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The Search for Professional Identification

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An interpretive case study examining identity work at a consulting firm.

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Abstract

- Title:** The Search for Professional Identification - An interpretive case study examining identity work at a consulting firm.
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- Keywords:** Employer branding, identity, identification, internal branding and organisational identity.
- Thesis Purpose:** Our aim is to understand what impact employer branding and organisational culture has on individual's identity building from a socially constructed view.
- Methodology:** Qualitative research method based on an anti-positivistic epistemology and a socially constructed ontological perspective.
- Theoretical Perspective:** The concepts of identity work in relation to the adjacent theoretical foundation of employer branding and organisational culture.
- Empirical Foundation:** A case study at Quarter Consulting. Empirical material was collected through nine semi structured interviews as well as secondary data.
- Conclusion:** The major finding is that Quarter Consulting's employer branding and organizational culture seem to have a limited impact on employee's self-identity construction.

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Max Henriksson, Therese Mattisson and Nathalie Zukowski.

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Table of Contents

Chapter: 1 Introduction	1
Problem Statement	3
Purpose	4
Research questions	4
Target Audience and Contribution	4
Thesis Structure	5
Chapter: 2 Methodology	7
Research Design	7
Selection of Company	9
Data Collection	9
Interviews	10
Secondary Data	11
Method of Analysis	11
Validity	12
Chapter: 3 Literature Review	13
Employer Branding	13
Internal and External Employer Branding.....	14
Organisational Culture	17
Identity	20
Organisational Identity	21
Organisational Identification and Identity Regulation.....	21
Chapter: 4 Empirical Material	24
Background	24
Who is the typical Quarter Consultant?	25
Ambiguous Identities	27
Employer Branding	29
Why Quarter Consulting?.....	29
Organisational Culture Building	31
Career Development.....	33
Summary of Empirical Material	35
Chapter: 5 Analysis	37
Culture: Values	38
Culture; Identification with Co-Workers	40
Internal and External Branding	41
Employee Identification; Identity work	43
Management Consulting – becoming an established profession?	45
Our summarised findings from this study are:	45
Chapter: 6 Conclusion	47
Questioning previous research within Identity Work	47
Valuable insights for academics as well as practitioners	47
Limitations	48
Suggestions for Further Research	48
Methodological and Practical Evaluation	49
References	50
Appendix A	A
Appendix B	B

Chapter: 1 Introduction

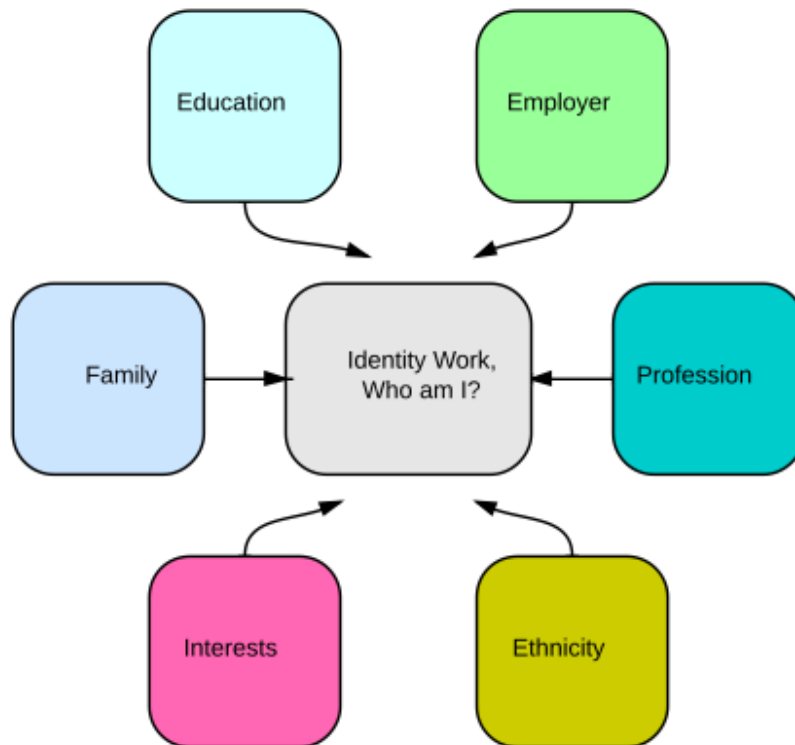
This chapter presents the background for the thesis along with why we decided to investigate the concept of identity work and why we chose to do so in the consulting industry. Secondly, we will define our problem statement, purpose and research questions. Finally, we will present the thesis structure.

Many of us spend more time at work than waken time at home during a normal working week. Some people identify themselves with their profession or work and research has shown that employees who identify themselves with the organisation that they work for tend to perform better and stay longer with the organisation (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Therefore focus in leadership has changed during the last couple of years and managers today tend to manage people's feelings and ambitions rather than their actual work (Deetz, 1995 and Knights & Willmott, 1989). By affecting employee's emotions, they feel more attached to the organisation (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). In general, organisational control is considered to be achieved by designing and applying suitable structures, procedures, measures and targets (Weick, 1969). Interpretive researchers, such as Barley and Kunda (1992), Mumby (1988), Rosen (1985) and Ray (1986) highlight important factors regarding normative control, such as; shared values, meanings and beliefs (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), which can be referred to as organisational culture in scholarly research. To enhance this further; Alvesson (2008 p. 15) uses the metaphor "*the employee as a managed identity worker*" to describe the process of identity regulation, where managers intend to affect people's identities.

A first step in identity regulation is to attract the kind of people who already identify themselves with the organisation. Many companies actively work with employer branding activities with the aim of reaching and attracting potential employees who would like to work for them. Once in the organisation, it is vital that the employees identify themselves with the organisational culture, which is built on shared values among the employees.

Identity work is what people do when actively working on their identity creation and who they are. It answers the question "*Who am I?*" (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), which in turn can be answered by different factors such as what nationality one has, which gender, hobbies, one's background and family and also the profession (see figure below). The one factor in

identity work that we will mainly focus on in this study is what impact the profession has on one's self-identity construction.



(Interpretation of Watson, 2009)

Especially in consulting firms, organisational identification plays a crucial role since consultants many times have a rather insecure working situation. Working with organisations within all sorts of industries with a non-tangible product- or service offering can be difficult for various reasons. Therefore, it is vital that consultants have a clear sense of their identity and who they are in order to support them in their job. Thereby the organisational identity can provide a focus and create a feeling of belongingness to a group within a disperse authority structure. It can function as a tangible identity to counteract the ambiguity of the consulting service offering. Additionally, it can also be used as a managerial control in an ambiguous work environment (Alvesson & Empson, 2007). Further, doubts from clients regarding the service offering could reinforce the need for a strong identity of consultants. The need for the

individuals to identify with their organisation or profession seems to be increasingly important in today's knowledge intense society and organisational identity could, according to many, play an important role in consulting firms (Alvesson & Empson, 2008; Alvesson, 2004 and Alvesson & Robertson, 2006).

The management consultancy market in Sweden is dominated by KPMG, Deloitte, EY and PWC, also often referred to as "The Big 4" auditing firms, who apart from auditing services also provide other forms of consultancy. Studying at one of the top Universities in Sweden, we have continuously been approached by these firms and they appear to be similar to each other at a first glance. If this is true, the firms may find it difficult to distinguish themselves through employer branding activities to reach desirable potential employees.

Being different from other firms is crucial when building a strong organisational identity in order for employees to use the firm in their identity work. If the employing organisation does not stand out from the rest of the industry, employees are more likely to identify with the profession, rather than the firm, which then leads to looser ties between the organisation and the employee (Alvesson & Empson, 2008).

To tie the theories together that this thesis is based upon; employer branding is crucial in the process of attracting skilled personnel and the organisational culture of keeping them through creating a culture that the employees will identify themselves with.

Our research has been carried out through deep interviews with nine employees with different positions throughout *Quarter Consulting*, a pseudonym for the studied firm within the Big 4. Throughout these interviews, we intended to capture the identity work of the employees and what impact Quarter Consulting has on their self-identities.

Problem Statement

Many organisations work actively with building a strong organisational culture through employer branding activities; both externally towards potential employees as well as internally, towards existing employees. However, the question of what impact these activities have on people's identity still remain to be answered. Looking back on former scholarly

research, there are not many existing studies connecting employer branding and organisational culture with identity work. The limited previous research suggests that identification with the employing consultancy firm is important for the individual consultant's identity creation and self-confidence. This is also in line with what our research object, Quarter Consulting is trying to achieve; a strong identification with the firm. However, Quarter Consulting seems to be unable to establish uniqueness among new job applicants as well as current employees. Quarter Consulting are investing time, money and effort into various branding activities but the Big 4 firms are still perceived as alike by their employees. Therefore, we question what affect the organisational culture and the employer branding is having on the current employee's identity construction.

Purpose

Our aim is to understand what impact employer branding and organisational culture has on individuals and their identity building from a socially constructed view. Hopefully this thesis will be an eye opener and trigger further research within the field of identity work.

Research questions

What impact does employer branding and culture building activities have on identity work of employees at Quarter Consulting?

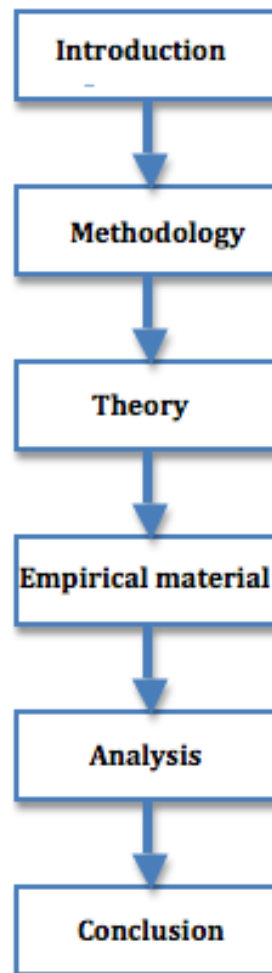
- What is the reason current consultants started at Quarter Consulting?
- Do consultants at Quarter Consulting identify with the firm or the profession?

Target Audience and Contribution

We target both University academics as well as organisations with this thesis. We hope that this study will be a potential eye opener for relevant professionals within this academic area as well as practitioners within consultancy firms. Further, we have intended to stick to a basic language use and we have tried to explain theoretical concepts. The contribution from this thesis is that we connect employer branding and organisational culture to how employees

construct their self identities. This type of research has not been done to a large extent before and we hope to inspire to further research in the field.

