Bachelor Thesis in Marketing

What makes you stay?

- Employer Branding effects on employee retention in the technical consultancy industry

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Abstract

This study address one of the issues present in many of today's companies; how to deal with rising employee-turnovers, a growing problem when industries are increasingly service-dominated and thus ever more rely on competent personnel. This problem is since earlier addressed by researchers through Employer branding, however a field predominantly focusing on how to attract rather than retain employees. Further, research has to large extent adapted managers' rather than employees' viewpoint of the subject. Therefore, to create a better understanding of how Employer branding affect employees propensity to stay with its employer, this study takes the employees view through a multiple case study of six employees at a technical consultancy firm using interviews. Collected data was analyzed by applying a combined framework of two sub-categories of Employer branding; Employer Brand Equity and Internal Branding. This created a complementary model of greater practical applicability displaying a comprehensive set of factors. Results from the study indicate several factors importance for the employee. However of which, two appeared distinctive; physical allocation of the employee and its relation to the closest manager. Physical allocation was seen as an enabler for a functional work context while the manager influenced several other factors of the brand. Research is recommended to continue to in-depth study these two factors to create a better understanding of how they affect employees' propensity to stay.

Keywords: Employer Branding, Employee retention, Technical consultants, Employer brand equity, Internal branding

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1. Background

Today's labor market is experiencing a growing rate of voluntary turnover of employees (Casico 2014), people who leave their employer by own will to take on new opportunities in new positions. Rising rates of turnover is a result of the current upswing in the global economy where a surplus demand for labor has been created (Blomgren 2017). The surplus demand creates an unbalance in the labor market favorable for employees with wider selection of job opportunities. Appealing opportunities makes employees more prone to switch jobs for new positions and conditions. Coinciding with the current expanding economy and rising demand for labor is a large scale retirement of Baby Boomers which intensifies the employers competition for talented employees even further (Ng et al. 2016).

High employee turnover is seen to have several negative effects on companies. Turnovers entails extra costs; losing an employee at entry-level is estimated to cost between 30% and 50% of their annual salary and in the situation of losing high level employees the number can be as high as 400% (Blake 2006). Costs linked to losing and recruiting employees are often overseen by management as they are viewed as inevitable, hard to estimate and thus seldom formally reported and managed (Blake 2006) making the perceived negative effect of extra costs smaller than it really is. Losing talented employees also entails loss of knowledge that in turn decreases the company's ability to deliver superior value to customers (Khandekar & Sharma 2005) and productivity (Tanwar & Prasad 2016). Lowered potential to deliver high value affects the company's competitiveness through a lowered level of performance making the company less attractive for current and possible future customers (Berry 2000).

The importance of employees for a company's performance is emphasized in service-dominated industries. Employees' interactions with customers cumulate to build the overall corporate brand-view (Vallaster & de Chernatony 2005) making the employees' actions in these touch points crucial in making, or breaking, the brand (Ind 1998).

Not only is the actual loss of employees a negative thing in above-mentioned aspects of raised unnecessary costs, lost competence and potential to deliver value, but as well the negative signals these actions of voluntary resigning send to the remaining employees. Losing experienced employees is seen to have a demoralizing effect within the company (Hansen et al. 2003). Voluntary leaving on position for another can indicate greater possibilities in other positions that the company was not able to provide. Signals as such can disturb the company's corporate culture when more employees decide to leave, creating a self-reinforcing negative effect.

Practitioners' attention to the problem is increasing on how to identify areas of improvement and act in order to decrease the turnover and better retain important employees. More and more companies recognize problems connected to the rising turnover of employees. In 2012, 30% of companies surveyed the rising voluntary turnover, this number hade in 2013 grown to 51% (Careers 2013).

Not only practitioners are taking actions to deal with the problem. A fast growing body of research is identifying and studying the situation taking several approaches applying both Human Resource Management- and Marketing-theories to further explain and solve problems of attracting and retaining employees. Several areas of research such as Employer Branding (e.g. Alshathry et al. 2017; Ito et al. 2013; Tanwar & Prasad 2016), Internal Branding (e.g. Liu et al. 2017; Punjaisri & Wilson 2011; Saleem & Iglesias 2016) and Internal Marketing (e.g. Matanda & Ndubisi 2013; Kaurav et al. 2016) takes on an mix of HRM and Marketing to address current and possible future employees. However, these studies are far too often focusing on raising employee attraction rather than retention (Punjaisri & Wilson 2011), job performance rather than employee loyalty (Narteh & Odoom 2015) and how to deliver customer- rather than employee value (Saleem & Iglesias 2016). Such one-sided focus creates unfavorable conditions for companies and leave gaps in research is underlined by for example Balmer and Gray (2003). Further, a majority of studies in the field of research applies a management- rather than employee-perspective on the subject (Alshathry et al. 2017) resulting in an ignorance of the employees' perceptions.

The increasingly problematic employee-retention situation together with growing body of unbalanced, theory-based and management-focused research makes a prominent case to further develop the knowledge base of how theoretical methods are applied in practice using employees view of the corporate brand. By studying the technical consultancy industry, a service-centered industry where employees are of great importance and thus employer branding activities essential, an improved understanding of relevant factors can be identified.

1.1 Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of the study is to establish a practically applicable model for understanding how Employer Branding-efforts affects employees' propensity to stay with its current employer. The study further aims to contribute to the existing knowledge by applying an employee-perspective of the study and thus even out the unbalanced focus of research.

Following research questions was developed to guide the research:

1. What affects the employees' view on their employment?
2. How does Employer branding efforts affect the employees' propensity to stay?

2. Theoretical Framework

In below sections the theoretical framework for the thesis is presented. Beginning with a theoretical discussion of brands and branding which acts as a point of departure for the following discussion of Employer Branding. Brands are viewed as a shorthand representation of a company's actions, products and services for the consumer. Employer Branding is in similar manner the shorthand representation of the company in an employer-context for the employee. The work with Employer Branding is further explained by introducing two theoretical frameworks of Internal Branding and Employer Brand Equity. These two complement each other for the sake of providing a comprehensive base of knowledge for the study. While Employer Brand Equity explains the "whats", Internal Branding explains the "hows" of Employer Branding.

2.1 The brand and branding

A brand is the combination of the name, symbol and design that defines products or services of a selling actor in a market (Cascio 2014). In closer scrutiny, this definition is a definition of a brand in the consumer-supplier context where the brand transposes a simplified meaning of the firm- or product characteristics in relation to its competitors. These characteristics can be of both good and bad, meaning that brands comprising mainly good associations will attract whilst brands comprising mainly bad association will repel consumers (Keller 1993).

The customer's view of a company will most likely comprise of lots of events, interactions and impressions. Thus, the brand acts as a shorthand summary of these making it easier for the consumer to understand the core essence of the firm, its products and services. This reduction of meanings helps the consumer to create mental structures to organize knowledge about firms and their offerings to easier make perceived rational decisions of consumption (Cascio 2014). The comprised meaning acts as a simplified promise of what value the products or services from the company will deliver which induces trust and reduced perceived risk (Keller 2012) making it easier for the consumer to choose.

Branding or brand management, has since a long time been viewed as a concept where consumers are seen passively receiving the brand meaning created in a firm-centric perspective (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004). However, the body of research has in recent time shifted focus towards the role of interactions, relations and experiences in the creation of brand meaning to which multiple stakeholders contribute (Iglesias & Bonet 2012). This emerging body of literature expands the former view of how brands are created, shaped and perceived which better adheres to the earlier notion of brands being build upon impressions. No longer are customers the only important received of a brand's message and the firm not seen to single-handed create its brand's meaning. Thus, the complete organization becomes the brand (Curtis et al. 2009). Employees will with this view possess a key role in

creating, shaping and maintaining the brand. Through every single interaction between customer and firm where the employees in the majority of times will be, the experience is created (Vallaster & Chernatony 2005). Experiences are individually shaped impressions resulting from the sum contact points in interaction of a given brand (Carbone & Haeckel 1994)

An attractive brand is built on delivering the expected experiences promised by the company through the brand itself (Alshathry et al. 2017). These expectations are co-created between the company's stakeholders, both internal and external, in every interaction occurring (Palmer 2010). With this view of how brands are shaped, possibilities of to influence the process is far greater than through the traditional one-way communication. In the light of multiple touch points and co-creation with stakeholders, the need of redistributing resources from traditional branding activities such advertising is emphasized (Dall'Olmo Riley & De Chernatony 2000).

Companies that successfully manage their brands are able to obtain high affective commitment (Iglesias et al. 2011) and influence the individual's preferences. High brand preference strengthens the intentions to maintain the brand-person relationship (Chang & Liu 2009). Brand loyalty is connected to several perceived benefits of the brand with raised reliability, quality and consistency among customers leading to less price sensitivity with higher tolerance for service and product failure, higher resilience to competition and raised overall recognition (Kotler & Keller 2009).

Brand equity

One way of measuring the effects of a company's branding activities are through the use of brand equity. High brand equity motivates higher price premiums, repurchases and raises possibility for recommendations (Bendixen et al. 2004). The brand's value is in the individual's mind built by essentially three aspects; the individual's level of knowledge about the specific brand, how the individual, based on this knowledge, assesses the brand and the how the individual perceives earlier experiences with the brand (Keller 1993; Aaker 1996). Combined, these will deliver a higher value and thus tie the customer closer to the company, which in the long run becomes loyal the brand (Iglesias et al. 2011).

2.2 Employer Branding

Consumer branding is closely related to Employer Branding - marketing strategies used to strengthen the brand towards current and potential employees (Foster et al. 2010). Since branding aims to link an organization with its potential and existing customer, the brand values and promise has to be well understood and accepted internally to enable the entire organization to deliver on it. This falls well in line with the earlier notion of brand management being the co-creation of meanings between the company's stakeholders where contact points to large extent are the organizations

employees. If employees are to positively influence the brands meaning, they must themselves understand the brand and buy-in on it in order to deliver it.

Employer Branding is an expression used to describe how a company uses promotional activities to deliver a brand value, both externally and internally (Näppä et al. 2014). Externally, Employer Branding is the attracting and recruiting talented and valuable employees, whereas internally it is the ongoing process of retaining existing, talented employees. Attracting and retaining talented employees is in this way similar to acquiring and retaining customer as the creation of presenting attractive brand promises. A majority of research within the field of Employer Branding focuses externally on how to attract employees (Martin et al. 2011; Rampl 2014), which leaves internal Employer Branding somewhat underexplored (Foster et al. 2010). This single sided focus of research creates theories possible misleading practices of non-applicable models for the complete area of Employer Branding, both internal and external (Martin et al. 2011). Thus, making contributions to internal Employer Branding-research of interest for better understanding the complete practice of Employer Branding.

Despite large perceived similarities between branding towards employees and branding towards customers, there is one major aspect that needs to be taken into account for altering the way brand management should be considered. A customer orientation does to large extent apply a single-transactional approach to branding, which to some extent also has found its way into Employer Branding literature (Alshathry et al. 2017). But as Employer Branding combines marketing and Human Resource Management (HRM), where HRM focus on long-term relations rather than transactions makes customer oriented branding theories not straight of applicable in a employer context where employee experience is even further emphasized (Iglesias et al. 2011). This is of great importance when considering retention of employees and thus for this study.

2.3 Employer Brand Equity

To further expand the domain on Employer Branding, it is of importance to understand the concept of Employer Brand Equity (EBE). EBE is the outcome of an organization's work with Employer Branding, more specifically the effect of Employer Branding on potential and existing employees in terms of the perceived value of being part of a specific organization (Alshathry et al. 2017). This value is in the employer-context synonymous to the earlier described brand equity addressing customer's perceived value. EBE delivers similar value to the organization's stakeholders to establish a strong connection to these. EBE is the representation of the cumulative evaluation of benefits reflecting the value delivered to the organization's employees (Alshathry et al. 2017) and consists of four blocks constituting the employer brand. The four blocks are; Familiarity with the brand, Experiences with the employer, employer brand Association, and the Loyalty to the employer (Alshathry et

al. 2017). Minchington (2010) uses similar categories in his general framework for EBE and the earlier presented three aspects of brand equity. Strong EBE provides prerequisite for obtaining a strong position in the labor market, especially valuable in high-rivalry labor markets for attracting talented employees and lower rates of employee turnover (Collins & Han 2004). However, as EBE is subjective like brand equity, and not actual, current and potential employees in different positions can perceive this value differently which the earlier noted unbalanced research problematic for practical applications (Alshathry et al. 2017).

