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FORMATION OF THE INTERNAL EMPLOYER BRAND

Case Nordea

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1   INTRODUCTION

1.1   The war for talent and the employer brand

As the working environment becomes increasingly demanding and young academics are even more highly educated than before, the competition between companies for talented personnel grows constantly. Organisations are expanding and becoming more global in their orientation, and moreover, workforce is coming to be more demanding of their employment relationships. The nature of business has changed with the result that access to intelligence and creativity has become the key route to competitive advantage for organisations. (Ind 2007, 181–182.) In the competitive labour markets the ultimate challenge for organisations is to differentiate themselves in order to successfully attract and retain talented workforce (Knox & Freeman 2006, 695). It is not only a question of attracting 'top talent' for management positions, but finding employees with the right set of qualities to successfully perform a wide variety of roles throughout the organisation (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 104).

Introduced in the late 1990s by Michaels, Handfield-Jones and Axelrod (see Brown, Duncan, Harris & Kelly 2003, 22) the war for talent was rightly identified. Labour markets were tense and companies competed for the most qualified personnel. In an increasingly knowledge-based economy, organisations with the best talent would have a natural competitive advantage. (Brown et al. 2003, 22.) According to Michaels et al. (2001, 3), there are three fundamental drivers which influence the war for talent. These drivers comprise the emergence of the technological innovations, the intensifying demand for high managerial talent, and the growing propensity for employees to switch from one employer to another. The drivers yield two profound implications; firstly, the power has shifted from the organisation to the individual; and secondly, excellent talent management has become a crucial source of competitive advantage.

Barrow and Mosley (2005, 15–17) support the war for talent when arguing that the era of technological innovation has changed what employees are required to do. With the emergence of individual skills has come the need for improved delegation and, therefore, empowerment. As a result, a greater need of trust in employees is critical. Alongside the technical skills expected there is a growing need for customer service and the presence of sufficient emotional intelligence in dealing with both internal and external customers. Moreover, employees are becoming increasingly litigious. They are more confident and better able to afford professional advice when they believe they have been treated unfairly. Consequently, the possession of more capable personnel is not the only reserve companies will have to acquire in order to be successful; they must also set high

aspirations and enact the right strategies and performance initiatives (Michaels et al. 2001, 3).

Eight years ago, Michaels et al. (2001, 1) asserted that the war for talent was far from over; instead, it was predicted to persist no less than for another two decades. Even today, this statement appears to stand. Organisations can no longer fully rely on the loyalty of their members, and therefore they must continuously focus on attracting and hiring the most talented personnel and on retaining their critical existing talent (Lawler 2005, 11–12). In recognition of this phenomenon, there has been introduced the notion of branding the organisation to potential and existing employees in order to develop the desired market place differentiation (see, for example, Barrow & Mosley 2005; Backhaus & Tikoo 2004; Ewing, Pitt, de Bussy & Berthon 2002). According to Johnson and Roberts (2006, 38), *employer branding* is perhaps the best method of redefining and improving the means by which companies recruit and communicate with an often overlooked audience – their employees.

Employer brand is driven by how companies wish to create expectations, communicate values, and influence perceptions. Employer branding is understood to mean the positioning of the company's brand within the company. (Johnson & Roberts 2006, 38.) The term employer brand, first introduced by Ambler and Barrow in 1996 (see Barrow 2008, 7; Mosley 2007, 129–130; Barrow & Mosley 2005, xvi), is used respectively to characterise the package of functional, economic, and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employing organisation. Employer brand has both an external and an internal dimension. External employer brand is generally channelled to the potential recruits whereas internal employer brand is perceived among the existing employees. Yet until recently, companies have not fully understood that the external perception, while important, is only one part of the employer brand. Therefore the concept of the employer brand has taken a considerable time to gain wide acceptance. (Barrow 2008, 7.) This research concentrates particularly on this overlooked matter, namely, the internal employer brand.

It might be assumed that employer brand thinking has become relevant for employers solely because of the war for talent and many similar studies which have highlighted the difficulty of recruiting and retaining capable people. However, the demands for effective employer brand management have always existed when expectations of the workforce have been extreme. (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 13.) In the war for talent and the competition for commitment, targeting the right audiences with the right brand messages and benefits is as critical for the employer brand as it is for the customer brand (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 63). Organisations must take into account that successful brands are built from the inside out and the work commences at the highest management level (Barrow 2008, 7).

1.2   Previous commercial studies on employer branding

Regardless of the recency of employer branding concept, a certain amount of studies have been performed on the phenomenon. For example, in a study conducted by Bayard Advertising Agency, a New York-based national recruitment company, 40 percent of work seekers ranked treatment of employees as highest in their perception of organisations. Although 20 percent of respondents were unfamiliar with the actual term employer branding, an enormous amount of 95 percent experienced it being 'important'. (Johnson & Roberts 2006, 38–39.)

In 2005, a survey of Personnel Today UK readers with responsibility for recruitment revealed very much similar results. Also in this survey, 95 percent of respondents accounted employer branding as 'important', and 42 percent of them assessed it even 'extremely important'. According to the respondents, employer branding would become even more important in the future. (Willock 2005, 4.) According to the Conference Board report on employer branding in 2001, organisations have discovered that effective employer branding leads to competitive advantage, helps employees internalise company values, and increases employee retention (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004, 501).

There are also employer brand surveys taking place in Finland. For instance, an international consulting firm Universum conducts annually employer image measurement surveys among Finnish students and young professionals (Räsänen, unrecorded conversation 8.6.2009; The Finnish Professional Survey 2008; The Universum Finnish Student Survey 2009). One of the main results of the latest Finnish Professional Survey, conducted in autumn 2008, was that young professionals strongly favour Finnish companies as employers. Financial institutions, such as Nordea and OP-Pohjola Group, were able to sustain their good rankings on the survey despite of the financial crisis. (Pulkkinen 2008, B2.) However, according to the employer branding manager of Nordea, the importance of employer branding has not yet been fully realised in Finnish organisations. There are only a few corporations taking actions in order to enhance the employer brand, and not many Finnish organisations are aware of its potential as a subject matter of exploitation. (Räsänen, unrecorded conversation 29.9.2008.)

1.3   Purpose of the study

Recently, employer branding aimed at potential and existing employees has been discussed particularly in the marketing literature (Knox & Freeman 2006, 695). However, the interesting and critical aspect of the employer brand lies in the intersection of the theoretical aspects from marketing, human resources (HR), and corporate communications. Employer branding has various objectives reliant on which viewpoint is empha-

sised; that is also why research outcomes are dependent on which perspective is chosen. (Krogh, e-mail response 15.10.2008.) According to Sartain and Schumann (2006, viii), the formation of a brand from the inside of the company requires more than one corporate function. Marketing, HR, and corporate communications each have a vested interest in brand performance and a key part in brand value creation, and employer branding provides an effective connection between those functions (see, for example, Barrow 2008, 7; Mosley 2007, 129–130; Barrow & Mosley 2005, 164; Rogers 2003, 35).

Besides the studies conducted on employer branding, also majority of the employer branding literature concentrates on the employer's perspective of the employer brand – how the company can develop effective employer brand strategies. This study is conducted from the opposite viewpoint; it approaches the concept of employer brand from the employees' viewpoint.

The purpose of the research is to describe the formation of the internal employer brand from the current employees' viewpoint; how is the employer brand formed in the minds of the current employees? Three detailed research questions are formed as follows:

1. What kind of perceived image do current employees have of their employer at the moment?

2. What kind of expectations do current employees have about their employer?

3. Which measures in the construction of the employer brand should be exploited in order to influence these perceived images and expectations?

The ultimate aim of the research is to provide information for the case company on how it can utilise the information gathered from the employees to systematically develop further its internal employer brand. The researcher wished to focus on an organisation which already has strong corporate and product brands. Therefore the empirical part of the study is conducted in cooperation with Nordea Finland, a Nordic financial institution providing products, services and solutions within banking, asset management and insurance (Nordea Ltd.: About Nordea).

The employer branding approach has been recognised in Nordea in recent years. The concept was implemented as a permanent part of Nordea's 'people strategy' in spring 2008. It was operationalised during the summer 2008, when Nordea established a person in charge of the employer brand in every Nordic country. (Räsänen, unrecorded conversation 29.9.2008.) The systematic concentration on the employer brand is fairly recent in Nordea, and therefore the company has not yet reached thoroughly to construct the employer brand internally. Consequently, through this particular research Nordea can acquire valuable information on its internal employer brand.

When conducting a research on employer branding, it is critical to focus the most suitable target group which is either external, i.e. potential recruits or internal, i.e. existing employees (Krogh, e-mail response 15.10.2008). According to Davies (2008,

667), the role of employer branding among companies' existing employees is remarkably less clear than among potential employees. Until recently, also Nordea has concentrated somewhat to potential recruits, meaning academic students graduating from universities (Räsänen, unrecorded conversation 29.9.2008), and therefore this research adopts the important viewpoint of company's existing employees when examining the employer brand.

The internal target group of this research consists of Nordea's existing employees. The target group under examination includes key employees whose retention is essential for Nordea (Räsänen, unrecorded conversation 17.11.2008). Moreover, the best means of reaching as versatile perspective from the employer brand as possible is to collect data from different target groups within the organisation. There are three target groups chosen: recently recruited young employees, experienced employees, and employees with a working background from elsewhere. By using this technique, the researcher is able to hold a comparative viewpoint which, in turn, helps to identify the diverse factors for creating a coherent employer brand for the company.

There are almost as many definitions of branding as there is literature on the subject (Ind 2007, 16). Besides the mixture of the elements of product, corporate, and employer brands (see, for example, Lievens, Van Hoye & Anseel 2007; Martin, Beaumont, Doig & Pate 2005), the terms within the concept of the employer brand are often confused (see, for example, Berthon, Ewing & Hah 2005). In addition, scholars use different terms such as 'employee branding', 'employment branding' and 'employer branding' for the phenomenon as overlapping definitions (see, for example, Lawler 2005). In this research, the focus is solely on the employer brand and the term 'employer branding' is used respectively. Furthermore, there is no detailed research on employer brand components, and therefore the researcher has exploited the existing literature of corporate and customer brand components (see, for example Pelsmacker, Geuens and Van den Bergh 2007; Vuokko 2003).

Chapter two forms the theoretical framework for the study. In that particular chapter the concept of the employer brand is closely defined; the employer brand image is examined; the dimensions of, and the expectations about the employer brand are deciphered; the construction of the employer brand is reported; and the framework of the formation of the employer brand is created. Chapter three concentrates on the methodological arguments of the particularly chosen research strategy as well as of the research methods. In addition, the evaluation of the research is undertaken. In chapter four, the results of the research are closely analysed and explained, and in chapter five, the conclusions are generally discussed. Finally, chapter six forms the concluding summary of the research.

2 EMPLOYER BRAND

2.1 Introduction to the employer brand

2.1.1 Product brand, corporate brand and employer brand

In order to understand the essence of the employer brand, a division between product brand, corporate brand and employer brand must be drawn. First and foremost, a brand is something that exists in people's minds, whether it is consumers, employees, or any other stakeholders of an organisation (Ind 2007, 24). A brand has to be authentic. Authentic brands are not only about promises made by the organisation but instead about promises delivered. (Buckingham 2008, 79.) Consumers learn about brands through past experiences, discovering which brands satisfy their needs and which do not (Kotler & Keller 2009, 237). Therefore branding should be executed in such way which clarifies the decision-making of consumers and, in the process, provides value to the company (Ind 2007, 15).

According to Ind (2007, 15), the primary function of *a product brand* is to reduce consumers' anxiety when making choices. The key to product branding is that consumers perceive differences among brands (Kotler & Keller 2009, 238; Keller 2003, 13). In product branding, it is necessary to present consumers a label for the product and to provide a meaning for the brand (Ind 2007, 15). Nevertheless, consumer brands are no longer primarily associated solely with products; rather, they can also be services. In fact, compared to product brands, service brands are even more innovative and becoming more dominant. (Olins 2000, 55.) In essence, product branding involves the creation of mental structures and the assistance to consumers with the organisation of their knowledge about products and services (Ind 2007, 15).

The branding function traditionally aimed only or at least largely at the customer, is more complex at *the corporate level*. The organisation not only has to manage its relationship with consumers but has to take into account all the other stakeholders, such as investors, media, government, suppliers, buyers and most of all, employees. (Ind 2007, 20–21; Dukerich & Carter 2000, 99; Olins 2000, 60.) Moreover, all stakeholders are not equally important in the eyes of organisational members (Dukerich & Carter 2000, 102).

A corporate brand is distinct from a product brand in that it may encompass a much wider range of associations than an individual brand, which is identified only with a

certain product or products. For example, in comparison with a product brand name, a corporate brand name is more likely to evoke associations of common products, people and relationships, values, and corporate credibility. (Keller 2003, 540; Keller 2000, 118.) However, there is a strong tendency in organisations to strengthen the corporate brand by creating associations with its product brands (Einwiller & Will 2003, 102).

The construction and the management of a strong corporate brand have additional requirements in relation to those of a product brand. For example, a corporate brand necessitates that the company maintains a visible public profile. At the same time, the company must also be willing to be subjected to more scrutiny and to be more transparent in terms of its values, activities, and programs. Thus corporate brands have to be comfortable with a high level of openness. (Keller 2003, 540.) According to Elliott and Percy (2007, 216), building a corporate brand demands that major attention will be paid to employees, bringing them along with the brand strategy so that they understand it, believe in it and also practise it in their behaviour towards customers and other stakeholders.

When examining the success of the most booming service brand companies at present, the most obvious point of similarity is the emphasis these organisations place on their personnel. Employees play a critical role in delivering a distinctive brand experience, which makes them a crucial stakeholder group to companies. (Mosley 2007, 126.) Although firms commonly focus their branding efforts towards the development of product and corporate brands, branding efforts should also be used for *employer branding* (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004, 501).

Davies (2008, 667–668) suggests that the four basic attributes of the brand – the ability to differentiate, to create loyalty, to satisfy, and to develop an emotional attachment – are relevant also in terms of the employer brand. When the employer brand however is under examination, as opposed to customers the target group consists of employees. The employer brand is the company's promise to its employees to provide an experience which in return will motivate their commitment to deliver the customer brand (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 23). According to Barrow and Mosley (2005, 61), the employer brand represents the ultimate test in authenticity; it is nearly impossible to misrepresent the culture of an organisation to those who experience it directly 40 to 60 hours a week – the employees.

The employer brand is generally developed to be consistent with the product and corporate brands, but also key differences can be identified. Firstly, the employer brand is employment-specific, characterising the organisation's identity as an employer. Secondly, it is directed at both internal and external audiences, i.e. current employees and potential recruits, whereas product and corporate branding efforts are primarily directed at an external audience. (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004, 503.) This particular study concentrates solely on the employer brand and employer branding.

2.1.2   Development from internal marketing to employer branding

The concept of *internal marketing* (IM) was first introduced in the mid 1970s, when employers begun to emphasise that the whole workforce should participate somehow in marketing. At that time, measures from previously existing human resource and management literature were exploited. (Järvi 2000, 7.) IM has been described as the task of ensuring that employees understand both the brand promise and their part in delivering the brand experience to customers (Mosley 2007, 128). The basic premise of IM is that having satisfied customers a company must also have satisfied employees. This in turn can best be achieved by treating employees as customers. However, IM has long been understood solely as a means of reaching continuous service quality. (Ahmed & Rafiq 2002, ix.)

Ballantyne (2000, 43) considers IM as a strategy for developing relations between the employees across the internal organisational boundaries. The objective of this strategy is to enhance the quality of external marketing relationships (Ballantyne 2003, 43), and consequently there is an evident outside-in approach to IM (Mosley 2007, 128). While it is important for employees to understand their role in the delivery of the brand experience to customers, the result can easily be short-lived if employees consider themselves only as a channel to market (Mosley 2007, 128). One of the main challenges of IM is how the individual competencies of employees could be integrated into marketing strategies as a means of gaining actual competitive advantage (Ahmed & Rafiq 2003, 1184–1185; Ahmed, Rafiq & Saad 2003, 1221–1241).

Over the last decade there has been a shift in emphasis from IM to *internal branding*. Internal branding takes more of an inside-out, value-based approach towards the employees. (Mosley 2007, 128.) Internal branding, according to Bergstrom, Blumenthal and Crothers (2002, 135), refers to three things: communicating the brand effectively to the employees, convincing them of its relevance and worth, and successfully linking every job in the organisation to delivery of the brand essence.

In practice, the execution of internal branding has followed very similar lines to the engagement programs based on communication which are typical of IM (Mosley 2007, 129). Backhaus and Tikoo (2004, 503) perceive IM and internal branding even as completely similar definitions. They argue that the goal of both IM and internal branding is to develop a workforce that is committed to the set of values and organisational goals established by the company. Mosley (2007, 129) however draws a slight distinction between the two disciplines saying that the main difference between them is that internal branding has a less narrowly-defined focus on customer brand experience; it rather has a broader range of brand-led corporate goals and objectives.

Recently, organisations have started to show support for the relatively new discipline of *employer branding*. As stated in the introduction, interest in this approach has been

driven by increasing competition within the labour market. In order to fulfil their corporate ambition, companies require real talent as their employees. (Mosley 2007, 129–130.) Originally, the focus on employer brand approach was to ensure that the same clarity and coherence, which had typically been applied to defining and managing the customer brand, would now be applied to employees. Until lately, the primary focus for organisations has been on the use of employer branding to develop a distinctive external reputation, with only limited application to internal efforts. Nevertheless, many organisations have recently begun to evolve their focus towards a more integrated approach, aligning external recruitment promises with the internal employee experience, and employer brand development with the corporate and product brands. (Mosley 2007, 130; Barrow & Mosley 2005, 57–68.) Barrow and Mosley (2005, 80) believe that the employer brand can help to deliver more significant impact and credibility to internal marketing programmes which seek to promote understanding of the brand.

2.1.3 Employer brand today

The concept of employer brand was first introduced by Ambler and Barrow in 1996 (see Barrow 2008, 7; Mosley 2007, 129–130; Barrow & Mosley 2005, xvi) as 'the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employing company'. Since then, a number of definitions have been proposed by several scholars (see, for example, Berthon et al. 2005, 153–154; Martin et al. 2005, 78). Backhaus and Tikoo (2004, 502) define employer branding as the process of building an identifiable and unique employer identity, and the employer brand as a concept of the organisation that differentiates it from its competitors. The discipline of employer brand management strives to take a holistic approach to shaping the overall culture of the organisation. This will be accomplished by ensuring that every people management touch-point is aligned with the brand culture of the organisation. (Mosley 2007, 123.)

In the most recent publications, Davies (2008, 667) defines employer branding as the set of distinctive associations made by employees – actual or potential – with the corporate name, and Buckingham (2008, 92) simply as 'how we are supposed to do things round here'. The definition which best reflects the core of this particular research is presented by Sartain and Schumann (2006, vi) who define employer branding as 'how a business builds and packages its identity, from its origins and values, what it promises to deliver to emotionally connect employees so that they in turn deliver what the business promises to customers'.

2.2   Employer brand image

2.2.1   Employer brand continuum

When examining more closely the definition of a brand, it can be seen to consist of different components, i.e. brand personality, identity, image, and reputation (Keller 2003, 458; Aaker & Joachimsthaler 2002, 40; Harris & Chernatony 2001, 444). Similarly to corporate components which comprise a continuum (Vuokko 2003, 104; Cornelissen & Harris 2001, 64) the description can also be applied to the concept of employer brand (figure 1). Only whereas corporate brand components are applied to several various stakeholders of an organisation, employer brand components are closely involved with the important stakeholders of employees. Employer brand personality influences the employer brand identity in such circumstances where the management or other responsible authority decides what the brand should be. Employer brand identity, in turn, reflects to the employer brand image when stakeholders construct interpretations about the brand and in time, employer brand image reforms into employer brand reputation. (Vuokko 2003, 104.)

  In this research, the goal is to gather information on the images which the current employees hold of the employer at the moment, and that is why the employer brand image is under specific interest. The employer brand continuum is examined in detail in the following, and a special attention is paid to the employer brand image.
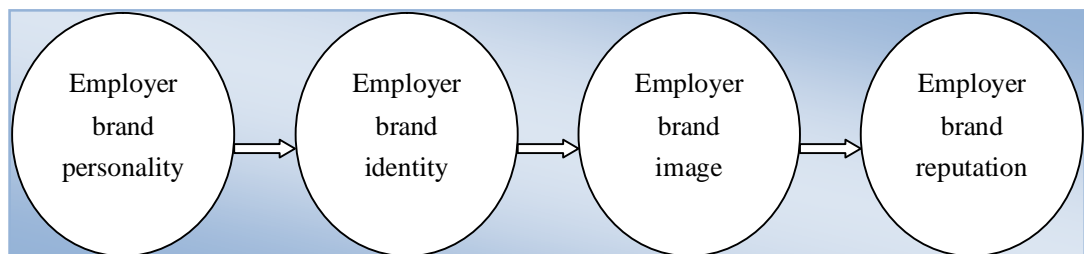
Figure 1   Employer brand continuum (adapted from Vuokko 2003, 104; Cornelissen & Harris 2001, 64)

  The emotional characteristics of a brand are represented by the *brand personality*, which evolves from the brand's core values (Harris & Chernatony 2001, 444). If values state what the organisation believes in, the employer brand personality describes how these beliefs are expressed in terms of tone and style (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 122). Adapting from the definition of corporate personality presented by Pelsmacker, Geuens

and Van den Bergh (2007, 13), employer brand personality can be perceived as the collective, commonly shared understanding of the employer brand's distinctive values and characteristics.