Thesis Structure



The structure of the thesis is based on a theoretical overview supported by Bryman (2012) and Bryman and Bell (2011). We chose this because it gives a description of how background, problem statement, methods and theories can be presented in a logic manner.

The first chapter, which was covered above, gives an introduction and background to our research project.

The second chapter aims to present our methodological approach and foundation for the thesis. We will discuss our epistemological and ontological basis as well as our applied

approach collecting and analysing our material. We will end the chapter by discussing weaknesses and validity, which is important in order to make our findings trustful.

The third chapter intend to present relevant theoretical concepts regarding identity work, organisational culture and employer branding. We will present the context through relevant theory such as internal and external employer branding and identity, which links back to our research questions. The purpose with this chapter is to establish, define and link the various concepts and their interrelationship.

The fourth chapter will present our empirical material collected throughout the interview process with Quarter Consulting. We will present various key themes, discrepancies and alignments that we find relevant for the analysis.

The fifth chapter seeks to analyse our empirical material in relation to the chosen theoretical foundation. We will delve deeper into the implications of identity work and employer branding at Quarter Consulting, ending the chapter with a summary of findings from our study.

The sixth and last chapter will conclude our thoughts and findings around the thesis topic as well as presenting suggestions for further research.

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Chapter: 2 Methodology

This chapter will present and explain our methodological foundation for our study. We will discuss our epistemological and ontological foundation as well as our research design and data analysis. Secondly, we will present why we chose to study Quarter Consulting and how our interviews were conducted. Finally, we will argue the thesis weaknesses, validity and why these elements are important for our research.

Research Design

Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) state that there are two main areas of research methodologies; quantitative and qualitative research. Quantitative research is created in the belief that data is something that can be quantified in a standardized manner. Qualitative, on the other hand, is created in the belief that the world is not fixed or measurable but is socially constructed. This is also the method we applied when conducting this thesis. Through this view multiple interpretations exist in the world and the qualitative research aims to understand those interpretations. According to Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) the difference is that through a quantitative research one holds a predefined route while qualitative is of a more emergent nature where data is found and created through the unknown.

In order to relate to knowledge, one has to consider the concepts of ontology and epistemology (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Ontology is the nature of being, or the nature of physical and social reality (Carter & Little, 2007). Epistemology is according to Carter and Little (2007) the justification and evaluation of knowledge, or simply put, the answer to the question: “how is knowledge attained?” This means that ontology answers what is true, and epistemology answers how the truth could be reached or how knowledge can be gained. Concerning ontology, every researcher has to take a stance whether she believes the world to be socially constructed, or if there is an objective truth (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). Our intention was to study the identities of the employees at Quarter Consulting in comparison with the intended organisational identity, with the assumption that the reality is socially constructed, also known as nominalism.

Regarding our epistemology and how we will gain knowledge to answer our research questions we took an anti-positivistic approach where the researcher believes that the world is relativistic and there is no such thing as only *one* truth since each individual will form their own truth based on their own reflections and perceptions (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Further, anti-positivists believe that science cannot generate objective knowledge because every case is different. In contrast, positivistic approaches tend to explain the world by regularities and causal relationships (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Since we did a case study of a specific organisation we cannot compare any similarities or differences from doing research on identity work in other organisations. Taking an anti-positivistic epistemological approach during our research we believe that we would hear many different truths about identity work and through an interpretive and nominalistic ontology we are aware of that our own reflections and pre-understandings can affect our interpretations when analysing our empirical material.

Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) state that there are three perspectives and standpoints of how to relate and link empirical findings to theory; induction, deduction and abduction. We have used an abductive approach, which is a mixture of both deductive and inductive approach. We started with an empirical foundation in order to be as open-minded and unbiased as possible, but also to be able to discover areas and topics that perhaps would have not emerge since we could be steered from our beforehand chosen theories. (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009)

We analysed our material based on a hermeneutic approach, which recognizes that “*the meaning of a part can only be understood if it is related to the whole*” (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 92). For example, one interview will not mean anything on its own and we had to analyse all interviews as a whole. Since hermeneutics focus on interpretations and meanings, we looked for deeper meanings and actual understandings of answers that we gained during the interviews. We kept in mind our epistemological approach that the truth is relativistically constructed and that our pre-assumptions and former experience can affect our understanding when analysing the data. When analysing qualitative data Ryan and Bernard (2003) suggests different techniques of organizing the data by discovering themes and then narrow them down to a manageable few. We used these different techniques by looking for repetitions, metaphors, similarities, differences and missing data in our empirical material.

We analysed our data by looking and developing themes from our empirical data all the three of us together.

Selection of Company

We conducted our empirical research through a case study at an international consultancy and audit firm with local offices in Sweden. The reason for choosing this organisation was that we already had access to the organisation through former networks. In order to protect the organisation and its employees we chose to give them pseudonyms. We chose to name the company “*Quarter Consulting*” since they are one of the well-known Big 4 auditing firms in the world. When mentioning the other firms within the Big 4 we will name them “*Competitor*”. The interviewees are given pseudonyms taken from the Swedish author Astrid Lindgren’s book *The Children of Noisy Village* (Alla vi barn i Bullerbyn).

We interviewed employees based at offices in Malmö and Stockholm since this is where our contact gave us access. On this basis, it was not a random selection, however, one can see some similarities with Bryman and Bell’s (2011) convenience sample since the organisation was chosen because of the availability. Although we interviewed employees from two different offices, we have not compared their identity work since it was not the purpose of our study. However, it was interesting for us to see whether the employer branding and organisational culture has penetrated both offices equally or not. We interviewed nine employees on different levels within the organisation who were selected by our contact within the organisation. We do not believe that more interviews were necessary since our nine respondents gave us much relevant material.

Data Collection

Interviews are a way of getting data where empirical information is found through either a set of pre-outlined questions asked by the interviewer, so called structured interviews, or an open dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee, so called semi-structured interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

Our study is based on qualitative semi structured interviews. This means that we had an interview guide during each interview, with the possibility to add or ignore questions from the guide if the interview would develop in another direction that was interesting (Bryman, 2003). For more detailed information regarding the interview guide, please go to Appendix B. The interview guide was structured with different themes around the concepts of identity work, employer branding and organizational culture. We chose not to use open and unstructured interviews since they could be difficult to interpret and therefore more challenging to compile.

Interviews

The first step in our process was to establish the interview subjects. Having a connection with the student coordinator at Quarter Consulting, she assisted in setting up interviews with different employees. We requested employees that had different backgrounds and positions within the company. This allowed us to get a diverse perspective and hence, a more legitimate result. The interviewees were deliberately divided amongst different departments, from low-level employees to high-level executives. For more detailed information regarding the specific interviewees, please see Appendix A. We conducted nine interviewees in both Malmö and Stockholm since the student coordinator could not give us the right amount of respondents at just one office. The amount of respondents gave us a good base of empirical material and they were satisfactory since we noticed on the ninth interview that interviewees had similar answers.

The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were conducted by one or two of the thesis researchers and transcribed by the missing third person. The purpose was to get different perspectives on the situation and maximize the amount of empirical material collected. Using a schedule, all researchers conducted interviews. The process had a friendly approach in order to get the interviewee to feel comfortable with the situation and speak freely. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed to ensure accurate representations of the interviews. To ensure that we understood the interviewees correctly we sent the thesis to them so that they approved their material before submission. Recorded material from the interviews has been destroyed. The interview guide used during the interviews was created so that some of the questions were the same for all the interviewees but depending on how the interview went, we add questions when needed. Typical questions were: ‘Why did you chose

to work for Quarter Consulting?’ ‘What are typical characteristics for your co-workers?’ ‘Can you describe Quarter Consulting’s values and culture?’ ‘How do you find your development potential within Quarter Consulting?’

Secondary Data

Secondary data is information that already exist and that is not produced exclusively for the study. This can be articles, books, reports and websites (Lundahl & Skärvad, 2009). In our study we have used secondary data from Quarter Consulting’s website and their annual report from last year. An important aspect of using this type of information is to be critical to its content since it has an agenda to portray Quarter Consulting in a positive light. This is something that we have been aware of and hopefully countered due to this acknowledgement. The webpage gave us information of the intended brand that the firm is trying to convey externally. The interviews gave us personal views regarding the matter so that the data has complemented each other.

Method of Analysis

One of the challenging aspects conducting qualitative research is that it generates a large amount of information. According to Bryman and Bell (2007) the process of analysing transcribed interviews is therefore not a straightforward process since it can be confusing sometimes due to the rules of analysis is ambiguous. We used an open coding process where we decoded the interviews and broke them down to relevant concepts within our empirical material. The decoding process has been limited to quotes and not word-by-word interpretations. We did the process of decoding twice in order to ensure high quality. We do not consider a third time to contribute with more relevant data. The first time helped us establish themes and similarities between the interviewees’ answers. During the second time we looked for contradictions. These processes made us aware of possible misalignments. The decoding process was done by all of us to ensure no important data was lost. The themes and quotes were then analysed together with appropriate theories.

Validity

Validity means how one measures what was intentionally intended to measure. In qualitative interviews this means that we have to formulate relevant questions, which make it possible for us to answer the thesis question. It was important that we understood the concepts that the respondent might use (Trots, 1997) and we reassured by follow-up questions that we had not misunderstood the respondent. Bryman and Bell (2011) describes the external validity as dependent on how individuals and organisations are selected. If we had chosen another company the result might have developed differently. It is significant to note that the interpretations of the interviewees' answers could look different from someone else's point of view. However, we find it to be a strength being three researchers, with different backgrounds and experiences, interpreting from different perspectives. To minimize the risk of misunderstanding the respondents, they have approved the material before the submission.

Authenticity is whether or not a source is a source and it concerns the truthfulness of attributes, sincerity and commitments (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). We tried to get as honest answers as possible during the interviews by giving the interviewees anonymous identities. However, we are aware of that the interviewees may angle their responses for various reasons. It was also important to be aware of the existence of our biases, which means lacking a neutral viewpoint or not having an open mind. If a strong bias is suspected, less value can be gained from the information from that source (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Therefore, it was crucial for us to acknowledge our biases in order to be as open as possible. Also, we have tried not to accept single pieces of information without looking at the bigger picture. By stating our biases to each other, both before and during the analysing process of our empirical material we tried to keep an eye open in order to be careful so that no biases got over hand (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). To complement these sources of criticism we also used empathy hence, re-enacting the intentions behind original creation. Based on this, we tried to put ourselves in the interviewees' situation and how they described and submitted things to us to gain a better understanding and meaning. Additionally, we studied body language and underlying conditions.

