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EMPLOYER BRAND AND THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS

Leadin Oy

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ABSTRACT

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Leadin is a company that designs and builds digital services. Based in Tampere with offices also in Helsinki, Germany and the UK, Leadin is experiencing fast growth, which makes attracting new talent to the company increasingly important and timely. The present thesis aimed to find out how this could be done better. The objective was to ascertain how Leadin's employer brand is viewed, how well their recruitment process works currently, and what types of job seekers would find Leadin as a good employer. 12 most recently recruited Leadin employees were interviewed for this thesis with the data analysed first using content analysis methods, and further using service design methods of service blueprint and personas.

The analysis showed Leadin's employer brand to be internally strong with a distinct personality. Employees were motivated and happy especially about the workplace community, culture, atmosphere and flexibility. However, Leadin was shown to be not very well known in the job market, and it struggles to make its main concept easily understood. This poses challenges for Leadin's marketing. The data showed Leadin's recruitment process to work well, receiving great feedback for their interviews and feedback to practical assignments. Based on the interview data, three job applicant personas were also produced.

The research concluded in development suggestions for enhancing Leadin's recruitment process and employer brand with a new service blueprint that aims to be faster and more agile, plans to raise Leadin's awareness levels, as well as employing an employee value proposition to be used as a commitment to excellence for the current workforce and attracting new talent to the company. A large-scale employer brand study for all employees is suggested, as well as continuous feedback from all applicants in Leadin's recruitment process.

Key words: employer brand, recruitment process, service blueprint, personas

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ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMS

TAMK	Tampere University of Applied Sciences
TUT	Tampere University of Technology
UX	user experience
UI	user interface
SW	software
EVP	employee value proposition

1 INTRODUCTION

Leadin is a company that designs and builds digital services, such as digital platforms and user interfaces. Their mission is to help their clients deliver products and services with outstanding User Experience. Founded in May 2009, and now with offices in Finland, Germany and the UK, they have a multidisciplinary production crew of over 80 people, including user researchers, business consultants, service and UI/UX designers, system and software architects, front-end developers and quality assurance experts. (Leadin 2017.)

Working in close cooperation with their clients, the production crew innovate, design and build products and services that meet their customers' needs and fulfil the value proposition. Leadin calls this *service production*. They have a three-step production cycle: *Pre-production* involves intensive user research followed by business/concept design work, *Production* commits to painstaking UX design and SW development, while *Post-production* sees the finished product deployed to the customer, supported with training and various life-cycle management. (Leadin 2017.)

As examples of the many clients and projects Leadin has in their portfolio, there is Cygate, for whom they developed a network system for monitoring and managing immense amounts of hardware and software; Sandvik, whose drilling products received an automatic positioning feature; and Ensto, whose ventilation management offering Leadin modernized and supplemented with a web-based solution for remote control. (Leadin 2017.)

Leadin is proud of having a very dedicated, professional and fun-loving work community that aims to excel and exceed expectations. This #LeadinCrew is at the front and centre of their aim to attract even more talent to their company. How well this is communicated to potential employees is still a good question. Moreover, which types of employees would actually find being part of #LeadinCrew as a good and natural fit in accordance with their ambitions and motivations?

1.1 Thesis topic

The topic of this thesis is about employer branding—a fairly new concept, coined in the mid-90s. It has become exceedingly important for employers to be mindful and purposeful about the image they present of themselves to potential employees in order to successfully attract the correct talent to the company. In Finland, this war for talent is especially topical among the ever-growing ICT and software industries, which are experiencing rapid growth.

The situation is the same for Leadin. As their business is booming, there is a pressure to find new talent to meet the growing work load of an expanding clientele. In the face of this situation, Leadin wants to make sure that their employer brand is well communicated to potential employees and taken into consideration in recruitment efforts. To make this communication even clearer, they are also interested in identifying the different personalities that find Leadin as an attractive employer.

The newness of this thesis is the attempt to see the employer brand and recruitment process as a *service* and analyse it using service design methods. Using a *service blueprint* to fine-tune the recruitment process and *personas* to target the right talent could be very useful tools for other growing companies to consider.

1.2 Objective and research questions

After discussions with Leadin's Chief Commercial Officer Ville Tuominen and their new Talent Management Specialist Iina Korpivaara, the current management problem for the company was articulated as "What can we do better to attract great talent to the company?". This leads to three research questions: (1) How is Leadin's employer brand perceived? (2) What does Leadin's current recruitment process look like? (3) Which segments of employment seekers find Leadin as an attractive employer?

Answering these research questions, this thesis features a description of Leadin's perceived employer brand, a service blueprint of Leadin's recruitment process, and examples of Leadin's possible job seeker *personas*.

1.3 Working methods and data

The research was carried out using qualitative methods. Qualitative data was gathered through interviews with Leadin's most recently recruited employees, focusing on their perceptions about Leadin, experiences through the recruitment process and motivations for applying for their jobs. The interviews were semi-structured, which sees the interviewer following a guide of set questions, with the ability to follow topical trajectories in the conversation, possibly straying from the guide when it feels appropriate (Cohen & Crabtree 2006).

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for relevant parts. The data was analysed with a deductive approach using content analysis methods. The data was coded, categorized thematically and tabulated.

The interview data was further analysed using service design methods. *Service blueprint* was used as a method to describe the recruitment process, and *personas* to segment the customers of this service (i.e. job applicants).

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Recruitment marketing

Job advertising is not something reserved only for Human Resource Management – it is increasingly approached from the marketing perspective. In fact, Łącka-Badura & Jolanta (2015, 10) see that recruitment advertising now shares more with commercial advertising than ever. Organizations can be seen as providers of *employment products*, jobs, while employees can be seen as *employment customers* on the look for employment suppliers and choosing between them similarly as a consumer choosing a product.

The classic approach to marketing strategy involves the *Marketing Mix* (the four Ps) as a set of factors and actions under an organization's control to create customer value and profitable customer relationships (Kotler & Armstrong 2016, 74). Dale (2003, according to Łącka-Badura & Jolanta 2015, 11-12) has interpreted the four Ps to the recruitment context, and shows that the marketing mix is a concept more than well suited to analyse recruitment marketing: **Product** refers to the *job vacancy*, which should be appropriately 'packaged' and 'presented' to its potential 'consumers' (applicants) with certain qualities, features and values: **Price**, from the point of view of a candidate, is the cost of applying for the offered job (the energy, time and effort in the recruitment process); **Promotion** has to see the recruitment message carefully designed, and the method well thought-out, so as to reach the target audience of potentially suitable candidates willing to apply; **Place** means the medium, channel and location of the recruitment message and process, which should be placed effectively.

Adopting a marketing perspective to recruiting is called for especially where there is a huge competition between companies for attaining great talent. In the IT industry, this competition is only getting stronger.

