Framing Employer Branding

An explorative case study of legitimacy within the public sector context

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Abstract

Title: Framing Employer Branding - An explorative case study of legitimacy within the public sector context.

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Background: Increasingly, organizations from the public sector embrace employer branding as a strategy to better attract and retain qualified employees. Current research shows a lack of research regarding how public sector organizations' work with employer branding, where the mission of the organization is not to conquer the global market but rather to provide welfare and serve the common good for all citizens. Hence, public sector organizations cannot just compete by being attractive as an employer; they also have to present their assignment as something attractive for the applicants. The purpose of this study is to explore how one municipality within the public sector in Sweden frame employer branding to make the alignment between the strategy and the organizations' overall goals and mission legitimate.

Method: The study uses a qualitative research strategy with the approach of a single case study of one municipality within the public sector in Sweden. 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with HR specialists, and managers from different departments within the Municipality of Gothenburg.

Results: The findings show that employer branding is used as strategy to help the organization deal with issues of legitimacy. A dilemma occurs to exist as the organizations' aim to practice employer branding as an act of balance between internal unity and external sensitivity towards diversity. The dilemma creates uncertainty among employees' that show a tendency to use mimetic framing as a strategy since they experience the situation to be ambiguous. The results from this study show an importance for HR to take on a leadership role and function as support, and make sure to educate employees about this dilemma. Therefore public sector organizations need to consider the importance to be transparent and communicate about this dilemma, and make sure that employees' are aware of different opportunities that exist.

Key words: *Employer branding, legitimacy, common good for all, public sector, frame theory*

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1. Introduction

1.1 The need for qualified human capital

The war for talents is claimed to be a strategic business challenge that companies need to battle as their viability depends on it (Sivertzen, Nilsen& Olafsen, 2013). Without the capability to recruit and retain qualified human capital, companies are argued to face difficulties since most companies build their operations around competencies (Lindmark& Önnevik, 2011). Employer branding has frequently been used within private sector organizations as a strategy to attract and retain qualified human capital. Increasingly, organizations from the public sector are applying strategies to manage their brand more efficiently, and to better attract employees (Parmar, 2014; Dahlqvist& Melin, 2010). If public sector organizations cannot attract and retain employees with the right competencies there will be societal implications as they may not be able to provide the same quality on their services. Hence, it is not only the organizations' viability that depend on the public sector's capability to attract and retain human capital, the whole society will be affected as public sector organizations' manage services that are used throughout citizens' lives. Employer branding is a concept that is used as a strategy for how to attract and retain talent, and it is said to be focusing on "*strategic alignment of human capital with organizational goals"* (Backhaus& Tikoo, 2004:511). Minchington (2010) argues that employer branding needs to be integrated in the company's overall strategy-work in order to become successful. However, how is the strategic alignment of human capital done in public sector organizations in Sweden, where they have to consider other types of goals? How do public sector organizations work with employer branding in order to make the alignment between their employer branding strategy and their overall mission and goals legitimate? This will be the topic of this thesis that will focus on the public sector within the Swedish context.

Public sector organizations cannot just compete by being attractive as an employer; they also have to present their assignment as something attractive for the applicants. Public sector organizations are predominantly politically driven, and work under guidelines from determined political goals, which are common goals that should be assessable for every citizen. Political goals aim at supporting collective interest with the aim of achieving common good for all citizens within the given society (Johnson& Scholes, 2001). The context of public sector

organizations therefore differ somewhat from the private sector context as the mission is to achieve common good for all citizens, thereof the interest to explore some of the challenges and conditions that come into play regarding how public sector organizations' frame employer branding. How do public sector organizations' work with employer branding, where the goal of business is not to conquer the global labor market, but rather to fulfill their mission to serve high quality service for the common good of all citizens (Dahlqvist& Melin, 2010). The legitimacy of the organization depends very much upon how public sector organizations are framed within society. People use frames as tools to organize and describe events in their surroundings, and through the practice of framing people make sense of and process information (Boundarouk, Looise& Lemsink, 2009).

This report will explore the case of the Municipality of Gothenburg to see how they practice employer branding in order to endorse their legitimacy. The Municipality of Gothenburg has around 50 000 employees working within the organization that is built upon different types of business operations (Göteborgs stad:A, n.d). The organization has ten city district administrations that aim to manage and provide public services to the population within their own district. Additionally, there are around 20 different specialized departments and multiple state enterprises, which focus on more specialized goals, such as health services, education and social services (Göteborgs stad:B, n.d). The Municipality of Gothenburg needs to manage to attract employees with the right competences in order to keep the different businesses within the organization running.

1.2 Problem statement

There are several challenges to the public sector that are apposed to efficiently manage employer branding aligned with the public goals. For instance, Dahlqvist and Melin (2010) claim that large parts of the public sector organizations have image issues that they are battling with. In today's, technology driven (Chhabra& Sharma, 2014), demographic, attitudinal-shifting, competitive labor market (Moroko& Uncles, 2008; Edwards, 2005) it is crucial to maintain good reputation and build an attractive image to be able to attract qualified employees that can contribute, and enhance companies competitive advantage (Backhaus& Tikoo, 2004). Ambler and Barrow (1996) assert that reputation is an important mechanism in employer branding, as the brand bring about associations, ideas, images and feelings about how it is to be working at that particular

company. Research has shown that potential recruits tend to view companies with good reputation as more attractive employers than companies with less great reputation (Edwards, 2009). Reputation is an important key for attracting qualified employees that can assist in the work of achieving overall strategic goals of the organization. Hylen (2011) claims that talents that make career within municipalities need to act as ambassadors, and sources of inspiration, in order to make municipalities attractive employers in the eyes of potential applicants. 'Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting' (SKL) (2006) claims that many people holds the view of employment within the public sector to be dull and non-attractive, which makes reputation a huge challenge in public sector organizations' employer branding work. Municipalities work to provide high-quality services to serve the common good for all citizens (Government offices of Sweden, 2011) and SKL (2010) claims that it is crucial for Swedish municipalities to attract the right employees in order to continue deliver quality-service to all citizens. Without employees that acquire the right competencies, the public sector will fail to deliver good quality on their services, which will have negative impacts on society. Municipalities and county councils work to uphold good quality of the Swedish welfare system, and they aim to provide common good for all citizens (ibid). Education, from pre-school to high school level, eldercare, and hospitality are some of the services that public sector organizations provide (Dahlqvist& Melin, 2010). The societal implications will be devastating if public sector organizations' fail to attract and retain qualified human capital, and the whole idea of the common good for all citizens might come to an end.

Employer branding is arguably a strategic issue for HRM as the company's viability depends on their capability to manage human capital in successful manners (Backhaus& Tikoo, 2004). Christiaans (2013) asserts that employer branding can be put in the category of Strategic HR management, since employer branding focuses on the overall strategic goals of the organization. However, there is not much research done that takes the HR function into consideration in relation to employer branding, which leaves the context relatively unexplored (Parmar, 2014). Neither does current research of employer branding (EB) reflect on the evident differences between the private- and public sector (Dahlqvist& Melin, 2010). The application of employer branding similar to the private sector, may not be the best option for how to practice employer branding within the public sector. Literature of employer branding tends to be very descriptive and normative with little empirical research of different practices and what actually is done in

terms of employer branding (Edwards, 2009). There is a need for more empirical research of how public organizations practice employer branding to further explore what the concept entails in the Swedish local public administration context.

1.3 Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore how the public sector in Sweden practice employer branding and how they work in order to make the alignment between employer branding and the organization's overall goals and mission legitimate. Further, the study aims to explore how public sector organizations in a Swedish work to keep their legitimacy by investigating how employees' frame employer branding. This in order to gain further knowledge and contribute with research to amplify the relatively unexplored area of employer branding within public sector organizations. Following research questions have been developed:

RQ1: *How do a public sector organization in the Swedish context practice employer branding?*

RQ2: *How is employer branding aligned with the overall mission and goals of a public sector organization in Sweden?*

