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# Managers in the Employer Branding Process

How managers contribute to
the employer branding value creation

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# Abstract

Employer branding is a topic that is becoming significantly more interesting among both scholars and practitioners. This study analysed a small part of this topic - the practical use of Employer Branding Value Chain. This study tackled this topic in a unique way because all data was gathered and analysed from the perspective of managers and their work. The purpose of this research is to discover and describe the main activities of managers that contribute to employer branding process and thus assess the functionality and relevance of Employer Branding Value Chain model for managers' work.

To better understand employer branding, we started with a general review of the research in branding from which employer branding theories are derived. We focused on the *Brand Value Chain* and its employer branding version - The *Employer Branding Value Chain* - the backbone of this study. The theoretical part is concluded with the review of roles that managers can possibly have in the employer branding process.

The empirical data was collected through eight semi-structured interviews conducted in four companies that are among the top 30 brands in Sweden, based on students' perception. The interviews were conducted face to face or via phone call. One interview was accepted in written form. We have interpreted and analyzed our empirical data by using a qualitative data analysis process that consisted of coding and categorization in Nvivo.

Our findings include various management activities that contribute to the employer branding process. Our conclusion is that managers; act as spokespersons for their brand, align companies' and employees' views on culture and values, influence and evaluate different processes, deal with employment dissatisfactions, and deal with negative media attention. Our other findings are that the first step of the Employer Branding Value Chain, with the exception of one category, is relevant for managers.

**Key Words:** employer branding, Employer Branding Value Chain, management, employees, applicants

# Acknowledgements

We want to thank everyone who has guided, helped and supported us to conduct our research and writing our thesis.

We want to give a special thanks to Bo Göransson, our supervisor, who has provided us with excellent and concrete feedback throughout our writing process.

We also want to thank Anna Månsson and Cecilia Arkestad from the LUSEM Career Services and LUSEM Corporate Partner Foundation, for providing us with excellent contacts that were truly helpful in finding respondents for our interviews.

We also want to give a special thanks to everyone who participated in our interviews and a shout-out to all firms that participated: SEB, Swedbank, Deloitte and IKEA - thank you!

Lastly, we want to thank our parents for being so supportive and cheering throughout our studies.

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# 1. Introduction and Background

In the literature about management, we can find a lot of effort in the research area of what managers do. Similarly, we can also find a lot of effort in researching and defining the concept of employer branding. For our research, we decided to combine those two topics and find out how managers contribute to employer branding.

Employer branding is a critical tool for companies as it helps them with talent acquisition, development and retention (Biswas & Suar, 2016). The importance of employer branding is increasing, especially for companies in the new or highly competitive industries that are facing global talent shortage (Moroko & Uncles, 2008). Because of an ever-increasing global talent shortage, organizations are seeking comprehensive strategies to attract and retain potential as well as current employees (Guthridge, Komm & Lawson, 2008). This makes the field of employer branding very relevant to research. A strong employer brand helps a company to compete in the labour market by attracting and retaining the best people, which is crucial for a company's performance (Rampl & Kenning, 2012). Among other benefits of a strong brand that we can find in the literature, there is  a lower sensitivity of customers towards prices (Feldwick, 1996). In the context of employer branding it means for example, that in case of companies with a strong employer brand, the best talents are willing to accept the job offer even if the salary is lower than the competition offers.

The importance of employees in employer branding is indisputable (Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). However, different scholars highlight different groups of employees in relation to employer branding. Sometimes, employer branding is perceived by practitioners and scholars as equivalent to the recruitment process, with the majority of empirical research focused on recruitment alone (Theurer, Tumasjan, Welpe & Lievens, 2018). Therefore, in both practice and the literature, the responsibility for managing the employer brand often lies in the human resources departments. Recently, employer branding is becoming increasingly popular, and both practitioners and scholars start to discover that there is much more to it. In some companies, people who work with employer branding or people who are responsible for it work in various positions. The growing fragmentation of the topic is testified in the theoretical background. You can find literature on employer branding under different research areas - mainly under marketing or human resources management but also under brand management, organizational development, general management or even psychology. This brings us to the question of who should be responsible for the employer branding within a company? Is it the Human Resource (HR) department, or should the responsibility lie within the marketing department? Some researchers even suggest that there should be a new role of a reputation manager (Davies, 2008). Perhaps the concept is too broad, which makes it impossible to find one department or even one person that should have the ultimate responsibility. What if the most effective way would be to include employees across the company? Clearly, the employer brand needs to be managed by someone, so why not include managers?

The broad theoretical background of employer branding gives researchers a lot of options for their focus. At the same time, it is a challenge for researchers because often, the description of particular elements and concepts of employer branding differs across literature. For example, there is little differentiation between discussions about the employer brand and the process of employer branding. Furthermore, researchers apply and define different related terms and constructs inconsistently in the literature. Examples include *employer brand equity*, *employer image*, and *internal employee branding,* to name a few. Also, we can find employer branding research in several other fields such as marketing. Finally, there is no consensus on the target group of employer branding activities. Some researchers focus on current or potential employees. Some researchers include a third target group - the public (e.g. Lane, 2016).

The concepts of managing and the work of managers has been described by many in various contexts. The most relevant factor in the field of managing organizations for this study is the nature of the work of managers. To be a manager means meeting people, talking to them and establishing relationships with them, among other things. It is then logical to think that they have an opportunity and should bear the responsibility for spreading the good name of the company for which they work. The Employer Branding Value Chain (*Figure 2*) provides the employer branding area with a complex theoretical framework applicable to companies across various industries. It is a highly relevant tool that provides an overview of the most recent theoretical background for research in this area. To the knowledge of the authors of this study, the role of managers in relation to this model has not been discussed by researchers. Due to the generality of the model, we can apply it and empirically test it in various conditions. Since the topic about the work of managers faces similar fragmentation as the topic of employer branding, the Employer Branding Value Chain (*Figure 2*) is a suitable framework in which we can research the work of managers within employer branding in a structured way.

## 1.1 Purpose

Now more than ever, employer branding is an area which attracts the attention of both scholars and practitioners. Little is known about how managers contribute to this. The purpose of this study is to investigate the work of managers within the Employer Branding Value Chain. Our hypothesis is that there are activities or functions in managers' work that contribute to the employer brand value creation through employer branding. This study examines these main activities and describes their relevance for the employer branding process. This study also offers some empirical evidence on the functionality of the Employer Branding Value Chain model by researching if the model is applicable to the work of managers.

## 1.2 Research Questions

1. What are the main activities of managers that contribute to the employer brand value creation through the employer branding process?

2. Which part(s) of the Employer Branding Value Chain do managers perceive to be the most relevant for their work in the employer brand value creation?

## 1.3 Research Motivation

The value which this thesis brings is a better understanding of how managers are involved in employer branding. It also provides a practical use of the employer branding research for managers. Since the Employer Branding Value Chain is a rather new concept and, to a large extent, an under-researched area, more empirical data is needed (Theurer et al. 2018). That gives this study a great opportunity to fill this research gap while also testing the validity of the model in practice and to back up the theory with empirical data. For this purpose we selected managers from four companies that are perceived by students as top employer brands in Sweden, according to Universum (2018). Moreover, the ambition is to suggest some improvements or amendments to the model if relevant. At the same time, based on the findings of this study, we will be able to see if the understanding of the employer branding process embodied in the Employer Branding Value Chain holds true when compared with the empirical data collected from selected managers. However, we will not discuss the economic aspects of employer branding (i.e. brand value) as they are beyond the scope of this research.

When it comes to describing what managers do, Mintzberg (2011, p.1) says that the problem is not to find out what managers do, but the problem is how to interpret what they do. With the result of this study, we hope that we will be able to provide companies with a better understanding of what their managers do to contribute to the employer branding process. Furthermore, we aim to open a discussion on how managers can be better involved in the employer brand value creation process and help the companies to get a competitive advantage in the "war for talent".

## 1.4 Disposition

This thesis is divided into six chapters. The first introductory chapter is followed by Chapter Two, which covers the theoretical framework of this thesis, outlining terminology and basic concepts of employer branding. Chapter two also describes the Employer Branding Value Chain, which is the theoretical backbone of this thesis. Chapter Three explains the methodology of this thesis, clarifying how the data was collected and analysed. Chapter Four presents the empirical findings and the analysis in relation to the theoretical framework. Chapter Five presents the conclusion of our research. Chapter Six discusses the implications of our findings and recommendation as well as further research and development of the topic.

# 2. Theoretical Framework

To research the role of managers in employer branding we first need to define the area or our research. This section represents a summary of the most relevant theoretical concepts for our study. From some theoretical concepts, only some parts were selected and described, based on the assessed relevance of our research. To describe and understand the Employer Branding Value Chain, a model developed by Theurer et al. (2018), we needed to discuss some general theoretical concepts of branding. That concludes the first part of this section. Then, we describe employer branding and the Employer Branding Value Chain, which is followed by selected theories and concepts on the roles of managers in employer branding processes.

## 2.1 Brand Value Chain

A brand in a general meaning gives its owner two major benefits: differentiation and customer franchise, i.e. satisfaction of the customer with the brand and his or her loyalty to it (Davies, 2008). According to Foster, Punjaisri and Cheng (2010), the brand acts as a promise that an organization gives to its potential and existing customers. To better understand what activities create value for an organization, the Brand Value Chain was developed (*Figure 1*). The simple model, sometimes called *Brand Equity Chain*, connects soft aspects of branding (e.g. emotions) with the hard data-based aspects, such as market share or revenues (Anselmsson & Bondesson, 2017, p.66).
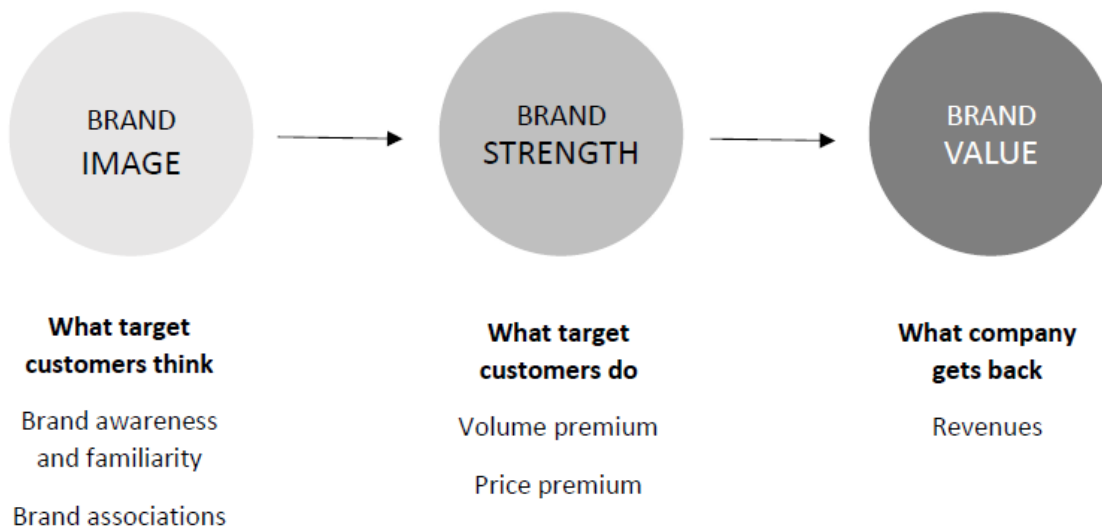


