

Positive Candidate Experience and Employer Brand

Of the case company Mercateo

Abstract

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Abstract <p>Due to the demographic change and an increased transparency, there is a war of talents between companies. A company needs to create a competitive advantage in the labour market in order to attract and retain qualitative employees. The research investigates possible advantages of the candidate experience and employer brand. Additionally, it aims to find a possible connection between the candidate experience and employer brand of a company.</p> <p>The theoretical framework of the candidate experience and employer brand show, that the implementation and analysis of both can help a company differentiate itself. It also displays the current demand of German candidates on employers.</p> <p>The candidate experience and employer branding strategy of the German company Mercateo is analysed. Additionally, a questionnaire of new employees assesses the effectiveness of the strategies. The empirical data shows the positive effects of the measures Mercateo implements during their recruitment process and employer branding.</p> <p>The key findings also imply a relationship between the candidate experience and employer brand of the company.</p>		
Keywords Candidate experience, employer branding, human resources		

Contents

1	Introduction.....	1
1.1	Background	1
1.2	Objective and delimitations	2
1.3	Research questions	2
1.4	Theoretical framework	3
1.5	Research method	3
1.6	Thesis structure	4
2	The candidate experience.....	5
2.1	Definition	5
2.2	Six-phase model.....	5
2.2.1	The attraction-phase.....	6
2.2.2	The information-phase.....	6
2.2.3	The application-phase	7
2.2.4	The selection-phase	7
2.2.5	The onboarding-phase.....	8
2.2.6	The integration-phase.....	8
3	The employer brand.....	10
3.1	Definition	10
3.1.1	Internal employer branding	10
3.1.2	External employer branding	12
3.2	Implementation of an employer brand.....	13
4	Application Example Mercateo.....	17
4.1	Introduction of the company.....	17
4.2	Analysation of the recruitment process and employer branding	17
5	Empirical research and analysis	23
5.1	Structure of questionnaire.....	23
5.2	Data analysis.....	24
6	Conclusion.....	36
7	Summary	39
	References	41

Appendices

Appendix 1. Questionnaire

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

During the last years, the landscape of the labour market has changed due to several mid and long-term trends. One of these trends is demographic change, which among other things, affects industrial countries. It describes the development that in a few years, the number of people going into a pension will increase and simultaneously the count of the total population is declining. This shift results in a decreasing number of working people and therefore in a shortage of workforce for companies. (Busold 2013, 4) Considering the German labour market, for example in the next ten years the number of people entering the pension age will increase by seventeen per cent. At the same time, the number of people in the working-age of 20-67 years will decrease by seven per cent. (Statistisches Bundesamt 2019) This leads to the conclusion that German companies will face more problems in recruiting new employees. Another one of these long-term developments in the labour market is its increased transparency. Due to communication channels such as social media, it is easier to broadcast the relationship between employees and their respective companies (Trost 2014, 7). These two described developments among other things result in an enhanced competition for potential employees, also referred to as talents.

For that reason, companies need to build a strong connection with possible employees early on (Busold 2013, 120). In order to accomplish that the company needs to know how they can identify possible candidates, attract them and build a long-term oriented relationship with them. One aspect of achieving that is the improvement of the recruitment process of a company itself. The model developed to understand and facilitate change in recruiting strategies is the candidate experience. It is a concept derived from the marketing model of the customer experience and focuses on the needs of a potential employee to create a positive perception of the recruitment process (Verhoeven 2016, 8). Another aspect of gaining a competitive advantage in the labour market is developing an employer brand that contributes to the decision of a candidate to work for this company (Hesse & Mattmüller 2019, 22).

The hypothesis for this thesis report is that whether there is a correlation between a candidate experience and the employer brand of a company. For this purpose, a case company was studied to test if there are advantages of developing a consistent recruitment process in the labour market by using the candidate experience model. Additionally, the case company will confirm or disconfirm if a positive candidate experience can have influence on the employer brand of a company.

1.2 Objective and delimitations

The thesis report has two main objectives. The first is to analyse whether implementing the theory of the candidate experience in today's economy is necessary and how to achieve that. Therefore, the main aspects that create a successful recruitment process will be identified. The second objective is to explore if a candidate experience can influence the employer brand of a company. This second objective contains the characterization of the employer branding concept and its measures. Then the research aims to find a connection between a positive candidate experience and a successful employer brand by testing it against a case company. A case company from Germany will function as empirical data to compare its current conditions to the theoretical framework.

Since the candidate experience is a theory that covers all steps in the recruitment process, the thesis paper will be focusing on giving an overview of the different stages of that process. Furthermore, it will only concentrate on the German labour market and the needs of its candidates. This is justified by the location of the headquarters of the case company which is in Germany. The influence of a candidate experience on the employer brand will focus only on the positive outcomes it can have and not go into depth about the possible consequences of a negative candidate experience. The empirical data retrieved from the case company is limited to the employees recruited in the year 2021. Due to that reason, it will not be able to give conclusions to the state of the candidate experience or employer brand of the company for the past or coming years. Additionally, the thesis is not able to conclude how big the effect of the candidate experience can be. It can just determine whether there is an effect or not.

1.3 Research questions

In order to achieve its objectives, the one main question to be asked in this thesis is:

- In what way can a candidate experience influence the employer brand of a company?

Additionally, two sub-questions help answer this main question:

- Is a candidate experience analysis necessary for a company?
- How can a company use their employer brand in the war of talents?

1.4 Theoretical framework

The thesis is based on two main theoretical frameworks, the candidate experience theory and the employer brand theory. The candidate experience theory is a concept derived from the customer experience theory in the marketing sector (Trost 2014, 109). It describes the overall perception an applicant has of a company during the recruitment process and how it can be shaped. The six-phase model is part of the theory and will be used in this report as a tool to describe the different touchpoints a potential employee has when interacting with the company during the recruitment process. (Verhoeven 2016, 11-36) Furthermore, this phase model will help in this thesis to determine the current needs potential employees have regarding the recruitment process by breaking it down into single steps.

The second main concept is the employer brand theory which is part of the overall marketing strategy of a company. Clear employer branding management provides applicants with a positive image of the company in a sustainable way (Prieß 2019, 25). This area of marketing can be directed internally to current employees or externally to the environment and therefore potential employees (Hesse & Mattmüller 2019, 22). The thesis will describe the strategy and measures of internal and external employer branding. As well as how these two kinds of branding can be communicated. Additionally, the “House of Employer Branding” will be used as a model to visualize the structure of analysing and establishing an employer brand in a company (Hesse & Mattmüller 2019, 209).

Both theoretical frameworks, the six-phase model and the house of employer branding, will be applied to the case company in order to be able to determine the current status of the company.

1.5 Research method

For this thesis, primary and secondary data are used. The secondary sources build the qualitative part of the report and are business articles, journals, and books. The theoretical framework will be derived from these secondary sources to give a better understanding of the theory and its models. The primary data is obtained from a questionnaire of the case company and represents the quantitative part of the report. The survey questions all employees of the case company who have been recruited since January 2021. The respondents are both German-based employees that work on-site and international employees that work purely online. They are asked to evaluate the recruitment process of the company, starting with its employer branding and ending with its onboarding methods.

The questions are designed as multiple choice and open-end questions or Likert scale questions with a range from one to five. The response time for the survey amounts to two weeks.

The general research approach for the thesis report is deductive. This means that the report starts with a general view of the topic and after that, quantitative data is collected and tested against the general view (Emerald Publishing Limited 2021). For this report, the theoretical framework of the candidate experience and employer branding represents the general view and its models build the basis for the hypothesis of the thesis. Then the hypothesis is tested against the quantitative method, in this case, the questionnaire. The resulting empirical data will be analysed through statistics and either affirm or disconfirm the established theory.

1.6 Thesis structure

The thesis report is divided into four sections. The first section acts as an introduction to the report. It explains the reasoning behind the chosen topic of this thesis and provides insight on the background of the topic. Furthermore, the objective of the thesis, the research questions and the delimitations of the research are introduced.

The second section provides an overview of the theoretical concepts and models that are related to the thesis topic. This section represents the theoretical framework of the research. First, the concept of the candidate experience is explained with the help of the six-phase model. Second, the theory of employer branding with the model house of employer branding is introduced. These two concepts build the foundation for the empirical section of this thesis.

The third section introduces the case company of this report and represents the empirical part. First, the candidate experience and the employer branding methods of the German case company are analysed. For that, the afore mentioned two concepts are applied on the company. After that, the collected primary data in form of a survey is introduced and analysed. The results from the empirical data tests the concepts addressed during the theoretical framework.

The final section of the thesis report presents the key findings of the research. It combines the results from the theoretical framework and the empirical results. Additionally, it gives suggestions for further research regarding this topic.

2 The candidate experience

2.1 Definition

The first theory introduced in this thesis is the candidate experience. The concept of the candidate experience is derived from the marketing term *customer experience*. Similar to the marketing model, where the interaction between customer and company during the buying process is analysed, the candidate experience describes the perception the individual applicant has of the company during the recruitment process. In this theory, the recruitment process does not only include the step of selecting future employees but is expanded. The process begins with the attraction of candidates, it includes the recruitment step of top candidates and ends with the first working months in a company (Verhoeven 2016, 12).

As mentioned before in this thesis, the application of the candidate experience theory is one possibility for a company to gain a competitive advantage in the labour market. The candidate experience analysis enables the company to establish a relationship between employer and possible employee. The candidate experience can also influence the decision of the applicant whether to accept a work offer or decline it. Therefore, the theory includes, additionally to factual and procedural aspects, an emotional view on the process as well. The consideration of these factors supports the efforts of a company to develop a trust-based relationship between applicant and itself. If such a relationship is established, then even a rejection can result in a positive perception of the company and the chances of a candidate applying again are higher. (Athanas & Wald 2014, 5-7) The reapplication of candidates after a rejection is an aspect that needs to be considered more seriously due to the before-mentioned long-term trends, the demographic change and increased transparency, that lead to a war of talents. The candidate experience can act as a differentiator and give a company a competitive advantage (Verhoeven 2016, 14).

2.2 Six-phase model

By definition, the candidate experience is an accumulation of single interactions between an employer and a possible employee. These contact points are also referred to as touchpoints. The identification and analysis of said touchpoints can help the company achieve a competitive advantage in the war of talents and retain new employees in the long term. (Athanas & Wald 2014, 5) The number of touchpoints today is constantly increasing for instance due to social media as a new communication channel. It is, therefore, more complex for companies to gain an overview of all the different points of interaction between candidate and company as well as control them.

The six-phase model can be seen as a tool to facilitate the categorization of the different touchpoints into six main sections. (Verhoeven 2016, 35-36) The analysis of these six sections allows a company to identify room for improvements in its recruitment process. This can for instance result in a reduction of application abortions or a higher probability of gaining top candidates. (Athanas & Wald 2014, 5)

The following sections give an overview of the six phases of a recruitment process and their included touchpoints. Additionally, they provide previous findings of the needs that German candidates have during these individual phases.

