

Employer brand experience development in a crisis situation

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<p>COVID-19 has been timewise one of the longest crises in service industry's history and it has dramatically decreased service companies' business operations. Companies are facing difficult decisions of how they can secure their business operations and find savings at the same time. These decisions affect to their employer brand image in employees' eyes.</p> <p>This research is exploring the effects of a global pandemic crisis situation on the case company X's employer brand experience. It was conducted based on the company's personnel survey that highlighted dissatisfaction towards the employer functions in communication and management actions in a crisis situation. The aim is to get a deeper understanding of how employees experience the challenges in internal communication and management during the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal is to get improvement and development ideas from employees to the employer.</p> <p>The theoretical framework of this thesis is covering the base factors for good employer experience and employer brand management. It gives an overview of the importance of employee appreciation and demonstrates the employee value proposition as a tool. In addition, the theory base is introducing the crisis management and the significance of crisis communication in detail.</p> <p>This research is a qualitative case study of service company X's perceived employer brand image. The research was conducted by interviewing twelve company's employees from operational department.</p> <p>The results show that the employees are mostly dissatisfied to the employer's crisis management actions and internal crisis communication. They see the company's economic financing actions in a good light but highly disagree with rewarding any employees in a crisis situation. Interviews show the difficulty with the use of multiple internal communication channels and the results underline transparent, open and interactive communication style. The respondents understand the difficult situation and in conclusion see that the employer brand image cannot be improved during the COVID-19 crisis situation. As a conclusion this pandemic brings to surface the challenges of leadership and management and the necessity of good communication in a crisis situation.</p>	
Keywords Employer brand experience, brand image, crisis management, crisis communication, Covid-19	

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1 Introduction

This report is presenting the main points of the thesis research and the theoretical framework behind it. The research is exploring the effects of a global pandemic crisis to the case company X's perceived employer brand experience. The research was started approximately after a year of the start of the pandemic and by this time it had spread throughout the world. After a year the effects of this new pandemic phenomenon are clearly visible. COVID-19 has affected to almost all the industries and especially some of the most dramatic changes have happened within the service industry. The case company X's market situation before the crisis was great and growth in customer numbers as well as in revenue was evident. Like many others, the company is currently struggling but its management believes in growth after the crisis. The positive attitude is due to the fact that company has faced crisis situations before, but still managed to survive them and afterwards expanded its business, polished its image, and kept its employees engaged on the payroll. The topic of this thesis is important because even during the critical crisis situations the importance of satisfied employees is crucial for companies. This pandemic brings to surface the challenges of leadership and management and the necessity of good communication in a crisis situation.

This research was conducted to be able to get a deeper understanding of how employees experience the challenges in communication and management during the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim is to cover the general attitudes towards the case company as an employer during the COVID-19 pandemic situation. Company X conducted a personnel survey to its employees after approximately eight months of the start of the pandemic and the results showed dissatisfaction towards the employer actions. In particular the challenges of communication, the feeling of not belonging to the work community and the need for better management actions emerged as themes in the responses in this personnel survey about employer and work conditions during this exceptional pandemic time. This research is built based on these challenges that surfaced in the personnel survey and will be delving deeper into these aspects. This thesis aims to finding out what kinds of employer actions are needed in order to develop the internal communication and employer image into a positive direction during a crisis situation from employees' point of view. The topic is very up to date since the pandemic is still ongoing and the company needs relatively motivated and committed employees to work in it after the crisis. The expected outcomes are to be able to explore employees' insights and to find ways to improve employer's brand image and its crisis management actions. The whole research is focusing on the employee point of view about the crisis management and crisis communication.

The research benefits the case company because it gives insights of how well the employees are coping in this pandemic crisis and it introduces tangible improvement ideas from the employees to the management. The subject is relevant since nowadays employee experience is considered important and employer brand image can be highly affected by a crisis if the employees are not well-treated and managed.

This thesis is following the guidelines of a qualitative case study research of a specific company. The theoretical framework of this research is aiming to cover comprehensive and versatile sources of information to be able to achieve an adequately wide image of the studied phenomenon. The interview questions were built based on the themes of theoretical framework and they aim to get profound answers and insights to the research questions. This thesis' empirical part is a case study, which is done by interviewing the employees of the case company. The interview included three set of questions about the employees' experience of employer brand image and the success of management and internal communication during the COVID-19 crisis situation. The final conclusions were made based on these interviewees' answers.

The first chapter of this thesis is covering the research questions, expected outcomes and the target of this research. The second chapter shortly introduces the COVID-19 pandemic and the service industry as an operational industry. The third chapter is the theoretical framework of this thesis. The subjects of employer brand image and employer brand managements are explored followed by the chapter of employee engagement and its importance in a crisis situation. The crisis management as a theory is also studied and covered and lastly the internal crisis communication is taken into closer examination. The theoretical framework ends in uniting these theory bases to the service industry and the case company X.

The fourth chapter is explaining the qualitative case study methodology used in this thesis. This chapter also expands the research process and its parts thoroughly. Rest of the thesis is focusing on the analysis of the conducted employee interviews and the thesis ends in conclusions and proposals for further research.

The key concepts of this study are employer brand experience, crisis management and internal crisis communication. Employer brand experience is the employee point of view of how they see their employer and what they think about it. Since employees are company's representatives for customers and their opinions and work behaviour reflect the company's ethics and values employees' image of their employer should be highly considered in all business. (Barrow & Mosley 2005.)

The definition of crisis management used in this study is the way of how a surprising or unexpected situation such as a crisis is handled by the company. To be able to keep operations ongoing and employees engaged throughout the crisis companies need a crisis plan for successful crisis management. (Lee, Tao, Li & Sun 2020.)

The concept of internal crisis communication means the ways of company's information sharing to its employees in a crisis situation. During a crisis the internal communication should be adequate, truthful, and open because transparent communication enhances employees' participation levels and make the employees feel that they are part of the company. (Lee & co 2020.) Good internal communication creates understanding, trust, and willingness to support common organizational goals (Chong 2007).

1.1 Expected outcomes and objectives

The objective of this thesis is to find out ways to develop crisis management and internal crisis communication during an abnormal crisis situation from employee's point of view. This research clarifies how the employee experience has developed during the COVID-19 pandemic according to case company's employees. The aim is to figure out ways to ensure that the employer brand image stays on a fine level throughout the crisis.

The goal is to discover solutions to how the crisis management and internal communication during a crisis could be developed from the employee point of view and improved for the upcoming crisis situations. The main focus points are to find out the key elements that support or impair the employee experience and to figure out how the employer brand image has been affected during this pandemic crisis in employees' eyes.

The expected outcomes are to clarify the successful and unsuccessful company actions during the crisis situation. Employees from company X's operational department are interviewed about the employer's brand image, crisis management and internal crisis communication. The expected outcomes include development ideas for the company in order to enhance these matters. The interviewees are the employees of the case company and the decisions to ask their opinions and to delimit the research to these three categories were made based on the company's personnel survey's answers.

1.2 Research questions

The research questions will focus on the research problem from the perspective of current employees within the company. The research questions aim to find out how company's employees perceive the employer image, management and internal communication in a crisis situation and what are the factors that affect these.

The research questions of this thesis are divided into three categories which are all considered from the employees' perspective. These three categories included multiple questions about the subjects but the main research questions behind them are:

- How has the crisis situation affected to the employer brand image?
- What are the factors that support the positive employer brand image throughout the crisis?
- How do the employees see the success of the crisis management during COVID-19 pandemic?
- What are the factors that affect to the perceived quality of internal crisis communication?