Chapter: 3 Literature Review

In this chapter we will present relevant theories regarding employer branding, organisational culture and self-identity. The chapter aims to establish, define and link the theories to each other. As we seek to gain understanding about how employer branding practices affect the employees of Quarter Consulting it is vital to include theoretical concepts that explain how employees relate to themselves, their co-workers and to the employer.

Employer Branding

Employer branding could be performed both internally and externally, where the internal employer branding aims to affect the employee's view of the company and enhance the company's role in the employer's identity creation. In other words; internal employer branding aims to make the organisation a more important part of how the employees view themselves. Further, internal employer branding intend to create a stronger organisational culture, which also could play an important role in the employee's identity construction. External employer branding aims to create an attractive image to potential future employees as well as customers. However, we will focus on the internal employer branding, which we will later use to analyse its effect on the employees identity creation.

In recent years, researchers have highlighted the benefits of having a well-managed corporate brand (Maxwell & Knox, 2009). However, they have acknowledged the challenges in ensuring that the employees' behaviour is consistently aligned with the company's brand (Hulberg, 2006 and Balmer & Gray, 2003). A strategy to achieve this alignment is employer branding.

Previous research on employer branding has mostly focused on issues related to recruitment and attracting, retaining and motivating employees. However, not much research explains what makes an organisation's brand affect the employee's identity and very few studies have been made on employer branding from the internal perspective (Maxwell & Kox, 2009). Harris and De Chernatony (2001) and Hulberg (2006) mean that employer branding can only construct the desired behaviours if it is attractive to its current employees. Hence, researchers

argue that the corporate branding strategy should be aligned with the organisational identity and therefore, managers must understand how to align the employee's values and behaviour with the brand's desired values (Maxwell & Knox, 2009).

Internal and External Employer Branding

Employer branding can be viewed as a long-term plan to manage the perceptions that potential and existing employees holds towards an organisation (Backhaus & Tikko, 2004). Employer branding can be divided into external and internal employer branding where the external branding drives the recruitment and the internal drives retention by aiming at engagement and productivity of the employees (Berthon, Ewing & Hah, 2005). Ahmed and Rafiq (2004) argue that no unified definition of internal branding exist. Due to the diverse interpretations, problems with implementation and the acceptance have occurred. Rafaiq (2004) suggest that the internal branding should be seen as a strategic effort, performed in a market-like method, with the aim of motivating employees, while at the same time striving towards integrating and implementing long term tactics towards customer orientation. This vision is related with Berthon et al.'s (2005) debate about internal branding as a vital part since employees have a central part in building the brand. Hence, there is a need to align employees' values and behaviour with the strategy of the organisation (Harris & Chernatony, 2011).

The goal of external employer branding is to attract desirable employees by creating the perception of the organisation as an attractive employer. According to Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) internal employer branding is about putting emphasis on aligning employee workforce with organisational strategy to ensure employees engagement in the corporate culture. Furthermore, employer branding can assist employees in adopting organisational values and at the same time contribute to a high retention of employees. An overall view of employer branding is that it can reduce the cost of obtaining desired personnel and improve the relationship with employees. It can also enable the organisation to reduce the salary cost compared to other organisations with a weaker employer brand (Ritson, 2002) since the employees are motivated by other factors than the salary. Sullivan (2002) states that employer branding makes it possible for the organisation to position themselves from competitors by creating their own uniqueness as an organisation.

HRM practitioners propose the following three-step method when implementing employer branding;

- The first step includes creating a rooted value proposition. This is done by taking management style, culture, employee image and the impressions of the company's products or services into account (Sullivan, 2002).
- The next step involves reaching out with the organisation's proposal to potential future personnel, such as recruitment agencies and universities. According to Sullivan (1999) the goal is to attract the desirable individuals, while at the same time enhance and support the corporate brand.
- The third and last step entails the internal branding due to its characteristic of working as a vessel to integrate the brand promise into both culture and employee's identities (Frook, 2001). This step is all about aligning the intended brand strategy with the employees.

Both Barney (1991) and the Resource Based view theory can be aligned with employer branding since they state that investing in human capital can result in a competitive advantage. The underlying explanation is that these activities can increase organisational performance. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) states that positive effects on the internal branding can be linked to lower employee turn-over as the workforce becomes hard to imitate, which further build up the competitive advantage claim (Ambler & Barrow, 1996).

Employer attractiveness is defined as the perceived repayment potential employees see in being employed by a specific company. Berthon et al. (2005) argue that in order to improve recruitment and retention, organisations needs to understand how to increase employee attractiveness. One of the major arguments for using employer branding is that it creates employee loyalty and satisfaction and it can also create the perception of being different in comparison to competitors. Further, employer branding can help to set aside a part of rational thinking and make emotional thinking available. Satisfaction is stated to be produced by agreeableness, if the employer brand is interpreted as trustworthy and supportive. Perceived differentiation and loyalty could result from the combination of two terms (Davies, 2008). The first one; *enterprise*, entails the employer brand being interpreted as daring, while the other term *chic* represent stylish prestige. Vallaster and De Chernatony (2005) emphasise the

aspect of aligning employees with organisational values to get them to manage their customers in accordance with how they want to portray themselves outwards. Another aspect of internal employer branding includes treating personnel as you treat customers in order to create an optimistic feeling towards the employer and hence, uphold employee satisfaction (Davies, 2008). The employee attitude is important since they are the ones interacting with the customers in most service industries (Schlager et al. 2011).

Long-term success, in terms of employer branding can be connected to the company's impact on the employee's identification processes, which might include status and reputation of the firm (Davies, 2008 and Schlager et al., 2011). The underlying reason is that customers will notice employee's attitudes. Additionally, Davies (2008) suggests that a strong employer brand will result in employee identification and satisfaction. This in turn will result in a more optimistic attitude within the workforce that makes employees eager to conduct themselves in line with managerial desires (Schlager et al., 2011).

Employer branding, is as we have illustrated with these theoretical concepts, the practice of promoting a positive image of the company externally, as well as internally. As we seek to gain understanding about how these employer branding practices affect the employees of Quarter Consulting it is vital to include theoretical concepts that explain how employees relate to themselves, their co-workers and to the employer. Two theoretical concepts that provide guidance within this field are organizational culture and identity. The first concept provides insight how shared values and collective meaning making binds the employees together, whereas identity provides theoretical insight in how the employees view themselves. The internal employer branding is highly related to these concepts since it aims at affecting the identities of the employees and enhancing the organisational culture. Further, internal employer branding is often referred to as culture building activities but the meaning is the same; creating a unique organisational culture which the employees relate to and identify with. Therefore, the next theoretical concept presented is Organisational Culture.

Organisational Culture

A potential force in identity construction is organisational culture, also known as corporate culture and it could have a big impact on how the employees view themselves. A strong organisational identity usually appears as a strong “we” feeling within the organisation and it has been described as the glue that holds the organisation together. As mentioned in the introduction, a strong organisational culture could tie the employees to the organisation and reduce employee turnover, which usually results in increased costs.

According to Kotter and Heskett (1992), the concept of culture represents the qualities of any specific human group that are passed on from one generation to the next. Deal and Kennedy (1982) define corporate culture as “*the way we do things around here*” and this definition is widely used in research about organisational culture. In terms of organisational culture, Kotter and Heskett (1992) make sense of the concept by looking at it as having two different levels. These two levels differ in how visible they are in the organisation as well as how hard they are to change. The deeper one of these two levels represents the values that are shared within a group. These values represent what the group views as the important things in life, whether this is making money, being innovative or feeling good at work. The deeper values are difficult to change and they are not always visible to an outsider, furthermore the members of an organisation are often not aware of how these values binds them together (Kotter & Heskett, 1992). The other level, mentioned by Kotter and Heskett (1992) is the more shallow and visible level. This level is easier to change, although not always easy, and it refers to the behaviour that newly employed members are encouraged to follow. Examples of this visible level of organisational culture include being “hard workers” or always wearing a tie etc. The deeper and the shallow levels of culture tend to influence each other and evolve in the same direction. If one of the shared values, for example, the deeper level of culture is that the customer comes first, then this likely affects the behaviour in the sense that the customers are served in a professional way, referred to as the shallow level of culture according to Kotter and Heskett (1992).

Schein (1984) is another widely cited researcher who claims that organisational culture is divided into different levels. However, Schein looks at organisations as having three different levels, which are:

1. Artefacts and creations
2. Values
3. Basic assumptions

The first level represents the visible and constructed environment within the organisation. Example of artefacts and creations are the structure of the firm, the way people dress, stories, and other visible parts of the constructed environment of the firm. This first level of organisational culture give us the answers to *how* an organisation is constructed by it is members as well as *what* behaviour is encouraged. However, this first level does not answer *why* the organisation is constructed the way it is, nor *why* certain behaviours are encouraged. The answer to why, could according to Schein be found in the second level of organisational culture; values. Third and last level is the one of basic assumptions, which represent former values that is now so deeply embedded in the culture that they are taken for granted. Basic assumptions represent the nature of human relationships and people's relationship to the environment. These basic assumptions are something that most of us have, like the assumptions that companies should be profitable and medicines should save lives. This third level laid the ground for the rest of the organisational culture to evolve since these assumptions form the cultural paradigms that govern the way people interpret their surroundings. "*A cultural paradigm is a set of interrelated assumptions that form a coherent pattern*" (Schein, 1984, p. 4). If, for example a group has the assumption that good ideas originate from individual efforts, then this same group can hardly reward groups for achievements. Given the need of our species, for contingency in our environment, every group will naturally evolve a set of assumptions that holds the group together (Schein, 1984).

Many researchers have suggested a link between a strong organisational culture and high performance outcomes (Homburg & Pflesser, 2000 and Kotter & Heskett, 1992). Hence, organisational culture-work through employer branding and various culture-enhancing activities have been popular within the strategic work in many organisations throughout the last decades. However, Kotter and Heskett (1992) also suggest existing linkages the other way around, indicating that a strong performance creates and enhance organisational culture. According to Frost et al. (1985 p. 17), organisational culture is best explained as "*the importance for people of symbolism – of rituals, myths, stories and legends – and about the interpretation of events, ideas, and experiences that are influenced and shaped by the group*

in which they live". This definition highlights the means that shapes the culture within organisations and Alvesson (2002) argues that studying meanings and symbolism, is far more rewarding than studying values in a cultural analysis. In this sense, culture is viewed as something that exists between people, rather than inside their heads, which would be the case when defining culture in terms of common values. In our research we see gains studying both culture as a set of common values, as well as culture carried out through meanings and symbolism. The culture will be examined, as stated in the methodology, through deep interviews with the employees of our chosen consultancy firm.

