



MAKING SENSE OF EMPLOYER BRANDING IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

Linda Amby

Essay/Thesis:	30 hp
Program and/or course:	Strategic HRM and Labour Relations
Level:	Master Thesis
Semester/year:	Spring 2015
Supervisor:	Andreas Diedrich
Examiner:	Bertil Rolandsson

Abstract

Problematisation: Previous research about employer branding is conducted in the context of the private sector and lacks cases from the context of public sector. The literature explains employer branding as series of rational decisions being made in a linear process. However, strategy making is rarely rational, it is a complex process with a lot of actors involved, who create their own meaning around the concept and therefore it transforms throughout its journey in an organisation. This study has added a new piece to the picture, by exploring an employer branding strategy within the public sector through the lens of the translation theory. The theory creates a meaningful explanation of how a strategy is done in practice and how it changes when it is placed into a new context.

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to explore the practice of employer branding within the public sector and look into how the idea transforms throughout involved actors' understandings of, and interest in, the concept.

Methodology: A qualitative case study with 16 in-depth interviews. The context of the research was a Swedish institutional setting within the public sector.

Findings: This study contributes to previous research by explaining how employer branding is done in practice and how it has emerged within a public organisation. The result shows that the practice of employer branding is an on-going attempt at constructing and upholding an actor network. When constructing an actor network, the key to success is, above all, the ability to involve other actors and keep them aligned. The process cannot be controlled because the construction of an employer brand is in the hand of the actors. Employees can be one of the most relevant supporters when constructing an employer branding actor network, however, they can also be one of the strongest enemies if they have had a negative experience of working in the organisation. The practice is a complex construction process, which has to be adapted and adjusted into a local context in order to be successful.

Key words: Employer branding, Sense making, Translation theory, Public sector, Actor network

Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 THE COMPETITIVE LABOUR MARKET	1
1.2 PROBLEMATISATION	1
1.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY	2
1.4 RESEARCH QUESTION	2
1.5 DISPOSITION OF THE THESIS	3
2. EARLIER RESEARCH	3
2.1 EMPLOYER BRANDING	3
2.2 EMPLOYER BRANDING WITHIN PUBLIC ORGANISATIONS	4
2.3 EMPLOYEE'S PERSPECTIVE OF EMPLOYER BRANDING	5
2.4 LIMITATIONS OF EARLIER RESEARCH	6
3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	6
3.1 TRANSLATION VS. DIFFUSION	6
3.2 TRANSLATION THEORY	7
3.2.1 <i>An Idea Travels</i>	7
3.2.2 <i>An Idea is Materialised</i>	7
3.2.3 <i>An Idea is Enacted</i>	8
4. METHOD	8
4.1 RESEARCH DESIGN	8
4.2 THE CASE	9
4.4 DATA COLLECTION	9
4.5 INTERVIEWS	11
4.6 DATA ANALYSIS	11
4.6 LIMITATIONS	12
4.7 ETHICAL REFLECTION	12
5. RESULTS	12
5.1 THE IDEA OF EMPLOYER BRANDING TRAVELS FROM THE PRIVATE SECTOR TO THE PUBLIC SECTOR	12
5.2 THE IDEA IS MATERIALISED INTO AN EMPLOYER BRANDING PROJECT	14
5.3 THE IDEA OF EMPLOYER BRANDING IS ENACTED BY ITS ACTORS	16
5.3.1 <i>External Employer Branding</i>	16
5.3.2 <i>Internal Employer Branding – Targeting the Group of Nurses</i>	17
5.4 THE CONTEMPORARY IMAGE OF THE MUNICIPALITY'S EMPLOYER BRAND	18
5.4.1 <i>Well-Known and Visible</i>	18
5.4.2 <i>The Powerful Word-of-Mouth</i>	19
5.4.3 <i>Attributes of the Employer Attractiveness</i>	21
6. DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS	24
6.1 THE PRACTICE OF EMPLOYER BRANDING	24
6.1.1 <i>The Organising of Employer Branding</i>	24

6.1.2 Involved Actors	26
6.1.3 External Image	26
6.1.5 Keep Promises	29
6.2 PRIVATE SECTOR VS. PUBLIC SECTOR	29
6.3 THE TRANSLATION PROCESS OF EMPLOYER BRANDING: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE OF PREVIOUS RESEARCH	30
6.3.1 <i>Figure: The Practice of Employer Branding in the Public Sector</i>	31
7. CONCLUSION	32
7.1 CONCLUDING REMARKS	32
7.2 CONTRIBUTION OF STUDY.....	33
7.3 RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE CASE ORGANISATION	34
7.4 FUTURE RESEARCH	36
8. REFERENCES	37
9. APPENDIX.....	39
APPENDIX 1- INFORMATION MAIL.....	39
APPENDIX 2 – INTERVIEW GUIDE	40

1. Introduction

1.1 The Competitive Labour Market

Demographical and financial changes in the global labour market have increased the competition of skilled employees (Christiaans, 2013). The competitive advantage of an organisation has shifted to include having the most qualified employees, as well as having the best products (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Products are quite easy for competitors to imitate but, the workforce is difficult, or even impossible, to imitate (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Therefore, many organisations use an employer branding strategy to differentiate themselves from their competitors; by building a unique and strong brand, with the goal of being the employer of choice (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Kucherov & Zavyalova, 2012). Organisations have recognised that the human capital is a valuable asset, and therefore find it important to employ strategies to attract and retain current and potential employees (Moroko & Uncle, 2008).

Ambler and Barrow (1996) coined the concept of employer branding in the 1990s and since then it has been frequently used as a strategy in the private sector. Whelan et al. (2010) claim that marketing concepts is still a quite new field in the public sector. Recently public organisations have been more interested in marketing their employer brand because of the difficulties in attracting and retaining skilled employees (Lavigna & Hays, 2004). The idea of new public management theory explains that the public sector can be improved by imitating management principles from the private sector (Gromark & Melin, 2013). Although, some people have criticised spending public money on marketing and argue that public spending should be kept low (Whelan et. al., 2010). Even so, the interest of marketing in the context of employment has lately got increasing attention in the public sector. Professionals within human resources, marketing and communication are often the ones who have the responsibility to carry out an employer branding strategy (Christiaans, 2013; Edwards, 2010; Barrow & Mosely; 2005). In Sweden these professionals are facing a major challenge, since the public welfare system is predicted to lack skilled employees in the future (Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting, 2015a).

1.2 Problematisation

In Sweden more than one million people work within the public welfare system, within a time span of ten years one third will have retired (SKL, 2015a). The citizens are getting older which

will lead to a higher demand of employees within the health care sector (SKL, 2015a). If nothing changes, the welfare sector will need over a half million new employees by the year 2023 (SKL, 2015a). This is a great challenge for public organisations since public employment is perceived to be unattractive (SKL, 2006). Even so, SKL (2015b) claims that employees within the public sector find their jobs more meaningful than employees in the private sector. Public organisations aim to respond to public needs (SKL, 2015c) accordingly, one of the motives of choosing a position within a public organisation is to serve the common good for the citizens of society (Lavigna & Hays, 2004).

There is a huge body of literature within the field of employer branding, including many articles published by the practitioner's press (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). In the scientific arena most research has been conducted in the context of private organisations, but not much has been done within public organisations (Whelan et al, 2010). Previous research has taken much for granted, and claims that if an organisation implements employer branding in a certain way, it will succeed (Backhause & Tikoo, 2004; Barrow & Mosely, 2005). The literature has provided tools and models, but has not viewed employer branding as a practice. Tools and models are implemented in practice, which is why it is important to understand the practice and not just the tools and models. Therefore, this study aims to extend the understanding of how employer branding is done in practice and how the strategy has emerged within a public organisation. Through the lens of the translation theory it will explain how the idea of employer branding changes when it is placed in a new context; when involved actors add meaning to the concept. This perspective will provide a meaningful and nuanced picture of how the actual practice occurs. The translation theory has been used in this study as a guide on how to look at the phenomena of employer branding in the context of a Swedish public authority.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the practice of employer branding within the public sector, and to look into how the initial idea transforms throughout involved actors' understandings of, and interest in, the concept.

1.4 Research Question

- *How is employer branding done in practice and how has it emerged within a public organisation?*

1.5 Disposition of the Thesis

Section one provides an introduction to the concept of employer branding, problem discussion, the purpose of the study, and the research question. Section two presents earlier research and addresses limitations of previous research. Section three explains the translation theory, which serves as the theoretical framework for this study. Section four provides a description of the method and presents the context of this study. Section five shows the empirical findings structured after the steps of a translation process. Section six provides a discussion analysed through the lens of the translation theory. Section seven concludes the main findings and contributions of this study, gives recommendations for the case organisation, and suggestions for future research.