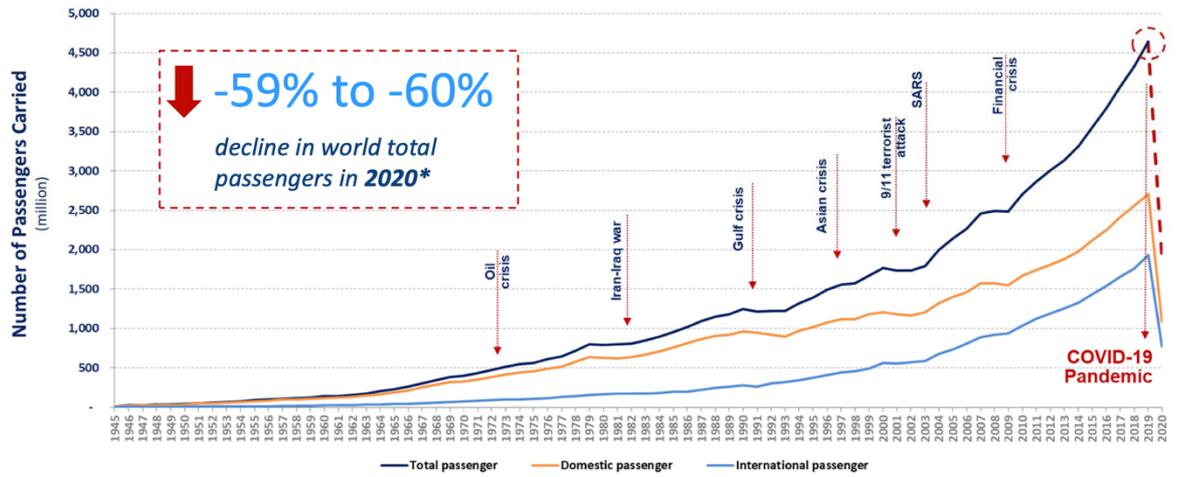
Based on these research questions, this research is giving answers to what actions should be conducted in order to get over the crisis situation and maintain the high level of employee satisfaction. It aims to giving insights to what are the factors that would increase the company's positive image within employers in a crisis situation. The questions open the views of employees about the way they feel the management actions and the need for management in a crisis situation. Based on the research questions the thesis will clarify how the employer is giving out information during this crisis situation and how it has changed compared to a normal situation.

2 Operational industry

This thesis will focus on service company X's employer brand image development in COVID-19 crisis situation. The conducted research is focusing on company X's employer brand image and finding answers about how employees perceive it. Companies all over the world are facing similar challenges due to this pandemic. There are constant business restrictions, changing guidelines and the responsibility to try to affect negatively to the spreading of the disease. Companies are facing strict rules by governments, World Health Organization (WHO) and other organizations of the industries. They are forced to develop new safety policies to meet the requirements of these organizations and to be able to guarantee that business operations are made as safe as possible. It is inevitable that this is a pandemic that has a negative effect to the service industry and all its stakeholders, and the consequences will show for years after it.

The COVID-19 virus started spreading in the beginning of 2020 worldwide. The virus is a new and unknown version of SARS-Cov-2 virus and the original source of it has been traced to China in the end of 2019. Research show that the epidemic started as an individual infection from animal to human. The virus can be deadly, and it causes mostly respiratory and other influenza-like symptoms. During the year of 2020 the researchers worldwide have developed what it seems to be a working vaccination for the virus and the vaccinations for people started in the end of 2020. (THL 2020.)

Due to this new and very contagious virus, almost every industry has been impacted with destructive economic losses. People are constantly living with uncertainties as well as with global and local governmental restrictions all over the world. These restrictions affect deeply in the service industry. As an example, one of the operating service industries is aviation industry and picture 1 presents the numbers of passengers carried in airplanes throughout the years. Some of the biggest crises have been marked in the picture to show the difference of how they influenced the airline passenger flow. This picture demonstrates how dramatically for example the aviation industry has been affected and damaged due to COVID-19 pandemic. These dramatic changes have the similar negative effect also to other service industries and companies, like company X.



Picture 1. World passenger travel evolution (ICAO 2020)

3 Employer brand experience in crisis situation

In order to understand the employee perspective of the employer brand image in a crisis situation the theory base of this thesis is covering an employer brand image in a normal situation, handling a crisis situation and the importance of internal communication. The case study of this thesis was conducted by interviews of the company's employees and the questions were based on these theoretical aspects.

This chapter explains the relevant theoretical concepts for the research. The theoretical framework starts with the introduction of the employer brand image and the need of employer branding in attracting employees. It is continued by exploration of the employer brand management including the employee value proposition and the study of employee engagement. To be able to discuss the need and use of proper communication in a crisis situation the last parts of the theoretical framework explore the crisis management and communication.

3.1 Employer brand image

Since people spend most of their lives at work, it is more or less necessary to if not enjoy then at least like one's work and workplace. When people are not satisfied with their work, they most likely are not contented with their employer either. The employer image is important because it represents the company through employees' eyes and can add value to the company operations and add trust for customers. When it comes to recruiting new workforce, it is crucial to have a good employer image and to be appealing and desirable as company in order to get the most talented and interested applicants. Negative employer image can expel potential talents or even possible business partners. Although employer image is important for employees, the image is just as important for a company in the eyes of customers, business partners and other stakeholders, since it demonstrates and reflects the company ethics, values and operating environment. (Barrow & Mosley 2005.)

In the early stages of adapting employer brand as a concept and way of thinking it was mainly limited to only managing employer brand identity and to advertising recruitments. Over time when the employer brand management has been taken in use more widely, it has been extended and nowadays includes wider aspects in areas of human resources from employee experience to employee management and company processes. (Mosley 2014, 217-218.) When thinking about branding in general it can be seen as a guideline to features and attributes of a product or service. Branding defines how customers see and feel the product they are buying and using. Employer brand image is adjusted branding to

the company image and the organization beyond the products and services. (Thornton, Mansi, Carramenha & Cappellano 2019.)

3.2 Employer branding and brand management

Employer branding is a process where a company builds a positive image of itself and creates a reputation that it is a desirable workplace for its employees (Mosley & Schmidt 2017). It means that the company is placing efforts to promote itself as a great workplace as well as to stand out from its competitors for existing employees and also for new recruits (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004). Employer branding can be described as Sullivan (2004) states “a targeted, long-term strategy to manage the awareness and perceptions of employees, potential employees, and related stakeholders with regards to a particular firm.” (Sullivan 2004). Employer branding in general is a defined group of actions in company’s marketing strategy and human resources. When it comes to branding, companies used to focus it more to the products and services than to employer brand. Since 1996 when Ambler & Barrow presented the term employer brand, it became a phenomenon, and it has been more and more recognized and used effectively nowadays. (Gehrels 2019.)

When thinking about employer branding the question behind it is what kind of visible associations and assumptions people have about the company. Employer brand brings together the main qualities of how employees see their employer as a company. Employees can identify these qualities as economic such as salary and other benefits, functional as in developing skills or getting promoted, or psychological by having a certain status or title. (Mosley 2014, 217-218.) In addition to Mosley’s views about employer branding benefitting employees, Mark Chong (2007) highlights the importance of employees in delivering brand promise and this way adding competitive advantage especially within service industries where employees are the “brand ambassadors” of the company for external stakeholders. It is common that nowadays workforce and employees expect the companies to be well-managed and their employers to treat them as well as their customers. If employees are expected to give their best especially in extreme or demanding situations, the expectations for good employer experience management and support increase as well. (Barrow & Mosley 2005.)

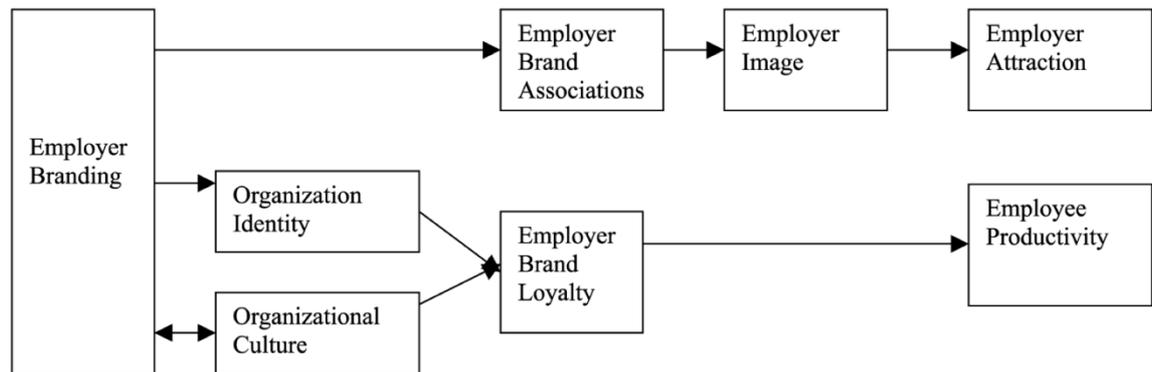
Employer brand management should be seen as a worthy human resource asset since by having a strong and positive employer brand companies can add value for their business and gain more success. Strong and good employer image affects positively for example in recruitment by intriguing talented candidates and in employee engagement by being a company and a work environment where people like to be in and are proud to be part of it.

