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Economics

# Charging up Talent

A case study on employer branding to attract and retain student talent

Master's thesis  
in International Business

Author:  
Lea Heikkilä

Supervisors:  
Ph.D. Eriikka Paavilainen-Mäntymäki  
D.Sc. Jonathan Van Mumford

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**Author:** Lea Heikkilä

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Human capital is a vital asset for companies, impacting their productivity and performance in competitive markets. A compelling employer brand serves as a strategic advantage, enhancing a company's ability to attract and retain top talent. Employer branding has gained attention due to its impact on a company's position on the labour market and due to its effects on critical business factors, including employee engagement, performance, recruitment costs, and talent acquisition.

Students are pivotal for companies aiming to build sustainable and innovative teams. Attracting them as trainees or junior team members establishes a foundation for long-term, skilled workforce. Understanding what influences their career decisions and how employer branding impacts their choices is crucial for organizations that seek to gain competitive advantage in acquiring young talent. Beyond domestic students, foreign students and international specialists are vital for economies like Finland's, enhancing innovation and supporting export industries by broadening and diversifying the skilled labour base and introducing new perspectives. Research confirms that diverse teams yield financial benefits, outperforming industry standards.

The theoretic framework for this research is a combination of marketing and human resource management literature. The literature review covers the external and internal employer brand and various employer branding activities. A fundamental part of a company's employer brand is its employer value proposition, meaning the benefits and rewards that an organization provides to its employees in exchange for their skills, capabilities, and experiences. The theory section also discusses students as a key talent pool and describes common young professionals' characteristics, as well as the importance of international student talent. Lastly, a theoretic framework is presented, which showcases how internal and external employer brands affect student talent's experiences of the company's employer brand and how successful employer branding activities can build a strong student talent base.

This study focuses on the role of a company's employer brand in attracting and retaining student talent. Furthermore, the study aims to explain reasons for engaging in employer branding and describe how companies can execute it. Based on these aims, the main research problem is to analyze how companies could enhance their employer brand and improve their ability to attract and retain student talent effectively. The main research problem is approached by three subproblems: 1.) What attributes and criteria could make prospective employers more attractive to student talent? 2.) What is the role of traineeship in formulating the student perceptions of the employer and in employee retention among student talent? 3.) How can companies build a strong student talent base by leveraging their employer brand? The chosen research approach for this qualitative study is a single case study. The data was collected by conducting eight semi-structured interviews on employees from the case company who started as summer trainees in 2023, and one expert interview with an HR Specialist of the company.

The findings support existing literature and research, supporting that students value learning and growth opportunities over salary. The trainees had learned about the traineeship opportunities largely by word-of-mouth, thus granting a good trainee experience is vital to affect this word-of-mouth information positively. To build a strong student talent base, companies must invest in both internal and external employer branding and highlight attributes and values important to students in their employer value proposition.

**Key words:** employer brand, employer branding, student talent



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Inhimillinen pääoma on yrityksille elintärkeä voimavara, sillä niiden tuottavuus ja suorituskyky riippuvat työntekijöiden laadusta. Menestyäkseen kilpailluilla markkinoilla yritykset tarvitsevat ammattitaitoisia työntekijöitä. Vakuuttava työnantajabrändi voi toimia strategisena voimavarana ja todellisena kilpailuetuna, jonka avulla yritykset voivat houkuttaa ja säilyttää huippulahjakkuuksia. Työnantajabrändäys on saanut laajaa huomiota sekä tutkijoiden että markkinoinnin ja henkilöstöhallinnon ammattilaisten keskuudessa, koska sillä on vaikutusta yrityksen asemaan työmarkkinoilla ja se vaikuttaa kriittisiin liiketoimintatekijöihin, kuten työntekijöiden sitoutumiseen, suorituskykyyn, rekrytointikustannuksiin ja kykyjen hankintaan.

Opiskelijat ovat ratkaisevan tärkeä väestöryhmä yrityksille, jotka pyrkivät rakentamaan kestäviä ja innovatiivisia tiimejä. Opiskelijoiden houkuttelemisen joko harjoittelijoiksi tai nuoremmiksi tiimin jäseniksi voi luoda pohjan pitkän aikavälin ammattitaitoiselle työvoimalle. Opiskelijoiden uravalintoja muokkaavien tekijöiden ymmärtäminen ja se, miten työnantajabrändäys voi vaikuttaa opiskelijoiden päätöksentekoprosessiin, on elintärkeää organisaatioille, jotka pyrkivät saamaan kilpailuetua nuorten lahjakkuuksien hankinnassa.

Tämän tutkimuksen teoreettinen viitekehys on yhdistelmä markkinoinnin ja henkilöstöjohtamisen kirjallisuutta. Kirjallisuuskatsaus kattaa ulkoisen ja sisäisen työnantajabrändin sekä käy läpi erilaisia työnantajabrändäysstrategioita. Keskeinen osa yrityksen työnantajabrändiä on sen työnantajalupaus (employer value proposition), eli ainutlaatuinen etuuksien ja palkkioiden kokonaisuus, jonka organisaatio tarjoaa työntekijöilleen vastineeksi heidän taidoistaan, kyvyistään ja kokemuksestaan.

Tässä tutkimuksessa keskitytään yrityksen työnantajabrändin rooliin opiskelijoiden houuttelemisessa ja sitouttamisessa. Lisäksi tutkimuksessa pyritään selittämään työnantajabrändäyksen hyötyjä ja selvittämään, miten yritykset voivat toteuttaa sitä. Näiden tavoitteiden perusteella päätutkimusongelmana on analysoida, miten yritykset voivat parantaa työnantajabrändiään ja parantaa kykyään houkuttaa ja sitouttaa opiskelijalahjakkuuksia tehokkaasti. Päätutkimusongelmaa lähestytään kolmen alaongelman kautta: 1.) Mitkä ominaisuudet ja kriteerit voisivat tehdä mahdollisista työnantajista houkuttelevampia opiskelijalahjakkuuksien kannalta? 2.) Mikä on harjoittelun rooli opiskelijoiden työnantajakäsitysten muodostumisessa sitouttamisessa? 3.) Miten yritykset voivat rakentaa vahvan opiskelijalahjakkuuspohjan hyödyntämällä työnantajabrändiään? Tähän laadulliseen tutkimukseen valittu tutkimuslähestymistapa on yksittäistapaustutkimus. Aineisto kerättiin tekemällä kahdeksan puolistrukturoitua haastattelua case-yrityksen työntekijöille, jotka aloittivat kesäharjoittelujoina vuonna 2023, sekä yksi asiantuntijahaastattelu yrityksen HR-asiantuntijan kanssa.

Tulokset tukevat olemassa olevaa kirjallisuutta ja tutkimusta, joiden mukaan opiskelijat arvostavat erityisesti oppimis- ja kasvumahdollisuuksia. Harjoittelijat olivat saaneet tietoa harjoittelumahdollisuuksista pitkälti suullisesti (word-of-mouth), joten hyvän harjoittelukokemuksen takaaminen on tärkeää, jotta tähän suulliseen tietoon voidaan vaikuttaa myönteisesti. Rakentaakseen vahvan opiskelijakykyjen pohjan yritysten on investoitava sekä sisäiseen että ulkoiseen työnantajabrändäykseen ja korostettava työnantajalupauksessaan opiskelijoille tärkeitä ominaisuuksia ja arvoja.

**Avainsanat:** työnantajamielikuva, työnantajabrändi, työnantajabrändäys, opiskelijalahjakkuus

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

“A company can only ever be as good as its people.” (Hoppe et al. 2022, 139.)

Human capital is a vital asset for companies, with their productivity and performance depending on the quality of their employees (Huselid 1995, 667). To succeed in a competitive market, companies need skilled employees. Attracting the right talent has always been a challenge, but in today’s job market, organizations find it even more difficult to stand out from a global pool of competing potential employers. (Hoppe et al. 2022, 139.) Therefore, in this highly competitive landscape, many organizations have made it a key strategic priority of attracting and retaining talented employees. (Maheshwari et al. 2017, 543).

In today’s world, the significance of a robust brand is undeniable, whether it’s luxury fashion, innovative technology, or even entire nations. Just as companies invest in building their brand to attract and retain customers, it’s equally crucial to establish a compelling employer brand to attract skilled and motivated talent to join the workforce.

In order to lure the right talent, companies must stand out in a competitive market where employees have more demanding expectations than ever, and where the competition for skilled workforce is intensifying. Creating impressive ad campaigns when recruiting or providing enticing employee benefits only get companies so far – to find mutually beneficial solutions, companies must prioritize improving the employee experience and building a solid employer brand. A compelling employer brand can serve as a strategic asset and a true competitive advantage, enabling companies to attract top talent and ultimately succeed in the competitive labour market. (Huhta & Myllyntaus 2021.)

Employer branding has gained widespread attention by both academics and practitioners in marketing and human resources due to its impact on a company’s position on the labour market and due to its effects on critical business factors, including employee engagement, performance, recruitment costs, and talent acquisition (Lievens & Slaughter 2016, 408.).

Students represent a crucial demographic for companies that aim to build sustainable and innovative teams (Tulgan 2015, 3). Attracting students, whether as trainees or junior team members, can lay the foundation for a long-term, skilled workforce (Festing et al. 2017).

Acquiring fresh student talent can help organizations navigate in the increasing global talent shortage (Theurer et al 2018, 155). Understanding the elements that shape the career choices of students and how employer branding can contribute to their decision-making process is vital for organizations that seek to gain a competitive edge in acquiring young talent.

Despite the acknowledged importance of employer branding in talent acquisition, there is an insufficiency of comprehensive research specifically addressing its impact on attracting student talent. This study aims to address this gap by examining the key dimensions of an employer brand that resonate with students and the broader impact of these employer brand perceptions on their career choices. By exploring these aspects, the study seeks to offer valuable insights for the case organization, clarifying its employer branding strategies and enhancing its appeal to the student demographic.

## **1.2 Research problems and structure of the thesis**

This study focuses on the role of a company's employer brand in attracting and retaining student talent. Furthermore, the study aims to explain reasons for engaging in employer branding and describe how companies can execute it. Based on these aims, the main research problem is as follows:

*The target is to analyze how a company could enhance its employer brand and improve its ability to attract and retain student talent effectively.*

The main research problem is approached by three subproblems, which provide a better understanding of the topic:

1. What attributes and criteria could make prospective employers more attractive to student talent?
2. What is the role of traineeship in formulating the student perceptions of the employer and in employee retention among student talent?
3. How can companies build a strong student talent base by leveraging their employer brand?

This study is structured as follows: The next two chapters provide an overview of the topic's existing academic literature and create the foundation for the research. Chapter

two focuses on the concepts of employer brand and employer branding, defining them, exploring the dimensions of an employer brand, as well as advantages and different ways to execute employer branding. Chapter three dives more into the students as a key talent pool, discussing the characteristics of student talent, international students, and lastly, presents a framework that combines employer branding and student talent.

In chapter four, Methodology, research design and decisions regarding data collection and analysis are presented and explained. In addition, the trustworthiness of the collected data and credibility of the whole study are evaluated.

Chapter five, Findings, presents key findings of the collected and analyzed data. After this, in chapter six, Conclusions, the theoretical contribution based on the results of this research are presented. In addition, managerial implications and suggestions for further research are provided. Finally, chapter seven summarizes the study, what was researched and what was found.

The phenomenon of employer branding has originally emerged from the challenges in human resource management, which are addressed through marketing theories. Thus, this phenomenon connects elements from both marketing and human resources management. To examine the rather fragmented field and differing perspectives of employer branding, this study integrates both marketing and management literature. The purpose of this study is to explore how a specific company can shape its employer brand in the eyes of a specific target group, students, both before and during their employment, to attract and retain student talent. To achieve this, employer branding theory is examined from both the company's and the individual's viewpoints. Since creating an employer brand is a strategy for the company to distinguish itself and to retain and develop its intellectual capital, the theory is considered from both perspectives.

## 2 Theoretical foundations of the employer brand

### 2.1 Central concepts: Employer brand and employer branding

To grasp the concept of *employer brand*, it is useful to begin by examining the broader term, *brand*. The American Marketing Association (2024) defines a brand as “any distinctive feature like a name, term, design, or symbol that identifies goods or services”. Moilanen and Rainisto (2009, 6) in turn emphasize the customer’s role, defining a brand as “an impression perceived in a client’s mind of a product or a service.” They suggest that a brand is the sum of all the characteristics – whether tangible, intangible, psychological and sociological – that come to mind when thinking about a specific brand.

A brand serves to individualize and distinguish the offering from other competing goods. It can be described as a promise of something and a certain personality that the customer can connect to (Moilanen & Rainisto 2009, 6). A brand’s identity encompasses both its functional and experiential characteristics, playing a significant role in creating emotional connections, building trust and loyalty, and influencing brand preference (Ahmad & Thyagaraj 2015, 38; Anholt 2003, 1).

These definitions and descriptions of the term *brand* can also be broadened to describe the term *employer brand* as well. In the same way as customers form perceptions of a company’s brand, other stakeholders, including employees, also develop their own views. (Maheshwari et al. 2017, 742). Thus, instead of future or current clients as the target group, a company’s the employer brand aims to address potential and current employees (Huhta & Myllyntaus 2021).

An employer brand inherently includes the fundamental brand elements such as the company’s logo, name, or slogan. However, more importantly, it conveys the message of what kind of a workplace the company offers. (Theurer et al. 2018, 156.) A company with a strong employer brand is more appealing in the labour market. The core of an employer brand should reflect the spirit and values of the company’s people. An employer brand is an idea of what the employer is like and a promise of what kind of a workplace the organization offers to potential employees. (Huhta & Myllyntaus 2021.)

The concept of using marketing to build an employer brand and attract talent originated in the 1990s. In 1991, Stephen King published an article in which he proposed that the

personnel director should be involved when managing a company's brand. His view was that there seemed to be a barrier between marketing and personnel departments, and that companies could benefit by seeing their personnel director as a marketing person. King's idea was that an organization could benefit in multiple ways when finding employees who want to connect to this specific company's brand. (King 1991.)

Numerous scholars and practitioners have contributed to this idea, with the most notable contributions coming from Simon Barrow and Tim Ambler five years after King's article. Barrow and Ambler have been widely credited for their work with creating and popularizing the term employer brand with an article published in 1996 (Franca & Pahor 2012, 79; Lievens & Slaughter 2016, 408). Scholarly interest in the subject increased quickly in the early 2000s and 2010s. Following Barrow and Ambler's article, the employer brand became a prominent topic in HR practice. The phenomena created extensive research and discussion, first in marketing but then followed by human resources. (Lievens & Slaughter 2016, 408.) Yet, research has been broad and lacking focus on particular industries or sectors, leading to a fragmented field with various interpretations about the concept (Theurer et al. 2018, 155; Maheshwari et al. 2017, 743).

Ambler and Barrow (1996) brought brand marketing and human resources management together by suggesting that an employer brand is quite similar to a product brand in terms of what it offers its clients, or in the employer brand context, the employees: practical, economic, and psychological value. The practical benefits include for instance learning and development opportunities. The economic benefits involve material or financial rewards such as salary, benefits, or bonuses, while the psychological benefits include a sense of belonging and job satisfaction. (Ambler & Barrow 1996, 185–187.) Thus, Ambler and Barrow's definition explains employer brand through the benefits a company offers its employees. Their definition has become central in employer branding research, but as time goes on, this definition might not be sufficient enough anymore. Aggerholm et al., for instance, argued already in 2011 that this definition is outdated and fails "to respond to present organizational challenges and societal pressures" (Aggerholm et al. 2011, 109).