2. Earlier Research

2.1 Employer Branding

Ambler and Barrow (1996) were the first users of the concept of employer branding and they concluded that branding is important in the context of employment. They defined the concept as *“the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company”* (Ambler & Barrow, 1996:8). The functional benefit has to do with employee job satisfaction. The economic benefits are about rewards, and the psychological benefits explain employee feelings of belonging, or having a purpose. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004:502) state that earlier definitions of the term have been about promoting the company and they define employer branding as *“the process of building an identifiable and unique employer identity, and the concept of the firm that differentiate it from its competitors”*. This definition explains how an organisation can differentiate from its competitors by building a unique and strong brand as an employer, in order to be the employer of choice.

Employer branding is described as a process, which includes planning and implementing a strategy, with the aim to influence the target employee’s perception of an attractive employer (Christiaans, 2013). Research has shown that there are many benefits of an employer branding strategy (Barrow & Mosely, 2005). First and foremost, it helps an organisation to attract and retain current and potential employees (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Besides this, research has shown that the strategy can reduce costs, increase employee’s performance, and lead to a

competitive advantage (e.g. Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Barrow & Mosely, 2005). Furthermore, the strategy of employer branding is situated in the area of human resources, communication and marketing (Christiaans, 2013; Edwards, 2010; Barrow & Mosely, 2005). Ideally the different professions should cooperate in these areas. Barrow and Mosely (2005) point out that the support functions have specialist knowledge, and therefore have much to offer to each other, in order to create a better employer branding strategy.

The process of employer branding is often done in a three-step process (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). The first step in the process is to develop the employer value proposition, which are the values that the employer would like employees to associate with their brand. The second step is to use external marketing to attract potential recruits. The third step is to use internal marketing in order to retain current employees. Chhabra and Sharma (2014) argue that internal employer branding increases an employee's loyalty, whilst external employer branding increases the organisation's attractiveness for potential recruits. According to Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) the internal perception of an organisation influences the external perception of an organisation's attractiveness. Therefore, the employer brand needs to be built from the inside out in the organisation. Moroko and Uncles (2008) claim that the employer branding strategy follow the employees throughout the whole life cycle. Employees within the organisation influence the external view of the organisation. In other words, satisfied and proud employees act as ambassadors for the organisation and inspire others to seek jobs within the organisation (Whelan et al., 2010). The better the reputation, the more employees perceive the organisation as an attractive employer (Edwards, 2010).

2.2 Employer Branding within Public Organisations

Research on marketing concepts is still an unexplored in the field of the public sector (Whelan et al., 2010). Recently public organisations have shown an increasing interest of branding and to implement an employer branding strategy (Lavigna & Hays, 2004). The private sector was first out with the idea then it was adapted by the public sector. According Gromark and Melin (2013) the theory of new public management explains that the public sector can be improved by imitating management ideas from the private sector. However, the two sectors have different objectives, which might influence on the way of managing an employer branding strategy. The public sector is politically driven and its purpose is to respond to the public needs (Whelan et al.

2010), whilst the private sector is driven by numbers of customers (Barrow & Mosely, 2006; Whelan et al., 2010). Lavigna and Hays (2004) states that the main reason people chose the public sector as an employer is because they are committed to serve the common good for the citizens of society.

2.3 Employee's Perspective of Employer Branding

Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) claim that employer branding messages create associations of the employer image, which employees carry into the firm. The organisation has to keep their promises in order to create a workforce committed to the values and goals of the organisation. To understand the phenomena researchers have used the social exchange theory and the concept of psychological contract, which describes the reciprocal exchange agreement between an employer and the employees (Christiaans, 2013). The communicated employer brand message creates an image of what the employees can gain if they are employed within a specific organisation. The employee offers working hours and expects to get something in return e.g. salary, training or job security. If the organisation does not delivering on their promises, this may lead to disappointment and thoughts of leaving the organisation (Christiaans, 2013).

When recruits apply for a job they consider different attributes connected to the employer image. Research has shown that factors presented in personnel policies matter; for example, interesting work tasks, training, development, rewards or working hours. In addition, another factor that matters during the recruitment phase is symbolic benefits (Christiaans, 2013). In meeting with the hiring manager, or other employees within the organisation, the employee can attribute some personality characteristics to the organisation. When a recruit gets a job offer from a well-known and attractive employer, the recruit feels special, and might gain a higher level of self-image, because their personality is perceived as a match towards the attractive employer (Christiaans, 2013). The theory of person-organisation fit has been used to analyse this phenomena, which describes the importance of the congruence of values held by the employee and the employer (Christiaans, 2013). Employees who can identify with an organisation are often loyal towards, and usually stay with, the organisation (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

Moving forward, Devendorf and Highhouse (2008) conducted a study showing the connection between female undergraduate students' attraction, and the perception of similarities to employees, which influenced their attraction to a specific employer. The results were analysed

with the social identity theory, which explains attraction to similarities. In addition, the researchers investigated the kind of information that job seekers were influenced by the most, based on three different sources; employer information, job information, or people information. The results showed that people information tended to influence the most when the job seekers made their choice of employer.

2.4 Limitations of Earlier Research

Most of the scientific literature explains the best practice of employer branding, for example Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) describe the strategy as a rational three-step process. Besides, previous research lacks cases from the context of public organisations (Whelan et al, 2010). Thus there is a need for an additional perspective, because the process is rarely rational and cannot be done in the same way in all organisations. Previous research has been unable to explain how the idea of employer branding transforms when it travels to new places, where it is adapted and adjusted in the local practice. Therefore, this study will analyse the practice of employer branding in the context of the public sector through the lens of translation theory, which explains the best fit, rather than the best practice, scenario. Next chapter will describe the differences between two contradictory perspectives; the traditional diffusionist and the translation perspective, before providing a deeper explanation of the translation framework for this study.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1 Translation vs. Diffusion

Czarniawaska and Joerges (1996) argue that there are mainly two perspectives of organisational change; diffusion and translation. The traditional diffusionist perspective explains organisational change as a rational and linear process, with the underlying assumption that involved actors are passive and spread a management idea as the original one. In other words, it focuses on the plan and the outcome, and does not explain what actually occurs in practice. A contradictory perspective is translation, which looks at organisational change as ideas that are being transformed when placed in a new context. The involved actors are seen as active in the process, which both adapt and adjust the management idea through their own interest and understanding. They either accept or reject the idea and if it is going to be legitimated and spread within an organisation depends on support from its actor network. Czarniawaska and Joerges (1996) argue

that the translation perspective is more meaningful than the traditional diffusionist perspective; because it portrays a more nuanced picture of what actually happens when a new idea is placed in a new context. Therefore, this study uses the translation theory in order to make sense of employer branding within a public organisation.

3.2 Translation Theory

The translation theory has its origins in the work of the 1980s sociologists Callon (1986) and Latour (1986). The authors developed the theory in the context of innovation and technology, and focuses on power relations amongst the actors within an organisation. The translation theory explains how ideas change when they are travelling from one context to another. The movement of ideas depends on the involved actor's interests and understanding of the concept, and the original idea is going to be changed through the adaptation and adjustment in the local context.

3.2.1 An Idea Travels

Czarniawaska and Joerges (1996) state that ideas of change are often introduced in the same time within organisations. An idea gets attention because it might solve an organisational problem, or it rises because other organisations are using the idea. According to Czarniawaska and Joerges (1996), consultancy firms carry fashionable ideas between organisations. Usually they present a simplified solution of a problem; offering a whole package as best practice for the implementation of an idea within an organisation. In contrast, the translation perspective states that an idea cannot be taken for granted before it has been supported, and translated by, involved actors and has been adapted to a specific context.

3.2.2 An Idea is Materialised

In a translation process an idea starts small, then grows more and more when the involved actors support it. Once the idea has been selected and accepted it is then materialised through action into objects. Czarniawaska and Joerges (1996) argue that the simplest way of making an idea into an object is to transform it into labels, metaphors or graphical design. This is a way to legitimate and spread the idea within an organisation. In fact, an idea needs a supporting actor network, which can consist of both human and non-human actors; e.g. people and computer systems (Latour, 1986). The author argues that the idea is in the hand of the actor network, which transforms the idea. Actors take the idea and make it to their own, depending on their understanding and

personal interests. When an idea is being materialised into an object it usually spreads with increasing speed.

3.2.3 An Idea is Enacted

The idea is enacted when it is brought into action (Czarniawaska & Joerges, 1996). In a certain time, a management idea might be stabilised and then, according to Latour (1986), the idea is black boxed, or, in other words, successful, when it is supported and not questioned within the organisation. However, the idea could anytime demolish, if actors are not supporters, and then the idea might leave the organisation again. Czarniawaska and Joerges (1996:41) continue to explain the process of translation as a never-ending story; the idea is materialised “into objects, and then into action, and then into ideas again”. Within a translation process the results are expected to differ from the initial idea; Latour (1986) states that is the whole point with a translation process.

Through a translation perspective, this study will explore how the practice of employer branding has emerged and occurs within a public organisation. This study will look into how the idea travelled into and throughout the organisation and how involved actors are taking part of the construction of the employer brand.