Alvesson (2002) describe organisational culture as the glue that holds the organisation together and it is further stated that focus has generally shifted from measurement and control of behaviour, to the attitudes of employees. People in today's organisations do not expect to be micro- managed and demand a less authoritarian style of leadership. This is according to Alvesson (2002) one of the reasons for the increased interest in organisational culture. Another reason for the increased interest, and perhaps need for organisational culture building could be the globalization of many firms, which often calls for a standardization of culture (Alvesson, 2002).

The field of organisational culture has however been subject of some critique over the years. Alvesson and Berg (1992) suggest that the field has been damaged by unrightfully usage of organisational culture as a term. The authors also point out that a mistake is often made during research since many researchers assume that there is a culture at each firm. A second common mistake according to the authors is the assumption that there is only one culture at a firm since there might exist several sub cultures.

In order to build a strong organisational culture, the employees need to identify themselves with their co-workers as well as the employing firm. Even though external employer branding aims at attracting potential employees with suiting personalities, the firm still needs to work on the individual identities in order for them to be aligned with the organizational identity.

We have now walked through external and internal employer branding, as well as the phenomenon of organisational culture, including shared values that binds the organisation

together. These concepts are crucial tools in order for the company to build an identifiable and unique identity that distinguish from competitors. However, for these concepts to become successful, it all comes down to the individuals within the organisation, who must accept common values and identify with the firm. Identities can be viewed on an individual level, but also on an organisational level as organisational identity. Identities are formed and changed over time and the reason we decided to study the theoretical concepts of employer branding and organisational culture is that these two concepts aim to affect the identities of the employees with the goal of making the organisation a part of the employees identities. The so called identity work that takes place when an employee asks herself “who am I?” is eventually what our thesis comes down to, hence, the last part of this theory section surrounds identity.

Identity

Identity revolves around the notion of the self. Within this field, identity is divided into two groups, social identity theory and identity theory. The first refers to the connectivity between the individuals’ social categories and the identification that surround us, for example friends or organisations (Stets & Burke, 2000). The latter refers to an individual’s identification of herself, putting one’s self-perspective into context. The connection between satisfaction, effectiveness and identification has already been recognized (Brown, 1969). In order to understand human and organisational identity, one has to understand what identity is built upon. Typical questions regarding identity can be; “where do we come from?” and “Who am I?” Some of the most important stands are regarding individual and collective identity, national and ethnic identities and corporate identity (Balmer, 2008). Identity is central concerning meaning and motivation, commitment, loyalty, decision-making, leadership, group and intergroup relations (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

In research today scholars argue that more focus should be put on the identity process. For example Alvesson and Willmott (2002) have done research on identity regulation as organisational control and how to produce the appropriate individual and they talk about identity building as a constant construction dependent on different factors such as central life interest, someone’s direction, values and self-awareness. Identity work is what people do

when actively working on their identity creation and who they are. Identity work can function as being engaged during crises or when adapting to new situations (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). For example, if an employee does identify herself with the organisation she will be more engaged in difficult times. In times like this one does not think about that identity work is actually ongoing. On the other hand, conscious identity work is usually undertaken when one is in self-doubt and worry faced in social contexts where the self-understanding does not match with the social ideals (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

Organisational Identity

From an interpretive perspective organisational identity is something that is constructed socially through collective and socially constructed understandings about “who the organisation is” (He & Brown, 2013) and how employees define themselves as a social group in relation to their external environment. It answers the question of “who are we?” but also partial “who am I”? (Alvesson & Empson, 2007) This can be connected to what one thinks is central and what gives meaning to the employees in their work. Pratt (2003) differs between two variants of organisational identity, one is an “aggregate” perspective and the other one is a “gestalt” version. The “aggregate” perspective is the sum of many individuals collective view of the organisation, whereas the “gestalt” perspective proposes that the organisational identity derives from relationships that tie people together.

Organisational Identification and Identity Regulation

Social identity theory has been used in former research to explain the relationships between the employee and the organisation where the organisation is the social group with whom the employee can identify herself with. The social identity theory itself means that an individual’s identity is shaped by and affected by, or as Tajfel (1978, p. 72) explains; “*knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership*”. Thereby, organisational identification is when the employee feels a belongingness and “as one” with the organisation, defining his/hers identity referring to the organisation. The identification can be with different levels of the organisation, for example with leaders, with a profession, work units, groups or teams. Looking at organisational identification from a functionalistic perspective, it can lead to benefits for the organisation such as more creativity from the employees, more willingness to help each other

out if they feel like they are treated fairly from the organisation. Also the relationship between the leader and employee plays a crucial role in organisational identification (He & Brown, 2013). Alvesson and Willmott (2002) explain how leaders play a crucial role in identity regulation. The regulation from management might reduce anxiety among employees and help them coping with ambiguity and when doing focused, productive work (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). The criticism towards this is that one should not control other people's lives and that it is ethical incorrect (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996). Also, it can lead to a degree of inflexibility among employees if they are being "regulated" to act based on a certain set of values (Barker, 1993).

In general, organisational control is considered to be achieved by designing and applying suitable structures, procedures, measures and targets (Weick, 1969). Interpretive researchers, such as Barley and Kunda (1992), Mumby (1988), Rosen (1985) and Ray (1986) also highlight important factors regarding normative control, such as; shared values, meanings and beliefs. Alvesson (2008, p. 15) uses the metaphor "*the employee as a managed identity worker*" to describe the process of identity regulation. Examples of the process of identity regulation are activities such as training, induction and internal marketing such as in-house magazines and posters. The focus on managing employee's identities derives from an effort to gain commitment and loyalty from employees since this is something that cannot be taken for granted and therefore managers intend to control it by identity regulation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

Especially in consulting firms organisational identification plays a crucial role since consultants many times have a rather insecure employment situation. Consultants do not work with a tangible product or service offering and are often met with doubt and are used as scapegoats. Therefore it is vital that consultants have a clear sense of their identity and who they are in order to support them in their job. Thereby the organisational identity can provide a focus and create a feeling of belongingness to a group within a disperse authority structure. Further it can also function as a tangible identity to counteract the ambiguity of the service offering. Lastly, it can also be used as a managerial control in an ambiguous work environment (Empson, 2004).

For consultants, the organisational identity must coexist with the professional identity. As Alvesson and Empson (2007) state; if people describe themselves based on their profession it is more challenging to create an organisational identification, since the individual to a strong degree identifies with the work and tasks itself rather than performing them in a certain organisation. In that case the organisations mainly function as a physical place where to perform the work and a meeting place for people with strong individual identities (Alvesson & Empson, 2007).

Some researchers as for example Deetz (1995) and Knights and Willmott (1989) argue that modern management is more about managing the hopes, fears and aspirations of employees rather than directly managing their behaviours as more functionalistic researchers have suggested. Since the modern management is more about managing employee's feelings it is important to understand the importance and complexity of identities. Because, since as mentioned above, if employees identify themselves with the organisation they tend to stay longer and help each other out in the daily work. Also, with identification with the firm employees know what decisions to make without reflecting too much about it. As Simon (1945) and Tompkins and Cheney (1985) argue; if employees identify themselves with the organisation they base their decisions to be compatible with the organisation. However, employees are not supposed to be seen as passive shapeable individuals. Factors such as resistance and subversion to control should be considered. By introducing new discursive practices as for example 'teamwork' or 'partnership' are part of active identity work since it creates a certain kind of work orientation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). A process of introducing these new practices could be through different trainings and corporate education in order to enhance the impression of "we" as a team (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

Chapter: 4 Empirical Material

Below we will present our empirical material collected through the interview process with employees of Quarter Consulting. We will start by presenting the subject of our study. We then present the major themes that emerged from our data focusing on Identity Work. The chapter ends with concluding remarks. We will use pseudonyms for the employees as well as for the competitors within the Big 4 when they are used in the interviewee's answers.

Background

Our empirical research was conducted at one of the firms within the Big 4, which we have given the pseudonym Quarter Consulting. Quarter Consulting is one of the biggest international business networks with their 200 000 employees worldwide. The journey to become one of the largest accounting firms has involved acquiring different agencies. According to Quarter Consulting's annual report (2013), their vision is to be the first choice for talented people in the labour market who wish to pursue a career in the accounting and consulting industry. Quarter Consulting state that the power of their network consists of their employees and their continued success on the market rests on their ability to attract, retain and develop employees who can deliver exceptional and innovative services to clients worldwide. Further, Quarter Consulting state a commitment to consistently build a true and strong employer brand, where they place a strong dedication to creating individual development plans for each employee. Quarter Consulting Academy is a training program that provides employees with necessary support in their development within their areas of expertise, leadership and business acumen. During the last year, the 1081 employees in Sweden participated in 26 different instructor-led trainings in business skills and leadership as well as 186 training courses in specialized areas. In addition, employees participated about 4,700 times in different e-learning courses in various areas of expertise. During 2013 Quarter Consulting welcomed 158 new employees and for roughly three out of four of these employees Quarter Consulting is the first workplace following the academic education. (Quarter Consulting's Annual report 2013)

In order to attract talented students, Quarter Consulting continually invests in activities to build a strong brand in the talent market and establishing a good relationship with students

during their studies. Quarter Consulting are looking for high performing students with relevant experience. The students are also expected to fit in to Quarter Consulting's culture and they should also be attracted by the shared values. By having theme days, internships and ongoing discussions students are given the opportunity to create a picture of how a future career as an accountant or consultant at Quarter Consulting might be.

The four core values of Quarter Consulting are:

- Outstanding value to markets and clients
- Integrity
- Commitment to each other
- Strength from cultural diversity.

Also, at the Swedish career website (2014) it is stated;

“At Quarter Consulting we are driven to continually develop our experience and knowledge to be able to bring more value to our clients. Common to all employees is a big commitment and joy for their work.”

Who is the typical Quarter Consultant?

Identity work is a set of active processes, which aims to construct a sense of “Who am I?”

We have been trying to capture the identities of the employees at Quarter Consulting in order to understand why employees desire to work as consultants for Quarter Consulting. Further, we intended find out if there is identification with the employer branding and organisational identity.

Based on our empirical material, Quarter Consulting are looking for high achievers with relevant educational background who fit in the culture of Quarter Consulting and are attracted by the organisation's values. The desired characteristics from the applicants are that they are driven, have an ability to learn quickly, and are proactive, analytical and social.