Another notable contributor to the concept of employer brand is Richard Mosley. According to Mosley (2014, 3–4), most definitions of employer brand can be categorized into three groups. The first group views the employer brand as a promise. This definition

emphasizes that employer brands are abstract entities, consisting of various attributes and qualities. These attributes help a company differentiate itself from other employers and it is used to promise a certain employee experience. This promise is designed to attract individuals who are well-suited to the organization and its culture and values. The second group sees the employer brand as a desired external image and reputation. This definition highlights the importance of people perceiving the company as a “great place to work”. (Minchington 2006; Mosley 2014, 3–4.)

Mosley (2014, 4) argues that the third category is the most inclusive and realistic one to grasp the concept of an employer brand. This definition is perceiving the employer brand as “the full spectrum of thoughts and feelings that people associate with an employer, both positive and negative, both true and untrue, both clear and impressionistic, whether based on direct experience, intentional communication, unintentional communication or hearsay” (Mosley 2014, 4). From this perspective, every employer possesses an employer brand, regardless of whether they deliberately have defined the attributes or image that they want to project. In case they have not, the employer brand still exists and is simply based on people’s perceptions.

The primary difference between the various definitions appears to be whether the employer brand is seen as entirely constructed by the company, or if it also includes all of the outside associations, as Mosley (2014, 4) suggested. Another example of including external associations is the definition by Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), who describe the employer brand as the perceptions that different stakeholders have about the organization as a workplace. On the other hand, an example of basing the employer brand solely on the company’s actions is by Theurer et al. (2018), who define the employer brand as an organization’s chosen method to consciously differentiate itself from other employers. However, despite these varying definitions, researchers agree that employees are especially vital for an organization’s success. This idea typically stems from the resource-based view or stakeholder theory, to justify the organizational necessity of investing in an employer brand. (Theurer et al. 2018, 160; Huhta & Myllyntaus 2021.)

When examining the concept of *employer branding*, it fundamentally refers to all the actions a company takes to develop a strong its employer brand (Hoppe et al. 2022, 140). Backhaus and Tikoo (2004, 502) describe employer branding as “promoting, both within and outside the firm, a clear view of what makes a firm different and desirable as an

employer”. As previously discussed, there are various opinions whether an employer brand exists regardless of whether or not the company is doing something to shape it. However, employer branding is always a conscious strategic process of shaping and managing the employer brand. It involves actively managing and influencing perceptions of the company as an employer in order to attract, engage, and retain top talent. It also entails distinguishing a company from its competitors by highlighting the unique features of the company’s employment offerings (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004, 502). In employer branding, marketing principles are utilized to manage the tangible and intangible employment offerings of the company (Theurer et al. 156).

Employer brand is closely linked to other emerging topics in related research, such as *employer image* and *employer reputation* (Franca & Pahor 2012, 80; Huhta & Myllyntaus 2021; Theurer et al. 2018, 156). Both employer image and reputation include the experiences, information, feelings, and beliefs individuals have about a company. These are all elements that a company aims to target by investing in its employer brand. Consequently, employer brand is seen as a broader concept, often including both company image and reputation. Although employer image is frequently used interchangeably with employer brand, it is more accurately a result of employer branding efforts. Unlike the other concepts, employer branding focuses on differentiating the company and creating value that resonates with the target group. (Huhta & Myllyntaus 2021.) Lievens and Slaughter (2016, 410) further argue that the employer brand is a more comprehensive concept that includes the external employer brand, which can be seen as a synonym to employer image, and the internal employer brand, which can be seen as a synonym for company identity. Therefore, this research will use the term employer brand to include both the internal and external dimensions.

## **2.2 Employer brand dimensions**

The employer brand includes managing two corporate identities, as shown in Figure 1: internal and external. First, the internal employer brand focuses on the current employees, promoting the company as a good place to work and aiming to engage, motivate, and retain them. It is an insider’s perception of the qualities and characteristics associated with the company as an employer (Lievens & Slaughter 2016, 410). By managing the internal employer brand, companies want to ensure that their current employees are engaged in the culture and strategy of the organization (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004, 501).



Second, the external employer brand targets potential employees, also promoting the company as a good place to work but aiming to draw in potential new employees. It is an outsider's perception of the qualities and characteristics associated with the company as an employer (Lievens & Slaughter 2016, 410). Thus, with their employer brand, companies aim to motivate, engage, and retain current employees as well as attract potential employees. (Srivastava & Bhatnagar 2010, 26; Backhaus & Tikoo 2004, 503.) Interestingly, as noted by Theurer et al. (2018, 160-161), conceptual literature has largely addressed both target groups, but empirical literature, on the other hand, has primarily focused on external employer brand and the recruitment context.

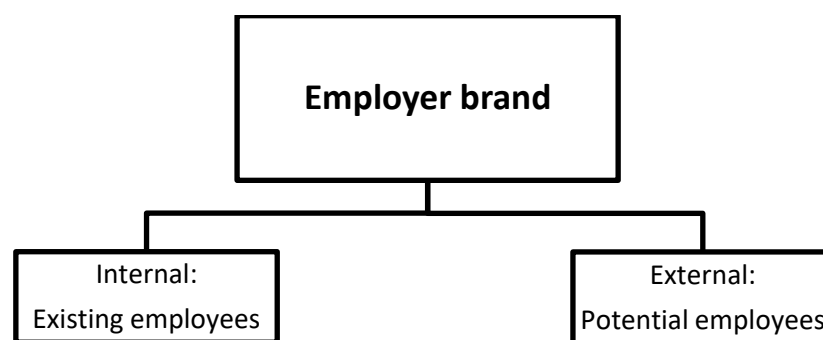


Figure 1 Internal and external employer brand (based on Srivastava & Bhatnagar 2010) Employer brands are crafted to align with the company's corporate brand and product or service brand (Huhta & Myllyntaus, 2021). However, there are two main differences between them. Firstly, the employer brand is employment specific, characterizing the company's identity specifically as an employer. Secondly, the employer brand is divided into external and internal brands, as illustrated in Figure 1. Whereas the employer brand addresses both internal and external audiences, the product and corporate brands are primarily aimed at an external audience. (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004, 503.)

Nonetheless, Huhta and Myllyntaus (2021) argue that the employer brand is usually connected to the corporate brand and cannot be developed solely in isolation. Thus, efforts directed toward enhancing a company's corporate brand also affect its employer brand, and vice versa. Mosley and Schmidt (2015) describe this as a tree structure, where the corporate brand serves as the trunk and the employer brand along with the product or service brand function as the branches. Lemmink et al. (2003) also found a connection between different brands of a company, stating that both corporate brand and employer brand have independent but significant effect of potential employees' intentions to apply for a position at a certain company.

### 2.2.1 Internal employer brand

A vital part of the internal employer brand is the employee experience. When an employee has been attracted to join the company by its external employer brand, it is vital to live up to the expectations the employee has. Just as customers have certain expectations about a purchased product or service, employees also have expectations about the organization as an employer. (Huhta & Myllyntaus 2021.)

A company has to determine what kind of employee experience it wants to deliver and how it will do it (Moroko & Uncles 2008, 171). An employee experience includes the whole employment life cycle and every interaction between the employee and the employer (Mosley 2007). An employee experience is the formation of the employees' thoughts and feeling about the job, the work environment, and the organization as an employer. Companies should aim to deliver added value for its employees and prove why it should be their employer of choice. Attracting the employees is not enough, the company needs to deliver its promises. (Huhta & Myllyntaus 2021.)

Organizational culture is also a significant part of the internal employer brand. The culture of a company guides the employees through shared beliefs and values, creates the organization's identity and builds a community out of the individual employees. Organizations aim to attract employees that are compatible with its culture, and these employees tend to have higher retention rates and increased job satisfaction. (Huhta & Myllyntaus 2021; Backhaus & Tikoo 2004.)

One additional factor of the internal employer brand is the employee's perception of the meaningfulness of their work (Bhasin et al. 2019). This refers to the extent to which the employee perceives their work as having significance and value, both personally and in the bigger perspective. Once employees feel like their needs matter to the employer, they are more engaged to their work. Moreover, aspects that affect an organization's internal employer brand include, for instance, leadership style, support, rewards and benefits, feedback and communication cultures, diversity and inclusion. (Huhta & Myllyntaus 2021.) By paying attention and improving these aspects, a company is able to build a strong internal employer brand.

### 2.2.2 External employer brand

The aim of the external employer branding is to ensure that the targeted talent pool is familiar with the organization and would prefer it over other potential employers. Similar to other types of branding, employer branding focuses on enhancing, changing, or protecting brand recognition, brand associations, and brand loyalty. (Huhta & Myllyntaus 2021.)

Brand associations refer to the attributes and benefits that people connect with a particular brand. These associations are based on product related attributes and non-product related attributes. In the context of employer branding, product-related attributes refer to the actual jobs the company offers, whereas the attributes related to non-product include aspects of the organization, such as its values, culture, work environment, or overall reputation. (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004; Theurer et al. 2018, 161.) These associations build the employer image of the company on the job market.

Job seekers' knowledge about a company as an employer, meaning employer brand recognition, can be affected by multiple different information sources (Cable & Turban 2001). Especially if a job seeker has no or limited information about a certain company as an employer, they will pay attention to all kinds of cues related to that organization to evaluate it as a potential organization (Stockman et al. 2020, 1). The external employer brand can be shaped by the company itself through various activities (Theurer et al. 2018).

One form of external branding is recruitment activities. This includes job advertisements, in which the company can highlight the benefits and opportunities the employment would entail. Another recruitment activity is participating in job fairs or other events, where the company can connect with and promote itself to potential candidates. (Theurer et al. 164-165.) The fundamental purpose of recruitment activities is converting target groups into job applicants. Recruitment efforts are one of the most visible ways how employers carry out employer branding activities. Many organizations invest just enough resources into employer branding to facilitate their recruitment activities. However, once the company allocates enough resources to more comprehensive employer branding, it often experiences fewer challenges in recruiting suitable employees. (Huhta & Myllyntaus 2021.)

Additionally, companies can execute employer branding through its website. Showcasing the organization's culture and values on the website as well as sharing inspiring career stories from current employees are ways to utilize a company's website for enhancing the external company brand. In order to also reach other audiences online that do not find their way to the company's website is having a social media presence in channels relevant for the company. Social media enables companies to post relevant and engaging content as well as interact with potential employees. (Theurer et al. 164-165.)

However, where most sources of information can be controlled by the company, there is another dimension of information that is not under companies' control. Especially with new communication technologies constantly emerging, organizations are not able to control all employer information about them (Stockman et al. 2020, 2). An example of this is word-of-mouth, which is an interpersonal source of employment information that is company-independent. (Van Hove & Lievens 2009; Stockman et al. 2020). Word-of-mouth is a valued source of employment information for job seekers and it can be exchanged by personal conversations with family or friends or by online discussions (Stockman et al. 2020, 2). Word-of-mouth is a natural form of communication and has the potential of being very powerful, significantly influencing perceptions and behaviours. Whereas the employment information controlled by organizations paint a good picture of the employer, the word-of-mouth information can also include negative aspects (Cable & Turban 2001).

Through external employer branding, companies aim to convey a positive image of them as an employer and about their company culture, work environment, compensation and benefits, diversity and inclusion, corporate social responsibility, and so on. Thus, by external branding, organizations want to show potential employees that they are a good place to work. However, as stated, a company's external employer brand is not only the company's branding actions, but it also consists the outsiders' perceptions of the qualities and characteristics associated with the company as an employer. (Lievens & Slaughter 2016, 410; Backhaus & Tikoo 2004; Theurer et al. 2018, 161.) Thus, it focuses on how the company is perceived from the outside and by external employer branding effort companies aim to create a positive image that attracts talent (Backhaus and Tikoo 2004).

### 2.3 Employer branding process and models

Although an employer brand shares many similarities with other types of brands, job seekers are not likely to act in the same way when applying for work as customers do when purchasing products or services. Choosing an employer has more significant and long-lasting effects compared to typical purchasing decisions. In addition, the cost and effort involved in changing employers are much higher than switching between most products or services. However, despite these differences, employers face the same challenge of creating a positive image in the minds of potential employees, showcasing the company as a great place to work – similar to how they have been branding their products and services. (Franca & Pahor 2012, 85.)

Employer branding is a relevant HR strategy, particularly in the context of a knowledge-based and service-driven economy where skilled employees are frequently in short supply. Unlike traditional recruitment strategies, which tend to be short-term, reactive, and dependent on job openings, employer branding adopts a long-term perspective. This approach focuses on continuously attracting and retaining talent to ensure a consistent flow of talent in an organization. (Srivastava & Bhatnagar 2010, 26.)

There are numerous methods for developing an employer brand, each affected by a variety of factors such as organizational structure, goals of the company, or the environmental contexts. Therefore, there is no universal strategy, theory, or practice that would suit all companies. This naturally also means that there are multiple methods of measurement. Companies can assess their employer brand strength through various metrics, such as turnover rates, the number of applicants for open positions, employee satisfaction through internal surveys, and brand recognition, to name a few. Thus, the strength of an employer brand is a multifaceted concept. (Franca & Pahor 2012, 90.)

Developing employer branding activities in a company requires active leadership, meaning responsible, goal-orientated and planned actions, that aim to include various functions of the organization to work together and do planned employer branding effectively. Despite employer branding being seen as important in many organizations, often it's not led systematically. A booth at career fairs or creating an employer branding video can certainly be steps in the right direction, however, if the goal is impact rather than just activity, success is more likely when actions are systematically managed. (Huhta & Myllyntaus 2021.)

In 2007 Mosley argued that initially, employer branding primarily focused on establishing a unique external reputation, with only limited efforts directed towards driving positive employee engagement or cultural transformation. However, the emphasis has since evolved towards a more holistic strategy, harmonizing external branding initiatives with the internal employee experience. (Mosley 2007, 130.) Companies use employer branding to craft a compelling and emotional impression of themselves as employers in the minds of both current and potential employees (Oladipo et al. 2013, 56).

Creating an employer value proposition is a crucial part of employer branding. The employer value proposition (EVP) refers to the added value that the organization brings to its employees. It is the unique set of benefits and values that a company offers its employee in exchange for their skills, knowledge, and experience. (Huhta & Myllyntaus 2021.)

The EVP should convey the key message of the employer brand (Theurer et al. 2018, 166). Companies should consider potential employees' current perceptions about the company as an employer, the strengths of the employee experience they provide, and the needs of their target groups when formulating their employer value proposition (Huhta & Myllyntaus 2021). Additionally, they must offer compelling benefits and values that stand out compared to other potential employers, since overlapping attributes in companies' EVPs do not make them distinctive from one another (Theurer et al 2018, 167). Companies who are able to clearly define and convey their EVP gain advantages in both talent attraction and retention (Maylett & Wride 2017, 94).

Theurer et al. (2018, 166) define an EVP as "a desired or ideal employer identity". However, there are often gaps between the image companies promote and the actual experiences of new hires and existing employees. (Theurer et al 2018, 167). Therefore, Huhta and Myllyntaus (2021) argue that it is crucial to define a realistic proposition rather than an aspirational EVP, as this ensures employees feel that the company delivers its promise. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004, 502-503) base their conception of employer branding on the EVP, and describe it as a three-step process: developing a value proposition, marketing the value proposition to targeted potential employees, and carrying out the brand promise inside the company.