4. Method

4.1 Research Design

This study aims to explore the practice of employer branding within a public organisation. The research question was the guiding star for the choice of a qualitative case study, the interview questions and, the choice of translation theory. This goes in line with Kvale and Brinkman (2009) who state that it is important that the research question is the right one in order to be able to investigate what the study aims to investigate. A qualitative approach makes it possible to get an in-depth understanding of a person’s individual perception, views, believes and attitudes (Bryman, 2008; Hakim, 2000). A qualitative approach also allows the researcher to use different sources of data in order to understand the whole picture. In this study the data was collected from secondary analysis, which was used to map the research field and to be able to identify a gap in previous research, organisational documents was used to explore the early stages in the employer branding process and in-depth interviews was used as the main source to understand involved actors perception and interest in the concept.

4.2 The Case

The context of this study was a municipality in a big city in Sweden. The organisation was divided into several different geographical areas and the City Council was the highest decision organ for the organisation. The organisation has approximately 50,000 employees within more than 100 different types of profession e.g. managers, engineers, nurses, teachers. Every year the organisation hires around 6,000 new employees, and on an annual basis the organisation's recruitment system handles 240,000 applications, and on a daily basis, about 600 applications.

Regardless, the organisation is struggling to attract and retain certain types of employee e.g. engineers, preschool teachers and nurses. Accordingly, for several years the organisation has used an employer branding strategy in order to build a strong brand in the labour market, and to be the employer of choice. Since the organisation has several years of experience within the field the organisation provides a relevant context for this study to explore the practice of employer branding within the public sector.

4.4 Data Collection

A literature review within the research field of employer branding was collected from books, Internet and scientific articles. Most of the literature was concerned with the private sector and provided a traditional diffusionist perspective. Previous research does not portray how employer branding is done in practice within the public sector. To add this missing piece to the picture, this study used a translation perspective in order to show the complexity of the construction of the strategy.

Since a municipality in a big city in Sweden was perceived as a suitable case for this study, the author of this report scheduled a meeting to discuss the topic with key contact people within the organisation. They name-dropped some employees involved in the employer branding strategy, who were selected as the first interview persons. The selection was done through snowball sampling, which means that the first respondents, in their turn, mentioned other involved actors, who also were chosen as respondents. The total number of respondents was 16.

Title/Profession	Number of people
Employer branding project leader	2
Recruitment specialist	1
Strategic HR-specialist team	1
Specialist in the area of competence and career	1
Manager within a health care unit	1
Nurses	10
Total	16

The above chart shows the profession and number of respondents who participated in this study. Furthermore, the selected quotes in the empirical material were referred to as Interviews 1-16, instead of showing the employees titles, in order to keep the respondent's answers anonymous. Interviews 1-6 were conducted with employees within human resources, communication, marketing and management, all of whom were identified as important actors in strategy making. Those employees provided the story about how employer branding has emerged and has been organised within the organisation. In addition, the actors who were involved in strategy making identified a group of nurses as an important group in the construction of the organisation's employer brand, therefore those employees were also chosen as respondents. Interviews 7-16 were conducted with ten nurses, employed between fall 2014 and spring 2015, because this group was recently employed and considered to still have a fresh memory of their association of the organisation before their employment, and could explain their experiences from the first period of their employment. Four out of the ten were men, and six were women. Their age varied between 24-55 years old. The respondents were employed within different units. Two respondents worked within elderly care, seven respondents worked within health care in patient's homes and one person worked with advanced health care. These respondents provided a contemporary image of the organisation's employer brand.

First an information mail (see appendix1) was sent to the respondents. The mail generated a low response rate, and therefore the author of this report tried to reach respondents through a phone call, which turned out to be much more effective. Furthermore, all participants in this study were informed about the aims of the study and the whole process. They were informed that their participation was voluntarily, anonymous, and that the collected material was confidential and

only used for research purposes. Likewise, Bryman (2008) states that voluntariness, integrity, confidentiality, and anonymity, are important ethical aspects to consider during research.

4.5 Interviews

Primary data was collected through in-depth interviews. The interview questions were formulated in an open way, which, according to Hakim (2000), gives rich and detailed answers. An interview guide for the group of nurses was formulated (see appendix 2), and the aim of the interviews was to look into how the nurses perceived the contemporary image of the organisation's employer brand. The interview guide had two main themes; 1) their perception of the organisational image before their employment, and, 2) their perception of the organisational image after their employment. Furthermore, when interviewing the respondents involved in the organising of the employer branding strategy, the author of this report asked questions such as; Can you tell me about the background of the organisation's employer branding strategy? Can you tell me about the connection between your job and the employer branding strategy? How is the employer branding done in the organisation? Are there any challenges regarding the employer branding strategy? The interviews were mainly based on what the respondent thought was important, and the author of this report used follow-up questions when interesting aspects were brought up by the respondents. The interview questions followed a common structure and that made it possible to compare the responses and, since the data was recorded it was possible to transcribe the exact wording given by the respondents and in such way get trustworthy results. The interviews lasted between 35-75 minutes and the researcher was writing field notes. Most of the interviews were face-to-face meetings at the respondent's workplace, one interview was done at the university and some interviews were carried out by phone. In addition, written organisational documents about the employer branding project, a competence based strategy for the group of nurses, career and competence development for nurses, and other personnel policies e.g. reward system, were used as supplementary sources.

4.6 Data Analysis

The first step of the analysis was to transcribe the recorded empirical data into text. The interviews and the organisational documents were in Swedish, so the first text produced was written and structured in Swedish and later translated into English. The data analysis was conducted with an abductive approach, which allowed the author of this report to go back and

forth between the theory and the empirical data when analysing the material. The empirical material was read several of times and the author of this report was looking for patterns and marked related words and sentences, which was organised in different categories. The empirical material was analysed through the lens of Translation theory. It was structured in a chronological order in order to be able to see the translation process described by Czarniawaska and Joerges (1996); the idea travels, the idea is materialised, the idea is enacted, and the contemporary employer image of the organisation was structured after following categories; well-known and visible, the power of word-of-mouth, and attributes of the employer attractiveness.

4.6 Limitations

This study was conducted during a period of five months and the time limitation made it impossible to gather in-depth information about all the employer branding activities within the organisation. If there had been more time for observations it would have provided a more nuanced picture of the practice. Furthermore, this study only includes one organisation in a particular context and a small number of participants. A case study is context dependent and might not be possible to generalise. However, a theoretical generalisation could be possible, and Hakim (2000) claims that it is possible to build theories from the results. Besides, qualitative data gives an in-depth and rich understanding of the topic (Hakim, 2000). Furthermore, the empirical material was translated from Swedish into English, so some of the original meaning might have changed. However, to avoid translation mistakes the text was carefully looked over several of times to make sure that the original meaning was not lost in translation.

4.7 Ethical Reflection

As aforementioned, ethical aspects was considered throughout the whole research process. The participants was informed about the aims of the study, the whole process, and that their participation was voluntarily, anonymous and the collected material was confidential and only used for research purpose.

5. Results

5.1 The Idea of Employer Branding Travels from the Private Sector to the Public Sector

From the empirical data, the first sign of employer branding activities in the case organisation was already apparent in the 1980s. The organisation was promoting their employer brand at work

fairs in schools in order to attract future competence. In the year 2004, one employee was hired on a part time contract to work with the municipality's employer brand, and the initiative got a lot of attention within the organisation. Together with ambassadors, this employee promoted the employer brand at work fairs. From this experience they understood the value of personal meetings when attracting potential employees.

In year 2005 a private company, who claim themselves to be experts in employer branding, contacted the previous HR-director and asked if the organisation wanted to join their annual employer branding study. Subsequently, the HR-director delegated the question to the person who was responsible for the municipality's employer branding activities. Because this person had a great interest of employer branding, and thought it was important to get on board, they accepted the invitation. The private company offers support through the whole employer branding process, for example, consultancy support, and they also conduct research on student's perception of the attractiveness of employers and their employer of choice. From the start the results showed that not many students were aware about the city as an employer, however the latest studies showed a much better result, and this year, for the first time, the organisation was among the top 20 of the most attractive employers in Sweden (according to the study results produced by the aforementioned private employer branding company). On an annual basis the results of this study are published on the company's web page and in the daily newspaper. The case organisation was the first public organisation to be represented in this study. Several municipalities have joined, one after another, and today the employer branding study includes around 35-40 municipalities. In Sweden there are around 200 companies who are included in the study. Moreover, the private organisation arranged lectures and seminars about employer branding, and the person responsible for the municipality's employer brand participated in the mentioned activities.

When the municipality created their employer branding strategy they were inspired by private organisations, because there were no role models within the public sector at that time. They hired consultant specialists within the area because they did not have the competence within the organisation. Since private organisations had an influence on the municipality's strategy, it can be interpreted that the concept of employer branding was travelling from the private into the public sector.