1.4 Background

These questions will be answered by looking at the specific case of a Swedish Municipality within the public sector, more specifically, the Municipality of Gothenburg. More than a million people work within the public sector/welfare system, and within a span of ten years, about one third of these employees will retire (SKL, 2015: Dyhre& Parment, 2013; Parment et al, 2009). This creates and urgency for organizations to recruit employees to different positions within the public sector. If nothing gets done regarding this matter, the welfare system is going to need over a half million new employees until year 2023 (SKL, 2015). It was in 2008 that the Municipality of Gothenburg acknowledged that they were about to face difficult times regarding their recruitment of qualified employees with the right competences. A project for employer branding was created, which they called "Attractive Employer" (translated from Göteborgs stad, 2011), in which they discussed challenges, and came up with strategies for how to deal with these. About the same time, the Swedish Municipalities and County Councils organization, which in Sweden is shortly referred to as SKL (Svenska Kommuner och Landsting), recognized that there were

existing recruitment issues, and stated that the problems related to recruitment had to become key priorities, which all organizations within the public sector in Sweden should start working more with. In 2014, SKL launched a project called 'Sweden's Most Important Jobs" (Sveriges Viktigaste Jobb, 2014) with the aim to spread knowledge about work within Swedish municipalities (ibid). An additional aim was to try to help change the picture of municipalities, this in order to increase positive associations, and ideally contribute to spread positive reputation about Swedish municipalities as attractive employers (ibid). The project of "Sweden's most important jobs" can be placed on a more national level, with the aim to spread attention to the recruitment-issues that all municipalities within Sweden share (SKL, 2010). This study's case of the Municipality of Gothenburg can be place within SKL's project and affirmed key priorities. This report will investigate, and explore how the Municipality of Gothenburg practice employer branding in order to enhance their employer attractiveness. The research area of this report goes along with the concept of New Public Management, which discusses the transfer of ideas from the private to public sector as well how the governance of public sector should look like (Røvik, 2008). There is much knowledge and research of employer branding within the private sector, but little about employer branding within the public sector. Employer branding is a concept with origins in the private sector, but it has started to spread across different business sectors. However, what type of trends can we expect when we talk about employer branding within the public sector?

1.5 Outline of the thesis

Chapter one gives an introduction to employer branding and some of the related challenges that public sector organizations might confront. The chapter aims to give background information to give significance to the purpose and objectives of the study. Chapter two reveals important aspects found through extensive literature reviews of previous research, and some of the theories that been used within the field are presented. Chapter three gives an introduction and explains institutional theory and concepts within the frame theory, which will serve as the theoretical foundation of this study. Chapter four provides a thorough description of the study's methodology. The results of the empirical findings are presented in themes that evolved, these can be found in chapter five. Furthermore, the sixth chapter includes discussion and analysis of the research findings. The conclusion in chapter seven summarizes the important aspects of the

study, and argues for the significance of the thesis. Additionally, suggestions for future research are presented in the end of the final remarks section.

2. Previous Research

This chapter gives an introduction to some of the main aspects found within employer branding literature with the aim to provide the reader with some further understanding of the field.

2.1 Employer perspective

Within management research it is argued that employer branding has turned into a prominent strategic tool that can be used to attract and retain talent (Chhabra& Sharma, 2012). Studies have shown that labor market shortages and global competition are some of the underlying factors to organizations' interest in employer branding. Another factor that might influence is the fact that employees nowadays seem more willing to change jobs more often (Rampl& Kenning, 2014). For instance, Dyhre and Parment (2013) argue that companies need to start to communicate about different career paths available within their organization, since research shows that an employer get more attractive in the eyes of prospective employees if career paths within the company are easily identifiable (ibid). Backhaus and Tikoo (2004:511) argue that employer branding is an exercise of promoting career paths and individual development within the organization, and assert that without *"career advancement, individuals lose their competitive edge, and so does the firm"*. Dahlqvist and Melin (2010) claim that a large amount of municipalities in Sweden have started to realize the importance of building strong brands as essential for their sustained competitive advantage. Many organizations have started working on different types of brand-projects. However, Dahlqvist and Melin (2010) assert that many of these projects unfortunately end up in piled documents, filled with wise words about how to become an attractive employers, but without any practical actions taking place.

Employer branding is assumed to be build upon the beliefs that human capital can bring value and provide loads of benefits to the firm, and that companies can enhance their performance by managing employees efficiently (Moroko& Uncles, 2008). For instance, research shows that employer branding can positively affect the organizational culture, as well as the productivity of

the organization (Parmar, 2014). Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) present research results that show how organizations noticed that effective employer branding lead to competitive advantage, and helped employees internalize the values of the company. Successful employer branding is said to be able to attract human capital that best fits the company, and that can contribute to the strategic aims, and the bottom line of organizations (Wallace, Lings, Cameron& Sheldon, n.d). There is research that has shown that employer branding can help reduce costs and lead the way towards increased financial results (Barrow& Mosley, 2005)

Employer branding has become an important tool in HR practitioner's toolkit, and Edwards (2005:269) claims that, *"The notion of employer branding pulls the HR function into the strategic engine room of the organization, encouraging HR professionals to become Ulrich's (1997) strategic partners"*. However, current research reveals issues and discussions regarding questions of whom stands, or should stand, responsible for employer branding within organizations. The discussions seem to be around HR and marketing, for instance, Wallace et al., (n.d) claim that there is a need for organizations to strategically align the HR functions with the marketing and communication functions in order to better attract and retain talent. Foster et al., (2010) argue that HR and marketing practices need to be more coordinated, and Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) assert that strategies within marketing and HR should be congregated. It is argued that both sides can learn from each other and benefit from collaborating, which possibly could lead to a more consistent and successful employer brand (Barrow& Mosley, 2005). Dahlqvist and Melin (2010) claim that a successful brand is defined from the outside of the organization to the inside of the organization, but built from the inside out. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) explain that practitioners within the HRM literature describe employer branding as a three-step process: first, the company needs to develop its Employee Value Proposition (EVP), which is the existing package of benefits that the company has and can offer to prospective and current employees (Moroko& Uncles, 2008). The second step is external marketing that aims to attract ideal applicants, and the third step is internal marketing of the employer brand with the goal to develop a workforce that is committed to the goals and values of the organization (Backhaus& Tikoo, 2004). A second approach within research holds the perspective that companies should take on an inside-out approach with the assumption that happy and satisfied employees will

function as proactive brand ambassadors, and contribute to a positive reputation of the company (Van Mossevelde, 2012).

2.2 Brand communication

Previous research holds the perspective of employer branding to be a concept that can function as a strategy to communicate about the company's values, and additionally help to make sure that employees fit with the organization's culture (Parmar, 2014). Employer branding is said to impact the culture of the organization as well as its identity, which is claimed to contribute to employer brand loyalty (Backhaus& Tikoo, 2004). Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) describe brand loyalty as the commitment that employees make to their employer. Employer branding is claimed to allow the company to attract employees that hold similar values as the organization and is argued that companies have started to realize the importance of recruiting employees that hold values that fit with the organization's values (Foster et al, 2010).

Although most researchers argue that employer branding aims to communicate to both prospective and existing employees, Foster et al., (2010) assert that most current research focuses on effective value-matching and communication at a person-organization level during the recruitment process. Dyhre and Parment (2013) claim that communication is important, and that organizations should work with internal communication in order to create a strategy for how to communicate inside the organization in order to create a coherent workforce in which all employees are aware of what is going on. The value of communication has been recognized as an important tool to create efficiency, and to reach the goals of the organization (Dahlqvist& Melin, 2010). They claim that one criterion for successfully building a strong brand is transparency with a coherent connection between the mission and what the company offers (ibid). A lack of transparency and consistency between what the company offers, and the mission, is argued to be common among municipalities branding efforts (ibid). It is important to be transparent both internally and externally, when it comes to what goes on in the employer branding process (Dahlqvist& Melin, 2010).

In order for public sector organizations to gain acceptance, and keep their legitimacy, they need to show citizens within society that they deliver high-quality service for the common good, and provide measurable results (ibid). Dahlqvist and Melin (2010) argue that the picture of public

sector organizations is affected by values that the organization communicates, which are assumed to be built upon values, experiences, reputation and the image media paints of the organization. The value of a brand is said to lie in the eyes of the observer (ibid), and Edwards (2005) claims that there have been an increase in job applicants that want to work for a company that stands for particular values, ideally similar to their own. Edwards and Kelan (2011) discuss employer branding in relation to diversity as the authors' believe diversity and employer branding can be each other's opposite. Diversity is described as the process of bringing out the differences between employees (ibid). They describe branding as something that aims towards creating an aligned workforce and coherent employment brand, and argue that the aim can lead to a homogenization of the workforce, creating issues of diversity (ibid).

2.3 Employee perspective

The perspective of the psychological contract, which builds on work from social exchange theory, has commonly been used within employer branding research. The messages that are communicated by companies to attract prospective employees can be interpreted as promises that the company makes to the employees (Christiians, 2013). Employer branding is said to involve strategies with the aim to develop a consistent positive image that will increase the employer attractiveness to help organizations' attract applicants, ideally from the desired target group (Ambler& Barrow; 1996). The concept of employer attractiveness is usually taken into consideration when describing employer branding, and is described as the mental image of benefits that prospective employees hold that they would gain when working for a particular employer (ibid). Christiaans (2013) claims that it is important the benefits that are communicated paint up an accurate picture in order to avoid developing unrealistic expectation among prospective employees. The psychological contract is about fairness perceptions, and is describes as a reciprocal exchange agreement between the employee and the employer (Edwards, 2009). Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) argue that employer branding is the start of the formation of a psychological contract. Christiaans (2013) claims that literature on the psychological contract perspective can be used to gain better understand of the crucial role of realistic employment images. Welinder, Araujo and Lynn (2011) describe employer branding as the process of creating an identity, and communicating that identity to ensure that it remains authentic.

