



(Image credit: Ballisager)

# The battle of attracting and retaining talents

(BASED ON THE CASE OF KOMBIT A/S)

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## Summary

This study investigates how employer branding is used in practice to attract potential employees and retain existing employees. With the application of Backhaus & Tikoo's (2004) theoretical framework of Employer Branding, this qualitative research examines a case company, Kombit A/S, through 10 semi-structured interviews with employees from the HR, communication and other departments. Hermeneutics is the philosophical approach through which the investigation of employer branding is advanced, by recognizing that interpretation is the key to reaching closer to the data.

Our approach in this research has been to create an understanding of how a company works actively with employer branding, by relating the theoretical components with the collected data. Furthermore, this study analyzed how Kombit works with attracting and retaining employees using the three theoretical employer branding components; external employer branding, internal employer branding, and the development of employer value propositions (EVPs).

Our findings showed that within external employer branding, it is essential to work with market segmentation, where a company approaches the labor market based on the target group they wish to attract. Based on the interviews, it was determined that different profiles have different motivators (EVPs). Young and inexperienced employees prioritize different values in their employment compared to more experienced ones, and knowing the drivers or values the employees prioritize, can result in a better external strategy for attracting similar profiles to the company. Furthermore, it was determined that by matching internal employer branding components such as organizational identity as well as culture with the employees, a company can experience higher employee retention due to a heightened attachment towards the employer brand. The EVPs can also be used regarding employee retention and here a company has to have an ongoing focus on, which values the employees perceive as the most important for them in their employment.

Moreover, we conclude that symbolic benefits are more important than functional benefits and a company like Kombit must focus on creating symbolic benefits as it may not be possible for Kombit to be the salary leader in the market.

## **List of abbreviations**

**EB: Employer Branding**

**IEB: Internal employer branding**

**EEB: External employer branding**

**EVP: Employer value proposition**

**CB: Corporate branding**

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# 1. Introduction

The most important resource for an organization is human capital. Having the right employees within a company ensures productivity and growth. In order to gain the necessary human capital, an organization has to be aware of the labor market and make sure to appear attractive towards potential employees. However, this process is also controlled by the labor market in the classical sense of supply and demand. If there is a high supply of employees and a low demand for them, attracting employees would appear as a simple process, while on the other hand, if there is a low supply of employees and a high demand by companies, it will make the process of recruitment more difficult. This study will focus, specifically around this topic, namely attracting and retaining employees within a highly competitive labor market. In contemporary times companies have started to use employer branding (EB) as a Human Resource strategy with the purpose of attracting the right set of skills and retaining already existing skills within an organization. EB is a new concept within branding practices, where organizations brand themselves as an *employer* rather than a corporate name or by a product (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). The idea behind EB is for an organization to differentiate themselves through their *employer brand*, which is the perception of how others see the organization as an employer. EB theory revolves around the idea that by emphasizing the strengths and unique aspects of the workplace and branding these towards the outside world, an organization can better attract potential employees (ibid). Furthermore, an equally important factor within EB is the retention of employees. EB practices can help retain employees through the maintenance of a strong employer brand (Sullivan, 2004; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

In contemporary times more and more companies are starting to implement an EB strategy with this purpose. The main reason behind this is the high competition in the labor market. The labor market has become one of the most important markets to companies (Englund & Buchhave, 2009), and this is due to two arguments; First, in modern times the greatest competitive advantage a company can gain is its employees, as it has become more difficult for companies to maintain a competitive advantage through for example, financial management or the purchase of new machinery or equipment. In today's time, it is easier for other companies to either copy or buy likewise tools to gain the same advantages, one company may hold over their competitors. However, human competencies and resources are much more difficult to copy. Second, there are overall fewer and fewer skilled employees to 'fight for' (ibid).

In the Danish labor market, which this research will investigate, the high demand for skilled employees is noticed. The unemployment rate in Denmark at the start of 2023 is 1,8 %, which means that out of all people in Denmark that have reported that they are fit to work, only just below 2% of them are not currently employed (Rasmussen & Sørensen, 2022). This is the lowest unemployment rate ever recorded in the history of Denmark, according to Dansk Industri (DI) and Danmarks Statistik (ibid; DST, 2023), and is only around 0,3% lower than the unemployment rate just before the financial crisis in 2008. Furthermore, 40% of Danish companies view the shortage of labor as the biggest barrier or threat to a company's growth (DI, 2022). Danish companies are in demand of more workers, and experts within the field have stated that this labor shortage is the biggest and most important economical challenge that Denmark is currently facing (ibid). However, it is specifically skilled employees who have the highest demand for Danish companies. Studies show that in 2030, there will be a shortage of 99,000 skilled workers throughout all industries in Denmark, and on the other hand, there will be a surplus of 100,000 unskilled workers (Ritzau, 2021). So, one thing is, that in recent times there is a low supply of skilled workers compared to the demand of what the Danish companies need, but secondly, there is also a political aspect concerning the lack of education within the fields, which is needed in the labor market in the future.

In a highly competitive labor market, where the unemployment rate is reaching its lowest, and the overall demand for skilled workers is much higher than the supply, EB can be used as a tool to attract the needed new employees and further retain existing employees. The high demand for skilled employees results in competition between companies in the labor market. Here, the fundamentals of EB address that through a strong employer brand, a company can gain a competitive advantage within the labor market, which will make the workplace more attractive towards potential employees (Barrow & Ambler, 1996).

This research will investigate how EB is being used actively as a tool to attract and retain employees in a highly competitive market. This study will be made qualitatively, by focusing on a case company, Kombit A/S, which is a public IT company located in Copenhagen. Kombit already uses EB as an HR strategy, which was introduced in 2021 due to recruitment challenges. The main issue with recruitment, according to Kombits HR director, is due to the shortage of IT skills worldwide (Interview 1). As a public company that only recruits Danish-speaking employees, this shortage was affecting Kombit to a greater degree, and regarding specific positions, there were times when the company did not receive a single application

(ibid). These challenges resulted in an EB strategy, where the purpose was to create a strong employer brand for Kombit in order to attract the right skills. Hence, this study will investigate how Kombit is working with EB in practice by examining both external and internal EB components. Based on empirical data, we will, along with the theoretical understanding, analyze how a company in practice works with EB to attract potential employees and retain existing employees. This research will further unfold the challenges Kombit has met in their work with EB, and based on theory and former research, contribute to creating an understanding of how these challenges can be solved.

With all of this in mind, we have landed on a research question, supplemented with three sub-questions:

***How is Kombit A/S using employer branding as a tool to attract potential employees & retain existing employees?***

- *How can external employer branding (EEB) benefit Kombit regarding employee attraction?*
- *How can internal employer branding (IEB) benefit Kombit regarding employee retention?*
- *How can EB help Kombit to develop an Employer value proposition (EVP)?*

## **2. Research design**

Here, there will be an explanation of the structure of this research. At first, this study will start with an introduction of the topic which also includes the problem area and problem formulation above. The following chapter will consist of a summary of Kombit A/S, to aid the readers to get a general overview of the company. Afterwards, a literature review on EB will be done to investigate and review the existing literature related to the subject field. This part is developed in order to obtain knowledge about different corners of the subject field. By going through different arguments by different authors and by identifying common logic and differences, it will be possible to draw a strong analysis. This chapter is followed by the methodology section, where our methods and strategies in relation to the analysis are explained. This research is primarily developed on qualitative data, which includes semi-structured interviews backed up



with secondary data to strengthen the reliability. The next chapter will present the theories, concepts and frameworks utilized in relation to the analysis strategy and afterwards, the analysis and discussion of the findings will be presented followed by the conclusion and suggestions for future research.

### **3. Description of the company**

The study is qualitative, where the focus is to examine one case-company in depth, to create a better understanding of how EB is used in business practice to attract and retain the right skills in a highly competitive job market.

Kombit is known as the Danish municipalities' IT community, and is a quite unique organization, as many countries do not have what it resembles. Kombit was established in 2009 following the sale of KMD (the former IT supplier to the municipalities), who at that time had a monopoly on all IT systems that were delivered to the Danish municipalities. Hence, the purpose of establishing Kombit was to break the monopoly. Kombit's role is, therefore, not to produce and develop the IT systems for the municipalities but to go to tender with the IT systems, where private IT suppliers have the opportunity to bid and buy a contract based on the quality and price they can offer. The idea is based on liberal principles of the labor market, where competition between more companies would deliver the best product for the best price to the municipalities. During Kombits establishment they promised a 25% price saving on IT systems to the municipalities, which was the main reason the Danish municipalities governed under the organization KL (Kommunernes Landsforening), agreed to the establishment of Kombit. Kombit consider themselves a specialist organization, as they specialize in the law and practices of IT development, but do not create the "product" themselves. Instead, they hire IT suppliers from the private IT market and make sure that the systems they provide live up to the requirements of the municipalities. Kombit has since its establishment delivered 30 different IT systems to the municipalities through tender, and in which they are in charge of the maintenance of these systems.

Kombit is seen as a public organization, as they are 100% owned by KL. There are around 240 employees at Kombit, and the employees' professional background ranges widely. The figure below gives an overview of the different specialist areas at the company:

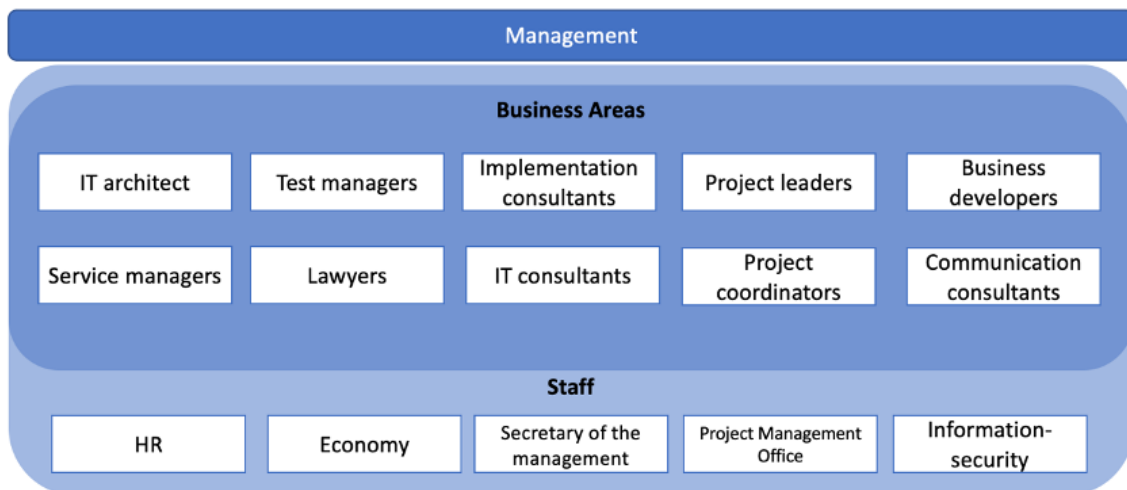


Figure 1: Kombat organization

There are three different levels of employment at Kombat, which are mainly based on experience; these levels are consultant, senior consultant or chief consultant. As of March 2023, Kombat has registered 25 consultants, 82 senior consultants, 95 chief consultants and 21 student assistants.

#### 4. Literature review

Our literature review has been conducted with the use of systematic topic researching, where keywords such as “EB”, “EVP” and “brand management” have been searched for in numerous databases offered by RUC library. These databases include the Danish Royal Library’s database, Web of Science and Google Scholar.

Our literature review will be structured as an intertwining of both the historical and context review as explained by Neumann (2006). Here, the idea is to show the historical traces of branding throughout time, and the movement that brand literature has had from the early stages of its conceptualization. This will specifically be related to the development from product branding to CB, and now to EB. Furthermore, after the historical review, a context review will be conducted, where the idea is to link our study to a larger body of knowledge surrounding our research field (Neumann, 2006). This includes a thorough review of literature, which has had significance for the conceptualization of EB.

## 4.1 Product branding

Branding stands for a feature that aids with the differentiation of something. When something gets branded, it indicates a certain value in the thing which can provide meaning to some people. But branding is not a new phenomenon and it has been practiced since 1760 when “Wedgwood” became the first brand to label its products to point out the quality of its products (Sandstrøm, 2006). Therefore, the concept of companies attempting to establish themselves as different compared to their competitors is not recent.

The reason behind the organization’s wish to brand its products is due the creation of a competitive advantage. This can be done by promoting and differentiating the product of the company so that it will significantly be different from the competitor’s products. It is important to create an identity of the product as well as awareness about the product which will provide an assurance of the certain quality of the product and these should be heavily backed up by the advertisement. When these attempts regarding product branding become successful, the sales will rise which eventually leads the company to gain significant market shares and a loyal customer base will be created. Moreover, the company will be able to sell the products at an increased price compared to the production cost of the products, which is called a "premium price" (Hollensen, 2019). The creation of a solid brand is a challenging process but not impossible (Aaker, 2010). When branding of a product becomes successful it provides a great value to the company. Generally, the marketing department deals with the product branding and it is only connected to the product and its life cycle.

Brand identity is a vital part of developing a strong brand (Aaker, 2010). Backhaus & Tikoo mentioned Aaker while explaining the theory of EB. Therefore, it is relevant to mention his research related to branding theory. Aaker has explained brand identity as, “*a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain. These associations represent what the brand stands for and imply a promise to customers from the organization members*” (Aaker, 2010). Aaker has also mentioned that the aim of a brand is to develop the brand equity. According to him, “*Brand equity is a set of assets (and liabilities) connected to a brand's name and symbol that adds the value supplied by a product or service to a firm and/or customers of that firm*” (Aaker, 2010).

Hollensen has mentioned that the branding concept itself was developed on the basis that consumers, during a purchase situation, choose products to and from based on a combination

of rational and emotional criteria (Hollesen, 2019). That means, when a product gets branded it creates an emotional and rational value in the customer's mind. The rational value is constructed from the product's material, quality, trademark and design. In this stage, the factors that guide the customer are imagination and reason. The emotional value gets developed when a customer gets a positive impression in his heart about the product and also by the association that a future customer has towards the product. Hollensen has mentioned that the emotional part complements the brand's personality. This type of branding is developed by its abstract features that customers need to connect with.

## **4.2. From product branding to corporate branding (CB)**

CB is the additional advancement of product branding. The reason for this additional development of branding was due to the fact that it was not only relevant for the product of the company but also for the company itself as a producer of the product. This demand arises not only from the company's customers but also from employees, investors and others (Sandstrøm, 2006). CB puts its focus on the company producing the product, and therefore it is more about the company rather than its products that must differentiate itself from competitors (ibid) Even though some parts of CB have similarities with product branding, still CB has noticeable differences compared to product branding. CB is a long-term strategy that is linked to the life of the company, whereas product branding relates only to the life of the product (Hatch and Schultz, 2003).

The focus of different companies differs from each other, depending on the purpose of the corporate brand (Sandstrøm, 2006). CB is divided into four subsections by Sandstørn, which are: stakeholder brand, customer brand, investor brand and employer brand (ibid). According to him, it is important for a company to identify which stakeholder the company needs to focus on. A corporate brand does not necessarily need to focus on all stakeholder groups at the same time, but still, it should not put importance only on one individual stakeholder group. The company needs to identify a so-called balance while branding, which will show that it will achieve a more credible corporate brand (Sandstrøm, 2006).

When it comes to CB, it is important to identify a company's authentic characteristics, which can be seen within the firm's values, culture, and history and then communicate it to the internal and external parts of the firm. The firm's distinctiveness can be identified by analyzing what values it already has and what it wants to achieve in the future (Hatch and Schultz, 2003). Hatch

and Schultz also explained CB as a holistic process and the brand itself is developed by the sum of the relationships between vision, culture and image (ibid). In accordance with Hatch and Schultz (2003), it is significantly important for an organization to utilize this strategy to be able to identify the corporate brand that best represents the organization.

### **4.3 Employer branding (EB)**

EB as a term was first introduced academically in 1996 when Barrow & Abler published the academic paper “The employer brand”. The paper focused on applying brand management techniques to human resource management through a qualitative pilot study of 27 UK companies. In that research top executives from different companies were asked to reflect upon their HR practices and their relevance to branding, to investigate whether or not companies either consciously or unconsciously brand themselves as an employer (Barrow & Ambler, 1996). This study introduced the term EB as an academic term to the world, and in 2001, a survey made by the Conference Board in North America showed that out of 138 leading companies in the world, 40% stated that they have been engaged in some form of EB activity. So, without there being a theoretical or conceptual framework for the term EB at that point in time, companies still claimed to actively be engaged in HR activities that were used to brand their company as an employer (The Conference Board, 2001). Both of these studies also led to the first academic definitions of EB as a term. Barrow and Ambler (1996) defined the employer brand as *“the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company”*. Furthermore, the Conference Board of North America following their study proposed that *“the employer brand establishes the identity of the firm as an employer. It encompasses the firm's value system, policies and behaviors towards the objectives of attracting, motivating, and retaining the firm's current and potential employees.”* (The Conference Board, 2001). These definitions indicate that an employer brand embraces the benefits of employment at a company and that these benefits can be used to attract and retain talent. Consequently, Sullivan (2004) defined EB as *“a targeted, long-term strategy to manage the awareness and perceptions of employees, potential employees, and related stakeholders with regards to a particular firm”* (Sullivan, 2004). Here the term employer brand expanded from being product-centric to strategic. Sullivan developed the term into an active strategy, where there was a more narrowed focus on how a firm can maintain, develop and build a strategy around their employer brand in order to recruit and retain the best talents.

This led to one of the first conceptualizations of EB, which was written by Backhaus and Tikoo in 2004. Backhaus and Tikoo build a theoretical framework on what the employer brand embraces of organizational components and, and how it can be used to improve concepts such as EVP, employee loyalty, attraction & productivity, organizational identity & culture. They defined EB as “*a process of building an identifiable and unique identity of the employer*” (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). The theoretical framework as presented by Backhaus and Tikoo, on building the firm's employer brand will be addressed further in the theory section.