Franca and Pahor (2012) propose an employer brand pyramid, as illustrated in Figure 2. The pyramid consists of three hierarchically structured dimensions: knowledge of an

employer, consideration of an employer, and choice of an employer. This model provides a company a clear assessment of the strengths of its employer brand and reveals areas where it either outperforms or lags behind its competitors. The pyramid presents areas of improvement to enhance the employer brand, ultimately positioning the company as an employer of choice.

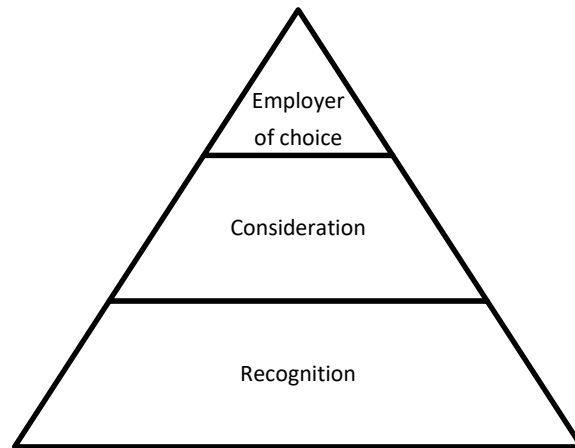


Figure 2 Employer brand pyramid (Franca & Pahor 2012, 94)

Franca and Pahor (2012, 93–94) highlight that employer branding is not solely the responsibility of the human resources departments of companies. The base of the employer brand pyramid is recognition, meaning awareness of the company’s existence and recognition of the company’s name as a potential employer. It is followed by consideration, which means that potential candidates on the labour market would consider employment at the company. Finally, the top of the pyramid is employer of choice. This means that the employer would be a candidate’s first choice for employment. (Franca and Pahor 2012, 93–94.) However, this pyramid portrays the employer brand from the outside and from the viewpoint of potential employees, thus fails to recognize the internal employer brand.

Considering the internal employer brand, Mosley (2007, 131) introduced the employer brand experience -framework, presented in Figure 3. This is a comprehensive model that illustrates the “touch-points” and everyday behaviours companies need to manage and develop in order to create a positive and engaging experience for employees. This framework highlights the long-term management of the employee experience in order to form a solid employer brand. Just like a customer experience, companies need to provide employees with a positive experience.

According to Mosley’s framework, the employer brand experience consists of two aspects, everyday behaviours and process “touchpoints”. The day-to-day experience of employees is influenced by the company’s values and through the communication and behaviour of their immediate supervisor as well as the corporate leaders. The touchpoints, on the other hand, refer to a wide range of processes and HR “products”. These include recruitment, orientation, communication, shared services (for instance HR), performance and development, measurement (for instance employee feedback surveys), and reward and recognition. (Mosley 2007, 131.)

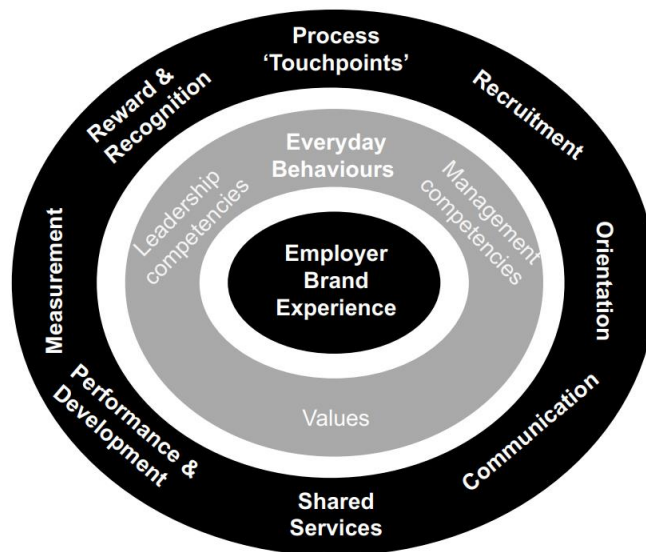


Figure 3 Employer brand experience framework (Mosley 2007, 131)

Thus, there are various methods to execute employer branding and a successful employer branding strategy should include activities targeted towards both internal and external audiences. Researchers agree that it is a combination of human resources and marketing, and the idea of treating employees as customers of the employer brand has gained lot of traction. HR professionals need to understand the fundamental principles of marketing and branding. Integrating marketing and human resource management theories and considering prospective and current employees as customer leads to employer branding actions is called a HR marketing philosophy.

Therefore, employer branding should not be seen as solely an HR practice, since it requires collaboration of various departments, in addition to the involvement of the top management. The adoption of the HR marketing orientation allows organisations to create a structured and systematic framework for talent acquisition and management. This approach helps to set clear priorities and to increase productivity by enhancing



recruitment efforts, improving employee retention, and fostering commitment among employees. (Maheshwari et al. 2017, 745; Franca & Pahor 2012, 116.)

## **2.4 Advantages of a strong employer brand**

Cultivating an employer brand is one method how companies can secure and retain the most sought-after and skilled employees. These employees will enable organizations to perpetuate their brand success and secure ongoing profitability. Thus, companies that invest in their employer brand might gain a competitive edge in return. Human capital, meaning the skills, knowledge, and experience of employees, act as sources of value to the company and its shareholders (Moroko & Uncles 2008, 160-161.) According to Barrow and Mosley (2005, 69), the three most significant benefits of employer branding are "enhanced recruitment, retention, and employee engagement/commitment". Employee retention, engagement and commitment is an advantage of internal employer branding, whereas recruitment is influenced by external employer branding.

### **2.4.1 Advantages of a strong internal employer brand**

Internal employer branding is a strategic approach that organizations utilize to provide a positive and engaging work environment for their employees. Employees who are satisfied will stay at the company longer, and having motivated and committed employees also affects company performance and lowers costs. (Barrow & Mosley 2005; Backhaus & Tikoo 2004.)

Internal employer branding plays a crucial role in enhancing employee engagement. Employees who agree and identify with the company's values, mission, and vision feel more connected to it and motivated to contribute to its success. A strong internal employer brand conveys an inspiring message to the employees about their purpose and significance, making the employees feel that their work is meaningful. (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004, 503–504.)

When employees are motivated, they are more likely to be productive as well as seek continuous improvement in their work. This not only enhances individuals' performance but also contributes to a positive and dynamic workplace culture and the overall company performance. Additionally, a strong internal employer brand boosts productivity and innovation. (Huselid 1995, 639; Maheswari et al. 2017, 746.)

Another significant advantage of internal employer branding activities is employee retention. Employee retention poses a significant challenge for many organizations, and high turnover rates can be costly and disruptive. Internal employer branding can significantly reduce employee turnover by creating a strong sense of belonging and loyalty (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 69–71). When employees feel valued and connected to their company, they are more likely to stay for the long term. Lower turnover rates also contribute to a more cohesive and experienced workforce, which helps maintain organizational knowledge and can enhance overall organizational performance. (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004, 503, 505.)

By investing in employee engagement and retention, companies can reduce costs. As stated, satisfied employees are more likely to stay at the company, which reduces the costs associated with recruiting, onboarding and training replacements. Additionally, companies with robust internal employer brands often experience lower sickness absence rates. Sick leaves are a significant cost to many organizations, and disengaged employees tend to take more sick leave than satisfied ones. By fostering a positive and engaging work environment, companies can decrease these costs. (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 69–71.) There are also several studies about the positive correlations between employee engagement and financial results of the company (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 73; Huselid 1995, 639).

#### 2.4.2 Advantages of a strong external employer brand

As established, a strong internal employer brand and high employee satisfaction are undoubtedly crucial for ensuring high retention rates and minimal turnover. However, these alone do not secure advantage in the competition for talent. The factors that make the company a great place to work must be effectively communicated to the outside, to the potential candidates on the labour market. An effective external employer brand is key in attracting new talent and thereby enhancing recruitment (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 69). (Franca & Pahor 2012, 86–87, 113.)

A strong external employer brand positions the company as an employer of choice, enabling it to attract top-tier employees (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004, 503; Barrow & Mosley 2005, 69). Therefore, a robust employer brand provides the company a distinct competitive advantage in the labour market (Franca & Pahor, 87, 113). The assumption

is that a good reputation and unique offerings of the company enables it to acquire distinctive human capital (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004, 503; Franca & Pahor 2012, 83).

Thus, a strong employer brand significantly helps the recruitment processes of companies. Once companies invest enough resources to execute comprehensive employer branding, they often experience fewer challenges in recruiting suitable employees. (Huhta & Myllyntaus 2021.) This not only helps when attracting top-tier talent and qualified employees but also improves the effectiveness of the company overall (Franca & Pahor 2012, 83–84.) Additionally, once new hires have been drawn in by the employer brand, they bring with them specific expectations about employment with the company. These assumptions align with company's values and strengthen their commitment to the organization. (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004, 503). In conclusion, external employer branding enhances talent acquisition by increased employer attractiveness.

While employer branding targets potential and current employees, it's also essential to acknowledge its broader effect. Employees who interact with the company's customers can have significantly influence on the customers' perceptions of the company. The personal contact employees have with customers gives them substantial influence over how customers perceive the company. (Moroko & Uncles 2008, 161.) Therefore, satisfied employees often lead to satisfied customers (Huhta & Myllyntaus 2021).

#### 2.4.3 Overall effect of employer branding on company performance

The advantages of employer branding are illustrated in Figure 4. Internal employer branding leads to increased employee motivation, engagement, retention, satisfaction, and productivity. External employer branding on the other hand results in enhanced employer attractiveness and recognition, which both help in recruitment activities.

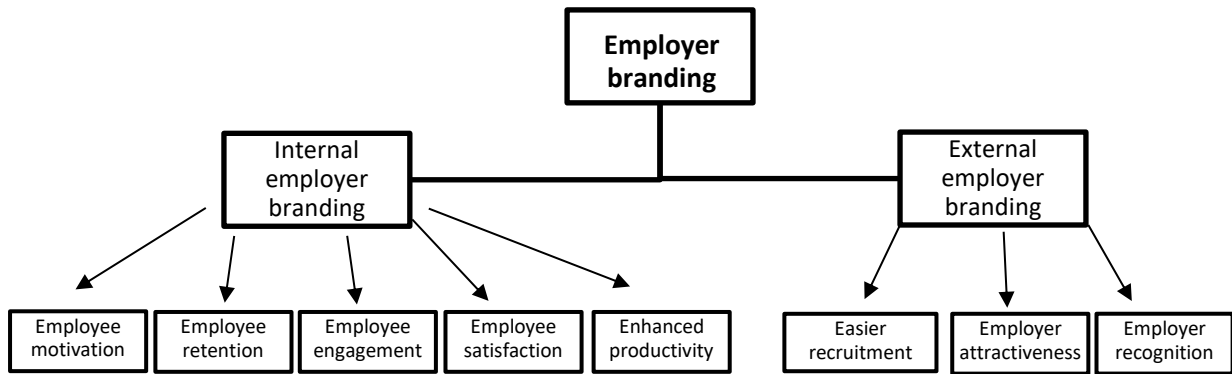


Figure 4 Employer branding's advantages for a company (based on Srivastava & Bhatnagar 2010)

In conclusion, employer branding offers numerous advantages that can significantly enhance an organization's performance. It is not just a tool for attracting new talent, but also a vital strategy for retaining existing employees and support organizational growth. By investing in both the internal and external dimensions of employer branding, companies gain several significant benefits that contribute to the overall success of the company.

### **3 Attracting and retaining student talent with employer branding**

#### **3.1 Characteristics of student talent**

In the contemporary business environment, young talent is increasingly recognized to be a vital asset for companies when aiming to be competitive and innovative (Keller & Meaney, 2017). A young workforce has a lot to offer, including new ideas, technical skills, fresh perspectives, and new energy (Tulgan 2015, 3). Hiring student talent can also bring advantage for organizations in the global shortage of talent, and by fostering young talent in the organization and employing students, companies can develop a pipeline of skilled professionals who can grow with the company. (Theurer et al. 2018, 155; Keller & Meaney, 2017).

However, attracting and retaining young talent poses significant challenges for organizations globally. Thus, practitioners and scholars are focused on identifying the most effective methods to recruit and manage talented young employees, aiming to improve their job satisfaction, well-being, performance individually and in their team, and ultimately retention rates. (Keller & Meaney, 2017.)

Students, as the future labour force, introduce new attitudes and expectations regarding work, along with different ways of work that companies need to adjust to (Morgan 2014, 13). The new generation of employees is often associated with negative workplace stereotypes, such as being reluctant to work, having unrealistic salary expectations, lacking motivation, having a sense of entitlement and being disloyal. However, further research indicates that young employees often exhibit proactiveness, a strong desire to learn and grow professionally, openness to constructive feedback, and an appreciation for engaging and meaningful work (Baker Rosa & Hastings 2018). They also place high value on inclusivity and innovativeness. While salary is important, opportunities for learning, creativity, and making meaningful contributions are even more important to them. (Brueckner & Mihelič 2019, 103–105.)

However, a characteristic that can be seen as somewhat accurate, is the young employees' tendency to switch jobs more often, which can be perceived as disloyalty to employers. Research shows that the new workforce generation demonstrates notably lower loyalty toward their employers compared to preceding generations. Previous research has

highlighted a grown tendency among younger employees to switch jobs or employers more often than their older counterparts. (Govaerts et al. 48). The phenomenon of young professionals changing jobs early in their careers has grown, resulting to reduced retention rates within this demographic. While the average employment in a job is approximately 4,4 years, the expected time for the youngest workers is merely half of that duration. Although this seems to be the new norm, the repercussions of turnover for companies are often underestimated. Particularly in roles that are knowledge- and information-intensive, the departure of competent individuals poses a significant risk to productivity, and also means higher cost and time spent in searching and onboarding suitable replacements. Additionally, when competitors gain these talents, they gain valuable insights into an organization's strategies, operations, and culture. (Keller & Meaney 2017.) Thus, by addressing the wants and needs of student talent, companies should focus on retaining them.

One of the key characteristics of student talent is the desire to have opportunities to learn and develop at the workplace (Baker Rosa & Hastings 2018; Brueckner & Mihelič 2019; Muratbekova-Touron et al. 2018; Zupan et al. 2017). Students want to develop their practical skills and understanding to complement their gained academic knowledge and they even place the importance of learning and developing opportunities higher than the desire to earn high-income. By offering learning and development opportunities, such as trainings, coaching, or a mentor, organizations can build a more loyal and skilled workforce that is motivated to grow with the company. (Muratbekova-Touron et al. 2018, 445–449.) This investment not only enhances employee capabilities, but also can reduce the turnover rates and increase employees' motivation, contributing to organizational stability and success. (Festing et al. 2017; Huselid 1995, 635.)

Another key characteristic of young professionals is that they are often familiar with the latest trends and technologies, which positions them as key drivers for innovation and creation within their organizations. This provides the companies with a competitive edge and adaptiveness to the fast-changing market conditions. (Festing et al. 2017.)

Other essential traits of student talent is valuing autonomy, empowerment, engagement, and low-hierarchy. Students value low-hierarchy workplaces where they are being involved and empowered (Muratbekova-Touron et al. 2018, 445). Students often also require flexibility in order to be able to work besides their studies. In order to retain

student talent, the company has to be prepared to offer flexible schedules. By doing so, graduating students have already been integrated into the company and are more likely to continue working there after graduating. (Muratbekova-Touron et al. 2018, 448.) The new generation wants to work in a more autonomous way, places higher importance on work-life-balance and hybrid possibilities. They want to have more influence over how they work, when they work, and where they work.

