer brand of Sparbanken Öresund is our specific feature. To conclude our research design, we have chosen to do an interpretive abductive qualitative research using semi structured interviews as our main source of empirical data. The reasons for these choices will be further discussed below.

With regards to the above definition of the research method and the presented research design, we chose to make a case study with an abductive qualitative research method. The reasons for these choices were several. The choice of an abductive approach was that it gave us the freedom we needed in order to interpret the empirical material and align it with the existing theory. Using a case study as our research design was made based on two conditions, the time restraints writing the thesis and the fact that we only had one organization to our disposal. Embarking on a bigger project would jeopardize the quality of the end result. Our choice of a qualitative research method was based on the fact that in order to get an in-depth understanding of the situation at Sparbanken Öresund we needed a method which would allow us to delve deeper than would have been possible with a quantitative method. A qualitative method allowed us to ask individual and possibly sensitive personal questions regarding the topic with each interviewee, establishing feelings concerning the bank as an employer and hence get a more multilayered answer. Using the qualitative method also gave us the possibility to develop and delve deeper in to certain statements where we found it appropriate, giving us a more flexible interview situation with regards to our research question.

## **Theoretical and Empirical Relevance**

The main topic of this thesis is employer branding. With regards to the established theory the purpose of this thesis is to provide our own interpretation of the concept of employer branding at Sparbanken Öresund. The concept of employer branding have been derived from the concepts of image and identity. How and why these concepts relate to each other is covered and explained in further detail in the literature review chapter. The empirical material presented in chapter four is created through three interview questioners with the theoretical concepts of image and identity closely in mind. These questioners can be found in Appendix B.

## **Data Collection**

The practical methods of data collection used in this thesis were semi structured interviews and secondary data. We will now present in further detail how the data collection was conducted.

## **Interviews**

In this thesis we chose to use semi structured interviews. Interviews are a method of data collection where empirical information is found through either an open dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee so called semi-structured interviews or a set of pre outlined questions asked by the interviewer, so called structured interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2007). A structured interview is more information oriented, the semi-structured interview is besides information oriented, also more person oriented (Lundahl & Skärvad, 2009). The main reason for choosing this method was in order for us to get closer to the employees of the bank. The semi-structured approach would also allow us to have a more flexible interview session where both information and person oriented data could be found. With regards to our research question this was an obvious choice since personal opinions were very important.

The first step in the process was to establish our interview subjects. Having close connection with the HR- manager, she assisted in setting up interviews with different employees in the bank. When preparing for the interviews we had long discussions regarding the amount of interview subjects we wanted in order to gather the appropriate amount of data. We knew Sparbanken Öresund had some limits, which we had to take into consideration. Nine interviews were completed. We requested employees which had different positions and backgrounds within the bank, this allowed us to get a diverse perspective on the matter and hence a more legitimate result. These were deliberately divided amongst the different parts of the organization, from low level employees to high level executives. For more specific

information regarding the specific interviewees see Appendix A. The first interviews were conducted during a visit to the headquarters located in Malmö in March 2012. We met the HR- manager and the Communications manager. The remaining interviews were conducted during a period of 2 week in the beginning of April of 2012. The interviews lasted approximately 55 minutes and were conducted by one of the thesis researchers. We had a rolling schedule so that all the researchers conducted interviews. All three researchers attended each interview. The purpose of this was to maximize the amount of empirical material collected and get different perspectives on the situation. The interview situations had a friendly approach in order to get the interview subject to feel more comfortable with the situation and speak more freely. The interviews were recorded, later transcribed and translated to ensure accurate representations of the interviews. All interviews were anonymous and they were informed of this before starting the interview. Since we looked for honest opinions regarding the bank, being anonymous would be important in order to get honest answers.

The questionnaires used during the interviews were created so that some of the questions were the same for all the interviewees and some were tailored to their specific position in the bank. The reason for this was to get an element of comparison as well as tap into their individual knowledge and perspective of the situation. Here are some examples of questions we asked the employees:

‘Why do you think people find Sparbanken Öresund attractive?’

‘What weakness do you believe Sparbanken Öresund has with regards to the employee/employer relationship?’

‘How would you describe the banks relationship with its employees?’

‘Do you find your development potential within Sparbanken Öresund to be good?’

Since we used a semi-structured interview method some questions deviated from the questionnaire during the interview. This was done when we found it appropriate to delve deeper into the subjects’ thoughts. The full questioner can be found in Appendix B.

### **Secondary Data**

Secondary data is defined as information that already exist and that is not produced exclusively for the own study. This can be books, articles, budget reports, websites etc. (Lundahl & Skärvad, 2009). In this thesis we use secondary data from Sparbanken Öresund’s website and handouts provided by the HR-manager. An important aspect of using secondary

data is to be critical to its content and to be aware of the potential bias from which the information has been produced. An example of this could be the awareness that the information printed on the website of Sparbanken Öresund does have a clear agenda to portray Sparbanken Öresund in a positive light. This is something that we have been aware of and hopefully countered due to this acknowledgement. Information found at Sparbanken Öresund gave us initial information of the intended brand the bank was trying to convey externally. The interviews with the employees gave us their personal view opinion regarding the matter so the data complemented each other.

### **Method of Analysis**

One of the problems conducting qualitative research especially interviews is that it generates a huge amount of information. The process of analyzing transcribed interviews is not a straight forward process and can be confusing at times since the rules of analysis is so ambiguous (Bryman & Bell, 2007). When analyzing the empirical data in this thesis we used grounded theory as our interpretive framework. Grounded theory is derived from data, and the framework considers empirical research to be the only source of knowledge. Within grounded theory everything that the researcher finds can be considered valid data (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009). With grounded theory as our basis of analysis and using an open coding process, we have decoded all the interviews, breaking down and examining the transcripts looking for interesting categories and concepts within our empirical data (Bryman & Bell, 2007). The intensiveness of decoding has been limited to paragraphs of quotes and not word for word interpretations. The inherit message of the paragraph have governed the analysis and the categorization. The process of decoding was done twice in order to ensure the quality of used empirical material. We acknowledged that a third time of decoding would not contribute with more relevant data. The first session of decoding helped us to establish the main themes of Sparbanken Öresund's employer brand, resulting in the findings being 'business like' and 'giving back'. During the second session of decoding we mainly looked for similarities and contradictions regarding these themes. It helped us become aware of the possible misalignments regarding the concept in the bank. These will be presented in chapter 4. The decoding process was done by each member of the thesis group in order to ensure no important data was lost. The categories and themes found were later analyzed using the appropriate theory in order to highlight any discrepancies or similarities. Difficulties countered during this process were the uncertainty of the importance of certain empirical findings and what should be considered themes and categories relevant for the research

questions. In order to counter this problem we had to go back and forth between the empirical data and the theory in order to make sense of the data's relevance

### Reflexivity

When doing qualitative research and gathering data being reflexive is very important. Reflexivity is described by Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) as the complex relationship between the knowledge creator and the process of knowledge creation. The primary tool of gathering data and interpreting this data is the researcher of the project. As the primary tool they choose what data to collect and what type of methods to use when interpreting this data. This fact makes the process of knowledge creation vulnerable towards misleading and biased interpretations that could jeopardize the thesis legitimacy. The concept and process of reflexivity can be divided into two steps, careful interpretation and reflection. First, all empirical data must be considered a result of interpretation. The second step involves considering the researchers mind and what factors might affect the interpretation (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009). As a human being we constantly get influenced by our surroundings. It affects the way we interpret things, what we see, read and hear (Sandberg and Targama, 2007). The reason reflexivity is so important is because it is important to understand how this pre- understanding can affect the interpretation and the collection of the empirical material.

In this thesis we are three different researchers. This means that we have three different minds and backgrounds to consider when collecting and interpreting our empirical data. We have been aware of this throughout this thesis process and in order to be reflexive we have decided to have as much transparency as possible when collecting the data, trying to motivate to each other why we find certain data relevant. A second step in order to achieve the desired transparency everyone participated in all the interviews. Taking notes and making sure that the interview was conducted in similar manners throughout the process. The data coding process was done separately by all the researchers and all the nine interviews. The result from this was later presented and cross matched within the thesis group. This allowed us to detect and erase any biased thoughts in the process, since we got a chance to look at each other's work.

One of the most important aspects to consider during this thesis was our professional backgrounds. Kenth is currently working for Sparbanken Öresund and Gustav has recently been employed by the bank. This presented a potential biased situation where the researchers might have felt restricted in their interpretations and possibly felt obligated to have a more

positive approach towards the collected empirical findings rather than an objective one. This was something that was hard to counter and ignore but since we were aware of it and Per - Christian was not an employee of the bank he took a bigger responsibility trying to be tentative of this problem. This was one of our bigger challenges writing this thesis but we felt that we have dealt with it to the extent that we believe it won't affect the legitimacy of the thesis.

### **Weaknesses and Limitations**

Acknowledging weaknesses and limitations is an important part of conducting research. It protects the legitimacy and highlights the awareness of the author's critical thinking towards the thesis. We have found that one of the biggest weaknesses in this thesis was due to the lack of time to write. This affected the amount of interviews we could conduct and hence they had to be kept on a manageable level. Conducting more interviews could have provided us with a more solid and thick empirical foundation and perhaps shed more light on other aspects regarding the topic, but since time was strictly limited this was impossible. The second weakness has previously been mentioned in the reflexivity paragraph and it concerns the two researchers who have professional commitments with the bank through employment. We have acknowledged this problem and the fact that it can have affected the outcome of the thesis result. The third weakness is that of the interpretation of the researchers. When researching theoretical concept possible misinterpretations from the researchers part is always a present risk. The result could hence be questioned by other scholars as well as the targeted organization. We are aware of this and therefore make it clear that this is our interpretation of this particular concept and that the interpretations have been founded and guided by the relevant literature.



## CHAPTER 3: Literature Review

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*This chapter will present the relevant theory and concept surrounding this thesis and its chosen subject, employer branding. We will create the context through relevant theory in which our research questions revolve around. The content of the concept of employer branding can be seen as image and identity work which is something this chapter will argue and give an account for. The purpose with this chapter is to establish, define and link the different theories to the concept of employer branding and their interrelationship to each other.*

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### Introduction

The main topic of this thesis is employer branding. The concept of employer branding is closely related to the functions of HRM and that is why we will begin this literature review by outlining the field and recent development. The essence of Human Resource Management (HRM) consists of the activities of managing people so that they work in a manner which results in a desired outcome. The traditional functions of HRM are recruitment, selection process, induction, training and development, performance management and remuneration. These characterizations are synonymous with the old view of the role of HRM (Boxall, Purcell & Wright, 2008). HRM have gotten critique regarding its actual contribution to increased organizational performance (Ulrich, 1997). As a result of this critique, HRM has developed into a new approach of HRM, named Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM). It combines the pieces of HRM and relates it to both a broader context and activities within the organization. SHRM puts emphasis on the relation between HRM strategies conducted by the organization and the affect of those strategies on organizational performance (Boxall et al, 2008). According to Ulrich (1997) SHRM could be considered the only variable left in the war of organizational competitiveness.

The reason for the changing dimensions of HRM is the necessity to think globally and act locally, due to the increasing globalization (Ulrich, 1997). Ulrich (1997) emphasizes learning and collaboration but also managing diversity, complexity and ambiguity in order to change successfully. He suggests highlighting creativity and innovation as a way of increasing performance. This can be achieved through a free flow of information and shared learning. Another important variable he argues for is the intellectual capital of an organization. In other words attracting, developing and retaining individuals who can carry out the work in the best possible manner as management desires. Lastly, also shape the organization in order to become more responsive towards change (Ulrich, 1997).

The term branding has been commonly used when trying to promote both the development of corporate brands and products. But what is a brand then? A brand could be defined as the organization's way of teaching customers what the organization represents. It therefore becomes crucial to manage the brand in a way that both displays what the organization stands for, but also what they potentially want to represent (Kay, 2006). Kay (2006) argues that the strength of branding lies in consumers and employees' perception of the organization and what it represents. A strong brand is therefore most likely connected to a successful organization. A great deal of literature has highlighted a product-driven marketing and communication-led approach to create value together with the customers. Opposite to this perspective is the view which puts emphasis on the interaction between the customer and the organization in order to create a brand image (Ind & Bjerke, 2007b). Another approach creating a strong brand is to align the employees with the brand. This somewhat outside-in, inside-out approach is argued to be of great importance when trying to uncover the meaning of brand through participation (Ind & Bjerke, 2007a). With the theoretical framework of branding in mind we will start of by introducing the concept of employer branding. We will then delve deeper in to its origin and a suggested way of implementing it.