2.2 Recruitment process

The recruitment process varies quite much between organizations and available jobs. Although it is not necessary to go in-depth to the whole process of recruiting, the "usual"

process with its four main phases of planning, execution, decision-making and follow-up, is presented in Table 1 below (Kortetjärvi-Nurmi & Murtola 2016, 166-167).

TABLE 1: The recruitment process

1. Planning	2. Execution
➢ initial mapping ➢ job description ➢ criteria for selection ➢ selection of channels	➢ job advertisement ➢ answering queries ➢ processing applications ➢ interviews ➢ appraisals
3. Decision-making	4. Follow-up
➢ selection ➢ notifying applicants ➢ announcing the selection ➢ work contract	➢ on-boarding ➢ trial period ➢ assessing the selection

No matter what the recruitment process looks like, successful recruiting begins from good leadership. According to the views of a recruitment consultant Hannu-Matias Nurmi (Kortetjärvi-Nurmi & Murtola 2016, 169), finding the best solution for recruiting comes from the existing staff of an organization. Happy and content employees provide the best material for building the employer brand, which should be taken into consideration when building a recruitment plan.

2.3 Key concepts

The key concepts relating to this thesis include *employer brand*, and the service design methods *service blueprint* and *personas*.

2.3.1 Employer brand

A *brand* is a very common term in the marketing environment referring to a name, term, design, or other feature that differentiates a product or corporation from others in the market. At its simplest the term refers to "anything carrying a distinct identity, and the reputation, good, or bad, associated with that identity" (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 57). A brand represents everything a product or a service *means* to a consumer (Kotler & Armstrong 2016, 274).

The term *employer brand* is a more recent one, used publicly for the first time in 1996 by S. Barrow, used at first as a means of bridging HR and marketing and as a strategical tool of building employers' reputation. However, it soon became an integral concept to organizations' HR activities, taking into account the entire employment experience (Barrow & Mosley 2005, xvi, 8).

Every employing organization has an employer brand because it is defined by how people see you as an employer whether it is managed or not, positive or negative, accurate or misguided. The employer brand is therefore much more than intended brand messages from the employer – it is shaped by what people hear about them and experience them. (Mosley 2014, 9.)

Reputation is therefore an important part of the employer brand. According to Aula & Heinonen (2002, 32), reputation is built on stories: people pass along the stories they feel relevant to a company's success or failure. Reputation is not only a mental image or impressions in a person's mind, it has a basis in action and experiences as well. The reputation of an organization is formed in the interaction of company actions, the experiences that convey the actions and the impressions of those actions. (Aula & Heinonen 2002, 36-37.)

Barrow & Mosley (2005, 58-60) presents the employer brand as benefits promised for the employee. These include *functional benefits* (payment for work performed, working environment and equipment), *emotional benefits* (emotional attachment to employer, value derived from the whole work experience), and *higher order benefits* (purpose and value statements of the organization translated as something meaningful for employees).

Furthermore, integral to the employer brand is *personality*, which in employer branding comes down to the current culture within the organization as well as the shared aspirations of its employees. Brand *positioning* and *differentiation* are also highly important. To be able to be relevant and motivating to its current employees and future candidates, an employer brand needs to be positioned to meet their needs and aspirations, as well as be differentiated from its competitors with the right brand messages and benefits to attract the right talent. (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 60-63.)

Employee value proposition (EVP) is a necessary additional concept to make employer brand management effective. The EVP describes a focused list of key qualities and benefits an employer wants to be associated with in the future (while the employer brand describes the current situation). It should describe the most defining or differentiating pillars of the employer brand in a clear, focused way that is also easy to understand. (Mosley 2014, 4.)

Putting effort in strengthening a company's employer brand is far from useless. Barrow & Mosley (2005, 69-74) propose three main benefits of having a strong employer brand: **Lower costs**, due to stronger employee engagement leading to reduced need of recruitment, higher worker retention and reduced absenteeism; **Customer satisfaction**, brought out by satisfied employees motivated to "live the brand"; and **financial results**, where increased employee satisfaction and engagement paves way to better performance and additional revenue.

Mosley (2014, 1) argues that if an employer is clear and consistent in setting out the benefits of working in one's organization, and if they deliver an employment experience in line with these promises, then the organization is more likely to develop a positive employer brand reputation, and attract, engage and retain the right people.

2.3.2 Service blueprint

The service blueprint is a tool and a method to depict, analyse and develop services. Coined in the early 80s and further augmented in later years, it allows one to see the entire service ecology of the customer journey, all the different touchpoints and channels, as well as the backstage processes in a clear visual representation. It is a comprehensive tool

for placing the customer and service stakeholders at the heart of service design and innovation projects. (Polaine, Løvlie & Reason 2013, 93.)

Two different types of service blueprints were considered for the use of this thesis and the one chosen is described by Stickdorn & Schneider (2011, 204). In this version, the service blueprint is built in rows of information. The main row is called **user action**, describing, step by step, the actions a person has to take to join, use and complete a service (the customer journey). Above it is the **physical evidence** row, showing all the physical evidence of various materials/mediums the user will receive during the service process. Below user action (divided by the *line of interaction*) is the **frontstage** row, describing the user's interactions with staff or different electronic or online mediums that provide the service. Below frontstage (divided by the *line of visibility*) is the **backstage** row, describing the actions hidden from the user's view that make the frontstage actions possible. Below backstage (divided by the line of *internal interaction*) come the **support processes** from the organization that provides the service, including planning, managing, coordinating, recruiting etc.

Another service blueprint version is found from Polaine, Løvlie & Reason (2013, 94), and is more detailed in certain aspects. Here, the *user action* row is divided to five stages (aware, join, use, develop, leave) that can include multiple steps within them and each step describing both the user action and the *experience* of the action. The frontstage and physical evidence rows are here combined below the user action row in multiple rows of *channels* that the user interacts with, dedicating a row for each different medium (including face-to-face interactions). The backstage and support processes are combined as *backstage processes,* also featuring individual rows for different organizational departments and third parties.

Both blueprint versions are based on the process of describing and outlining all of the elements involved within a service, which allows one to identify the most crucial areas of the service, as well as reveal areas of overlap or duplication (Stickdorn & Schneider 2011, 205). This makes service blueprint a wonderful tool for refining and developing services and coordinating the people and resources available.

Considering the scale, features and the number of stages in Leadin's recruitment process, the simpler blueprint version was seen a better choice for this thesis.

2.3.3 Personas

Personas is a method to describe segments, popular in service and UX design. *Personas* are fictional profiles, “characters”, representing a particular group based on their shared interests and behaviour patterns. Design teams are able to engage with these personas and take their “voices” into account in developing a service or a product. (Stickdorn & Schneider 2011, 178.)