As stated, the new generation of workforce expects much more than just salary and material benefits from their employer. They value development and training possibilities over high income (Muratbekova-Touron et al. 2018, 450). In addition, students desire to work for organizations that reflect with their own values and provide a sense of fulfilment through meaningful and inspiring work. Thus, it is crucial for companies to comprehend the expectations of young talent when it comes to choosing an employer. In this regard, research indicates that job seekers favour socially responsible organizations over others (Chaudhary 2018, 305.) According to past research, some of the biggest priorities of younger employees is transparency on social issues, such as gender equality and diversity and inclusion (Sparrow et al. 2016). Also, climate change actions are valued among younger employees. Moreover, students value relationship and a good work atmosphere (Muratbekova-Touron et al. 2018, 445).

By investing in the development of young employees and by addressing their specific wants and needs, companies are able to create a dynamic and resilient workforce that is prepared for future challenges (Festing et al. 2017). Understanding the values and needs of the younger workers can provide organization with clear advantage, since these employees bring fresh ideas, innovation, creativity, and energy. Engaging young talent enables companies to more effectively achieve business objectives, act in an agile way in the fast-paced business environment, and outperform the competition. Companies that understand and prioritize these aspects can more effectively attract and retain young talent. Thus, to succeed, organizations must adopt leadership and management styles that align with the work preferences of these younger employees (Thompson & Gregory 2012). According to Muratbekova-Touron et al. (2018, 450), when targeting students, companies should take three areas into account: Creating close relationships with universities to enhance recruitment, offering development possibilities and investing in that over high income, and providing flexible working models and learning opportunities in order to increase retention.

### 3.2 International student talent in Finland

According to Papademetriou et al. (2010, 217–219), high-income industrial countries do not produce enough graduates in fields such as mathematics, sciences, and engineering to meet the needs of their companies or their broader economy. Thus, it is crucial for these nations and their organizations to attract highly skilled foreign nationals. Foreign students are valuable recruitment pools, and rightly so: by accommodating an international workforce, the host country's economy benefits from an expanded pool of skilled labour force, while businesses gain diverse perspectives from culturally varied employees (Fink & Miguelez 2017).

Research shows that diversity can clearly benefit companies: those with employees from different ethnic groups and genders perform above the national industry median financially (Hunt et al. 2015). International specialists enhance the growth, internationalization and innovation activities of businesses, as well as entering new target markets. Bringing together individuals from diverse backgrounds and fostering internationality form a strong foundation for innovation. (Opetushallitus 2024.)

Finland faces a serious shortage of highly educated workforce. International talent is especially vital for a country like Finland, which prioritizes innovation and heavily relies on export industries for its economy. Education-based immigration can enhance the pool of skilled professionals and contribute to Finland's growth, internationalization, and innovation efforts. (Opetushallitus 2024.)

When foreign students consider potential international education opportunities, Finland's main competitors are Sweden, Germany, and the Netherlands. Finnish society, diversity, and non-discrimination in the working life are critically important for Finland's attractiveness as a destination for international students and skilled labour force. (Valtioneuvosto 2021.)

As shown in Table 1, 7.2% of students enrolled in Finnish higher education institutions were international in 2021. According to Table 2, in 2019, half of European international students and 59% of those from other countries had found employment in Finland one year after graduating from a university of applied sciences. For university graduates, the figures were lower, with 30% of European students and 54% of students from other countries securing employment and staying in Finland.



Table 1 Foreign students at Finnish universities of applied sciences and universities in 2019-2021 (Opetushallinnon tilastopalvelu Vipunen)

	<b>Foreign students</b>	<b>Share of all students, %</b>	<b>New foreign students</b>	<b>Share of all new students, %</b>
<b>2019</b>	19 881	6.7 %	4 830	7.4 %
<b>2020</b>	20 868	6.8 %	5 838	7.8 %
<b>2021</b>	22 791	7.2 %	7 101	9.0 %

Table 2 The proportion of foreign students employed in Finland one year after graduation 2018-2019 (Opetushallinnon tilastopalvelu Vipunen)

	<b>University of applied sciences students</b>		<b>University students</b>	
	2019	2018	2019	2018
<b>EU-/ETA-countries</b>	50 %	43 %	30 %	37 %
<b>Other countries</b>	59 %	53 %	54 %	50 %

Finland aims to enhance and strengthen its position as a globally appealing destination for talented individuals to study and work in. Therefore, the country has set a national target to triple the number of international students enrolled in its higher education institutions by 2030. Furthermore, the country seeks to increase the percentage of those who remain in Finland and find employment after graduating to 75%. (Valtioneuvosto 2021.)

### **3.3 Employer branding to attract and retain student talent**

This research investigates how a company can utilize its employer brand to build a strong talent base. Figure 5 illustrates the relationship between an organization's external and internal employer branding efforts and how both of these affect trainees' experience of the employer brand. When successfully executed, this leads to a strong student talent base.

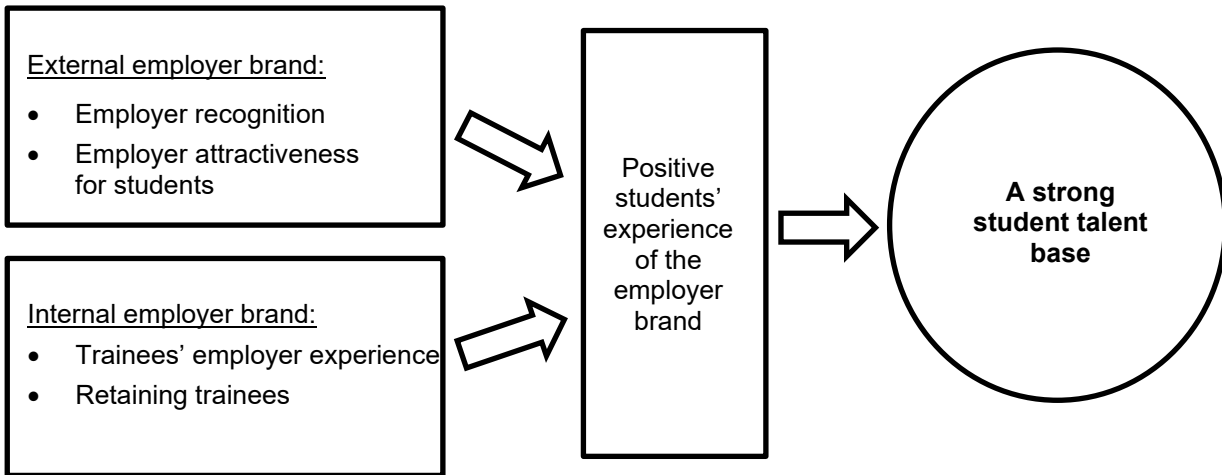


Figure 5 The two-fold employer brand experience of student talent

The external employer brand focuses on attracting potential trainees by promoting the organization's appealing characteristics to students. This involves marketing the organization's values, culture, and opportunities to create a positive perception and entice students to consider employment. External employment branding actions also aim at increasing employer recognition on the labour market.

The internal employer brand on the other hand emphasizes retaining trainees by ensuring a positive and enriching trainee experience. This involves fostering a supportive work environment, offering growth opportunities, and maintaining open communication, for instance, which help retain talented trainees and enhances their overall experience within the organization.

Both the external and internal employer branding efforts affect the students' overall experience of the employer brand. This experience is crucial as it influences their perception of the organization and their decision to first of all, join, and then stay with the company. When an organization effectively integrates both external and internal employer branding strategies, it leads to a strong student talent base. This base is composed of highly engaged and motivated students who are attracted to and retained by the organization due to the positive experiences and opportunities provided. Figure 5 highlights the importance of a holistic approach to employer branding, integrating both attraction and retention strategies to build and maintain a robust pipeline of student talent.

## 4 Methodology

### 4.1 Research methodology

Research methodologies are generally divided into two main categories, quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative methods use numerical, measurable data and focus on testing hypotheses and doing statistical analysis. Quantitative research allows researchers to quantify and predict phenomena (Gillham 2000). Qualitative research, on the other hand, aims to understand, interpret and describe the phenomena. Therefore, quantification versus interpretation can be seen as the fundamental difference of these two methodologies (Cassell & Symon 1994). (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2016, 4–5, 83.)

While quantitative research highlights structure and standardized ways of data collection and analysis, qualitative research is more sensitive to social and cultural contexts around the phenomenon. Therefore, when the aim is to gain deeper insights into organizational processes or human interactions, the qualitative methodology offers a more adaptable and flexible approach. Instead of predicting outcomes, it seeks to understand the subjective experiences and aims towards a holistic understanding of the issue. Therefore, qualitative and quantitative researchers often examine organizational events, processes and characteristics from very different viewpoints (Cassell & Symon 1994). (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2016, 4–5, 83.)

The main research problem of this study is *“to analyze how a company could enhance its employer brand and improve its ability to attract and retain student talent effectively”*. To explore this topic in depth, a qualitative approach was chosen. Qualitative research tackles research goals that involve intangible, abstract concepts, shaped by human interaction, interpretation, or specific circumstances. Essential in qualitative research are participants’ perspectives and experiences. (Puusa & Juuti 2020.) According to Lee (1999), “qualitative research is well suited for describing, interpreting, and explaining”. The research problem of this study is best addressed through the exploratory methods that qualitative research offers.

This approach is suited to business research as it allows for the examination of complex business-related phenomena within their contextual frameworks. Qualitative methods enable the generation of new insights into real-life business scenarios, why they work in that specific way and how they can be changed. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008.)

## **4.2 Case study**

Since this research focuses on a specific phenomenon within a particular company, the chosen qualitative approach is a case study. A case study is a research method that entails an thorough investigation of a specific phenomenon or situation within its authentic real-life context (Yin 2018, 15). In business research, this involves gathering evidence about a specific phenomenon as it occurs in its natural setting, such as within a company or a specific country. It is especially useful for investigating contemporary phenomena. By narrowing the study to a small number of units, the case study method allows for an in-depth analysis of the subject. (Farquhar 2012.) Selecting a case study approach for this research is motivated by its suitability to provide detailed insights into specific experiences, enabling the researcher to investigate a real-life situation and obtain a rich, contextualized perspective.

To provide a thorough description and analysis of the chosen phenomenon, this study uses a single-case design. A single-case study is focused on a single organization, individual, or a project, for instance. This method allows researchers to gain a thorough and comprehensive understanding, even of complex issues and processes. (Gillham 2000.)

This case study examines the perceptions and experiences of a company's summer trainees regarding the organization's employer brand. By targeting this study towards trainees, the aim is to provide valuable insights into student talent's perceptions of the organization's employer brand that can be beneficial for organizational strategies and practices and that can help enhance the traineeship program. A key element of providing an in-depth description of a specific case is that the researcher has access to case-specific materials (Creswell 2007, 95). The researcher of this thesis has been employed for the company for a year and has direct connections to the summer trainees.

## **4.3 Case introduction**

This case description is based on public materials available about the company, but due to the anonymity of the case, the sources are not enclosed. The subject of research in this thesis is a Finnish company that first started in the late 1960s as a vehicle contract manufacturer. Over recent years, the global automotive industry has undergone significant transformations, caused by the rapid evolution of political, societal, and

technological aspects, as well as evolving consumer preferences. Therefore, disruption and volatility can be seen as a new normal of the automotive market. Alongside the rather volatile vehicle manufacturing, the company has since added two further business lines: Electronic Vehicle Systems and Roof and Kinematic systems. Headquartered in Finland, the company also operates in Germany and Poland. With a diverse workforce of approximately 3 700 employees and over 70 nationalities across three nations, the company is a good subject for international business research.

This research narrows its focus on the Electronic Vehicle Systems business line. The company's journey in this sector began with their first and largest battery plant in Finland in 2019, followed by additional plants in Finland and Germany. The company is committed to advancing electromobility by developing and manufacturing battery modules and packs for electrified vehicles. It has managed to establish a strong market presence as a Tier 1 system supplier for battery systems and modules. In addition to cars, the case company also manufactures batteries for buses, trucks, and off-highway vehicles in sectors such as agriculture and material handling. The company has made significant investments in its battery operations, leading to rapid growth: since entering the battery business, the company has produced over 2 million battery systems, positioning itself as one of the leading suppliers in Europe. Beyond contract manufacturing, the company has enhanced its role as a system supplier by offering a range of services spanning the entire battery system value chain, including system design and testing.

The EV business line of the company has identified a need to address potential perceptions stemming from the volatility of the car manufacturing sector and its impacts on the company's employer reputation. The company is interested to understand its image and standing within the employer market, as well as understand employees' perceptions of the organization prior and during their employment. Furthermore, as the battery business line is gaining significance and experiences rapid growth, there arises a need of qualified and skilled workforce. The motivation for this research stemmed from the researcher's own experience as a Summer Trainee at the case company in 2023, during which discussion among fellow trainees regarding the company's employer brand and the shadow of the volatile car manufacturing business line emerged.

As discussed in Chapter three, students are an important part of an organization's talent pool. Each year, several Summer Trainees join the company's largest battery plant and

fellow 700 employees as office workers across various departments. The Summer Trainees of 2023 represent a diverse group with both Finnish and international backgrounds, occupying various roles within the company and contributing diverse perspectives and experiences within the battery plant's workforce. By focusing on Summer Trainees – a group consisting of students from different universities and universities of applied sciences – insight can be gained from individuals kickstarting their careers and eager to utilize their knowledge and ideas gained during studies. Consequently, this thesis highlights the role of students and recent graduates in enriching the talent pool of organizations.

#### **4.4 Data collection**

In academic research, data is typically categorized into primary and secondary sources. Primary data refers to original data directly designed and collected by the researcher, such as interviews or surveys conducted by them (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2016, 82). The data is collected for a specific study and by collecting primary data, the researcher aims to obtain new insights for the research questions with fresh data (Farquhar 2012, 68). Secondary data on the other hand is data previously generated by others and that is already available for the researcher to collect and analyze. Sources of secondary data include company reports, newspapers, websites, books, and articles, and it can either be used as a standalone source of data, or to complement primary data. (Papachroni & Lochrie 2015.)

This research utilizes primary data, with the researcher directly generating the data to accurately address the research questions. Given that this research is a case study focusing on a specific company and aims to capture the perspectives of the interviewees, there is a need for new, original information to fill the research gap and provide answers to the research questions. The use of primary data for this research provides distinct advantages, offering insights that are not available in existing sources. It can be tailored to address the specific research questions of this thesis, and by designing their own data, the researcher ensures the data's relevance to the study's objectives. Additionally, collecting primary data allows for control how the data is gathered and ensures consistency, accuracy, and reliability.

#### 4.4.1 Interviews as a data collection method

Qualitative research typically aims to understand a specific phenomenon by focusing on the experiences, thoughts, and emotions of individuals impacted by it. Since it's challenging to perceive how individuals perceive things from an external standpoint, various methods have been designed to facilitate this research. Qualitative research methods are designed to generate rich, detailed information and provide a deeper understanding of the subject. Common data collection methods in qualitative research include interviews, surveys, observation and document analysis. These methods are often also used in combination, depending on the research problem and the available resources. (Puusa & Juuti 2020; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018.)