*Figure 1: Brand Value Chain (Anselmsson & Bondesson, 2017, p.67).*

Brand image refers to the perception of customers related to a brand, brand strength refers to customers reactions or responses to a brand and the brand value represents the economic value of a brand (Anselmsson & Bondesson, 2017, p.66-67). From consumer brand research, employer branding concepts and theories were derived during the last decade (Rampl & Kenning, 2012).
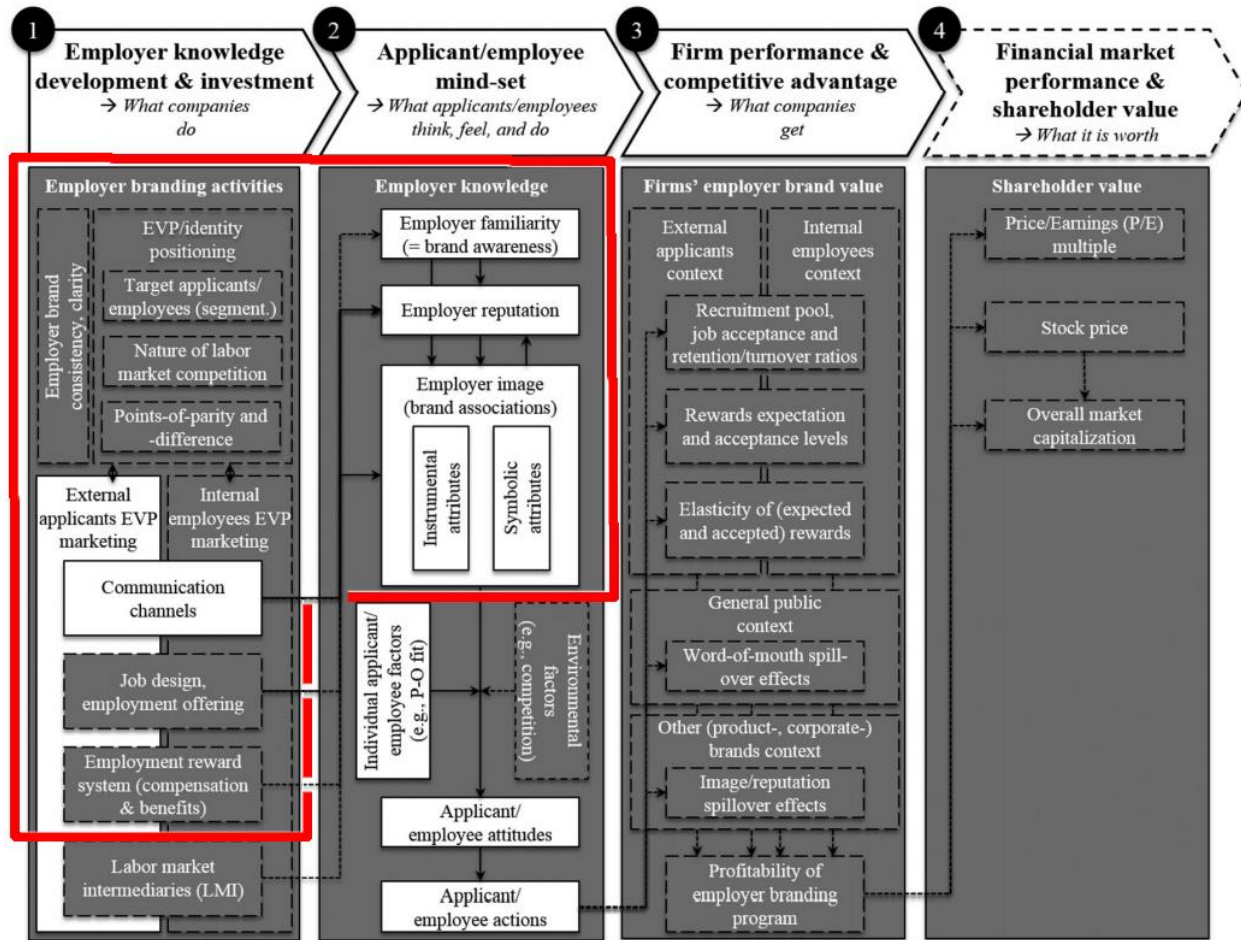
## 2.2 Employer Branding

Like Lievens, Van Hoye and Anseel (2007), we consider employer branding and employer brand management to be a new and under-researched area. Concluding one definition of employer branding that would be agreed upon by all the researchers is impossible. For example, Mosley (2014) defines employer branding quite narrowly considering only the visual aspect of the brand when he describes it as "the consistent application of the brand logo and other elements of visual design to identify and differentiate the brand" (p.3). Some authors use a rather broad definition which includes both internal and external aspects connecting the concept to the recruitment process (e.g. Lievens, Van Hoye & Anseel, 2007). Rampl and Kenning (2012) use a broader definition of employer branding, which also includes the public. They describe employer branding as a concept addressing "the proactive management of an organisation's image as an employer, as perceived by current and potential employees, and, to a lesser degree, by the public" (p.219). Theurer at al. (2018) state that "employer branding [is]...an approach to recruitment and retention that involves internally and externally promoting a clear view of what makes a firm different and desirable as an employer" (p.155). For this study, the definition provided by Theurer et al. (2018) applies. We do not intentionally exclude the public as a stakeholder in our research. However, since the Employer Branding Value Chain (*see Figure 2*) is the central concept used in this study, the definition provided by its authors is the most corresponding with the scope of this research.

What is common for all researchers is that they divide the topic of employer branding into two dimensions based on who the target group of the branding is. Internal branding is focused on current employees and their retention in particular (Theurer et al. 2018). External branding is focused primarily on potential employees or job applicants and is closely associated with recruitment. However, its influence on the public or other brands is not excluded (Theurer et al. 2018). Here, the link to general branding concepts is the strongest. Some authors explain that employees can be compared to customers (e.g. Berthon, Ewing & Hah, 2005). Therefore, where literature on branding refers to customers, the analogy with employees applies to employer branding. The primary purpose of employer branding is obtaining a critical tool for talent acquisition, development and retention (Biswas & Suar, 2016). The secondary purpose of employer branding is to utilize the potential of the best talents - to get a competitive advantage in highly competitive industries by increasing profitability of the company, raising awareness of the brand among various stakeholders, increasing customers satisfaction, and increasing employees' performance and their commitment (Biswas & Suar, 2016). Thus, it is clear that employer branding is a multidisciplinary concept that goes far beyond activities related to recruiting new employees. To bring all the activities under one house, Mosley (2014, p.3) uses the term **employer branding management**. The term includes employer branding (in restricted meaning; defined as a mean

to present the organization in the most attractive way), recruitment, onboarding of new hires and talent management. The diversity of activities falling under employer branding management suggests that companies need to include multiple expertise across the organization. For example, Biswas and Suar (2016) suggest introducing an internal integrated mix consisting of top management, a business processing group (staffing, process changes, incentive systems) and a cross-functional group (HR, communication, marketing).

## 2.3 Employer Branding Value Chain

The model created by Theurer et al. (2018), called the *Employer Branding Value Chain* is the result of a literature review that summarized the findings of 187 different articles on employer branding and aggregated everything into a single model. The Employer Branding Value Chain can be used to develop an effective employer branding strategy for recruiting potential applicants and retaining current employees. By highlighting effective levers, interrelations and outcomes in the field, firms can gain a clearer picture of effective employer brand management (Theurer et al. 2018). There are four steps in the model representing four different stages of employer branding process: Employer knowledge development, the applicant/employee mindset, firm performance & competitive advantage, and financial market performance. By comparing the model with the *Brand Value Chain* by Anselmsson and Bondesson (2017, p.67), we can observe that the Employer Branding Value Chain is to a large extent derived from it. Step 2 is the incorporation of brand image and brand strength. Step 3 and 4 are the incorporation of brand value (see *Figure 2*).

*Note.* Well-researched areas are highlighted in white, under-researched areas in grey

*Figure 2: The Employer Brand Value Chain (Theurer et al. 2018). The areas outlined in red is what is researched in this thesis.*

This thesis' research is focused on managers and their activities within employer branding. Therefore, only Step 1 and Step 2 are relevant for this research. To evaluate Step 3 and Step 4, i.e. employer brand value and shareholders' value resulting from the work of managers, is beyond the scope of our research. Furthermore, we excluded activities that are presumably not relevant for managers from Step 1, namely the category of labour market intermediaries, i.e. "entities that match or regulate employment between workers and firms" (Theurer et al. 2018, p.168). Due to the fact that Step 2 is primarily focused on applicants and employees' mindsets, we selected only categories that are directly influenced by activities from the first step. Those are employer familiarity, employer reputation and employer image. This restriction makes our research more focused. Covering the whole model would be too extensive for what our research aims to achieve. It would require more research questions, different respondents and additional research methods. For the purpose of clarity, our research area is highlighted in a red frame in the model (see Figure 2).

## 2.3.1 Step 1: Employer knowledge development and investment

Step one is concerned with what firms can do to strengthen their employer brands, i.e. to make themselves better known among potential employees and to strengthen their perception among the current ones. This step consists of four main parts: The employer brand consistency and clarity, The *EVP (Employer Value Proposition)*, the internal marketing of this value proposition and the external marketing of this value proposition. Internal marketing applies to current employees. External marketing applies to applicants or potential employees. All of these four areas have different branding purposes and values, and most areas need more research (see the grey areas in *Figure 2*).

**Employer Brand Consistency and Clarity**
According to Theurer et al. (2018), employer brand clarity and consistency influence brand credibility and trustworthiness. Rampl and Kenning (2012) stress the importance of consistency when communicating brand messages. They say that this is important, especially for defining corporate values and desired behaviours and aligning them with both current and potential employees.

**Employer Value Proposition/Identity positioning**
An Employer Value Proposition (EVP) is a desired or an ideal employer identity, basically how the company wants to be perceived by current employees and future employees (Theurer et al. 2018). Some authors use the term Employ**ee** Value Proposition. Mosley (2014, p.4) explains that the parallel with Customer Value Proposition is more accurate and it reflects more precisely the target group of employer branding - employees. For the sake of alignment, the term Employ**er** Value Proposition is used in this paper. However, we consider both terms to have identical content. In the Employer Branding Value Chain (*Figure 2*), the EVP consists of target applicants/employees, the nature of labour market competition, and points of parity and difference.

Companies need to reach the **target applicants/employees** (the desired current and future employees of the company) with their brand. Companies need to adjust their efforts based on who the target is. If the target is an applicant, this process can be made by, and affected by everyone involved in the recruitment process with regards to what impressions the organization wants to convey (Avery & McKay, 2006). If the target is a current employee, other processes directed towards their retention in the company apply.

The **nature of labour market competition** and **points of parity/difference** categories are very integrated and it is hard to differentiate them. According to Theurer et al. (2018), further research on these categories must be conducted because the literature has mostly neglected these aspects. The nature of labour market competition is very contextual and depends on what the current labour market supply, as well as all competitors (Theurer et al. 2018). The nature of labour market competition category is difficult to research for our purpose and conditions. For a single firm, the labour market is difficult to influence. The points of parity and difference category provides a company with "differential advantage" over competitors (Biswas & Suar, 2016). According to Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), it is a primary purpose

of employer branding to differentiate a company as an employer from its competitors. They add that often within the same industry, it is difficult for organizations to differentiate themselves as an employer from their competitors. In such cases when differences between brands are limited, the importance of symbolic functions (like innovativeness or prestige) increases.

**External and Internal EVP Marketing**
EVP marketing, both internally and externally, seeks to integrate four areas: applicant and employee communication; job design; the employee reward system; and *Labour Market Intermediaries* (LMIs) such as search firms or head-hunters (Theurer et al. 2018). Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) describe external marketing as activities towards establishing the company as an employer of choice, while internal marketing as activities contributing to creating a unique workforce that other firms cannot imitate.

The applicant/employee **communication** category can be understood both as the content that is communicated or as a platform for or means of communication. Chhabra and Sharma (2014) consider the strategic decision about the selection of communication channels equally important as the decision about the selection of the employer value proposition. Theurer et al. (2018) mention that the investigation of some communication channels has been neglected, especially the influence of social media and online applications.