Framework

Alshathry et al. (2017) presents an EBE-framework of four components; Familiarity, Experience, Associations and Loyalty relating to each other according to Figure 2.1 below. The fundamentals behind the model are that an employee's positive experiences and knowledge makes positive associations to the employer brand, which creates higher loyalty, and employees more inclined to remain employed. These are influenced by four factors; Corporate reputation, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Job content and Work context.
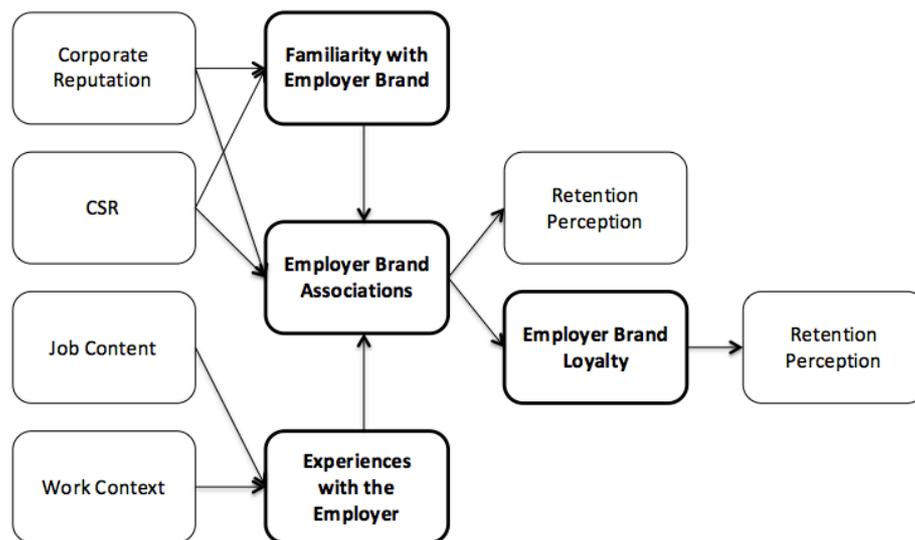
Figure 2.1 Employer Brand Equity framework.

Familiarity with employer brand

The first element of EBE, reflecting the employee's level of knowledge and awareness of the employer is familiarity. Familiarity is knowledge beyond simple brand-recognition requiring substantial investments in time and commitment to acquire information vital for making well-founded, low risk, employment-decisions (Wilden et al. 2010). This makes brand familiarity important for both potential and existing employees (Barber 1998) where promotion of employee-related benefits is as an important means for successful internal Employer Branding (Moroko & Uncles 2008). For existing employees, Familiarity helps to understand the organization, its culture and shared values (Sokro 2012).

Experience with the employer

Employer experience focuses on the interactions between employer and employee, normally occurring within the organization boundaries (Alshathry et al. 2017). Through these interactions of exchange, the employee accumulates experience over time. Experiences are hard to manage due to their high complexity (Davies 2008) partly because of the vast number of factors affecting the employer brand experience (Edwards 2010) and Conflicting perceptions of the employer brand experiences may occur. These ambiguities can arise from the employee's different relations to co-workers, managers and supervisors (Shore et al. 2009). For experiences, the central activity is different forms of exchange such as economical, psychological and functional benefits. These exchanges will however be affected by the settings that to large extent determine the experienced exchange quality (Cardy et al. 2007). Meaning that the key to provide positive employer experiences is a well functioning, actionable management (Biswas & Suar 2014).

Employer brand Association

Associations to the employer brand are linkages to memories carrying ulterior meanings and acts as generalized impressions of the organization's former actions. As different memories can be either good or bad and several of these memories coexist, alike experiences the associations can contradict each other (Brooks et al. 2003). Employees can also hold associations unrelated to the employment, such as customer experiences. However, according to Highhouse et al. (2009) in the employer context, the only relevant associations are those connected to the actual employment. Though, the discrepancy of what impressions that cannot, in any way, be associated with the employment is unclear.

Employer brand Loyalty

Employer brand Loyalty can only be obtained by existing employees having past experience with the employer brand and is developed through the attitudes they have towards the employer (Alshathry et al. 2017). Loyalty in this context is synonym to organizational commitment (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004), which encourages employees to maintain a close relationship with their employer. Enactment of loyalty is seen both through attitudes and behavior towards the employer and has a positive effect on employee retention (Alshathry et al. 2017). Loyalty in the employer-context is a part of the unwritten contract between employee and employer of reasonable actions (Rousseau 1996) with the ability to occasionally put other's interest over the self-interest (Ogunyemi 2014). However, the concept of loyalty is best recognized as a two-way relation between employer and employee where not only the employee must act loyal but the employer as well (Fielder 1992).

Corporate reputation

Corporate reputation is the external perception of the employer and is likely to include aspects of employee expectations (Helm 2011), work environment and market position (Alshathry et al. 2017). Signals about the corporate reputation are important information both for potential- (Cable & Turban 2003) and existing employees (Helm 2011) as it provides general information used to evaluate the benefits of being part of the organization (Dögl & Holtbrügge 2014). External stakeholders views will hence affect the existing employee's view of its employer (Maxwell & Knox 2009) where positive signals can increase pride among employees. In these ways corporate reputation is linked to both Familiarity and Association.

Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) shows the organization's contributions to community which helps employees to understand their stance in several questions that can be of importance for the individual (Aguinis & Glavas 2012). CSR actions clearly signal the organizational values and norms externally, which makes the organization more attractive (Brammer et al. 2007) and thus will, alike corporate reputation, have a positive effect on both the individual's association and familiarity.

Job content

Job content refers to the tasks implied by the job description, what is, by the employee to perform at work and its outcomes (Hornung et al. 2010). This is the primary contribution to the employer-employee relationship from the employee in the origin of employment (Shore et al. 2009). Feeling that the work put in contributes to the organization and to get it confirmed through feedback gives the employee positive impressions and thus delivers a positive effect on the experiences with the employer (Hackman & Oldham 1976).

Work context

Whereas job content is the actual work put in by the employee, work context is contextual factors not directly connected to the job, the environment facilitating exchange of benefits (Cardy et al. 2007). Supportive colleagues and engaged management are among several factors that encouraging the contributions to the organization while making it a more positive experience of doing so (Mitchell et al. 2012). The work context will in this way have a positive effect on the individual's employer experience.

2.4 Internal Branding

Service quality provided through the use of employees as internal customers is a driving factor for end-customer satisfaction through company performance leading to high profitability (Heskett 1987). Delivering high internal quality is further emphasizes by the importance of employees total commitment to an organization in order to properly differentiate (Balmer 2001) and the need for employees to understand the brand's meaning in order to emotionally and intellectually engage in its communication (Thomson et al. 1999). Capable and engaged employees providing superior service must thus be motivated, developed and retained within the company by addressing their needs and creating a feel of their importance (Kanter 1983). However, a coherent view brand-view is not achieved through one single approach as situational and personal factors will moderate the effect of Internal Branding (IB) activities (Punjaisri & Wilson 2011) making the individual experience highly complex and difficult to manage (Davies 2008) depending on a several factors that together constitute the total brand-package (Edwards 2010)

Another way of approaching Employer Branding with more internal company focus is through IB. Alike Employer Branding; IB is focusing branding activities towards employees. The internal focus limits the research to consider existing employees and how branding activities shape this view of the company brand and disregard the external, potential employees. This makes IB more suitable for creating a common comprehension of the company brand throughout the organization and thus positively influence the employees' commitment through raised awareness of its meaning (Punjaisri et al. 2008). IB is thus, though closely related to Employer Branding, a distinct, separate area of research (Saleem & Iglesias 2016).

Framework

From Saleem and Iglesias (2016) research of IB, five key components of IB are identified from earlier research within the subject. These are; Brand Ideology, Brand Leadership, Brand-focused HRM, Internal Brand Communication and Internal Brand Communities. Figure 2.2 below depicts the framework developed by Saleem and Iglesias (2016). Though presented separately, all five components relate to each other and cannot be considered in isolation.
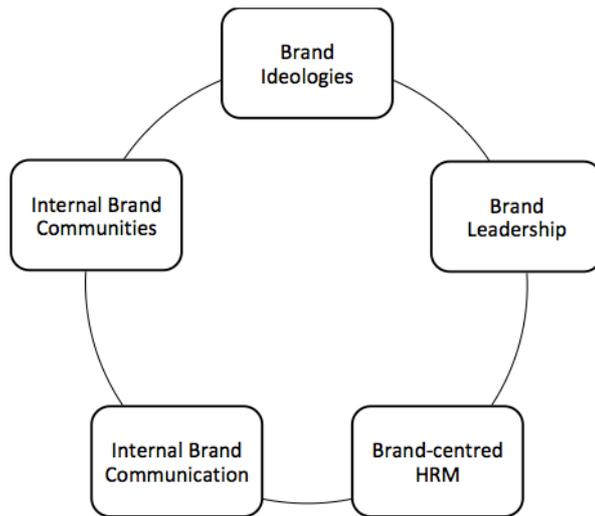
Figure 2.2 Internal Branding framework.

Brand Ideology

One of the most central parts of IB is the brand's ideology. The ideology integrates the company vision, mission, overall goals with norms and values shared within the organization. An outspoken, clear ideology provides structure for decision making ensuring that it aligns with the brand's values (Burmann & Zeplin 2005) and makes focused actions from employees possible (Ind 2003). Norms and shared values are closely connected to the organizational culture, to large extent unspoken and unwritten rules exposed to the employees on daily basis (King & Grace 2008). The organizational culture needs to be clearly connected to and hence support the ideology to make the internal brand consistently deliver its promises over time (King 2010).

Brand Leadership

Brand leaders are the employees of a company translating the brand's ideology to help employees understand and deliver its promises (Saleem & Iglesias 2016). Strong brand leaders enhance brand identification among employees, which positively influence commitment to the brand values (Burmann & Zeplin 2005), which in turn decreases turnover (Morhart et al. 2009). Of importance for Brand Leadership to be effective, the leaders need to work together with employees and recognize their contribution. They also play a key role in building a shared understanding of the brand values within the company to align organizational behavior (Vallaster 2004).

Brand-centered HRM

The two first domains of IB is inherently marketing-focused whilst Brand-centered HRM focus more on attracting, developing and working with employees. Large part of the research-domain of IB focus on this part as achieving a good fit between new employees and the brand values of the organization seen crucial (Burmann & Zeplin 2005) to reduce the initial period of socializing for new employees. Further employees' skill development (Punjaisri et al. 2009) and rewarding positive brand

behavior (Hartline & Ferrell 1996) are both effective ways of ensuring a coherent view and alignment between employees and the brand's values. Actions and policymaking intending to strengthen this alignment and internalize the brand values are many. However, a too rigid structure of HRM-activities tends to provide the former without the latter of these (Morhart et al. 2009) emphasizing a flexible HRM practice.

Internal Brand Communication

Employees receive information from several both internal and external sources affecting their view of the employer brand through both intellectual and emotional conviction (Thomson et al. 1999). Information comes in all shapes, ways and directions inside the organization, to distinguish different types four categories can be applied (Saleem & Iglesias 2016):

- Formal internal - Outspoken and written policies from management and HRM
- Informal internal - Interactions with co-workers
- Formal external - Advertising
- Informal external - Customer and partner feedback and interactions

These categories highlight the wide variety of information sources and show that not only internal information will affect the employer brand (Hatch & Schultz 2002). Further, internal brand communication is not limited to the HRM and marketing department but will also be affected by the employees communication where brand champions have a vital role in driving the informal internal communication (Thomson et al. 1999). This communication is more effective for IB than both Brand Leadership and Brand-centered HRM (Du Preez et al. 2015). Brand leaders are although recognized to have an important role (Bergström et al. 2002) in communicating and supporting the formally sought brand identity (Vallaster & de Chernatony 2005).

Internal Brand Communities

Like Cova and Pace's (2006) studies of consumer culture and the phenomenon of communities that form around and influence a consumer brand, internal brand communities exist in the same manner. These communities discuss, negotiate and reconstruct the brand meaning (Muñiz & O'Guinn 2001). Formation of groups both online and offline, within organizations with similar effects of shaping the organization identity and internal brand (Devasagayam et al. 2010). Such groups are in this way a powerful tool for aligning inter-organizational actions with the brand. Though research within the area of internal brand communities is scarce, its potential becomes evident by looking at the influence and vast spread of consumer brand communities in contemporary research (Saleem & Iglesias 2016).

EBE and IB are two fields of research closely related to each other however apply different focus in the work of employee satisfaction and Employer Branding. While

EBE provides the important "whats" of internal marketing and HR-activities directed towards employees, IB provides the important channels, or "hows" through which the communication is mediated. This meaning that not only one of these models would provide a sufficiently complete picture of how employee retention is affected by IB.

