

# **Employer Branding in the IT Industry in Finland**

Johanna Koivumäki



<b>Author(s)</b> Johanna Koivumäki	
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<p>This bachelor's thesis examines employer branding in the IT industry. The objective of the study was to investigate how employer branding is organized in IT organizations in Finland, and what the needs and challenges with employer branding are, and what the current and future state of employer branding is like in IT organizations.</p> <p>The outcomes of the thesis offer important information on the current state of employer branding inside companies, and on the factors that would enable IT organizations to evolve in tech employer branding in the future. The purpose was to provide an understanding of the maturity of employer branding management within IT organizations.</p> <p>This thesis consists of a theory section and an empirical section. The theory section provides a thorough understanding of employer branding on the basis of relevant literature and online sources. The empirical part focuses on the results and provides valuable data about employer branding in the IT industry. The qualitative research was conducted in order to gain insights of the importance, functions, and goals of employer branding, and to gain a further understanding of the challenges and the development needs with employer branding in the IT industry. Moreover, various international aspects of employer branding are covered in the research.</p> <p>The data was collected with qualitative semi-structured interviews. The sample included four management level employer branding professionals working in organizations operating in Finland, either in the IT sector or in organizations with a significant IT department. The total number of conducted interviews was four. The interviews were held remotely via Microsoft Teams video meetings due to Covid-19, and they were recorded with the interviewees' permission.</p> <p>The results showed that the importance of employer branding has recently become even more crucial in all of the companies interviewed. Especially internal employer branding was highlighted in the results. The results indicated that, in all the cases, companies aimed to go towards more strategic employer branding, and this requires continuous work. One of the most important development needs was continuous development work by providing advice and support to other departments, and getting employer branding to the agenda of executives.</p> <p>The purpose of employer branding is to support a company in its growth to the direction of the business strategy. What to consider regarding employer branding activities is that everything that happens in the recruitment will also reflect the employer brand. The results suggest that it is important for a company to understand the current state of employer branding maturity, and the various activities on different employer branding maturity levels in order to succeed in employer branding development.</p>	
<b>Keywords</b> Employer Branding, Employer Value Proposition, Employee Experience, Talent Persona, Employer Brand Management, Employer Brand Strategy, Employer Brand Maturity, IT Industry	

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# 1 Introduction

This is a bachelor's thesis in the HRM major in the degree programme in International Business at Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences. This chapter introduces the reader to the background of the topic, then moves on to the research question followed by the investigative questions (IQs). Thereafter, the topic is demarcated, and international aspects discussed. Moreover, the benefits of the thesis and the key concepts are defined to the reader. Finally, the commissioning company Finders Seekers Oy is introduced briefly.

## 1.1 Background

This thesis is research-based, and it was commissioned by Finders Seekers Oy who are specialized in tech employer branding. The purpose of this thesis was to examine how employer branding is organized in IT organizations. What the needs and challenges with employer branding are, and what the current and future state of employer branding is like in IT organizations.

According to Mosley and Schmidt (2017, 1) the global competition for talent is increasing and companies must work harder to attract, engage, and retain the talent. One of the most powerful ways for companies to achieve this goal is to build a strong employer brand. Even if the company does nothing to build an employer brand, it already has one in the sense that employees and the public at large has some perception of the company as a desirable or undesirable employer. Employer branding means creating the kind of positive image for the organization that will help to attract skilled talents. It is a process of building an amazing place to work and then promoting it to the candidate whose skills and knowledge the organization needs to succeed in its business goals. (Mosley & Schmidt 2017, 1, 13, 8.)

In 2018, IT companies' turnover in Finland was 13,9 billion euros. The turnover of the IT industry grew almost 7% during 2018. The reason behind this growth was the digitalization trend which is increasingly affecting everyday activities. Digitalization enables organizations to improve their productivity as well as produce new products and services. The demand of the services is also estimated to grow in coming years. However, the lack of skilled IT talents limits the organizations' possibilities to grow. (Rajala 2019.)

One of the reasons for choosing this particular topic for the thesis was the need and interest by the commissioning company Finders Seekers Oy. Whether organizations need help with building an employer brand strategy from scratch or developing the existing employer brand strategy even stronger, the commissioning company Finders Seekers Oy provides

tech specialized services to help organizations to attract the best talents in the IT industry. (Finders Seekers Oy 2019.) It is mentioned in Stack Overflow blog that it can be hard to find a versatile and highly skilled developer. Skilled IT talents have their pick of job opportunities. Therefore, companies must show them that they can offer them a supportive environment to work within. The key to developing a powerful employer brand is to find out what the potential candidates are looking for and giving them proof that you can offer what they need. (Hawkins 6 February 2020.)

Since, this thesis focuses on the IT industry, it provides valuable data to any company operating in that field, but especially for people working with HR, recruitment marketing and communications. It helps them to understand what employer branding really means and what components it includes. It explains, what an employer branding strategy is and why companies should have one. Overall, this thesis provides support with planning, implementing, and developing employer branding.

The author has had a great opportunity to familiarize herself with IT industry earlier through one school project in one of the HR specialization courses in 2018. That project was a wake-up moment in terms of professional development because it helped to understand how much it brings value to have some knowledge about IT industry as a future HR professional. While the fascinating concept of employer branding also became more familiar, the author saw it beneficial to focus more deeply in one area that interested her the most. In terms of choosing the topic for this thesis, the importance and current need for this kind of data was also recognized by the author. As all this matched perfectly with author's own interests, it strengthened the decision to choose this particular topic for the thesis.

## **1.2 Research Question**

The thesis aimed to investigate how employer branding is organized in IT organizations in Finland, and what the needs and challenges with employer branding are, and what the current and future state of employer branding is like in IT organizations. The outcomes of the thesis offer important information on the current state of employer branding inside companies, and on the factors that would enable IT organizations to evolve in tech employer branding in the future. The purpose was to provide an understanding of the maturity of employer branding management within IT organizations.

The Bachelor of International Business degree programme requires an international aspect for the thesis. Hence, the author examined on how interviewee companies apply employer branding on a global level; and how the interviewee organization has taken a global

talent into account in their employer branding strategy and whether it was on their agenda. Other viewpoints are an international employer branding strategy and international employer branding activities.

**The research question (RQ) was:**

How is employer branding (EB) organized in IT companies operating in Finland currently, and what are their development needs?

**The research question was divided into investigative questions (IQ) as follows:**

IQ1: How do the IT companies' EB managers view the importance, functions, and goals of employer branding in their company?

IQ2: Do IT companies have employer branding strategies, and if so what kind of components those strategies contain?

IQ3: What kind of employer branding activities do IT companies engage in?

IQ4: How do IT companies attract domestic and international talents?

IQ5: What employer branding maturity level are the IT companies currently?

IQ6: What challenges do IT companies face in planning and implementing employer branding?

IQ7: What are the companies planning to develop in their employer branding in the next few years?

A figure 1 below illustrates the purpose of the thesis. The results show the current and future state of employer branding and describes the main factors of investigative questions (IQ) that seek to answer for the research question. The main factors of the IQs are employer branding (EB) functions, EB activities, EB attractiveness, EB maturity, and the challenges faced with EB. These factors focus on the employer branding goals that companies have set for the future.

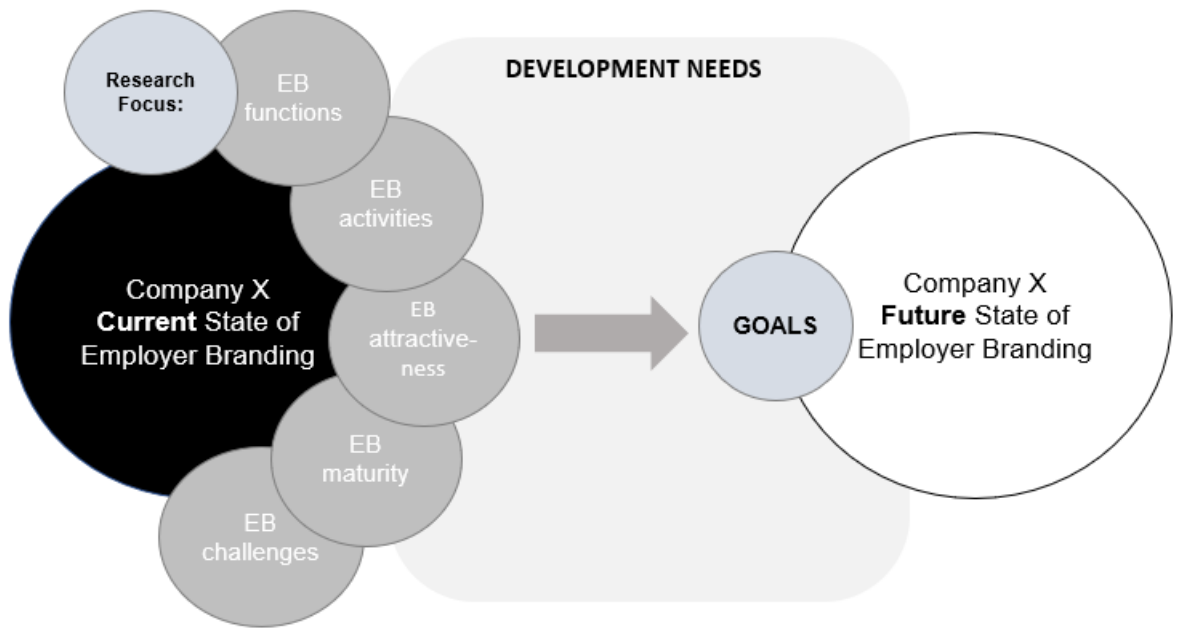


Figure 1. The current and future state of employer branding (EB)

The overlay matrix (table 1) below presents the theoretical framework, research methods, interview questions as well as result chapters for each investigative question.

Table 1. Overlay matrix

Investigative Question	Theoretical Framework	Research Methods	Interview Questions	Results Chapter
<b>IQ 1.</b> How do the IT companies' EB managers view the importance, functions, and goals of employer branding in their company?	The meaning and importance of EB, EVP, EB communication	Qualitative semi-structured interviews of EB managers, analyzed thematically	Theme one: questions 1 - 3	4.3 4.3.1 – 4.3.3
<b>IQ 2.</b> Do IT companies have employer branding strategies, and if so what kind of components those strategies contain?	EB strategy, EB management, EVP, integrated strategy model, integrated brand model, EB maturity model	Qualitative semi-structured interviews of EB managers, analyzed thematically	Theme two: questions 1 - 3	4.4. 4.4.1 – 4.4.3
<b>IQ3:</b> What kind of employer branding activities do IT companies engage in?	EB management, EB image, international EB, external EB, employee experience	Qualitative semi-structured interviews of EB managers, analyzed thematically	Theme three: questions 1 - 3	4.5 4.5.1 – 4.5.3
<b>IQ4:</b> How do IT companies attract domestic and international talents?	EB, EVP, EB activities, EB communication, employee experience, talent persona, candidate journey, diversity	Qualitative semi-structured interviews of EB managers, analyzed thematically	Theme four: questions 1 - 7	4.6 4.6.1 - 4.6.6
<b>IQ5:</b> What employer branding maturity level are the IT companies currently?	EB maturity, EB development, EB management, main goals	Qualitative semi-structured interviews of EB managers, analyzed thematically	Theme six: question 1	4.8 4.8.1
<b>IQ6:</b> What challenges do IT companies face in	EB management, EB maturity,	Qualitative semi-structured interviews of EB	Theme five: question 1	4.7 4.7.1

planning and implementing employer branding?	EB development, IT industry	managers, analyzed thematically		
<b>IQ7:</b> What are the companies planning to develop in their employer branding in the next few years?	EB management, EB development, EB maturity model	Qualitative semi-structured interviews of EB managers, analyzed thematically	Theme six: question 2.	4.8 4.8.2

### **1.3 Demarcation**

The commissioning company Finders Seekers Oy offers consultancy services on recruitments and employer branding in the IT industry, and therefore the topic of this thesis was demarcated to focus on employer branding needs of companies that operate in that field. Other than companies in the IT industry are excluded from this research. Also, the nature of employer branding varies a lot based on the industry and type of talent segments.

Moreover, employer branding is viewed from the perspective of management focusing on how they see their employer branding implemented in practice. Therefore, the employees' point of view is excluded from this thesis. The data collection targeted management level employer branding professionals working in organizations operating in Finland, either in the IT sector or in organizations with a significant IT department.

### **1.4 Benefits**

The results aimed to help the commissioning company Finders Seekers Oy to modify their current employer branding services and develop new ones based on current and potential B2B clients' needs. The commissioning company Finders Seekers Oy also used the data for onboarding their new employees to the world of employer branding and to gain further IT talent insights. Other stakeholders, such as, interviewees benefit from the results by recognizing possible needs for their organization and learn from peer companies' ways to deploy employer branding.

Since this thesis focuses on the IT industry, it provides valuable data to any company operating in that field, but especially for people working with HR, recruitment marketing and communications. It helps them to understand what employer branding really means and what components it includes. It explains, what an employer branding strategy is and why companies should have one. Overall, this thesis provides support with planning and implementing employer branding in any kind of an IT company. Moreover, it provides valuable insights for students who are interested to learn about employer branding, and particularly about IT field.

The author's field of specialization, Human Resource Management, needs more current and up-to-date information about employer branding from the IT industry perspective. The author has noticed this while searching for source literature. Employer branding is a very fascinating topic and the author hopes to have a possibility to work with it in the future. The thesis offered an excellent opportunity for the author to learn and see how employer branding is implemented in the IT sector. However, there was a possibility that the thesis

process could have brought some minor challenges since the author does not have any experience from the IT field. Hence, from the learning viewpoint, the author saw those possible challenges more as benefits. Additionally, growing the author's professional network and gaining new connections was successful.

## 1.5 Key Concepts

**Employer Branding (EB)** is described as "The package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company" (Ambler & Barrow 1996, 187).

**Employer Brand Image** is a vision that people form in their minds when they think of an organization as an employer (Mosley & Schmidt 2017, 50).

**Employer Value Proposition (EVP)** describes the characteristics that an employer would most like to be known as (Mosley & Schmidt 2017, 10, 63).