Moving forward, the interest for employer branding increased within the organisation and one of the employer branding project leaders arranged some informal workshops with employees in the areas of human resources and communication. In the workshops they concluded there was a need for an employer branding strategy within the organisation because of the current problem the public sector was facing; a competitive labour market, high numbers of retirements and short supply of skilled employees. Within the workshops they discussed following questions; who are we? What do we want? How does the external world perceive us? The findings were written in a report and handed over to the previous HR director, and a year later the city council made a political decision about creating an employer branding strategy within the case organisation. The aim of the strategy was to create a strong employer brand and to be perceived as an attractive employer by both current and potential employees. Furthermore, the organisation wanted to implement an employer branding strategy, in order to control people's perception of the employer brand, as applied in following quotation:

“We cannot allow the surrounding world define us, we have to be the owners of our own employer brand. The idea of having an employer branding strategy was born from this thoughts... we want you to perceive us in a certain way and it is when you perceive us in a certain way we have a definition of our employer brand, actually it is in such way we try influence, you should see what we want you to see.” (Interview 1)

5.2 The Idea is Materialised into an Employer Branding Project

After the political decision in 2011 the municipality created an employer branding project, led by two project leaders, which involved other employees from the human resources and communication function in the project. The project group discussed what they should include in their definition of employer branding and they created a definition of the concept:

“How we act and communicate with current and potential employees why we are an attractive employer”. (Employer Branding Report, 2011)

The definition explains that the organisation should act and communicate their employer brand during the whole employee's lifecycle. Through focus groups and in-depth interviews the project group developed the municipality's employer value proposition; 1) work for the common good for all citizens, 2) are part of the municipality's development, and, 3) can chose between many

interesting jobs and have career opportunities. In practice, it means that both current and potential employees should be able to recognise that the employer offering, and current employees, should be proud ambassadors for their city. One respondent claimed that it is crucial to have an accurate and realistic employer branding message, otherwise it might end up with employee's disappointment and thoughts of leaving the organisation. The below quotation shows the importance of keeping promises:

“It is a great danger to offer something we cannot deliver, if an employee are being promised something and we cannot live up to the expectations then we are digging our own grave.” (Interview 1)

To be certain that the organisation was communicating an accurate and realistic employer value proposition, they conducted interviews and focus groups with employees. The results showed that most of the employees thought that the employer branding value proposition was accurate, however, some employees working in specialist roles thought that they lacked career opportunities within the organisation, and therefore they decided to improve this part of the offering.

The employer brand project was divided into one main project and five sub project groups. In the project they identified five areas of improvement were they wanted to include their employer value proposition: 1) job advertisement templates, 2) the web page for available positions, 3) HR-processes, 4) create common introduction material, and, 5) to have short and long-term strategies for attracting specialist groups of professionals, which were identified as difficult to recruit e.g. engineers, preschool teachers and nurses.

The project group identified three major challenges: 1) high level of retirements and increased competition of skilled employees in the labour market, 2) the external image of the organisation; unknown and uninteresting work tasks, and, 3) the internal image of the organisation; satisfied but not proud ambassadors. The project group identified an image problem that they wanted to change in order to be able to secure future competence.

In the year 2011 the project was finalised and the findings was written in report. The organisation decided to base their employer branding strategy on the results of the project. However, they realised that they will face new challenges, and therefore they would continually need to develop

and improve their strategy. Within the project they identified professional roles, which were expected to carry on with the employer branding work.

5.3 The Idea of Employer Branding is Enacted by its Actors

One after another of the employees have endorsed the idea of employer branding. From the beginning the organisation had one employee who was responsible for the city's employer brand, after a while the organisation hired an additional employer branding project leader. They were responsible for the organisation's common employer branding strategy, and to target special groups of potential employees in short of supply e.g. engineers, preschool teachers, nurses. More actors were involved, HR-managers were responsible for putting employer branding on the agenda, and managers were responsible for acting and communicating the employer brand towards the employees. One of the respondents argued that *"the work of employer branding, is ongoing everywhere in the organisation at the same time"* (Interview 5), however, the basic idea was that the HR-function, together with the managers, sum up their current challenges, which later are handed over to the strategic HR-team, who compile the material from all the different units within the organisation. The result works as basis for the employer's branding strategy. One of the respondents stated that it is important to get managers involved in the strategy, because the employees perceive their manager as their employer. However, it seemed like it was difficult to get managers on board, as the following quotation shows:

"The greatest challenge with employer branding is our own organisation. It is the size and it is difficult to get 2200 managers to go in the same direction." (Interview 1)

One manager said that their unit had high level of employee turnover, recruitment problems and that something had to be done because of the lack of HR initiatives. It seemed like the manager thought that employer branding was an HR work task, and not a managerial work task. Even so, the manager had sent mail to students with information about job opportunities, and published articles in student magazines in order to promote the municipality as an attractive employer.

5.3.1 External Employer Branding

The case organisation has done many different external employer branding activities. The respondents mentioned different activities such as work fairs, a cinema commercial, and articles in student magazines. They had created billboards and other graphic material, which employees

within the organisation could use when they participated in work fairs. According to the statement below it seems like the municipality was struggling to be visible as an employer:

“The greatest challenge with employer branding is to be noticed within a crowd, because the huge competition, the key is to find activities and arenas to reach out to the crowd.” (Interview 5)

To be more visible as an employer, they had a new idea of how to promote their brand, which was a spin off from the previously mentioned cinema commercial. At the cinema they were the only actor and they got a lot of attention, more than they got on work fairs. They created a new concept, which they referred to as Road Shows, which means that they were the only actor meeting potential employees in different arenas such as primary schools, colleges and universities. Ambassadors for the organisation promote the employer brand at the aforementioned Road Shows.

5.3.2 Internal Employer Branding – Targeting the Group of Nurses

The organisation had created generic internal employer branding activities and arranged specific activities in order to target the groups of employees who were difficult to attract and retain. Highlighted groups were engineers, preschool teachers and nurses. The group of nurses were one of the important groups considered when investigating the employer branding strategy. Therefore, this study focuses on a group of nurses, when looking into the organising of specific employer branding activities targeting this group, and see how they perceive and construct the contemporary employer brand. One of the specific activities was a special introduction program for non-experienced nurses, in order to attract this group and secure future needs of competence.

“Introduction should be used to secure competence and to be an attractive employer.”
(Interview 6)

As the above quotation implies, the introduction of new employees was important in order to both secure competence and to attract potential employees. In the year 2012, the organisation was short of supply of skilled nurses. This year the organisation crossed two lines; more nurses left the organisation than entered the organisation. Many nurses retired, and less graduated from university. An initiative to solve this issue was to use the competence of experienced nurses, and at the same time, invest in non-experienced nurses to supply the organisation with skilled

employees. They created an introduction program that offered non-experienced nurses support from experienced nurses during a period of eight months.

Another initiative to attract and retain nurses was to offer career and competence based development. The city encouraged internal mobility, which is the ability to move between jobs within the organisation. The organisation lacked nurses with specialist competence, for example within the area of elderly care. A mentioned reason was low interest in applying for the speciality education at the university. To solve the problem, the organisation hired licenced nurses and encouraged them to study 50% of their working time in order to secure competence for future needs. Another initiative was a career path for nurses. The career path was directly connected to education, experience and, indirectly, to financial rewards. The career path for nurses had three steps: 1) First step; entry position that required a nurses licence, 2) Second step; required a nurses licence and in-depth knowledge and experience in one or more specialist areas, and, 3) Third step; an expert role which required the qualities of the two first steps plus an expert assignment within one specialist area. The career model aimed to serve managers and employees as a supporting and motivating tool.

5.4 The Contemporary Image of the Municipality's Employer Brand

As mentioned, the group of nurses were identified as important actors in the construction of the organisation's employer brand. Therefore, this group was investigated in greater detail as to how they perceived the contemporary image of the organisation.

5.4.1 Well-Known and Visible

Most of the interviewed nurses were familiar with the organisation as an employer before they applied for their current position. Some had experience from earlier employment whilst others had had previous work placements within the organisation. The work placement was described as a positive experience, which showed them what the work was about, and how it was done. Furthermore some respondents argued that the municipality was visible as an employer. They had seen several external employer branding activities around town. The perceived message was that the organisation values their employees, have a lot of job offerings and that the organisation works for the common good of the citizens, as applied in following quotation:

“I have seen advertising about the municipality as employer, both in town and at the cinema... they are visible, they really advertise their employer brand, they attract with many jobs opportunities... the advertisement are nice, it shows that the employees are of importance and that the employee network aims to serve the common good for the citizens, that is the main message.” (Interview 9)

During the interviews the respondents mainly talked about general external employer branding activities, which aims to target all potential employees. It seems like not much had been done when it came to specific external activities, at least, not much was brought up during the interviews.