Similarly to a person, a brand can be characterised for example as 'modern', 'old-fashioned', 'lively', or 'exotic' (Keller 2003, 86). Thus brand personality is the sum of human characteristics or traits which can be attributed to the brand (Keller 2003, 444; Vuokko 2003, 103). Just as human personality defines the patterns people seek when forming relationships with others, brand personality helps stakeholders to familiarise and identify with different choices of the brand (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 61).

The personality of a service brand is even more difficult to construct and control than the one of a product brand, since it tends to be deeply rooted in the culture of an organisation and the in character and behaviour of the many different types of employees. Defining the employer brand personality, therefore, requires both an insightful reading of the current culture of an organisation, and of the employees' shared aspirations. (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 61.)

According to Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2002, 40), a strong brand should have a rich, clear *brand identity*; that is a set of associations which the brand management seeks to create or maintain. Again, similarly to corporate identity (Pelsmacker et al. 2007, 14; Dowling 2001, 19; Harris & Chernatony 2001, 453), employer brand identity can be interpreted as the means by which the employer brand is chosen to be presented to its relevant stakeholders of employees; it is the symbols and categorisation an organisation uses to identify itself to the personnel. Brand identity is a tangible statement of brand personality, and it consists of measures by which the personality is reflected. Thus identity comprises both the conscious and the unconscious messages about the brand's own personality. (Vuokko 2003, 103.)

In addition, adapting from the definition of corporate identity (Hatch & Schultz 2000, 18), the recipients of the employer brand identity messages can be seen either as an external audience of potential employees which needs to be persuaded, or a group of internal stakeholders, in other words existing employees, whose interests need to be addressed. The distinction between these groups is increasingly complicating because of the amount of overlap between them. In this research, the most important internal stakeholders, current employees, are of special interest.

In a fundamental sense, employer brand identity represents what the organisation desires the employer brand to stand for. Brand identity is both valuable and rare, and therefore it is likely to be very costly to imitate (Barney & Stewart 2000, 40). Brand identity is intentional and may imply that the image, discussed in detail in the following chapter, needs to be changed or expanded (Aaker & Joachimsthaler 2002, 40).

2.2.2   Employer brand image in detail

Just as with products, the branding of an employer brand proposition requires the creation of a strong, unique image that distinguishes an organisation from others (Lawler 2005, 15). An employer brand becomes the filter through which employees look at the facts of the organisation – everything they hear, observe, and experience about the company (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 47).

Brand image is considered to be the current associations which different stakeholders hold regarding the brand (Keller 2003, 458; Aaker & Joachimsthaler 2002, 40), whether it refers to product, corporate or employer brand. An image is a subjective and multidimensional impression of the brand and it belongs to the stakeholders instead of the company itself. In other words, it is born in the receivers' minds, not in the organisation. (Vuokko 2003, 103; Aula & Heinonen 2002, 50.) Adopting from the definition of corporate image (Pelsmacker et al. 2007, 17; Dowling 2001, 19), employer brand image is a comprised set of all experiences, beliefs, feelings, knowledge and impressions which each employee has about an organisation. The image is also dynamic and changes all the time (Aula & Heinonen 2002, 50).

Barrow and Mosley (2005, 49) have imposed a few important questions concerning the employer brand image. To begin with, it is important to learn how employees currently perceive the employer brand and whether they have a strong sense of the organisation's purpose and values, both implicit and explicit. Valuable things to consider are also whether all employees share a consistent core of opinion regarding the employer brand image, why they choose to join the organisation and why do they leave, and finally, if the employees are asked to describe the kind of organisation they would work for, how they are likely to reply.

Brand image is not always consistent with the desired identity; therefore an image gap can exist (Pelsmacker et al. 2007, 17). According to Hatch and Schultz (2000, 21–24), there are three types of differences between organisational identity and image, and these differences can also be adapted to employer brand identity and image. Firstly, employer brand identity is associated with managerial perspectives of the company while employer brand image is more associated with the perspectives relating to employees as stakeholders. Secondly, when defining employer brand identity it is important to construct a notion of 'self' to which the own identity of the employer brand refers. On the contrary, images are formed when 'a self' is considered from the position of the employee. Lastly, there is organisation's biased viewpoint attributed to the identity whereas image is formed by various groups of existing and potential employees.

According to Dowling (2001, 20–21), a corporate identity can have two possible effects on corporate image which can also be seen in employer brand image. First, employees can make a positive association between the employer and its brand identity

symbols. Then, hopefully, these identity symbols help employees recall their image of the employer brand. Employer brand image in turn has two components, a logical or cognitive and an emotional component. These components fit together to form an overall employer brand image. Finally, if the image of the employer suits the employee's values about the appropriate employer behaviour, then the individual will form a good reputation of the employer in question.

There is often a close relationship between the brand image and the *brand reputation* (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 149; Aula & Heinonen 2002, 50). Image and reputation have a significant common factor; they are both evaluated by a bundle of characteristics attached to the company (Aula & Heinonen 2002, 95). Since the two definitions are so closely related, they are often described as having the same meaning. Yet several scholars draw a difference between those definitions (see, for example, Dolphin 2004, 77–89; Aula & Heinonen 2002, 50; Dowling 2001, 18).

Each employee will form a distinct evaluation of the organisation's brand image and brand reputation (Dowling 2001, 29; Fombrun & Rindova 2000, 78). Adapting from Einwiller and Will's (2003, 100) statement of corporate brand image, creating and maintaining a coherent employer brand image in the minds of each individual employee is the basis for a favourable overall brand reputation. Employer brand reputation, in turn, is the most important in attracting new recruits. Over time, the reputation will become a lens through which every person interested in the organisation will view every experience they have with the organisation. (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 45–46.) Because of the close relation between the employer brand image and reputation, employer brand reputation can be useful when examining the fairly recently recruited employees, and therefore it is considered as a separate component in this particular study.

2.3   Dimensions of the employer brand

The employer brand frames the methods the organisation must establish to support employees. This includes such things as training, team management, and reward which are generally the responsibilities of the HR department. It also includes the function the company follows to inform employees through different channels, and this is usually coordinated by corporate communications. Finally, how these efforts align with how the company promotes itself through advertisements and promotions is usually the work of the marketing department. (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 43–44.) According to Backhaus and Tikoo (2004, 513), integrating those kind of activities will have a substantially different effect on the employer brand than each of the processes would have alone.

The employer brand must engage the employee in every dimension of his relationship with the company (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 43). Barrow and Mosley (2005,

149) have developed a detailed employer brand mix holding twelve dimensions which represent the key touch points for the employer brand. These dimensions are divided into two broad groups, the first relating to wider organisational context and policy and the second relating to local context and practice. The writers exploit the model for effective employer brand management, but most of the dimensions are applicable to describe the employer brand also from the employees' viewpoint. Therefore the dimensions of the employer brand mix are partly adapted to this particular research.

2.3.1   Dimensions relating to organisational context

The dimensions of the employer brand relating to the organisational context and policy, used in this particular research, are internal communication, senior leadership, values, and internal measurement systems (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 150).

Internal communication is perceived as an extremely important builder of the employer brand (Ind 2007, 116; Rogers 2003, 35) and it should at all circumstances be regarded as employer brand communication, as every piece of communication enlightens something about the company. Internal communication in companies is still quite fractured between different departments and functions, and from the employee's perspective it is likely to lead to perceptions of information overload and incoherence. All internal communication has the potential to reinforce or undermine how the workforce perceives the company. This means that the company is unlikely to build trust and credibility in the employer brand unless it manages to deliver consistency across all of its communications. Therefore more employee-centric and coherent internal communication should be embraced. (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 142–143, 151–152.)

Internal communicators have to convince the challenging audience of their colleagues who recognise a truthful brand promise. Authenticity, sincerity, clarity, credibility, and, most importantly, involvement are the best tools in enhancing employees' commitment. (Buckingham 2008, 90–95.) There are a few essential questions which employees can consider regarding the internal communication. For example, are the most significant corporate messages being constantly reinforced? Employees can also ask whether the style of communication support consistently the desired identity of the organisation. Finally, employees should question whether there is sufficient feedback and monitoring to ensure the desired messages are getting through. (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 151–152.)

Employees seldom trust a management team which continues to send them inconsistent messages. When a company adopts an employer brand approach, it should support the *senior leadership* to view employee communication in a more similar light to customer communication. It reinforces the strategic role of internal communication in

shaping how the workforce perceives the organisation and its leadership. Resulting from the employer brand approach, if the senior managers are encouraged to think in terms of their target audience – in other words employees – it provides much greater clarity and less information overload for the employees. (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 80.)

In particular large organisations are subject to inertia. It is difficult to change one component without adjusting everything else. Yet organisations can be changed through strong leadership. (Kotler & Keller 2009, 56.) Although it might not be clear among the employees at lower levels of work, senior leadership has the most critical roles in both reinforcing the credibility and conveying the character of the employer brand. Senior management should be constantly aware of the impact of their actions in shaping employees' perceptions of the organisation. The majority of employees will recognise the false response if what is said deviates from the reality of their observations. For that reason, it is very important how managers communicate, behave, and how they structure their messages to reinforce the desired relationship between the company and its employees. (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 152.)

A brand should be both a source of differentiation and a promise of performance. Consequently, the best means of developing a brand which has a high degree of relevance and consistency is to ensure that the employees understand and believe in the *values* of their organisation. (Ind 2007, 24.) It is not unusual for the corporate values to live alongside brand values, and there might be even several sets of value-like descriptions in a company. In the context of employer brand, adding a further set of values to already existing ones should be avoided. Instead, companies should ensure that the current values are made relevant and meaningful to employees. Thus there has been a general rationalisation of value statements over recent years in organisations. (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 119–120.)

According to Barrow and Mosley (2005, 121), it is often tempting for the management to dictate what the values should be. However, values cannot be invented, but rather they have to come from the essence of the organisation and they have to be lived sincerely (Ind 2007, 24). Employees are far more likely to believe that the values are authentic and 'live the values' if the values are reflected in their own experience of the organisation (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 120).

Kotler and Keller (2009, 56) argue that the key to organisational health is the willingness to examine the changing environment and adopt new goals and behaviours. Employees are a tremendous source of information on how to improve the organisation, but simply running an employee survey is not such a straightforward procedure (Mackay 2007, 33). When *internal measurement systems* are accordingly executed in an organisation, employees can be assured that the company takes its propositions to employees seriously enough to measure it, publicise it and act on the results (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 154).

Internal measurements should be utilised to identify areas of required improvement which, in turn, can have a high impact on organisational performance. While traditional opinion surveys may be helpful, a more strategic approach to measurements can provide organisations with, for example, feedback on employees' behaviours which support critical business practices. Above all, employee surveys can be used to uncover the feelings of the employees and their attitudes towards the employer. (Mackay 2007, 33–34.)

2.3.2 *Dimensions relating to local context*

The dimensions of the employer brand which in turn relate to the local context and practice, used in this particular research, are recruitment and induction, team management, performance appraisal, learning and development, reward and recognition, and working environment (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 150).

An attractive employer brand increases the likelihood of the attention of better job applicants. For instance, job applicants may evaluate the employer brand based on the recruitment materials they have received. (Knox & Freeman 2006, 698, 707.) The *recruitment* process is increasingly being tailored to identify the types of potential employees who will have a natural affinity with the brand values of the company. Recruitment is however seldom regarded as a pure transaction by new employees and therefore the *induction* process, in other words the orientation to the work, is equally important to the actual recruitment process. It represents a valuable opportunity to the company to reveal its character – what the company expects of its personnel and what in turn the individual employee can expect from the company. (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 155–156.)

Michaels et al. (2001, according to Barrow & Mosley 2005, 156) noted in their study among middle and senior managers that especially younger managers rated a 'good relationship with my boss' as one of the most important elements in deflecting their career decisions. Barrow and Mosley (2005, 156) specify that *team management* is generally recognised as a crucial success factor in the many recent studies which have explored employee engagement. In other words, the every-day quality of the local management plays a vital role for each individual employee in shaping their employer brand image.

The main objective of team managers should always be the motivation of their own team. Superiors should be able to provide such motivators to their employees which activate the employees, commit them to their jobs, and encourages them to work in a desired way. Besides executing these measures in the team level, team management should also exploit them in the individual level. This helps the employees to feel that their work tasks are appreciated and also get rewarded from them. (Mackay 2007, 29.)

In their study on employer branding, Barrow and Mosley (2005, 157) discovered that *performance appraisals* were actually regarded as one of the most important factors in grounding the core values of the organisation in the everyday behaviours of the employees. In many organisations, performance appraisals are often a postponed activity and then eventually undertaken at the last moment by equally unenthusiastic appraiser and employee. That is not a favourable situation in terms of helping all employees perform to the best of their potential. (McKeown 2002, 160–161.)

Whether performance appraisals are successful depends on how thoroughly they are applied at a local level at the workplace. It should be considered whether the employees are clear about what is expected of them and how they will be judged. Thus the appraisals should be based and focused on the goals of employees. Additionally, employees do not find it motivating to be appraised by a manager who cannot do it completely. Therefore it must be taken into account whether the appraisal is properly prepared for by both the appraiser and the employee. Lastly, it is important to know whether the employees are actually ready to deal with poor performance. (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 157; McKeown 2002, 161.)

To be effective, performance management must be an ongoing process (Fields 2001, 209). There should, above all, be constant feedback – positive as well as constructive regarding the areas of improvement – given for the employee on the appraisal. The feedback should be specific of each key goal, positive, challenging, and practical. This is important for employees in regards to both their personal and career development. (McKeown 2002, 162–163; Fields 2001, 211.)

Barrow and Mosley (2005, 157–158) state that research findings in general emphasise the importance of *learning and career development* in strengthening the employer brand. They influence both the company's general attractiveness to new recruits and its constant ability to maintain employees committed. However, there is an equal amount of evidence to suggest that most employees believe their employers could significantly improve the learning and development offering. Earlier, training was largely controlled by the employer, but today, the emergence of regular development and extension of the employees' skills as well as the availability of distance learning have enabled the employees to pursue more their own career development (McKeown 2002, 120–121).

If employees experience they are advancing in their career and learning, they are not likely to switch jobs. If the employee is however willing to move to another position, it is a good opportunity for the employer to find them another position within the same organisation. (Fields 2001, 48.) Additionally, it should be beared in mind that learning and development does not stop when an employee exits the company. Former employees and their careers and successes are often among the first points of interest when potential recruits are gathering information about the organisation. (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 158.)

Reward can be an excellent opportunity for an organisation to demonstrate what its values and beliefs are, what its mission is, and which steps it is adapting in order to secure its future operations (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 188). Rewards should align also with employees' own value systems (Fields 2001, 217). Michaels et al. (2001, according to Barrow & Mosley 2005, 159) emphasise that unless a company stays competitive with its rewarding systems, it will have difficulties in surviving against competitors. However, according to Barrow and Mosley (2005, 159), while reward is a major symbol of recognition it is only one of the numerous options. Employees want to experience that their work is appreciated and appropriately compensated. However, most employees do not believe that there is a clear relationship between their salary and the job performance. (Mackay 2007, 117.)

McKeown (2002, 80) states that reward is essentially a satisfier, not a motivator for employees. Adjusting it has only a temporary effect on the employee instead of a long-term, sustained effect, which should be the goal of all recognition. A good reward package should provide the tools to allow employees clearly establish whether they have achieved their goals for the period under review. In addition, a reward package must include such motivational elements – incentives, bonuses, and perquisites for instance – which motivate employees not only occasionally, but regularly.

Several surveys reveal that *recognition* is a critical element in the motivation of employees. It is one of the simplest and most direct ways of demonstrating that employees are highly valued in the company. (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 159.) Recognition can be anything which recognises the achievements of employees. A company can even exploit a recognition program which can combine structured, planned awards with unplanned, spontaneous rewards and other contests. (McKeown 2002, 101.)

Recognition is essential in order to motivate employees to perform well (Mackay 2007, 105). Henry Ryan, Corporate Director of Employment and Training in Partners HealthCare Systems, Inc. (according to Fields 2001, 212), has argued eloquently: 'Recognition takes other forms beyond increased compensation. We all like to know that our efforts are appreciated. Sometimes it is just a matter of saying, 'I appreciate and value what you are doing!'' Employees in many organisations request for better and more direct feedback on their performance. If workers are never told how they are performing, they may not know and become unmotivated. (Mackay 2007, 105, 115.) According to Mackay (2007, 105), feedback must also be rapid, and in addition, both positive in order to praise good performance, and constructive in order to correct poor performance.

For employees, work content, relationships with superiors, compensation and benefits can change, but for most of them the 'look and feel' of the physical space in which they work remains nearly the same (McKeown 2002, 62). Barrow and Mosley (2005, 160) have discovered that interestingly but yet not surprisingly *working environment* represents an important expression of the employer brand. Working environment is

likely to be the biggest constant in the employees' daily lives. Issues such as dress code, the ability to individualise the working environment, and even the physical location to the workspace vary from one organisational group to another. However, the fundamental issue for every employee is the ability to work in a pleasant environment. (McKeown 2002, 62.)

According to Fields (2001, 85), in many occasions one reason for job turnover is an unsatisfactory working environment. Unfortunately many organisations still pay fairly little attention to the working environment in general (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 160). Employees stay where they feel being at home (McKeown 2002, 28). Therefore it should be ensured that the working environment is challenging yet supportive, so that all employees can work to the best of their abilities. (McKeown 2002, 167; Fields 2001, 198.) In today's fast-paced working environment, there are as many work and lifestyle arrangements as there are employees at the workplace. Employers, who desire to be successful in retaining employees, need to explore a variety of work arrangements with the workforce; for example, telecommuting, job sharing, flexible scheduling, and compressed work weeks. (Fields 2001, 263.)

2.4   Expectations about the employer brand

Each of the organisations' different stakeholders will have different expectations and understandings of the brand (Ind 2007, 20). Employees can be an important internal stakeholder group to the company (Olins 2000, 60), and they are also at the core of how the company connects with every other possible stakeholders (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 52). Employees do not have the same brand expectations internally as the consumers do externally with the brand. They expect greater sincerity from the brand and they are the first to notice any disconnection between the adopted externalised brand and the actual. (Buckingham 2008, 91.)

When looking from the inside of a corporation, the brand concentrates on the total working experience; the way in which the employees are inspired, motivated, recognised, developed, and rewarded, and the degree to which the infrastructure of the organisation reinforces or detracts from that experience (Rogers 2003, 34). Also, what the employee as an internal stakeholder expects when joining the company, will fundamentally differ from what is essential later in the career. Furthermore, factors which motivate an employee to commit during the career differ over time. (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 159.)

There are two key questions to which employer branding addresses itself according to Martin et al. (2005, 79). The first question inquires what the compelling and novel story is which a company can tell its personnel about working there. The second ques-

tion asks how the company can tell the story to potential and existing employees in such way which convinces them of the reality of what the company has to offer.

Martin et al. (2005, 79) suggest that the strength of the employer brand is that it aims to deal with the complex task of harmonising internal belief in the brand with the external brand message. The translation of the brand promise internally is primarily concerned with creating and delivering the same experience promised to customers to employees (Rogers 2003, 34). Understanding the explicit needs and aspirations of employees is important but it is not enough to ensure an effective internal brand strategy. As with customers, also an understanding of employees' implicit needs must be developed. (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 85.)

In order to meet the expectations of the personnel, an employer brand makes a promise to current, future, and past employees. Employer brand promises a specific functional and emotional experience at each touch point with the employer brand. (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 38.) According to Barrow and Mosley (2005, 58), employer brands are on the one hand founded on a number of basic *functional benefits*, such as reward, a safe working environment, and the provision of the equipment necessary to carry out employee's roles and responsibilities. The risk in these kinds of benefits is however that they might be implicitly taken for granted.

Sartain and Schumann (2006, 232) address a few questions to reveal the functional expectations and experiences of the employees. It can be asked whether the employees know the employer brand, what it stands for and what it promises. Also, a relevant question is whether the employees, once they have been recruited, believe that they can get things done in the company. Again, it is beneficial to ask whether employees trust the employer brand and the company as a place to work.

Brands take tangible form in the functional benefits which they provide, but they also tend to deliver value in more delicate ways (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 58). The employer brand must project what employees expect and aspire by connecting them with the company, and it must be easy for an employee to emotionally recognise. (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 52–54.) The *emotional benefits*, on the other hand, associated with employer brands are just as important as they are to branded products and services. Employees' emotional attachment to their employer is determined by the value which they gain from the tasks they perform, the extent to which they feel valued by their colleagues, and their belief in the quality, the purpose and values of the organisation they represent. (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 59.)

Sartain and Schumann (2006, 232) have again posed a few questions which reveal the emotional expectations and experiences of the employees. First, it should be inquired whether the employees connect with the employer brand, what it stands for and what it promises. Second, it can be asked whether the employees believe in the inspira-

tional qualities of the employer brand. Last, an important question is whether the employees advocate for the employer brand and the company.

A side benefit of a strong employer brand is the 'halo effect' it can have on the employees – the spontaneous word-of-mouth recommendations which effectively attract new employees, retain current employees, and continue to engage former employees (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 56–57). Employees at successfully branded companies sell the company to the environment in various ways, for instance, by promoting solid career opportunities, expert management, or flexibility. This word-of-mouth, whether it is internal or external, has a considerably strong impact on the employer brand; it builds employee loyalty and increases recruits of good quality. (Johnson & Roberts 2006, 40.)