Subsequently, several studies have been made on the influence a firm's employer brand can have on people seeking jobs. Samoliuk et al. (2022) conducted a survey of 510 respondents, who all addressed their own perception of one company's employer brand. The study showed that the main differences in the perception of the employer brand were by gender and work experience. Men valued personal development higher compared to women, who valued safety in the workplace higher. Furthermore, people with higher work experience valued pay higher, than people with no work experience, who valued reputation as more important. Overall, there were different assessments of what key values of the employer brand had the biggest influence on the respondents, but values such as workplace safety, professional development, comfortable environment, and work-life balance were prioritized the most (Samoliuk et al, 2022). Another study by Wilden et al. (2010) addressed that job seekers evaluate the attractiveness of the employers based on previous direct work experiences with the company or within the sector in which the company operates. Additionally, similar studies (Biswas & Suar, 2014; Moroko & Uncles, 2008) show that other key values are prioritized within an employer brand. Different studies addressed that social values, development possibilities, economic values, the credibility of the brand, organizational support and leadership are all prioritized factors within an employer's brand.

These studies give a great perspective on how people are different and therefore value different aspects of the employer brand. Hence, it is not possible to attract everyone, and therefore it is also important for the company to find the segment of employees that they want to attract. Here, techniques for market segmentation can actively be used with EB (Moroko & Uncles, 2009). Market segmentation is commonly used as a business practice, where firms develop or brand their product towards one part of the market, with the intention of fully penetrating and ‘taking over’ that part of the market (Tarver, 2023). This same technique can be used by

managers/leaders in relation to EB, where the idea is to localize the segment of potential employees they are seeking, and brand the employer brand specifically to them (Moroko & Uncles, 2009). Furthermore, it is not only the values that an employer can offer, which play a role but also how the company chooses to promote its brand. This is mostly concerned with the attraction part of EB rather than retention. However, social media is one of the most commonly used tools in promoting brands and is also commonly used when advertising a job post. Branding and promotion go hand in hand, and therefore a company's SoMe strategy plays a role as well when attempting to attract the right employees to the company (Sivertzen et al., 2013). Sivertzen et al. (2013) address the importance of segmenting when promoting employer brand through social media, and therefore, it is important for companies to assess which employees they are seeking and how to reach them.

The conceptualization of EB then resulted in a more narrowed research on EVP, which further determines key values that employees care about when evaluating employers. A study made by Dabirian et al. (2019) is based on 15,000 employee reviews in IT firms, which was used to describe eight key values that IT professionals care about when evaluating employers. This study focuses on the key EVPs, which can be described as the 'thing' which gives value to an employee. They further state that through the identification of the EVPs, companies can use EB to make them more attractive towards similar IT profiles, both with attraction and retention (Dabirian et al, 2019). This research was a continuation of Dabirian et al. 's (2017) theory on EVP, which will be reviewed further in the theory section.

Recent studies within EB, such as Schwarzgruber (2022) and Phungula et al (2022) further addressed the importance of developing and applying value propositions to employees both with the intention of recruitment and retention. Schwarzgruber emphasized the importance of having key values that an employer can offer, as these values can be used as a unique selling point (Schwarzgruber, 2023). Therefore by identifying the key values the firm can offer to current and potential employees, they can "sell" themselves to employees through branding. Furthermore, Phungula et al. (2022) addressed that the development of strong EVPs can result in employee commitment and motivation. These different literatures have given an overview of how former and current researchers of EB have been conducting their research, mainly quantitative by unfolding key values that employees find attractive based on a high number of respondents. Our thesis will investigate EB qualitatively by focusing solely on one company, and our methodological approach to this will further be explained in the next chapter.

## 5. Methodology

The upcoming chapters describe explanations and causes for the selections and as well as choices that have been made during the planning process of this study's empirical inquiry.

The chapters are subdivided where each part describes the target of visualizing reflections, progression and operationalization of the selections in relation to methodology, as a result, the subject of these is interwoven.

### 5.1 Qualitative research

Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2009). The qualitative method differs from the quantitative method, as it originates from the scientific tradition of interpretation (ibid). Qualitative method focuses on the context-dependent, where meaning and understanding orientation are important. It is claimed within the qualitative method that no explanation can be found without an understanding of the object field (Fuglsang & Olsen, 2009). It is important that the choice of method is consistent with the subject area that we would like to investigate. Since we have chosen to focus on how Kombit can use EB to attract and retain qualified talents, in order to best process and answer the problem formulation, it has been decided to utilize qualitative methods.

An important element in the qualitative method is language and expressions that appear in the study itself. These are typically words, which are expressed through an interview, that form a collection of information that must constitute the material. The material must then contribute to an analysis and interpretation (Ingemann et.al., 2022).

When we investigate the practice of EB in Kombit, we have a qualitative approach, as we: "*try to understand the world from the subjects' points of view, unfold the meaning of their experiences and uncover their lived world for scientific explanations*" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). By using qualitative empirical collection in the form of interviews, we thus have the opportunity to examine the respondents' motivation and how they express themselves. We try to find out if there are discrepancies between Kombit's management's vision regarding EB, the strategic level and what the employees experience in their daily work life. After this, we can look at how Kombit can strengthen its employer brand to ensure employee attraction and retention.



## **5.2 Qualitative semi-structured interviews**

Based on our scientific point of view which is hermeneutics, our aim is to develop an interpretive understanding of the meaning hidden in our interviewees' expressions, to which their perception of the world is open for discussion (Juul et. al. 2012). We used the semi-structured interviews which give us a structured but flexible way of collecting empirical evidence, since on the one hand we can obtain information about the practice of EB in Kombit, respondent's experience of working at the company and on the other hand we want the opportunity to change our questions along the way, so that can be followed up on the respondent's specific answers (ibid).

What characterizes the semi-structured interview is that there is an overarching theme that one tries to investigate. Even if we follow an interview guide, it is not important to follow the guide strictly in structure. The semi-structured interview opens the door for us to ask about other topics that emerge during the interview. With this, the semi-structured interview takes a dialogical form, where there is an opportunity to uncover areas that were not predetermined by the interview guide (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). According to Kvale and Brinkmann, it is through interaction between actors that an understanding of each other's lives, feelings, experiences and opinions arises (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Therefore, it is natural that we gather knowledge about a subject area through dialogue with other players. And it is precisely this that is the qualitative interview's strong point, namely to produce knowledge through conversation (ibid).

## **5.3 Interview guide**

A proper interview guide has been made in order to gather primary data through semi-structured interviews. The process of creating an interview guide is linked to the themes, questions and topics related to the understanding and practice of EB in Kombit. Interview guides are generally common in semi-structured interviews, which is why they have also been used in this project (Poulsen, 2016). During the creation of the interview guide, the targeted problem and the perspectives of the research get translated into specific questions and these questions must help to identify the benefits of the interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

In our interview guide, we have been focusing on selecting our questions based on different research interests. The interview guide functioned as a guideline during the interview but with

the opportunity to ask supplementary questions along the way. Our starting point was that our interviewees themselves should contribute to what they wanted to highlight in their stories. In order for this to succeed, we asked open and general questions within the various categories. This allowed us to interpret the narratives of our interviewees. This interpretation process is consistent with our scientific starting point, which is hermeneutics. We prepared two interview guides, respectively one for the HR employees and one for other employees.

One of the important aspects of the qualitative study is the methods of concept creation. While doing primary research we had some questions that were unanswered and a lot more was there to uncover regarding EB in order to be able to understand how Kombit practices EB. Due to professional relationships, we were able to talk informally with several employees of Kombit about their understanding of EB and the strategies the company follows in their work with EB. By doing that, we tried to understand how the concept of EB is being practiced by Kombit. Some of those informal talks developed into open conversations where they explained their own experiences. These talks benefited us to figure out some aspects of EB activities within the company. At the end, a great amount of work was done to establish the interview guide.

#### **5.4 Selection of interview persons**

The interviews were held with carefully selected interviewees who we believed could contribute to uncovering the investigation of EB in the best way. The respondents for the interviews were managed through our personal and professional network and afterwards also by the respondents. Snowball technique has been applied here to collect the respondents. In snowball sampling the researcher primarily samples a small group relevant to the research, and these sampled respondents propose others who have had the experience or characteristics relevant to the research (Bryman, 2016). This technique is also recommended when networks of individuals are the focus of attention (Coleman, 1958). While gaining access to the respondents, the HR director Christina was the first one who got interviewed and afterwards, Christina herself, advised some respondents who could fit better according to our target group and research interest.

Besides, when we selected interviewees, it was a prerequisite that they come from different parts of the company, different age groups, and some specifically from the HR department who generally deals with the company's EB strategies. This is due to our assumption that employees with different backgrounds from different departments have differentiated perceptions of EB.

At the same time, we acknowledge that people are influenced differently by the workplace and working environment. This helps to give a broader perspective on EB and companies' use of the strategy. We have also selected our interviewees on the basis of the extent of their professional work experience, which is why we have conducted interviews with directors and senior consultants with years of experience, employees who are new entrants to the labor market and employees who are student assistants etc. Moreover, importance was given to having participants from different genders and different age groups to notice if it makes any difference.

While doing qualitative research, it can be difficult to establish at the outset how many persons should be interviewed (Bryman, 2016). There are discussions among different authors regarding the minimum number of interviews. In general, sample sizes in qualitative research should not be too small as it can be difficult to achieve data saturation (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). On the other hand, samples lower than 20, increase the qualitative researcher's chances of getting close involvement with participants in interview-based studies (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006). We have done 10 interviews for this research that we assume will be strong enough to benefit us with the opportunity to reach deep into the data, which will eventually help to analyze that data in a more efficient way. It seems after 10 interviews, our data has reached a saturation level as we started to get many similar answers from the respondents.

## **5.5 Philosophy of science**

Our philosophical position is rooted in hermeneutics. In this section, we will outline general features from the chosen discipline that are essential and relevant to the project and its position. In this project, hermeneutics will be applied to understand perspectives that employees from HR and other departments developed to make sense of the daily situations they face with their work life in Kombit regarding EB.

### ***5.5.1 The hermeneutic analytical approach***

Hermeneutics revolves around the understanding or interpretation of phenomena (Fuglsang et. al. 2021). It deals with the interpretation of dialogues, conversations and texts (ibid). In a shortened version, hermeneutics stands for "interpretation", where one tries to get as close to the true meaning of a text as possible (ibid). It interprets text, speech, and signs in order to analyze their hidden meaning and significance (Egholm, 2014). The scientist's own prejudice

and preconceptions form the starting point for the research, and this facilitates a better and deeper interpretation of the phenomena (ibid). Hermeneutics operates with an ontology that perceives social reality as fundamentally different from nature, and an epistemology that perceives recognition of the social world as interpretation that is always uncertain and open to discussion (Juul, 2012).

There are different forms of hermeneutics, including methodical, philosophical and critical hermeneutics. The approach we are following in this study is the methodical hermeneutics. In methodical hermeneutics, which deals with rules for interpretation, it is claimed that the researchers form some rules of interpretation in order to avoid misinterpretations in communication. For Schleiermacher, whenever a text is produced, its author follows a set of unconscious, and semiconscious rules and conventions of his own language, time and culture (Demeterio, 2001). The reader, who most often belongs to a different language, time and culture, has to reconstruct these unconscious and semiconscious rules and conventions and bring them into full consciousness first before undertaking any interpretive move (ibid). When such a reader approaches the text, as a result, he is in a better position compared to the author (ibid). Instead of problematizing the interpretation of specific texts, Schleiermacher problematized the process of interpretation itself, where his opinion is, through interpretation, a reader can understand a text even better than the text's own author (Demeterio, 2001).

A strong feature of methodical hermeneutics is that the clearer we are in the description of our method, the closer to reality we get through our interpretation. In addition, it is important to point out that the researcher in the hermeneutic method does not have an objective approach to the outside world. This means that the researcher will always have an underlying reason for choosing a field of interest, this can be interests or values that have an impact on how the subject field is processed (Fuglsang et. al. 2021). Within the hermeneutic analysis, those who are analyzed are regarded as meaning and meaning-bearing social actors who express themselves in texts, utterances and actions. In addition, the actors' attitudes to norms, rules, values and behavior patterns are looked at. The reality that the researcher is trying to uncover is characterized by the interpretations and meanings that the actors have assigned to the field in advance. Therefore, social practice is characterized by both the researcher and the social actors. In addition, the researcher also draws both his theory base and his horizon of understanding across the research field, which in turn affects the actors' expression of opinion. Therefore, within the hermeneutic analytical approach, there is a constant interaction between

the actor's understanding and the researcher's understanding of a given event or action. The approach tries to understand the social actors and the meanings they attach to specific forms of action and social contexts. Hermeneutics does not look at causal explanations or the social constructions in the formation of meaning, as, for example, positivism and social constructivism do. Hermeneutic analysis primarily looks at social reality and what character traits there are, in the understanding and insight of this reality (ibid).

### *5.5.2 The hermeneutic circle in a methodical hermeneutic perspective*

At the beginning of the 1900s, Schleiermacher first identified the importance of the hermeneutic circle for understanding how information is integrated into the interpretation of text (Crotty, 1998). Schleiermacher suggested that through hermeneutics, researchers could develop *empathy* with text, a relationship identical to what happens when listeners understand information delivered by a speaker (Zweck et. al., 2008). In the hermeneutic circle, there is an interaction between the overall understanding and the partial understanding of the object the researcher seeks to interpret. When the researcher first confronts an object, this does not happen without his prejudices forming a perception of what is sought to be interpreted, and this understanding forms the premises for how the researcher understands the individual parts of the object field. When these individual parts are reviewed in the light of a specific context, this brings with it, a new holistic understanding for the researcher. Thus, it can be said that it is not possible to understand the parts without having an understanding of the subject field, even if this holistic perception is incomplete, but at the same time, the whole cannot be properly understood either until the individual parts have been reviewed. It is this commuting between the understanding of the whole and individual parts that enable the emergence of a new understanding of the whole, and it is this connection that creates meaning for the researcher in what is sought to be elucidated (Zweck et. al., 2008).

Methodic hermeneutics is an epistemological principle since the researcher (subject) is categorically separated from the subject field (object) that he must try to understand. Here, it is the relationship between part and whole that is in focus when interpreting, and therefore the researcher stands outside the world being interpreted. Thus, it can be said that the researcher stands outside the hermeneutic circle, and by using this, a methodological framework is thus formed which enables the understanding of the meaning, hidden behind the object (Juul, 2012).

### *5.5.3 Hermeneutics in this project*

The reason why the choice fell on hermeneutics is due to the methodological choice, which is qualitative in the form of semi-structured interviews. This has been chosen on the basis of the interpretation task that the interview imposes on us as researchers, where we have to discover the intentionality behind the individual's actions. It is in this aspect that the qualitative method has its strength (Juul, 2012).

According to the hermeneutic approach, it is not possible to proceed objectively and neutrally when we must produce new knowledge in accordance with the problem statement. We are bound to the context from which it works. This includes, among other things, the academic knowledge acquired by reviewing the literature on EB. These form the framework in which we act and provide the tools in the form of theories and concepts that we will use to answer the problem statement. When we want to investigate Kombit's practice and application of EB regarding employee attraction and retention, we have already made the assumption that Kombit is not working very well with the concept of EB. This overall understanding developed based on the access we had inside the company and some informal conversations with the HR employees. Based on this pre-understanding, the theoretical apparatus that we assume will be relevant in relation to the problem formulation is provided. The theory apparatus forms the analysis framework for the collected empirical evidence, and in this, the interaction occurs which constitutes the hermeneutic circle. When the theories and frameworks regarding EB are read for the first time, it has given us an understanding of a possible reason for Kombit's struggle in attracting and retaining. Then we worked with the collected empirical data based on the theory and then returned to read the theory again. This time with a new understanding of the theory, which in turn enables a new understanding of empiricism. The interpretation task paves the way for the interaction between theory and empirical work and will ultimately produce a new overall perception of Kombit's situation and possible reasons for this.

This interpretation task, which is assigned to us, will only be finished when we have obtained an adequate picture of the phenomenon for which it seeks an explanation, and it is up to us to convince readers that this explanation is valid. However, the conclusion we reach is not definitively true, but arose from the context in which we work, and the preconceptions & prejudices that have paved the way for the empiricism and theory that we have chosen to use for this study (Juul, 2012).

## 5.6 Data processing

In order to achieve a successful analysis of our data/interviews, the voices of the respondents were recorded during the interviews which helped us to listen to the interviews again and again and stay focused during the analysis. It is possible that some of the meanings and atmosphere while conducting the interviews are not picked up by the recordings, such as body language, mimicking or irony (Kvale, 2009), but we were able to monitor the respondents carefully during face-to-face interviews.

### 5.6.1 Transcription

To use the results from the interviews, they must go through a transcription, which is why we have recorded the interviews. During the transcription process *“the vocal communication among two individuals turn abstracted and established in a written structure”* (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). As Kvale and Brinkmann explained, *“the interviewing characteristic is frequently reviewed, although the transcription quality is hardly discussed in qualitative research articles”* (ibid). Transcription is defined as: *“To transcribe means to transform. Writing from one form to another”* (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Therefore, we understand the necessity to explain the transcription process.

Transcription can be argued to be an interpretation process because the difference between spoken language and written texts are emphasized, which leads to an opportunity to interpret what is being said (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). There are different approaches to the transcription process. Either we can transcribe the interview verbatim or in a more formal and written way (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Here, we have chosen to use the last option. As the interview is in spoken language, we have changed some words to use the quotes in writing correctly in the analysis.

### 5.6.2 Coding

Coding was utilized to be able to make it possible to break down the interviews and discover important segments, as it is beneficial to recognize uniformity in parts of an interview (Brinkmann & Tanggaard, 2020). Coding can be driven by both data and concept (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Coding is when *“the research process begins without codes but by studying the transcripts codes get generated”* (Brinkmann & Tanggaard, 2020). In order to figure out different themes from the interviews, the data was coded by reading through the transcriptions.