5.4.2 The Powerful Word-of-Mouth

Ambassadors within the case organisation spread a good reputation of the municipality as an employer. The respondents talked with colleagues or other people who worked within the organisation and they got a good impression of the work place, which influenced on their choice of employer. For example, one respondent claimed that people information was important in this persons perception of the organisation, as the below quotation implies:

“I heard from a colleague who works here and she gave a positive impression.”
(Interview 12)

According to the ambassadors, the case organisation offers a competitive salary, comfortable working hours, a good working environment, easy pace and flexibility (the freedom to independently plan the working day). The respondents claim that colleagues talked about different employers when they gather in training, or talk with people in their network who have knowledge about the organisation. Some respondents stated that an organisation’s reputation runs fast among colleagues especially, if it is not a good reputation. As applied in the following quotation:

“The best message is a well functioning work group. A well functioning work group is going to be spread by itself. I work here and it is good, this message will be spread to 30 people, while if the employees are not feeling good then this message will be spread to 100 people.” (Interview 13)

Moreover, one respondent, who earlier worked at a hospital, claimed that she was in contact with a special team who worked with advanced health care within people's homes. This team inspired her to apply for a job within the city "*I was inspired by their team feeling*" (Interview 8). This person wanted to work with this team because they listened to each other, and there was no prestige or hierarchical order between different professions. Moving forward, the recruitment process was fast, and the hiring manager gave a good impression of the work place, as applied in following statement:

"They made it sound like the world's best job, I was influenced by that." (Interview 14)

To sum up the above statements, the ambassador's impression of the work place had a huge impact on the nurse's choice of employer. The ambassadors were often someone the recruits knew from before. They trusted their words and therefore applied for a position at the organisation.

However, the municipality has an external image problem, because many external nurses associate health care work within municipalities as boring, slow and monotonous in comparison to hospitals. They stated that hospitals were seen as more attractive because they were associated with action, specialist knowledge and a higher level of status.

"It is more prestige to work within hospitals than to work within the municipality, it is not the same status." (Interview 8)

The above statement shows that employment in a municipality does not have the same status as employment in hospitals. However, the respondent's claimed that the public image was not true because they thought that the health care work within municipalities could be very advanced and the job variety that the organisation offers was perceived as attractive.

Even so, some respondents thought that the best way to prepare for health care work within municipalities was to start a career in a hospital. They claimed that it was difficult for non-experienced nurses to manage the independent and responsible work at municipalities. However, other respondents stated that it was possible to start a career within the municipality right after graduation, if support from experienced colleagues was offered. One of the respondents was involved in the special introduction program for non-experienced nurses. This person was

satisfied with the program and thought that the health care work within the municipality was not as lonely and independent as some people seemed to believe. The respondent claimed it was an old perception about health care work at the municipality, which below quotation implies:

“A talk based on old perception that you cannot work within the municipality as a graduate.” (Interview 10)

5.4.3 Attributes of the Employer Attractiveness

Most of the respondents made an active choice of employer, while a few mentioned that it was a coincidence that they had searched for a job within the municipality. The main reasons why the respondents searched for a job within the organisation was because they offered: a competitive salary, comfortable working hours, and because health care in the municipality was considered as patient focused (interpreted as working for the common good). Other mentioned factors were easy pace, flexibility, job security, diversity, equality, and good career and competence development.

Competitive salary and opportunity for salary development: almost all respondents stated that a competitive salary was an important factor in their choice of employer. The city was offering both a competitive salary and an opportunity to develop the salary over time, which was not the case in many other work places. Even if the respondents were satisfied with the salary, they believed that three years of university study and a high level of responsibility could have generated an even better salary. In addition, some of the respondents pointed out that a good salary development was an important factor when considering whether to stay within the organisation, as the three following quotations shows:

“The salary is on a higher level than other work places and there is a good opportunity to develop the salary.” (Interview 11)

“Salary development is important so you do not get the feeling of standing still.” (Interview 13)

“A good salary development is the only thing which shows how much the organisation appreciate the employee, if the salary is high the more you can tolerate stressful situations, because it is still worth it.” (Interview 9)

Comfortable working hours: most of the respondents thought that the working hours were attractive. They said that the working hours at the city had a better fit with their private life than the working hours they had in their previous job. They argued that they had a better work-life balance since they started to work in the municipality. The working hours were regular because they mainly worked during office hours (daytime) and just had a few evening and weekend hours; it is more common for nurses to work more evenings and weekends at hospitals. The below quotation describes that the case organisation offers comfortable working hours:

“Better working hours you work mainly day time and that is different from hospitals.”
(Interview 8)

Patient focus: the health care work within the city was seen as being attractive because it was patient focused, which meant that their work was based on patient’s needs. This statement is in line with the case organisation’s employer value proposition; to work for the common good. The respondents claimed that the health care work was holistic because they worked with the whole patient in their own home. The nurses had the ability to work proactively, and the ability to create a long lasting relationship with the patients, as the three following quotations implies:

“We work with the whole human being... much more humane work than on hospitals were the patient often are just a bed number and not a person, that’s the difference when working with health care in people’s homes.” (Interview 8)

“You get to know the patient... our elderly do not have it so good. I want to be the one who makes it easier for them and I have that opportunity here.” (Interview 15)

“When working within health care in peoples home you got to manage everything, it is a broad work and we have to manage a lot. You do not get specific knowledge but you get to know a lot in many different areas.” (Interview 12)

Flexible work: most respondents argued that their work was flexible because they had the freedom to independently plan their day. Another factor was that the work was mobile and they had the opportunity to be outside, whilst they were moving between patient’s homes. The below quotation shows the that the respondent valued the flexible working conditions the case organisation offered:

“Freedom with responsibility, you have the opportunity to plan your own day. You plan your own time and when you are going to visit the patients.” (Interview 12)

Calm work pace: several respondents claimed that the working pace was much calmer than at other work places. Even so, some of the respondents did not agree. They claimed that they were facing a lot of stress and they mentioned colleagues who had burnt out because of the stressful work situation. A short supply of personnel, and heavy workload, was the reason for the stressful situation. One respondent stated that the stressful situation could sometimes make it difficult to live up to the values of the organisation; to serve the common good.

Job security: some respondents explained that the municipality offered job security, and they felt that they had a job guarantee, even if many respondents had short-term contracts. As applied in following quotation:

“The municipality is a large employer, it is stable and there is no risk for bankruptcy, it gives security... a job is guaranteed”. (Interview 9)

Diversity and equality: in the eyes of some of the younger respondents the values of diversity and equality in an organisation was perceived as attractive, as shown in below quotation:

“The municipality communicates a clear message that they values equality, no matter where you come from, ethnicity, socio-economic background or sexuality, whatever it is, they make everybody fell important, and they value everybody equally. Our manager is really good on that and I think it is important.” (Interview 9)

Career and competence development: some respondents thought that the municipality was an attractive employer because they offered career and competence development. The organisation especially encouraged specialist education within elderly care, and it was possible to attend training in order to be a supervisor for new employees or students who are on work placements. Several of the younger respondents considered career and competence development important in their intention to stay within the organisation, as applied in following two quotations:

“It has much to do with opportunities of career and development, work is more fun if you are able to take some steps forward.” (Interview 12)

“I want development, so I become better and can offer good health care”. (Interview 15)

In contrast, some of the older respondents argued that career development was not important for them, whilst others claimed that they had not thought about their career because they had been occupied in their new work situation. In addition, one of the respondents stated that her manager had talked about development within the role of nurses. This person described the mentioned career path for nurses.

Most of the respondents said that their expectations matched their experience of the work place. Even so, some respondents experienced a more stressful situation than they had expected. Others thought that the organisation lacked efficient and effective administrative IT-systems. They claimed that they had to learn many different systems and it was ineffective to have so many systems. They explained that they had to put too much effort to manage the systems and they claimed it took valuable time away from the patients. For the employees to be able to work for the common good, the administrative IT-systems have to be improved.

6. Discussion/Analysis

6.1 The Practice of Employer Branding

This study has so far shown that, in line with Czarniawaska and Joerges (1996), the idea of employer branding has travelled from the private sector into the public sector. First, a few involved actors gave meaning to the concept, and then it was materialised into objects within the employer branding project. Increasingly more employees enacted and legitimated the employer brand.

6.1.1 The Organising of Employer Branding

The municipality initiated an employer branding strategy because they were facing several challenges; a competitive labour market, high level of retirements, short supply of skilled employees and image problems. According to Czarniawaska and Joerges (1996), an idea gets attention because of other organisations are using the idea and, because it might solve organisational problems. Another mentioned reason for implementing the employer branding strategy was to control the internal and external view of the organisation. This statement goes in line with the traditional diffusionist perspective, which has an underlying assumption that

management ideas are possible to control, because the actors are perceived as passive receivers of an idea and therefore able to be controlled. This study have shown that the employer brand is in the hand of the actors and therefore not able to be fully controlled. Organisations should allow change and see employer branding as an on going process, which just succeed if it is supported and adjusted into the local context.