The chosen method for this research is interviewing. An interview, as described by Gillham (2000, 1–3), is a conversation where the interviewer seeks information from the interviewee or interviewees for a defined purpose. The goal of a research related interview is to gather information and gain insights relevant to the general aim and specific research questions of a research project. According to Saldaña et al. (2011, 32), interviews are “an effective way of soliciting and documenting, in their own words, an individual’s or group’s perspectives, feelings, opinions, values, attitudes, and beliefs about their personal experiences and social world, in addition to factual information about their lives”.

Interviews are the most common data collection method in business research and according to Yin (2018, 114, 118), interviews are an essential source of data in case studies, as these studies often centre around human affairs or actions. Gillham (2000, 59) also argues that interviews of some sort “are indispensable in case study research”. “Case study interviews resemble guided conversations, rather than structured queries” (Yin 2018, 118).

Interviews can be defined with three main features. First, the topics and questions are open and the interviewee determines their own answers. This is a main difference to questionnaires, where the researcher usually provides answers in some sort of choice format, for instant with yes or no -questions, by asking to rank preferences in order, or by asking to rate different statements. Second, the relationship and conversation between the interviewer and interviewee is interactive, allowing space for clarifications and exploration. Third, the interviewer has structure and a purpose for the interview, even if

the interview resembles an unformal questioning or natural conversation. (Gillham 2005, 3–4.)

One of the greatest benefits in using interviews for collecting data is flexibility. During the interview, the interviewer has the opportunity to repeat or clarify a question, correct misunderstandings, and have a conversation with the source of information, fostering deeper insights. This is not possible for instance when collecting data with a survey, unless it is filled out in the presence of the researcher. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018.) Yin (2018, 114) highlights that interviews can be precisely tailored to focus directly on case study topics, providing detailed explanations as well as personal views of the interviewees, such as their perceptions or attitudes. Compared to questionnaire data, interviews provide richer information by facilitating direct communication, which enhances the depth and authenticity of the collected data. (Gillham 2000, 62).

This richness of information, on the other hand, leads to one of the weaknesses of interviewing as a data collection method, the time spent on them. Collecting data with interviewing means involving time in creating interview questions, interviewing, often multiple individuals, transcribing all of these interviews, and lastly analyzing the content. (Gillham 2000, 62.) Some other weaknesses are that interviews might generate bias information, either due to poorly articulated questions or due to the interviewee being biased. There can be also inaccuracies in the information due to poor recall, and reflexivity, meaning that the interviewee might answer based on what they think the interviewer want to hear. (Yin 2018, 114.) These strengths and weaknesses of interviews as a data collection method are gathered in Table 3.



Table 3 Strengths and weaknesses of interviews as source of evidence (Yin 2018, 114; Gillham 2000, 62; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018)

Data collection method	Strengths	Weaknesses
<b>Interviews</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— Targeted: Can focus directly on case study topics</li> <li>— Insightful: provides explanations as well as personal views (e.g., perceptions, attitudes, and meanings)</li> <li>— Flexible: opportunity to clarify or repeat questions and correct misunderstanding</li> <li>— Richness of information</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— Consumes a lot of time</li> <li>— Bias due to poorly articulated questions</li> <li>— Response bias</li> <li>— Inaccuracies due to poor recall</li> <li>— Reflexivity: e.g., interviewee says what interviewer wants to hear</li> </ul>

Interviews were chosen and the data collection method for this research, since there is only a small number of potential participants, and the questions were mainly ‘open’, meaning they cannot be answered with short ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers and require extended responses which would have been more unlikely to be received with a survey. (Gillham 2000, 62). Questions were formulated in a neutral tone to avoid bias in the responses.

Interviews can be divided into structured, semi-structured and unstructured. Structured interviews are somewhat similar to surveys, since interview follows a fairly detailed script of prepared questions and interviewees are given relatively little freedom in their responses (Saldaña et al. 2011). Semi-structured interviews have a more conversational and informal style, but the interview materials are still systematic and comprehensive (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008.) Unstructured interviews, also known as in-depth interviews, give the interviewees great freedom to respond in any way they see fit. The questions are flexible and open-ended, and the interview often resembles a specialized conversation among peers. Therefore, this interview method requires an interviewer that has specialized knowledge about the topic in question. (Walle 2015, 18–19.)

Data for this study was collected by conducting semi-structured interviews. According to Gillham (2000, 65), “semi-structured interviews are the most important form of interviewing in case study research”. This type of qualitative interview style was chosen since it enables the interviewer to change the wording of the questions and the order in which the questions are asked. The semi-structured interview method was selected to give the interviewee room to talk about the topic quite freely and with their own words, but on

the other hand to still ensure that all necessary topics are covered by having prepared questions. (Farquhar 2012.)

The interviews were conducted with eight Summer Trainees of 2023 who were still employed at the company during data collection in May and June. Trainees were selected as interviewees to gain insights about the case company's employer brand and the company's attractiveness to students, as well as possible development proposals of how the company could better attract and retain student talent from their point of view. Additionally, the study includes one expert interview.

#### 4.4.2 Expert interview

To deepen the understanding about how the employer brand is perceived by the case company itself and what kinds of employer branding activities it has, a semi-structured expert interview was also conducted. Expert interviews are a qualitative research method that includes interviewing individuals with specialized knowledge related to the researched topic or the particular context. Also referred to as elite interviews, this method targets people who have particular expertise in a specific field and are identified based on their specific expertise, their standing within the company or community, or their status (Döringer 2021, 265). (Gillham 2005, 54.) These individuals can provide answers with insight and a comprehensive understanding of the subject being researched (Gillham 2000, 63–64). The interviewee for this case research is a HR Specialist at the case company.

Bogner and Menz (2009, 46) divide expert interviews into three categories: “exploratory, systematizing, and theory-generating”. When used as an exploratory method, expert interviews help researchers to establish orientation in fields that are either new or that lack definition. This approach helps the researcher to develop a clearer idea of the problem or lay the groundwork for developing a more structured interview guide. A key similarity between the exploratory and the systematizing expert interviews is that both aim to gain access to exclusive knowledge possessed by the expert. However, a systematizing interview seeks to obtain systematic and comprehensive information, with the expert viewed as a source to gain specialized knowledge otherwise unavailable to the researcher. This specialized knowledge stems from the expert's practical experience. In contrast, in a theory-generating interview, the expert no longer serves as the means by which the researcher can gain useful information. Here, the goal is analytic reconstruction

of the subjective dimension of expert knowledge. Thus, the expert's insights serve as a foundation for developing a theory. This research uses the second type, a systematizing expert interview, since the goal is to compare the expert's views to the literature review and the other interviews and gain deeper insight to the topic by getting access to exclusive knowledge.

Even a single expert interview can be a valuable source of information, often providing access to unpublished insights. However, it is important to be aware that experts may have some hidden agendas or motives when answering the research questions. They can be a powerful tool, but the researcher needs to be aware of these potential biases and ensure a thorough approach to analysis and interpretation. Thus, expert interviews are most effective when used in combination with other research methods to cross-verify data and ensure a balanced perspective. (Gillham 2005, 59.)

Overall, the data sources for this research include semi-structured interviews with eight Summer Trainees and an expert interview. This combination of methods offers a comprehensive understanding of the case company's ways to attract and retain student talent from both perspectives.

#### 4.4.3 Interview process

Interviewees for the trainee interviews were randomly selected among the trainees of 2023 that were still employed at the company during the data collection of this research, May and June 2024. By interviewing trainees who still work at the company, the researcher was able to form an understanding of how the perception of the company has evolved during the interviewees' employment. In 2023, the business line had 28 summer trainees in Finnish plants, 17 of which were still employed at the company during data collection. Four of the 2023 trainees were international and three of them were still employed at the company in May 2024. The data for this research was collected by conducting nine interviews in total, eight were semi-structured interviews with employees who started as summer trainees at the company in 2023, and one was a semi-structured expert interview with an HR Specialist from the company. Five of the interviewed trainees were Finnish and three had an international background. Thus, 35.7% of domestic and 100% of international trainees that remained employed at the company were interviewed for this research. Three of the trainees study at a university and five at a university of applied sciences.

The researcher wrote the interview questions beforehand (Appendix 1 for trainee interviews, Appendix 2 for the expert interview). Potential interviewees were contacted in May 2024 via Microsoft Teams with a message that included basic information about the study and the estimated duration of the interview. All of the contacted potential interviewees accepted the request. Before the interview, the researcher sent additional information to each participant. This document included the master thesis topic, research aim, research questions of the thesis and information about privacy and data handling. In addition, the document included the interview questions, so that the interviewees had the chance to familiarize themselves with the questions.

The interviews were conducted both face to face and via Microsoft Teams in May and June 2024. The interviews were held either in English or Finnish, based on the interviewees' preferences. The summary of each interview, including whether the interviewee was international or domestic, interview date, duration, and whether the interview took place online or face to face are presented in Table 4.

Table 4 Summary of the interviews

<b>Informant</b>	<b>International or domestic trainee</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>How the interview took place</b>
Expert interviewee		31.5.2024	52 min	Microsoft Teams
Interviewee A	International	31.5.2024	38 min	Microsoft Teams
Interviewee B	Domestic	3.6.2024	54 min	Face to face
Interviewee C	Domestic	3.6.2024	42 min	Face to face
Interviewee D	International	3.6.2024	68 min	Microsoft Teams
Interviewee E	International	4.6.2024	44 min	Microsoft Teams
Interviewee F	Domestic	4.6.2024	47 min	Microsoft Teams
Interviewee G	Domestic	5.6.2024	51 min	Face to face
Interviewee H	Domestic	5.6.2024	57 min	Face to face

At the beginning of each interview all of the participants were reminded of the purpose of the research, the interview topics, anonymity, and that the interview will be recorded for transcription purposes. The conversations were recorded with the permission from the participants. The interviews lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and were successful throughout; the interviews were uninterrupted and a clear recording for transcription was obtained from every interview. Since each interviewee could select their preferred language and since the researcher already knew the participants, the interviews were relaxed and conversation flowed nicely.

## 4.5 Data analysis

The goal of analyzing qualitative data is to interpret and clarify the information, which in turn creates new knowledge about the topic under investigation (Eskola & Suoranta 1998). Just as qualitative research includes various data collection techniques, it also offers numerous approaches for analyzing the data. The choice of the analysis method should align with the research's conceptual framework, produce the most comprehensive answers to the research questions, and effectively represent and communicate the findings of the research. (Saldaña et al. 2011.)


Data analysis should be done simultaneously with the data collection. In qualitative research, the amount of data can be quite overwhelming, so without ongoing analysis, the data can be unfocused and repetitious. Qualitative data analysis includes progressively examining the data and comparing different parts of it to gain a deeper understanding as more data is collected and reviewed (Fossey et al. 2002). However, even though data analysis is carried out alongside the data collection, it becomes more intensive after all the data has been gathered. (Merriam 2014.)

A common qualitative data analysis method is content analysis, which serves as the foundation for many other forms of analysis. The data of the study describes the researched phenomenon, and the goal of content analysis is to create a clear description of the topic. Content analysis helps researchers organize the data in a concise and generic form while preserving its essential information. Thus, this technique aims to increase the informatic value of the qualitative data by converting extensive and scattered data into clear and coherent information. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018.)

In this study, the content analysis method was used to obtain a concise and generalized description of the researched phenomenon. This study also utilizes the thematic analysis method, which is widely used in qualitative research as well. As defined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 79), “thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data”. Thematic analysis can be used to compare the different views of research participants, and to help highlight similarities and distinctions (Nowell et al. 2017). The phases of thematic analysis are presented in Table 5.

Table 5 Phases of thematic analysis (Braun &amp; Clarke 2006)

<b>Phases of thematic analysis</b>	
Phase 1	Familiarizing yourself with your data
Phase 2	Generating initial codes
Phase 3	Searching for themes
Phase 4	Reviewing themes
Phase 5	Defining and naming themes
Phase 6	Producing the report



The first step is to familiarize yourself with the data. If the data is in verbal form, such as interview recordings, it needs to be transcribed into a written format first. Regardless of whether the data has been collected by the researcher themselves or it has been provided to them, it is crucial to be familiar with the depth and breadth of it. This step includes reviewing the data several times and identifying meanings and patterns in it. (Braun & Clarke 2006.)

The second step is to create initial codes from the data. Codes identify specific attributes or elements of the data that seem interesting to the researcher. Through coding, the data is organized into distinct groups based on common features. After that, in step three, these different codes are sorted into potential themes. This phase involves analyzing and combining the different codes to form broader, overarching themes. (Braun & Clarke 2006.)

The fourth step includes reviewing and analyzing these formed themes. During this phase, some themes might be combined into one, broken down into smaller themes, or removed due to lack of suitable data. Once the thematic grouping of the data is satisfactory, the themes are defined and named in phase five. This is where the themes that will be presented in the analysis are selected and refined. Lastly, in phase six, the final analysis and report are written. These need to be coherent, logical and interesting and convince the reader of the validity of the analysis. (Braun & Clarke 2006.)

Even though the thematic analysis process appears linear in this table, it does involve a continuous back-and-forth movement between the phases (Nowell et al. 2017). This is expressed with the arrow next to the table. Thematic analysis is easy to grasp, and due to

its theoretical freedom, it is a highly flexible approach that can be modified for many studies (Braun & Clarke 2006). However, due to its flexibility, using this analysis method can result to inconsistency and a lack of coherence when formulating themes based on the data (Nowell et al. 2017).

After each interview, the interview recordings were transcribed. Each transcription was then carefully proofread to ensure accuracy. During proofreading, the researcher also gained a comprehensive sense of each interview and also highlighted some key topics from the interviews. During the data collection process, the researcher already started to compare transcriptions in order to see if there are any repetitive themes emerging from the interviews. Once the entire interview and transcription process was completed, all the data was gathered into one document and then reviewed multiple times to identify different interesting attributes that could form common themes. These themes were then separated into their own categories, allowing the researcher to easily pinpoint where the data for a specific subproblem is located.

Each theme was examined more thoroughly, with similar viewpoints being highlighted using assigned colours to help identify connections across the different interviews. After color-coding the data, it was reorganized once more to group findings with the same colour under each theme, making the structure easier to understand. This also created a logical order for presenting the findings, which is done in Chapter six.

#### **4.6 Trustworthiness of the study**

Investigating the trustworthiness of a study allows researchers to justify that their research is legitimate and that its findings are worthy of attention. This research uses the evaluation criteria established by Lincoln and Guba (1985), which are commonly used in qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba present four different criteria for evaluating the trustworthiness of a study: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 300.)

Credibility is determined by the researcher's ability to deliver research findings that are equivalent in reality (Lincoln & Guba 1985). In other words, credibility addresses how aligned the respondents' views and the researcher's portrayal of them are (Nowell et al. 2017.) Credibility can be achieved by clearly identifying and detailing the specific data analysis methods that are being used, for instance (Lincoln & Guba 1985; Saldaña et al.



2011). The interview framework was based on the literature review, and the data analysis method was carefully selected and presented. Also, the interview was recorded and immediately transcribed to avoid false interpretations made by the researcher. Additionally, Eriksson and Kovalainen (2015, 213) state that a study's credibility is influenced by the researcher's familiarity and knowledge about the subject. To develop the theoretical framework for this thesis, the researcher familiarized themselves comprehensively with research and literature about the topic and did an extensive literature review. Furthermore, having worked at the case company for over a year in tasks connected to the research, the researcher was already acquainted with the case concept. The prior experience facilitated a more profound comprehension of the reviewed literature, ensuring that the researcher was knowledgeable about the studied topic.