When the transcription was done, the document was uploaded in Nvivo where necessary themes and quotes were marked (figure 1; appendix 2). Then, we read over the marked sections in order to identify relevant themes. In Nvivo, we have been categorizing different quotes under different themes or codes and marking them in different colors accordingly (figure 1; appendix 2). Here, the themes or keywords we had in our mind from our pre-understanding while developing the interview guide get compared with the new themes that have emerged from the transcriptions. It has been done to help us to identify a direction that could benefit us to reach an answer for our problem formulation. Afterwards, a comparison among the respondents regarding the similarities and dissimilarities of their statements has been made in order to have a better understanding of their personal experiences regarding the concept of EB. In Nvivo the word frequency tool is a search which looks over the whole transcription document and counts each word and how often these words appear. By doing this we got a visualization of the words (both as summary & word cloud) that have been repeated a lot during the interviews (figure 2 & 3; Appendix 2). Coding was helpful as it benefited us to identify different themes and afterwards, by reviewing the themes the common ones in the interviews were selected. The themes that got identified were useful as they directed us to figure out a way to answer our problem formulation. The themes that got identified are as follows: IEB, EB in social media, VCI- model, EEB, loyalty, motivation, onboarding process, private vs public sector, EVP, unknown Kombit, current vs desired image, flexibility, functional & symbolic benefits. Thereafter, the themes get reviewed once again, depending on how they have drawn our attention and what popped up as relevant and attractive elements regarding the practice of EB. We have added the theme chart in Appendix 2. Besides, a couple of themes (as example) have been visualized to show how it looked in Nvivo when we worked with the selected quotes under a specific theme (figure 4 & 5; Appendix 2).

During the process of coding, focus was given to interpretation and analysis contexts which are illustrated in the following figure:



Figure: Interpretation and analysis contexts (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015)

Figure 2



We began with self-understanding where we note down what our respondents mentioned in the specific quotes. After that, we moved to common sense where we note down what we understood from the respondents' quotes and what was our pre-understanding of those. Thereafter, we proceed to theoretical understanding where we look at the theories & concepts and connect them with the quotes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

## **5.7 Reliability & Validity**

Reliability, according to Kvale, is about whether the research results are consistent and whether the results of a study can be reproduced by other researchers (Kvale, 1998). Reliability, in the qualitative data, is about making the study transparent to the reader and achieving reliability in the implementation and analysis (ibid). Reliability can be viewed as the credibility of the output of the applied method. While the interviews are going on, the chosen questions should generally be developed as the discourse gets generated. It is therefore uncertain that the same statements will be achieved as the discourses will take shape in accordance with the respondent's own worldviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). It turns out that some experiences and opinions of the respondents have similarities which might aid to present a picture of what the world of phenomena looks like.

Validity depends on the quality of the research's investigations, control and theoretical interpretation of the results (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Validity is about making sure the examination of what is set out to investigate (Halkier, 2016). Generally, the meaning of validity refers to the ability of a study's methodology to measure what is in the study supposed to be measured. According to Kvale, validity in science is about whether the results of the study are valid (Kvale, 1998). In other words, does the method investigate what it aims to investigate?

To obtain high validity while doing a qualitative study, ethical recruiting is a factor that needs to be focused on. This is due to the importance of finding interview respondents who truly represent the segment or target group. Failure to do so, the study will not be able to produce valid results. Our selected interview respondents are all from different departments of our case company Kombit. Since our data is based on interviews with the directors, managers, employees and student assistants from our case company Kombit, we believe that our data set is adequate and forms a good background for a valid analysis with academic relevance.

Another aspect in relation to reliability and validity is the study's research question. It can be argued that the research questions in the study help to ensure the study's reliability and validity. The research questions create structure in the study and contribute to bringing theory, method and analysis into play with a focus on answering the research questions and ultimately answering the problem formulation. The methods have been carefully selected, which is why much thought has been given to whether the methods investigate what is relevant to our research, which must be said to strengthen the validity.

## **5.8 Ethical considerations**

Discussions about the ethics of social research bring us into a dimension in which the role of values in the research process becomes a topic of concern (Bryman, 2016). Arguments about ethical standards in social research and more specifically about violation of them, are likely to circle around some fixed points that recur in different appearances, but they have been positively divided by Diener and Crandall (1978) into 4 sections : (1) whether there is harm to respondents, (2) whether informed consent is missing there, (3) whether there is a violation of privacy, (4) whether deception is involved (Bryman, 2016).

Qualitative research is, like all other research, a value-laden activity that is often about people's personal lives and experiences, private utterances in a public arena (Brinkmann & Tanggaard, 2020). Although it gives rise to different ethical questions, there is also an ethical potential that a group or individuals can be heard in the public space (ibid). The mission of social science research is to help people flourish and thus research, as practice, gets ethically justified (ibid).

There can be a particular ethical risk associated with a qualitative approach, where there are subjective, experiential and socially constructed dimensions of the reality one creates as a research object (Brinkmann & Tanggaard, 2020). To act morally in a research context is, therefore, an ongoing process, where the researcher is jointly responsible for what is brought into interpretations and descriptions. While we were conducting the interviews, the focus was given to different ethical issues regarding how to deal with our respondents with respect. This comprises not only the significance the interview might have on the respondents but also particularly how the future analysis of the collected data will link a practical aspect of what has lightened up in the true world.

Importance was given to the fact that the employees and managers/directors from Kombit have chosen to be a part of the interviews under the conditions of their own wishes. Consent was obtained from the respondents to record their voice during the interviews. Before the interviews, a short presentation was provided about us and the purpose of the interviews. Besides, they get informed about the possibility of being anonymous if it is wished. After each interview, respondents were informed regarding the option to withdraw any information before the submission of the project. The data is saved in our phone as voice records and will be saved until this research is submitted and evaluated by the supervisor and the censor. Afterwards, the voice recordings will be deleted permanently.

## **5.9 Generalizing**

When working closely with people, it is almost impossible to generalize the results of such a study to other groups. Robson argues that within generalization one can speak of two forms of generalization, respectively internal and external generalization (Robson, 2011). External is understood as generalization where the results are transferred and applied to other groups in society. This cannot be done for studies within the qualitative method. The internal generalization is an expression of focusing on a few informants, all of whom are within that same area. By focusing on a few examples of a particular group, it is easier to generalize internally within the larger group (Robson, 2011). By investigating how EB is being practiced in Kombit, we can only say something about Kombit and its strategies regarding EB. But we cannot say anything exclusively about how other companies and Kombit's competitors use EB in favor of employee attraction and retention.

But on the other hand, some authors have argued about the possibility of generalization based on a single qualitative case study. Regarding this, Flyvbjerg (2006) has mentioned, "*One can often generalize on the basis of a single case, and the case study may be central to scientific development via generalization as supplement or alternative to other methods*".

## **6. Theory and concepts**

This particular chapter will concisely provide an explanation of what EB is in detail and describe the concepts and frameworks around EB. The intention of this section is to provide an understanding towards the theories that guide the progress of the EB theory.

### **6.1 Employer branding (EB)**

The concept of EB is quite new and there are not a lot of theories and frameworks regarding this kind of branding compared to CB and product branding. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) explain EB as a tool that helps the companies to develop an identity as an employer which paves the way to make the company different than the competitors to make a clear indication of the company's offer as an employer. Within branding, regardless of the kind, differentiation is a very important factor which different authors have also put importance on. According to Backhaus and Tikoo "*EB is the process of building an identifiable and unique employer identity, and the employer brand as a concept of the firm that differentiates it from its competitors.*" (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). Ruch explains EB as "*the image of the image as seen through the eyes of its associates and potential hires*" ( Ruch 2002). Even though there are differences in the above definitions of EB, the common focus can be identified behind the practice of EB, which is the company's need to establish itself as different compared to its competitors in a positive way. EB focuses on making a company's employer brand attractive both internally and externally, which will result in retention of existing employees and attraction of future employees.

The image in the following demonstrates an explanation regarding what EB can influence and offer to a business (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). The image which is known as "EB framework" illustrates what EB can offer to a company:

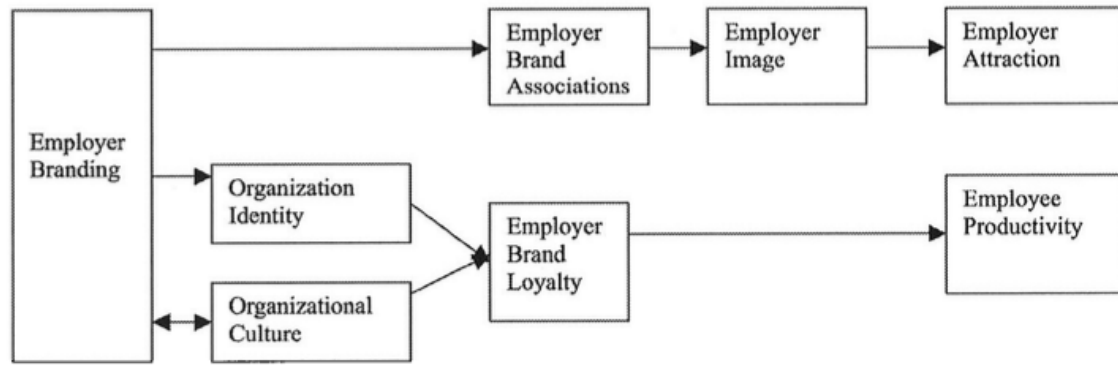


Figure 3: EB framework (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004).

### 6.1.1 External employer branding (EEB)

EEB focuses on building an image of the company to attract new employees. Companies reach out and spread insight and awareness about them through EEB to new candidates and demonstrate the benefits of working with them. This is done through the company's website, social media and job fairs (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). By showing that the company is an “employer of choice” (Herdan & Stuss, 2017), the company thus attracts the best candidates. Once new recruits start looking for work, they will have certain assumptions about employment with the company through the brand the company has demonstrated and thus will enter the company with the values that have been set. This strengthens their commitment to the company and, in turn, also the values within the company. Product branding and CB tend to be externally oriented and EEB is designed to support that (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

Herdan & Stuss (2017) state that research from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) shows that EB helps make the recruitment process more efficient for 75% of companies. It can also reduce the cost of recruitment by up to 50% and reduce employee turnover by up to 28% by creating a positive employer brand, and by hiring competent employees (ibid).

EEB can perform two functions, the first is to create a positive image of the company aimed at increasing candidate awareness of the employer brand. The goal of the second function is to find the most suitable candidates and influence them to apply for vacancies. EEB is aimed at students, academics, professionals and other stakeholders. To reach all stakeholders, communication channels such as social media, relations with the academic community,

collaborating with media, job fairs, events at universities and company ambassadors are used. The construction of a good company page with information about the company culture, goals and values, career opportunities, benefits and competitive advantages, will positively strengthen the company's visibility. For EEB to be successful, it is necessary that the information that gets out is relevant and reliable (Herdan & Stuss, 2017). Successful EEB is only possible to achieve through positive IEB. The existing employees must have a good experience of working at the company (ibid).

According to Nilsen et. al. (2013), social media has influenced EB specifically in recruitment processes. Different types of marketing channels such as the Internet, newspapers and general communication are used for recruitment. Bondarouk et. al. (2013) argue that social networking sites can change value propositions through their ability to provide company profiles. They describe how social media is taking over traditional media by enabling companies to inform customers and stakeholders about their brands, purchases and service offerings (Bondarouk et al 2013). Distribution of information through social media can be of great interest to companies willing to establish a good EB reputation.

LinkedIn is one of the most popular social media for recruiting and job hunting. According to Steentoft (2016), besides job advertisements, there are many ways in which a company can strengthen its own brand by using the company's own LinkedIn page to spread good stories. This can be done, for example, by sharing articles about the employees, good accounts and results, CSR measures, employee stories, conference participation, internal events and anniversaries and new hires etc.

### ***6.1.2 Internal employer branding (IEB)***

IEB is a crucial part of EB, as it carries the brand "promise" made to recruits into the firm and incorporates it as part of the organizational culture (Frook, 2001 in Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). IEB helps and creates a unified workforce and by systematically and organized exposing the company's values and goals to the workers, a common company culture is created. According to Backhaus & Tikoo (2004), this is important when recruiting new employees for the company. Employees who share the organization's vision and values have been shown to be a significant competitive advantage, with consequences such as lower employee turnover and higher employee well-being (Foster et al., 2010). To maintain the way people see the company's employer brand, it is important that the new employees are integrated into the

company's culture and strive to preserve the goals and values the company has set. This in turn creates its own unique corporate culture, which is difficult for other companies to copy (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

IEB is not only a tool to maintain corporate culture, but can also be used to change it. The more the culture supports the quality of work life, the more likely the culture will strengthen organizational commitment. Integration of IEB promotes individual career development within the company. Without the opportunity for career development, employees lose their drive, which can lead to the company losing an important competitive advantage (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

IEB is primarily focused on creating a uniform and friendly working atmosphere and opportunities for personal and career development. The IEB is aimed at existing and departing employees and focuses on development programs and a well-defined corporate culture. Through good relations with their employees, they try to make the employees ambassadors for the company, which leads to more positive exposure when the employees talk about the company they work for.

## **6.2 Person organization fit**

Social theories argue that people identify themselves in relation to which groups they belong to and find themselves in (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). When a company prepares an employer brand, the employees will thus compare this with their own personality and values. In the same way, potential employees will more easily identify with a company's employer brand and thus seek to become a member of the organization if they sense that the values formulated in the employer brand, agree with their own personality. It is therefore important that the employer brand contains some symbolic benefits that employees and prospective candidates can relate to. In the same way, it is essential that the employer brand exhibits a characteristic that the employee finds attractive and interesting (ibid).

Barrow and Mosley (2005) emphasize that the psychological benefits associated with employer brands are of great importance. In other words, it takes more than good pay to attract employees. Barrow & Mosley (2005) believe that people's emotional attachment to the employer brand stems from the value the employee obtains from the overall experience at the workplace. It is about the company managing to match the employees' expectations, and that

the employees' values, personality and needs are in line with the employer brand image the company projects. This match is also called person organization fit. Chatman defines person-organization fit as “*a match between patterns of individual and organizational values*” (Backhaus et. al. 2002). Barrow and Mosley (2005) say that it is important that external communication matches with internal communication so that the company's external promises to potential future employees are credible.

Regarding person organization fit, Backhaus & Tikoo (2004) have said, “*The better the match between the values of the firm and the values of the individual, the more likely the individual is to be attracted to the organization*”. By this, the authors emphasize that attracting qualified employees happens by letting the applicant recognize her or his individual values in the organization's values (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). This means that the two groups, employee and organization, match each other, which according to Backhaus and Tikoo is a leading force in EB.

### **6.3 Employer brand equity**

To gain a further understanding of EB, Backhaus and Tikoo (2004: 504) include the concept of employer brand equity. The concept has its origin in Aaker's marketing-based concept brand equity, which is defined as: “*..a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or that firm's customers*” (Aaker, 2010).

In other words, consumer-oriented brand equity relates to the associations that the consumer has with a given brand and the value that the consumer attributes to the product. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) have transferred this concept to the EB theory and define employer brand equity as the following: “*Employer brand equity is the desired outcome of employer brand activities. In other words, potential or existing employees will react differently to similar recruitment, selection, and retention efforts from different firms because of the underlying employer brand equity associated with these firms.*” (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) hereby emphasize that EB will have different effects on employees and job seekers since everyone has different individual perceptions of the company as a workplace.

In connection to employer brand equity, Backhaus and Tikoo highlight two main elements: brand associations and brand loyalty. Employer brand associations help to shape the employer



image, which thus affects the attractiveness the company has towards new potential employees. Furthermore, an EB strategy affects the company's culture and identity, which ultimately leads to employer brand loyalty (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Brand associations are defined as the thoughts and ideas that create the company's image as a workplace. These associations can be divided into functional and symbolic benefits. Functional benefits are elements such as pay, working conditions and company policies, while symbolic benefits relate to the company's reputation, social relations and other benefits that working in the company can bring to a person.

Brand loyalty is defined by Aaker (1991) as the attachment a consumer has to a brand. In the same way, employer brand loyalty is the commitment an employee has towards the employer/company. Loyalty towards the workplace is therefore linked to the employee's acceptance of the company's culture, values, mission and vision, as well as a desire to achieve these goals together with the organization. The more a company's culture supports the quality of working life, the better this culture can increase employees' commitment to the workplace (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). EB is thus also about strengthening the organization's culture, as this helps to create strong employer brand loyalty.

#### **6.4 Employer value proposition (EVP)**

EVPs were already expressed in 1996 by Ambler and Barrow in connection with coining the term EB. Their definition of an attractive employer contains three essential components that should be met in order to achieve attractiveness. These components are functional, psychological and economic attributes (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). The attributes are later confirmed by Berthon et. al. (2005) who define an attractive employer brand as the following: *“the envisioned benefits that a potential employee sees in working for a specific organization.”*

They emphasize five factors that potential employees highlight as important for an organization to be perceived as an attractive employer (Berthon et al., 2005). These five factors are social value, interest value, application value, economic value and development value (ibid). Social value emphasizes the importance of enjoying the social atmosphere of the workplace and finding going to work enjoyable and rewarding (ibid). The value of interest highlights even more finding it rewarding to go to work, to see one's tasks as challenging but achievable and where the individual's creative and innovative side can be expressed at work (ibid). It is also important for individuals that they get the opportunity to show off their knowledge and skills

and get to apply these within the organization, which is what the application value aims for (ibid). The economic value highlights the importance of the organization being able to offer the employee the salary and benefits that the individual finds reasonable for the job. In the fifth and last factor, development value, emphasis is placed on the organization being able to provide employees with competence development and provide opportunities for career development (ibid).

Berthon et al.'s (2005) theory of employer attractiveness was later confirmed by Dabirian et al. (2017) who conducted a similar study on what employees perceive as attractive in potential employers. The study revealed that in addition to the five identified factors, there are two additional components that have an impact on the attractiveness of the employer brand (Dabirian et al., 2017). These are leadership values and work-life balance. According to Dabirian et al. (2017), the value of leadership has a large impact on whether an employee enjoys their workplace or not and poor leadership is one of the reasons employees leave an organization. The work-life balance emphasizes the importance of mastering one's different identities without conflict and stress (ibid). People have a role at work and other roles in other types of activities and there should be harmony between these roles if a balance is to occur (ibid).








| SEVEN EMPLOYER BRANDING VALUE PROPOSITIONS   |   |   |   |  |  |   |
|--|---|---|---|--|--|---|
| SOCIAL VALUE   | INTEREST VALUE  | APPLICATION VALUE   | DEVELOPMENT VALUE   | ECONOMIC VALUE   | MANAGEMENT VALUE   | WORK/LIFE BALANCE   |
|   |  |  |  |  |         |  |
| Is this a fun place to work with talented people and a great organizational culture? | Is this an interesting place to work, with challenging but achievable goals?        | Is the work meaningful and does it invite the application of knowledge and skills?  | Are there opportunities for employees to grow and advance professionally?           | Is work rewarded appropriately through salaries, benefits and perks?                 | Are managers good, honest leaders who inspire, trust, protect, enable and respect employees? | Are work arrangements flexible enough to achieve success on and off the job?          |

Figure 4: The seven value creation factors identified by Dabirian et al. (2017).