The organisation adapted a global and universal idea of employer branding from the private sector and adjusted the idea to the local context. The highest decision organ in the organisation made a political decision to start to work with the marketing concept of employer branding. The aim of the employer branding strategy was to be perceived as an attractive employer by both current and potential employees, and to strengthen the employer brand in the labour market. In the project they defined the concept of employer branding, the organisation's employer value proposition, and responsible actors, then followed with ideas of how to conduct both the external and internal employer branding activities. The project members arranged an action plan following the best practice described by Backhaus and Tikoo (2004). They created their employer value proposition and the organisation wanted to be associated with following values: work for the common good for the citizens, development of the city, and with opportunities for career and competence development. A group of nurses within the organisation showed that their association with the employer was in line with the first and the third mentioned values. They thought that 'work for the common good', which goes in line with Lavigna and Hays (2004) statement, is one of the motives of choosing a position within a public organisation. They also thought career and competence development was important in their choice of employer, and even pointed out career and competence development to be an important factor in their intention to stay within the organisation. However, the second value, about the employee's opportunity to develop the city, was not mentioned. This value might have a better match with other groups of employees, or this message has not reached the respondents in this study. Furthermore, the project was finalised in the year 2011, and the result aimed to work as a base for future work. However, they understood that they might face new challenges in the future, and that the employer branding strategy was an on-going process that needed constant development and improvement.

6.1.2 Involved Actors

The literature claims that employees within human resources, marketing, and communication should cooperate in an employer branding strategy (Barrow & Mosely, 2005; Edwards, 2010; Christiaans, 2013). The main actors who organised the strategy in the organisation were from mentioned support functions. Two employer branding project leaders were responsible for the common employer branding activities and for targeting specific groups of employees. An HR-strategic team provided the employer branding project leaders with information about which type of profession they should focus their specific activities on. A specialist in career and competence development was working with internal employer branding activities, such as planning career and competence development. Furthermore, HR-managers were responsible for putting employer branding on the agenda, and encouraging managers to include the concept in their work. Most of the respondents were positive towards the employer branding strategy, and as more and more employees became involved, it legitimised the strategy within the organisation. However, one respondent stated that it was challenging to get managers on board. Since they were identified as key actors in the construction of the employer brand, it is important that they understand their role in the strategy. The employees perceive the managers as the employer, and therefore their behaviour and actions are of importance when attracting and retaining employees. For the idea to be successful it needs to be supported by relevant actors within the organisation. Latour (1986) explains that an idea is black boxed, when it is stable, supported, and not questioned within the organisation, and if the idea is not supported then it can easily demolish and start its travel out from the organisation again. Czarniawaska and Joerges (1996) describe the process of translation as a never-ending story, and Latour (1986) argues that the whole point with the process is that the results are different from the initial idea. Organisations should allow change, and the actors should be seen as active receivers of a management idea, who transform it throughout the journey within the organisation. The strategy has to be transformed by involved employees otherwise it might not survive in the organisation.

6.1.3 External Image

The employer branding project identified following challenges; a high level of retirements, and increased competition of skilled employees in the labour market. Christiaans (2013) argues that these challenges have increased the interest of developing an employer brand within organisations. The organisation is still facing the aforementioned problems, which strengthens the

need of an employer branding strategy. Another challenge identified in the employer branding project was an external image problem, which SKL (2006) confirms, when they claim that public organisations are perceived as non-attractive employers. The organisation was unknown as an employer and the work tasks were perceived as uninteresting. Some of the interviewed nurses stated that the organisation was still struggling with the external image. They said that many nurses associate the work within municipality as boring, slow, and monotonous in comparison with hospitals, which are, instead, associated with action, speciality knowledge and a higher status. The comparison with hospitals was a constant theme during the interviews, and therefore hospitals can be interpreted as being the main competitor when attracting nurses in the labour market.

Furthermore, the contemporary image of the organisation's employer brand showed that the organisation was well known as an employer, because its ambassadors had promoted the employer brand, and some of the respondents had had a previous work placement or earlier employment within the organisation. Because work placements seemed to attract potential employees the organisation should continue to offer this opportunity to students. It is a win-win situation, the students get valuable experience whilst the organisation has the chance to create a relationship and evaluate future competence. Moving forward, several respondents claimed that the organisation was visible as an employer, because they had seen the organisation's commercial at the cinema, and on billboards in the town. The perceived main message was that the city offers a lot of jobs, that the employees are valued, and that they work for the common good. It seems like the general employer branding activities were noticed by the crowd, however, the organisation lacks the initiatives for specific external activities for the group of nurses. At least, not much has been brought up during the interviews. Therefore, the organisation should develop their specific marketing activities towards the group of nurses. The organisation could use the attributes of the employer attractiveness mentioned by nurses, especially the main attributes; *competitive salary*, *comfortable working hours* and the holistic *patient focus* (work for the common good), when attracting this specific group of employees, e.g. use in job advertisements, or in other communication with potential employees. In addition, the more employer branding activities or campaigns that the organisation performs, the more people talk about the employer brand and legitimate it, and in such way it is being spread and supported within the organisation.

6.1.4 Internal Image

The employer branding project group also identified an internal image problem, because the employees were satisfied, but not proud ambassadors. Even on this point it seemed like the strategy might have influenced the employees' perception of the work place. The contemporary image of the employer brand showed that the employees were mostly satisfied with their work situation. Most of the respondents had applied for a position within the city because ambassadors within the city had promoted the city as a good place to work. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) state that the internal perception of the organisation influences the external perception of the organisation's attractiveness. Satisfied and proud employees can act as ambassadors for the organisation, and inspire potential employees to seek a job within the organisation (Whelan et al., 2010). The empirical data showed that proud ambassadors had an important role of attracting potential employees. They spread a good reputation, which Edwards (2010) claims is essential for organisations to be the employer of choice. Therefore, the organisation should have an inside out perspective in order to be able to continue the improvement of the organisational reputation (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Devendorf and Highhouse (2008) argue that people who identify themselves with employees within the organisation tend to seek a job in that work place. The employees trusted the ambassador's representation of the organisation, and this tended to be one of the most important factors in their choice of employer.

Some specific internal activities for the group of nurses was conducted in order to attract and retain this group of employees. As mentioned before, many nurses believe that it is not possible to work within the municipality with no work experience. Several respondents said that non-experienced nurses needed extra support from experienced nurses in order to handle the autonomy and responsibility in their work. Therefore, the organisation created an introduction program made especially for this group. In the introduction program they used current nurses' competence and invested in the new ones. The initiative might attract more graduate nurses directly from university, and it seems to be a first step to change the myth that 'it is not possible for non-experienced nurses to work within the municipality'. Another initiative to attract and retain the group of nurses was to offer career and competence development, and it was perceived as important when the employees made their choice of employer. Some respondents added that career and competence development was crucial if they were going to stay within the

organisation. Even so, only one respondent mentioned the three-step career path for the group of nurses. This person's manager had talked about it during a work place meeting, but they had not started to work with the model. The respondents were newly employed, and that could explain why they did not have more knowledge about the career model. However, it seemed to be a good initiative to encourage career development in order to retain current employees.

6.1.5 Keep Promises

According to Christiaans (2013), employees perceive the job offering as a psychological contract, which means that they believe that an exchange with their working hours will gain the mentioned attractive attributes. The employees carry the expectation into the firm, and if the organisation is not delivering these promises, then it might lead to employees' disappointment, and thoughts of leaving the organisation (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). The respondents main expectations was to get a competitive salary, comfortable working hours and to have a work that is patient focused. The respondents thought that most of their expectations were matched in the real work situation. Even so, some respondents thought they had a stressful work environment, and claimed that there is a need for more nurses in some units who can share the heavy workload. One consequence of this need not being met might lead to a negative spiral; problems to recruit nurses leads to a heavy work load for current nurses, which in turn might lead to high level of employee turnover, and then the organisation will have an even more urgent need of nurses. Therefore, the organisation needs to solve the stressful situation in some health care units in order to retain this group of employees. Another mentioned challenge about the work situation was that they had too much administrative work tasks, and they claimed that these took valuable time away from the patients. Therefore, the organisation should look over the administrative IT-tools, and find a more efficient and effective way of solving the administrative work tasks, in order to make a better work situation for nurses, and allow them to spend more time with their patients.