2.2.1 The attraction-phase

The first phase in the candidate experience model is concerned with the measures a company can take to draw the attention of possible candidates to itself. In this phase, a candidate first notices the company as a potential employer. Possible measures to gain the attraction of applicants are for instance advertisements or career fairs. (Verhoeven 2016, 36-37) The choice of tools that are used by the company is depending on the position that needs to be filled and the competencies it entails. Resulting from these requirements, the company needs to create a research profile and define a target group of candidates. Depending on that group the candidates can be addressed through print media, journals or online job portals. (Prieß 2019, 58-59) A new development in the labour market is, that during the attraction phase the company needs to be easily found in online media. The reason for that is that today, an increasing number of people are searching for vacancies on online employment agencies or job portals. (Athanas & Wald 2014, 8)

2.2.2 The information-phase

Due to the usage of job portals and career websites, the first and second phases are increasingly difficult to separate. The touchpoints regarding the information phase are viewed the same as the touchpoints of the first phase. Among them are for example social media channels, the career website of a company, or job advertisements. They are used by possible candidates to inform themselves about the company and its job vacancies. (Verhoeven 2016, 36) In that phase, the company needs the ability to provide clear and comprehensible job requirements as well as give the reader a sufficient overview over their recruitment process (Athanas & Wald 2014, 16). This aspect of transparency in this phase can be a differentiation factor in the labour market. Additionally, the expectations of candidates to be informed about the corporate values is gaining in importance as well (Wald & Athanas 2017, 11).

2.2.3 The application-phase

The application phase describes the entirety of steps a candidate fulfils to apply for a job vacancy. There are several possibilities to apply for a position depending on the measures imposed by the company. The most common application methods include applying via e-mail, filling out application forms, or using the one-click application. The one-click application is a new trend that has been gaining acceptance among candidates. With that form, the candidate applies with their LinkedIn or Xing profile and does not need to fill out online forms or send an E-Mail to the company. (Athanas & Wald 2014, 16, 24) As can be deduced from these methods, the majority of the applications take place online. For this reason and the rapidity of social media, time is a decisive criterion in the recruitment process, especially for younger candidates (Trost 2014, 109). The average time a candidate is willing to spend on an online application is less than 30 minutes. Therefore, the process needs to be fast and easy to understand in order to prevent the abortion of the application process. Another aspect of time management during this phase is the response time of the company to the initial contact. The main expectation from candidates is to receive a reply within two weeks of their application which is, according to the candidates, a deficiency for many German companies. (Verhoeven 2016, 18, 20, 92)

2.2.4 The selection-phase

During the selection phase of a recruitment process, the candidate undergoes steps that determine whether or not they are suitable for the position. The touchpoints during that phase can be for instance interviews or assessment centres (Verhoeven 2016, 36). The selection process especially can influence the decision of a candidate to accept or decline a future job offer. Several aspects can provide the company with a competitive advantage during that phase. Again, the prospect of transparency is represented, in this case in the expectation of candidates to have a personal contact person during the entire recruitment process. Due to the fact that candidates need to be informed about the different steps during the selection process and be able to inquire about their current status. (Athanas & Wald 2014, 25) Another aspect that adds to the transparency of the recruitment process of a company is to minimize the asymmetry between candidate and employer before an interview. This can be achieved by informing the candidate about the person who is going to conduct the interview beforehand or disclosing the interview agenda at the beginning of the meeting. (Trost 2014, 116)

Furthermore, the aspect of time management can be a differentiating factor in the candidate experience. In general, it can be said that the longer the recruitment process takes, the higher is the probability that the perception of the candidate experience is negative. The selection phase of the recruitment process ends with the company offering the candidate a job position or delivering a rejection. In case of a rejection, it is more challenging for a company to achieve a positive perception of the candidate experience. A deciding factor under these circumstances is how the applicant is informed about the decision of the company. For the candidate to receive a personal call informing him about the rejection and giving them the possibility to learn about the reasons behind the decision is the most preferred way. The probability of obtaining a positive perception of the candidate experience through an individual and personal rejection is higher than for instance through an automated e-mail or no communication at all. (Athanas & Wald 2014, 27-28)

2.2.5 The onboarding-phase

The onboarding phase can be divided into two sections. The first describes the time the candidate spends as a new employee outside of the company after signing a work contract. More precisely, the period between contract signing and the first days of work. The second phase addresses the actual first days for the employee in the company. This differentiation needs to be made due to the fact that the time between signing the contract and the first workdays can extend to several months, depending on if the candidate is still in an employment relationship with another company. (Verhoeven 2016, 110) During that time, it is still possible for the new employee to withdraw from the offered position. Therefore, the company needs to maintain communication with its new employees by using measures like providing access to the intranet of the company or introducing future colleagues. (Trost 2014, 119-1120)

During the onboarding process itself, the first working days are an important factor for the company to fulfil the expectations and information provided during the previous phases. New employees expect the company to welcome them into the cooperation, to have a working space ready for them, and to have the work processes explained to them among other things. (Wald & Athanas 2017, 25-26)

2.2.6 The integration-phase

The integration phase describes the perception of the everyday working life in the new company. It can be defined as the timeframe during the probation months of the new employee.

(Verhoeven 2016, 36-38). During that phase, it is the goal of the company to develop the qualified candidate into a loyal employee to prevent the possibility of a change of employer. For new employees, it is important during that time to be able to identify themselves with the business strategy of the company. They also expect to be given the possibility to acquire more independence and responsibility in the fulfilment of their tasks. (Wald & Athanas 2017, 27) A way for the company to facilitate the integration process of a new employee is to make time for regular feedback meetings between a manager and the employee and thus be able to solve problems as they arise. A dedicated contact person can further support this purpose in case of concerns that are arising during work tasks that do not require the presence of management personnel. (Prieß 2019, 171)

3 The employer brand

3.1 Definition

The establishment of an employer brand represents the second possibility, which is explained in this thesis report, for companies to differentiate themselves in the labour market. As mentioned before in this thesis, the transparency within companies is increasing due to communication channels like social media. For that reason, a company must obtain an overall positive image. (Figurska & Matuska 2013, 35) The general branding process of a company includes the participation of different fields for instance product branding or corporate branding. The promotion of the human resource management of a company is called employer branding (Banerjee et al. 2020, 173). In the case of employer branding, the company needs the ability to communicate its value propositions for the selected target group through chosen activities. These value propositions can be of economical or psychological nature as well as development-oriented. (Sengupta et al. 2015, 320)

The goal of employer brand activities is to create a clear and positive image of a company as an employer in a sustainable way. This means that the taken measures need to be long-term oriented and cohesive with the corporate strategy of a company. (Prieß 2019, 25, 36) A challenge concerning the creation of a positive employer brand is its connection to the product and corporate brand of a company. For instance, reliability or financial stability can influence the image of the company as an employer also. The same applies to the nature of the product or service of a company. (Banerjee et al. 2020, 178, 188) The employer branding activities can be focused internally or externally. The internal employer branding measures serve the purpose of retaining current employees whereas the goal of the external measures is to attract potential employees to the company. Both strategies aim to provide the company with the image to be a great place to work. (Sengupta et al. 2015, 307, 321) The two forms of employer branding with their characteristics and advantages are analysed in this chapter. Additionally, the theory of the house of employer branding is introduced to explain a possible way of establishing a successful employer brand.

3.1.1 Internal employer branding

The activities of the internal employer branding process are directed at the current employees of a company and focus on creating a positive corporate culture (Figurska & Matuska 2013, 37). Therefore, the company needs to view its employees as brand ambassadors that communicate their perception of the work environment or corporate culture outside of the organization (Hesse & Mattmüller 2019, 22).

The internal employer brand is based also on the fact that the management acts as an example to support the values of the company through their behaviour. (Hesse & Mattmüller 2019, 41-42) For an employer brand to be successful in the labour market it needs to be embedded in the culture of the company and represented by its employees. It requires credibility and sustainable integration in order to attract fitting candidates for the company. (Busold 2013, 61)

The internal employer branding measures start with the first working days of an employee and end with them leaving the company. They include for instance the onboarding days, mentoring activities as well as feedback meetings. (Hesse & Mattmüller 2019, 32) The basis for a positive employer brand is a positive corporate culture. For a company to reach a positive culture, the value propositions that define the successful employer brand need to be communicated to the employees. Therefore, a company needs to choose its internal communication channels based on the target group they want to reach. (Leekha & Sharma 2014, 51)

Additionally, the type of communication needs to be cohesive with the values of the company. Overall, there are two different possibilities to communicate the employer brand and its values to the current employees. Passive and active communication. The passive communication channel includes media like newsletters, flyers, or posters and represents a more traditional approach to employer branding. Active communication channels on the other hand provide the possibilities for the employees to give feedback and participate in the decision-making process. This leads to the result that the current employees engage with the corporate brand. Possible channels can be discussions, feedback meetings, or rituals in the workday. (Hesse & Mattmüller 2019, 42)

The goal of internal employer branding measures is to enable the employees to identify themselves with the corporate strategy as well as to increase their satisfaction and motivation of working in the company. This strengthens their commitment and can then lead to an increase in the productivity of the company overall. (Von Walter & Kremmel 2016, 50) Possible benefits resulting from an internal employer brand strategy, aside from increased loyalty and productivity, can also be less absence from work by employees, a lower fluctuation rate, or an increased level of trust within the company (Figurska & Matuska 2013, 40).

3.1.2 External employer branding

The external image of a company as an employer is in most cases linked to the product brand of a company. This can either facilitate or complicate the establishment of a positive employer brand. (Banerjee & Kalyanaram 2020, 175) Nevertheless, a company needs to differentiate itself in the labour market by promoting its unique employer characteristics to external stakeholders (Leekha & Sharma 2014, 51). The goal of promoting their value propositions is to enhance the perception of the targeted group of candidates towards the company as a possible employer.

The promotion of strengths as an employer is mostly directed at students, graduates, or active professionals (Figurska & Matuska 2013, 37). Characteristics that need to be analysed for a successful employer brand for external stakeholders are for example the moral image of the company, the work culture, which can include for instance the scope and nature of the job, or growth possibilities in the organization. Potential employees also consider the recommendations from trusted people in their environment. (Sengupta et al. 2015, 317,320)

The same question asked about channels for internal communication must also be asked for the external communication. The external employer brand communication encompasses all interactions between the company and its environment. Because the employer brand can be intertwined with the corporate or even product brand, these communication strategies must be cohesive with each other. The whole employer brand communication process can be divided into two kinds of channels, similar to the internal communication strategy. The company can choose between a personal or an impersonal communication channel. Unpersonal communication channels are media of mass communication, which provide certain information to a large audience. The advantages of choosing this form of communication are that it is relatively cheap and easy to repeat. The goal of these channels is to enhance the overall awareness level of the company. (Hesse & Mattmüller 2019 42-43) Possible tools can be image advertisements in universities or on websites, sponsoring activities, or public relations (Kalinska-Kula & Staniec 2021, 598). The personal communication channels on the other hand are directed and adapted to a chosen target group. They are more flexible and the company has greater control over its impact on the external stakeholders. The personal communication channels can be more effective because possible candidates have the chance to directly interact with employees of the company or experience the corporate environment themselves. (Hesse & Mattmüller 2019 44)

Possible activities can be lectures at universities, scholarships for students, or the participation of the company in career fairs (Kalinska-Kula & Staniec 2021, 598).