An individual who identifies with the organization is argued to be likely to accept the goals and values of the organization, and is according to Edwards (2005) very likely to stay within the organization. When employees' care about the brand they are usually committed and work hard for the company they work for. Barrow and Mosley (2005) argue that it is the extra effort that makes the difference in today's competitive market. A theoretical perspective that has commonly been used within employer branding research is the person-organization fit perspective, which has been used to help explain the importance of congruence of values between employees and employers (Christiaans, 2013). It is argued that research of person-organization fit indicate that prospective employees compare the image of the employer brand to their own needs, personalities and values. An individual that has matching values with the organizational values is more likely to be attracted to that particular organization (Backhaus& Tikoo, 2004). An additional theory that commonly has been used within employer branding research is the social identity theory (ibid). According to the social-identity theory, employees develop their social identity and self-esteem from their organizational membership (Christiaans, 2013), and in addition, the reputation of the social group can contribute to peoples' self-concept (Backhaus& Tikoo, 2004).

3. Theoretical framework

Evoking back to the purpose, this study explores how public sector organizations in Sweden practice employer branding with the aim to see how they work in order to make the alignment between employer branding and the organization's overall goal and mission legitimate. This study will be conducted by investigating how employees in the case of the Municipality of Gothenburg frame employer branding. Employees use various frames as a way to organize experiences and to make sense of occurring events in their environment. The purpose of this study will be addressed theoretically by using concepts within institutional theory that discuss the concept of legitimacy. Additionally, frame theory is used in order to be able to investigate how employees actively make sense of employer branding, and legitimize their actions.

3.1 Institutional theory and Legitimacy

The institutional theory builds on the assumption that organizations are embedded in a wider institutional environment in which the organizational practices are the result of rules and

structures that exist within the larger institutional environment (Paauwe& Boselie, 2003; Najeeb, 2014). Institutional theory asserts that legitimacy has a fundamental role in social interactions as it is defined as generalized perceptions of social acceptance (Vergne, 2011). Organizations are viewed as legitimate if their values and behaviors appear to be congruent with societal accepted norms (ibid). Organizations with high levels of legitimacy are argued to be able to survive longer, and can gain resources more easily (ibid). Supporters of the institutional theory argue that organizations need to adapt to external pressure since they need a societal mandate to keep their legitimacy. Simultaneously, they need to operate in manners that are conforming to societal expectations, and Boxenbaum and Jonsson (2010) assert that organizations often conform to rationalized myths that exist in society about what makes up a proper organization. Czarniawska and Guje (1996) argue that many organizations introduce the same type of changes around the same time that leads to organizations adopting similar practices, which is a phenomenon referred to as institutional isomorphism. Institutional theory holds the assumption that isomorphism leads to organizational legitimacy, which DiMaggio and Powell (1983) describe as an organization being acceptance by actor and other organizations in their external environment. Organizations' that conform to normative practices can be argued to do so because they want to show that they act in acceptable manners, by which external actors should view them as legitimate (Deephouse, 1996).

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) discuss three types of institutional mechanisms that influence how actors' legitimize the way they organize, for instance employer branding. ***Coercive mechanisms*** come from political influence and the issue of legitimacy. ***Mimetic mechanisms*** are standard responses to uncertainty. Mimetic mechanisms are imitations of strategies and practices that organizations implement since their competitors' use/have them (ibid). And the third mechanism is ***normative*** with mechanisms that are associated with professionalization, and explain that organizations' adopt certain practices because professionals within the organization claim they are superior. These mechanisms are different ways/attempts to reach legitimacy (DiMaggio& Powell, 1983). These three mechanisms are argued to have an impact on strategic HRM since they can cause HRM homogeneity across organizations (DiMaggio& Powell, 1983). In other words, looking at legitimacy can be done with the use of different types of framings that are described within frame theory, where organizations' motivate employees by framing the

organization in different ways (ibid). Framing is a way to justify and motivate actions, and can be seen as a part in the discussion of legitimacy as a type of legitimizing practice. Frame theory and institutional theory deal with legitimacy in a similar but somewhat different ways; the later is more theoretical whereas frame theory is more about the practice and can be used to get deeper into the active sense-making process that employees are involved in when legitimizing their actions and decisions.

3.2 Frame theory

Frame theory presents a framework that can be used as a tool to organize peoples' experiences. For instance, Boundarouk et al., (2009) claim that frames help people to describe, explain, and predict events in their environment. Dexter, Perry and Berube (2007:np) describe frames as *"a skeletal structure designed to give shape or support"*. Frames are not static characterizations, rather they change over time (Hallahan, 1999), and Boundarouk et al., (2009) claim that frames are context specific, flexible and have an interprevistic tone. Hallahan (2013) claims that frames can define problems, and also help define possible solutions when frames come into practice, a phenomenon referred to as framing. Framing is a type of practice, and is said to be a critical factor in constructing social reality as it helps people shape their perceptions, and provides them with context to be able to process information (Hallahan, 2007). The concept of framing (frames in practice) has received attention from various disciplines, and is used in many different ways (Hallahan, 2013). Framing builds on the notion that message producers are involved in the construction of social reality, and the meanings of a message are negotiated. A majority of psychologists argue that people use processes of association, and expectation, to make assumptions and assign meaning to a message, which may might not be evident in the message itself (ibid). Employer branding is about the associations that people relate with your company brand (Ambler& Barrow, 1996), and companies try to influence these associations by using different strategies.

3.2.1 Different types of framing

Mosley (2014) discusses ***brand framing*** as being messages about the company as the employer of choice, and argues for the importance of keeping the content of the frame authentic and constantly updated in order to keep, and get, peoples' attention. Organizations are argued to have a tendency to use framing as a tool to analyze situations, and to justify actions that they take (Hallahan, 2013). ***Organizational framing*** has been used to study contemporary problems as it is

said that the *"business contexts in which individuals work provide important cues that frame understanding of problems and lead to distinct behaviors"* (Hallahan, 1999:211). Managers are said to be able to use ***strategic framing*** within the context of organizational communication as a strategy to enforce their version, regarding something, onto other members of the organization (Hallahan, 2007). In relation, Boundarouk et al., (2009: 473) argue that management literature shows that *"it is the actor's perceptions of organizational processes, filtered through existing mental frames, which form the basis for the formulation and interpretation of organizational issues"*. Frames can be viewed as a tool to facilitate decision-making and problem solving (ibid). Further framing that can be referred back to strategic and organizational framing is the goal framing theory, as they all hold an organizational level of analysis, which is the level of analysis in this report as it aims to study the framing (practice) of employer branding within the public sector in Sweden.

3.3 Goal Framing Theory

The goal framing theory embraces the concept of frames from the frame theory, and proposes that goals' frame the way people process information, and act upon it in specific situations (Lindenberg& Foss, 2011). The theory distinguishes between three overarching goals: the ***hedonic*** goal, which focus on immediate individual pleasure and is about achieving stimulation when performing a task. The ***gain*** goal that is about the desire to improve or preserve one's resources. The ***normative*** goal is about the desire to increase welfare for others (Lindenberg& Foss, 2011). The goal framing approach is built on the assumption that each one of the three types of goals' determines a certain structure of preference for the whole goal option (ibid). Multiple goals are argued to be active simultaneously, but the goal that is the strongest, most focal, is the goal that makes the frame, whereas the other goals' contribute to the frame but remain in the background. *"In the foreground, the goal-frame structures the definition of the situation and works as a filter […] to sort options"* (Etienne, 2011:312). Actors are attentive and give priority to the front of the frame, whereas the background is not given the same amount of attentiveness. By understanding that people have these three different types of goals, an organization can work to manage so that the normative goal is in the forefront in employees' minds to get them focused on the goals of the organization (Lindenberg& Foss, 2011). Etienne (2011) claims that the goal framing approach is viewed as an interpretative tool while working with the sense making of empirical data.

The focus of this study will be on how a public sector organization practice employer branding, and in addition explore how they frame the alignment of employer branding with their overall goals as something legitimate. This study also aims to reveal how employees within a public sector organization describe meaning and make sense of employer branding.

4. Methodology:

4. 1 Research strategy

This study takes on an explorative approach as it seeks to explore employer branding in the public sector, which is a relatively unexplored area with little previous research. A qualitative approach is suitable in order to get a holistic overview of peoples' feelings, interpretations and behaviors towards different situations (Hakim, 2000), which can help gain rich, descriptive, data of how employees' frame employer branding and interpret the meaning behind the strategy, Compared to quantitative research, qualitative research focuses on quality rather than quantity, depth rather than breadth, and is concerned with words rather than numbers (ibid).