The employer brand may disappoint employees if what they actually experience differs significantly from what they believe they are promised. To make the employer brand authentic for the employees, functionally and emotionally, it must live during each part of employees' every-day work. To make the communication of benefits as effective as possible, companies must give the employee the information in an easy-to-understand way and provide access to experts so that employees can easily get the answers needed. (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 158, 189.) Strong brands deliver their promise to each and every stakeholder inside as well outside the organisation (Rogers 2003, 34).

2.5 Construction of the employer brand

2.5.1 The development of the relationship between the employer and the employee

Ambler and Barrow (1996, according to Mosley 2007, 130; Barrow & Mosley 2005, xvi) define the primary goal of employer brand as 'to provide a coherent framework for management to simplify and focus priorities, increase productivity and improve recruitment, retention and commitment'. Increasingly, companies are using employer branding to attract recruits and to assure that current employees are committed in the culture and the strategy of the company (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004, 501). Therefore employees play a crucial role in the brand constructing process (Harris & Chernatony 2001, 453).

Most successful brands are founded on a deep understanding of the relationship between the brand and its audience (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 49). Consequently, the employer brand is about a relationship between the organisation and its personnel (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 23–24). Employees must be able to understand why their contribu-

tion is essential to their employer's success. It is important for employees to know what the brand promises to customers and what role they play to facilitate the company to deliver the brand. However, similarly important is the employees' knowledge on what the company offers in return for employee commitment. (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 40–41.)

In order for the employer brand to meet the expectations of employees, the company must carefully operationalise the employer brand through each stage of an employee's relationship – from the first consideration of the company as a place to work through how the employees notice, consider, apply, join, work, leave, and remember the employer (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 158). Sartain and Schumann (2006, 159–192) use the seven stages of employer-employee relationship as a way to frame the employer brand. In the first stage, a prospective employee notices a business. The relationship between an employee and a company begins with an impression which the prospective employee receives by seeing and hearing about the company. In the second stage, a prospective employee considers the company as a place to work. In the third stage a candidate will go through an application and screening process which, if successful, is followed by the fourth stage: the recruit's joining the organisation. New employees will notice several crucial factors when joining the company, for example, whether their experience of the company is consistent with the employer brand, and whether this experience promotes the employer brand.

In the fifth stage of the employer-employee relationship, the employee works for the company until deciding or being asked to leave. In this particular stage, the ways employees are treated at every step along the way must follow the employer brand standards. The sixth stage in turn appears when an employee leaves the organisation due to retirement, resignation, or termination. Finally, in the seventh stage, a former employee will remember and, perhaps, relate the experience of working at the business. Following these seven stages is the key to operationalising the employer brand. Once the operationalisation takes place, the employer brand comes to live and stimulates itself almost naturally. Obviously, however, the stages of the employer-employee relationship should only provide an initiative framework for the collaboration towards creating an authentic employer brand. (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 183–192.)

2.5.2   Measures in the construction of the employer brand

The key to attracting, retaining, and engaging employees is the creative, holistic use of what the organisation believes from its core, as articulated in its employer brand (Sartain & Schumann 2006, ix). As the employer brand must reflect the different stages of an employee's work and life, it must also frame the efforts the organisation offers to ad-

dress each stage. Each effort must address two dimensions of an employee's experience discussed earlier in chapter 2.4 – the emotional and the functional. Employees do not arrive at companies completely engaged in the brand even if there can be evident commitment identified. Each stage of the employer-employee relationship demands something new from the employee and places new pressure on the brand. (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 192–193.)

Johnson and Roberts (2006, 39) clarify that the process of constructing the employer brand begins with the identification of what maintains the existing brand; the perceptions and expectations employees possess about the employer. After this initial assessment, it is important to establish measurable and attainable objectives for the employer branding process. Thereafter, the vital stages of introducing the employer brand and monitoring the progress through a well-defined response management program are in turn. Response management programs include the tracking of employee referrals, processed resumes, tendered and accepted offers, retention rates, and job positing hits.

Brand positioning is highly relevant to the employer brand promise in two manners. The first is that employees represent an important target group for the brand with distinctly different needs and aspirations from customers and consumers. For the brand to be relevant and motivating to employees it must be positioned to meet these needs and aspirations. It is also valuable to consider whether the employer brand promise is clearly differentiated. What can the organisation offer its potential candidates and particularly current employees, which makes it better or different from the other alternatives? After answering this critical question, the next logical step is to recognise that current employees and potential recruits are likely to be as diverse, if not more diverse, than the company's customer base. (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 63.)

A strong employer brand does not take place simply by calling something a brand; it requires a careful and professional process. And, similar to any market strategy, it takes time for the employees to experience it, build faith and trust in it, and eventually embrace it. Employer branding is the means to capture extremely talented employees while building equity in the company's brand. (Johnson & Roberts 2006, 40.) What companies should aim to do is appoint an employer branding manager responsible for ensuring that the processes and behaviours which enhance the employer brand, are accentuated, and those which weaken it, are changed for the better. Employer brand managers must be effective researchers, competitive analysts and planners. (Barrow 2008, 7.)

2.5.3   Communication of the employer brand

Employer branding is affected by every channel through which a company interacts with the stakeholders; advertising, media articles, interactive strategies, websites and

promotional materials. A well-formed construction of the employer brand should integrate all media, particularly the internet which is a rapidly growing means of expression for recruitment industry. (Johnson & Roberts 2006, 40.) Communication enables the organisation to begin a dialogue to create awareness, understanding and appreciation for the company's strategic goals, ideally resulting in the satisfaction of the interests of both the company and its environment (van Riel 2000, 157).

In the external context, it is essential to develop an understanding of the range of channels which are available, and which are the most effective for different target audiences or different type of message. Hence every piece of communication the customer receives is also designed to reinforce the overall brand proposition. However, an equally sophisticated understanding is required for internal channels if the employer brand is going to perform a similar role for internal communication. (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 102.)

In essence, the successful communication of an employer brand must follow a specific sequence: to lead the internal audience of employees from initially experiencing the brand message to understanding the message, believing in the message, and finally doing what the message is designed to motivate (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 198). The clarity of the employer brand communications is the key factor when helping to improve this sequence (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 129). What is unique about the communications approach is the emphasis on the experience – the opportunity to surround the personnel with the key messages before actually trying to help them understand or motivate them to believe in the message (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 198).

Another key area of focus is that internal and external communications must be consistent. Firstly, external communication, including both recruitment and consumer advertising, can send powerful messages to the employees about the company. (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 143.) Secondly, while employees are sometimes regarded as a more captive audience than consumers, in reality they are just as likely to suffer from information overload from constant brand messages. Therefore it is vital that employer brand messages are simple and direct. (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 129–133.) Van Riel (2000, 157) states that the stakeholders will be more receptive to messages if the contents of the message is coherent and appealing, in other words contributing to the personal advantage of the stakeholders, and above all not irritating them.

2.5.4   *Challenges in the formation of the employer brand*

Although many organisations claim that their employees are their greatest asset, managers often fail to take active steps to engage them in the work and to ensure that they are making the best possible use of their employees' talents (Mackay 2007, 33). Naturally,

any company's aspiration for its personnel is for them to 'live the brand'. Employer brand is about the daily communication at workplace; how managers interact with employees and how employees interact with each other. (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 59.) However, it seems to be quite challenging for organisations actually to live the brand (Ind 2001; Barrow & Mosley 2005; Sartain & Schumann 2006). While employees' understanding of the customer brand proposition is clearly important, the motivation to truly live the brand requires a more general commitment to an organisation (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 71).

Many 'living the brand' campaigns focus almost entirely on how the employee needs to behave to deliver the desired brand identity to the customer. This is naturally relevant in terms of the commercial objectives of the company, but it fails to address the more direct benefits of the organisation's brand values to the personnel. Employees are far more likely to accept the organisation's brand messages if they experience the worth of the values for themselves. (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 134.)

There is no doubt that managers recognise and exploit the value of strong brands in attracting the best workforce. But the retention of the talent and the influence on the performance is another question. A strong brand is quickly undermined if the employer brand does not support it. (Rogers 2003, 34.) The achievement of living the brand requires commitment and sincerity and this has to permeate the entire organisation. Employees must have a sense of owning the brand. Additionally, they have to be able to understand the brand in their own terms and contribute to its development. The management of a brand is a long-term process, which suggests that the brand idea must be included in the systems of the organisation. Brands must be built on solid ground but they also have to be capable of evolution and change. (Ind 2007, 24, 105, 179.)

2.6   Framework of the formation of the employer brand

Based on the literature on employer branding described in previous chapters, it is obvious that from the employees' viewpoint, the formation of an employer brand comprises of several determinants. The researcher identifies four main components affecting the formation, namely current efforts from the employer to construct the employer brand, perceived employer image, expected employer brand image, and required efforts from the employer to construct the employer brand. Consequently, these components constitute the theoretical framework of this research (figure 2).
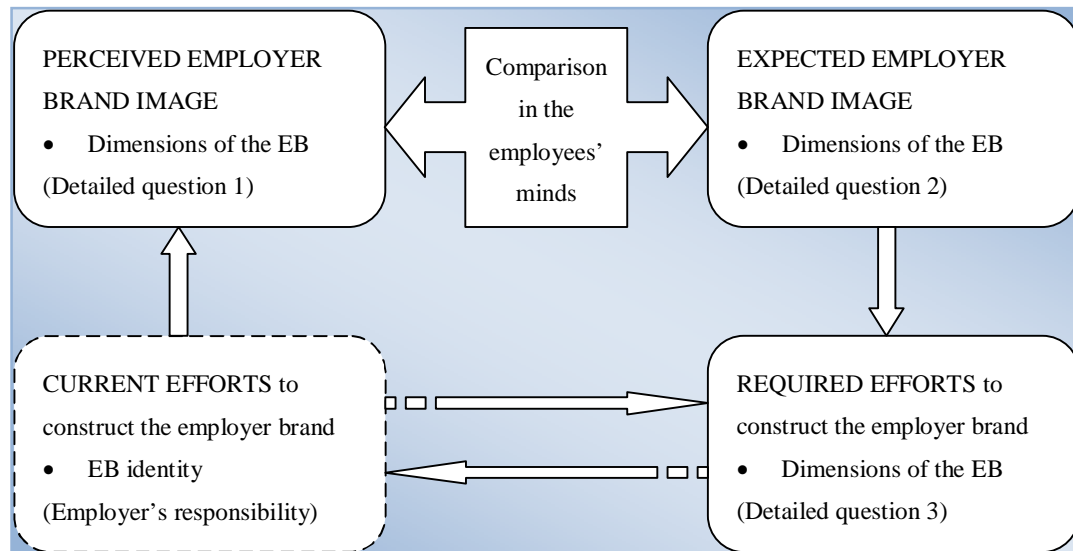
Figure 2   Formation of the employer brand

As stated above, perceived employer brand image is created in the minds of employees. It is based on the dimensions of the employer brand; those dimensions have an influence on how the employees distinguish their employer brand from others. The perceived employer brand image is affected by the current efforts which the employer strives to take in order to evoke the best possible employer brand image in the minds of the employees. Those efforts are a result of the desired employer brand identity. Since the current efforts are employer's responsibility, they are only examined in this study from the employees' viewpoint and are therefore marked with a dashed line in the framework.

The image which employees have of the employer creates expectations which in turn should have a crucial influence on how the organisation constructs its employer brand building process. Employees do constant comparison between the perceived employer brand image and the expected employer brand image. In other words, employees have certain expectations about the employer brand which are, equally to the perceived employer brand image, based on the dimensions of the employer brand. Finally, the expectations the employees hold on the employer brand have an impact on the required efforts to further construct the employer brand. This is when the measures in the formation of the employer brand should be taken into close consideration, and again the dimensions of the employer brand affect the actions taken.

Perceived and expected brand images represent a more abstract level of the determinants whereas required and current efforts to construct the employer brand are tangible attributes. This study is executed through employees' viewpoint and therefore the em-

phasis is on the employees' perceived and expected employer brand images and also on the efforts employees regard most valuable in constructing the employer brand.

3 CONDUCTING THE RESEARCH

3.1 Qualitative research approach

One of the major interests of qualitative research approach is the understanding of the socially constructed reality; it is interpreted and produced through cultural meanings Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 4–5; Denzin & Lincoln 1998, 8). Therefore a qualitative approach is often concerned with interpretation and understanding, whereas a quantitative approach deals with explanation, statistical analysis and testing of hypothesis. In addition, in qualitative research approach the collection of data and its analysis are sensitive to the context, aiming at a holistic comprehension of the issues studied, whereas quantitative research is more prone to structured and standardised modes of collecting and analysing empirical data. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 5.) A qualitative approach is one in which a researcher collects open-ended, emerging data with the primary intent of developing themes from that data (Creswell 2003, 18). This particular research concentrated on interpretation and understanding of the phenomenon of employer branding, the ultimate goal being the development of themes from the collected data on employer branding.

Qualitative study includes a thought of the reality being versatile; the incidents affect each other and therefore a variety of relations can be found (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2009, 161). One of the major challenges of qualitative research approach is dealing with the complexity; managing the nature and quality of the data and acknowledging their limitations (Zalan & Lewis 2004, 514–515). In this study, the major challenge was to manage the versatile data collected from three different employee groups.

Hirsjärvi et al. (2009, 164) have listed some typical features of qualitative research. Firstly, the research is a comprehensive procurement of information and the material is collected in natural, real situations. Secondly, a human being is favoured as the instrument of gathering the information. Moreover, inductive analysis is being utilised; the researcher aims to reveal unexpected things, and therefore testing of theory or hypothesis is not the basis, but complex and detailed study of the data (Creswell 2009, 4). The target group is selected appropriately instead of a randomly selected sample, and lastly, the research plan is formed during the progress of the research and every case is handled uniquely. In qualitative research, one must be prepared that the research problem may alter as the research progresses (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 126). These features were met by the research in question: the data was collected in real situations, employees were the instruments of gathering information, an inductive type of analysis was used, target groups were selected appropriately, and finally, the case was handled uniquely.

A research always has a purpose which guides the strategic choices of the research. The purpose of the research can be divided into four categories: descriptive, exploratory, explanatory, or predictive. (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 138–139.) In this research, the purpose of the research was descriptive. The aim of descriptive research is to document central and interesting features of a certain phenomenon and moreover, to present precise descriptions on individuals, events, or situations (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 139). In descriptive research, the researcher typically proceeds through a series of analysis stages which compress data into a more coherent understanding of 'what, how and why' (Miles & Huberman 1994, 91). The purpose of this particular research was to describe the formation of the internal employer brand from the current employees' viewpoint.

3.2   Research strategy: case study research

The choice of research strategy is always determined by the objective of the study, the nature of the research problem, and the theoretical frameworks that inform the study (Zalan & Lewis 2004, 512). There are three types of research strategies; experimental research, survey research and case study (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 134–135). *Case study* is a flexible research approach which is suited to a range of different research questions. It is both the process of learning about the case and the product of learning. (Ghauri 2004, 109.) As a research strategy, case study is used in many situations to contribute to the knowledge of individual, group, organisational, social, political, and related phenomena. It allows researchers to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events, such as organisational and managerial processes. (Yin 2009, 4.) This study aimed at contributing to organisational phenomenon, in other words employer branding.

According to Eriksson and Koistinen (2005, 15), there are two types of case study research; intensive and extensive case studies. The aim of extensive case study is to compare several cases and thereby search common characteristics, whereas intensive case study is aimed at interpreting and understanding of a unique and therefore also theoretically interesting case. The description of the context of the case is most important characteristic of the intensive case study. On the basis of these criteria, the applied strategy in this particular research was an intensive case study. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 118–125.) Case study research is a useful strategy when the area of research is relatively less known (Eriksson & Koistinen 2005, 5; Ghauri 2004, 109; Yin 2003, 4). Until today, the concept of employer brand is fairly new phenomenon in Finnish companies and also in Nordea (Räsänen, unrecorded conversation 29.9.2008), and therefore a case study was a justified choice for a research strategy in this particular research.

In general, case study is the preferred strategy when 'what', 'how' or 'why' questions are being posed in the research question. In this research, the research question is a

'how' question: *How is the employer brand formed in the minds of the current employees?* Furthermore, case study is preferred when the examination concerns contemporary events within a certain real life context, but when the relevant behaviours cannot be manipulated. If this occurs, the research strategy has two potential sources of evidence: direct observation of the events being studied and interviews of the persons involved in the events. Here the investigator examined contemporary events and used interviews as a source of evidence. Finally, when the researcher has little control over events, as was the situation in this particular research, a case study is in place. (Yin 2009, 2–11; Eriksson & Koistinen 2005, 5.)

There are some traditional prejudices against the case study strategy. Firstly, it is argued that there is a lack of preciseness in case study research and that the conducting of a case study takes too long and results in massive, unreadable documents (Yin 2009, 14–16). In this research, there was a single case chosen and moreover, a limited amount of data collected, which helped to produce a targeted and a compact research document.

Secondly, case studies are claimed to provide little basis for scientific generalisation. However, generalisation should not be the ultimate aim of the case study research. (Eriksson & Koistinen 2005, 34; Ghauri 2004, 115.) Instead, the goal is to understand the particular case being examined and no assumptions can be done in order to generalise. By researching a single case deeply enough – which was the objective of this research – it can be discovered what is remarkable about the phenomenon, and which elements repeat themselves when examining the phenomenon in a more general level. (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 181–182.)

Case study research is indeed among the hardest types of research to do because of the absence of routine procedures (Yin 2009, 66). Besides the requirement for clear research questions, a thorough understanding of the existing literature, and a sound theoretical foundation, case study research necessitates excellent language skills. This created some challenges for the research in question, since the interviews were conducted in Finnish, but the research itself in English. As in this study, a case study researcher must be able to synthesise large amounts of quite diverse data, such as interview notes and transcripts, and from all these data produce theoretically informed and convincingly argued conclusions. Furthermore, a researcher must be able to communicate with both the subjects of the research and the readers of the report. (Scapens 2004, 107.) Regardless of these challenges, case study provides excellent opportunities for researchers to ensure their understanding and continue asking questions until they obtain sufficient answers and interpretations (Ghauri 2004, 111).

3.3 Selection of the cases

Similar to quantitative researchers, qualitative researchers need to describe, define and justify the units and levels of analysis. These concerns are of critical importance to qualitative studies since the choice of a case may well influence the results of the study. (Zalan & Lewis 2004, 512–514.) There is no exact limit to the number of cases which should be included in a study (Ghauri 2004, 114), but a typical characteristic for a case study is that a single case, situation or a group of cases is chosen (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 135). A single case design is highly justifiable when the case is rare or unique (Yin 2009, 47; Ghauri 2004, 114). This particular research has elements of a unique case, since the employer brand is rather new phenomenon. Furthermore, case selection should take into consideration the type of organisation being studied (Ghauri 2004, 113). In this study, a single Finnish company with strong corporate and product brands was selected.

When selecting the objects for the study, a researcher should first decide the target population that is to be used for the investigation. The target population includes those organisations, individuals, groups or elements that will be represented in the study. (Ghauri 2004, 112.) In this research, the target population was the employees of Nordea. There is also most likely a certain accessible population for the researcher out of which one or a few objects have to be selected for study. Here also practical issues such as personal contacts are of great importance. (Ghauri 2004, 112–113.) The accessible population in this particular study comprised of those employees who were reachable by Nordea's employer branding manager.

The objective of a qualitative study is to deliberately and carefully select the participants who will best help the researcher understand the research question, and this target group should correspond to the theoretical framework under the study (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008, 58–59; Ghauri 2004, 112; Creswell 2009, 178; Dowling 2001, 217). Participants should not be selected because of their demographic reflection of the general population, but instead represent the same experience of knowledge (Morse 1998, 74). In this research, the overall target group was key employees whose retention is vital to Nordea. The key employees are extremely talented and they have a lot of potential for an upward career development. If the company loses them as employees, it will leave a great blank in the organisation's knowledge foundation. (Räsänen, unrecorded conversation 17.11.2008.) The participants for the study were selected by the employer branding manager of Nordea. This may cause bias to the research results since individual perceptions and preferences can influence the choice of respondents. However, the employer branding manager has the best knowledge of the background of the personnel, as well as their willingness to take part in the study, and therefore the employer branding manager was the most qualified person the carry out the selection.

In descriptive case study, the examination of the data from different viewpoints of different actors often enhances the significance of the research (Eriksson & Koistinen 2005, 41). According to Dowling (2001, 217), it is recommendable to include such employees in the study who are very familiar with the organisation and in contrast some who are not so familiar. Those who are less familiar with the organisation often rely more on brand images than on their knowledge of the organisation to form their evaluations. Another favourable option is to include employees who are possibly disposed to competitors. They are more likely to provide important criticism towards the organisation than are loyal supporters. Based on these arguments, the researcher decided to take a comparative viewpoint of three target groups within the organisation in order to reach as versatile view from the employer brand as possible.

The detailed division of three particular target groups was created by the researcher, but to ensure the most informative results for the study, the division was decided in collaboration with the employer branding manager. Selected by the employer branding manager, all three target groups comprised of employees with an academic educational background.

Recently recruited *young employees* who have been working for the company about a year, still having a fresh reminiscence from the moment of recruiting, served as the first target group. They were assumed to be likely to provide excellent information on how the employer brand image has changed in their minds during the relatively short working period in Nordea. The second target group included *experienced employees* who have been in the company for years. They have internalised the employer brand profoundly and have experience on several changes and renewals inside the company. Lastly, the third group of respondents comprised of *employees who have a working background* from elsewhere within the same or different industry. They were able to provide information on how the employer brand appears in this particular company compared to others. The respondents of the third target group were intentionally chosen to be ones who have switched employer fairly recently, approximately within a year. They have a reasonably fresh memory from the previous employer and therefore were able to give valuable comparative information.