According to Berthon et al. (2005), it is only when organizations implement the value factors as part of their EB strategy, then a business can succeed in attracting, recruiting and retaining its employees. Dabirian et al. (2017) confirm Berthon et al. (2005) statement and highlights that all seven value factors have an impact on how attractive the organization is. However, both

Dabirian et. al. (2017) and Berthon et al. (2005) argue that employees value the seven factors differently. An employee's preferences of what is considered attractive in an employer largely have to do with personal characteristics, such as age, gender, ethnicity, education and experience in working life and more (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011). It is thus highly individual which factors an employee is attracted to and as an employer, it is a solid work with these factors that is required to create an attractive employer brand (Dabirian et al., 2017).

The EVP aims to be used as a strategic tool to identify the target group and reach it via communicating the organizational attributes that it possesses and differentiate it from the competition. The corporate culture itself strengthens the employer brand in two ways: on the one hand, it can make the employer more attractive (Sommer et. al. 2017) and on the other hand, if the EVP is realized, it can make employees stay within the organization (Chhabra & Sharma, 2014).

A large part of the process of finding the right people involves mapping the advantages that the companies themselves consider they possess regarding the employer brand (Aleksandrovna & Aleksandrovna, 2018). Therefore, work on a long-term and mutual relationship should start already at the attraction and recruitment phase regarding retaining and rehiring competent employees.

## **7. Analysis**

In this chapter, we will analyze our collected data in comparison to the theories and relevant literature and studies regarding EB used in practice. Our analysis has the purpose to unveil how Kombit works with EB through a number of initiatives to attract and retain employees. The analysis will start by defining Kombits employer brand based on the collected data, and what Kombit contains as a workplace that differentiates them from other companies within the same sector. Afterwards, there will be a thorough analysis of Kombit's EEB practices using the collected data. Likewise, we will analyze Kombits IEB initiatives to examine how Kombit retains their employees based on cultural and identity integration and furthermore EVPs. Thereafter, we will look at the strength of Kombit's corporate brand by investigating people's awareness regarding Kombit. And lastly, we will analyze Kombit's image based on the employee interviews.

## 7.1 Kombit's employer brand

The fundamentals of EB is to build “*an identifiable and unique employer identity*” (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004) with the purpose of differentiating oneself from its competitors. The desired outcome of EB is about attracting the right skills of human capital to the organization and retaining current employees. Kombit is a public organization placed within the IT sector, and as clarified earlier, they have had challenges recruiting the right skills to the company due to the low availability of IT workers in Denmark, and the high competition in the market for those who are available. Due to these challenges, Kombit established an EB strategy in 2021 and has since worked with EB. How Kombit has worked with both EEB and IEB, with the purpose of either attracting the right skills or retaining the current skills, will be further examined here. Nevertheless, before analyzing these practices, it is important to get an understanding of what Kombits employer brand is built upon. What makes Kombit a unique employer that may differentiate them from other companies?

### 7.1.1 Purpose

According to Kombits HR director, Christina, the main thing that differentiates Kombit from others is their:

*“completely unique overall purpose of doing something for welfare Denmark. It's not just an IT development of some small gadget, it's actually about welfare in Denmark, and it's about giving back to society. So that feeling that we are getting up on that more national blade, Kombit has that in a completely unique way. No one else has that when it comes to digitalization”* (Interview 1).

Christina addresses that Kombit itself is unique in its establishment. The work that they do, is only done by them and no others, namely buying all major municipal IT systems, and making sure the product brings value to the Danish municipalities. Christina instigates a symbolic foundation of Kombit's purpose, as she sees “*the value to the municipalities as our most important indicator.*” (ibid). Every citizen in Denmark is connected to the municipalities, based on where they live, and what Kombit produces are digital solutions that are commonly used by all municipalities, which means that no matter which municipality one is connected to, Kombit is delivering a product to that municipality with the purpose of making IT systems cheaper and

better. Hence, there is a symbolic gesture in Kombits purpose to give back to ‘Welfare-Denmark’ or the society that we live in. Working at Kombit actually means working with the municipalities in creating value both financially and quality-wise, so all the systems that ordinary citizens use are faster, simplistic and better. HR consultant, Ida stated likewise, when asked about what differentiates Kombit as a workplace “ *There is only one kind of company that does what we do. As already mentioned, we are quite unique. We work for something bigger.*” (Interview 2), and one of the employees likewise supplemented this “*it is a unique constellation, where through 98 municipalities you can create some synergy effects, which means that you can buy cheaper and better*” (Interview 10). Overall, the purpose of Kombit is unique in itself. There is no organization in Denmark that does what Kombit does. There is of course an organization that works with public IT, such as StatensIT, which works with IT systems for government purposes. Nevertheless, if a potential employee wants to work with shaping and delivering IT systems for the Danish municipalities, there is no other place than Kombit.

### ***7.1.2 Flexibility and working philosophy***

Another trademark of Kombits employer brand is their flexibility and employee philosophy. Kombit recently implemented something called LiFE, which is a new working philosophy with the purpose of giving employees more flexibility at their work. The concept of LiFE is to ‘set the employees free’, and one of the main features of LiFE is that employees have the possibility to work at home every day of the week, as long as they still manage their tasks and deadlines. LiFE is built on trust between the leader and the employee, where the employee now has more self-management and freedom. Communication is key between the manager and the employee, but the idea is that as long as the employee maintains their working tasks and delivers what is expected from them, they can schedule their working hours and relocate as much as they want. There is a possibility for both to work from home or come to the office, all weekdays. The employee now has more control of work, as long as they meet their deadlines and it is communicated with their managers. LiFE has its purpose of improving work-life balance in the workplace, where the employees receive more flexibility in scheduling their time between private and work life. According to Christina, LiFE and flexibility is something that differentiates Kombit from other companies, as this new employee philosophy is quite new and unique, “*I think our LiFE concept is unique. I think we are far ahead in terms of thinking about working life in a different way.*” (Interview 1). The employees have also felt that LiFE has had

an effect on them, and it has been difficult to find one negative comment about this, as it is a concept meant for the ordinary employees to provide them with flexible hours. Some of the comments from the employees are:

*“this LiFE concept where you can work from wherever, I think it opens up some opportunities. And I also think that many private workplaces will follow it. I feel that Kombit is ahead of its game”* (Interview 6),

*“what LiFE has done is to have made us more flexible to work at home the other days as well, if that is what we are interested in.”* (Interview 7),

*“the new LiFE gives me a little more freedom to decide on my own hours.”* (Interview 8),

*“this is something that is hopefully here to stay”* (Interview 5).

The employees of Kombit have definitely felt that they have gained more value in their employees through this concept, which provides more flexibility and freedom. Furthermore, Christina has branded the LiFE concept externally, by recently getting two articles published in Børsen and ITWatch, introducing this new employee philosophy, as a concept which gives employees more control and flexibility in their employment. This also shows that Kombit indeed sees flexibility as a defining factor in their employer brand, as they have externally been out in the media and branding themselves as an employer that promotes flexibility and work-life balance.

## **7.2 External employer branding (EEB)**

One of the important aspects of EB strategy regarding employee attraction is the EEB. The potential employees need to have knowledge about the company as a workplace and the more positive the knowledge is the more likely the employees are interested to join. EEB activities are a great way to display how the company is as a workplace. The employer brand puts forth an image showing the organization as a good place to work (Suvillian 2004, in Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). The HR team from Kombit put great emphasis on branding Kombit externally through EB activities. The HR director Christina has mentioned, *“we have become more visible at educational institutions, and we need to become even more so. We have held a number of*

lectures and tried to interact with the important places because it is also a way to plant Kombit early” (Interview 1). Here the focus is to market Kombit to the right place. They have started to market themselves, in educational institutes where the plan is to make Kombit known to the young people in the early days of their professional life. Kombit wants to plant its brand among young people and recent graduates with the aim to be chosen as a workplace by them. It is also building a relationship with future employees, as Avinash et. al. (2015) has mentioned EB as an enthusiastic relationship between an employer and employee. The HR manager Ida has mentioned, *“We have been to Aalborg university, where we gave a little training on artificial intelligence. And last year, we were at ITU and different places. So, we try to attract younger profiles”* (Interview 2). This can be considered as a good move by Kombit, as their aim according to the recruitment strategy is to bring more young workforce into the company. EB is the procedure of putting a picture of being an “extraordinary work environment” in the brains of existing and imminent employees (Avinash et.al, 2015). Ida continued in this regard, *“We were at different digitalization fairs. That is also branding. We show where we are, who we are. We also go to educational institutions, where we take employees with us”*(interview -2). This is exactly what Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) have suggested, promoting the firm by using EB both within and outside of the firm by making a clear view of what makes the firm different and attractive as an employer. These activities connect the employees of Kombit with the outside world. This is also explained by Kolesnikov (2017) where she has mentioned EB as one of the activities that constitutes a bridge between the internal and external stakeholders of an organization. Therefore, employees within the organization can also be used as a great resource to strengthen the employer brand of the firm. Ida has said, *“It's not just HR that's on these things. We actually bring employees along to talk about their jobs and what they like about Kombit”* (Interview 2). Using the information on the qualities of the employees and current employment image can help to establish a concept of what specific value the company offers to the employees (Suvillian, 2002 in Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Besides, future employees can get an idea about the company and get inspiration to join the company by meeting and talking with the existing employees. Current employees are the ones who are going to talk about the positive things out of the company towards future employees and this way the reputation of the company will spread. And this will only be possible if the current employees can identify themselves with the organization, which is one of the main purposes of EB (Edwards, 2005). Job seekers often consider several organizations when they are going to apply for a job, and they may use corporate reputation as a source of information about working conditions in different organizations (Cable and Turban, 2003). Christina has mentioned,

*“there is also the matter of getting the young students earlier in their decision-making journey in relation to searching for a workplace. This is certainly also a targeted way of doing it. Just like we try to actually use our student assistants”* (Interview 1). On a general basis, Kombit employs a good number of student assistants every year and many of them get offered a job position after study completion.

Another important aspect of Kombit’s EEB is the usage of social media. In the battlefield of attracting new talents, nowadays, the role and influence of social media can not be ignored by any firm. Social media is increasingly used in EB campaigns and in the recruiting process (Nilsen et. al. 2013). More and more young and talented employees are now using social media as a platform for networking and looking for new professional opportunities. As a result, companies are also focusing on making them more visible and easily accessible on different social media platforms in order to reach closer to potential employees and the outside world. What makes social network sites unique is that they allow users to make a public profile and make their social network visible to others (Nilsen et. al. 2013). Until a couple of years ago Kombit was not really present in social media but recently the scenario has changed after the management started to realize the value of utilizing social media. Kombit mostly utilizes LinkedIn among social media, as Christina has said, *“LinkedIn is our main channel, and it can be used in many different ways, and we do that as well”* (Interview 1). Ida has also commented on the fact that social media was not really used before, where she mentioned, *“within the last two years after we got SoMe Student, our LinkedIn has gone from having no interaction, to there is something coming up almost every day, things are being followed up”* (Interview 2). Besides LinkedIn, the management also put importance on using other social media but until now, it has only been LinkedIn that has been used for EEB as one of the employees said, *“LinkedIn is the external platform we use. There has been a demand from HR that maybe something like Instagram could be a good medium to reach younger target groups. But we have decided to keep our LinkedIn profile running and focus on it”* (Interview 3). Christina also explained regarding social media, *“show a film and a picture of the working environment and what kind of people are here, because we know that it triggers whether you think it would be cool to apply or not, and it actually helps to brand the organization”* (Interview 1). This type of marketing activity in social media is beneficial as external marketing of the employer brand establishes the firm as an employer of choice and thereby enables it to attract the best possible workers (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). In this connection, Christina continued, *“it's pretty clear that you have to make some image material that you can identify yourself in. And*



*that's the mode you have to get into when you're processing the job market” (Interview 1). Another employee has talked about how existing employees can help Kombit through the usage of LinkedIn. He mentioned, “We have included it in the strategy now, to try to interact more in LinkedIn as Kombit, because it is something we have not done in the past” (Interview 3). The more current employees will interact positively on social media, the more attractive the company will look like towards the outsiders.*

According to the interview participants, Kombit right now is focusing on employing a large number of young people which is also backed by their recruitment strategy. In this regard, some of the employees showed their concern regarding using other platforms than LinkedIn as today's youth are using different social media at the same time (Vogels et. al, 2022). By being active in those media, Kombit can place itself in a better position to reach closer to its targeted (young) employees. Christina put importance on being active in different channels, as she said, *“what do we write in the job advertisements, but also what channels we use for each target group” (Interview 1). Another employee has mentioned, “we should use more platforms than we do now. And it also has something to do with the fact that we have been working on the SoMe strategy for a long time, and it is focused on LinkedIn” (Interview 3). Kombit also works on its EB strategy by focusing towards its target group, as the employee has said, “we have a target group called potential employees. Where we communicate about what vacancies we have, what the work culture is like at Kombit and employee benefits and other things” (Interview 3). The focus on attracting young people has been reflected by one of the employees as well, “I think over the last years where they changed their main focus with hiring more young people, has really given Kombit a boost to get renewed energy and a strong workforce” (Interview 7). But the important fact to notice here is that, even though Kombit’s EB strategy is focused on their target group which is the young people, their communication strategy is not developed based on their target group, which get identified from the quotes by the employee from communication department, “We haven't thought that our communication should be targeted at younger people receiving the language as new potential employees. We just put everyone in the same box. We haven't thought about making it attractive to younger people in particular” (Interview 3). To be successful in hiring more targeted employees from specific segments of the population, Kombit’s communication should be more focused towards their target group.*

Besides commenting on the communication strategy, employees have been also talking about the failure of Kombit to focus on their target group. As an employee has said, *“I think there is something where Kombit still doesn't hit the mark in terms of what younger generations expect. I think Kombit has not yet reached the point where young people think that it is an attractive place to be (Interview 7)”*. Another employee also agreed regarding this issue, *“I think that sometimes they have a tendency to forget the young people they would like to attract” (Interview 6)*. Besides, he also commented that, *“often I think that the senior colleagues are taken out to represent Kombit. And that might be a misrepresentation of what Kombit would like to be, as it is my understanding that they would like to attract more young people.” (ibid)*. EEB can be beneficial here, as Backhaus (2016) has mentioned, in EEB the employer's goal is to create positive employer brand associations within the target population.

Some companies differentiate themselves by providing symbolic benefits while others do it by providing functional benefits. The assumption of EB is that the distinctiveness of the brand allows the firm to acquire distinctive human capital (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Kombit tries to attract potential employees by touching their emotions and responsibilities towards society. Skilled talents can choose to ignore functional issues such as salary (on the basis that they will be able to demand a high remuneration package at any of a number of employers) and, instead, choose employers based purely on the emotional factors that matter to them (Zeuch, 2016). About this Christina has said, *“our unique purpose is doing something for welfare Denmark. It is about Danish welfare and Danish citizens. So it's about giving back to society” (Interview 1)*. This approach by Kombit can be useful in some contexts regarding attracting talents as research on person-organization fit indicates that potential applicants compare the employer brand image they have to their needs, personalities, and values (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Therefore, if potential employees' values and personalities match with Kombit, they will prefer Kombit over others. Another employee said, *“there is only one kind of company that does what we do. We have a really important agenda, which I think is a really good brand to have” (Interview 2)*. Besides, in this regard, she also added, *“ We brand ourselves by saying, do you want to help work to digitize Denmark? Do you want to help make work easier for people in the municipalities? Then it's Kombit you have to work for” (ibid)*. These types of EEB can trigger some of the talents if they feel the same way regarding their personal responsibilities towards society. The better the match between the values of the firm and the values of the individual, the more likely the individual is to be attracted to the organization (Judge and Cable, 1997). As one of the employees said, *“it's not the case that you can say Kombit is fantastic and*

*we get everything, because we don't. But in return, we have a lot of freedom. It's about how you prioritize”* (Interview 8). This has been also shown by Backhaus & Tikoo (2004) in their research regarding EB.

Some of the employees have shown their dissatisfaction regarding the onboarding process. The employer brand meets its moment of truth when it begins to manifest itself in the employee experience, which begins in the onboarding process (Thornton et.al. 2019). One of the employees said, *“the onboarding process is such a minimum model based on the fact that we need to know something about HR, something about law, something about where we file, what the strategy is. But it's not set up very well in the system, to be honest”* (Interview 10). He has also shown frustration regarding the same issue, *“I think they could have done more with the onboarding process. I perhaps lacked the common introduction* (ibid). In order to position themselves as attractive employers, most companies pick generic positive attributes to communicate when doing employer brand communications (Thornton et.al. 2019). Worse, many pick attributes that do not necessarily the company as it is, but as it wishes to be (ibid). Therefore, Kombit needs to be careful if they are highlighting the onboarding process as a key factor to promote their employer brand. Because if the employer brand message is strictly positive, omitting any real, negative organizational information, the firm may not reap positive outcomes that could otherwise be attained (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). The HR employee Ida has recognized indirectly the issue regarding onboarding, *“Basically, there is no fixed onboarding plan. A new graduate starting their first job will need more onboarding. Someone who knows Kombit and has been in the game for many years may need less onboarding”* (Interview 2). Once recruits have been attracted by the brand, they develop a set of assumptions about employment with the firm that they will carry into the firm, thereby supporting the firm’s values and enhancing their commitment to the firm (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). And onboarding is one of the first stages for the recruits that they face right after joining the company. Therefore, when employees are not convinced with the onboarding process it creates dissatisfaction from the beginning. Employees, who base their job choice on unbalanced information, are more likely to become dissatisfied due to unmet expectations and are more likely to quit their job (Cable and Judge, 1996). A proper, systematic and well-functioned onboarding process can be a useful tool for EEB. A great deal of EEB can be done by selling and explaining a well-established onboarding process towards the potential employees. As a result, potential employees will also feel calm as they will realize that no new employees will be lost without proper training/onboarding.