4.2 Research approach

The researcher of this report holds the perspective of employer branding as a concept that has been socially created, and to which actors assign meanings in different ways. Employer branding is not viewed as something that exists independent of social actors. Human actions are argued to arise from how peoples make sense of different situations (Easterby-Smith et al, 2012). Therefore it can be claimed that this thesis takes on an ontological position of constructionism (Bryman& Bell, 2007). Abductive reasoning is applied when analyzing the empirical data, which is a type of logical inference that allows the researcher to go back and forward in the data along the process of analyzing, which can give new insightful ideas. *"Abductive reasoning about the data starts with the data and subsequently movies towards hypothesis formation"* (Charmaz, 2009:103). Abductive reasoning may not always be correct, but it explore different types of hypothesis, which is why the method is argued to be able to come up with new and insightful ideas that come from a process of hypothesis-driven exploration (Kolko, 2010).

A single, explorative, case study is used as research approach. A case study can be used as a methodology to explore (Collis & Hussey, 2009), and seek to produce detailed and holistic knowledge about a certain phenomena (Eriksson& Kovalainen, 2008). Case studies take one or more selected examples from a social entity (Hakim, 2000), and entails a detailed exploration research approach of a specific case (Bryman& Bell, 2007). Employer branding will be explored within the public sector in Sweden by focusing on the specific case of the Municipality of Gothenburg to see how they practice and align employer branding with their overall goals and mission. Hakim (2000) claims that a case study can provide a descriptive detailed portrait of a social phenomenon. This approach is well suited for this report as it can help to provide detailed description of how one Municipality within the Swedish public sector work with employer branding in order to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of employer branding within the public sector context.

4.3 Case context

The Municipality of Gothenburg is built around ten different country district administration departments, together with more specialized departments and multiple state enterprises. In 2008, the Municipality of Gothenburg started a project, which they called "Attractive Employer", with the aim to develop strategies for employer branding (translated from Göteborgs stad, 2011). Different studies were performed with focus groups that were asked questions about their organization. The results from these studies were discussed, and three sentences were developed that describe their organization and what employees can expect to gain: 1) *I work for citizens of Gothenburg to have good lives*. 2) *I am involved in the development of Gothenburg city*. 3) *I can choose between many different interesting jobs and career paths* (translated from Göteborgs stad, 2011). The project included discussions about upcoming challenges, and three major challenges were identified; "we have satisfied employees, but not proud ambassadors". "The external image held of the organization as an employer". "A big group of employees will retire and leave a gap with vacancies that need to be filled with employees with the right competences" (ibid). The Municipality of Gothenburg came up with strategies for how to deal with these challenges, and their main employer branding strategy came to be about employees' knowing their mission, who they work for, and that they are expected to provide high quality services to all citizens of Gothenburg (translated from Göteborgs stad, 2011). The organization defined their main strategy into one sentence: we are here for the citizens of Gothenburg (ibid). The project

was finished up in 2011, and the outcome was different sub-strategies and a main strategy for employer branding that the organization developed in order to respond to the upcoming challenges in the near future.

4.4 Research design

Research designs *"are about organizing research activity"* (Easterby-Smith et al, 2012). This report uses interviews as the design to organize employees' experiences, and understandings, of employer branding within the Swedish public sector context. Secondary data from databases, per reviewed articles, online journals, internal documents and books is collected in order to gain information about the research field (Collis& Hussey, 2009). Literature reviews is performed to gain in-depth understanding of the research topic in order to have an extensive understanding of what already have been studied within the field of employer branding. Primary data is generated from semi-structured interviews, which is a method concerned with exploring data of people understandings, opinions, and what they do, think or feel regarding different aspects (ibid). Semi-structured interviews enable the possibility to gain thick descriptions of employer branding. Surveys would not have given the same type of depth and understanding that this thesis aims to explore and gain. With the purpose of the study in mind, an interview guide was developed with some background question and then more specific about employer branding (see interview guide in the appendix).

4.5 Data collection

4.5.1 Sampling

This study focuses on employees working in different HR departments within the Municipality as the HR department is claim to be responsible for the implementation of employer branding within the Municipality of Gothenburg (Göteborgs stad, 2011). Purposive sampling and snowball sampling were used as the approach in the selection of whom to interview. Emails were sent out to HR managers, and the ones that declined were asked to send the interview request to some of their co-workers at their specific department. The Municipality of Gothenburg has ten different city district administrations, and the aim was to interview at least one individual from each city district to get a holistic view. However, the study ended up with including eight out of the ten city districts. Additionally, four people from four different specialized departments were interviewed. At three occurrences within the sample there were two from the same city district

that were interviewed, but they held different roles within the HR department. Three respondents were men and the rest women, and the average age span among the respondents varied between early 30s to mid 50s.

4.5.2 Interviews

Fifteen employees were interviewed, 11 face-to-face and four by telephone. Four interviews were conducted over the phone because the researcher and the respondents were geographically dispersed at the time that suited the respondents to be interviewed. The quality of the interviews performed over the phone held the same depth as the interviews that werer performed face to face. However, when comparing the content and depth in the answers, the researcher explored that the respondents that were interviewed over the phone tended to talk longer, and give longer answers to certain questions. The interviews were recorded after given consent from the participants. Additional notes were taken during the interviews, and after the interviews, thoughts and ideas that came up about the conducted interviews were written down in a journal right after each interview. The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Swedish, and took between 40-75 minutes, and they were transcribed after each interview had been conducted.

4.6 Data Analysis

The empirical data is analyzed through thematic analysis, which is an approach that can help reveal underlying patterns existing in respondents' descriptions and answers during the interviews (Guest, MacQueen& Namey, 2012). Thematic analysis focuses on identifying and describing implicit as well as explicit ideas from within the empirical data (ibid).

The analysis was started by dividing the transcripts from the interviews into a document with two tables, in the first column all the questions were added, and in the parallel column was left empty. The interviews were read over several times, and key words (codes) from the transcripts were written down in the left column. These codes were written in Swedish and later on in the coding process translated into English. After the interviews had been read a couple of times, the left column was filled with key words and sentences that were sorted into categories with words and sentences that related to each other. These categories were named into different themes that were identified by code co-occurrence of the wordings in the left column. In this study themes are described as the underlying meaning in the answers from the respondents. In order to avoid deception the issue of creditability will be considered (Bryman& Bell, 2007). Creditability is

about ensuring that the researcher's understanding, and conclusion, regarding the research is correctly understood by getting confirmation of the members of the studied case. Deception is when the researcher represents the findings as something other than what it actually is (ibid). In order to keep the creditability of the data, the data is first coded into themes independently, which are presented in the result section. Secondly, the theoretical concepts are taken into consideration, which findings can be found in the discussion and analysis section. The theoretical concepts are left outside the first part of the analysis and coding process as the researcher holds the view that it is important to read the empirical data and see what it means in itself. Later on in the analysis, connections between the themes and the concepts from the chosen theories (institutional and frame theory) are discussed.

4.6.1 Trustworthiness

There are many different arguments regarding the applicability of reliability and validity in qualitative research since the aims of qualitative research differ from the ones in quantitative data. Bryman and Bell (2007) discuss the approach of trustworthiness, which is an approach that can be applied for evaluating the value of qualitative data. This approach contains four parts that need to be taken into consideration during the evaluation; transferability, creditability, dependability, conformability (ibid). These four parts should be considered in order to create authentic, and trustworthy, data.

Instead of focusing on fulfilling the criteria of **transferability**, which is about the repeatability of the study (ibid), this qualitative study focuses on producing thick description of a social reality context. To keep the data authentic an interview guide is provided in the appendix in order to be transparent of the questions asked during the interviews. **Creditability** is about the consistency of the observation and the results, and in order to increase the creditability the interviews were recorded and transcribed in the exact words being said during the recording, the final paper is sent out to all participants in the study. **Dependability** evaluates how well the study achieves creditability and transferability (ibid). In other words, are the findings consistent and could they be repeated? **Conformability** regards the objectivity of the study to see to what extent the findings of the study are shaped from the respondents' answers or if the researcher has been biased and steered the findings in the way of his/her own interest (Bryman& Bell, 2007). In order

to avoid biases, limitations of the study have been considered, and description of how the analysis of data was performed is described in detail.