When employer experience is seen positive, people want to stay in the company and this way companies have lower attrition numbers. If a company manages to create a positive employer brand it can also bring it competitive advantage by getting the most motivated, engaged and talented people to work for it and thrive for success. (Mosley & Schmidt 2017.) In order to be desirable among the new employees all companies should pay attention and spend money to enhance their employer brand. Building a strong employer experience demands research of how employees see their employer, resources of workforce and possible time for development. Employer brand should also be aligned with the company's business strategies as well as its visions and targets. (Mosley & Schmidt 2017.)

Employees that are well-treated, appreciated, motivated and enjoy their workplace can be seen as a marketing asset for the company. These people promote their employer by telling positive stories about the company, their superiors, business operations and give their honest general opinions about it. This way a positive image of the company as an employer spreads externally and builds demand and pride. (Sullivan 2004.) This is why companies should think about their workforce as an important stakeholder when it comes to internal communication, since they give honest and accurate information about the company (Chong 2007). In addition to content and talkative employees, it is important for the company to be present in different medias. For example, being written about or publishing advertisements in certain publications can make a difference for stakeholders and add pride for company's employees. By getting positive exposure in media the company markets itself and the employer brand gets stronger. (Sullivan 2004.)

The employer brand has been a relevant topic in employer experience management for a while now and its importance has been researched for example in human resources in various studies. Ambler and Barrow's research *The Employer Brand* (1996) about employer branding focused on 27 different companies in UK in multiple industry sectors and services. Its goal was to find out how these companies see following aspects regarding employer branding: Employer branding existence and importance, affects over HR policies, positioning it in the company, measuring employee connections and to find out possible development problems regarding companies' employer image. The results show the importance of a good employer brand and experience within employees. In the article it is stated that by improving employees' motivation for their work also the work quality improves. Good employee performance adds value to customer relationships and also to the employer image. When the employer image gets added value it assumingly adds more motivation for employees and this way creates a positive impact in a

circulation. (Ambler & Barrow 1996, 188.) Picture 2 demonstrates this positive cycle that good employer branding brings to the company.



Picture 2. Employer branding structure (Bakhaus & Tikoo 2004)

In Ambler & Barrow's (1996) research the respondents commonly focused their opinions of brand management to be cross-functional tasks of human resources department. Human resources department is usually in charge of employer brand management in organizations as it is seen to be the most suitable option for managing it based on its close co-operation with management and executives. Human resources departments also support company visions and brand equity. (Ambler & Barrow 1996, 197-199.)

The results also showed that the most common and used ways of measuring employer brand management is to do benchmarking and to conduct internal surveys for employees. Also, the research demonstrated that the employer brand management is not seen as important in those industries where employee individuality is not relevant, such as manufacturing and industrial fields. It matters more to those companies who are in need of specific talents. (Ambler & Barrow 1996, 201.)

It is important for the company to be honest and open-minded about its employer image and how the employees experience it. This can be assessed time by time by performing realistic internal employer image surveys for company's employees. In some cases, it might be a good idea to also conduct research with other stakeholders in order to review their opinions and get possible improvement ideas. (Mosley & Schmidt 2017.)

3.3 Employee value proposition

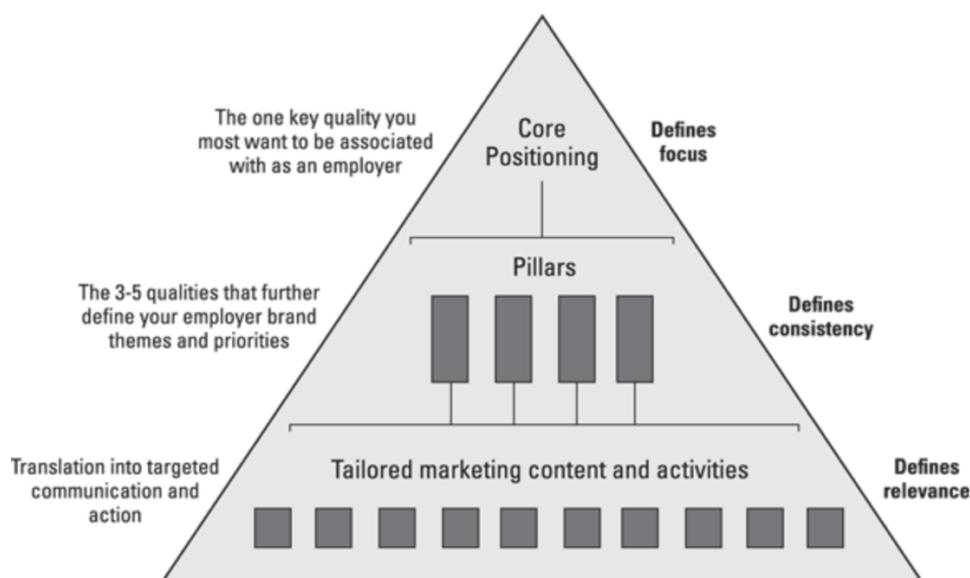
Employee value proposition (EVP) has become a tight part of employer branding. It is an employee-focused approach of strategy that aims to answer the questions such as what the employee benefits for joining the company and what the company can offer for employees for their commitment. (Browne 2012.) This proposition means the distinctive

advantages that are associated to the company in employees' perspective (Mosley 2014, 218).

In the increased competition of getting the most talented workforce to join the companies, the employee value proposition can be seen as an important part of the modern brand strategy. With a precisely build and well-defined EVP the company can stand out from its competitors and lure possible candidates towards itself by defining clearly what they can offer to them. With a good EVP the company separates itself from others and demonstrates what it has to offer for its employees. (Wright 2021.)

Like in all business, its goal is to create value for the business owner. In order to be valuable deal for both parties the EVP has to be meaningful for both the employee and the employer company. The proposition does not work accordingly if it is no trueful and precisely built. A wisely built EVP helps not only to recruit new talents but also engages the employees and this way can create effectiveness in productivity. (Rosethorn 2009, 103.)

When company is building an EVP to support the employer image the essence part is to create so called pillars to it that form the base to the proposition. Pillars show the company's aspirations as an employer for its employees and demonstrate the core values of the company culture. These pillars should be precisely considered and researched since they represent the importance and need of the whole EVP.



Picture 3. EVP structuring.

Picture 3 demonstrates how the employee value proposition can be built and what it includes. The top of the picture summarizes and gathers together the main points that describe the company and defines how it wants to be seen as an employer. Under the core there are 3-5 pillars that define deeper the employer image and the core values for the employee. On the bottom of the model are the company activities uniquely shaped by the top levels and that are put to action. (Mosley & Schmidt 2017.)

3.4 Employee engagement

The word engagement was introduced in 1990 by William Kahn in his research about personal engagement. In the article Kahn discussed the meaning of person's engagement and disengagement and related it to work life from psychological perspective. (Bridger 2015). Kahn conducted studies about on how people's experiences of themselves and their work shape their role in work environment and impact on their engagement. The studies showed that employees' work motivations were influenced by major psychological aspects. Kahn delimited three psychological conditions that emerged from the studies: meaningfulness, safety and availability. (Kahn 1990). These three conditions are commonly used when thinking about and building employee engagement strategies. Later on, the academic researchers defined engagement as "a refer to a psychological state", meaning one's commitment, involvement or even mood. (Bridger 2015.)