Personas are usually developed from research insights collected from interviews, shadowing, stakeholder maps and some quantitative data. These insights can then be collated into common-interest groupings and further developed into a workable “character”. Personas can be fleshed out for example by visual representations and anecdotal profiles. The power of personas as a method for design is that it can shift focus away from abstract customer demographics and more toward the motivations, wants and needs of real people. They embody the real-world perceptions surrounding a company’s service. (Stickdorn & Schneider 2011, 178.)

The level of detail needed in persona descriptions differs slightly between service design needs and UX design needs. Personas for service design require descriptions of the persona as a human being (background story, common behaviour, a quote, etc.), but also as a stakeholder in context of a service (interests, expectations, etc.) (Stickdorn & Schneider 2014). UX designers require even more detail with a description of the daily life in narrative form; goals, motivations, skills and knowledge within context; as well as pain points or frustrations related to the context (Siika-aho 2016, 18).

To be effective and reliable, personas do need to be based in large amounts of data of the target audience, i.e. the intended user base. The data can be compiled from qualitative and/or quantitative data, as well as primary and/or secondary data. Siika-aho (2016, 10) presents the data source options and examples of collection methods in a table seen here in Table 2.

TABLE 2. Examples of different data type sources for persona creation

	Qualitative data	Quantitative data
Primary data	User interviews Contextual inquiry User observations	Product usage data Market segmentation analysis User surveys
Secondary data	Scientific literature review Subject matter expert interviews Census data on user population	Existing survey response data Scientific research review

Although primary qualitative data has been traditionally favoured in persona creation (as it is in the present small-scale research), Siika-aho (2016, I) examines and argues for the use of secondary sources as a less time and resource-consuming method to create personas and provides recommendations to increase the perceived reliability of secondary data personas.

3 INTERVIEW FINDINGS

The primary source of data for this thesis was collected by means of interviews, conducted in early March 2017 both in the premises of Leadin's office in Tampere (Lapinniemi), as well as through Skype video calls with employees located in Helsinki. A total of 12 Leadin employees were interviewed, half recruited to Leadin within 1 to 5 months, half within 6 to 9 months before the interviews.

The selection of the most recent recruits for the interviews is mostly based on making sure Leadin's latest recruitment processes were in use in their cases, and that the process would still be reasonably fresh in their memories. The caveat to this is that new recruits can be wary to criticize their employer too much (if there would be reasons to do so) and can still be caught up in the "honeymoon" phase of acculturation to a new environment. However, the interviewees seemed quite realistic with their expectations and consequent experiences working for their new employer.

The interviews were carried out using a semi-structured method, following questions found in Appendix 1, but allowing interviewees to elaborate and the conversation to stray naturally when appropriate. Topics covered in the interviews included current feelings about Leadin as an employer, how the employer brand was perceived before being employed at Leadin, and how the recruitment process unfolded in each case. The interview audio was recorded and transcribed to textual form for relevant parts. The data was analysed with a deductive approach using content analysis methods. The data was coded, categorized thematically and tabulated. The interviewees' life situation, education background, personality and interests, as well as professional motivations and goals were used to develop three personas, discussed in chapter 5.

3.1 The best things about Leadin

The interview questions of "How do you like working for Leadin?" and "What are the best things about Leadin as a place to work?" produced many interesting answers, presented on Table 3 in categories. Grouping the answers and comments in categories made

evident that both the people who work there and the atmosphere and culture they create are on the forefront of Leadin employees' thoughts.

TABLE 3. Best things about working for Leadin

Comment	Freq.
THE TEAM	**15**
"People here are nice, open, approachable, empathetic, supportive, share knowledge and help"	5
"People here are considerate and respect your opinions and ideas - there's a sense of equality"	4
"People here are experts, professionals, know their stuff and have various skills"	3
"There is a sense of community here - we're a team, a family"	3
WORKPLACE ATMOSPHERE AND CULTURE	**15**
"The atmosphere in the office is very good, inspiring, chill, relaxed, comfortable"	7
"The work culture is more inviting, and less about individual accomplishments"	2
"There's a sense of trust in your skills and expertise"	2
"A low hierarchy/bureaucracy. It's very easy to talk to bosses"	2
"Our teamwork is very consultative; we develop things together"	1
"The Leadin community is accepting of different cultures"	1
SENSE OF FREEDOM, FLEXIBILITY AND VARIETY	**8**
"There's a freedom and flexibility in working hours, location, and tools to use"	3
"There's a great variety of tasks and interesting cases"	3
"I have influence on the tasks I do and what my job consists of"	2
MISCELLANEOUS	**20**
"Leadin's method and approach that puts end-users first is just right"	2
"The size of the company is good. Not too big, not too small"	2
"There's a sense of continuous development and improvement. We're not set in our ways"	2
"I learn a lot of new things"	2
"Internationality opens possibilities down the line"	2
"Working here is being part of the *future*. We de exciting, progressive things and continue to grow fast"	2
"Leadin leaders actually keep publishing papers. They're in touch with what's happening next"	1
"I appreciate the company-wide and office events"	1
"There are projects that are actually meaningful, like involving healthcare and children's daycare"	1
"The office in Vallila is open and flexible: contributes to people interacting with each other"	1
"Working here gives opportunities to use different technologies"	1
"Co-operation with schools and municipalities (and society in general) is important"	1
"Leadin's strong design team creates more possibilities for a SW engineer"	1
"Leadin is a cool place to be"	1

Most respondents had lots of good things to say about the people they work with. The following quotes give a good impression of how the community is experienced:

> "There's a sense of inclusion and consideration, like we're all in the same level. People aren't in their ivory towers. There's equality. Those who have been here long pay attention to me even if I'm a newer employee – I feel like I can actually have an influence on things." (male employee, age 24, translated from Finnish)

> "The culture here is more inviting and less about individual accomplishments, it's more like a team, and, I don't know, it's like a family, kinda. In my previous job, it was more like people were only out for themselves. Here it's more like nurturing and helping you get to the next step or better your skills and things like that." (female employee, age 25)

It is clear Leadin's strength as an employer is the team they have built and the culture it harbours, making it a very pleasant working environment. Another frequent topic was the sense of freedom and flexibility in terms of working hours and choosing between different offices (and countries) and working from home, as well as, the variety of work Leadin projects provide their employees.

3.2 Awareness and first impressions

Half of the 12 interviewees had not heard of Leadin until they came across a job ad or started deliberately looking for employment opportunities. This should signal a certain lack of public awareness among potential employees, which Leadin should try to tackle.