According to Theurer et al. (2018), the job design category includes both actual **job design** (current employees) and job offering (applicants/potential employees). They add that based on the experience from practice, discrepancies often exist between what the company advertises or offers and the actual experience of new hires. Biswas and Suar (2016) explain that employers need to provide a realistic job preview to their candidates to avoid unrealistic expectations from their side. They add that a well-designed realistic job preview is compelling and enhances employer branding.

The category of the **employment reward system,** in practice, faces similar challenges as the job design category, when it comes to misalignment of what employer advertise or offer and what new hires get (Theurer et al. 2018). Biswas and Suar (2016) discuss the reward system in relation to the retention of employees and conclude that a higher salary may not increase the retention if employees do not feel that they are treated equally. Furthermore, Theurer et al. (2018) note that research that would explain the consequences of such misalignment is needed. They add that possible consequences could be negative employee attitude or unfavourable word-of-mouth. Biswas and Suar (2016) name reduced productivity, diminished loyalty, dysfunctional behaviour, decreased trust, emotional exhaustion, and job dissatisfaction.

## 2.3.2 Step 2: The applicant/employee mindset

Whereas the first step focuses on the desired employer knowledge, this second step is about what the applicants/employees know, think, feel, and do, i.e. their mindset. Everything that happens in step one affects the areas in step two. Employer image and familiarity affect employer reputation. But in turn,

employer reputation also influences employer image and organizational attraction (Cable & Turban, 2001, p.127). This study focuses on those elements from Step 2 that are directly influenced by categories from Step 1, i.e. employer familiarity (brand awareness), employer reputation and brand image (brand associations). The same image and attributes do not always apply to the same applicant or employee mindset because they are subject to several individual differences and environmental factors. Therefore, this step of the value chain is complicated (Theurer et al. 2018). At the same time, this step in the Employer Brand Value Chain is the area that has been the most researched (see the white areas in *Figure 2*).

**Employer familiarity - brand awareness** reflects how strongly the brand is rooted in the memory of customers and how easily the brand comes to their minds (Theurer et al. 2018). This research focuses on both the external and internal aspects of employer branding. Davies (2008) argues that for internal aspects of brand equity, only brand image applies because awareness within existing employees is undisputable. However, Biswas and Suar (2016) state that brand awareness among existing employees is about the level of their knowledge about the employer. The level of brand awareness among the existing employees can influence their retention. Rampl and Kenning (2012) explain that employer brand attractiveness depends on brand personality traits which are connected to a person's social identity and self-concept, as explained below. We can conclude that the level of awareness about the brand personality traits has an impact on both potential and current employees. Therefore, neither group should be omitted in this research. For the purposes of this research, brand awareness is a relevant concept for both internal (current employees) and external (applicants, potential employees and potentially public) aspects of employer branding.

The reputation within the employer branding context is connected to how different stakeholders perceive the organization, or what are their impressions of it (Rampl & Kenning, 2012). In our context, stakeholders are current employees, applicants and potential employees. According to Biswas and Suar (2016), the higher the **employer reputation** of a company is, the prouder the employees are about working in that company. They add that for managing a company's reputation, the leaders' actions are crucial. That is even more visible and more evident in times of scandals and crisis, when leaders' reactions to such situations are expected to correspond and be aligned with the publicly stated values of their company. Employer reputation is also affected by both employer familiarity and image, employer familiarity, in turn, also influences employer image and organizational attraction (Cable & Turban, 2001, p.127). These categories are all affected by all the components from step 1 in the Employer Branding Value Chain (Theurer et al. 2018).

The brand image reflects associations that customers have to the brand and determines their different responses (Theurer et al. 2018). The **employer brand image** affects employees' (and potential employees') identification with the organization, which further influences their behaviour (Xie, Bagozzi & Meland, 2015). According to Rampl and Kenning (2012), employees are central to brand image because they create the work environment. According to Biswas and Suar (2016), interpersonal communication between current and potential employees plays an important role in creating an

employer brand image. We can conclude that the personalities of the employees help the applicants, potential employees or even the public (if considered as a target group of employer branding) identify and evaluate the brand image of an organization.

# 2.4 Managers and Brand Personality Traits

## 2.4.1 Brand Personality

Another concept that can be considered as an under-researched topic related to employer branding is the brand personality concept. Rampl and Kenning (2012) define brand personality traits as a "set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (p.219). They highlight the relevance of the concept especially in association with an organizational membership, which they regard as a contributor to a person's social identity and self-concept. Therefore, through brand personality, a person associated with the brand (e.g. employee, potential employee, customer) communicates their status, ethical values and moral standards towards their external environment (Rampl & Kenning, 2012). They add that:

*If employer brand affect and trust are related to brand personality traits, it would be useful to brand an employer through persons who are employed there, or who have an ownership stake in the company.*
(Rampl & Kenning, 2012, p.220).

Davies (2008) describes brand personality through the metaphor of a brand as a person. For example, one brand can be more "honest" than another. Further, Rampl and Kenning (2012) conclude that brand personality traits influence employer brand affection and trust, which have a significant impact on employer brand attractiveness. Hence they suggest organizations to give their employer brand a "face" - to communicate their positive brand personality traits through word-of-mouth and satisfied employees, which shall contribute to the perception of the employer brand as sincere and thus build employer brand affect and trust.

## 2.4.2 Roles That Managers Have

When it comes to research on managers and their role in employer branding, not much has been found or discovered. If we consider the general concept of branding, the literature mainly focuses on the internal aspects of branding. For example, Saleem and Iglesias (2016) conclude that the existing research on internal[1] and employer branding focuses mostly on employees who interact with customers and efforts in those fields are directed to human resources management or marketing. They state that that brands should be understood as a "complex social processes that are co-created by multiple stakeholders" (p.50) thus, managers involved in branding activities need to align many different internal and external stakeholders in order to build a successful brand. In this approach, managers are **coordinators** of branding efforts.

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[1] Internal branding is not to be confused with internal aspects of employer branding. Internal branding aligns employees' behaviors with the brand image in relation to their interaction with customers (Saleem & Iglesias, 2016).

According to Biswas and Suar (2016), managing employer branding includes managing the relationship between employer and employee. They do not provide a clear answer toward who should manage that relationship. They identify three groups of key players in the employer branding process: top management, the business processing group and human resources as a cross-functioning group. They mention specifically managers as a group of employees that promotes organizational trust, which fosters employees' compliance, commitment and willingness to go an extra mile. In the perspective presented by Biswas and Suar (2016), managers play a significant role in employer branding both externally and internally. Furthermore, Mosley (2007) states that employees are key to building a brand through intangible brand characteristics, such as emotional values evoked by a specific service style. In the context of managers, it would be the impact of their managerial style on current or potential employees. In this perspective, managers are a **personification** of organizational brand messages.

Another approach to the role of managers within employer branding is Mosley's discussion of the ownership of the brand (Mosley, 2014, p.44). He stresses the importance of adapting and flexing the brand based on the given environment or the recipients. Therefore, the logical conclusion is that there should be different people or different departments within the organization responsible for the brand in different environments. Mosley (2014, p.44) concludes that for the sake of unity and authenticity, the overall corporate brand needs to be led by senior management. He refuses a simplified concept where the responsibility for the brand is given either to a human resources department or marketing teams or is split between both. In this theory, managers are **brand owners** with the ultimate responsibility.

Last but not least, employer branding is strongly connected to marketing. Based on many definitions of employer branding (see *Chapter 2.2*), marketing includes both internal and external activities that aim to promote the brand. The literature includes a lot of information about what to promote or how to promote it. For example, Biswas and Suar (2016) see leaders in the organization as a source of information about the company for current and potential employees. Furthermore, Kryger Aggerholm, Esmann Andersen & Thomsen (2011) stress the importance of creating the employer brand identity through management activities that are built on trust and matching the expectations of stakeholders. But similarly, as literature does not provide an answer to the question of who owns the brand, it does not give an answer to the question of who should promote the brand. Thus, the fourth potential role of managers is **brand promoters**.

# 3. Methodology - Semi-Structured interviews

Since our research focuses on gaining an in-depth understanding of the subject, this is considered a qualitative study. We chose to conduct semi-structured interviews to can gain an in-depth understanding of how managers work with employer branding in different companies that are successful in the field. Since the model by Theurer et al. (2018) already provides a clearer understanding of the field, we want to test its validity and further develop it by researching activities of managers and project leaders who are in decision-making positions and work with employer branding. The model also suggests which areas are less researched. This makes it easier to identify what areas need more empirical data. We have interviewed companies that do well in terms of employer branding. This data already exists publicly available through the *Företagsbarometern* by Universum (2018). In this publication, there exists a list of the top 30 companies that most successfully work with employer branding, based on the perception of students. We have used this quantitative data from Universum (2018) to determine our research samples. With the Employer Branding Value Chain (Theurer et al. 2018) as a framework, we have developed our interview questions.

We use semi-structured interviews with an emphasis on *structure*. This means that the interviewer asks the same questions towards each respondent in the same order. However, the researchers might take a lead from a respondent's answer and ask other relevant questions which are not on the interview protocol (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p.116). According to Sekaran and Bougie (2016, p.115), a semi-structured interview usually consists of: an introduction of what the interview is about, a set of topics (usually questions) in a logical order: first "warm-up" questions (which are easy to answer and non-threatening) and then the main questions covering the purpose of the interview. Lastly, the interviewer asks follow-up questions in case the first answer is unclear or incomplete, the interviewer does not fully understand the answer,  or the interviewer requires more specific or in-depth information. The reason we chose to do semi-structured interviews was that the method generates more in-depth answers. The interviewer informed each respondent that the interview would take around 30-45 minutes. On average, the interviews took around 45 minutes, with the shortest approximately 30 minutes and the longest lasting approximately 80 minutes. This revealed that the respondents designated their time to the interview which resulted in high-quality data. We chose to gather qualitative data to develop a proper understanding of how successful employers work with employer branding and to provide empirical data to the field.

We then used qualitative data analysis to analyse the data in a structured way. We used NVivo and coded the respondent's answers in categories derived from the Employer Branding Value Chain. In Chapter 3.3, we will explain this in further detail.

## 3.1 Interview Design

Since the employer value chain by Theurer et al. (2018) provided clear research topics that outline what further research and information are needed, we chose to collect the data through semi-structured

interviews, which can be conducted when it is known what information is needed (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p.116). We have created a set of 16 basic questions with follow-up questions which we asked when we got yes/no answers. Some of the follow-up questions were exclusively for respondents who have presumably an advanced understanding of employer branding, such as HR-managers. This enabled us to gather data that is more accurately grounded in theory. The aim was to answer our research questions by determining the main activities of managers within the model, and also to test the validity and relevance of the main aspects of the first two steps of the Employer Branding Value Chain by Theurer et al. (2018). We have focused on the less researched topics to provide empirical evidence and data. We have also focused on some well-researched topics to increase the study's reliability and validity, as well as providing more empirical data to the field. Many of the questions were open-ended, meant to spark a discussion and in-depth answer in order to get a more detailed and deeper understanding of the manager's beliefs, mindsets, and how they work.

Some respondents asked for the questions in advance. To ensure that they answer the questions with as little bias as possible, the questions provided to respondents were without any categories or headings. Categories were only known to the interviewers. The order in which the interviewer asked the questions was developed to provide comfort to the interviewee. The easiest questions were at the beginning of the interview, while questions that required longer answers were towards the end. Interviews were conducted face to face, through phone calls, and we accepted one written reply.