In general, Kombit has been struggling to fill up some positions which is still a problem for them. HR employee Ida has said, “ *It's primarily IT people that we recruit. But there are some positions that are difficult, because we need very technical specialists*” (Interview 2). Often within the same industry job-related factors are similar and therefore it is difficult for organizations to differentiate themselves as employers from their competitors (Lievens and Highhouse, 2003). Moreover, Ida also acknowledged the difficulty regarding attracting skilled employees, as she said, “*I think no matter how good a brand is, some positions are difficult to fill, where you need help, because they don't exist. Those exist, are safe and sound in a job*” (Interview 2). In such an environment, using EB to convey the symbolic benefits of working with an organization can be especially useful for developing a favorable employer image (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). To get rid of this issue, Kombit has been using external recruiting agencies. She said in this regard, “*we have tried Graduateland. We know when we need help. We know when it makes sense to use Jobindex. We also know when it is possible to do without Jobindex, but just purely LinkedIn*” (Interview 2). Using recruiting agencies might help to solve the problem quickly but in the long run, it can create financial pressure on Kombit. Here, under these circumstances, Kombit may need to focus better on communicating the functional and symbolic benefits towards the potential employees. In the context of recruitment, potential applicants will be attracted to a firm based on the extent to which they believe that the firm possesses the desired employee-related attributes and the relative importance they place on those attributes (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). In EB, symbolic traits might include organizational attributes like innovativeness or prestige characteristics that the potential applicant finds interesting or attractive (ibid). Being a public company Kombit may not be able to offer greater functional benefits to overcome its competitors but offered symbolic benefits should be known by the future employees. As one of the interview respondents has mentioned, “*Kombit is not the salary leader, but it's important to point out that with pensions and other good things, they are competing*” (Interview 6). In support of this contention, Lievens and Highhouse (2003) found that symbolic trait inferences of organizations have incremental value over and above instrumental job and organizational attributes like pay or benefits in explaining a company's perceived attractiveness as an employer.

Overall, we can say, there is no substitute for EEB in relation to attracting skilled employees. What the company can offer needs to be communicated towards future employees. Research provides further support for the assertion that employer brand messages can convey important pre-employment information which is important to applicants in making a job choice

(Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Future employees' beliefs about the firm affect the validity of self-selection decisions and affect their post-entry performance (Schein, 1985). Therefore, if EEB can be utilized in a positive and structured way, it can be possible that potential employees might turn into existing employees.

### 7.3 Internal employer branding (IEB)

IEB focuses on incorporating the “promised” employer brand that has been made to new employees in the organization (Frook, 2001). IEB is a crucial part of any EB strategy, as it operates around retaining employees through organizational identity, culture and loyalty. Previously, we analyzed how Kombit externally brands itself as an employer. Hence, after recruiting an employee, the IEB process begins, where the focus is on retaining the employee, so all the effort made to recruit an employee benefits the organization through employee value creation (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

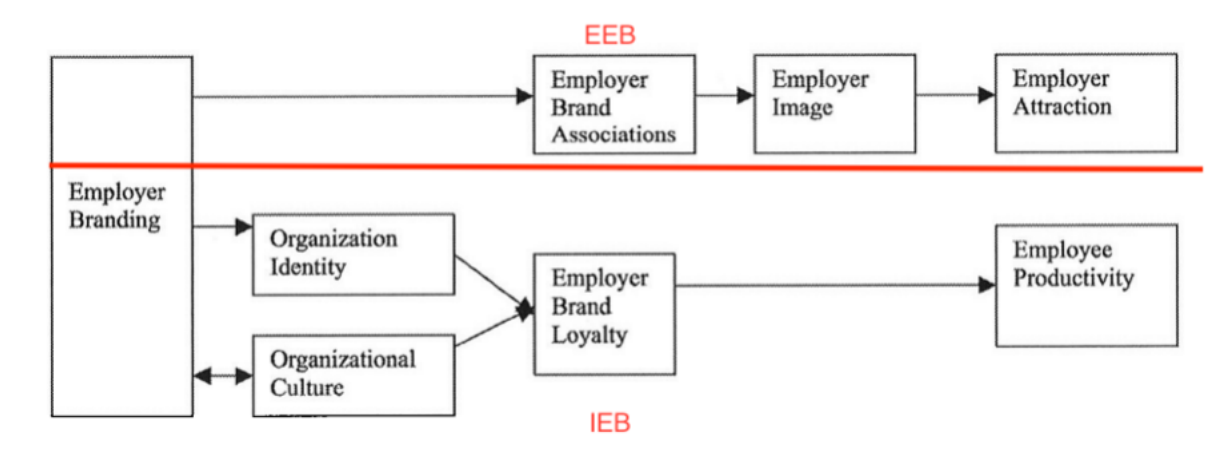


Figure 5: EB framework split into EEB & IEB

The EB framework contains two processes EEB and IEB. Through IEB, the employer brand is incorporated within the organization’s identity and culture. As the framework shows, the organizational culture partially defines the employer brand, but an organization’s desired employer brand can further shape the organizational culture. The theory states that if an employee is a part of the organization’s culture and identity, loyalty towards the employer brand is established, resulting in employee productivity (ibid). Employee productivity and satisfaction are leading factors in employee retention (Ramrall, 2004).

Kombits HR department has, per April 2023, measured the employee turnover for the past year to 14%. Kombit has an internal target of 10% employee turnover yearly, which addresses challenges in retaining employees. To unfold and understand Kombit's challenges in retaining employees, this analysis chapter will focus on each of the IEB components using our collected data. It is important to mention that the EVPs also have an important role in IEB and will, therefore, be applied here. The EVPs give a visualization of the set of values that the employees at Kombit desire in their employment, and pertaining to these values results in employee productivity and satisfaction (Phungula et al, 2006). Hence, after analyzing Kombit's work with their identity and culture, there will further be a chapter dedicated towards Kombit's work with EVPs.

### ***7.3.1 Reaching Employer Brand Loyalty***

Brand loyalty is the attachment a consumer has to a brand (Aaker, 1991), and the more attached/loyal a consumer is to the brand, the less likely they are to switch to another brand. The same illustration is countable for employer brand loyalty, which revolves around an employee's commitment to their employer (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). The idea of employer brand loyalty is simple – if an employee is committed and loyal to the employer, the higher the probability there is for them to stay within the brand - however, achieving brand loyalty is not quite as simple. Backhaus & Tikoo (2004) addresses organizational culture and organization identity as main contributors to employer brand loyalty, as they argue that the more an employee identifies with the organization and the more the culture supports their work life, the more committed the employee will be to the organization. IEB revolves around creating an employer brand loyalty towards its employees, as this decreases employee turnover and attaches the employees to the organization. As stated previously, Kombit's employee turnover has exceeded its desired target in the past year, and this chapter will create an understanding of why Kombit faces these retention challenges using our theoretical standpoint, which addresses that organizational identity and culture lead to loyalty and retention (ibid).

Organizational identity is, according to Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), an attitudinal contributor to employer brand loyalty, and is further defined as “*the cognitive image held by organization members about the organization*” (Ibid; Albert & Whetten, 1985). Thus, the collective attitudes toward who the company is as a group is the organization's identity, and one of the main contributors to creating an organizational identity is the management, who can shape the

identity through organizational goals, purposes, and policies (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Dutton et al. (1994) also state that the more attractive and unique an organization's identity is, the more the employees will identify with the organization. The HR director, Christina, stated that Kombit in its present state is in an identity crisis (Interview 1). And the main reason that she states this, is due to a new strategic change in Kombit's purpose. Kombit was established in 2009 with the main purpose of breaking a monopoly held by KMD on municipal IT systems. In 2022 Kombit officially declared that the monopoly was broken, and the former CEO resigned due to him reaching this desired goal, and a new CEO joined at the end of 2022 and was appointed in charge of putting Kombit on a new strategic course. Kombit's main purpose since its establishment has come to an end, and in May 2023, Kombit plans to officiate a new strategy, which will pave the way for a 'new Kombit'. Thus, Kombit is in the progress of a strategic transformation, and the identity of what Kombit is or will be is therefore questioned by employees and the outside world. When asked about this topic, Christina stated:

*“So we're in a vacuum now, and that's why the new strategy is so central, because something else has to take its place. It is both a movement that must be made internally in the organization, where Kombit is going, and what does it mean for the culture and competencies but also towards the market, the customers, the municipalities, what is Kombit going to do? The municipalities have different experiences of what we should do so there is a need to raise awareness of what kind of entity we are”* (Interview 1).

This indicates that Kombit is in a vacuum right now regarding its internal and external identity. A chapter of their history has just ended, and employees and their biggest stakeholders, the supplier market and the municipalities, have different opinions on what Kombit should engage with prospectively. A transformation in Kombit's brand and purpose is shortly happening, so it seems natural that the employees at Kombit are confused about Kombit's identity. Albert and Whetten (1985) define organizational identity as a set of statements that are central, distinctive and enduring to the organization. The identity of an organization is very close to the purpose and mission; “Who are we?”, “What are we doing” and “What do we want to be in the future?” (Lin, 2004). When the identity is unsure due to an organizational change, it affects the employees' perception of these exact questions, of who Kombit is, what they are doing and what they will be in the future. Albert and Whetten (1985) further state that organizational change results in a loss of organizational identity, which is exactly what Christina addressed.

Kombit is in an uncertain state in its identity, and it is therefore natural that the employees perceive a weaker organizational identity at the moment.

If we move on to the organizational culture of Kombit, this represents the fundamental values and assumptions incorporated by an organization's members, which are further brought forward to newcomers on how to behave in the workplace (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Research has proven that culture can result in heightened commitment towards an organization (Goodman et al, 2001). Additionally, EB theory dictates that a healthy and strong organizational culture can link to brand loyalty (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Thus, a strong culture in an organization, which meets an employee's values, can further result in employee retention (ibid).

Kombit has a great focus on organizational culture and creating a community within the workplace (Kombit, 2021). In their recruitment strategy, they name 'culture and community' as one of the main values they can bring to its employees, but according to their HR director, Christina, the culture of the company is getting challenged through employee growth:

*“Last year we welcomed 65 new employees, each with their own set of values and perceptions. Therefore, I also think that our employer brand is under pressure, each has their own views on what you should and shouldn't do, what kind of organization you are, and what kind of culture you should have. So our culture is also under pressure now, not because it's deliberate, but because 65 new employees come with their own set of values”* (Interview 1).

She argues that there is a need for constant alignment of the culture alongside the company's growth. So what initiatives does Kombit have taken to create unity, culture, and social bonds? Kombit's EB strategy addresses an initiative called the “employee baton”, where employees, through their internal social media channel, “Yammer”, share stories of their personal interests (Kombit, 2021). Other than that, Kombit hosts internal events such as wine tasting, which is held every quarter – Summer party and Christmas lunch, which is held once a year and lastly, they have an internal group of employees, what is called “Kolorit”, which is in charge of employee events, where they previously have hosted canal trips, bowling and more. So, many initiatives are being made to improve the organization's socialization and culture. However, culture is also about the shared norms and values shared by group members, and as Christina indicated, Kombit has a role in incorporating each individual within the shared culture. So, even though Kombit has had degrees of success in attracting employees to the organization and



maintaining growth in human capital, there is a lot of work, as a part of the IEB strategy, to incorporate each new employee to the shared values and norms Kombit holds. Christina further addresses that each employee has their own views and beliefs on how the culture should be (what kind of an organization Kombit should be), which puts the culture under pressure. Hence, this may lead to another perspective in EB literature, which according to Sheridan (1992) is the importance of pre-employment activities. It is addressed that when recruiting employees to the organization, it is important to consider whether the potential employee fits with the organizational culture. The most important issue is to already choose employees with values that fit into the culture of an organization (ibid). Organizations should focus on the message communicated to potential employees about the culture, as misleading information has been proven in research to increase turnover (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). The culture of an organization is constantly evolving along with new employees entering the company, as the newcomers bring new values (Wright, 2021). Christina shows awareness of this, but the company also has a role to assimilate newcomers in the current culture of the organization (Hess, 1993), and one approach to succeed in this, is by making sure that the new potential employees fit the culture, by addressing the culture and norms in the recruitment phase (Sheridan, 1992).

With all this in mind, we can draw from our findings that Kombit is aware of challenges that occur within the organizational culture and identity of the company. Regarding the culture, there is pressure from newcomers that constantly brings new values, and Kombit hereby, has an important role in integrating the new employees into the culture. EB theory also addresses the importance of pre-employment activities in addressing the culture and norms of the company to a potential employee and further examines whether or not the specific potential employee fits the culture of the organization. This practice could solve the challenges that Christina addressed, regarding increased pressure in the culture due to employee growth at Kombit. Considering the organizational identity, it is also clear from our findings that Kombit is in an 'identity crisis' at the moment, which also impacts the employees' attachment to the organizational identity.

Considering the challenges on both the organizational culture and identity, it can be based on EB theory (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004) that the employer brand loyalty is challenged as well. This leads to lower employee retention, which can explain the challenges Kombit has faced with their employee turnover exceeding their desired target.

### 7.3.2 EVP and Organizational Fit within IEB

Based on the theoretical framework of EB, followed methodologically throughout the analysis, employer brand loyalty will result in employee productivity, which commits the employee more to the organization and their work, further leading to retention. However, as mentioned earlier, EB is a fairly new concept, and the theory used by Backhaus and Tikoo has been further conceptualized through the years, for example, through EVP. EVP as a concept is mentioned in the theory by Backhaus and Tikoo, but not included in the framework, and further theoretical background on EVP has been conceptualized in recent years – for example, in our thesis, we use Dabirian et. al (2017) as our main EVP theory.

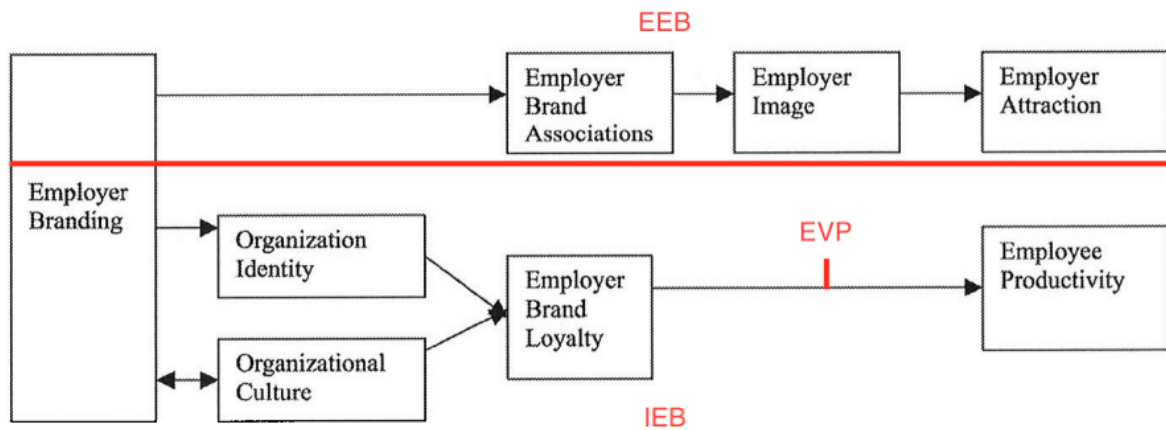


Figure 6

Hence, we have decided to include EVP as a concept within the framework as a contributor to employee retention through IEB, and will furthermore address this concept in relation to our data and theory. Kombat has in their EB strategy, proposed a set of value propositions they believe they can offer to their employees.

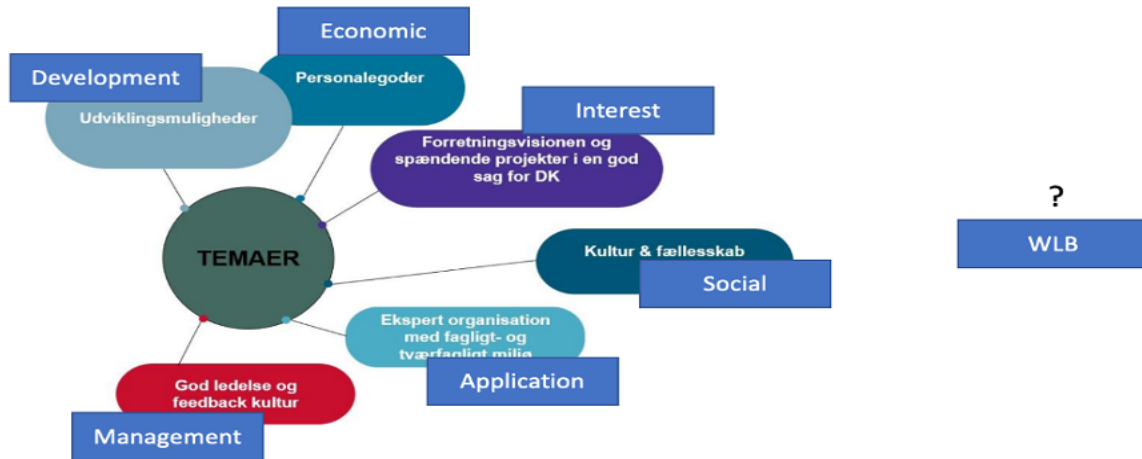


Figure 7: Taken from Kombits Recruitment Strategy 2021: The blue boxes are self-added to the original model.

The model above is Kombit’s own model of value propositions they offer to their employees. However, the blue boxes are not a part of the original model but are added to compare Kombit’s value propositions to the seven theoretical EVPs, as Dabirian et al. (2017) explained. First of all, this shows that Kombit has considered which EVPs they, as an employer, can offer to their employees, and comparing this to the EVP theory, each of the seven EVPs except for work-life balance can be related to their initial propositions. The model was made in 2021, so the HR director was asked, whether these EVPs still is applicable today:

*“the business vision and the exciting projects (Interest value), I think that due to the new strategy, it is calling for something different. Something else will take its place, because first of all, we are no longer a project organization, we are an operating organization, so I imagine that we will have to further unfolded that value. I also believe that in culture and community (social value), we are quite strong in community, but the culture will become more nuanced when we run a cultural project, which we are about to start. But I actually think that the themes that are there, revolve very well around the main core, and then some of the themes are more relevant for some categories of employees than others. And we know this because we know what their drivers are.” (Interview 1).*

Christina challenges two of the EVPs, the interest value which revolves around Kombit's vision and exciting projects and the social value, where she mainly focuses on the organizational culture. She unfolds that within the interest value, Kombit is in the progress of establishing a new strategy that will no longer see them as an organization that works with projects, and their

vision will also be adjusted on their overall purpose for the municipalities. However, within this statement, she does not show any concerns that this is no longer an EVP that is proposed to their employees, but that the value the employees receive through interesting and significant work, will be unfolded further towards a different direction. Kombit's main purpose and work, since its establishment, has been to break the existing monopoly on municipal IT systems by taking each of the systems to tender, and through required specifications, shaping the IT systems so the quality of the systems is optimized. This has always been their main task, but now that all the IT systems have been tendered and developed, there will continuously be some work in maintaining the systems, but the development of these systems will no longer be a main task for Kombit. Hereby, if the employees find the most interest in this specific work of developing IT systems, there could be a possible loss in value for them. However, with the new strategy, Kombit will unfold its main vision and purpose for the municipalities in the future, which can potentially give the employee a new interest value in their employment at Kombit.