**Employee Experience** relates to everything employees experience during the employment journey at a company (Zojceska 25 August 2020).

**Employer Brand Strategy** needs to align with the people management strategy, marketing strategy and business strategy. It supports the talent capabilities required for the organization to be able to compete efficiently. It should be in line with the way that HR and talent management operates within the organization. It must also reflect the corporate and customer brand promises and aspirations of the company. (Mosley 2014, 49.)

**Employer Branding Maturity Model** Every company has an employer brand, however, the employer brand management is at different stage for everyone. The EB maturity model helps to clarify the current situation/state of the employer brand management and provides a clear understanding of what to work on next. (Finders Seekers Oy 2020a.) The EB maturity model is a tool, which helps the company to find out:

- the current state of the employer branding maturity
- after identifying the current state of employer branding maturity, it allows the company to clarify the next steps to develop and strengthen the employer brand. (Erkkilä 21 July 2020.)

**Employer Brand Management (EBM)** is a higher-level approach to coordinating people management activities and it has essential implications for how recruitment, on-boarding, talent management, leadership development and performance management is being implemented (Mosley 2014, 3).

**Employer Brand Communication** aims to enhance people's comprehension and perceptions of what the company has to offer (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 129).

**Tech Stack** is described as "Technology stack is a crucial part of developing any web or mobile application. People refer to the term when speaking of the combination of programming languages and software underneath a development project in question". (Nevogt 27 March 2019.)

## **1.6 Commissioning Company: Finders Seekers Oy**

The thesis was commissioned by Finders Seekers Oy. The company operates in the IT industry serving their B2B clients with the best and truly holistic recruitment services with human-to-human approach. Finders Seekers Oy was founded in 2018 and the company is located in Helsinki. The team consists 19 specialists (Erkkilä 8 February 2021) who build winning teams by finding the right tech talent with direct search and perfecting recruitment processes. With their services and by sharing their knowledge, they also support organizations to build a strong employer brand. Finders Seeker's mission is "We build winning teams". (Finders Seekers Oy 2019.)

## 2 Employer Branding as a Phenomenon in Today's Business

This chapter introduces the reader to the theoretical thinking supporting the thesis. The key concepts of the theoretical framework are illustrated in the figure 2 below to help the reader to get an overview of some of the main concepts that are linked to employer branding. Theory consists of many different aspects of employer branding to be able to create a wider understanding about topic.



Figure 2. Visualization of key concepts

## 2.1 The Meaning and Importance of Employer Branding

The concept of employer brand was first defined by Simon Barrow and Tim Ambler (1996, 187) as “the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employment company”. Employer branding has a significant role “to provide a coherent framework for management to simplify and focus priorities, increase productivity and improve recruitment, retention and commitment”. An employer brand thinking was originally having the emphasis on assuring that the same consistency and clarity was applied to defining and managing the organization’s proposition to employees as it usually applied in the exact same way to customer brand proposition. Interest in this approach was caused by the increasing competition within the job market for the talent needed by companies to realise their corporate aspirations. (Mosley 2007, 129-130.)

Until recently, the main focus of employer branding activities was to develop a distinctive external reputation with only a limited application of the concept to describe companies’ internal efforts to drive positive culture change or increase their levels of employee engagement. Recently, however, for many organizations the main focus has more recently begun to develop towards a more holistic approach, aligning the promises of external recruitment with the internal employee experience, and employer brand development with the corporate and customer brand. (Mosley 2007, 130.)

According to Mosley and Schmidt (2017, 8) employer branding means creating the kind of positive image for the organization that will help to attract skilled talents. It is a process of building an amazing place to work and then promoting it to the candidate whose expertise and knowledge the organization needs to succeed in its business goals. (Mosley & Schmidt 2017, 8.)

Before spending time into building an employer brand, an honest self-assessment of the brand is required. Companies must consider what its employees and people outside the company think of it as an employer. Additionally, employee surveys, reviews of thoughts across social media channels and feedback from customers and partners provide valuable information to companies. Moreover, how employees view the employment experience contribute substantially to the company’s reputation as an employer. Taking a closer look into external employer branding is highly recommendable. External perception includes areas such as how well is the organization known among the talent it is trying to attract, what is the organization known for, and how do people feel about the organization. (Mosley & Schmidt 2017, 14.)

Mosley and Schmidt (2017, 9) describe the approach to building a strong employer brand as follows:

- form a clear understanding of company's business goals and identify talent personas to meet the business goals
- assess the current employer brand image among potential candidates and find out how current employees are experiencing employer branding
- find out how this compares with the interests of your key target candidates.

A brand is as crucial inside the organization as it is outside of it. A distinct brand idea is a fundamental part of establishing an employer brand that will inspire the current employees and attract new skilled talents. While a brand idea may help to meet an internal need – to conduct business decisions, to recruit and retain the talent – it must also help to differentiate the organization from the competition. Your employees are the most valuable people in your brand's transformation. Involving the employees in the process of building the brand platform and then in its launch are vital steps in order to get your staff on board. Make sure to train your employees on the brand first, because it's your people who make your business and your brand come alive. (Benbunan, Schreier & Knapp 2019, 36, 182.)

## **2.2 Building and Shaping an Employer Brand**

Building a brand is a long-term job with various campaigns and tactics (Erkkilä 21 July 2020). It requires spending money on research and creative development to build a strong employer brand, and adding the workloads of departments, including recruitment, marketing, and human resources. Since organizations need to commit time, money, and other kind of resources to employer branding, organizations naturally are interested to know what investing in employer branding will offer in return. To be able to build and maintain a strong employer brand, organizations must first answer that question themselves, because everyone involved needs to be aware of what employer branding really means to the organization and how a strong employer brand can positively impact an organization's success. (Mosley & Schmidt 2017, 8.)

Mosley and Schmidt (2017, 47) says that employers generate a brand reputation in spite of whether they knowingly set out to determine one. The reputation of the company as an employer is an essential element of employer brand equity, meaning the intrinsic value of the brand. The employer brand image means a vision that people form in their minds when they think of a certain company as an employer. Assessing the employer brand image is crucial because it helps to understand why potential applicants choose to work for a particular company, or its competitor. (Mosley & Schmidt 2017, 47, 50.) It is also important to communicate right about what does the brand stand for and the benefits the brand

promises to deliver. Effective consumer and customer brands are founded on a 'proposition', the key benefits provided by the brand. It is the same with employer brands. Employer value proposition (EVP) and employer branding works hand in hand when it comes to enhancing a great brand reputation and experience. (Universum 2 April 2019.)

### **2.2.1 Evaluating Factors that Shape the Employer Brand Image**

Mosley and Schmidt (2017, 47) says that understanding how the company is perceived as a potential employer can be a complicated process, because it is impacted by the following factors:

- to what extent is the company known as an employer with respect to brand awareness and familiarity
- the companies it is competing with for a skilled talent
- to what extent is the company viewed as a desirable employer and preferred to competitors
- the relative attraction of various employment characteristics in defining recruits' consideration and priorities for desirable employers
- the employer brand image
- the factors shaping the employer brand image and attract the most, such as the image of services and products, employer brand marketing, and the common assumptions of the industry.

Amongst the most crucial target groups, the most essential measures are awareness, consideration, and preference. When company operates mainly with consumer products and services, greatest levels of general awareness and consideration generally result from the consumer marketing, but in a business-to-business environment, it is more recommendable to concentrate on the findings within the industry and geographical locations. (Mosley & Schmidt 2017, 49.)

To be able to measure the factors that may have shaped the brand image, it is important to answer the following questions:

- How effective has the employer brand marketing been in shaping the company's image?
- How much has the company's image been shaped by the customer marketing?
- How much does the company's image reflect common assumptions of the industry?
- To what extent does the company's image match with reality? (Mosley & Schmidt 2017, 53-54.)

### **2.2.2 Methods to Evaluate Employer Branding**

Tiirikainen (1 November 2018) says that most often when speaking about a desirable employer brand image, one may think about how desirable employer that company is in general. But is the desirable employer brand image the same thing as the good average in the huge target audience. However, the corporate culture should not address everyone. It is all about finding the right people who fit into the culture, not about making the work culture

equally enjoyable for everyone. While companies are used to measuring the employer brand image by the amount of interest of potential job seekers. It is at least as crucial to measure the satisfaction of the new employees, and to make sure that the employer brand image given is as realistic as possible. (Tiirikainen 1 November 2018.)

There are few important things to keep in mind in order to have the right kind of an approach towards the company's employer brand. First step is to identify the target audience. This requires answering to the following questions:

- What kind of a culture do we have and what do we want to become?
- What kind of people are comfortable with us at the moment – and what are not?
- What kind of people do we want to work here? (Tiirikainen 1 November 2018.)

Tiirikainen (1 November 2018) points out that it becomes easier to identify the target audience after having the answers to those questions. The second step is to identify to metrics. A typical mistake that companies continue to make is to evaluate the employer brand image using only quantitative metrics such as, the volume of job applications, recruitment costs, site and social media statistics, and the employer brand image measurements by the third-party. However, these mainly tell about the results of individual measures or the attractiveness of the brand and not about a quality of the employer brand. (Tiirikainen 1 November 2018.)

Therefore, one of the most relevant metrics for the company's employer brand is how much the applicant's image matches the truth about what it is like to work for a company. The less difference there is between the employer brand image and the reality, the better the company is building an employer brand image. It is recommendable to take this one as the most important KPI metric for the company's employer brand. (Tiirikainen 1 November 2018.)

The third step is to measure at the right places. The new employees, who have started a couple of months ago, act simultaneously as a window into the external employer brand image, the candidate experience, and the employee experience. A new employee is a valuable database of how well or poorly the work environment and culture have been described before the new employee has started to work there. (Tiirikainen 1 November 2018.)

The fourth step is to find the right angles of content. Once guidelines and concepts have been agreed for the employer brand and marketing, the information from the new employees can be utilized in the content marketing planning. This ensures that the content is created around the right topics. (Tiirikainen 1 November 2018.)

Finally, the fifth step which is the courage. It is important to deliver the message to the target group that shares the common set of values. When the courage is found, it leads to the right people noticing the company, applying for jobs, and committing to their employer and its values. The end result is a happy and a healthy work community where employees are sure to bring the best benefits to the business. (Tiirikainen 1 November 2018.)

Some of the metrics used to measure employer branding are related to

- **recruitment:** the number of relevant applications/openings of career discussions vs. all applicants, the number of internal referrals, candidate experience, diversity recruitment, time-to-hire, and the percent of successful recruitment (retainment)
- **internal employee experience:** employee engagement, employee advocacy and staff turnover (6 and 12 months, 2 years)
- **general awareness:** the number of followers in social media channels, visitors in the career page, number of organized events, Glassdoor reviews and the number of brand advocates. (Erkkilä 15 June 2020.)

### 2.2.3 Employer Value Proposition

One essential part of an employer branding management is to find out, who the company presents as an employer or what kind of an employer the company wants to be (Erkkilä 10 April 2019). An employer value proposition (EVP) is the core of the employer brand that determines its positioning and strategic direction (Universum 2 April 2019). The EVP refers to the qualities an organization would most like to be related to as an employer. The EVP offers potential candidates and current employees with distinct reasons to choose as well as stay with a certain employer. Through the EVP, employees are able to get a clear understanding of what they can expect from the employer and what is also expected of the employees. The EVP is composed of a core positioning statement, the main thing about an employer that summarizes how and why it is such an amazing place to work. By managing the EVP successfully, companies can attract more potential candidates, enjoy great levels of employee engagement as well as retention. (Mosley & Schmidt 2017, 15, 63.) A powerful EVP reflects the internal reality, the strategic context of the company, the external demands, and the competition. Moreover, it should represent the values and principles of the company. (Universum 2 April 2019.)

Another way to look at the EVP is that it answers to the question: Why would a talented employee want to work for us? Once the answer is solved for the previous question, it will provide helpful solutions for communicating a brand to the external stakeholders. The EVP consists of the following components: work, learning and development, culture, people, compensation as well as purpose and meaning. Finders Seekers Oy presents the

components of EVP in the following way in figure 3 below. (Erkkilä 10 April 2019; Finders Seekers Oy 2020b.)

Work	Learning & Development	Culture	People	Compensation	Purpose & Meaning
Work environment	Career growth	Build Trust	Colleagues	Salary	Company's vision
Work-life balance	Learning opportunities	Collaboration	Managers	Bonus	Team vision
Variety of projects	Company's growth potential	Feedback	Reputation of leadership	Fairness of the pay	Ability to influence
Challenges				Recognition	Greater contribution globally

Figure 3. The EVP Framework (adapted from Finders Seekers Oy 2020b)

Lastly, a strong EVP is:

- True – to what a company stands for and offers
- Credible – to ensure that a brand is believable and trustworthy
- Relevant – in that company's offering applies to today's top talent
- Distinctive – so that a company differentiates from its competitors
- Aspirational – to enable top talent to see growth, value, and purpose as a result of investing in a certain company. (Universum 2 April 2019.)

#### 2.2.4 Delivering through Talent Personas

Efficient management of both talent and culture, will gain the organization the opportunity to attract talent, to spark the innovation, and to create an impact (Doucette & Parsons 20 February 2020). Tech sector is experiencing a change. Tech talents of the next generation will search for a different workplace, but also make it better for everyone. Recent graduates, with skills and values that they will bring to the workplace, have a potential to become a core of organizational transformation. (Puri 17 March 2020.)

Mosley and Schmidt (2017, 143) says that creating talent personas for the various candidate groups helps the company to better understand their motivations, and also allowing the company to develop targeted recruitment marketing campaigns that reaches the right target groups. A talent persona can be described as a fictional character that represents all the qualities than a potential candidate would have. More precisely, a talent persona can be described as follows:

- a fictional representation of the potential talent
- a collection of requirements brought together from actual profiles of recruits who would be a great fit for the organization and for a certain position
- 'a professional image' that represents the professional goals and personal aspirations, values, motivations, and lifestyle of the potential candidate

- a marketing tool which guides and supports the content strategy regarding the employer branding activities. (Mosley & Schmidt 2017, 144.)