### **The Employer Branding Concept**

The term employer branding can be defined as an active long-term strategic decision to manage the awareness and perceptions, existing and potential employees holds towards an organization (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). According to Berthon, Ewing and Hah (2005) employer branding and employer attractiveness belong within the term internal marketing (IM). Ahmed and Rafiq (2004) describe the term internal marketing to be a somewhat problematic area. They argue that there is not a single unified definition of the IM concept, resulting in the inclusion of many different activities within the scope of IM. The number of diverse interpretations of the concept has led to difficulties in a broad acceptance of the concept as well as problems with implementation. Their suggested definition of IM is as a planned effort, conducted in a market-like approach, with an aim of motivating employees but also striving towards both implementing and integrating long-term strategies towards customer orientation. (Ahmed and Rafiq, 2004) This discussion is in line with that of Berthon et al (2005) and the discussion regarding internal branding as a part of internal marketing. They argue that employees have a central role in building the brand and thus the employees conduct can either reinforce or damage the message the organization wish to convey. Due to

this fact there is a need to align the employees and their values and behavior with those of the organization (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001).

The term employer branding partly entails improving the recruitment process for organizational needs. The aim for this type of activity is to create a perception of the organization as a good employer and consequently a good workplace, which in turn would attract the wanted employees. The other aspect puts emphasis on aligning the employee-workforce with the overall organizational strategy and ensuring their engagement in the corporate culture (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). There have also been reports suggesting that properly conducted employer branding can result in competitive advantage for those adopting it. It also assists employees in adopting company values on a more profound level and at the same time contribute with retention of employees (Conference Board, 2001). Another claim regarding employer branding is that a strong employer brand could reduce the cost of obtaining the desired personnel, also improve the relationship with the employees, create an increase in retention of employees and also even be able to offer lower salaries than correspondent employees in another organization with weaker employer brand (Ritson, 2002). Employer branding is a possible way to position the organization as a unique employer in the eyes of potential employees, striving towards differentiating the organization from competitors, and creating their own uniqueness as an organization (Sullivan, 2002). HRM practitioners suggest the following three-step approach when implementing employer branding.

The first step involves creating a deeply rooted value proposition. By taking culture, management style, qualities of employees, employee image and impressions of their service or product and what they offer their employees in terms of value (Sullivan, 2002).

The second step entails reaching out with their proposition to potential future employees, recruitment agencies and such. This is done with the aim of attracting the right kind of people but also to support and enhance the corporate brand (Sullivan, 1999).

Step number three involves the internal marketing of the employer brand due to its attribute of working as a vessel to incorporate the brand promise into both the employees and culture (Frook, 2001). It is about aligning the employees with the intended brand or strategy. Having presented how this could be done in practice one needs to examine positive effects of the possible competitive advantage an organization could harvest from employer branding.

Employer branding align with the view of Barney (1991) and the Resource-Based view which states and argues that investing in human capital can result in competitive advantage. The underlying reason is that such activities can increase organizational wide performance. Working in this manner with employer branding is a way of striving towards becoming the "employer of choice" on the work-market and thus attracting the best employees as a result (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). Positive effects of internal marketing of the employer brand can be linked to retention as well as the creation of a workforce that is hard to duplicate which further strengthens the competitive advantage claim (Ambler and Barrow, 1996). Going back to the discussion of attracting the right employees we will thus investigate the level of attractiveness an organization holds towards potential employees.

The employer attractiveness is defined as the perceived benefits potential employees sees in being employed by a particular organization. As the organizations seek to improve retention and recruitment they argue that this can only be successfully achieved when organizations understand how to increase employee attractiveness (Berthon et al, 2005). Being attractive from an external perspective has been described and we will now delve deeper into the effects of employer branding for existing employees and how they perceive it.

One argument for the use of employer brand is that it creates employee satisfaction, affinity and loyalty and even creating a perception of the employment as being different in comparison to competitors. An employer brand could in a way help to set aside a part of rational thinking and allow for emotional thinking to be a part of the equation. Satisfaction is argued to be created by 'agreeableness', if the employer brand is perceived as supportive and trustworthy. Affinity is suggested to be the result of both agreeing and 'ruthlessness', in other words controlling. Loyalty and perceived differentiation is derived from a combination of two terms. The first being 'enterprise' which entails the employer brand being perceived as exciting and daring while the other term 'chic' consists of stylish and conveying prestige (Davies, 2008). They argue that all these variables will contribute to the important state of employee satisfaction. Moreover, Davies (2008) work depicted an inherent complexity for managers to manage the employer brand. Their findings did not reveal any of these mentioned aspects to dominantly affect the desired outcome of employer branding. Accordingly to Davies (2008) this previous statement awoke an interesting thought regarding brand differentiation since it reduces price sensitivity and they voiced a thought whether or not this might be the case with employer brand as well. More specifically, if employees would accept a salary that is lower than market average to be employed by an organization which is

satisfactory to them in other ways than monetary (Davis, 2008). The part of employer branding that puts emphasis on internal marketing has two areas of focus. First, aligning employees to organizational values in order to get them to approach their customers in accordance with how they profile themselves outwards to customers (Vallaster and de Chernatony, 2005). In other words trying to get the employees to deliver what the organization promises to deliver.

Second, treating employees as you treat the customers in order to create a positive feeling towards the employer (Davies, 2008). It could be important in order to establish a positive relationship with the employee in order to promote employee satisfaction. Much in line with this reasoning is scholars who put emphasis on employer branding and its effects on employee attitudes and in turn how that resonates towards customers. In other words which affects employee attitudes have in service sectors, the service brand, since the employees are the ones interacting with the customers (Schlager, Bodderas, Maas and Cachelin, 2011).

Following Schlager et al (2011) they argue that expected social value and reputation is dominant in employees identifying with an organization and as a consequence promote long-term success of that service brand. The underlying reason being that employee's attitude is something customers will notice in an interaction with the employee and thus rendering employee attitudes important for delivering the value management strives for, as a part of their long-term strategy. Moreover, they suggest that a strong employer brand results in employee satisfaction and identification with the organization as an outcome. This then results in a more positive attitude within the employee workforce which in turn makes the employees more eager to conduct themselves in line with the managerial desires (Schlager et al 2011). Consequently, in regards to attract potential employees they suggest that portraying an attractive image of being respectful, friendly work-atmosphere, people-focus is more efficient than conveying an image of good reputation or good products.

Alvesson (2004) states and declares the fact that organizational brand and branding does not vary to a considerable extent in comparison to the term image. Consequently, he ignores the term brand in favor for image management and organizational image as he considers them to be both more valid and applicable. This relationship is something which we will have in mind throughout the text henceforth when examining employer branding. Since we argue that organizational identity and identification is suitable in connection to image when trying to explain employer branding in other terms, we will give an account for those terms below.

How the present society is portrayed in regards to organizational images is very interesting to examine further.

### **Image and Identity in Context**

Getting your organizational message across to the broad masses has been argued to pose some difficulties in the present business climate. One reason is the overload of corporate messages of organizational images making it hard for a single message to stand out as something unique (Cheney and Christensen, 2001). Alvesson (2004) argues the definition of an image to be that of an internal picture of an object while in other circumstances it might refer to the conveyed attributes of that particular object. He further develops on the view of image by referring to it as something which is affected by organizations and their particular intentions. The image is in this sense defined as a particular concept and focus for instrumental action to be undertaken. Thus, the image does not appear to be that integrated to the referent and instead linked to it in a more loosely manner, a view on image which is shared by a number of scholars such as Bernstein (1984). This view of image hold double meaning, since it involves both how the organization is perceived externally but also the impressions and sentiments of members in the organization (Alvesson, 2004). The question is, whether the internal and external factors of image are divided in the present environment.

Hatch and Schultz (1997) argues an environment where these two aspects, internal and external, has been more or less melted together or at least beginning to do so. The reasoning behind the argument is the increased interactions between members of the organization and external actors. Moreover, they argue that organizational identity in this regard should be considered as the connector between the positioning of the organization and the internal environment of the organization. Thus, it embodies the role of a symbolic framework which holds double meaning. Outsiders interpret the framework in order to form an opinion about the organization. Members of the organization on the other hand interpret it as a means to infer their own individual identity (Hatch and Schultz, 1997). Hence, the external perception of the identity of an organization is represented within the organizational image (Whetten and Mackey, 2002). In what way could then identity be defined and characterized in this particular context.

The concept of identity revolves around the notion of 'the self'. Within the field of social psychology, identity is divided into two categories, identity theory and social identity theory. Identity theory is referred to as an individual's identification of him/herself, putting one's

self-perception into context. Social identity theory refers to the connectivity between the individual identification and social categories that surround us, such as groups of friends or organizations (Stets and Burke, 2000). The connection between identification, satisfaction and effectiveness in organizations has already been recognized (Brown, 1969). Creating the image message is therefore suggested to be of great importance since it to a certain extent defines the identification with the identity and consequently also arguably competitive advantage. This can also be connected to the first step of the suggested implementation of employer branding but also somewhat adjacent to step number two previously mentioned. We will now delve deeper into how this is accomplished.

### **Managing Organizational Identity**

The interest in corporate identity management has grown significantly among organizations (Mitki, Herstein and Jaffe, 2007). According to Markwick and Fill (1997) the reason for this interest is due to the need for differentiation in an increased competitive environment. Maintaining relationships in an environment where marketing and communication conditions constantly changes makes it important to define the organization in the eyes of the stakeholders. The purpose of creating a strong organizational identity is to make the name of the organization distinct, known and credible in the eyes of the public and the employees hence creating a specific attachment that customers and staff can relate to with their own personal identity (Chernatony and McDonald, 1998). According to Van Riel and Balmer (1997) the term organizational identity is composed of three characteristics. The first involve symbols and logos that is communicated and identified by the customers and the public. The second refer to the public policy and legal aspect of an organizational personality. The third and last involve the behavioral aspect of the organization, specific characteristics such as culture, competence and strategies. All these are crucial when aiming to nurture and maintain a functional organizational identity within an organization. The positive effects of management of identity are something well worth examine.

Having a strong organizational identity could lead to competitive advantage since a positive organizational image makes people more inclined to surround and work for the organization (Balmer and Stotvig, 1997). According to Beer (2001) organizations invest a lot of money and time creating attractive corporate identities even though most attempts fail. He suggests that the reason for this is due to poor learning mechanisms within the organization. In order to implement an identity successfully with chosen norms and values, the organization must be receptive to it. Employees as well the organization itself might have difficulties accepting the

new identity, putting pressure on the learning mechanisms and communication of the organization in order to make it work (Garvin, 2000). The activity of aligning the identity within the workforce is a complex activity in which an organization should tread lightly but distinct in order to make the most out of it. Failure to succeed might result in damaging outcomes instead of the desired one. Step number three that is suggested by practitioners of the concept employer branding, is to market the employer brand internally to the employees in order to align the employees with the employer brand as they are the ones carrying it. In order for this to begin to happen the employees need to identify with the organization, the organizational identity. Consequently, we consider identification to be suitable to present and describe in order to further demonstrate the inherent complexity with these kinds of HRM activities.

### **Identification**

As previously mentioned, the identification process in which the employees infer a piece of their own identity with the organizational identity is important in order for both the identity and regular work to be accomplished in a pleasing manner. The employees must decode and make sense of the organizational message of their intended image. As one can imagine some individuals identify more with the organization work while others do it to a lesser extent. In line with what has previously been said about identifying and following (Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail, 1994) the employees who identify more with the organizational identity have more similar attributes in common with the organization in question. Opposite to individuals who identify less with the organizational identity which have less similar attributes in common. Moreover, the process of identity creation through identification should be highlighted more and will hereby be delved deeper into for the sake of clarity.