Furthermore, Christina addressed the social value through “Culture and Community”, where she stated that the culture would be shaped differently in the future through a so-called “cultural project” they are driving. She confirms that the community in Kombit is strong, but that the cultural norms at the workplace will change and unfold differently than it is today. This could be an attempt on creating more social value for the employees through a clear organizational culture, as Christina thinks - as addressed previously within this chapter - that *“our culture is also under pressure now”* (Interview 1).

Christina’s thoughts on Kombits EVPs show awareness of their work with EB, especially because some of the weaknesses in Kombit's organizational identity and culture, which she addressed previously in the interview, have been taken into consideration and acted upon. She is aware of cultural pressure and an ‘identity crisis’, and acknowledges this. She further explains that they plan on acting upon these deficiencies through a cultural project they are about to launch, and their new strategic vision is about to be established. IEB is not only meant for new employees to incorporate in the culture and identity of the organization but IEB can also be used as a tool to change it (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Adapting to the values and norms of employees, and adjusting to the shared culture continuously is a part of IEB, and making a cultural project to adjust and form a better organizational culture, is an example of following the EB methods.

Christina further explained that the other EVPs in the model are, according to her, available for the employees at Kombit. Additionally, she even addresses that some values are more relevant for specific groups of employees, which according to EVP theory (Dabirian et al, 2017) is essential to meet the demands of different target groups. Many EB studies (i.e. Samoliuk, 2022) have concluded that a specific group of employees, such as employees with different gender, age and experience, find different values attractive in their employment. Samoliuk (2022) identified in his study that more experienced employees would value economic benefits highest in their employment, while younger and less experienced employees would value development opportunities higher. Furthermore, EVP theory states that knowing and providing the necessary EVPs for the employees increases the incentives for them to remain within the organization, but also develops the employer brand to be attractive towards similar profiles (Sartain & Schumann, 2006). This relates to person-organization fit, which specifies that employees will review and compare an organization's employer brand against their own personality and values (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). According to theory, if employees sense that their personality and values fit the organization, they tend to feel more attached to that organization. Therefore, by meeting the different demands of different groups of people, the employees can create a higher attachment. Kombit does claim to work with value propositions based on the personal demands of different target groups, and according to theory, possessing values which are attractive towards a specific employee results in retention, and can further be used to attract similar profiles (ibid).

Additionally, Christina stated that Kombit has previously made a driver analysis to detect the values that drive the employees. However, she commented that *"it may be that it (the EVPs) has changed because it's been some time since we did the driver analysis"* (Interview 1). Nevertheless, this shows that Kombit has taken into consideration which values the employees may prioritize in their employment, and this driver-analysis, which they have conducted, has been the foundation for the proposed EVPs in their EB strategy when established in 2021 (Kombit, 2021). However, are these EVPs that Kombit can offer still the value propositions that the employees at Kombit find attractive in their employment? The next chapter of the analysis will take a closer look at the several employee interviews that have been conducted, where employees with different experience level addresses, whether or not they receive value from each of the EVPs, and further which values they prioritize the highest in their employment.

But before taking a closer look at this, we first have to address work-life balance as an EVP at Kombit, as according to Kombits own EB strategy (cf. figure 7), it shows that work-life balance is the only value that Kombit does not offer to its employees based on EVP theory. This may seem surprising, as we have talked a lot about Kombit’s LiFE concept, and how this change of employee philosophy is established to provide employees more flexibility, freedom and work-life balance. However due to the recent implementation of LiFE at Kombit, it was not a part of their initial EB strategy, but when asked if work-life balance should be a new EVP, Christina does state “*You could easily do that*” (Interview 1).

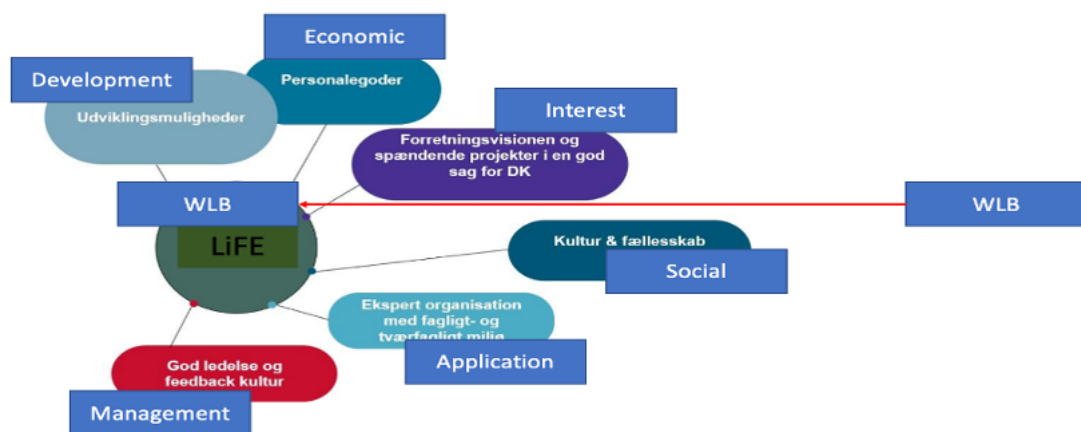


Figure 8

Christina specified that the new LiFE concept could be placed in the middle of the values, being a connecting attributor to all values, including flexibility and work-life balance (ibid). This new employee philosophy is not only to bring flexibility to the employees but also to improve the management values, social value and application value through more freedom and flexibility in the day-to-day work.

By this, Christina approves that Kombit does offer all the theoretical seven EVPs, which according to Dabirian et al. (2017) is the total value an organization can offer to its employees. But do the employees at Kombit perceive that these EVPs are applicable to them? This leads us to our next chapter, where we will examine the employees' own perception of the different EVPs.

## 7.4 Employee perception on value propositions offered in Kombit

In this chapter, we will take a closer look at the EVPs offered by Kombit to its employees. Theory states that a workplace can offer seven different work-related values to its employees (Dabirian et al, 2017). Berthon et al. (2005) state that these values are what potential employees highlight when perceiving an employer as attractive. Based on the theoretical foundation of the EVP theory, we will examine if these values apply to Kombit's current employees to determine the attractiveness of Kombit's employer brand. Through interviews with employees at Kombit, we will in this chapter examine the values Kombit offers to its employees based on their own perceptions. We are aware that individuals are different and may perceive Kombit differently as a workplace, but through careful interpretation of our data, we will seek to get an understanding of whether or not Kombit offers each of the seven values to its employees. As mentioned before, we have conducted 10 interviews with different employees of Kombit, where 7 of them were asked and discussed their EVPs within their employment. The other 3 employees from the HR department were not asked questions regarding EVPs. Due to the employees, not knowing the theoretical concept of EVP, the questions were formulated to be more nuanced and understandable. For example, when the employees were asked about their interest value, the question was formulated: "*Is Kombit an interesting place to work with challenging but achievable goals?*". The interviewees were asked to answer the questions by replying either 'to a high degree' (green), 'to some degree'(yellow), or 'to a low degree' (red) – followed by an explanation of the reason behind their answers. At the end of the interview, each employee was asked to prioritize three values out of the seven they think are the most important to them. Hence, we will interpret the meaning and context of their answers in relation to the EVP theory.

The interviewees were mixed in age and gender, and out of the 7 interviewees (except the 3 from HR), we interviewed one student, two consultants, two senior consultants, and two chief consultants. This was done to understand the different values one may prioritize in their employment, based on their experience level. Former literature on EB has shown that more experienced people tend to value differently than less experienced and younger employees (Samoliuk, 2022). Furthermore, EB theory also alerts that each individual is different, and therefore can have different opinions of what they value within their employment (Dabirian et al., 2017). This was taken into consideration, and through the different interviews, we will analyze what EVPs Kombit offers to their employees.

The following subchapters will be a descriptive summary of how the employees perceived each of the seven values. This is done to give the reader a thorough understanding of the interviewees' standpoint on each of the values. After these descriptive subchapters, there will be an analysis, where based on EVP theory, we will look if Kombit, through their proposed EVPs, creates value for the employees as a part of IEB with the purpose of retention.

### Social value

|              | Student | Consultant | Consultant | Senior Consultant | Senior Consultant | Chief Consultant | Chief Consultant |
|--------------|---------|------------|------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Social Value |         |            |            |                   |                   |                  |                  |

Social value emphasizes the social atmosphere at work, enjoyment and chemistry with colleagues, as well as the organizational culture at the workplace. Overall, the respondent group perceives that they receive social value to a high degree. Only two employees addressed that they merely to some degree receive value in their work through social factors. The chief consultant who gave the 'yellow score' addressed that because he was quite new in his employment, he did not have a strong social bond with his colleagues yet. He also addressed that it would take some time for him to fully be a part of the organizational culture Kombit offers (Interview 10). The consultant who gave the yellow score also had an individual-based reason for her score. She explains that her position in the company is in the staff, where she lacks a bit more 'team spirit'. *"There are few of us, and what we have is very independent, where we each have our own tasks. I would like to be part of something bigger"* (Interview 6). The rest of the employees who scored the social value highly did not add much to why they chose the way they did. Comments like *"Yes, I definitely think there is"* (Interview 5) and *"Yes, very much so."* (Interview 7) were mainly how satisfied employees explained their answers. However, this is not out of the ordinary. The interviews showed that when the employees seem satisfied with a specific topic/area, they tend to address the situation less.

### Interest value

|                | Student | Consultant | Consultant | Senior Consultant | Senior Consultant | Chief Consultant | Chief Consultant |
|----------------|---------|------------|------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Interest Value |         |            |            |                   |                   |                  |                  |

Interest value emphasizes an employee's job content, and whether or not they find interest in what they do at work (Dabirian et al, 2017). In relation to attractiveness, an organization needs to ensure that its employees maintain interest in their work, which can increase productivity. Out of the seven employees, three experience a high degree of interest value, while four experience an interest value to some degree. There is a distinguished opinion on this matter,



but this value is especially focused on the individuals' perception of what they find interesting in their work at the company. For instance, the student stated that her work is interesting, but being a student there are mandatory assignments which can be too administrative, and these many routine tasks become non-challenging after some time (Interview 4). The one consultant with the yellow score addressed that the overall purpose and work that Kombit does is interesting but his own tasks can be too generic (Interview 8). The chief consultant, who gave the yellow score, had a different explanation, where he addressed his longevity of employment at Kombit as a factor of why his interest in his work is descending. He stated that he had thought about trying something else before retirement because he was at the end of his working career. The senior consultant, who gave the yellow score, is however interesting to investigate. He addressed that his position in Kombit is not where he wishes to be. He sees himself as having a much more technical profile and could potentially see himself suited better as an IT architect, rather than an IT consultant. Even though he still has an interest in what Kombit does as an organization for the municipalities, he does not find much interest in his tasks within his current position at the company. In comparison to the other employees, he is aware that his interest would be elsewhere within the organization.

### Application value

|                   | Student | Consultant | Consultant | Senior Consultant | Senior Consultant | Chief Consultant | Chief Consultant |
|-------------------|---------|------------|------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Application Value | Yellow  | Green      | Yellow     | Yellow            | Red               | Green            | Green            |

Application value emphasizes whether or not an employee's knowledge and skills are applied in their job, and if they think their job is meaningful. Again, there are distinguished opinions, as three of the interviewees stated that they only apply their knowledge and skills to some degree in their work, and one employee stated that their knowledge and skills are not applied in their work. It is interesting to note that the most experienced employees receive a high degree of application value, while the less experienced employees only receive in general some degree/or no degree of application value. The senior consultant with a red score addressed that his technical IT abilities are not being applied through his work, which is why he did not receive any application value. The student emphasized that not all the knowledge she gains from her studies is used in practice at Kombit, and the one consultant, who has a yellow score, addressed that because she recently went from a student to a full-time employee, *"there are some doors you have to kick in"* (Interview 8), in order to get the possibility to apply your skills in the right way. Overall, it appears from the respondents' answers that there is a deficiency in providing value to the employees by applying their skills in the right way.

## Development value

|                   | Student | Consultant | Consultant | Senior Consultant | Senior Consultant | Chief Consultant | Chief Consultant |
|-------------------|---------|------------|------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Development Value | Yellow  | Red        | Green      | Yellow            | Yellow            | Yellow           | Yellow           |

Development value emphasizes whether or not the employees at Kombit feel that they have opportunities for professional development within the organization. The development value is the one category in which the employees in total scored the lowest, with five employees receiving development value to some degree, and one employee to no degree. The two chief consultants addressed that due to them being experienced and in the job market for many years, there is not much development that they personally need, which could be why they did not experience any value recreated within this category. However, many younger or inexperienced employees do not experience development opportunities to a high degree, which can instigate resignations, as development is key for younger people to retain themselves to one job (Das & Baruah, 2013). One of the employees emphasized that he sees possibilities for development, but in his position at the company, he does not see the possibility to develop in the direction that he wants (Interview 6). The consultant, who has a red score, emphasized that Kombit is a matrix organization, and development in terms of promotion is very difficult to achieve (Interview 7). Another employee also addressed that Kombit does offer specific courses in developing certain skills. However, these courses have to be initiated by the employee, and she thinks that Kombit can do more to initiate the development of their employees (Interview 5). Overall, it can be interpreted that the employees do not perceive a high value of development; it appears that there are possibilities for development, but these possibilities do not pertain to the employees.

## Economic value

|                | Student | Consultant | Consultant | Senior Consultant | Senior Consultant | Chief Consultant | Chief Consultant |
|----------------|---------|------------|------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Economic Value | Green   | Yellow     | Yellow     | Yellow            | Yellow            | Green            | Yellow           |

Economic value emphasizes if an employee perceives that they are adequately rewarded in their job through wages and other economic benefits. As Kombit is a public organization, the employees' salaries are in general lower than what the private market can offer (Interview 1). However, it seems that the employees are attentive to this, as they mainly state likewise. When the interviewees were asked about economic value, they all compared their functional benefits to what they might receive elsewhere for the same job, which is natural. The student stated that she receives a high degree of economic value because other student jobs that she knows do not pay the same salaries as Kombit does. The chief consultant with a green score reviewed his

situation, comparing his current economic benefits to his former jobs, primarily at a municipality. Overall, with in mind that Kombit is a public organization, the economic value they apply to its employees is passable. There are no employees who feel that they do not receive any economic value, and the employees are aware that the public sector in general pays less than the private. Many employees have also stated that other values, such as flexibility and more freedom at work, amend for the lower pay (Interview 5, 6, 8).

### Management value

|                  | Student | Consultant | Consultant | Senior Consultant | Senior Consultant | Chief Consultant | Chief Consultant |
|------------------|---------|------------|------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Management Value | Green   | Green      | Yellow     | Yellow            | Yellow            | Green            | Green            |

Management value emphasizes the leadership of the top and middle management, and whether or not an employee receives value from the management through motivation and inspiration. The chief consultants received a high degree of management value, where they both mainly addressed their immediate manager. However, as they both are hierarchical closer to the top management in their position, it could influence why they receive a high level of management value. The senior consultants and one of the consultants addressed that their relationship with their immediate manager was good but lacked more visibility from the top management (Interview 8). The consultant, who gave the green score, was also targeted towards his immediate manager. The student gave a high score on management value as well, but with the explanation that due to her position at the company, she was closer to the top management, and therefore received some value from them, which many other students do not receive (Interview 4). In Kombit's employee satisfaction survey, it is also clear that the employees at Kombit perceive the top management differently from their immediate manager. In the latest survey, the employees' relationship with the top management was ranked lower than with their immediate manager (MTU, 2022). There is no surprise that in an organization with over 240 employees, the employees can feel distant from the top management, but overall due to the value provided by the middle management, Kombits employees express that they do receive management value.

### Work-life balance

|                   | Student | Consultant | Consultant | Senior Consultant | Senior Consultant | Chief Consultant | Chief Consultant |
|-------------------|---------|------------|------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Work-life Balance | Green   | Green      | Green      | Green             | Green             | Green            | Yellow           |

Work-life balance emphasizes flexibility at the workplace, where employees gain value through a balanced relation between their work and personal lives. Work-life balance has been a rising focus within employee philosophies and is indicated to create higher job satisfaction

and happier employees (Renato et al., 2020). Work-life balance is definitely where Kombat brings the most value to its employees, according to our interviewees. Every employee that was interviewed, except one, has addressed that they receive a high value of work-life balance in their employment at Kombat. Many of the employees have also mentioned the new LiFE concept, which has allowed them to have even more freedom and flexibility in their work (Interview 7 & 9). One employee even mentioned that the flexibility she receives at Kombat makes up for the salary being lower compared to other IT companies (Interview 5). Furthermore, one employee, who recently started at Kombat after spending many years in a private IT company, addressed that the main reason he moved to Kombat was due to the higher flexibility in his work life and better employee conditions (Interview 10). However, this value is something that Kombat has focused a lot on in the past years. Before the new LiFE concept, Kombat allowed employees to work 2 days from home per week, but now after LiFE, employees are allowed to work from home every day of the week, of course with certain criteria that have to be fulfilled.