While targeting the talent groups, it is important to commit to increasing diversity in the company (Mosley & Schmidt 2017, 217). By embracing diversity, companies are in the best position to remain competitive in the market (Puri 17 March 2020). A wide range of skills and competencies might be necessary to be able to meet the resources needed, nonetheless, before segmenting the personnel into various target groups, discover the qualities that the personnel must share in respect of the desired culture and values. Culture fit does not mean uniformity, therefore, while discovering the qualities, also take into account, how to make sure the personnel represent a diversity of backgrounds and views. (Mosley & Schmidt 2017, 30, 32.)

Cultural diversity represents the kind of group that includes people of different races, ethnicities, nationalities, religions, genders, sexual orientations, socioeconomic statuses and more. (Amadeo 21 October 2020.) Organizations with diversified personnel experience various advantages over the ones who do not have diversified personnel. The benefits of the workplace diversity are the following:

- plenty of different perspectives
- greater creativity
- greater employee engagement
- greater hiring results
- increased problem-solving
- greater company reputation
- decreased employee turnover
- greater profits. (TalentLyft 2021.)

### **2.3 Employer Brand Strategy and Models**

Mosley and Schmidt (2017, 11) points out that when creating an employer brand, everyone needs to approach the same direction. Branding works ideally when all the branding activities align. To obtain this ideal alignment, an employer brand must be built on a company foundation. Mosley and Schmidt (2017, 11) describe that employer brand strategy must align with three strategies such as: business strategy, HR and talent strategy and marketing strategy. The employer brand needs to support the kind of talent capacities the company needs to compete successfully. Furthermore, the company and the talent must match to each other. To make sure that promises are constantly in line with experience, the employer brand needs to reflect the way HR and talent management operate within the company. Moreover, to uphold a common sense of brand integrity the employer brand needs to reflect the promises of customer and corporate brand. (Mosley & Schmidt 2017, 11.)

According to Mosley and Schmidt (2017, 24) a successful employer brand management is influenced by the coordinated action throughout the company. In the figure 4 below, the employer brand strategy is placed at the intersection between HR and talent management strategy and marketing strategy. The reason for this is because the employer brand strategy is usually linked with the corporate brand and business strategy, and with the HR and talent management strategy, but also with the marketing strategy. The illustration of the integrated strategy model is presented in figure 4 below. (Mosley & Schmidt 2017, 24.)

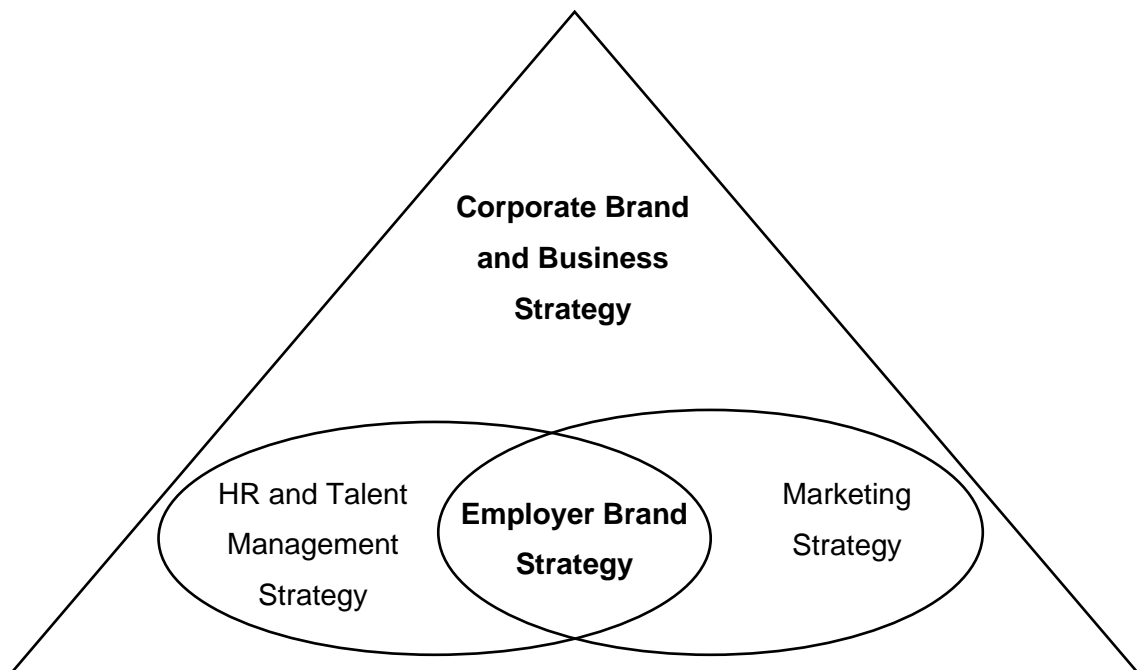


Figure 4. The integrated strategy model (adapted from John Wiley & Sons, Inc. in Mosley & Schmidt 2017, 24)

Mosley and Schmidt (2017, 24) says that in an ideal situation, all three, the line management, HR management and marketing management may be perfectly aligned. However, the employer brand strategy may often have a reconciliatory role between these stakeholder groups to improve the consistency and efficiency of the line management, HR management and marketing management. (Mosley and Schmidt 2017, 24.)

Mosley and Schmidt (2017, 12) describe that employer brands are built in the context of the consumer and corporate brands, and, in most cases, they must be in line with their consumer and corporate counterparts as follows:

- **Corporate brand:** The reputation the organization is aiming to build based on its purpose, vision, and values.
- **Consumer brand:** Perceptions by the customers of the products and services as well as the brand associations promoted by the company.

- **Employer brand:** The reputation of the company that it internally and externally represents.

According to Mosley and Schmidt (2017, 25) the term *corporate brand* describes the entire reputation of the company, instead of its more specific reputation as an employer. Therefore, the company must also find its place within the brand hierarchy. Aligning the employer brand with the corporate and consumer brands may be complex because corporate and consumer brands may be associated in various ways. Therefore, before launching any employer brand initiative, it is important that the company determines how closely and in what ways the employer brand should align with existing corporate and consumer brands. Additionally, special attention must be given on how the brand is communicated to each target group. The illustration of the integrated brand model is presented in figure 5 below. (Mosley & Schmidt 2017, 12, 25.)

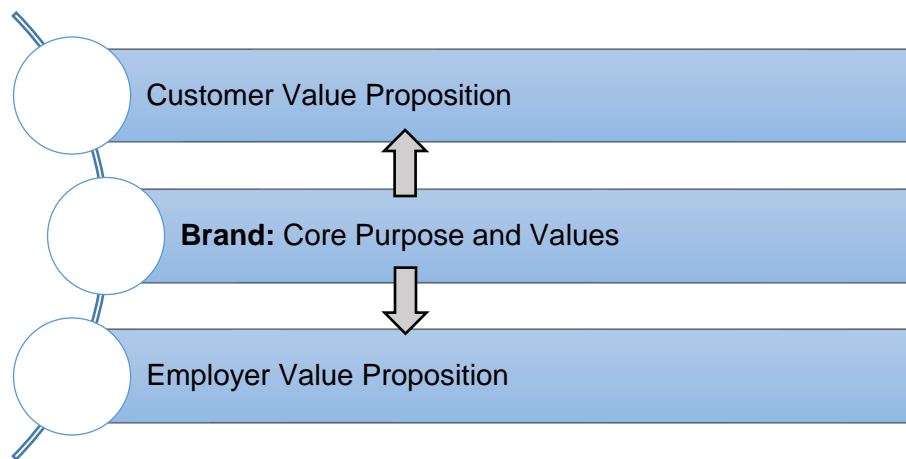


Figure 5. The integrated brand model (adapted from John Wiley & Sons, Inc. in Mosley & Schmidt 2017, 25).

Petra Erkkilä, the head of employer branding and one of the three co-founders of Finders Seekers Oy (21 July 2020) provides an example that an employer branding strategy may contain themes such as:

- content - having a strong content strategy externally to direct potential candidates to career sites
- events - organizing an online and physical face to face events for potential candidates
- activating employees - by engaging them into external employer branding activities
- supporting the internal employer branding management by ensuring a strong communication, a strategy, and the ideation internally, and by building an employer branding and the recruitment culture in the company. (Erkkilä 21 July 2020.)

## 2.4 Employer Branding Maturity

Every company has an employer brand, but the stage of employer branding maturity is different for everyone. Finding out about the current situation is the first step in employer branding development, because it gives a clear understanding of what to work on next. (Finders Seekers Oy 2020a.) Employer can often be described as a huge entity with no idea where to start from. Often the work is done by one person and not many might even have a training needed to manage the employer branding. One person should have a significant understanding of business, human resources and recruitment, as well as marketing and communications – and to be able to drive employer branding forward often across the whole organization. (Aro 25 May 2020.)

One way to develop the employer branding management is to approach it through employer branding maturity model which has been created earlier by Universum, but also a similar kind of a tool is created by Finders Seekers Oy in 2020, which is specialized in tech employer branding. (Finders Seekers Oy 2020a; Universum 15 September 2016.) Petra Erkkilä from Finders Seekers Oy (21 July 2020) describes that the employer branding maturity model helps the company to find out:

- the current state of the employer branding maturity
- after identifying the current state of employer branding maturity, it allows the company to clarify the next steps to develop and strengthen the employer brand.

Being successful in employer branding requires progressing step by step. The most important thing is to understand that there are more than two levels in employer branding and that there are many stages in between those different levels. Working with employer branding takes time. Advancing from one level to another requires the performance of certain activities according to the EB maturity model. For instance, different stages might require employee surveys, EVP work and an employer branding content plan in line with the business strategy. These are all separate steps towards a larger goal, the next level. The maturity model is a great tool that provides help when exploring the next steps. The work will get easier by setting up milestones for the next steps, and by measuring, monitoring, and optimizing. (Aro 25 May 2020.)

The employer branding maturity model is presented in figure 6 below. The model includes 4 levels: beginner, developing, fascinating and leading. Each activity in the right side of the model tells how it is linked to the different activities in different levels. **The beginner's level** consists of activities such as reactive communication in different channels, and job advertising but which is still inconsistent and job-focused. In addition, the talent acquisition is still separated from other functions. **In the developing level**, the recruitment marketing

starts to be EVP driven, the activities include taking care of the brand look and there is co-operation with other departments like HR. Also, the first HR metrics are in use. **In the fascinating level**, the EB management is EVP driven and EB has an owner. The EB is executed together with marketing and communications, and the content they create generates added value. In the fascinating level, the company is known among attractive candidates. Also, the recruitment process is shorter, and the company has an integrated metrics in use. Finally, to get to **the leading level**, the CEO has the ultimate accountability of employer branding and EB is executed together with other functions such as recruitment, HR, business, marketing, and communications. Additionally, the content is created by the employees and advocates. The employee experience has a key position in the company and most wanted candidates apply for the career discussions themselves. (Finders Seekers Oy 2020a; Universum 15 September 2016.)

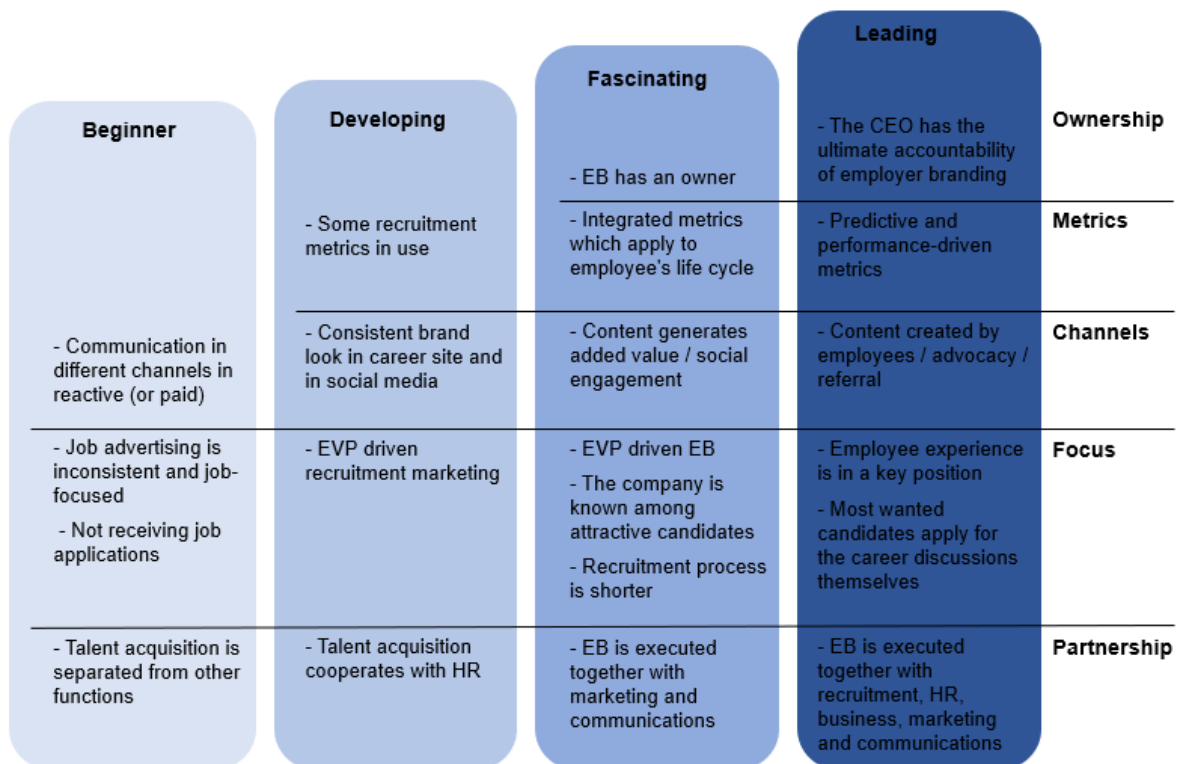


Figure 6. Employer Branding Maturity Model (adapted from Finders Seekers Oy 2020a; Universum 15 September 2016.)