Transferability measures whether the findings and results of the research can be used in other empirical and theoretical contexts, in other words, how generalizable it is (Lincoln & Guba 1985; Farquhar 2012). The researcher should provide a thorough description of the research process and methodology, enabling others who wish to apply the findings to their own context to evaluate the transferability (Nowell et al. 2017). The research process and methodology choices have been presented earlier in this chapter and the research topic has been described in chapters 1, 2, and 3. This enables future research to replicate the study's methodology and achieve comparable results.

To ensure dependability, the research has to be logical, easily traceable, and thoroughly documented, so the researcher is able to create an accurate picture of the phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba 1985; Nowell et al 2017). This also allows the reader to grasp the extent to which the researcher themselves and the research context have influenced the findings of this study (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 316–317). In this thesis, evidence of the decisions and choices of the researcher is provided. The research process and research situation is explained in detail, and it has been explained that the interviews were undisturbed, and that the interviewer and participant had enough time. In addition, to bring more insights about the interviews, the interview details were presented in Table 4 and the interview framework and questions are presented in the Appendix of this thesis.

However, one aspect of dependability is considering the impact the researcher might have on the findings. Therefore, it is necessary to note that the researcher is employed at this company and has previously had work assignments that are related to this case study.

Thus, the researcher already had information about the case. Despite the researcher's efforts to conduct the data collection and analysis as objectively as possible, it is important to acknowledge that prior knowledge may have affected the interpretation of the data. Moreover, it is important to reflect the researcher's position: the researcher is working in the HR department of the company where the interviewees were still employed at, so it is possible that this setting affected the answers to the interview questions. On the other hand, the researcher knew all of the interviewees personally beforehand, which enabled relaxed and friendly interview settings. Therefore, it is difficult to evaluate the full effect of the researcher's position on the collected data. Additionally, the data collection took place in May and June 2024 through interviews with trainees who started in the late spring and early summer of 2023. Thus, it is important to consider that since some of the interview questions were about the company recognition before joining as well as the recruitment process, interviewees might have provided limited answers due to recall difficulties.

Confirmability means that other research about the phenomenon support the findings. (Eskola & Suoranta 1998). It measures the researcher's objectivity to the topic and proves that the researcher's interpretations are justified (Lincoln & Guba 1985; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). To gain confirmability, this study thoroughly explained the entire research process, enabling others to replicate the study if needed. In addition, to increase objectivity, the interviews were recorded and transcribed. However, the confirmability could have been enhanced by letting the informant confirm the findings and conclusions of the study. Furthermore, the anonymity of the interviewees and the case company poses a challenge to exact replication of the study. Additionally, since the interviews were semi-structured, there was room for flexibility, making it difficult for other researchers to precisely recreate this study.

#### **4.7 Ethical considerations**

The awareness of ethical issues and concerns in research has grown significantly in the last decades (Flick 2007). Ethical considerations are essential for all types of research and all researcher need to follow ethical principles. Research ethics includes how the research is conducted and reported. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008.)

In qualitative research, obtaining original data is essential. Data collection should be ethically sustainable, with informed consent being a critical aspect to ensure the ethical

integrity of the research. Informed consent must be secured prior to data collection. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008.) Other ethical considerations include avoiding the deception of research participants, ensuring that they are not misled or misinformed about the research's purpose. Respecting the participants' privacy and confidentiality is also vital, alongside the accuracy of the data and its interpretation, ensuring no fraudulent practices in the data collection or analysis. Additionally, justice, trust, and well-being of the participants need to be taken into account throughout the research process. (Flick 2007.)

In this research, every interviewee received a document with information about the research before the interview (Appendix 1 and Appendix 2). The documents included the master thesis topic, research aim, and research questions of the thesis. In addition, the document included the interview questions, so that the interviewees had the chance to familiarize themselves with the questions. However, that was completely voluntary and not required. The document also included privacy information, stating that the interviews are anonymous, will be recorded for transcription purposes, and all information will be treated confidentially. Consent for all of these was verified from the participants at the beginning of each interview and the participants had the opportunity to ask any possible remaining questions about the study.

All participants confirmed that they received sufficient information about the study and that they understood that participation was anonymous, voluntary, and cost-free. They were also aware that they have the right to withdraw from the research at any point without providing a reason and without facing any negative consequences. Thus, informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Any personal identifiers were removed from the interview transcripts, and the data was handled confidentially. Proper acknowledgements have been given to the used research and literature sources to avoid plagiarism. Furthermore, the process and details of this research have been carefully described, making the research transparent and available for inspection. During the interviews the researcher aimed to maintain objectivity. Nevertheless, due to human nature and natural human bias, absolute objectivity cannot be assured.

Ethical considerations also include the use of artificial intelligence (AI) and communicating transparently and accurately how AI was used in research. The researcher

has read the guidelines provided by the University of Turku for the usage of artificial intelligence in research.

The ChatGPT chatbot was used during the writing process of this thesis to assist in rephrasing sentences and chapters. This step enhanced the clarity and academic tone of the text, since English is not the researcher's native language. AI was utilized solely for rephrasing purposes and it did not generate any original text. In practice, this means that the researcher put certain sentences or chapters into ChatGPT with the prompt "rephrase", and compared the results with the original text to see how the text can be enhanced. Consequently, the output of the AI tool was always validated and verified. Therefore, all sources were found and reviewed by the researcher, ensuring that the content is based on the researcher's own work, with AI assistance limited to rephrasing.

Additionally, an AI tool called TurboScribe was used during the transcription process, providing preliminary interview transcriptions. However, final transcriptions were heavily edited by the researcher to ensure accuracy. The use of AI did not compromise the privacy of the interviewees, since no personal information was included in the files or text put in the AI tools.

## 5 Findings

### 5.1 Employer branding from the case company's perspective

The study included an expert interview with a HR Specialist from the case company. The expert elaborated that the company perceives employer branding as the actions taken to showcase their identity to both current employees and potential talent. This includes demonstrating what kind of company they are and aspire to be. The company recognizes that employer branding extends beyond external perceptions and encompasses internal aspects as well.

*By employer branding we want to show what kind of company we are and what we want to be like. (Expert interviewee)*

Describing the current employer branding processes, the expert described them as rather elementary and basic so far. Two main reasons were identified for this. Firstly, the battery business is closely intertwined with the company's other business lines, limiting the opportunities to distinguish the business line's personality as an employer. Secondly, there is no clear dedicated team or individual for employer branding. While many departments are involved, the responsibility primarily falls on the HR. However, the expert indicated a forthcoming change in this, mentioning soon having a manager for talent acquisition, who will also oversee and lead employer branding activities.

Regarding the attraction of potential student talent, the expert outlined several strategies. These include promoting trainee positions on social media and at student-oriented job fairs, creating marketing materials showcasing the career paths of former trainees inside the company, and collaborating with a nearby university of applied sciences. This cooperation includes, for instance, course projects provided by the company as well as company presentations at the university of applied sciences.

In addition, efforts to retain student talent are also being made, for instance by having a talent club for students and fresh graduates that are employed in the company. The club organizes various activities, including company visits and leisure program. Moreover, trainees are always involved in company-wide events such as summer parties and other similar activities. The company aims to foster a sense of community and a good working atmosphere, which also influence the trainees' interests to stay at the company. This is also improved by trying to communicate the positive things that are happening, and for

this the company has recently created a general channel in Microsoft Teams where everyone is welcome to share positive feedback and praises about colleagues.

When discussing the key messages that the company wants to highlight with their employer branding, the expert emphasized their uniqueness in the Finnish market and battery business. In addition, the company uses the term “fast lane” to underscore their rapid development and growth, considering that the battery business line is only six years old. The company is interested in constant evolvement and reckon that potential employees might be interested in being a part of this growth story of the company.

*In our marketing materials we often use the term “fast lane”, since it emphasizes our quick development and growth in the battery business.*  
(Expert interviewee)

Furthermore, the company values internationality and diversity. On the other hand, the expert saw these as such fundamental parts of the company that it has not been necessary to particularly highlight them in employer branding. The communication is always in English and the marketing material involves also international employees. The company sees internationality as a fundamental part of their company culture and recognize the need of foreign talent in a small country like Finland. The expert states that the company does not prioritize candidates based on their nationalities, but rather their skills and other sought-after attributes.

*Internationality is such a natural part of this company that there's not really a need to specifically emphasize it, it comes automatically. It's just so inherent that we also seek international talent.* (Expert interviewee)

Challenges in attracting and retaining student talent include the locations of the battery plants, which are located in rather small cities that do not have universities or universities of applied sciences. This means that many students would have a longer commute to work, and to address this issue, the company aims to offer hybrid working models and flexible working hours. Another challenge is that the company has to compete with other technology companies for the same talent pool. The required skills and knowledge are also needed in other similar technology organizations, meaning that the company has to find ways to be seen as the most attractive employer. An additional challenge is the challenging image of the other business line as an employer. The expert stated that the battery business is a bit overshadowed by the car manufacturing business line, and that

that is much more well-known. The battery business is still quite new and has not yet gained such recognition.

*The electric vehicle business line is still quite young, and so far its employer brand is not very thought-out. In the future our aim is to develop it to be more thought-out and consistent. (Expert interviewee)*

The expert highlighted that the company aims to offer various possibilities for the trainees to continue after the trainee period, for instance part-time work alongside studies or the opportunity to write a thesis as a commission for the company. This is partly done by offering meaningful and interesting work for the trainees.

*We aim to offer opportunities to continue with us after the trainee summer. We have a lot of employees who have started as a trainee and has then progressed in their careers inside our company. (Expert interviewee)*

*We encourage the departments to provide the trainees with interesting work tasks that support their growth. This of course is also a way to engage and retain the trainees. (Expert interviewee)*

When discussing measuring the success of employer branding activities to attract and retain student talent, the expert mentioned a few points. First, the company can track how many applicants they have for the trainee positions. Second, the company actively collects feedback from the current trainees to further develop their trainee program and trainee experiences. Additionally, the company follows how many of the trainees continued at the company after the trainee period.

## **5.2 Employer attractiveness from the student talent perspective**

### **5.2.1 Attractive attributes in employers**

Through the Summer Trainee interviews, several attributes and criteria emerged as common themes and significant factors influencing the attractiveness of prospective employers to student talent. For instance, all three international trainees stated that they value a company that invests in diversity and an international environment, and offers opportunities to work in English. Diversity and an international environment was also valued by some of the domestic counterparts.

*Diversity brings in a different kind of productivity and creativity that helps companies thrive, especially in the technology sector. (Interviewee D)*

*Diversity matters to me as an international employee because it will make me feel like I'm welcome here, I'm accepted here. (Interviewee A)*

In addition, professional growth opportunities were highly valued, even prioritized over salary. The desire for learning opportunities and the application of theoretical knowledge in practical settings emerged as paramount considerations across the interviews. When discussing important attributes of potential employers, these opportunities were mentioned more often than a good salary. This was mentioned by half of the interviewed trainees, whereas salary was only brought up by two. Thus, students value opportunities to grow professionally at the start of their career.

*At this point, I want to develop my skills and start using what I have learned in my studies in practice. (Interviewee F)*

Flexibility emerged as another crucial factor, with half of the interviewed trainees valuing options such as flexible working hours and remote or hybrid working models. Additionally, almost half of the interviewed trainees also mentioned the importance of an interesting industry that aligns with their own values and beliefs.

*If the company sells something that does not match with my own values, for example oil, I would not be interested to work there. (Interviewee G)*

*I also have some personal limitations; I do not want to work for a company that manufactures alcohol or cigarettes. (Interviewee D)*

Finally, while less frequently mentioned, a positive work atmosphere and friendly colleagues were also considered significant. However, these attributes are hard to know of in advance, which might be the reason they were not brought up that often. Furthermore, there were additional attributes that were not as frequently brought up, such as the potential employer's performance in sustainability issues.

### 5.2.2 Case company recognition

Trainees had varying levels of familiarity with the case company before applying for the trainee positions. Notably, six out of the eight trainees had heard about the company, its job or traineeship opportunities from friends who had either worked at the company or applied. What is notable is that all three international trainees had heard about the company through their friends. Therefore, word-of-mouth referrals can be considered as significant in among student talent.



*My friend had applied and he told me about this opportunity. (Interviewee C)*

*An alumnus of my school works here, and through him I got to know more about the company. (Interviewee D)*

In addition, the traineeship opportunities were discovered via career websites such as Mol, Duunitori, and LinkedIn. Two of the trainees also talked to the case company's representatives at a job fair, while another visited one of the company's battery plants through their studies.

*The visit to the battery plant and the company presentation there really sparked my interest. (Interviewee D)*

*The company has been visible at job fairs I have been to. (Interviewee C)*

Among the interviewed trainees, five were primarily or even exclusively familiar with one of the company's other business lines, automotive vehicle manufacturing. When asked about their perceptions of the company, many mentioned being aware of high turnover rates and mass layoffs. Therefore, the company's image as an employer at other business line can be seen to cast a negative shadow over the studied business line. Additionally, two trainees admitted to initially confusing the case company with another company with a similar name. Remarkably, only three of the interviewed trainees were aware of the studied business line, indicating that the company's recognition in relation to battery manufacturing is largely absent or even unfavourable due to the prominence of the vehicle manufacturing business line. Only two trainees mentioned being aware of the studied business line before the other, and one trainee had not heard about the company at all before seeing the job announcement through a career website.

*At first, I thought like oh no, I hope this is not the car manufacturing side. Yeah, I didn't have a very good image about the company, I knew that the turnover rates were really high. (Interviewee G)*

*I had some doubts, because I feel like the car manufacturing side has had uncontrollable growth. First there was even a lack of apartments near the plant, and now mass layoffs. It gave me the feeling that the company is not a stable employer. (Interviewee F)*

When asked how the company could enhance its visibility among students, some interviewees provided recommendations. One suggestion was to increase the company's social media presence and engage on the same social media platforms as students and student unions. Some trainees also noted that while the company is visible in the Turku region, since it is the closest city with universities and universities of applied sciences, it

could benefit by increasing its visibility in the capital region. An international trainee highlighted that the Helsinki area offers a larger pool of international talent due to more opportunities to study in English. However, both international and domestic trainees agreed that expanding presence to the capital region could be beneficial.

### 5.2.3 Case company attractiveness

As stated previously, some of the trainees did not perceive the case company as particularly appealing due to the less favourable reputation of its other business line as an employer. However, the trainees still identified certain attributes that made this the case company an attractive employer.

Half of the trainees indicated that conversations with friends about the case company influenced their decision to apply. As stated, all of the three international trainees had heard about job opportunities at this company through friends or acquaintances, all of whom had positive experiences working at the company.

*I talked with an alumnus who has graduated from my school, he is also an immigrant. He works here and I got the impression that the company is diverse and treats international employees well. (Interviewee D)*

Other factors mentioned by several trainees was the size and international nature of the company. It is perceived as a company of many career development opportunities both during and after studies. Additional motivations for applying for a trainee position included finding the job description intriguing and viewing the company as sustainable. Moreover, the company's interesting field of business also contributed to its appeal in the eyes of three of the interviewees. One trainee also mentioned that the career stories on the company's homepage made the trainee positions attractive, as they provided insights into employee journeys within the organization. On the other hand, two of the trainees stated that they did not have a specific reason for applying for this particular company and had applied to multiple organizations.