#### 7.4.1 Which EVPs are most important to the employees at Kombat?

At the end of each employee interview, the interviewees were asked to prioritize the three EVPs that were the most important to each employee.

|                    | Social Value | Interest value | Application value | Development value | Economic value | Management value | Work-life balance |
|--------------------|--------------|----------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------------|------------------|-------------------|
| <i>Student</i>     | X            |                |                   | X                 |                |                  | X                 |
| <i>Consultant</i>  | X            |                | X                 | X                 |                |                  |                   |
| <i>Consultant</i>  | X            |                | X                 |                   |                | X                |                   |
| <i>Senior Con.</i> |              | X              |                   |                   | X              |                  | X                 |
| <i>Senior Con.</i> |              |                |                   | X                 | X              |                  | X                 |
| <i>Chief Con.</i>  |              | X              |                   |                   | X              |                  | X                 |
| <i>Chief Con.</i>  |              |                |                   | X                 | X              | X                |                   |

Figure 9: The employees' prioritization of EVPs

Work-life balance, economic value and development value were amongst the EVPs with the highest importance for the employees, followed by social value. As shown in the table above, it is mainly the experienced employees who value work-life balance the highest, along with the student, who stated that high flexibility between her studies and her work is highly prioritized (Interview 4). The reason why work-life balance is prioritized higher by experienced employees can be related to age and family status. Work-life balance is mainly valued by working parents, who receive more flexibility in balancing their professional life with their

personal life due to having children (Renato et al, 2020), which is to a high degree also what our findings show. Furthermore, it is interesting to point out that the four most experienced employees prioritize economic value highly, whereas all the less experienced employees, for example, prioritize social value highly.

#### *7.4.2 Comparing the EVPs of the employees with Kombit's IEB approach*

Through interpretation of our gathered data with the HR department of Kombit, we have in the previous chapter examined how Kombit works with IEB in correlation to the values offered to Kombit's employees. Thus, we addressed that Kombit's present EVPs, which can be replicated as the seven EVPs in theory, to their employees, and that the HR director, Christina, is aware that certain EVPs are prioritized and valued by a certain group of employees. Furthermore, Christina emphasized that she believed that each value is offered to the employees, however not in as broad a sense as the EVPs per theory surround. The economic value was addressed as employee benefits and for example not salary. The employees, on the other hand, were asked about economic value both as salary and other economic benefits. Therefore, their answers consider more than what Kombit proposes they can offer of economic value. Interest value was as well in their EB strategy proposed as the overall interest of work that Kombit committed to, through their vision and purpose, while the employees were asked to consider their own work as well as, and whether they find interest in that. Application value was likewise addressed as the overall skills and applied competencies that Kombit withhold as an expert organization, and not directed towards the application of these skills from an individual perspective, as the interviewees were asked to have in mind as well. However, the other EVPs replicate well to the proposed values Kombit promotes. These differences have been considered, but do not limit the possible findings of whether or not Kombit offers certain EVPs to their employees. Based on our employee interviews it shows that development value, application value and economic value were the EVPs that the employees felt the least applied to them in their employment, while work-life balance, social value and management value were applied the most.

As previously mentioned, EVPs are a significant factor within EB, as these proposed value propositions are theoretically proven to make a workplace attractive towards current and potential employees (Dabirian et al, 2017). Other research, such as Phungula et al (2006) further states that EVPs create employee commitment and motivation towards the workplace. The EB framework mainly proposed culture and identity as the attributes to retention within

IEB, but further research within EB has addressed EVPs to have a likewise role in employee retention (Ramrall, 2004). Motivation is said to be one of the leading contributors towards employee retention (ibid), and EVPs have been identified to create attractiveness towards a workplace (EEB), and further increase motivation within the workplace, once an employee is a part of the organization (IEB). So, if EVPs can result in employee motivation/productivity, which leads to retention based on our EB framework, then EVPs can be considered as a main contributor, likewise identity and culture, to employee retention within IEB practices. Based on our interviews with the employees at Kombit, our findings suggest that the less experienced employees prioritize development, social aspects and application of their skills as the most important motivators in their employment at Kombit. However, our data suggest that the employees do not perceive that development and the application of their skills is highly applied in their employment. So, there is a bit of a contradiction between what Kombit believed they offered to their employees and how the employees actually perceived these specific EVPs. Besides, when we consider that younger employees are one of the main target groups for Kombit, and our data along with former research on the topic (Samliouk, 2022) shows that younger employees highly prioritize development opportunities, there should be a greater focus from Kombit's side to make sure that the employees notice these opportunities within development. Especially when Kombit promotes development as one of its EVPs, it is important to make sure that this value is applied to the employees. If we switch focus to the other main target group, the experienced and technical profiles, our findings show (figure 9) that economic value and work-life balance are two EVPs that are prioritized the most. Work-life balance is something that Kombit indeed provides to their employees, and can be seen as one of the EVPs that makes the workplace highly attractive. However, economic value is not perceived highly by the employees, and as both Christina and Ida addressed, due to Kombit being a public organization, the salary is just lower compared to the private companies within the same market (Interview 1 & 2). Nevertheless, the employees are aware of this. They know that they receive less in salary than they would in a private company, but they also appreciate other economic benefits such as pension (which is higher in the public) (Interview 7). An employee also stated *"In return, we have a lot of freedom. So yes, it's also how you prioritize."* (Interview 5), when asked about economic values. This also indicates that flexibility and freedom, which we have addressed that Kombit does indeed provide to their employees, may cover up for other EVPs that are not as well applied to the employees.

Nevertheless, it can be concluded that Kombit has a set of EVPs such as work-life balance, social value, management value and interest value that the employees do feel and appreciate. These EVPs work as motivators and drivers in their employment and can result in increased employee retention (Dabirian et al, 2017) as a part of IEB practices. Nevertheless, Kombit is aware that there are certain EVPs, which motivate certain target groups, which has also been proven through theory (Dabirian et al, 2017), and our findings clearly indicate that development value, social value and application value, are the primary EVPs, that the less experienced employees view as the most important aspects in their employment, while economic value and work-life balance are the EVPs the more experienced employees value the most. Hence, there is an ongoing IEB practice to maintain and develop these motivators towards the employees in order to attract them and retain them to the organization.

## **7.5 Unknown Kombit**

One important factor that was common among many of the participants is the discussion about the unknownness or lack of awareness regarding Kombit. Besides the employees, people from outside of the organization are also not aware of the existence of Kombit. Branding Kombit can be useful in this situation, as a brand can convey meaning beyond tangible benefits (Hirschman, 1980). Christina has been saying, *“if you ask someone outside the municipalities about Kombit, they will say no. Our level of awareness is extremely low”* (interview-1). She also explained an experience regarding students/young people’s knowledge about knowing Kombit, *“during a presentation at RUC, I asked how many people knew Kombit. There was one who raised his hand, just one, out of hundreds”* (interview-1). Even though, according to her, the situation is better now after some EB initiatives have been taken. Here, some work can be done by Kombit in relation to their brand management as brands are among a firm’s most valuable assets and as a result, brand management is a key activity in many firms (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). One of the employees from the communication department thinks in a different way where his opinion is that Kombit does not necessarily need to be known by everyone, *“maybe not everyone needs to know what Kombit is. It is more relevant that we reach out to those who are relevant to know about Kombit, such as the municipalities”* (interview-3). But even in the municipalities, Kombit is not well-known to everyone. One of the employees has talked about his experience, *“in Glostrup Municipality when I said that I was going to work in Kombit, many had no idea what it was, which is a bit funny because Kombit’s main stakeholder*

*is the municipalities*” (interview-8). Besides, he added, *“maybe sometimes we see ourselves as a little better than you do if you're sitting on the other side of the table. I think there are many who don't quite know what we stand for, even in the municipalities”* (interview-8). From here, it can become visible that, even though Kombat is the biggest supplier of IT solutions for the municipalities and works exclusively only for the municipalities, many employees over there have not even heard about Kombat. As the employee from the interview said, *“they might use the systems, or be familiar with the systems, but have no idea what Kombat is”* (interview-8). This shows how Kombat has failed to brand itself as a corporation where Kombat’s customers (municipalities) and end users are using the products without having any knowledge of Kombat. A positive reputation can greatly help Kombat to attract talent. In their study, Cable & Turban (2003) showed how positive perceptions of an organization’s reputation have a positive effect on jobseekers' desire to apply for jobs with that company, thus attracting larger and better applicants and allowing the organization to select more highly-qualified employees. One of the employees said, *“we are a bit unknown. Not many people know Kombat. They're more familiar with our competitor, Netcompany for example. So, in relation to the outside world, I think our brand is a little weak”* (interview-6). The ability to use a brand to convey symbolic benefits to prospective employees makes EB especially useful (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). Much of the strength of branding lies within the power of the symbolism of the brand (ibid). Another employee also talked about it, *“there are many people who don't know exactly what Kombat is doing. When you explain it to them, they can see that it makes sense, but on the face of it, I would say no”* (interview-7). Out of those quotes, it is visible that Kombat’s corporate brand is not very strong and not widely spread. In this particular situation, EB can be beneficial as Employer brands are developed to be consistent with the firm’s corporate brand (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). The same opinion was there from other employees as well, *“we can to a degree be seen as quite unknown. I don't think many know that Kombat is actually here”* (interview-9). EB can particularly be helpful regarding managing awareness, as it is defined as, a targeted, long-term strategy to manage the awareness and perceptions of employees, potential employees, and related stakeholders with regard to a particular firm (Sullivan, 2004 in Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

Many of the employees had no or minimum knowledge about the company before joining Kombat. One of the employees said, *“I actually didn't know what Kombat was before. It was more the content of the job advertisement that attracted me”* (interview-4). He also commented that it was not only him but also none of his networks had any idea about Kombat. He said,



*“when I told people that I got a job at Kombat, none of my friends knew what it was. My parents didn't know what it was either”* (ibid). Here Kombat is staying behind as parents and friends can play a vital role and influence the choice of young people's workplace. For entry-level and graduate roles in many countries; parents play a large part in helping their sons and daughters make career decisions (Zeuch, 2016). What people's circle of friends and peers say about a company is important in coloring potential employees' opinions (ibid). Another employee said, *“I didn't know much about Kombat, I just saw they worked with digitalization and technology which was the industry I would like to get into”* (interview-6). EB can help to create positive self aspects in the mind of the employees which will result in them seeking employment within the organization (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). The same story can be heard from another employee, *“I was in another job where I was not so satisfied. So when I saw the position of project coordinator, and what Kombat stood for, and what Kombat did for the municipality, I thought to apply”* (interview-5). Employees continued, *“I think the position I applied for was about Aula. So in that sense, I had to do some research and have some background knowledge about it. But it was actually only then that I realized what Kombat was all about”* (interview-7). To deal with this unknownness, creating awareness among people regarding Kombat is a must. EB can play a vital role here, as Edwards (2010) has mentioned EB as a process to raise awareness and strengthen associations between the brand and desirable attributes. Another employee has said, *“it was the content of the job posting that appealed to me. I had no idea about Kombat at all”* (interview-8). Here, many of the employees have mentioned that they become interested in Kombat by seeing the job advertisement but to be successful in attracting talent in the long run, Kombat needs to advertise themselves as a company. This is exactly what Collins & Han (2004) showed in their study where they explained that general corporate advertising rather than job-specific advertising is significant in increasing organizational attractiveness and a company's reputation. There is no doubt that corporate branding will help to let the outside world know about the existence of the company and afterwards EB will help to create a positive image of the company as an employer which eventually leads people to apply. As social identity theory suggests, in the end, the consumer purchases the brand because of the positive self-concept that results from feeling membership with the brand (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). In a similar manner, as potential employees find positive aspects of the employer image, they are more likely to identify with the brand, and will more likely choose to seek membership with the organization for the sense of heightened self-image that membership promises (ibid).

Besides, the identity of Kombit in the sense of which sector (private or public) the company belongs to is very often questioned by the employees. One employee has said, *“we are also semi-public. We don't really know whether we are private or public. So I feel that Kombit could do something to better position itself, and to better cement its position between the private and public markets”* (interview-6). Another employee has mentioned Kombit as a hybrid company, where he said, *“I think the financial aspect is fine, but then again, being a kind of hybrid between the public and private sector, I also feel that you can get more salary in the fully private sector”* (interview-8). It is visible from the data that there is definitely a crisis of identity within the company. Employees are not being able to fit themselves within a particular sector. Rather, they find themselves somewhere in the middle between the private- and public sector. These confusions need to be eradicated in order to reap the positive results of EB. Because the culture in the company can be different depending on whether it is private or public. Often, the goal of EB is not something as simple to differentiate, rather, EB tries to help candidates understand what kind of culture an organization has and allows them to self-select or deselect accordingly (Zeuth, 2016). It is fundamental to EB that the employer brand be consistent with all other branding efforts of the firm (Sullivan, 1999). Therefore, we suggest, besides utilizing EB, it is high time for Kombit to take a look at their corporate branding activities in order to deal with the unknownness of Kombit.

## **7.6 Current vs desired image**

Another important aspect from the data to notice was the discussion regarding how Kombit wants to be looked at by others and how others look at Kombit as a brand/workplace. The company's image is constructed by insiders and conveyed to outsiders in an effort to create a positive reputation (Gioia et. al. 2000). Different employees, especially, from the HR department have been talking about this specific issue. The HR director, Christina, has been mentioning *“if you look at the brand triangle, we are creating a new profile, and we clearly need to close the gap between identity and profile* (Interview 1). Here, direct acknowledgement came from her regarding the existence of a gap between the organization's identity and profile. When an organization successfully creates its own identity, it can project itself as different from the rest and when the individual employees adopt these values, it helps in building a stronger employer brand, and consequently stronger corporate brand (Rana et. al. 2021). She continued about the same matter, *“we have to close that gap, because otherwise we are signaling something other than who we are. That doesn't give us credibility. So we haven't been*

*good enough at closing that gap*” (ibid). The employer brand establishes the identity of the firm as an employer (The Conference Board, 2001). Therefore to create a strong identity there should not be any gap between the company’s identity and profile. She further addressed the image of the organization *“But there is a gap now. There is a gap between profile and identity, and there is certainly also a gap up to image”* (Interview 1). Employer image has been found to influence applicant attraction to the organization (Turban and Greening, 1997). Employer image reflects the content of beliefs held by a job seeker about an employer (Cable and Turban 2001). Therefore, to establish an attractive image as an employer and create a solid employer identity, the existing gap between profile, identity & image need to be eradicated where in order to succeed to do so, EB can be specifically beneficial.

The sole customers of Kombit which are the municipalities also have different opinions regarding Kombit as she said, *“The municipalities have different experiences of what we should and should not do. Some love us, some don't like us so much, so there is a need to raise awareness of what kind of entity we are.”* (interview-1). The way the municipalities look at the performance of Kombit is also not up to the mark in relation to where Kombit wants to see itself in the eyes of the municipalities. Christina continued *“They don't think we fully understand their business and we are there enough. There is a gap there in relation to their perceived value and Kombit’s own value. There is a gap between our own self-perception and what the municipalities actually think of us”* (interview-1). To deal with the issue Kombit is trying to adopt new strategies. Besides, a new logo is also going to be launched. Ida from HR has said, *“we are in the process of getting a new identity in the sense that we will have a new logo”* (Interview 2). Image is assumed to be influenced by employer familiarity and reputation, but in turn also supposedly affects reputation and organizational attraction (Cable & Turban 2001). Other employees also mentioned municipalities, *“Kombit does something good for the municipalities, even if it is not always visible. Municipalities often see that we are late with our projects and things are getting more expensive”* (interview-5). Besides, another employee has commented, *“I think maybe sometimes we think we are more famous than we really are out there”* (Interview 8). Therefore, it is important how others look at the organization. EB towards an external audience encompasses how the organization exposes itself and how others evaluate the organization as an employer (Martin et al., 2005).

Customer satisfaction is undoubtedly a fact that can not be ignored to be successful in establishing a solid corporate & employer brand. Above mentioned quotes show that, in many

cases, Kombat has failed to satisfy its customers (municipalities) which resulted in a mismatch between the current image and desired image Kombat wants to have. This mismatch can greatly hamper the retention and attraction process of skilled employees. Perceptions of the employer image drive employer attraction among potential recruits (Turban & Greening, 1997). A well-differentiated employer image enables job seekers to understand the organization's values and to find similarities between themselves and the organization (Backhaus, 2016). By branding themselves more properly and intensively towards the customers (municipalities), Kombat can try to develop a better image in the eyes of the municipalities. Besides, by involving the customers more and engaging them in the product development process, Kombat can also establish a better image. With some intensive EB activities, Kombat will be able to establish a strong brand among its customers and potential employees.

## **8. Discussion**

Based on our analytical findings, we will in the following chapter discuss three topics, which compared to previous literature and theory, will help this research to create a better understanding of other related challenges in Kombat's work with EB. Furthermore, our recommendations for Kombat on their EB strategy will be proposed at the end of the chapter.

### **8.1 Employer branding and Corporate branding**

The purpose of EB is mainly to create a good employer image, and thus create a more attractive workplace, where CB relates to the entire company and its image. According to Hatch and Schultz's theory, CB mainly focuses on the company's internal conditions (Hatch and Schultz, 2014).

From our analysis section, it is visible that not so many people are aware of the existence of the brand Kombat. Not only people from outside the company but also many of the municipality's employees are not even familiar with the brand Kombat, even though they are using a system at the workplace which is often developed by Kombat. It can be advantageous for companies like Kombat to use CB before EB is implemented. In particular, this will be advantageous for companies that have not previously worked on branding the company or have not dealt with how its image and reputation are both internally and externally, or perhaps have not previously involved employees in the company's vision and mission. In their research, Collin and Han (2004) have been showing that general corporate advertising helps more to

attract talent rather than job-specific advertising. It will give Kombit the opportunity to create a wider image and reputation in relation to the company, which we consider advantageous, especially as the company is not very known. Furthermore, it is important that the company appears positively as a whole and not just as a workplace. Therefore, CB will help to create a more credible employer brand for Kombit, since the company appears positively in general and not just as a workplace. In relation to this, it can be debated whether it is actually possible to have a strong employer brand if the company does not have a strong corporate brand. And such an image will not seem attractive to many in relation to applying for a job in the company. On the other hand, the company can be a good workplace, but it can be difficult to communicate it in a credible and effective way. Therefore, based on the above analysis, we suggest Kombit as a whole should seek to have a good image and reputation, and CB can be beneficial for this. This is exactly what Cable and Turban (2003) have mentioned in their research where they explained that, if a company can create a positive perception about their image, it will attract future employees to apply for a job in the company where CB can greatly help to create this perception.