“Every year we take in 4-5 new employees and they are very nice and good, no criticism towards them whatsoever. Don't get me wrong but I can see that they are all the same type, not all, some have been standing out, being very impressive, but in general I think it is a problem that no one does not think

differently. On the other hand in other industries they have other problems, for example with hiring mainly men or women.” (Bosse)

“There is only one kind of people employed here, which I think is a pity. If we would be more different, I think we would get more out of our departments. The company recruits mostly native Swedish people in the same age.” (Kerstin)

According to our interviewees, Quarter Consulting typically hires quite similar employees in terms of background and personal interests. Being driven and always searching for new challenges seem to be two of the key characteristics Quarter Consulting are looking for in their employees. However, this seems to be qualities that all of the Big 4 firms are looking for. Quarter Consulting are aiming towards a diverse workforce but the recruits have to live up to certain standards, including academic degrees and outstanding grades. The selection base, which consists of specific prioritized Universities in Sweden, makes diversity hard to achieve according to HR since it can only reflect the diversity at the Universities.

HR at Quarter Consulting states that having an appropriate personal profile and the right mindset is more vital than grades. However, Quarter Consulting still requires top achievers and they emphasise that their employees need an academic education in order to secure quality in the eyes of their clients. From a critical perspective, it is questionable if the personal profile matters more than grades since applicants must attach both high school and university grades when applying for a job. Common for the recruitment process within the Big 4 is also the usage of case solutions in order to see which applicants has the best solutions and thereby will go forward in the process.

“I have a lot of fun at work, it is fun, exciting and developing. But as a person I am my job to a very small extent. I am not dependent of my title for my identity. But I think that many others are. Very many, not only here, but also in other places, if you have a certain position, then you are that job very much, like a counselor for example. I have discovered how little I am my job. But I do not think that means that one makes a bad job. I have the ability to turn off work and do other fun things.” (Nils)

Nils touches upon how different people cope with their personal and the organisational identity. Some people might feel a need to say that are a consultant since it can be viewed as

giving a high social status. The negative aspect of this could be that employees forget their personal identities and “who they really are”. Nils is an example of someone who separates his personal identity from the organisations.

Ambiguous Identities

Consultants at Quarter Consulting must fit in at Quarter Consulting as well as at the organisations where they currently perform their consulting work. The shift between different organisations could be challenging for the consultants at Quarter Consulting, especially since consultants are often subject of doubt from clients, or client’s personnel. As the consultants are out most of their time with clients and their organisations, it can be of great importance for Quarter Consulting to support their own employees and enhance culture in order to make the consultants feel a sense of belonging. One can imagine that it can be challenging for Quarter Consultants to be facing different organisational identities from clients at the same time as being employed at Quarter Consulting, having to fit in and be accepted at different places. This could lead to a higher level of ambiguous identities and result in staff leaving Quarter Consulting since the consultants might feel fragmented and insecure.

Acting as a trusted advisor can be challenging at times, but Quarter Consulting provides tools and support for identity construction through education and different mentorships in order to provide well-being and strengthen employee’s self confidence in their professional role.

“When you start at Quarter Consulting you have mandatory trainings regarding ethics and how to behave towards both clients but also internally. The values of the company so to speak. Each consultant also have a counselor who acts as a support and with whom you can discuss private problems. It is up to yourself how private you want to get. Also, when you start working here you get a “sponsor”, someone who has worked here for two years who you can discuss more everyday matters with.” (Bosse)

Bosse told us about the intentions to live up to Quarter Consulting’s value of “commitment to each other” by having mentors and sponsors who support employees. This could be a way of getting closer to employees and their thoughts about the company and work. The mentorship

could also be used as normative control since the mentors could impact their feelings and thoughts of the organisation at an early stage of the career.

Another thing that shows the possible ambiguous identities of consultants is how the consultants adapt their clothing to fit in with the clients;

“Many of my clients have jeans and a lower standard than Quarter Consulting. I usually taper off gradually, one day I went crazy and had yellow summer pants and then I got a lot of compliments from the client but usually I tend not to go dressed like that.” (Maja)

Quarter Consulting have an employee handbook, which includes guidance for what type of clothing to wear and how to adapt the clothing to the client’s organisations. How employees dress can be connected to the culture of the organisation regarding visible artefacts. Agda speaks about the importance of doing a good job and blending in with the client;

“I am a very adaptable and flexible person. I actually think that one have to try to fit in at the client’s offices. If you are a loud person and come to a place where everything is calm and quiet you won’t be loud - you try to blend in. At the same time you want to stand out by doing a good job, not by your looks and how you are as a person. Still you want to feel like one of “them” even though you are not.” (Agda)

Agda’s statement could imply a struggle between ambiguous identities and organisational identification since the employees should try to fit in with their clients at the same time as representing Quarter Consulting. It could be questioned which is most preferable; the end result for the client or keeping the identity solid at Quarter Consulting? One can imagine that it can be difficult to handle two different cultures and separate their organisational identities while doing client work for many months.

Employer Branding

Different factors play a vital role when deciding which organisation one wants to work for. Typical factors can be the size of the organisation, co-workers, culture, image, wage and/or what position one wants to have. This is where the external employer branding comes in, aiming to attract the right employees to apply for a job within Quarter Consulting. In order to understand if and how employees identified with the organisation, prior to employment we wanted to investigate why they applied for a position in the company.

Why Quarter Consulting?

Quarter Consulting's employer branding strategy is according to the Human Resources department focusing on selected channels where they create the most value, adapting to the needs of the target group and to the arenas where Quarter Consulting can meet relevant students. The firm wants to create an interest and insight in Quarter Consulting as a future potential employer. Activities like individual meetings and activities are organised where Quarter Consulting aims to provide students with a deeper insight into the company. The firm focuses on establishing a closer relation with students they have met and with whom they want to keep a good relation for future career opportunities. The successfulness of the employer branding is measured by employee turnover and through qualitative data.

We intended to capture why current employees applied to Quarter Consulting by simply asking our interviewees why they ended up at Quarter Consulting. Some of the answers are presented below;

“For me it did not matter which one of the bigger firms I started working at, but from the second I started studying in Lund, I knew I wanted to work in one of the Big 4. I was actually in a process with a competitor as well at the same time, but Quarter Consulting was faster in their process. They welcomed me to the firm with open arms and I just felt more wanted here, so I accepted the offer and started at Quarter Consulting.” (Agda)

“I chose Quarter Consulting partly because I had friends that started working here, who then gave me a good picture of how it was to work there, what culture they had, how much the workload was and

what tasks they had. Having that information, I applied for Quarter Consulting and as soon as I met them I felt that it was a good match.” (Bosse)

Many of our interviewees perceive all the Big 4; EY, KPMG, PWC and Deloitte as very similar employers. The majority seem to be attracted by the consultancy work itself rather than the specific firm. The reasons why they end up at Quarter Consulting seem to depend on factors like friends and contacts who are already employees of the organisation. Another factor is the speed in the recruitment process as in the case of Agda. Altogether, we interpret our findings as a weak connection between Quarter Consulting’s employer branding activities and the people who end up at the company. Of our nine interviewees just one attended an activity organised by the company during her studies at University and it was only one that implied that it was the attractiveness of the company and not so much the profession that drew her to apply for Quarter Consulting.

“I had two friends who got a job here and it sounded good. One day I happened to visit Quarter Consulting’s website and saw that they just put up an advertisement. I started calling around to my contacts and finally, I got an interview.” (Kerstin)

Kerstin states that her first contact with the organisation was through a friend. Again, friends seem to play a key role in the decision-making, but in this case, the friend seems to have introduced her to Quarter Consulting without a previous interest in the profession.

Another reason why one might apply to the company is due to their unique departments;

“I chose Quarter Consulting because of the XXX department, not because of the company itself. I had heard much positive things about Quarter Consulting, but on the other hand you do that about the competitors as well.” (Lasse)

This shows another perspective, some of our interviewees stated that it was a specific department at Quarter Consulting that made them apply for a job at Quarter Consulting. Again, this could imply that it is the actual work tasks of a consultant that are of importance rather than the firm per se. Maja seems to have a broader explanation of why she finds Quarter Consulting attractive;

“I think it is a combination of Quarter Consulting being one of the best schools - both in terms of looking good in your CV and also what you learn in terms of knowledge. A combination of that and the atmosphere and drive that exist here. Some people still want away from this extreme flexibility and may want a permanent position, but find it difficult to quit because of this.” (Maja)

Maja describes that there is a combination of reasons why she wanted to work for Quarter Consulting, both in terms of being attractive for future employers, but also in terms of personal development and flexibility.

Organisational Culture Building

In the previous section we have focused on the external branding of Quarter Consulting and identified why people apply for a job with them. In this section, we focus on the internal branding, which can also be referred to as culture building activities. Through these activities, Quarter Consulting aims to affect the employee’s view of the company and hence, motivate employees to perform a satisfying job and stay longer with the organisation.

Some of Quarter Consulting’s internal branding is done by communication processes such as e-mails, videos and value seminars. In this way Quarter Consulting seek to strengthen pride and value consciousness internally by creating an emotional connection with employees. In this sense Quarter Consulting intends to reach out to and influence their employee’s identities, making employees work as branders by “living the brand” and staying with the company. From this point of view, internal branding seems like a critical factor for the organisation to work with. The efforts to tell employees what the company does and stands for, can be seen as a way of working to reach a consensus between employee’s image of the organisation and the image conveyed by the organisation's management.

During the induction period of new employees Quarter Consulting conducts seminars about their values and culture. This might be a way of introducing and implementing Quarter Consulting's values, culture and beliefs into their employees. Continually throughout the career similar activities are conducted.

“We work a lot with the values, we often get e-mails about it and now lately our CEO is sending out videos with our values and then we are supposed to fill out a survey. I have missed all of them. We are supposed to get much done and I have to prioritise.” (Agda)

“It is hard for me to say what Quarter Consulting’s values are since every partner has their own values and styles. They differ a lot and I prefer some of them more than others. Quarter Consulting have their values but individual identities shine through and some partners have a harder attitude, they expect more from us.” (Anna)

The information on Quarter Consulting’s website and material from our interviews indicate that Quarter Consulting has desire for employees to identify with the firm. However, even though working with implementation of these values through value seminars our respondents do not seem to prioritize this. Still, some of the values, like ‘commitment to each other’ is well established in the organisation and some of the interviewees mentioned ‘As one’, as one of the values at Quarter Consulting. This is of interest since ‘As one’ is not stated as an explicit corporate value and perhaps it could be that the employees actually are unconsciously aware of the values.