## 2.5 Employer Branding Execution in a Nutshell

Petra Erkkilä from Finders Seekers Oy (15 June 2020) says that when executing employer branding, clarify well, what is it that the company wants to achieve with employer branding. Is it a public visibility that the company wants to gain or increase the awareness

in a specific key audience. Who should employer branding address, and who are the people that should be reached with our activities. What kind of key professionals are challenging to reach in order to start career discussions with them. After having answers to these questions, employer branding becomes more targeted and for instance metrics are easier to choose to target these goals. (Erkkilä 15 June 2020.)

Petra Erkkilä from Finders Seekers Oy (15 June 2020) points out that employer branding is as much an internal as it is an external job. When investing internally in a positive employee experience, it is also more natural for everyone to communicate it to the external audiences. (Erkkilä 15 June 2020.) While executing employer branding the internal support in building a culture is crucial. One of the main things is that employer branding must have an owner. Additionally, the following activities are considered to be important:

- educating the management about EB and enabling trainings for internal hiring managers to understand the meaning and the purpose of EB
- communication in different internal forums regarding the importance and the success of EB
- promoting for the employer branding and the recruiting culture
- having the material bank available for the employees
- taking care of the career sites
- reporting about employer branding
- coordination of the paid social media marketing
- coordination of the alumni network
- establishing KPI's for employer branding. (Erkkilä 21 July 2020.)

Nevertheless, developing the external awareness and attractiveness is always recommendable, however, the main long-term effects of employer brand strategy should be internal. The outcome of effective employer branding is ultimately having the top talent, who fits in the company culture, who shows engagement, is willing to stay and motivated to perform in the best possible way. (Mosley & Schmidt 2017, 289.)

### **2.5.1 Summarizing the Management Needs of Employer Branding**

According to Mosley and Schmidt (2017, 38) the brand must be led by the CEO and collectively owned by the entire senior leadership team in order for the brand to be authentic and fully embedded in the company. Effective brand management includes clear responsibilities for different groups. When leading the employer branding in the organization, one part of the responsibility is to bring people together to ensure everyone is on board. To be successful, encouragement and support of key players throughout the organization is a necessity for an effective employer brand communication. Getting the support of senior leaders, HR, marketing, and corporate communication is an important first step in implementing a new EVP and employer brand strategy. If the efforts of employer brand management have the emphasis mainly on recruitment marketing, employee engagement

may be narrowed down too much. Thus, more integrated approach that consists of recruitment marketing, overhauling employee experience and proactive employee engagement provides more value. Introducing a new employer brand promise can fall flat if it lacks the real improvement in the organization. Simply, employees are more interested to hear what is happening next to boost things up. (Mosley & Schmidt 2017, 38, 130, 132.)

## 2.5.2 Employer Brand Communication

Brand communication plays an important role in enhancing people's understanding and perceptions of what the company has to provide as an employer. (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 129.) The two most essential objectives of any communication strategy are to convey the message and engage the right people. An additional goal, from the employer branding viewpoint, is to make sure that the communication reinforces a more positive and distinctive brand image. (Mosley & Schmidt 2017, 159.) Powerful brands are built through unique, and coherent brand communication and, therefore, they signal positive and reliable associations. Companies must be crystal clear in their communication, as today's young generation of talent, the 'Generation Z', are greatly focused on constant learning and development. (Universum 2 April 2019.)

As buyers look for products or services to purchase, in the same way, job seekers go through different stages when looking for jobs. This is called the candidate journey and it is illustrated in figure 7 below. It describes six stages that job seekers go through: awareness, consideration, and interest, which focus on active job seekers; and application, selection and hire which focus on passive candidates. (TalentLyft 2020.)

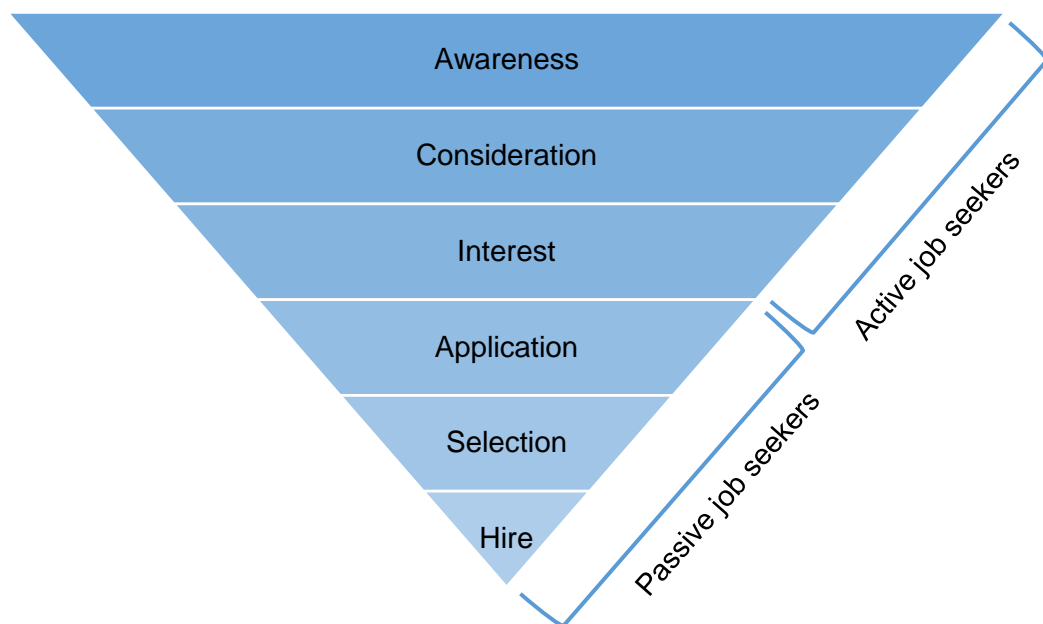


Figure 7. Candidate journey (adapted from TalentLyft 2020)

Job seekers have multiple interactions with employer brand during their candidate journey, and these touchpoints can happen for instance when they see the job ads, visit the career site or read the blog, check the company reviews, talk to the company representative in local events, join the talent network, or when they apply for a job and are being interviewed. To be able to lead candidates through the first three stages, recruiters use recruitment marketing with the help of recruitment marketing tools not only to attract and hire the top talents, but also to encourage to candidate engagement and to improve the candidate experience. (TalentLyft 2020.)

According to Dryden (11 May 2020) for some business, consumer brands and an employer brand have their own target groups, or alternatively, some businesses can have a strong relationship between them, a situation where the consumer brand feeds the employer brand. Employer brand cannot be a one size fits for all and, therefore, messaging must be tailored according to who you are trying to attract. For instance, what motivates a management accountant to work for a certain company will probably be different to the motivations of a tech professional. (Dryden 11 May 2020.)

The following factors have a potential to change or promote a positive employer brand perception in the mind of the tech candidates that companies would most like to recruit and employ:

- case studies showcasing interesting projects
- a developer blog written by tech professionals
- tailored job ads to inspire tech professionals
- social proof – especially in tech, nothing is more powerful than great insights from colleagues. One reason why advocacy platforms and employee referral work so well in tech community is because they are so well networked and have a great access to diverse talent pools
- by promoting the tech stack, the company may spark the interest of a top talent (Dryden 11 May 2020.)

Mosley and Schmidt (2017, 122) says that employer brand marketing is viewed mostly as an external activity, such as building an image and recruiting candidates. However, remarkable benefits can be gained by expanding the employer brand communication internally in a way that it engages everyone in the organization. This helps to ensure that the management understands and is committed to delivering on the employer brand promises, new employees can experience that the company really delivers on the promises it communicates externally, and current employees are aware about what makes their employer unique, attributes that cherishes employee engagement, advocacy, referral, and retention. (Mosley & Schmidt 2017, 122.)

Moreover, employees are the heart of every organization, and therefore it is crucial to keep in mind that building an internal brand is just as important than building an external brand. Internal communication can help organizations to build a strong employer brand with the following ways by:

- understanding employer values and how they shape the employee experience
- creating measurable goals for employer branding to see what is working and what to improve
- tailoring communications to employer brand
- using the brand voice - developing a strong employer brand involves creating the tone of voice that will be used throughout internal communications
- highlighting and recognizing employees
- keeping employees updated about company news or changes - also what is happening internally
- asking for employee feedback – it is crucial to know how the organization's efforts are being seen and experienced by employees while building a strong employer brand. (Cleary 10 March 2020.)

## **2.6 IT Industry as an Employer**

Versatile and highly qualified developer might be hard to find. Companies must focus on improving their employer brand to ensure it holds strong appeal to the tech talents they are hoping to recruit. Stack Overflow has researched topics such as technology, culture and professional development opportunities, and they found out that when developers are considering a job offer, one of the main concerns they have in mind is: what their tech stack would look like; what frameworks and programming languages they would be working with; and whether it would be hard to integrate with outdated technologies. In order to attract highly skilled candidates, the tech stack must include cutting-edge technologies that they want to use and that the company prioritizes learning opportunities. (Hawkins 6 February 2020; Stack Overflow 2019.)

The Stack Overflow's research from 2019 also found out that alongside the chosen tech stack, candidates are interested in the company culture. Work-life balance is also valued by developers. For instance, programming is a very independent role, so it is worth making sure that the company is able to provide the freedom they are looking for. Candidates also want to make sure that they won't be blocked from productivity in their role. Software engineers value the opportunities to grow. They want to use their skills to create value with the tools they build, and they are interested to grow their knowledge and learn new languages, frameworks, and tools. (Hawkins 6 February 2020; Stack Overflow 2019.)

Stack Overflow's annual Developer Survey is known as the largest survey of professional coders around the world. In 2020, the survey was completed by almost 65,000. Nearly 75% of respondents said that they learn a new technology at least every few months or

once a year. This shows clearly how fast innovations happen and how developers are continuously learning to keep their skills fresh. (Stack Overflow 2020.)

One of the main things in building a strong employer brand is to identify what the candidates are seeking for and giving them a clear proof that the company can provide that. For instance, if applicants are searching for roles that provide them great learning opportunities, it is a good idea to create employer branding content together with an existing developer team. Employer branding content that showcases the opportunities that developers have had to learn and grow on the job, through trainings, seminars and hackathons is a great way to attract potential candidates. (Hawkins 6 February 2020; Stack Overflow 2019.)

Sofia Pohls, The CEO and one of the three co-founders of Finders Seekers Oy, was interviewed for the Prochat podcast by Identio. Sofia was asked, what the trends are in IT recruitment. She mentioned two trends. Firstly, talent markets has been trending for years. Remote work is becoming more common; some people work remotely and some locally. Secondly, forms of work are changing. The IT industry is employee-driven. For instance, many might want to work as freelancers. Companies must consider, from where do they find the skilled talents, and whether the employment relationship is the only available form of work for the company to hire the top talent. (Bergström 9 June 2020.)

### 3 Research Methods

This chapter introduces the reader to the research design which is illustrated in the figure 8 in the subchapter 3.1. Thereafter, the population and sampling are discussed, and the interview framework is introduced. Moreover, this chapter provides information about the data collection and the data analysis methods to explain how this research was conducted. Lastly, the reliability and relevance issues are discussed.

#### 3.1 Research Design

The purpose of this research was to investigate how employer branding is organized in IT organizations in Finland, and what the needs and challenges with employer branding are. In addition, another important objective was to find out what the current and future state of employer branding is like in IT organizations and which factors would enable IT organizations to evolve in tech employer branding in the future. The research approach was qualitative, and the data was collected with semi-structured interviews. The total number of interviews conducted was four. The interviews were held remotely via Microsoft Teams video meetings due to Covid-19, and they were recorded with the interviewees' permission. The sample included four management level employer branding professionals working in organizations operating in Finland, either in the IT sector or in organizations with a significant IT department. The research design is illustrated below in figure 8.

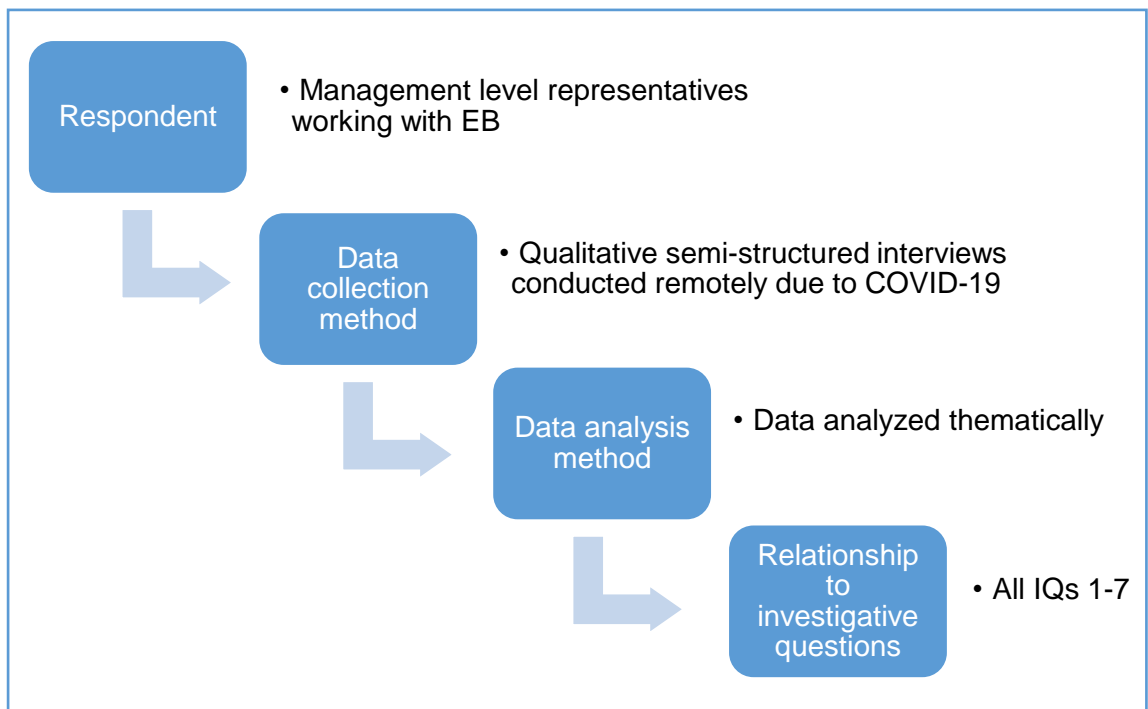


Figure 8. Research design

Qualitative data is expected to be rich in contextual detail when the data collection is done in the natural surroundings. Interviews are likely to provide more descriptive and explanatory data because they give the interviewer a chance to explore issues while interviewing. This supports analyzing and interpreting the data. Qualitative data can be characterized by its richness and fullness which gives a chance for in-depth analysis, where context can be related to the themes that come out from analysis, to provide justifiable and contextualized explanations. (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2019, 639.)