3.4   Data collection

In empiric study, the methods are always in a fundamental position regarding the researcher's work. The choice of method is generally directed by what kind of information is desired (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 184), and therefore the research method should be relevant for answering the research question of the study (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 27). In many qualitative studies, the data is commonly collected via several methods,

the methods being observations, interviews, collecting documents, and audiovisual materials (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 135; Creswell 2009, 179–180). Nevertheless, particularly when conducting a case study, one of the most important sources is the *interview* (Yin 2009, 106). Therefore this specific research concentrated solely on interviews as a best way of collecting data on the subject.

Daniels and Cannice (2004, 185) define an interview-based research study as one where the data and findings are based on direct researcher-to-respondent conversations. Interviews are more of guided conversations rather than structured queries and they are targeted, focusing directly on case study topic (Yin 2009, 102; 106). When collecting interview data, a researcher needs to consider a variety of factors; what kind of information is desired, from whom the information needs to be received, and how many responses are required in order to obtain representative answers. A researcher must also take into account how many interviews can feasibly be undertaken. (Daniels & Cannice 2004, 187.)

It is argued that there are some limitations to an interview as a source of evidence. Firstly, researcher's presence or poorly articulated questions may bias responses. Also, there can be biases from the responses since participants are not equally articulate and perceptive. Finally, the researcher must recognise that interviews provide indirect information filtered through the views of the interviewees in a designated place rather than the natural setting. (Creswell 2009, 179; Yin 2009, 102.)

Despite of the multiple challenges, there are several reasons why an interview is a favourable choice for a research method. Firstly, it should be chosen if the emphasis is on an individual as an active creator of meanings. In the case of Nordea, the employees are vital creators of the employer brand. Also, if it is known beforehand that the research will produce multiple and complex answers, as was the case in this particular research, an interview can be used. (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 205–206.) Finally, an interview should be considered not only because it allows the interviewer to control the line of questioning but also because the participants can provide important historical information on the phenomenon, helping the interviewer to identify other relevant sources of evidence (Creswell 2009, 179; Yin 2009, 108). In this research, respondents' historical information on Nordea as an employer was especially valuable, since the employer brand is largely built on previous perceptions and expectations of the employer.

An interview is a unique research method in a sense that it requires a direct linguistic interaction with the target being researched (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 204; Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008, 49). Interviews in this study were conducted in Finnish since the native language of both the interviewer and the respondent was Finnish. It is also especially important to maintain a good communication with the participants, even if they would be unable to communicate with each other (Scapens 2004, 107). In this particular study, there were employees from several different departments taking part in the study, and it

was important for the interviewer to preserve communications with every respondent regardless of their various backgrounds. The greatest benefit gained from an interview however is generally the flexibility when collecting the data. The order of the subjects of the interview can be easily managed and there are wider possibilities to interpret the answers than in postal inquiries for instance. (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 204–205.)

A themed interview lies in between of a structured and an open interview. A typical feature for a themed interview is that the themes are thought in advance but there is no exact order or form for the questions. Following from the nature of a themed interview, also the nature of the questions is open. Interviews are conducted by interviewing personally a single employee at a time, which is the most common form of interview (Hirsjärvi et al. 2007, 208–210; Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008, 48). When using a themed interview, the most common longitude is from one to two hours (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 211), and in this study the interviews were designated to take approximately one hour. As there were three interviews collected from each target group, altogether there were nine interviews conducted within the company (appendix 1).

Pilot interviews with selected key participants are an essential part of a themed interview and can assist the researcher in a number of ways. The purpose of pilot interviews is to test the structure of the interview, the order of the themes, and the design of the hypothetic questions, which can be changed after the pilot interviews. Pilot interviews allow the researcher to focus on particular areas that may have been unclear previously. Furthermore, they enable the researcher to develop an interviewer-interviewee-relationship with participants as well as to establish effective communications patterns. Pilot interviews reveal also the average length of the interview. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008, 72–73; Janesick 1998, 42–43.)

In this research, the researcher conducted one pilot interview. The interviewed person would have belonged to the third target group, employees who have a working background from elsewhere within the same or different industry, but the respondent was working on the customer interface unlike the respondents belonging to the actual target group. The pilot interview revealed that even though the questions were partly the same as in the final interview, it is the interviewer's responsibility to guide the answers to the desired direction; this pilot interview concentrated too much on external customers instead of the employer itself. It also exposed the lack of logical themes in the interview structure, and in addition, gave useful information on the time-management.

As a result of the pilot interview, the following research operationalisation chart, which enlightens the structure of the research, was created by the researcher (table 1). In addition to background information (theme 0), there were five themes covered in the interviews.

Table 1   Operationalisation of the research

Research question: *How is the employer brand formed in the minds of the current employees?*			
Formal detailed questions	**Theoretical concepts**	**Themes**	**Examples of questions asked**
1. **What kind of perceived image do current employees have of their employer at the moment?**	Employer brand image (Chapter 2.2) Dimensions of the employer brand (Chapter 2.3)	**Theme 0:** Background information	•Position in the workplace •Duration of employment in Nordea
		Theme 1: Current associations about the employer	•What is it like for you to work in Nordea at the moment? •How Nordea's values show in your every day work? •Why did you apply particularly to Nordea when searching for a job?
		Theme 2: Current strengths and weaknesses of the employer	•If you would be asked to recommend Nordea as a place to work, what would you say? •At the moment, what good qualities or strengths does Nordea have as an employer? •At the moment, which weaknesses does Nordea have as an employer?
2. **What kind of expectations do current employees have about their employer?**	Expectations about the employer brand (Chapter 2.4) Dimensions of the employer brand (Chapter 2.3)	**Theme 3:** Previous and future expectations regarding the employer	•Have your previous expectations regarding Nordea as an employer been fulfilled? •What are your future expectations regarding Nordea as an employer? •What could Nordea do better as an employer?
3. **Which measures in the construction of the employer brand should be exploited in order to influence these perceived images and expectations?**	Construction of the employer brand (Chapter 2.5) Dimensions of the employer brand (Chapter 2.3)	**Theme 4:** Current efforts provided by the employer	•Do you feel like you have the tools, resources, and skills to 'get things done' at work? •How does your manager communicate important matters to the team? •Do Nordea's values show in that communication? How?
		Theme 5: Preferred efforts provided by the employer	•What additional efforts from your employer would you prefer? •Are there any efforts you feel are not useful or which could be removed? •Which channels of communication do you prefer at work? Why?

The object of theme zero was to gather background information from the respondents. The purpose of themes one and two was to answer the first detailed research question. The aim of the first theme was to evaluate the current associations and perceptions which the employees hold on the organisation. The second theme was aimed at exploring the current strengths and weaknesses of the company. In the themed interview frame (appendix 2), the questions related to these themes were partly based on Barrow and Mosley's (2005, 49) questions on employer brand image (see chapter 2.2.2).

The purpose of the third theme was to answer the second detailed research question and its aim was to discover the previous and future expectations regarding the em-

ployer. The questions associated to the third theme in the themed interview frame were partially derived from Sartain and Schumann's (2006, 232) questions revealing the functional and emotional expectations of employees (see chapter 2.4). Finally, the purpose of themes four and five was to answer the third detailed research question. Theme four explored the current efforts provided by the employer while theme five involved the preferred efforts provided by the employer. In the themed interview frame, the questions relating to themes four and five concentrated particularly on the different dimensions of the employer brand introduced by Barrow and Mosley (2005, 149–150) (see chapter 2.3), and also on the key issues in communicating the employer brand internally (see chapter 2.5.3). In addition, Barrow and Mosley's dimensions of the employer brand were a relevant part of every detailed research question, and therefore they were present in every theme of the interview frame.

3.5   Analysis of the data

The analysis, interpretation, and drawing conclusions comprise the core of the research (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 221). There are direct links between the chosen research strategy, the types of data collected, the data collection method, and the interpretation methods in a specific research process. In relation to these links, it is important for the researcher to recognise that most qualitative data can be interpreted in different ways. (Andersen & Skaates 2004, 471.) The most popular approach with interviews is to treat the collected answers as describing some external reality, such as facts or events; or internal experience, such as feelings or meanings (Silverman 2005, 154), as in this particular research.

All analysing methods of the qualitative research can be applied also in the case study research. It is however essential to choose those analysing methods which are most suitable for the particular research question and which provide the best answers for the questions posed. (Eriksson & Koistinen 2005, 30.) According to Hirsjärvi et al. (2009, 224), the analysis should be started as soon as possible after the collection of the data. However, it is even more preferable if the analysis is closely connected to data collection during the whole case study research. This helps the theory to develop alongside the growing volume of data, allowing the research problem to be formulated or even reformulated at the same time. (Ghauri 2004, 117.)

Analysing and interpreting qualitative data is perhaps the most difficult task while doing case study research (Ghauri 2004, 117; Yin 2009, 127). Analysis is experienced to be difficult particularly because of the multiplicity of choices and the lack of strict guidelines (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 224). Analysing the data is difficult also because the techniques are still rather poorly developed and have not been well-defined (Yin 2009, 126). Regardless of these challenges, particularly the richness of the material and the

close relation to the reality makes the analysis stage interesting (Hirsjärvi et al. 2007, 220).

According to Yin (2009, 126), all case study analyses should follow a general analytic strategy. Similarly, Ghauri (2004, 117) states that while the analysis of the data may not form an isolated process, nevertheless it does involve some separate stages. The first stage of analysis is to construct a case description and explanation which helps the researcher to understand how things are done and why things occur the way they do (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008, 145; Ghauri 2004, 117). In order to construct a clear case description, every interview of the study in question was transcribed.

The second step of analysis is also a filtering process. This means rearranging the collected data into more conceptual rather than chronological categories. Coding means the searching for common or conflicting concepts and themes in the data, exploring the themes related to the research questions, and then sorting the data according to concepts and themes. This allows the researcher to identify relationships between different themes and research questions and to detect gaps in the data. Clustering means the grouping or categorisation of the data according to common patterns and characteristics. This technique helps the researcher to interpret the data and relate the information to the framework of the study. (Ghauri 2004, 118–119; Creswell 2003, 192–194; Miles & Huberman 1994, 246–248.) According to Creswell (2009, 189), five to seven themes or categories in a research is a suitable amount.

In this particular research, the application of themes through coding and clustering was exercised. As can be seen from the operationalisation chart, there were five actual themes through which the researcher examined the answers; current associations about the employer, current strengths and weaknesses of the employer, previous and future expectations regarding the employer, current efforts provided by the employer, and preferred efforts provided by the employer.

There are also a few other techniques to facilitate the analysing process. Using matrices refers to explaining the interrelationship between identified factors (Ghauri 2004, 118). Matrices involve the crossing of two or more main dimensions or factors to distinguish how they interact. In descriptive analysis, the researcher strives to outline data to discover 'what is there' according to the matrix (Miles & Huberman 1994, 239–240). In this study, a matrix was used when comparing the themes between different target groups (table 2; appendix 3).

According to Ghauri (2004, 121–122), researchers should use a combination of the above-mentioned strategies, but the precise method of analysis depends however on the type of study being undertaken. Regardless of the choice of strategies and techniques, there is a constant challenge to produce high-quality analyses. This in turn requires the researcher to focus all the collected evidence, display and present the evidence thoroughly, and explore alternative explanations. (Yin 2009, 126.) The research is not

nearly ready after the analysis of the data – the results must yet be explained and interpreted. At this stage, the researcher discusses the results of the analysis and draws individual conclusions. The interpretation of the analysis indicates clarifying and arguing the meanings which have occurred in the data analysis. The interpretation means also reflecting the validity of the research. (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 229–230.)

3.6   Evaluation of the research

When conducting a research, all researchers try to avoid occurring errors, and therefore an evaluation of the overall quality of the study should always be conducted (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 231). According to Silverman (2005, 242), a research of good quality satisfies the following four criteria. Firstly, it thinks theoretically through and with data and secondly, it develops empirically sound, reliable and valid findings. Thirdly, it uses methods which are demonstrably appropriate to the research problem, and finally, where possible, it contributes to practice and policy. The concepts generally used to evaluate the quality of the research are validity, reliability and generalisation. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, 291) describe this as 'adopting the classic criteria of good-quality research'. According to Hirsjärvi et al. (2009, 232), validity and reliability have different interpretations in qualitative research, but yet they should be at least somehow examined along every research, even if the exact terms would not be used. In this research, the classic criteria of good-quality research were adopted.

Validity means the compatibility of description and explanations and interpretations attached to it. Validity is another word for truth; the ability to measure exactly what is supposed to be measured. (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 231; Yin 2009, 116; Silverman 2005, 224.) The results of a research are valid only when numerous correct sources of data are reported, when the criteria for including those particular sources of data are provided, and the original form of the materials is available (Silverman 2005, 224). Additionally, the validity of interviews is largely dependent on the questioning and interpretative skills of the interviewer (Dowling 2001, 217).

Andersen and Skaates (2004, 464; 475) claim that it is the exception rather than the rule that qualitative researches include a discussion of validity issues. According to the scholars, there is no single way of validating qualitative research findings, and consequently there exists more than one set of procedures to demonstrate validity. However, according to Yin (2009, 24), particularly the case study approach needs to maximise four conditions related to the quality of the research: construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability. Internal validity – establishing a causal relationship – concerns only explanatory or causal studies and not descriptive studies (Yin 2009, 40), and therefore it was not examined in this chapter.

Construct validity represents the establishing of correct operational measures for the concepts under study. There are three extremely important principles to any data collection effort in doing case studies, and the incorporation of these principles into a case study will increase its quality substantially. The first principle, the use of multiple sources of evidence, means that a researcher should retrieve evidence from two or more sources, yet resulting in the same set of facts or findings. The most important advantage from using multiple sources of evidence is the development of converging lines of inquiry, in other words triangulation. (Yin 2009, 40; 98; 114–116.)

Triangulation refers to the collection of data through different methods or different kinds of data on the same phenomenon (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 233; Yin 2009, 116; Ghauri 2004, 115) and thereby to the attempt to get a truthful understanding of a situation (Silverman 2005, 212). The main advantage of triangulation is that it can produce a more complete, holistic and contextual description of the object under study. In essence, triangulation is used to reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation. (Ghauri 2004, 115.) There are four different types of triangulation methods; research data triangulation, researcher triangulation, theory triangulation, and methodological triangulation (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 233; Yin 2009, 116; Eriksson & Koistinen 2005, 42). According to Flick (2006, 389), it must be remembered that research data triangulation is distinct from the use of different methods for producing data. In this research, a research data triangulation was used by gathering data from three different target groups within a single organisation.

The second principle of construct validity, the use of a case study database, requires a formal assembly of evidence which is distinct from the final case study report. Every case study project should strive to develop a formal, presentable database, so that other researchers, at least in principle, can review the evidence directly and not be limited to the written case study reports. (Yin 2009, 98; 119.) In order to develop a clear database for this study, each interview was recorded, transcribed, and moreover, all the emails and other relevant correspondence were stored.

Finally, the principle of using a chain of evidence means that there should be explicit links between the questions asked, the data collected, and the conclusions drawn. The principle is to allow an external observer – in this situation, the reader of the research – to follow the sources of any evidence, ranging from initial research questions to final case study conclusions. (Yin 2009, 98; 122–123.) In order to ensure this information to be as accessible as possible, the researcher formulated an operationalisation chart which clarifies that the detailed research questions are in line with the theoretical concepts and selected themes and furthermore, there are questions relating to every theme in the interview. Also, no original evidence should have been lost through carelessness or bias (Yin 2009, 123). For instance if data have been recorded using technical device, as in the study, the transcription is a necessary phase on the way to interpretation (Flick 2006,

288). For that reason, the transcription was conducted by the researcher, and furthermore, the transcribed text was read through multiple times.

External validity indicates whether the findings of the study can be *generalised*. In particular in single-case studies, as in this particular study, this means that the researcher creates a theoretical framework through which he or she strives to generalise a particular set of results to some broader theory. (Yin 2009, 40–43.) In this research, a framework of the formation of the employer brand was created in order to see the results of the empirical study in the light of the previous theoretical discussion. However, since every organisation has an individually characterised, unique employer brand, the exact empirical results cannot be generalised to other companies, even within the same industry.

Reliability refers to the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different researchers or by the same researcher in different occasions (Silverman 2005, 224). In other words, reliability means that the operations of a study, such as the data collection procedures, can be repeated with the same results (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 231; Yin 2009, 40; Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008, 186). The objective of reliability is to be sure that if a later researcher followed the same procedures and conducted the exact study again, he should arrive at the same findings and conclusions as the earlier researcher. Naturally, the goal of reliability is to minimise the errors and biases in the study. (Yin 2009, 40–45.)

For reliability to be calculated it is essential for the researcher to precisely describe and document the procedure and to demonstrate that different categories have been used consistently. The preciseness must cover all stages of the study; the conditions in producing the data, the time used in the interviews, explanation for classifications made, and the analysis of the data (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 232; Silverman 2005, 224). To indicate the precise description of this study, all the classifications made were explained thoroughly. The research procedure was documented by storing all the emails and other relevant correspondence, and furthermore, by carefully recording and transcribing each interview. Moreover, to demonstrate that the information gathered from different target groups have been utilised consistently, the empirical results were analysed in detail by indicating clearly the division between the answers of the three target groups.

4 INTERNAL EMPLOYER BRAND IN NORDEA

4.1 Introduction of the case organisation Nordea

4.1.1 The organisation and Nordea value house

Nordea is the leading financial services group in the Nordic and Baltic Sea area. By providing a wide range of products, services and solutions within banking, asset management and insurance, Nordea strives to guarantee that its customers reach their goals. Nordea has roughly 10 million customers, approximately 1400 branch offices and a leading netbanking position in the Nordic area with 5.1 million e-customers. Nordea is present in 19 countries and the Nordea share is listed on the OMX Nordic Exchange in Stockholm, Helsinki and Copenhagen. (Nordea Ltd.: About Nordea; Nordea Ltd.: Corporate & Institutional.)

Nordea has, since its inception in 2000, always been focused on values. Traditional values in the Nordic region are much focused on community, good citizenship and caring for people and the environment. These are the ideas that Nordea brings to the cultural heritage it has built, and yet is constantly developing, its business on. In order to illustrate its core of business, Nordea has established a 'value house' (figure 3). (Nordea Ltd.: Values; Nordea Ltd.: Corporate statement.)

Figure 3   Nordea value house (Nordea Ltd.: Corporate statement)

The foundation to Nordea's operations is profit orientation: cost, risk and capital. Simultaneously, these are Nordea's old, 'hard' values. Particularly in the times of the global financial crisis, the foundation of the value house must be stable in order for the entire house to stand on solid ground. Next to the old values construct the company's new, 'softer' values. These current values originate from a survey conducted among Nordea's personnel during winter 2006–2007. The survey explored the personnel's views on Nordea's values and corporate culture, and based on the results of the survey, the new values were established in spring 2007. (Nordea Ltd.: Corporate statement; Räsänen, unrecorded conversation 8.6.2009; Räsänen, e-mail response 8.6.2009.)

The organisation has altogether twelve value statements which fall into three different categories: 'Great customer experience', 'It's all about people', and 'One Nordea team' (Nordea Ltd.: Corporate statement). According to the employer branding manager of Nordea Finland, these values have had a good response among the company's personnel (Räsänen, e-mail response 8.6.2009).

Nordea's vision is 'to be the leading Nordic bank, acknowledged for its people, creating superior value for customers and shareholders'. Finally, the mission of the organisation is 'making it possible'. (Nordea Ltd.: Corporate statement.) All these components together create a value house for Nordea. Working according to the values must be constantly taken care of, and therefore they are measured by annual follow-up surveys, and moreover, the top management links regularly their business decisions to the values. The values have been imbedded inside the organisation in order to make them a permanent part of every employee's day-to-day work. (Räsänen, e-mail response 8.6.2009.)

4.1.2   Employer brand in Nordea

The Nordea brand is built on the two components: Nordic and Ideas. These components reflect what the company is and what it desires to be. (Nordea Ltd.: Values.) Nordea has a master brand strategy, and the Nordea logo with the symbol is the brand used for all its products and services in all markets. A master brand strategy supports the consistent delivery of financial services across the main markets. Nordea's success depends on the ability to act as one bank with common processes, corporate values, direction and objectives, and a common brand is a cornerstone of this approach. Nordea believes that the brand will be stronger by a simpler and consistent brand structure. Therefore a master brand strategy for Nordea is the best way to support the business and to create added value for the stakeholders. (Nordea Ltd.: Brand and intangibles.)

The systematic utilisation of the employer brand is fairly new in Nordea, recognised during summer 2008. The establishment of the employer branding team concerns the whole corporation: there is a person in charge of the employer brand in every Nordic

country. The employer branding activities are divided in two; activities which maintain the existing employer brand and activities which develop the employer brand. The daily work includes driving and participating in different projects and promotions as well as planning of numerous fairs and cooperation with several target groups, such as university students or recently graduated young academics. Furthermore, the concept being somewhat new-found in Nordea, no spontaneous feedback from the employees concerning the employer brand has yet been evolved. Therefore the internal target group of current employees is of special interest for Nordea, and the company can learn greatly from this particular group of employees. (Räsänen, unrecorded conversation 29.9.2008; Räsänen, unrecorded conversation 8.6.2009.)