## 3.1.1 Limiting the Categories

The field of employer branding is broad, and the model by Theurer et al. (2018) provides a great overview of the field. Based on the first two steps of the Employer Branding Value Chain, we have developed interview questions that will provide empirical data within selected areas of employer branding research. Because of this research's purpose and the research questions, we had to limit the categories further as some were not relevant. Testing the model's validity is still relevant, but the limitations is a consequence of determining the role of managers within employer branding. We selected the topics presented further down in chapter 3.3.1 - *Table 2*, based on the presumption that these are what managers can influence their job. Another reason was that many topics overlapped and were difficult to separate. We chose to focus on the more specific areas that often serve as building blocks for the more general topics - this does not mean some of the areas were left out of this research, they were just too general to be their own category. In this limitation chapter, we explain why the other topics were not relevant as their own research area. *EVP identity/positioning* is not a category of its own because it consists of *Target Applicants*, *Nature of Labour Market Competition* and *Points of Parity/Difference*. The topics that are excluded are *External applicants EVP marketing, Internal employees EVP marketing, Labour Market Intermediates (LMI), Individual applicant/employee factors, Environmental factors, Applicant/employee attitudes* and lastly *Applicant/employee actions*.

When it comes to *External-* and *Internal EVP Marketing,* we chose to exclude them as separate categories as they are too general and broad. Marketing itself is a theoretical discipline that is outside of

the scope of this research. However, by researching, *Communication Channels*, *Job Design*, and the *Employment Reward System*, we are looking into the more specific areas that according to Theurer et al. (2018) are the building blocks of the *External-* and *Internal EVP Marketing*. We are also covering *EVP/Identity Positioning* which is used to develop the key message of the brand (positioning), the external marketing of this EVP towards target groups (applicants) internal marketing to make employees aligned with firm values and goals (Theurer et al. 2018). We are, therefore, researching *External-* and *Internal EVP Marketing,* but it is not a category of its own used for the development of interview questions or the data reduction.

As LMIs in Step 1 refers to as head-hunter or search firms (Theurer et al. 2018), this employer branding area is outside of this research scope. The *Individual applicant/employee factors* and the *Environmental factors* in Step 2 are also outside of the research scope as they are outside of what managers can influence within their own company. Similarly, *Applicant/Employee- Attitudes* and *Actions* in Step 2 are not our researched segment because that quantitative and qualitative data is provided by sources such as Universum (2018) who research for what companies people choose to work. The scope of our research focuses solely on what managers mainly can work with and influence directly within their company, therefore, we are not able to provide those data.

## 3.2 Research Sample

The research sample is a selection from the organizations that are listed as top employer brands, according to Företagsbarometern (2018) by Universum (2018). They have polled 25,188 students at 33 universities across Sweden and evaluated 95,144 different employers. There are a total of seven lists separated into different sectors, like Law, Technological, Business and more (Universum 2018). According to Theurer et al. (2018), employer branding is deemed to be highly relevant in highly competitive job markets (such as consulting or banking industry) where talents are scare. As a result of this, we chose the *business* sector list as our target research sample. The fact that this is a master in management thesis that focuses on business administration also supports the decision to focus on the business sector.

Out of the top 30 companies, we chose to conduct interviews with IKEA, Deloitte, SEB and Swedbank. Because we had available contacts within these and they replied within the given timeframe, these were the companies that were interested in participating in this research. The selection process was heavily influenced by contacts that we established through various networking events. We obtained some of our interviewees' contact details from the Career Services at LUSEM. The contacts within these companies often suggested other managers that could participate in this study. Within the four selected companies, we interviewed two managers and/or project leaders. Overall, the managers are people in management positions, project leadership, or decision-making position; either managing people, systems or both.

We conducted the interviews via phone calls or face to face meetings, and we also accepted one written answer. The written answer specifically was the odd-one-out and had its own limitations. Even though we could ask follow-up questions, we could not do so in real-time like during the other interviews. However, the respondent was very knowledgeable in the employer branding area, and the data provided valuable insights.

| Organization and respondent | Date Conducted | Interview method | Length |
|---|---|---|---|
| IKEA 1 | 18/4/2019 | Written reply | N/A |
| IKEA 2 | 15/4/2019 | Face to face interview | 46 minutes |
| SEB 1 | 17/4/2019 | Face to face interview | 45 minutes |
| SEB 2 | 2/5/2019 | Phone interview | 29 minutes |
| Deloitte 1 | 2/5/2019 | Phone interview | 41 minutes |
| Deloitte 2 | 10/5/2019 | Phone interview | 35 minutes |
| Swedbank 1 | 25/4/2019 | Face to face interview | 78 minutes |
| Swedbank 2 | 26/4/2019 | Phone interview | 29 minutes |

Table 1: Information and overview of the research sample

Even though all of the companies are operating on an international level, the research sample is limited to Sweden exclusively. There are several reasons for this, one of which is that the *Företagsbarometern* by Universum (2018) is based on the experience of Swedes. The list provided us with a large possible research sample of the most successful companies. The list served as a guideline and reliable way to identify companies that work well with employer branding, knowingly or unknowingly. The third reason is that comparing different companies within the same country provides more consistency.

## 3.3 Qualitative Data Analysis

In order to assure a high validity and reliability, we have interpreted and analysed our empirical data in a structured way by using a qualitative data analysis process that consists of coding and categorization. There are three steps in qualitative data analysis: data reduction, data display, and the drawing of conclusions (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p.333). Since qualitative interviews produce large amounts of data, the first step is a data reduction. In this step, we explain how we interpreted the data and label it in a process referred to as selecting, coding, and categorizing (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p.333). Next, we present the data. This is referred to as data display (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p.333). Lastly, we draw conclusions based on patterns in the reduced set of data.

## 3.3.1 Data Reduction

**Coding**

Coding begins with selecting the coding unit. We decided to identify themes. When using the theme as a coding unit it means that we are primarily looking for the expression of an idea. This means that we can assign a code to a text unit of any size, as long as that unit of text represents a single theme or issue (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p.335). We decided to code the entire paragraphs. Each code was interpreted to fit into a general theme or idea, also known as a category.

**Categorization**

Categorization is the process of organizing, arranging, and classifying coding units. Codes and categories can be developed both inductively and deductively. In this situation, we have a preliminary theory on which we have based our codes and categories. As a result, we constructed an initial list of codes and categories from the theory. The benefit of using existing codes and categories is that we can build on and/or expand prevailing knowledge (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p.336-337).

Since our codes and categories are built on prevailing knowledge, our categories correspond to the selected areas within the Employer Branding Value Chain that we used to design the interview. As was necessary, coding provided us with the ability to change or refine the categories during the research process as new codes and categories emerge inductively (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This was the case when we gathered data that could not be categorized. For this, we have created the *Others* category. The purpose of the *Others* category was to identify management activities missing in the Employer Branding Value Chain. We inductively identified a topic that doesn't fit under any other category present in the Employer Branding Value Chain.

| Overview of the categories used for data reduction | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Employer brand consistency, clarity | 7 | Employment Reward System |
| 2 | Target applicants/employees | 8 | Employer Familiarity – Brand Awareness |
| 3 | Nature of labour market competition | 9 | Employer Reputation |
| 4 | Points of parity and difference | 10 | Employer Image |
| 5 | Communication Channels | 11 | Other |
| 6 | Job Design, employment offering | | |

Table 2: Qualitative Data Analysis Categories, derived from the Employer Branding Value Chain by Theurer et al. (2018)

**Data display**

This means to take the reduced data and display it in an organized, condensed manner. This enables to organize the data and to discover patterns and relationships in the data so that the drawing of conclusions is eventually facilitated (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p.347). We started by transcribing the recordings of the interviews. The transcription process enabled us to exclude linguistic fillers and also creating a foundation for the categorization process. We then used the software *Nvivo 12* to create categories and coded paragraphs from the transcribed material. We did this by interpreting the answers, deeming what belongs in which category based on employer branding literature, and using Nvivo to put the respondent's answers anonymously into one document per category. We then focused on finding similarities and differences within each category. This we did through the authors' interpretation of the respondents' answers.

# 3.4 Validity & Reliability

**Validity**

Validity shows how correct the observation is (Hartman, 2004, p.146). In this case, *observation* refers to empirical data. By doing semi-structured qualitative interviews, we are researching how the situation looks according to managers. This provides us with an insight into the companies and how they work with employer branding, as well as what roles the managers have, according to themselves. A challenge here is that it is important for us to be well knowledgeable in the research field before we conduct the interviews, as some of the managers might have little knowledge about theoretical concepts of employer branding. Therefore, we conducted an extensive literature review and created our interview questions from the concepts in the Employer Branding Value Chain. Semi-structured interviews enabled us to compare answers, as we asked each respondent the same questions.

After we had conducted the interviews, we had a huge amount of data. Through coding and categorization, we were able to organize and reduce the empirical data. We focused on the less researched topics to provide new empirical evidence and data. We also focused on some well-researched topics to increase the study's reliability and validity, as well as provide more empirical data to the field. The limitations of this method are mostly about interpretations. What we researched in this thesis was all from the view of managers, and how they interpreted our interview questions, as well as how we interpreted the respondent's answers. Misunderstandings can, therefore, be one of the limitations of the method. However, we tried to minimize this by asking follow-up questions to be sure thatthe respondents understood the questions.

**Reliability**

According to Hartman (2004, p.146), reliability means that the observation can be made several times, in other words, the research should be replicable. Qualitative methods sometimes have difficulties ensuring reliability because of the lack of consistent measurement. Semi-structured interviews do have however have high consistency, and the advantage over quantitative methods such as surveys is that respondents can speak freely, come up with answers the interviewee did not expect, and the

interviewee can even ask follow-up questions. We are ensuring reliability by being as transparent as possible in our process regarding thoughts, analysis, and conclusions. Since we cannot conduct the same interview twice, the goal of the interviews is to gain an understanding of the roles and activities of managers in employer branding on a deeper level. We are transparent about how we designed the interview and how we coded and categorized the interview transcripts, which ensures higher reliability.

We interviewed managers in companies within different industries in the business sector. Four respondents were females, four were males. Because of this, we are ensuring that our results are general enough and applicable to different conditions. At the end of this thesis, we give indications for further research. By making our method as transparent as possible and describing its limitations, we give other researchers the opportunity to take the generalisability of this thesis further.

# 4. Results and Analysis

In *Table 3,* we summarized every area of the Employer Brand Value Chain that we analysed and identified the main activities that managers do within each researched area. We also identified the roles of managers within each category. We analysed each research area separately. Each research area has its own chapter. Each chapter has its own conclusions, which are presented in *Table 3*. Therefore *Table 3* serves as an overview of the analysis chapter.

**Short descriptions of the researched companies**
IKEA is a Swedish privately-owned company that operates in the retail industry. IKEA's products mainly consist of ready-to-assemble furniture and homeware. The company was founded in 1943 in Sweden. In 2018, IKEA had revenue of €37.05 billion. IKEA has 208,000 employees and operates in 55 countries worldwide (IKEA, 2018).

SEB is a public limited company in the financial services sector. SEB is a Swedish company and was founded in 1972, its predecessor was founded in 1856. The main products and services include retail banking, merchant banking, wealth management, life insurance and pensions (SEB, 2019). In 2014, SEB had revenue of SEK 46.94 billion (SEB, 2014). In 2014, SEB had 15,714 employees, operating in 10 different countries in Europe (SEB, 2019).

Deloitte is a UK private company, limited by guarantee. It was founded in 1845. Deloitte offers audit tax, management consulting, financial advisory, risk advisory, and legal services. In 2018 Deloitte had a revenue of US$38.8 billion. Deloitte has 286,200 employees and operates in 150 countries and territories (Deloitte, 2018).