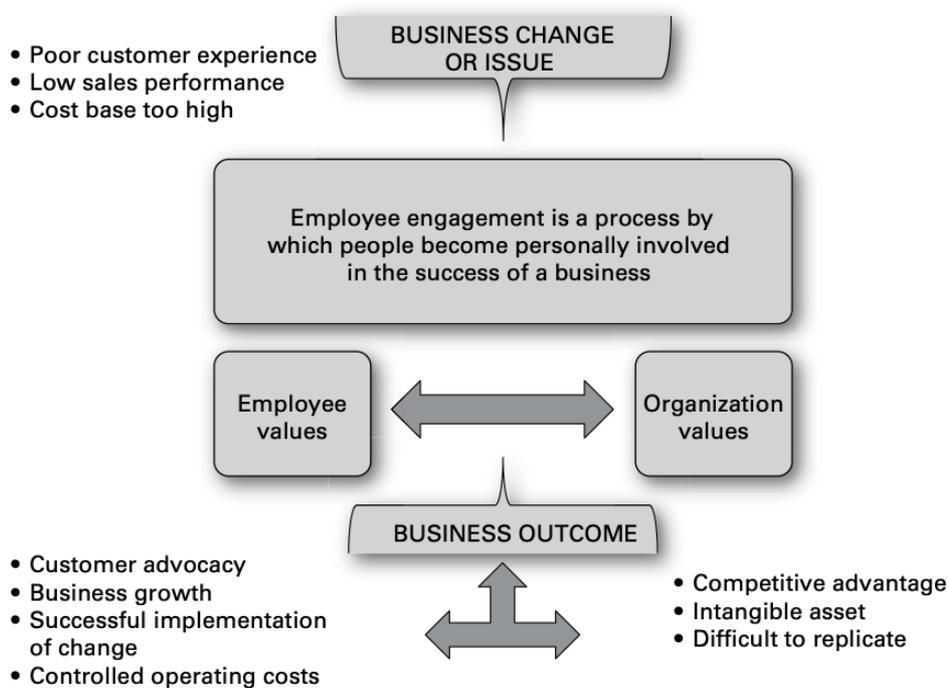
There are multiple definitions when it comes to describing employee engagement, but the most typical words that are used when thinking about it are work-related commitment, collaboration, involvement, etc. The meaning can vary depending on the definition done by each separate organization but in general employee engagement is something that employee offers for the employer, but it is not required as an objective from the employer's side. An engaged employee gives a positive work performance willingly and supports positive and fulfilling social connections at workplace. In other words, employee engagement means that the employees are more or less happy at their work, share positive thoughts about it and show loyalty towards their employer. (Bridger 2015.)

Despite these definitions, people see employee engagement differently. There is debate about the meaning of it and some of the typical definitions of how it can be seen are following:

- Personal attitudes towards the employer e.g., liking the work atmosphere and co-workers or showing pride about the company
- Personal behaviour towards the employer e.g., doing a little extra in tasks or giving out recommendations about the company as an employer

- Company business outcomes e.g., what factors keep the employees in the company or new innovations

All these three definitions are usually seen as important when researching employee engagement, since together they all strengthen the overall engagement for the employee. Picture 4 shows the importance of well-engaged employees for the company and reviews all the three aspects discussed. Engagement should be a long-term sustainable strategy in which both parties (employer and employee) share same values. It also separates the meaning of an engaged employee and a happy and satisfied employee and recognizes employee engagement as a two-way process between the employee and the employer. Picture 4 demonstrates the reasons of concentrating on employee engagement, such as preventing employee resignments or burnouts and sharing the same business goals. (Bridger 2015.)



Picture 4. Employee engagement model (Bridger 2015)

Ryan & Deci (2017) see engagement from even more psychological perspective, and they use self-determination theory (SDT) as a base in their engagement research. They describe this theory as an “empirically based organismic theory of human behaviour and personality development” and it focuses on people’s motivation through their contentment of three psychological needs: competence, relatedness, and autonomy. This research is a social-psychological theory that supports the understanding of interpersonal and

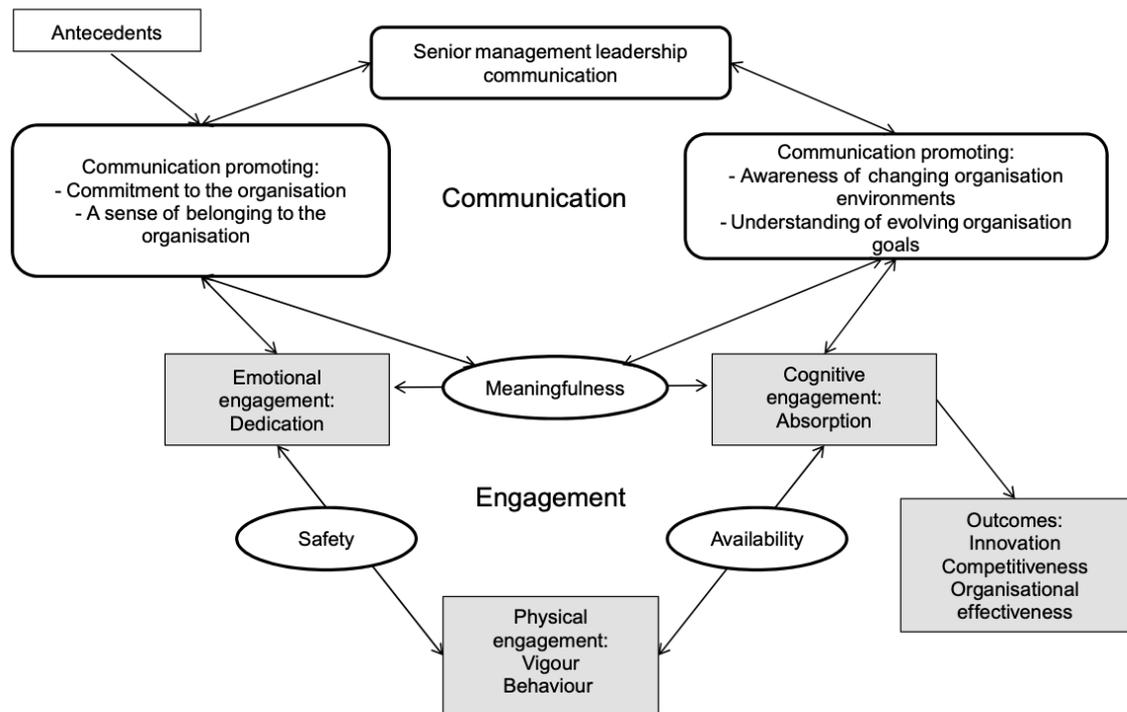
environmental factors on people's self-determination, motivation and engagement. (Ryan & Deci 2017.)

The level of employee engagement can vary depending on the position and role in the company. The more responsibilities employees get the more they feel like they have a chance to affect matters and to make change. In Ambler & Barrow's (1996, 192-194) research article it is stated that when employees get more seniority and responsibility also the commitment for the company improves. This research also shows that those employees who are not committed to the employer and are working in customer service with face-to face contact with customers are affecting in the customer service quality decreasingly. The best engaged employees know their personal skills and their value for the organization. They demand respect and the knowledge of being appreciated by their employer. (Ambler & Barrow 1996, 192-193.)

3.5 Communication enhancing engagement

Nowadays the competition between companies is not just about the end product or service, but also about the customer's experience and value-adding contact with the company's brand image. This means that the companies have to clearly demonstrate who they are and what they represent in order to compete with others. All employees have to be able to successfully deliver the company's brand promise in all contact points and this is not possible without well-working internal communication. (Chong 2007.) Since company's internal communication affects on employee engagement the communication style should be open all the way from senior management and the communication strategies have to be conceptualized as strategies (Welch 2011). Good internal communication creates understanding, trust and willingness to support common organizational goals (Chong 2007).

In her research article Welch (2011) proposes a conceptual model as shown in picture 5. This picture is one point of view of how employee engagement and communication support each other as a conceptual strategy from communication directed perspective. Welch's model demonstrates how internal communication can enhance employee engagement by using Kahn's three psychological conditions needed in employee engagement creation as a base. In the model commitment and engagement are united since they both are influenced by managerial communication and it constructs together innovation, competitive advantages and efficiency as a result of well-done internal communication that affects employee engagement. (Welch 2011).



Picture 5. Welch’s conceptual model of internal company communication and employee engagement

Chong (2007) states in his research article that when putting in more effort and input in internal communication it is proven that also the employee engagement levels increase. He points out that internal communication should be a two-way liaison and executed in participative way as a dialogue instead of a monologue between the employer and employee. Brand values have an effect on employee behaviour so engaged employees that share the goals with the employer succeed better in creating brand-supporting experiences in customer contacts. (Chong 2007.)

3.6 Crisis management

“A crisis is any incident or situation, whether real, rumoured or alleged, that can focus negative attention on a company or an organization internally, in the media or before key audiences.”

This is one of the descriptions of a crisis by Ruff & Aziz (2004) who define crisis as a potential negative impact on a company or an organization that may be predicted diminished or even prevented by accurately done crisis management. Crisis situations can be categorized into slowly building events such as unrests within the industry, criminal functions and ineffective management, or sudden events as e.g., terrorism or accidents and emergencies. (Ruff & Aziz 2004.)

For a company a crisis can be defined as a surprising, uncertain and/or ambiguous situation. It has been researched that these kinds of uncertain and new surprising situations create tension among company's workforce by adding insecurity and feelings of insufficiency in terms of their work input and these intense feelings have an effect on their work engagement. The research also shows that in order to survive a crisis situation and have a potentially successful future companies need engaged employees. To be able to enhance a positive atmosphere and help employees to stay hopeful and keep up their performance at work the employer company is obliged to have a strategy of how to survive a possible crisis situation. (Lee, Tao, Li & Sun 2020.)