A successful external employer brand results in the securing of talents which will, later on, provide a competitive advantage for the company in their industry. (Hesse & Mattmüller 2019, 24) Aside from the ability to attract qualified talent, a successful employer brand can also lower the costs of recruitment by facilitating the access to candidates in general (Figurska & Matuska 2013, 41).

3.2 Implementation of an employer brand

The success of a company can depend on the recruitment and retainment of talented employees. The establishment of a positive employer brand can result in a decrease in resignations and an increase of committed employees that support the goals of the company. Additionally, a positive employer image can attract more talented employees. One of the main factors that need to be considered when developing an employer brand is that it needs to be cohesive with the overall identity of the company. (Figurska & Matuska 2013, 49)

The first step in establishing an employer brand is to benchmark the internal and external work-related characteristics of a company with its competitors in the labour market. Possible characterizations for that can be for example the analysis of their salary system, working methods, training opportunities, and management quality. The next step in establishing an employer brand is to determine the desired image of the company as an employer and the development of a strategy to realize that concept. (Prieß 2019, 33-34)

The House of employer branding is a model which can facilitate the analysis of the values that shape a company and the factors that affect the properties of an employer brand (Hesse & Mattmüller 2019, 209). This model consists of four levels that define influencing factors in the implementation process of an employer brand (Figure 1).

The basis level represents the fundamental values of a company which are developed over time. A change of these values is a complex and time-consuming process. Important values especially for the younger candidate generation are for instance flexibility, equity, and sustainability. (Hesse & Mattmüller 2019, 210-211)

The second level in the house of employer branding addresses culture-related factors. They are built on fundamental values and reflect these by creating a corporate culture. Contrary to the first level, the culture of a company is tangible and noticeable for the employees. In other words, the second level describes the implementation of the first level. Characteristics for that level are for instance the management style of a company, hierarchy system, or the working culture (Hesse & Mattmüller 2019, 211-212) The culture and working environment of a company are two of the main differentiating factors for employees in the German labour market today (Marktforschung 2020). At the same time, the corporate culture is one of the main reasons employees are willing to switch their current employer (Wald & Athanas 2017, 39). One can conclude from this, that the development or establishment of the corporate culture should therefore happen with consultation and feedback systems from the current employees.

The third level consists of two pillars that address the arrangement of the culture-related factors. More precisely, it describes how the value and culture of a company can be implemented into an employer branding strategy. The first pillar concentrates on the own employees of the company. The company needs to develop measures that accomplish a positive employer brand experience for them. This concerns for instance the remuneration system or characteristics in the working environment. (Hesse & Mattmüller 2019, 212) Some of these measures have already been analysed in the internal employer branding chapter of this thesis. An important aspect that needs to be considered is that only when the culture is established internally, then the company can begin communicating it to the external environment. This ensures the authenticity of the employer brand overall. (KOFA 2021)

After the first pillar is considered, the second pillar can be addressed by the company. It describes the implementation of employer branding for possible candidates. The main objective behind this pillar is to identify measures that gain the attention of new talents and successfully attract them to apply for a position in the company. For this purpose, the external employer branding strategy needs to be adapted to each target group individually. This ensures that the company begins to form a relationship with the candidates from the first interaction. (Hesse & Mattmüller 2019, 213-214) Individual communication with target groups has been facilitated due to a variety of communication channels like online platforms, apps, and other media channels. Therefore, it needs to be part of the strategy of a company to choose between for example a communication through social media or more traditional channels in order to reach their target group. (Prieß 2019, 32)

The fourth level of the house of employer branding illustrates as a roof. It represents the overarching factors on an employer brand that are difficult for a company to influence. These factors can be for instance the reputation of the industry that the company operates in, the product or service it provides as well as the corporate brand itself. (Von Walter & Kremmel 2016, 237). If, for example, a product is not seen as attractive it is more difficult for the company to establish a positive employer brand. In that case, the organization has to separate the employer brand from its product or service to stand out in the labour market. Another example can be that the industry the company operates in is suffering. In such an event, it is a huge challenge for a company to overcome a negative reputation. A possible measure to achieve this can be for example to cooperate with other organizations of the same industry to work on an image campaign. (Hesse & Mattmüller 2019, 215)

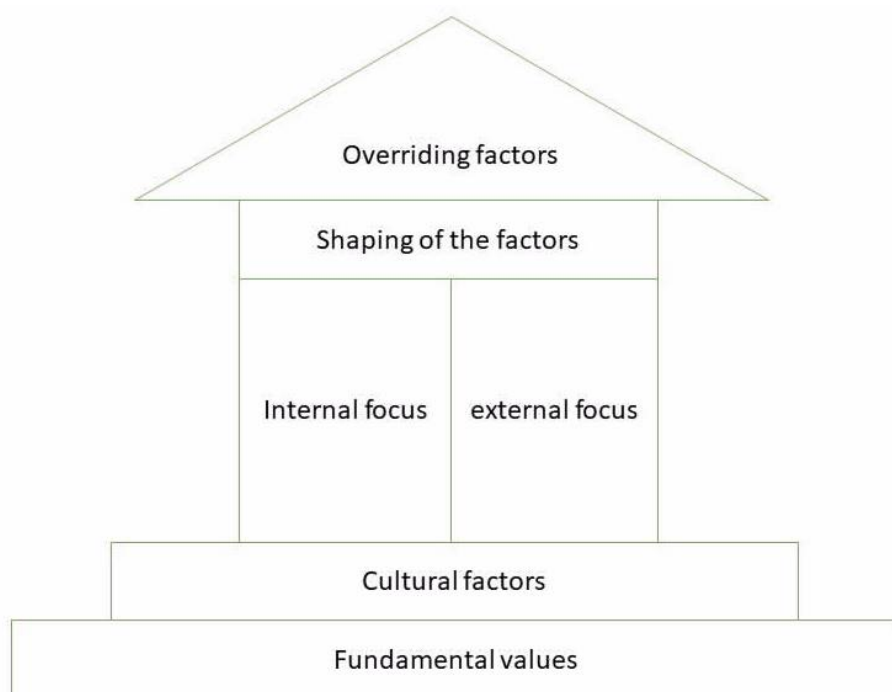


Figure 1. House of employer branding (adapted from Hesse & Mattmüller 2019)

To summarize the process of implementing an employer brand a company needs to analyse its internal values, structure, and strengths. It also needs to analyse its external environment, for example, the reputation of the industry or the employer branding strategies of competitors. From that, it is possible to create the value propositions that are supposed to define the employer brand.

After that, these value propositions are communicated internally and externally. If this is accomplished, it is possible to measure the success of the employer branding strategy by defining KPIs that can be analysed. Some key figures can be for example the number of applications per position, the number of takeovers after the probationary period, or the employee fluctuation rate in general (KOFA 2021).

4 Application Example Mercateo

4.1 Introduction of the company

The thesis report is supported by the company “Mercateo Services GmbH & Co. KG”, later in this thesis referred to as Mercateo. The German company was founded in the year 2000 as a procurement platform for business customers to be an online shop filled with articles for their customers. Due to increasing customer demand, the company was able to develop an e-procurement portal that also reduces the process costs in the acquisition of C-items which are not regulated through framework contracts. Today the Mercateo Group is represented in 13 European countries and employs around 600 people. (Hendel, 2021a) In the year 2020, the company has generated a sales revenue of 300.000.000 euro and a net profit of over 500.000 euro (Mercateo 2021). For the past three years, the company has been developing the networking model Unite which allows customers and suppliers to enter into a one-to-one relationship. This means that a digital network between customer, vendor, supplier, and service provider is created. The goal is that Unite serves as a platform that enables the creation of digital framework contracts between the organizations. The company’s mission is to provide networking and that includes the involvement from small companies as well. The goal is to create win-win situations during the business processes. Mercateo emphasis on ecological and economical sustainability, which is reflected in the company’s core values: humanity, fairness, sustainability, diversity, and courage. (Hendel, 2021a)

4.2 Analysis of the recruitment process and employer branding

The majority of information provided in this chapter about the recruitment process and employer branding of Mercateo was gathered during a three-month internship in the company. The first process that will be analysed and compared with the demand of German candidates is the candidate experience of Mercateo. Beginning with the attraction phase, the company is represented on several portals like Facebook, LinkedIn, Xing, and other job portals. These portals address different target groups for instance students, potential trainees, or currently working employees. Additionally, the company has a career website that displays information about the cooperation of Mercateo with initiatives for career orientation for younger candidates. Furthermore, the company participates in career fairs that address different target groups. With their different attraction touchpoints, the company tries to address each target group in the most efficient way which is an aspect that was mentioned in the theoretical background.

The majority of the above-mentioned touchpoints take place online which indicates that the company is adapting to the demand of potential employees.

The next step in the candidate experience is the information phase in which the possible candidate tries to gather information about the company and vacant positions. In the case of Mercateo, the candidate can achieve that by visiting website of the company. It entails for instance a description of the business strategy of the company. The executive board of Mercateo is introduced and the recruitment process, as well as its steps, are explained. As a result of providing this information, it is easier for the company to transmit transparency to the candidates. The career website of Mercateo displays all open vacancies in the organization. It additionally contributes details about job requirements, personal and professional, which tasks the position entails and what the company offers in return. The information about benefits, working environment and work-life balance addresses the demand of candidates to learn about the values of a company.

The application phase of Mercateo can be initiated by the candidates in different ways. The German company provides the possibility to apply via E-Mail, their career page, or regular Mail. If the candidate applies directly on the career page of Mercateo they need to fill out an online form and attach required documents for example their CV. After this, they receive an automatic confirmation E-Mail that the application was received and will be processed. If a candidate applies via E-Mail or Mail the information needs to be uploaded manually into the applicant management system and as a result, the confirmation E-Mail can take a few days until it reaches the candidate. In contrast to the online application, which is entered directly into the application management system. In that confirmation E-Mail, the candidate is asked to answer a questionnaire asking about the ways they found Mercateo and why they decided to apply. The next internal step during this phase is the viewing of the application by a recruiter and with that, the selection phase begins.

At the beginning of the selection phase, the recruiter makes the preliminary decision if the application will be further processed or if it will be rejected. In case of a rejection, the candidate will receive an E-Mail informing them about the outcome. However, if the profile of the candidate is appropriate for the open position, the recruiter will forward the application to the manager of the respective department with their initial impression. Then it is the task of the department manager to assess the candidate and give feedback to the recruiter. The next touchpoint of Mercateo with the candidate is the invitation to an interview. Depending on the approach of the department manager, the interview can take place by phone, online or on-site.

The invitation E-Mail for an interview contains information about the time, the form of the interview, and its participants.

The period between the application of the candidate and the next interaction with the company is dependent on the time it takes for the recruiter to make a preliminary decision and then again for the manager of the department to give back their assessment. After the interview, the recruiter and department manager exchange opinions about the candidate and their qualifications. If at that point in the selection phase the candidate is not a fit for the company, they will be informed through a personal phone call of the recruiter. The same applies in the case of a positive outcome which is that Mercateo submits an offer to the candidate. During the entire selection phase in the company, the candidate has one personal contact person which is the respective recruiter. Therefore, they can gain information about their application status or can turn to them with arising questions.