Swedbank is a public limited company in the financial services sector. Swedbank is a Swedish company and was founded in 1997 and its predecessor was founded in 1820. Swedbank operates in the financial services sector and offers Retail banking, mortgage loans, corporate banking and merchant processing services. In 2016, Swedbank had a revenue of US$6.28 billion. In 2011 Swedbank had 16,287 employees, operating in 11 countries worldwide (Swedbank, 2019).

| Sub Ch. | Categories | Roles | Managers' Activities |
|---|---|---|---|
| **4.1** | **Employer brand consistency, clarity** | Coordinators | Telling the same story.<br>Participating in activities outside work.<br>Bringing employees together. |
| **4.2** | **Target Applicants** | Brand Owners | Preparing for the future by hiring "the right people" for the more digitized and more social interactive future.<br>Managers act as gatekeepers and are architects of the company's future. |
| **4.3** | **Nature of Labour Market Competition** | N/A | Seeking information about the labour market and the labour market competition. |
| **4.4** | **Points of Parity and Difference** | Promoters | Participating in activities outside work.<br>Creating culture.<br>Focus on people. |
| **4.5** | **Communication Channels** | Promoters | Mostly face to face communication.<br>Mostly Internal meetings with employees.<br>External promotion in networking events and at job fairs for students.<br>Interviews for recruitment purposes. |
| **4.6** | **Job Design** | Brand Owners, Personification of the Brand | Influencing <u>how</u> the work is done.<br>Finding solutions.<br>Following formalized roles.<br>Explaining what the job and the company are about. |
| **4.7** | **Employment Reward System** | Personification of the Brand | If it is applicable, they influence who gets a reward.<br>Managers evaluate who gets a reward by looking at hard facts, such as sales, but also soft facts, such as how satisfied the customer is and how the employee works in a team. |
| **4.8** | **Employer Familiarity – Brand Awareness** | Brand Owners | Dealing with negative media.<br>Contributing to employer familiarity with everyday work.<br>Building the brand towards both customers and employees. |
| **4.9** | **Employer Reputation** | Promoters, Personification of the Brand | Promoting the company.<br>Internally bringing attention to what is not working.<br>Dealing with negative media by promoting Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and what the company will do in the future. |
| **4.10** | **Employer Image** | Personification of the Brand | Showing as real picture of the company as possible.<br>Creating trust. |
| **4.11** | **Others** | Coordinators | Retaining colleagues.<br>Offering an incentive (career development, salary raise).<br>Communicating (e.g. giving and receiving feedback). |

Table 3: Summary of Manager's activities within Employer Branding

## 4.1 Employer brand consistency, clarity

**General Branding Activities**
In relation to general branding activities, most of the interviewed managers, the respondents, state that their company does not provide any specific training in employer branding for its employees. One of the respondents says that they have some training mainly focused on education about the company's values and culture. Three respondents state that their companies have professionals who work only with employer branding. One of the respondents mentions that even without education in employer branding, they know what they should communicate externally, e.g. when they meet potential applicants like students.

When it comes to the specific activities that managers do in the area of employer branding, four respondents mention that they participate in student activities and organize trainee programs in their companies. Two respondents mention giving financial aid to various programs as a part of their branding activities. Among internal branding activities, some respondents stated that their main aim is to bring employees together, strengthen their feeling for the brand, engage them and make them feel proud about the brand:

*We make surveys every year... We are open and transparent with results and discuss, how we can improve and do things better or different, to improve the culture and the feeling for the brand.*
(Swedbank 2)

One respondent mentions that their internal employer branding is weak. One respondent also says that even though they do many activities that contribute to society, they do not communicate their engagement well to the public.

**Aligning views**
Most respondents say that they ensure that they hire people with the same values that their company pursues through participating in job interviews. When it comes to aligning the views of the employees with the company's values and culture, one of the interviewed HR managers says that it is CEOs' and managers' responsibility to do that. One of the respondents stresses the need for consistency in the story about their employer brand that they communicate to external subjects:

*Professionals and specialists always go together. We try to build our employer branding story together. … We try to tell the right story. And at the same time, we try to tell the same story.* (Deloitte 1)

Our research showed that training focused directly on employer branding is rather rare in companies for both managers and regular employees. In one company, we received two conflicting answers when we asked if they have training in employer branding. At the same time, none of the respondents said that

they think that the company should do some specific training in employer branding or that they should do more. One respondent stated that they know what to do even without any training in this rerspect. This could mean that the ownership of the employer brand among managers is quite strong.

Our findings indicate that the managers we researched are aware of the fact that they need to communicate the brand consistently. The need for clarity of employer brand seems to play a stronger role in external branding activities. On the other hand, when it comes to consistency of the employer brand, managers seem to invest the same effort in aligning the views of current employees with the brand and properly explaining what their employer brand is about towards applicants or potential employees. This is the coordinating role that managers play in employer branding activities.

Our findings support the conclusion that managers do many activities to ensure the clarity and consistency of their brands. We did not observe many answers that would point out weak spots in employer branding in this area. One answer was stressing the need to enhance internal branding activities. Another answer was about insufficient communication of the brand's successes to external stakeholders. This finding supports the opinion of Chhabra and Sharma (2014) when they say that the selection of communication channels is crucial for building a strong employer brand. Therefore, we can conclude that with some small exceptions, managers find their branding activities in the area of clarity and consistency of the brand important. At the same time, they do not feel a stronger need to improve in this area.

## 4.2 Target Applicants/Employees

As shortly explained in the Theoretical Framework chapter 2.3.1, an important step to develop an Employer Value Proposition (EVP) is to determine what impressions the organization wants to convey, both externally and internally – to the target applicants and employees (Avery & McKay, 2006). For example, "employing a female or minority recruiter will convey the impression to women and minorities that the firm values diversity" (Avery & McKay, 2006, p.169). Therefore, recruiters of an organization must have a common understanding of what applicants and employees they want to have for the future of their organization and what they want to convey. Furthermore, recruiters must consider their firm's reputation and current competencies before implementing a targeted recruitment strategy (Avery & McKay, 2006). This means that there must be an ongoing process that constantly evaluates the current employees to identify what competencies are missing.

According to this thesis' research, our respondents state that their firms prefer positive values, good attitudes and a personality fit between the applicant and the company - competence is not as important. The company culture and the company's values are very important for the managers, and it is something they want to target applicants to have. Therefore, managers mostly want to target applicants who are engaged, drive their own personal growth and have the prospect to change. One of the respondents summarized this well:

*We want them (applicants) to have an entrepreneurial mind, the prospect to change, driving your own personal growth. Educate yourself and drive yourself. We have the platform for you, but nobody else can do it for you. Only you have the motor to drive your own growth. -* IKEA 2

The respondents also see a shift in what is important for target applicants; in the past, applicants generally cared a lot about salary and the proximity of the workplace. Today, applicants care more about flexibility, work-life balance and personal growth. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and what the company stands for is therefore important for the companies, the managers, and the target applicants. As a result, applicants have started to ask a lot about the organization's values in interviews.

*I remember a few years ago during an (job) interview, I wasn't prepared for that (being asked questions). It was us that asked the question but, in the end, it was the applicant that asked the questions and I understood that there is a change. - SEB 1*

Some of the respondents think the change is happening because of technological disruptions over the past 20 years. Managers actively work with preparing for even more change in both work but also recruitment in the future, especially when it comes to digitalization. Within the banking sector, our respondents have experienced that the financial sector "is moving in a new direction" (SEB 1 & Swedbank 1) where it is more important to become more customer-centric. Respondents within banks state that they need to change their target applicants to fit the future. Knowing a lot about economics is becoming less important, and there are fewer job offerings because of automatization. Building good customer relations is becoming more important (SEB 2 & Swedbank 1). When put into Avery and McKay (2006) terminology, this means that there currently is a common understanding within banks that the future employees need to have a more diverse background in terms of competencies. Banks now must convey the impression that they value customer-centric or service-minded employees. In order to do that, it is important for the banks to hire applicants that are working well with customers and clients. Values and company culture are overall becoming much more important for the field of employer branding.

What managers generally do is to prepare for the applicants of the future, while also hiring the "right people" for the future. The "right people" refers to applicants that are driving their own personal growth, while having the right values and mindsets that align with the company's values and company culture. Most of our respondents are somehow involved in the recruitment process. This way, managers make sure that the target applicants fit into the current company, as well as the company's desired future. Managers in employment interview situations act as brand owners, sort of gatekeepers that make an effort to sort out people whom they deem do not fit, while at the same time being designers for the future of the company by selecting the employees that, according to them, have the most important qualities. This is an ever-changing process that is different within each company, which makes it difficult to generalize. However, the thing that all respondents have in common is that competencies are less important than the applicant's values and how self-driven the applicants are.

## 4.3 Nature of Labour Market Competition

According to our research, we did not find any direct activities of managers in relation to the Nature of Labour Market Competition. According to Theurer et al. (2018), this area is very contextual as it depends on every firm that wants to recruit, as well as every applicant that is trying to be employed. According to Wilden, Gudergan, and Lings (2010), despite increasing competition in labour markets, little research has explored the mechanisms by which potential employees evaluate prospective employers, and the employee-based brand equity inherent in these evaluations. Therefore, to reach a conclusion for this, one would have to research how the applicants choose their employers. This research area is being investigated by Universum (2018). Because we are researching four of the most popular employers, we were able to gather results on the points of parity/difference – the key employer branding activities that make these employers popular according to managers.

As mentioned in Chapter 2.3.1, the points of parity/difference are difficult to differentiate from the nature of labour market competition when determining the employer branding value creation. Therefore, our results conclude that managers' activities mostly are within the points of parity and difference. That is what they can influence. However, this raises a paradox question; to work with the points of parity/difference, managers need information about the current and future nature of the labour market competition. An educated guess of what managers do, based on the data we have gathered, would be that they stay updated on how the labour market develops - in other words, managers seek information about the current and future labour market competition.

## 4.4 Points of Parity and Difference

As the most common difference from the competition, our respondents mention the company's culture, value and its people. Some respondents also mention the long history of their companies as their competitive advantage. They also talk about presenting their culture and values while reaching to students. They say that they participate in different fairs and seminars organized by universities and in other related activities. Also, some respondents, namely from the banking sector, mention that overall, they are not so different from other banks. In those cases, the respondents usually name a culture and other **symbolic functions** as their biggest competitive advantage.

*If I ask people outside SEB, I always hear that we are **progressive**, doing the right things to be the bank in the future.* (SEB 1)

"*We are a very **inclusive** bank. We are the bank for many people and households and many companies. For example, when have gotten in a lot of refugees in Sweden. I think that maybe 90% of those who needed a bank account got it from Swedbank. ... Everyone is welcome.*" (Swedbank 1)

When it comes to managers' personal involvement in activities that help to differentiate their companies from other competitors, our respondents usually mention things like meetings with

stakeholders including students and spreading the good word everywhere, including on social media, and among friends and family.

Our research showed that activities in the area of differentiating companies from their competitors are, to a large extent, dependent on the specifics of the industry in which they compete. For example, for the respondents from IKEA, it was relatively easy to name what makes them different from other companies, highlighting the unique concept of their stores. On the other hand, respondents from the banking sector and the consulting sector admit that they are not very different from their competitors because all of them offer the same services. In agreement with the literature (see *Chapter 2.3.1*), which points out that for such companies, the differentiation is based on symbolic functions, managers stress functions like having nice people and culture, being progressive, being inclusive.

In this segment of the Employer Branding Value Chain, the role of managers can be brand promoters who try to strengthen the differential advantage of their companies and communicate it to different stakeholders. What also is significant in this segment is that the external branding aspect is much stronger here.