Further, we found ‘Professional excellence’ and ‘Client focus’ to be visible throughout the organisation and the employees of Quarter Consulting seem to embrace it by always acting professional. Even though most of the interviewees told us that they cannot state the values literally, they are aware of them but by different names.

“It is stated that - the better we know each other the better work we will do. This is connected with the business values, you have to know a lot of persons in order to get help when you need it. We are supposed to thrive in our department and know each other within the social network. It is nice to have a coffee or beer together after work.” (Lasse)

The value of “commitment to each other” seems to be important for employees since they alert each other that other companies may not achieve the same commitment. Employees seem to think that the core value of “*commitment*” helps them in their daily work which can be a way of creating direction and guidance for employees. Even though most consultants at Quarter Consulting are relatively young and started working at the firm after University, there are exceptions. Nils was recruited from a competitor after many years in the business. He still

has a standing offer from another competitor but switched to Quarter Consulting after getting a tempting offer with much freedom in his work. Most employees at Quarter Consulting view the Big 4 as almost the same regarding culture or values, so it all comes down to the people you are working with as well as the work tasks you get. The core value of “*integrity*” was mentioned very few times and in addition there were a few complaints about the lack of cultural diversity, which according to the values on the webpage is how Quarter Consulting supposedly creates strength; “*strength from cultural diversity*”.

Some of the interviewees also discussed the need to integrate juniors and seniors. They said that it already exist parties and activities to tackle this but it might not be enough. It seems like the integration of different sub-groups at Quarter Consulting is tricky. Also employees that are hired during the same year do not seem to interact with employees who are hired during an earlier or later year.

Career Development

Throughout the interview process, we have asked our interviewees how they perceive the opportunities for career development at Quarter Consulting since this might indicate something about how the employee views her future at the firm. The picture we received during our interviews was that Quarter Consulting seems to emphasise on employee development and the possibility for employees to grow within the firm, which is in line with Quarter Consulting’s stated intentions.

Today, the career development at Quarter Consulting is set out in pre-determined steps where an employee must complete different steps and require certain skills in order to get promoted to the next level in the firm. The different career steps at Quarter Consulting are the following:



The Analyst/Assistant is usually a recent graduate from University and the first career step takes about two years to complete. This system can also be referred to as the “up-or-out” system where employees are expected to have as a goal to constantly develop and go on to the next career step. If the expectations of skills at each level are not met, Quarter Consulting tries to find a more suitable position for the employee. However, Anna seems to be satisfied with the expectations and the development the company put on her;

“At Quarter Consulting we are encouraged to continually develop our knowledge base in order to bring more value to our clients. Common for all employees is a big commitment and joy for our work. I see my opportunities to evolve and grow here as good but I think it’s too square-like here at Quarter Consulting. But there is too much focus on things being equal. However, I still think I have a future here as long as I evolve.” (Anna)

Most interviewees seem to agree that the opportunities to develop is one of the most vital reasons why they want to work as consultants and this need seems to be met by Quarter Consulting. This also applies to Anna, who seems to agree that the opportunities to develop are good. However, at the same time she describes the organisation as too “square like” indicating a discontent with the company’s career ladder, which according to Anna is too bureaucratic. She indicates that some people live up to set goals earlier than expected without the possibility of an early promotion. These pre-determined steps could therefore disadvantage those who develop faster than the majority and hence, act as de-motivating, rather than a motivator for high performance.

In contrast to Anna’s view of the career ladder being too strict, Nils joined Quarter Consulting on a more senior level and had more input in regards to his assignments;

“You have very great opportunity for yourself to develop and affect what you do. It is not that I am like ‘I’m going to do this now’, it is more that I feel like ‘that looks interesting’ and then you can do it. So we have quite a few odd assignments...you get to do so many different things. So it is hard to get bored. It is pretty tough at times as well, but very diverse.” (Nils)

This contrasting view in regards to what Anna previously witnessed sums up one of the understandings that we have gained throughout our research, namely that freedom increases with seniority which is also in line with the pre-determined skills that should be met at each level of the career steps.

One can also connect the career development to the value of “*equality*” since promotion is handled through standardization. After a pre-determined time, the employees that started the same year are evaluated and everyone living up to the predetermined standards will be promoted to the next step. There are exceptions to these strict promotion policies but the standards still apply to a majority of the employees, especially for the junior ones. This way of promotion might be in line with the value “As one”, hence limiting internal rivalry and boosting teamwork. However, top achievers risk being lost to other organisations as they might feel unfairly treated.

Summary of Empirical Material

Below we summarise our empirical findings in the different themes, which we have used throughout the empirical chapter.

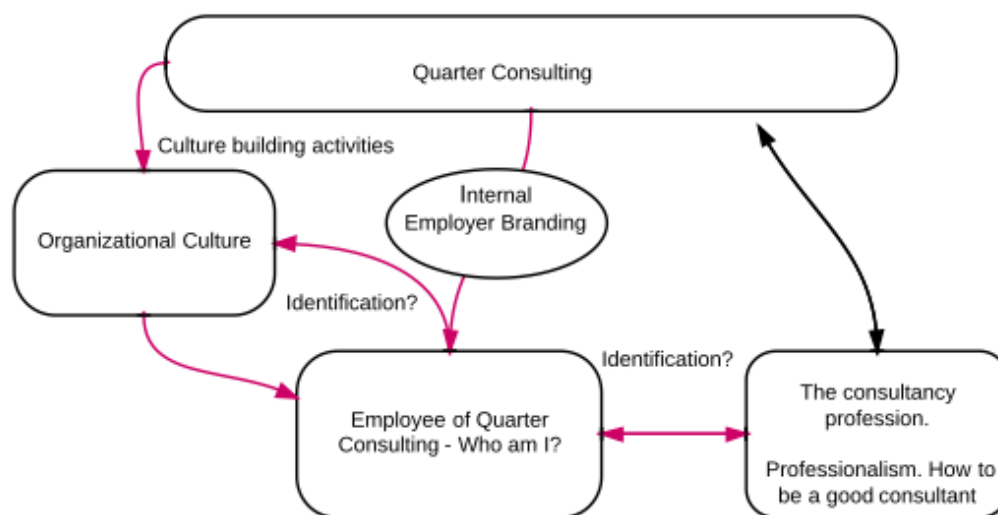
- **Who is the typical Quarter Consultant?** The typical characteristics that represent our interviewees at Quarter Consulting include being driven, helpful, social and appreciating challenges. We wanted to see if the consultant’s characteristics matches what Quarter Consulting are looking for, hence if the consultants are identifying with the characteristics promoted by HR and through the employer branding activities.
- **Ambiguous identities** The consultants constantly have to fit in at different organisations and adopt clothing depending on where they are working for the day.

Consultants are often questioned in their work according to previous research, which suggests that identification with the consultancy firm is important in order to provide a sense of belonging to a group. However, we found no indications that this need of identification with Quarter Consulting exists.

- **Why Quarter Consulting?** We investigated why employees applied to the firm in order to see if the external employer branding affected the consultants before they applied for the job at Quarter Consulting. It appears that most consultants applied to all the Big 4 firms and did not know the specific differences between them when they applied.
- **Organisational Culture building.** Quarter Consulting seek to strengthen pride and value consciousness internally by creating an emotional connection with employees through various communication processes. The culture at Quarter Consulting consists of four core values, but the consultants did not know values by heart. Our findings indicate that the culture is not affecting the employee's identity work to a great extent.
- **Career development.** Since Quarter Consulting are measuring the effect of their employer branding in staff turn-over we wanted to study how the career development looks like at Quarter Consulting and how the consultants view this. Most respondents see the career ladder as positive since they know what they need to complete and learn in order to get to the next step. Further this can be used in the identity construction, since a new level in the organisation means identification with new working tasks and a new social group.

Chapter: 5 Analysis

The purpose of this chapter is to analyse the empirical material using our theoretical foundation. We will discuss our main theme, identity work, in regards to the concepts of culture and employer branding. The analysis consists of three main concepts that are all related and intertwined. However, the analysis of Culture, Employer Branding and Identity have been separated and every section is introduced with a figure in order to illustrate the connections between our theories. We will end the chapter with suggestions for further research and methodological and practical evaluation.



The image above represents some of the different “identification forces” imposed on each consultant, who’s trying to answer the question; who am I? The identification forces in this image comes from Quarter Consulting, as well as from the profession and the Consultant takes these forces into account when constructing/ questioning her identity. Other forces such as friends, family, interests and ethnicity are also competing for a piece of the “identity pie” but we have focused on how the employer uses the organizational culture and employer branding in order to increase the firm’s part of the employees identity. However, as the consultant struggles with her identity work in regards to her job, there are other forces from

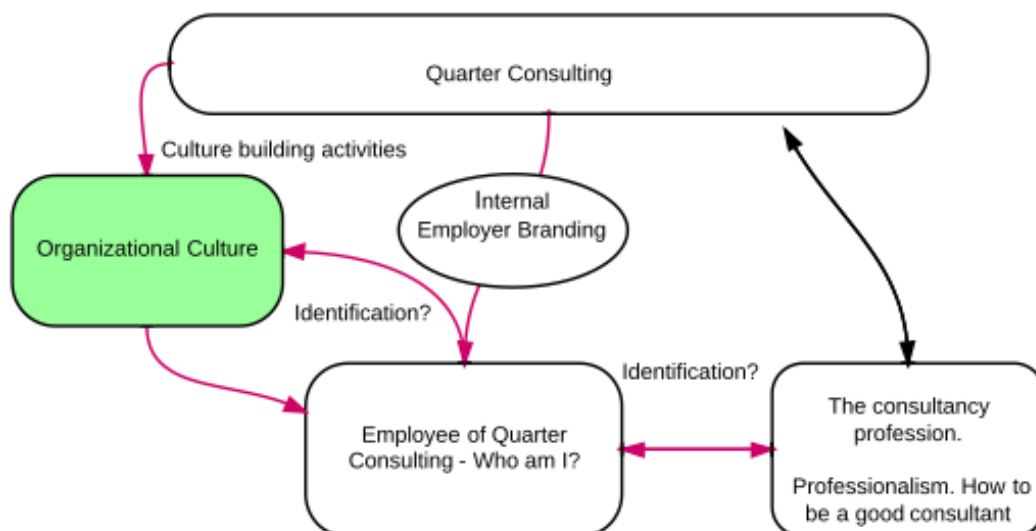
working life that competes with the employer for the employee's identification. While the employee is bombarded by the identification forces from culture and employer branding, she is at the same time is hit by the identification forces from the profession.