After the candidate has signed the working contract, they are entering the onboarding phase. This step in the candidate experience of Mercateo is characterized by two onboarding days. Previous to these two days, the new employee receives an E-Mail from the administrative team of the human resource department containing organizational information. This entails for instance the contact information about personnel from human resources or the IT department. It also introduces the intranet website of the company which is called Confluence.

The first onboarding day is simultaneously the first workday of the new employee and takes place at the site in Leipzig or online. The new employee receives information regarding this first day beforehand. After two weeks the second onboarding day takes place at the site in Köthen or online as well. Both days are guided by the head of the human resource department. They are supposed to give the new employee the possibility to familiarize themselves with the different departments and get to know the other new employees. Another purpose of these days is to communicate the corporate strategy and values of Mercateo.

The last step in the candidate experience theory is the integration of the new employee in the company. This phase is supervised by the respective manager of the department and turns out different for each department. A common characteristic of this phase in the company are feedback meetings between employee and manager. The first one takes place 100 days after the new employee has started working at Mercateo. The second one is the final interview, with which the probation period ends.

Additionally, there is a yearly development meeting between employee and manager. The purpose of these meetings is to give feedback and help the employees express wishes for their future careers.

To summarize, the candidate experience of Mercateo is well structured and follows a certain scheme which allows a consistent recruitment process. This is further supported by the usage of an applicant management system which facilitates the communication between recruiter and department manager. Additionally, the system provides an overview of the previous steps, assessments of the candidate, and the current status of the application. During the recruitment process of Mercateo, every step of the six-phase model is considered and can be applied to the company. This can lead to the conclusion that the candidates perceive their recruitment process at Mercateo as positive, which will be questioned by the empirical study.

The second process that will be analysed is the employer branding of Mercateo. To be able to display the employer brand methods applied, the house of employer branding will be used. The first level of that model is the fundamental values. As mentioned before, the promoted values of Mercateo are humanity, fairness, sustainability, diversity, and courage. These values are first introduced to an employee during their onboarding days.

They are reflected in the second level of the model by measures like low hierarchies, an open-door policy, and a tolerant error culture. The management strategy focuses on trusting the employees and providing them with an environment that allows errors and enables the employees to take on risks and be courageous in their everyday work. During the development of Mercateo as an employer brand, the management decided to conduct interviews with their current employees with the intention to learn about their perception of the company. The employees could describe the experiences they associate with Mercateo. From these stories, the values that describe Mercateo as an employer have been derived. (Hendel 2021b)

The third level in the house of employer branding represents the implementation of these values and cultural factors. Equally to the theory model, the implementation methods of the company are divided into the internal and external focus. Mercateo uses internal measures that support the corporate values by organizing team building days or summer and Christmas events that include the whole company. Furthermore, employees can expand their qualifications by participating in workshops in the Mercateo Academy.

The form of communication used by the company consists for instance of a monthly newsletter that contains information about new developments and employees. There is a monthly video message during which one of the members of the board addresses concerns of employees and the current economic status of the company. Additionally, the employees have a yearly feedback meeting with their supervisors in order to voice problems and receive an assessment of their performance of the year. To summarize, the possibility of professional growth and a comfortable working environment are value propositions that are demanded by current employees (Sengupta et al. 2015, 314). Therefore, it can be concluded that the internal employer branding measures applied by Mercateo can lead to a positive image supported by the employees of the company.

For the external focus on employer branding, Mercateo employs different tools for instance cooperation with several schools to gain interns which later on can become trainees or dual students at the company. As was mentioned before, the company also participates in labour fairs to raise the overall awareness of the company. Additionally, Mercateo participates in sponsoring activities, for instance in sports clubs, business plan competitions or social activities. One communication channel of Mercateo is the external newsletter which provides information about innovations and developments regarding the company to increase their transparency. The main utilized communication channel is the website of Mercateo. It entails information about the working environment of the company during which the organization promotes its emphasis on work-life balance. The employees have the possibility to work part-time, in the home office, or with flexible work time models. Additionally, Mercateo describes itself as a family-friendly company and supports parents for example with childcare subsidiaries. (Mercateo) Mercateo addresses on their website the main demands employees have on an employer with the description of work time models and possible benefits (Randstad 2019,39). The possibility of further education is also promoted on their website. External stakeholders also can learn about the different departments within the procurement company. Each department is introduced by an employee who describes their experiences while working at the organization. (Mercateo) With this method, Mercateo is able to provide a personal connection between the company and a possible candidate.

The fourth level in the house of employer branding describes the overriding factors concerning the company and builds the roof. Mercateo is an e-procurement platform and can be categorized either in the commerce or IT sector. Due to the fact that the company undergoes the expansion of becoming the Unite network, it is assigned in the IT sector. In Europe, the region that Mercateo operates in, the IT sector is the most attractive sector to work in (Randstad 2019, 18).

This is a good basis for the employer brand of the company in the future as well. The company provides a B2B service that does not influence the personal life of the candidates. Therefore, the connection between product brand and employer brand can be disregarded.

To summarize, the employer brand strategy of Mercateo focuses on transmitting their corporate values through the employees into the environment. They emphasize on creating a working environment that reflects their values and is based on constant communication between management and employees. Their main communication channel for external employer branding is the website. The communication through social media, which addresses especially the younger candidate generation, is not yet established. This is an aspect that needs to be considered in the future. Overall, Mercateo can utilize different employer branding strategies to communicate its value propositions transparently. The next chapter questions the results of this analysis with the assessment of new employees.

5 Empirical research and analysis

5.1 Structure of questionnaire

The following empirical research aims to assess the candidate experience and employer branding of Mercateo. The conclusions that will be drawn from the results should answer the question, whether there is a possible connection between the candidate experience and the employer brand of a company. More precisely, if a successful candidate experience can have a positive influence on the employer brand of a company. The questionnaire was conducted in English and German, to address not only German but international employees working at Mercateo as well. The asked employees have been recruited since the beginning of 2021. The survey consists of 26 questions which are designed as multiple choice and dichotomous questions, as well as Likert scale questions with a range from one to five and a few open-end questions.

At the beginning of the survey, the topic of the thesis is introduced and the purpose of the questionnaire is explained. The questions are divided according to different topics. The first two questions ask about the background of the employee, which includes their age and their current position working at Mercateo. The next set of questions are concerned with the candidate experience of Mercateo and address the single steps that have been explained in the theoretical framework. The employees are asked about their perception of the recruitment process. The employer brand of the company is analyzed within the last set of questions.

The questionnaire was created through Google Forms and was, therefore, an online survey. The finished survey was distributed to the target group via email by the head of the human resource department at Mercateo. Overall, 110 employees received the request to participate in the survey. They were informed that their answers to the questions would remain anonymous. The period for answering the survey was originally intended to last one week. After a consultation with the head of the human resource department, the period was extended for another week and a reminder was sent to the employees with the intention to increase the response number. At the end of the period, 65 employees of Mercateo have answered the questionnaire. Out of these, 60 have completed the German survey and five the English form.

After the primary data was collected, the analysis of it began. For this purpose, Excel and the Power BI tool by Microsoft were used. With these programs, the data was extracted, sorted and visualized.

5.2 Data analysis

The beginning of the questionnaire deals with the background of the employees that have been recruited by Mercateo in the year 2021. The age distribution of the 65 respondents shows that the majority of employees are between 30-39 years old (Figure 2). The second-largest group, with around 25%, consists of employees in the age range of 18-25 years. The smallest section of the age distribution is represented by candidates with an age over 50 that have been recruited. Overall, this age distribution shows that the survey will enable the analysis of Mercateo from the perspective of different stages in the work-life.

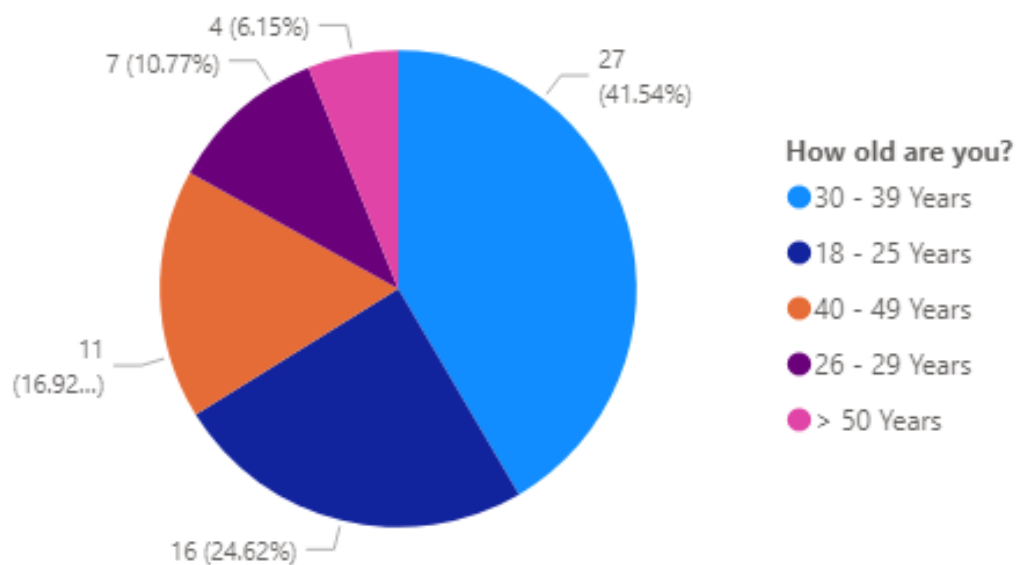


Figure 2. Age of the participants

The second question that inquires about the background of the participants addresses their current position (Figure 3). The results show that 80% of the respondents are working in an employment relationship and the remaining 20% are students or trainees. It can be assumed that Mercateo is the first permanent employer for the group of students and trainees and therefore they have fewer comparison possibilities than the majority. The respondents are working in various departments in Mercateo for instance IT, customer service, marketing, human resources and analytics. This enables the analysis of the recruitment process and employer branding of the whole company rather than a single department.

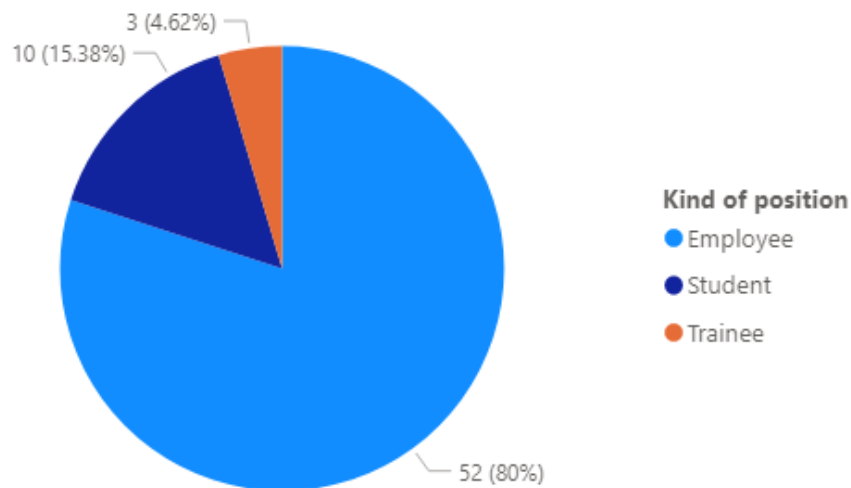


Figure 3. Current position within Mercateo

The main part of the survey queries the perception of the recruitment process of Mercateo. For that, five of the six phases and their touchpoints, that have been introduced in the theoretical framework of this thesis, are addressed. The implementation phase was not included in the questionnaire because the employment time of the asked candidates at Mercateo is not long enough to draw conclusions from it.