## 4.5 Communication Channels

There are many communication channels available in today's more digitalized world. The literature talks a lot about social media changing the way communication is carried out, (Keller, 2011; McFarland & Ployhart, 2015) especially when it comes to external- and internal EVP marketing (Theurer et al. 2018). While this might be true, our research suggests that managers do not seem to rely on social media very much to communicate the EVP towards potential applicants or current employees. All companies we researched use their websites, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and more to promote their workplace. In job ads that they post on social media and various job hunt sites, companies also promote their workplace. When it comes to the managers we have researched, they mainly promote their workplace through more traditional communication channels.

Even though there are many possible channels for communicating the employer brand, we conclude that managers mainly use meetings, networking events, fairs and phone calls as communication channels when it comes to employer branding. The communication channels that mostly were mentioned by our respondents were face to face meetings with potential applicants and employees.

*As I said earlier, (I promote the bank) every day. Client meetings, internal meetings, in meetings I always do some kind of promotion of the bank. But I also have bigger meetings with clients and staff meetings where I actively promote the bank and talk about the bank in a different context.* - Swedbank 2

Most of our respondents report that they promote their workplace a lot outside of working hours. "I would say 24/7, more or less" (Deloitte 1), which indicates that managers spend a vast amount of time promoting their workplace. Even though most respondents mainly work in more administrative

functions, they still make time to promote their workplace. Outside of their office hours, that promotion continues. It is not difficult for our respondents to talk positively about their companies. The companies we researched need to hire people all the time, so they are often at job fairs and other networking events, usually at universities. Most of our respondents are present at such fairs themselves, directly communicating with their target applicants. The companies also focus on promoting the company as a great workplace when meeting with clients or customers. Even outside working hours, managers always promote their workplace to everyone when asked or when it is relevant.

Even though managers network a lot, or are involved in the process of hiring new employees, they spend most their time meeting existing employees according to our respondents. In these internal meetings, they promote their companies a lot. It is a process of re-affirming the culture, values, and for the managers, it is an opportunity to get a better understanding of their own company. Many of our respondents participate in or have participated in the recruitment process of new employees. Their role here is to interview applicants to check if they fit into the company values and culture. This way, they simultaneously communicate the external and internal EVP. Since the managers spend most of their time meeting employees of their firm, they are usually experts about their own company. Managers who in some form are involved in the recruitment process focus their communication mainly towards students. The recruitment process is a great example of why the internal- and external EVP marketing are hard to separate when it comes to communication channels. The quote below explains how SEB, for example, works with this according to our respondent.

*Of course, we do! We need to hire people all the time. In SEB you can work part-time as well. We collaborate with a company called Adecco. We have a lot of students here right now, and we of course network with them in order to hire them in the future.* - SEB 1

It is important that both the internal EVP and external EVP are aligned so that they tell the same story. This is something all of our respondents have stressed. It is similar to what Rampl and Kenning (2012) explain, that consistency when communicating the brand messages is important. For example, this means that whatever gets told to applicants needs to correspond with the reality in the company. When collaborating with recruitment firms such as Adecco, it is even more important for the internal and external EVP to be aligned and communicated properly. In one of the interviews, one of the respondents said that there was a situation when none of the applicants provided by a recruitment firm fit the profile they were looking for (SEB 1). The conclusion was that the communication did not go as planned, and the recruitment firm had the wrong understanding of the company. This indicates how entangled the internal and external communication is. Therefore, the role of managers regarding communication channels is the role of brand promoters.

## 4.6 Job Design and Employment Offering

All respondents say that, even though they cannot influence the things their staff or they themselves do, our respondents can influence how things are done in their departments.

*I have a job description, I know what's expected from me. It's more about how I do it. That's what I can influence.* (IKEA 2)

Furthermore, we found out that the ownership of the working process gives managers some opportunities on how to act in situations when a new employee is either not satisfied with the job or is underperforming. The majority of our respondents state that the most common reason why new employees are not satisfied with the job is an insufficient explanation of the job – what it is about.

*If I have certain expectations and don't communicate them, and the employee has certain expectations and doesn't communicate them, then normally there will be a problem*. (Deloitte 1)

In one case, the respondent stated that sometimes, the HR department provides a candidate with information about the job that is not accurate. Among other reasons, managers mention that employees have different values than the company or not they do not have enough capacity to learn. Most respondents stated that they try out more things when a new employee does not match with the job - they try to find different positions for the employee, sometimes different team or different work.

Furthermore, we found out that looking for talents during networking is something that not many of our respondents do. Most of them state that they do not deliberately focus on selling their company during networking but rather use other ways of promoting their company, for example participating in student activities or promoting the company as a nice place to work. Some respondents state that their position is not fitting for acquiring new employees through networking. On the other hand, most of the respondents, even those who do not deliberately use networking as a tool for finding new employees, state that they did manage to get a new employee at least once thanks to the networking. One respondent stated that they are more focused on getting new employees through internal networking.

In this part of the Employer Branding Value Chain, we discovered several aspects in the work of managers. First, respondents clearly stated that they influence the design of processes, how the work is done in their branches and departments. In this aspect, they play the role of brand owners.

Another aspect we discovered is the possibility of managers to tackle situations when their staff is not satisfied with their job position. To avoid such situations, managers know that they need to explain what the job is about. Our respondents see it as their responsibility, even though they usually have a specialized recruiting department. We have found that managers are better suited to explain what the job is about because it is they who can design the job or its processes. If they do not explain the job properly, some employees leave, because the job is something different than what the employees expected. This is especially true for managers that attend the job interviews. On the other hand, networking also provides an opportunity to promote the company. Even though most respondents repeatedly mentioned that they do not actively look for new employees during networking, they are always open to discussion about the company whenever they are approached by interested people. In

all those situations, managers take the role of a personification of the employer brand upon themselves, trying to create a trustworthy picture of what the company can offer. That way, managers align the expectations of all interested parties with reality.

## 4.7 Employment Reward System

According to Theurer et al. (2018), firms need to further evaluate which bundles of job design and rewards employees are attracted to and are willing to accept for specific employment. For instance, in some retail industries, employees may be willing to sacrifice financial rewards in favour of working for a renowned brand (Williams & Connell, 2010). In this category, our respondents also gave the most variation in answers. All respondents agree that they cannot influence the reward system itself. However, most are able to influence how the rewards are distributed. There are different kinds of rewards for each firm. Everything from adequate salary, bonus systems, or that you can be yourself at work is considered a part of the reward system. IKEA, for example, doesn't have any bonuses.

*I can be myself, I think that's the most important. You don't need to be like someone else. You can come as you want if you want to have a nice jacket and a suit that's fine if you want to come in shorts that's fine. What you do at work matters. I think that's really good*. - IKEA 2

In Sweden, it is overall difficult to work with or change the employment reward system according to our respondents. Overall the respondents say they cannot influence the reward system itself because this decision is centralized in the headquarters, and because it is dependent on how the firm operates across countries. Many reward systems are also bound by laws in different countries. Most of the rewards are market and union driven, but managers have the responsibility to spend thoughts, time and energy on who gets a reward.

Our respondents are, also in this research area, reporting a shift in trends. The firms, especially the banks, report that traditionally rewards such as bonuses were rather fixed based on performance. Today they are more individual and based on how satisfied the customer is, which is up to the manager to determine. Given that our respondents are part of the most popular employers in Sweden, these findings correspond with the literature: employers succeed by appealing to their consumer interests (Williams & Connell, 2010). This could be an explanation for the shift from a heavy focus on number-based performance to other ways of measuring the employee's performance. The factors that influence who gets a reward has changed the working process and the activities of the managers. For example, one of our respondents says:

*Lately, other factors are much more important. So, I think today, within my branches, it is maybe fifty per cent of the performance evaluation is this kind of hard facts but the other things are like how do you contribute to a good working environment together with the employees. How good are you at getting customers to feel welcome when they come in. -* (Swedbank 1)

By "hard facts" the respondent refers to actual numbers, for example, how many pension saving plans an employee has sold during a month (Swedbank 1). The other factors that have become much more important are more about how the employee acts like a person - referring a lot back to culture, values, and how service minded the employee is.

For applicants, what is important in the reward systems are usually the salary itself, other benefits such as healthcare, and within banks specifically: loans. All respondents stated that they have a generous reward and compensation system that includes basics like a reasonable salary and other benefits mentioned above. This is something that matters for the applicants to an extent. However, the biggest reward still seems to be that applicants are able to work for a renowned brand (Williams & Connell, 2010). According to all our respondents, it is mostly about the possibility for the employee to develop within the company and as a person.

In this chapter, the conclusion is that what managers do specifically for the employment reward system is difficult to pinpoint. What they do is generally deciding on the distribution of rewards. This evaluation process is today less based on hard facts and more on how the employee works in a team and with customers. The managers we have researched cannot influence the reward system itself. An alternative way of how to reward their employees is to give them a foundation to develop. In this case, managers can be regarded as personifications of their organizational brand messages, as they often cannot influence a reward system, but they can still influence employees to perform better.

## 4.8 Employer Familiarity – Brand Awareness

Except for one manager, all respondents declare that they feel responsible for building their brand awareness. They, more or less, state that it is their everyday work. Most of the managers described their activities within building brand awareness as activities towards their customers. Four respondents mention that it is just as important to build brand awareness among their employees:

*As a manager, it is very important to build brand awareness among the employees. What are we about? What is our mission? What are our values? What is our strategy and what is our position and a way forward?* (Swedbank 1)

Two respondents also talk about brand awareness in some crisis or unpleasant situations – they see themselves as people responsible for preserving the good name of the company even if there are negative media related to the company or angry customers.

*"The crisis we have been or are still in is a trust issue. So that, of course, is my role, to encourage my managers so they can encourage their employees. I go to as many branch offices as possible and try to talk about our situation and what went wrong. What is happening and what is important for us to do now. I try to encourage all the employees. Because it's very difficult for them to meet a lot of customers that are worried, angry, or disappointed."* (Swedbank 1)

Even though we can find different opinions in the literature on whether there is an internal branding aspect of brand awareness (see *Chapter 2.3.2*), our research showed that managers consider building internal brand awareness as well as the external brand awareness. Therefore, based on practice, we can conclude that internal brand awareness is a valid concept. Managers also named crisis situations at times when their work matters a lot. From the theoretical point of view, this would correspond more with the concept of brand image or brand reputation. Here, the most distinctive role of managers would be the role of employer brand owners. They build the employer brand, convey the message to both current and potential employees and protect the brand in situations when its good name is at stake.

## 4.9 Employer Reputation

Employer reputation expresses employees' and applicants' beliefs of what others think about the organization (Highhouse, Brooks & Gregarus, 2009). Since we have researched the most popular employers according to Universum (2018), we can conclude that the firms we have researched all have a positive employer reputation.

According to our respondents, the recurring theme of culture and values within the organizations are very important for employer reputation. How the employees are seen externally is ultimately dependent on what culture and values (as a part of EVP) they share internally. Apart from that, customers and clients also need to be able to relate to the company and what they do to co-create a positive employer reputation. This is, perhaps, what makes IKEA an attractive employer, as many people can relate to the company:

> *Once you say you work for IKEA they always say "oh I'm going to buy that thing", "I bought this, it works", "it doesn't work", "oh they're so nice". People can easily relate to the company.* - IKEA 2

Managers also try to take in feedback from acquaintances and customers, even outside of their working hours. Most respondents get often asked by students how it is to work at their company, especially in meetings at student or job fairs and other networking events. In these meetings, our respondents communicate an as accurate story, as possible, to let students know how it is to work at their firm. What the managers hear about their firm, even if it isn't part of their own responsibilities, is brought back to the firm and discussed internally. In other words, managers constantly promote their firm, while at the same time internally bringing attention to what is not going so well, which ultimately is improving their brand.