3. Method

This section present the methods used throughout the study when collecting and analyzing the empirical data. Structured in levels of detail, the section starts at the methodological level to continue to research level and further down to choice of method for collecting and analyzing empirical data. The use of a qualitative research approach was most beneficial for the study's intentions and semi-structured interviews were chosen for collecting the empirical data. Semi-structured interviews correspond to the study's nature of acting explorative within the given theoretical framework. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded and analyzed in an iterative process for building knowledge throughout the study. Transcribing recorded interviews helped create a richer picture of for the analysis and coding acted as a part of the analysis by facilitating the management of large amounts of data.

3.1 Methodological approach

"Research is guided by theoretical ideas and the aim of research is to make a contribute to theory" (Bryman & Bell 2015, p. 22)

The research process for this study began in the thoughts of what methods and in which order to apply these to best give answers to the posed research questions and thus contribute to theory. The study sought to let the empirical data speak for itself and from which it would be possible to draw interesting conclusions when applying theory to make sense of it. Even though conclusions was drawn after collecting the empirical data, the exploration of theory continued simultaneously with the data collection to finding a good fit and further explanations for the empirical data was considered necessary. Thus the study's relationship to theory and research can be defined as inductive reasoning with influences of an abductive method in the process (Bryman & Bell 2015). The main limitation of using an inductive reasoning is that no amount of empirical data collected can single handedly be validating theory-building (Bryman & Bell 2015). By taking influences of an abductive method, this limitation of an inductive reasoning is overcome.

3.2 Research method

Studying the already well-explored subject of Employer Branding within which several known frameworks have been developed initially speaks for applying a qualitative approach to this study. This is also what is seen for several contemporary studies building on statistics in order to established relations between factors and results. Though, the body of research lacks transparency in how connections are done in practice, creating ambiguities in what branding activities makes employees stay with its employer. Seen for the two applied frameworks only providing what to achieve and how to do in on a high level of abstraction making applicability for practitioners low. Thus, the need for an explorative approach providing descriptive

evidence of connections and interactions speaks for the use of a qualitative, rather than quantitative method for this study. The qualitative approach is also favorable for the study as it emphasize the understanding of how people react to and think of their social surroundings and world (Bryman & Bell 2015) suitable when taking employees perspective of the subject.

Collecting data

The study started with a literature review where a theoretical base of the subject as well as an understanding for where contemporary research within the field was acquired. This also resulted in the two frameworks used for better guiding the study forward. Literature was searched through an iterative process initiated with simpler search terms regarding Employer branding which over time, when literature was compiled and more knowledge was gained, lead to refined terms and keywords. Regarding search engines, both Gothenburg University Library's service; SuperSearch and Google Scholar was applied. The two cover multiple databases making searches wide, which through refined search criteria enabled targeted searches possible.

Crang and Cook (2007) suggest several approaches for conducting qualitative studies in social research. In this study of employees' own perspective, reflections and thoughts, interviews were deemed most appropriate. The interviews enabled the emphasis of the consultants' point of view and captured the employer setting of events, relations and relevant factors possibly influencing the Employer Brand and thus the employee retention. Qualitative methods labeled face-to-face methods among which, interviewing is part, comprise physical presence of the researcher making it one sort of participating observation where this presence can influence the interviewees behavior and thus needs to be taken into account.

Qualitative interviews can be structured in several ways. For this study a semi-structured approach was chosen where interviews refer to a context in which the interviewer has a series of general questions or topics forming an interview guide (appendix). The initial guide was based on the topics of the theoretical frameworks. Using this type approach provides structure but still makes space for liberty in answers, topics and sequence of questions asked (Bryman & Bell 2015) suiting the study's well-defined theoretical framework of topics but sought explorative approach. Further, semi-structured interviews was deemed suitable due to the time-limitations that the thesis implied, where less structure would bring upon heavier, more comprehensive raw-material for the analysis. Hence, the trade-off between exploration and structure within the given timeframe was found in semi-structured interviews.

The study was shaped as a multiple-case study where consultants in different positions were interviewed. This sought to provide a richer picture of the subject

providing a realistic view of the practitioners' situation. Even though multiple interviews were done, the semi-structured approach enabled the researchers to follow a structure to provide the interviewees the same prerequisite, whereas doing completely unstructured interviews would risk ending up with a number of disconnected interviews. The empirical data from interviewees was complemented with formal information given through meetings held with management representatives at the company. These were seen to help understanding the topics from a formal standpoint and not solely from the eyes of the employees.

Interviews were recorded for several reasons. First, as this study focus on attitudes and associations, it is of interest not only what people say, but also how they say it (Bryman & Bell 2015). Recordings made it possible to capture intonations, expressions and hesitations from interviewees that later could be taken into consideration in the analysis (Bryman & Bell 2015). Further, when conducting interviews, it can be difficult to remember everything only by memory since the human mind is naturally limited (Bryman & Bell 2015) making recordings a good way to capture the large amount of information that is given during an interview. Also, as an interviewer you want to be alert and follow up on interesting answers. This can be difficult if you are to notes on everything that is said and expressed by the interviewee. However, as one of the researchers was moderating the interview, the other took notes to complement the recordings and in case of recorder malfunction. The interviews were all conducted at the company's office in Gothenburg to simplify scheduling and due to limited access of consultants who often experience a tight schedule.

Sample

The study addresses one technical consultancy firm, which was deliberately selected on its characteristics. The organization has over time acquired a brand with that focus on the employees as individuals and emphasizes the personal career development. This was consider a great prerequisite for building a strong internal employer brand and hence of importance for facilitating this study. Further, the firm is one of the leading firms within the technical consultancy industry in Sweden, providing required resources to enquire a well-functioning internal communication. By conducting the study only within one company, interviewees were seen to large extent be exposed to similar brand communication which eliminates possible differences otherwise seen exist between companies. Though the company holds several offices all over Sweden, only consultants in the Gothenburg region was studied to reduce the risk for local fluctuations possible existing at different offices.

Of importance was to find relevant interviewees for the study. Since the aim was to understand how the internal brand is perceived in reality, not how managers want or think that it is perceived made it relevant to opt out managers and only focus on employees working as consultants. Even though the study did not include any interviews with management, two formal meetings was held with management

representatives within HRM and Marketing. At these meetings, formal information about the internal communication was received that was used to compare to the interviewees' perceptions in the analysis.

Interviewees were sourced through informal contacts at the company and a formal request for participants that were put up on the company's intranet. Thus, no interviewees was contacted through, or prompted by management to participate in order to strictly hold the study's anonymity. Initially viewed, as a main factor was the consultants' physical allocation as it is one of the characteristics making the industry unlike many others. Therefore, an even spread between consultants placed at customer site's (on-site) and at the consultancy firm's office (in-house) was sought to better explore possible differences between these. Further, as perceptions develop over time, the study sought to opt out newly recruited employees where knowledge and experience about the employer have not yet been fully developed. This resulted in an exclusion criterion of employees hired less than two years ago. The result was six interviewees; three located in-house (Respondent A-C), two on-site (Respondent D & E) and one in-house (Respondent F) that spent time on-site as well, all having more than two years of experience of working in the company.

Processing data

The process after finishing an interview included transcribing the recorded material, coding it and analyzing its content. This work of processing the recorded data was initiated when the first interview was completed. By doing this and not waiting until all interviews was done helps raise awareness of interesting, emerge themes to further elaborate on in the remaining interviews (Bryman & Bell 2015). Thus, this process over time facilitated a refinement of the interview-guide to better collect relevant empirical data. Further, this approach did also help streamline the process enabling more time to be spent on qualitatively analyze the data which was of great importance considering the tight time plan of the study.

To enable the process of analyzing the transcribed empirical data, the material was coded. But before coding, annotations and marks were made on the transcripts. This helped single out especially interesting, important or significant events or phrases (Bryman & Bell 2015) Since the interview guide used in this study was divided into topics, the process of marking and singling out important information was made easier. Coding is a way of separating and organizing data, (Bryman & Bell 2015) which requires the researcher to think outside the box (Corbin & Strauss 2008) to find connections linking segments in the empirical data to each other. Thus, coding is the first step of the analysis where data is being processes. For this study, data was initially coded according to the set theoretical frameworks and later sub-coded for more specific topics. The technique of open coding was used. Described by Strauss and Corbin (1990) as *"the process of breaking down, examining, comparing,*

conceptualizing and categorizing data", which yields relationships and concepts that can be grouped and linked together in categories.

The following step in the processing of the empirical data was to use the coded material to find connections to the theory. The main part of this step was finding parts from the consultants' interviews that had connections to the framework of and EBE and IB. The parts, in form of quotations, were used in the Results section as a way of confirming statements and conclusions drawn from the interviewees' answers. Further, differences between interviewees' statements in the coded material identified to highlight how different situations can affect the consultants' perceptions of their employer and work. The aim of the analysis was therefore not to single handedly confirm positive statements and apply it to the framework, but to find both confirming and contradictory statements of a strong internal employer brand of the consultancy firm.

Discourse analysis

Since the interviewees in this study narrated their perceptions and thoughts, of interest how this is told and what consequences this implies through a discourse analysis (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). It is of importance when doing a discourse analysis to emphasize that it is not the language per se that is analyzed, it is the meaning of the language - how the interviewees socially interact and how it is mediated through their language (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). This analysis came to use when interpreting whether the interviewees' answers had a positive or negative undertone to them. It made a great difference in what the interviewees literally did say and what they actually meant when considering the use of sarcasm or having a negative feeling about anything regarding their job situation or employer. Such accentuations was taken into consideration when transcribing and coding the recorded interviews, and later on when analyzing the empirical data.

Ethical considerations

The ethical considerations of the study mainly regard the participant's anonymity to eliminate possible negative impact on organizational- and individual level (Bryman & Bell 2015). This was also seen favorable for the study, as when anonymous, several topics that could be regarded as sensitive were now easier for the interviewees to talk about openly. When recording an interview it is important to consider the ethical aspects of the situation and ask the interviewee for approval of recording. In this study, all of the interviewees approved of audio recording. The results of this study are partly presented through quotations from the interviewees. Out of respect for the interviewees' anonymity and to make sure that all quotations had been understood and cited correctly, these and their context were sent to the interviewees during the analysis.

4. Results

In the following sections, results from the analysis are presented. Through synthesizing the empirical material collected through six interviews with the two frameworks of EBE and IB, key-explaining factors of employee retention is identified. Results presented are structured according to the EBE framework upon which IB theory is applied. Several factors of Familiarity and Experiences for the employees were identified to contribute to both positive and negative associations to the Employer Brand and thus the loyalty towards their employer. Findings are throughout the chapter supported by anonymous quotes from the interviews as supporting evidence to describe the situation. Out of presented characteristics, physical allocation and relation with closest manager in Work context was found being distinguishing factors for the overall creation of the employer brand. Main findings from each section are summarized in table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1 Summary of findings in each section.

Factor	Characteristics	Implications
Familiarity		
Corporate reputation	• Low prior knowledge • Builds upon general industry characteristics • Opportunities to explore, easy to get an employment • Business-focus	Employees choose the industry rather than the company
Employees' channels for information	• Colleagues Main source for information • Managers sparse communication • Low interest for formal channels	Difficulties in spreading information formally
Brand ideology	• Contradicting vision and goal • Vision indistinct and not representative for the company	Vision and goal do not help create a strong brand
CSR	• Low commitment to initiatives • No connection to company profile • Supporting grassroot-initiatives	CSR initiatives do not help to create a strong brand
Experiences		
Work context	• Managers lack personal contact with employees possesses a key-role for the experience • Work allocation set prerequisites for context experience • Courses develop personal	Important to have well functioning relations between employees and managers
Job content	• Job characteristic perceived engaging • Changing assignment can be difficult • Lacking work-related feedback	Managers' role is further emphasized

4.1 Familiarity with employer brand

Familiarity in this study address not only prior knowledge but also its continuous development and how the company affects this through spreading information. Corporate reputation and CSR affects Familiarity according to the EBE framework and is therefore addressed as parts of Familiarity. Further, Channels for information and knowledge about the Brand Ideology from the IB framework is identified to influence the Familiarity and are therefore also included in this section. The corporate reputation is largely built upon general characteristics of the industry regarding career opportunities and employment while the brand's ideology is perceived difficult to relate to as an employee. Internal communication at the company is partly seen poorly functioning where employees think that the informal communication among colleagues is the best way of getting information. Employees have a relatively low knowledge about the company's CSR-activities, which are seen to lack clear purpose.