This identification process is unique to each individual, since every single one is unique to some extent. The employees' perception might then correlate with a collective organizational identity or not. The collective organizational identity consists of what they as employees consider being distinctive, central and enduring about their particular organization. Adding to this problematic aspect is the possibility or the risk of the employees' perception of the image of the organization not to be accurate, consequently resulting in a somewhat skewed outcome. (Albert and Whetten, 1985). One positive outcome may be that the employees feel proud to belong to the organization, if the organization is deemed by others as something with intrinsic high social value. A possible negative effect to be aware of is when and if an individual interprets the image to be unfavorable, and consequently starts to experience negative

outcomes on a personal level. (Dutton et al, 1994) They might start to value their employment less and in time their involvement and attitude towards work would have sunk to a low level, consequently damaging the organization as a result (Kahn, 1990). Identifying with the organizational identity therefore seems important to gain a workforce which is more invested in the organization as a whole. Another sensitive subject in achieving sufficient identification from the employees is how they perceive people outside the organization to view the organization. Dutton et al (1994) uses the term 'Construed external image' to describe the phenomenon.

As previously mentioned we have highlighted the importance of identification in connection to the concept of employer branding with regards to the third step suggested by practitioners for implementing it. And due to the inter-relationship with image in regards to employer branding we also gave an account for the most relevant theory in that area as well. We now move towards looking at effects of actively managing identity, more specifically identity regulation. In other words, how the employees are encouraged to identify with the objectives set up by the management group. Moreover, also present how actions taken towards this end, long-term strategy with identity, may present itself towards employees. In essence, how these identity regulations affect employee self-constructions in terms of coherence, distinctiveness and commitment Alvesson and Willmott (2002). Thus, we are aiming to investigate this situation further and try to bring clarity to it within this context of employer branding.

### **Identity Regulation**

According to Alvesson and Willmott (2002) identity regulation is a common tool used by management in order to strive towards achieving the above mentioned, normative control amongst the employees. They argue for a linkage between the identification process and rational decision making and their bounded relationship with one another. The importance of managing identity work can then be further developed as it is argued to be crucial and vital in relation to the employment relationship, to achieve sufficient normative control. A cultural mechanism is sometimes put into action in order to further nurture and refine both employee commitment and involvement but also to ensure and increase both job security and the average duration of employment. Consequently, providing support for the normative control activities. Hence, as previously mentioned these kinds of activities are argued to bare great importance to creating such an environment. In such circumstances when organizational identification is manifested and resulting in heightened employee loyalty it has to be handled in an active manner and not taken for granted. That is why image work needs to be actively

generated and created (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). What the possible effects of such activities are what we now will delve deeper into.

In order to try and expand on which effects identity regulation might bring Alvesson and Willmott (2002) have divided the concept into three different patterns which they suggest being distinct and useful towards such end but also as they in practice are frequently intertwined. They argue for three variables of identity regulation namely managerial, cultural-communitarian and quasi-autonomous in making the distinction. By dividing it as such they highlight process aspects of identity regulation which will put emphasis on negative outcomes. Consequently, they developed an analysis of identity work which revolves around the interrelation between self-identity, identity work and regulation of identity. The three patterns they highlight is an appropriate way of approaching it into in moving this section forward.

The managerial theory of identity regulation highlights their role in providing discourses from which self-identity is constructed as well as maintained. Following this chain of thought the focus can be directed towards Smircich and Morgan (1982) due to their conceptualization of leadership defined as management of meaning. Moreover, when a certain meaning is contingent upon identity the proper managing of such a meaning is pertinent to managing identity. Managerially created identities may favor a constraining and somewhat demoralizing atmosphere. Instead of advocating the work and interaction of members of the organization in favor of the identity work and consequently productivity (Willmott, 1997). Managers act as both recipients and bearers of efforts in connection to regulations which can be damaging in terms of being counter-productive when transferred and conveyed down through the hierarchy (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

The second part of their argument highlights the importance of cultural-communitarian patterns of identity regulation. They argue that they emerge from common understandings and convictions. These common understandings may be derived from an organizational setting, but more likely from society and the occupation as a genre (Ezzamel and Willmott, 1998). These types are typically based from historically based themes giving it more legitimacy and they may oppose, support or work without managerial identity control (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

The third and last piece of their argument involves quasi-autonomous identity patterns of regulation. This pattern can be conceptualized as something leaning towards micro-

emancipation (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996). When organizational identity is forged in part by the many discourses and practices available for employees it is suggested that identities are only partly regulated by managerial directives. Thus, the managerial identity regulation may be negatively affected by other processes. This particular regulation entails employees to have or get the opportunity to coordinate their schedule and working practices albeit within certain parameters set by management. This great fluidity can nurture the removal of quite oppressive restrictions (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Organizational identity has several layers which are important in multiple ways for an organization when trying to create uniqueness around and about their organization. Even though creating and nurturing an organizational identity is argued to be important in this context of employer branding there are as showed some interesting down-sides to striving towards that goal. This multi-dimensional relationship and the complexity and ambiguity of employer branding is something this thesis wish to bring clarity to and also as a result contribute to existing knowledge of the academic area.

Within this chapter we have conducted a literature review of the adjacent theories to our thesis topic namely employer branding. Some scholars have written about the subject matter and which we gave an account for in the introduction part of this chapter in order to portray and provide the reader with a solid foundation, a foundation from which we will build our argument together with the following theories. Following Alvesson (2004) we started by presenting image and identity theory as employer branding can be considered to consist of image and organizational identity work. Moreover, we introduced the area of managing organizational identity. This since we argue for the importance of image and identity work, or employer branding, in order to strive towards increased organizational performance. With that section we aimed to portray the suggested importance of managing organizational identity actively. As it is argued that employees need to identify with the organization or the brand for several reasons we also outlined that area as well. The reason behind this argument is the connection to both delivering value to their customers as well as creating a more devoted workforce. We finished this chapter by explaining that identity can be used as a form of control and highlight what such activities might bring as a result from a managerial perspective. The suggestion we presented is describing possible side-effects of such activities. We can conclude by stating that this chapter provided the reader with what we set out to do namely establish, define and link the different theories and their suggested interrelationship to each other and the concept of employer branding.



## CHAPTER 4: EMPIRICAL MATERIAL

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*In this chapter we will present the empirical material collected throughout the interview process with Sparbanken Öresund. We will start off by presenting the bank and its key themes regarding employer branding. Secondly, we will look at the recruitment process and the necessary characteristics Sparbanken Öresund seeks in order to convey their intended employer brand. Thirdly we will look at potential discrepancies and misalignment which might affect their employer branding.*

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### **The Sparbanken Öresund Way**

Sparbanken Öresund is the result of the fusion between the two savings banks Sparbanken Gripen and Sparbanken Finn. The newly established bank was launched in late autumn of 2010. During a meeting in the beginning of 2012 with the HR-manager of Sparbanken Öresund the concept of employer branding was for the first time brought to our attention. The HR-manager emphasized the importance of the concept with regards to the homogenous environment they exist in. The HR-manager states that, as an employer all banks offer more or less the same benefits, making it crucial to differentiate from others.

Sparbanken Öresund's stated vision is according to them having the most satisfied customers in the region, they aim to do this by managing business in a different way compared to how banks normally are perceived to do business.

*"Through broad competence, local decision-making, individual commitment, sustainable development, good quality and active value creation." [Sparbanken Öresund, 2012]*

As the quote states, we can find some deviations from what could be considered common visions for banks. They try to attract customers by focusing more on an individual commitment and sustainable development. We therefore draw the connection that this will apply for the employees as well, believing they need to act and live in a certain way to attract the right customers. We consider it therefore to be important to find employees who share the banks values.

This partnership created a new local and regional full service bank within the Öresund area. The launch involved not only changed name, logos and colors but also changes in the way they would conduct their business, in order to attract the type of customers the bank was aiming for.

In order to attract customers and in the long run good employees which match the bank, they developed a business idea where Sparbanken Öresund stands for a strong local presence in the region. They aim to deliver complete financial solutions to both individuals and small/medium sized corporations by doing business in a certain way and by being vigorous with a focus on individual advisory services.

*"We are 'business like' and vigorous. We create value together with our customers through individual advisory services" [Sparbanken Öresund, 2012]*

In order to be vigorous and create value through individual advisory services it seems important for Sparbanken Öresund to have a long lasting relationship with its employees in order to make sure they stay and the connection lasts. Otherwise they might risk both the employee and the customer, if the relationship between the employee and the customer is stronger than the relationship between the customer and the bank. Then the bank risk losing them both if the employee is not satisfied and decides to leave the organization. This would counter the bank's intentions to create long lasting relationships. Creating a unique ethos could possibly prevent this from happening.

### **Unique Ethos - Potential Employer Brand**

During the interviews we received a lot of useful information and together with Sparbanken Öresund's own material we have tried to understand how they conceptualize their employer brand. As mentioned previously, employer branding aims to enhance recruitment and align the workforce towards the company's strategic goals. To define employer branding in specific terms and concepts is hard and perhaps there are other aspects to take in to consideration as well. Based on the findings the essence of Sparbanken Öresund and its employer branding consists of two main themes. It concerns their way of conducting business towards their customers, this is referred to as being 'business like'. The second comprises of their 'giving back' work, giving back an annual amount of money from their revenue to the local region via two foundations.

We are seeing these themes as their overall branding and as argued for earlier this makes them differentiated compared to other banks, both as employers and service providers. Since a bank does not deal in physical goods their focus is on selling services. Therefore could it be considered important to have the right employees which can convey this unique approach. We therefore argue for the overall branding also being their employer branding, since it is the employees who represents and act as the brand. Due to this fact these two themes could be

considered the employer brand of the organization. These two themes will be investigated in further detail below.

### **The 'business like' Approach**

Sparbanken Öresund tries to summarize all these values and concepts within a term they call 'affärsmässighet', which we have translated as 'business like'. Sparbanken Öresund defines how to be 'business like' with the following words in their handout material:

*“Our goal is to create long lasting relationships and to grow with our customers. We start to build relationships with private customers in early years and with companies in an early stage as possible. It creates the opportunities for future profit. To be 'business like' means that we in all contexts make 'business like' decisions and places the customer relationship in focus and see the questions from a customer perspective. Our commitment involves helping the customer to create a balanced and healthy economy by offering the right solutions at the right time. By doing so, we satisfy the customer's needs and ensure our own positive development over time. Our 'business like' approach makes it possible for us to live up to the small savings bank idea. It means we give back some of our result to the region and customers through our owner foundations. It means no money is being sent to anonymous owners or founders. The small savings bank idea is amazing and it means that we are not without a certain pride to feel that we are value-creators in our region!” [Sparbanken Öresund, 2012]*

As stated in the quote, their way of doing business focuses on the customer relationship. It is the main goal to have a long lasting relationship between the employee and customer in order to make a profit. This in our opinion makes their employer branding even more important since there is a need to find the right employees in order to successfully convey this approach. Throughout our interviews, we came to the realization that a majority of all definitions of 'business like' were in the same way but with very small deviations. One of the interviewees had a different interpretation of what being 'business like' is all about.

*“It's about being personal, you have faithful customers and you are very personal towards the customers. They have been able to just run in and get things done. It becomes a completely different relationship, our way of making decisions has made being 'business like' possible by being able to reply much faster.”*  
[Employee B]

Another employee chose to express herself in the following way when describing how to be ‘business like’ at the bank. Once again the values within the bank seemed very rooted, keeping the focus on the customers but at the same time being aware of the need to make a profit.

*“Each business we do, we cannot make a loss for business just to be kind, the goal is to generate profit for the bank in the end. It is supposed to also benefit the customer, there should be a good deal for both. It allows us to make money but might earn less than what other banks are doing. One should not make a deal for the deal’s sake if the bank do not profit from it.”* [Employee A]

One of the employees emphasized a greater willingness to ensure customer needs more than the bank.

*“It is to find a good solution that benefits both the bank and especially the customer. I work more to make it beneficial for the customer than the bank. It’s probably my weak side as an employee, where I perhaps should actually listen more to the bank and what they want to do, then focusing on the customer. It’s a bit like that when taking small initiative on its own, but I also know that they have no problems with it. If you remove the small fees for customers, it feels a lot better.”* [Employee G]

As we can see from the above stated quotes, it seems there are several aspects and deviations in the concept of being ‘business like’. Some seem to value the relationship between them and their customers in such way where they are willing to promote less profit in order to make the customer satisfied. Some argues that a deal should not be done if there is no chance of making a profit whilst others define it as fast service. Being ‘business like’ also seems to be a tool in order to guide the employees in their way of conducting business and act when at work. Regardless of the different opinions they all seems to have a very customer oriented business approach where the relationship is the most important part, but they seem to have different definitions on where relationship ends in favor for the need to make a profit.