*I just needed to get experience of my field, the company didn't really matter as long as I got my foot in the door. (Interviewee B)*

Therefore, the company could benefit from enhancing its visibility among students, thereby increasing its attractiveness and distinguishing its employer identity in this business line. This way, the company could be able to enhance its position as a preferred employer, instead of a possible employer among others.

### 5.3 Role of traineeship in employer perception and retention

#### 5.3.1 The recruitment process

The recruitment process for trainee positions was generally viewed very positively. The trainees particularly appreciated the efficiency and speed of the process. The fact that the trainee recruitment process includes only one interview was also a notable highlight.

*Everything just went very smooth and very fast, which was quite impressive.*  
(Interviewee A)

*The recruitment process went great. It was nice that it only had one interview. I was used to long processes with many interviews, this was nice and simple.*  
(Interviewee E)

*The recruitment process was a good experience.* (Interviewee D)

However, half of trainees did also note some areas for improvement. One mentioned that the results were not delivered as promised and required follow-up inquiries. Another felt unimportant due to multiple last-minute changes to the interview schedule. The third trainee shared similar experiences, expressing that there were uncertainties about who would have time to interview them. The fourth trainee was disappointed that the salary was not negotiable based on work experience, for instance.

*When it was rescheduled on the same day, just a couple hours beforehand, I felt disappointed because I had already been nervous and stressed about it the whole morning. So that did not feel good.* (Interviewee G)

*It was not certain who would have the time to interview me, but otherwise the recruitment experience was good and quick and the interviewers were good.*  
(Interviewee B)

*I was told in the interview that they would inform me about the decisions the following week, but they didn't and I had to message them. It's not the end of the world, but when you have applied to multiple companies and you have to make all kinds of decisions, it would be nice to keep to the agreement. But the next week I got a call that I got the job, so it wasn't too bad.* (Interviewee C)

Thus, while the recruitment process was mostly perceived positively, there are some improvement possibilities that are rather straightforward and easy to implement. Having a well-functioning recruitment process is important, since it does not only impact the company's employees, but also the candidates who were not selected. Their recruitment process experience affects their future interest in the company as well as how they speak about the company as a potential employer to others.

### 5.3.2 Traineeship experience

Trainees generally found that the company either met or even exceeded their expectations, describing their experience as good or very good. Some mentioned having no specific expectations initially due to lack of previous work experience, and some even had slightly negative ones due to the vehicle manufacturing plant's reputation, but were pleasantly surprised by their overall positive trainee experience.

*My overall experience as a trainee was very good. (Interviewee A)*

*It was a positive experience. If I'm going to rate it, if the full rating is five, then I will give it a five. (Interviewee D)*

Five out of the eight interviewees highlighted the support from their team and supervisor as an important pillar of their experience as a trainee. The majority emphasized feeling respected as trainees and treated equally to other employees. For instance, one trainee considered traveling to Germany with their team as a definitive highlight of their traineeship, and another trainee was also excited that they got to travel to another plant regularly. These positive experiences included meaningful working tasks and responsibilities that contributed to their learning and professional growth. This kind of environment fostered trust, with most trainees feeling trusted by both the company and their team.

*The trainee position was a big learning opportunity for me. I gained a lot of experience and responsibilities. [...] People here are very supportive, very encouraging, and willing to train and spend time with the trainees. That way the trainee can also fully understand the tasks and how it relates to the bigger. (Interviewee D)*

*As a trainee here you get a full experience working as a formal employee and you get to learn and practice a lot. (Interviewee A)*

*Trainees are given real work assignments. This is both exciting and fulfilling. (Interviewee D)*

*I got really important work experience here. [...] I got a lot of responsibility, but it wasn't stressful or scary because people were very understanding and supportive. (Interviewee C)*

However, the remaining three trainees expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of support and structure during their traineeship. This was particularly evident at the start of their traineeships, as the interviewees found that the departments weren't prepared for them and that the supervisor didn't provide a plan or defined tasks for the summer. These

trainees shared a sense of uncertainty about their roles within the company and believed that the onboarding in their department could have been better organized. Thus, despite mostly positive experiences regarding support and meaningful work, there is evidently still room for improvement. In addition, one trainee mentioned that they did get responsibility, but at some points it was even too excessive and the team relied heavily on the trainee during their holiday period.

*It was a bit like, oh, I don't really have a purpose to be here. That they hadn't really thought about how this trainee can be included in the department's work. (Interviewee F)*

*The beginning was a bit slow, I felt like I had to come up with things to do myself. (Interviewee H)*

*One time a person got angry when I went to ask them something. When my colleague asked the same thing, there was no problem [...] I sometimes felt like the "trainee" title in my email signature also meant that I don't have to be answered to or that my email is not as important. (Interviewee G)*

*Our slogan says that we are on the fast lane, and sometimes it's challenging. The pace is quite fast and there's a lot of changes. And in summer many were on holiday, so trainees had to take responsibility independently, but given the time we had to learn everything, as a student it felt a little bit stressful and also challenging to take full responsibility alone. It's a big challenge for trainees. (Interviewee A)*

What gained praise from five of the interviewees were the activities designed for trainees, such as afterwork gatherings and visits to other plants of the company. This also resulted in many expressing their appreciation for the positive atmosphere within the trainee community. The regular opportunities to meet the fellow trainees was appreciated, since the trainees are spread across the various departments. Furthermore, trainees were pleased with their involvement in the company's events, such as the summer party, which enhanced their sense of inclusion and belonging not only within the trainee group, but also across the entire employee community.

*It was really good to have a dedicated person to take care of the trainees and organize activities. It showed that the company cares about us and they are trying to do things for us to make us happy and make us feel like we matter. (Interviewee A)*

*The company gives importance to its summer traineeship program. (Interviewee D)*

*Even as a trainee, I always felt like the same as a formal employee because we get involved in everything all the formal employees do. (Interviewee A)*

When asked to describe the company as an employer and its culture, nearly every interviewee mentioned the positive working atmosphere. Trainees felt that they were able to develop a professional network as well as make friends during their traineeship. The overall atmosphere was described as friendly and positive. In addition, the company was generally perceived as committed to improvement and also provided employees with opportunities to learn and grow. Trainees also valued flexibility, meaning the opportunities to have flexible working hours and remote work day, contributing to a good level of work-life balance. Since many trainees travel to the plant from a nearby bigger city, the hybrid model was particularly valued.

*I love the flexibility and being able to work remotely. (Interviewee D)*

The company was also praised for its diverse and international workplace environment. Trainees valued the inclusive atmosphere where they felt welcomed regardless of their cultural background. One international trainee already had previous experience of the Finnish working culture, while the other two, having experience of Asian companies known for stressful atmospheres and long workdays, were pleasantly surprised. Since all of the international trainees had heard experiences of international employees of the company, they had positive expectations about the diversity and internationalism. One of the international trainees had read about the Finnish culture and was prepared for the people to be reserved and passive, but was pleasantly surprised that people were friendly and accommodating. Six out of eight trainees spoke positively about diversity and international aspects; thus, they are not only appreciated by the international trainees but also by domestic ones.

*The diversity of the company definitely met my expectations, or I would say even a bit over my expectation because I see how many international employees we have here and how well people interact with each other, regardless of their cultural background. (Interviewee A)*

*I think that the diversity is on a good level, for example the female-male ratio is quite good considering how much we need engineers here and that's a quite male-dominated field. We also have both males and females in leadership positions. (Interviewee H)*

*It's nice that the company is so international. Finland is quite small so it would be hard to manage without additional international talent and skill. (Interviewee B)*

*I see the international atmosphere in my day-to-day working life. (Interviewee E)*

Another factor that received positive feedback during interviews was the transparent communication: overall, the trainees found that the company kept its employees well-informed about both positive and negative developments, as well as performance outcomes and the company's progress. The majority of trainees also perceived that the communication was open in both directions, and they had opportunities to provide feedback and express their own ideas. While not every trainee had regular meetings with their supervisor and mentioned that they often had to be proactive, they still felt heard. Many appreciated the chance to provide feedback about the traineeship through a survey at the end of the summer and at a workshop day arranged for the trainees. Trainees were also impressed by the opportunity to take part in the company-wide feedback survey concerning the company, its work environment, culture, and atmosphere.

*I think that it's important that the company is hearing the employees' voice. It's an indicator that the company wants to be responsive at least and would want to know what the employees think about the operation and about the performance of the company. (Interviewee D)*

What stood out was that during the interviews, the trainees did not prioritize salary. Many did not even mention it and instead focused on other positive and negative aspects about their traineeship. However, when specifically asked about compensation, the majority found that the salary was not enough. Two trainees considered the trainee salary fair, but the other six described it as poor or even very poor. A few trainees noted that their study peers receive higher salaries from their traineeships, and one mentioned earning almost the same salary at a previous job on an assembly line, which did not require any education or special skills.

*Considering that we were given real responsibilities and work tasks, I sometimes felt like we were thought of as cheap workforce. (Interviewee F)*

*I feel like the salary could be more based on the salary recommendations of trade unions for traineeships. I have talked with my friends and they have a higher salary. (Interviewee C)*

*Even as a student trainee, they pay a fair salary, at least it's market level salary. (Interviewee A).*

Furthermore, sustainability was mentioned surprisingly infrequently, appearing in only three interviews. While one trainee observed that the company is making efforts to accelerate and support sustainable development, two others found that the company

portrays a highly sustainable image externally, but lacks genuine commitments and sufficient resources internally.

*I do see some efforts to speed up and support sustainability. (Interviewee D)*

*Sustainability is said to be part of the strategy, a big pillar, but it's mostly just talk. Like that the words are bigger than the actual actions. There's not enough resources for sustainable development. It looks impressive from the outside, but inside, there's not much substance. (Interviewee C)*

*Sustainable development felt more like greenwashing. It is talked about a lot, but the actions are quite small. To me it seems that there's not much internal desire to actually do it. (Interviewee B)*

Thus, the company has succeeded in creating a positive trainee experience that meets or even exceeds student talent's expectations. Trainees praised the company on many fronts, however, it would be beneficial to reevaluate trainee salaries and consider how sustainability aspects could be better highlighted during the traineeship.

### 5.3.3 Effect of traineeship on student retention

Overall, the interviewees had a positive trainee experience, as evidenced by them continuing to work for the company after their summer trainee period. During the interviews, possibilities to continue employment after the trainee summer were highly praised. Many emphasized that one of the definitive strengths of the traineeship was the opportunity to continue to work with the company after the summer, or to write a thesis for the company.

*Yes, I would recommend the company as an employer. It looks good in your CV, the company is big so you have a lot of opportunities here and you learn how a big company operates. (Interviewee F)*

*Yes I would recommend it and already have. The work culture is good, you have good growth opportunities, learning opportunities and flexible working hours. (Interviewee E)*

*The traineeship helped build the foundation of giving me the direction for long term and helped me identify areas where I can focus on for professional growth. (Interviewee D)*

*Even as a trainee, I was given tasks just like the others and I think we were also treated the same as formal employees, which also gave me a very good impression about the company and it's also part of the reason why I wanted to stay after my traineeship. (Interviewee A)*



*This company is a good place to start your career. (Interviewee E)*

Despite encountering some challenges, all interviewed trainees expressed their eagerness to pursue their careers with the company. Among trainees, the company is viewed as a large, international organization that offers students with opportunities for professional growth. In addition, when asked if they would recommend the company as an employer to their fellow students, every interviewee said yes.

#### **5.4 Building a strong student talent base through employer branding**

In summary, the company recognizes employer branding as essential for showcasing its identity, both internally and externally, though current efforts are considered rather elementary. Key challenges include establishing a distinct brand personality for the rather young battery business within the broader company framework and insufficient resources dedicated to form structured employer branding initiatives. The company has many employer branding initiatives; however, a clear strategy seems to be missing.

*“We do have multiple employer branding activities that we do, but having a clear plan for the long-term and following up how the activities actually worked could be on a better level.” (Expert interviewee)*

When comparing perspectives between trainees and the company expert, both emphasize the importance of a positive work atmosphere and opportunities for professional growth. Both also recognize the company’s international and diverse environments as a strength, as well as share a mutual appreciation for the opportunities to continue employment after the traineeship. Both parties recognized challenges with individualizing the battery business’ employer brands from the company’s other business lines.

*This is a very versatile company for students, a lot of different departments and opportunities. (Interviewee B)*

Regarding differences in the perspectives, the company seemed to have a bit more focus on trainee attraction, while trainees themselves highlighted aspects that influence their retention. Thus, the focus areas are different. Additionally, regarding perceptions, salary and sustainability was not a big part of either parties’ interviews, but still trainees seem to express more concern about salary and sustainability than the company.

What the case company should invest in is developing a more robust strategy for promoting the battery business as a distinct employer brand within the company. This

includes appointing a dedicated manager for talent acquisition and employer branding activities. Additionally, the company should create key messages that they want to convey by defining a clear employer value proposition. This could include unique selling points such as rapid growth in the battery business, commitment to sustainability with tangible actions, and the inclusive international culture to attract diverse talent.

Even with the active participation in job fairs and the collaboration with the university of applied sciences, it is evident that the company needs to further improve its visibility and recognition among students. One opportunity for this could be leveraging the power of social media, using social media channels that students use. The recruitment process was generally perceived in a very positive light. It gained praise about its effectiveness, though some improvements in communication and consistency are needed. Regarding the recruitment process, the company would benefit from addressing inconsistencies in communication and scheduling to improve the candidate experience even further.

*“It’s worth increasing the social media presence. You can clearly see that companies active on social media have high demand among young people.”*  
(Interviewee F)

Onboarding can be seen as a clear development point, with trainees highlighting initial challenges with the lack of structure, onboarding and defined tasks. Managers and departments should be advised to pay attention to proper onboarding of the trainee, ensuring all trainees receive clear tasks and support from day one. Supervisors of the trainees need to have their team prepared and informed about the trainee’s arrival and already have discussed with the team about the trainee’s work tasks. It would be effective to have a clearer plan for the trainee period, that is communicated to the managers.

*“The first introduction day held by HR was good. After that, when joining my department and team, it was quite unstructured, like they weren’t really prepared and didn’t have anything ready for me.”* (Interviewee B)

Additionally, the company should implement regular feedback mechanisms and support systems to address concerns promptly and enhance the overall trainee experience. It is important to regularly collect feedback from trainees to refine employer branding efforts and ensure alignment with student expectations. The trainee experience has to be as good as possible, since word-of-mouth among students became very evident during the interviews. Managers should be advised to have regular meeting with their trainee, thus giving them an opportunity to discuss ideas, feedback and how the traineeship is going.

*“When I joined, I could see things from a fresh perspective. I actually had quite a few ideas how to develop things, but I feel like there wasn’t really space for them. Trainees could bring more to the table.”* (Interviewee C)

Moreover, the company should continue the good level of trainee activities as well as involving trainees in company-wide events to foster community and integration. Flexibility was also highly valued, and that aspect can also be used to attract talent from bigger cities that have a lot of student talent due to the location of universities or universities of applied sciences. Regarding sustainability, the company should align its actions with words. The company should strengthen internal resources and commitment to sustainability initiatives and increase internal communication about sustainability to bring it closer to employees.

At the moment the company cannot be seen as an employer of choice among domestic students. Based on the international trainees, the company is more attractive due to positive experience of their fellow international employee peers. Word-of-mouth is evidently a powerful tool among student talent, so a positive trainee experience for students also positively effects the company’s attractiveness.