A person might consider work more or less important, but nevertheless she will still identify more with either the profession or with the employer. Quarter Consulting is actively trying to use the means available to enhance identification with the firm, but at the same time professional norms acts as another force towards a professional identification.

The arrows between the employee and the organisational culture and between the employee and the consultancy profession go both ways as we assume the one to affect the other, while getting affected at the same time.

Throughout this analysis, which is divided into sections of Organisational Culture, Employer Branding and Identity, the same image as above will appear and highlight the relevant area for the analysis.

Culture: Values



As previously mentioned, the organisational culture could work as the glue that holds the organisation together (Alvesson, 2002). Through internal employer branding, Quarter Consulting are trying to create a strong organisational culture with shared values among employees in order to make Quarter Consulting as big part of the employee's identities as possible. A strong organisational identification is then supposed to lead to less self doubt from the consultants, a higher workplace satisfaction and hence, a lower employee turnover (Sveningsson & Alvesson). At the same time, a strong culture and shared values would give Quarter Consulting an attractive and unified front towards future employees, communicated through current employees as well as HR personnel.

Shared values are considered to be what holds the organisation together and these values are considered to be the deeper level of an organisational culture. They can function as a normative control according to Alvesson and Willmott (2002) by providing discourses for employees in how to behave and act. At the same time the values can be a helpful tool for employees. The values can give a sense of direction when consultants are facing ambiguous identities when working for different clients, at the same period of time, each with their own distinct organisational culture. Then the values can function as a stability of knowing how to behave and act when in doubt.

Quarter Consulting are working actively with implementing shared values but our empirical material has shown that the values that Quarter Consulting are trying to implement on its workforce is not really sticking to the individuals. In fact, the interviewees could not literally replicate the shared values of Quarter Consulting. Shared values are referred to by Kotter and Heskett (1992) as the deeper level of culture and this level of culture is considered to be difficult to change. Even though the employees of Quarter Consulting generally did not know the explicit values, they often talked about the importance of team work, which is part of Quarter Consulting's values "As one" and "Commitment to each other". Hence, this is in line with what the culture building activities and employee branding aims to achieve.

In contrast, the higher level of organisational culture is easier to change and it is more visible to the eye (Kotter & Heskett, 1992). This level represents the behaviour that newly hired employees are encouraged to follow. We have noticed this level in Quarter Consulting and it

is visible through the professionalism, working late when needed and in the clothing. It is also shown through how the individual workers view themselves; as hard workers and trusted advisors. However, these characteristics seem to represent all of the Big 4 firms and this identification might be more with the profession.

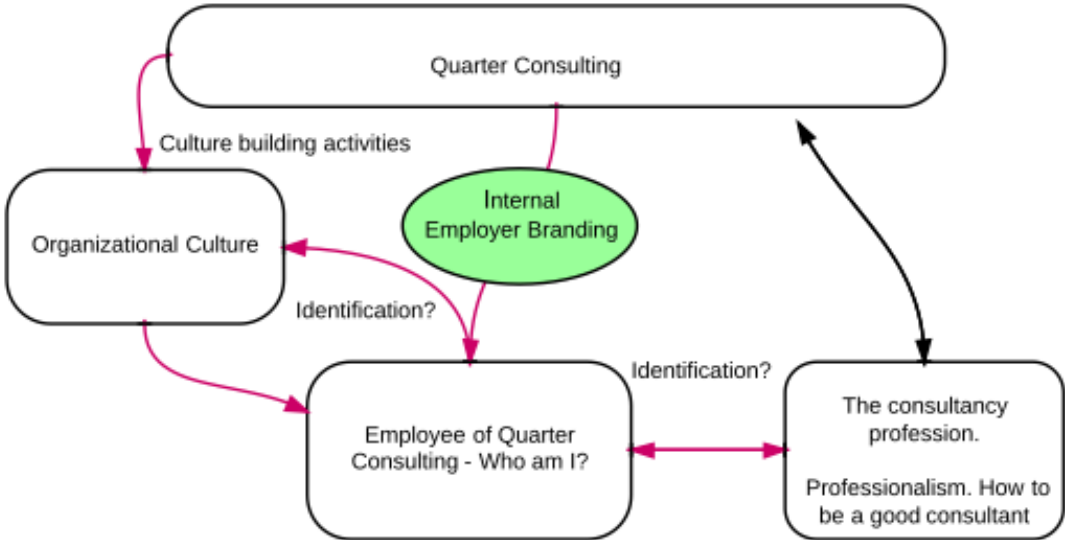
Further, our empirical findings show that Quarter Consulting's employer branding- and culture building activities has had some success in the sense that employees continuously mentioned 'As one' and 'Client focus' as important values. The concept of 'As one' seems to be Quarter Consulting's way of creating a cohesive feeling within the company as well as for their clients. This could be a way for the management to create a greater team spirit in order to ensure that employees align with Quarter Consulting's values. According to the interviewees, clients should perceive Quarter Consulting as a whole organisation and not as specific employees and/or departments. This could be a way for Quarter Consulting to distance themselves from other consulting firms, making them unique in the eyes of both employees and clients. The second concept consists of the company's 'Client focus' where it seems like Quarter Consulting are trying to create an attractive image intended to strengthen the brand and the organisational identity. We believe that by doing so, Quarter Consulting intend to create a standard among employees, namely that employees should care about clients and be service-minded. This represents the shallow level of culture presented by Kotter and Heskett (1992), in the sense that it is a way of doing things, which new employees are expected to follow. It is a cohesive way of acting and it might even be connected with the deeper level of culture, like the values. However, values that focus on teamwork and delivering a good product to the customer could also be viewed as characteristics for the whole workforce and hence, represent a culture built around the profession rather than the firm. Another example of this phenomenon, if applied to another industry, is generally shared values of doctors; for example that lives should be saved at all times.

Culture; Identification with Co-Workers

Many of the interviewees expressed that there are many similarities among the employees at Quarter Consulting. This might mean that employees can mirror themselves in each other, suggesting identification and perhaps even a sense of belonging to a social group. The employees of Quarter Consulting seem to view their co-workers as an important part of their

life. This implies that there is something holding the employees together. However, we found no indications that the specific culture of Quarter Consulting contributed to this identification with the co-workers. Perhaps the reason for this identification could be that the employees of Quarter Consulting are often young and have similar life situations, which generally makes identification easier. The identification between the co-workers might indicate that the employer branding of Quarter Consulting is successful as the employees appear similar and identify with each other. On the other hand, characteristics such as being hard workers, acting professional, and embracing new challenges seem to apply to the whole industry of management consultants. Further, we have found a desire from employees to have more diversity at Quarter Consulting. Since one of the shared and written values at Quarter Consulting is “Strength from diversity”, this is a possible misalignment, which might work against the strong organisational identity since the employees actually experience the opposite.

Internal and External Branding



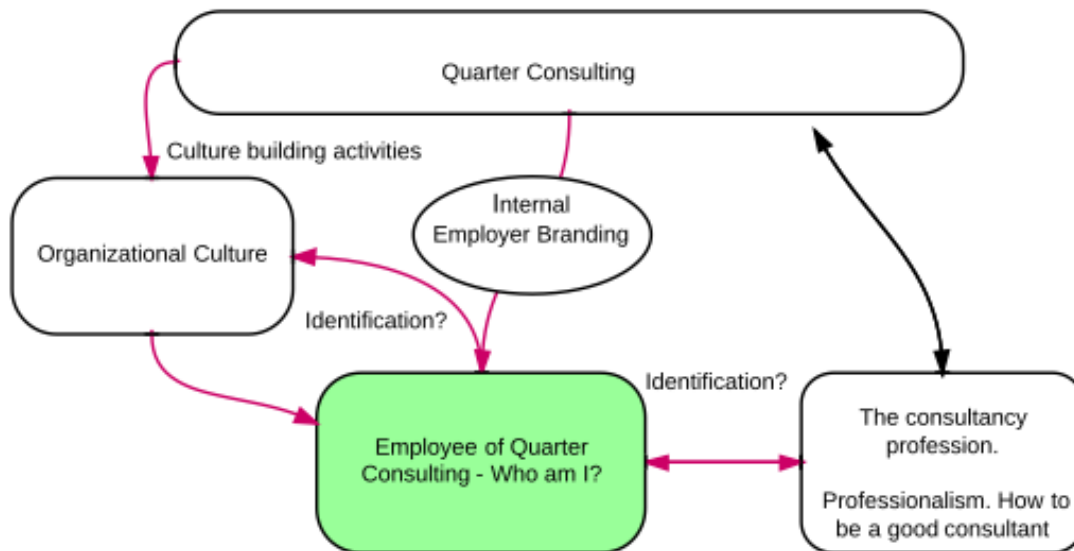
The success of internal employer branding is measured in terms of employee turnover at Quarter Consulting and a low turnover is generally viewed as successful employer branding. However, we understand that a great deal of business is generated through former employees that hire Quarter Consulting to do consulting at their new companies. Also, the up-or-out system could be seen to be working against the goal of a high retention rate. Perhaps the goal

of the internal employer branding is rather to get a “suitable retention” and make sure that employees leave the company voluntarily and smooth. We have not investigated this path further and we accept that a high retention is the sole goal of the internal employer branding activities.

Regarding the external employer branding, which we have studied by asking the employees why they ended up at Quarter Consulting, the firm aims to attract top-performers. Given the perceived lack of clarity concerning the differencing cultures at the Big 4, we cannot argue that the external employer branding has been successful. Most current employees started at Quarter Consulting without knowing exactly what differentiated the firm from the rest of the Big 4. Further, only one of our interviewees had attended an employer branding activity, a one day event with Quarter Consulting.

Our findings show that the company puts effort in getting information about the values out to employees but still few employees actually have time to take in the information. Since many of our interviewees applied to Quarter Consulting as they had friends who told them about their work at Quarter Consulting, it seems as if the employees are part of the external employer branding. However, the fact that most of the employees applied to all the Big 4 firms suggests that they have not been convinced that Quarter Consulting is by far the best. The employees of Quarter Consulting seem to take on a role of branders, as they usually are the reason for new employees to join the organisation. However, the employees of Quarter Consulting might do an improved work, unconsciously or consciously, with branding the company if they knew the values better. Today, the employees seem to act more as branders of the industry, rather for the specific firm since the employees still do not know what differs their firm from the rest. The managers seem to understand the importance of supporting Quarter Consulting’s values but appear to have difficulties with aligning and implementing them in the organisation. Many researchers highlight the difficulties of achieving successful internal branding (Ahmed & Rafiq, 2004) and these difficulties seem to be apparent in Quarter Consulting as well. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) suggest that appropriately conducted employer branding can assist employees in adopting organisational values and contribute to higher retention of employees.