Corporate reputation

Prior employment, knowledge about the company had mostly been acquired mouth to mouth in interactions with friends that had experience with the company or through the direct interaction with the company itself. Several of the interviewees had experienced earlier interaction with the company through student work fairs but little distinctive knowledge about the firm was recalled to been acquired through these events. At the most, one interviewee had a friend who earlier worked for the company and thus had a rough perception of characteristics of the company's salary-model, which was described as somewhat unique to the industry. This model was mentioned by other interviewees as good and was perceived as a positive characteristic that provided greater freedom of choice for employees.

Interviewees with an employment exceeding five years in length spoke about a recent merge that the company had undergone when getting bought by a larger, international consultancy firm. In conjunction to this, the firm changed name and graphical profile, which appeared to disorder the general view of the company, both externally for potential employees and internally, for current employees. The company before the merge was viewed as a small consultancy firm offering high flexibility and great career opportunities for its consultants. However, the new company was more seen as a company of growth where more consultants constantly were hired and greater focus did lie on doing business, which made the individual career less focused upon. This was exemplified by an interviewee when talking about one of the company's competitors:

"... they are quite big, which makes it feel like the focus shifts away from the individual, which you even can start feel happening here as well." (Respondent D)

Put in words by another interviewee that described the intensified business-focus of the company since the merger:

"I can feel that it is very much focus on sales now, but not so much focus on the staff, or the persons behind it all." (Respondent E)

Of great importance, mentioned by several of the interviewees, was their view of the technical consultancy industry as a whole. The view held by the majority of the interviewees was that the industry of technical consultancy was uniform. That all firms of considerable size where you could take employment was very much alike each other. They offered pretty much the same jobs, with the same salary and benefits, because the companies held the same customers and competes for the same jobs. Further, as a consultant, you were likely to work with the customer as well as several of the competitor's consultants in customer-projects making the choice little to no different wherever you decided to take employment. An interviewee summarized this view when talking about the choice of employer:

"Consultancy firms are all alike. All you need is a good boss, a good team and a good job, then you can be anywhere" (Respondent C)

Prerequisites of the industry was further elaborated upon by another interviewee that compared the technical consultancy industry to management consultancy:

"But we could also discuss weather we are consultants or just temporary staff. I would rather say that we are temporary staff then, in those roles that I have had… Perhaps it is not like what management consultants do where they go in to a project for half a year and then just disappears. That is not how consultancy works within the technical industry at least" (Respondent F)

The comparison to temporary staff made a prominent case of how the interviewee did chose to differ his conception of consultants to the business that was carried out by the company. To not hold the same type of expertise as management consultants indicated how he felt that the industry not really was worth its own name.

Mentioned by several interviewees was how they felt the consultancy industry provided the opportunity for gaining a broad spectrum of knowledge. This because consultants worked in assignments that each consultancy firm held a wide spectra of and that it would therefore be easy to change between these over time. To broaden the individual's set of skills and knowledge seemed to be desirable for less experienced consultants as these were seen to have little knowledge of within what field they would like specialize. In this way, working new fields helped explore the labor market for attractive fields for each individual. Thus more desirable than applying for employments directly in engineering firms where opportunities to explore were to be seen narrower. Further, the industry was also seen as a way into the technical line of

work for people with little or no earlier experience. Exemplified by one interviewee when comparing the application process for the company to when he applied directly to one of the company's customer:

"I had to do like four different IQ-tests when I applied for the job (at the engineering firm), then it was a behavioral-test, talk to a psychologist, and a medical examination. This process took like four months. While at XX (the consultancy firm), it all took like a day, just "Hi, who are you?" and then just start working. I believe that consultancy firms in general are less afraid to hire newly graduated" (Respondent F)

Which was further confirmed by the current situation in labor market where consultancy firms experienced a high employment-rate due to the large amounts of new customer inquiries for consultants, confirmed by the managers at the company.

Mainly, the corporate reputation was created by the general characteristics of the industry of technical consultancy rather than specific characteristics that would make the company stand out and become a more attractive choice among employers. This was seen to be a result of the view of technical consultants' job characteristics where all companies offered a similar setting making employee expectations (Helm 2011), work environment (Alshathry et al. 2017) and market position (Cable & Turban 2003) insignificant aspects of the company. Interviewees confirmed this when explaining their choice of employment, which in several cases was more by coincidence than a conscious choice when applying for jobs at consultancy firms. Hence, employees did mainly look for the general characteristics of the industry rather than the company-specific qualities when applying for jobs, making the choice of employer rather haphazard. This demonstrated the brands anonymity in the labor market providing little positive distinctions for the employee. Regarding company-specific characteristics, the business-focus was seen positive in that it displayed healthy growth but negative as it did put less focus on the individual consultants.

Employees' channels for information

News and information was within the company spread through primarily two formal and two informal channels. These were all seen to help increase the consultants' Familiarity with the employer. The interviewees' opinion of their individual relevance was scattered, though some patterns of consistency could be identified. Most of the formal information was communicated through the company's intranet that was accessible for all employees. The homepage presented two news feeds, one for corporate news and one for the employee's specific department. According to management, the two feeds were to be customized for each employee's position, both geographically and organizationally for the purpose of creating a more relevant and attractive newsfeed for each employee. Staff and higher management posted corporate news while department news were open for any employee to post. Employees were obligated to visit the website at least once a day to keep themselves updated on what

was happening in the company. Nevertheless, this was not a thing that all employees did:

"When I sat at the customer site, I did not check the intranet at all." (Respondent F)

While employees primarily stationed in-house were seen to visit the intranet more frequently. Perhaps explained by the dominance of what was seen as irrelevant information for employees not present in-house:

"... there's is a lot of news and information about what is going on for those at the office… These do not affect the majority of us." (Respondent E)

The intranet further contained all the formal policies and guidelines applicable for the complete organization and a department-site where news and information about each department was available. However, not one single interviewee did mention this department-site and only one interviewee mentioned the formal documents of policies briefly. This showed a possible misconception about the use of the intranet where a large mass of information was put up but perhaps rarely read making the channel under- or miss exploited.

The second formal channel for information was newsletters written for each department. These were to be individually designed but mainly present what was currently happening and what had happened during the last week within the department, and were often written by the department managers. Interviewees that had seen several of these witnessed about a variety in quality and quantity them in between. Newsletters were designed and distributed differently in different departments providing, alike the use of the intranet, a shattered perception among the employees about its effects and purpose. However, common was that they were often read only briefly for the purpose of getting a glare at what was happening. One of the interviewees expressed the need for a reconsideration of the newsletters content as they were lacking forward sight:

"What is of importance for me is to get a feeling of how it goes and if there is any problem anywhere." (Respondent A)

Alike the intranet, among employees not stationed in-house, the newsletter were seen to have a more marginal relevance as they mainly presented news connected to the office and were on a divisional level to which consultants could have a hard time relating to. Described by one interviewee that talked about the newsletters perceived relevance:

"Sometimes they contain things that do not affect us as much. I read them much more, and was much more affected by what happened at XX when I sat in-house"
(Respondent D)

Regarding informal channels for information, the interaction between employees was seen to be the dominant way of getting and spreading information. For several of the interviewees, this interaction seldom extended far beyond their closest colleagues; often those working in the same project or even just in the same room. Only interacting with the closest colleagues was seen normal and interacting more across departments was for the individual not seen as potentially beneficial. Thus a one-sided view of the company may be developed when only interacting with a small part of the colleagues who experienced the same part of the company as oneself. A further elaboration of the social aspects in the informal communication between colleagues is presented in 4.2 Experiences with the employer brand.

The second channel for informal communication was the interaction between the employee and its closest manager. In this case, the closest manager was the person responsible for a group of consultants and allocating assignments to them. It was thus this person a consultant turned to for general questions and for getting new assignments. Interaction between manager and employee was directly treated as a different subject by the interviewees and took a much more substantial part of the interview's focus making it a subject of greater interest for the employees. Noticeable was that a great variety in how their managers decided upon how this interaction was to be and what was communicated. In general, a sparse communication between the two was established with a formal character where little information was exchanged. Interaction was seen more dense only when changing assignment and in the start of the employment. Put in words by a senior consultant working on-site:

> " … if I wouldn't have taken the initiative it could have gone half a year without having any communication" (Respondent E)

Out of the four categories in the IB framework, only two were present in the interviews. Of which, both was internally directed making external channels perceived less important to the interviewees. This was supported by the earlier presented general characteristics of the brand where this provided little distinctive information from external parties. The formal communication through the intranet and newsletters were described as currently poorly functioning where employees saw little interest in receiving what was communicated, even though their content was to be customized for each individual, aiming to make it more relevant. This revealed a problematic situation where the company had little possibilities of formally reaching out to their employees. Thought, of greater importance for the interviewees was the informal channels where they received information word of mouth from other colleagues and their closest manager. Communication between colleagues was seen as the main channel for information, which is problematic for the company to influence, as this channel is not directly manageable. Thus, targeted branding activities through this channel were not possible. The organization consisted of local groups of employees were little communication was transferred in between, which made local

interpretations of the brands meaning possible leading to lacking consistency throughout the company. The manager's vital role as a brand leader (Bergström et al. 2002) was confirmed. This is further elaborated upon from the aspect of employees' experiences later on in the report but was seen to emotionally affect employees (Thomson et al. 1999). However, as interviewees experienced this channel as dysfunctional, potential for improvements to better communicate the brand was identified.

Brand ideology

Several of the interviewees had trouble recalling the company's vision when being asked about it. Those whom had an idea of it all formulated it differently, which initially indicated a low knowledge of the company's vision and key values. This was confirmed when management presented three models used throughout the company explaining the confusion among employees. Two of the models was founded in the old company, had been transferred during the merger and over time gone through modifications to better correspond to the new company profile. According to one of the more senior consultants, these models held the same content as before the merger.

Throughout the six interviews, one concept was occurring more frequently than the other two. This was also the one used in the majority of the company's official communication for example on their website and in printed material such as the cover for employees' introduction-kit and thus was the most communicated concept for the company. The concept expressed the company's consultants as extra dedicated, to which several of the interviewees had reflected upon. One common theme among the interviewees connected to the earlier described uniformity of the industry where consultancy firms are very much alike each other for their employees. In the same manner employees are very much alike each other for their employers and hence, their dedication could not be significantly different from any other consultancy firm. These consultants' introspection revealed a non-conformation to the concept's validity and thus its meanings' substance not only to themselves but also to the general industry. Put in words by one of the interviewees:

"I think that it (the vision) is good towards customers, "most dedicated"… But I wonder if it has any effect, if you were to compare XX with any other (consultancy firm), that, I do not know." (Respondent E)

And further put in the context of the company's perhaps greatest focus to achieve a high growth rate of recruiting more consultants.

"…. The vision… is perhaps more unclear than that we are to grow. That is at least what I feel… It is a massive pressure on that we are to grow, but not really this other vision of how we are to do it" (Respondent D)

These two focuses of growing fast and keeping employees dedicated was seen to create an ambiguous view of what the company was trying to achieve as, according to the interviewees, growth take away the focus form the individual.

The other concept brought into the new company was a symbol for the different career-opportunities that the company offered to its consultants. Its basic idea was that there were three career-paths that one could choose, either to become a specialist consultant with a narrow focus, a manager within the company or a general consultant with broad knowledge within many fields. However seen by several of the interviewees was an unclear way to make a career as a consultant within the company and that the focus was more on those who chose to become managers, a career-path unappealing to several of the interviewees:

"What is promoted within the company is that it is a career-company. And I would say that it is, as long as you choose to do a management-career" (Respondent A)
and
"... you start of by becoming some sort of consultant-manager and that is not at all what I want to work with!" (Respondent C)

For the company, one vision and one overall goal were found. These were though seen by the interviewees to contradict each other, which had created an ambiguity in what, the company stood for and what its overall purpose was. This was further seen to stand in conflict with the organizational culture where employees' values did not align with the results of the overall goal of growth. Thus, the communicated brand ideology was not clearly understood by the employees, which created uncertainties in the brand's meaning. Neither did the employees identify with the company's vision of having distinctively dedicated employees, which goes back to the corporate reputation generally being characterized by the industry's qualities earlier presented. Further what was called the company's business-model was seen with skepticism by some of the interviewees criticizing it for not being representative or guiding for consultants striving to make a career as a consultant. On this basis, the company's brand ideology was considered weak and not enabling focused actions from employees (Ind 2003) or a consistency in delivering a positive promise over time (King 2010).