All companies and organizations should be prepared for sudden and unexpected situations by evaluating themselves and potential risks and creating a crisis plan. As a business owner and an employer, it is crucial to assess the impacts that a crisis should have on their company's value, employees and other stakeholders. Since these situations are usually suddenly appearing and ambiguous, having an advanced made crisis strategy plan helps company and its people to survive it. A well-done crisis plan presents the company as a successful business player that have professionally made strategies for any scenario that can occur. Without a crisis plan, sudden crisis' may destroy the company's value or even terminate the business. (Condit 2014.)

New research has shown that during a crisis situation versatile management styles have resulted into positive outcomes and better comprehension of employees' demands and needs (Lee & co 2020). When a crisis occurs and it cannot be influenced or controlled, such as a natural disaster or a global pandemic, company management is obliged to make decisions from the business perspective. These decisions might possibly be affecting to the employees' work attitude and perception of their employer. Since employees are also trying to manage their own lives in a crisis, their view of the employer's decisions might feel unfair. (Harvey & Haines 2005, 53-55.)

When dealing with crisis situations, there are three components of timeline that have to be considered. These are the time before, during and after the crisis. The time before a crisis occurs is the most relevant in successful crisis management, since if there is no prepared crisis plan it is much more difficult to survive through it as a business. The time during the crisis is when the crisis plan is taken in use and it covers everything from the immediate reactions to restarting the business operations and crisis communication between the stakeholders. The time after the crisis is for self-evaluation of how the company managed through the crisis and for reinforcing and stabilizing the current business situation. (Faisal, Albrecht & Coetzee 2020.)

3.7 Importance of internal crisis communication

During an uncertain crisis situation, the employees have a natural psychological need of having as much information as possible about changes happening in their work environment. The ambiguity of the future and uncertain emotions of employees are highlighted when the information flow is minimal or non-existent in the company. (Lee & co 2020.)

Ryan's & Deci's (2017) self-determination theory of psychological needs affecting the employee engagement and promoting human motivation is argued by Lee & co (2020) who state that the leadership's effect on workforce have an even more important role than the focus of only psychological needs in a crisis situation. By using Ryan's & Deci's SDT-theory as a theoretical framework, Lee & co see the active and efficient internal communication from the management as an option in supporting and satisfying the needs of relatedness, competence and autonomy. Employees' feelings of autonomy and competence can be enhanced by management help and support and management recognition of each employees' experience of their rights by highlighting the diversity and this way creating the sense of relatedness. (Lee & co 2020.)

In order to have as honest and reliable public image throughout a crisis situation it is necessary for companies to communicate as openly and transparently as possible by telling the truth at all times. A positive media coverage should be addressed through all communication channels: external as in news and social media, internal as in company emails and announcements. (Condit 2014.) By providing adequate and truthful internal information employees' independent decision making improves and open communication enhances participation levels. This way employees feel the relatedness and that they are part of the company which increases engagement. (Lee & co 2020.)

When a crisis occurs, the research shows that the companies tend to focus more on the external than internal communication (Strandberg & Vigsø 2016). In a crisis situation it is better to have as much communication as possible to avoid rumours and potential misunderstandings. Nowadays information is available everywhere anytime and providing on-time information by company's side is crucial in order to minimize possible false messages and reports on media's side. (Condit 2014.) It is also necessary to prepare the company and its employees to a much higher volume in communication in a crisis situation and differentiate the stakeholders who need information of non-stakeholders. All messages from the company should be as accurate as possible and information given out should be according to the crisis plan. (Ruff & Aziz 2004.)

Internal communication in a crisis situation should focus on those facts that employees want to know but it is also important to think about what is necessary from the employer's side to inform. By having a control over information flow in a crisis the employer has a chance to reflect the situation and its actions in it. (Ruff & Aziz 2004.) It is necessary to acknowledge that internal communication is happening also between and among employees. Lack of internal information may lead to employee speculation and distorted reality within them leading to lack of trust towards the employer. (Strandberg & Vigsø 2016.)

Successfully conducted crisis communication is impossible if company's internal communication hasn't been working before the crisis occurs. When the organizational culture is established and recognized throughout the company, the internal communication in a crisis situation is structured and aligned with it. This way the communication between the employees and the employer is transparent and the interest is mutual. Internal communication is a large part of company's organizational culture and in a crisis situation the employees' reaction to the internal crisis communication reflects how well the culture is built. (Strandberg & Vigsø 2016.)

3.8 Employer brand experience development in a crisis situation - employee's perspective

Since the service industry is so easily influenced by almost everything that is happening in the world it is very important to keep in mind that the information flow should be fast and clear between the operators and employees as well as other stakeholders, both in positive and negative situations. Internal communication is the only way of sharing information inside the company and employees rely on it. In order to having employees' trust and keeping the good employer image the given crisis information should be accurate and employee oriented. Internal communication is not only employer's information to the employees, but also communication and sharing thoughts between employees. By communicating between themselves employees create peer support in a crisis situation.

Because the COVID-19 is a global phenomenon and easily spreading virus it has a massive effect on service industry. The new variations of the virus and the uneven vaccination coverage at the moment are some of the reasons why it is so difficult to predict how the situation is progressing. For companies this means constantly changing effects on limitations, operations, and the need of workforce. This is a scenario that was truly surprising and the severity of it is something that has never been seen before. By having a well-done crisis plan company X started to manage the crisis and implemented crisis communication to be part of the monthly, if not weekly operations. The future

remains to be seen but it will focus on rebuilding a desired service operator that has a strong communication and service culture within the company.

This pandemic has forced company X to adjust its ways of operations and strategically change the company's organizational structure. The company aims to keep as many employees as possible on its payroll and keep them engaged despite the changing conditions, although some of the departments have been compelled to terminate employee contracts. There is a real challenge of keeping up the well-built employer brand image in this kind of crisis situation where it is impossible to predict the future and how it will develop. As a company the goal is survive the COVID-19 crisis and build up the revenue streams and the strong brand image after it.

During this exceptional time company X has conducted customer surveys that have shown that the level of customer service and satisfaction has stayed the same as before the crisis and even improved. There have also been personnel surveys about the employees' well-being and coping at work and during lay-offs and about the employer image in this situation. By performing these questionnaires company X shows that it clearly focuses on taking care of its employees and tries to sustain its well-built employer brand image. There is a strong will from the company to support employees and in this research the aspects of how to do it in employee's eyes are taken into closer examination.

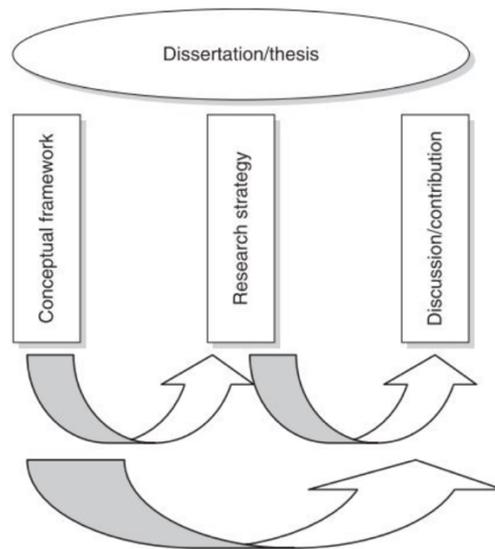
4 The research process

This chapter introduces the chosen methodology. It was selected to be a qualitative case study based on the research questions and the studied subject. Although quantitative research would have given results that could be analysed more easily the qualitative aspect was selected because it offers more varied, mixed and freely expressed answers to the research questions.

4.1 Qualitative case study

This research was conducted as a qualitative case study. According to Eisenhardt (1989) “The case study is a research strategy which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings.” In other words, case studies help to see the studied phenomenon in its context by collecting documentation of the phenomenon and its operational environment. For example, in this case study the phenomenon is the development of the employer image and company’s internal crisis communication, and the operational environment is the company itself in the ongoing COVID-19 crisis situation. Case studies give specific understanding and insight to the studied subject and the research topics are usually rather current issues or phenomena. Case studies are used when trying to find out answers to questions “how” and “why” and when the research aims to develop a contemporary phenomenon. Commonly case studies involve the collection and analysis of a data and thus they are considered as empirical studies since they are based on information and knowledge. (Farquhar 2012, 5-6.)