During autumn 2008, an international consulting firm Universum conducted an annual employer image measurement survey among Finnish young professionals, meaning recently graduated young academics who have one to eights years of working experience related to their educational background. The research resulted in Nordea being the eleventh most attractive employer in business category in Finland, which is a noticeably good accomplishment at the times of the global financial crisis. (Pulkkinen 2008, B2.) In The Universum Finnish Student Survey 2008, Nordea was placed as the third most attractive employer among academic students in business category, and in the same survey in 2009, Nordea was placed fourth. Besides the external researches, Nordea conducts also annually internal work atmosphere measurement, which is called Employee Satisfaction Index (ESI). (Räsänen, unrecorded conversation 29.9.2008; Räsänen, unrecorded conversation 8.6.2009; The Universum Finnish Student Survey 2009.)

In Nordea, HR, marketing and communication departments strive for intense cooperation between these areas of expertise. The recently established employer branding team is one part of the Nordea Group's HR function, and more closely, Staffing function. Regardless of the employer branding being an individual team, it is very closely aligned with marketing and communications departments and cooperates constantly in these areas. (Räsänen, unrecorded conversation 29.9.2008; Räsänen, unrecorded conversation 8.6.2009.)

4.2   Perceived employer brand image

In this research, there were five actual themes through which the researcher aimed to explore the employer brand. In this chapter, the first two themes are explored. The first theme concerned current associations which the employees have about Nordea and the second theme the strengths and the weaknesses Nordea possesses in the minds of the employees. The aim of the first and the second themes was to discover what kind of employer brand image the current employees have of their employer and in addition,

which dimensions of the employer brand (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 149–150) can be identified among Nordea's employees. Furthermore, the ultimate aim of the themes one and two was to answer the first detailed research question.

4.2.1 Current associations, strengths and weaknesses of Nordea

The employer brand image is considered to be the current associations which different stakeholders hold regarding the brand (Aaker & Joachimsthaler 2002, 40; Keller 2003, 458). It is the result of the interaction of all experiences, beliefs, feelings, knowledge and impressions of each stakeholder of an organisation (Pelsmacker et al. 2007, 17; Dowling 2001, 19). *Young employees* appeared to have relatively good employer brand image of Nordea. When asking how it feels to work in Nordea at the moment, the general answer was that Nordea is a good place to work. This question, where the employees are asked to describe the company they work for, is one of the essential things to be considered when examining the employer brand image (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 49). The images about the word 'Nordea' as well as the images about Nordea as an employer evoked a lot of discussion about the Nordic heritage and the international operation of the company. The origin of the word Nordea, 'Nordic Ideas', was generally known, and respondents felt that it reflects well the content of Nordea's existence. Also the characteristic of trustworthiness was mentioned several times.

Barrow and Mosley (2005, 49) also stress that when employer brand image is under observation, it is important to ask why employees choose to join the organisation. Interestingly, when discussing about the reasons why young employees had applied to Nordea, two of the respondents told that the process had initiated by accidence. However, all of the interviewees expressed positive features about Nordea which related to the applying itself, such as an interesting work task, the multiple opportunities inside the company, and the internationality. One of the respondents answered that Nordea's good image was purely the most attractive attribute which inspired to apply:

> *Just because of the image, because I knew, and I've been [working] in Nordea before.*

Experienced employees did not say any less of their employer. All of the respondents reacted well when asking how it feels to work in Nordea. One of the interviewees said to be proud of being a 'Nordea member'. According to Ind (2007, 15), in product branding, it is necessary to present consumers a label for the product. When it comes to employer branding, the name of the company Nordea, corresponding for the 'label' in product branding, provoked interesting discussion with experienced employees. A notable fact was that one of the experienced employees saw the history of Nordea as strength, when asked to describe the images provoked by the word 'Nordea'. In contrast

to the young employees' fairly unanimous answers, there were some differences between experienced employees. One of the respondents argued that the word 'Nordea' provokes images of stable, but yet conservative and careful corporation. On the contrary, another respondent answered to the same question that Nordea is modern and dynamic. It is rather natural for an employee who has worked a long time for one company to say that the company is stable and conservative. Also, the expression of almost opposite characteristics may be an indication of the respondents' own personalities or feelings towards the organisation. For example, if the respondent has experienced challenging organisational changes, he could have therefore paid special attention dynamic elements of the company. The fact that experienced employees characterised Nordea by adjectives, which is characteristic for employer brand personality (Keller 2003, 86), shows that Nordea's employer brand personality reflects also to its employer brand image and consequently there is a detectable continuum between those components.

The question of why employees may choose to leave the organisation is one of the crucial issues when examining the employer brand (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 49). Experienced employees were in particular asked whether they have ever considered switching the employer and furthermore, and if they have not, what are the reasons for staying in Nordea. All of the respondents admitted to have considered it, but none of them had truly done concrete actions in order to leave the organisation. The feeling of knowing already all there is to know, and being too competent for one work task were heavy reasons for considering the change. However, the most common reasons for staying with the same employer were continuity and the ability to find yet a new, intriguing task within the company.

> *…there comes the feeling, that 'I can do this and there is nothing new about this', and then you start to see what other possibilities there would be. But then there has always appeared a new opportunity from inside the company, and then the choice has been easy...* (Experienced employee)

One of the respondents mentioned that basically, the only reason to stay in Nordea was that the interviewee was actually cared about in the company.

Also *employees with different backgrounds* were generally quite content with their employer. However, compared to the two other target groups, this particular group seemed to be clearly more unsatisfied with their employer. When asked how it feels to work in Nordea, there was a little hesitation from one answerer, whereas two other respondents were relatively neutral with their answers. Nordea was described as a dynamic corporation, and again Nordic stood out. One of the respondents stated that the word Nordea itself is easy for people to say and that it is very positive by spirit. However, one of the respondents argued that based on the recent organisational changes in Nordea the workload is very heavy, and that it is difficult to prioritise tasks. Therefore,

according to the interviewee, there is always something that will not get done properly. From this answer it can be interpreted that the two components of the employer brand image, cognitive and emotional (Dowling 2001, 20–21), do not meet in the mind of the interviewee. The cognitive component, in this case the workload, is not satisfactory and therefore influences negatively the emotional component of the employer brand image, making the employee feel inadequate.

One interesting matter which was emphasised in the interviews with employees with different backgrounds was that they immediately brought upon their expectations regarding the current work, and whether those had been fulfilled. The employer brand may disappoint employees if what they actually experience differs significantly from what they believe they are promised (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 156), but with employees with different backgrounds, this phenomenon was not noticeable. One of the answerers said not to have had any particularly vast negative surprises. Another answerer said to have quite precisely known what to expect when joining the company, and that those expectations have been met by the organisation so far.

When asking from employees with different backgrounds the reasons why they applied for Nordea, the answers varied. One of the respondents was offered a position from Nordea, one of them was discovered by a head-hunter, and one applied spontaneously because of the developing turbulence within the previous employer:

> And certainly for me – these are of course matters of images – the most obvious option was Nordea.

However, from all of the respondents' sayings, it could be figured that they accepted the current position because they had a good image of Nordea as an employer. This can also be the result of a favourable employer brand reputation which, according to Sartain and Schumann (2006, 45), is the most important in attracting new recruits. As opposed to the employer brand image, reputation is a lens through which every person interested in the organisation view every experience they have with the organisation (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 46). The interviewer decided to ask also from two of the employees with different backgrounds whether they have already thought about switching the employer. Both of the answerers said that they have not actually been considering switching the employer. However, the other one of the respondents did say to have considered switching into other tasks inside the company.

When discussing the current strengths of Nordea, clearly a number of categories arose. The main strengths which *young employees* appreciated the most were international cooperation across borders, the opportunity to switch job description as well as proceeding in one's own career, and finally the possibility to do versatile tasks. As Barrow and Mosley (2005, 158) state, training and career development are of crucial importance to employee engagement and the strength of the employer brand. Interestingly, *experienced employees* saw that despite of the long working experience in Nordea,

while they still need to develop themselves, it is yet possible. In addition, one of the respondents considered the strengths of Nordea from a viewpoint of younger workers. The respondent believed that the ultimate strength for the younger employees would be internationality.

Employees with different backgrounds stated versatile areas of strengths. Nordea was said to be a secure and safe employer. The company was claimed to be flexible with the employees' working time which, according to one respondent, is especially important at the difficult financial times when workers are pushed to their limits with the working endurance. This tells that Nordea's employer brand concentrates on the total working experience; the way in which the employees are inspired and motivated (Rogers 2003, 34). Also, the details that Nordea is a solvent organisation and that it has the ability to make investments during the financial crisis, were mentioned as strengths.

As an employer, there were also weaknesses in Nordea identified by *young employees*. As stated by Kotler and Keller (2009, 56), particularly large organisations are subject to inertia. Thus, perhaps the most common flaw was bureaucracy which was generally assumed to be a result of the enormous organisation of Nordea. Other aspects mentioned were cultural differences experienced despite of the geographical proximity of the Nordic countries, and the Nordea corporate brand being slightly distant to customers as Nordea is still perceived as a business-to-business bank:

> *[Nordea] is maybe not so warm, when compared to the other businesses which are easy to approach.*

Also *experienced employees* named bureaucracy and the miscellaneous ways of operating as weaknesses. On the contrary, however, one of the respondents argued that when changing the perspective a little, one can again view those weaknesses as positive features. The internationality of Nordea arose also as a negative aspect, because it was claimed to bring slowness in every-day operations. Another interesting fact was that one of the respondents experienced the internationality as a difficulty factor. Here the difference between young and experienced employees may be spotted; experienced employees do not necessarily see the international operations as much as an opportunity as their younger colleagues. Perhaps language barriers, extra travelling and other inconveniences are the reason for this perception. No different from the other two target groups, one of the respondents from the *employees with different backgrounds* saw bureaucracy as a weakness. This was revealed from a claim saying that the making of compromises and general slowness is common in the company. Also the poor adaptation to the organisational changes and the fast working pace were seen as the main weaknesses of Nordea.

4.2.2   Relevant dimensions of the employer brand

The dimensions of the employer brand can be divided into two categories, the first relating to wider organisational context and policy and the second relating to local context and practice. The dimensions relating to organisational context, used in this particular research, are internal communication, senior leadership, values, and internal measurement systems. The dimensions relating to local context, used in this research, are recruitment and induction, team management, performance appraisal, learning and development, reward and recognition, and working environment. (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 149–150.)

Ind (2007, 24) states that the best means of developing a brand which has a high degree of relevance and consistency is to ensure that the employees understand and believe in the values of their organisation. With *young employees*, the values appeared really strongly and they created a lot of discussion with all of the respondents. Values have to come from the essence of the organisation and they have to be lived sincerely (Ind 2007, 24). This occurred in the three values of Nordea; they seemed to be really internalised among young employees, and they appeared to affect their work sincerely. All of the respondents disclosed the value 'One Nordea team' and the internal communication as a critical value and also as a challenge for Nordea to yet improve. Additionally, 'Great customer experience' was told to be somewhat a challenge for Nordea, and particularly one of the young employees considered the company to be yet slightly cold for an individual consumer and to be more of a large distant institution.

In their definition of employer brand, Sartain and Schumann (2006, vi) stress the significance of values by stating that the employer brand is created by how a company builds its identity from its origins and values. The importance of this argument became apparent with *experienced employees* discussing the values of Nordea. Interviewees were generally under the impression that the values are now taken into consideration more seriously than in a long time. Two of the three respondents raised the subject about how the company has managed to root the values in every level of operation. One of the experienced employees argued that, for instance regarding the value 'It's all about people', there does sometimes evolve moments of lack of faith:

> *But regarding that, I think our HR executive said very eloquently, that it does not mean 'it's all about me', but instead it means that when we give something, we get something.*

Again with *employees with different backgrounds*, values were brought upon in a positive light. One of the respondents stated that in Nordea, also difficult things are attempted to do according to the values and that, in turn, shows especially well how the values are appreciated within the company. According to Barrow and Mosley (2005, 121), it is often tempting for the management to dictate what the values should be, but

in Nordea's case, this did not seem to be an issue. Employees with different backgrounds discussed that the employer genuinely supports the current values, which actually originate from Nordea's own personnel's views on company's values and corporate culture (Räsänen, e-mail response 8.6.2009). However, one statement within this particular target group claimed that the values might not show in every-day working environment and that some values may be stressed more than others. Therefore it can be asked whether Barrow and Mosley's (2005, 120) claim of relevance and meaningfulness of the values is supported, when they state that employees are far more likely to believe that the values are authentic if the values are reflected in their own experience of the organisation. However, there can be such further argument posed that it is not necessary for values to be physically present all the time in employees' every-day work. Values can be mostly unconscious among employees, and thus it does not mean that they would not be properly implemented in the company. In other words, values can be identified within the employees' every-day behaviour even if they are not purposefully communicated constantly.

Senior leadership has the most critical roles in both reinforcing the credibility and conveying the character of the employer brand (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 152). On the one hand, it was clearly reflected from the *young employees'* sayings that while the work of the senior management does reflect to their every-day work, it is still slightly distant to them. However, it was identified that the general guidelines naturally come from the senior management.

> *I feel that it is actually a very big factor how they [senior management] act. Because how they [act], it then sets the example, and then others start to follow from there.* (Young employee)

The main objective of team managers should be the offering of such motivators to their employees which activate them, commit them to their jobs, and encourages them to work in a desired way (Mackay 2007, 29). Regarding team management, *young employees* really seemed to appreciate their closest superiors. It was generally said that their current superiors are extremely hard-working and excited about their own work, and that it reflects positively also to young employees' work. On the other hand, *experienced employees* considered their own superiors more as sparring partners and discussion companions than actual bosses. This shows that at least for experienced employees, team management had succeeded in exploiting the motivating measures in the individual level (Mackay 2007, 29). It was said that the closest managers take their work very seriously and are passionate about their careers. Also the senior management was seen as quite an important influence on one's every-day work.

Moreover, *employees with different backgrounds* seemed to emphasise the good reflectivity of their own superiors' work and their own work, which, according to Mackay (2007, 29), helps the employees to feel that their work tasks are appreciated and also get

rewarded from them. It was also said that the top management seems to be extremely committed to their work and that there is trust towards them among the employees. One of the employees with different backgrounds argued that there could be a clearer view about the reflection between the work of the nearest superior and respondent's own work. The respondent explained that they do work closely together, and do almost same work tasks, but nonetheless, the superior's work does not reflect positively to the respondent's work:

> *I feel like we go a little by extinguishing fires, and of course it reflects to one's own work, so that one cannot necessarily execute own tasks as systematically as one would want.*

Finally, in regards to recruitment and induction, an important factor brought upon from one of the *young employees* was that Nordea should pursue to be better in identifying the recently recruited talents and to further educate and develop them. As emphasised by Barrow and Mosley (2005, 155), the recruitment process is increasingly being tailored to identify the types of potential employees who will have a natural affinity with the brand values of the company. The young employee said to know that Nordea has a lot of potential in their workers, but that sometimes they get overlooked. According to the interviewee, this would benefit the employees since they would feel more motivated and, consequently, also the company would benefit from the employees' motivation.

4.3   Expectations about the employer

The third theme of the research comprised the future expectations which the employees have about their employer, in other words, the expected employer brand image. Theme in question also included discussion about the earlier expectations which employees might have had regarding Nordea, and whether those expectations had been fulfilled. The goal of the third theme was to explore further the dimensions of the employer brand (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 149–150) and moreover, to see whether the benefits of the employer brand meet the expected employer brand image which Nordea's employees have of their employer. Furthermore, the ultimate goal of the theme three was to answer the second detailed research question.

4.3.1   *Previous and future expectations regarding Nordea*

In order to meet the expectations of employees, an employer brand promises a specific functional and emotional experience at each touch point with the employer brand. What

the employee as an internal stakeholder expects when joining the company, will fundamentally differ from what is essential later in the career. (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 38, 159.) In general, the former expectations which recently recruited *young employees* might have had about the employer have been fulfilled. According to Sartain and Schumann (2006, 232), in order to reveal the functional expectations of the employees, a relevant question is whether the employees, once they have been recruited, believe that they can get things done in the company. When discussing about the future expectations, one of the interviewees emphasised that the development of better working tools would be essential. The respondent claimed that in order to share information, more tools are needed, and in addition, employees must also be educated to use them. Despite of the general satisfaction towards the international atmosphere in Nordea, one respondent hoped for an international aspect for one's currently domestically biased work. Another respondent had an important expectation of having time to stop and discuss with one's colleagues about the work itself:

> *…the stopping, even though it is considered not to be productive, but there can be ideas or this creative thinking or whatever it is. That producing can be something else than the financial producing.*

Regarding *experienced employees,* the previous expectations about the employer were also mainly fulfilled, even though they had not particularly preoccupied themselves on thinking about the previous expectations. This may be a consequence of the experienced employees' long career within the same organisation and getting overly accustomed to certain work task life cycles which, in turn, can be resulting in the lack of interest when considering one's expectations towards the employer.

An interesting topic with experienced employees was again the notion of the financial sector's multicoloured history. In particular, one of the respondents said not to have actually chosen Nordea as an employer, but solely by staying in the company over the years – and through multiple mergers and acquisitions – the respondent had eventually become Nordea's employee. Another respondent claimed also not to have created purposefully a certain kind of career, but instead opportunities had simply arisen to different kinds of new tasks. Thus, it can be asked whether Nordea has managed to tell its compelling and novel story to the employees in such way which convinces them of the reality of what Nordea has to offer (Martin et al. 2005, 79). Despite of these facts however, all of the respondents said to have their previous expectations fulfilled.

In regards to the future expectations, experienced employees mentioned the security about one's own work position and yet further development of one's own expertise. This reveals that the employee's trust towards the company as a place to work is an important factor when discussing the functional expectations of the employees (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 232). When asking about what Nordea could do better in the future as an employer, there were not many issues distressing experienced employees. One of the

respondents however raised an essential topic of organisational changes. Particularly in large organisations, it is difficult to change one component without adjusting everything else (Kotler & Keller 2009, 56).

> *...when we move the other end of the carpet, we do not realise that the other end moves also.* (Employee with different background)

According to the respondent, the changes in Nordea are normally done in such fast cycles that they are not the best solutions when considering an 'ordinary' employee. The respondent reminded that in organisational changes, all the pieces of the puzzle must be taken into consideration in order to make the changes as employee-friendly as possible.

As revealed already in chapter 4.2.1, *employees with different backgrounds* had their expectations about Nordea on top of mind when switching the employer, and therefore those thoughts were brought upon already in an early stage of the interview. When more detailed questions about the expectations were asked, the previous statements were confirmed; the respondents felt that their expectations had mostly been fulfilled. One respondent stated that the central expectation was to get into a more dynamic working environment and that the interviewee feels the work is now much more motivating, rewarding and versatile. This can be a result of the nature of the work itself rather than the employer brand. Nevertheless, as stated by Martin et al. (2005, 79), Nordea has managed to convince the employee of the reality what Nordea actually has to offer, and this reflects that the employees' expectations have been successfully met with the help of employer branding.

Another employee with different background claimed that the expectations were only partly fulfilled. On the one hand, the interviewee had expected internationality and new areas of improvement, which had actualised. On the other hand, the respondent had expected to be more able to influence matters and to be involved in the decision making at work which, in turn, had been a disappointment. This may be an indication of the unsuccessful implementation of the total working experience with this particular employee (Rogers 2003, 34); the employee has not felt that the infrastructure of Nordea has reinforced the employee's experience of being motivated and recognised in the company.

Regarding the future expectations about the employer, employees with different backgrounds appreciated generally new options and possibilities relating to one's own work, and further self-development as well as the development of the service offering of Nordea in general. These attributes could be described as inspirational qualities of Nordea's employer brand, and the target group in question seems to believe in those attributes, which in turn reveals that there are relatively high emotional expectations from the employees in regards to the employer brand (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 232).

4.3.2   *Relevant dimensions of the employer brand*

A number of the dimensions of the employer brand (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 149–150) can also be identified when discussing the expectations which employees place on their employer.

In regards to future expectations with *young employees*, the absolute most common attribute was learning and development, and more in detail, the further development of oneself as an employee. Today, the emergence of regular development and extension of the employees' skills have enabled the employees to pursue more their own career development (McKeown 2002, 120), and this could be quite noticeably seen from the target group's opinions. Young employees were clearly requiring more challenges in their future work; one of the respondents mentioned a manager position and another respondent an international position as well as educational possibilities.

Recognition was identified by one of the young employees in an interesting manner. The respondent said that generally in the future, there could be more attention paid towards individuals, even though in the respondent's own team the situation was fairly satisfying. The answerer also mentioned that this form of recognition should be rooted into the working culture:

> *…it must be embedded into lowest level of work and that one will be awarded when succeeding, and maybe celebrate more those successes. We are here in Finland a little poor at that...*

One of the young employees raised also performance appraisals as a critical feature in influencing one's future expectations. The feedback in the appraisal should be challenging and practical, which is important for employees in regards to both their personal and career development (McKeown 2002, 162–163; Fields 2001, 211). The interviewee told that in the performance appraisal, the closest superior had discussed about other opportunities for the respondent also from outside Nordea. This particular appraisal had enhanced the respondent's appreciation towards the superior, and naturally it had given the respondent also new views about the future in the working environment. This also shows that the superior has trust in the employees, and that introducing other options does not automatically mean that the employee will desire to switch employer.