Corporate Social Responsibility

The interviewees recalled some known initiatives by the company. Over all, the company appeared to frequently make initiatives for contributing to the society but lacked commitment for following them up. Initiatives had mainly been of monetary sponsoring charity organizations. The company's commitment to these initiatives was exemplified by an interviewee when talking about one of these:

"I think that we sponsored a school in Africa for a while. I have not heard anything about it for a while now" (Respondent F)

Which also displayed the company's way of communicating these activities internally towards their employees. Whether the company took responsibility for its social impact was further elaborated on by the same interviewee when discussing the possibilities that was given in choosing what customers and assignments to take when the company was being pressured to produce results:

"I think it is difficult to influence such things (what assignments to take) … they can't really "This is not good" because if they do not take that assignment, some other firm will and XX will lose money" (Respondent F)

The interviewee regarded the company as somewhat powerless in its relations to its customers. That it was necessary to take whatever assignments were given to them in order to maintain the best possible results making its social responsibility a secondary priority. This strict business-focus was earlier presented in Corporate reputation and was further confirmed by another interviewee who saw a changing corporate environment that signaled strict focus on sales with disappearing individual personality.

"I think that many of the managers perhaps are more focused on sales. They forget about the human behind what they are selling" (Respondent E)

Consultants also created initiatives. One of the interviewees had started a Movember-campaign that gained support from management who helped spread the message throughout the company. The campaign eventually engaging the CEO who donated a substantial amount of money for the cause. One other interviewee as mentioned the same campaign briefly:

"Else, I do not know if they (the company) engages in any other charity… Some sporadic Movember-campaign, but it is more employees that do such things" (Respondent C)

Which once again spoke for the company's inability to communicate such initiatives internally.

The technical consultancy industry was described as heavily male-dominated. This was viewed as problematic and since some time back, the company had created a female networking-group to counteract possible negative aspects for their female coworkers. The group's purpose was explained to create opportunities for female colleagues to connect and socialize but perhaps not act as a catalyst for changing the overall situation. Put in to words by an interviewee:

"I do not know about its long-term purpose … I believe it is to unite women in the industry and to network a bit" (Respondent E)

Noted by one of the employees was the indirect responsibility that the company takes for contributing to diversifying the company. The view was that through a diversified recruitment not looking to unify employees of a certain type but rather to find the right spirit and competences, the company contributed to a more open and diverse industry. The interviewee put it this way:

"It feels like many nationalities are represented in the company, which is great I think. It feels like they recruit people in all ages, sexes and that you do not need to be a specialist in any way to join, like you do not need to be super social or something"
(Respondent C)

CSR initiatives performed by the company were seen sporadic, without clear purpose and did not directly connect to the company's vision. Thus, initiatives could not help employees to better understand the company's stance in social questions important for the individual (Aguinis & Glavas 2012) making it neutral, or even negative, contributor to the brand. A perceived lacking commitment to initiatives made no positive contribute to the overall company profile and thus not making it a more attractive employer (Brammer et al. 2007) Further, initiatives were seen to not reach the employees which once again displayed the company's inability to use its communication channels for creating a strong internal brand. However, supporting grass root initiatives like the Movember-campaign contributed to a positive view of the company listening to employees in the co-creation of the company's meaning.

4.2 Experience with the employer brand

The majority of data collected regarded experiences that the interviewees have had with its employer. Where Familiarity mainly display the knowledge obtained through the processing of information from different sources, Exchange display the actions and interactions taking place within the employment. Corresponding to the EBE framework, a distinction between how the Work context and Job content influence the brand is applied in this section. Within two these sections, residual parts of the IB framework was identified. Work context was seen as the most central part to how the brand is perceived, within which the relationship with the employee's closest manager as well as colleagues and where the job is allocated were of importance. Job content highlighted three crucial parts of the interaction with the manager; Changing assignment, Work-related feedback and how the Job characteristics were perceived by the employees.

Work context

Four primary factors of the earlier defined Work context were identified throughout the interviews. These factors were not directly connected to the job performance but create the environment influencing and facilitating the exchange of value (Cardy et. al

2007). Identified areas were closely connected to earlier presented subjects of Familiarity. However, the following descriptions and analysis considers the interviewees' experiences rather than solely the informational received.

Managers

Significant differences between managers ways of communicating was earlier presented in Familiarity were interviewees did put emphasis on the subject in the interviews. Not only was the manager's style of communicating vital but as well how the individual consultant perceived it as preferences was highly individual for each interviewee. This was highlighted when comparing two consultants' perceptions of this interaction, the two having the same manager:

"I have said that I'll contact you (the manager), you do not need to contact me"
(Respondent F)
and
"No, you only see your manager when negotiating salary… or changing assignment.
It doesn't feel so personal I think" (Respondent C)

Thus, one standardized way of interacting for managers with their consultants would not provide an overall optimal work context for employees. Not only was there no single one optimal management style among managers but also that each manager had to co-decide upon an individual style of communicating with each of its consultants because each individual valued different approaches independent. Of importance here was to find a balance between standardization and customization of communication to fulfill employees' needs in a time-effective way. Noted by several of the interviewees was their managers stressed situation indicating their time to individually interact with each consultant was limited. One of the interviewees presented this when he talked about one of his colleague's experiences with his manager:

"… every time he tried to book a meeting with him he would "no I am busy" or "can
we take it later?" (Respondent B)

Several of the interviewees perceived the communication to their closest manager to be impersonal and sparse, highly based around the mandatory yearly salary negotiation and otherwise dependent on the consultants' own initiative to contact their manager. This was well represented in the latter of the two earlier presented quotations. Those experiencing such situations described them as negative and wished for a closer and richer contact with the manager. The wish of including more informal contact was expressed by several of the interviewees:

"… just that they (the managers) stay in touch and ask "how is it going?" or "how do
you feel?" once in a while." (Respondent E)

And further, the feeling of being overseen as a person by the manager and more treated as a product was described by several of these interviewees. This reinforces the earlier presented view of the company's growth developing a stronger business-focus among managers where individuals were to greater extent overseen. Put in words by one who interviewee who had more or less been given an assignment without having a say in the decision:

> *"... what I feel reflects my experience when getting thrown out (on the assignment). That, you are an consultant that is to be sold." (Respondent D)*

While this impersonal contact was seen as problematic for some of the interviewees, others had a completely different view of their communication to the closest manager. Two of the interviewees, who had the same manager, experienced a more personal connection with frequent communication both in person, by mail and telephone. Even though one of them was based in-house and the other on-site, they both had the same positive feeling regarding their communication with their closest manager. These expressed a more relaxed and positive view of the communication:

> *"She just keeps coming up to say hi sometimes. So she is quite friendly… But I know other friends at XX who have not had such a good time with their managers." (Respondent B)*

Which also indicated the general knowledge among consultants of managers having different approaches to their consultants and that either you are lucky or unlucky when assigned a manager. Further, one interviewee exhibited a third type of manager with a highly relaxed approach to its consultants and the way of communicating with these. This interviewee had experienced co-workers expressing dissatisfaction of this style being too vague and containing too little concrete information.

The informal interaction between consultant and the closest manager was seen not only to hold value in the form of information that was exchanged but also, and of greater importance, the interaction itself. In these touch points between management and employee was the individual's possibility to be seen and appreciated high. A majority of the interviewees saw a lack of personal communication between them and their closest manager leaving a gap between sought and experienced recognition. This demonstrated the managers important role of providing a positive employer experience for the employee (Biswas & Suar 2014) and that their lacking engagement hampered employees ability to identify and commit to the brand's values (Burmann & Zeplin 2005). Further, managers' efforts to recognize employees' contributions were not great enough (Saleem & Iglesias 2016). Thus, the consultants' closest manager could not be seen to fulfill their role as a Brand leader.

Colleagues

Employees' narrow social circle within the company was earlier presented where interviewees seldom interacted with others outside the own department or even the closest group. Several of these expressed a feeling of the company being shattered with only groups of people not uniting people. Two of which exemplified it in their interviews describing situations where this was observed:

"... like the Christmas party with the whole Gothenburg (office), but it was quite a fail because people, I don't know, they were hanging out only with their own groups and not mingling..." (Respondent B)
and
"When we eat lunch together there are very clear groupings like "there comes that group and there comes that group" ..." (Respondent C)

A majority of the interviewees saw no problem in these divisions of the company, but was more comfortable in that they most times only were socializing with the people that they already knew and saw no direct benefits in extending their network by getting to know more people in other divisions. However, possibly not a problem for the individual consultants, this could be a problem for the company as a whole as lacking ties between departments divides the company. This was put in words by one interviewee:

"... I think that there are great benefits in creating contacts across groups. That the most exciting jobs are those that involve multiple competences ... there is where you feel that there is a winning in having a multi competent company" (Respondent A)

An example of a strong division was presented by the same interviewee, which he himself was a part of. Their division-manager was known to give a lot of space for the consultants in their daily work and had friendly attitude with an informal way of communicating. Of work he engaged in arranging team-building activities for his employees in order to create a tight group. But despite these initiatives, the interviewee identified three groups of employees within the group: those who engaged in all activities, of which most were allocated at the office, those participating in larger events and those never participating in anything. This showed that even with great dedication, far from all employees is to be entrained.

"It is his ambition to create a group with an open climate" (Respondent A)

Some non divisional-bound initiatives for uniting the company were found throughout the interviews. Already mentioned is the Christmas-party for the Gothenburg office and CSR-initiatives where colleagues meet for a good cause, like the Movember-campaign. Further, weekly training sessions for soccer and floor ball were arranged by employees, which were economically supported by the company. Even though driven by employees, these events had experienced poor attendance during the last

few months. Just a few of the interviewees knew about these events and little help from management was seen to have been given in spreading the word of their existence and employees possibility to join. Other employee-driven initiatives such as lunch workouts were also seen; these were often spread through the intranet in the feed available for employees at the office.

Recently a new group for innovations was started in the company, a collaboration between consultants and managers. Meetings were held off workings hours and all were free to join. The aim was to gather employees for idea generation and problem solving through spurring creativity with group exercises. So far, only two events had taken place but great support had been gained within the company. According to one interviewee:

"I expected that all participants would sit quiet and just wait but instead everybody dared to speak up and lots of good ideas was created in a short manner of time…"
(Respondent A)

These events were seen to unite employees around a subject dear to many which they perhaps not always get outlet for in their daily work as a consultant. In this way, these meetings acted as a catalyst for social involvement where employees could find similarities in each other even though they were from different divisions and allocated at different places.

"… there is a lot of people in this company who spur of ideas. They have one assignment, but in their head they are somewhere else." (Respondent A)

The informal interaction between colleagues was shown to potentially be the medium of greatest influence for how employees perceived their work situation. This based on the frequency of interaction occurring daily rather than the sparse interaction earlier presented between employee and their closest manager. However, rather than contributing with new information, this channel predominantly spread already existing one, thus acting to confirm and reinforce the existing brand. Employees were to large extent only socializing in locally formed groups with the closest colleagues or within the department. They were on this level able to negotiate and reconstruct the employer brand's meaning in local interpretations, similar to informal internal brand communities (Muñiz & O'Guinn 2001). However, on an organizational level, these small groups were seen to hold little power in the overall negotiation of the brand making earlier local interpretations commonly occurring. It was rather in the cross-functional communities where employees met that got greater visibility and could influence the overall brand's meaning. Examples of such communities that existed within the company were the initiative regarding innovation and CSR-initiatives. The innovation initiative was seen to engage employees in the overall goals of the company and CSR-initiatives gave the possibility for employees to influence the company's values and thus the internal brand (Devesagayam et al. 2010).

Work allocation

Interviewees were based on different assignments, in-house, on-site, or in a combination of them both. When discussing their attitude towards their employer, differences were seen to connect to their allocation.

Interviewees assigned to jobs on-site gave the impression of being more cut of to the consultancy firm. Being allocated to a job away from the office, having little or no contact with firm colleagues and managers and feeling that the information given by the formal channels did not concern you at all, contributed to their feelings of not being included in the organization. One of the consultants based on-site talked about the activities and events being arranged by the firm:

> *"So, they have these activities, for them, at the department. But, I can imagine that many employees feel a bit lonely at their assignments at customer's office …"(Respondent E)*

Consultants based in-house generally felt a stronger connection to the organization, mainly because of the closeness to everything that was happening. When being allocated at the firm's office, where everyone was an employee of the company, the connection to the organization became more noticeable. At the organizations office, there was a weekly breakfast event open for all employees. Though, the majority of the consultants attending these breakfast events were the ones working in-house. One explanation to why on-site consultants showed less interest in these events were given by one interviewee working at a customer's office:

> *" … it takes to much time to go there… If I would come here (to the office) for the breakfast and then go there (to the customer) I would be there around nine or ten perhaps... " (Respondent D)*

The trade-of between spending time at the office and what was given at the breakfast was not favorable for the consultants being located on-site, far away from the office, as it took up too much time from their schedule. Consultants working in-house did also tend to have a closer relationship to their manager as they were working in the same building. This physical proximity was seen to enable a more frequent contact with informal meetings together. Though as earlier noted, this was highly dependent on the manager's type of leadership elaborated upon earlier in Work context.