One employee summarized the level of engagement and the depth of the commitment to the cause in a very vivid and graphic way, which in turn further demonstrates how deeply rooted and well-spread this view is.

*"I think that when it comes to banks and their business, that you can view it in different ways. Either as managing numbers, percent and money or you view it as realizing dreams. Which attitude you have towards these two sides will erase the boundaries between the job and your personal time and me as a human being. Imagine a doctor sitting at a health center prescribing cough medicine, starts a 8 and leaves at 5 or someone else caring for very sick people. In that case you become a part of that person's life, it becomes more than a job. It is like a priest, he gets paid for 9 hours but is present for 24 hours. You live with other people and their lives, the saying within our bank is to give back and think differently."*

[Employee E]

This is a good example of how an employee identifies himself with the tasks of being 'business like'. He argues that being 'business like' is something that should be deeply rooted and hence affect the commitment of the employee. Being an employee at Sparbanken Öresund should be considered more than just being a regular banker. We get a feeling that the image conveyed by the bank is that of a calling rather than just a regular nine to five job.

According to the interviews and obtained material the term 'business like' at Sparbanken Öresund seems to mean a good deal both for the bank and the customer where both in some sense shall gain from the deal. We find being 'business like' seems to be the very core of what could be considered appropriate behavior within Sparbanken Öresund. It affects all the actions taken by the employees and hence reflects and conveys the employee environment at Sparbanken Öresund.

### **The 'giving back' Approach**

The second theme in Sparbanken Öresund's employer brand revolves around their 'giving back' work. Sparbanken Öresund is collectively owned by two savings bank foundations, Sparbanksstiftelsen Öresund and Sparbanksstiftelsen Gripen. These two foundations strive towards contributing to the development of the region of west Skåne. Together with the two foundations Sparbanken Öresund is supporting projects focusing on kids and youths, education and research, culture, sports as well as local business. Sparbanken Öresund is also by themselves trustees for a number of foundations.

During our interviews and research we found that 'giving back' was an important part of Sparbanken Öresund. We made several findings regarding employee's views of 'giving back' and how well it is established within the organization. For instance, it appears that the

majority of employees we interviewed found it highly important with ‘giving back’. Although one interviewee did express it as highly important but only in order to stay competitive and not in terms of ‘giving back’ being for a good cause. The HR-manager decided to describe the fact that they are ‘giving back’ with the following words:

*“We are becoming more and more engaged both socially and within the society as a whole, we believe it is important to use money in a proper manner. Our two owner foundations and the work they do with giving back money to the community can feel quite good. It feels good being a part of an organization which for example gave flat-screens to the children’s oncology unit.”* [HR manager]

The HR-manager expresses an importance for money to be used in a proper manner which of course has to be considered a good thing. One could argue based on this quote if they actually do it because they believe it is important to use money in a proper manner, or if this is a response to the changing public opinion regarding corporate social responsibility, especially for financial service firms.

The banks reason to focus on ‘giving back’ is a part of their profile in order to promote further development within the region. By doing so they create connections with both future employees and customers since they live in the region and can be a part of the positive environment the banks creates. The communications manager explained her view on ‘giving back’ with the following words:

*“I believe people like this, I also believe our ‘giving back’ approach is viewed as sympathetic. It is something very contemporary, this inclination towards being philanthropic. Sustainability, you cannot just consume without thinking about the consequences, there needs to be some kind of recycling in some way. This is our model of recycling, we are ‘giving back’ in a way which is not that bad.”*

[Communications manager]

The employee emphasizes that their approach is contemporary and provide the bank with a sustainable future. They seem to think that stakeholders find it sympathetic and philanthropic, providing the bank with a unique image as an employer.

One employee expresses her positive view of the importance of ‘giving back’ work for the future and how it will benefit the bank, its employees and its customers in the long run.

*“I think it matters, it matters a lot and it will especially matter in the future. We have in fact a foundation which gives back to the local region and it has existed within the organization for a long time, it is not a new phenomenon. What shall I say, we want to highlight it in a different way and it feels very positive to do so. That is something I notice among all my colleagues they feel that this is something they want to be a part of.”* [Employee C]

This quote further strengthens the rooted belief in ‘giving back’ within the company and its importance for Sparbanken Öresund and its future success. When asking an employee if she believed that Sparbanken Öresund’s ‘giving back’ approach was a contributing factor for making people interested in the bank, we received the following answer:

*“I have not heard a customer say it directly but I can imagine it is something positive, especially since all this talk regarding larger banks and their bonuses.”*  
[Employee F]

The previous quote led us to the following quote:

*“It is the fact that we have no shareholders, we have a foundation. It is not about numbers so the shareholders money should increase, it is about us being owned by a foundation.”* [Employee D]

The previous two quotes, together with the earlier argumentations displays a picture where one could wonder how the ‘giving back’ approach is being projected. In some sense we received a feeling where ‘giving back’ is only a way to attract customers, an efficient way to counter the negative publicity regarding banks’ profits. At the same time some employees express feelings where it is highly important whilst others could see the relevance but not the effect of it. Based on the last quote it might be an easier way for the bank to motivate their ownership structure using foundations to gain customers and appropriate employees.

### **Appropriate Recruitment Characteristics**

In order to uphold the theme and employer brand of Sparbanken Öresund, finding the right type of employees could be considered important in order to maintain this brand. This section aims to highlight what kind of individuals the bank seeks in order to achieve this certain employer brand as well as what background current employees hold.

Developing employees' competencies seems to reside in the very core of Sparbanken Öresund and their organization. It is a process which is continuous and together with the closest executives they try to create a development plan with concrete goals in order to fulfill its overall employer brand. This is achieved providing employees with educational possibilities in order to increase the competencies. (Sparbanken Öresund, 2012) The HR-manager explains further what the bank looks for when hiring and their view on developing competence.

*“What is of interest is which attitude and mindset a human being has, because competence is something you can attach to a person later. That is the way it is, if you as an employee arrive here and we come to an agreement of what Sparbanken Öresund stands for it is a much better foundation than you having exactly the right qualifications.”* [HR manager]

This view is something which seems to be evident when looking at the backgrounds of the people we interviewed. It is clear that the educational background differs a lot within the organization but they all seem to share common values as individuals.

*“But at the same time we want to attract people with an academic background, just because you then have a basic competence and an understanding of our business. But also because you have completed an academic degree and that tells us that this is a person who can develop and evolve. Someone who is able to acquire knowledge and has those qualifications, for example study technique.”*

[HR manager]

The bank states that having the right mindset and appropriate personal profile is better than focusing on higher education. On the other hand they emphasize that employee's need academic education in order for the bank to secure quality in the eyes of the public, to see that they are able to obtain new knowledge and be adaptable. This way of looking at employee competence could reflect the banks viewpoint of hiring people with the right mindset in order to achieve its unique employer brand.

Delving deeper into the employee's actual background and education we found a wide variety of different personal profiles. Some of the personnel did not have any formal education in economics:

*“I have not studied a day of economics in my life, I have studied media and communications at Karlstad.”* [Employee D]

*“I went from upper secondary school straight to the bank, I have studied a few courses. I then studied something completely then banking or economics. I studied psychology with a focus on sports.”* [Employee G]

Whilst other employees had more relevant academic experience.

*“I have studied economics and graduated from Lund University 1978 and started working within the bank two days after my last exam.”* [Employee C]

*“I studied a special course in economics for a year and a half. I did not graduate due to the fact that I had worked for the bank for several summers as an intern.”*  
[Employee E]

Looking at the intended profile of a Sparbanken Öresund employee and what is expected of the individual, in comparison with the actual employee profile there seems to be both alignments and misalignments. They seem to succeed with getting the right personnel when it comes to employ individuals with the right mind set with regards to our previous discussion being ‘business like’. We have acknowledged that it is hard to measure people’s mindset, but we have come to the conclusion that they all define and do business in similar ways and this could be a measure of that fit. But regarding the educational background we see that the employees come from very different backgrounds and since the bank both emphasizes the right mindset and appropriate educational history this might show that they have only half succeeded with their intended recruitment since some do not seem to have the right education according to the bank’s guidelines. Perhaps this is a consequence of their focus on finding people with the right mindset and sees it as easier to educate those who lack specific skills instead of changing their mindset. Since Sparbanken Öresund has a different way of doing business and the employees are such a great part of it, it most likely becomes more important with a good personal chemistry.

A hands-on example from one of the author’s shows us how this process of aligning employees in the terms of being ‘business like’ is done.

#### **A Researchers Lived Experience**

When I first started at Sparbanken Öresund I got a warm welcome by all at the office and then got invited into the office manager’s office for an introduction meeting. The people present during the meeting were only him and me. While inside his office I got the opportunity to explain my thoughts and feelings of arriving at the bank, what my expectations were and so

on. I guess a way of getting a better understanding of what my intentions were and how he could help me reach them. Afterwards he told me about the values of the bank and explained them more in detail. Then he continued by explaining how they conducted their work in a 'business like' manner, once again delving deeper into what it actually means. By these two previous sentences it is very clear which aim he had, in my mind he aimed towards aligning me towards the organizational objectives of conducting the daily day-to-day business. Moreover, he encouraged me to dare to take own decisions because such actions by employees were considered to be highly praised. It is better to act and ask for help afterwards was something he told me. In encouraging doing this he gave me some kind of freedom of action whilst still in between the guidelines the later on gave me regarding the routines.

The process of creating and working with an employer brand, having employees align and interpret the brand as originally intended might not always go as easy as initially planned. The next section will delve further in to the possible implications employer brand can have.

### **Potential Implications with the Employer Brand**

Based on the previous stated empirical findings we have found Sparbanken Öresund's intended employer brand could cause some discrepancies in regards to the employer/employee relationship. Going back to the definition of employer branding, it states the main purpose is to improve recruitment and align employees with the intended corporate strategy. The main reason for this is to ensure engagement with the corporate culture and improve performance. This section will highlight the misalignments found during the interviews which might threaten Sparbanken Öresund's intended employer brand.

### **Conveying Employer Branding**

Due to the recent crisis between 2008 and present time the banking industry's reputation has taken a massive blow. This has resulted in a common view of the banking industry being sometimes characterized as a greedy and money hungry industry, overcharging their customers. We believe that Sparbanken Öresund has chosen another path in order to counter this bad reputation, by creating a sustainable future for the company being different in the eyes of both customers and employees. This has resulted in focus on 'giving back' to the customers and the region, creating a 'business like' environment where deals should benefit both parties. One interviewee acknowledges this new path and claims they only seek a fair compensation for their involvement with the customers.

*“I believe the environment is important, it is not about profits. We want a fair compensation for what we do. We want to be able to create enough muscles in order to change our internal systems, or further develop the different markets we embark on.”* [Employee E]

The employee emphasizes they might not be the cheapest bank, but they believe their commitment to their customers by ‘giving back’ to the society compensates for this fact. This approach of doing business could possibly also create a sense of pride amongst the employees, creating a positive feeling of working in an organization which is fair towards its customers. We believe the bank might also hope this could boost the interest in working for the bank, making them an attractive employer. It could also result in a faster identification process from the employees’ side and hence strengthening the employer brand of Sparbanken Öresund’s current employees. Another employee had similar thoughts regarding the bank’s unique approach and its effect on customer satisfaction. Putting emphasis on a more sustainable approach where the region also benefits from the banks business.

*“It is really important! It is often the case that people do not want to be customers in typical banks with typical shareholders for principle reasons. This is because the money goes to the shareholders, they instead want the money to go back to the region. That is something I really feel strongly about as well, but the ‘giving back’ approach was not the reason I applied for a job here. But since starting work here it has become a part of my every day and I get to experience firsthand which difference it makes, for real.”* [Employee B]

It seems employees identify with the intended employer brand, feeling strongly about its intentions once inside the bank but the statement also seems to show that they did not know about it when applying for the job. We found this to be a reoccurring theme throughout the interviews. This seems strange since ‘giving back’ and being ‘business like’ is what separates Sparbanken Öresund from other banks making them different. One employee revealed that it has become an important part since starting working in the bank, but it was not anything the employee thought of before applying.

*“I think it had a lot do with me wanting to get out and start working, I can honestly say that I never thought I would like to work at a bank. But now I ended up here and still enjoy it, I did not know this in beforehand. But as I mentioned, it was not really deliberate, that is sadly something I cannot say.”* [Employee F]

This fact was repeated by several employees. The reason behind it can be of varying kind but one employee revealed that it was a purely random act that contributed the employment.