Beginning with the attraction and information phases. The candidates were asked about the touchpoints with which they first came into contact with Mercateo (Figure 4). This includes the channels they utilized to search for general information and vacant positions as well. The most used communication channel in all age groups, with a total count of 29 candidates, are job portals. This number is consistent with the general development in the German labor market. The recommendation from friends, acquaintances or colleagues comprises 20%, which is equivalent to 13 participants. It stands out, that the majority of candidates choosing that communication and information channel can be allocated to the age group of 30-39 years. Before their application, 44,62% of the respondents have known about the company Mercateo.

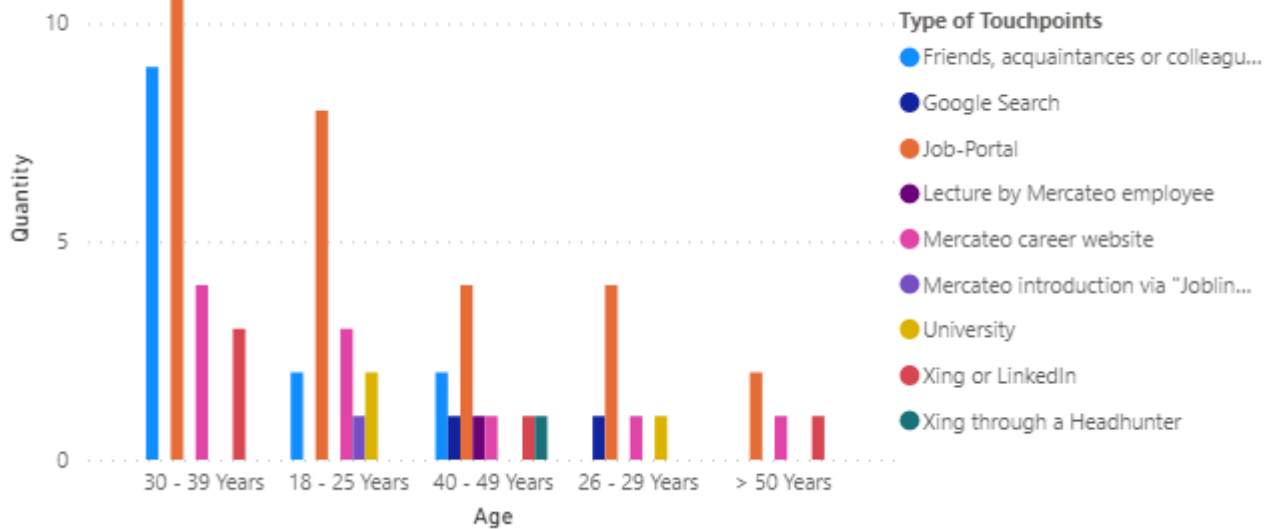


Figure 4. Communication channels

The next phase addressed in the questionnaire is the application phase of Mercateo. In order to analyze its efficiency, the candidates were asked to rate the response time during the candidate experience (Figure 5). The results show that, over 90% of the respondents were satisfied with the time it took Mercateo to respond to their application. In their case, the period between application and response amounted from a few days to at most two weeks. However, four candidates received a response after more than two weeks until one month after applying at Mercateo. As described in the theoretical framework, the response time is an aspect of the recruitment process of a company, that has been criticized by candidates. The data shows, that in the example of Mercateo, the company has satisfactory time management with only a few exceptions.

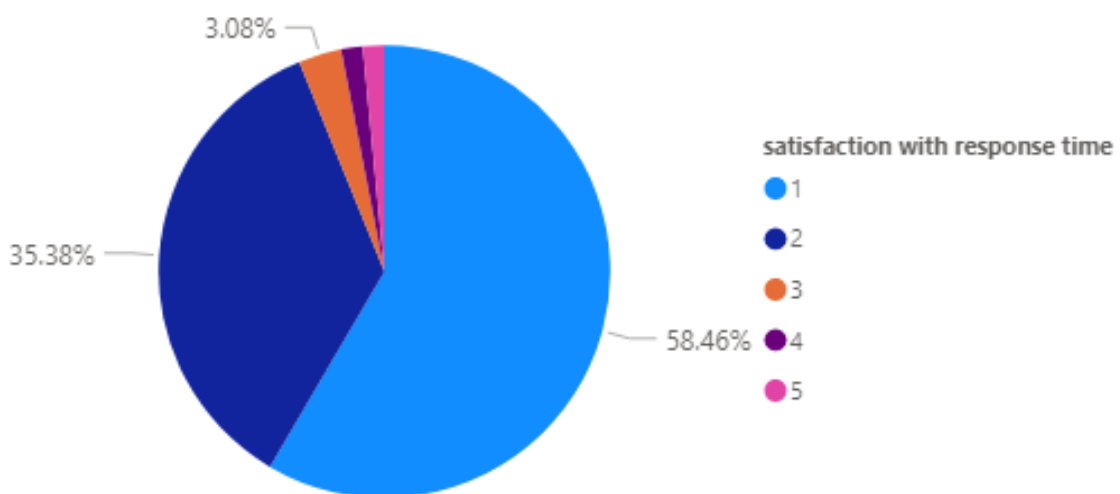


Figure 5. Satisfaction level with response time

The selection phase in a candidate experience includes several different aspects, for instance, the kind of communication, the interview or the grade of transparency. One feature, that has been defined as important for candidates, is the existence of a personal contact person. All 65 candidates state, that they have had a recruiter assigned to them during the recruitment process, whom they could ask questions and who kept them informed. Additionally, 64 respondents felt that they were very well and well informed during their candidate experience. None of the employees indicated that they felt uninformed by Mercateo.

The perception of the interview can have a great influence on the decision of the candidate whether to accept a job offer or decline it. For that reason, the candidates were asked to evaluate the interview according to their opportunity to present themselves and the quality of the feedback after the interview. For 75% of the respondents, the interview was conducted online, whereas the other 25% were on-site during the interview. The reception of the interview by the candidates is set in proportion to the type of interview that took place (Figure 6). If only the online interviews are considered, 65,31% of the candidates, which is equivalent to 32 respondents, stated that they could show who they are. On the other hand, 2,04% of the respondents chose number for on the Likert scale and therefore indicated that they did not get a sufficient possibility to represent themselves during the online interview. This can be compared to the data of the offline interview in which 56,25% of the employees were satisfied with the interview. At the same time, none of the respondents chose the fourth option on the Likert scale. It could be derived from these results, that it is more difficult for the company to reach an equal speaking part during an online interview rather than an interview face to face.

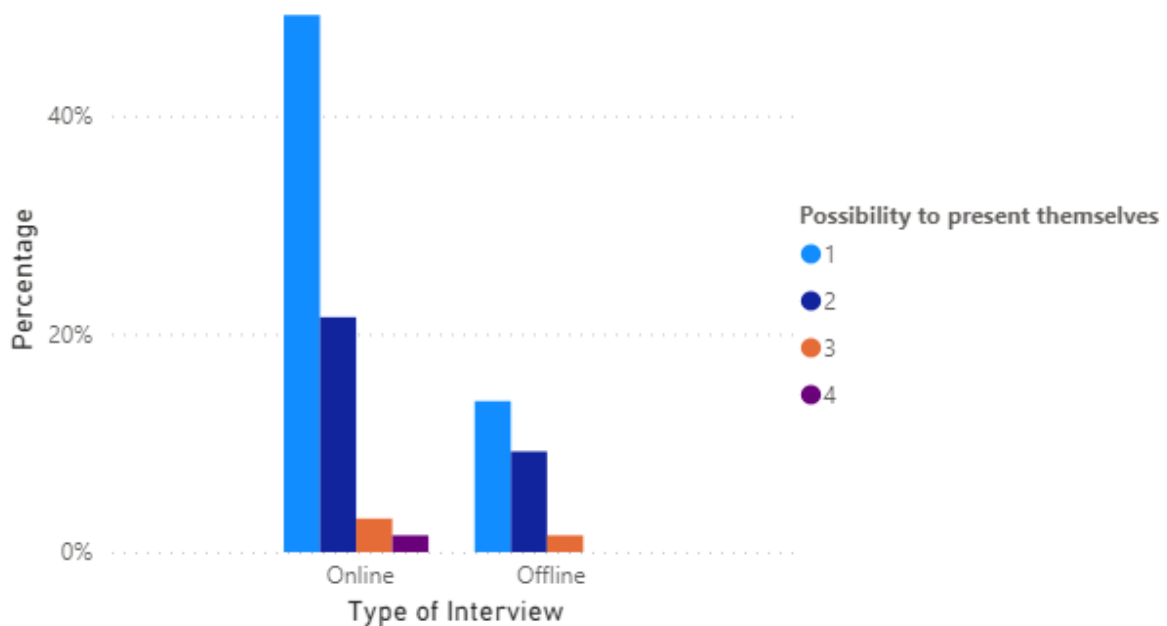


Figure 6. Perception of the interview

Another part of the interview that can be analyzed is the feedback after. Of the 65 responses, 55 stated that the interview was very well and well-evaluated which represents a percentage of 84,62%. Only 1,54% of the candidates said that the feedback given was not sufficient enough. It can be derived from these results that the overall perception of the interview with an employee of Mercateo is perceived positively.

The last phase of the candidate experience that was evaluated by the employees is the onboarding phase. An important aspect during that phase is bridging the time between signing the working contract and the first working days. The employees were asked if they had any communication with Mercateo during that time and if yes, what kind of communication. According to the results, approximately 90% of the candidates had some form of contact with the company during that period. The most common mentioned form was organizational or administrative communication via email or telephone.

Similar to the interview, the onboarding days at Mercateo can take place online or at a company site. Out of the 65 respondents, 37 experienced their onboarding online and 28 were at a Mercateo site. The type of onboarding days is set into proportion to the perception of the employees of being welcomed by their colleagues (Figure 7). It can be derived from the results, that the majority of candidates have a positive perception of their onboarding.

No one of the candidates has chosen the fourth or fifth choice in the Likert scale, which would have indicated that they did not feel welcomed by Mercateo. There is one individual who has chosen a neutral answer. Consequently, it can be concluded that the type of onboarding is irrelevant for the introduction to the company.

