

CORPORATE BRAND MANAGEMENT AND REPUTATION

MASTER CASES



The GitLab Database Incident

By:

Angelos Karageorgos

Camila Moreira

Viktoria Chalkidou

First Edition
Student Case Papers

2018

Corporate Brand Management and Reputation: Master's Cases

The "Corporate Brand Management and Reputation: Master's cases" is a case series for applying the case method of teaching and learning in higher education. The cases are relevant to brand strategists in private and public sector organizations, as well as academics and students at universities, business schools, and executive education.

The cases are written by groups of master's students as a course project. The specially developed case format is defined as: *"A management decision case describes a real business situation leading up to a question(s) that requires assessment, analysis, and a decision reached by discussion in class. The alternative approaches and recommendations from the class discussion are followed by a description of the choices made by the case company. This description is then discussed by the class."*

The student groups select the topics of their case providing updated and relevant insights into the corporate brand management. The cases can be used as "written cases" (handed out and read in advance, later to be discussed in class) and/or as "live case" (presented by the teacher following a discussion in class). Each case includes teaching notes, visuals with speaker's notes, learning objectives, board plans, and references.

The mission of the series is *"to develop cases for discussion providing insights into the theory and practice of corporate brand management and reputation, with the intent of bridging the gap between academic teaching and managerial practice."*

The series is a result of co-creation between students and teachers at the elective course Corporate Brand Management (BUSN35 – five-credit course/eight-week half-time studies), part of the master's program International Marketing and Brand Management at Lund School of Economics and Management, Sweden. The cases represent the result of the intellectual work of students under the supervision of the head of course.

Although based on real events and despite references to actual companies, the cases are solely intended to be a basis for class discussion, not as an endorsement, a source of primary data, or an illustration of effective or ineffective management. The cases are free to be used and are to be cited following international conventions.

Editor

Mats Urde
Associate Professor
mats.urde@fek.lu.se

Head of master's course Corporate Brand Management (BUSN35), part of the master's program International Marketing and Brand Management.
Lund School of Economics and Management

The GitLab Database Incident

WRITTEN CASE

The authors prepared this case solely as a basis for class discussion and not as an endorsement, a source of primary data, or an illustration of effective or ineffective management. Although based on real events and despite occasional references to actual companies, this case is fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons or entities is coincidental.

ANGELOS KARAGEORGOS

CAMILA MOREIRA

VIKTORIA CHALKIDOU

The GitLab Database Incident

On January 31st, 2017 at approximately 23:00 UTC a software engineer at GitLab was frustrated as he was trying to fix a database overload on GitLab.com since 17:20 UTC without success. Due to this problem, many users were not able to post comments on issues and merge requests on the platform. It was late, and he was very tired, so he mentions to his colleagues on Slack (a virtual workspace communication application) that he was signing off.

Nevertheless, he was intrigued by the issue and suddenly he has the idea of removing a directory which could be the cause why other commands had not worked. He believes this directory is being deleted from a secondary database, however one second after terminating the removal process he realizes it was executed on the primary database. Unfortunately, it was too late, and his action caused 300 GB of client's data to be removed from their website GitLab.com. Together with other engineers, he tries to locate database backups and desperately asks for help on Slack but no backups were found, and he sadly realizes GitLab.com had just lost an enormous amount of their client's data.

GitLab background

GitLab is an open source coding platform with a community of around 1800 contributors worldwide, in at least 39 countries. The company offers their services to approximately 100.000 organizations and millions of users. GitLab offers an integrated open source platform for software developers aiding them from the very first step of planning on an idea until finally executing it, getting it live and lastly monitoring it. Steps of GitLab's software development and operations lifecycle include planning, creating code, testing, getting feedback from the community, releasing, configuring and monitoring their software projects.

GitLab offers their services in two pricing packages; a freemium limited solution and a paid one aimed at companies. GitLab Community Edition is a solution for users and has a basic version which is free of charge for the first year. They also have the

GitLab Enterprise Edition for business-to-business customers which is a paid solution. Some of their B2B customers are companies such as IBM, NASA, Alibaba, Sony, Invincea, Siemens, and CERN.

GitLab project started in 2011 in Ukraine when Dmitriy Zaporozhets, current CTO realized he needed a better tool for project management to collaborate with his team. He was joined by Sid Sijbrandij, current CEO, in 2012 who was impressed with the quality of the code at GitLab and started to make improvements to the open source platform for software developers.

Later in 2013 large organizations started to request features and they launched GitLab Enterprise Edition. In 2016, they raised \$20 million from three investors in the USA and launched a master plan to go public by 2020. Today, the company has a small office in San Francisco, California with approximately six people eventually working there. The majority of their team members, which are approximately 240 today, work remotely.