*“In my case it was just plain coincidence that I started working here, and then I just got stuck here.”* [Employee G]

Another interviewee reflected upon a similar experience when applying for the bank but in this case the interviewee knew that the service sector was an interesting environment.

*“Yes it was pure chance I have to admit. I wanted to try working at a bank, I was studying here in Lund. And Lunda Bygdens Sparbank as it was called at that time was a big and dominating employer. They were very visible, more than we are today, towards students. And they had offices in many different locations and I felt that it would be very exciting to give it a go but it was really a coincidence. It would suit me because I knew that I would like to work within the service sector so that bit was not a coincidence. But the fact that it was this bank was a coincidence.”* [Employee C]

This phenomenon was not shared by all the employees since one revealed that she considered the bank and its good intentions, before start working at the bank. For this employee the ‘giving back’ work and overall working approach were a contributing factor.

*“Much for my own sake, my heart, that I work for a bank which I can stand for.”*  
[Employee D]

Even though the personnel for the most part had no prior knowledge of the bank which helped them make a decision to apply, the previous statement stands out as an anomaly. One employee gave an account for why this situation could exist, the reason being that the message of Sparbanken Öresund and its brand as an employer has not reached the broad masses and therefore has not yield any results in regards to the recruitment process.

*“I think actually... it has been too short or how do I put it... too short time that we have communicated our message as clearly as it is at this moment and has been especially since we became Sparbanken Öresund. It has not had a big impact on recruitment at this time but I think it will. But it takes much longer time for a message to reach out. You see it since you have looked at us closely and I believe*

*someone who has decided “this is where I want to work” does as well.”*

[Employee C]

We find that Sparbanken Öresund has quite a clear employer brand, despite that it seems like few people have found their way in to the bank for that reason. Instead employees have expressed that the choice of employer has been mostly random and by coincidence. These findings seem quite contradicting since one of the main reasons for using employer brand is to attract and align employees but in this case this has not happened in a straight forward way.

### **Being a Bank of Relationships**

As previously mentioned, the bank strives to become a long-term partner with their customers. Sparbanken Öresund take pride in their way of conducting their business but also in the way they try to create an attractive working environment for their employees. This could be considered a crucial aspect since it is the employees who creates and maintains the relationships with customers during long periods of time.

One way they care for their employees is by taking their employees specific personal situations in consideration. This helps to create a stronger bond between the employer and the employee.

*“One thing I found very positive, before I started to work here is something I have told many people before. Is that when I first got contacted and meet our retiring CEO for the first time, I had got the news of my pregnancy some weeks before and felt, damn I really want this job and this was child number two. I then told him, I really want this job but I want you to know about my situation with me being pregnant, I just want you to know. Then he told that children are a natural part of life and that they had a more long-term approach than that. I then got offered the job despite all, such an approach is something I believe contributes.”*

[Communications manager]

This example intends to show the type of commitment the bank does in order to be the employer they strive for. But the next section will highlight some misalignments were their focus on being ‘business like’ have unintended consequences on the workforce and their intended relationship mentioned above.

### **Long Term Financial Partner to Their Customers, What About the Employees?**

Sparbanken Öresund's, approach has resulted in an attempt to become a long lasting financial partner towards their customers. It seems like their entire business approach consists of a focus on relationships with their customers. In order to accomplish this long-term relationship with their customers we believe they must also take care of their employees as well. We believe customers tend to stay with their personal bank contacts for a long time if they have a good relationship. Their aim seems to be to care for their customers in a manner absent from the traditional banking industry.

*“For me personally it is precisely that, we characterize ourselves as a bank of relations, a partner to our customers, a financial partner to them. The ‘business like’ approach in such a pairing cannot be single-sided in my opinion, because then we cannot build any relations. On the other hand, we cannot just give away everything to our customers for free because that would leave us without anything. If we do not get something back we will not have a long-term existence and consequently fail to act as a long-term partner for our customers. The same goes for our employees, it is a constant struggle between satisfying either a customer or an employee, but the satisfaction cannot be so high that you lose the long-term perspective.”* [Employee C]

The majority of employees identified and supported this approach to conducting their business. The employee also brings up the problematic aspects of having this approach, talking about the duality of satisfying both the customers and the employees. Where do you draw the line between ‘giving back’ to the community and giving back to the employees?

A different scenario but still a matter of disgruntled employees surfaced during one other interview where an employee expressed negative feelings towards the lack of appreciation the unit received from the organization:

*“I have also heard in what way other colleagues looks at different units. In their minds we are seen like some kind of a back-office unit. They take for granted that we are available, that we know everything and that we will help them. The acknowledgement is lacking, you do not get the recognition that you want. That is something I know people are angry about in my unit, that we do so much and know so much.”* [Employee G]

The discussion regarding being appreciated for your efforts brought us closer towards the aspects of remuneration and its implications. One example of this was an employee's concerns regarding the salary and the bank's 'giving back' policy to the community.

*"I believe it to be important, especially when our salary is not the best, to know that the money is not going to something else. This makes it all okay, it is nothing one gets angry about. On the other hand, of course you want to hear that you are doing a great job, you want to grow. And get some recognition for your work. "*

[Employee G]

Another interviewee gave voice towards the same discussion as above. Their wages could have effects on the younger employees of the bank if they continue to offer an insufficient salary:

*"Well I would say that it feels better if you do a job that feels right in your heart but would result in getting 3000 SEK less in salary. But you always have to make a decision regarding if it is worth it or not. I believe that it is a dangerous game to play amongst the younger employees and the potential employees. The younger employees can't get a high salary since that would make the older employees angry. "* [Employee A]

When asking about how and if the management side conveyed their reasoning around benefits and salaries in the bank one of the employees responded the following.

*"No not really, of course the salary is only one part of it. The general answer when it comes to benefits is that they are flexible when it comes to leave of absence. For instance, paternity leave for those aged 30 -45 and that is of course very good but what happens after that? "* [Employee A]

The situation where new people arrive from other banks to Sparbanken Öresund and get to keep their salary from their previous employment which according to this interviewee could be higher than it would be if they worked at Sparbanken Öresund. Such events seemed to cause some tension within the workforce as it might seem unfair.

*"No it is not, you cannot count on that. I hope that it will change because otherwise... Another thing is when people from other banks get the same salary here as they had at the other bank and also get a raise. It is hard to know how*

*they reason because evidently it is not that hard to get a raise. If I am too soft when I negotiate my salary or something, I do not know. I more or less works like this, they tell you that they have a pot and then basically tell this is your salary, and here you go. While at the same time people from outside can get a quite high raise.” [Employee G]*

When talking about salary benefits with the HR-manager the following was said. She emphasized both the importance and difficulty of aligning the employee benefits to fit all employees so it seems fair.

*“About being considered an attractive employer consists of several factors such as the feeling of getting paid appropriate for what you do, that you get a competitive salary you also need to be offered benefits you consider to be of value, of course some benefits might suit younger employees better than older ones. But still that it feels like the benefits are decent. ” [HR manager]*

A contradicting interaction between the bank and its employees came up during one of the interviews. An interviewee was concerned about the lack of renegotiating their salary while still employed which resulted in negative feelings as a result:

*“I feel that I have had to find my own personal path in that sense. I do not have a clue as to how much my colleagues earn but on the other hand I know that the only time I have gotten a raise is when I threatened to leave. That can feel quite bad.” [Employee A]*

The importance of being ‘business like’ and ‘giving back’ is somewhat questioned in this section and to what cost it has for the people involved. The employees seemed to support this approach but there seems to be a duality of both being fair towards customers and at the same time be supportive of their employees. It is expressed as perhaps grasping for too much. Resulting in a strategy probably being executed mostly on the expense of the employees, making them feel unappreciated and underpaid. One employee said it could be a dangerous game to play, not looking after your employees especially when it comes to younger recruits. We believe this could damage reputation as an employer and hinder new talents from entering the company hence countering the goals towards a sustainable future. The next section we found a possible solution in order to counter this issue offering attractive career paths.

### Career Opportunities – Being Seen

The picture we received during our interviews with the bank was that they seem to put much emphasis on employee development and their possibility to grow. This is something which is in line with their intentions of being a good employer and taking care of their employees. They state, if a person show some initiative and determination they might get additional responsibility such as more challenging and stimulating tasks and assignments. They also state that the possibility to advance is the same regardless what position you have as an employee. (Sparbanken Öresund, 2012) The HR manager further develops this thought of how the bank position itself in regards to career opportunities within the bank.

*“You as an employee also need to have the possibilities for personal and professional development. We as a bank focus much of our attention towards educating our employees since we are smaller and you get the opportunity to advance career wise. A skilled person will get both the attention and the opportunity to make a career.”* [HR manager]

Their intentions seems clear but how could the employees be certain if they qualify for advancement, the risk could be that the bank does not acknowledge the potential individuals which is ready or seek further development. How could the employees be certain of this, do they have to bring it up themselves? Another employee also addresses the importance of career opportunities whilst at the same time mention several other variables to consider when evaluating an employment.

*“I will think loudly, career comes first since development is important. But then you cannot deny that career and income comes hand in hand, cash is king.”*  
[Employee D]

Other employee expressed it in the following way:

*“Motivation is most often salary, unfortunately. For me has been a lot about them seeing me and thinking of me. That I’m on their recruitments lists if there were to show up a job offer on higher level.”* [Employee B]

As earlier spoken it seems clear, some of the employees share the importance of career opportunities but emphasizes also the importance of salary when choosing between employers. One employee gave us a different view of career opportunities within the bank.

The number of positions higher up in the hierarchy is limited and as a consequence employees might leave the bank due to lack of such positions.

*“Something I have noticed while talking to colleagues throughout the organization, is that they feel that they cannot get the specific job they are interested in and thus have to seek employment elsewhere. Then perhaps with hopes of returning in the future because most of the personnel do not leave because they are unhappy, but because they cannot get any higher at that point in time. If an employee wants to move on, there are certain limitations. That is not something we can affect that much, I mean we cannot grow for such a reason. That is something one has to be aware of when applying but also clear on when recruiting.”* [Employee C]

This quote strengthens our previous discussion regarding the importance of career opportunities but also highlights the need for an honest dialogue regarding the possibilities of advancements when applying. Failing to be truthful regarding the career opportunities could result in employees leaving the company hence breaking the goal towards customer relationships. The bank will then risk failing in achieving its goal towards long term customer satisfaction.

Further discussing the banks career opportunities we found that the bank’s ability to offer international experiences was something that concerned some employees. One employee expresses this situation in the following way:

*“Employees that seek much more, employees that want to work somewhere else. The bank can take you as far as Ängelholm (interviewee laughs). If you would like to try London or New York we do not have the ability to offer that at all. If you have those ambitions then this organization is not the best employer for you.”*  
[Employee E]

This is something which were strengthened and confirmed by an employee who said that the bank can offer career opportunities, but only up to a certain level:

*“This is a reasonably big bank that can offer pretty good career opportunities but only up to a certain level. We have a quite big headquarter with a lot of different special units but it is not like there are manned with ten people each instead they are for example two at each position. And if those people are pleased with their*

*employment it might take a while before such a position opens up. And that is where it possibly ends career wise.” [Employee C]*

The career aspects of the bank seems limited according some of the employees, due to both the banks current size and the unclear dialogue regarding what is expected of you in order to advance. The bank only states a skilled person will get the attention and opportunity to advance. They do not say what to do in order to get this attention more than being a skilled employee, which we find to be a vague definition. Being honest with the carrier opportunities within the bank seems important, since for example employees who seek international experience might not be satisfied with an employment at Sparbanken Öresund. On the other hand, it is well known fact, Sparbanken Öresund is a regional bank and therefore the expectations amongst future recruits regarding international experience most likely could be expected to be low. It is important to highlight that some of the interviewed individuals saw good career opportunities within the bank and felt acknowledged by management. One reflection we made regarding these individuals was that they saw the career opportunities as a motivation instead of having a good salary confirming that individuals perceive situations differently.