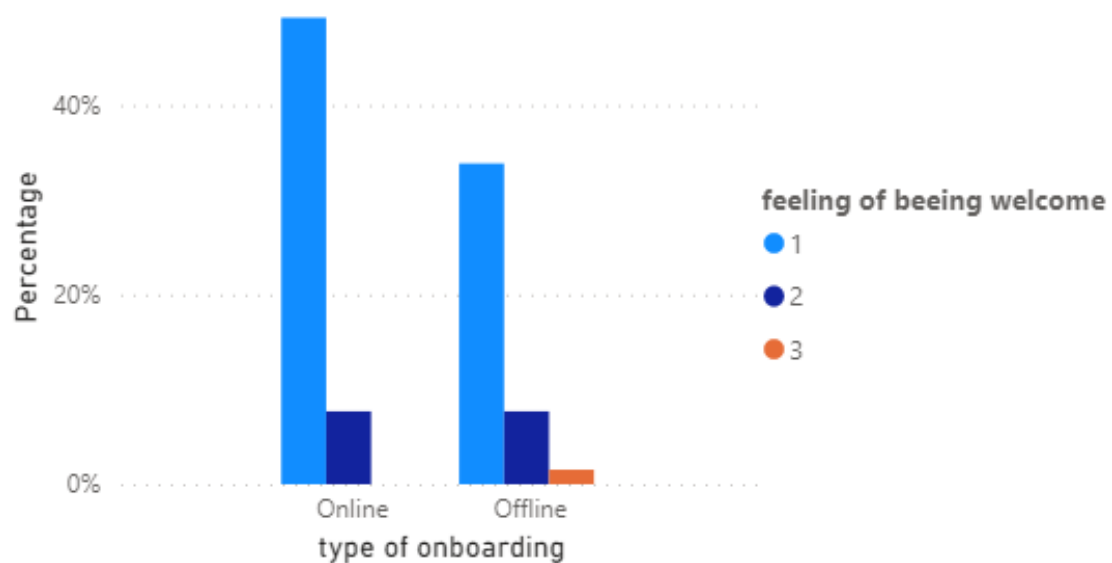


Figure 7. perception of the onboarding days

Additionally, to the onboarding process, the company wanted to enquire about the acceptance of a possible Onboarding App for future candidates (Figure 8). The purpose of the App is to facilitate the communication between Mercateo and the new employees. It would operate also as an information channel for the period between signing the contract and the first day of work. Possible features can be for instance an introduction of the team or of the induction process into the company. The results show, that the demand for such a tool is divided. Approximately 40% of the respondents feel that the introduction of such an app could be useful for the company. At the same time, around 40% of the respondents would find it unnecessary. It is unclear if the reason behind this result is the satisfaction of the employees with the current onboarding process or if the advantages of the concept are not made clear enough. This is an aspect that Mercateo should further inquire about.

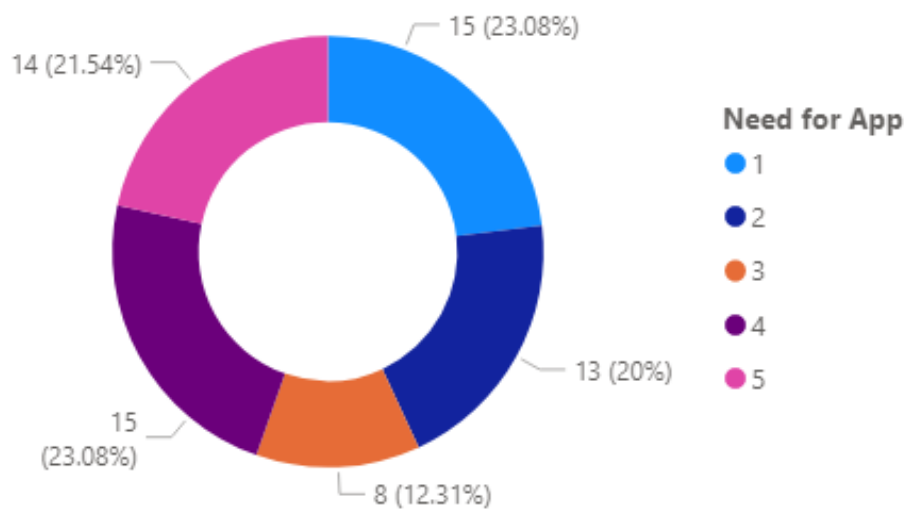


Figure 8. Need of an Onboarding App

Another question asked in the survey regarding the Onboarding App are possible additional features the employees would expect (Figure 9). Among the answers given, the most frequent suggestions describe that it could be helpful to build relationships before the first days of work at Mercateo. They refer to future team members in their department as well as other new employees that will begin working at the same time. This could be achieved by a chat function of the app or an overview of the above-mentioned colleagues with contact information. Another proposed feature deals with organizational and administrative functions that facilitate the submission of forms or other required documents.

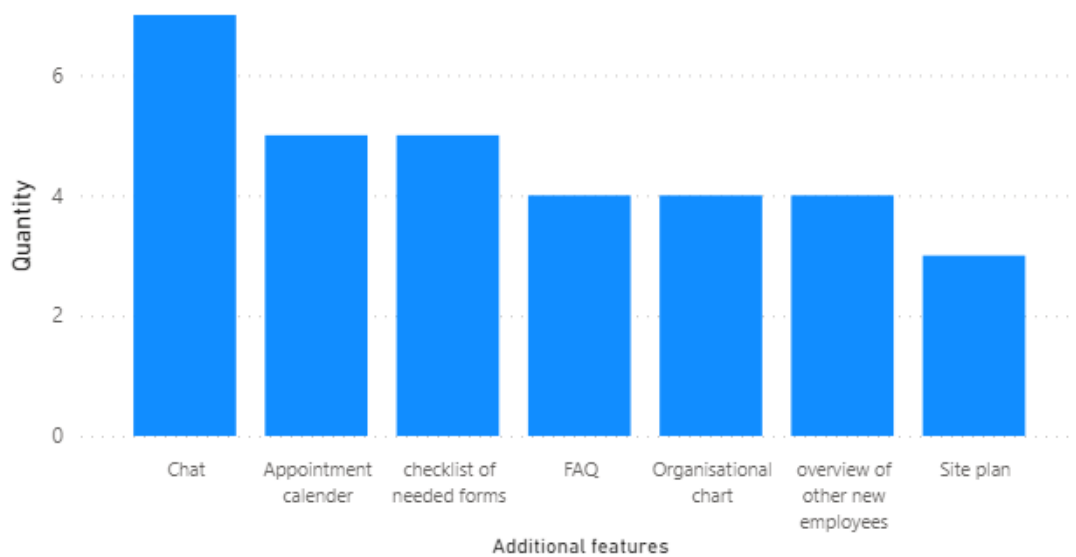


Figure 9. Suggestions for additional features

The next set of questions in the survey address the comparison of the recruitment process of Mercateo against other companies. For that, the candidates were first asked if they had parallel applications at the time of the recruitment process at Mercateo. As a result, 23 respondents did not have any other applications, 16 had one parallel application and 26 had at least two more applications at the time of the recruitment process.

The comparison of the recruitment process of Mercateo with other companies are allocated to the three different groups (Figure 10). The assessment tool is the Likert scale with a range from one to five. In which one represents that the company has performed better than their competitors and number five states, that the process at Mercateo was worse than at other companies. No respondent stated that the recruitment process at Mercateo was worse than at another company. Approximately 80% of the candidates in each group stated, that the recruitment process was better compared to other companies.

Additionally, 10 respondents chose the answer that the quality was equal to their competition. After this, the candidates should name the reasoning behind their perception of the recruitment process.

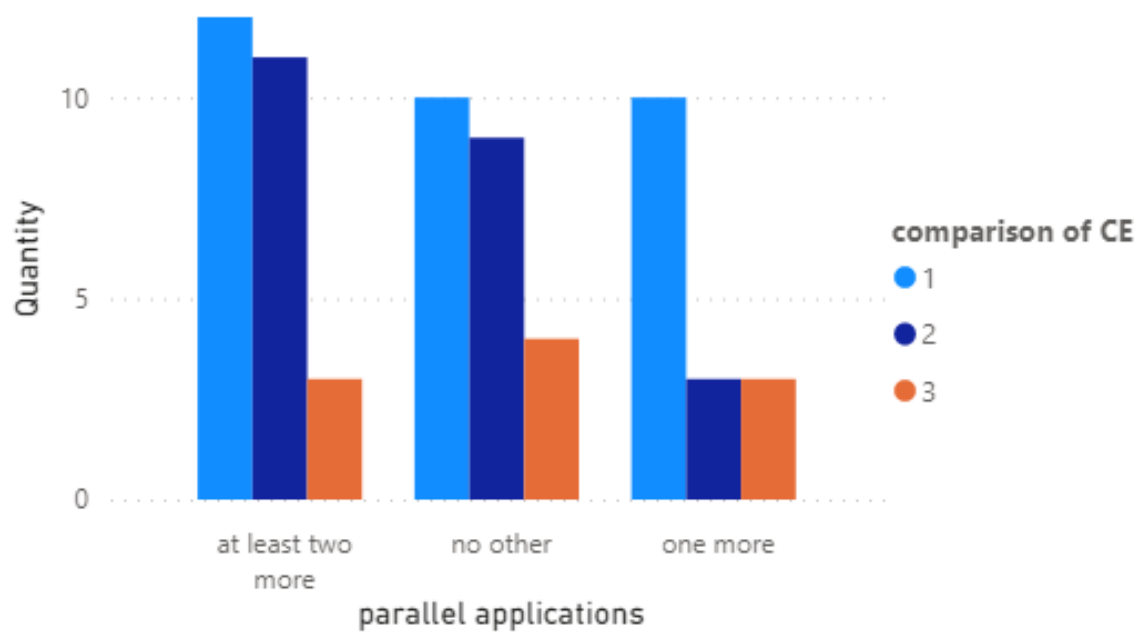


Figure 10. Perception of recruitment process compared to other companies

Since the assessment of the recruitment process was overall positive, the candidates were asked about the features, that provide Mercateo with a competitive advantage in the labor market (Figure 11). The results indicate that, the level of transparency maintained by the company is one of the main strengths of their recruitment process. This affirms the statement made, during the theoretical part of the thesis, that transparency is essential for creating a competitive advantage. Also, the time management and process itself are included in that overview. The aspects that establish a connection to the employer brand of a company are the following three strengths. Appreciation during the process, kindness towards the candidates as well as insight into the teams and working environment of Mercateo. The conclusion can be drawn, that the features of an employer brand are recognizable for a candidate during the candidate experience.