Employees do not find it motivating to be appraised by a manager who cannot perform the appraisal accordingly (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 157; McKeown 2002, 161). Unfortunately however, this occurred during one badly failed performance appraisal with an *experienced employee*. The employee was told by a former superior, that the respondent can never be in a significant position at work because the respondent has started as a summer intern in Nordea. At that minute the respondent started to search for new positions inside the company and switched the task. Despite of the fact that this had happen several years ago, it shows that unsatisfactory experiences stay in mind for a

long time and affect the employee's future expectations. Thus, the employer brand can severely disappoint employees if what they experience differs significantly from what they believe they are promised (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 158). In this case, the unsuccessful appraisal experience had affected in a positive manner, but it can also diminish the employee's motivation and discourage him from working efficiently. Therefore performance appraisals are extremely important.

Also opportunities for learning and development can be extremely important modifiers of the expectations of the employee. According to Barrow and Mosley (2005, 158), most employees believe their employers could yet significantly improve learning and development offering. One of the experienced employees was once told:

> *You are damn good, actually you are the best in Finland, but because you do not have a university degree, we cannot assign you into any executive positions.*

When hearing this comment, the experienced employee decided to strive for more education in order to meet the expectations of the employer. After accomplishing this goal, the expectations had suddenly turned another way around; now the employee had expectations of the employer to provide the employee with a better position.

Reward and recognition was one subject which could be recognised within expectations of experienced employees. One of the interviewees introduced a wish about the coherent relation between one's own input for work, and career development, financial reward, freedom to operate, or offering educational opportunities. According to the respondent, these links should be logic and correlative. The same views are reflected in McKeown's (2002, 80) statement, which claims that a good reward package should provide the tools to allow employees clearly establish whether they have achieved their goals. In addition, a reward package must include such motivational elements – incentives, bonuses, and advantages for instance – which motivate employees not only occasionally, but regularly. Finally, talent management was brought upon when discussing the future expectations as well as the options what the employer could do better in the future. One of the respondents of experienced employees was particularly concerned about the usage of talent management, which is a new dimension in Nordea's People Strategy. The employee hoped that Nordea would genuinely take advantage of the potential of the company's ten thousands of employees in the future by pooling them – regardless of the network those employees belong to – according to their competences and skills.

Again, learning and development was particularly emphasised in the answers of the *employees with different backgrounds*. One of the respondents said to be particularly interested in the development of one's own business knowledge in the future. The reason for the employee to experience it so positively was that the superior had discussed about the subject with the respondent already in the job interview. Therefore the em-

ployee felt that one's needs are taken seriously in Nordea. Additionally, one of the employees with different backgrounds emphasised the importance of the possibility of switching tasks without switching the employer:

> *I wish I could stay in the company for a long time, to take advantage of the benefits of the big company. … I think the point is that if you feel like you want to apply for new tasks, you do not have to search for a new employer, so that is pretty nice.*

One of the things the employer could do better in the future, according to the employees with different backgrounds, was associated with reward. As McKeown (2002, 80) argues, reward is essentially a satisfier, not a motivator for employees, and adjusting it has only a temporary effect on the employee. In particular one of the respondents stressed, that compared to the previous job, the monetary benefits in the current work are minor. According to the employee, if one is used to getting vast monetary benefits and then those are taken away, they will naturally be longed for. However, the respondent admitted that the realities must be considered; a large organisation such as Nordea cannot provide those kinds of benefits for every employee – the costs would simply be too high.

4.4 Measures in the construction of the employer brand to influence the images and the expectations

Theme four discussed about the current efforts which Nordea takes in order to enhance the employer identity and consequently to influence the employees' images and expectations, and theme five respectively the preferred efforts the employees desire Nordea to provide. The objective of the fourth and fifth themes was to find clues about the measures in the construction of the employer brand in Nordea with the support of the employer brand dimensions (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 149–150). Furthermore, the ultimate objective of the themes four and five was to answer the third detailed research question.

4.4.1 *Current and preferred efforts provided by Nordea*

The employer brand is about a relationship between the organisation and its personnel. Employees must be able to understand why their contribution is essential to their employer's success. (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 23–24, 40–41.) Therefore, the construction of a strong employer brand requires a careful and professional process (Johnson & Roberts 2006, 40). Overall, *young employees* perceived the current efforts provided by the employer fairly positive. All of the respondents felt that they have the resources to

get their work done properly. This was an important question posed by Sartain and Schumann (2006, 232), revealing the functional experiences of employees. However, especially interesting was that in one of the interviews there was discussion about the future employees of Nordea. As Sartain and Schumann (2006, 38) argue, employer brand makes a promise to future employees. The respondent argued that in the future, when five or ten years younger employees apply for a job, they do not see Nordea as a desirable employer unless the company invests in facilitating the work, particularly when it comes to virtual tools.

In discussion about the preferred efforts provided by Nordea, it was particularly interesting that young employees were unanimous on the fact that the enhancement of the general working conditions depends largely on oneself. They felt that if being active, one can achieve a lot, and it is not solely the responsibility of the employer to, for example, offer educational possibilities or other benefits.

> *…it is of course largely dependent on me, what kind of benefits I can bring to others... I have not used all that potential yet.* (Young employee)

Furthermore, in one interview it turned out that the young employee felt not being able to exploit thoroughly one's own potential from the studying background. The respondent wished to integrate more theoretical knowledge into practical work, but noted also, that it should be initiated by the employee itself.

The motivation to truly live the brand requires a more general commitment to an organisation (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 71), and this commitment appeared to be actualised with *experienced employees.* In general, the target group considered the current efforts provided by the employer being at a reasonably good level. When talking about the benefits and conditions of work currently, the overall atmosphere of the interviews was very positive. In addition, experienced employees could not name too many efforts which should be added into the current benefits. One of the respondents even said that it sounds 'bad' how satisfied the employee actually is at the moment. This basically indicates that the employees do not further demand much of their employer, and that the efforts the employer provides currently are in decent level.

One possible improvement which was discovered during the interviews with experienced employees concerned the well-being of the employees and, more precisely, that more proactive actions should be taken in order to enhance the well-being of the workforce. It is indeed a relevant concern, since the employer brand must reflect the stages of an employee's work and life (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 192). For example, one respondent who was concerned about the subject suggested that employer should provide more financial support towards physical exercising to motivate older employees to take care of their physical condition. This is a valid argument, since the employer brand must frame the efforts the organisation offers to address each stage of an employee's work

and life, and each effort must address two dimensions of an employee's experience – the emotional and the functional (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 192–193).

Another respondent argued that in regards to financial benefits, Nordea has a fairly conservative course of action compared to other organisations, and in addition, that the relation between one's job performance and compensation is not always consistent. Indeed, according to Mackay (2007, 117), most employees do not believe that there is a clear relationship between their salary and the job performance. The respondent wished for more imagination when providing benefits for employees in the future, but did not suggest any concrete improvements. However, the respondent continued the argument by saying that the benefits do vary also inside the corporation, depending on the individual's organisational position and on the company the person is working for.

With *employees with different backgrounds*, the general response to the current efforts provided by the employer was not particularly positive, but more neutral. This may be an indication of the fourth stage of Sartain and Schumann's (2006, 159–192) employer-employee relationship. In this stage, where new recruits joins the organisation, they will notice several crucial factors, for example, whether their actual experience of the company is consistent with the employer brand, and whether this experience promotes the employer brand. Two of respondents implied that they do not have the resources to do one's work properly, because there is too much work load for one person. On the contrary, the third respondent said that apart from the momentarily slow decision-making within Nordea, the interviewee does have the resources to get the required work done.

When asking about the preferred efforts provided by the employer, employees with different backgrounds also raised the wish of supporting the well-being of employees as one issue. Also flexible working time and remote work were underlined. Indeed, in today's fast-paced working environment, employers who desire to be successful in retaining employees need to explore a variety of work arrangements with the workforce; for example, job sharing, flexible scheduling, and compressed work weeks (Fields 2001, 263). Additionally, language courses and joint events at the workplace were mentioned:

> *At least with us, those [events] are not like 'let's go somewhere and loosen up', in order to detach from the work environment. ...it could be more... Nothing extreme, but just to have a sauna night or something.*

One of the interviewees wished for some kind of acknowledgement from the employer's side, even if it was a small Christmas gift. Again however, another respondent said not to require any other benefits besides the current ones.

4.4.2 *Relevant dimensions of the employer brand*

In regards to the current and preferred efforts provided by the employer, nearly all of the Barrow and Mosley's (2005, 149–150) dimensions of the employer brand are relevant. These dimensions were covered quite thoroughly in the interviews, and numerous varying opinions regarding the different dimensions emerged.

Among *young employees*, there were several efforts from the employer which were experienced currently as encouraging factors. For instance, the education offering and the possibility to attend to educational events when desired as well as the switching of work tasks were praised. However, one of the interviewees wished that the possibility of switching work tasks, also internationally, would be more of an active factor at the workplace. This fact is particularly interesting, since when discussing about employees' future expectations, young employees placed a lot of stress on the self-development and further challenges in one's work. However, it is important to keep in mind that what the employee expects when joining the company, will fundamentally differ from what is essential later in the career (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 159), so the same attributes which are appreciated at the moment, might not be critical for young employees later on during their careers.

Other critical points about current efforts were performance appraisals and the standard of the salary, in other words, reward. Whether performance appraisals are successful, depends on how thoroughly they are applied at a local level at the workplace (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 157). Young employees felt that the performance appraisals they had attended were comfortable situations and almost as normal conversations with the superior. However, compared to the previous appraisal, one of the interviewees hoped for a less shallow situation. Furthermore, young employees had interesting validations about the standard of the salary. Employees want to experience that their work is appreciated and appropriately compensated. However, most employees do not believe that there is a clear relationship between their salary and the job performance. (Mackay 2007, 117.) It was generally discussed among young employees that even if the amount of the financial reward was relatively low, it would be compensated by other essential factors.

> *Salary is not the biggest motivator for me, what is more important for me is that I enjoy my work... just the job itself and the people.* (Young employee)

At least at this point of the young employees' careers, one's working experience and self-development seemed to be far more essential assets than the level of salary. This validates Barrow and Mosley's (2005, 159) argument about reward; while it is a major symbol of recognition, it is only one of the numerous options.

One particular attribute which was criticised by young employees was the fairly low amount of feedback, one form of recognition, given in general. Barrow and Mosley (2005, 159) emphasise that recognition is one of the simplest and most direct ways of demonstrating that employees are highly valued in the company. However, employees in many organisations request for better and more direct feedback on their performance (Mackay 2007, 105, 115). One of the respondents stated that the superior does give feedback, but that the employee also has to request the feedback spontaneously. This argument the interviewee explained however by the unique working culture of the interviewee's own department. Another young employee argued that giving feedback in Nordea is a major challenge. As Mackay (2007, 105) argues, if workers are never told how they are performing, they may become unmotivated. According to the interviewee, negative feedback is even more uncommon than the positive one:

> But maybe the challenge is that so many, if they give some negative [feedback], they do not know how to do it constructively.

The respondent convinced trying to be open in regards to the giving of the feedback at work but, according to the interviewee, since all other co-workers in the department are quite withdrawn, it is difficult to encourage the feedback whatsoever. The interviewee also argued that if one receives neither negative nor positive feedback, it does not guide the employee in any direction. McKeown (2002, 80) states that the goal of all recognition, including feedback, should be a long-term, sustained positive effect on the employees. According to Mackay (2007, 105), feedback must also be rapid, both positive to praise good performance, and constructive to correct poor performance. Therefore giving constant feedback, both positive and constructive, at the workplace is extremely important.

In regards to internal communication, perhaps the most obvious area requiring improvement from the viewpoint of young employees was the Intranet and virtual tools in general. According to Johnson and Roberts (2006, 40), a well-formed construction of the employer brand should integrate all media, particularly the Internet and other virtual environment, which is a rapidly growing means of expression. Young employees considered the Intranet as an endless source of information, where the important messages will easily get lost. Also, the concern with the Intranet seemed to be that it is only one-sided communication channel, and currently no interactivity can be utilised in that environment. One of the young employees was in favour of a common virtual forum, where employees could communicate with each other, for example, a 'questions-and-answers' type of share point. The respondent was happy about the platform for sharing information, which had already been introduced at the workplace, but still according to the respondent, Messenger and Office Communicator for instance are channels which should be exploited in order to ease the internal communication flow. It was however commonly acknowledged among young employees, that the execution of these kinds of

virtual tools is very challenging in a large organisation like Nordea. Moreover, one of the respondents desired that telephone would be more used as a communication tool, since emails, which are currently used most frequently, tend to have a control of the sender rather than the other way round.

In particular education and the noticeable amount of feedback were perceived as positive attributes by *experienced employees*. It was generally said that receiving education depends greatly on oneself, and whether the person is initiative and active and pursues the opportunities himself. Also all of the respondents in this target group were very satisfied with the feedback, both positive and negative, given to them.

> *The organisation teaches you, that it [feedback] will not be given all the time, but when the moment comes, when it feels like nothing is working, then you need the feedback, no matter how long you have been working for the company.* (Experienced employee)

Nordea's internal measurement system Employee Satisfaction Index (ESI) and the Intranet as a channel of internal communication were seen as areas of improvement among experienced employees. Internal measurement system such as ESI should be utilised to identify areas of required improvement which, in turn, can have a high impact on organisational performance (Mackay 2007, 33). The critique which was given on the ESI was that it seems to be conducted almost too intensively. The respondent claiming this considered that nearly have the former results been analysed, when the next inquiry is already about to start. With this pace, the results of the former inquiry have not even been analysed yet. Another viewpoint which was emphasised by two of the respondents was that employees tend to consider the enhancement of the working atmosphere solely as a task of the superior. It was discussed that the responsibility of the repairing actions should belong to each and every individual of the organisation, not just the superiors. This may indicate that according to experienced employees, ESI has not succeeded in taking a more strategic approach to measurements, recommended by Mackay (2007, 34), which could provide organisations feedback on employees' behaviours which support critical business practices.

The Intranet was seen as an endless source of information according to experienced employees. It must be kept in mind that while employees are sometimes regarded as a more captive audience than consumers, in reality they are just as likely to suffer from information overload from constant brand messages. Therefore it is vital that employer brand messages are simple and direct. (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 129–133.) All of the respondents in this target group agreed that finding information from the Intranet is difficult, and based on this it is being used in a slightly inconsiderate manner. Interestingly, there occurred an unintentional development idea from one respondent when the respondent proposed that in the future, workers are probably going to receive text messages saying which news are most beneficial to read form the Intranet. This kind of in-

formation channel could actually facilitate the targeting of the critical messages towards the right employees. Another improvement suggestion in the area of internal communication was that there should be a common communication channel for all employees regardless of the level of work. This channel could, for instance, be an electric communication system – TV or live video connection.

One point of criticism with the current efforts by experienced employees was the use of values, even though the values in general had been perceived extremely positively. As van Riel (2000, 157) states, employees will be more receptive to messages if the contents of the message is coherent and appealing, and above all not irritating the receivers. Two of the respondents brought upon the fact that in Nordea's internal communication, the values may sometimes be used somewhat artificially. By this argument they meant that the values of the company may be highlighted by the top management only to show that they actually exist. However, overall the values were seen as important background influencers of internal communication, and ultimately all of the respondents regarded them as positively communicated in Nordea.

> *But it does appear in every communication that we are one Nordea and that we are here only for the customers and therefore we make these decisions...* (Experienced employee)

Also, it was said that some of the financial advantages, in other words rewards, which should be beneficial in particular for the employees, have become disadvantages because of the global financial crisis and its influences on interest rates and other instances. As Michaels et al. (2001, according to Barrow & Mosley 2005, 159) emphasise, companies will have difficulties in surviving against competitors unless they stay competitive with the rewarding systems. This is important for the employer to take under observation also from the value perspective, since rewards should always align with employees' own value systems (Fields 2001, 217). If the financial advantages become unbeneficial for the employees, they may experience that the company does not appreciate them as employees anymore, which can clash between their own value systems. This in turn may cause the employees to be more sensitive towards competitors.

Finally, one interesting point of criticism, also relating to the financial crisis, was that during the times of a difficult market situation, when employees might feel pressured, senior leadership should be more visible. According to one of the experienced employees, top management should encourage and inspire their personnel more, and for example inform regularly on the Intranet, what the company's overall situation is, and moreover, ensure the employees that they are secured and supported in their work as much as possible. Resulting from the employer brand approach, when the senior managers are hopefully encouraged to think in terms of their employees, it provides much greater clarity and less information overload for the employees (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 80).

Employees with different backgrounds valued particularly the feedback given and Nordea's internal measurement system ESI. Feedback is essential to motivate employees to perform well (Mackay 2007, 105). According to one interviewee, there has been discussion within the department about the low amount of feedback, and it has been taken under observation. As a result, the interviewee said that it shows clearly that the supervisor gives feedback and most importantly, this course of action is working nicely. In regards to ESI, the results have been processed in every respondent's department and the attitude towards the measurements was rather positive among employees with different backgrounds. As Barrow and Mosley (2005, 154) confirm, when an internal measurement system such as ESI is accordingly executed in an organisation, the employees can be assured that the company takes its propositions to employees seriously enough to measure it, publicise it and act on the results.

An interesting aspect provided by this target group was the attention given to the working environment. Barrow and Mosley (2005, 160) have discovered that interestingly but yet not surprisingly working environment represents an important expression of the employer brand.

> *Our physical working environment got probably the worst result in Nordea's history in the ESI measurement and we have done quite a lot of corrections to that lately and I think this is rather nice now.* (Employee with different background)

Also another respondent told that there had been done a renovation in their department and that the environment is now remarkably more comfortable than before. Working environment is likely to be the biggest constant in the employees' daily lives, and therefore it should be ensured that it is challenging yet supportive, so that all employees can work to the best of their abilities (McKeown 2002, 62, 167; Fields 2001, 198.) One of the answerers stated that their department had initiated regular coffee breaks to their weekly schedule, which, according the employee, enhances the working environment in general. It was also pointed out by one of the respondents that the physical environment affects the employees particularly when there is something wrong; as long as everything is in order, workers will not pay particular attention to the environment.

Employees with different backgrounds regarded performance appraisals as an area of improvement. According to McKeown (2002, 160–161), performance appraisals are often a postponed activity and then eventually undertaken at the last moment by equally unenthusiastic appraiser and employee, which is not a favourable situation in terms of helping all employees perform to the best of their potential. It was thought that the appraisal situation has shifted towards an excessively regularised model, and there was also one bad experience of a past performance appraisal mentioned. However, it was commonly recognised among employees with different backgrounds that performance

appraisals are a very crucial part of the employer-employee relationship. This reflects to the fifth stage of the employer-employee relationship, when the employee works for the company. In this stage, the ways employees are treated, for example in performance appraisals, at every step along the way must follow the employer brand standards (Sartain & Schumann 2006, 183).

An interesting fact with employees with different backgrounds was that the switching of work tasks was seen as a point of criticism. One of the respondents had personally experienced that the departments are not eager to let go of their existing talent. According to this respondent, in theory the company encourages to change work tasks, but in practice the old job position is not guaranteed when the employee has completed his or her replacement period. This is unfortunate, since as Fields (2001, 48) emphasises, if the employee is willing to move to another position, the employer should see it as an opportunity to find them another position within the same organisation. It was also said among the employees with different backgrounds that the educational opportunities depend largely on oneself. However, the respondents of this target group were generally under the impression, that if considered necessary, there is education provided by the employer.

> *There is surprisingly large amount of education organised by Nordea itself in different matters. And of course one can go also to the ones organised by others.* (Employee with different background)

According to Sartain and Schumann (2006, 198), the successful communication of an employer brand must follow a specific sequence; to lead the internal audience of employees from initially experiencing the brand message to understanding the message, believing in the message, and finally doing what the message is designed to motivate. Internal communication in Nordea was generally seen as quite effective among the employees with different backgrounds. One interviewee suggested that instead of emails, which are currently used maybe even too much, the use of telephone would be easier and more efficient tool for communication and inquiries.

A company is unlikely to build trust and credibility in the employer brand unless it manages to deliver consistency across all of its communications (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 143). In regards to this statement, one development idea which derived from a conversation with one interviewee was that there is a need for a chat type of communication channel. According to the respondent, it would be a good channel for processing certain types of development ideas, because people normally participate quite actively in those kinds of channels. On the contrary, another respondent thought that in their department, there is no more room for another communication channel. However, the advantage of a chat type of channel is that it could be voluntary to those who want to participate, and not obligatory for everyone.

Employees are far more likely to accept the organisation's brand messages if they experience the worth of the values for themselves (Barrow & Mosley 2005, 134). The values in Nordea's internal communication received contradictory responses from employees with different backgrounds. Particularly interesting was that in general, Nordea's values had been seen as a highly positive attribute of the company's brand image among employees with different backgrounds. Nevertheless, when asking how the values appear internal communication, one of the employees with different backgrounds argued that the values do not show at all in the internal communication in Nordea. Another member of the same target group claimed that the values show sometimes even too much, and on these occasions, it can be noticed that there is almost a 'farce' hidden in the message. Despite of this however, the respondent also thought that most often the values are presented in an appropriate way in the internal communication. Finally, a third respondent stated that the values can indeed be detected in the internal communication:

> *If I send a message, which I know does not actually concern everyone, for example assistants, it will anyway be sent to everyone, because we are one unit. So in that way it shows.*

This statement reflects that from Nordea's three values, the value 'One Nordea team' has been at least somewhat internalised by the interviewee. The respondent is willing to consider the other team members, and this feature seems to appear even automatically.

4.5   Employer brand in comparison between the target groups

In this research, there were three target groups of employees examined when exploring the five themes related to the employer brand. Several common positive and negative arguments between the target groups were found, and the comparison of these arguments is presented in table 2. A more extensive division of the interrelationships of each target group is described in the comparative matrix in appendix 3.