4.7 Ethical considerations

Research ethics is crucial and ethical considerations such as informed consent, transparency to avoid deception, confidentiality, anonymity and protection of information are some of the research principals that will be applied in this report. After the sample of employees was identified, an email was sent out asking for participants willing to be part of this study (see appendix for letter of consent). The informative email included purpose of the study and considered ethical issues regarding the study. The participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, and that they could choose to avoid answering any of the questions, or stop the interview at any time if they wanted to. The email explains that the employees willing to participate in this study will be kept anonymous. Confidentiality issues were also included in the informative email, explaining that the participants' answers will be used for academic reasons only and that the data could not be traced back to the individual.

4.8 Limitations of the research method

There are limitations that come with the choice to limit the study to one case, since multiple case studies are more robust and make it possible to compare and contrast the findings from the different cases (Eriksson& Kovalainen, 2008; Collis& Hussey, 2009). The aim of this research is not to compare, rather to investigate employer branding in a context with little previous exploration and contribute with descriptive empirical data. The findings from this report with the focus on one single case will make contributions of thick, descriptive data of employer branding within the public sector context. An additional limitation is the fact that the sample is rather small compared to the total amount of employees working with the organization. Additionally, the sampling method was not random but purposive sampling, which could have influenced the result of the study. Four interviews were conducted over the phone and Bryman and Bell (2007) discuss several advantages of telephone over personal interviews; they are cheaper, easier to supervise, and potential sources of bias is removed as the interviewer's personal characteristics cannot be seen as s/he is not physically present. However, there are also limitations that come with this type of interview as observation is out of the picture, which sometime can provide the researcher with rich data of how the respondent reacts, and feels, regarding certain questions.

When comparing the content and depth in the answers in the two different types of interviews, there was no significant difference. The transcripts from the interviews were translated from Swedish to English, and the translation can cause some levels of bias in the interpretation of some words/sentences since the meaning of some words might get lost in the translation process, which is a limitation of the study. However, the researcher went over the interviews several times to see if the words or sentences could be interpreted in another way.

5. Results

Findings from the empirical data show that consistency and sensitivity towards diversity are two important concepts for describing how the Municipality of Gothenburg practice employer branding. Two themes that evolved from analyzing the empirical data were; '***Organizing coherent employer branding',*** which explains practices that aim for unification and consistency. And, ***'Organizing employer branding sensitive towards diversity',*** that deals with expectations of employer branding as a practice that is sensitive towards diversity. Employer branding seem to be about an act of balance between consistency and sensitivity towards diversity that employees describe as a daily dilemma, which they have to deal with.

5.1 Organizing coherent employer branding

This theme concerns consistency and has three subthemes that aim for unification/coherence; *employer branding activities, match-making* and *the water drop effect*. The Municipality of Gothenburg is working hard to unify the image of the organization to bee seen as one unified entity. Employer branding is said to about associations that external actors have of the organization, and the Municipality of Gothenburg perceives it to be difficult to uphold the image of the organization as a legitimate actor when they lack consistency and coherence among its practices. Coherence is about having shared values and practices/processes that stick together, whereas consistency concerns the benefits to gain from behaving in the same way over time.

5.1.1 Employer branding activities

Several of the respondents explain that they have difficulties to see the entire organization as one entity due to the wide range of operations, and the different opportunities that some respondents describe to exist between departments. The respondents explain that the Municipality of

Gothenburg has made attempts to organize practices and processes within the organization so that they are performed similarly with consistency throughout the different departments. The main activity that is common for all departments (city districts, specialized departments and community enterprises) is advertisement, where the organization has a common framework for how to publish job offerings in newspapers, and other suited target-magazines. Respondents' explain that it was decided from the top down in the organization that everyone should have a common framework for their ads regarding job opportunities, as it was viewed to create separation when every department could choose how their ads should look like. Some departments have started to publish job openings on LinkedIn (a social media page), but the respondents' claim that the place of publication depends very much on the type of job offering, and where managers wish to publish it. Advertisement is an example of an employer branding activity where the organization's attempts to unify the image of the organization as one unified, legitimate employer. For instance as one respondent states;

"Because if you can see Municipality of Gothenburg as one big employer, the brand will become more permanent. Together we are stronger and there are economical benefits to gain, and it also has benefits for those that work here if it can become more transparent that we are one and do things in the same way" – HR specialist

Trainee program and internships were also mentioned as examples of employer branding activities that were conducted. Some departments within the organization are engaged in a trainee program where students get to experience working both in the public sector as well as the private sector for some set time period. The respondents' saw this as an important opportunity where they could provide the trainee with a good experience in order to strengthen their brand, as the trainee would be able to compare the organization to his/her experience in the private sector. Internship is another activity that can be viewed as an opportunity, where employees can provide students with an experience that makes them perceive the organization as legitimate. Respondents' from a few departments within the Municipality of Gothenburg state that they have started to provide opportunities for uneducated employees to get certifications and education which led to that employees can get a job title and a full time employment, instead of remaining employed as part time employees. As one respondent explains in the following quotation;

"They get their knowledge validated, which means that they can go less time in school, it looks a little different but if you have worked long and is considered to be proficient in certain areas you may not need to read those when you can have formal knowledge of these. These type of education form comes more and more in occupations where there is a lack of employees, you have to find other ways, not only those traditional school forms" – HR manager

One example of how the Municipality of Gothenburg market themselves to students is by being present at different work fairs held at different universities in Sweden, where they get to present themselves, and talk to students about the opportunities that exists within their organization. Respondents' perceive work fairs as a unique opportunity to communicate about aspects that makes them an attractive employer to prospective employees. However, few of the respondents' state that their departments are not present at work fairs because their produced material for how to present themselves is not ready to be communicated yet.

"We have many things that is common within the Municipality that we are using as we have said that we should work in these ways and developed similar practices to have a consistent approach and thereto related working materials" - HR manager

As the citation above shows, the Municipality of Gothenburg has developed common procedures for how to work within the organization should be conducted, and the HR function is organized around different processes that are similar for all departments. These procedures are suppose to function as support since it is decided that every department has a responsibility to adapt these practices to a level that best suits their specific department. The documents with common work practices and procedures/guidelines are described as vague, and many respondents' state that they want them to become more practical since they find it hard to know what to do in practice. These documents had been developed with the aim to make sure that everything is standardized and done correctly, and to make sure that all departments work in alignment with the overall mission and goals of the organization. However, the majority of respondents' perceives that these procedures are very abstract. For example as one respondent states;

"We are good at producing documents and material to use but these things needs to be taken into practice and not stay in the written documentations" - HR specialist

5.1.2 Match-Making

During the interviews, respondents' discuss the importance of changing their way of thinking, and argue that many put too high requirements in their advertisement text. Some respondents' suggest that the recruitment process should work as some type of match-making where the applicant describe his/her attributes and experiences, and what s/he likes to work with and why, and then the recruiter could offer some different types of jobs that fit with their description. This is something that respondents' argue could be beneficial for current employees as well, that could be matched to a different job/department within the Municipality when employees' feel that they have fulfilled their current job position and are in a need of change. This match-making was discussed as a suggestion to provide alternative careers within the organization instead of having employees quit and leave the organization. Following quotation indicate that values are important aspects to consider when trying retaining employees as well in the attempts to attract;

"It is about values. And the majority of employees outside our organization are value-driven. And as a public organization we have moral values I would say" - HR manager

Many of the respondents said that they believe it is more important to focus on the social attributes of the applicants rather than their experiences and educational background. Most employees held the perspective that it is important that applicants are motivated and have social values that fit with the values of the organization. This was argued to be an important aspect to consider, as the applicants potentially were about to join an organization that is humanistic driven with a mission to achieve the common good for all citizens. The mission of the organization is something that the majority of respondents' claim that they carry with them, something they have in the back of their heads and reflects back to every now and then. Respondents view the work within the municipality as tough and difficult, especially the transparency of the expectations that are placed on the individual employee. Some respondents argue that applicants should be informed about the expectations before they decide to accept a job offer. This in order to listen to if the applicant is ready to take on that type of responsibility, so that there is some type of match during the contact of the recruitment process. If the applicant

is not informed about the expectations during the recruitment, the applicant could possibly quit when his/her expectations of the job were not fulfilled, which few employees stated would be a wasted recruitment. Some respondents explain that if applicants get a negative experience when they are involved in a recruitment process, the individual can spread negative words about their experience, which can cause issues for the organization.