Sirkka Hirsjärvi and Helena Hurme in their book *Tutkimushaastattelu* (2009, 36) compiled from several sources the many benefits of interview research compared to surveys. For instance, there is a greater chance of motivating an individual in an interview than in survey. Interviewee has more chances to interpret the questions. The interview is also a more flexible method and allows for clarifications compared to survey research. Interview also provides illustrative examples. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2009, 36.)

### **3.2 Population and Sampling**

The necessary sample size depends on the research objective, methods used, resources and time available. In qualitative research, the sample size must be large enough to identify recurring patterns: the more you do research, such as, interviews the more likely it is that theoretical saturation is reached. This means that doing more research will not bring any new knowledge. (Stickdorn, Lawrence, Hormess & Schneider 2018, 104-105.) In other words, the saturation in qualitative research means that the intention is to interview individuals for so long that the new interviewees no longer provide any substantially new data. In this case, the researcher must be able to decide at what point the interviews should end and when there is so much data that significant theoretical results can be obtained. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2009, 60.)

The population in this research project were HR professionals or other management level professionals working on employer branding issues in organizations operating in Finland, either in the IT sector or in organizations with a significant IT department, and who also have a need for IT professionals and are recruiting international IT talents into their organization. The sample was discretionary based on commissioning company recommendations. The sampling criteria were confidential.

### **3.3 Interview Framework**

The purpose of the interview is to gather material on the basis of which conclusions can be reliably drawn about the phenomenon under study. When using a thematic interview,

one of the most important tasks in the planning phase is the design of the interview themes. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2009, 66.) The appendix 1, which can be found in the appendices at the end of this thesis, presents the relationship between investigative questions, interview questions and theory. Moreover, it presents the themes that emerge from the research question and investigative questions, and chapter numbers referring to the theory. In addition, the interview framework for four interviews (appendix 2) can be found in the appendices. The themes covered in the interview were:

- Theme one: The importance, functions, and goals of employer branding
- Theme two: Employer branding strategy
- Theme three: Employer branding activities
- Theme four: Attracting domestic and international IT talents
- Theme five: Challenges in planning and implementing employer branding
- Theme six: EB maturity level and EB development.

### **3.4 Data Collection**

Some practical arrangements need to be made before the actual interviews. These include deciding on the time and the place for the interview, approximate duration, and the suitable equipment. Recording of the interviews is also essential. The interview requires a good contact with the interviewee, and therefore the environment for the interview must be peaceful. Such an interview place is the best where communication is as uninterrupted as possible. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2009, 73-75.)

The data was collected with qualitative semi-structured interviews between 14 September 2020 and 12 October 2020. The total number of interviews conducted was four, and the duration of each interview was one hour. The original plan was to collect the data with face to face interviews, however, due to COVID-19, the interviews were held remotely via Microsoft Teams video meetings. The interviews were recorded with the interviewees' permission. Each interviewee was contacted via email with an interview requests, where the author has asked the interviewee's preference for the online or face to face interview. However, as mentioned earlier, all the interviews were held remotely due to COVID-19. The interview request also included requesting a permission to record the interview for transcription purposes, after which the interview recording was destroyed to ensure data security. Interviewees also received the thematic interview questions in advance via email right after the interview was confirmed. Each interview started with a presentation in which the author went through the practices of the interview including the recording permission for transcription purposes, data security and anonymity.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

Even if the number of interviewees is smaller, it does not mean that there is not enough data. For instance, if the duration of the interview is long, also data has been received abundantly. The data gathered through the thematic interview is usually abundant. The deeper the dialogue between the interviewer and interviewee, the richer the data is. Some of the main features of the qualitative analysis can be outlined in the following way: The analysis often begins during the interview, also observations can be made while interviewing, for instance, about the phenomenon on the basis of their number, frequency, distribution and special cases. The difference between qualitative and quantitative analysis is that qualitative research keeps its data in a verbal form. Once the data is collected, the researcher has two choices: 1) The data can be written as text. Word-by-word transcription can be done from the entire interview dialogue or only from certain thematic areas. 2) Conclusions are drawn directly from the recorded data instead of writing the recorded data as a text. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2009, 135-136, 138.)

The data was transcribed from word for word right after each interview was finished, as the author saw that it helped with the internalization of the data. The total number of transcribed text in pages was 43. The data was analyzed thematically by using tables created in Microsoft Word.

### **3.6 Reliability and Relevance**

In the case of an interview, quality must be observed at different stages of the research. In data collection, one way the quality can be pursued in advance is to create a high-quality interview framework. Also, by thinking in advance, how the themes can be deepened, and by considering the alternative forms of additional questions is an advantage. Nor can it be overemphasized that a thematic interview is not just about presenting the main themes. Another way to improve the quality of the data in advance is to pay attention to the interview training as it may increase the confidence of the interviewer. As important as training, is going through the interviews during the interview phase. For instance, a good idea is to listen to the earlier recordings to see how the interviews have changed. In addition, during the interview phase the quality can be improved by taking care of the technical equipment. At the end of the interview, a good idea is to check the interview framework in case of additional questions. The quality of the interview can be improved also by the fact that the interview is transcribed as soon as possible. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2009, 184-185.)

Reliability means that when the examining the same person, the same result is obtained with two examinations. Another way to define reliability is that the result is reliable if two

evaluators come to a similar result. The reliability of the interview material, on the other hand, depends on its quality. For instance, if the audibility of the recordings is poor, or the transcription follows different rules at the beginning and the end, or if the classification is random, the interview material cannot be said to be reliable. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2009, 185-186.)

To ensure the reliability, the author recognized her earlier experience of doing the face to face interviews as very beneficial. Before every interview the author carefully went through the interview framework. In addition, the author made a lot of observations during the interview, however, the observation was more challenging as the interviews were held remotely. Listening to the interviewee was in a big part during the whole interview, as the author wanted to give space for the interviewee to speak. Additional questions were also made from both parties, for instance, in case of unclear question or information. The technical equipment and virtual tools, for example, Microsoft Teams, were very familiar to the author in advance. Taking care of the schedule was also very important. Therefore, the author believes that her earlier experience was a big advantage. In addition, the fact that the author and interviewee had no relationship of any kind, for instance, a subordinate-supervisor relationship, ensured that the interviewees could answer questions, and speak as openly as possible.

Each phase in this thesis was carefully planned from the beginning to the end. At the beginning of this thesis project, the purpose and all the goals of this research were carefully thought. The research question and the investigative questions were carefully designed with the support from the commissioning company. The theory part was carefully planned, and only high quality sources were used to ensure the relevancy of the theory part. The interview framework was designed with the aim to find answers to the research question and investigative questions. All the interviewees have a long experience in working with employer branding which ensured a high-quality data and the relevancy of results.

## 4 Results

This chapter introduces the results that provide the answer to the research question and to the investigative questions. The results are presented through six different themes. In addition, the direct comments by the interviewees are included under theme one in the subchapter 4.2.1 as they provide interesting aspects to this research. The companies interviewed are also presented briefly.

### 4.1 Brief Introduction of Interviewed Companies

The organizations interviewed operated in different fields such as digitalization and financial industry, and they all have a significant IT department. The size of organizations varied from middle-sized companies to large corporations, and they all operate internationally. The employee numbers of organizations interviewed varied from more than 100 to more than 20 000. All the interviewees were management level EB professionals. The companies interviewed are presented narrowly in the table 3 below including the industry and the size of the company. Company names have been withheld for confidentiality reasons. The interviewees are referred as to company A, B, C and D.

Table 3. Introduction of the Companies Interviewed

Interviewed companies is referred as to	Industry	Size of the company
Company A	IT	Large
Company B	IT	Large
Company C	IT	Middle-sized
Company D	Financial	Large

### 4.2 Theme one: The Importance, Functions, and Goals of Employer Branding

The interview started with theme one which covered the following topics: the meaning of employer branding, the EVP and EB communication. The results of all the three interview questions are presented under theme one, and each interview question is covered in its own subchapter. The first theme comprised three interview questions, one of which included a sub-question.

#### 4.2.1 The Meaning of Employer Branding

The first question focused on the meaning of employer branding in the organization. The interviewees were asked about the meaning of EB in their organization.

**Company A** described that in their daily work EB focuses on the kind of content to be published and the types of paid advertising needed, and the channels where their culture is presented. On the other hand, on the channels where they want their experts to talk and who those experts are. Moreover, gathering all this information together and ensuring that they get to tell their story in different channels.

**Company B** interviewee highlighted that EB must be seen as a big entity, which has an impact on everything, it should not be seen only as a sales object. Company B described that EB has both, the external side and the internal side, and everything is linked to each other. Company B highlighted the importance of internal side of EB and mentioned issues like candidate path, candidate experience and employee experience, and the importance of seeing the bigger picture of EB and issues linked to each other.

**Company C** described the meaning of EB in few ways. They place great importance on strengthening their current, so called present EB. They aim to bring up issues that people do not know about them yet. One important mention was that it is important for them to go along hand in hand with their product. The purpose of EB is to support them in the growth of their company to the right direction.

**Company D** highlighted that EB requires a long-term, far-reaching, and planned systematic action. Delivering information about them as the most important software house in Finland is one of their most important priorities. In the same way as the other interviewees, Company D also highlighted the importance of their product, the reason for having the best talents working for them.

Summing up the results through some quotations from the interviews, the meaning of employer branding in the companies focused on the following issues:

- "What kind of an employer do we want to be. What kind of issues do we want to emphasize, and what kind of a message do we want to deliver about us as an employer and as a company". (Company A)
- "We must start the EB management from the internal EB. That is, taking care of that employee experience before you start pushing that content outwards or even attracting a talent". (Company B)
- "What we are as a company, what products we have, and what we are as an employer". (Company C)
- "It is one of the most important things in the organization. There is nothing that could bypass it". (Company D)

#### **4.2.2 EVP and Its Most Important Attributes**

The second question (and its sub-question) under theme one had the focus on the EVP. Interviewees were asked if they have a clearly formulated EVP and the key attributes of the EVP.

**Company A** has an EVP with five themes. Company A highlighted their community, strong professionals as well as experts. Company A said that their culture includes trust and transparency, and a strong presence. The importance of sharing the knowledge about their work was also mentioned. And, finally, sharing information of the employer brand, and how future-oriented and forward-looking company they are.

**Company B's** EVP has three different aspects. Company B underlined the importance of people and team spirit as well as the importance of their experts. The way of doing the work was also mentioned, which is communal and local. Company B highlighted agile ways of working and reported that especially employer branding requires a local action. Moreover, Company B highlighted the development opportunities. Finally, Company B stated that it is important for the EVP to involve people and to use different employee surveys as a source, and also to take into account the cultural aspects of the company culture.

**Company C** has the cornerstones of culture, issues they promise for their current and future employees. At the time this interview was held, the EVP work was in progress. They had, for instance, recently performed a culture research inside the company to find out if there were changes in the cornerstones of the culture. Moreover, Company C also said that the cornerstones of culture were not yet tailored for the different talent personas.

**Company D** has several EVP attributes. They highlighted the importance of employee experience. Self-directed teams were mentioned, and the will to leave a strong hierarchy behind and to do things differently than before. In the same way as other companies interviewed, company D also highlighted the development and career opportunities. Lastly, Company D stressed the corporate social responsibility, which is reflected in everything they do.

#### **4.2.3 Communicating EB**

The last question under theme one focused on EB communication. Interviewees were asked whether and how exactly the EB is communicated throughout the organization internally.

**Company A** reported that they had recently redesigned their EVP with countless number of discussions on different internal platforms and through a survey. Company A described that they tend to communicate all the issues really openly in their organization. And, in addition to the earlier created internal blog text, company A was planning an external blog series about this topic. An interesting finding was that company A highlighted the fact that it is surprisingly difficult to create an enduring EVP.

**Company B** reported that they communicate a lot and lately even more. Company B described that they engage their own people and talk about the importance of employer branding in different channels. Company B works closely with marketing department, the same issues are pursued together, and thus both strive to support each other. They had also noticed that it brings more results and is much more effective.

**Company C** reported that they have not communicated it yet, but they do have an EB plan and they are, for instance, planning to build an internship program for trainees that could be marketed through an external public relations campaign. The company also reported that they were planning to interview all teams to find out more about their values. Company C also mentioned the employee advocacy, the purpose is that employees would produce and share content independently. Company C also stated that they had a little experiment going on that they were going to have internal presentations coming up in the future, and one of the topics mentioned was employer branding.

**Company D** stated that they would have to be better at employer branding in general and highlighted that they had already considered how to get to the next level to be able to improve it in the future.

### **4.3 Theme two: Employer Branding Strategy**

The main goal of theme two was to find out if the company has an EB strategy or plan, and whether it is global or domestic. Another important goal was to find out what the main goals for employer branding are, and finally, how often the strategy is updated. Lastly, the interviewees were asked about the responsibility of EB and their collaboration with other functions in the organization. The second theme comprised three interview questions, one of which included three sub-questions.

#### 4.3.1 Employer Branding Strategy and The Main Goals

The interview question one, including its sub-questions, focused on the EB strategy. Interviewees were asked if they have an EB strategy or plan, and whether it is global or domestic. The author also asked about the main goals for EB, and the frequency of EB strategy or plan updates.