We also identified a factor that is not present anywhere in the Employer Branding Value Chain - media attention. Our respondents get many questions from potential applicants as well as acquaintances when there is a lot of media attention towards the company. Negative media attention influences the employer reputation, which is a factor not present in the Employer Branding Value Chain (Theurer et al. 2018). For example, in the case of Swedbank which currently is in the midst of an AML (Anti-Money

Laundering) scandal, one of our respondents argues that negative media attention directly influences the way the company is perceived, therefore affecting both the brand reputation and the employer brand reputation. One of our respondents points out that sometimes, the impacts on employees is very harmful to the company:

*When you come into a problem when you get negative media or the trust of the bank is questioned, that is a lot about employees. The employees get very disappointed, they get angry, they don't understand how could we fall into this trap. How did we get into this situation? I think that is some kind of employer branding that has gotten a big blow.* (Swedbank 1)

The negative effect then affects the employees, which in turn affects the entire organization's culture. Our respondents at IKEA have provided similar responses. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is, therefore, one of the managers' favourite subjects when talking about their company. How the company works with digitalization and the near future is also an important topic managers like to talk about when representing their company. In employer reputation the role of the manager is, therefore, to be a brand promoter. Our respondents in banks specifically talk a lot about the importance of openness and transparency. At the same time, they consider the banking to be a business that is built on trust. Their job is to build trust towards their clients. Managers enhance trust through personal involvement; thus, they also have the role of the personification of the brand. In the light of negative media on current events, it is, therefore, important for managers to know what the company is going to do in the future to divert from the current negative discussion.

# 4.10 Employer Image

Almost all respondents mention that having the same values as the company has was a key element that attracted them to work for the company. Some of them also state the culture of their company as a key feature that attracted them. Another aspect that our respondents often mention is the possibility to learn and grow in the company and to have a chance of developing their career.

When it comes to delivering the message about the image of the employer brand to applicants or current employees, most of our respondents mention that showing the right picture of the company is essential - creating a trustworthy image of the company is essential for attracting the right people. Our respondents speak about the importance of having a story and communicating the right picture of the company to employees and mainly potential employees repeatedly in the interviews. One of the respondents says:

*You don't want to end up in a situation when students get the job at Deloitte and then they find out that what you told them at the interview isn't correct.* (Deloitte 1)

Some respondents also mention that they think that it is better to wait for the right person than hiring someone just because they are in need of someone. Two respondents also state that they are aware of

the fact that maybe, for the future, they need different people than they hire now - people with different competencies to be able to react better on the changing world.

*If you look at our history the people that are attracted to banks like the financial sector, investments, lending, they know a lot about financial theory. In the future, I don't believe that this is the competence we are looking for*. (SEB 1)

Since the literature stresses the importance of interpersonal interaction for creating an employer brand image (Biswas & Suar, 2016), it is clear that employees play a crucial role in that process. With the exception of two managers, all of them have been working for the same company for more than 10 years. Therefore, they are trustworthy in the sense that they know a lot about their companies, their values and their culture. Because of that, they can provide interested stakeholders with the right picture about the company. Since leaders are the dominant source of information about the company for both internal (employees) and external (public and customers) stakeholders (Biswas & Suar, 2016), their role in creating employer brand image, in the long run, is crucial. Our interviews showed that managers are well aware of the responsibility they have for conveying the companies' messages to both current and potential employees. Respondents also think that to be successful in the long run regarding the attraction of the right people, employing people that share the values and the culture of their company is essential. In this role, managers are in the role of personification of organizational brand messages, thus contributing significantly to the employer brand image of their companies.

## 4.11 Other

In our research, we also asked our respondents about employee dissatisfaction and related retention of the colleagues whose dissatisfaction resulted in intention to leave their job. Based on our assessment, it is a category falling under internal employees EVP marketing but does not completely fit under any existing segment in that part of the Employer Brand Value Chain (see *Figure 2*). However, the analysis is fruitful because managers are very active in these activities.

The processes of how employees can voice their dissatisfaction are quite uniform across the companies we interviewed. The majority of respondents mention that their companies use tools like regular surveys (conducted once or more a year) that are supposed to provide feedback on the work environment and find out if employees are satisfied. Other tools managers point out are; possibility to talk to managers or even bring the thing more up, open talks in teams. Some managers also mention that they have an anonymous hotline and whistle-blower system for severe matters.

According to some managers, it is important to constantly work on retaining good people:

*That is everyday work. We try every day to keep good colleagues. We are a company that depends on its people. The main resource in a bank is the people working here.* (Swedbank 2)

Some respondents stress the importance of having a regular conversation about how people feel in the company and what they want to improve. As a reaction to having an employee who already expressed the intention to look for another job, most of our respondents say that first, they try to figure out why the person wants to leave the company. Often, they say that they can offer a different position to that person if they really want to keep them. In general, they say that it is important that employees feel for the company and want to stay for the right reason. Half of the respondents state that they don't try to retain colleagues who want to leave the company. One of the respondents states that in the long run, persuading the employee who wants to leave never works:

*In the past, we have tried to persuade these people not to leave, but if they have made up their mind, it is never a good idea. They will stop anyway. It normally takes from 1 to 2 years, and they leave anyway. So, you should be really careful about that*. (Deloitte 1)

Some respondents say that they sometimes try to retain their employees offering them either better salary or an opportunity to develop, even in other departments or teams within the company. As the most common reasons why employees/colleagues leave the company, respondents mention that not having enough opportunities to develop, not working in a suitable position, or getting an offer from a competitor.

In this segment, managers are channels through which employees can communicate their concerns as well as things they are satisfied with. They also have many possibilities of how to deal with such dissatisfaction or concerns. Their role here is very proactive and crucial. At the same time, the interviews showed us that some managers use their tools carefully because it is not always beneficial to try to keep colleagues who need a change. In this category, the manager's main role is to manage the relationship between employees and the employer. Therefore, managers are coordinators of different stakeholder aligning their views on the employer brand.

# 5. Conclusion

In this chapter, we are answering this thesis' research questions by summarizing our findings and conclusions.

**Research Question 1: What are the main activities of managers that contribute to the employer brand value creation through the employer branding process?**

For starters, managers do a spectrum of different activities for employer branding, and in this research we have only scratched the surface. To begin answering the first research question, we refer back to *Table 3* as it serves as a summary of what activities the managers that we interviewed do. In *Table 3,* we have summarized every area of the Employer Brand Value Chain that we analysed and identified the key activities that managers do within each researched area. *Table 3,* therefore*,* provides an overview of the research we have conducted. In this chapter we have summarized the managers' activities even further by identifying common denominators for activities that appeared repeatedly and narrowed it down to the activities that we concluded are the most distinctive within the managers' work. We concluded five main activities and gave them appellations:

**Being spokespersons for their brand:** A clear conclusion that we have is that managers are excellent spokespersons for their company. Managers spend a lot of their time meeting employees. By doing so they are both contributing to the development and promoting the internal EVP within their firm. This makes them highly knowledgeable about employer branding within their companies. Managers also prefer face to face meetings. Managers involved in recruiting are often also present at career fairs, seminars and networking events where they exceed at promoting or explaining their company and how it is to work there. In other words, this conclusion has confirmed that managers are the personification of the employer brand, brand promoters as well as brand owners who are a "roof" over the marketing and HR functions of their brand. The major activities are all rooted in communicating a consistent story of their brand, both internally and externally, even outside of working hours and working tasks.

**Aligning the company's and employees' views on culture and values:** Managers have in-depth knowledge about their firm's or branch's culture and values and are especially good at conveying these. Managers do this by both working with aligning the firms' employer brand with the views of the existing employees, as well as conveying the aligned story towards applicants. While doing this, managers also occupy themselves with making future predictions about what competencies, views and which values are needed for the firm in the future. For some companies, in this research namely SEB, Swedbank and Deloitte, there is not a  notable difference in terms of what they do, the biggest difference lies in the firm's values and culture. This means that employer branding is a very individualistic topic. The biggest difference among these companies is in symbolic features. These are usually the decisive factor for applicants based on their individual preferences.

**Influence and evaluate internal processes:** Regarding internal processes, our respondents often stated that they cannot directly change the framework of some categories (e.g. job design or employment reward systems), but that they can always influence the processes within. For example, in reward systems it is mostly about the distribution of rewards. If it is applicable within the firm and up to the manager, it is about combining the "hard facts" - the sales numbers for example, with the soft facts; how good is the employee with customers and how well does the employee work in a team. This goes back to the values and culture within the firm, as managers often consider these in their evaluations.

**Managing the employees' agenda:** Managers are highly active in recruitment activities, as well as activities aimed towards retaining colleagues and dealing with employees' dissatisfaction. Because of this, managers are channels through which employees can communicate their concerns as well as aspects they are satisfied with. Managers, therefore, constantly evaluate their own employer brand; activities include participation at job interviews, finding a solution if an employee is not satisfied with their current position or wants to quit. Managers convey their experiences to the HR department or whoever is responsible for recruitment so that they can provide a more accurate picture of the company for the future.

**Keeping it all together:** All activities above (Step 1 of the Employer Branding Value Chain), influence the Employer- Familiarity (Brand Awareness), Reputation and Image. Within these concepts, dealing with negative media or crisis situations is one of the managers' main activities. In order to deal with negative media, managers try to convey an as accurate picture as possible of how the brand operates, while also trying to steer the discussion towards the brand's future plans and CSR. These activities are directed towards the public but also towards the current employees, as they are considered by managers to be the most important stakeholder in employer brand building activities.

**Research Question 2: Which part(s) of the Employer Branding Value Chain do managers perceive to be the most relevant for their work in the employer brand value creation?**

Our research shows that all areas we researched in Step 1 and 2 of the Employer Branding Value Chain are, with one exception, clearly relevant for managers and their work. This is because managers are knowledgeable in all these fields and can, to some extent, influence all of them. We have concluded that managers consider communication to be the most significant element in their work. The topic of communication appeared repeatedly throughout the interviews in different segments of the Employer Branding Value Chain. Since the activities including communication in the broadest sense (i.e. both means of communication and the content that is communicated) are intertwined in all segments of the model, we concluded only the most relevant segments of the Employer Branding Value Chain where the communication was perceived by managers as the most crucial aspect. Those are, within the first step of the Employer Branding Value Chain, Target Applicants/Employees segment in the EVP/Identity Positioning part of the model, and the whole part about the External EVP applicants Marketing and the Internal EVP employee Marketing. The relevance of the second step of the Employer Branding Value Chain results from its tight connection to the External EVP applicants Marketing and the Internal EVP

employee Marketing segments of the model. Within EVP/identity positioning specifically, we conclude that the Nature of Labor Market Competition is almost irrelevant because managers did not report any direct activities that would influence it. However, we concluded that they passively gather information, which makes it somewhat relevant.

In the EVP/identity positioning part of Employer Branding Value Chain, the necessity of proper communication turned out to be the most significant concern for managers. The segment of **Target applicant/employees** is perceived by managers to be highly relevant for the future development of the company. In this area, the choice of communication channels is the most important for managers. As a reminder from the theoretical background, an EVP is a desired or an ideal employer identity, in other words, how the company wants to be perceived by current employees and future employees. This means that the managers for example can control how the company is perceived by communicating the company's culture and values to employees and applicants. Managers perceive that this way they can influence the firm's choice of new recruits, in other words, the target applicants. As concluded in the analysis, competence is less important, while the personal values of applicants are more important. Managers involved in the recruitment process are gatekeepers for their organization. This means that managers deem and decide if an applicant fits the firm's culture. At the same time they act as architects for the future of their firm, by deeming what applicant attributes are the most promising. Managers gather information about the applicants during job interviews, usually in face to face meetings. We have also concluded that the nature of labour market competition is the least relevant for managers, as managers cannot influence it. The only thing managers can do regarding the nature of labour market competition is to gather information about the current and future status of it.