### **Concluding Remarks**

During our interviews we believe to have established a better understanding of Sparbanken Öresund’s intended employer brand. With regards to reoccurring themes throughout our interviews we believe it to consist of being ‘business like’ and ‘giving back’. These two concepts permeate the whole organization and hence affect the behavior and environment around the employees in the bank thereby creating the employer brand. This section has highlighted the potential employer brand within Sparbanken Öresund, how employees interpret this brand and the implications surrounding this process. The main implications that we have found, have been the seemingly problematic aspect of conveying the employer brand so that employees interpret it in the intended way, having employees identify with the brand. We have also found the potentially problematic aspects of finding a balance between the intentions of the employer brand and the use of it. The next chapter will analyze the empirical findings with regards to the theoretical theories in chapter three.



## CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS

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*During chapter five we aim to analyze the empirical material using the theoretical foundation previously outlined. We will discuss the concept of employer branding with regards to Sparbanken Öresund. Secondly discuss the different misalignments we have found and what potential effects it might have. The first misalignment we found was that the employer branding did not seem to help the bank with the recruitment process. The second one revolves around a possible contradiction were the employer brand of the bank seem to be somewhat counter-productive. The last part of the analysis discusses whether or not the concept of employer branding can be considered to be a fad within management practices.*

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We have found that the concept of employer branding is a process closely related to the theoretical foundation of branding together with the activities of SHRM. We suggest that the concept of employer branding can be seen as image and identity work. The realization of the importance of making active HRM decisions in the hopes of enhancing performance is getting more and more attention. In this thesis we have chosen to look at the concept of employer branding and its implications in regards to Sparbanken Öresund.

Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) characterize employer branding as a concept with an employer specific focus. The employer brand establishes the identity of the organization as an employer and is intended for both external and internal receivers. Our empirical findings suggest some discrepancies within the concept of employer branding regarding the implementation, both internally and when trying to convey the employer brand externally.

The intentions of this thesis is to explain employer branding through more academically accepted terminology as put forward by Alvesson (2004). We will be using terms such as image, identity and other closely related areas of theory when analyzing the empirical material in this chapter. Due to the inter-connectivity between the terms image and identity, these two will be referred to both in connection to each other as well as separate from each other when analyzing the empirical data. This thesis entails a case study of Sparbanken Öresund's employer brand. In the following section we will analyze the concept with regards to existing theory within the field and in connection to the empirical material.

## Sparbanken Öresund's Employer Brand

The suggested definition of employer branding is to manage the perception and awareness of both existing and potential employees in regards to a particular organization, in this case Sparbanken Öresund. The purpose is to improve retention, recruitment and align employees with the intended strategic goal. Another aspect of this procedure is to ensure future engagement in the corporate culture and creating a deeper connection (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). Through our empirical material we have found that Sparbanken Öresund's employer brand seems to consist of two main themes of being 'business like' and 'giving back'. These two themes seem to affect the employees on a day-to-day basis, permeating the daily work and the organizational environment. The term 'business like' is their way of conducting the daily work tasks. A concept created by management in order to ensure that the employees align with overall strategy of the organization. The second concept of their suggested employer brand is their 'giving back' approach by which we argue that they aim to create an attractive image intended to strengthen their brand as a philanthropic organization. In order to differentiate their image as an employer and organization, Sparbanken Öresund seems to put more emphasis on a personal approach than the social discourse surrounding banks in general these days. We believe that by doing so they create a distance between themselves and other banks, making them unique in the eyes of both existing and potential employees. This justifies our claim that being 'business like' and 'giving back' is Sparbanken Öresund's employer brand. In order to align people with the intended employer brand successful implementation and management becomes imperative. The term 'successful' with regards to employer branding is hard to define but in this case we suggest it means having people live and breathe the intended image, making other people wanting to be a part of it. In order to align the employees with the intended employer brand, Sparbanken Öresund promote themselves as a bank of relationships towards customers hence striving towards attracting potential employees who would like to be a part of such an organization. This is later strengthened within the organization through discourse and practical work. Our empirical material show that management put great emphasis on its employees to act 'business like' at all times.

Through our empirical material we found misalignments that would suggest that the process of using employer branding is not a straight forward procedure. The concept of employer branding consists to a high extent of different perceptions, managing the perceptions of individuals is one of the important and difficult aspects when working with an employer brand. Since the sought outcome of employer branding is increased organizational

performance the need for getting the employees to work together in unison towards a common goal is crucial. But since every employee is his/her own person with their own interpretation it is hard to achieve this alignment. Those individual interpretations results in unique perceptions which increases the importance to give an account for the most important misalignments between the intention of the bank and its recipients. We will during the following sections cover the potential problematic aspects of conveying the employer brand.

### **Failing the Promise of the Employer Brand**

The employer brand represents in a way a promise from the organization, both externally and internally, a promise towards both potential employees and existing employees. The promise consists of their value proposition and consequently what they promise their employees in terms of value (Sullivan, 2002). We argue that failure to deliver such a promise could result in an equal reaction as if an organization were to fail a brand promise of a product. If you are promised something, you might assume that the promise will be delivered upon. How would you for example react if you bought an item X and received an item Y instead. Applying this chain of thought on the employer/employee relationship we believe this could damage organizations credibility as an employer and hence the employer brand.

### **Employer Branding, Helping the Recruitment?**

One inherent function of employer branding is to improve recruitment but also retain the employee workforce. This section will put emphasis on the former, focusing on the impacts it has at Sparbanken Öresund and consequently the employees' perception of it. One problematic aspect our empirical material revealed was that the intended employer brand of Sparbanken Öresund did not seem to have the desired outcome on the recruitment process. The aspect being that almost none of the employees we interviewed gave the 'being business like' and 'giving back' approach as a reason for applying to the bank. The interviewed employees did not think of it as an important reason for applying to the bank. Another viable explanation could be the brand identity message of Sparbanken Öresund has not been rooted with potential employees. Sullivan (1999) states that this is achieved through attracting the right people for their organization together with supporting and nurturing the brand of the organization. The image of the organization could perhaps not be established within the broad masses. Or potential employees could possibly have the wrong idea of the organization or perhaps have no idea due to different reasons and hence not apply for a job at the bank. This could potentially damage the possibility of the bank obtaining new talent. Either way this is a situation we found interesting and will delve deeper into.

The present business climate is argued by Hatch and Schultz (1997) to be consisting of internal and external factors which is somewhat welded together. The situation they are referring to is the one previously set by Alvesson (2004) which dictates the image to hold dual attributes. Meaning it involves both external perceptions of the organization as well as internal impressions. The reason for re-conceptualizing the present environment is due to the increased encounters between outsiders and insiders of the organization resulting in blurring the boundaries, or at least beginning to blur out the two extremes (Hatch and Schultz, 1997). In light of this new characterization it becomes highly important to ensure that the employees have perceived the message which the organization intends to convey about their organization and image. Because as an employee argued, they are all carriers of the message of Sparbanken Öresund and especially this employee, since she held a manager's position. We argue, in light of our research, that the message of Sparbanken Öresund as an employer, their employer brand or image has not reached their intended audience. This since a large majority of the employees did not list 'business like' or 'giving back' as a reason for applying for a position at Sparbanken Öresund. Another problematic angle is whether every aspect of the employer brand can be conveyed successfully to both future and existing employees. We found strong empirical data suggesting that employees consider the image of the organization being more important once inside the organization, when they had come closer to the intended image.

With such findings in mind we argue that the employee become more aware of the intended image while inside the organization and consequently deems the image to be of higher importance at that point. The underlying reason for this is something we will delve deeper into and discuss. One employee analyzed the situation by stating that this is something you as a potential employee discovers when looking further into the organization, conducting research before coming to an interview or before the first day as an employee. A possible explanation might be that it is a result of the homogeneous banking industry. As one of the thesis researchers gave an account for previously, the alignment process starts on the first day. In order for the alignment with 'business like' and 'giving back' to really attach to each employee, it has to speak to the employee on a deeper level. Connecting the discussion back to identification and the argumentation by Dutton et al. (1994) and how they describe the process of identification to vary due to the fact that individuals decode the messages in unique ways. This results in differing levels of identification, some more and some less. Moreover, we argue that since their way of conducting the daily work is perhaps vague in its description the need for practical demonstration is a way to fuse the term 'business like' and what it

actually entails in practice together. Perhaps one reason for this matter is the bank being rather newly established. But what Dutton et al. (1994) concludes by saying is that an employee might change their behavior if they start to think of their organization in a different manner. If the employee acknowledges changes in the perceived organizational identity such a change might occur. This is the way the organization tries to align the employee workforce towards a long-term strategic goal, being a long-term business partner to their customers through conducting their business in a ‘business like’ manner. How such an approach affects the employees is of great importance to discuss since they are the vessel which carries out the strategy advocated by the management group.

### **Being a Bank of Long-Term Relationships?**

Employer branding emphasizes the importance of thinking long term and attracting suitable employees in order to achieve an increased organizational performance through the employer brand (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). During our empirical research we found contradictions in connection to this matter in Sparbanken Öresund. Our theoretical research concluded that in order for the employer brand to gain ground within the organization the employees needs to identify with the employer brand. According to Brown (1969) there is a close link between identification, satisfaction at work and organizational effectiveness. In order to build a long lasting relationship with the customers we argue that identification with the organization is important for multiple reasons and something we will investigate further.

As previously mentioned, one of the key themes of Sparbanken Öresund is being ‘business like’ when conducting the day-to-day work tasks. Being ‘business like’ is defined by the bank as a continuous process of creating a long term relationship with the customer. Following Dutton et al (1994) he argues that this process requires a deep commitment from the employees both in terms of time and emotional commitment. One high ranking employee describes his lived experience in regards to this subject in the following way. He defines it by saying it is all about how you view it, depicting it through a metaphor equating his work to being a doctor or a priest. This expresses his level of commitment and dedication to the long-term strategy. Hence, being ‘business like’ consists on one level of having a close and personal relationship with the customers. Having this in mind we believe that in order to create this long lasting bond with the customers, employees need to stay employed at the bank over a reasonably long period of time. We argue that the biggest threat for Sparbanken Öresund’s employer brand would be if employees started to leave. It would damage the connection and long term attitude between the bank and its customers (Kahn, 1990). Our

empirical material showed potential drawbacks from identifying with this somewhat dual 'business like' approach. We found that this problematic duality becomes hard to find the right balance between making money for the bank and creating a sufficient solution for the customer in order to form a stronger bond with them. We draw the conclusion that in order for this to be achieved, employees need to be satisfied at work and feel appreciated and as a consequence stay within the organization longer. Creating an environment where all employees prosper is not an easy task to do and perhaps not even possible in reality.

The theory regarding social identity becomes relevant at this point. According to this theory we tend to achieve greater results and being more satisfied when identifying with a group that share similar mindset (Brown, 1969). With this in mind, having personnel at Sparbanken Öresund that identify with its employer brand is therefore very important. Building a strong employer brand could then be considered working with the identity management in a way. One of the reasons for creating a strong identity is to attract certain people, individuals who can become potential employees that can relate their own self-identity with the organizations intended identity (Chernatony and McDonald, 1998). In the empirical material we have found that Sparbanken Öresund is mainly looking for employees having the proper mindset. But they also emphasize education as a way of measuring a person's abilities to learn and adapt better and consequently evolve into better employees which may result in a better outcome for the bank. This two way approach could become problematic since it might be hard to find both qualities. The HR manager says during an interview that employee competence can be added in a later stage and having strong feelings for the employer brand, sharing similar values, is more important. Since the bank has a differentiated approach towards doing business we also find it suitable if they were to keep the employee workforce as homogeneous as possible. Thus, also contributing towards a better working environment and identification process. This is something Hatch and Schultz (1997: 361) summarizes quite nicely by stating "Who we are is reflected in what we are doing and how others interpret who we are and what we are doing".

In order to link the identification process to the employer branding literature we will investigate the importance of employer attractiveness. Berthon et al (2005) suggest that it is when an organization understands how to increase the employer attractiveness that they can improve recruitment and retention. Another suggested positive effect of a strong employer brand is that it may create satisfaction amongst the employees, affinity and loyalty as well as an employee perception of being different compared to competitors. Thus, internal branding

of the brand first focuses on aligning the workforce with the values of the organization so that the employees will conduct the interactions with the customers in the desired way (Davies, 2008). The lived experience of one of the researchers of his first day gave an account for this aligning process. Davies (2008) argues that satisfaction is created by employees agreeing with the employer brand as supportive and trustworthy, this is something which surfaced during our research. Employees showed high levels of agreement with the employer brand as they deemed it to be caring, personal and something they considered to be important. As a result many employees of the bank conveyed satisfaction of this fact. Achieving loyalty and perceived differentiation is created through a perception amongst employees of the employer brand as exciting, daring, stylish and prestigious. This is something our research found traces of since some employees told us that they had defended the bank if someone critiqued it, they almost took it personal.