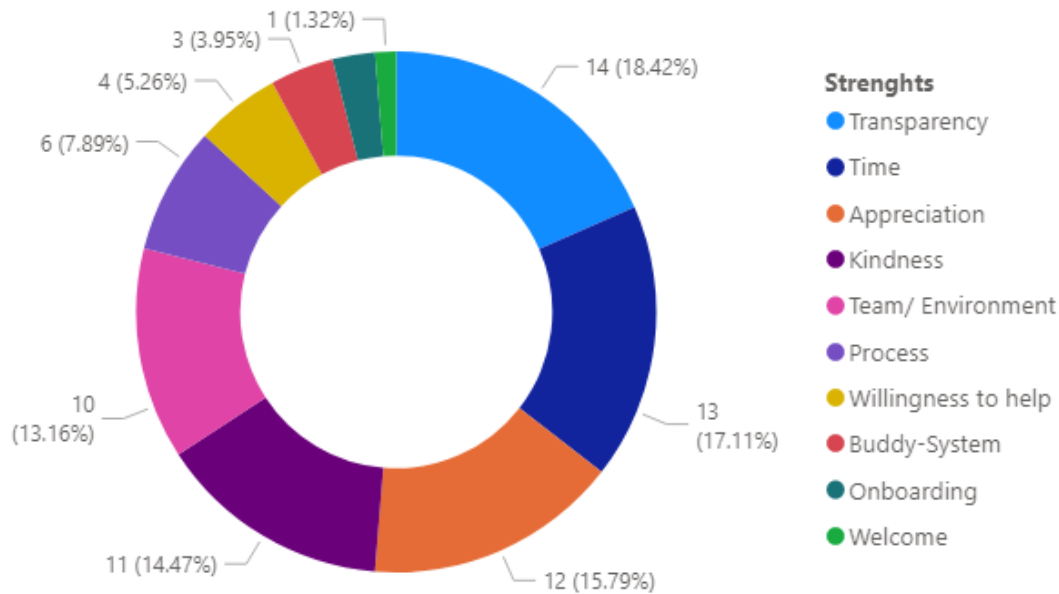


Figure 11. Positive features of the recruitment process

The next set of questions analyzed will give an insight into the employer branding of Mercateo during the recruitment process. First, the candidates were asked if the corporate values were introduced during the onboarding days at Mercateo and they could all confirm this. Consequently, they should assess how the presented values are integrated into the everyday work of the employees (Figure 12). The results show, that for 80% of the respondents, which is an equivalent to 52 individuals, the corporate values are clearly implemented in the working environment and practiced by employees and management. Approximately three per cent of the respondents are not able to identify the values during their everyday work and 16,92% have a neutral opinion of that matter. Overall, this result shows that Mercateo can integrate its promised values into their everyday work. If the majority of new employees is able to experience these values at work, then it can be concluded that the internal employer brand strategy of the company is successful.

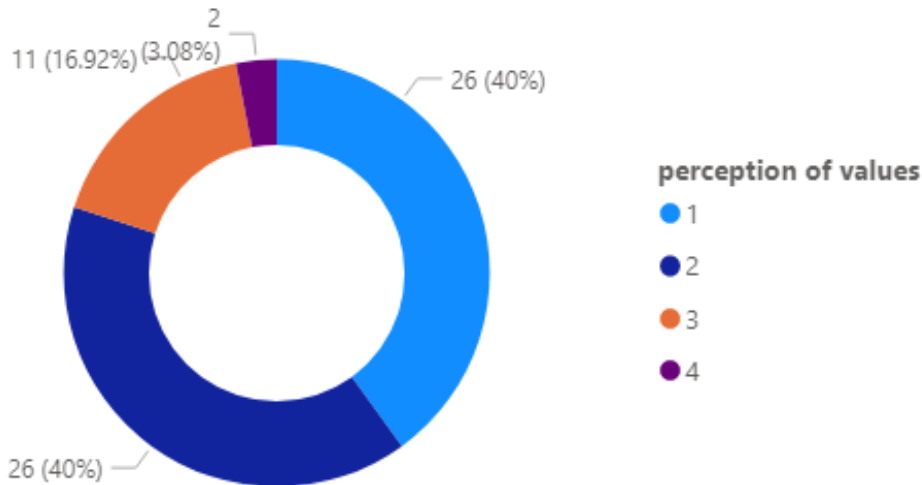


Figure 12. perception of corporate values in everyday work

As mentioned during the theoretical framework of this thesis, the moral image of a company, their work culture as well as the scope and nature of the job or growth possibilities in the organization are competitive factors for an external employer brand.

Therefore, the candidates were asked about their reasons for choosing Mercateo as an employer (Figure 13). The results show, all of the previously mentioned characteristics are reflected in the given answers of the employees. The primary reason mentioned by the respondents is the corporate culture of Mercateo with a share of 39,44%. Although just 8,39% of the employees have chosen the brand "Mercateo" as a reason for working at the company, it could still be seen as a positive development for the image of the company as an employer. Since Mercateo is working in the B2B sector, it is harder to establish awareness amongst possible candidates during their everyday life. Therefore, the result can be seen as a success for the external employer brand of Mercateo.

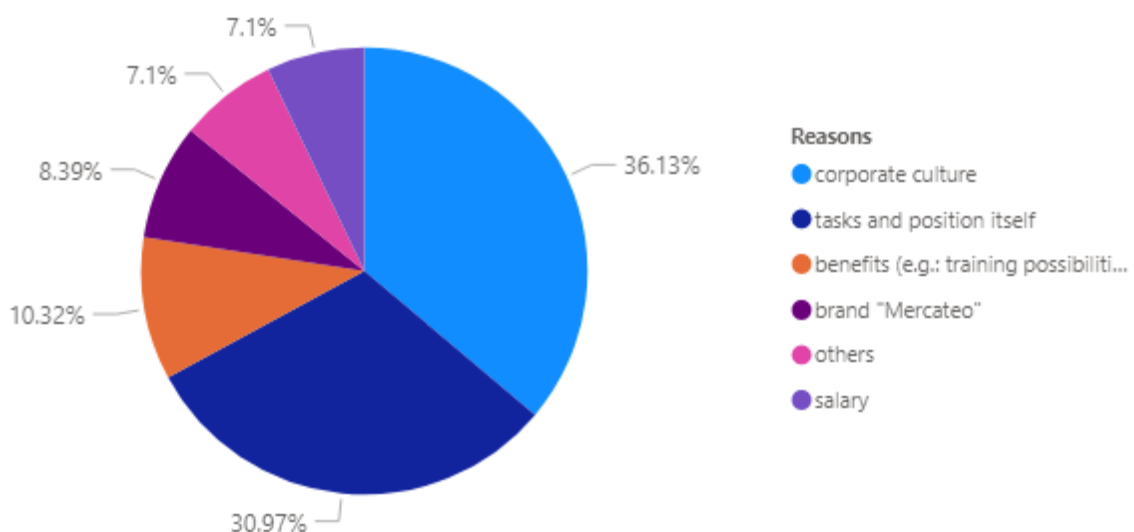


Figure 13. Reasons for working at Mercateo

At the end of the questionnaire, the employees were asked whether they could imagine applying at Mercateo again, on the assumption that they would have gotten a rejection. In the theory of the candidate experience, it is described that in case of a rejection, a positive perception of the recruitment process can increase the possibilities of a candidate to reapply at the same company. For this question the Likert scale is divided as follows. Number five represents a complete willingness of the candidate to apply again and consequently, number one represents the opposite.

In general, 26 respondents chose numbers five and four and as a result, stated that they would have applied again at the next opportunity. 17 employees chose numbers one and two, which indicates that they would have not applied again and 22 individuals were indecisive. In order to clarify these results, the perception of the candidate experience at Mercateo compared to other companies is set in proportion to the disposition of the candidates to apply again (Figure 14). According to the data, employees which have a very positive perception of the recruitment process contribute the lowest percentage on answering number one, with 12,50%. It also shows that the employees who have chosen a rather neutral assessment of the candidate experience at Mercateo, contribute the highest percentage on answering number one, with 30%. Therefore, it can be derived, that the better the perception of the recruitment process, the less likely it is that a candidate will not apply again.

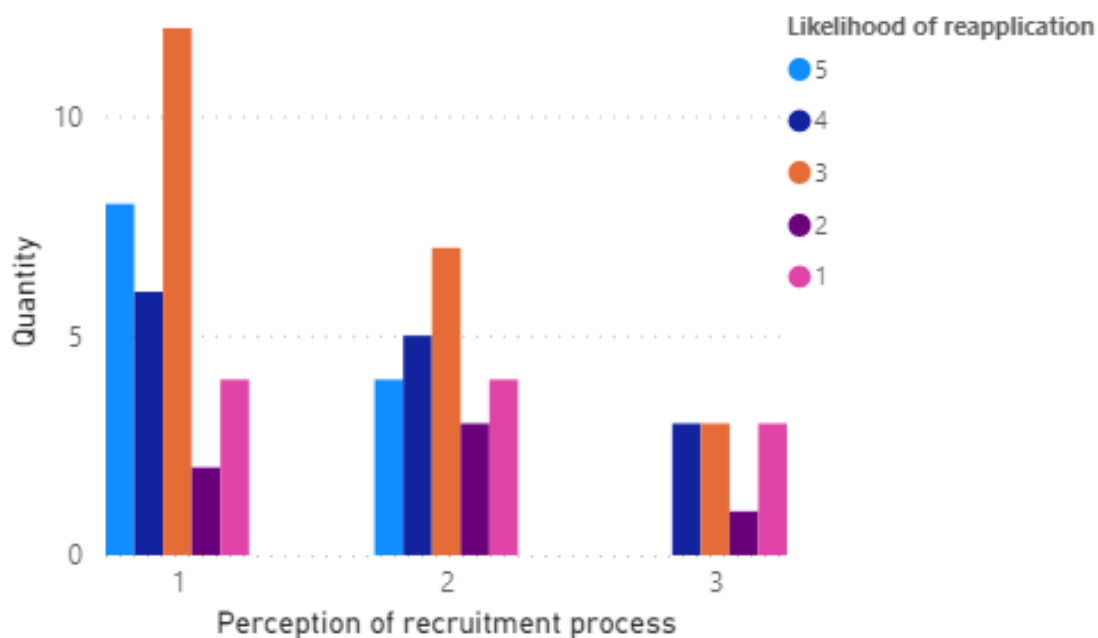


Figure 14. Probability of reapplication in case of a rejection

To summarize the empirical study of this thesis paper, it can be said that the overall perception of the candidate experience at Mercateo in the year 2021 is positive. The company is able to address different target groups regarding age and position through a variety of communication channels. The selection process itself is considered to be very good in various aspects, apart from individual cases for instance the response time of a few applications or online interviews. An important result for Mercateo is also the fact, that they can differentiate themselves on the labour market, in the eyes of the candidates, in a positive way. Furthermore, the internal and external employer brand strategy of the company appears to have a positive impact on the image of the company as an employer.

6 Conclusion

The following chapter aims to answer the main research question which is to find a connection between the candidate experience and employer brand of a company. In order to answer the main question, two sub-questions have been defined. The basis of this chapter are the conclusions from both theoretical frameworks as well as the analysis of the company and the results of the empirical study.

The first question asks, if a candidate experience analysis is necessary for a company. In the theoretical framework it is explained that the analysis of the recruitment process of a company can identify strengths and weaknesses and lead to an improvement of said process. Moreover, the candidate experience analysis would allow the company to benchmark their recruitment process in the labour market. The empirical research of the candidate experience made for Mercateo supports that. The survey indicates that the strength of Mercateo during the recruitment process is its transparency. This is indicated by the fact that each candidate had a personal contact person during the process. Moreover, approximately 97% of the respondents stated that they felt well informed during the candidate experience. Possible weaknesses identified during the study is the response time after the initial application of the candidate and the conduction of the online interview. Due to the candidate experience analysis, Mercateo has the possibility to compare its process with competitors in the labour market. The result of that inquiry shows that, in the perception of the respondents, the overall candidate experience is at least equal to other companies. For approximately 72% of the respondents, the process was better than at other companies. Overall, it can be said that in the case of Mercateo the candidate experience analysis helped in identifying strengths and weaknesses of the company. It also allowed to benchmark the company in the labour market. For those reasons, it can be concluded that an analysis of the candidate experience is necessary for a company.