**Company A** reported that they have a domestic EB strategy, which has been made for the long run. Company A mentioned that is based not only what is defined as their EVPs but also on their company's strategy so that they go hand in hand. The strategy is updated once a year. Company A was in the process of re-working its strategy at the time the interview was conducted, but one of the main goals was that they had carried out employer brand surveys for the target groups in order to have some kind of a vision of where to start from, and to compare to the coming years. Moreover, they aimed to carry out the employer brand surveys later again in order to see whether the employer brand image was developed into the direction to which they aimed to take it with their own actions. Company A also called this as one of the metrics they were going to have.

**Company B** stated that their strategy is global as well as domestic as they have goals in the local and the Nordic level. The strategy is updated at least twice a year and reviewed every two to three months. Company B described that the main goals in the Nordic level are to recruit junior talents and to position their organization at the Nordic level in the market and build a leading position. Company B reported that they were going to have a graduate-program in Finland in the future, which will support the recruitment of junior talents. Company B described the main objectives in Finland, which are to focus on senior talents based on their business needs and be the employer of choice for them on the Finnish market. Another goal for company B is to create a functional structure and concept for university collaborations, and to raise the awareness of the company among students and engage the future talents. A third goal the company B mentioned was to build a talent pool of junior and senior talents.

**Company C** reported that they had a preliminary plan for employer branding, which was domestic. However, Company C also stated that they recruit professionals from abroad to Finland, and that is why the strategy is also seen as global. Their goal is to update the strategy quarterly. Company C reported that they did not have numeric goals yet, but the main goals were to increase awareness of the company and the products, but also to raise the awareness of the company as an employer. Another goal was to genuinely reach for the talents needed, and that is why Company C mentioned the importance of the talent

personas which they were going to identify to attract the right talents. And, finally, to strengthen the present employer brand in addition to what people know about them as a company and through their products.

**Company D** reported that they had a domestic employer branding strategy, however, Company D stated that they have many nationalities working their organization, and the working language in some teams is English. Company D stated that even though they have not had the need and the intention to recruit from abroad, however, they were aware of a certain type of expertise regarding their organization, and the fact that there is a lack of that type of expertise in Finland. Company D reported three main goals. The first was to increase the awareness of Company D as a software employer in the target segment of experts with a developer background. The second goal was to increase the interest of developers towards Company D, especially from the viewpoint of the software employer. Finally, the third goal was to increase the talent pool through the employer brand image marketing. The strategy is updated quarterly, however, company D pointed out that they review the strategy every month in order to find out if some issues needs changing.

#### **4.3.2 Responsibility for Employer Branding**

The interviewees were asked who is responsible for EB in their organization.

**Company A's** interviewee leads the recruitment and is responsible for employer branding in Finland.

**Company B** reported they have an employer branding team that collaborates with other teams such as recruitment, marketing, and communications. The main responsibility is with the employer branding team.

**Company C** stated the main responsibility lies with the interviewee. Other people having the responsibility are the creative director (one of the owners), the recruitment coordinator, the HR team, and in the future also the marketing team, and all the employees in the company. Actually, company C interestingly turned the interview question to "Who owns the employer branding?" Their answer to that would be everyone in the company.

**Company D** stated they have a team titled an employer brand image and recruitment marketing. In this context, some bigger EB responsibilities were reported, and these were projects related to trainee and summer jobs, and recruitment marketing and branding. Company D also described some of the activities by the recruitment team such as the job

advertisements and the discussions with candidates, and this is why everyone in the recruitment team has the responsibility for EB. However, one person still has the main responsibility for EB. Company D stated that they had tried to share the responsibility earlier, but it did not yet work quite as it should.

### **4.3.3 Collaboration with Other Functions**

The interviewees were asked if they collaborate with other functions, for example, with marketing department, on employer branding.

**Company A** reported that their EB team consists of recruiting and product/services marketing people, and there is one marketing person who works full-time with recruitment marketing and employer branding. Company A stated that they meet with the entire product/services marketing team on a weekly basis to plan, for example, the upcoming social media week.

**Company B** reported that they collaborate with marketing team. However, in the same context, Company B also spoke about the employee engagement as well as the internal activities and stressed the importance of the communications team to be part of the agenda and the annual strategy.

**Company C** reported that they have an Instagram account created by the HR team. This Instagram account is to attract new talents, and it is primarily managed by one person from the HR team with collaboration by one person who helps the video and content production teams. At the time the interview was conducted the collaboration with marketing team was still in progress, however, the aim for Company C was to find out what the collaboration with marketing team could be like in the future.

**Company D** reported that they should do more collaboration, and that they have learned to do more during the last year. Company D added that perhaps that could be their plan for the next year that how they could improve the collaboration. They have collaborated more with the social media team, and at the time the interview was conducted they were planning to open up an Instagram account, however, it was reported that even though the Instagram account may not attract so many developers, on the other hand, it will drive the greater employer image and spread the word. Company D described that they have monthly meetings with the social medial team where they go through what has been done, and what they will be doing next. In addition to this, they also meet their brand and communications team on a quarterly basis and take a look at the greater employer image. Company D stated that all their units have a really precise plans, but they could sync them

together because everyone is ultimately striving for the same issues, reaching for employees and a skilled workforce. Not to forget branding and marketing, and others, they want customer relationships and more customers, the same audience, but a different purpose.

#### **4.4 Theme three: Employer Branding Activities**

Under theme three, the author covered three interview questions related to EB activities. The results of all the three interview questions are presented under this theme. The third theme comprised three interview questions.

##### **4.4.1 Variety of Employer Branding Activities**

Question one focused on the EB activities. Interviewees were asked what the EB activities are like in their organization.

**Company A** reported that they perform lots of EB activities and that their own people produce a huge amount of content. Company A has weekly blogs where the topic can be just as much as about tech or harmonization of the family and work life. In addition, it is distributed not only organically but also as paid advertising. Company A also mentioned the university collaboration with certain subject organizations, and the large collaboration with professional communities such as Women in Tech and Mimmit Koodaa.

**Company B** reported that they have recently had a strong focus on junior talents. They have their own ambassador community inside the organization, which has recently focused more on the university collaborations. Company B has created networks within the company for each subject organization they collaborate with, for instance, five employees from across the company runs the collaboration with a specific subject organization. The employer branding team in Company B has set goals for these networks. An example of a concrete goal is last year's focus on increasing the number of new cooperation partners. Another activity was to increase the number of Instagram followers. Company B also mentioned that once they start the graduate campaign, they will try to boost the visibility with the help of these networks. Company B added that they could produce the material for these networks, and they could then share it to schools and partners. Moreover, Company B also reported that they have succeeded in taking the recruitment and employer branding to the next level. The goal was to move towards more proactive recruitment, and to be able to plan and engage in it. Finally, Company B stated that they developed some activities by identifying the critical roles and areas together with business, and by creating talent personas for these roles.

**Company C** reported that they have a goal to update their Instagram every other week. Also, the importance of LinkedIn was mentioned in this context. In addition, paid advertising in Instagram was mentioned as an option for the future. Related to this Company C mentioned they have five themes they want to bring up. The first is the company, who they are and what their story is. The second is to tell more about their location, Helsinki, to the international talents. The third is the roles and the kind of opportunities they have. The fourth is the work experience, and why people like to work for them and what is the job all about. And finally, the fifth, which is personal and professional satisfaction. This means how people have been able to succeed in changing the roles or learned something new. Company C also mentioned the future activities that were in progress at the time the interview was conducted. These were the university collaboration and the internship program as well as mentoring for young talents. Company C added that they are planning to have an employee advocacy program in the future, and they will also see whether their own people would be interested to talk in events outside the company. Lastly, Company C interestingly added the recruitment as a one activity, because everything that happens in the recruitment will reflect to the side of employer branding.

**Company D** stated that one of their absolute favorites, and also the most powerful and productive, has been their tech podcast. Other activities include the virtual events, content production and social media marketing. For example, they create articles about what it is like to work in the Company D. They also encourage their supervisors to share the information about open positions to the widest network possible. In the same way as other companies interviewed, Company D is also increasingly collaborating with schools and higher education institutions. Company D also highlighted that their own programme for junior tech talents has significantly increased the popularity of their employer brand.

#### **4.4.2 Engaging IT Professionals in EB Activities**

Question two focused also on the engagement of EB activities. Interviewees were asked how employees / IT professionals are engaged to be part of the companies' EB activities.

**Company A** reported that some of their employees like to talk at the professional events. Company A highlighted that they give the opportunity for the people to participate in various activities, but also pointed out how important it is for people to feel that it is an important and interesting thing for the employee himself/herself. Company A stated that they do not have employer branding ambassadors, because not all of their people care so much about social media. Despite that they still produce a lot of content. They have also created social media campaigns where their people or their views have been presented.

**Company B** reported that they have produced various blogs recently, especially last year. Company B described that once they start looking for a new talent, they also have the material ready for it. Company B mentioned that their people are part of the development activities and they want to share their stories, but it was also pointed out that development activities require a long-term job. It was mentioned earlier that Company B identified the critical roles and created the talent personas for these roles. This particular activity was followed by the talent persona workshops, which Company B arranged together with their IT professionals. Company B described that this also helps them once they start to produce the content, and to reach for the talent as it is more strategic and targeted.

**Company C** reported that the referral percent is very good, which means that their employees recommend to other people to come and work for them. Company C added that this indicates that their employees are in a way acting as employer brand advocates. This type of activity is informal, and it is not coordinated by the EB staff.

**Company D** reported that their IT professionals are more and more part of their EB activities. For instance, there is always someone of their professionals as part of their Tech Podcast. Company D added that also the people in the management level roles have been more and more engaged as well, for instance, in their social media channels telling what it is like to work in the Company D, or they might post about their open positions. Company D pointed out that they have also given their support for this type of engagement by the employees, and hope that everyone in the company would take an active role.

#### **4.4.3 Employer Branding in the Daily Working Life**

Question three under theme three focused on the daily working life. Interviewees were asked how EB is present in their daily work and organizational life of employees.

**Company A** reported that they do not intentionally bring EB to the table every day. However, for instance, social media channels and blogs are all the time on the table in one way or another. Company A mentioned an important point: nowadays every channel is quite full of content and this is why they also limit it every now and then to avoid people getting overwhelmed.

**Company B** stated that EB is present in their daily work and nowadays even more consciously. Company B described that sometimes, even if employer branding might be present and appears in some ways, yet, people may not recognize it as employer branding.

**Company C** stated that EB is reflected through the cornerstones of their culture. For instance, through what they are doing, how they are doing it, and how they think as a company. Company C also stressed the importance of the recruitment activities, for instance, how they treat the candidates, how they communicate with them, how quickly they act during the recruitment process, whether they keep the candidates up to date, whether they provide information about what the future holds, and whether they provide feedback to the candidates.

**Company D** also reported about how much EB might be present without people recognizing it as EB. Company D stated that their people really enjoy working for them and that is how EB is present at all times. Company D takes great care of their people by helping and supporting them. Company D mentioned that what they should do more is to share more information about their EB with the public. Company D highlighted that they do not want to be a company where everything is done perfectly by the plan, because they also like to test and try different things and to see whether these things work or not. A good example is the newsletters they created. Later on, it turned out that many of their own employees also became subscribers of these newsletters. This means that employees are interested in what is going on in their workplace and also what kind of job opportunities there might be.

#### **4.5 Theme four: Attracting Domestic and International Talents**

Theme four focused in attraction and retention of IT talents, organizational culture, internationality, and competitiveness. The main goal of this theme was to find out about what kind of an IT talent is the most crucial in the organizations, the aspects of the organizational culture, the utilization of EB in the recruitment and internationality. The fourth theme comprised seven interview questions, one of which included a sub-question.

##### **4.5.1 The Need of IT Professionals in the Companies**

The first two interview questions focused on the IT talents and the results are provided under this sub-chapter. Interviewees were asked what kind of IT talent is crucial in their organization, and what type of IT talent is the most challenging to attract and retain.

**Company A** reported that the most crucial ones are the software developers, because of the concrete development work they do with their customers. Company A mentioned that software developers are also the most challenging to attract and retain. Specifically, they reported that it is more challenging to attract and retain seniors than juniors.

**Company B** reported that at the moment the most crucial ones are the software developers and especially full-stack and back-end developers. In addition, the need of data architects and data engineers was mentioned. All of these roles are also the most challenging to attract and to retain.

**Company C** stated that the most crucial ones are data analysts and data scientists. One reason for this is that especially such senior data analysts that Company C would need are hard to find in Finland. In addition, the most crucial and important ones are also programmers, and these experts are usually hard to attract and retain. However, Company C reported that they have recently been very lucky in finding and recruiting them. Moreover, Company C mentioned that the most challenging of all at the moment is attracting the data analysts.

**Company D** stated that the most crucial ones are developers, such as, the front-end and back-end developers. Company D mentioned that roles with very specific area of expertise are the most challenging to attract and to retain.

#### **4.5.2 Organizational Culture**

The interview question three focused on the organizational culture. Interviewees were asked what aspects of their organizational culture are attractive for IT professionals.

**Company A** highlighted the importance of professional development for software developers, being able to work in the projects that are professionally developing, or projects that are very challenging or particularly meaningful, or to be able to grow in the role, for example, by moving from a certain role to another. Other important things are flexibility of the employer and work-life balance.

**Company B** reported that opportunities to develop and grow are attractive for IT professionals, especially when it comes to seniors. In addition to these, also learning opportunities were mentioned. Company B also highlighted the importance of work-life balance and flexibility.

**Company C** stated that the work-life balance is highly appreciated. Another one is concentrating on the core competence, which means doing the right things in the best possible way. Other aspects that Company C mentioned were transparency, freedom, responsibility, and a low hierarchy.

**Company D** reported that it is the significant influence of their work. Other aspects that Company D mentioned were development and growth opportunities, and kindness of the employer which means that they take care of their employees.

#### **4.5.3 Utilizing Employer Branding as part of Recruitment**

The interview question four focused on the recruitment. Interviewees were asked if they utilize employer branding as part of their recruitment activities.

**Company A** stated that they utilize employer branding a lot especially in the beginning of the recruitment process. For instance, when they are doing paid advertising and keep track on what kind of advertising works, and what percentage of people reaches their website and from there again into the recruitment system. Moreover, they optimize paid activities based on the results.