When conducting case studies, it is important to be highly aware of the purpose of the research. The research objectives and the scope of the study have to be clearly stated. A good way to do this is to be able to introduce the research subject in an understandable manner in one sentence. Once the research questions have been created and refined, it is obligatory to form the structure of the research work step by step in order to achieve the desired result. The typical formation is consisted of three parts: theoretical framework, empirical research and discussion and outcomes. As seen in picture 6 these three parts form a base for the whole research study and when designed accurately support its completion. All three segments are connected to others and they form a solid base to which the researcher can return and seek support for scheduling the amount or evaluate the success of the work. (Farquhar 2012, 7, 33-35.)



Picture 6. Research structure

It is normal that case studies examine and unite various data collection methods e.g., surveys, interviews and perceptions and the result evidence is qualitative or quantitative or the combination of them both. If the conducted case study exploits both qualitative e.g., interviews and quantitative e.g., surveys as methods the results can lead to more broad and diverse results. By conducting case studies, the research targets test a certain theory, but it can also create them or offer a description. (Eisenhardt 1989.)

Qualitative research targets to catch people's own descriptions of perceived reality, including relevant and important issues to themselves. It is important that the researcher stays neutral and impartial throughout the research process and while conducting the research. (Vilkka 2015.) For this research the reasonable decision was to choose qualitative method because the research was conducted to get information only from a limited group of people and the goal was to get honest and open answers about the employer.

4.2 Data collection

It is typical for case studies to have overlaps between data collection and data analysis since they are processes of continuous observation and analysis. The analysis should always be done separately from the observation situation in order to get unaffected opinions from the participants. (Eisenhardt 1989.) Research interviews are very common and good way to gather research material for qualitative case studies. When conducting an empirical qualitative research, it is important that the researcher is well oriented and has knowledge about the target group as well as the operating environment and its

culture. Gathering background information helps the researcher to perceive the interviewee's world and thus to understand what kind of understanding the interviewee describes things against. The aim of a qualitative research material and its collection is its substantive scope rather than the amount of it. The research material serves as an aid in understanding a case or a phenomenon or in forming a theoretically meaningful interpretation. (Vilkka 2015.)

When choosing the participants for the qualitative interviews it is considered as an important criterion that the participants have personal experience of the studied subject (Vilkka 2015). For this research the interviews were conducted to company X's current employees. People from the main operational department were chosen since they represent the largest part of all company's employees and have knowledge about the operational environment as well as the company culture. To be able to get as diverse sampling as possible the number of interviews was decided to be a minimum of 10 answers from participants and the chosen interviewees were all currently either working full-time or part-time or on long layoffs. The decision of interviewing all of these groups was made to ensure a wider perspective of answers and to get more varied opinions from employees. The assumption was that these 10 answers would reach the saturation point, meaning that the basic logic of the gathered research material (interviews) repeats itself and additional material would not result to any new perspectives for the research problem (Vilkka 2015).

Since qualitative research method aims to answer the descriptive questions such a "how" and "why", the interview questions should be designed so that the participants cannot answer just yes or no to them. The interviewees can be asked to give out examples after their answers. For this research, the use of a semi-structured interview with an open questionnaire as a base for the interviews was chosen for various reasons. First of all, the aim was to see the participants as subjects and give them an opportunity to express themselves and their opinions as openly and justified as possible. Secondly, the interviews were following wanted guidelines, but it was also necessary to give the participants a flexible adaptation to the context. The questionnaire paper was used in order to give the participants time to think about their answers and give them the opportunity to write freely about their feelings and without any influence from the researcher by asking the questions. To secure the anonymity of the participants, the research interviews were conducted one by one as individual interviews with the use of questionnaire paper with no specific participant details.

In total the number of responders was 12. The data processing was done by reading through the questionnaire papers and while interviewing the participants writing down all the extra information that interviewees were saying. All this data was then combined by each participant and in total processed as 12 different answers. The answers were then analysed and divided in to positive, neutral, and negative sections based on the main feeling of the responses. The results of these semi-structured questionnaire interviews are analysed in this study by using the content analysis meaning that only the essential information of these answers is used and opened in the analysis.

4.3 Reflection and evaluation

The interviews were done in Finnish in order to get more open and deeper answers since all of the respondents were native Finnish speakers. The aim was to create as relaxed and confidential atmosphere as possible for the interviewees and using their native language supported that. The saturation point, which means that there are no more new answers that would add value or give added information need to be defined in a research process in order to get answers that are comprehensive and versatile enough (Vilkkä 2015). For this research was defined saturation point was set to be approximately 10 answers and in total there were 12 participants, and the saturation point was reached.

In a research process it is necessary to evaluate the credibility of it based on the information available. This means that the reliability needs to be differentiated from the validity. Validity means that the research measures what it is supposed to measure and is to be evaluated without numbers. In other words, validity in a research means how successfully the researcher has been able to transfer the theory concepts and ideas used in the research to the interview questionnaire and how well the interviewees understand them. The answers can be distorted if both parties understand the research ideology and questions differently. (Vilkkä 2015). The reliability of the research means the accuracy of the results. Reliability is the ability to give non-incidental results and reproducibility of the measurement results. This means that the results of the research would be the same if it was repeated regardless of the researcher. Reliability is necessary in order to make the research valid. Together reliability and validity form an overall reliability which is in a good level if the studied sample represents the basic population and there are as few incidents as possible in the measuring. (Vilkkä 2015.)

Because the research is evaluated by the actions, choices and solutions made by the researcher in a qualitative research method, one of the criteria for the reliability of the research is the honesty of the researcher. This is why it is important for the researcher to self-evaluate his work in every phase of the process and to be able to justify his choices.

Also, in order to the research to be truly reliable the researcher has to be able to stay completely objective and impartial even though he usually is part of the research community and its operational culture. (Vilkkä 2015.)

All research should be ethically conducted. If the data collection method is very open and versatile, it is more difficult to manage the potential ethical problems in the design of the research. To be able to conduct the research ethically the researcher must stay neutral and not let own ethical choices or opinions affect to the solutions made in the research process. (Sarajärvi & Tuomi 2017.) For this study the main ethical aspect was to decide what means of research the researcher is allowed to use and what kind of results are pursued since the researcher is working in the operational department of the case company. Because of this the choice of the research topic was also a considered ethical question.

The research sampling was comprehensive enough to be able to get versatile answers and the response rate was high (100%). The research is not fully reliable since the sampling was made based on volunteering and the reliability of the research is undermined by respondents' different backgrounds and the employment time within the company. The weakness of this study is that the crisis situation is a so-called force majeure situation for the employer company, and the company cannot affect to it or its duration in any way so the conclusions may not have high importance for the case company.

5 Analysis of the data and outcomes

Because the research topic is very current and the pandemic is still ongoing, this research was especially focusing on employee point of view and how the operational employees feel about the crisis management and communication. The topic is important since it helps to figure out the reasons behind the development of the employer image through these chosen subjects. The importance of employees' opinions is put in high focus because they are the ones who can have an impact on the company's employer image both internally and externally.

The interviews for this research were conducted in early spring 2021. The timing for the interviews was sensible because the COVID-19 crisis was still ongoing, and it had already been affecting the service industry for a year, so the impacts of the crisis were already felt. The participants were company X's employees from business operations and half of them were currently working and the other half on long layoffs. In total the results from 12 individual interviews were collected and analysed. The respondents were chosen from voluntary employees randomly based on the employment situation and the requirements were that they are working in operational department and that there is not too close acquaintanceship between the researcher and the interviewee.

The interview was divided into three different subjects of questions in order to separate different research questions. The interview questions can be found from attachment 1. Interview questions. Each question category aims to find out the employee's opinions about the situation before COVID-19 crisis and how it has changed during it. The questions were formed in a neutral tone and as a guideline for answers in order to allow the participants to express themselves freely with own opinions. The questions were also set open to find out possible improvement or development ideas for crisis management and communication.

The presentation of the research findings is done in three categories based on the different interview questions and in order to separate the employer brand image, crisis management and internal crisis communication to their own aspects. The interviewees' answers are coded in order to keep their identities anonymous. Since part of the interviewees are currently working and other part is on long layoffs the answers are coded based on these two groups. The group that is currently working during the pandemic is coded as A1-A6 and the group that is laid off is coded as B1-B6. Table 1 introduces the key findings and main research conclusions. The chart is divided based on the research questions and it unites the used theories to them. In addition, the main problems and improvement suggestions are summarized based on the interviewees' answers.