The second part of internal branding, aligning the employees entails treating them in the same way as the customers in order to create a positive feeling towards the organization (Davies, 2008). The reasoning behind this focus is that the employees are the ones re-living the values in the desired way of doing business towards the customers (Schlager et al, 2011). This is since the boundaries between internal and external factors have started to decrease due to increased interactions between employees and external parties (Hatch and Schultz, 1997). Following Davies (2008) we can highlight the fact that none of these variables did affect the outcome of employer branding, it was different combinations of them that affected the employer brand. Consequently, it increases the complexity to implement this concept for managers. The bank strives towards being a long-term partner and a bank of relations while at the same time 'giving-back' to the society. One employee said that if you want to have a good conscience then Sparbanken Öresund is the right place to work. If you have no such desires you can work for any other organization. Following Davies (2008) we will examine the question whether employees might accept a salary below average due to other benefits than monetary.

This is something our empirical findings contradicted in some ways, since we found negativity regarding salary as well as being allowed to properly advance in their careers. Our empirical material shows some employees to be unhappy with their compensation but that the knowledge of the good work they were doing helped soothe such negative feelings. Another common finding which can suggest strong identification with the organizational identity is the fact that employees highlighted 'being seen' by management as something they value and

uses when rationalizing their reduced remuneration for example. Our research found that, within the employee workforce there were several individuals who agreed that their compensation was not the best, but the knowledge of the good work they were doing reduced those feelings. Employees felt seen by upper management when positions higher up in the hierarchy opened up and became available. So in a sense they put in more effort into their work if they perceive a positive image of the bank with high social value and reputation (Schlager et al, 2011). In regards to this a description from an employee can be applied where she conveyed people to consider the bank as a nice bank doing good, a positive feeling because they give back money and nurtures the development within the region.

Schlager et al (2011) argues that identifying with an organization is important in order to promote long-term success within the service sector. He puts emphasis on the interaction between employee and customer, and the fact that customers will detect the employees' attitude towards their work. If the employee has a good attitude the customer will more likely have a good experience and also an experience closer to the desired one set by management. In this particular case would an employee conduct their work closer to what the bank desired with their 'business like' approach. This situation with strong identification with the organization has been established in our empirical material, as the majority of the employees considered the employer brand to be important after becoming a member of the organization. Consequently, strengthening their commitment to both the bank and their work which is in line with their long-term strategy. At least, the employees are committing to it as a result. Some employees had identified with the employer brand but also showed signs of negativity in regards to the salary as well as advancement opportunities.

Following Ritson (2002) he argues that a strong employer brand besides helping recruitment and retention also might allow for a salary level amongst the employee workforce that is lower than average due to the fact that other variables compensate it. Our empirical material suggest quite contradictory findings which we now will discuss .A number of employees highlighted the fact of being seen as something they valued a great deal. But as we argue, there are different ways of being seen, being appreciated for the work employees put in. Following this line of thought we argue that the bank could be failing to achieve that every employee have the perception of being seen. We argue that this might not even be possible. As mentioned above, when the employees evaluated the salary we discovered several accounts of negative perceptions. Both that they say that the salary was not market competitive and that newly arrived people got higher salary than existing personnel

conducting same tasks. Another negative evaluation regarding recognition surfaced during one interview where an employee displayed discontent towards how her entire business unit did not get the recognition they deserved. She perceived them to be viewed as a back-office unit instead of a 'real' unit. There were contrasting experiences to this that stuck out as anomalies, some perceived their compensation to be competitive on the market. One interesting reflection we made was that all the higher managers shared this view. We argue that a reason for this might be that they have a better insight into the actual environment and different salary levels.

The empirical material showed us that Sparbanken Öresund overall had in some ways succeeded with the task of getting strong identification from employees. The employees we spoke to displayed a wide array of different backgrounds and seem to share the organizational values with regards to their perceived understanding of the concepts of being 'business like' and 'giving back'. This empirical material could suggest that the employee staff at Sparbanken Öresund is reasonably homogeneous and that could be why most of the employees seem to get along with their colleagues. But throughout the interviews we found that there was some discrepancy with the identification process with regards to the 'giving back' and being 'business like' with other words the employer brand of the bank.

With our empirical material in mind we argue that the concept of being 'business like' and 'giving back' somewhat counteracts its own purpose. Or, another possibility is if the bank intentionally uses its employer branding as a way switching focus away from the lower salary. As Ritson (2002) stated the bank might be creating room for a salary level below average by infusing the employer brand within the organization. Sparbanken Öresund spend a lot of resources 'giving back' to the local community, this year 25million SEK. Some employees hinted that it was being done on the expense of the employees for example, having quite low salary and perhaps not getting the attention that they deserve. This is a direct contradiction to the argument of employer branding being able to reduce such tensions. Or perhaps those individuals have not identified with the bank to the extent that feelings of reduced salary can be ignored. In contrast, one employee said that it is an important thing what the bank is doing with the 'giving back' approach. This might be indicative of strong identification and as we portray within this section there are split opinions among the employees. One employee reflected upon that it could have damaging effects if the employees did not understand that they might have to settle with lower salary due to it, especially new and ambitious recruits. Since, the present environment demands quicker advancements in contrast to some employee

experiences where they stayed in customer service for ten years before moving on towards other positions. In contrast, this can become negative for management if they do not acknowledge such attitudes among for example new recruits. This could jeopardize the long term goal of the employer brand, since people might leave the bank for other employments. So one could say that the employer brand of 'giving back' is both a strengthening factor as well as in a way counterproductive. But since people are unique and perceive things differently as previously stated we deem it interesting to discuss other things that might contribute to job satisfaction namely things such as career opportunities and the somewhat mentioned factor of being seen.

We would like to highlight the individuality and its effects on this thesis subject of employer branding at Sparbanken Öresund. In this context we mean by individuality that every employee is unique, resulting in unique interpretations, of the external image of the bank and of the brand. Moreover, people will have different opinions of what they consider to contribute to a positive attitude towards their work or job satisfaction. This relationship is what we strive to convey through this following section.

By support from our empirical research we can conclude that Sparbanken Öresund is a bank with career opportunities up to a certain level with varying possibilities in different areas of their business. Some people can allow a salary below average as a result of other attributes which makes the employment attractive. Thus, we argue that we have found another similar component within the bank. Our suggestion is that some of the employees at the bank consider the salary to be okay since they perceive they are being seen by upper management when advancement opportunities arise. They have identified with the organization but their way of rationalize the lower salary is connected to the possibility of being promoted (Dutton et al, 1994). It is not derived from a positive feeling towards the organization as a result from their way of conducting their business or 'giving back'. This further depicts the complexity of the concept of employer branding. Our aim has been to provide a linkage between employer branding and our suggested adjacent terms of image and identity throughout this chapter. Image and identity work has been described as a way of achieving the commitment needed from the employees in order to achieve the desired outcome which is increased organizational performance. What we now will be attending to is the possible outcomes of using identity regulation as control.

### Outcomes of Identity Regulation

Alvesson and Willmott (2002) argue that there are some outcomes of identity regulation to be aware of when conducting identity work. One aspect is in regards to the demoralizing aspects of managerial identity regulation. They argue that managerially created identities may create a demoralizing and somewhat constraining atmosphere. Our findings seem to contradict these findings, perhaps it might be as a result of how the identity has been created within Sparbanken Öresund. Accordingly to the interviews it is created by the management, but it seems as it has been well established among the employees as well. The establishment of the identity among the employees is something we argue to be crucial if it shall be successfully implemented and something we believe Sparbanken Öresund has managed to do. We found no clear evidence of constraining aspects actually more on the contrary. The identity regulation might be one of the reasons for their success in aligning the employees towards the same objective but as mentioned there could be negative outcomes of such strives towards normative control.

Alvesson and Willmott (2002) argue regarding the managers being both bearers and recipients of the identity and their effect on the identity regulation. Our findings in empirical material presented do not seem to show any major deviations in terms of managers affecting the identity regulation in a negative way. Firstly, our research is based on nine interviews and it is therefore highly possible that our samples of interviewees is too small to detect accurate findings when it comes to managers' negative effects of being both bearer and recipient of the identity. Nevertheless we found several positive findings where managers 'lived' the identity. Based on our findings we believe this could be linked back to the fact that the bank identity is well established within the entire organization. This makes us believe that the managers does not have to regulate the identity in order for it to be aligned with the organization, since the identity is based on values they already are likely to share. The managers will therefore most likely not need to plan how they shall 'act' the identity since the employees might not act according to what the managers tells them, but instead act as they act. In other words, the need for 'walking the talk' becomes important. By doing so and if the identity is properly aligned with the shared values of the managers and employees we believe it is a contradiction to Alvesson and Willmott (2002) that managers does not necessary need to be counter-productive in order to regulate identity.

This leads us to further discuss Alvesson and Willmott (2002) and their thoughts regarding cultural-communitarian. We have found the same positive effects as described in the literature

review regarding cultural-communitarian. It seems as the core concept of a successful identity lies as argued for earlier in aligning the employees to share common identity values. Perhaps their success in implementing and aligning their employees towards being 'business like' and 'give back' lies in all the employees shared values regarding how they see the 'savings bank' concept of taking care of others. Something we believe closely relates back to the philosophy regarding 'business like' and 'give back' and therefore something the employees can relate to.

The 'business like' approach is something we argue to be considered as some kind of quasi-autonomous identity regulation. It entitles employees to act outside the framework for the sake of promoting their long-term strategy (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). As an employee depicted her situation with her pregnancy. She got offered the job and had a few weeks before received the news of her pregnancy and told the CEO of this as she wanted to be honest. The CEO responded by saying that the bank has a long-term approach to things and being pregnant is a natural part of life. We believe that his statement strengthens the banks intentions. To conclude and summarize, we argue this to be their form of micro-emancipation (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996). The content of the concept has now been discussed and analyzed in order to gain further understanding of it. What we now will discuss is whether or not the concept of employer branding is here to stay or if it is just something that has gotten attention due to the lack of other sufficient strategies of accomplishing what employer branding claim to be able to achieve. We will further investigate whether or not employer branding is a management fashion.

### **Management Fad?**

As we have mentioned previously the term employer branding is not as widely spread concept amongst scholars as it is amongst practitioners. Some scholars have written about the subject with different emphasis (Ritson, 2002; Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Berthon et al, 2005; Davies, 2008; Schlager et al, 2011). We find the fact that, the concept of employer branding seem to be more popular amongst practitioners than scholars as an interesting notion and worth discussing.

With regards to Alvessons (2004) view of the concept of employer branding as not a valid academic concept raises questions regarding why that might be. We believe that scholars might adopt this view due to their already established conviction of image and identity being the only legitimate theory within this field. They might view the somewhat recent research on employer branding as an attempt by branding scholars to broaden their area of expertise and

hence create a fabricated relevance for the concept. On the other hand we believe that we also need to take into consideration that we might be facing a new development and a changing view on the concept of employer branding. We previously suggested HRM strategies to be connected and to increased organizational performance, since it is argued to be the only competitive advantage left to exploit (Ulrich, 1997; Boxall et al, 2008). With this research in mind our thesis has presented arguments which portray the present business climate to be highly competitive (Hoskisson et al., 1999). We believe this could be a reason for concepts like employer branding to emerge since it gives the organizations new tools to differentiate themselves compared to others. Having this in mind and with regards to our case study at Sparbanken Öresund we have found that the current employer brand is rooted within the employees perceptions. Employees seem to have identified with the organization to high extent, they are reliving the values of the organization. The big anomaly can in this context be derived from the discussion regarding remuneration and its connection to the bank and its 'giving back approach'. Since they need to allocate their resources somehow we suggest these two variables to be appropriate to set up against each other. The bank gives back money to the region in order to nurture sustainable development within the region. Our reflection of the concept of employer branding in this context is that it might be used as a way of trying to convey a unique picture of them, as an organization and employer. One contributing factor might be that bank resides in a very homogenous industry and thus makes it hard for both customers and employees to differentiate one organization from another. We argue that they might be leaning a bit more towards being sustainable towards customers and consequently resulting in decreased sustainability in regards both to the organization and the employees.