One of the on-site consultants experiences was different from the general experience when being located on-site. This consultant was content within his situation and had a positive attitude towards the company. On-site, many of his closest colleagues were consultant colleagues from the company. Furthermore, he also described a well-

functioning communication with his closest manager that he highly appreciated. He expressed his feelings towards his job situation as:

" ... I like it very much out there (at customers office) ... I think I know almost every one of them (the colleagues)! I have very good contact with them, many of us started at the same project together." (Respondent D)
and
"We (he and his closest manager) have a very good communication. She usually comes out to us (on-site), like every other week or so, and just talk a bit and then you can continue your work." (Respondent D)

This employee had a positive attitude towards his employing consultancy firm, primarily because of his great relationship with his manager and his close relationship with his colleagues. All of this explained, it could be said that there was a distinct difference between the general experience of the employer, being the consultancy firm, depending on where you are based. The in-house consultants generally had a closer bond to their employer and the brand compared to the on-site consultants having less contact with the firm.

The important role of Work allocation in creating a strong bond between the consultant and the company was proven. Though not seen as a factor for creating a positive experience, Work allocation acted as an enabler for other factors such as Internal brand communication, Internal brand communities and Brand leadership. Though allocated at the company's office made these factors more easily fulfilled, examples of well functioning on-site experience for the consultant was provided. Thus, strengthening Work allocation was not a prerequisite for a positive Work context but rather an enabler where a strong brand leader and good communication with colleagues could counteract negative effects of on-site work.

Courses

One way to further create an extended value exchange to its employees was through the organization wide offering of educational courses. These courses were of different character and provided the employees a wide variety of knowledge, both for professional and personal development. One of the interviewees expressed his view of the courses:

"The courses are really good. The only cost is your own time, then XX (the consultancy firm) pay for the course. So you just have to take the opportunity." (Respondent F)

All courses were scheduled at evenings, after work, making them accessible for all employees, even those not located in-house and those having a tight schedule with their assignment. By the interviewees, these courses were highly valued because they

were free for them to take but otherwise would have cost them money. By each year, the course selection was updated through feedback given by the consultants both for each course and for the over all selection. Interviewees saw that this feedback working well and those new courses were added in order to enable further development. Two of the interviewees had also experienced the possibility to get courses not listed in the ordinary selection but on request for their current assignment. These situations was seen to positively influence the consultants, not only through the value gained through sought knowledge but also as they got their voices heard for their managers.

"They take good feedback so you can tell them what courses you want next year and the will try to make those happen. So they are always very good with the feedback I'd say. They always make us fill up surveys because they actually implement it in the next year." (Respondent B)

Courses fell within the skill development of HRM (Punjaisri et al. 2009) and were an overall well functioning way for the company to provide extra value for its consultants. No negative aspects about the subject were found throughout the interviews. As no courses were mandatory to the consultants, and they were free to join any of them, this made the system flexible enabling the consultants to use it as they wished and helped internalize the brand values (Morhart et al. 2009). Since courses were not central to the employment, these were only to be seen as an extra add-on to the overall employer brand not able to compensate for other potentially negative aspects fully.

Job content

Whereas Work context addressed the contextual factors of for the consultants' job, Job content focused on factors of the actual job that was performed. For which, three areas was identified to be part of throughout the interviews.

Job characteristics

Earlier presented were the industry's tendencies of providing assignments not conforming to the general definition of consultancy work. However, in several cases, interviewees described their job as highly varying with new problems to tackle every day. Hence, even though not working at an expertise level in any field, the work was stimulating and not monotonous which in general was perceived as positive by the interviewees:

"There is no day that is similar to another … That is probably why I've been here for so long." (Respondent F)

This variety was perceived as positive by the interviewees where they had freedom to move and plan their own work, as the days were not strictly set. However, too vaguely

communicated direction of work from management made the job content difficult to relate to and was perceived negative. One interviewee expressed a communal dissatisfaction among his colleagues of the manager's soft style of giving orders not providing enough sense of direction:

"I believe that several of us would like him (the manager) to be more bossy…
Sometimes, he is a bit vague in his orders" (Respondent A)

For several of the interviewees though, little or no direct communication regarding their assignments progress existed between them and their closest managers at the company. This was rather done with involved parties at the customer company regarding the progress important. Thus, a majority of the consultants' actual work engaged the customer rather than the consultancy firm. In-house assignments were more autonomous controlled, often by a project leader at the company and hence involved the customer less while assignments on-site often was completely controlled by the customer. This made the job characteristics depending on the assignment's allocation. Working directly in a customer's team implied a more direct contact with the customer and its employees and directly reporting results to one of its managers. This made the consultant more a part of the customer's settings which further built on the earlier presented Work allocation where not only physical placement could dislocate the consultant from the company but as well organizational dislocation. Described by one of the interviewees sitting as the only consultant from the company at a customer's office:

"It's only me, and I can feel that it is a bit dull… I know that they (the company) are
trying to get one more person in but no, so far it is only me." (Respondent E)

Furthermore, all of the interviewees had experiences from two or more assignments since earlier from which they had seen the different characteristics an assignment could hold. Thus not only was the allocation that the assignment implied, but also the actual work that was done. In general, the interviewees talked about their assignments as interesting and challenging, often matching their personal interest. One had since childhood been interested in cars and was now able to work with it on daily basis, fulfilling a dream of his. Another one spent large parts of his spare time coding applications, a hobby closely related to the work he performed in his assignment.

Several of the interviewees were highly dedicated to their work expressing that they wanted to and gave it everything, which indicated a generally high commitment among employees. One interviewee presented it like following when talking about his leisure activities:

"I guess I'm here quite often… So there is not so much spare time." (Respondent A)

Overall, interviewees were seen satisfied with their assignments, which was to be seen as a hygiene factor for staying at the company and thus not explicitly contributing to the brand. Job characteristics were mainly defined by the job that was performed by the employee in the employer-employee context and thus revolved around the employee's contributions to this (Shore et al. 2009). For consultants, this contribution was seen in explicit as work was put in for the company's customers locating it one step further away from the organization. Through this view, consultants were best contributing to the company by keeping the customer satisfied and continue their assignment making high performance not visible for the consultancy firm. Thus, being part of the customers organization and contributing to this made consultants more incline to connect to this rather than the consultancy firm, hence the job content performed in the assignment was preceding the contribution to the company.

Changing assignment

As a consultant, the job content depended on what assignment you were put on. Some assignments were time-restricted whilst some were ongoing meaning that consultant's sooner or later would change assignment either due to its predetermined termination or by their own will to do something else. This possibility of changing assignment was earlier presented in Corporate reputation as one of the significant aspects of the consultancy industry. Experiences regarding managers' attitude towards consultants changing assignment varied among the interviewees. Some regarded it as welcomed by their manager whilst some felt forced to stay on-site or with an assignment. As it was through discussions between the consultant and the closest manager that these decisions were made, having the manager's support was of great importance. The feeling of more or less being obligated to take on an assignment by their managers was described by several of the interviewees:

" ... He (the manager) expressed it more like... "We can not have you here (at the office) now, we are too many!" That had not really been communicated to us, so that was a little harsh so to speak." (Respondent D)

and

" ... I felt a bit of pressure to take this short assignment, because someone came to me and asked, "Can you take this? We need someone right now". If it would have been a long term assignment it would not be okay, to pressure me like that, to take a job that I didn't really want." (Respondent C)

All of the interviewees had experienced changing assignment and most of them describe the process as non-challenging, though not always directly encouraged by management. This once again depended on the manager's style of handling its consultants, earlier proven as general knowledge within the company and further exemplified by one interviewee:

"Well, I have heard both sides. Where consultancy managers have been very active and working hard on finding new assignments if someone says "I am really tired of

this now" or "I really want to develop my skills in this/another area now". But then I have also heard about those who more or less don't care at all. Like "Well… No I think you should stay where you are." … I really think it depends on what kind of manager you've got." (Respondent B)

While managers' attitude towards initiating the change of assignment for a consultant differed, none of the interviewees had themselves experienced any greater resistances in the process of actually carry through once initiated. Management described their situation as a market overflowing with requests from customers making access to assignments for consultants easy. Regardless the supply of assignments and support from the company, trouble for junior consultants could occur when applying for assignments, as these often required earlier experience. Without experience the options was vastly narrowed down to only a few. Described by one of the interviewees:

"Many of the assignments have requirements that you should have worked for like five years before. So you cannot really get those if you have not worked for a while. Otherwise it is pretty straight forward" (Respondent F)

Appreciated by the interviewees was the short period of notice they had from the assignments. In general, if nothing else was stated in the assignment-contract, the consultant could resign from an assignment within a month:

"It is very nice, because one can do as I am doing now - change assignment with pretty short notice." (Respondent C)

For consultants it was often easy to resign from an assignment but troubles could be met both in finding a new assignment and in the closest managers support of taking such actions. This once again did put emphasis on the manager's key-role in creating a positive brand experience for the consultant through supportive and actionable behavior once the employee signaled the intent of changing assignment. Further, the actions of moving connects to the individual's skill development being part of HRM, aided the personal and professional development described as one of the attractive factors of the industry, particularly for junior consultants early in their career. The degree of rigidity in the structure was highly individual for each consultant as it was the manager who primarily controlled this process.

Work-related feedback
Consultants seldom had a responsibility of directly reporting work progress to their closest manager at the company regarding their assignment. Progress was rather reported to people in charge at the customer company. However, these people were not in charge of the consultant's performance, which was still the consultant manager's responsibility. This created a glitch between who was engaged in the work

and who held the responsibility for the performance, which once again did put the closest manager in a central position for the consultant's brand experience. But rather than being interested in detailed performance, their interest was in keeping the customer happy, only indirectly seen by the consultants performance where performance did not straight off equal customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction was measured through surveys where results from these surveys meant to be used for feedback to the consultants work. One of the interviewees expressed her feelings about this:

> " *… he (the manager) doesn't really know what I am doing, or at least what I am performing." (Respondent C)*

The majority of the interviewees, even the ones having a good relationship and frequent contact with their closest manager, were getting little feedback on their work-performance. The sparse feedback was seen problematic by the consultants where both in-house and on-site consultants expressed a need for a more frequent and personal contact with their closest manager. One of the interviewees explained the feedback he got from his manager in the following way:

> *"Well… Yes, occasionally. It's a back and forth with that, because they (the managers) get very little feedback from the customers. It is mainly, or only, on request that they get it." (Respondent D)*

Where communication between the consultant and its closest manager was sparse though sought by the consultant, a lacking engagement from the closest manager in the consultants' work was seen as disappointing. Described by one interviewee:

> *"Now you only see the manager when you have a meeting regarding your salary, or maybe when you eat breakfast on Fridays, or when you are getting a new assignment… But it does not feel that personal, I would say. And I think that is kind of sad..." (Respondent C)*

Further, the feedback from customers was perceived sparse as well. One interviewee even doubted that managers at customer firms where allowed by contract to give direct feedback to the consultants. That this had to go through the consultant's manager before reaching the individual:

> *"I do not know if they, the managers at (customer company), or any other firm can speak directly to the consultants. But it feels like such things (feedback) goes through the consultancy managers." (Respondent F)*

In general, the feedback given to the consultant did not regard what was perceived of greatest importance for the individual. This due to the different focus of the manager and the consultant where the consultant was performing in the assignment and

technical problem solving, and the manager regarded the customer satisfaction which was only one of the outcomes of the consultant's work performed. Further, the importance of providing the formal feedback regarding customer satisfactions to the consultant was seen given low priority among managers.

"Both times I was to get that (feedback), well it was a couple of years ago now, but then they (the manager/firm) had lost them… Perhaps they did not save it… It feels like it is a thing that are to be done but is not very prioritized" (Respondent E)

Feedback of the consultants' work was a tangled subject where different stakeholders perceived work contribution differently. The company sought to obtain high customer satisfaction, a measurement of high abstraction that easily was taken too far away from the actual job performance by the consultant. This made feedback of consultant's contribution to the organization difficult to relate to when measured only in customer satisfaction. Further, managers' attitude towards this feedback was seen to lack commitment, which signaled a low priority towards consultants. When feedback of work was not given, employees did not get their contributions to the organization recognized, an important function that was to be provided by the manager. This highlighted one further aspect of the manager's role in the interaction contributing to the brands creation.