The first impressions about Leadin collected from the interviewees can be found on Table 4. The dating of these impressions range from the very beginning of the company in 2009 to hearing about it 2-4 years ago, and to making a judgement about it while looking for work right at the beginning of the recruitment process. Understandably, these impressions vary quite much, although still staying generally on the positive side. Most notably, there are misconceptions regarding the size of Leadin's software development side, which are based on impressions made about 3 years ago. Leadin's software side has grown considerably during these past years, but if these misconceptions linger they can distract some potential job seekers from considering the company.

Another thing visible from the first impressions is that Leadin fails to make a strong first impression. People find it hard to grasp what the company is about based on the information online and only make shallow remarks as a first impression. Three interviewees mentioned only getting a satisfactory picture of Leadin after their first interview in the recruitment process.

TABLE 4. First impressions of Leadin

First impression	Freq.
Leadin's focus is on UX, SW side assumed to be small (irrelevant for a SW developer)	4
Sensible and competent place to work at	2
Interesting	2
Not traditional or linear, which is a good thing	2
Based on expertise (top guys from Nokia)	2
Nice	1
Just another software company	1
Built on genuine interest and enthusiasm. The leaders see their work as important	1
Usability-led SW development company	1
Modern employer taking advantage of newest technologies	1
Huge breadth of work	1
International with global opportunities, English-speaking	1
Not too popular, but cool enough	1
A friendly environment	1
A growing company	1
A cooler place than it seems to be	1

3.3 Sources of information

Knowing where potential recruits collect their information about an employer is valuable information – it shows where employer brand communications efforts could, or should, be targeted. The sources used by the interviewees can be found in Table 5. With a sample of 12 interviews, this list is not comprehensive, but should serve as providing a general idea.

TABLE 5. Sources used to find information about Leadin

Source	Freq.
The official website	8
LinkedIn pages for Leadin and their employees	4
Friends who are employees at Leadin	3
University staff	3
Interviews during the recruitment process	3
Other social media (Twitter, Facebook)	3
Participating on a TUT project course for Leadin	2
The job ad itself	2
Leadin employees at recruitment/tech events	1
The whole recruitment process	1
Company blog	1
Google	1

Unsurprisingly, the official website is the most frequent source of information for collecting information and building an understanding about Leadin. However, as stated before, some interviewees could not form a full understanding of the company based on the website alone, but relied on the interviews to complete the picture. Although using the interviews as an opportunity to form a better understanding about a company is perfectly valid, this could still signal that Leadin may need to clarify its message on the website.

The LinkedIn environment, second most frequent on the list, should also be recognized as an important channel for data collection, more so than other social media. Leadin's own profile as well as its employees' personal profiles help job seekers widen their understanding of Leadin, and the types of people who work there. The qualifications and work history of other Leadin employees can also encourage others to apply for positions at Leadin.

The human sources of information are the next frequent information source category, including Leadin employees as job seekers' friends recommending the employer, and University staff members recommending Leadin for their students. Although Leadin does not have a far-reaching reputation, these individuals who are "on the know" of Leadin's premise serve as an invaluable asset in forming new human contacts and relationships for Leadin, i.e. new recruits.

3.4 Goals

The interviewees were quite pragmatic when answering to a question about their current goals. Most mentioned wanting to gain more experience and develop their skills in their own field, as well as gain insights from other disciplines at work at Leadin. Those who had not yet finished their degree had their thesis as a big goal.

As all interviewees were happy working for Leadin, they all felt like staying with the employer for now or at least a few years. Half of the interviewees expressed a more long-term commitment to the employer, wanting to see the company grow and develop, as well as gaining a more permanent position and advance in the corporate ladder. Only two had goals that clearly went above what Leadin could offer in the long run, but still saw their time working for Leadin as very valuable.

3.5 Areas for development

The interviewees were more hard-pressed to think of things that should be made better in the workplace, and Leadin as an employer in general. The collected ideas can be seen on Table 6. Most responses were concerned with Leadin's marketing communications and their use of different marketing channels. The main concerns were how poorly known Leadin is and how it should make its message clearer so people would be more easily introduced to Leadin. The role of different marketing channels used (website, blog, LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter) were also called to be more consistent and their roles more defined.

TABLE 6. Ideas for development

Development areas	Freq.
Marketing and communications clearer and more consistent in different channels to strengthen the public image	7
Define certain protocols better, update frameworks (as company grows)	3
On-boarding procedure	3
Hosting tech meetups, calling developers and designers together	2
Stronger and more inspiring leadership	1
Develop Leadin's business model	1
SW and UX teams could be more socially interconnected	1
Prospective applicants may not realize SW department is as big as it is	1

The second most frequent development area concerned protocols and organizational frameworks as the company continues to grow. The on-boarding procedure was one specific example of this. Although none felt like there was a huge problem "getting on board," some felt like it could be handled in a more streamlined and defined manner.

Talking to the interviewees about development areas also revealed how much employees appreciate how *responsive* Leadin is to ideas for development. One interviewee expressed feeling especially hopeful as he saw constant development in many areas – whenever a certain way of doing is deemed to be bad or unpractical it is changed. Being still a fairly young company, growing rapidly, it is very important not to be too set in your ways.

3.6 Current state of Leadin's employer brand

Interviewing 12 new employees of a company cannot possibly give an all-encompassing picture of the state of the company's employer brand. Doing this properly would require a quantitative multiple-construct study of *all* employees, managers, as well as a fair sample of job seekers. However, the interviews of the present study do give some indications and reveal issues that are relevant in pursuing to develop the brand further.

Overall, this study revealed Leadin's *personality* to be the strongest construct in their employer brand. The community, the culture, the atmosphere all succeed in being distinctly inviting and caring, as well as relaxed and fun. Every interviewee was positively surprised by this and became part of the #LeadinCrew—some even with a heightened sense of attachment and investment. The question is, how well is this personality communicated to job seekers? Is the personality detectible by browsing Leadin's website, blog and social media? Do job ads allude to the benefits of belonging to this community?

The interviewees had only positive things to say about the working environment and equipment, especially the flexibility in choosing them. They also held in high regard the chances to learn and develop professionally. These suggest Leadin's *functional benefits* to be in a good condition. Salaries and employee benefits, although being important parts of functional benefits, were not discussed in the interviews.

Emotional benefits should also be deemed fairly strong, as the interviewees seemed genuinely rooting for Leadin as a company, and doing their best to see it succeed, develop and grow – even though some were more pragmatic (but professional) in their long-term commitment to the company.

The *higher order benefits* (meaning purpose and value statements of the organization translated as something meaningful for employees) are a bit trickier to pin down. Leadin has not (to my knowledge) formulated proper purpose or value statements that would be ready at hand, but they have set four core values: getting things done, joy, love & caring, learning. Most interviewees had not encountered these values in written form, but still thought they were realized well enough in the everyday life of working for Leadin, which is definitely positive. However, these values are fairly basic in nature and do not wake much meaningful commitment. For one interviewee, the values were more like *prerequisites* for a worthwhile work environment.