**Company B** reported that a good example is their talent persona workshop. Company B described that the purpose of the workshop is to identify the critical roles needed, and then create the talent personas for those roles, from where they will get the content needed, and also a possible pitch. After this they will have more information about; where this person might be hanging out and what this person might be doing, from where they might reach this person, and what things might attract this person. After this, they create a candidate journey for this role, where they go through different stages such as what this person wants and what are his or her goals. Moreover, Company B mentioned a paid campaign as an example, however, it was also pointed out that for the campaign they need to have the information regarding the talent personas.

**Company C** reported that they create talent personas to know who to target with the recruitment marketing and from where to find this person while doing headhunting. In addition, they also create a candidate journey and follow some of the recruitment metrics. Company C stated that they are planning to focus more on the purpose-driven recruitment in the future which means the added value that every recruitment step will bring to them and to the candidate. In their recruitment related emails, they also share tips to check the social media channels.

**Company D** stated that they utilize links and tips in their job advertisements, for instance, if they have a podcast episode of that particular task to which it relates. Company D talked about reaching the right target group, and highlighted the importance of sales and marketing in their recruitment, for instance, it is very important to be able to tell things by utilizing sales and to be able to write attractive job advertisements.

#### 4.5.4 International Talents

The interview question five under theme four focused on internationality. Interviewees were asked how important it is to recruit international talent.

**Company A** reported that it is important that an international and a non-international have the equal position and they are equally in demand, however, unfortunately it is still not the case in Finland, and that there are challenges in employing non-Finnish speakers.

**Company B** reported that it is very important. One of the challenges is that some of their customers from the public sector require proficiency in the Finnish language, and this is an issue that should be looked into as to whether Finnish competence is really required or not. Company B stated that they could think of different possibilities, one of them is that they can provide trainings in order to learn the language. Company B also mentioned another challenge that what should be done when the Finnish speaking talent runs out in Finland, where can that talent be found.

**Company C** stated that is very important to recruit international talent. Company C reported that 30 percent of their employees do not speak Finnish, and at the time this interview was held they had just recruited a new talent from abroad.

**Company D** reported that they have a lot of international talents working through their partners. Company D also described that there are many examples of how challenging it is in the financial sector to recruit international talent because of the strict regulation in the financial sector. Moreover, Company D stated that it will be more important in the coming years, possibly in five years, but also when situation with Covid-19 will get easier, and people can travel to Finland again.

#### 4.5.5 Competitiveness in the International Recruitment

The interview question six under theme four focused on competitiveness. Interviewees were asked how their organization ensures the competitiveness when recruiting internationally, or when recruiting from an international talent market.

**Company A** stated that in Finland it is rather going in the way that their organization differs from others. This means that they differ from the general approach in their industry, and while it is their competitive advantage, it is also a bit of their concern how people who come from completely different working cultures suddenly adapt to the fact that they do

not have a hierarchy, they do not have a chains of approval, and people do the job independently and without being obligated to report it to anyone. Therefore, often this is a competitive advantage but at the same time it is a pretty big challenge. Furthermore, Company A reported an example how people have successfully been able to adapt into such a culture and are really happy.

**Company B** reported that they rarely recruit from abroad. Unfortunately, only executive level people are recruited from abroad at the moment. Company B added that they have a lot of international talents working in Finland, but they were recruited from among foreigners already residing in Finland.

**Company C** stated that what makes them a great company is that they have such a great product, which means that they also have a really talented team, and people also recognize them through these things. In addition to these, a competitive salary was also mentioned. Company C reported that on behalf of international talents it becomes especially important to manage expectations and referred to relocation as well as transparency; what is Finland; what is this role; what we are as a company; how can we support that person to relocate to Finland.

**Company D** reported that hearing what size of a transformation Company D is undergoing at the moment has been the most important reason why people choose to work for them. Company D highlighted the storytelling skills and stated that there are such things to tell just as long as we know how to tell them to people. Company D added that we must be able to tell what it is in our daily lives at work in such a way that it is attractive to that person and one must also think about the context from the viewpoint of to whom these things are being told.

#### **4.5.6 The Most Important EVP Factors Valued by IT Professionals**

Lastly, question seven, including a sub-question, focused on the EVP. This question aimed to find out what EVP factors do IT professionals value the most. Interviewees were also asked if these factors are part of the EB communication in their organization.

**Company A** reported that the most valued EVP factors are the professional development, for instance, challenging or particularly significant projects. Other factors are the flexibility of the employer and the work-life balance. Company A stated that these factors are part of the EB communication, and they have carefully thought about which channels are best suited for each theme.

**Company B** reported that the IT talents value the professional development, interesting projects that are professionally developing, learning opportunities, good team spirit and doing things together, such benefits that are associated with leisure time, work-life balance, and flexible working hours. Company B also stated that these factors are part of the EB communication.

**Company C** reported that the most important factors valued by IT professionals are the work-life balance and transparency. Company C stated that these factors were not yet part of the EB communication at the time this interview was held.

**Company D** reported that IT professionals value their employer, diversity of their job, professional development, and an opportunity to make a significant impact on something through the work. Company D stated that these factors are part of the EB communication, for instance, they have created career stories and their goal was to make them a bit more diverse by asking their people; what interests them, and if they would be applying to Company D for a job, what would they like know about it. Company D also mentioned an important point that about career sites, for instance, one needs must be able to look at it from the outside while career sites are being redesigned. Moreover, Company D raised a one more thing about their culture, which is the platform they utilize for communicating about all kinds of things, there is always an expert in the house to help you in all kinds of matters.

#### **4.6 Theme five: Challenges in Planning and Implementing Employer Branding**

The main goal of this theme was to find out about challenges in planning and implementing employer branding. Theme five comprised simply one interview question.

##### **4.6.1 Challenges in Employer Branding**

Interviewees were asked what challenges they have with EB currently and why.

**Company A** stated that they are a quite unknown company in terms of the new consultancy services because they are so strongly perceived as an IT company. Therefore, while working their strategy they were evaluating that particular target group in terms of how they differ from the software developers, and for instance, how their current EVP works for that particular target group, and what perspectives must be taken into account when approaching them in order to genuinely and truly succeed in generating the interest of the target audience.

**Company B** reported that the biggest challenge is to success in getting the employer branding to the agenda of all departments, including the executives, and to get the meaning and purpose of employer branding more visible. Company B stated that a lot of work has been done, but it still requires a hard work towards it. Company B highlighted that it is important that other teams know the purpose of the EB team or what those people do who work with EB. Company B reported an example where one of their departments had been thinking about some issues, but they did not know that they could have asked for a help from the EB team. This means that one should also internally brand the team to make it more visible regarding the issues they manage to serve to needs inside the company. Company B underlined that fact that it requires a lot of work that executives take the employer branding seriously and sees the importance of employer branding in the long run, and pointed out that most often the results are desired to be seen right away, while in employer branding, the results start to show in a couple of years. However, understanding how much it saves when employer branding is managed more strategically, and that EB is taken into account in everything, still requires some work.

**Company C** reported that one of the challenges is that the most critical target groups are so small, and the challenge in terms of employer branding is the question how the message should be targeted and to whom. Company C also reported another possible challenge, which is related to the division of the EB responsibilities internally.

**Company D** stated that they are constantly searching for a quite similar roles, and one of the challenges is related to that, and therefore, they should be able to innovate and to keep up with what is going on. Company D reported that Covid-19, however, has not affected negatively their recruitment, but the numbers of applicants have increased instead. Therefore, their goal is to succeed in maintaining the achieved state also in the future. Company D stated that now as they have a really good situation and so many people know the company D as a very potential employer. Therefore, it requires them to start working even harder in order to strengthen their employer brand image even more, and therefore, they must also think about, for instance, what the future looks like in that particular field they operate in.

#### **4.7 Theme six: Employer branding Maturity Level and EB Development**

Finally, before ending the interview the interviewees were asked to discuss the EB maturity and EB development. The aim was to find out about the current state regarding the EB maturity, the EB development plans and the most immediate EB development needs,

and whether the companies need an external advice with EB regarding the EB development. Theme six comprised two interview questions, one of which included two sub-questions.

#### **4.7.1 The Levels of Employer Branding Maturity**

Question one focused on the EB maturity model (appendix 3) and its EB maturity levels. In terms of the maturity model, interviewees were asked at what maturity level they place their company at the moment. The maturity levels are the following: beginner, developing, fascinating and leading. The highest level is the leading. (Finders Seekers Oy 2020a; Universum 15 September 2016.)

**Company A** placed their company at maturity level of “fascinating” in the maturity model. Company A stated that it was nice to see that also at the maturity level of “leading” there are things that they are already working on in their company, but also at the maturity level of “fascinating” there are things that could be done even better.

**Company B** reported that they have thought about this already before and placed their company at the maturity level of “fascinating” in the maturity model. Company B stated that their goal is to reach the maturity level of “leading”, and that they are already working for some of the activities, which belong to the “leading” level.

**Company C** placed their company at the maturity level of “developing” but reported that they have already taken steps towards the “fascinating” level. For instance, some of the activities from the “fascinating level” include a shorter recruitment process and they also have a content production plan, which includes five themes and rules for posting. Company C also stated that they have been working some of the elements from all of the maturity levels.

**Company D** placed their company at the maturity level of “fascinating” and reported that they rose to that maturity level during the year 2020. Company D estimated that they were at the “developing” level for around two years. Company D stated that there is still some work to do before they can reach the “leading” level. Company D also reported that it may not ever be possible for them to reach the state of “The CEO has the ultimate accountability of EB” in the “leading” level, because their entire organization is different from traditional businesses.

#### 4.7.2 The Future Needs of Employer Branding Development

Question two, including its sub-questions, focused on the EB development. Interviewees were asked how they plan to develop employer branding in the near future. What the most immediate EB development needs for them are, and if they are able to take these steps internally, or if they need external advice to do it.

**Company A** reported that their biggest goal is to make their company more known as an employer among the new consultancy services and similar candidate profiles. Another goal is related to the fact that there are differences between the cities they operate in terms of how well they are known, and therefore, they will put a strong focus on certain cities also in the future. Company A reported that another development need were the numerical metrics because they would like to use them more. The company also stated that they have the needed competence, but not enough of people, and therefore they are unable to produce analytics as much as they would like to have them. Company A reported that it is refreshing to get some outside views for employer branding, and they have used the external advice when needed. However, the company pointed out that they would like to see some insights already from the next level of employer branding to see where employer branding is going to refine next. Company A stated that everything that is taught around this topic in Finland is already well managed in their company and has not yet found a partner with whom to think over and who would have some vision and views about it. Moreover, Company A reported that it may be that this problem is not only present in Finland, and that probably the next level of employer branding just does not exist anywhere in the world yet.

**Company B** reported about going towards more strategic employer branding which requires continuous work. Company B reported an interesting example that just as some departments have, for example, an HR partner, in the same way, the companies could also have an EB partner role in the future. The second example that Company B presented was that the EB team could be grown, and the employees from that EB team could be assigned to each department to help them. A third example was that if different departments would have resources, then, in that case an existing employee from that department puts in 50 percent of their time for EB, however, this would be more of an advisor role. Moreover, the most important development needs are to align the strategies regarding the larger employer image, doing the development work by providing coaching and support for other departments, and lastly to get the employer branding for the agenda of the executives in the organization. Finally, regarding the external advice for employer branding, Company B

reported that they have recently been doing a cooperation with one external partner, but before that they had been able to take the steps mostly without an external advice.

**Company C** reported that they plan develop the employer branding by interviewing their employees to be able to better understand all the things they value, and the things they want. Another goal is the employee advocacy program they are going to have in the future. Company C prioritized the need to talk to the marketing team regarding the EB activities. Moreover, company C stated that they have taken the development steps internally so far, but one never knows what the situation might be, for instance, six months after the interview.

**Company D** reported that the next step is to modify and to finalize the EB strategy. Another important development need is to focus on the internal employer branding by engaging the employees and thereby to strive to support the external employer branding through the internal employer branding. This is going to be done from the viewpoint of what interests their employees in order to know what to focus on. Company D also mentioned an important point that how important it is to maintain the achieved level but also to be able to innovate, which in turn requires a systematic action, and to try and to see what works the best. Lastly, the internal meetings were also mentioned as one of the future goals with the purpose for people to get to know more about their employer. Finally, Company D stated that they have been having the external advice for employer branding with the cooperation of the external partner.

## 5 Conclusions

This chapter provides the key findings of this thesis. Thereafter, the reliability and relevance, as well as the suggestions for further research are being discussed. Moreover, the commissioning company feedback and the reflection on learning are covered in the latter part of this chapter.

### 5.1 Key Findings

The thesis investigated how employer branding is organized in IT organizations in Finland, and what the needs and challenges with employer branding are. The outcomes of the thesis offer important information on the current state of employer branding inside companies, and on the factors that would enable IT organizations to evolve in tech employer branding in the future. The purpose is to provide an understanding of the maturity of employer branding management within IT organizations.

The Bachelor of International Business degree programme requires an international aspect for the thesis. Hence, the author examined on how interviewee companies apply employer branding on a global level; and how the interviewee organization has taken a global talent into account in their employer branding strategy and whether it was on their agenda. Other viewpoints are an international employer branding strategy and international employer branding activities.

#### **The research question (RQ) was:**

How is employer branding organized in IT companies operating in Finland currently, and what are their development needs?

**The investigative question one** aimed to find out how the IT companies' EB managers view the importance, functions, and goals of employer branding in their company. The results showed that the importance of EB has recently become even more crucial in all of the companies interviewed. The purpose of EB is to support the company in its growth to the direction of the business strategy. The results indicated that EB is a big entity, which has an impact on everything. Especially internal EB was highlighted in the results. Based on the results, EB has an important link to the products and to the growth of the company. All of the companies interviewed have an EVP or a similar one, which highlights the importance of positive employee experience and professional development opportunities. An interesting finding was that it is surprisingly difficult to create an enduring EVP. The results suggest that people could be more engaged to talk about the importance of EB in different channels. Based on the results, it is also important for the companies to create an EVP

which includes at least three themes. The importance of the EVP was also covered in the theory chapter. Mosley and Schmidt (2017, 63) have defined that managing the EVP successfully, companies can attract more potential candidates, enjoy great levels of employee engagement as well as retention.