To finalize this section on Experience with the Employer, of great importance was to highlight the primary and most affecting parts to have in mind when discussing the following part on Employer Brand Association - the work allocation and the relation to the closest manager within the employing organization.

4.3 Employer brand Association

The starting point of the following section is within the above described Familiarity and Experience and thus frequently refers back to earlier presented topics. Associations are the generalized impressions one holds of the employer and will, like the brand itself, be personal and thus differ between employees. The aim is to present associations conforming to several, or all of the interviewees and thus can be argued general for consultants at the company. Of importance are these associations' meanings for the consultants; weather information and experiences are positively or negatively charged for the individual. Associations was in this study interpretations of information given through the interviews, hence this information was not available straight from the interviewees but rather derived from discourses.

The primary associations with the Employer brand was connected to the consultant's closest managers as an extended hand of the employing organization and the work allocation affecting how closely connected the consultants feel to the employing organization. Other associations connected to the Employer Brand regards

interactions with colleagues, job content and the general view of the organization and internal communication.

The company

Overall associations of the company were seen to adhere to the corporate reputation earlier presented in Familiarity. These were the characteristics held by both external stakeholders and the consultants themselves that applied not only to the specific company but also the industry in general. The industry was seen attractive through its displayed freedom for the consultants, freedom embodied in the simplicity of changing assignment and a large variety of assignments to choose from. This was seen to be strongly positive for the consultants and one of the major reasons to be part of the industry, together with the industry's attitude towards employing despite little or no earlier experience making it easy to get into. On the negative side was the industry's reputation of being seen as a staffing agency, where assignments were business as usual for customers rather than one-of expertise-projects.

"I'd say that the consultancy industry is like a large employment agency. They delegate jobs to us." (Respondent F)

One of the subjects that the interviewees drew attention to was the business focus that corporate management emphasized. Both the consultants that participated in the study, and representatives from management spoke about the new business focus that had arisen since the merge. In majority, the business focus was perceived as something negative for the consultants, though positive for the company as a whole. These perceptions were built upon the communicated propensity of the firm where focus mainly was on the growth in numbers of employees and assignments rather than in how this growth increased opportunities for the consultants. As discussed by one interviewee:

"They talk a lot about how many we will become, but they don't talk that much about what benefits that gives us employees other than that it creates new opportunities for assignments! But I don't believe it until I see it..." (Respondent D)

Such questionings of the current overall goal of the company, with an undertone of negativism, implied the interviewee's skeptic attitude towards the goal of growth. Though seen positive for the company as a whole, the change towards getting bigger and hiring more employees was in total perceived negative for the individual consultant. Though growth and propensity were positively charged words, the actions and communication of this within the firm was overall perceived as negative by the consultants.

An explanation to the skepticism was found in the consultants' relation to their closest manager which several interviewees perceived as impersonal where managers gave

little attention to the individual consultant. Furthermore in the formal communication information in general did not seem to catch the consultants' attention. Interviewees gave the impression of considering themselves as a very small part of a big, and ever growing, organization. Several discussed the consultants' role in the firm comparing it to a product with the purpose of mainly delivering sales:

"I am like a 1500-part of the firm." (Respondent D)
and
"It is a bit like you are a product." (Respondent E)

This skepticism towards the focus on growth and feelings of impersonal treatment of the consultants was in a great sense affecting the employees' total view on their employment. Negative effects were seen as a result of the size of the company being extrapolated onto a future even greater company with greater negative aspects for the individual. Thus, a future increasingly negative for the consultants where little aspects of positive development were communicated for countering these either from management or the formal channels for information.

Management making their visibility low for the employees, explaining the interviewees' low knowledge of these, rarely promoted the company's CSR-activities internally. Even though little was known about these initiatives, what was perceived was mainly negatively presented in the interviews. Mostly emphasized was the company's low commitment to initiatives showing a half-hearted drive for the social questions addressed where little follow-up was either given or at least not communicated. Further, the company was displayed as inferior its customers in taking social responsibility through its operations of selecting assignments having a positive impact on its context. Thus, the company's stance in social responsibility was perceived neutral due to their poor communication, and in some aspects negative, through weak position against its customers and half-heartedness in commitment to initiatives.

Another aspect of the company was it's wide selection of courses available for the employees to take. These were seen to have a greatly positive impact on the interviewees' perception of the company. With a well functioning feedback system, the course catalog was kept up to date every year and held relevant for the employees. The courses provided important extra value in the employee-employer relation, thus acting as a complement to the overall value-exchange experienced by the employee.

The job

The main perceptions of the job content were positive for the interviewees where assignments were matching their personal interests. Being occupied with assignments personally valued for the consultants did set the prerequisites for enjoying the employments. However, noticed in several of the interviews was the general fear of

being assigned a job not matching the consultant's preferences, described to occasionally happen at the company. Since assignments could be limited to a period of time, consultants regularly moved around to new assignments exposing themselves for this risk.

Even though the consultants regarded the possibility of changing assignments positively, this was seen to not always encourage by the managers. In several of the cases, consultants had even experienced or heard of managers being directly negative about the employees changing assignments. This did to a great extent conflict the consultants view of the company, whereas they in the beginning of their employment were told that they could easily change assignments and would have several assignments to choose from, but this turned out not to be well received or not encouraged by the managers. Having this in mind, the associations being made towards the Employer Brand took a turn when consultants experienced a conflict in wanting the encouragement to change assignment if not satisfied with the current one, but not getting it from the managers.

Consultants that worked on-site perceived assignments to be more controlled by managers at the customer company. Thus, when on-site, work was perceived being executed for the customer firm, which disconnected the consultant from the consultancy firm. The contribution was not perceived less valuable but did no longer address the consultancy firm creating less affiliation to it. Though, less tendencies for such perceptions was seen for consultants stationed in in-house projects at the company's office. These saw themselves and their contributions through their job closer connected to the company. Having a closer affiliation to the company was in this study seen contribute to an overall more positive approach towards the company.

Not only was the physical allocation of the consultant seen contribute to its perceptions of the company. Of even greater importance was the relationship between the consultant and its closest manager. Several of the consultants talked about an almost non-existing work-related feedback, which was directly related to the consultants expressing a need for a more frequent and personal contact with their closest manager. A stimulating job situation was depending on the consultants being satisfied with the assignments, which only could be discovered and handled through a frequent communication with their closest managers. A situation where the employees were dissatisfied with their job situation and not feeling seen or heard contributed to negative associations of the Employer Brand.

The context

Associations held by the consultants falling within the work context connect to their use of formal and informal channels for information, relationships with co-workers and the relationship with their closest manager. These forms of interaction sat the prerequisites for being satisfied with the context of their work and job situation. In

this section, associations were shown mainly affected by the consultant's physical allocation, its relationships with co-workers and closest manager. For consultants in-house, formal communication was perceived positive since they found the information useful, whilst the on-site consultants felt less concerned of the information in the formal channels and therefore did not use them as often. Furthermore, the contact with the employee's closest co-workers and managers was of great importance for how information was spread and the general satisfaction and well being in a work context.

There was a noticeable difference in how consultants consumed the information that was given to them through the formal communication channels. Consultants based in-house described a more frequent use of the intranet and the company email, from where they got information on activities going on at the office. Thus, seen a good way of being updated and was predominantly appreciated. They gave the impression of having quite neutral feelings about the formal way of communicating, but since the general view was that the site and newsletters were good ways of receiving information on what was going on within the company and department, hence the conclusion was that the associations of the Employer Brand was positively affected. When analyzing the interviews with the consultants based on-site who used of the formal communication channels seldom, primarily based on the perception that the information found there did not concern them, the main associations were negative. This lack of interest in the formal channels resulted in a difficulty for the management to reach out to the employees with information, and the consultants ended up feeling disconnected to the employing organization, thus creating negative associations with the Employer Brand.

The interactions between consultants within departments was considered among the employees to be the best way of getting information regarding what was going on within the firm. When discussing this in the interviews, the consultants described their relationships with their closest co-workers as good and meaningful for the well being at work. Contrary to this, there was more or less no interactions at all with colleagues from other departments of the firm. Though, the employees did not consider this a negative thing, as the majority has good relationships with their co-workers within the department. The informal communication was made possible through the good relationships between co-workers. Moreover, these relationships were positive for what associations being made to the Employer Brand since a friendly and communicative surrounding was important for the general feeling of satisfaction at work.

Finally, a communicative, frequent and personal contact with the closest manager was of great importance for building positive associations with the Employer Brand. Some of the consultants expressed a job situation where they had frequent and personal communication with their closest managers, which created positive associations to the Employer Brand since the manager worked as a connection between the employee

and the firm. Other consultants discussed having less frequent and quite impersonal communication with their closest manager even though requesting the opposite, that created negative associations to the Employer Brand for the same reasons as mentioned regarding the positive associations.

4.4 Employer brand Loyalty

On the basis of the above-described associations loaded with positive and negative values by the interviewees interpreted through a discourse analysis, a stance of loyalty was created for the individual consultant. Positively associations increased the propensity of acting loyal while negative associations counteracted such behavior. Loyalty was not straight off equal to the employees' propensity to remain in the company, but was better viewed as the organizational commitment acted out in the overall behavior and attitude. Of importance was to recognize loyalty as a dyadic relation between employee and employer where the exchange of loyal enactment was two-way. Three types of loyalty were identified that related to the employer loyalty: loyalty towards the closest manager, the closest colleagues and the customer company. Of which, the two foremost were parts of the employer loyalty whilst customer loyalty counteracted this loyalty by taking away parts affiliation to the company.

The view on loyalty

Interviewees were asked about how they themselves viewed their relation to their employer and if and how enacted loyalty. Several of the interviewees perceived it as a relation of giving and taking from both parts, a dyadic relation. The exchange of being loyal had a price from where benefits of acting in a favorable way for the company had to yield the employer.

> *"You must always ask yourself "What do I get and what do they get?" (Respondent D)*

This exchange of loyalty was seen not only being measured in monetary terms in the consultants' paycheck but also included several other parameters. Thus, a consciousness of the loyalty-relationship's complexity was exhibited among the interviewees where employees weights in several other intangible aspects in the exchange.

> *"The salary is motivating only to a certain point…"(Respondent F)*

Relatively well-paid consultants perhaps viewed salary as a hygiene factor for event taking take employment from the very beginning and thus not even a relevant parameter for these to be discussed when considering their loyalty to the company.

This was overall confirmed as several of the interviewees not even mentioned salary as a factor.

Types of loyalty

Of further interest was how the actual loyalty between employee and employer was created through the associations developed through experiences and knowledge earlier presented. First of, loyalty was seen to exist not only towards the company as a whole but both on different levels and in other directions. Out of which, primary three types of actors was identified to have a distinctive type of loyalty-relationship to the employees: the closest manager, the closest colleagues and the customer company. Their specific characteristics will further be described below.

The closest manager

Within the company, consultants' closest managers had in several aspects proven to hold a key role for the consultants overall experiences, even in cases where sparse communications were seen composing the whole relationship. For employees that perceived their relation as negative and thus the exchange of benefits unbalanced were loyalty towards the manager not existing. However, for those interviewees that experienced a well functioning relationship between them and their manager, one type of loyalty was created tied to this specific person rather than the overall company. This loyalty was earlier embodied in the consultants' knowledge of the scarcity of good managers within the company. One interviewee demonstrated this loyalty's importance to the overall employment when he talked about an earlier colleague's experience of having a bad manager:

"... that was not the nicest way, I would also leave XX if I had a manager like that!"
(Respondent B)

This loyalty was largely built upon a shared understanding of needs that shaped the communication and relation between consultant and manager. Even though several of the interviewees preferred close communication, a more distanced type of relation was experienced in the majority of the cases. This provided evidence for employees valuing a customized relation to their closest manager where communication was individual and directly affected their loyalty towards this person.

The closest colleagues

The second type of loyalty was identified in the relationship to other employees in the company. Social boundaries between departments were seen to exist where small groups of employees constituted the closest social network for an employee in the company. Further boundaries were to be seen between consultants and general management where the mentality of differentiating "them" from "us" through the interviews attested this. The physical and work-related aspects that divided employees within the company thus explained boundaries. Closer relations with employees were

seen to better create a sense of belonging, which motivated enacting loyalty to a greater extent towards these than to the company. Tight relations with the closest colleagues were seen an as a major part of the total loyalty of the brand:

"I could just as well quit and take employment somewhere else. But what make me stay are probably my new assignment and the people I have got to know here…" (Respondent E)

The customer company

Thirdly, and mainly for consultants that worked on-site in customer projects, a sense of belonging to the customer company was created. A changed sense of affiliation balanced away some of the belonging to the consultancy firm that lowered the overall loyalty where loyalty rather was allocated towards the customer and its employees to which stronger ties were created. Some of the interviewees even expressed a greater sense of responsibility towards the customer than towards its employer.