In meetings with employees, managers consider communication to be a crucial tool for aligning views of different stakeholders. Part of their job is to manage colleagues that are dissatisfied with their current position. In other words, managers are also working on retaining colleagues/employees. This is done through constant communication. The earlier the manager knows of an employee's dissatisfaction, the earlier the manager can collaborate and work on a solution. As a distinctive message in the interviews, sometimes underlying, sometimes expressed explicitly, we noticed that managers perceive employees as the most important resource for a company, the whole **Internal Employees EVP Marketing** segment of Employer Branding Value Chain is therefore perceived as very relevant by the managers.

When it comes to promoting the company externally, managers perceive that they promote their firm's EVP in meetings with potential applicants at fairs, networking events and business meetings. Similar to aligning the views internally, managers consider it important to do the same thing externally towards target applicants - specifying what the job and company culture is about so that the future employees do not feel dissatisfied. We have also concluded that some managers deal with media attention in external EVP marketing. Managers perceive that this is relevant because negative media attention can have a significant impact on employer reputation and image, both internally and externally. While media attention is an external factor and managers cannot directly influence it, managers can still decide how and what to communicate in reaction to the given situation on behalf of their firm. Therefore, the whole

**External Applicants EVP Marketing** is considered to be a highly relevant segment of the Employer Branding Value Chain.

# 6. Discussion

The ambition of this study was to close the research gap in the area of managers' contribution to employer branding, a research area that was deemed to be rather under-researched. The study focused on analysing the activities of managers in their everyday work and how these activities fit within the framework of theoretical concepts incorporated in the Employer Brand Value Chain. The hypothesis was that there are activities and functions in managers' work that contribute to the employer brand value creation. Interviewing eight managers in different companies that are distinguished as top employer brands provided an understanding of a diverse spectrum of activities that managers in these companies do perform. Despite the different area of expertise of interviewed managers, we were able to identify activities that are common for all respondents. The results of this research reveals that managers are a highly active element in the employer branding process, even if their job position is not directly connected to any formal role that deals with employer branding in a company. The main activities of managers were identified as; being a spokesperson for the brand, aligning companies' and employees' views on culture and values, influencing and evaluating internal processes, managing the employees' agenda and keeping it all together.

To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine the activities of managers in relation to the Employer Branding Value Chain by Theurer et al. (2018). To better understand how managers fit in the Employer Brand Value Chain, we identified four roles of managers in employer branding processes, based on different theoretical concepts. The roles we identified were promoters, brand owners, coordinators and personification of the employer brand. The list of roles is not exhaustive. It only contains the roles that we identified as the most significant, based on patterns in the theories. There is little evidence in the literature on criteria that a person or a group of people should fulfil in order to be the most suitable for managing the employer brand. It is, therefore, impossible to make a conclusion on whether it should be managers. However, the literature suggest that it could be useful to brand an employer through employees (Rampl and Kenning, 2012). Our research found that managers do brand their employer through everyday work. Therefore, they are most certainly a group of employees that should be considered by companies to be used more consciously in employer branding efforts.

One aim of this study was to test the Employer Branding Value Chain's validity. This was achieved by answering the second research question – what is perceived by managers to be the most relevant part. By researching the activities of managers within each segment of the model, we indirectly researched if managers, and therefore, practitioners agree with the Employer Branding Value Chain by Theurer et al. (2018). Even without prior knowledge of the model, the managers talked about several of the fields within the model and their answers often directly corresponded with the literature. The model, therefore, proved to be relevant for managers. While narrowing down our findings to determine the most relevant part, we concluded that **communication** was perceived as the most relevant factor. This could have to do with that all employer branding at its basis is about conveying the "right" message to the receiver. The results and conclusions of this thesis strengthen the model's validity in practice.

The findings of this thesis prove the significant role of activities of managers in building an employer brand, presumed by authors before the study was conducted. Therefore, the data collected in this research also proves the relevance of the Employer Branding Value Chain in practice. Overall, these findings were not unexpected in the sense that it was presumed that the complexity and the nature of the work of managers provide a wide base for identifying specific activities that contribute to the employer branding. At the same time we managed to create categories or groups of those activities which helped to narrow down this wide topic and revealed some patterns that can be tackled by practitioners that manage an employer brand. We also discovered that there are some specific activities that are not used for employer branding purposes as it would be presumed. For example, most managers do not use networking activities for actively acquiring new talents. Nevertheless, the study showed that managers perceive employer branding activities to be their responsibilities, even if it is formally not part of their job description, which provides their employers with a good base for further developing this area of their work.

## 6.1 Implications and Recommendations

The most recent literature explains a growing interest in the field of employer branding, which was displayed in this research. Companies are aware of the benefits of a strong employer brand and act accordingly. Some companies have specialized departments or jobs devoted exclusively to this topic. However, as the literature suggests, it is often unclear where the ultimate responsibility for building the employer brand lies. Our research suggests that it is difficult to state whether managers within a firm should solely be responsible for the employer brand. Based on our research, we identified that managers' work has an impact on almost all segments of the Employer Branding value Chain. We also identified that managers have all of the roles we selected based on the literature. Therefore, it can be a matter of choice, in which activities and roles managers decide to put more effort. It is also dependent on specific attributes of their work. Some managers work more with external subjects, some managers are more oriented on activities towards current employees. Either way, the space for developing the managers' capabilities in employer branding is vast.

Although this study was conducted with companies performing within the business sector, the findings did not suggest that the results would not be usable in other sectors. The findings should also be relevant for managers with different job descriptions, as long as they conduct similar activities as described in our conclusion. The findings of this thesis can contribute considerably to the development and evaluation of employer branding for practitioners as well as further academic research in the field.

**Recommendations for practitioners**
After having conducted this research and in the light of our conclusions, we re-affirm that managers are, among others, excellent ambassadors for their brand, as they are a personification of everything the brand stands for. Our conclusion is therefore to let managers be representatives for the brand as much as possible, especially when recruiting target applicants and dealing with retaining colleagues. That way they can deliver a direct, trustworthy and well-informed message about their employers to interested

stakeholders. Managers therefore need to work closely with the Human Resource department, or whoever is responsible for applicants as well as current employees that might be dissatisfied with their current position.

Contrary to the Employer Branding Value Chain, which does not cover the public (despite the fact that some researchers include it in the target groups of employer branding), we have concluded that managers consider the public to be a target of employer branding. Their activities are not limited to applicants or employees. This is important regarding media attention that might affect the employer brand. Our recommendation for this is to spend more time and thought into developing the EVP to be aligned with the potential media attention, to either serve as a counter-weight if negative or to capitalize on it if positive.

**Recommendations for the Employer Branding Value Chain**
We have conducted the research within the framework of the Employer Branding Value Chain, and it showed its relevancy for the work on managers. However, in some parts, it was difficult to separate the activities of managers. Some activities were overlapping. For example, managers talked about the necessity of explaining the company's values and culture in several segments on the model. We concluded that the model is usable for managers. However, a model of employer branding activities for managers would be useful. For the current model, we have identified two new areas that do not fit in when it comes to how managers work with employer branding. These could be named Media attention and Retaining Colleagues. Therefore, we suggest introducing these categories in the Employer Branding Value Chain under the categories of External Applicants EVP Marketing and Internal Employees EVP Marketing.

Further, we identified an area that is barely significant in the work of managers - the Nature of Labour Market Competition. This study, therefore, reinforces the recommendation for the combination of the Nature of Labour Market Competition and Points of Parity/Difference segments into one category in step 1 of the Employer Branding Value Chain, as both are highly dependent on each other. We can also suggest to separate the Target Applicants/Employees and make it two categories within the EVP. Since the process for attracting target applicants is different from the process for retaining colleagues, they should be two different areas of research.

## 6.2 Limitations of the Study

Apart from the limitations of our method and our theoretical framework, this study has other possible limitations. First, when talking about the recruitment process, based on the relevant literature which does not distinguish between recruiting from internal (other departments or branches within the same company) and external resources, we did not make that distinction either. There is a chance that processes for both internal and external hiring may differ in some details. However, we did not consider the details to be of significance to our findings. Second, half of our respondents were from the banking sector. This may render our data somewhat less general. We tried to reduce this limitation by

interviewing managers working in a different managerial position in the banks. Finally, we interviewed managers that are working for companies in Sweden. Managers in different working environments and other cultural backgrounds may have a different approach to some activities we researched.

## 6.3 Recommendations for Further Research

Future research on managers in other industries, in different positions or with different job descriptions would be of interest to support the generalizability of the conclusions. Following the findings, some amendments should be suggested for the Employer Brand Value Chain to fit the needs of managers. Second, a comparative study of potential and existing employees may provide a relevant data for the comparison of the perception of managers' activities from themselves with the perceptions of the side that receives the outputs of their efforts. Third, more research in the area of employer branding ownership is necessary in order to conclude whether managers should ultimately be responsible for building the employer brand in their companies. Research that would determine the criteria for this concept that is a subject of many theoretical discussion would be highly relevant. Fourth, in the financial sector, specifically within banks, there is an ongoing change regarding employer branding. This change is happening due to automatization and digitalization, which terminates current positions and pushes the sector into a new direction that is more customer-centric. Maintaining a strong employer brand is important for the banks, as they must be appealing to new employees with different qualities. This trend would be worth researching.

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# Appendix

## Questionnaire

**HR – Human Resources Manager**
**M – Anyone in a management position**

**Some of the questions are for HR Managers or employees with a bigger understanding of employer branding. These are marked with "(HR)". Other questions are for anyone in a management position only, these are marked with "(M)".**

1.   Tell us a little bit about yourself
     - What do you do?
     - How long have you worked here?
     - What made you want to work here? Were your expectations fulfilled? (Employer Image)

2.   Why do you think so many graduates want to work in your company?

3.   Do you think that your work contributes to the overall brand awareness of your organization? How?

4.   What are the benefits of working at your firm?

5.   Employer branding is a process including both external and internal activities aiming to communicate and promote what makes the company different and desirable to potential employees. This is a very broad question so feel free to interpret it as it suits you. Do you know if and how your company does this? Are you aware of any specific activities?
     - Do you get any guidance or training in employer branding area from your company? **(M)**
     - Do you (or your company) consciously align employees views of the corporate brand and their behavior with what is promoted externally? **(HR)**

6.   Does your company have any values or attitudes that you want your employees or applicants to have?
     - How do you ensure that you hire the employees that share those values? **(HR)**
     - Can you personally make sure applicants have these values or qualities before they are hired? **(M)**
     - If yes, do you usually do it? And how?

7. Are you sometimes promoting your company as part of your job?
   - o   If yes, in what situations?

8. Do people outside of your organization ask about your company?
   - o   If yes, what things about your company do you communicate or say to them?

9. Do you think you attract the right people? As a manager and as a company?
   - o   If yes, what is the key to attracting the right people?
     - § Do you feel that you <u>should</u> actively engage in attracting potential employees?
   - o   If no, why not?

10. What makes your company different from other companies in your industry?  Do you know what makes applicants choose your company instead of others?
    - o   (If you are a bank, what makes your bank different)
    - o   Do you do any activities that contribute to this?
    - o   Do you do something to make sure your workplace stands out as a nice place to work at?

11. Do you intentionally try to attract talents during networking? Are you personally actively doing something?
    - o   Did you ever get an employee through networking?
    - o   If yes, how? What do you tell them?
    - o   If no, why not?

12. Was there a situation when the expectations of new employees you attracted were not met?
    - o   If yes, what was the reason?
    - o   How did you react?

13. Can you yourself influence a reward system in your company or your department/branch?

14. Can you yourself influence the job design of your staff?
    - o   Can you influence your own job design?

15. How can your employees (staff) voice their dissatisfaction? What is the process?

16. What do you do to retain your colleagues? Have you ever managed to retain an employee (staff) that wanted to leave?
    - o   If not, what would you do it if there would be such a situation?