6.2 Private Sector vs. Public Sector

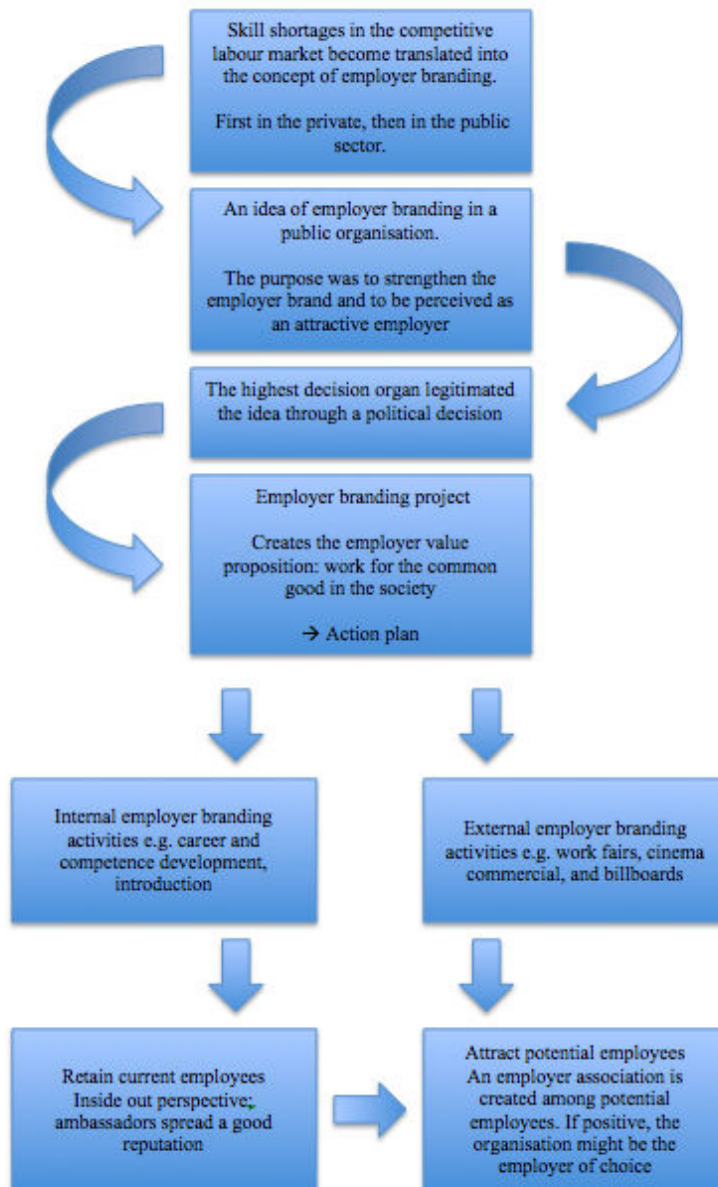
In the beginning, the case organisation was inspired by private organisations way of organising employer branding but later in the process it became adjusted to the local context. Private organisations and consultancy firms influenced the case organisations, since there were no role models within the public sector at that time. One can argue that the public organisation imitated the practice of employer branding in the private sector, which, according to Gromark and Melin

(2013), can improve management principles in the public sector. The case organisation followed Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) example of creating the strategy in a three-step process: first, development of an employer value proposition, second, create an internal employer branding activities, and, third, development of external employer branding activities. Even if the way of organising was similar, this study showed that the decision-making process and the employer value proposition were unique for the public organisation. The main employer value proposition was that the organisation wanted to be associated with the value of serving the common good in society. Many people chose the public sector, as an employer because they want to respond on public needs, Whelan et al. (2010) state that it is one of the most important factors in employees choice of employer. It seems like several of the interviewed nurses were more focused on their profession and about their work tasks than the actual workplace. Another difference was the decision making process, since the highest decision organ needed to legitimate the employer branding strategy through a political decision. Public organisations are driven by political decision since the organisation is democratic and governed by the state. In addition, some people do not think that the public sector should spend public money on marketing activities (Whelan et. al., 2010). Some people rejects the idea of employer branding, while others especially the employees who were organising the strategy thought the it was important in order to secure future competence and to be able to build a strong employer brand on the market. Organisations in the competitive labour market need to promote their brand in order to be visible and to be perceived as attractive, otherwise they will face problems to attract and retain skilled personnel, which in turn can lead to difficulties to serve the common good to the citizens of society.

6.3 The Translation Process of Employer Branding: a critical perspective of previous research

As stated in the theory, the process of employer branding is an on-going attempt at constructing and maintaining an actor network (Latour, 1986). When constructing an actor network, the key to success is, above all, the ability to enrol other actors and keep them aligned. An employer branding strategy involves a lot of recourses and involved actors transform it on the way throughout the organisation. This study shows that the practice of employer branding is context dependent and is a complex, socially constructed, process, where involved actors' understandings of, and interest in, the concept transform the idea of employer branding. The below model illustrates how the practice of employer branding have emerged within a public organisation.

6.3.1 Figure: The Practice of Employer Branding in the Public Sector



The above model shows that the idea of employer branding has travelled from the private sector into the public sector, because of the belief that the idea might solve organisational problems. The public organisation adapted employer branding and the highest decisions organ legitimated the idea. Then a project group created a definition of the term employer branding and created the employer value proposition, which was to work for the common good. Thereafter an action plan was created with both internal and external activities. The internal activities aimed to retain current employees and to create proud ambassadors within the organisations. The ambassadors word-of-mouth were powerful as a tool when attracting potential employees. Therefore, it is important to create a satisfied work force that promotes the employer brand. The external activities aimed to make the organisation visible and well known as an employer and especially attract potential employees. Furthermore, the arrows in the model symbolise the actors who added meaning to the concept. The construction of employer branding is in the hand of the actors; if more and more actors support and legitimate the idea it becomes successful, or in other words it is being black boxed. However, if the idea of employer branding is not supported it can anytime travel out from the organisation again.

The model shows that the process is not as simple, as the traditional diffusionist perspective claims it to be. Previous research has taken much for granted and claims that if an organisation implements employer branding in a certain way, then it will succeed (e.g. Backhause & Tikoo, 2004; Barrow and Mosely, 2005). The translation perspective is critical towards this traditional diffusionist perspective because it believes that the actors are passive receivers of an idea that they will pass on as an original idea. This study illustrates that it is not the case; the employer branding strategy cannot be fully controlled because people construct their own idea of what it means for them. This study shows it is a complex process that requires much effort to make the strategy successful.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Concluding Remarks

This study illustrates how an employer branding strategy has emerged in practice within a Swedish public organisation. The provided translation perspective extends previous research because it adds complexity into the picture and shows how the idea moves and changes

depending on the actor network. The unique aspect of the employer brand in the public sector was that it was associated with meaningful work tasks and about serving the common good to the citizens of society.

7.2 Contribution of Study

This study contributes to previous research of employer branding in several ways.

Firstly, this study contributes to earlier research by explaining how employer branding is done in practice and how it has emerged within a Swedish public organisation. Previous research has explained the input and output of an employer branding strategy, and this study adds the missing piece in-between. One can say that this study has opened up the black box and has explained how the real practice occurs. The results show that the practice of employer branding is an ongoing attempt at constructing and upholding an actor network. When constructing an actor network, the key to success is, above all, the ability to involve other actors and keep them aligned. It is a complex construction process because it depends on supportive actors who create their own meaning of the concept and legitimise it for others. If employees have a positive experience of working in the organisation, then they can be one of the most relevant allies when constructing an employer branding actor network. However, if they have had a negative experience of working in the organisation, then they can also be one of the strongest enemies. In addition, when an organisation adapts a universal management idea, it has to be understood and adjusted within the local context in order to be successfully implemented.

Secondly, this study contributes to earlier research by illustrating the practice of employer branding in the context of the public sector. The result shows that public organisations are imitating private organisation's way of organising an employer branding strategy. Even so, the decision process and the employer value proposition differ; public organisations are politically driven and therefore the highest decision organ needs to legitimise the strategy. The public sector wants to be associated with the values of serving the common good for the citizens, and the empirical material showed that it was one of the motives for choosing the public sector as an employer.

Thirdly, this case study can work as an example for organisations that intend to implement an employer branding strategy. Organisations wishing to follow the results of this study should allow for change, and see the construction of the employer brand as an on-going process, which will succeed if supported and adjusted to the local context. The process cannot be controlled because the construction process is in the hand of the actors. The actors are active receivers, who need to have their own interest and understanding of the management idea. If they support the idea then they legitimise and enrol other actors into the process. Furthermore, organisations should arrange employer branding activities in line with their value proposition, make sure it is an accurate message, and that promises are being held. The more activities the organisation use, the more people talk about the employer brand and legitimise it; and in such way it is being spread and supported within the organisation. The literature claims that a good reputation is essential for organisations to be the employer of choice. This study shows that ambassadors spread a good reputation, and that their word-of-mouth was a powerful tool when attracting potential employees. In order to create satisfied ambassadors, it looks like building the employer brand from the inside out is the way to go.

7.3 Recommendations to the Case Organisation

The result shows that the employer branding strategy within the case organisation was accepted and had been spread and stabilized within the organisation. The respondents were positive about the employer branding strategy and the previous image problems have been improved, however still some challenges remain. Since the results shows that human resources, communication, marketing professionals and managers were responsible for the employer branding strategy. The following recommendations are addressed to these groups of professionals within the case organisation.