5.1.3 The water drop effect

From respondents' descriptions, the individual employee seems to get a lot of responsibility, as s/he needs to make sure that his/her performance is strengthening external actors' associations of the organization as the employer of choice. It is said that every employee is expected to contribute and help spread positive aspects and associations to help strengthen the positive image of the organization. The responsibility on each individual employee to make contributions can be seen to be about unity as the municipality strives to make sure that employees' are operating towards the same goals and work to create a positive reputation to make the organization viewed as legitimate by external actors. The following citation indicates that the respondent believes it is important to consider the employer branding work to be part of their every day work;

"Its practical, you have to perform it. I mean that the attractiveness comes in the offering as a whole, in the things that you do every day" - HR manager

Respondents claim that satisfied employees will talk good about their work at among family and at dinners with friends, which they believe can help spread positive associations of the organization to external actors. Respondents' working within HR argue that it is important to work hard to create a good working environment, based on their assumption that a good working environment creates satisfied employees, which one of the respondents' statement indicates;

"I use to say that if we concentrate, and can praise, our thousands employees at our department, and makes sure to take care and develop our current employees, that we are clear about expectations and transparent what they can expect from us, that we work to make them feel pride, then we have done a big contribution" - HR manager

5.2 Organizing employer branding sensitive to diversity

Another prevalent theme that evolved when examining the empirical data was about employees dealing with vagueness and ambiguity. This theme has three subthemes; *humanistic perspective*, *frustration over the abstract and visional* and *ambiguity.* The humanistic perspective of the company, and the organization's mission to be accountable for the common good for all, are some things that the respondents' experience as vague, which makes them unsure of how to perform in different situations. The respondents agree that they have meaningful professions but that the overall mission is vague, which makes it difficult for them to understand what they should do in order to remain legitimate. The respondents' describe their responsibility, and their work of trying to balance diversity with consistency as a prominent challenge, which they have to battle as it is part of their everyday work life.

5.2.1 Humanistic perspective

"The feeling of helping others, and that someone else appreciate what you do for them is amazing... It is good to feel that you are there for someone and that the things you do make a difference" - HR specialist

The respondents mention the humanistic perspective of the organization to be the key that makes their business unique and attractive. At the same time, some respondents describe it as a challenge that they need to get better at communicating and informing applicants about so that they are prepared that they might face situations where they hold feelings of performing insufficient work. Some employees in this study explain that it is challenging to never feel that they get to accomplish and finish something, which some respondents perceive cause feelings of frustration. One respondent states;

"When you work with products, you might put together two pieces and then the work is done. When you work with humans you can never really finish the work" - HR specialist

The extent to which the different departments' practice employer branding varies, and some respondents state that they look at what other departments do to get inspired and ideas for what

to do. Respondents' deal with the uncertainty by imitating what others does since they have to have something to relate to when taking decisions. The empirical findings suggest that employees' seem to make sense of employer branding by making comparisons and justifications, and also by imitating employer branding activities conducted by other departments, or the private sector.

"It is harder and more comprising to work with employer branding in the world of public sector organizations. When you talk about employer branding you associate it very much with the work around a brand. Here the brand is Gothenburg city and a lot of different departments, then it is little harder to identify compared to when you have one brand that is famous for a product or service" - Communications manager.

The quotation above shows that employer branding can be perceived as a difficult practice. However, employer branding is regarded an obligation, which needs to be embraced in order to remain competitive on the labor market. Employer branding is often described by the respondents in comparison to the private sector combined with vindications of what makes them unique. Some of the respondents claim that they perceive that they are behind the private sector regarding how they practice employer branding. Some employees even make the claim that the private sector is better at employer branding. However, after making such claims, respondents defend themselves by arguing that they have more meaningful work, and that the public sector wins over other businesses in the long run, as some of the respondents claim that many ends up working in the public sector.

5.2.2 Frustration over the abstract and visional

Even tough most respondents agree upon the fact that it is the human perspective that makes their business different to others, many employees find it difficult to know what to communicate to appeal external actors. The majority of respondents stress the importance of living up to the communicated messages in order to remain legitimate. As the following citation indicates;

"You cannot just live on the fact and state 'hey come to us, because you can do good here', you actually have to show what you do, so it's practical, it has to be performed" - Communications manager

Respondents' explain that it is important to be able to live up to what is being communicated, but this is described to be a challenge since employees work with abstract guidelines, which that makes it hard for them to know how to plan their practices and upcoming activities to make sure that they are aligned with the mission and overall goals of the organization. Much responsibility is being put on the individual employee that needs to take decisions, which are simultaneously consistent with the organization's guidelines, and sensitive towards societal diversity. The challenge seems to be to keep the practice of employer branding consistent with continuous activities, and some of the given explanations for this were lack of time, having few opportunities and other tasks that were more important to focus on. Some respondents even argued that the available opportunities in the departments differed, which makes it hard for everyone to have the same opportunities to work with employer branding.

5.2.3 Ambiguity

"It is more about the goals and not any plans, no summaries and activities that can be implemented. It is more objective than practical. It is up to every department to implement activities, and it would have been fun to get inspiration from others since it is difficult to push this issue yourself" - HR specialist

This quotation shows that even though the respondents are aware of that they are suppose to adapt the common guidelines to a level that suits their department, some respondents perceive the balance between following the common guidelines, and the adaption to make it fit their specific department, to be a challenge that employees' battle with. Regarding the decision about having a unified framework that everyone should follow when developing ads, is a decision viewed as positive by some of the respondents, whereas few respondents argue that the similarity made the organization loose the value of diversity that exists among the different jobs and within departments. One respondent states;

"I would almost say that there are ten culture, and we are very much characterized by the areas where we operate, and I do not believe that the ambition to create a common culture would, it is

neither possible or would be good I think, since it looks so different therefore you have to adapt a little to the difference" - Communications manager.

The vision of the organization is political and respondents' describe it to be too visional as they claim that they had a hard time to get a grip of. The surrounding environments in where the departments are located look very different from each other, and therefore the respondents believe that it is important that the work practices at each department are adapted so that it suits the citizens living within that specific area of Gothenburg. The challenge to be both unified and diversified is important and can be regarded to be about legitimacy. Every citizen has to be treated equally and get the same amount of opportunities, and since the mission of the Municipality of Gothenburg is to serve common good for all citizens, the respondents' claim that it becomes extremely important for them to be sensitive towards diversity in order to avoid to be regarded as unfair. The following quotation indicates that sensitivity towards diversity is an important aspect that is combined with the idea that everyone should be treated equally;

"We are trying to implement a more systematic ways to work when it comes to the recruitment process in the case that we want managers to use interview guides in order to secure that everyone that applies gets an equal treatment, and have the same opportunity to get through at the interview occasion" – HR specialist

The empirical findings show that respondents' hold the view that people are different from each other, and when employees are expected to treat everyone equally in order to be regarded as being fair, it becomes problematic to simultaneously be sensitive towards diversity. During the challenging work to standardize the recruitment process within the organization, fairness is considered as an important part, as the organization strives to perform the process equally across the different departments in order to be seen as legitimate actors.

6. Discussion and analysis

Employer branding is a concept that has gained more attention as organizations acknowledge the importance to improve their capabilities to attract and retain qualified human capital. Most research of employer branding is from the private sector, and researchers almost seem to take for granted that employer branding can be performed similarly in all work spheres, but the results of this study shows that this may not be the case.

The purpose of this study is to explore how the public sector in Sweden practice employer branding in order to make the alignment between employer branding and the organization's overall goals and mission legitimate. This study focus on the case of the Municipality of Gothenburg within Sweden, and the results from the empirical findings show that the municipality frame employer branding as a strategy that helps them deal with issues of legitimacy. Consistency and sensitivity towards diversity seem to be two important concepts that explain how the municipality chooses to practice employer branding. The act of balance between these two ways of organizing (organizing coherent employer branding, organizing employer branding sensitive towards diversity) can be explained by how the Municipality of Gothenburg has decided to align employer branding with the overall mission and goals of the organization.

6.1 Organizing coherent employer branding

The first research question that was answered in the result section was about how public sector organizations practice employer branding, which was answered by looking at how employees within the municipality frame employer branding. The Municipality of Gothenburg practice employer branding through having a unified framework for their ads, and a structured recruitment process that aims for consistency. The organization strives for consistency by developing certain practices within the organization coherent in order to ensure to be seen as one, legitimate, actor on the labor market. The respondents' perceived the situation of having each department within the organization decided by themselves how their ads should look like as a problem, therefore standardized procedures were developed for the whole organization, which employees are expected to adapt to in order to fit to their specific department. Organizational framing, which Hallahan (1999) describes as a strategy to use to understand issues and problems as the business context can provide cues that lead to distinct behaviors, could be argued to been

used as a strategy in the decision about making the recruitment and advertisement more structured in order to unify the organization. Strategic framing can also explain the situation of the organization deciding upon the common procedures/guidelines. The organization communicates about the importance to practice employer branding, and provide guidelines and expects that employees take responsibility to implement employer branding activities at their specific department. This could also be described as some degree of institutional coercive mechanism that the municipality adapts in order to legally secure that every department are following policies/guidelines. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) describe coercive mechanisms to have a political influence, and can be pressures from other organizations or governmental mandate (ibid). However, the broad span of opportunities within the frame is something that the respondents experience as vague and too ambiguous, and describe to be too abstract for them to know what to do in terms of activities that are related to employer branding. The majority of respondents' believe that they have vague guidelines for how to develop employer branding activities that aim to strengthen the image of the organization as the employer of choice.