This does not mean, however, that all companies should work with CB before EB. EB can easily be used independently. Whether CB will be advantageous to use beforehand requires an individual assessment of each company. Factors such as the company's size, its image and reputation, its experience in working with values, culture and involvement of employees etc. come into play here. In relation to our case company, Kombit, CB can undoubtedly be beneficial. The point is that Kombit's overall image and reputation, have an impact on the degree of success it will achieve with EB. Therefore, as mentioned in the analysis, Kombit needs to work with the issue of unknownness.

## **8.2 Desired outcome of EB**

What do an organization want to achieve through EB? It seems like an obvious question, as it may be so, as all the main studies and theories on EB have the same purpose, namely to strengthen an organization's brand as an employer to attract the right skills, and further retain these new skills as well as existing ones. This is exactly the same case for Kombit, as Christina addresses the situation of why Kombit introduced EB in 2021:

*“A couple of years ago, we could start to see that when we needed to recruit IT skills, we really weren't getting many applications. There were positions where we didn't receive a single*

*application. And we knew that the market had become somewhat tight, and in reality, we also knew that we were quite affected.”(Interview 1).*

The desired outcome or achievement of EB activities is called the employer brand equity (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004), and it is clear that Kombit wants to build an employer brand to attract better, due to the fact that they previously had too few applicants for vacancies. However, Kombits desired outcome was actually to recruit more young people/graduates to the organization to solve this issue. Christina and Ida both stated that the target group Kombit wishes to recruit more of is the younger audience due to two reasons. First, Kombit has a very high average age at the company, because they were in need of many experienced skills when they were established in 2009, to start the project on developing and implementing IT systems to the municipalities. They want to push their average age down by recruiting more young people, as they can contribute with something different and new. Secondly, there is the financial aspect, as experienced competencies are more expensive to have than less experienced competencies. Kombit has made promises to the municipalities during their establishment to give a 25% cost reduction on their IT systems. To achieve this goal, it means that they need to reduce their salary expenses, which again is part of the strategy for recruiting younger people to the company (ibid). Hence, it can be argued that Kombits employer brand equity or their desired outcome of EB is to recruit more young people. But do their EB activities, both externally and internally, as well as their EVPs relate to younger employees?

Throughout our analysis, we have examined Kombits EB activities based on Backhaus & Tikoo’s (2004) framework. Externally Kombit presents different channels, which they use to attract the right employees. One of them is to attend universities and conferences to get in touch with students and younger profiles, which do in fact correlate with their target of attracting younger employees. However, when it comes to Kombit’s use of social media, they do not directly approach this target group through their posts and activities on their social media channels. They only use LinkedIn as their primary channel, where the audience is more professionally oriented, whereas a channel such as Instagram and Facebook has been up for discussion internally in the organization, whether or not they should use those channels to attach Kombit to the younger audience. Nevertheless, they have chosen not to activate these channels and keep LinkedIn as their main focus in promoting Kombit’s brand (Interview 3). This contradicts Kombit’s own desired outcome of attracting more young employees, as Kombit further addressed that they do not directly target the younger audience on social media

as a part of their social media strategy (ibid). Other studies, such as Sivertzen et al. (2013) and Moroko & Uncles (2009) emphasize the importance of market segmentation within EEB. They address that different profiles have different values and preferences in their employment, which can be further confirmed by studies conducted by Dabirian et al. in 2017 and 2019. These studies mainly focused on EVPs and developing certain values within the workplace that makes a company attractive towards certain profiles. Here, it is as well argued that certain profiles value differently based on their personal interest, but that there also appears a pattern in what specific people value based on gender, age and experience. Our research has a specific focus on profiles with different experience levels, as Kombits desired target group is younger employees. However, the majority of Kombits employees are experienced IT profiles, who they still want to withhold, and which they have stated are the most difficult profiles to attract due to the high competition in the market on these specific profiles (Interview 1 & 2). So, Kombit seems to be in a confusing state regarding its EB strategy, as they wish to brand themselves towards both target groups. However, as previously mentioned, former EB studies suggest that different groups have different motivators and values that they highlight in their employment. Therefore, in order for Kombit to appear attractive towards the younger audience, it can be argued that there is a need to brand themselves externally as so. Christina did however state that their EB strategy does focus on market segmentation, where they approach different target groups differently, but further addressed that *“I don't think we do it enough”* (Interview 1). An example of how Kombit works with this is that they target IT architects, a highly technical profile, through networking meetings and by attending specific IT-architect events, where they appear visible. Another example would be that they approach the younger audience by visiting universities and attending job affairs dedicated to graduates. When it comes to social media, there could as well be an indication to expand their social media channels to target the younger audience. Channels such as Instagram and TikTok have a high number of users between the age of 18 to 34 (Oberlo, 2023). Hence, their main channel, LinkedIn, could have the purpose of branding themselves as an expert organization, which may approach the more experienced profiles. A channel such as Instagram, could then be used to approach the younger audience and brand the workplace through attractive motivators that drive the younger profiles.

### **8.3 Functional and symbolic benefits**

In relation to functional benefits, such as salary and employee benefits, it can be difficult for companies in the same industry to differentiate themselves (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). However, Kombit has a good number of functional benefits where they provide a salary which is a little better than the average public sector and also some employee benefits including good pension schemes. But the point is that it can be difficult for Kombit to differentiate with these benefits because these advantages can easily be copied by competitor companies. These findings match with the study of Lievens & Highhouse (2003), where they have shown that symbolic benefits offered by organizations have more value over the other organizations' functional benefits such as pay or benefits. However, functional benefits are important, as they help to signal what Kombit is doing to create a good workplace for their employees, and that the company is willing to invest in the employees. Therefore, we believe that the functional advantages have a great signal value and these are therefore of great importance. Furthermore, these benefits are tangible both for the employees and potential employees, whereas the symbolic benefits can be difficult to show and put into words. If Kombit's functional benefits are included in an EB process, we consider these to be an advantage for the company.

Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) consider the symbolic benefits to be the most important, especially in relation to companies within the same industry. And in connection with attracting employees, it is the symbolic benefits that potential employees will mostly be attracted to, which is why it is important to emphasize these in an EB campaign (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). Above, we have argued that the functional benefits also have a value in connection with the attraction of labor, but we will agree with Backhaus and Tikoo that the symbolic benefits weigh more heavily than the functional benefits, since the functional benefits can be copied by other competitor companies. The symbolic benefits are not tangible, which in turn can mean that these are difficult and take longer to communicate to potential employees.

The symbolic benefits are some that have been created in the company over time, and which help to create and influence the company's image. These benefits are more of a feeling than a tangible thing, it's like when, for example, an iPhone from the brand Apple gives the person who chooses to buy, a feeling of added value that any other phone will be able to add to that person, even if it in principle have the same features. But if an employer's image is created around these symbolic benefits, they will also be considered credible, and thus it will be of less importance that they are not tangible, as they are part of the company's image.



This is where one of the biggest challenges lies for Kombit within EB. The reason why we consider the symbolic benefits to be a big challenge is that these greatly help to shape the company's employer image, and since these benefits are not tangible, they are far more extensive for Kombit to either create or improve. According to the theory, the symbolic benefits can be decisive for whether a potential employee will choose to apply for a job at Kombit or to a competing company. Furthermore, such symbolic benefits are very sensitive and susceptible to bad publicity. It is therefore extremely important that the symbolic benefits Kombit communicates to the outside world, that it possesses, are actually to be found internally within the company. If they are not found in Kombit, this can damage the company's employer image, and such damage can be difficult to rectify. Furthermore, it can mean that if a new employee does not experience the expected symbolic benefits to be found in the company, they will choose to leave the company. This will mean that the company cannot retain new employees, and there will therefore be a greater turnover of employees than desired. It is therefore important to state that the company must not try to show itself off as something it is not or does not possess, because this may ultimately mean that the employer's image deteriorates rather than improves, which is the purpose of EB.

It is therefore much easier for Kombit to create some functional benefits, but as mentioned before they can be copied. That is why the symbolic benefits have a greater value in the long term, which is the reason why they are ultimately more important and valuable for Kombit. This can be seen from the findings of Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) where they have agreed that, when functional benefits are similar in different companies, employees will choose a company with greater symbolic benefits.

A workplace where employees work well together socially can help retain employees. Therefore, we find the internal part of an EB process to be central, which is why Kombit's management should have a strong focus on employee well-being in connection with IEB. Above, we have also argued the consequences it can have for the company's employer image if the externally communicated symbolic benefits cannot be found internally. In their study, Biswas et. al. (2014) has also shown that the symbolic benefits are the ones which matter more compared to the functional benefits.

Backhaus and Tikoo write that the symbolic benefits must be communicated via a branding campaign both externally and internally, but they do not elaborate on how such a campaign should be approached and where the company should start. Here we will mention Hatch and

Schultz's theory of CB, where they argue that a company must start a branding process internally within the company (Hatch and Schultz, 1997).

In relation to both the functional and symbolic benefits, it is important that Kombit starts its work with these benefits internally within the company. This means that Kombit must examine which advantages the company already possesses and which it wants to have. The advantages Kombit does not have but will implement in the company must be found in the company before it begins the external branding so that the EB will be credible. Backhaus (2016) agrees with this finding, where she is of the opinion that, for top organizational leaders, the challenge will be to ensure that the brand message communicated externally is consistent with the internal reality. We, therefore, consider internal branding as an important part of EB. Furthermore, we find it crucial that the desired employer image is rooted internally in the company before Kombit starts an EEB campaign.

A clear advantage of valuing the symbolic benefits highly is that these benefits are not a large and permanent expense for Kombit like the functional benefits are. And since the functional benefits can be easily copied and surpassed by other companies, competition for functional benefits can become a very large expense for the company. This finding is in line with Zeuch (2016), where he has mentioned, in the long run, symbolic benefits are less costly and most valuable to focus on. Many SMEs have to give up competing with the functional advantages for this reason. This is not to say that there are no costs for the symbolic benefits, but the costs will be much more limited over a longer period of time.

## **8.4 Recommendations**

Based on our qualitative research on Kombit's use of EB, we will in this chapter present recommendations to the company regarding, what our findings suggest for future adjustments in their EB strategy. We have throughout our analysis and discussion examined how Kombit uses EB and related their practices to the theoretical standpoint. Through our collected data, we have gained an understanding of how Kombit externally brands themselves as an employer, how they internally integrate its employees into its brand and how they through proposed EVPs retain their employees in the organization. Thus, there have been revelations on what aspects of Kombits EB strategy works well, and also critics on what could have been done differently.

First, we recommend Kombit to externally brand itself according to whom they target. Throughout our research, we have confirmed that different values drive different people. Kombit has two main target groups; the young and less experienced people and the very experienced and technical IT profiles. These two different profiles have different motivations they respond to in their employment, and therefore it is also important that Kombit presents these motivators externally when searching for new candidates, either on social media or at events. Our findings suggest that younger profiles prioritize development opportunities, a great social environment and that the skills they withhold are applied well in their work. When externally branding themselves as an employer, either on social media or at events and conventions, Kombit should focus on promoting these aspects to potential young employees. Just alike, this same approach should be made towards the experienced IT profiles. Our findings suggest that the more experienced employees at Kombit prioritize economic value, work-life balance and interest value. Hence, when targeting the experienced profiles, Kombit should brand these motivators.

Second, we recommend Kombit expand the number of their social media channels. At the moment Kombit is only using LinkedIn as their social media channel to brand themselves, and regarding their target group being younger profiles, it could benefit Kombit's brand to be more visible on channels such as Instagram, Facebook or TikTok. Channels such as Instagram and TikTok have a high number of users between the age of 18 to 34 (Oberlo, 2023). By expanding Kombit's social media channels and by adapting to the channels of its target groups, Kombit can develop its image and make the workplace look attractive.

Third, we recommend Kombit to present greater value to its employees through development opportunities and the application of the employees' skills. EVP theory states that there are a number of value propositions an employer can offer to its employees. Our findings suggest that regarding development and application value, the employees were not satisfied with the value they received in these areas. Referring back to the target groups of Kombit, our findings also disclosed that the younger employees prioritized development- and application value highly. Furthermore, the experienced employees also prioritized development highly, and these value propositions are not perceived well enough by the employees. It may be that Kombit has development opportunities or offers the possibility to switch positions to a different area internally, where the skills can be applied better, but the employees do not recognize this.

Hence, the recommendation is that Kombit has to be clear in identifying and proposing these values to their employees.

Fourth, we recommend Kombit to continue with LiFE and continue branding LiFE. Flexibility and work-life balance have been one of the topics that give Kombit a strong employer brand. The employees of Kombit have indeed noticed and perceived high value in their employment through flexibility and LiFE, and it is something that the employees prioritize highly. Kombit has also branded themselves externally in the media, by presenting this new working philosophy and debating against the traditional way of work, which is something they should definitely continue with. Furthermore, we also recommend Kombit to use flexibility and LiFE as a distinguisher to describe the workplace more often when attending events, conferences or job fairs.

Fifth, we suggest Kombit to put focus on corporate branding as well, due to the fact that the brand is still unknown to a large number of people including potential employees. Without establishing a strong corporate brand it might be difficult for Kombit to cash all the desired benefits of EB.

Sixth, we recommend Kombit to work on integrating new employees to the culture and identity of the organization. Based on EB theory, it is essential to commit the employees to one culture and one identity, as this attaches the employees to the company. Kombit has faced some difficulties with its identity due to its new strategy and is currently also working on improving their culture. These factors are essential in order to establish brand loyalty in the organization, where the employees feel attached to the company, which can lead to a higher retention rate/lower employee turnover. Especially, when a new recruitment is made, it is important that Kombit integrates the new employee into the culture and identity with a proper and well-structured onboarding process, so the person feels committed and attached to Kombit, which also functions as a motivator that increases productivity for the employee.

## 9. Conclusion

In conclusion, many observations can be made from our research on Kombit's use of EB as a tool in attracting and retaining employees in a highly competitive market. When it comes down to recruiting potential employees, it can be concluded that Kombit indeed has begun to form an employer brand and through external communication strategies brand themselves as an employer, which gives value through flexibility, good working conditions, a professional and expert environment and a unique purpose. Those are at least what Kombit wishes to present themselves with, as the HR department clarifies that these values are what Kombit can bring to its employees. Recently they have succeeded with this through a lot of media attention for their new working philosophy, LiFE, as well as the implementation of a new strategic course for the company. Recruitment-wise, Kombit has two main target groups, which they wish to attract to the company; young inexperienced employees, who can bring new knowledge and motivation to the company, and experienced technical IT profiles, who can bring expertise and product to the company. They have in recent years succeeded to some extent in attracting the younger profiles to the company, but their EB practices, in some aspects, do not approach the younger profiles well enough, especially regarding external communication towards the job market. Furthermore, they still struggle in attracting highly experienced IT profiles, which in the current market is highly demanded and highly competitive. In regard to retaining its current employees, Kombit has through its EB strategy developed a number of value propositions, they as an employer can offer to their employees. Our research concludes based on employee interviews as well as secondary data on the matter that Kombit has developed certain EVPs that the employees have noticed, felt and valued. Especially within work-life balance, the social environment and interest in the work that the company delivers, the employees do receive value in their employment. However, there are certain EVPs, where the employees do not perceive that Kombit brings value to them, such as within the development & application of their skills and economic benefits. Furthermore, we also disclosed which values the employees prioritized the highest in their employment, where we unfolded a pattern in the answers, which can support former EB findings (i.e. Samliouk, 2022) that experienced employees value different aspects in their employment compared to less experienced employees. We concluded that the younger and less experienced employees (consultants and students) prioritized social value, development value and application value the most, while the more experienced employees (senior and chief consultants) prioritized economic value and work-life balance the highest. Regarding the previous remarks on development, application and economic value being

perceived as the EVPs with the lowest notice by the employees, there are definitely some reflections on Kombits EB practices that can be made. Especially, when Kombit has a narrowed focus on younger employees, who through our findings stated that they value development and the application of their skills, as the most significant factors in their employment, there should as well be a more narrowed focus on delivering these values to its employees.

Overall we can say that EB work is important and serves as a strategic tool to manage and maneuver the difficulties in attracting and retaining skills. EB can be used to create an attractive workplace and a good image both internally and externally. There are different ways to work with EB, where the building and highlighting of a unique, open, flexible and welcoming company culture are seen as important in the work to attract, recruit and retain employees. The reason EB is useful is because it focuses on the areas that the company has to deal with in order to differentiate itself from its competitors. Furthermore, we argue that EB can help create a better workplace, as a good and attractive working environment is a large part of a credible employer brand. This gives the company the opportunity to look at itself at the seams and improve in the areas that contribute to creating an attractive workplace and thus a good employer image. This also means that EB is useful for creating a higher degree of loyalty among employees.

EB can be used to structure the company's work in attracting and retaining employees, as the theory's focus is solely on this. However, we consider this both an advantage and a disadvantage. The advantage is that the theory concentrates on the conditions the company must focus on in connection with strengthening its competencies and opportunities to attract and retain employees. The disadvantage is that the theory does not relate to the company as a whole and that its work with EB may be at odds with its image and reputation in general. It can therefore be an advantage for a company like Kombit to include corporate branding, in order to create a good image and reputation in relation to the entire company and not just as a workplace.

## **10. Future research**

We chose to include a diversity of professionals from different departments of Kombit in our study. This is due to getting a broad idea of how employees in various departments experience their employer. Since we chose to conduct qualitative interviews, the number of respondents was limited with regard to the estimated scope of the study and the predetermined time period. However, it would have been of interest to conduct a similar study regarding the employees' experiences, but instead, a quantitative study or a mixture of qualitative and quantitative studies to see if the results of our study agree with the new study. Then even more employees' opinions could have been included.

Had the study been covered by a larger time frame, there would also have been the opportunity to obtain, for example, a perspective from job seekers to get their interpretations and opinions about the phenomenon. Such insight could have broadened the perspective of the study and given insight from another perspective.

We felt that working with a single company was most suitable for our study in order to study the phenomenon of EB. The reason for this is that our aim was not to generalize the conclusion but to have a more detailed and in-depth insight into the phenomenon.

Another suggestion is to compare the public and the private sector. Kombit is not a profit-making organization and therefore it may be interesting to do a comparative study where we examine and compare the organization with the private sector to see if EB has a different outcome in the private sector. Are the conditions changing when it comes to making a profit?

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