Table 1. Result summary table

Research question	Theory chapter	Main problems	Main improvement ideas
Q1. How has the crisis situation affected to the employer brand image?	3 3.1 3.2 3.3	Lack of respect, understanding and listening towards employees External employer image is polished, internal employer image is getting worse.	Keeping made promises towards employees Equal treatment for all units and departments Appreciation through benefits- not reducing the earned work conditions and salaries
Q2. What are the factors that support the positive employer brand image throughout the crisis?	3.2 3.3 3.4 3.5 3.6	Financial actions and media coverage are seen positive, but HR actions and personnel leadership are seen negative Employee engagement during a crisis	Engagement through employee well-being and management support Employer brand image is seen difficult to improve during a crisis
Q3. How do the employees see the success of the crisis management during COVID-19 pandemic?	3.6 3.7 3.8	Timing of rewarding should not be during a crisis situation Immediate supervisors' management skills Curtain between management and lower-level employees	No rewarding or bonuses during a crisis situation- constant austerity measures for others feel unequal Supervisors' actions and messaging should be more positive, transparent and open Co-operation with different departments- no more hierarchy
Q4. What are the factors that affect to the perceived quality of internal crisis communication?	3.5 3.6 3.7 3.8	Style of the communication is dictating, not interactive Employees' questions are not answered Communication responsibility- internal messages before external ones Too many communication channels	Internal communication before external- information directly from the company and not from the media Regular and increased communication from the company during a crisis situation Only emails or company's intranet as communication channels, no other unofficial communication channels

5.1 Analysis of the employer brand image questions

The first set of questions concerned the employer brand image and how employees see it at the moment compared to the situation before recruitment. These questions are giving the participant the chance to observe their employer openly and give an honest opinion about it.

Based on answers about the employer brand image it is clear that the well-polished external employer brand image is different from the internal employer brand image. The reputation of a great workplace is something that can only be told by the company's employees so there has to be some kind of misleading information when recruiting people since the answers declare that the image shatters and degrades after the employment starts. Because this research covers only the operational department it can be reasoned that the other employee departments do not share these feelings and thoughts because the company is rated so highly in the "Employer of the year"- ratings.

Although the respondents stated that the employer brand image is seen mainly negative in the operational department because of the lack of understanding, listening and respect towards the employees, the answers point out that despite of all of these the group spirit within the employees is fairly good. Continuous changes in the company's organization and service procedures and the development and implementation of various constantly changing digital tools are mentioned to be some of the reasons why the employees feel like they are not listened or considered enough. This is because of the constant changes and decisions are usually done in the office and the decision makers may not have the whole picture in mind when it comes to putting the new development ideas in use in operational level. These decisions are controlled by money and the need for continuous quality development in order to stay competitive in the service industry but based on the answers the employees feel like they are not listened or taken in consideration when designing these various changes.

The interviewees' answers also gave simple examples of how the employer could improve its brand image by keeping the made promises and showing concrete and tangible appreciation towards employees by rewarding and not cutting down the earned benefits. In addition, one point was that if the company's management would hear the lower-level employees and truly focused on the employees' well-being in all levels and departments the employees would feel equally treated and could be proud of their employer and this way promote a good employer brand image. The interviewees' answers gave also reasonable comments about realizing the pandemic situation to be still on-going and that

the employer brand image is greatly influenced partially by it in addition of these earlier issues.

5.2 Analysis of the crisis management questions

The second set of questions is about management actions in a crisis situation. These questions are giving answers to how the crisis situation has affected the employer brand image in employees' opinions and how they feel that the management has been working during the crisis. Also, possible improvement ideas are included in the set of management questions.

Among the respondents it is stated and understood that the COVID-19 crisis is something that no one could have predicted in advance. This pandemic is a crisis that is taking more time than no one was prepared for and it obviously has a serious effect on the businesses. The interviewees understand how difficult this time is for management and leadership and somewhat empathize for them because the situation is so economically critical. But on the other hand, they feel like when being personally in a difficult lay-off situation they would want more transparent actions and realistic support from the management. The given answers show openly the employees' concerns about the company being economically in a point where even the huge austerity measures that the company is planning to execute within the next years cannot bring back the profitable company that it was before this crisis. Employees are openly concerned about their own employment; Will they ever work again after long lay-offs or will they be permanently let go? How will the working conditions be after these severe austerity measures? If the company cuts down salaries and does radical changes in for example working times is the employment worth it anymore? It is clear that because the fight for COVID-19 pandemic is so slow and has been taking so long time already and that even after starting the vaccinations the situation has not been drastically better it is very difficult to predict anything that concerns it. This unpredictability of the pandemic is one reason why the employees of company X feel like they are floating without anything permanent or solid to hold on to. Other reason for this is that people expect the management to give even some truthful answers, which is not done and cannot be done when the crisis situation is changing rapidly and every week there is something new that affects the company's business. These are some of the reasons why the company's employees on operational department feel so concerned about the possibility of losing their jobs.

The set of questions about management brought out some brutal opinions about how operational department's employee feel about management and it's functioning in the company. Especially interviewees see that the COVID-19 pandemic has been an

unforeseen crisis that has not been well-enough managed by the company. Company X's management actions were seen insufficient and unprofessional regarding human resources and personnel leadership. Living under constant fear of losing one's workplace and uncertainty of the pandemic situation and its duration can be seen factors that have an impact on employees' mindsets and one of the only positive comments was the possibility to get to therapy through health services. Even though the major financial actions like the company's share issue were seen as a working and positive effort of controlling the economic balance of the organization, these actions are seen as a reflection and an opportunity for the company to push down and cut back the operational department's working conditions. The fear and uncertainty in this situation are this way seen in interviewees' answers and the need for more open and clarified leadership from the management is called and seen necessary. The answers pointed out the employee's opinions of what went wrong in the crisis management in their eyes and what they would have expected to be done differently. These tangible examples were emphasizing the co-operation with different departments from management to lower-level workers and getting rid of the old-fashioned habits of hierarchy. The information given by the immediate supervisors should be more positive than negative and the questions from the employee's should be answered openly and with transparency even though the answers would not be positive. One big issue that surfaced from the answers was definitely the rewarding and distributing bonuses in this serious situation, which was seen as poor judgement from company's side and an oppressing for the employees in lower levels. The need for equal treatment of all employee departments was raised up in the management questions clearly.

5.3 Analysis of the internal crisis communication questions

The third set of questions is related to internal communication and internal crisis communication. These questions concern the ways and channels of communication as well as its content and amount. The aim of these questions is to find out the best ways and proper volume of communicating internally and to thoroughly process the successful and unsuccessful messages. The interviewees give also examples of successful and unsuccessful messages from the company.

The internal communication is something that divides interviewees' opinions the most from all of the questions. Communication is seen as a crucial part of managing a company but also the difficulties regarding it are comprehended. Through the answers it is proved that internal communication and especially communication in a crisis situation are factors that highly affect to the experienced employer brand image.

Before the COVID-19 crisis the internal communication was seen in a relatively positive light. The information included in the internal messages was experienced to be versatile and comprehensive enough in order to provide all the necessary knowledge regarding the everyday operations. One big opinion divider was the adequacy of the amount of communication. Some interviewees saw that there was too much information that constantly changed, and others thought that the amount of given information was good enough and not too much. From these answers it can be concluded that the amount of internal communication was in a good level before the crisis situation. More divided opinions arise in the answers about the extent of information during this crisis. This is varied by every person depending on how much support and encouraging one needs. The lack and the style of communication came to prominence to be the biggest issues during the COVID-19 crisis situation according to the interviewees' answers. The employees see the communication channels as difficult to use and feel like the communication should happen through official routes such as emails.

The answers show how ignored employees feel while being on layoffs. They state that they feel forgotten by the management when the information flow is limited and negligible. Employees that are on long layoffs state that they do not feel themselves as part of the work community anymore and fear that they are left out because of the lack of internal messaging and communication. They simply feel neglected due to the fact that the communication flow is not big enough or reaching them. Big differences are seen also in external communication towards customers and internal communication towards employees. Respondents see that the external communication is more positive, and it shows the company in a good and even polished light to people. Communication internally is seen more negative and realistic in this crisis situation and these different communication styles confuse employees when the message varies based on the recipient.

Based on the answers the employer brand image could be improved through wisely conducted communication from the company. The use of only certain communication channels should be considered and changing the internal communication strategy since for example now the company is using unofficial channels and not all employees receive the information provided in those since they are unofficial. The interviewees present a clear improvement idea which is that the employees wish to have even some communication regularly from the employer even if major changes are not happening. The given messages should be more positive than negative and all in all there should be more communication during the exceptional crisis time.