Employee Identification; Identity work



Employees repeatedly stated that the Big 4 firms are very similar to each other, which might undermine the identification process with the firm in accordance with previous research that has stated that the employees must agree on general characteristics of the employing firm in order for the firm to build a strong culture that the employees can identify with (Alvesson, 2002).

Our findings suggest that the employees identify with, and appreciate their co-workers at Quarter Consulting. However, there seem to be a lack in shared values and there is no distinct identification with the firm. Instead, the employees seem to identify with the chosen profession, which is commonly expressed through emphasis on profession specific characteristics like professionalism and being a trusted advisor. Previous research has found that the identity of consultants, and more importantly the identification with the firm to be crucial in consultancy work since consultants often are subject of doubt from clients (Alvesson & Svenningsson 2003). If Quarter Consulting wants to have a shared identity, or a strong organisational culture, it is vital for the consultants to identify with the Quarter Consulting brand, rather than the profession explicitly. Here processes of identity regulation activities such as training and internal marketing as suggested by Alvesson and Willmott

(2002) could be used in order to promote an organisational identification. In the case of professional identification, meaning that the employees identify with the profession, rather than the firm, the company will not have any means of keeping the valuable personnel. Professional identification could be seen within other professions like University professors and doctors at hospitals, and this is exactly what Quarter Consulting intend to avoid by building a culture supported by shared values. Perhaps there is no identification with Quarter Consulting per se since the consultants are out and about at different organisations. Hence, they cannot identify with one organisation only, especially when they spend more time with the client than at their home office. Instead, this could lead to ambiguous identities which lead us to a vicious circle since it is shared values and identification with the organisation that could assist consultants in managing the ambiguous identities as Empson (2004) suggests.

An aspect that the junior consultants struggle with is that they many times need to act as advisors to professionals who have more experience than themselves. In situations like this, one may lose confidence and appear insecure and perhaps not as knowledgeable as desired. A strong identification with Quarter Consulting as an organisation could provide the confidence needed, since it could act as a safety belonging to a community (He & Brown, 2013). Having the values of Quarter Consulting could also give a sense of security of how to behave in insecure situations. However, our findings suggest that the profession might provide enough support and build enough self-confidence among the consultants. Hence, the specific firm might not be needed in the employee's identity work, or in order to figure out "who am I?" This can be reinforced by Alvesson and Empson (2007) who state that if employees describe themselves based on their profession it is more challenging to create an organisational identification, since the individual to a strong degree identifies with the work tasks itself and the organisation mainly function as a physical place where to perform the job. Hence, our empirical finding indicates that the forces of employer branding and the organisational culture might not be a factor in consultant's identity creation.

The different career steps at Quarter Consulting could function as a sense of stability and hence, a security of the consultants knowing what awaits them, in the otherwise insecure working situation. In terms of identity work this could provide consultants with confidence; knowing that if they fulfil a certain step they can be proud and go on the next. Also, the

consultants do probably not compare with each other to the same extent as someone else since they know that everyone have to go through the same steps. This could enhance the team spirit and in terms of identity work, the consultants belong to a certain social group at Quarter Consulting, which generally supports a strong organisational culture.

Management Consulting – becoming an established profession?

Given that the business of management consulting has grown dramatically over the last decades (Armbrüster & Kipping 2003), clients might know more about what to expect in terms of consultancy services today. If this is the case, consultants might get affected and identify more with the profession as the clients demand a certain professionalism, regardless of what firm the consultant represents. A patient usually knows what good service from doctor looks/feels like and we usually have certain professional expectations on doctors, regardless of what hospital they might be working at. The same effect could possibly affect consultants, especially since they spend most of their time out on the field. This can be connected to how He and Brown (2013) explain identification with a sense of belongingness and membership of a social group. As clients increasingly know what they want from consultants in terms of service and professionalism, a social group of management consultants is possibly created. Our findings about consultants identifying more with their profession than the employer are certainly interesting and they conflict with previous research, which might indicate a step towards a well established professionalism.

Our summarised findings from this study are:

- Consultants of Quarter Consulting seem to identify more with the profession and less with their employer.
- Quarter Consulting's external employer branding seem to have a limited impact on potential employees since they apply for jobs at all the Big 4 firms.
- The reason why consultants start working at Quarter Consulting is generated by interaction with current employees who they are friends with and identification with the varying work tasks.

- Currently employed consultants at Quarter Consulting still see the Big 4 as similar to each other.
- The internal employer branding and culture building activities have not been successful in terms of creating a strong and distinct organisational culture.
- Consultants at Quarter Consulting generally see themselves as driven, helpful, social and are motivated by challenges. They identify with their co-workers and internal departments, which indicates emerging sub-cultures and a less unified Quarter Consulting culture.
- Our empirical findings indicate that the forces of employer branding and the organisational culture might not be a factor in consultant's identity creation.

Chapter: 6 Conclusion

In this last section, we will look back on the process of our research and draw conclusions from our investigation. First, we will question previous research within identity work and the valuable insights for academics as well as practitioners. Secondly, we will discuss our study's limitations such as possible misinterpretations. The chapter and thesis ends with suggestions on further research and methodological and practical evaluation.

Questioning previous research within Identity Work

This thesis intended to investigate if and how the concepts of employer branding and culture building can impact the identities of consultants at Quarter Consulting from a socially constructed view. Previous research has pointed at the importance for consultants to identify with their firm, due to the lack of a physical product and since consultants are often questioned by the receiver of the service. These factors were said to create a need of consultants to identify with their employer and hence, stand stronger and more confident.

We wanted to investigate if the consultants in fact identified with the employer and if so, the reasons behind it. Identification with one's employer is generally connected to a strong organisational culture at the firm, where the employees have a distinct "we feeling". Further, employer branding is a way for the employer to affect the image that employees and outsiders have in regards to the company. We figured that these two concepts would be the most interesting ones to build our analysis on since both employer branding and organisational culture aims to make the organisation a more important part of the employees identities.

Valuable insights for academics as well as practitioners

What we found throughout our research is summarised at the end of the analysis, but the most important insight was that the consultant's identification with the firm might not be as important as previously suggested. Rather, the profession seem to have a more important role in the consultant's identity work. We have interviewed nine employees, but if our insights apply in general for Quarter Consulting, HR managers can gain from re-thinking their branding, and culture building activities in order to make the firm more unique in the eyes of

both current and future employees. Also, our findings are relevant for academics since the results go against some of the previous findings within the field, concerning the need for identification with the firm.

Limitations

Acknowledging limitations and weaknesses is of significance when conducting research. It highlights the awareness of the author's critical thinking towards the research method, hence, protects the legitimacy. We have found that a limitation is the number of conducted interviews. Conducting more interviews could have provided our thesis with a more solid empirical foundation and perhaps shed more light on other aspects of identity work. We acknowledge that nine interviews cannot generalise the whole firm, less the consultancy industry. Identity is an ongoing process, therefore we can only capture the self-identity of the interviewee's at this point of time, and hence we cannot say how these identities will develop at a later stage. The second weakness is that of the interpretation of the three researchers. When researching theoretical perceptions, possible misinterpretations from the researchers are always a risk. The result could hence be questioned by other scholars as well as the targeted organisation. 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.

Suggestions for Further Research

We suggest further research within the identity work area to focus on further in-depth studies of what impact and effect employer branding and culture building activities have on self-identity construction. Since this study is based on Quarter Consulting, a proposal for future studies is to investigate several consultancy firms. It would result in a broader study, which could visualize a more representative picture of how consultancy firms interpret and apply these concepts.

We would also like to see more research in the field of professionalism versus commitment to the employer. This research could compare the consultancy business with older professions

like doctors or lawyers to find out if there are differences or similarities in how the employees use their profession and/or employer to construct their self- identity.

Furthermore, we noted that Quarter Consulting has information in regards to why employees choose to leave the firm. However, it would be interesting to conduct more research on what the main motivation factors are when deciding to remain in a management consultancy firm. There might even be a need to investigate further how employer branding should be constructed in order to make it easier to evaluate and measure its success.

Methodological and Practical Evaluation

The practical contribution is to managers within the consultancy field through knowledge sharing about the concepts and the possible need for internal branding and rooted values. This research was based on a qualitative and abductive method along with semi-structured interviews. These choices proved to be reasonable for the situation since it gave an insight about how employees experienced Quarter Consulting and if they identified with the organisation. If the research had been conducted for a longer period of time, these semi-structured interviews could have been followed up with further interviews in order to examine whether respondents' perceptions changed over time. As this was not the purpose of the study, we experienced the choice of semi-structured interviews as being adequate in generating the desired results.

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Appendix A

<u>Name</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>City</u>	<u>Date</u>
Britta	HR	Stockholm	20140407
Lasse	Junior Consultant	Malmö	20140311
Anna	Consultant	Stockholm	20140410
Maja	Consultant	Stockholm	20140411
Bosse	Junior Consultant	Stockholm	20140410
Anders	Manager	Malmö	20140408
Nils	Director	Malmö	20140311
Kerstin	Consultant	Malmö	20130401
Agda	Audit Assistant	Malmö	20140414

Appendix B

Interview Guide

- **Tell me about yourself**, who are you? What do you do at Quarter Consulting? For how long have you been working for the organisation?
 - Why did you apply for Quarter Consulting? Can you describe what you were attracted by?
 - What have you studied and worked with before you started working at Quarter Consulting?
 - How has your view of Quarter Consulting change since you started?
- **What motivates you (professionally and private)?**
 - If you have subordinates, how do you motivate them?
 - What do you think your co-workers think is important in their job?
- **Can you describe your work-life balance?**
 - Can you describe your work? How many hours do you work?
 - What do you do in your spare time? How important is the spare time for you?
 - Does your work take time from our private life?
 - Do you check your phone and/or e-mail during nights and weekends? Why?
- **Can you describe Quarter Consulting's values, culture and way of thinking?**
 - Please describe your colleagues.
 - Please describe Quarter Consulting's reputation.
- **How do you see your opportunities to develop within your organisation?**
 - What do you think about Quarter Consulting's coaching and feedback system?
 - Have you experienced a culture of "up-or-out"?
- **Do you adapt to your clients in terms of clothing and behaviour?**
 - How do you think your customers perceive you? (As a threat or help?)
 - Do you customize your dressing, language, etc. to the customer's environment?