With these three types of loyalty, interviewees balanced their belonging and motivation to go the extra mile. If it was for their manager, colleagues, the customer or a combination of these differed but all had at least one of these to lean on in their employment. Else than this loyalty, what made them stay in the company when able to take employment at other consultancy firms with short notice in the prevailing conditions of the labor market where supply is short? From the more senior consultants, one possible explanation to this question was found. Over time, employments tended to build up securities and freedom for employees. One consultant explained a situation where his long period of employment had resulted in him feeling confident in his job and wanted to take advantage of the amount of knowledge and trust he had built up for himself within the company:

" … I ride my own wave right now. I can go up to the managers at the 6th floor and just say "I want to talk to you about this" and they listen to me. That would never happen for a new employee at any other consultancy firm or other company. If I were to leave, I would have to work my way up again during 20 years…" (Respondent A)

How the associations affected loyalty within the company

After having described the different types of loyalty and the view within the company, the final part was to connect the associations with the loyalty among the employees of the organization. According to the model on EBE, loyalty towards the employer acquired that the existing employees had developed associations with the Employer Brand through experiences with and knowledge of the employing organization (Alshathry et al. 2017). Following paragraph will conclude what main associations were affecting the loyalty among the consultants at the firm.

Firstly, of great importance was as earlier mentioned the associations connected to the feelings towards the relationship with the closest manager. Since the closest managers figured as extensions of the employing organization, the consultants view on the organization depended on the associations connected to the behavior of these managers. The analysis of the consultants view on the managers showed both negative and positive associations. The consultants that had positive associations with their closest managers, expressed feelings of being very satisfied in their job situation and literally said that they wanted to stay within the department under the manager, since "good managers was not easy to find". This loyalty towards their closest manager indicated an indirect loyalty towards the employing organization since the closest manager figured as an extension of the organization. On the other hand, consultants that had negative associations connected to their experience of their closest manager expressed no feelings of loyalty towards the employing organization.

Secondly, the process regarding the work allocation was strongly affecting the view of the employing organization. This part of the associations was connected to interactions and frequency in contact with their closest managers. The results showed a distinct correlation between managers interacting frequently with their consultants and the consultants being satisfied with their job situations and work allocation. Furthermore, how the work allocation affected the associations drawn to the organizations did show differences in whether the consultants were based in-house or on-site. Consultants that were based in-house showed a stronger connection to the employing organization, creating positive associations. These associations contributed to a sense of belonging and feeling connected to the Employer Brand, which created loyalty. The consultants that were based on-site described a disconnection towards the employing organization, since physical location and a feeling of the formal information not regarding them made it harder to feel closely connected. This did result in the consultants developing negative associations and thus not a feeling of loyalty towards the employer.

5. Conclusion and discussion

The purpose of the study was to establish a practical applicable model for understanding how Employer Branding-efforts affects employees' propensity to stay with their employer. A model was developed by combining the two theoretical frameworks of Internal Branding and Employer Brand Equity providing a complementary stance focusing on both how and what to affect in the employer brand. Thus, the theoretical base applied obtained comprehensiveness not to be found in either of the frameworks exclusively. The model was further used in an empirical study of the technical consultancy industry where one firm was studied taking the employees' perceptions. Through the study, the model's practical applicability was proven - hence providing the sought purpose of the study to better understand employer branding for employee retention. By connecting empirical findings to the model's content through logical reasoning, primary factors affecting the employees' perceptions and thus loyalty to the employer brand of the consultancy firm was illustrated.

Employees' level of knowledge is seen having an overall moderate effect on the employer brand where positive and negative associations derives from general characteristics of the technical consultancy industry as a whole. Predominantly positive attributes are identified to be the employee freedom to choose assignments and opportunities to explore different professional roles as well as technical industries. Negative attributes consist mainly of the industry's tendency to treat consultants as products rather than expertise professionals and individuals. Although affecting the employer brand, these factors saw a secondary impact put to the whole, where their primary effects related to the initial choice of industry.

Of greater importance for the employer brand are factors of Experience that the employees obtain over time in the employee-employer relationship. These build upon interactions in exchanges accumulating over time making experiences naturally becoming the dominant source to the individual's associations in an ongoing employment. Whilst Familiarity was rather coherent, Experiences differed among employees making factors clearly distinguishable. Mainly two factors, work allocation and closest manager, was identified to have significant impact on the overall employer brand. Work allocation constitutes the physical placement of the employee where on-site consultants perceive their employment inferior to those placed in-house. Being on-site made consultants less affiliated to the consultancy firm and thus holds less affection and thus less loyal behavior. Secondly, employees' relation with their closest manager is seen to be either close and personal or distanced and stricter. These characteristics are directly linked to the management-style used by each individual manager. Generally, the employees preferred the former relation where a committed manager provides essential visibility of the consultant making it feel included in the company while the latter had negative effects on the employees' perception of the company. It is these insights provided through this study, further

research can depart from and contemporary practice apply to build stronger employer brands and for employee retention.

5.1 Method Discussion

The study's results have limited applicability outside the consultancy company. Above presented general results are thought to be expected applicable to the industry as a whole, whereas company-specific results are not suitable extrapolating to other companies in the same industry. Further, qualitative studies' can be questioned regarding the methods transparency. This is in the study provided through the thick description supported by plentiful citations from the interviews resulting in a well-founded, detailed analysis. Thus aiding the reader to see the logical reasoning throughout the text.

The six interviewees in the study were voluntary participants, a choice made to ease the search for interviewees but not engage management in the process of finding participants. This choice was reasoned most adequate for maintaining the study's requirements of anonymity. However, possibly jeopardizing its validity as such approach can attract participants especially inclined to utter their voice of either content or discontent. Such would therefore provide polarized answers that highlight only extreme opinions within the company, thus not generally representative. For this study, interviewees had similar opinions in several questions, which implies that these are general opinions validated by the high degree of compliance. For further studies though, this aspect needs to be more carefully addressed. Further, the study's setting did not allow a totally randomized sample to be selected due to restricted resources, time and access to consultants. Regarding given prerequisites of the study, choice of sample is deemed most suitable.

Interviews were held at the office of the company, which can be perceived as a non-neutral environment for the interviews to be conducted in. However, as interviews were always held secluded from colleagues, and managers and mainly off working hours, the environment was not seen interfere with the interviewees' answers. A more neutral environment is therefore deemed not enabling more honest answers from the interviewees.

Excluding management from the interview-sample was deliberately done as their perceptions was not of interest with the given research-questions. However, as the study proceeded these actors were seen to have an increasingly important role for shaping the consultants perceptions of the brand and thus the loyalty created in their relationship. Further exclusion-criteria of deselecting consultants with less than two years of experience working as a consultant was seen effective as all interviewees had more than enough experiences and knowledge about the company to share during the interviews. If a lower or perhaps higher criterion could have been motivated is hard to determine though.

Focusing on only the parameter of physical allocation of the consultant, provided sought results as this was confirmed to be one of the main factors mediating the total brand-experience for the employers. From given prerequisite this is deemed to have been the best possible focus for the study. In the following section of further research, more possible factors identified through this study will be presented to contribute to a better understanding of the topic.

5.2 Further research

Employer branding is a complex subject of several domains and possible approaches to study in similar research for gaining a better understanding of how it is applied in practice. As this study is limited to only one company, a more comprehensive studied of the technical consultancy industry would be needed to further confirm findings in this study and make these more readily applicable in the industry as general factors. Thus, a more overarching study taking into account consultants companies of different characteristics as well as customers.

Further, the closest manager was only highlighted in this study as one of the key actors for creating the brand experience for the consultant. More comprehensive research of this specific relationship would be needed to better understand the how this is to be and what factors of this person's conduct is of importance for the consultant. Thus, a need to extend research towards managers' perceptions would complement the established approach with a deeper understanding of their behavior in the context where both sides of the interaction of sub-factors can be identified. The work allocation is, similar to the closest manager, in this study merely highlighted as one of the great influencing factors on the employer brand. Thus, research needs to further explore the contextual factors within work allocation to better understand how these influence the employer brand.

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Appendix – Interview guide

Studien görs helt anonymt och vi kommer inte använda namn på varken arbetsgivare eller personer som medverkar. Både för deltagarnas integritet och att inte finns någon vinning för studien att göra detta.

För oss hade det varit bra om vi kan spela in intervjun, detta handlar om att vi vill kunna fånga allt som sägs i intervjun på rätt sätt. Det material som sedan är aktuellt att använda i studien kommer vi såklart att be om tillåtelse från dig att använda. Är det okej för dig att vi spelar in?

Vi studerar marknadsföring på Handelshögskolan här i Göteborg där vi just nu gör vårt kandidatarbete. I vår studie fokuserar vi på dig som nuvarande anställd här på XX och vill ta din synvinkel. Hur du som teknisk konsult förhåller dig till din arbetsgivare och ser på din arbetssituation. Vi kommer att prata om saker som dina upplevelser och erfarenheter med ditt arbete/arbetsgivare, din kunskap om ditt arbete/arbetsgivare, hur du ser på lojalitet och vilka associationer du gör till ditt jobb.

Vår intervjun kommer att utgår ifrån dessa punkter, men vi börjar mer allmänt om dig.

ALLMÄNT (inledande frågor/konversation)
Berätta lite om dig själv!
(VÄRDERINGAR)
Personliga värderingar/ viktiga områden/ vad personen värdesätter (behöver ej vara jobbrelaterat) - hög/bred nivå.
Samhällsfrågor som man brinner för?
Varför?
Hur engagerar du dig i dessa frågor idag?
Om arbetet
Hur länge har du jobbat här?
Hur länge har du arbetat som teknisk konsult.
Vad jobbar du med?
Ute hos kund/på kontoret?
Hur ser en typisk arbetsdag ut?
Vilka människor möter du?

Vad visste du om XX innan anställning?
Hur fick du reda på detta?
Hur är XX ansett i konsultbranschen enligt dig?

Känner du till företagets vision?
Hur blir du informerad och påmind om denna?
Vad tycker du om den?
Hur märks detta i ditt arbete?
Hur märks det i företaget?

Hur hjälper din närmaste chef dig att arbeta mot visionen?
Hur agerar de själva efter visionen?

EXPERIENCE
Hur kommunicerar din närmsta chef med dig?
Hur tycker du att det fungerar?
Vad får du för feedback?
Får du dina idéer hörda? Blir du sedd? Uppskattad?
Vad finns det för förmåner i din anställning?
Finns det något som du saknar?
Vad utnyttjar du inte för förmåner? varför?
Hur är gemenskapen inom företaget tycker du?
Varför tycker du att det är så? Några exempel
Hur får du reda på vad som händer i företaget?
Känner du att du har bra koll på vad som händer i ftg?
Prat med medarbetare, formell kommunikation?

FAMILIARITY
Vilket samhällsansvar ser du att XX tar?
Finns det möjligheter för dig att engagera sig i dessa frågor genom arbetet?
Hur?
Tycker du att XX tar sitt sociala ansvar?

Finns det några initiativ från kollegor för att utvecklas sina intressen eller dyl.? *Utöver*
formella arbetsuppgifter, fritid etc.
Hur har dessa tagits emot av företaget?
Hur pratas det om värderingarna i företaget? (Kollegor emellan eller ute hos kund,
informellt snack)

ASSOCIATION
Vad förknippar du med företaget?
Positiva/negativa associationer efter kunskap och erfarenhet → hur och vilka
associationer skapas genom kunskap och erfarenhet?

LOYALTY
Hur ser du på dina förpliktelser mot din arbetsgivare?
Övertid
Det lilla extra
Tillgänglighet utanför arbetstid

ATT STANNA I FÖRETAGET
Hur ser du på din arbetssituation?
Vad är ditt mål med anställningen?
Har du möjlighet att utvecklas i ftg?
Intern befordran?

Hur länge planerar du att stanna i företaget?
Vad skulle din arbetsgivare kunna göra för att få dig att stanna längre?
Vad motiverar dig?
Hur kommuniceras detta?
(Commitment
Uppmuntran till att upprätthålla en nära relation till organisationen
Attityder och beteende)

AVSLUTANDE
Har du något du vill tillägga innan vi avslutar?
Vad får dig att stanna på XX?