Table 2   Comparison of the themes related to the employer brand between the target groups

	Theme 1: Current associations about the employer	Theme 2: Current strengths and weaknesses of the employer	Theme 3: Previous and future expectations regarding the employer	Theme 4: Current efforts provided by the employer	Theme 5: Preferred efforts provided by the employer
Target group 1: Young employees	+ Values + Unanimous associations	– Bureaucracy: employees are small actors + Recommendable as an employer	+ Talent management: recruiting	+ Education: depends on oneself – Switching of work tasks: international opportunities	+ Internal communication: traditional communication
Target group 2: Experienced employees	+ Values – Diverse associations	– Bureaucracy + Recommendable as an employer: viewpoint of younger employees	+ Talent management: recognising current talents	+ Education	+ Internal communication
Target group 3: Employees with different backgrounds	+ Values	– Bureaucracy: discussing, slowness + Recommendable as an employer: on a general level		+ Education – Switching of work tasks: employer not willing to let go of the talents	+ Internal communication: traditional communication

Regarding the current *associations* about Nordea, the most obvious point of compliments with all three target groups was the values of the company. It was seen from all of the target groups that the values are indeed present in the every-day work, and moreover, that the values are quite deeply rooted in the mindset of the employees, even though they are created only a couple of years ago (Räsänen, e-mail response 8.6.2009). This indicates that Nordea has genuinely succeeded in Barrow and Mosley's (2005, 120) insistence about the organisation making its current values relevant and meaningful to employees. The difference in nuances, which could be detected from the attitude towards values between the target groups, was that younger employees tended to regard the values more naively, in other words as firmly guiding and almost authoritative elements, whereas older employees had more of a critical approach towards them.

Generally, some variations in the associations between the target groups were detectable. For example, whereas the target group of young employees was fairly unanimous with their associations towards the employer, there were visible differences within the experienced employees' associations. This can be an indication of the fact that experienced employees, logically, know the company for decades and, moreover, they have been exposed to several changes and evolvement in the working environment during their careers. Therefore experienced employees are also more open to criticise the employer and question the employer's ways of operation compared to earlier conditions than their younger associates. However, it could be argued that young employees are often the ones who notice the possible inadequacies regarding the employer, and provide fresh insights to the organisation.

When discussing the current *strengths and weaknesses* of Nordea, one point of interest, bureaucracy, appeared in nearly each interview regardless of the target group. Bureaucracy is quite a typical characteristic of a large organisation such as Nordea. Interesting was however, that this weakness disclosed different kinds of reactions between the target groups. To a certain extent, it was agreed between the target groups that the processes and decision-making tend to be really slow in the organisation. However, on the one hand, one of the young employees argued being only a small actor getting lost in large institution and trying to struggle against it. On the other hand, one of the respondents from the employees with different backgrounds declared that the Swedish background of Nordea emerges as a certain kind of discussing, slowness, and making compromises, and the respondent sealed the comment by realising that 'a Swedish bank is always a Swedish bank'.

Sartain and Schumann (2006, 232) have founded an important question which reveals the emotional experiences of the employees; whether the employees advocate for the employer brand and the company. When asked if employees would recommend Nordea as an employer at the moment, all of the target groups answered affirmatively – every respondent would recommend Nordea as an employer and some had in fact already done that. Johnson and Roberts (2006, 40) confirm that employees at successfully branded companies sell the company to the environment in various ways, for instance, by promoting solid career opportunities, expert management, or flexibility. Consequently, this word-of-mouth, whether it is internal or external, has a considerably strong impact on the employer brand; it builds employee loyalty and increases recruits of good quality.

Regardless of the general inspiring atmosphere among target groups, some of the respondents were less enthusiastic about recommending Nordea as an employer than others; the more pessimistic comments initiated from the target group of employees with different backgrounds. For example, one of the respondents said to recommend Nordea as a general level, but clearly not for the current task of the employee. Also different

perspectives aroused between target groups. Compared to the other two target groups, experienced employees, for instance, did not consider so much the employees of their own age but instead took a viewpoint of younger employees. According to one of the interviewees, Nordea offers a great outlook to the financial world and an opportunity to learn for a young graduating academic.

When discussing the *expectations about the employer*, an interesting assessment from talent management emerged between a young and an experienced employee. Both of the respondents discussed about the necessity for extensive talent management in Nordea, but the young employee reflected the issue into the area of recruiting whereas the experienced employee discussed about recognising the current talents in Nordea. The young employee argued that Nordea should pursue to be better in identifying the recently recruited talents and to further educate them. The respondent pointed out that the acknowledgement of how to better direct the workers in such tasks which correspond to their competencies, has a clear connection to the recruitment activities of the company. On the contrary, the experienced employee was especially concerned about how Nordea can recognise all the potential it has in its current employees. The respondent wished that there should exist such kind of a talent management system, where regardless of the area of expertise the employees represent, their competencies and abilities would be pooled together. Experienced employee hoped that Nordea could seriously take advantage of this kind of system in the future, and that the respondent could also be part of this pooling.

When discussing the *current and preferred efforts* provided by the employer, the opportunities for learning, education and development could be absolutely most clearly identified within all of the target groups. As Barrow and Mosley (2005, 157–158) state, these attributes influence both the company's general attractiveness to new recruits and its constant ability to maintain employees committed. However, it was interesting to notice that target groups placed a different kind of pressure on the individual learning. Respondents in all of the three groups did say that the education depends largely on oneself, but compared to experienced employees and employees with different backgrounds, young employees stressed most noticeably this fact. Naturally, fairly recently graduated and newly recruited young employees are most obviously those who recognise their constant need of further professional development, and therefore strive to educate themselves most aggressively. This could be detected also from the detail where one of the young employees said to have discussed the educational opportunities with the own superior.

According to Fields (2001, 48), if employees experience they are advancing in their career and learning, they are not likely to switch jobs. If the employee is however willing to move to another position, it is a good opportunity for the employer to find them another position within the same organisation. This may not be thoroughly understood

by the employer's side in Nordea, since both an employee with different background and a young employee saw the switching of work tasks as a point of criticism. However, there was an interesting difference in the feedback from these employees. The employee with different background argued that the departments inside Nordea are not eager to let go of their existing talents. According to the employee, there is always a risk to be taken if one desires to switch work tasks; the current department may inform the employee that once the person returns, there might not be a guaranteed position available anymore. The interviewee indicated that if the employer sincerely wants to support the switching of tasks, it should be expressed in such a way that the employee will be missed but also welcomed back when the exchange period is over. On the contrary, one of the young employees felt that the switching of work tasks could be provided also across country borders. The interviewee stated that since Nordea is increasingly oriented towards international operations, employees should be provided with short working periods in another country in order to exchange ideas and thoughts.

In regards to preferred efforts, internal communication inspired a lot of discussion with all of the target groups. In addition to the modern communication channels which attracted attention in the interviews, an interesting aspect of traditional communication also aroused despite of the age of the employees. One of the young employees desired that telephone would be more used as a communication tool, since emails, which are currently used most frequently, tend to have a control of the sender rather than the other way round. A similar comment was given by one of the interviewees from the target group of employees with different backgrounds claiming that the use of telephone would be easier and more efficient tool for communication and inquiries. Derived from these arguments, traditional communication channels still appear to be seen as efficient ways of communicating, and should not be forgotten in the world of constant technical innovations.

5   CONCLUSIONS

This research aimed at the reflection of the existing literature and theories on the employer brand and the empirical results provided by different target groups of employees. In general, the empirical part of the study supported quite thoroughly the existing theoretical arguments. The dimensions of the employer brand had a noticeable role in every detailed research question. The particular dimensions which the researcher chose to use in this particular study were well represented in the empirical results. In the following, the essential conclusions are examined by reflecting the theoretical arguments with the empirical findings, and thereby answering the three detailed research questions of the study. Also, the central results of the study are applied to the framework of the formation of the employer brand, developed by the researcher. Finally, the possibilities for future studies as well as the limitations of this research are discussed.

The first detailed research question of this research asked what kind of perceived image current employees have of their employer at the moment. The empiric part of the study revealed that in general, the employer brand was experienced noticeably well among all three target groups, and employees did share a relatively consistent core of opinion regarding the employer brand image. In addition, there were various different associations related to the employer from all target groups, which supports the theoretical arguments about the nature of the employer brand image; it is considered to be a comprised set of all experiences, beliefs, feelings, knowledge and impressions which each stakeholder has about an organisation (Pelsmacker et al. 2007; Dowling 2001). However, also some variations about the employer brand image appeared between the target groups, which enlightens the theoretical fact that the image is dynamic and subject to change (Aula & Heinonen 2002).

It is stated in the employer branding literature, that concerning the employer brand image, it is valuable to know whether the employees have a strong sense of the organisation's purpose and values, and also, if the employees are asked to describe the kind of organisation they work for, how they are likely to reply (Barrow & Mosley 2005). From the empirical results it could be identified that all three target groups were able to describe both strengths and weaknesses of their employer, which in turn tells about the fairly strong sense of their employer. A strength which appeared in many occasions was general security and attention to employees from the employer's side. In general, the more difficult the times are in the employment market, the more the appreciation towards the employer grows. Today, when the whole financial world is suffering from the global financial crisis, which affects specifically financial institutions, it is natural that the employees mention safety as a crucial factor influencing the employer brand image.

On the contrary, a weakness accentuated in the empirical results was general bureaucracy within the company. Bureaucracy is natural but yet persistent and exists most

likely in every large organisation. It will probably never disappear entirely from organisations, but nonetheless, the struggle against it is an essential task for every employer. Therefore the employer should always try to ensure that the way of operating in the organisation does not evolve into an overly bureaucratic establishment where employees do not feel comfortable working in.

There are twelve dimensions which represent the key touch points for the employer brand introduced in the employer branding literature (Barrow & Mosley 2005). These dimensions are divided into two broad groups, the first relating to wider organisational context and policy and the second relating to local context and practice. The researcher selected ten most essential dimensions to describe the employer brand from the employees' viewpoint. In the view of the empirical results, dimensions from both context groups emerged when examining the employer brand image, which supports the argument that the dimensions can indeed be implemented into the examination of the employer brand from the employees' perspective.

Values, which relate to the organisational context and policy, were one of the most commonly discussed dimensions of the employer brand in the empirical scene. They were largely praised by employees in all three target groups, but also some criticism appeared – however only in singular answers. This is an indication of a fairly good reflectivity between the empirical results and the theoretical argument about the organisation making its current values relevant and meaningful to employees (Barrow & Mosley 2005). However, after the values of the organisation are established, it is absolutely crucial that the senior management acts according to them. If the thorough commitment to the values from the upper management does not take place in the company, it is pointless to expect that the employees would believe in the values either.

Based on the reflection between the theoretical and empirical findings of this research, the answer to the *first detailed research question* reveals that the current employees have a fairly good employer brand image of their employer. This is revealed by the plentiful positive experiences, beliefs, feelings, knowledge and impressions which employees had about the employer. There can be some variations detected between the associations between the target groups, but in general, there exists a consistent core of opinion regarding the employer brand image. Additionally, from the dimensions of the employer brand, values appear to be the most appreciated factor in the formation of the positive employer brand image in the minds of the employees. There are no particular dimensions, which are mentioned in a negative manner and would therefore require repairing actions, when considering the employer brand image.

The second detailed research question strived to answer what kind of expectations current employees have about their employer. The empirical results of this research showed that the previous expectations about the employer were fulfilled in all three target groups. It can however be interpreted from certain parts of the empirical results, that

they do not totally support the questions posed in theory about the employer managing to tell its compelling and novel story to the target groups in such a way which convinces them of the reality of what the company has to offer (Martin et al. 2005). More closely, this can be detected from the lack of interest with some of the respondents when considering one's previous expectations towards the employer. Nonetheless, the overall expected employer brand image was rather good among all employees.

According to the employer branding literature, employer brand promises functional benefits, such as reward; and emotional benefits, such as the value which employees gain from the tasks they perform, and employees' belief in the quality, in the purpose and in the values of the organisation they represent (Barrow & Mosley 2005). In the empirical discussion about the future expectation of the employees, educational possibilities and continuous self-development were discussed among all three target groups. This reveals the fact that the empirical results of this study reflect the theory particularly in regards to the emotional benefits promised by the employer.

Self-development in the working environment seemed to be considerably more valuable motivator for employees than the salary, for example. It can be argued that the development and the education of particularly young recruits is a very valuable factor for any organisation. There is a vast potential in young academic professionals, who are enthusiastic to learn and willing to experience the possible changes inside the company as well as in the working environment. However, today, the older employees are very potentially as eager to educate themselves as their younger colleagues, even if they have been working for the company for decades. Therefore they should not be neglected when considering the utilisation of educational resources.

A vast number of the employer brand dimensions could also be identified when discussing the expectations which employees place on their employer. Deriving from the empirical results, learning and development – one of the dimensions relating to the local context and practice – was mostly brought upon among the three target groups, and the employer has managed to fulfil fairly well employees' requirements in the area of learning and development so far. The existing literature highlights that the emergence of regular development and extension of the employees' skills as well as the availability of distance learning have enabled the employees to pursue more their own career development (McKeown 2002), and the empirical results supported that argument. Employees of all three target groups did necessitate more learning and education, which is natural since it is a significant factor in one's continuous career development. Employees want to be educated in the working environment and they are in all probability to bring it up when discussing about the expectations relating to one's own work. However, the practical execution of different types of education conferences and programs is not always a simple task for the employer. Particularly in an organisation of a large size, there should be countless options available considering all the different working groups inside

the organisation, and this might not be possible to execute in all circumstances due to the scarce resources, for instance.

In the employer branding literature, there is also plenty of evidence to suggest that most employees believe their employers could significantly improve the learning and development offering (Barrow & Mosley 2005). The empirical results indicated a case where the lack of formal education background prohibited employee's career development. It is most obviously true that it is a severe challenge for an employee with no formal education to get a good position or to be promoted. To maintain the employees' motivation towards work, it would be beneficial if at the workplace, there were more organised possibilities for formal education, such as master's degree programs which could be performed along the existing work tasks.

In essence, the expectations of the employees are a critical feature for the employer. It is not easy to predict, even in the near future, which particular expectations are going to evolve into interests of special importance. Therefore it is important both for the employer branding team and for the senior management to take the expectations of the employees into very careful consideration.

The answer to the *second detailed research question* indicates that employees most likely place such expectations on their employer which are related to the emotional experiences and benefits promised for the employees. The previous expectations which employees have had towards the employer are noticeably fulfilled. Regarding the future work, the most important expectations of the current employees are related to one's self-development in the working environment. Moreover, when discussing the future expectations of the current employees, learning and development is the most appreciated dimension of the employer brand.

Finally, the third detailed research question examined which measures in the construction of the employer brand should be exploited in order to influence the perceived images and expectations. The existing theory on employer branding states that the employer brand should be carefully operationalised throughout the relationship between the employer and the employee; it must reflect the different stages of an employee's work and life; it must be positioned to meet the employees' needs and aspirations; and it must also be communicated correctly (see, for example, Sartain & Schumann 2006; Barrow & Mosley 2005). The empirical results support the theoretical requirements of the construction of the employer brand only to a certain extent. Not nearly all of the features in question emerged when discussing the current and preferred benefits provided by the employer in the target groups. This is however natural when considering that the employer is only at the beginning of the systematic construction of the employer brand. Thus the ultimate aspiration of the empiric part was to gather clues from the employees for the employer on how to further construct the employer brand.

The comments from all three target groups about the current efforts were quite thoroughly what could be expected. Basically, current benefits were much appreciated among the employees, which is not surprising when considering the normal behaviour of any employee; those benefits which are given, are not voluntarily forsaken. There was no specific guiding principle among the employees in regards to the current benefits, but instead every employee had minor separate wishes. This can be an indication of the fact that there are no severe insufficiencies in the current benefits, and consequently, in regards to the current efforts, the employer has managed to position its employer brand correctly among the employees so far. Regarding the preferred efforts provided by the employer, the overall well-being of the employees was perhaps the most accentuated feature which stood out from the empiric findings. This feature emerged particularly among the older employees, which is not unexpected; it is quite obvious that when ageing, in addition to mental health, employees start to increasingly pay attention to their physical well-being.

In regards to the current and preferred efforts provided by the employer, several of the dimensions of the employer brand introduced in the employer branding literature emerged. From the dimensions of the organisational context and policy, internal communication was the most emphasised dimension among the three target groups. According to the empirical observations, internal communication was seen somewhat as a challenge among all three target groups, which is in line with the critical aspects introduced in the theory. It is emphasised in the employer branding literature that internal communication in companies is still quite fractured between different departments and functions, and from the employee's perspective it is likely to lead to perceptions of information overload and incoherence (Barrow & Mosley 2005).

It can be argued that in general, information overload is common in large organisations, and no one is able to follow all the possible existing internal communication. Consequently, adding interactivity between the co-workers as well as between the superiors and subordinates could be a valuable solution to the information overload problem. For example, adequate casual occasions, such as short common coffee breaks suggested in the empirical scene, are excellent in order to maintain social relations and to distribute informal information at the workplace. It would be desirable that also superiors could attend these kinds of meetings, so that the employees could be convinced about their superior's sincere interest towards the employees, and about the superior's willingness to enhance the working efficacy and well-being.

Furthermore, it can be claimed that email as a communication channel can be dangerous and that it should be carefully used if personal issues are handled or constructive feedback or reprimands are sent. On the one hand, it should be kept in mind that traditional communication channels, as stated by some of the employees, are yet important and should not be forgotten. For example, positive feedback should still always be given

in person, not through emails or text messages. On the other hand, particularly in the financial industry, it is absolutely critical for an organisation to stay beside the technological development when it comes to the internal communication. In essence, the employer should pay special attention to confirming that the essential messages reach the employees accordingly.

From the dimensions of the local context and practice, reward and particularly recognition were brought upon among all three target groups. According to the empirical results of the research, feedback as a form of recognition was highly identified among all employee target groups, and some employees had actually requested more feedback spontaneously. This shows that the empirical findings are consistent with the employer branding literature, which claims that recognition is essential in order to motivate employees to perform well, and employees in many organisations request for better and more direct feedback on their performance (Mackay 2007).

Feedback is indeed an important part of how the employees experience the employer, and it is equally important how the feedback is given; an employee can actually remember even a small piece of recognition after years of work whereas increase in salary stays in the memory only for a limited amount of time. According to the theoretical arguments, feedback must both positive in order to praise good performance, and constructive in order to correct poor performance (Mackay 2007). Therefore giving constant feedback, both positive and constructive, at the workplace is extremely important for the employer in all circumstances. When the senior management or superiors give feedback, it should always be carefully structured and be given in a constructive manner. Positive feedback should be given fairly often and in even in surprising situations, but when it comes to constructive feedback it should be more subtle and private.

In addition, when examining the current and preferred efforts provided by the employer, the empirical findings revealed within all target groups the discussion about the adequate frequency of ESI and again, the importance of the communication of organisation's values. The main conclusions are that internal employee satisfaction surveys should not be executed too often. Employees lose patience with the surveys conducted too frequently, even if they concern the well-being of employees or other important issues relating to the working itself. Consequently, the whole survey can suffer from severe inflation and lose its purpose as serving the employees. Finally, when considering the proper communication of values, it must be kept in mind that the senior management should in all circumstances operate according to the company's values. Otherwise the crucial objective of getting the employees committed to the values can be lost on the way to lower levels of work.

On the basis of the reflection between the theoretical and empirical results, the answer to the *third detailed research question* shows that there are several measures in the construction of the employer brand which can be exploited in order to influence the per-

ceived images and expectations of employees. The current efforts provided by the employer are at a reasonably good level among the employees, but in regards to the preferred efforts by the employer, the overall well-being of the employees is a considerable point of development. From the dimensions of the employer brand, the enhancement of the internal communication and recognition are the most appreciated efforts from the employer, alongside with the internal measurement systems and communication of values.