Based on the interviews, Leadin enjoys a very good *reputation*: the professionals and academics who know Leadin recommend it to people who are searching for work. However, the reputation is not in a particularly wide circulation, which is definitely better than having a bad reputation in wide circulation. A good but narrow reputation is a good foundation to build on.

4 BLUEPRINT OF THE CURRENT RECRUITMENT PROCESS

The interviews included questions about how each recruit experienced Leadin's recruitment process. The answers were categorized by process stages and combined to produce a unified service blueprint, Missing pieces in the blueprint were supplemented by talks with Leadin's Talent Management Specialist Iina Korpivaara.

The blueprints were created using an online tool at canvanizer.com for ease of use and convenience. The interviews revealed (mainly) two different recruitment processes in use: one for the software team, and one for the design/UX team. The former is accessible through the link https://canvanizer.com/canvas/rWF9OJ135uizP, while the latter is accessible here: https://canvanizer.com/canvas/rjkToOmbnxba7. Both blueprints are identical up until the first interview in the process, where the software team opts for two different interviews with a separate coding assignment, and the design team mainly gets by with a single interview.

4.1 Finding Leadin

The first step in user actions is gaining awareness of Leadin as a company. However, half of the 12 interviewed new recruits did *not* have previous knowledge of Leadin before coming across a job advertisement or deliberately searching for possible employers in their field of work. This is, of course, less than ideal, although understandable for an SME still breaking out.

The danger here is that if Leadin is not already in job seekers' minds when they decide to look for work, there is no guarantee they would ever find Leadin. One of the interviewees said he found Leadin "…on like the third or fourth page of a google search" while looking for work. As there is a joke about the second page of a google search being *the perfect place to dump a body* (because no one ever goes there), finding a good result from the third or fourth page might be considered just lucky.

From the other six who did have previous knowledge of Leadin, some had personal contacts inside the company, two had personally participated in a Leadin case part of a TUT

project course, one had met Leadin representatives while participating in a startup tutoring program called New Factory, and one took initiative to find out which software companies operated in Tampere before it was time to apply for jobs. Personal contacts, cooperation with Universities and programs like New Factory are important channels to utilize and keep in use, while other channels should be considered to raise general awareness of Leadin. This is primarily a marketing issue.

The second (or for some, the first) step in user actions is finding (or coming across / hearing about) a job opportunity at Leadin, the different channels used by the interviewees are presented in Table 7. Personal recommendations and job ads were the most usual ways of finding a Leadin opportunity. Job ads were found from the official website, LinkedIn, University of Tampere website and a share by a Leadin employee on Aalto university students' Facebook group.

TABLE 7. Finding Leadin as a possible employer option

Channel	Freq.
Recommendation through personal contact	4
Contact from Leadin after a TUT project	2
Job ad on website	2
Job ad on LinkedIn	1
Job ad on UTA website	1
Job ad shared on a University Facebook group	1
Leadin looking for talent at Webbisauna	1

Two interviewees were approached by Leadin after having been part of a TUT project course with Leadin, which is a very convenient way to recruit talent you have already been familiarized with. One met and talked with Leadin representatives at a tech meetup Webbisauna and heard they were hiring new talent, peaking his interest. Going in person where the job seekers and prospective employees are, or is also a valuable way to get new recruits. The added benefit of these are the opportunities to verbally explain Leadin's concept and the job opportunities they can offer, when relying on the online presence alone has proven challenging for some to form an understanding of Leadin.

4.2 Recruitment interviews and practical task

When the applicants send their cover letter and CV, HR does a preliminary check on them for suitability. If the documents seem acceptable, they are passed along to a senior employee of either software or UX design to check more closely if they are qualified based on experience and education. Promising applicants are then invited for an interview.

This is the stage where Leadin succeeds wonderfully. The interviewees had a lot of good things to say about the experiences they had with their interviews. Those applying for software positions had a two-stage interview process: the first interview is more general in nature, checking how well the applicant would fit in the Leadin culture, while the second is more technical, concerning skills and experience.

Between the two interviews is a coding assignment done at home, of which, after turning in the finished assignment, the applicant receives thoughtful feedback. Those who applied for a UX designer traineeship had the pleasure of experiencing a speed-dating interview consisting of three separate interviews, including a practical assignment.

The regular interviews were found warm, human, enlightening and showing genuine interest. For a few interviewees, the interview experience was enough to sway Leadin as a top employer choice, especially next to a more disappointing experience:

> "[The recruiters from another company] were focusing a lot on hard skills, and they didn't ask more human questions about myself or my hobbies. Whenever I would meet someone from the company for an interview it would be someone different who wouldn't know about me or the previous interviews, so they'd ask the same things over and over again. They would ask me things that were in my CV and LinkedIn, which means they probably didn't read them. But when I had an interview with Leadin it was visible that they had read my LinkedIn, they asked me questions about experiences in my past, my hobbies – really personal questions about myself. That made the difference at that point for me to make Leadin my first choice." (male employee, age 32)

The speed-dating route was also met with positive feedback:

> "[It] was very different, I had never done something like that before. It made me more able to connect with all three of my interviewers. I think it's one of my favourite interviews that I've ever done, probably, just because I had so much fun – it didn't feel like an interview. It seemed like they genuinely

> wanted to get to know me and […] it seemed like I was already part of this group, that's what it felt like. […] I was thinking that these are my people, though, like I feel like I fit in there immediately." (female employee, age 25)

Leadin has clearly tapped into something special in their recruitment interviews, which does not require much intervening, and the excellent experiences do not stop here. The practical task, which for most SW applicants is a coding assignment, was also met with praise, especially for the very detailed and beneficial feedback sent to the applicant:

> [The feedback] pointed out what are the good things and what are the bad things, what are the things that can be improved. That's quite valuable to me, because even if you didn't pass the assignment, you would actually learn something. I had also taken other assignments [for other prospective employers], and sometimes there's no response, don't get any reply […] you're thinking should I contact them or maybe they are just busy […]. This is a terrible feeling. But in the case of Leadin it only took them one week, […] and I got very valuable feedback. At that moment I told myself, even if I wouldn't be accepted at this time, Leadin is still a very good company because they respected what I have done. Seriously, this impressed me very much." (male employee, age 36)

4.3 The final stretch

The final stages in the recruitment process raises no special issues. If the applicant is successful enough in the practical task, he/she is invited to a second interview, usually with the director of SW or UX. This is followed by an offer or acceptance, the contract and finally some sort of on-boarding procedure. Like previously mentioned in development areas, the interviewees had mixed experiences about on-boarding.