In regards to whether or not employer branding is a management fad or not, we argue trying to profile ones organization as something unique is not something new. But we argue that the term of employer branding consists of already established theories only repackaged and renamed. The reason for this could be that organizations attempt to find new solutions to differentiate themselves in the overflow of organizational images in today's business climate (Cheney and Christensen, 2001).

### **Theoretical Contribution**

The main goal of this thesis has been to investigate the concept of employer branding and its surrounding implications. We have through our literature review presented the theoretical themes adjacent to the concept of employer branding. Previous literature has put emphasis on employer branding in relationship to competitive advantage. We argue that this angle of

approach is not sufficient in order to explain the inherent dimensions of complexity and thus derive our argumentation from organizational studies. We have found that the inherent attributes of employer branding can be linked to the theory around image and identity. We have therefore chosen to analyze employer branding through the theoretical foundations of identity and image work. What the employer branding literature state is that the main purpose of the concept is to increase competitive advantage and organizational performance through different HRM practices within the organization. In order to increase competitive advantage employer branding emphasizes appropriate recruitment and retention as well as having employees identify with the organizational values.

This thesis set out to investigate the concept of employer branding and the potential implications it could have on an organization. We established with regards to the theoretical definition of employer branding that being 'business like' and 'giving back' were Sparbanken Öresund's employer brand. These two themes permeated the whole organization affecting all parts of its business. The empirical material found during our interviews at Sparbanken Öresund gave account for the complexity of the concept of employer branding and the possibility that it is more to the concept than increased organizational performance. Emerging from our empirical material were several misalignments that did not align with the concepts intended goal, increasing organizational performance.

One of the purposes of employer branding is to create an image of the organization as an attractive employee hence attracting the right kind of employees suited for the organization. Conveying this brand externally therefore becomes imperative in order to accomplish that task. Employer branding theory suggests that it should assist recruitment of desired employees. During our research at Sparbanken Öresund we found that this process seemed hard to realize. Our empirical data showed that interviewees did not seek employment at the bank due to the employer brand. Instead they gave other reasons for joining the bank. Since proper recruitment was one of the main themes of gaining competitive advantage through employer branding this should be considered a drawback in its effectiveness and therefore contradict current theory. One reflection can be made of the fact that potential employees have difficulties to define the concept and create an appropriate perception of it. We argue that this is partly due to the fact that how you are as an employer is partly determined by practical knowledge and not just words.

Despite this previous misalignment our empirical material showed that once hired and working in the bank employees seemed to adapt well to the intended employer brand, enjoying their employment. This empirical data would suggest that successful recruitment could happen despite a poorly externally conveyed employer brand. On the other hand we found contradicting findings to this regarding employee's negative view of some parts of their work.

The concept of employer branding also emphasizes having an aligned workforce, working towards having employees identify with the employer brand and hence do a better job. Our empirical material suggests that the process of aligning the employees displayed some discrepancies. Theory regarding identity says that proper identification is closely related to satisfied workers. At Sparbanken Öresund we found that the employees were over all happy with the employment but that there were some discontent with regards to the actual employer brand being 'business like' and giving back. Previous theory regarding employer branding as mentioned, highlights the importance of aligning the employees. But we argue that perhaps the literature takes too lightly on this aspect of creating an employer brand in comparison to what the literature of identification and identity does. This is something our research found where some employees expressed concerns that the concept of the employer brand attended to the customers and in a way neglecting the employee's needs. This suggested that it is hard to accommodate everyone, both customers and employees, and thus adding to the complexity of creating an employer brand. In this case the employer brand of Sparbanken Öresund seemed to create some discontent instead of creating the intended aligned workforce. These findings suggested that the employer brand at Sparbanken Öresund seemed to counter its own purpose of increasing organizational performance.

The theoretical contribution in this thesis is the deeper understanding of the seemingly inherent complexity of the concept of employer branding. This thesis has shown that employer branding originally set out to enhance organizational performance but can end up doing the opposite. Presenting several misalignments within Sparbanken Öresund with regards to employer branding we have managed to highlight potentially problematic implications of the concept. To clarify, it is hard to accommodate everyone with a single concept since people value things differently. In essence, managing sentiments of existing employees is hard but achievable to some extent, you cannot please everyone. Managing perceptions of potential employees is very hard due to its inherent complexity.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

We suggest further research within the employer branding area to be focused more on how to successfully attract employees and in what ways employer branding can improve it. More specific, how you as an organization reach out to the broad masses with your brand message and how you live the brand as an employer. We would also like to see more research in the field of employer branding when it comes to how to optimize and manage existing employees', different personal sentiments and perceptions. In other words, how an organization can be more receptive and aware of discrepancies in order to care for the employees. There might even be a need to investigate further how employer branding should be constructed in order to make it more user-friendly and easier to apply for practitioners.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

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*Chapter six aims to provide a summarization of the thesis, concluding remarks and highlight the key points and contributions the thesis add.*

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This thesis has investigated the concept of employer branding. A concept which has gotten more and more attention the last couple of years amongst practitioners and researchers. In this thesis we set out to further develop the concept and highlight potential implications with it. In order to achieve this goal we conducted a case study at Sparbanken Öresund, a regional bank located in the south west region of Sweden.

Our research problem originated from the banking industries characteristics of being a homogenous industry with a need for skilled employees. The purpose with employer branding is to create an attractive image of the organization as an employer in order to achieve competitive advantage. In order to answer our research questions we had to establish the employer brand at Sparbanken Öresund and investigate how they worked with the concept. Locating different misalignments within Sparbanken Öresund allowed us to find contradictions adjacent to the concept of employer branding and hence contribute to established theory.

Using an interpretive qualitative research method we completed nine semi-structured interviews with employees from different positions within Sparbanken Öresund. The empirical material found was analyzed using an abductive approach.

Through existing theories around employer branding, we found that the origin of the concept consisted of image and identity theories. Image being the external perception of the organization and identity being the process of identifying with the organizational identity, using the intended image in that process. Employer branding emphasizes creating an image of the organization as an attractive employer. Creating an image employees perceive as attractive and would like to be a part of makes aligning employees with the employer brand important. Using recruitment and retention as a tool to find employees who identify with the brand

The empirical material found during the interviews provided us with an in depth understanding of what could be considered the employer brand of Sparbanken Öresund. The empirical data provided us with the intentions conveyed by management. Consequently, it also gave us an understanding of potential misalignments as well as successful correlations

with regards to the desired concept. Our empirical research concluded that being 'business like' and 'giving back' was two reoccurring themes permeating the organization and its employees. We argue employer branding to be a complex concept since it consists of perceptions to a high extent.

We found indications that employees did not seem to apply to Sparbanken Öresund due to their employer brand but once working in the bank they seemed to align well with it, supporting and identifying with the values. This fact gave us an initial indication of possible shortcomings of the concept of employer branding. We concluded that their employer branding had not resulted in positive effects in regards to their recruitment process.

Our analysis showed that these two pieces of their employer brand were contradicting and in a way worked against itself since it seemed to fail to promote sustainability amongst the employee workforce. Their aim is to become a long-term financial partner to their customers and thus rendering the relationship between the employee and the customer highly important. Our findings describes a situation where employees feel appreciated for their work for the most part, but as we concluded there are more ways than one to show appreciation. Employees felt positive about advancements opportunities within the bank and thus creating a feeling of worth. The negative findings surrounded the question of remuneration on different levels. Our discussion then focused on how this allocation between 'giving back' money to the region and nurturing the region might be better used as reward for the employees. In conclusion, we argue that there might be a small but still existing 'reality' where the bank is focusing more on 'giving back' then the benefit employees are deriving from it. Hence, we urge to some extent a need for maximizing the benefit for both the organization as a whole as well as for the employees. Which is an interconnected relationship is as previously mentioned, nurturing the employee satisfaction could then yield increased organizational performance since it might create a more committed workforce. How this re-allocation would look like in reality is something outside the scope of this thesis but our belief is that Sparbanken Öresund is a somewhat newly established organization with a couple of possible misalignments which in time will decrease as the organization adapts. Or, another explanation might be that this is just an exemplification of the ambiguous and complex reality we live in making this task a truly difficult one to accomplish successful for every single employee. We believe it is a combination of the two which constitutes the current reality of employer branding. With these final words we conclude this thesis.

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## Appendix A

<b>Name</b>	<b>Title</b>
Employee A	Private Advisor
Employee B	Private Advisor
Employee C	Manager
Employee D	Private Advisor
Employee E	Manager
Employee F	Customer Service
Employee G	Customer Service
HR Manager	HR Manager
Communications Manager	Communications Manager

## Appendix B

### Questioner Employees

Interview questioner employees

- Our goal with this interview is a relaxed conversation regarding the banks environment and co-workers.
- It will be a semi-structured interview.
- The interview will be anonymous.
- Short explanation of the purpose with the thesis.

1. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

- For how long have you been in the bank?
- What makes you enjoy work?
- What kind of background do you have? Academic?

2. Why do you think people find Sparbanken Öresund attractive?

- What does Sparbanken Öresund offer which makes them unique compared to other banks?

3. What does Sparbanken Öresund represent for you?

- Do you feel that you identify with this?

4. What weakness do you believe Sparbanken Öresund has with regards to the employee/employer relationship?

- What weaknesses do you believe they can improve?

5. How would you describe the banks relationship with its employees?

- How do you communicate with each other?
- In what way do you develop and maintain this relationship?

6. Do you find your development potential within Sparbanken Öresund to be good?

7. Could you describe a situation which represents what Sparbanken Öresund is all about?

8. How would you describe Sparbanken Öresund as an employer using an animal of your choice?
  - What characteristics are you considering and why?
9. If you were to think about Sparbanken Öresund and its marketing, what do you feel they are trying to convey through their, website, choice of exterior and logo?

## **Questioner Human Resource Management**

Interview questioner employees

- Our goal with this interview is a relaxed conversation regarding the banks environment and co-workers.
  - It will be a semi-structured interview.
  - The interview will be anonymous.
  - Short explanation of the purpose with the thesis.
1. Tell us a little bit about yourself.
    - For how long have you been in the bank?
    - What makes you enjoy work?
    - What kind of background do you have? Academic?
  2. How would you describe the recruitment process at Sparbanken Öresund?
  3. Why do you think people find Sparbanken Öresund attractive?
    - What does Sparbanken Öresund offer which makes them unique compared to other banks?
    - What characteristics do you look for in a Sparbanken Öresund employee?
  4. What weakness do you believe Sparbanken Öresund has with regards to the employee/employer relationship?
    - What weaknesses do you believe they can improve?
  5. How would you describe the banks relationship with its employees?
    - How do you communicate with each other?

- In what way do you develop and maintain this relationship?
6. What does employer branding mean to you? What do you aim to gain from it?
  7. What does Sparbanken Öresund represent for you?
    - Do you feel that you identify with this?
  8. How would you describe Sparbanken Öresund as an employer using an animal of your choice?
    - What characteristics are you considering and why?
  9. If you were to think about Sparbanken Öresund and its marketing, what do you feel they are trying to convey through their, website, choice of exterior and logo?

## Questioner Communications Manager

Interview questioner employees

- Our goal with this interview is a relaxed conversation regarding the banks environment and co-workers.
  - It will be a semi-structured interview.
  - The interview will be anonymous.
  - Short explanation of the purpose with the thesis.
1. Tell us a little bit about yourself.
    - For how long have you been in the bank?
    - What makes you enjoy work?
    - What kind of background do you have? Academic?
  2. Could you explain your view on communication?
    - What does brand and image mean to you?
  3. Why do you think people find Sparbanken Öresund attractive?
    - What does Sparbanken Öresund offer which makes them unique compared to other banks?

- What image is you trying to convey and why?
  - How do you work with conveying this image?
  - Do you believe the intended image reaches the intended audience?
4. What weakness do you believe Sparbanken Öresund has with regards to the employee/employer relationship?
- What weaknesses do you believe they can improve?
5. If you were to think about Sparbanken Öresund and its marketing, what do you feel they are trying to convey through their, website, choice of exterior and logo?
6. How would you describe Sparbanken Öresund as an employer using an animal of your choice?
- What characteristics are you considering and why?
7. What does Sparbanken Öresund represent for you?
- Do you feel that you identify with this?