In essence, it would be extremely important that superiors increasingly pay attention to their employees. For instance, employees generally appreciate the fact that their superior knows them and that the superior gives credit to those who have succeeded well. In particular employees appreciate the feedback given whenever it is possible. For the employer, these are rather small efforts which yet increase remarkably the employees' commitment without reserving overly the employer's time and resources, and therefore the efforts are rather easily achievable. As a concluding remark, the results of the research can be implemented into the theoretical framework of this research, introduced in chapter 2.6, which illustrates the overall formation of the employer brand (figure 4).
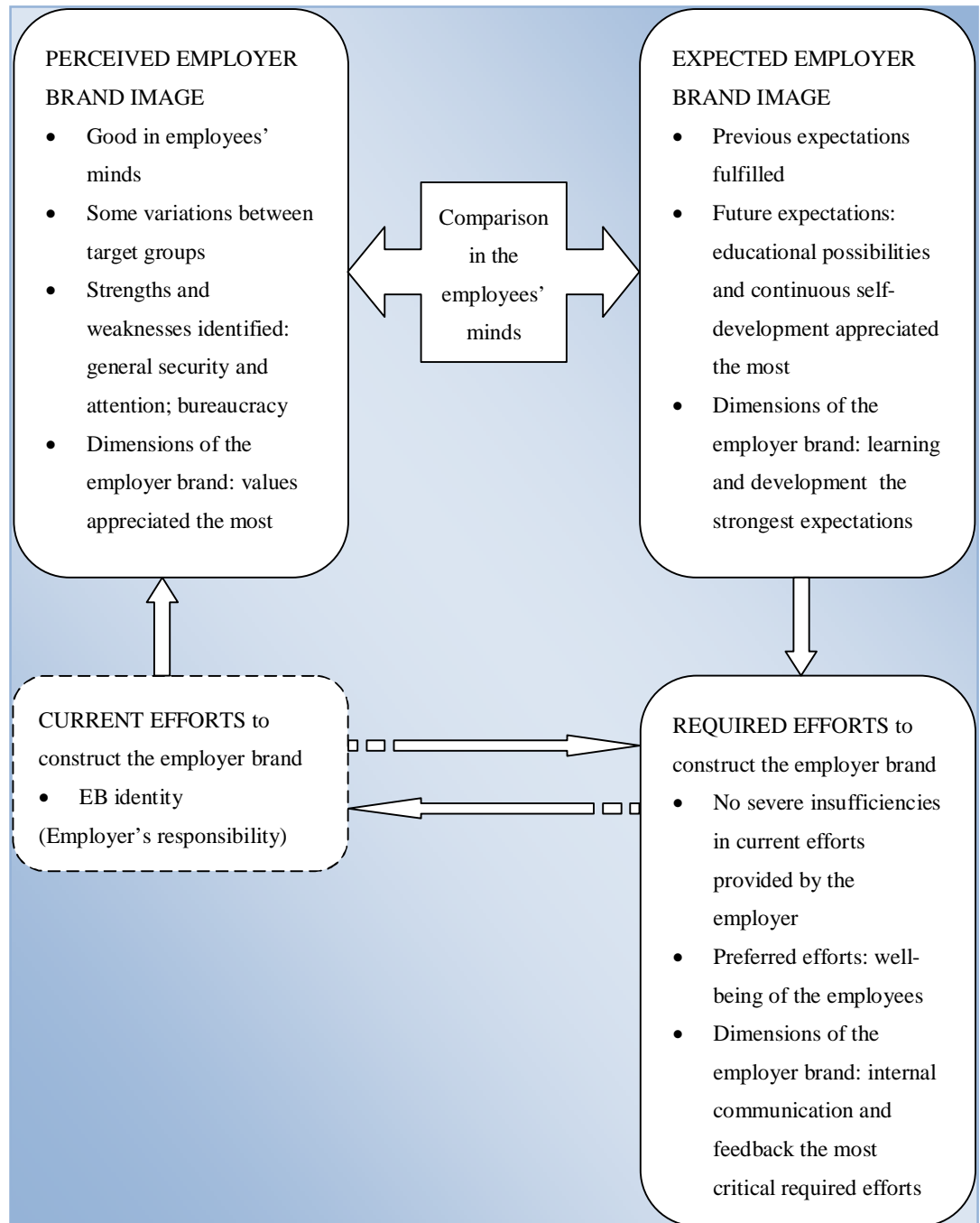
Figure 4   Central results of the research

In the figure, four main components affecting the formation of the employer brand have been identified, namely current efforts from the employer to construct the employer brand, perceived employer image, expected employer brand image, and required efforts from the employer to construct the employer brand. It can be seen that the results relating to the first detailed research question are outlined under the perceived employer brand image. This perceived image is rather good among employees even while there

are some detectable variations between the three target groups. Strengths and weaknesses of the employer can be clearly identified by the employees, general security and attention to employees from the employer's side being the most clearly identified strength and bureaucracy being the most evident weakness. Moreover, values are the most appreciated dimension of the employer brand image.

Employees do constant comparison between the perceived and the expected employer brand image. In the figure, the results relating to the second detailed research question are summarised under the expected employer brand image. The previous expectations which employees have had towards the employer are mainly fulfilled, and regarding the future expectations, educational possibilities as well as continuous self-development in the working environment are appreciated the most. Also very closely related to these areas, learning and development are the strongest expectations appearing from all employee target groups.

Finally, the expectations which the employees hold on the employer brand have an impact on the required efforts to further construct the employer brand, and this is when the measures in the formation of the employer brand should be taken into close consideration. It can be noticed from the figure that the results of the third detailed research question are revealed under the required efforts to construct the employer brand. There are no severe insufficiencies with the current efforts which the employer provides for the employees. Regarding the preferred efforts provided by the employer, the well-being of employees is one essential factor. In addition, the enhancement of internal communication and the giving of feedback are among the most strongly highlighted preferred efforts.

In the future, there could be room for a comparative research conducted in a similar manner to the current research, and if possible, with the same target groups or even with same interviewees. The purpose of this type of research would be to discover whether the perceived employer brand image, expectations about the employer and the thoughts of the current and preferred efforts provided by the employer have changed in the minds of the employees. A suitable time to conduct this research could be after Nordea has further systematically constructed its internal employer brand; for example, within a couple of years.

Generally, external employer brand has been more extensively under attention than the internal one, but this kind of study would serve as an initiative for further comparative study. There could be either a quantitative or perhaps qualitative research conducted among potential recruits such as young, nearly graduating academic students. It would be followed by a similar research conducted among the young academics that are recently recruited as employees, and these two target groups would then be compared with each other. This could reveal interesting facts about how the external employer brand experienced by young academics will change to the internal employer brand after

the academics have become new recruits. Furthermore, there could be a research conducted with the purpose of creating practical guidelines for the employer to systematically further develop the employer brand.

Case studies are generally claimed to provide little basis for scientific generalisation, and as this research was a case study it did not provide information which could serve as a basis for scientific generalisation. However, generalisation should not even be the ultimate aim of the case study research. Instead, the goal is to understand the particular case being examined and no assumptions can be done in order to generalise. By researching a single case deeply enough – which was the objective of this research – it can be discovered what is remarkable about the phenomenon, and which elements repeat themselves when examining the phenomenon in a more general level. Employer brand is such a unique and subjective experience for every employee, that the results of this particular research cannot be generalised to other companies even within the financial industry. However, it provides essential information on the important internal perspectives introduced by the extremely valuable resource of the company – its employees.

On the one hand, the empiric part of this research revealed such results which were natural and even obvious when considering the age and the length of the career of the interviewees. On the other hand, particularly the comparison perspective of three different target groups within the company revealed interesting detailed viewpoints, which might not have been able to detect from a quantitative study.

The aim of this research was to reflect the theory written on the employer brand with the empirical results provided by different target groups of employees. The empirical part of the study supported quite thoroughly the existing theoretical arguments. Despite of this fact, the framework developed by the researcher can be stated to provide novel information on the different components behind the formation of the internal employer brand, and also on the formation process from the current employees' viewpoint. Most importantly, the ultimate aim of the research was to provide information for the case company on how it can utilise the information gathered from the employees to systematically develop further its internal employer brand. This research has indicated that the employer brand is the key to attracting, retaining and engaging talented employees, and that maintaining a successful employer brand requires a careful and professional process. Therefore an employer branding team is a crucial resource for any organisation which wants to thoroughly engage its employees.

6   SUMMARY

The nature of business has changed with the result that access to intelligence and creativity has become the key route to competitive advantage for organisations. In the competitive labour markets the ultimate challenge for organisations is to differentiate themselves in order to successfully attract and retain talented workforce. Employer branding is perhaps the best method of redefining and improving the means by which companies recruit and communicate with an often overlooked audience of their employees. Employer branding has been defined as how a company constructs and packages its identity, from its origins and values, and what it promises to deliver to emotionally connect employees so that they in turn deliver what the company promises to customers.

Employer brand has both an external and an internal dimension; external is generally channelled to the potential recruits whereas internal is perceived among the existing employees. Yet until recently, companies have not fully understood that the external perception is only one part of the employer brand. Therefore the purpose of this research was to describe the formation of the internal employer brand from the current employees' viewpoint. Detailed research questions to the study were formed as follows:

1. What kind of perceived image do current employees have of their employer at the moment?

2. What kind of expectations do current employees have about their employer?

3. Which measures in the construction of the employer brand should be exploited in order to influence these perceived images and expectations?

The researcher aimed at finding results to the research question through both theoretical and empirical findings. The theoretical framework for the study was formed from the examination of the employer brand image, the dimensions of the employer brand, expectations about the employer brand, the construction of the employer brand, and finally, the framework of the formation of the employer brand was created by the researcher. The empirical findings were gathered from a Nordic financial institution which already had strong corporate and product brands.

Employer brand personality, identity, image and reputation comprise an employer brand continuum, which altogether comprise the entity of the employer brand. Employer brand image is considered to be a comprised set of all experiences, beliefs, feelings, knowledge and impressions which different stakeholders hold regarding the brand. It is important to learn how employees currently perceive the employer brand and whether all employees share a consistent core of opinion regarding the employer brand image.

The dimensions of the employer brand, which represent the key touch points for the employer brand, are divided into two broad groups, the first relating to wider organisational context and policy and the second relating to local context and practice. The di-

mensions relating to the organisational context and policy, used in the research, are internal communication, senior leadership, values, and internal measurement systems. The dimensions which in turn relate to the local context and practice, used in the research, are recruitment and induction, team management, performance appraisal, learning and development, reward and recognition, and working environment.

Each employee has different expectations and understandings of the brand. What the employee expects when joining the company, will fundamentally differ from what is essential later in the career. Also, the factors which motivate an employee to commit during the career differ over time. In order to meet the expectations of the personnel, an employer brand makes a promise to current, future, and past employees. Employer brand promises functional benefits, such as reward, a safe working environment, and the provision of the equipment necessary to carry out employee's roles and responsibilities, and emotional benefits, such as the value employees gain from the tasks they perform, the extent to which employees feel valued by their colleagues, and employees' belief in the quality, the purpose and values of the organisation they represent.

Employees play a crucial role in the process of the construction of the employer brand. They must be able to understand why their contribution is essential to their employer's success, and therefore a relationship between the employer and the employee should be created. Employer brand must reflect the different stages of an employee's work and life, and moreover, for the employer brand to be relevant and motivating to employees it must be positioned to meet their needs and aspirations. The employer brand must also be communicated correctly. The management of a brand is a long-term process, which suggests that the brand idea must be included in the systems of the organisation.

The formation of the employer brand comprises of four main components. The *perceived employer brand image*, which is created in the minds of employees, is affected by the *current efforts* which the employer strives to take in order to evoke the best possible employer brand image in the minds of the employees. The image which employees have of the employer creates *expectations* which, in turn, have an impact on the *required efforts* to further construct the employer brand. This is when the measures in the formation of the employer brand should be taken into close consideration.

Before the empirical part of the study was conducted, the researcher justified the methodological choices of the study. The research followed a qualitative approach since it strived to interpret and understand the phenomenon of employer branding. The study was conducted as a case study which is a useful strategy when the area of research, such as the employer brand, is relatively less known. The data was collected through nine themed interviews from three different target groups; recently recruited young employees who have been working for the company about a year, experienced employees who have been in the company for years, and employees who have a working background

from elsewhere within the same or different industry. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The collected data was organised by the application of themes through coding and clustering. Also, a matrix was used when comparing the themes between different target groups. The analysis itself was conducted through reflecting the theory and empirical results. Finally, the quality of the research evaluated through validity, reliability and generalisation. The validity was guaranteed by using multiple sources of evidence, a case study database, and a chain of evidence. Reliability was guaranteed by precisely describing and documenting the procedure and to demonstrating that different categories have been used consistently.

For the empirical part of the research, Nordea Finland was chosen as a case organisation. The systematic utilisation of the employer brand is fairly new in Nordea, and no spontaneous feedback from the employees concerning the employer brand has yet been evolved. Therefore the internal target group of current employees was of special interest for Nordea.

Based on the reflection between the theoretical and empirical findings, the answer to the first detailed research question revealed that the current employees have a fairly good employer brand image of their employer. This was revealed by the plentiful positive experiences, beliefs, feelings, knowledge and impressions which employees have about the employer. There could be some variations detected in regards to the associations between the target groups, but in general, there exists a consistent core of opinion regarding the employer brand image. Additionally, from the dimensions of the employer brand, values appeared to be the most appreciated factor in the formation of the positive employer brand image in the minds of the employees.

The answer to the second detailed research question indicated that employees most likely place such expectations on their employer which are related to the emotional experiences and benefits promised for the employees. The previous expectations which employees have had towards the employer are noticeably fulfilled. Regarding the future work, the most important expectations of the current employees are related to one's self-development in the working environment. Moreover, when discussing the future expectations of the current employees, learning and development is the most appreciated dimension of the employer brand.

Finally, on the basis of the reflection between the theoretical and empirical results, the answer to the third detailed research question showed that there are several measures in the construction of the employer brand which can be exploited in order to influence the perceived images and expectations of the employees. The current efforts provided by the employer are at a reasonably good level among employees, but in regards to the preferred efforts by the employer, the well-being of the employees is a considerable point of development. From the dimensions of the employer brand, the enhancement of

internal communication and recognition are the most appreciated efforts from the employer, alongside with internal measurement systems and communication of values.

This research aimed at the reflection of the existing literature and theories on the employer brand and the empirical results provided by different target groups of employees. In general, the empirical part of the study supported quite thoroughly the existing theoretical arguments. The dimensions of the employer brand had a noticeable role in every detailed research question. The particular dimensions which the researcher chose to use in this particular study were well represented in the empirical results. Also, the framework developed by the researcher can be stated to provide novel information on the different components behind the formation of the internal employer brand, and also on the formation process from the current employees' viewpoint.

In essence, it would be extremely important that superiors increasingly pay attention to their employees. This research has indicated that the employer brand is the key to attracting, retaining and engaging talented employees, and that maintaining a successful employer brand requires a careful and professional process. Therefore an employer branding team is a crucial resource for any organisation which wants to thoroughly engage its employees.

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APPENDIX 1   LIST OF INTERVIEWS

Nordea Finland employees, target group 1: Young employees. Interviews 25.3.2009, 26.3.2009 and 1.4.2009.

Nordea Finland employees, target group 2: Experienced employees. Interviews 1.4.2009, 8.4.2009 and 8.5.2009.

Nordea Finland employees, target group 3: Employees with different backgrounds. Interviews 2.4.2009, 6.4.2009 and 9.4.2009.

Nordea Finland employee. Unrecorded pilot interview 9.1.2009.

APPENDIX 2   THEMED INTEREVIEW FRAME IN FINNISH

TEEMA 0: Taustatiedot
- Mihin ikäryhmään seuraavista kuulut? Alle 30 / 30–39 / 40–49 / 50 tai yli
- Mikä on asemasi ja työtehtäväsi Nordeassa?
- Kuinka kauan olet työskennellyt Nordeassa?
- Jos olet vaihtanut työpaikkaa äskettäin, oletko tullut kilpailevasta yrityksestä vai muulta alalta?

TEEMA 1: Tämänhetkiset mielikuvat tai assosiaatiot Nordeasta
- Miltä sinusta tuntuu työskennellä Nordeassa tällä hetkellä?
- Millaisia mielikuvia sana "Nordea" herättää sinussa?
- Millaisia mielikuvia Nordea työnantajana herättää sinussa?
- Mitä Nordea edustaa yleisesti mielestäsi? Entä mitä Nordea edustaa juuri sinulle?
- Mihin Nordea mielestäsi uskoo?
- Mitkä ovat Nordean arvot? Näkyvätkö ne työssäsi? Miten?
- Miten koet lähimmän esimiehesi suhtautuvan omaan työhönsä ja Nordeaan työnantajana? Miten se heijastuu sinun työhösi?
- Miten koet ylimmän johdon suhtautuvan työhönsä ja Nordeaan työnantajana? Miten se vaikuttaa sinun työhösi?

RYHMÄT 1 JA 3:
- Miksi hait juuri Nordeaan töihin hakiessasi työpaikkaa?
- Miten rekrytointiprosessi sujui?

RYHMÄ 2:
- Oletko miettinyt työnantajan vaihtamista? Jos olet, niin miksi?
- Jos et ole harkinnut vaihtavasi työnantajaa tai niinä hetkinä, kun olet harkinnut, niin mikä tekijä on erityisesti pitänyt sinut nykyisen työnantajan palveluksessa?

TEEMA 2: Nordean tämänhetkiset vahvuudet ja heikkoudet
- Jos sinua pyydettäisiin arvioimaan tai suosittelemaan Nordeaa työnantajana tällä hetkellä, mitä kertoisit?
- Mitä vahvuuksia tai hyviä ominaisuuksia Nordealla on mielestäsi työnantajana tällä hetkellä?
- Mitä heikkouksia tai huonoja puolia löydät Nordeasta työnantajana tällä hetkellä? Vai onko niitä?

TEEMA 3: Tulevat odotukset työnantajan suhteen

- Ovatko aikaisemmat odotuksesi Nordeasta työantajana täyttyneet tähän mennessä? Jos ovat, niin miksi? Jos eivät, niin miksi?
- Mitä tulevia odotuksia sinulla on Nordean suhteen työnantajana?
- Mitä Nordea lupaa sinulle työntekijänä?
- Mitä Nordea voisi tehdä tulevaisuudessa paremmin työnantajana?

TEEMA 4: Nykyiset toimet, joiden avulla työnantajan huomioi työntekijän

- Onko fyysinen työympäristösi miellyttävä?
- Onko sinulle tarjottu tilaisuutta kouluttautumiseen, työkiertoon tai työtehtävien vaihtoon, ym.?
- Oletko ottanut osaa kehityskeskusteluihin? Millainen tilanne se oli? Oliko siitä mielestäsi hyötyä työsi kannalta?
- Oletko saanut sanallista kiitosta tai palautetta työpanoksestasi?
- Onko mielestäsi sisäisiä työilmapiirimittauksia (Employee Satisfaction Index) ja niiden tuloksia hyödynnetty jälkeenpäin työympäristön parantamiseksi?
- Ovatko palkkaus ja muut rahalliset edut mielestäsi sopivalla tasolla?
- Tuntuuko sinusta, että sinulla on tarvittavat työkalut, taidot ja resurssit saada työsi tehdyksi?

Viestintä (teema 4):

- Mitä viestintäkanavia käytetään tällä hetkellä yleisimmin henkilöstöasioista viestittäessä?
- Miten oma esimiehesi viestii henkilöstöasioista sinulle / tiimillesi?
- Miten ylempi johto viestii henkilöstöasioista sinulle / tiimillesi?
- Näkyvätkö Nordean arvot kyseisissä viesteissä?
- Koetko, että nykyiset käytetyt kanavat ovat tehokkaita ja toimivia?

TEEMA 5: Toivotut toimet, joiden avulla työnantaja voisi huomioida työntekijän

- Mitä etuja tai työsuhteeseesi liittyviä parannuksia kaipaisit lisää?
- Onko työnantaja tarjonnut sinulle joitain sellaisia asioita tai hyötyjä, jotka koet turhaksi ja jotka voisi mielestäsi poistaa?

Viestintä (teema 5):

- Minkä kanavien kautta mielestäsi tieto työhön ja henkilöstöön liittyvistä asioista kulkisi parhaiten työntekijöille?
- Mitä muita viestintäkanavia intranetin lisäksi voisi käyttää?
- Mitä viestintäkanavia itse käyttäisit mieluiten henkilöstöasioissa? Miksi?
- Onko olemassa sellaisia viestintäkeinoja, joita Nordea ei mielestäsi ole ottanut lainkaan huomioon?

APPENDIX 3   COMPARING THEMES BETWEEN TARGET GROUPS

	Theme 0: Background information	Theme 1: Current associations about the employer	Theme 2: Current strengths and weaknesses of the employer	Theme 3: Previous and future expectations regarding the employer	Theme 4: Current efforts provided by the employer	Theme 5: Preferred efforts provided by the employer
Target group 1: Young employees	Average duration of employment: 1 year	+ Good place to work + International, Nordic + Nordic Idea + Values + Trustworthy + Good superiors	+ Cross-border cooperation + Opportunity to switch job description, proceed in own career + Versatility + Recommendable as an employer – Bureaucracy – Cultural differences – Distant to customers as a brand	+ Previous expectations fulfilled + More challenges + Self-development	+ Performance appraisals + Education + Salary – Feedback	+ Depends on oneself – Own potential – Enhancing communication via intranet, virtual tools

	Theme 0: Background information	Theme 1: Current associations about the employer	Theme 2: Current strengths and weaknesses of the employer	Theme 3: Previous and future expectations regarding the employer	Theme 4: Current efforts provided by the employer	Theme 5: Preferred efforts provided by the employer
Target group 2: Experienced employees	Average duration of employment: 25 years	+ Professionalism + Leader in it's field of business + Values + International, Nordic + Stability – Conservative – Careful	+ Internationality + Opportunity to develop + Continuity + On the top of development + Recommendable as an employer – Bureaucracy – Cross-border cooperation → slow decision-making	+ Previous expectations mainly fulfilled + / – Talent management + Safety + Logical career development – Organisational changes	+ Education + Feedback ~ ESI ~ Intranet – Values used artificially – Due to financial situation, some pros have become cons	– Efforts towards the well-being of the employees – Top management more visible during the financial crisis – A common communication channel for all

	Theme 0: Background information	Theme 1: Current associations about the employer	Theme 2: Current strengths and weaknesses of the employer	Theme 3: Previous and future expectations regarding the employer	Theme 4: Current efforts provided by the employer	Theme 5: Preferred efforts provided by the employer
Target group 3: Employees with different backgrounds	Average duration of employment: 9 months	+ Values + Nordic + Dynamic ~ Expectations expressed already at this stage – Workload	+ Secure + Flexibility + Solvent + Recommendable as an employer – Organisational changes – Working pace – Compromises, slowness	~ Previous expectations fulfilled partly – No possibility to influence things + Options in the future + Stay in Nordea for a long time, but change tasks + Self-development (business knowledge) + Service development	+ Working environment + Feedback + ESI ~ Performance appraisals ~ Changing work tasks and education dependent on oneself ~ Values in communication	– Flexibility – Well-being of the employees – Joint events – Remembering the employee + / – Messenger type of communication channel