The problem of on-boarding has been recognized and is continually seeing some changes. Currently new recruits get a sheet of paper in their mail that helps them through their first day(s). There is also a to-do list on the office project management software (Trello) on things to take care of and to go through in the on-boarding process. New recruits are also assigned a mentor to help them get acquainted with how everything works at the office. The mentorship program has received mixed opinions, because for some it works perfectly, but in some cases the mentor proves to be far too busy to devote him/herself to the newcomer's needs. In these cases, however, the whole office community is available for any question, although finding a person with the relevant information may take a while.

5 PERSONAS OF PROSPECTIVE EMPLOYEES

The interviews with the 12 Leadin employees produced data about their backgrounds, personalities, interests and goals, which allowed three personas to be formed (see Appendix 2). Two of them, “Mikko Keränen” and “Silvio Leone,” are software engineers, and one, “Jenni Alanen,” is a UX designer. Mikko, almost done with his thesis, is looking for his first real job as a software engineer, Silvio, from Italy, is looking for a senior position, and Jenni is in need of a traineeship position. All three personas are illustrated for the purpose of this thesis by Laura Kuismanen.

The reliability and effectiveness of these personas should be put into question. Qualitative data from 12 people can, at best, produce an indicative result, not a definitive representation. A more reliable set of personas would have required a wider set of both qualitative and quantitative data, which were unattainable considering the limitations of this thesis. Appropriate personas would also have a deeper level of detail, although the provided level is adequate for service design needs.

However, these personas can still be useful tools to consider several aspects of the recruitment process: Which marketing texts in job ads would they find especially appealing? Where would they look for and find Leadin and their available positions? What kind of interactions would win them over? These thought exercises are valuable in trying to develop the recruitment process more towards a service that leaves the applicants satisfied.

6 DEVELOPMENT SUGGESTIONS

Analysing the interview data and working on the service blueprints produced ways to further develop Leadin's recruitment process and employer brand. This chapter presents a revised blueprint with several development ideas and suggestions for the company's consideration.

6.1 The recruitment process

To be fair, aside from the awareness problem of the first steps, Leadin's current recruitment process works well. The interviews and the coding assignment, being the most important steps in the process, have received especially good feedback, which is a wonderful sign. However, what the present study does not account for is the number of people who are lost to other employers before Leadin's recruitment process is complete. According to Korpivaara (2017), this happens occasionally, and each case is a lost opportunity and a waste of recruitment effort. Considering the competition for talent in the IT industry, this is a matter that should be taken seriously. Having a faster process would be a clear advantage, and thus something to pursue.

The following updated recruitment process is made for the software side of Leadin, since the UX design team's process is already faster and more streamlined. The blueprint can be accessed through the link https://canvanizer.com/canvas/rKPbxGZdAPsyd or Appendix 3, where it is augmented with arrows and lines better implying connections between different actions.

6.1.1 New awareness plan

As an answer to Leadin's problems with awareness among job seekers I suggest two major focus areas: press releases to be picked up by local and professional publishers, whether online or print, and organizing events for students and professionals that showcase Leadin's expertise (that can also be used as fodder for press releases). It is important to be confident enough to be more open about what Leadin knows how to do well, and

showing how advanced it is to attract the brightest talent. This can be done by reaching the talent directly at events, or indirectly through media.

Having a clear social media strategy is vital in building and maintaining a positive employer brand, but it should not be relied on as the only way of trying to raise awareness. Salli & Takatalo (2014, 42) remind that organizations will gain followers in social media *after* they have first successfully caught their attention and gained recognition with a positive employer brand. Growing follower base mean job ads will start reaching even passive job seekers, which is also an advantage. However, gaining the required recognition is mostly done outside social media.

6.1.2 New job ads plan

The "home" of Leadin's job ads should stay on their website, then shared on Facebook, LinkedIn and academic networks. It would be counterproductive to post job ads in every possible channel as it could seem desperate and diminish the exclusivity and status of Leadin's employer brand. Additionally, job seekers could be more thrilled to apply for jobs they have "found" themselves, rather than those that seem like everyone is already applying for.

However, I'm suggesting using Google AdWords SEO to make it easier for job seekers to find Leadin's website and the available positions in a Google search (in addition to the more general awareness plan). The website should also be modified to make the premise of the company clearer and have it communicate what working for Leadin would mean for an employee. Leadin should formulate a clear EVP and use it to "sell" the careers they offer. An example EVP is discussed later in subsection 6.2.1.

6.1.3 Changes in steps

The new process would feature three interviews instead of two, but still making the process faster. The first interview will be pretty much the same as it is now, evaluating how the candidate would fit in the company culture. The second interview probes technical skills and experience, and leads to a coding assignment that is done at the Leadin office

on the very same day. Accordingly, the assignment would be smaller, but the applicant would receive the same quality feedback Leadin is – and wants to be – known for. The third interview would then be only for the software director's chance to see the recruit, present an offer and negotiate a contract.

To be flexible, if the candidate is not able to stay and work on the assignment on the same day, homework assignments can also be used, but it would be good to offer the faster one-day option. Separating the technical interview from the director's interview aims to ease the director's workload and to give him a more rounded picture of the candidate by the time they finally meet.

6.1.4 Faster steps

Making the whole recruitment process as fast as possible should be a priority. Even when traditional recruitment processes take a minimum of almost 2 months (Salli & Takatalo 2014, 11), a faster process is called for and appreciated in the quick pace of the IT industry, where new talent is needed, but layoffs also common per available projects, and career decisions are made fast. The best workplace in Europe 2016, Vincit, also located in Tampere, has pushed the envelope to a recruitment process that is finished within 2 weeks from receiving an application (Vincit 2016, 5).

The time-frame of Leadin's current process is approximately a month with each big step in the process taking 1-2 weeks (but longer especially with an open application). What drags the process down is the time it takes for HR to get approvals for applications, schedule interviews and delegate feedback duties – the things that happen "backstage" of the blueprint.

The suggested updated blueprint would feature stricter time limits beginning with an immediate reply to an application (confirmation of application received), and an invitation to an interview (or a friendly decline) within 48 hours. The first interview shouldn't be scheduled further than 5 days ahead, the same with the second. Feedback for the assignment should be sent within 2 days, and final interview in 3 days after feedback, keeping the whole process in just 2-3 weeks.

A faster process is achieved with leadership and prioritizing. There should be staff who have continually reserved time to help in the recruitment process with application reviews, interviews and assignment feedback, so that scheduling and delegating these tasks would be more agile. Salli & Takatalo (2014, 10-11) remind that during the recruitment process applicants are priority clients for the recruiters – they should be given time and schedules that are agreed upon should be met. Everyone involved should realize the importance of a fast process, and not leave applicants waiting.

6.2 Enhancing the employer brand

Leadin does a lot of things right, which is evident from the happy interviewees of this thesis. The current struggle is more about making the company known and communicating all the positive aspects Leadin can offer for their employees to those who are on the job market. Once found, applying for a Leadin position should be a no-brainer.