6 Conclusions

When this research process was started the world had already been suffering from COVID-19 pandemic for almost a year. At this point the virus had been showing its strength and power over the world's economy. It was obvious that many companies especially in the service industry would suffer dramatic losses in revenues and maybe even go through a bankruptcy. The difficult economic situation has forced the companies to furlough employees or even terminate their employments for good. These changes have been necessary but unpleasant to companies' employees who have had to figure out new ways of coping in life or find a new workplace. People's personal psychological recourses are put to test because the pandemic has closed also the recreational activities and common leisure services such as restaurants and gyms.

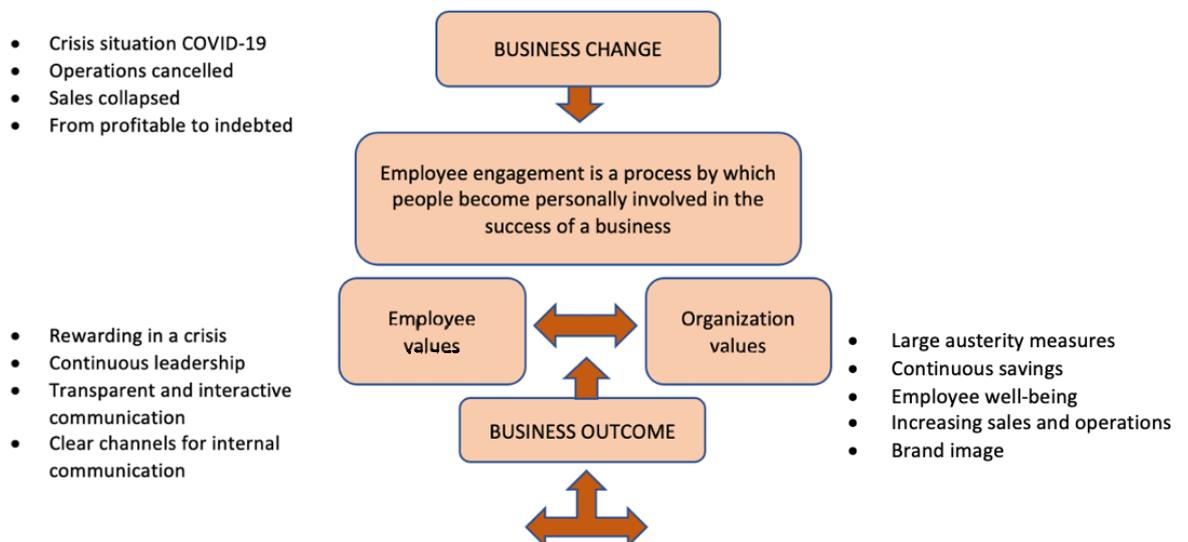
The research questions behind this thesis were about the effects of a crisis situation to the employer brand image and the supportive positive factors throughout it. These questions were focusing on finding ways of keeping the employer brand image as positive as possible in an abnormal situation and also keeping the employees satisfied and engaged. The claims about company's lack of modern ways of operation and the fact that it is seen as hierarchic are relevant conclusions about the employer brand image and show the need for development. One factor that support the positive employer image throughout the crisis was discovered in the interviews as the commonly felt positive group spirit in the operational department despite the constant changes and adjustments in their work conditions. Another major discovery was that for many of the respondents the employer brand image changed to more negative when they started to work in the company. In operational level the employees do not feel appreciated enough and the uneven treatment between the operational department and office workers is felt unequal. Although as a result the interviews showed many subjects about employer brand image that employees' wish to be developed, they acknowledge the fact that the improvement of their employer's brand image is difficult during a crisis situation.

The question of how the employees see the success of the crisis management during the COVID-19 pandemic was answered with straightforward opinions. As a result, it can be revealed that company X's employees see the management's actions in a good light when it comes to securing the company's finance and economy in this crisis. When it comes to managing the people of the company the opinions are more negative. The company's crisis management is seen as irregular, and the employees feel that there is a loss of continuous leadership from the management. In addition to this the communication from the supervisors is said to be too negative and not encouraging enough. Conclusions

involve also the fact that it is considered highly unfair and unprofessional action from the company to reward and give bonuses to any employee on any level in this serious crisis. The feeling of unfairness arises from the facts that the company has been terminating contracts for some employees and is constantly finding permanent saving solutions, so the employees see it as a very tedious activity from the company to give any rewards at this point.

The research question about the perceived quality of communication in a crisis situation gave the most similar opinions and answers from the interviewees but showed variation in what is considered to be the right amount of communication. As a main conclusion it can be stated that company X is using too many internal communication channels and it should decide on which it wants to centralize and remove the others. Another conclusion is that the employees wish to have more interactive communication with management and the questions they ask need to be answered in an open and transparent way without avoiding the difficult subjects.

This research shows that there is constant need for development for employer actions in order to maintain a good level of employee satisfaction. Even though interviewees' opinions have been affected by long periods without work on layoffs the statements about company X's employer brand image before the crisis showed implications of dissatisfaction. As a result of the interviews the employees expect the management to have wider perception of fairness especially in difficult situations and on the other hand the employees need to show more trust in management. When the crisis is over it remains to be seen how engaged the employees are after company's implemented crisis management and communication. Bridger's (2014) employee engagement model below is used as a base in order to summarize the researched issues and findings of this study.



Picture 7. Current employee engagement model for the case company

The aim of this research was to get an insight of how company X's employees on operational department experience the employer brand image, the management and internal communication during the COVID-19 crisis situation. The expectations of this thesis were to find possible solutions and suggestions for improving the employer brand experience within company X's employees. The best possible result was achieved since the interviews discovered tangible suggestions to the actions needed in order to improve all the researched areas. In conclusion this research showed that company X needs to do actions to improve its employer brand image and put more effort to its crisis operations in management and internal communication.

6.1 Further research suggestions

This research was started after the COVID-19 pandemic was already ongoing and it had been affecting on people's lives and to the service industry. The longer this crisis continues the more important it is to observe the employees' well-being and motivation to return back to duty after the crisis. The phenomenon is still very current because the pandemic is yet ongoing and it keeps on affecting the employer brand image. Due to this companies' managements are forced to focus on employee satisfaction even more as long as this crisis is ongoing.

This research gives multiple possibilities for further research. For example, the employer brand image itself and its development is a topic that is wide enough to be researched deeper. Employer branding has been developed within the past years to being a part of every company and marketing, especially in recruiting new work force, so the topic could be broadened even further.

In this research there were three different sections that are affected by the COVID-19 crisis and these subjects were explored through company X's employees' interviews. These were the experienced employer brand image, the success of crisis management and the internal crisis communication. For further research these areas could be divided and examined separately, and the research could focus on the time after the crisis. In other words what needs to be done after these important matters are negatively changed due to the crisis situation. Also, one point of view could be the exploration of management and communication in a normal situation instead of a crisis situation. This is because the interviewees' answers gave so many clear opinions and grievance about the ways of managing and communicating within the company.

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Attachments

Attachment 1. Interview questions

1. Minkälainen kuva sinulla on ollut yrityksestä X työnantajana ennen kuin päädyit työskentelemään yrityksessä?

- Miten työnantajakuva muuttui, kun aloitit työskentelyn yrityksessä? Millaiset keinot kehittäisivät työnantajakuvaa mielestäsi paremmaksi?

2. Kuvaile miten COVID-19 kriisitilanne on vaikuttanut työnantajakuvaan sinun mielestäsi työntekijänä ja millaisena näet sen tällä hetkellä?

- Miten koet johtamisen toimineen yrityksessä kriisin aikana työntekijän näkökulmasta?

- Mitä olisi mielestäsi voinut tehdä eri tavalla johtamisen suhteen kriisin aikana?

3. Kuvaile millaista yritys X:n sisäinen viestintä on ollut ennen COVID-19 kriisitilannetta?

- Millaista sisäinen viestintä on ollut mielestäsi COVID-19 pandemian aikana?

- Onko sisäisen viestinnän määrä ollut sopivaa?

- Millaisia sisäisen viestinnän kanavat ovat olleet? Ovatko ne olleet toimivia?

- Millaista sisäisen viestinnän sisältö on ollut?

- Mitä olisi mielestäsi voinut tehdä eri tavalla sisäisen viestinnän suhteen?

- Pystytkö antamaan esimerkkejä toimivasta ja epäonnistuneesta viestinnästä?