The second sub-question aims to describe how a company can use their employer brand in the war of talents. The theoretical research on the employer brand suggests that the communication of value propositions can be a differentiating factor in the labour market. Provided, a company is able to transmit their characterisation as an employer to their internal and external target group. In the case of Mercateo, the company uses different channels in order to increase the external awareness of it as an employer. The empirical research shows that Mercateo is able to address different age groups with their various communication channels. At the same time, it displays the fact that 45% of the applicants did not know Mercateo before their search for a job. This is an aspect that the company can still improve on.

Another aspect is the internal employer branding. The company established a corporate culture that is supported by measures like company events or team building days. The empirical data suggest, that the company is able to transmit their corporate culture onto the new employees with these measures. The results show, that for 80% of the respondents the values of Mercateo are detectable and implemented in the everyday work. This result can also be supported by the fact that Mercateo gained the kununu top company 2022 seal (Kununu). This means that the company is seen as a great place to work by current and former employees. Overall, the empirical research shows that Mercateo is able to differentiate itself in the labour market and raise the awareness of them as an employer.

The main question of this thesis is to find a connection between the candidate experience and employer brand of a company. One possibility for finding a correlation is the analysis of the external employer branding measures of Mercateo combined with its candidate experience. The purpose of the employer brand measures is to distribute the value propositions of a company to the environment. In the case of Mercateo, the value propositions are for example a good work-life balance, family friendly environment or its, afore described, corporate values. Thereupon, candidates decide to apply to the company due to these value propositions. Now, the candidate experience of the applicant begins. Through the candidate experience, the applicants are first introduced to the working environment of Mercateo. Therefore, the candidate experience gives the applicant the opportunity to evaluate, if these promoted values can be perceived during the actual recruitment process. A possible example for Mercateo could be the values humanity and fairness that are transmitted through the external employer branding measures. The aspect of the interview is used as an application example. The result of the empirical study shows, that approximately 90% of the respondents had a very good and good perception of the interview. The consensus was that they had the possibility to present themselves sufficiently and the speaking part was divided equally. These results allow the conclusion, that Mercateo is able to transmit its value propositions during the candidate experience. Another result from the empirical data that supports this argument is that the values of Mercateo were identifiable by the candidates during the candidate experience. Consequently, the candidate experience can be seen as part of the employer branding strategy of Mercateo because the features of an employer brand are recognizable during the candidate experience.

Another possible connection between candidate experience and employer brand is the consideration of the internal employer brand strategy of Mercateo. It is explained during the theoretical framework, that the current employees of a candidate can act as ambassadors for the company. They can promote the company in its role as an employer and therefore improve its employer brand.

In order to do that, they need to identify themselves with the corporate culture of the company. This assumption is applied to Mercateo, and their internal employer brand strategy. The empirical study showed that 56 of 65 candidates named the corporate culture of Mercateo as a reason that convinced them to work for the company. During the candidate experience the applicants had the possibility to gain an insight into the working environment of the company. It can therefore act as an opportunity to see if there is a cultural fit between the corporate culture and the applicant. If a fitting candidate is found, they support the values of the internal employer brand and can transmit that to the environment. The empirical study shows that the promised cultural values are indeed perceived and implemented by 80% of the respondents. This result suggests, that the candidate experience can be used by the company to find employees that fit the corporate culture and that can identify themselves with it. This can lead to the conclusion that the employees support the values of the internal employer brand and can transmit that to the environment. Which could explain the high proportion of applications based on recommendations. The study points out that the second most common reason for applying to Mercateo is the recommendation from friends, acquaintances or colleagues.

In summary, it can be derived from the empirical study that the positive candidate experience at Mercateo helps support the external employer branding strategy of the company. The company is able to implement a recruitment process that is cohesive with their value propositions. At the same time, the candidate experience helps strengthen their internal employer brand by recruiting employees that support and promote them.

7 Summary

The thesis aims to find a possible connection between the candidate experience of a company and their employer brand image. And if there is one, how the candidate experience can influence the image of a company as an employer. The main delimitation of the research is its focus on the German labour market. The demand of German candidates is the basis for the theoretical framework. Also, the empirical study is based on a German company.

The theoretical chapters of the thesis describe the model of the candidate experience with its six phases. It explains the needs German candidates have during the recruitment process. Additionally, it demonstrates the possible advantages a company can gain when analysing their recruitment process.

Also, the concept of employer branding is explained and analysed. It is described how internal and external employer branding measures can raise the awareness of the company as an employer. Furthermore, the different communication channels of employer branding are described. It is important for a company to adapt their internal and external communication according to the receiving target group. The house of employer branding model is used as a tool to help describe the implementation of an employer brand.

The theoretical framework is then applied on the German e-procurement platform Mercateo. Through both concepts, an analysis of the recruitment process and employer branding strategy of the company are achieved. The main finding from the analysis is that Mercateo is able to implement a consistent recruitment process that addresses the main demands of the candidates described during the theoretical framework. Regarding the employer brand strategy, Mercateo uses both internal and external strategies. For their internal strategy, they focus on creating a working environment that is consistent with their proclaimed values. The purpose of this is to increase the productivity and loyalty of its current employees. A consequence of that would be that the employees are acting as ambassadors for the company in the external environment. For its external strategy, Mercateo uses the website as main communication channel. On that website the company promotes their value propositions and corporate values. Furthermore, Mercateo participates in job fairs or sponsoring events to raise the general awareness of the company. An aspect that is not yet considered by the company is the communication through social media. This is a communication tool that would address especially the younger candidate generation. It is therefore an aspect that needs to be inquired by Mercateo in the future.

The empirical part of the thesis is conducted through a questionnaire. The two theoretical frameworks and the analysis of Mercateo build the foundation for the questionnaire. It addresses employees that have been recruited by Mercateo during the year 2021. The aim of the empirical research is to evaluate the recruitment process and employer brand strategy of the company. Additionally, the result confirms or disconfirms a possible connection between candidate experience and employer brand.

The results of the questionnaire and the key concepts are interpreted in the last chapter of the thesis report. They are utilized to answer the research questions of the thesis. First, the empirical data states, that the perception of the candidate experience at Mercateo is positive. Additionally, the result of the empirical part show that there exists a connection between the candidate experience of Mercateo and its employer brand image. The results suggests that a positive candidate experience can help the internal and external employer brand of a company. For one the recruitment process can help the company identify candidates that fit to the cultural values of the company. This can result in the reinforcement of the internal employer brand. It could also be detected in an increase of applications through recommendations. On the other hand, the candidate experience can help the applicant compare the external employer brand with the actual working environment. If the candidate experience and the external employer brand are cohesive, this can strengthen the image of the company as an employer. This results in a positive perception of the company in, for example rating websites. Nevertheless, the results can only indicate that the candidate experience has an effect on the employer brand of Mercateo not to what extent.

The candidate experience and employer brand strategy of a company is a broad subject. It should be further addressed due the increasing competition for talents on the labour market. A suggestion for further research would be to determine how great the effect of a candidate experience on the employer brand can be. This can be achieved by the analysis of employer brand and recruitment process of a company over several years. Furthermore, the delimitations only allow conclusions to be drawn about the German market. For that reason, further research regarding different labour markets with a different demand is needed.

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Appendix 1. Questionnaire

04.12.21, 17:25

Questionnaire Recruitment Process

Questionnaire Recruitment Process

Hello and thank you for taking the time to participate in this questionnaire.

I am Sophie Loettel and currently I am writing my bachelor thesis in collaboration with Mercateo in order to analyze their recruitment process.

With this questionnaire you help us understand and rate the current recruitment process so we are able to find room for improvement.

Your answers are of course anonymous and can not be traced back to you. So please answer the following questions as honest as possible.

Thank you very much for your support!

** Erforderlich*

1. How old are you? *

Markieren Sie nur ein Oval.

- < 18 years
- 18 - 25 years
- 26 - 29 years
- 30 - 39 years
- 40 - 49 years
- > 50 years

2. Which is your current position in Mercateo? (e.g.: Trainee or Team leader) *

3. How did you learn about a vacant position at Mercateo? *

Markieren Sie nur ein Oval.

- Friends, acquaintances or colleagues
- Mercateo career website
- Job-Portal
- Sonstiges: _____

4. Did you know Mercateo before your application? *

Markieren Sie nur ein Oval.

yes

no

5. Did you feel sufficiently informed during the application process? *

Markieren Sie nur ein Oval.

1 2 3 4 5

very well informed uninformed

6. Did you have a personal contact person during your application? *

Markieren Sie nur ein Oval.

Yes

No

7. Did your interview take place online or offline? *

Markieren Sie nur ein Oval.

Online

Offline

8. Did you feel that you were able to present yourself sufficiently during the interview? *

Markieren Sie nur ein Oval.

1 2 3 4 5

I was able to show who I am I hardly got a chance to speak

9. Did you get clear feedback after the interview? *

Markieren Sie nur ein Oval.

1 2 3 4 5

The interview was very well evaluated I have received insufficient feedback

10. How was most of the communication during the application process? *

Wählen Sie alle zutreffenden Antworten aus.

- Telephone
- Email
- Letter
- Web-Meetings
- Others

11. How long was the average time between your next contact with Mercateo? *

Markieren Sie nur ein Oval.

- few days
- one week
- two weeks
- Sonstiges: _____

12. Were you satisfied with the response time between the individual steps? *

Markieren Sie nur ein Oval.

1 2 3 4 5

satisfied less satisfied

13. Was there any communication with Mercateo between signing the contract and onboarding? *

Markieren Sie nur ein Oval.

- yes
- no

14. If so, what kind of communication?

15. Do you find an onboarding app useful as a communication and information channel for the period between signing the contract and the first day of work? (for the transmission of information, training procedures, team introduction) *

Markieren Sie nur ein Oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	
useful	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	unnecessary

16. Are there other functions you think this app should have? *

17. Did your onboarding take place online or offline? *

Markieren Sie nur ein Oval.

- Online
 Offline

18. Were Mercateo's corporate culture and values conveyed to you during the onboarding day? *

Markieren Sie nur ein Oval.

- Yes
 No

19. How do you perceive the corporate culture and its values in everyday work? *

Markieren Sie nur ein Oval.

1 2 3 4 5

they are implemented and practised they are not detectable for me

20. Did colleagues and supervisors make you feel welcome during the first days? *

Markieren Sie nur ein Oval.

1 2 3 4 5

very welcome unwelcome

21. Did you have parallel applications with other companies at the time of your recruitment process? *

Markieren Sie nur ein Oval.

- no other
 one more
 at least two more

22. How did you experience the recruitment process at Mercateo compared to other companies? *

Markieren Sie nur ein Oval.

1 2 3 4 5

better worse

23. Can you name why?

24. What convinced you to work at Mercateo? *

Wählen Sie alle zutreffenden Antworten aus.

- corporate culture
- salary
- Benefits (e.g.: holidays, training possibilities)
- the brand "Mercateo"
- tasks and position itself

Sonstiges: _____

25. Would you have applied to Mercateo again if you had been rejected? *

Markieren Sie nur ein Oval.

1 2 3 4 5

no, I don't think so yes, at the next opportunity

26. Is there something you would improve about the recruitment process?

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