Employees explain feelings of being uncertain of how to practice employer branding, and the majority of respondents from different departments said that they often were looking at what other departments within the organization do to get ideas and inspiration from their employer branding activities. Employees use some type of mimetic mechanisms that is described within institutional theory (DiMaggio& Powell, 1983), as the majority of employees seem to take ideas of activities from other departments within the Municipality. This type of framing where employees make sense of employer branding as an activity that they can perform by imitating other departments reminds about the mimetic institutional mechanism that DiMaggio and Powell (1983) describe, and discuss in relation to issues of legitimacy. Employees respond to the guidelines, that they experience as vague, by taking decisions to perform activities that other departments do, as the uncertainty takes over and makes it difficult for them to take decisions by themselves. Respondents described that they also were looking at what the private sector was doing in terms of employer branding. In this study these behaviors and descriptions of when employees look at what other departments perform, and the private sector, will be referred to as mimetic framing. Hence, employees' use mimetic framing as a tool to make sense of employer branding, something they can use in order to deal with their uncertainty. In other words,

respondents deal with their described uncertainty by following similar paths that other department takes regarding how they choose to practice employer branding. The respondents behavior can be regarded as the institutional theory's described concept of isomorphism (Deephouse, 1996; DiMaggio& Powell, 1983), as employees seem to assume that the activates that other departments and sectors conduct are legitimate, since they decide to perform similar practices themselves.

Further, respondents' explain that they believe it to be crucial for them to embrace employer branding as the labor market is showing a lack of talents and recruitment challenges. The respondents frame employer branding as a concept that they have to embrace, and take decisions about, no matter how difficult it might be. This in order to avoid fall behind other businesses that practice employer branding as a strategy for how to better attract talents. Respondents from different departments within the Municipality of Gothenburg state that they have started to provide job opportunities for employees that do not have education to provide them with the opportunity to get certificated and the chance to get a job title. This could be viewed as an activity that the organization execute in order to be regarded as legitimate employer. Dyhre and Parment (2013) claim that companies need to start communicate about the different available career paths available, since research that has shown that an employer get more attractive in the eyes of prospective employees if the career paths within the company are easily identifiable. Opportunities to make career or change job within the organization was something the respondents' highly valued. Respondents' believe that the organization should work to get better at communicating the existing opportunities for these to become more transparent for external actors, as well for current employees. Respondents' statements go along with Backhaus and Tikoo (2004:511) argument that without opportunities for advancement the organization loose its competitive edge and become less attractive for applicants.

6.2 Organizing employer branding sensitive towards diversity

The theme "frustration over the abstract and visional" is similar to the description of brand framing, where Mosley (2014) argues for the importance of keeping the content of the frame authentic and constantly updated in order to keep and get peoples' attention. Mosley (2014) describes brand framing as a strategy for how to frame messages about the company as the employer of choice. Employees' believe it is important to perform activities that make sure that

what is being communicated actually is conducted in order to ensure to keep their legitimacy. This goes along with the claim that Dahlqvist and Melin (2010) make of the importance for public sector organizations to be able to show external actors that they deliver services that contribute to the common good for all citizens in order to gain acceptance, and keep their legitimacy. If the Municipality of Gothenburg wants to communicate messages about being the employer of choice, employees feel that they want to be able to take these messages into practice in order to uphold the legitimacy of the messages that are being communicated. These statements are similar to the claim that Christiaans (2013) makes about the communicated benefit that should paint up an accurate image in order to avoid developing unrealistic expectation among prospective employees, since unmet expectations in the recruitment process might lead to problems in the future (ibid).

Respondents emphasize the importance of informing employees regarding different matters in order for them to know what is going on so that they can take pride in the work they do. The assumption is that if they know what goes on, employees will get more satisfied and a positive attitude towards work will start to build. Employees that hold a positive attitude towards work will help spread positive associations about their workplace, which can contribute to the positive reputation of the organization, like a water drop effect; spreading from the inside out. Van Mossevelde (2012) claims that companies should take on an inside-out approach with the assumption that happy employees will function as proactive brand ambassadors, and contribute to a positive reputation of the company. This is something that is discussed in theme "the water drop effect", where employees are explained to have a responsibility to make contributions, and function as ambassadors for their organization. Dahlqvist and Melin (2010) argue that many organizations within the public sector have reputation issues, which was something many employees with the Municipality of Gothenburg mentioned, as they find themselves working in a constant uphill, and some respondents' blame media for having some part in this as they claim that media tends to write about the negative aspects, but not so much about all the good things that they do within the organization.

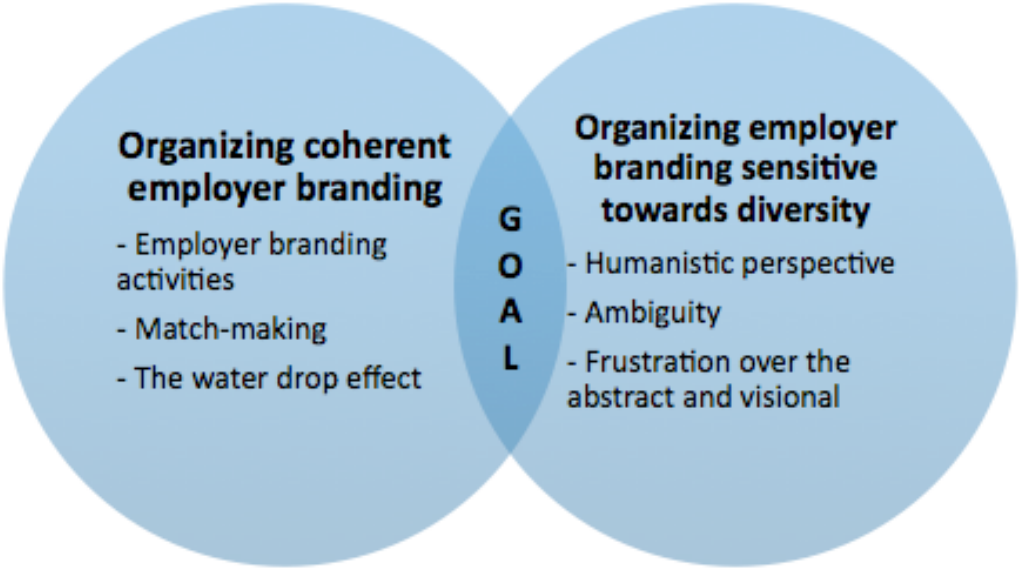
Edwards (2005) claims that an individual who identifies with the organization is very likely to accept the goals and values of the organization, which usually results in that they choose to

remain within the organization. Employees within the Municipality agree that it is the human perspective that makes their organization attractive and separates them from other businesses. The normative goal was well established, which was expected, as the mission of the organization is to serve the common good for all citizens of Gothenburg. The normative goal within the goal framing theory is about the desire to increase welfare for others (Lindenberg& Foss, 2011), which is what the description of the mission of public sector organizations. This can be seen through the Municipality's way of organizing employer branding as a practice that pays attention and is sensitive towards diversity. The gain goal is about the desire to improve or preserve one's resources Lindenberg& Foss (2011), which was another type of goal that employees used to frame their understanding of employer branding. Employees' claim that it is important to be able to compete for the best qualified talents in order to be able to attract them to their organization, which can be described as a desire to preserve ones resources to be able to continue deliver high quality services to citizens. The respondents' claim that they have the opportunities to be able to compete, but that the issue is that they need to get better at communicating about these to external actors, as well to current employees. Another type of goal that was revealed within the findings came from statements and comparisons with the private sector. The theme "humanistic perspective" shows that employees view employer branding as an important concept to embrace, it also show how the respondents' frame employer branding as a concept that the private sector manage and work with much better. Some of the respondents claim that private sector organizations are much better at employer branding, and few argued that they believe they have to start work more like the private sector. Continuous comparisons with the private sector show characteristics of another type of goal, a goal that can be characterized as having mimetic nuances, which could be described as some type of mimetic goal. This comes back to the mimetic framing that departments are involved in when they imitate employer branding activities that the public sector and different departments conduct.

6.3 Organizing coherent employer branding sensitive towards diversity – A dilemma?

The second research question of this report, which is about the alignment between employer branding and the overall goals of the organization, is answered by the empirical findings that shows that the biggest challenge respondents describe is regarding employer branding as an act of balance between consistency and diversity. The expectations of having to be accountable and

manage the common good for everyone, and at the same time balance practices so that they are sensitive towards diversity and aim for consistency is something that is hard to accomplish. This act of balance is specific to each unique situation that employees face, which explains why the guidelines and vision provided from the organization are viewed as abstract by the employees, since it is impossible for the organization to be specific on what to do since each situation is unique in its own way. This is something that the respondents described to be very difficult as they are left with responsibility to decide on activities to perform with no direct procedures for how to act when they face situations that require decision-making in the manner of having to act and balance the decision between diversity and consistency.