“The vision of GitLab is to allow everyone to collaborate on all digital content so people can cooperate effectively and achieve better results, faster.”¹

Their six values are Collaboration, Results, Efficiency, Diversity, Iteration, and Transparency that according to their handbook spelled together are the CREDIT they give each other. There is a complete handbook available online which is also collaborative, and they encourage their team members to send suggestions and questions. According to their CEO, Sid Sijbrandij it is important to write down their values which are the base of their working culture, especially being a remote only organization.

GitLab’s mission statement is: Change all creative work from read-only to read-write so that **everyone can contribute**. Their logo – tanuki (a Japanese raccoon dog) – aligned with their mission and vision, symbolizes a smart animal that works in a group to achieve a common goal (see **Exhibit 1**).

In 2017 GitLab was named a leader in Continuous Integration by The Forrester Wave™ due to their ease to use, scalable, integrated and innovative product (see **Exhibit 2**).

Every 22nd of each month GitLab releases their GitLab Community Edition software update and their GitLab Enterprise Edition for their B2B customers which are the main source of revenue in their business model. They maintain a strategy webpage on GitLab.com with detailed information on their business model, goals and

¹ Vision statement available at <https://about.gitlab.com/2016/09/13/gitlab-master-plan/>

promises which are very much aligned with their core values of transparency and collaboration.

The incident

On January 31st, at approximately 19:00 UTC GitLab.com starts experiencing an increase in database load and suspects it was spam. A week before they had experienced a similar problem but not as severe as this. Among other issues, this was causing users to be unable to post comments and issues in merge requests. At 23:00 UTC engineers started many attempts to fix this problem but they were not successful.

By 23:30 UTC one engineer has the idea to delete a directory believing he was doing it on a secondary database, however, he was unaware that he was executing the command on a primary data directory. The entire production data of Gitlab.com database was lost. Furthermore, their backup failed completely, and they were not able to restore the deleted data. When the engineer realized that the backup was unavailable, he asked for help on Slack so other team members could assist him in solving this serious incident.

In order to initiate attempts to restore the lost data from a secondary backup source they had to take GitLab.com down, which would interrupt coding projects of millions of users worldwide. GitLab Enterprise customers, GitHub customers, and self-hosted GitLab CE users would not be affected by the outage. This also means that the data loss on their cloud service platform – GitLab.com – had not affected the projects of their business-to-business customers' accounts.

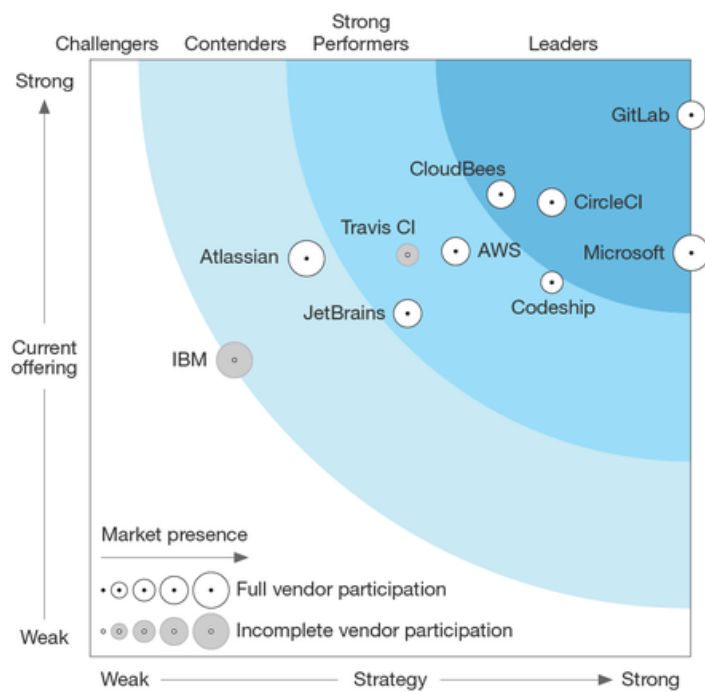
Until this moment they did not know if it would be possible to restore the entire deleted data and how long they would have to keep GitLab.com down. Taking the role of GitLab's executive team, how would you answer the following question:

How should GitLab communicate this incident to their community of users and would this affect their reputation among their stakeholders?

Exhibit 1 Gitlab logo



Exhibit 2 Forrester report recognizing GitLab CI as leader



Source: <https://about.gitlab.com/2017/09/27/gitlab-leader-continuous-integration-forrester-wave/>