Firstly, an identified challenge was to involve all managers within the employer branding strategy. Since this group was identified as one of the key players it is important that they are aware of their role as an attractive employer, in order to promote the municipality's employer brand and to attract and retain employees. Therefore, it is important that managers get information about their role in the employer branding strategy and in such way get involved.

Secondly, satisfied ambassadors word-of-mouth have played an important role in the employee's choice of employer. Therefore it is important to have an inside out perspective of employer branding, in order to create satisfied employees who act as ambassadors for the organisation. The ambassadors have spread a good reputation and the general external activities have made the municipality visible and well known as an employer. However, it seems like the organisation lacks specific external activities in order to target the prioritised group of nurses. At least not much was brought up during the interviews. The more activities, the more people will talk about the employer brand; in such way it is being spread and supported within the organisation. Therefore, it could be a good initiative to create more specific external activities that are targeting the group of nurses. One suggestion could be to include the main attributes of the employer attractiveness provided in this report: competitive salary, comfortable working hours and the patient focus (interpreted as working for the common good). Other mentioned factors were easy pace, flexibility, job security, diversity, equality, and good career and competence development. In addition, the employees expected these attributes to be fulfilled in their employment; therefore it is important to have a mutual understanding of the expectations and to deliver promises being made in order to create satisfied employees.

Thirdly, most of the interviewed nurses were satisfied with their work situation and claimed that they had meaningful work tasks. Even so, the administrative IT-systems were perceived as time consuming and needed to be more efficient. A suggestion is to evaluate the IT-systems in order to look into possibilities to create a more efficient IT-solution, so the nurses have the ability to spend more time with their patients.

Fourthly, the organisational activities regarding career and competence development and introduction for non-experienced nurses seem to be good initiatives. Several of the interviewed nurses thought career and competence development were important attributes in their choice of employer. Therefore, it is important that the nurses get information about their career opportunities and the competence and career model seem to be a good tool to use in order to motivate the employees. Furthermore, the introduction for non-experienced nurses was appreciated among the respondents and especially the respondent who participated in the program. The author of this report suggest that the organisation continues to offer this

introduction program towards non-experienced nurses, in order to attract this group in an early stage of their career and to secure future competence.

7.4 Future Research

Research about employer branding within the public sector is a relatively unexplored area and it opens up a whole landscape of unanswered questions. One suggested study could be to follow the translation process for a longer period of time and gather additional data from observations, for example, explore employer branding activities, or meetings, to get a deeper understanding of the practice. Another suggested study is to compare two cases, one from the public sector and one from the private sector, in order to get a more detailed picture and understanding of the similarities and differences between the sectors. In addition, a third suggested study is to look into different categories of professional's perspective of employer branding. The group of nurses in this study was mainly talking about working conditions and work tasks and not much was mentioned about the employer. Different groups of professions might have different view of an employer brand and this knowledge would extend previous research and be valuable for organisations employer branding strategy.

8. References

- Ambler, T. & Barrow, B. (1996). The Employer Brand. *Panágra working paper*. No. 96-902.
- Backhaus, K. Tikoo, S. (2004). Conceptualizing and researching employer branding. *Career Development International*. Vol. 9(5): 501-517.
- Barrow, S. & Mosley, R. (2005). *The Employer Brand- Bringing the Best of Brand Management to People at Work*. Chichester. England: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.
- Bryman, A. (2008). *Samhällsvetenskapliga metoder*. Malmö: Liber AB
- Callon, M. (1986). Some elements of a sociology of translation: Domestication of the scallops and the fishermen of St. Brieuc Bay. In Law, J. (ed.). *Power and Action Belief, a new sociology of knowledge?* London: Routledge. 196-223.
- Chhabra, L. N. & Sharma, S. (2014). Employer branding: strategy for improving employer attractiveness. *International Journal of Organizational Analysis*. Vol. 22(1): 48-60.
- Christiaans, L. (2013). *International Employer Brand Management: A Multilevel Analysis and Segmentation of Students' Preferences*. Weisbaden: Springer Gabler.
- Czarniawska, B. Joerges, B. (1996). Travel of ideas. In *translating organizational change*. Czarniawska, B. Sevon, G. De Gruyter: Berlin. 13-48.
- Devendorf, S. A. & Highhouse, S. (2008). Applicant-employee similarity and attraction to an employer. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*. Vol.81 (4): 607-617.
- Edwards, M.R. (2010). An integrative review of employer branding and OB theory. *Personnel Review*. Vol. 39(1): 5-23.
- Gromark, J. & Melin, F. (2013). From market orientation to brand orientation in the public sector. *Journal of Marketing Management*. Vol.29 (9-10): 1099-1123.
- Hakim, C. (2000). *Research Design - Successful designs for social and economic research*. London: Routledge.

Kucherov, D. & Zavyalova, E. (2012). HRD practices and talent management in the companies with the employer brand. *European Journal of Training and Development*. Vol. 36 (1): 86 – 104.

Kvale, S. & Brinkman, S. (2009). *Den kvalitativa forskningsintervjun*. Lund: Studentlitteratur AB.

Latour, B. (1986). The powers of association. In J. Law (ed.). *Power, Action and Belief*. London: Routledge. 264-280.

Lavigna, R. & Hays, S. (2004). Recruitment and selection of public workers: An international compendium of modern trends and practices. *Public Personnel Management*. Vol. 33(3): 237-250.

Moroko, L. & Uncles, M. D. (2009). Characteristics of successful employer brands. *Journal of Brand Management*. Vol. 16(3): 160-175.

Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting. (2015a). *Sveriges viktigaste jobb finns i välfärden: Hur möter vi rekryterings utmaningen?* Retrieved August 5, 2015 from: http://sverigesviktigastejobb.se/download/18.5b06742214b3091389c59d8c/1423733983369/150130_SVJ+finns+i+v%C3%A4lf%C3%A4rden_webb.pdf

Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting. (2015b). *Om Sveriges viktigaste jobb*. Retrieved October 18, 2015 from: <http://www.sverigesviktigastejobb.se/omsverigesviktigastejobb.67.html>

Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting. (2015c). *Så stys kommunerna*. Retrieved October 20, 2015 from: <http://skl.se/tjanster/kommunerlandsting/faktakommunerochlandsting.432.html>

Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting. (2006). *Den lokala offentligheten- En studie av makt, medier och mötesplatser i 14 kommuner*. Retrieved June 2, 2015 from: <http://webbutik.skl.se/bilder/artiklar/pdf/7164-201-1.pdf>

Whelan, S. Davies, G. Walsh, M. & Bourke R. (2010). Public sector corporate branding and customer orientation. *Journal of Business Research*. Vol.63 (11): 1164-1171.

9. Appendix

Appendix 1- Information mail

Dear participant,

My name is Linda Amby and I am currently enrolled in the master's program in strategic human resource management and labour relations at university of Gothenburg. I will conduct my master thesis in cooperation with the organisation were you are employed. The purpose of the study is to explore how the organisation works with employer branding and how recently employed nurses have made their choice of employer. The results should work as base for further development of the organisation's employer brand

The reason I sent this mail to you is because you are recently employed in the organisation and I am interested of how you perceive the attributes of the employer attractiveness when you did your choice of employer. Therefore, I wonder if you have the possibility to participate in this study? The interview is going to be conducted during the first weeks of June, wherever it is suitable for you, at your work place, at the university or through a phone call. The interview is going to last during approximately 1 hour. If you approve, the interview is going to be recorded. You will be anonymous and your responses will be handled with care and only be used for research purpose. Your participation is voluntary, important and highly appreciated!

Please, contact me if you have any questions regarding the study and to book an appointment that would be suitable for you.

Telephone: xxx

Email: xxx

Sincerely,

Linda Amby

Masters Student in Strategic Human Resources and Labour Relations

University of Gothenburg

Appendix 2 – Interview guide

1. Introduction

Introduce myself, the aim of the study and practical details about the interview

- Length of the interview (1h)
- The responses will be anonymous
- The interview will be recorded and transcribed. Ask for consent. Inform that the material will be used as support for our study and no one else will get access to it.

2. Background information

Name:

Age:

Gender:

What is your position/title?

In which unit are you located?

What did you do before your employment within the organisation?

3. Before the employment within the municipality

- What are the characteristics of an attractive employer?
- How did you perceive the municipality as an employer before your employment?
- What factors made your choice of employer?
- How did you become familiar with the municipality as an employer?
- How did you find the available position?
- How did you perceive the recruiting process?
- What expectations did you have before your employment?

4. After the employment within the municipality

- Did the employment meet your expectations?
- In short, can you describe how you perceive the municipality as employer after your employment?
- Did you receive any introduction? If yes, can you explain how you perceived the introduction?
- How do you perceive career opportunities within the organisation?
- Is career important for you?
- What differs the municipality from other work places?
- What challenges do you have in your current position?
- Under what conditions would you to continue to work within the municipality?

I do not have any further questions. Is there anything else you would like to add? Can I contact you if I have any additional questions?

Thank you!