Model modified by the author of this thesis.

In the public sector where the mission is to serve the common good of all citizens, it is important to respect diversity and treat everyone equally, which explains why Municipality have aligned employer branding with their assignment in a fashion that is more visional and less direct. People are different from each other, and when you are expected to treat everyone equally and have unified practices that are consistent, in order to be regarded as being fair, it becomes problematic to simultaneously be sensitive towards diversity. These two ways of organizing employer branding are not compatible and are causing tensions to exist, which makes it hard to locate employer branding activities in the middle. It is a challenge that creates a dilemma for employees

that has to perform work tasks that are sensitive to an external diversified world and functions in consistent unifying manners. These two types of organizing activities and decision-makings have underlying tensions that are challenging to deal with, and cause uncertainty among employees.

The challenge becomes to be about legitimacy as the actors always have to be on their guard when taking decisions and avoid creating attention from for example media that might want to publish a story about something that turned out to be more a more difficult decision-making then what was expected. Employees within the Municipality of Gothenburg are experiencing issues of legitimacy as they are trapped in a dilemma that involves issues of balancing decisions with two themes or organizing that are not really compatible with each other. These challenges influence the way employees' make sense of employer branding. The act of balance between consistency and diversity describes how the alignment between employer branding and the overall mission looks like within the Municipality of Gothenburg. Coherence and consistency are used as a strategy to align the employer branding practice and goals with the organization's overall mission to make sure that the organization practice employer branding in manners that pays attention and is sensitive towards societal diversity. The goal is to conduct activities, and practice employer branding that are balance in the middle, which is where the Municipality aims to be regarding how they practice employer branding.

7. Conclusion

Exploring how the Municipality of Gothenburg practice employer branding reveals issues of legitimacy. The findings suggest that employees within the Municipality of Gothenburg want to be viewed as legitimate, which the employees try to achieve by using mimetic framing and the strive to fulfill mimetic goals. The municipality chooses to solve the issue of legitimacy, involved in the act of balance, by using strategic framing. Whereas employees' attempt to solve the issues by using mimetic framing, which could can be argued to not really be regarded as a strategy as they decide to do what others do. Employees are responsible for performing legitimate practices, which is hard when the guidelines/common procedures are vague and abstract. Most respondents solve the battle by imitating what other departments do since they do not know what to do, instead they rely that since other have done these activities, they must be viewed as legitimate. The employees need to have something to relate to, and the risk from this

imitating behavior might cause the alignment and the act of balance between unity and diversity may get lost in the process of imitating others. The balance between consistency/unity and diversity is something that employees within the public sector are dealing with, therefore an existing dilemma can be argued to exists, that is characterized with no direct solutions since every day is different from each other. The Municipality of Gothenburg strives to have internal coherence and external sensitivity towards diversity. The dilemma arises when the organization is supposed to have an internal coherence and at the same time be sensitive towards a diverse society. The dilemma can explain why the vision and guidelines are experienced as abstract by the employees, hence, the organization cannot be too detailed and structured in the provide guidelines/procedures in order to strive to secure the balance act between consistency and diversity. In contrast, if the organization unifies processes and practices and makes them too coherent, the value of diversity may be lost. The question of how to manage and organize a public sector organization is involved in the ongoing discussion that is related to new public management.

Citizens expect that they will be provided with public services, therefore public sector organizations have to take decisions no matter how difficult it is. Therefore the results from this case study of one Municipality in Sweden can be assumed to be found in other municipalities within the public sector. Public sector organizations are not like private sector organization and the work for employees within the public sector becomes very difficult when the work is organized in a way that creates confusion and leaves employees' with obligations to deal with uncertainties. The findings suggest that the underlying factor in the discussion is about what specific opportunities the individual employee possesses, because when employees are aware of the available opportunities, they know what to expect.

This report contributes with its empirical evidence about the act of balance that creates a dilemma for employees within the public sector in Sweden. Complementary, the report makes a small theoretical contribution as a new type of framing was discovered (mimetic framing and mimetic goal), which could help develop, and expand, the field of frames and frame theory. The empirical findings of the dilemma create awareness that this is a problem that needs to become more transparent.

8. Final concluding remarks

The issue of balancing diversity with consistency is a dilemma that will always exists, therefore it is important to acknowledge this dilemma that employees' within the public sector experience. Additionally, employees should be aware about the dilemma and about the existing job opportunities, and that these types of situations where they have to balance between sensitivity towards diversity and consistency are responsibilities that they will have to accept. This is were HR can take on a more supportive role and function as leaders by helping employees manage this reoccurring dilemma. A recommendation for the HR function is to communicate about these results so that management becomes aware about the uncertain situation that employees battle with. In addition, there should be supportive opportunities provided from HR that needs to take on a leadership role and make sure that the organization educates their employees about this dilemma and what is expected of them. A support function such as HR becomes extremely important in these types situations where employees feel uncertain that they cannot deliver what is expected from them.

8.1 Suggestions for future research

Further research could look into what ways HR can function as a support system for employees within the public sector, in their daily battle with the dilemma of balancing the practice of employer branding. That type of study would be of interest as HR could proactively work with employees to better deal with the dilemma, which might become less prominent.

Another suggestion would be for future research to add to the empirical findings of this research to expand the research field of employer branding within the public sector, which would be of important in order to enhance further understanding. This study was conducted within one municipality in Sweden, therefore further research could be conducted by explore other types of public sector organizations, as it would be of interest to explore if the dilemma found within in this study can be found elsewhere. In addition, research could explore what specific sectors within the municipality in which employees' battle with this dilemma, as the dilemma might be more prominent in some specific sectors. This study found a new concept that is referred to as mimetic framing, which was used by respondents to make sense of employer branding, therefore an additional suggestion would be investigate the concept to explore if it exists in other contexts.

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10. Appendix

Appendix 1 – Interview guide

Background:

1. What is your current position, and can you describe some of your daily work tasks?
2. How long have you worked within the Municipality of Gothenburg?
3. What are the goals of the organization? Does the organization have a vision?
4. Can you further explain the four work objectives that are common for how to work within the organization? Can you explain how these can bee seen in your daily work?

Employer branding:

5. Can you explain what attractive employer means for you?
6. Why is it important to be seen as an attractive employer? What is the goal and purpose of having a strategy regarding the attractive employer perspective?
7. How do you work to be seen as an attractive employer, both for current as well for prospective employees? Can you give an example on an incentive and what you contributed with?
8. What actors are involved in the employer branding work within the organization? How do you experience the collaboration between the involved actors?
9. What are some challenges and issues while working with employer branding and to work with the image of the organization as an attractive employer?
10. How much impact do you perceive media and the things they write about your organization has on your daily work?
11. How do you like working within the public sector?
12. What makes you to an attractive employer? What do you believe could enhance the chances to attract people to apply for a job within your organization?

Appendix 2 - Letter of consent

Hej xxx,
Jag är en student på Göteborgs Universitet som studerar masterprogrammet inom Strategiskt Personalarbete. Jag är nu inne på sista året och skriver för tillfället på min masteruppsats. Uppsatsen handlar om ”employer branding” (attraktiv arbetsgivare) och hur en offentlig verksamhet arbetar med arbetsgivarerbjudandet i sitt dagliga arbete. Vidare berör studien hur medarbetarna förstår företagets arbetsgivarerbjudande.

Syftet med studien är att skapa förståelse för hur en strategi, som syftar till att framstå som en attraktiv arbetsgivare, används inom den offentliga sektorn. För att kunna genomföra min studie behöver jag din hjälp. Därför skulle jag vara ytterst tacksam om du, som medarbetare inom Göteborgs Stad, vill medverka i en intervju som kommer att ta ca.30-45min. Din medverkan ger dig möjlighet att bidra med värdefull kunskap. Resultaten kommer enbart användas i forskningsändamål.

Ditt deltagande är frivilligt och du kan välja att avstå från att svara på vissa frågor, eller avbryta intervjun när som helst, ifall så önskas. Din integritet kommer att skyddas och ditt deltagande kommer behandlas konfidentiellt. Du och dina svar kommer vara anonyma. Om du vill hjälpa mig genom att delta i studien, var vänlig att återkom till mig så bestämmer vi en dag och tid som passar dig.

Din medverkan är värdefull för mitt resultat! Har du ytterligare några frågor eller funderingar så är du välkommen att kontakta mig eller min handledare för mer information. Tack på förhand!

Ser fram emot att höra från er!

Vänliga hälsningar,
Josefine Koskinen