**The investigative question two** focused on finding out whether IT companies have employer branding strategies, and, if so, what kind of components those strategies contain. The results indicated that all of the companies interviewed have an EB strategy or a plan. The main goals for EB are to recruit junior IT talents, increase the awareness of the company as a potential employer and to strengthen the current employer brand, to attract the right target groups as well as to generate junior and senior leads. Based on the results the responsibilities for EB are usually shared, for instance, with other members in the team, but most often one person still has the main responsibility for EB. The results suggest that collaboration with other teams, such as, the marketing team, best supports the EB management. In addition, everyone must be aware of the common EB goals in order to succeed in the cooperation. Based on the results, the EB strategy or plan is also highly important and supports the company in EB management.

**The investigative question three** aimed to find out what kind of employer branding activities IT companies engage in. The results highlighted EB activities, such as, the content production, social media marketing, university collaboration, events, and the collaboration with professional communities. Based on the results, the collaboration with educational institutions has increased. What to consider regarding EB activities is that everything that happens in the recruitment, will also reflect the employer brand. The IT professionals are engaged to be part of the professional events, talent persona workshops, content production, such as, blogs and podcasts. Some of the IT professionals also act as EB ambassadors. However, depending on the company this activity is either more formal, for example, when the activity is coordinated by the company, but this activity may just as well be more informal. Employer branding is usually reflected in the daily work life, for instance, through what people are doing and how they are doing it. One interesting finding was that even if EB might be present in the daily work life, yet, people may not recognize it as employer branding. The results suggest companies to perform various EB activities, and to engage employees to be part of them. However, it is also recommendable for the companies to find out about the interests of their employees, and to see what EB activities seem to be the most effective. Moreover, based on results, the tech podcast has been one of the most effective EB activities.

**The investigative question four** focused on finding out how IT companies attract domestic and international talents. Based on the results, the most crucial IT talents are software developers and data analysts, and these are also the most challenging to attract and to retain. The IT professionals value EVP factors such as, professional development, challenging and interesting projects, work-life balance, and flexibility. These EVP factors are also part of the EB communication in the companies interviewed. The results highlighted how important it is to utilize EB as part of the recruitment activities. Employer branding was utilized in the recruitment by identifying the critical roles and by creating talent personas, by creating the candidate journeys and by doing paid advertising. The results also indicated that it is highly important to recruit international talents. The companies ensure the competitiveness when recruiting internationally by differentiating themselves from other organizations or through their great products, which from the IT professional perspective, means a very talented team. The author had also covered the importance of the talent personas in the theory chapter. Mosley and Schmidt (2017, 143) have defined that creating talent personas for the various candidate groups helps the company to better understand their motivations and allowing the company to develop targeted recruitment marketing campaigns that reaches the right target groups.

**The investigative question five** aimed to find out at what employer branding maturity level the IT companies are currently. Companies knew how to identify the current situation and the current maturity level, and that they are not just in one certain maturity level, but rather managing various EB activities at different maturity levels simultaneously. The results also showed that a company can tell how long a certain phase lasted on a specific level, and for instance, if there was still a way to go to the next level. An interesting finding was that a company can be in one certain maturity level for years. The results suggest that it is important for a company to understand the current state of employer branding maturity, and the various activities on different EB maturity levels in order to succeed in EB development. In addition, companies must be aware of the time and the resources required in EB development. Moreover, it is also crucial to understand the purpose of EB and how it supports the company in its growth to the direction of the business strategy.

**The investigative question six** focused on finding out what challenges the IT companies face in planning and implementing employer branding. The results show that one of the biggest challenges is to succeed in getting the employer branding to the agenda of all departments, including the executives, and to get the meaning and the purpose of employer branding more visible throughout the organization internally. Another challenge is that some of the most critical target groups are too small, and the challenge in terms of EB is how the message should be targeted and to whom. Also, worth noting was that how the

companies are able to maintain in the achieved state but also to be able to innovate and to keep up with what is going on. Based on the results, sharing the responsibilities of employer branding based on the company's needs is also highly recommendable.

**The investigative question seven** focused on finding out what the companies are planning to develop in their employer branding in the next few years. The results showed that, in all these cases, companies aim to go towards more strategic employer branding, and this requires continuous work. One of the most important development needs is continuous development work by providing advice and support for other departments internally, and getting employer branding to the agenda of executives. The results highlighted that it is important for other teams to know the purpose of EB. The management needs were also covered earlier in the theory chapter. Mosley and Schmidt (2017, 38) have defined that the brand must be led by the CEO and collectively owned by the entire senior leadership team in order for the brand to be authentic and fully embedded in the company.

Based on the results, internal employer branding is in a strong focus. Companies want to be better in understanding their employees. They want to know more about their interests and values. The results indicated that companies want to focus on internal employer branding by engaging their employees, and thereby to strive to support external employer branding through the internal one. The results suggest that just as some departments have an HR partner in the company, in the same way, companies could also have an EB partner role in the future. Based on the results, it appears that most of the companies interviewed have utilized external advice for employer branding, which also indicates that the external EB advice is recommended, for instance, in the cases when the company is developing the product or services. The results suggest that EB professionals are also interested to hear about some new insights regarding employer branding, for instance, what the next level of employer branding will be and where EB is going to refine next.

## **5.2 Recommendations**

The importance of support in employer branding plays a significant role in the future. Therefore, and based on the results, an internal EB partner role could equally be a great option for the future. In addition, strong cooperation with other departments and teams is greatly needed. This also supports the company in its growth to the direction of the business strategy. There should also be a stronger focus on getting employer branding to the agenda of all departments and teams, especially when the results highlighted that it is important for other teams to get to know the purpose and the meaning of EB. This would also support the continuous development in EB when everyone knows the common goals

and what it requires from everyone to succeed in these goals. However, the results indicated that EB is still such a big entity and it has an impact on everything, thereby, an internal EB should always be the starting point for an external EB. Utilizing EB in the recruitment is highly recommendable, for instance, by creating the talent personas for the most critical roles in order to reach the right candidates. Recruiting international talents is very important. The results showed that it is important that an international and a non-international have the equal position and they are equally in demand.

In order for the companies to identify their current development needs with EB, the recommendation is to utilize the EB maturity model for EB management. It helps the company to understand the current state of employer branding maturity, and the various activities on different employer branding maturity levels. (Finders Seekers Oy 2020a; Universum 15 September 2016.)

### **5.3 Evaluation of the Research**

The reliability of the results was increased by the fact that all the interviewees were working with employer branding in the IT field. The data that was received from the interviews was very deep and comprehensive. The connection of the data to the theory was good and the sources used in this thesis were reliable and current in terms of the thesis topic. In addition, the data obtained also proved the reliability of the used sources. The data was relevant to answer to the research question and to the investigative questions.

As the same issues have also been addressed in the theory as those raised by the interviewees, thus, the target group of the research has also been the right one as they have been able to answer to all the interview questions comprehensively. In their answers, the interviewees raised the same themes as in the theory part of this thesis. This shows that they have had a significant understanding of what EB contains, and therefore it can be thought that the target group was the right one in terms of the validity of the research. The author listened to the interviewees and did not steer the interviewee, and only asked complementary questions in case needed.

The semi-structured interview was a suitable method for this thesis as a data collection method because it worked well in this case as it also provided an opportunity to utilize the experience gained from the previous interviews. What the author could have done differently if there would have not been the Covid-19 situation, the author would have met face to face with the interviewees which would have increased the poise of the interviews, for instance, it would have been easier to see when the interviewee intends to further complete the answer.

The importance of this work is also emphasized by Covid-19 as the development of digital services has increased because the face to face meetings has been impossible to implement. This also increases the value of this thesis as companies in the IT field competes for the IT experts. When there is a greater need of IT experts, it also creates the shortage of the skilled IT talents, which in turn grows the importance of employer branding.

Although this research only covers the IT field, the results of this research could also be utilized in other highly competitive industries. Also, other than IT companies can learn from the results of this thesis in case they would like to digitalize their services, especially organizations who aim to do it with in-house IT professionals. Moreover, also other companies are going the face the same situation in the future, and this is why they must understand that what level of employer branding they are actually competing with. This is why it is so crucial to understand the meaning and the purpose of employer branding.

#### **5.4 Suggestions for Further Research**

For further research the author would be interested to know what has changed after employer branding has reached the executives in the organizations. More specifically, how the situation differs when compared to the competitors, and whether some issues have changed significantly after that. Another interesting aspect to examine would be the importance, functions, and goals of EB from the employee viewpoint, and how their views regarding EB differs from the management level. As internal EB plays an even more important role in the future, gaining more understanding of how employees view the various aspects of EB could also support the development of EB.

#### **5.5 Commissioning Company Feedback**

The author presented the results to the commissioning company Finders Seekers Oy on 9 February 2021. The presentation was held remotely via Microsoft Teams. The commissioning company was very pleased with the results. The study was very thorough and advanced. The feedback also indicated that the author has really internalized what EB is all about and is able to challenge the conventional ideas of what EB consists of. The author also received feedback that this study could work as an EB handbook for the companies. Finders Seekers Oy estimated that the thesis is very useful in the field of their business. They have already used the results for onboarding their new employees to the world of EB and to gain further IT talent insights. The commissioning company also gained some reassurance of the relevance of their employer branding service offering and they will also use the results in their future sales/consulting case discussions.

## **5.6 Reflection on Learning**

Choosing employer branding as a thesis topic was truly the right decision for the author. This thesis gave the author an opportunity to gain a deep understanding and knowledge about employer branding. It was important that at the beginning of the thesis project, the author thought very thoroughly: what employer branding means to herself in order to gain a better understanding of the topic as a whole. The most challenging part was to write the theory framework because employer branding can mean so many things, and various topics are related to it. However, the research question and the investigative questions helped the author to narrow down the theory framework before going further in the thesis process.

Choosing the qualitative research as a research method was clear for the author already from the beginning. The author had gained some experience of managing the qualitative research through another school project earlier, and it was beneficial in terms of managing the thesis process successfully. Analyzing the data was a great learning experience as well, even though, the author was not so experienced in that before. The support and the feedback from the commissioning company has been highly valuable throughout the journey as it helped the author to reach various goals during the thesis process and taught also deeper aspects about employer branding. The knowledge the author has gained is also very valuable in terms of the author's current job as a recruitment specialist but also regarding the future career plans. This has truly been a great journey in the world of employer branding.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Relationship between investigative questions, interview questions and theory

Investigative question	Themes in the interview framework	Question numbers in the interview framework	Theory chapters
1.	<b>1. The importance, functions, and goals EB</b>	1-3	2.1 2.2 2.2.2 2.4
2.	<b>2. Employer branding strategy</b>	1-3	2.3
3.	<b>3. EB activities</b>	1-3	2.2.2 2.4 2.5
4.	<b>4. Attracting domestic and international talents</b>	1-7	2.2.2 2.2.4
6.	<b>5. Challenges in planning and implementing EB</b>	1	2.2.2 2.3 2.4 2.5
5. and 7.	<b>6. EB Maturity Level and EB Development</b>	1-2	2.4

## **Appendix 2. Interview framework for four interviews**

### **Theme one: The importance, functions, and goals of employer branding**

1. What does employer branding (EB) mean to your organization?
2. Do you have EVP? If yes,
  - a. What are the most important EVP attributes in your EB?
3. Is the EB communicated throughout the organization internally?

### **Theme two: Employer branding strategy**

1. Do you have an EB strategy or plan? If yes,
  - a. Is your strategy global/domestic?
  - b. What are the main goals for employer branding?
  - c. How often do you update the plan/strategy?
2. Who is responsible for EB in your organization?
3. Do you collaborate with other functions, e.g. marketing department on employer branding? If yes, on what and how?

### **Theme three: Employer branding activities**

1. What kind of EB activities do you have?
2. How are employees / IT professionals engaged to be part of EB activities?
3. How is EB present in the daily work and organizational life of employees?

### **Theme four: Attracting domestic and international talents**

1. What kind of IT talent is crucial in your organization? Why?
2. What type of IT talent the most challenging to attract and retain?
3. What aspects of your organizational culture are attractive for IT professionals?
4. How do you utilize employer branding as part of your recruitment activities?
5. How important is it to recruit international talent?
6. How do you ensure that you are competitive when recruiting internationally? or when recruiting from an international labor market?
7. What EVP factors do IT professionals value the most?
  - a. Are these factors part of your EB communication?

### **Theme five: Challenges in planning and implementing employer branding**

1. What challenges do you have with EB currently? Why?

### **Theme six: Employer branding maturity level and EB development**

1. At what maturity level do you place your company at the moment? (The EB maturity model will be presented to the interviewee during the interview to support this question)
2. How do you plan to develop employer branding in the near future?
  - a. What are the most immediate EB development needs?
  - b. Are you able to take these steps internally or do you need external advice to do it?

### Appendix 3. Employer Branding Maturity Model

	<b>Beginner</b>	<b>Developing</b>	<b>Fascinating</b>	<b>Leading</b>	
			- EB has an owner	- The CEO has the ultimate accountability of employer branding	<b>Ownership</b>
		- Some recruitment metrics in use	- Integrated metrics which apply to employee's life cycle	- Predictive and performance-driven metrics	<b>Metrics</b>
	- Communication in different channels in reactive (or paid)	- Consistent brand look in career site and in social media	- Content generates added value / social engagement	- Content created by employees / advocacy / referral	<b>Channels</b>
	- Job advertising is inconsistent and job-focused - Not receiving job applications	- EVP driven recruitment marketing	- EVP driven EB - The company is known among attractive candidates - Recruitment process is shorter	- Employee experience is in a key position - Most wanted candidates apply for the career discussions themselves	<b>Focus</b>
	- Talent acquisition is separated from other functions	- Talent acquisition cooperates with HR	- EB is executed together with marketing and communications	- EB is executed together with recruitment, HR, business, marketing and communications	<b>Partnership</b>

Employer Branding Maturity Model (adapted from Finders Seekers Oy 2020a; Universum 15 September 2016.)