*“I would say that in order to attract more students, it’s important to make sure that trainees are well taken care of feeling good here. This helps us get a positive experience here. Because word spreads quickly among students, for example, in my school, many people know I worked here also last summer. I’ve said good things about working here, and as a result, many others have applied.”* (Interviewee C)

In summary, the findings suggest that the company has successfully cultivated an employer brand that resonates with student talent, offering a combination of career development, diversity, and supportive work culture. However, there are clear areas for improvement, and by addressing these areas, the company can further strengthen its employer brand and attract and retain top talent in the future. By addressing these findings and action points, the company can enhance its attractiveness to student talent, improve retention rates, and strengthen its employer brand in the competitive market. Continuous feedback and adaptation based on both trainee and expert insights will be crucial for sustained success in attracting and retaining top student talent.

## **6 Conclusions**

### **6.1 Theoretical contribution**

The purpose of this study was to investigate how a company can enhance its employer brand and improve its ability to attract and retain student talent effectively. The study adopted a comprehensive perspective on employer branding, integrating insights from marketing and human resource management literature. The study combined literature about the internal and external employer brand, employer branding activities, the advantages of employer branding, the characteristics of student talent, and importance of international student talent, and combined these to address student talent's perceptions.

The findings of the study support previous research by highlighting the importance for organizations to invest in both external and internal employer branding efforts to develop a strong employer brand (Srivastava & Bhatnagar 2010; Backhaus & Tikoo 2004). The internal dimension, which encompasses existing employees' experiences in the company, is as crucial, if not more so, than projecting an appealing employer image to the external audience, potential employees (Mosley 2007). Unlike traditional recruitment strategies, which tend to be short-term, reactive, and dependent on job openings, employer branding adopts a long-term perspective. Thus, employer branding is more comprehensive than just showcasing a positive image on the outside (Theurer et al. 2018). This holistic approach focuses on continuously attracting and retaining talent to ensure a consistent flow of talent in an organization.

Previous research lacks the student talent and employer branding combination, and this research aimed to contribute to that area. By investing in student talent and by addressing their specific wants and needs, companies are able to create a dynamic and resilient workforce that is prepared for future challenges. Understanding the values and needs of the younger workers can provide organization with clear advantage, since these employees bring fresh ideas, innovation, creativity, and energy (Keller & Meaney, 2017; Tulgan 2015). Engaging young talent enables companies to more effectively achieve business objectives, act in an agile way in the fast-paced business environment, and outperform the competition. Companies that understand and prioritize these aspects can more effectively attract and retain young talent.

The study supports previous research by highlighting that learning and growth opportunities are crucial for attracting and retaining young talent (Muratbekova-Touron et al. 2018). The findings reveal that trainees highly value opportunities to develop their skills and grow at the company, even over salary, aligning with existing research. Additionally, this study supports previous research by stating that student value flexibility and a good work atmosphere (Muratbekova-Touron et al. 2018).

According to past research, one of the biggest priorities of younger employees is addressing various social issues. Student talent value transparent and fair organizations that prioritize gender equality, diversity, and inclusion. (Sparrow et al. 2016; Chaudhary 2018.) This study supports this statement, since many of the trainees highlighted the case company's diversity and inclusive atmosphere. However, differing from existing literature (Muratbekova-Touron et al. 2018), sustainability and climate issues were surprisingly not as highly valued by the trainees.

According to existing research, a positive employee experience is critical in shaping employees' perceptions of the employer (Ambler & Barrow 1996; Mosley 2007). This was also supported by the findings of this research, and the study found that a positive traineeship experience enhances the company's reputation and increases student talent's retention.

This study highlighted the role of word-of-mouth information, especially among international student talent. This indicates that personal recommendations are highly influential in student's employment decisions. In existing literature, this was not as emphasized as a primary factor.

In conclusion, this study provided in-depth insights into how students perceive a company's employer brand how traineeships directly influence students' perceptions and long-term engagement with the company. The study's findings align with existing research in several aspects, such as the importance of learning and growth opportunities for student talent. However, the study's findings indicate that word-of-mouth information was a significant factor when students sought employment, which is an underemphasized aspect in existing literature. While the existing literature provides a strong foundation for employer brand and employer branding, this study brought new insights for the student talent perspective and combined it with existing employer brand literature.

## 6.2 Managerial implications

This research contributes to understanding the value of student talent and how to attract and retain them through a strong employer brand. By examining the employer brand through the lens of student trainees, this study enhances knowledge on how organizations can optimize and develop trainee experiences. Comparing the views of the company and its trainees gives a comprehensive overview of the company's employer brand regarding student attraction and retention. It highlighted factors that trainees are searching for in potential employers and attributes that they value, such as internationality, flexibility, and a positive work atmosphere. Students especially value learning and growth opportunities, thus by investing in these, companies can retain trainees. Additionally, word-of-mouth is an important source of information among students, which highlights the importance of creating a positive traineeship experience for students. This ensures that favorable feedback will be shared among student communities.

For successful talent attraction and retention, it is crucial for companies to understand that employer branding is a holistic concept covering both the internal and external dimension and that it needs to be continuously maintained. This involves enabling a positive employer perception, ensuring a favorable candidate experience, and ultimately fostering a positive employee experience. Based on this research, the reality of employer branding for trainees is predominantly shaped within the organization. From a managerial perspective, it is crucial to grasp the breadth of the employer branding concept and focus on managing the right aspects effectively, in order to really gain advantages of employer branding.

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the strategies and practices that companies can adopt to develop a compelling employer brand that effectively attracts and retains student talent. In addition, this study presents key characteristics of student talent and specific values and attributes that they look for in an employer. Students offer fresh perspectives, eagerness to learn and develop themselves, innovativeness and adaptability to organizations. By fostering young talent in the organization and employing students, companies can develop a pipeline of skilled professionals who can grow with the company. By understanding the attributes and criteria that make employers attractive to students, the role of traineeships in shaping perceptions and retention, and the importance

of strategic employer branding efforts, companies can strengthen their position in the competition for top student talent.

Implementing these insights can enhance the company's attractiveness as an employer, improve retention rates, and strengthen its employer brand in a competitive market. These actions not only address current challenges identified in the thesis but also lay the foundation for sustainable growth and success in attracting and retaining top student talent.

### **6.3 Limitations and further research suggestions**

The student talent approach when examining a company's employer brand opens up numerous avenues for further research. As this study was a commission from a company, it is limited to a single case study about this specific organization. Expanding the scope to include multiple case studies or studies from various industries would provide a more comprehensive and diverse understanding of the effects of employer branding on student talent. Such approaches could provide insights on how different industries and organizational context influence the employer branding process as well as the connection of student talent and the employer brand.

Moreover, another limitation of this study is that it only included student talent who remained with the company after their traineeship period ended. This decision was made to narrow the scope of the research and to be able to identify and analyze the elements that enhance employer retention, in addition to employer attraction. To gain a more comprehensive perspective, future research could include student talent who decided to leave the company after their traineeship. Their experiences and reasons for leaving could offer valuable insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the employer brand from a different angle.

Additionally, it is important to note that this research was rather limited considering the number of interviewees. Extending the research to involve a larger number of trainees within the company would further enhance the depth of the findings. One option could also be conducting this research as a longitudinal study, in which trainees from the coming years are interviewed as the company's employer brand evolves. This could provide a dynamic and ongoing evaluation of the employer brand and its impact on student talent. This approach would also allow for the observation of future trends and changes over

time, offering a richer understanding of how employer branding affects student talent attraction and retention in the long term. Moreover, this research encompassed both the external and internal aspects of the employer brand, as well as the perspectives of trainees before, during, and after their traineeship, resulting in a rather broad overview of the topic. Deeper insight could be gained by focusing more on each subject matter.

On a more general level, as the field of employer brand and employer branding is very fragmented and unfocused, it would also benefit from a coordinated efforts to establish clearer theoretical frameworks and research methodologies. Standardizing key concepts and terminologies would allow for more consistent and comparable research across different studies and industries. This would help to build a more cohesive body of knowledge and making it easier to identify best practices and common challenges in employer branding.



## 7 Summary

This study investigated how a company can enhance its employer brand and improve its ability to attract and retain student talent effectively. The issue was approached through three subproblems, which were 1.) What attributes and criteria could make prospective employers more attractive to student talent? 2.) What is the role of traineeship in formulating the student perceptions of the employer and in employee retention among student talent? 3.) How can companies build a strong student talent base by leveraging their employer brand?

The theoretical background of this study combined marketing and human resource management literature about employer brand, employer branding, and student talent. The literature review covered the internal and external employer brand, employer branding activities, advantages of employer branding, student talent characteristics, and the importance of international student talent. In conclusion, the literature framework presented a framework on the two-fold employer brand experience of student talent. This framework illustrates how successful employer branding can enhance student talent's experience of the company as an employer and build a strong student talent base.

The research was executed as a qualitative single-case study about a Finnish company operating in the battery manufacturing sector. The data was collected by conducting eight semi-structured interviews with the company's trainees and one with an HR Specialist, also from the company. The interview data was analyzed using content and thematic analysis methods. This qualitative, single-case approach and data collection and analysis methods enabled to gain a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

The study's findings support existing literature, indicating that students tend to value learning and growth opportunities over salary. The findings also highlighted the importance of word-of-mouth information in learning about the traineeship opportunities, emphasizing the importance of a positive trainee experience. To successfully attract and retain student talent, companies must invest in both internal and external employer branding activities, focusing on values and attributes that are important for student talent.

In conclusion, a strong employer brand is crucial for attracting, engaging, and retaining student talent. Employer branding activities should align with and showcase the

company's values and culture, providing learning and career development opportunities. By investing in employer branding, organizations are able to build a motivated, loyal, and skilled workforce, which ultimately also enhances organizational performance. Thus, a strong employer brand serves as a strategic asset on the competitive labour market for young professionals.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1 Interview framework for the trainee interviews

#### INTERVIEW FRAMEWORK

##### Master's thesis interview

#### CHARGING UP TALENT: DEVELOPING AN EMPLOYER BRAND

**ATTRACTIVE TO STUDENTS** - A case study on how a company can develop an employer brand that attracts and retains student talent

**Research aim:** to analyze how companies could enhance their employer brand and improve their ability to attract and retain student talent effectively.

#### Research questions of the thesis:

1. *What attributes and criteria could make prospective employers more attractive to student talent?*
2. *What is the role of traineeship in formulating the student perceptions of the employer and in employee retention among student talent?*
3. *How can companies build a strong student talent base by leveraging their employer brand?*

The interview responses will be treated confidentially, and your name or job title will not be included in the thesis. The interview will be recorded for transcription purposes with the consent of the interviewee. Consent will be verified at the start of each interview. After transcription, the original interview recordings will be destroyed to ensure source anonymity in the thesis.

For the interview we ask you to:

- Allow us to record the interview and transcribe it.
- Allow us to keep this recording and transcription and analyze it for research purposes, after which they will be destroyed.
- Allow us to anonymously quote you from your interview in the thesis.



The following questions will be discussed during the interview:

Background questions:

1. Can you briefly introduce yourself and your academic background?

Employer recognition and attraction:

2. How did you first learn about the internship opportunities at this company?
3. Were you familiar with the company before seeing the job application and applying?
4. Before joining, how aware were you of the company's reputation as an employer, and what influenced your decision to apply?
5. What aspects of the company's reputation or offerings attracted you?
6. What are the most important factors you consider when choosing a prospective employer? Can you describe the specific qualities or attributes that make a company attractive to you as a student?
7. How was your experience with the recruitment process, and what stood out to you in terms of the company's approach to attracting candidates?

Expectations and experience:

8. What were your expectations about working at the company before starting the traineeship, and did the actual experience align with those expectations?
9. Can you describe your overall experience as a trainee at the company?
10. Were there any unique aspects of the internship program at this company that positively influenced your experience?
11. Were there any aspects of the internship program that negatively influenced your experience?

Employer brand perceptions:

12. What values or qualities do you associate with the company as an employer?
13. How would you describe the company culture, and what aspects of it do you find most supportive or challenging?
14. Have you had opportunities to provide feedback to the company, and do you feel that your feedback is valued and acted upon?

Internationality:

15. How did the international nature of the company impact your perspective on the workplace and your own professional development?

Diversity and inclusion, cross-cultural experiences:

16. How important is workplace diversity to you, and did the company's commitment to diversity align with your expectations?
17. Can you share any positive experiences related to working in a multicultural environment at the company?
18. Do you have any suggestions for how the company could further enhance its commitment to internationality and diversity to attract more students?

Career opportunities:

19. Did your internship influence your perception of potential long-term employment with the company? How do you perceive your potential for growth and advancement within the company now, after completing your traineeship?

Recommendations:

20. If you were to recommend the company to a fellow student seeking an internship, what key points would you highlight?
21. **Company Strengths:** What do you think the company does particularly well as an employer? It could be related to work culture, learning opportunities, or any other aspect. What unique aspects of the company could make it a compelling choice for students and trainees?
22. **Areas for Improvement:** Is there something you think the company could improve upon to make the trainee experience even better? What suggestions do you have for making the company an even more attractive employer for future trainees?

## **Appendix 2 Interview framework for the expert interview**

### **INTERVIEW FRAMEWORK**

#### **Master's thesis interview**

#### **CHARGING UP TALENT: DEVELOPING AN EMPLOYER BRAND**

**ATTRACTIVE TO STUDENTS** - A case study on how a company can develop an employer brand that attracts and retains student talent

**Research aim:** to analyze how companies could enhance their employer brand and improve their ability to attract and retain student talent effectively.

#### **Research questions of the thesis:**

1. *What attributes and criteria could make prospective employers more attractive to student talent?*
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#### **For the interview we ask you to:**

- Allow us to record the interview and transcribe it.
- Allow us to keep this recording and transcription and analyze it for research purposes, after which they will be destroyed.
- Allow us to anonymously quote you from your interview in the thesis.

The following questions will be discussed during the interview:

Understanding the company's employer brand:

1. How do you understand and define employer brand and employer branding at the company?
2. Can you describe the process of developing and maintaining the employer brand of the company?
3. What key messages do you aim to communicate with your employer brand?
4. Who / which department is in charge of the employer brand?

Student talent:

5. Can you describe the trainee programs you offer and how they are structured to attract and retain student talent?
6. What opportunities for career development and advancement do you provide specifically for students or recent graduates?
7. Are there any unique challenges or considerations in attracting and retaining students that differ from other talent segments?

Attracting student talent / external employer brand:

8. What strategies does the company have to attract students during the recruitment process?
9. Do you have any partnerships with universities or universities of applied sciences to attract student talent?

Student talent retention / internal employer brand:

10. What strategies do you use to retain employees, particularly those at the early stages of their careers?
11. How would you describe the company culture here, and what steps do you take to ensure it remains positive and inclusive?

Diversity and inclusion:

12. How does the company integrate diversity and inclusion into its employer brand, and what role does it play in attracting a diverse pool of candidates?

Internationality:

13. Do you try to attract international student talent? If so, for what reason?

14. How do you attract and retain international students, any differences to domestic students?
15. To what extent do you leverage your company's international presence as part of its employer brand strategy, especially when targeting students?

Measurement / evaluation:

16. How do you measure the success of the employer brand initiatives, particularly in attracting and retaining student talent?

Future initiatives:

17. Are there upcoming initiatives or plans to further enhance the company's employer brand, particularly in relation to attracting and retaining students?