As previously stated, Leadin enjoys a good reputation, but in a narrow circulation. As the company keeps growing, the circle is bound to also widen, especially together with a new awareness plan. Happy employees are the foundation of a good employer brand, but the influence of other storytellers, like those, who go through Leadin's recruitment process but end up not receiving/accepting a position, should not be forgotten. That is why excellence in the recruitment process is important, and continuously asking for feedback from all applicants would be a good idea. All employees, especially those involved in recruiting, should be aware of their responsibility and influence as a medium of perceived employer brand to job applicants in the recruitment process (Salli & Takatalo 2014, 43).

Outside the recruitment process, social media channels (including LinkedIn, YouTube and Facebook) are among the most important ways of influencing the employer brand, and can be influenced positively or negatively by the company itself, its employees or job applicants (Salli & Takatalo 2014, 42). A clear social media strategy is therefore also an important addition for Leadin, while the help, positive feedback and encouraging stories from their employees in social media would be invaluable.

6.2.1 A new employee value proposition

One clear way of enhancing the employer brand is by devising an EVP. It would give a clear message on the aspects Leadin wants prospective employees to know about them. It would guide the texts in job ads and the website, where the voice of the employees should be heard more clearly and easier-to-find way. The blog on the website currently allows this to a degree, but the interested party is required to fish out the relevant selling points from the mass of texts.

An EVP is not only a marketing text – it is a commitment to excellence. It is what the management want Leadin to be known for, then putting effort in reaching it and keeping it a reality. Based on the present study, the following example EVP can be devised:

> *We are a community of professionals that inspires, supports and cares for each other towards growth and development.*
>
> *We are proud of our work, which is making a better tomorrow with excellent design and better code.*
>
> *The fun, joy and positive attitude of my work environment drives me to be the best version of myself and* enjoy *today*.

The first statement underlines the love, caring and learning values of Leadin. It promises employees are respected and cared for, and their aspirations for learning and growing are supported and encouraged. The second statement commits to excellence in the quality of work Leadin does, giving the impression of continual progress in both client work and internal processes, as well as being up to date and eyes in the future in technologies and innovations. The third statement promises a fun and relaxed working culture which enables a good work-life balance.

7 DISCUSSION

Based on the interviews of 12 recently recruited employees, Leadin enjoys a good employer brand, but has difficulties in making it known. The people, the workplace community, is most appreciated and experienced as caring, supportive and highly skilled. Similarly, the work culture and atmosphere in office were also highly regarded. Most interviewees saw marketing as a clear development area, which should address making Leadin more well known in the job arena, making its premise clearer, as well as clearing some misconceptions about opportunities in software development, since the company has grown in scale.

Leadin's recruitment process works reasonably well and receives praise for its humane interviews and high quality feedback to coding assignments. However, in the war for talent, time is of the essence, and a new suggested blueprint was devised to keep the process tighter.

Although interviewing recent recruits was a good choice for getting the most recent experiences of the Leadin recruitment process, their role as the only major data source is a limitation. Getting a fuller picture of Leadin's employer brand would have needed the input of employees with longer track records, or a questionnaire for all employees. Also, recognizing more of the problems (rather than the successes) of the recruitment process would have come by interviewing applicants who *did not* receive an offer from Leadin, or opted out during the process. Getting more closely acquainted with Leadin's preferred office communication and scheduling tools would also have yielded insights about the processes that happen in the backstage.

The importance of a positive employer brand is increasingly important in not only attracting and securing the right talent to a company, but also retaining them. The role of the recruitment process is particularly influential, as it is for many the first real touchpoint to a company, and the good and bad stories from the process can catch up and become part of the employer brand, positively or negatively. Using a service blueprint, and service design thinking, to develop and enhance a recruitment process is a wonderful way of

taking applicants into account and increase positive experiences, strengthening the employer brand at the same time.

For continuation research, a more well-rounded analysis of Leadin's employer brand among all employees would be good to recognize more of what makes Leadin as a unique and attractive employer. Continually monitoring the successes and failures of the recruitment process with feedback forms for all applicants would also be good to keep responsive and agile.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Interview questions

CURRENT WORK

- How would you describe yourself and your personality?
- When did you start working for Leadin?
- Do you enjoy working here?
- Which things do you enjoy the most about working here?
- How does Leadin compare to other employers according to your own experience/impressions?
- Do you like telling other people where you work?
- Can you think of some things Leadin could improve as an employer?
- What kind of goals or aspirations do you now have?

LEARNING ABOUT THE LEADIN EMPLOYER BRAND

- What were you doing before coming to Leadin?
- Where did you first hear about Leadin?
- What was your first impression about Leadin as an employer?
- Did your impression change during your research into the company?
- Which other employers were you considering/trying to apply for?
- Why did you choose Leadin? What motivated your choice?

APPLICATION PROCESS

- How did you start the application process? (Did you see a job ad or send an open application? Which medias were in use?)
- How fast were you replied to?
- Describe the recruitment process

Appendix 2. Job seeker personas

Persona #1:

Mikko Keränen

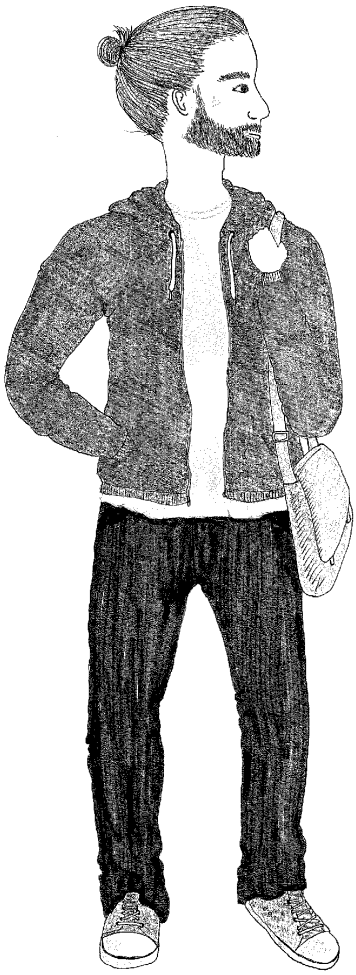
”Confident coder”

Male

Age 27

Finnish

Married



EDUCATION	M.Sc. Information Technology
BACKGROUND	After high school went to the army and spent a few years working in sales. Studies at TUT, selected Leadin's case in the project course
PERSONALITY	Analytical, calm, social and friendly, not taking life too seriously. Thoroughly enjoys coding. Isn’t the loudest in the workplace, but the one that seems to enjoy what he is doing the most.
SPECIAL INTERESTS	Music and movies, playing the guitar, technology
LOOKING FOR…	First real job as a software engineer
GOALS	To finish Master's Thesis, develop skills in programming and learn from design as well. Sees Leadin as a good place to grow and spend years in.
QUOTE	Keep ‘em coming!

Persona #2:

Silvio Leone

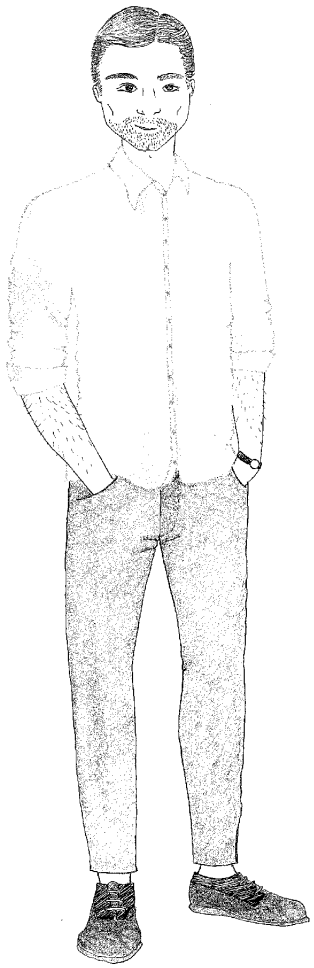
"Caring problem-solver"

Male

Age 34

Italian

Married with 2 children



EDUCATION	M.Sc. Computer Software Engineering
BACKGROUND	Studied in Italy, moved to Finland in 2007. Has great experience in software engineering with multiple employers, looking for a new opportunity in a new city.
PERSONALITY	Challenge-driven problem-solver and idealist. Enjoys change, learning new things and growing as a person. Honest, considerate and interested in people.
SPECIAL INTERESTS	Cycling, programming projects, family time.
LOOKING FOR…	Senior SW developer position, a challenging and engaging work environment to continue developing
GOALS	Develop skills further, take on technical challenges, enjoy various projects and new technologies. Sees Leadin as a good and enjoyable place to work and build a career, but does not feel obligated to stay if another good opportunity arises.
QUOTE	Be true to yourself!

Persona #3:

Jenni Alanen

“Team spirit champion”

Female

24

Finnish

Not married

EDUCATION	M.Sc. Human Computer Interaction and Design
BACKGROUND	Studies full-time in Aalto University.
PERSONALITY	Fun, social, expressive and creative. Goal-oriented conscientious worker with a high work ethic.
SPECIAL INTERESTS	Cooking and traveling, exploring the outdoors.
LOOKING FOR…	Traineeship in UX design.
GOALS	Master's Thesis hopefully for Leadin. Learn and develop in the multidisciplinary environment in Leadin. Eyes toward a permanent position as a senior or a lead. Feels invested in Leadin and wants to see and help it grow. Also considering international possibilities down the line.
QUOTE	Nothing is impossible!

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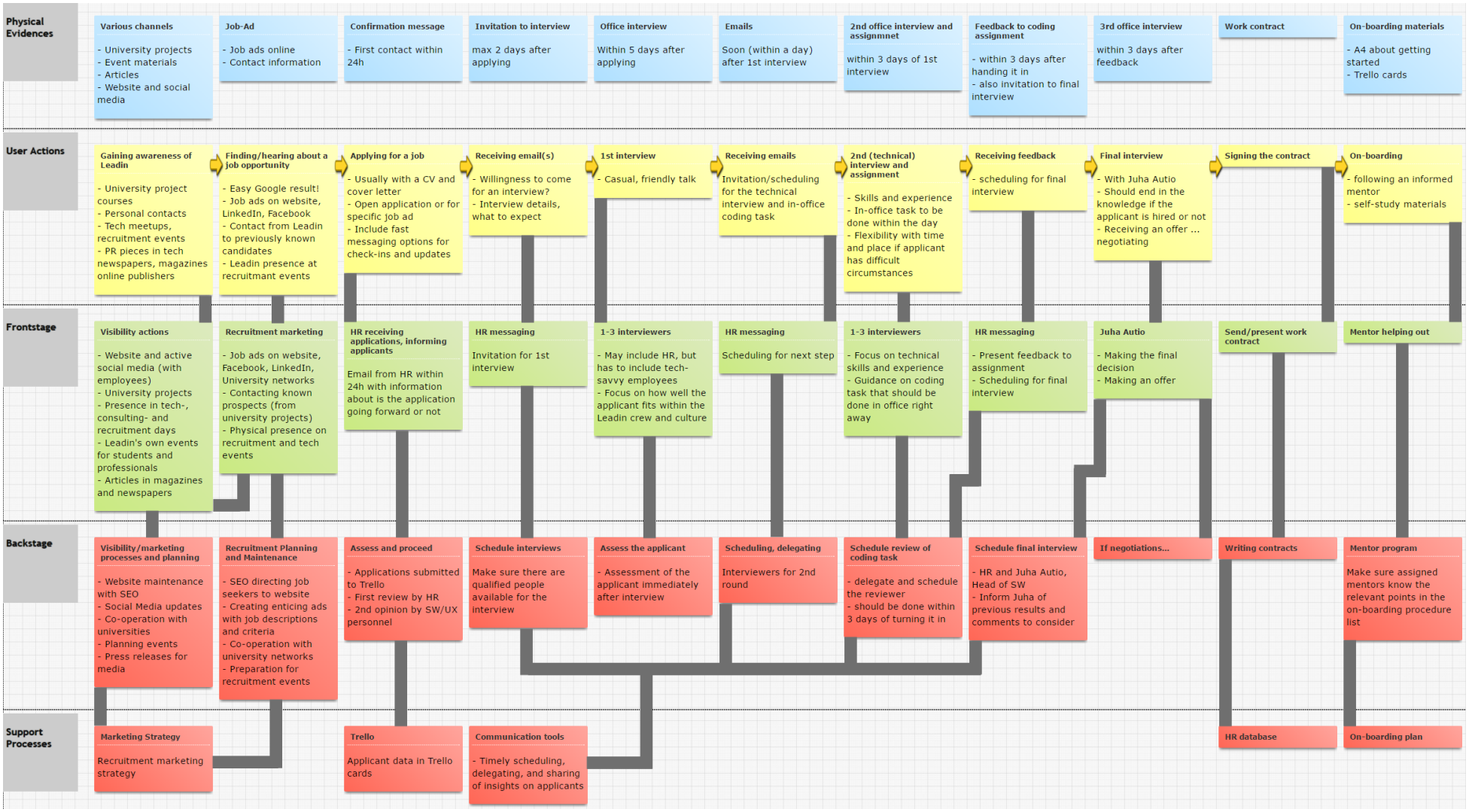
Appendix 3. Updated service blueprint